

The Shi'a perspective on Islam

Foreword

The two major schools of Islam, the Sunni and the Shi'a, hold different perspectives on Islam that need to be understood within their own terms. They do not form two different 'Islams', but rather two different ways of understanding the one way of life, Islam. They hold common elements: the belief in God, the prophethood of Muhammad, the guidance of the Qur'an, human accountability and destiny, but these are configured differently by the two schools; crucially, in the case of the Shi'a perspective, by the inclusion of divinely-appointed Imams, who act as infallible guides to humankind from the death of Prophet Muhammad onwards.

The revised syllabus for GCSE Islam from September 2016 gives more significance to Shi'a elements. These are presented throughout the background articles written to serve as a resource for teachers, which are available from www.chrishever.org >GCSE. This introductory background paper aims to set those disparate elements within the wider context of an overall Shi'a perspective on Islam.

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We are confident that GCSE teachers will value the comprehensive presentation of the Shi'a perspective on Islam offered in this paper.

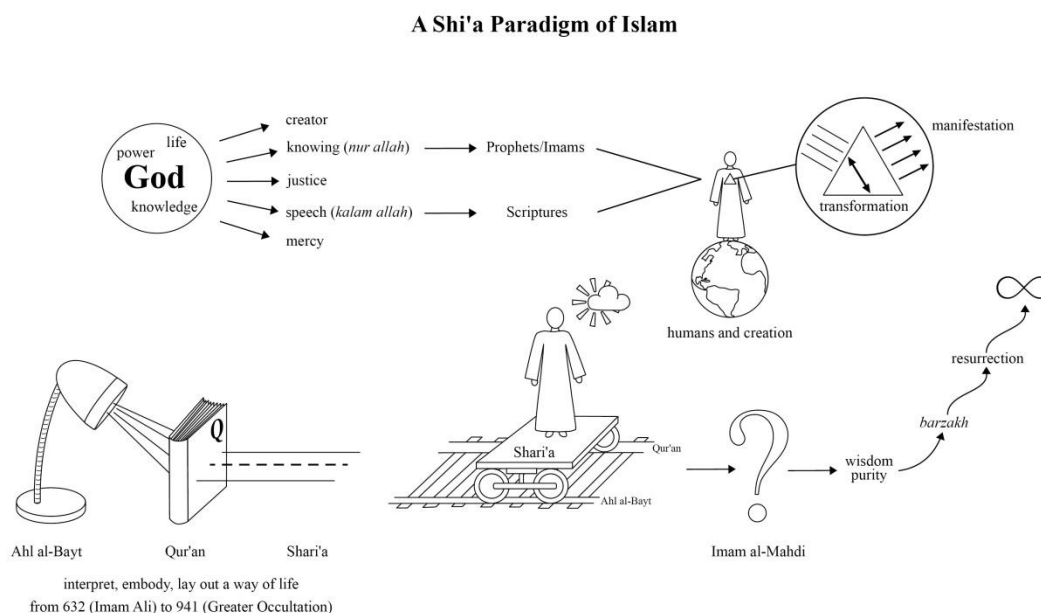
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The Shi'a Paradigm of Islam

A paradigm is a model that helps to bring different elements into a relationship so that they can be understood as a whole. Different religions have different paradigms and each needs to be understood within its own. The part that the Qur'an plays in the Islamic paradigm is different to the part played by the New Testament in Christianity, for example. Even within a particular religion, different groups, schools or denominations will draw their paradigm differently. For example, we can contrast a hierarchical, dogmatic, sacramental Christian denomination with one that stresses an absence of priesthood, dogma and sacraments; they would have quite different paradigms even though there would be some common elements. The same is true within Islam. To understand Islam as Shi'a Muslims do, one needs to understand it within a Shi'a paradigm; anything else will be a distortion.

This pictorial depiction may provide a helpful point of reference to return to as you read the sections that follow, helping to clarify the paradigm and illustrating how the elements relate to one another. [Square brackets in the text refer to these illustrations].



God is the starting point to understand Islam: God, the supreme being, who alone eternally existed, unmoved and uninvolved with any other being, for only God existed, before the creation of anything, before time and before space. Muslim philosophers have used the classical schools of philosophy to speak of God. God is the being who causes everything to exist but is uncaused by anything else; the one who sets all things in motion, whilst being unmoved by anything else; the one who knows everything, whilst being unknown by anything else. God existed and there was nothing else. The existence of God can be demonstrated by philosophical argument and presented to the human being as a rational proposition for belief. The rational man or woman then makes the act of faith; “I believe.”

What can we say of God in God’s very self, of the essence of God? Nothing. Human beings, like the rest of creation, belong to a totally different order to the supreme being. We are creatures; God is the creator of all that exists. We are finite, we have limits to our life and knowledge; God is infinite, eternal and all-knowing. No matter how sophisticated our poetry, philosophy or imagination, God is greater still, transcendent, beyond our ability to comprehend. Of the essence of God, we can say nothing.

Whenever we speak of God, the philosophers remind us that we are using a created human language and human philosophical categories to speak about a supreme being

who lies beyond all such things. This means that every positive statement that we make about God can only go as far as our creaturely knowledge will extend. Every time we say something, we are saying “it is as though...” “to the best of our ability, we can say...” “in our categories of knowledge, the best that we can say is...” When giving praise to God, Muslims will always add *subhanallah* to show that “God is holier” than anything that human beings can say or imagine. Given these limitations, what can we say about God?

There are certain things that we can say about God that do not depend on God doing anything, like being a creator. We can say that God exists; therefore God possesses life. God alone existed and created everything else in creation; therefore God possesses power. God knows how to fashion a creation without the need of any teacher; therefore God possesses knowledge. These three qualities belong to the very nature of God and, even though we cannot understand what they mean from God’s perspective, they are things that we can say about the essence of God that are not dependent on the creation. They are called, technically, attributes of essence. It belongs to the essence of God to possess life, power and knowledge.

Once God creates something, then there is a fundamental change. Something now exists outside of God. Now God knows the creation and the creation can know something about God; God is the being who created the creation. Now we can speak about interaction; God interacts with the creation. God guides, sustains and communicates with the creation. We can speak of God being merciful to the creatures and God acting with justice. These are a different kind of attribute; once they did not exist because the creation did not exist. After God created something these attributes came into being, therefore they are creatures too. These are called attributes of act; they show us some aspect of God’s interaction with the creation. Many of the names by which God is known tell us something about these attributes. God is called, for example: the All-forgiving, the Guide, the Judge, the Most Generous, the Giver of Life, the Giver of Death, the All-hearing, the Most Merciful, and the Source of Peace.

Speech and Light

Two of these attributes are central in God’s interaction with human beings. God is the one who speaks and God is the All-knowing. Through speech, God sends the word of guidance to the creatures so that we may know who we are, what is our capacity, our potential, our duties and our destiny. Through this speech or word of God, in Arabic the *Kalam Allah*, God reveals to humankind guidance and gives commands: things that must be done and things that must be avoided. Through this word, God sends guidance to the earth in the form of scriptures. The whole of creation is in a sense a revelation from God; the creation is full of the signs of God for those who would reflect and ponder on these things [Q. 10:24]. Through God’s knowing, human beings receive the capacity of intellect and reason; this enables us to reflect and know something of God’s actions. This is like a light that God radiates on the creation to provide guidance, knowledge, and reason, through which human beings have the capacity to receive the revelation, reflect on it and interpret it correctly. This light, in

Arabic the *Nur Allah*, shines on and through all men and women to different degrees, to be like an inner guide by which we can worship, obey, serve and love God.

The Qur'an tells of an incident in which God speaks to Adam before the assembly of the angels [Q. 2:30-34]. God asks the angels to name the things of the earth. They cannot as God has not given them this knowledge, thus they are unintelligible. God taught the names to Adam, on behalf of humankind. Now that he possessed the knowledge, he could inform the angels of that fact, but still could not teach them to the angels because they lacked the God-given capacity to receive the knowledge. The angels recognised the immense potential of human beings; they can know the source, process and outcome of everything. In this way, they bowed down in recognition of the superior knowledge given to Adam by God. A characteristic of all human beings is that the spirit of God (*ruh*) has been breathed into them at their creation [Q. 15:29]. These gifts of intellect, knowledge and the ability to interact with God are essential characteristics of what it is to be human. Through them we can know the attributes of God and connect with the divine essence, but we can never penetrate to share in it. Through them we have an innate awareness of our relationship with God. The Qur'an recounts that all the pre-embodied human souls were asked, "Am I not your Lord?" and they responded, "Yes indeed!" [Q. 7:172-174]. In a sense then, all the experiences of our earthly life are reminders of our true capacity and nature; we are in a process of awakening to what we really are.

