



SHI'ITE DOCTRINE

SHI'ITE DOCTRINE. Shi'ite doctrine is usually considered to be based on five principles. The first three, called “the principles of religion” (*oṣul al-dīn*; a somewhat ambiguous ascription which may also mean “theology”; Gimaret *EI* ²), are fully shared with Sunnism: belief in the unity of God (*tawḥīd*); in the mission of the prophets and especially that of the last among them Moḥammad (*nobowwa*); belief in the existence of reward and punishment in the hereafter (*ma'ād*). The last two, known as “principles of the School” (*oṣul al-madḥab*, i.e., Imamism) are belief in divine justice (*ʿadl*) and in the sacred nature and mission of the imams (*imāma*; now refer to Sobhani, 2001, chap. 2). However, to articulate matters of faith in such a manner seems reductionist and late. It is true, for example, that some earlier works, *al-Nokat al-eʿteqādiyya* by Šayḵ al-Mofid (d. 413/1022; Mofid, 1993, X, pp. 16-47) or *Oṣul al-dīn* by Fakr-al-Dīn Moḥammad b. al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥelli (q.v.; d. 771/1369; mss. nos. 349 and 350 at Āstān-e qods) and *al-Neẓāmiyya fī madḥab al-emāmiyya* by Moḥammad Ḳwājagi Širāzi (16th century; Ḳwājagi Širāzi, 1997) lean in this direction; however, almost all other such texts, both in Arabic and Persian, seem to have been written from the 17th and 18th century onwards (Ṭehrāni, II, pp. 181-196). Moreover, not all authors are in agreement regarding the list of principles. According to an early treatise, *Oṣul al-dīn* attributed to the 8th imam ʿAli-al-Rezā (q.v.), these principles are: divine unity, the science of the licit (*ʿelm al-ḥalāl*), the science of the illicit (*ʿelm al-ḥarām*), obligatory (*wājebāt*) and recommended (*mostaḥabbāt*) deeds (Kanturi, I, pp. 49-50). In his *Oṣul-e dīn* written in Persian (mss. nos. 39 and 351 at Āstān-e qods) **Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Ardabili** (993/1585; known as Moqaddas-e Ardabili) deleted



“justice” from his list of the Five Principles. In his *Nawāder al-aḡbār*, [Mollā Moḡsen Fayḡ Kāšāni](#) (1091/1680) seems to have added ‘*aql*’ (spiritual intelligence as well as dialectical and logical reason) and ‘*elm*’ (initiatory knowledge and/or religious science; Kāšāni, 1996, chaps. 1 and 2). Finally, the same author might present different lists of the “principles”; for example *Żiyā’-al-Din Jorjāni* (c. 9th /15th century) proposes five principles in his *Resāla-ye oṣul-e ḡamsa*, whereas in his *Resāla-ye oṣul-e din*, he deletes *ma’ād* and adds four other principles, namely: devotion towards the imams (*tawalli*), dissociation from enemies of the latter (*tabarrā*), ordering good (*amr-e ma’ruf*) and forbidding evil (*nahy-e monkar*; Jorjāni 1997, pp. 179-88, 225-32). In reality, Shi’ite doctrine is much more complex than that of the five principles which seem to bear the mark of the rationalist tradition from Buyid Baghdad (see POLITICAL SHI’ISM) and appear to have been inspired by the Mo’tazelite *oṣul ḡamsa*. In the summary that follows, an attempt will be made to present the doctrinal foundations upon which the articles of faith and most essential beliefs of Imami Shi’ism specifically rest. This will provide a better understanding of both the essential structural traits as well as finer points that will not be discussed here, notions such as the variability of divine decisions (*badā*), preservation of the secret (*taqiyya*), intercession (*ṣafā’a/tawassol*), divine Grace (*loṭf*). This summary is mainly based on the earliest corpus of Hadith reporting traditions going back to the first three centuries of the Hijra and mostly of Mesopotamian provenance, and more specifically, from the city of Kufa (van Ess, I, pp. 395-96). This corpus was primarily put into writing between approximately 250/864 and 350/961 by traditionalists belonging to the Iranian Schools of Qom and Rayy, such as Abu Ja’far Barqī (274/887 or 280/893), Ṣaffār Qomī (290/902-3), ‘Ali b. Ebrāhim Qomī (towards 307/919), [Abu’l-Naẓr Moḡammad b. Mas’ud ‘Ayyāši](#) (circ. 320/932), Moḡammad b. Ya’qub Kolayni (329/940-41), Ebn Abi Zaynab No’māni (towards 360/971) and [Ebn Bābawayh al-Ṣaduq](#) (381/991; Amir-Moezzi 1992, pp. 48-54; 2004, pp. 85-88).

