THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHĪ'A CONCEPT OF THE IMAMATE

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Introduction

The word Shī'a basically means partisans. They started after the death of Muhammad and were composed of people who separated from the following of the first three successors of Muhammad.[1] The early Shī'a were a very political group who believed that 'Alī had the right to the caliphate immediately after the death of Muhammad. They emphasized not only 'Alī's relationship to Muhammad[2] but also the old tribal concept of *ahl al bayt* (people of the household), the family from whom the chiefs of the tribe were chosen. Today, historians and scholars of Islam view the founding of the Shī'a as an important schism in Islam[3] which has survived from the early period of Islamic history in the Seventh C. to contemporary times.

In its process of formation and growth, the Shī'a have developed certain doctrines that were to have repercussions on Islamic society as a whole. Of the Shī'a doctrines, the concept of the *imāmah* stands out as significant for, while it constitutes a fundamental difference between the Shī'a and the majority of the Islamic community, it also gave rise to cleavages and divisions among the Shī'a. It is because of the resulting effects on the Muslims that the concept of the *imāmah* merits study. This paper will therefore focus on the theoretical concept of the *imāmah* as espoused by the different groups of the Shī'a.

This paper relies mainly on the materials written in the English language available at both the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University libraries. Among the major works are Tabātabā'ī *Shi'ite Islam*[4] which not only deals with the historical development of the Shī'a but also discusses their essential doctrines from a Shi'ite point of view. Donaldson's *Shi'ite Religion*[5] also provides a historical view of the Shī'a and their teachings. A part of Donaldson's book is a translation of Majlisi's *Hayātu'l Kulūb*. Well-

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[1] Abū Bakr, 'Umar and Uthmān. For a brief history of the Shī'a, see Allāmah S.M.H. Tabātabā'ī, *Shi'ite Islam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975) Chapter I. Also, Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Ismā'īlism* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1940).

[2] As a nephew, son-in-law and trusted companion.

[3] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 207.

[4] *op. cit.*

[5] D.M. Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion* (London: Luzac, 1933).

hausen,[6] on the other hand, treats the political dynamics of the Shī'a and the Khāwarij, giving an insight into the motivations of these two schismatic groups. Sachedina's work[7] focusses on the Mahdi as understood among the Imāmis and at the same time discusses the teachings of various Shī'a factions. Jafri, in his historical treatment of the Shī'a emphasizes the role of Ja'far al Sadiq in the development of the Shī'a teachings. He also asserts that explanation of the growth of the Shī'a in terms of their political differences is an oversimplification of a complex situation.[8] Among the articles that proved most beneficial to the study are Madelung's article on the *imāmah* in the *Encyclopedia of Islam,*[9] Friedlander's "Heterodoxies of the Shī'a,"[10] as well as Ivanov's "Isma'ilis and Qarmatians."[11] Madelung's work on the subject elaborates on the doctrine of the *imāmah* among the different Shī'a groups. Friedlander, on the other hand, deals mainly with the work of Ibn Hazm on the Shī'a, pointing out the differences, more than the similarities of Shī'a beliefs. Ivanov deals mainly with the Isma'ilis but also attempts to correct what he considers as misconceptions on the Shī'a which, he believes, are largely due to the methodological errors of the orientalists. Other articles that are also helpful to the study are mentioned in the bibliography.

II. The Concept of the *Imāmah*

The development of the Shī'a is characterized by the growth of different groupings espousing their own teachings on the *imāmah*. What gave rise to the formation of the Shī'a sect was the question of the legitimacy of succession to Muhammad. Later on it was the very same issue which caused divisions within the sect. Ibn Hazm notes that if the problem is viewed only according to the principal question of the Imamate, the Shī'a are divided into two large sections: the Zaydis and the Imāmis.[12] The Shī'a groups that evolved over time numbered much more than these two, some of which commanded very little following and eventually dispersed. This paper chose to focus mainly on the concept of the *imāmah* among the Imāmis, Zaydis, the Khawārij and the Isma'ilis.

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[6]J. Wellhausen, *The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam* (Netherlands: North-Holland, 1965).

[7]Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

[8]S. Hussain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shī'a Islam* (London and New York: Longman, 1979).

[9]W. Madelung, "Imāmah," *Encyclopedia of Islam,* III (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 1163-1169.

[10]W. Friedlander, "The Heterodoxies of the Shi'ites in the Presentation of Ibn Hazm," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* XXVIII (1907) 1-81 and XXIX (1908) 1-183.