The Prophets and Imams

Every human being receives the word and light of God but we receive these gifts to varying degrees. God chooses certain human beings and purifies them to become the recipients and conduits of knowledge and guidance for the sake of others. Those people who receive the ultimate degree of this light are the Prophets and their co-workers the Imams. Their purification is such that they are without any kind of sin from birth onwards. The intensity of their knowledge shows them the consequences of sin and thus they do not sin throughout their lives. They are sinless (impeccable) and also free from error (infallible); the technical Arabic term used is *ma'sum*. They are thus free from any doubt or weakness, and empowered and purified by God to become guides to the rest of humankind.

The Prophets sent by God receive direct revelation from God. They are thus the bearers of scriptures and the light to interpret them and fully to put them into practice. At least one such Prophet has been sent at some time in human history to all the peoples of the earth. Muhammad spoke of 124,000 of such Prophets in total although the identities of the vast majority are unknown to us. The Qur'an names twenty-five of them. The same light of prophethood filled each one of them until the last, universal, seal of the Prophets came in the person of Muhammad. Then the ministry of prophethood was completed. These Prophets had co-workers or successors, who shared in the fullness of the light of knowledge and purity; they were the Imams.

God showed through the Qur'an and Muhammad's own words and actions that his successors should come from the Ahl al-Bayt. The term Ahl al-Bayt literally means the household or family of Muhammad and technically refers to a group of his blood descendants through his daughter Fatima and her husband, Ali, who was also the cousin of Muhammad (they shared a common grandfather). God chose and blessed the Ahl al-Bayt and their descendants for spiritual leadership of the Muslim community, the Imamate, just as earlier God had chosen Abraham and his family to bring forth a line of Prophets. Ali was appointed by God to be the first in the line of successors to Muhammad, the line of Imams. According to the majority school amongst the Shi'a, there were twelve Imams in this line. They speak of "the fourteen sinless ones" (*ma'sum*) referring to Muhammad, Fatima and the twelve Imams. They were to guide humankind after Muhammad through the light that they possessed. They did not bring anything new but they shed light on the revelation that came to Muhammad through their knowledge and by their actions. Without such guides, human beings of lesser degrees of knowledge and purity would be bound to go astray because human beings are naturally forgetful and pulled down by their lower self (*nafs*). It would be fundamentally unjust of God to leave human beings without a guide; therefore the line of Imams will continue until the end of the world.

The human condition

The word and the light of God, sent through Muhammad in the Qur'an and through the Prophet and Imams as the living embodiment of that guidance, are for the benefit of human beings so that we might attain to our full potential of wisdom and purity of thought and action. Human beings stand at the pinnacle of creation [see the illustration of the human figure on the globe] and have the twin duties to be the servants of God (*abd*) and the regents of God on earth (*khalifa*). As such, we have the responsibility to cherish the creation and bring it to its full God-given perfection. This guidance works on the heart of human beings to transform us in knowledge, intention and action [see the inset illustration of transformation]. The heart is seen as the seat of knowledge and intention with the capacity to be manifested by the will to act according to that guidance. Human life is thus to be seen as a journey of transformation and manifestation. Just as Muhammad is the embodiment of perfect humanity (*al-insan al-kamil*), so he makes present the full human potential towards which all other men and women are to strive. Under the guidance of the ever-present Imam, we are to grow into the Muhammadan nature, which the Prophet exemplified. The high dignity of every human being is to have the capacity to know the attributes of act of God and to manifest them in our lives. Through living a life of obedience to God's guidance, our hearts are polished to become like perfect prisms through which these attributes are made manifest and shown by the quality of our actions.

Two Precious Things

Muhammad said that he would leave two precious things after him to guide humanity: the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt. These two are the on-going deposits of God's guidance on the earth after the time of Muhammad. During the years when the line of

Imams were visible on earth, 632-941, they were like a light of God's guidance that shone on the Qur'an and correctly interpreted and implemented it in human living [see the illustration of the light shining on/through the Qur'an to illuminate the straight path]. They developed and laid down a way of life (*shari'a*) and theology that would guide human living to ascend in spirituality, knowledge and purity of intention and action. Through the purifying gift of knowledge they were sinless (*ma'sum*) and thus could act as infallible guides to humankind. They not only made clear the inner dimensions of the message of the Qur'an but they also confirmed the practice of Muhammad (*sunna*) and themselves embodied that message so that they could act as perfect role models and conduits of God's guidance for later generations.

By the time of the disappearance of the last Imam in 941, they had laid out a complete way of life, spirituality and knowledge that acted like a platform running on the twin tracks of the Qur'an and the exemplary lives and wisdom of the Ahl al-Bayt that could guide humankind thereafter [see the illustration of the platform on unequal rails]. The last Imam is not absent but is hidden from our sight during the passage of time in which we now live. He is in hiding, not because God wanted to withdraw his grace from humanity, but because humanity in general is not receptive to that grace and would reject or kill the Imam if they could reach him. Human beings are thus deprived of the interactive presence of the Imam; he cannot be consulted for infallible guidance at this time. But he is present "like the sun hidden behind the clouds" and thus in a mysterious way serving as on-going guide. Even though we cannot see the sun hidden behind the clouds, we are conscious of its presence, day and night, without which life on earth would come to an abrupt end because we would be deprived of it as the source of energy on earth.

During the time of the Hidden Imam there is no infallible guide available for consultation on earth. We have to rely on the deposits left to us in the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad as preserved and implemented by his Ahl al-Bayt. The Qur'an and Ahl al-Bayt act like the two rails of a railway track guiding humankind. If they separate even by a tiny amount, the train would fall off the track. If only one rail is present, then the train could not run at all. The guidance of the Imams is in a sense diminished due to our inability to contact and receive infallible guidance from the Hidden Imam, hence the disproportionate size of the two rails during this period. For as long as the Imam is not accessible, guidance must come from the scholars of the community. The highest in rank of these scholars are the Ayatollahs who, though fallible, are held in high esteem due to their knowledge and piety. In every age, a small group of these, who are regarded as being of outstanding learning and pious life, take on the responsibility of giving guidance that others can follow; such are called Grand Ayatollahs (*marja*).

The final phase in the history of the Imams will come when the Twelfth Imam reappears as the Imam al-Mahdi in the final period of human existence [see the illustration of the question-mark]. No-one knows when this time will come; it will be at God's direction. During this final messianic period, Imam al-Mahdi will exercise

direct rule for all humankind and be once again accessible as the Living Imam until the end of the world.

The final goal of human existence

Through a process of transformation brought about by following the twin guidance of the Qur'an and Ahl al-Bayt, the human being grows in wisdom and purity [see the illustration of the ever-ascending quest towards the infinite God]. This is a drawing ever-closer to God through the practices of Islam, deeper obedience and worship, and increasing knowledge of the attributes of God, which is as far as we can grow in this life. Human beings then pass through the doorway of death into the next realm of existence; the timeless waiting state of *barzakh*. Here there are new experiences that purify the soul in preparation for resurrection. At the end of time will come the general resurrection when all human beings will be raised to a new form of life, a higher calibre of existence, which is unintelligible to us now. The seeds that we have planted in our souls in this lower life will flourish and bring forth foliage. Then we will stand before God with that fully developed soul, which will be beautiful for some and ugly for others; and in this way we will experience judgement.

For those judged worthy, through the mercy of God, a new paradisiacal realm will open up in which the soul will continue to ascend in purity and wisdom in ever-closer proximity to God. God is infinite and thus knowledge of God knows no limits, so the journey of encounter continues infinitely, revealing dimensions and wonders beyond our imaginings or expectation. The transition from one phase of human existence to the next expands the perceptions open to human growth and experience; it is as though we have moved from our womb-like experience before birth into the air-filled sentience of earthly life, or the transformation of an earth-bound caterpillar into the air-borne world of the butterfly. The human being continues to grow through these new dimensions becoming ever-more fully human with the transformation of our true selves by taking on and manifesting the divine qualities in an infinite progression, through God's grace, drawing into a closer embrace of the divine attributes of act, but always remaining a creature and never being able to penetrate through to the essence of God, which for ever remains beyond our ability to grasp.

The foundations of guidance: Prophets and Imams

God, in God's great wisdom, created human beings and placed them on the earth, but the earth is not their real abode. They were created to live in Paradise close to God. However, before they are able to live there, with the utmost freedom that their Lord would give them, they have to learn to use that freedom in the right way. For that reason they need to realise their full potential during their earthly lives by worshipping, obeying, serving and loving God and being God's regents (*khalifa*) on earth. To fulfil this high vocation, they needed guidance from God. How can one serve and obey unless one receives guidance on what to do? From the beginning of time, God sent guidance to human beings in the form of scriptures, but these alone are not enough. How is a scripture to be interpreted? How is it to be put into practice?

Who can interpret it with authority? From where does that authority come? God answered all these questions by sending the scriptures to human Prophets, who were endowed with the highest gifts of spirituality, knowledge, piety, courage and justice. These Prophets had such a refined sense of moral knowledge given by God that they realised the consequences of sin and so did not sin in any way from birth until death. Similarly, this knowledge removed any sense of doubt or uncertainty from their minds. Such were the people that God sent as Prophets to guide humankind in a chain from Adam to Muhammad.