The veritable axis around which the entire Shi’ite doctrine revolves is the figure of the imam. By summarizing to a great extent, one might even say that Shi’ism is fundamentally an imamology. Indeed from theology to ethics, from Koranic exegesis to canonical law, from cosmology to ritual and to eschatology, all doctrinal aspects, all the chapters of faith are determined and find ultimate meaning by a special conception of the figure of the Guide. One could say that Shi’ism developed around a two-fold vision of the world (*weltanschauung*). Let us examine how the figure of the imam, in his different dimensions, is omnipresent there and acts as a veritable centre of gravity.



(1) *Dual vision*. All reality possesses at least two levels: one manifest, apparent, exoteric (*ẓāher*), and another non-manifest/inner, secret, esoteric (*bāṭen*), hidden beneath the apparent level and able to consist of other levels still further hidden (*bāṭen al-bāṭen*). This dialectic of the apparent and the hidden, the exoteric and esoteric, distinct but nonetheless interdependent, constitutes a fundamental, omnipresent credo. It is at work in the different spheres of faith (Amir-Moezzi, 1997).

First in theology: God Himself comprises two ontological levels: first, of the Essence (*dāt*). This is said to be forever inconceivable, unimaginable, above all thought, beyond all knowledge. It can only be described by God through revelations and can only be apprehended by a negative apophatic theology. This recalls the *Deus absconditus*, the unknowable that forms the hidden, esoteric level of God, the level of the absolute abscondity of God (Kolayni, n.d., I, pp. 140sq. and 169sq.; Ebn Bābawayh, 1958, chap. 11; idem, 1978, chaps. 2, 6 and 28; idem 1984, pp. 2sq. sq.) However, if things were to remain so, no relation would be possible between the Creator and His creatures. Thus God, in his infinite grace, lets blossom in his own being another level: of Names and Attributes (*asmā' wa ṣefāt*) by which He reveals himself and makes himself known. This revealed level, recalling the *Deus revelatus* of Christian theology, is no longer God the Unknowable, but God the Unknown who aspires to be known. It is the exoteric, manifest, revealed level of God that can be known in Him (Ṣaffār, pp. 61-66; Kolayni, n.d., I, pp. 196 and 283sq.; Ebn Bābawayh, 1978, chaps. 12, 22 and 24). Now, the Names and Attributes act in creation by means of vehicles, "Divine Organs," which are just as much locations for the manifestation of God (*maẓhar, majlā*), as they are theophanies. The theophany par excellence, the most exalted place of revelation for the Divine Names, i.e., of that which can be known of God, is the Imam in his cosmic dimension, a metaphysical being that comprises all divine Organs. It is the Imam in an ontological sense—archetypal, universal (Ebn Bābawayh, 1958, pp. 114-16 and 149-53; idem, 1985, chap. 22; Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pp. 73sq. sq.). The knowledge of his reality is thus tantamount to that which can be known of God, since the cosmic Imam constitutes the revealed aspect, the exoteric level of God (Amir-Moezzi, 1996a).

In turn, the cosmic Imam possesses an apparent level and a hidden dimension. His esoteric, his unrevealed aspect, is precisely his metaphysical aspect, cosmic, "in the sky" according to an expression from one of the oldest sources (e.g. Ṣaffār, pp. 107-8; Forāt, 374; Ebn Bābawayh, 1958, pp. 110-11). His



exoteric, his apparent level, his place of manifestation – these are the historical imams of the different cycles in sacred History (Şaffār, pp. 61-66; Ebn Bābawayh, 1985, chap. 22). Here we are already dealing with prophetology.

