

so strong over time that it posed a serious threat. The fact that a caliphal order was issued in 850 to destroy the pilgrimage shrine of the Shi'ites above al-Husayn's grave in Karbalâ clearly shows the extent to which the Shi'ites were feared by the caliphs.

The eleventh imam, al-Hasan, was given the epithet al-Askarî, since he had been forced to live in the caliph's army camp (*askar*) in Sâmarrâ. When he died on December 25, 873 or January 1, 874, at the age of twenty-eight, he was interred beside his father on the grounds of his own residence. The golden-domed shrine of "the two Askarîs" (*al-Askariyyayn*), i.e. the tenth and eleventh imams, is now located at this site.

### 10. The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam (873)

According to common—especially Sunni—tradition, when the eleventh imam died at such a young age, he left no male heir. The oldest Shi'i sources also confirm that the apparent end to the main line of imams threw the Shi'i communities in Iraq and Qom into a serious crisis. There was much difference of opinion among "Party" members as to who should lead the umma as the imam. As a result the Shi'a splintered into more than a dozen different groups and sects. This phase of their history is referred to in Shi'i tradition as the period of "confusion" (*hayra*).

One of these groups claimed from the very beginning that the eleventh imam did not die without having produced a child; rather, he is said to have had a son named Muhammad who was born in 869. According to these sources, before he reached the age at which he was transferred from the realm of the women to that of the men, thus appearing in public, he was hidden by his father to protect him from the caliph. Only the closest family members and a few trusted friends—according to Shi'i tradition—had ever glimpsed this twelfth imam before he was hidden. Even when the eleventh imam died, his rightful successor

did not step forward. He has remained hidden somewhere on the earth since then, but he will supposedly reappear one day and take his position at the head of the "Party," asserting the legitimate rights of his family line.

The idea of a concealed or occult imam was nothing new. Even after the deaths of Ali's third son Muhammad, the sixth imam Ja'far as-Sâdiq, and the seventh imam Mûsâ al-Kâzim, some people believed for a time that they had not died, but were merely hidden, waiting to return a short time later. Some Shi'ites had similar hopes with respect to the twelfth imam, even though no one had ever seen him. It took almost two hundred years until the belief in the existence of the Hidden Imam became widely accepted throughout the Shi'i community, at which time the other circles and sects that had emerged during the period of "confusion" disappeared. The Imâmiyya Shi'ites thus became the "Twelvers" (*Ithnâ'ashariyya*), as they refer to themselves to distinguish themselves from other Shi'i groups. Belief in the existence of the hidden twelfth imam and his future return became the most important distinguishing feature.

It is important to remember that the twelfth imam is imagined as living in hiding somewhere on the earth. Initially he was believed to be living incognito on Byzantine territory to remain completely out of the clutches of the caliph. For four generations it was also believed that the Hidden Imam was connected to his "orphaned" community through a messenger (*safir*), giving his commands via letter. Such letters actually circulated throughout the communities and are still passed down today. The Shi'ites refer to this period (874-941) as the "lesser occultation" (*al-ghayba as-sughrâ*). After that, the Hidden Imam decided to break off all contact and retreat totally from humanity. In his last letter, he is said to have announced his intention, branding as a liar anyone claiming in the future to have had contact with him. The year 941 thus marked the beginning of the period of the "greater occultation" (*al-ghayba al-kubrâ*), which continues to the present day. Shi'i communi-

ties were thus totally lacking spiritual leadership, an umma without a present imam. This was a very precarious situation, since it raised the question as to who was capable and authorized to guide the community during the absence of the twelfth imam. The history of the Shi'ites can be described as continual wrestling for an answer to this question. The most recent attempt up to now to find an answer was the contemporary revolution in Iran.

## 11. The Fourteen Infallible Ones

The Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fâtima, and the twelve imams are referred to by the Shi'ites as "the fourteen infallible ones" (Pers. *chahâr-dah ma'sûm*). The word *ma'sûm*, borrowed from the Arabic, actually means protected or immune, since the Fourteen are considered immune to error and sin. Comments or written announcements they made enjoy unrestricted authority; every member of the faith can count on them absolutely.

The Sunnis have granted only the passed-down comments of Muhammad such absolute authority, and they view this collection alone as the binding "practice" (*sunna*) for all Muslims. The Shi'ites, on the other hand, have also collected the statements of the Prophet that have been confirmed by eye and ear witnesses, as well as those of Fâtima and the twelve imams. Such collections form the foundation of Sunni and Shi'i law, respectively (this will be discussed in the chapter on Shi'i legal scholars, the mullahs).