Some of the Prophets sent by God had not only spiritual authority on the earth but also political, legal and military authority. We can take the example of Abraham, for whom the Qur'an uses not only the term Prophet but also Imam [Q. 2:124]. Moses felt the need of a co-worker and God indicated that his brother Aaron (in Arabic, Haroun) was also a Prophet. He would work alongside Moses, be his minister (in Arabic, *wazir*) and indeed take on the leadership of the community after the death of Moses [Q. 28:33-35; 19:53; 25:35; 7:142]. Indeed, the Qur'an tells us that God will raise up Imams amongst the Children of Israel as guides [Q. 32:24; 21:73]. In a similar way, the Prophet Jesus gathered an inner circle of disciples around him, with their leader Simon Peter, who would guide the community after his ascension into heaven.

Why do human beings need such guides present in the community? In the same way that Prophets were needed to interpret the scriptures with authority based on the light of knowledge given to them by God, so all generations of human beings need the presence of an infallible guide. Every human being has the gift of reason so that we can puzzle things out for ourselves. But not all human beings are equally intelligent, or rational, or balanced in their judgements. There is a natural forgetfulness in human beings and the pull of the ego can cause us to go astray. Because of this human weakness, God has provided sinless, infallible guides who can lead the community of humankind with authority and certainty. It is a mercy from God that human society will never be without such a guide or else, left to ourselves, we would be bound to go astray. Under their guidance, men and women are able to bring their worship, obedience, service and love of God to its fulfilment by drawing ever-closer to God until the ultimate closeness of the life of Paradise.

Muhammad and Ali

After the initial revelation of the Qur'an in the Cave of Hira, there was a period during which Muhammad spoke of his experience only to his wife Khadija and his cousin Ali. They believed in his message and were the first Muslims. Ali had been taken in to live in the household of Muhammad and Khadija from an early age. He was able to observe the Prophet and model his own character and life on his mentor. Later Muhammad was told to share the message with other family members. He summoned his family to a meeting so that he could tell them of his call and ask for their support. Some forty members of the family were present. He asked who amongst them would follow him in the way of Islam. There was a stunned silence in response. Then Ali, at this time a youth of about thirteen years, stepped forward and pledged his allegiance

to Muhammad. Muhammad responded by announcing that Ali was his brother, he was to be his successor, his minister (*wazir*) and the executor of his will. The others were told that they should obey him. This caused some surprise within the family; should the elders accept the leadership of this boy and obey him?

The Qur'an says that Muhammad spoke not out of his own will but always by the will of God [Q. 53:3]. Thus God, speaking through the Prophet, named Ali as the successor to Muhammad at the very beginning of his mission. Muhammad said that his relationship to Ali was to be like that of Moses to Aaron, except that Aaron was also a Prophet and Ali not; Muhammad was the last of the chain of Prophets.

When the Muslim community was to migrate from Makka to Madina, it was Ali who slept in the Prophet's place to act as a decoy for those who sought to assassinate Muhammad so that he could make his escape. Ali was asked to stay behind in Makka for some time to return to the Makkans any goods that they had left in Muhammad's safe-keeping.

This divine designation (*nass*) of Ali was repeated in another episode mentioned in the Qur'an [Q. 5:55]. Some Muslims were in the mosque making voluntary prayers when a poor man entered and approached various people begging for alms. The only one to respond was Ali. He was actually performing a cycle of prayer (*rak'a*) and in the position of bowing when the man approached him. Without breaking off from his prayer, Ali extended his hand to the poor man and signalled that he should take the ring from Ali's finger as charity. It was at this time that the verse in question was revealed to Muhammad. It speaks of the guardian with authority within the community (*wali*), naming him first as God, then the Prophet, then "the faithful one who maintains the prayer and gives charity whilst bowing down." Muhammad himself confirmed that this was a reference to Ali being designated by God as his successor.

Ali was the constant companion of Muhammad from the earliest days in Makka, right through the years in Madina. In this way he could see and hear the Prophet at work and absorb his practice and wisdom. In the year 630, when Muhammad was preparing to lead an army towards the distant city of Tabuk to engage in battle with the forces of the Byzantine Empire, he asked Ali to remain in charge of Madina. There were hypocrites in Madina at the time and thus a fear that they might rise against the Prophet's rule in his absence. The normal thing was that Ali would accompany Muhammad on his journeys. On this occasion, he was asked to stay behind and told that Madina cannot be preserved without the presence of either Muhammad or Ali in it. Ali gained the reputation within the Muslim community of being a man filled with wisdom and also great courage, shown on many occasions on the field of battle, when Ali was often sent out in single-handed combat with the enemy. He married Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad with his first wife Khadija, thus cementing the bond.

About three months before his death, Muhammad led the Muslim community on the only Hajj that he performed. By this time, almost all the Qur'an had been revealed

and the Muslim practice of the community was well established. All the practices and teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet had been conveyed to the community. On the way back from this pilgrimage, on the journey from Makka to Madina, the Angel Gabriel (Jibril) appeared to Muhammad with the command to “convey what has been conveyed to you or else you have done nothing” [Q. 5:67]. What could this definitive command be at this late stage of Muhammad’s mission, when the message had been so comprehensively conveyed? Muhammad halted the community at an oasis called Ghadir Khumm. This was the point at which the roads separated and some had already gone on their way; Muhammad called them back. The whole pilgrim body was thus assembled, by tradition some 72,000 Muslims. Muhammad mounted a rock so that he could be seen and heard. He raised the hand of Ali and said that all those who accepted him, Muhammad, as their master or leader (*maula*) should take Ali as their *maula* after his death.

This was the clear designation by the infallible Prophet that Ali should be his successor. All the Muslims who were present pledged their allegiance to Ali at this time as the Commander of the Faithful (*amir al-mu'minin*). On this occasion, the verse of the Qur'an “this day I have perfected your religion” was revealed [Q. 5:3]. Muhammad then spoke this prayer: “My Lord, be the friend of whoever is Ali’s friend, and the enemy of whoever is Ali’s enemy; love whoever loves him and hate whoever hates him; help whoever helps him and abandon whoever abandons him, whoever he may be. Let those who are present convey this to those who are absent.” This day is commemorated annually on 'Id Ghadir Khumm.

The Family of the Prophet

In the year 631, a Christian delegation from the settlement of Najran came to Madina and entered into a discussion with Muhammad about the person and nature of Jesus. The debate was to be resolved by both groups coming into the presence of God with their families and invoking the curse of God on whoever was not telling the truth. The critical challenge is recorded in the Qur'an: “Come! Let us call our sons and your sons (*abna' ana*), our women and your women (*nisa' ana*) and ourselves and yourselves (*anfus ana* literally our souls), then let us pray earnestly and call down God’s curse upon the liars” [Q. 3:61].

The next morning Muhammad went out to face the challenge. He took with him his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, the two sons of Ali and Fatima (it was common in that culture to refer to one’s grandsons as one’s sons and Muhammad had no living son at this time). With them he took their mother, his daughter Fatima (our women). It is significant here that he had nine wives alive at that time but did not take any of them. Finally he took with him Ali (our soul or our *nafs*). The Christian delegation did not go through with the challenge when they saw that Muhammad was prepared to risk himself and his family in this affair. This constitutes a clear identification of these five people as the Family of the Prophet or the Ahl al-Bayt.

There are many accounts of the relationship of Muhammad with the other four members of the family. He is reported to have said that “Ali is my *nafs*.” The term *nafs* here can have meanings like soul or inner self. Ali is thus understood to bear the same inner light that was in Muhammad; they were almost like two faces of the same coin. Again Muhammad is reported as saying “I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate.” This indicates the function that Ali had of guiding people to the truth and making clear the hidden meanings of the Qur'an. Ali is characterised as being of exceptional wisdom in all matters relating to the way of Islam. In a Hadith, the Prophet said, “Wisdom is divided into ten parts: nine parts are given to Ali and the other one is distributed amongst the rest of the people.” Fatima is spoken of as “the leader of the women of Paradise.” Further there is a Hadith in which Muhammad said, “Fatima is part of me. Whoever offends her, offends me, whoever offends me, offends God, whoever offends God, his place is in Hellfire.” The closeness of father and daughter can be seen in the touching account of Muhammad on his deathbed telling her that he was soon to die. She wept with grief. Then he told her that she would be the first of his family to die after him and she smiled with joy. Fatima lived only a few months after the death of her father. Finally, there are many incidents of Muhammad playing with his grandsons and seeking to have them close to him. On one occasion, one of them even rode on his shoulders during the formal prayers. He spoke of them as “the leaders of the youths of Paradise.”