Indeed for Shi'ites, each great prophet, each messenger of God, is accompanied in his mission by one or many imams: from Adam, the First Man and prophet, to Moḥammad, “the seal of legislative prophethood,” having followed Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Solomon, Moses and Jesus among others. Moreover, these different cycles, these great messengers and their imams are interlinked by an uninterrupted chain of minor prophets, imams and “saints” that together constitute the great family of the “Friends of God” (*wali*, pl. *awliyā' Allāh*), those who bear and transmit Divine Friendship or Alliance (*walāya*), (Pseudo (?) –Mas'udi, passim; Amir-Moezzi, 1993, pp. 319-20), a key term in all of Shi'ite doctrine to which we return shortly. These are the places of manifestation of the archetypal cosmic Imam, his revealed face. In Imami Shi'ism, the *awliyā* par excellence are the group of the Fourteen Impeccable Ones: Moḥammad, his daughter Fāṭema and the twelve imams. Thus, thanks to a theology of successive “cascading” theopanies, knowledge of what is knowable in God, the ultimate mystery of being, begins by knowledge of the man of God. In this manner, a theology of theophany (*tajalli*) seeks to avoid both *ta'til* (agnosticism, a theological conception maintaining effective knowledge of God to be impossible) as well as *tašbih* (associationism /assimilationism), a conception that establishes creaturehood as the epistemological basis for knowledge of the divine (Corbin 1971-2, index s.v.)

What do the Friends of God accomplish? They enable the word of God to reach man. At specific moments, this is revealed by the Holy Books, sacred scriptures brought by important legislating prophets that the Qur'ān calls “those endowed with firm resolution”(*ulu'l-'azm*). Now, this Revelation too possesses an exoteric, apparent aspect, and an esoteric secret dimension, a “letter” beneath which a “spirit” is hidden, to use the Pauline analogy. The prophet-messenger is surely privy to both levels, however, his mission consists of presenting the letter of the Revelation, its exoteric level, “that which has descended (*tanzil*), to a majority of people (*akṭar*), to the mass of believers (*āmma*) from his community. As just mentioned, he is accompanied in his mission by one or more imams. It is evident that the sources do not all agree on the names. For example, the most recurrent list names Seth as imam of Adam, Sem as imam of Noah, Ishmael as that of Abraham, Aaron or Joshua for



Moses, Simon, John and all the disciples for Jesus, obviously 'Ali and his descendants for Moḥammad (Pseudo (?) –Mas'udi, pp. 8-90; Ebn Bābawayh 1970, vol. IV, chapter 72, pp. 129-30; idem, 1985, chapter 22, n. 1 and chap. 58; nos. 4-5; Rubin, 1979, passim; Kohlberg, 1980, passim). By rigorous complementarities and parallelism, the mission of the imams is precisely to teach the “spirit” of the Book, its esoteric level revealing the secret of its origin (*ta'wil*), not to all, but to a minority of initiated (*aqall*) that constitute the elite (*kāṣṣa*) of the community. The Shi'ites thus claim their minority status to be a sign of privilege (Amir-Moezzi, 1998, pp. 196 sq.; Kohlberg, 2000, passim). Without initiatory teaching by the imam, the text of revelation does not reveal its depth, like a barren letter whose spirit were to remain unknown; this explains why the Qur'ān is called the silent book or imam (*ketāb/emām ṣāmet*) whereas the imam is said to be the eloquent/speaking Qur'ān (*Qor'ān nāteq*) (Ayoub, passim; Bar-Asher, pp. 141sq.). Thus the prophet-messenger (*nabi, rasul*) is said to be the messenger of the exoteric of religion or of the exoteric religion that Shi'ite vocabulary calls *eslām*, literally, “the submission,” that is to say submission to the letter of Revelation thus making the mass of believers *moslem*, the “submitted” or “muslims.” In parallel terms, the imam (*emām, wali*) is the messenger of the esoteric of Revelation, the initiator into spiritual religion—concealed beneath the letter—technically called *imān*, literally “faith.” The people of faith, the faithful believers (*mo'menun*), are therefore, according to technical vocabulary, those initiated into the secrets of religion, the people of spiritual hermeneutics, adepts of the imam, in a word, Shi'ites, (Corbin, 1971-72, index s.v. *ta'wil*; Jambet, 2003, passim) which is why all religions have had their majority “Muslims” and their minority “Shi'ites,” a mass of “people of the exoteric” (*ahl al-zāher*), unable to fathom depth and an elite consisting of “people of the esoteric” (*ahl al-bāṭen*), initiated into spiritual levels of the faith. The historical Shi'ites, those of historical Islam, thus form the last link in a long initiatory chain that traverses history, going back to Adam and the initiated “Shi'ites” of his imam Seth. However, a distinction is made between those satisfied with exoteric aspects of their imams' teaching and those that seek to grasp secret dimensions of the latter, superficial Shi'ites and authentic Shi'ites respectively. Thus, there exist exoteric Shi'ites and esoteric Shi'ites (No'māni, pp. 300-302; Eskāfi, pp. 37-43).