It is significant that the Shi'ites accept the quality of infallibility only for the Fourteen. No other person dare claim such authority. This pertains even to the highest âyatollâhs; even they are capable of error, and all their decisions and judgments are therefore of provisional nature and always subject to revision (this procedure will also be discussed in the chapter on the

mullahs). The fact that infallibility is limited to these fourteen authorities, of which thirteen are already dead and the fourteenth is hidden, has proved to be especially favorable and practicable for the further development of Shi'ism. The existing authorities are all fallible human beings who have been granted free rein for their own actions, which are all provisional and thus subject to revision.

The imams have yet something else in common: they are also considered martyrs. Not only Alî, who was murdered in Kufa, and al-Husayn, slaughtered in the Karbalâ massacre; not only the imams deported to Iraq and killed in prison, but also those who seem to have died a natural death in Medina—all were eliminated by the respective rulers, according to Shi'i tradition. The entire family of the Prophet is thus called the "House of Sorrow" (*bait al-ahzân*). The anniversary of the death, of martyrdom, of each of the imams is celebrated by Shi'ites as a day of mourning. Only the twelfth imam is commemorated on his birthday (15th of Sha'bân). There are also traditions according to which even the hidden twelfth imam will suffer martyrdom once he returns, so that he, too, will be given the honorable title of a martyr (*shahîd*), the highest title granted by the Shi'ites.

Since the imams are infallible and without sin, they did not deserve to be martyred; they suffer even though they are innocent. It is also assumed that they all accepted their fate knowingly and willingly, especially al-Husayn, who is said not to have set off for Iraq to claim the power of the caliphate, but to seek the martyred death that God had foreseen for him. Just as Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on the cross, al-Husayn went to Karbalâ to accept the passion that had been meant for him from the beginning of time. Shi'i theologians do not neglect to draw parallels between Jesus and the "prince of martyrs." In some Shi'i texts, al-Husayn experiences a moment of doubt on the day before Karbalâ similar to that of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Another legend tells the story of Jesus and his disciples passing through the plain of Karbalâ. They see a herd of gazelles, crowding together and weeping. According to tradi-

tion, Jesus also begins to weep, explaining to his disciples that at this site, the youthful son of the Prophet Muhammad would one day be killed.<sup>9</sup>

Parallels to Christian ideas also come up when the martyrdom of innocent imams is interpreted as surrogate suffering that brings redemption. French Orientalist Henry Corbin spoke in this context of Shi'i "Christology." The differences to Christian beliefs are obvious, however. The Shi'a, as well as Sunni Islamic thought, includes neither the concept of an inherited, original sin, nor one of a constitutional sinfulness of humankind. Hence there is also no concept of redemption, for which there is no corresponding word in Islamic terminology. Guilt always refers to a historical—individual or collective—guilt that must be atoned. The Fourteen Infallible Ones voluntarily assume a portion of that punishment which is actually meant for sinful people—of course, this refers only to the "partisans," the Shi'ites. Their surrogate suffering spares humanity from experiencing God's full judgment. The merit of self-sacrifice authorizes the Fourteen to assume the role of mediator (*wasila*) between God and humanity and to speak out in favor (*shafâ'a*) of their sinful followers—the Shi'ites—at the Last Judgment. Fâtima's role as a mediator at the Last Judgment is especially emphasized.

The idea of the preexistence of the imams developed very early. Although it is always stressed that they are not eternal—as only God is—and they are born into the world as human beings and then die and are resurrected, their souls are said to be the first of God's creations, created before all other beings, in the form of light. They are thus not of dust, but of light. According to the fifth imam, Imam Alî himself is to have said: "God . . . is One . . . unique in His unity. He uttered a word which became a light. From that light He created Muhammad and created me and my progeny. Then God uttered another word which became a spirit, which He made to dwell in that light and the light He made to dwell in our bodies. Thus we [the imams] are the spirit of God and His words."<sup>10</sup> Shi'i theologians had con-

stantly to guard against the temptation to idolize the imams. Some marginal Shi'i groups, condemned by orthodox theologians as "exaggerators" (*ghulât*), succumbed to this temptation. Their tradition, according to which especially Alî is afforded divine status and Muhammad is seen as his prophet, lives on today in the Syrian sect of the Alawîs, or Nusayrîs.