An incident in the life of Muhammad and his family was the occasion for the revelation of a crucial verse in Shi'a understanding. The Prophet was covered by a cloak or blanket and then was joined under it by Hasan, Husayn, Fatima and Ali. The following verse was revealed at this time, “Indeed God desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household (Ahl al-Bayt), and purify you with a thorough purification” [Q. 33:33]. The term Ahl al-Bayt refers exclusively to these five people and their descendants, the later Imams. They are referred to by the Arabic term *ma'sum*, which is best translated as “the sinless ones” or by the technical term “the impeccables”, which includes the concept of being infallible or incapable of error in their lives and teaching. The five members of the Ahl al-Bayt gathered under the blanket were born sinless and remained so throughout their lives. This “verse of the purification” is the divine proclamation of their status, rendering them as “the best of creation.”

The Ahl al-Bayt

As we have seen, Ali, as the first male Muslim and constant companion of Muhammad, and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, were in the best position to imbibe the spirit of the message of Islam as well as the details of the Qur'an and the way that it was put into practice by Muhammad. This, combined with their God-given status as impeccables, made them the best equipped guides of the community. It is recorded that in the months between the death of Muhammad and her own death, Fatima was visited by the Angel Gabriel, who brought her comfort and imparted to her knowledge from the unseen world of God, including knowledge of future events. These revelations were recorded by Ali in a book, the *Mushaf of Fatima*. This

knowledge and this book were passed on to their two sons Hasan and Husayn and later into the keeping of the subsequent Imams. This visitation of the angel to Fatima is a reminder of Gabriel's visit to Mary, the mother of Jesus [Q. 19:17-21]. Mary shared with Fatima the status of being amongst the highest of creation: those who are purified and a blessing to humankind [Q. 3:42]. Both women received messages from God via the angel and conveyed the knowledge of their hearts to their sons.

There are many Hadith of the Prophet in which he spoke about the role of the Ahl al-Bayt after his death. He said, "Stars save people from being drowned and my household saves people from disagreements and conflicts." Again, "Be aware that surely the parable of my household amongst you is like the ship of Noah, whoever embarked on the ship of Noah was saved and whoever refused to do so was drowned." Finally, "Whoever enters by their association with the Ahl al-Bayt will be forgiven by God." These Hadith make it clear that the Ahl al-Bayt are to have the role of guiding the Muslim community, interpreting the Qur'an and authentic Sunna of the Prophet, and being a blessing leading to forgiveness and Paradise after the Prophet's death. He spoke of them as "his trust" and "a partner for the Qur'an."

The most explicit Hadith of Muhammad in this regard is called the Hadith of the Two Most Precious Things. Muhammad said, "I am leaving amongst you two most precious things, the Book of God and the Ahl al-Bayt, as long as you hold fast to them you will not go astray. These two things will not separate from each other until they reach me near the fountain (in Paradise) on the Day of Judgement." The Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt are like the two rails of a railway track to lead humankind through this life to Paradise. They run in parallel; if the rails separate from each other, then the train could not run along the railway track. If only one rail is present, then the train cannot run at all. This was God's plan for humanity. As the Qur'an says, "A faithful man or woman may not, when God and his Prophet have decided on a matter, have any option in their decision, and whoever disobeys God and his Prophet has certainly strayed into manifest error" [Q. 33:36].

After the death of Muhammad

When it became clear that the Prophet had died there was chaos and division within the Muslim community. Ali, who was about thirty-five years old at the time, as the closest male relative and executor of Muhammad's will, was responsible for seeing that the body of the Prophet was buried. While he was thus engaged, those companions of the Prophet who had migrated from Makka decided that one of their number, Abu Bakr, should become the head of the community of Muslims (632-634). Ali and his extended family, the Bani Hashim, which was also the family from which Muhammad came, reminded them of the designation of God and the Prophet of Ali as his successor but to no avail. The Makkan aristocracy could not think of the leadership of the community going to someone from the Bani Hashim. Ali realised that insistence upon his right of succession would lead to bloodshed and so withdrew from a fight that would have divided the Muslim community. Those who supported

the rightful designation of Ali were to be known by the name of the *Shi'a-t Ali* or Party of Ali; in short, the Shi'a.

When Abu Bakr was coming to the end of his life, he nominated another Makkan leader, Umar, as his successor (634-644). He in turn appointed a group of elders to be an electoral college to decide on the succession after his death. By this time, some of the elements of Muslim life and practice had already been changed by the first two Caliphs, in accordance with their own reasoning. One of the conditions set by the electoral college, that must be agreed by the successor, was to uphold the Sunna of the Prophet and, in addition, the teaching and practice of the first two Caliphs; Ali would only agree to uphold the Sunna of the Prophet. Uthman (644-656) was elected as the third Caliph. He was assassinated in 656, which led to immediate calls for revenge, which further divided the community. Those Muslims who were present in Madina turned to Ali as their leader and so he assumed his rightful place as the first Imam or successor to Muhammad.

The division intensified when there were calls for blood revenge for Uthman, which came from some of the old Makkan aristocracy, led by Mu'awiya, the Governor of Syria. Ali was criticised for not doing enough to take revenge on the killer. Some former friends of Ali, who had supported his claim to leadership, broke off their allegiance to him when he refused to grant them special privileges. They decided to wage war against him. The group opposing Ali included Ayesha, the youngest wife of Muhammad and she became a focal point in the battle that followed. This was the first time that Muslims had fought against their fellow Muslims. At the battle, which took place on 9 December 656, called the Battle of the Camel because Ayesha sat on her camel encouraging her forces, Ali was victorious and the leaders of the opposition were killed. Ayesha was treated with respect and escorted to Madina where she withdrew from public life.

This was not the end of the matter as those opposed to Ali marshalled under the leadership of Mu'awiya, the Governor of Syria. This led to a greater battle in Iraq in 657, called the Battle of Siffin, which went on for several weeks. In the end, Ali decided to go for arbitration to end the fighting but this displeased a group of his followers, who said that such matters should not be decided by arbitration. For them, this amounted to a lack of trust in God's designation of Ali as Imam. They left Ali's party and became known as the Kharijites (those who went out). They became another armed group opposed to Ali and he was forced to do battle against them in July 658 and defeat them. The arbitration did not bring peace with the group associated with Mu'awiya, who was accepted as their leader in Jerusalem in 660, thus beginning the Umayyad Dynasty. Ali's influence was reduced to the area of Iraq, where he settled until, in January 661, in the city of Kufa, he was assassinated by a Kharijite seeking revenge. Ali was buried in Najaf, not far from Kufa, but the exact location of his grave was kept secret until it was revealed by his successor, the sixth Imam, in the eighth century. Over the centuries it has been an important centre of pilgrimage.

Before Ali died, in accordance with the Prophet's instructions, he designated his eldest son Hasan as his successor. There were still tensions with the Umayyads, who were increasing their power based in their new capital of Damascus. Imam Hasan withdrew from political life and concentrated on the spiritual leadership of his followers. He made a pact with Mu'awiya that he would live quietly in Madina and not become the focus of rebellion against the Umayyads, provided that certain conditions were honoured. One of these stipulations was that Mu'awiya would not appoint a successor but allow the community to decide who should be the leader after him. Such agreements were ignored by Mu'awiya. Hasan remained the rightful Imam for the Shi'a, who believe that he was entitled to the political leadership of the whole Muslim community although this was not possible in the circumstances. He died in c.669 and was buried in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Madina.

Imam Husayn and the Tragedy of Karbala

Hasan, speaking in the name of God, designated his brother Husayn to succeed him and Husayn too lived in Madina and observed his late brother's agreement to keep out of politics as long as the Caliph Mu'awiya lived. A crisis was bound to follow when Mu'awiya named his son Yazid to succeed him as Caliph. Yazid was notorious for his immoral life and failure to observe the most basic commands of the Qur'an. After taking over as Caliph on the death of his father in 680, Yazid decided to demand an oath of allegiance from the people individually. Imam Husayn could not possibly give such an oath to him. It would be openly to support a tyrant and fail completely to give the appropriate leadership to the community. In order to avoid an open clash with the agents of Yazid, Husayn moved from Madina to Makka with his family and a group of close supporters in the hope that they would not come for him and cause trouble in the holy city.

Iraq had always been the power-base of the Shi'a and especially the city of Kufa, where Ali was killed. The difficulty was that the people of Kufa were fickle supporters and could not be trusted. The leaders of the community there wrote to Husayn to say that they needed him as their guide and asked him to come to live amongst them. There was the obvious question as to whether they could be trusted on this occasion. Husayn sent one of his trusted companions, Muslim ibn Aqil, to check out the situation in Kufa. Yazid heard what was happening and replaced the Governor of Kufa with his own man with orders to stamp out any support there for Husayn. Muslim ibn Aqil was killed and the people of Kufa pressurised into withdrawing their invitation to Husayn.