And what in the ultimate analysis is the initiatory teaching of these imams in succession? No less than the unveiling of the mysteries of God, the world and man; that is to say, in Shi'ite terms, mysteries of the Imam, the Man manifesting in the universe, both metaphysical as well as physical, the



revealed God, secret of secrets of all religions. The terrestrial imams are thus presented as the bearers and transmitters of a Secret whose content is precisely the metaphysical Imam.

The dual vision of the world may be represented by a table consisting of “complementary pairs” based on the dialectical of the manifest and the hidden:

MANIFEST	HIDDEN
Exoteric (<i>ẓāher</i>)	Esoteric (<i>bāṭen</i>)
Names and Attributes	Essence
Prophet/prophethood (<i>nabi/nabowwa</i>)	Imam/imamate (<i>emāma/walāya</i>)
Letter of the Revelation (<i>tanzil</i>)	Spiritual hermeneutics (<i>ta'wil</i>)
Submission to exoteric religion (<i>eslām</i>)	Initiation into esoteric religion (<i>imān</i>)
The Majority/the masses (<i>akṭar/ʿamma</i>)	The Minority /the elite (<i>aqall/ kāṣṣa</i>)

(2) *Dualistic Vision*. Concurrent with this dual vision, Shi'ite doctrine is based upon another fundamental belief: a dualistic vision of the world. According to this, the history of creation is a story of a cosmic battle between the forces of Good and Evil, between light and darkness. Given the vital role of initiation and knowledge, as we have just seen, one might say that Good is knowledge and Evil is ignorance. The battle between these respective forces, of these universal antagonistic powers, is woven into the fabric of existence. According to cosmogonic traditions, what marks creation ever since its origin, is the battle between the armies of cosmic Intelligence (*al-'aql*) and those of cosmic Ignorance (*al-jahl*), respectively symbols of the Imam and his adepts on the one hand, and the Enemy of the Imam and his supporters on the other (Barqi, I, pp. 196-98; Kolayni n.d., I, pp. 23-26; Pseudo (?) -Mas'udi, pp. 1-3; Ebn Šo'ba, pp. 423-25; Amir-Moezzi, 2000a, pp. 59-60). This primordial battle has repercussions from one age to another, opposing the Friends of God and their faithful adepts to forces of Ignorance in each period. Using Koranic expressions, Shi'ite texts speak of the permanent battle between the people of



the right/benediction (*aṣḥāb al-yamin/maymana*) and those of the left/malediction (*aṣḥāb al-šemāl/maš'ama*) (Qomi, II, pp. 357-61 and 453; Forāt, pp. 465, 513-14). According to theories of cycles, which are far from being clear, ever since creation, the world has known two kinds of government (*dawla*): of God in which prophets and imams, as guides of light and justice, are able to openly teach esoteric truths, and that of Satan in which these truths can only be transmitted and practiced secretly, as the world in this case is under the influence of the guides of darkness and injustice. Satan having been the adversary (*zedd*) of Adam, the history of adamic humanity is marked by adversity and violence by demonic forces of Ignorance; during the adamic cycle, these forces will remain dominant—a majority driving the minority of persecuted initiates towards marginality and isolation (Pseudo (?) –Mas'udi, 14sqq., 'Ayyāši, I, p. 199; Kohlberg 1980, pp. 45-46). Thus it will be until the End of Time and the advent of the Mahdi, the eschatological savior, who will definitively conquer the forces of Evil (Amir-Moezzi, 2000a).