[11]W. Ivanov, "Early Shiite Movements," *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society,* 17 (1941) 1-23.

[12]Friedlander, *op. cit.,* 21.

The basic meaning of *imam* is one who is imitated يُوَتَمُ بِهِ (yuwa-timu bihi). The early Shī'a recognized 'Alī as the first *imam* but the development of the doctrine on the *imāmah* took place in the succeeding years. In fact, several writers contend that it was during the time of Ja'far al Sadiq when the theological doctrines of the Shī'a were formulated.[13] Madelung, however, is of the opinion that the teachings of Ja'far al Sadiq are traceable to his father, Muhammad al Bāqir, whose followings Ja'far inherited.[14] Hodgson[15] attributes the notion of *nass*[16] to the time of Muhammad al Bāqir and added that it was the followers of Ja'far who elaborated on the idea that the *imam* should not only be a descendant of 'Alī, but rather, one who has been designated by the father. The father in turn designates his son to the imamate. It is difficult to point out the stage by stage development of the doctrine or its initial inception because to do so would involve speculation due to the insufficiency of data.[17] Scholars, however, have ventured to trace the origins of certain ideas pertaining to the *imāmah,* like the sinlessness of the *imam*. Donaldson attributes this idea to Fakr al Din Rāzi (d. A.D. 1210) who dealt with the subject in his commentary on the Qur'ān and also wrote a book *Ismatu'l Nabīyyah* (Sinlessness of the Prophets).[18] This, however, appears to be a bit late because infallibility was already applied to Ja'far by his followers. Friedlander, on the other hand, claims that the idea of *ghayba* or occultation must have come to the Shī'a through the medium of Manicheanism[19] which had adopted this belief. These opinions, however, are not conclusive and are therefore subject to further studies. Materials do not point out exactly who formulated specific *imāmah* ideas but they do stress the central role of Ja'far al Sadiq in the formulation of the Shī'a tenet on the *imāmah*. In his lifetime, Ja'far attracted a circle of thinkers[20] and engaged in discussions on matters of religion, particularly the notion of the *imāmah*. His authority was considered final and many *hadiths* are attributed to him by both Sunni and Shī'a. Ya'cūbī notes that it was customary for the scholars who related *hadiths* from Ja'far as saying "the learned one" informed us.[21] Malik ibn Anas referred to him as the "thiqa" (truthful).[22] While he is not the originator of the concept of the *imāmah*, his elaborations on prin-

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[13]Ivanov, *op. cit.,* 55.

[14]Madelung, *op cit.* Jafri traces them further to Ja far's grandfather, Zayn al 'Abidin in Jafri, *op cit.,* 282.

[15]M. Hodgson, "How did the Early Shī'a Become Sectarian," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* LXXV (1955), 10.

[16]Imamate by designation.

[17]H.A.R. Gibb, in "Shī'a," *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 537; and Ivanov, *op cit.,* also concedes to the difficulty in establishing precise periods for the formulation of specific Shi a doctrines.

[18]D. Donaldson, *op. cit.,* 337.

[19]Friedlander, *op. cit.,* 30.

[20]M. Hodgson, "Dja'far al Sadik," *Encyclopedia of Islam,* II, 374.

[21]Ya'cūbī, *Tarikh* II, 381, in Jafri, *op. cit.,* 260.

[22]Qādī Nu'mān *Sharh al Akhbār* MS. in Jafri, *op. cit.,* 260.

ciples embodied in the *imāmah* doctrine are important contributions to Shī'a teachings on the subject.

Among the principles elaborated on by Ja'far, are *naṣṣ* (imamate by designation), and *'ilm* (knowledge).[23] Under the principle of nass, an *imām,* before his death, designates his successor. His right to designate is vested upon him by God and it is also with God's guidance that he exercises such right. The imamate, however, is restricted to the descendants of 'Alī and Fatima. The other principle requires that the *imām* possess extensive knowledge of religious matters which includes both the exoteric and esoteric meanings of the Qur'ān. The two principles are intertwined and emphasize the religious aspect of the imamate, as well as the function of the imām as the spiritual leader of the community.