Husayn knew that his duty was to go to support the people of Kufa. He also heard that the agents of Yazid were going to come for him in Makka, but he did not want to see the holy city defiled with fighting. Husayn left Makka with his family and close supporters during the Hajj of 680 and set off in the direction of Kufa. Yazid's man in Kufa heard what had happened and sent a force of soldiers under the leadership of al-Hurr to shadow Husayn's party. They had been ordered not to let him turn back to Makka or to call at various settlements along the way. On one occasion, after several

days of travelling, al-Hurr rode into Husayn's camp with his men. Such travel in the desert is demanding and water is always a concern. Husayn noticed that the soldiers and their horses were in need of water so ordered that his water supply should be shared with them to quench their thirst. During the discussion between al-Hurr and Husayn, it came time for prayer and al-Hurr and his men lined up in one congregation with Husayn's party and prayed with Husayn acting as *imam*. Some days later, on the battlefield of Karbala, al-Hurr would leave the Umayyad army to ride to Husayn's side to beg his forgiveness for the part that he had played in bringing him to this situation. He was forgiven by Husayn and fought on his side in the battle, ultimately dying at the hands of his former comrades.

Al-Hurr had orders to arrest Husayn and bring him to Kufa. Husayn resisted and insisted on returning to Madina. Both sides were reluctant to fight and so a compromise was reached. Husayn and his party would go to neither place until al-Hurr had received instructions from the Governor of Kufa. Some faithful people escaped from Kufa and came to join Husayn's party, which eventually numbered some seventy-two armed men plus women and children. Whilst waiting for the new instructions, both parties moved on in the direction of Karbala. When the instructions from Kufa arrived, they were forced to halt on the Plain of Karbala, where Husayn's party were surrounded and cut off from the river from which they drew their water. The Umayyad army was numbered in thousands, so the odds were impossibly stacked against Husayn. The climax came when Husayn was given the demand that he must pledge allegiance to Yazid at Karbala before he would be allowed to leave. This he could not do. He foresaw that this would result in a battle and there would be great loss of life. He asked his companions to leave him and go to safety to save their lives. They refused, saying that they would prefer to stay and die with Husayn.

Orders reached the Umayyad army to say that they were to use force and attack and kill Husayn. As the time of battle drew near, valiant attempts were made by members of Husayn's party to break through to the river to bring back water for the children; one such was made during the battle by Husayn's half-brother, Abbas, who was butchered in the process. Husayn approached the Umayyads to ask for water for his six-months-old son Ali Asghar but the Umayyads killed the child with an arrow to the throat whilst he lay in his father's arms. Husayn himself was the last to die after having been seriously wounded with swords and arrows. Eventually his head was cut off as a trophy and the bodies of the dead were desecrated by running the horses over them. The battle took place on the 10th of the month of Muharram (10 October 680) and is remembered each year as Ashura Day.

The women and children, who were mainly the great-grandchildren of Muhammad, were taken as captives first to Kufa, where they were humiliated and had to watch the severed head of Husayn ridiculed. The same happened when they were led as prisoners to the Umayyad court in Damascus. The group included another son of Husayn, Ali ibn Husayn (also known as Zayn al-Abidin), who had been designated by his father as the next Imam, and Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali and sister of

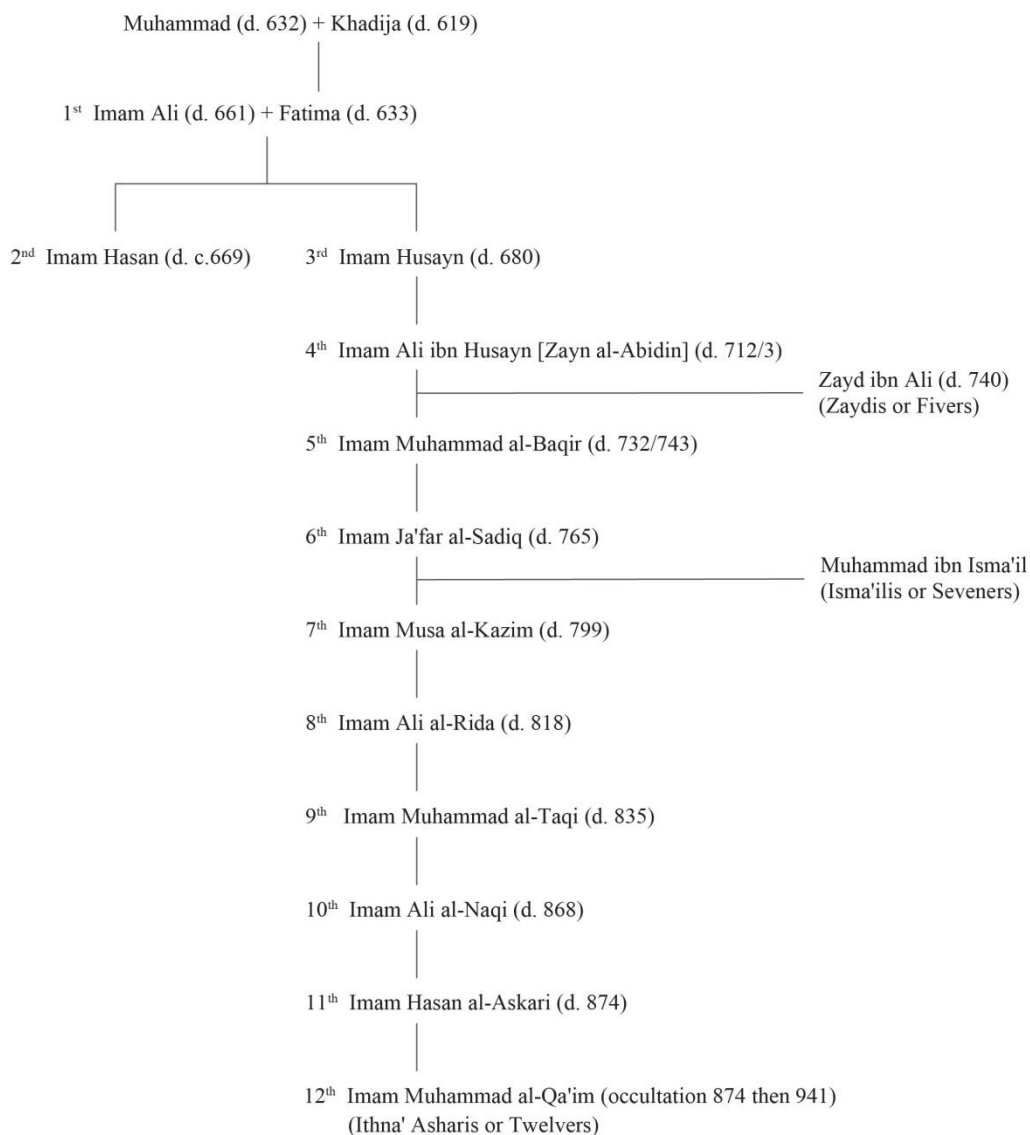
Husayn. Eventually they were allowed to leave Damascus and return to Madina, where the fourth Imam lived out the remainder of his life.

Karbala remembered to this day

This is such a momentous event in Muslim history that it is commemorated to this day by ten days of mourning. These begin on the first of the month of Muharram and reach their climax on Ashura Day itself, the tenth of the month. The solemn mood continues with a further forty days passed in remembrance. No celebrations take place during this time and Shi'a Muslims tend to dress in solemn clothing, with the women wearing black. For the first nine days, there are nightly gatherings to re-tell the story. On Ashura Day itself, there are solemn processions and lamentations. These are days of spiritual renewal and reflection when people consider how they can strengthen their "Husayn nature" and combat any tendencies they may have to act with injustice and arrogance like Yazid. It is a time of renewal of commitment to oppose injustice wherever it is found and to support the cause of right: "If only I had been there with Husayn, I would have stood firm and died with him." The sacrifice of Karbala acts as a model for life wherever and whenever it is lived, as is shown by the saying, "Every day is Ashura; every place is Karbala." Every human being has the duty to promote the good within society and to oppose the evil or else injustice, tyranny and barbarism will prevail.

Husayn goes down in Shi'a history as the Prince of Martyrs. His death assumes almost cosmic proportions; how could anyone of any time not shed a tear for the pure and innocent Husayn thus cruelly murdered? A martyr is one who makes the ultimate submission of their life in obedience to the command of God to stand for truth no matter what the enemy does; even to the point of accepting death rather than disobedience. Death with justice is held to bring joy to the human heart, whereas life with oppression and injustice is suffering. This spirit of facing persecution and suffering in the knowledge that one is in the right has coloured Shi'a history. They have always been a numerical minority within the Muslim community and for most of their history have lived as a minority under non-Shi'a rule. They have faced persecution and several of the Imams have met with violent deaths; through all this, the example of Husayn stands centre stage.

A Line of Imams



After the massacre at Karbala, Ali the young son of Husayn, who was ill on the day of the battle, became the fourth Imam. He is usually known by the name Zayn al-Abidin (“the embellishment of the worshippers”). He lived a quiet non-political life in Madina marked by piety and spiritual wisdom. He died in c.713 and designated his son, Muhammad al-Baqir as his successor, the fifth Imam. He also lived a non-political life in Madina at a time when there was a power-struggle between the Umayyads and the Abbasids, which drew attention away from the Ahl al-Bayt. This

allowed al-Baqir to pass on the divinely-inspired knowledge that he had received and thus he was widely noted for his wisdom, hence he was called Baqir al-Ilm (“the opener of knowledge”). The probable date of his death is c.733 and he designated his son, Ja'far al-Sadiq (“the upright one”) as his successor, the sixth Imam. Ja'far excelled in spreading the knowledge with which the Imams had been endowed and was principally responsible for establishing the Shi'a code of living, called after him, the Ja'fari School of Shari'a. He too lived in Madina and, after his death in 765, was buried there alongside three of his predecessors (Hasan, Zayn al-Abidin and Muhammad al-Baqir) in the cemetery of al-Baqi.