The great status that even orthodox Twelver Shi'ites attach to the imams can be appreciated through the notion that the existence of an imam is absolutely imperative for the continuation of the world. If there were no imam, according to Shi'i belief, the cosmos would immediately cease to exist. This idea is, on the other hand, often used as evidence of the existence of the Hidden Imam. The fact that the world continues to exist is considered proof that there must be a Hidden Imam.

The Fourteen play an important role in popular religious customs. Making visits (*ziyâra*) to their graves and crying over their fated suffering are considered very commendable acts. Through religious endowments (*waqf*) established by private persons or rulers, their shrines in an-Najaf, Karbalâ, al-Kâzimayn near Baghdad, Mashhad, and Sâmarrâ have grown in the course of centuries into huge economic enterprises that own land throughout the world. Ever since Shi'i monarchs have been ruling in Iran (1501), golden domes have been built on the tombs. The names of the imams, together with their respective epithets, are popular male first names. For example, the first name of the Âyatollâh al-Hakîm, leader of the Shi'ites of southern Iraq who is living in Tehran in exile, is Muhammad Bâqir (after the fifth imam). Even the descendants of the imams, called imâm-zâdes in Iran, enjoy high regard and are honored as local saints after their death. The domed mausoleums of the imâm-zâdes can be seen throughout Iran. Most famous are the shrines of the sister of the eighth imam in Qom and that of Abdal'azîm in Rey, south of Tehran. Their first names, too, are very popular, especially those of the sons killed at Karbalâ and other relatives of al-Husayn (the current foreign minister of Iran, Velâyatî, is named Alî Akbar, after al-Husayn's oldest son).



The living descendants of the first eleven imams, i.e., all natural descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, currently number in the thousands. They are called sherifs (Arabic *sharîf* means noble one) and have the privilege of being allowed to call themselves *sayyid* (sir). They live throughout the entire Islamic world. Only a minority of the descendants of the Prophet are members of the Shi'i faith. Among these descendants are the king of Morocco and the king of Jordan, both Sunnis. Both are Hasanis, descendants of the second imam. Among Shi'ites, the Husaynis of course enjoy particular esteem. As a descendant of the seventh imam, Mûsâ al-Kâzim, Âyatollâh Khomeinî has the family name Mûsawî (the name Khomeinî refers to his birthplace, Khomeyn). The Shi'i sayyids can be recognized by their headware; they are the only Shi'ites allowed to wear a black turban.

## 12. The Return of the Mahdî

According to Shi'i belief, the missing twelfth imam is living hidden somewhere on the earth. No one knows exactly when he will triumphantly return, though it could happen at any moment. In some Shi'i cities in Iran during the Middle Ages, a saddled horse was held ready at all times so that the imam could mount it upon his reappearance without any delay. In Article 5 of the 1979 constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the naming of the Hidden Imam—as the true head of state—is followed by the pious wish: "May God speed his return!"

It is no coincidence that the twelfth imam is named Muhammad, since it is his task to complete the mission of the Prophet, his forefather with the same name. The twelfth imam's epithet is *al-Mahdî*, the rightly guided one. This name calls forth eschatological associations in every Muslim. The concept of a future savior and renewer of Islam who will be called the Mahdî is not exclusive to the Shi'ites. It is widespread

throughout the entire Islamic world, though the expectation of the Mahdî does not play such a central role in Sunni doctrine. Only the Shi'ites have largely standardized the concepts associated with the Mahdî.

Hopes that God will send a "rightly guided" ruler who will end the political and denominational divisions within Islam and reestablish a unified, pure, original Islam emerged in the epoch at the end of the seventh century, when the unity of the Islamic umma was destroyed in bloody power struggles for the succession to the Prophet. At that time, a number of pretenders were proclaimed by their followers to be the Mahdî or they themselves came forth claiming to be the "rightly guided." Thus the concept of the Mahdî is common to all Islamic denominations that emerged during those confusing times. Hopes for the Mahdî did not take on its current particular expression until it was combined in the Shi'i realm with belief in a Hidden Imam. The first such case was following the death of Ali's third son, Muhammad—the half-brother of al-Hasan and al-Husayn (see above, page 21)—in the year 700. His followers believed that he did not die, but rather remained in Mount Radwâ between Mecca and Medina, waiting for the day of his return. This third son of Ali soon lost importance and fell into oblivion, especially in light of the fact that the descendants of al-Husayn provided living, present imams for the Shi'ites. When the eleventh imam died apparently leaving no heirs and the belief in the existence of a hidden twelfth imam gradually gained acceptance, hopes for the coming of the Mahdî were combined with this figure. The twelfth imam, Muhammad, is believed to be the "rightly guided one," who will one day return "to fill the earth with justice, as it is now filled with injustice."