The discussion of the concept of the imamah among the Shī'a groups included in this paper will deal with: the idea of succession, the necessity of an *imām,* the qualifications of the *imām,* the sinlessness and infallibility of the *imām* and the concept of the *Mahdī.*

The Imāmi Concept of the Imāmah

The Imāmis constitute the majority of the Shī'a and some writers consider them as being representative of the middle school.[24] Their central belief is that it is necessary to recognize the *imām* and his designation.[25] They trace the imamate from 'Alī, and view the line of succession as established both by descent from 'Alī and by *naṣṣ*. This raises the actual mechanisms of appointment but they believe that the assumption of the *imāmah* has been determined by God. In the case of 'Alī, the Imamis claim that he was designated by Muhammad in a written will but the Companions "maliciously made this will disappear."[26] This is in conformity with their idea that the *imām* is designated by God through the Prophet or another *imām* and that God must have sent a revelation to the Companions concerning the *imāms.*[27] In addition, the Imāmis claim that it was God's practise from the time of Adam to the time of Muhammad that the prophets should not leave this world until they have appointed a successor. They consider the first three caliphs before 'Alī as usurpers and therefore cannot be recognized as *imāms.* After 'Alī, the imamate passed on to his son al Hasan and upon the latter's death, to his brother, al Husayn. After al Hasan and al Husayn, the imamate could no longer be vested on two brothers, one after the other.

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[23]Jafri, *op. cit.,* 290-294.

[24]Gibb, *op. cit.,* 535.

[25]D. Donaldson, "The Shī'ah Doctrine of the Imamate," *Muslim World,* 21 (1931), 14-23.

[26]Friedlander, *op. cit.,* 21-22.

[27]Majlisi in Donaldson, *op. cit.,* 316.

From al Husayn, the line of succession continued to his descendants by desig-
nation from father to son until the Mahdī.[28] The teachings of the Imāmis
on the *imāmah* tend to reflect the elevation of the *imāmah* to the prophecy,
the only difference is that to them, the *imām* does not transmit revelation.[29]

The Imāmis affirm the necessity of an *imām* and stress the point that
the world cannot exist without a *hujja* (a proof, guarantor) of God.[30] The
imām derives his authority from God because he is the latter's *khalifah*
(vice regent) and proof. To them, the *imām* must be divinely guided, he must
be an infallible leader and an authoritative teacher of religion.[31] There can
only be one *imām* at a time though he may have a silent *imām* who is his
successor behind him.

In so far as the qualifications of the *imām* are concerned, the Imāmis
put considerable emphasis on the *imām's* spiritual knowledge. The *imām* is
heir to the knowledge of Muhammad and has perfect knowledge of the
Qur'ān in both its *batin* (esoteric) and *zāhir* (exoteric) meanings.[32]

The concept of sinlessness and infallibility (ʿisma) of the *imām* is funda-
mental to the Imāmis because this is what differentiates the *imām* from the
rest of humanity. He must be the most excellent of all the people in his
time[33] and since he is also divinely guided, he is free from sin and error.
The *imām* holds the light of God which was passed on to him by the Prophet.
And being such, he has attained such distinctions as the "tree of prophet-
hood, house of mercy, keys of wisdom, essence of knowledge, locus of
apostleship, frequenting place of angels and repository of the secret of
God."[34] The *imām* is constantly admonished by God and this is in addition
to the belief that he is imbued with perfect knowledge which would enable
him to distinguish evil from good.[35] This doctrine of sinlessness and infalli-
bility is traced by the Imāmis to the Qur'ānic revelation to Abraham. ". . . I
have appointed thee a leader (imān) for mankind. (Abraham said: and of my
offsprings, will there be leaders?) He said: My covenant includeth not wrong-
doers."[36]

Another major point of Imāmi doctrine is the idea of the *Mahdī*. Also
known as the Ithnā ʿAshʿarīs, the Imāmis believe that there are twelve *imāms*

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[28]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1167.

[29]Ibid., 1166.

[30]See al Nawbakhti's exposition on the Imāmiyyah in Sachedina, *op. cit.*, 49-51.

[31]Madelung. *op. cit.*, 1166.

[32]Jaʿfar al Sadiq emphasized this possession of knowledge (ʿilm).

[33]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1167.

[34]Kulayni, *Kafi* 1:387 in Sachedina, *op. cit.*, 21.