With the advent of each religion, due to usurpation of power by the “guides of injustice,” within the community there takes shape a majority, all the while subject to the letter of this religion, that refuses to believe in the existence of a hidden spirit beneath the letter and thus challenges the existence of the imam as master of hermeneutics. Manipulated by its guides of ignorance, this majority thus deprives religion of its most profound element, condemning itself to decadence and violence. The Adversaries (*zedd*, pl. *azdād*), Enemy of the Imam and his supporters, are therefore not necessarily pagans or adepts of another religion. The Israelites that betray Moses by worshipping the golden calf and Moḥammad's Companions who reject 'Ali's election are not non-Jews or non-Muslims, but those who deny the esoteric dimension of religion (the term applied here again is *walāya*) by rejecting the authority of the initiated Guide. They are the ones that the Shi'ites term “people of the exoteric, appearances, superficiality” (*ahl al-ẓāher*, according to different meanings of the word *ẓāher*), those subject to literal religion or rather Muslims gone astray (*moslemzāll*) (Kohlberg, 1980, pp. 45-46; Amir-Moezzi, 1998, *passim*). Thus in strictly doctrinal terms (though in reality history proves to be much more complex in terms of actual conduct) an initiated Shi'ite will feel closer to a Jewish or Christian “Shi'ite” i.e., one who is initiated into the esoterism of Judaism and Christianity, than a Muslim Sunni exoterist, considered from the outset as an adversary. Moreover, it is true that most early Shi'ite texts sing the praises of the Shi'ites as a whole (e.g. Ebn Bābawayh, 1963-64) but other texts make a clear distinction between “true Shi'ites,” i.e., those truly initiated into



the imam's teachings, and "superficial Shi'ites," or the mass of believers who only have a shallow understanding of the doctrine and can quite easily be led astray (see above).

In the historical context of the fierce conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites, given this dualistic vision of the world, two factors become critical.

First, discretion: Indeed, in order to protect one's own life and security, and those of one's imam and his companions, as well as the integrity of his doctrine, "secrecy" designated by terms such as *taqiyya*, *ketmān* and *ḵab'* is a canonical obligation for the Shi'ite. Under the rule of Satan, which is the case for humanity today, revealing secret teachings not only arouses disbelief but invites mockery, creates incomprehension, begets curses and provokes violence (Kohlberg, 1975, 1995). Secondly, in the realm of feelings and sentiments, there is emphasis on, sincerity of intention, whose necessity is underlined by unrelenting repetition in the sources: the faithful Shi'ite is constantly called upon to cultivate unconditional love, loyalty at all costs and willful submission towards the imam the attributes required from a disciple with respect to his master. The term used to designate this intense feeling is again one frequently mentioned above, namely, *walāya*. However, the believer is simultaneously called upon to dissociate from enemies of the imam, to practice *barā'a* (Kohlberg, 1986, *passim*). In a universe governed by war and its constraints, sacred alliance (*walāya*) with the initiating guide and the knowledge he dispenses cannot be complete unless accompanied with sacred dissociation (*barā'a*) from those who seek only to destroy true knowledge and its bearers (Amir-Moezzi, 2002, *passim*).

Here too, one might represent the dualistic vision of things by a table formed of "opposing terms" based on the dialectic of Good and Evil:

GOOD/KNOWLEDGE

EVIL/IGNORANCE

Cosmic Intelligence (*al-'aql*)

Cosmic Ignorance (*al-jahl*)



The Imam and his initiated faithful	Adversaries (<i>'adoww</i>) of the Imam and their supporters.
Guides of light/justice/guidance darkness/injustice/ error	(<i>a'emmat al-ḡalāl/ḡolm/ḡalāl</i>)
(<i>a'emmat al-nur/'adl/hodā</i>)	
People of Right / benediction malediction	People of the Left / (<i>aṣḥāb al-šemāl/maš'ama</i>)
(<i>aṣḥāb al-yamin/maymana</i>)	
Love / Alliance with the imam dissociation from his Enemy <i>walāya</i>	<i>barā'a</i>