For the Shi'ites, the twelfth imam is the only legitimate ruler of all Muslims, even though he is absent. For this reason, he is also the true head of state according to the current constitution of the Republic of Iran. The state order that was established in Iran through revolution is thus, theoretically speaking, provisional. The return of the Mahdî has been linked since time

immemorial with utopian notions of the reestablishment of the Golden Age that for all Muslims is the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This utopia was easily filled with political content during the Iranian revolution: the kingdom of justice that the Mahdī would establish took the place of classless society or other revolutionary goals.

A text from the late tenth century can serve to illustrate how people imagined the return of the Mahdī. It is taken from the *Kitāb al-Irshād* (Book of Guidance), a collection of traditions about the twelve imams from the pen of Baghdad Shi'ite, Shaykh al-Mufīd.<sup>12</sup> According to the text, terrible omens would announce the coming of the Mahdī:

“. . . there will be an eclipse of the sun in the middle of the month of Ramadān; there will be an eclipse of the moon at the end of that month in contrast to ordinary happenings; the land will be swallowed up at al-Baydā'; it will be swallowed in the east; it will be swallowed up in the west; the sun will stay still from the time of its decline to the middle of the time for the afternoon prayer; it will rise from the west; . . . black standards will advance from Khurāsān; al-Yamānī will come out in revolt; al-Maghribī will appear in Egypt and take possession of it from Syria; the Turk will occupy the region of al-Jazīra; the Byzantines will occupy Ramla; the star will appear in the east giving light just like the moon gives light; then (the new moon) will bend until its two tips almost meet; a colour will appear in the sky and spread to its horizons; a fire will appear for a long time in the east remaining in the air for three or seven days; . . . the Euphrates will flood so that the water comes into the alleys of Kūfa; sixty liars will come forward, all of them claiming prophethood, and twelve will come forward from the family of Abū Tālib, all of them claiming the Imamate; . . . a black wind will raise it at the beginning of the day and then an earthquake will occur so that much of it will be swallowed up; fear will cover the people of Iraq and Baghdād; swift death (will occur) there and there will be a loss of property, lives and harvests; locusts will appear at their usual times and at times not usual so that

they attack agricultural land and crops and there will be little harvest for what the people planted; two kinds of foreigners will dispute and much blood will be shed in their quarrel; slaves will rebel against obedience to their masters and kill their masters (*mawāli*); a group of heretics (*ahl al-bida'*) will be transformed until they become monkeys and pigs; . . . a cry (will come) from the sky (in such a way) that all the people will hear it in their own languages; a face and a chest will appear in the sky before the people in the centre of the sun; the dead will arise from their graves so that they will return to the world and they will recognize one another and visit one another; that will come to an end with twenty-four continuous rainstorms and the land will be revived by them after being dead and it will recognize its blessings; after that every disease will be taken away from those of the Shī'a of the Mahdī, peace be on him, who believe in the truth; at that time they will know of his appearance in Mecca and they will go to him to support him.”

The year the Mahdī returns is not known, but the day is known to be the 10th of Muharram, the day al-Husayn was martyred at Karbalā. He will stand opposite the Ka'ba “and Gabriel, peace be on him, on his right will call for the pledge of allegiance to God. His Shī'a will come to him from the ends of the earth, rolling up in great numbers to pledge allegiance to him. Then God will fill the earth with justice just as it was filled with injustice.”

According to a statement made by the fifth imam, it is known what the Mahdī will look like:

“He is a young man of medium stature with a handsome face and beautiful hair. His hair flows on to his shoulders. A light rises on his face. The hair of his beard and head are black.”

His kingdom of justice is described as paradise on earth. “In his time, injustice will be removed and the roads will be safe. The earth will produce its benefits and every due will be restored to its proper person. No people of any other religions will remain without being shown Islam and confessing faith in it. . . . At that time men will not find any place to give alms nor be generous because wealth will encompass all the believers.”