[35]Majlisi in Donaldson, *op. cit.*

[36]Qur'ān, II:124.

starting with Alī and followed by his descendants through his wife Fatimah,
Muhammad's daughter: al Hasan, al Husayn, Zayn al 'Abidīn, Muhammad
al Bāqir, Ja'far al Sadiq, Musa ibn Ja'far, 'Alī al Rida, Muhammad Taqī
(Jawad), Al Naqī (Hadī), Hasan al 'Askarī and the Mahdī. The Mahdī is the
last of the *imāms* and was supposed to have gone into *ghayba* (occulation)
when his father, Hasan al 'Askari, died. There are differing views as to the
identity of the *Mahdī*, with some claiming that he had not been born and
others saying that he went into occultation at an early age. Those who claim
that the *Mahdī* was born refer to him as the *Imām Asr* (Imām of the Period)
and Sāhib al Zamān (Lord of Age). He is supposed to have been born in
Samarra in 256/868 and was on earth until 260/872 when his father was
killed. He then went into concealment but some Imāmis assert that the
Mahdī appeared to his deputies as necessitated by the occasion. While in
concealment, believers insist that he provides guidance to mankind. Made-
lung, however, sees the doctrine of *ghayba* in a different light. He views the
idea of the *Mahdī* as a result of the crisis brought about by the death of the
eleventh *imām* (Hasan al 'Askarī) without an apparent son. This crisis was
resolved by the affirmation of the existence of a son and the doctrine of
ghayba or absence.[37]

Apparently, the doctrine of the twelve *imāms* took form only after
872 when the eleventh *imām* died. Watt offers the opinion that the two
members of the Banū Nawbakhti: Abū Sahl and his nephew, Abū Muhammad
al Hasan ibn Mūsā al Nawbakhtī (who is named an author of *Firaq al Shī'a*)
were presumably the two scholars largely responsible for producing the defi-
nitive form of the doctrine of the twelve *imāms*. Al Nawbakhti discusses the
positions taken by the different Shī'a groups on the subject of the *imāmah*
after the death of al 'Askarī,[38] and his work on the messianic *imām* repre-
sents the earliest Imāmi teaching on the *Mahdī*.

The Concept of Imāmah among the Khawārij

The Khawārij are those who originally followed 'Alī but seceded from
his ranks after their disappointment over 'Alī's handling of the Siffin arbitra-
tion.[39] Since then, they have repudiated 'Alī and recognized the imamate of
'Alī only up to the time of the arbitration.[40]

The Khawārij doctrine on the imamate assert that the establishment of
an *imām* is obligatory upon the community. They emphasize the concept of
justice and require that the *imām* must be just. The moment he becomes

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[37]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1167.

[38]These central points are discussed in Jafri, *op. cit.*, 42-56.

[39]Martin Hinds, "The Siffin Arbitration," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 17 (1972),
93-129.

[40]The arbitration took place in 38/657.

unjust and commits any infraction or violation of Divine Law, the *imām* loses his legitimacy and has to be removed, even by force.[41] The Muslims must dissociate themselves from an unjust *imām*, otherwise, they will also be considered infidels. For the Khawārij, this is a situation where regicide is justified.

On the question of succession, the Khawārij reject the prerogative of the Quraysh to the imamate. The choice of the *imām* is accomplished by election and any believer who is "morally and religiously irreproachable[42] or the most excellent in the community is eligible to the imamate even if he is of slave origin.[43]

Majority of the Khawārij share the Imāmi belief that there can only be one *imām* at a time. The Ibādis, which is one of the sects of the Khawārij, recognize the different types of *imāms* corresponding to the four states or ways (masāliks) in which the community of believers could face its enemies; the state of manifestation (zuhūr) when the members of the *ummah* (community of believers) could face its enemies; the state of defense (dif'a) when it could merely resist a powerful enemy; the state of self-sacrifice (shirā') when a small group of believers chose to rise against the enemy seeking martyrdom; and the state of concealment (kitmān), when the believers are forced to live under the rule of the enemy and to practise *taqiyya* (dissimulation).[44] The practise of *taqiyya* is also part of Imāmi teachings and scholars trace it to the time of Muhammad al Bāqir.[45] The Ibādis further assert the only one who can exercise the temporal functions of the imamate is the *imām* of the state of manifestation.

It must be noted that the Khawārij are divided into different sects but they tend to find a common ground in most of their teachings on the imamate. They elect their own *imāms* and they recognize the legitimacy of the imamates of Abū Bakr and 'Umar. Only the first six years of 'Uthmān are acceptable to them, in the same way that they approve of the imamate of 'Alī before the Siffīn arbitration. After Siffīn, 'Ali had become an infidel to the cause of Islam, thus necessitating the abandonment of 'Alī by the Khawārij. They justify this situation with the teaching that an *imām* who has strayed from the path loses his legitimacy.