After the death of Zayn al-Abidin, there was a division within the Shi'a community caused by a dispute about the rightful successor. The majority held that he had designated his son Muhammad as his successor but a minority group held that another son, Zayd ibn Ali, was the rightful fifth Imam. This minority group came to be called the Zaydis (or Fivers, as the dispute arose concerning the fifth Imam). Another dispute arose about who should be the seventh Imam. Ja'far's eldest son Isma'il (d.755) died before his father. As the position of Imam had gone to the eldest son in the previous few cases, this led to a dispute amongst the Shi'a. Because the political situation was extremely tense (the overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty by the Abbasids), Ja'far had not openly announced the designation of his successor. In these circumstances, Ja'far's second eldest son, Abdullah al-Aftah (d.766), who was known amongst the Shi'a for his lack of knowledge, claimed the Imamate for himself. Those who believed that Ja'far had designated Isma'il held that the designation then passed to his son, Muhammad ibn Isma'il, as the rightful seventh Imam. They were a minority and are called the Isma'ilis (or Seveners). The majority did not believe either in the apparent designation of Isma'il by his father or in the claim to the Imamate made by Abdullah al-Aftah. They held that Ja'far had designated his third son, Musa al-Kazim, as the rightful seventh Imam.

Musa al-Kazim (“the reserved one”) lived in his birth city of Madina until the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid had him brought to Iraq where he could be kept under surveillance in Basra and Baghdad. He was repeatedly imprisoned for long periods and is alleged to have been poisoned by order of the Caliph and died in Baghdad in 799. He was buried in the cemetery there, which was to be called al-Kazimiyya until the death and burial there of the ninth Imam, from which time it was also called al-Kazimayn (“the two Kazims”); it remains to this day an important centre of pilgrimage. Musa al-Kazim designated his son Ali al-Rida (“the agreeable one”) as the eighth Imam. He was still living in Madina, where he remained until he was brought to Merv in eastern Iran by the Caliph Ma'mun in 816. He was probably killed on the Caliph's orders in 818 in Tus, where he was buried. The city was later re-named Mashhad (“the martyr's shrine”).

Ali al-Rida designated his young son Muhammad al-Taqi (“the God-conscious”) as the ninth Imam. He grew up in Baghdad but later was allowed to settle in Madina. Eventually he was brought back to Baghdad and died in the same year 835. He designated his son, Ali al-Naqi (also known as al-Hadi “the guide to what is right”), as

the tenth Imam. He grew up in Madina but was brought to Iraq by the Caliph al-Mutawakkil in 848. He was required to live in the city of Samarra, where he died and was buried in 868. He designated his son Hasan al-Askari (“the one forced to live in the army camp of Samarra”) as the eleventh Imam. He died in Samarra in 874 and was buried there; again Samarra became an important pilgrimage centre.

The importance of the sites associated with the burial of the Imams as pilgrimage centres should be noted. They have been treated with great respect by the Shi'a and remain important centres of pilgrimage until the present time. The same Caliph al-Mutawakkil, who brought Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-Askari to Samarra, also ordered the destruction of the shrine of Imam Husayn at Karbala in 850; much to the annoyance of the Shi'a. Such centres of pilgrimage acted as focal points for Shi'a faith and identity and thus were feared by the rulers. A new shrine was built to Imam Husayn at Karbala in 977, where a domed mausoleum was erected. This dignified way of marking the burial sites of the Imams became a standard practice and in later centuries such a shrine was built to the second, fourth, fifth and sixth Imams in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Madina, which was destroyed by the followers of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792) in 1925.

The Twelfth Imam, Imam al-Mahdi

Hasan al-Askari feared that his young son Muhammad al-Qa'im, the designated twelfth Imam, would be harmed by the Caliph and so he was kept in hiding in Samarra so that few knew of his existence. He was present for the funeral of his father and then disappeared from the sight of people. Some reported that he entered a well beneath a mosque in Samarra. In this way he entered his existence as the Hidden Imam. He was never seen by the masses again. There were a series of four men who were appointed by him as his trustees (*wakil*) or mediators (*safir*). They were in contact with the Hidden Imam and were able to take petitions to him and receive his answers in guidance. This time was known as the Lesser Occultation. This continued until the death of the last of these trustees, Abu'l-Husayn Ali ibn Muhammad al-Sumari, in 941. The Imam had ordered him not to appoint any successors as he was severing contact with the world from this time onwards. This Greater Occultation, as it was called, continues to the present day.

We should recall the Hadith of Muhammad that he would leave after him two precious things, the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt, which would never separate and would act as guidance to the world until the Day of Judgement. The world cannot be left without the presence of an Imam as guide to humankind and so the Hidden Imam, during the period of the Greater Occultation, is understood to be present on earth but hidden from human sight. He is thus spoken of as the Imam of the Present Age. He is out of human contact and all guidance of the Shi'a community in his absence is based on the premise that the community should be guided along the lines established by the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt so that it is found to be on the correct path when he returns.

There was a Hadith of the Prophet in which he spoke of his community being guided by twelve righteous successors after his death. Muhammad was possessed of knowledge revealed to him by God; therefore he could see certain things that would happen in the future. The symbolism of the number twelve is significant for the Shi'a as it reminds them of the twelve tribes of Israel who succeeded Moses, and the twelve apostles of Jesus, who succeeded him. On this basis, this majority school amongst the Shi'a are called the Ithna' Ashari (or Twelvers).

The twelfth Imam will one day come out of occultation and take his rightful place as leader of humankind. This is made clear by some of his titles: al-Muntazar (“the awaited one”), al-Mahdi (“the rightly guided one”) and al-Qa'im (“the one who arises”). His return is eagerly awaited, longed for and prayed for by Ithna' Ashari Shi'a to this day. When he returns, he will fill the earth with justice and rule humanity in peace according to the guidance of the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt. He is expected to reappear in Makka between the Ka'ba and the Stone of Abraham but the year is unknown. He will then be hand-in-hand with Jesus, who will also return as the Messiah (in Arabic *al-masih* “the purified one”). The earth will be cleansed from impurities and unbelievers will repent or be killed. A time of correct belief and justice will come upon the earth as foretold by the Qur'an [Q. 24:55]. The earth will take on something of the character of paradise, in which there will be no more poverty, hunger or want. This will continue for an unknown period of time leading up to the Day of Judgement.

The centrality of the Imamate

The Qur'an refers to certain people as being “drawn close to God” [Q. 56:7-11]. These are spoken of in the same verses as “the Foremost Ones.” Amongst those drawn close to God was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is spoken of in the Qur'an as being purified, truthful, a witness and a blessing to humankind [Q. 3:42]. Indeed, the Qur'an speaks of four groups of people who are truly blessed by God and the most excellent companions: the Prophets, the truthful, the witnesses (those who bear testimony, e.g., through martyrdom) and the righteous [Q. 4:69]. From this list, the Imams are considered to be “the truthful”; as such, they have knowledge of good and evil but shun evil to live sinless lives worshipping God out of pure love alone. They are persons of spiritual excellence. They are not Prophets but the next in rank to them. The Prophets received direct revelation from God (*wahy*) whereas the Imams receive inspiration (*ilham*), which comes from the same source of divine light and knowledge, but it is the gift of interpretation and authoritative guidance rather than the direct revelation of a scripture. They are thus similar to the mysterious figure of Al-Khidr, who had been given knowledge by God to be the guide to Moses [Q. 18:65]. The Imams are “firmly grounded in knowledge” given to them by God so that they can interpret the ambiguous or metaphorical verses of the Qur'an [Q. 3:7; 34:6]. Only people of the highest spiritual order, who are pure in heart and protected from sin and error, can guide the community aright; such are the Imams. God has removed the veils of their hearts so that they can access the inner dimensions of faith.

Imams are not elected by people but divinely appointed; just as Ali was appointed by God and designated by the infallible Muhammad. As the Imams are also protected from error, when they designate their successors it is the appointment from God that is proclaimed. The Imams command both spiritual and temporal authority, even if circumstances mean that they cannot assume political leadership of the community. Thus they guide the community in every way. They are not in need of any human guidance because they are guided directly by God; only in such guides can humankind repose complete trust. They are the representatives of God on the earth (*khalifat ullah*). Just as the Hadith of Muhammad serve as sound guidance for living the Muslim life, so the teachings of the Imams have the authority of their impeccable status, thus their teaching is preserved and handed down within the community as a source of authority in drawing up the Shari'a. This means that the Shi'a have the benefit of a further three hundred years of infallible guidance after the death of Muhammad and the end of the revelation of the Qur'an.