The specifically Shi'ite faith seems to be characterized by this double vision of the world. The dual conception of reality, illustrated by “complementary pairs,” can be represented by a vertical axis of Initiation, since the transition from manifest to hidden, from exoteric to esoteric, occurs thanks to the sacred teaching of the imams, proximity to the divine and understanding of the mysteries of being. Similarly, one might apply the symbol of the horizontal axis of Battle to the dualistic vision of the world, illustrated by the “pair of opposites,” universal and perpetual battle between forces of knowledge and those of ignorance. Initiation and battle: the entire historical destiny of Shi'ism can be considered as a tension between these two constants which are its very own, since it considers that the first determines spirituality of humanity and the second its history, since the believer is constantly called upon to keep himself in balance at the point of intersection of these axes (Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pp. 308-10; 2004, pp. 38-40). Moreover, one notices that the notion of *walāya* is the only one to be found in both schemes; this serves to illustrate its principal role in the very structure of the doctrine. Designating not only the nature, status and function of the imam but also the believer's attitude towards him, the term has become almost synonymous with Shi'ism since the Shi'ites very often call themselves “people of *walāya*” (*ahl al-walāya*).”

The figure of the imam. Throughout this double vision of the world, the imam's



role proves to be pivotal and fundamental. Thanks to his very being and his knowledge, transmitting secret truths, and carrying the banner of knowledge and initiating others to follow suite, and ultimately preventing the otherwise certain submergence of the cosmos into darkness, the imam in his many dimensions is truly the Alpha and the Omega of Shi'ite doctrine. What is the definition of the imam? What are his special features? How does the corpus of sacred texts of Shi'ism, i.e., Hadith going back to the Impeccable Ones (see [ĀHĀRDĀH MA'SUM](#)), represent him in the religious conscience of believers? Three definitions seem discernable here, reflecting the different levels of reality that incarnate the figure of the imam, illustrating the famous words attributed to imam Ja'far-al-Šādeq according to which Shi'ite doctrine consists of three levels: exoteric, esoteric, esoteric of esoteric (Saffār, p. 29; for the rectification of this text, Amir-Moezzi, 1997, p. 40, note 8).

(1)*Imam as religious scholar.* At one level, the imam is the uncontestable master in religious matters in the strict sense of the term. He teaches exoteric aspects of law, exegesis, theology, cosmology and other disciplines to an audience comprised of all kinds of students: Shi'ites—initiated and uninitiated—but also to non-Shi'ites (a large section of the Hadith corpus corresponding to these disciplines and the chains of transmission readily attest to this; see also Amir-Moezzi, 1997, p. 61). In addition to the fact that they are descendants of the Prophet, it is especially as religious scholars—more specifically, as jurists and traditionalists—that some imams are highly respected in the Sunni tradition. Justifiably so: exoteric teaching of an imam does not contain any particularly Shi'ite traits and can therefore be heard and understood by non-Shi'ites, without shocking them.

(2)*Imam as initiatory guide and thaumaturge.* In this case, it is the figure of the imam as revealed by teaching destined only for Shi'ites. The esoteric aspects of doctrinal matters, as well as technical terminology lead to a conception of the figure of the imam that by far exceeds the limits imposed by what is to become Sunni “orthodoxy.” It is at this level that the texts relate that the conception and birth of the imam are miraculous, that he possesses a number of supernatural abilities since childhood, and especially that he is imam because he fulfils two important functions: he is the initiatory guide and thaumaturge par excellence. In other words, he possesses initiatory knowledge (*‘ilm*) as well as the fruit of this wisdom—supranormal powers (*qodra, a‘ājeb*; Amir-Moezzi, 1992, chap. 3, III-2, III-4). The sources of the imam's sacred knowledge regarding the mysteries of God, man and the universe are many. First, celestial