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[41]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1167.

[42]G. Levi Della Vida, "Khawāridj," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, IV, (1978), 1076.

[43]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1168.

[44]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1168.

[45]This was given final form during the time of Ja'far al Sadiq. See Jafri, op. cit., 299 and also I. Goldhizer, "Das Prinzip der Takja im Islam," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesselschaft*, LX (1906), 213-20.

The Zaydi Concept of the Imāmah

The Zaydis are followers of Zayd ibn 'Alī ibn Husayn who recognize the latter as *imām* instead of Muhammad al Bāqir's son, Ja'far al Sadiq. Upon the death of Muhammad al Bāqir, there were disagreements regarding succession and the majority followed Ja'far al Sadiq. This majority eventually became the Imāmis or the Ithna 'Ash 'āris while the followers of Zayd became known as the Zaydis who, in turn, were later divided into two: the Jarūdis who followed Zayd but were also followers of Muhammad al Bāqir and the Batrīyah who recognized the imamate of Zayd but did not follow al Bāqir.[46] The Jarūdis did not recognize the imamate of Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthmān. The Jarūdis assert that the Prophet Muhammad designated 'Alī by specifying his qualifications although he did not mention him by name.[47] Madelung asserts that the designation claimed was by *naṣṣ* which is also Imāmi idea.[48] The Zaydis believe that the Companions had erred when they chose a wrong person as Caliph after the death of Muhammad because God had willed 'Alī to be Muhammad's successor.[49] The beliefs of the Jarūdis came to prevail among the Zaydis from the third/ninth century onwards.[50]

The Zaydis agree with the Imāmis on the idea of the imamate as an exclusive privilege of the descendants of 'Alī and Fatimah. They trace succession either from the line of al Hasan or al Husayn, who, together with their father 'Alī have been invested with religious authority by Muhammad.

The teachings of the Zaydis on the imamate appear to be close to that of the Imāmis. Like the latter, they subscribe to the doctrine that the establishment of the *imām* is obligatory upon the community and it is the duty of the believer to have knowledge of the *imām*.

To be qualified for the imamate, the Zaydis require knowledge of religious matters, the ability to render independent judgment in law, piety, moral integrity and courage.[51] They also believed that the position is limited to the most excellent among the members of the community.

The legitimacy of the imamate is attained through a formal call to allegiance and not through an election. Apparently, this claim to the imamate was a topic of discussions between Zayd and his brother Muhammad al Bāqir.

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[46]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1168.

[47]Friedlander, *op. cit.*, 22.

[48]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1168.

[49]Friedlander, *op. cit.*, 22.

[50]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1166.

[51]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1166.

Zayd held that the *imām* was obligated to justify his cause if necessary by force of arms. Muhammad al Bāqir objected to this on the grounds that if it were so, then their father Zayn al Abīdīn would not have been an *imām* because he never took up arms to assert his right.[52] The early Zaydi doctrine appears to accept usurpation of the *imāmate* by force. There was also a time when they argued for the existence of two *imāms* but the prevailing doctrine upheld the idea of one *imām* at a time.[53]

The Zaydis do not attribute divinity to their *imām* and they limit the manifestation of God in the *imām* as merely possessing divine guidance.[54]

The Ismā'ili Concept of the Imāmah

The question of who would succeed Ja'far al Sadiq brought about another cleavage among the Shī'a. The Ismā'ilis uphold the imamate of Ismā'il and they claim that even if he died earlier than his father Ja'far, he had already been designated by the latter as *imām* through the principle of *naṣṣ*.[55] They deviated from the Imāmis in their idea of succession to Ja'far and claim that after Ismā'il, his son Muhammad al Tamm inherited the imamate. The Ismā'ilis believe that Muhammad al Tamm is the first concealed *imām*. After al Tamm, the line of succession continued to his son Ja'far al Musaddiq, then to the latter's son Muhammad al Habib who was the last of the concealed *imāms*. These concealed *imāms* in Ismā'ili teaching are not in *ghayba* or occultation. Rather, they are merely out of public view, in a state of *mastūr* but actually present in that particular time and place. Being in a state of *ghayba* means absence from the physical world.[56] Muhammad al Habib was succeeded by his son Ubayd Allah (the Mahdī of the Fatimids).[57] Even if they separated from the Imāmis, the Ismā'ilis retained a basic Imāmi teaching which calls for a permanent need for an *imām* who is sinless and infallible to lead mankind.[58]

For the Ismā'ilis, the imamate revolves around the number seven which also corresponds to their cyclical view of history.[59] They assert that in each prophetic era, the prophet is represented by his *wasi* or *asas*. During the time of Muhammad, his *asa* was 'Alī. The Ismā'ilis consider Ismā'il as the seventh

[52]D.M. Donaldson, "The Shī'ah Doctrine of the Imamate," *Muslim World*, 21 (1931), 17.