Particularities of Shi'a belief and practice

There are five foundational **beliefs** that underlie the practice of Islam. These are: *Tawhid*, the oneness of God; *Adl*, the justice of God; *Nubuwwa*, prophethood; *Imama*, leadership; and *Qiyama*, the Day of Judgement. Every human being possesses the gift of reason and great stress is laid on this within the Shi'a tradition. Each individual believer is responsible for coming to their own conviction of belief in these five foundations based on the use of their reason. Through the use of reason, human beings can come to an understanding of the will of God; it is sometimes spoken of as "the internal prophet." Not everyone has the same capacity for rational thought but the Qur'an commands people to reason, ponder, think and reflect. There is a Hadith Qudsi in which Muhammad is given the following statement from God to convey: "God rewards and punishes according to their reason," which indicates the principle that those who have a higher rational capacity will be expected to demonstrate a higher level of knowledge, piety and obedience.

Those with the highest rational capacity have the duty to give guidance to those with less. In our own times, the time of the Hidden Imam, there is no access to his infallible guidance. This means that fallible men and women have to struggle to acquire knowledge and implement it in their lives. These are the scholars of Islam, who have a duty of leadership. Someone who commands the basic sciences of Islamic knowledge after the appropriate period of study will be called a scholar (m. *alim*, f. *alimah*). Such a person who has the necessary capacity and application will pass through years of higher study and research in a specialised field and potentially become an *ayatollah*. There are several hundreds of these within the community worldwide at the present time. A small group amongst them, those of outstanding piety and wisdom, will be prompted by their peers to accept the burden of becoming a *marja*, this is an *ayatollah* who is worthy of emulation, sometimes called in English, Grand Ayatollahs. A *marja* will give guidance that others may follow and accepts the responsibility to be answerable for that guidance before God. Ordinary Shi'a men and women have the duty to investigate which *marja* they believe to be the most pious and

wise in their generation and then to pledge themselves to follow his rulings (*taqlid*). Just as the Qur'an, the Prophet and the Imams give guidance to human beings to worship, obey, serve and love God, thus guiding, supplementing and confirming human reason, so the *marja* will guide, supplement and confirm those with less rational capacity, knowledge and piety in the name of the Hidden Imam until such time as he returns.

Up until the year 941, when the twelfth Imam went into the Greater Occultation, it was possible for people to obtain infallible guidance from him. From that time onwards, all guidance is provisional until such time as it is revised by the scholar who gave it or shown to be surpassed by the scholars of a later generation. The science of intellectual struggling is called in Arabic *ijtihad* and the scholar who performs it is a *mujtahid*. Such scholars must have a comprehensive knowledge of Arabic and be trained in philosophy and logic to be able to weigh arguments. They must have an extensive knowledge of the Qur'an and the Hadith in the Shi'a collections, together with the sciences of Qur'anic interpretation and Hadith criticism. They must have a high level of knowledge of the work of earlier generations of scholars and the points about which there is broad agreement (*ijma*). The doctrines and Shari'a of Islam were laid down by the infallible Imams but the theory and practice of *ijtihad* comes later. The Prophet and the Imams knew things with certainty by their God-given knowledge; they did not practise *ijtihad*. The academic system of *ijtihad* was developed in structure by great Shi'a scholars such as Shaykh al-Mufid (948-1022) and Shaykh Tusi (995-1067) and was further expanded by Allama al-Hilli (1250-1325). Allama means "the most learned one" and he was the first to bear the title Ayatollah, which means "a sign of God."

The belief in divine justice also shows the relationship with reason. God is just and never oppressive or tyrannical [Q. 3:182; 41:46; 21:47]. Right and wrong, good and bad are objective realities and open to be accessed by our reason. God is not arbitrary, but acts in a rational way. This emphasis on the justice of God was to counter the common Hanbali view that God's acts cannot be justified by human reason. In other words, God is not bound to act justly rather God's acts define what justice is. Shi'a thought gives a high place to the freedom of the human will without detracting from the ultimate authority of God in all things. Again, this was to counter those Muslims who held that human beings have no free will in their acts and everything is predestined by God. God has taught human beings the standards of justice and God acts according to those standards, therefore God does not make an arbitrary decision to send some people to Paradise and others to Hell but rather such judgements are based on the justice of God.

Shi'a belief is characterised by love for the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt. It is a characteristic of Prophets that they do not ask for any reward for their services [e.g., Noah Q. 26:109, Lot Q. 26:164, and Shu'ayb Q. 26:180]. Muhammad likewise sought no reward except that the Muslims should love his Ahl al-Bayt, not for their own sakes but for the sake of God, whose servants they are [Q. 42:23]. Such love for the Prophet and his family brings a reward to the believer, a growth in knowledge and a

deeper love of God [Q. 34:47]. He summarised his closeness to the Ahl al-Bayt by saying in a Hadith in which they are referred to as 'you': "I am at war with those with whom you are at war and at peace with those with whom you are at peace." This love for the Ahl al-Bayt is shown by the Shi'a practice of making visits to pray to God at the shrines that have been erected to mark their burial places (*ziyara*). Each year is punctuated with days to remember important events in their lives, such as their births and deaths. This is especially important as the first eleven Imams are all regarded as martyrs. As they were all sinless, they died a death of pure innocence for the sake of God, the truth and their people. In some way they have absorbed some of the suffering due to sinners, so part of the visitation of the grave includes the rite of weeping for their unmerited sufferings.

The **practices** of Islam are built on these foundations of belief and are numbered as ten: *salat*, *sawm*, *hajj*, *zakat*, *khums*, *jihad*, *amr bil maruf*, *nahy anil munkar*, *tawalla*, and *tabarra*.

The Prophet was instructed that Muslims should offer the formal prayers (*salat*) five times each day when he had an audience with God during his Ascent to Heaven (*mi'raj*), but the Qur'an actually speaks of three times at which the prayers should be offered. It is common for Shi'a Muslims to combine the five prayers into three occasions by praying *fajr* between dawn and sunrise, *zuhr* and *'asr* between noon and sunset, and *maghreb* and *isha* between sunset and late night. A line is included in the *adhan* (call to prayer) that was there in the time of the Prophet: "hasten to the best of deeds" (*hayya 'ala khayr al-amal*). In making the ritual ablutions (*wudu*), the arms are washed downwards from the elbow to the hand, the hands and face are washed and the uncovered head and feet are wiped with wet hands. Hands remain at the sides of the body during the recitation of the Qur'an and in the prostration, the forehead rests on a *turba* (a piece of sun-dried clay), or a stone, or something else that grew from the earth but cannot be used for food or clothing. This follows the practice of the Prophet and his Companions, who prostrated on the sand. When it was hot, they would take a small portion and cool it in their hands, then build a little pile on which the head could rest in prostration without burning.

Fasting each day (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan is observed until the redness of the sun disappears from the sky. Qur'an recitation takes place in groups but the additional night prayers are done privately; there is a custom of doing a thousand additional voluntary night *rakat* spread over the whole month. The *hajj* will normally include at the end of it a visit to the grave of the Prophet in Madina and to those of the Ahl al-Bayt who are buried in the cemetery of al-Baqi in that city. Payment of a proportion of one's wealth for the benefit of others falls into two parts: *zakat* is paid at the rate of 2.5% per annum on livestock, minerals, gold/silver and crops, where these exceed a certain quantity; and *khums* is paid at the rate of 20% per annum on what remains from annual income after household and commercial expenses are deducted. This money is entrusted to the Grand Ayatollahs in the name of the Hidden Imam to be used for education and welfare purposes [Q. 8:41].

The life of each man and woman must be characterised by the struggle in the way of God (*jihad*) against one's own wayward inclinations and weaknesses and, if necessary and called for by legitimate authority, against those who attack the defenceless and threaten the continuation of an Islamic way of life [Q. 2:190]. As the regents of God on earth, all human beings have a responsibility to establish a just and law-abiding society; this is summed up in the phrase "commanding the good and forbidding the evil" [*amr bil maruf wa nahy anil munkar* Q. 3:104]. Love for God, the Prophet and the Ahl al-Bayt (*tawalla*) and for those who love them is a required practice and should be the hallmark of the Shi'a; it follows that they should keep away from those who are ungodly and unjust to the Ahl al-Bayt and do not show that required love (*tabarra*).

Two particular practices of the Shi'a should be clarified to conclude this section: *muta* and *taqiyya*. Fixed-term marriage (*muta*) is based on the Qur'an [Q. 4:24] and was practised in the time of the Prophet with his approval. A man and woman freely agree to enter into a marriage contract for a term fixed in advance; it can be any term that is agreeable to both. Any children that come from the marriage are legitimate and inherit from both parents. At the end of the term fixed for the marriage, the woman must observe a waiting period (*'idda*) to ensure paternity of the child should she be pregnant. As in a permanent marriage, an agreed marriage gift (*mahr*) is given by the man to the woman. Classic examples of the practice of *muta* are in the case of students who are not in a position to contract a permanent marriage and men working on contracts away from their wives and families. It is a way of making sure that sexual urges have a legitimate outlet so that no-one resorts to fornication. In contemporary western society, where young people often have to seek and come to a decision about marriage partners without the traditional extended family structures for assistance, *muta* can be used with mutual consent for "getting to know each other better"; the two people concerned, by mutual agreement, can place limitations on their intimacy during this fixed-term marriage.