sources: just like the prophets, the imam receives inspiration thanks to celestial beings, whence his appellation *muḥaddaṭ* “one who speaks to angels” (Kohlberg, 1979, *passim*). He is also capable of celestial ascension to renew and increase his knowledge (Amir-Moezzi, 1996b). Initiatory science also has occult sources: supernatural forces that “leave a mark on the heart” or “pierce the eardrum” and “the column of light” in which the imam can contemplate answers to his questions. Then there are written sources: the holy books of previous religions, the Qur’ān—all in their complete versions, not falsified—as well as a certain number of secret texts containing extraordinary knowledge transmitted from imam to imam, such as the Book of ‘Ali, Fāṭema’s Collection, the All-Encompassing Page (*al-ṣaḥīfat al-jāme‘a*), the book of *Jafr*, etc. (Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pp. 185-227; Kohlberg, 1993, *passim*). Finally, oral sources, that is to say teaching received directly by one or more of the previous Guides.

The miraculous powers of the imam flow mainly from his knowledge. Most among them are moreover presented as sciences: knowledge of the past, present and future; of events in heaven and on earth; of consciences, of souls, languages, reading minds, occult sciences etc. The imams can resuscitate the dead, cure illnesses, rejuvenate the old, travel and transport others supernaturally etc. Finally, they possess a number of “objects of power” such as the magical formula representing the great Name of God and relics with miraculous powers inherited from prophets such as Adam’s tunic, Solomon’s seal, Moses ark or the invincible weapon belonging to Moḥammad (Amir-Moezzi, 2000b; Loebenstein, 2003).

(3)*Imam as Revealed Face of God*. This aspect of imamology forms the most esoteric chapter of theology and seems to constitute the ultimate secret of Shi’ite doctrine. Destined only for initiated Shi’ites, this teaching defines the terrestrial imam as the sense-perceptible manifestation of the cosmic Imam, who in turn is the place of revelation for what God reveals of Himself. This definition clearly establishes the basis—considered highly subversive—of divinization of the Friend of God. Thus by a theology of successive theophanies, the terrestrial imam is said to reveal God. A limited number of sayings going back to the imams, recalling the “paradoxical speech” (*ṣaṭaḥāt*) of mystics, and disseminated here and there shrouded in the mass of traditions, audaciously evokes the identity of the imam in his ultimate ontological reality with God revealed through his Organs and his Names and Attributes (e.g. Furāt, pp. 178, 371; ‘Ayyāši, II, pp. 17-18; Ebn Bābawayh, 1978, pp. 117, 151-52; Amir-Moezzi, 2002, pp. 730-32). In this respect, the most



significant texts are certain sermons attributed to 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb, imam par excellence, in which, by virtue of a long succession of affirmations, he boldly declares his divinity: "I am the treasurer of knowledge; I am the secret of the invisible; I am the secret of secrets, I am the Face of God; I am the *First*; I am the *Last*; I am the *Hidden*; I am the *Manifest*; I am the created; I am the *Creator*; I am the Supreme Judge; I possess the incisive Word; I have penetrating insight into the path of the Book; I am the *Compassionate*; I am the *Merciful* . ." (the words in italics are part of the Koranic Names of God) (Amir-Moezzi, 1996a, *passim*).

All these definitions of the figure of the imam form an integral part of *walāya*—already encountered on many occasions. Shi'ism defines itself as based upon the concept of divine Alliance or Friendship. Presented as the esoteric dimension of prophethood (*al-walāya bāṭen al-nobowwa*), the religion of the imams, in its esoteric aspect is defined as being the very secret of Moḥammad's religion (Kolayni, 1969, II, p. 14). The terrestrial imam is the guardian and transmitter of this secret whereas the cosmic Imam is its content. As the absolute model for initiated believers, the imam as the Divine Guide, presents the divinization of the man of God as the final horizon of the doctrine.

The dual and dualistic visions of the world as well as the omnipresent figure of the imam as bearer of *walāya* constitutes the core of Shi'ite doctrine upon which many religious beliefs and practices are grafted. They characterize what one is able to know of Shi'ism from its earliest sources and seem to distinguish the original esoteric and non-rational tradition that predominated until the Buyid period. From this period onwards, with progressive influence of the "rationalist tradition" of the School of Baghdad the original doctrine will be masked in a great many theological and legal dogmas (see POLITICAL SHI'ISM).

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