[53]T. Arnold, *The Caliphate* (London: Luzac, 1965) 181.

[54]Gibb, *op. cit.*, 535.

[55]Ivanov, *op. cit.*, 58.

[56]S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 159.

[57]Friedlander, *op. cit.*, Appendix B.

[58]Madelung *op. cit.*, 1167

[59]W. Madelung "Ismā iliyya" *Encyclopedia of Islam*, IV, 203.

imām, and explain his death as mere disappearance. The pre-Fatimid Ismaʿilis expected him to return as the seventh speaker-prophet.[60] In their attempt to provide a continuity of the imamate from the "disappearance" death of Ismaʿil to the rise of the Fatimids to power, there were frequent changes in Ismaʿili teachings on the imamate. After the Fatimid caliphate, two branches of Ismaʿilism came about: the Tayyibi Ismaʿilism which recognized al Tayyib, the son of the Fatimid al ʿAmir (d.524/1130) as *imām;* and the Nizāri Ismaʿilism which claimed the imamate of Nizār, the son of the Fatimid al Mustansir (d. 487/1094) as *imam.*[61] This branch stayed in Iran until the nineteenth century when they moved to India.[62]

On the whole, the basic qualities of the *imām* as espoused by the Shīʿa centers on piety and the spiritual purity of the *imām.* The Shīʿa also concur in considering ʿAlī as the first *imām.* As noted earlier, the Zaydis deviated from the notion of the *imām* as accepted by the majority at the time of al Bāqir. Instead they asserted that after Husayn, who was the third *imām,* the imamate belongs to any qualified descendant of Hasan or Husayn who calls his allegiance and rises against the illegitimate rulers.[63] For the Imāmis, the line of succession follows the descent of Husayn. Both of them reject the concept of an elected imamate.

Also common among the Shīʿa groups is the belief on the *Mahdī* although they have different notions of who the *Mahdī* is. These differences generated the appearance of numerous persons claiming to be the promised *Mahdī.* Al Mukhtar claimed that it was Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya who was the promised *Mahdī.* In contemporary times, there are still people who claim to be the *Mahdī.* The Shīʿa faced frequent criticisms on their conception of the *Mahdī* but their response has always been that the critics do not really understand the concept.

III. *The Muʿtazili Influence on the Shīʿa Concept of the Imāmah*

Some of the Muʿtazili ideas on the imamate are similar to the views of several Shīʿa groups. The Muʿtazilis agree with the Zaydis on the recognition of the imamate as the legitimate leadership of the community. Like the Khawārij, they also emphasize the importance of justice as a qualification for the imamate as well as the idea that it is the duty of the community to remove an unjust *imām.* The Muʿtazili concept of justice, however, implied correct belief in accordance with their doctrine and submission to Divine law in both private life and government.[64]

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[60]Ibid.

[61]Madelung, *op. cit.,* 1168-69.

[62]Nasr, *op. cit.,* 159.

[63]Madelung, *op. cit.,* 1166.

[64]Madelung, *op. cit.,* 1165.

The early Mu'tazili also agreed with the Khawārij that succession to the imamate should not be limited to the Quraysh, but later Mu'tazili doctrine held that no non-Qurayshite could become an *imām* if one from the Quraysh was available. Like the Imāmis, the Mu'tazilis also subscribe to the idea of one *imām* at a time.[65]

Madelung emphasized that on the whole, there appears to be more contradictions in the teachings of the Shī'a and the Mu'tazilis rather than similarities. One of these has to do with the Imāmi conception of the *imām* as one who can intercede on behalf of his followers to spare them from eternal punishment. The Imāmis see salvation as dependent upon a person's loyalty and obedience to the *imām*. The Mu'tazilis, on the other hand, believe in the unconditional punishment of sinners.[66] The attempts of representatives of these two groups to integrate each other's teachings can be traced to the interaction of the Mu'tazili and Shī'a thinkers, especially in the school of Baghdad.[67] Some Mu'tazili scholars joined the Imāmis and adopted the latter's basic doctrine of the imamate while retaining their Mu'tazili theology.[68]