There are times when it can be dangerous to confess one's faith openly; indeed the Shi'a have faced times when to acknowledge that one was such would have resulted in death or persecution. Under these exceptional circumstances, it is permitted for a Muslim to conceal their faith (*taqiyya*) when their life, honour or property is in danger. Such situations were acknowledged by the Qur'an [Q. 16:106; 3:28; 40:28]. There is a balance between such dissimulation on minor matters for survival in particular circumstances and the fundamental denial of God and Islam; better to face death and martyrdom than to deny such fundamentals.

Ithna' Ashari Shi'a around the world

Iraq has always been associated with the Ahl al-Bayt containing the shrines of six Imams at Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad and Samarra; these have become important centres of pilgrimage and Najaf especially is the location of institutions of great learning. The Shi'a make up a majority of the population, although until this century they lived as a powerless minority, sometimes enduring great hardship. In the eastern province of

Saudi Arabia, which adjoins Iraq, there is a Shi'a community of some three millions. In the Gulf States: the Shi'a are a substantial but powerless majority in Bahrain and are minorities in Kuwait and the Emirates.

Shi'a concentrations in Greater Syria, especially modern-day Syria and the Lebanon, can probably be traced back to the ninth or tenth centuries. They make up the largest community in the Lebanon. In Afghanistan, where the Shi'a are mainly from the Hazari people, they are a minority, concentrated in the Herat region and the cities of Kabul and Khandahar. There have long been significant communities of Shi'a in the Indian subcontinent. In the Deccan region, they were significant from the 14th century onwards, being rulers in Hyderabad from 1589. In the north of India, there were important communities in Lucknow and Oudh, and from the 16th century in Kashmir and the Punjab. In Gujarat, the Khoja people converted to Islam and had a major presence amongst the Muslim communities of East Africa. In both modern India and Pakistan, the Shi'a make up significant minorities within the Muslim communities.

The Safavid Dynasty was established in Iran in 1501 and from this time onwards Shi'a Islam became the established religion. The masses converted to the Shi'a tradition and the Shah invited Shi'a jurists from al-Hillah in Iraq and Jabal 'Amil in the Lebanon to bolster academic teaching. The invitees were all from the Usuli School (meaning: based on 'principles' for the rational analysis of traditions), which was influenced by rationalist methods, *ijtihad* and *taqlid*. The scholars became established as a clerical group and grew in power, influence and wealth. The School is dominant amongst Shi'a today worldwide.

During the time of the Qajars in Iran (1795-1925) the clerical understanding was strengthened. The position of the *marja* was stressed with a tendency to recognise one outstanding *marja* as the *marja al-zaman* ("marja of the present time"). This clerical development saw a renewed emphasis on duties undertaken by them in the name of the Hidden Imam, such as the collection of *khums*, declaring *jihad* (e.g., against the Russian advance in 1804-1813) and declaring who had gone beyond the acceptable bounds of belief (*takfir*).

The position was significantly reversed under the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979). Reza Shah (1925-1941) followed a European political model, stressed absolute monarchy and suppressed the power of the clergy. Religious courts were suppressed in favour of civil courts, religious judges lost the power to certify and register contracts, an academic law degree was required for all judges and the state began to regulate religious education. Women were forbidden to wear the all-enveloping outer cloak (*chador*) and European clothing was required for men. Attempts were made to restrain mourning during the commemoration of the tragedy of Karbala during Muharram. Reza Shah supported Germany in the 1939-45 war and so was overthrown by British and Russian troops in 1941.

The son of Reza Shah, Muhammad Riza Shah, was installed in 1941 by the British and Russians with a view to controlling oil supplies. His was a weak rule and so the

clergy began to assert their role and call for the reintroduction of veiling for women and full mourning during Muharram. The outstanding *marja* of the time was Ayatollah Husain Ali Tabataba'i Burujirdi (1875-1962), who taught at Qum from 1949. He was apolitical and ordered the scholars to stay out of politics. In 1951 Musaddiq was elected Prime Minister with a mandate to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later BP) and so a coup was organised by the CIA and the military to overthrow him. The Shah became an ever-more autocratic ruler with tyranny exercised through the secret police. Under American influence, the Shah moved to a pro-Israel stance and the endowments of the religious establishments were put under his control.

The clergy became the focus of resistance to this oppressive rule. With the death of Tabataba'i in 1962, Ayatollah Khomeini became the leader of the clerical protest against the regime and so was sent into exile in 1964. He went first to Turkey but then settled to teach in Najaf, Iraq, until 1978 when, under the Shah's influence, he was exiled by the Iraqis to Paris. Opposition to the Shah and American influence grew under a combination of communists, intellectuals and religious groups until he went into exile on 16 January 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile on 1 February 1979 to spearhead the Islamic Revolution. He enjoyed overwhelming support from the masses and so the other revolutionary groups faded with the eventual creation of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini drew on and developed the principle of the governance of the legal scholar (*vilayet-i faqih*), leading to the direct governance of the religious scholars (*ulama*).

Minority groups amongst the Shi'a

Two groups within the Shi'a family have been seen to depart from the Ithna' Ashari majority position due to disputes about the rightful succession in the line of Imams: the Zaydis and the Isma'ilis. In history, there were other such minority groups but they either faded out or were re-absorbed into these three.

The Zaydis disputed the rightful fifth Imam and chose to uphold Zayd ibn Ali ibn Husayn as Imam, based on his opposing the Umayyads by force of arms. He was the half-brother of Muhammad al-Baqir, who was accepted as the fifth Imam by the majority. The Zaydis claimed that the Imamate could pass to any of the descendants of Ali (the Alids), who was pious and learned and staked a claim to it "sword in hand." They disputed the doctrine of designation (*nass*), rejected the concept of the impeccables (*ma'sum*), and did not accept the occultation of an Imam or the return of Imam al-Mahdi. They excluded the claim of an under-age boy to the Imamate. They accepted the Caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar, even though Ali was "more excellent," and so took a different position about the reliability of Companions as transmitters of Hadith, thus leading to their own Hadith collection. They founded a Zaydi state in Tabaristan in the ninth century, which endured until 928, was re-founded in 964 and lasted until the twelfth century. A Zaydi state was founded in the Yemen in 901, based at Sa'da and later at San'a, which endured until it was

overthrown in a republican revolt in 1962. Since the death of the last Zaydi Imam in about 1970, the Imamate has been vacant.

The Isma'ilis upheld Muhammad ibn Isma'il as the rightful seventh Imam. Over time, they developed an esoteric doctrine of Islam, claiming that there was a hidden (*batini*) meaning behind every apparent (*zahiri*) verse of the Qur'an. There was an Isma'ili state in part of Persia in the tenth century: the Qaramitans (Carmathians). The Isma'ilis founded the powerful Fatimid Dynasty (909-1171) in Egypt based on the newly founded city of Cairo, which, at its height, ruled into North Africa and down both sides of the Red Sea.

The Fatimids split into two groups in 1094 over a dispute about the rightful successor to the Imamate, to found the Musta'lian and Nizari branches. The Musta'lian Isma'ilis had a line of Imams until 1132, when the twenty-first Imam, Abu'l-Qasim Tayyib went into occultation leaving the leadership of the community in the hands of the Da'i Mutlaqs (Universal Missionaries). They then moved to the Yemen. The Musta'lian Isma'ilis again split over a question of succession in 1590, to found the Sulaymani Bohras, who remained in the Yemen, and the Da'udi Bohras, who spread out to India, the Persian Gulf, Burma and later East Africa and the West. Both groups were heavily influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy. They saw the seventh Imam as a law-giver in succession to Muhammad, who introduced a Shari'a based on esoteric knowledge and privileged allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an (*ta'wil*).

After the fall of the Fatimid Dynasty, the Nizari Isma'ilis moved to Iran and stayed in their fortress of Alamut, where they lived a hidden life until their re-emergence in the nineteenth century, when their leader, the first Aga Khan, moved to India. They claim a line of Living Imams until the present day Karim Aga Khan IV (b.1936, assumed Imamate in 1957). He is held to be the forty-ninth Imam in direct line of succession from Muhammad, through Fatima and Ali. They are the only group within the Shi'a that profess to have a living Imam and do not believe in occultation; there will always be an Imam of the Present Age accessible to the people. Because they stress the inner, hidden or *batini* dimensions of Islam and the importance of reasoning in every new age and situation, they have developed a more inward spiritual code of Islamic living. They are to be found in the Indian Subcontinent, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and East Africa, and in western countries to which they have migrated in recent decades.