It is difficult to trace exactly the Mu'tazili influence on the Shī'a teachings on the imamate but the frequency of contacts among their scholars and thinkers must have contributed to the formulation of both Shī'a and Mu'tazili doctrines on the imamate. Watt notes that it was not just the contacts and discussions but also the writing of books on the imamate by the Imāmis which were directed against Mu'tazili teachings on the subject.[69] An apparent source of conflict was the Imāmi difficulty of merging Mu'tazili ideas with their existing beliefs. Another is the Imāmi's having elevated the imamate to the level of prophecy.

IV. *The Sunni Concept of the Imamate as Compared to that of the Shī'a*

The question of the nature and degree of authority ascribed to the imamate constitutes a fundamental difference between the Shī'a and the Sunni sects. While both accept the obligatory nature of the *imām* on the part of the community, the Sunni emphasizes that the successor of Muhammad, who is called the *khalifah* is subordinate to religious law. The *imām* according to the Sunnis exercise his authority as a ruler of the community; it is incumbent upon him to implement religious law but he is not himself the religious authority. The Shī'a on the other hand assert that aside from

[65]*Ibid.*, 1166.

[66]Madelung, "Imamism and Mu'tazilite Theology," *Le Shi'isme Imamite* (Paris, 1970), 13–30.

[67]Watt, op. cit., 288-293.

[68]Madelung, "Imamism. . . "

[69]Watt, *op. cit.*

being a ruler, the *imām* must also be the supreme religious authority, whose virtues of sinlessness and infallibility puts him in a position to decide issues that are theological in nature. The Shī'a see the *imām* as the repository of religious knowledge and interpreter of the religious sciences. Contrary to the Sunni, the responsibility of the Caliph resides largely in his safeguarding religion from heterodoxy and destructive innovations.

Mawardī's *Ahkām al Sultaniyya*[70] is one of the treatises which represent the Sunni position on the Caliphate.[71] The rights and duties of the Caliph as embodied in that document emphasize the actual exercise of political power.

There are also differences in the Sunni and Shī'a qualifications for the imamate. The Shī'a, with the exception of the Khawārij, insist on 'Alī and his descendants as having the rightful claim to the imamate. The Sunni on the other hand requires that the *imām* be a descendant of the Quraysh tribe but he need not necessarily come from the immediate family of Muhammad. In addition, the Sunni demands that the *imām* must be knowledgeable on the law and must be just since his primary task is to administer justice.[72] He must also possess *'ilm* (knowledge) which can enable him to perform *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) and pass judgment; he must be physically and morally fit; he must be able to protect Islamic territory and carry on *jihād* (religious war).[73] The Khawārij share Sunni views on the proper qualifications for the *imām*. The majority of the Shī'a, on the other hand, appear to put more emphasis on the moral and religious qualifications of the *imām*, and this has to do with the Shī'a position on the functions of the *imām*, particularly in terms of his being a religious authority and repository of religious knowledge. When 'Alī was the caliph, a number of his critics considered him lacking in political skill than what his predecessors or his opponent Mu'awiyya possessed. Nevertheless, the followers of 'Alī and the succeeding Shī'a groups exhalted his piety and his extensive knowledge of the Qur'ān and Sunnah.

The Sunni believes that the proper procedures of choosing the caliph is either by appointment by his immediate predecessor or elected by the religious community. The Sunni emphasizes *ijmā'* or the consensus of the community in matters of choosing the *imām*. It is only after the caliph has received the *bay'a* (allegiance) of the community that he assumes legitimacy as caliph. The Imāmi and Ismā'ili idea of succession through the descent from 'Ali and through designation does not follow the concept of *ijmā* as

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[70] Al Mawardī, *Ahkām al Sultaniyyah* (Cairo: Al Matba'at, n. d.).

[71] Caliphate is normally used to refer to the Sunni institution, whereas, in the case of the Shī'a, it is imamate.

[72] This is based on the *Qur'ān*, IV:105 and IV:58.

[73] Al Mawardī, *op. cit.*, 4.

understood in Sunni jurisprudence. In other words, the Shī'a doctrine of designation by God implies the acceptance of the community and carries further the assumption that the designated *imām* is imposed upon the community.

V. *Conclusion*

After the demise of the prophet Muhammad there were no specific provisions regarding succession to the caliphate. As a result, conflicts immediately shook up the early Islamic community. The fact that Muhammad did not give any specific instructions for an election naturally gave rise to rival claims to the caliphate or imamate by opposing factions. The problem started when the followers of 'Alī believed that it was 'Alī and nobody else who had the right to succeed Muhammad. But the question was not settled with the installation of 'Alī as the fourth caliph, rather, it proved to be only an inital manifestation of the deeper conflicts over the issue of succession. According to Wellhausen 'Alī's claims to the caliphate showed that he was desirous of power, and that the Khawārij sect viewed the actions of 'Alī, particularly at Siffin as an indication that he had deviated from the right path.[74] 'Alī's having been elected to the caliphate, however, appeared to be more the result of the fact that he was among the remaining trusted companions of Muhammad rather than his having been a member of the Prophet's household. It seems that from the beginning, the family and followers of Alī conceived of a dynastic principle of succession but since Muhammad had no male heir, they asserted that belonging to the household of Muhammad was sufficient enough as a legitimate prerequisite for succession.

It is not easy to ascertain the motives behind the conflicts that resulted out of the issue of succession to the leadership of the Islamic community. Gibb noted that the motive of the early Shī'a was primarily political and that they were interested in obtaining temporal rule.[75] One wonders what motivated the movement of al Mukhtar who claimed the right of succession for Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya[76] who, they believed had as much right to the imamate as al Hasan and al Husayn. The followers of this movement came to be known later as Kaysānis. The movement of al Mukhtar raised questions as to who specifically among the descendants of 'Alī had the right to the imamate. The issue came up again in the time of the fifth *imām*. At that time, the majority of the Shī'a accepted Muhammad al Bāqir while a minority, known as the Zaydis, claimed the right of Zayd. The succession of Ja'far al Sadiq raised the same question, with the Shī'a splitting further into the Imāmis and the Ismā'ilis.

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[74]Wellhausen, *op. cit.*

[75]Gibb, *op. cit.*, 534.

[76]Son of Alī by a Hanafi woman. Lewis traces the first use of the word *Madhī* in a messianic context to this movement. See Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Ismā'ilism* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, Ltd., 1940), 25.

The history of the Shī'a witnessed the formation of various groups with their own claims to the imamate. Aside from the groups discussed in this paper, there were the Ghulats, who held the reputation of being extremists, the Kaysānis, the Jarūdis, the Waqifis who rejected the imamate of Alī al Rida, and several others, each differed from the other in certain aspects of their teachings on the imamate. While the Sunni doctrine on the imamate sought to preserve the unity of the *ummah* under the historical caliphate against the threat posed by the claims of the opposition movement,[77] the development of the doctrine among the Shī'a groups did not reflect the same goal. Instead, there was a continuing divergence of ideas as well as calls to loyalty to specific persons. One can surmise that the goal was more to strengthen the position of one group against that of the other. From the standpoint of the non-Muslim, the struggle for power and its consolidation are absolutely political matters but in a situation where the political and religious powers are so intertwined, there are no clear dividing lines between spiritual and temporal powers. What we could look into is where the emphasis lies — in the political or in the spiritual aspects. The formation of the Shī'a reflects an emphasis on the political side although they sought to combine in the person of the *imām* the spiritual and political roles of Muhammad, except his prophetic function. Starting initially as partisans of 'Alī, the Shī'a have grown into an important schism in Islam which commands following, particularly in Iran and Iraq. Particular Shī'a groups have their respective followings in specific geographic areas like the Imāmis or Ithna 'Ash'arīs predominantly in Iran and Iraq; the Ismā'ilis with a substantial following in India and Pakistan, and the Zaydis in Yemen.

In countries which were formerly Christian, writers note influences of this religion on some aspects of the doctrine on the imamate. The new converts to Islam carried over their earlier beliefs and ideas. It can be said that the development of distinctive Shī'a doctrines on the imamate was a product of cultural contacts and the offshoot of discussions among the various scholars and thinkers Shī'a, Mu'tazili, as well as Sunni. Shī'a concept of the imamate evolved as a matter of practical necessity to wrest leadership of the Islamic community. It found its justification in various teachings of the religion and in the *Qur'an*. While Shī'a concepts of the imamate did not deal with specific mechanics of the institution of the caliphate (or imamate), these concepts nevertheless provided guidelines and principles upon which the relationship among the faithful may be conducted.

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[77]Madelung, *op. cit.*, 1164.

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