

Psychology of the Shia Cult

A CRITIQUE OF THE DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT OF SHIA ISLAM

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Written by;

SYED MUHAMMAD WAQAS

BAB-UL-ILM RESEARCH FOUNDATION®

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Shias, the Protestants of Islam—and the Catholics in their ‘icon worship’—are one of the two main factions of Islam. The Shia doctrine is strictly based upon the concept of the political legitimacy of Prophet Muhammad’s scion, and thus it gives enough space to found a political hierarchy of the type of dynastic rule in Islam. Their belief publishes Prophet Muhammad as the precursor of a hierarchy of 12 Imams, “(spiritual) Leaders”, and the imparter of the divine wisdom in ‘Ali.

The “Shia” movement (also written as *Shi’ah*) began as a protest against the mainstream Islam during 7th century CE in consequence to the election of the first Righteous Caliph, Abu Bakr, which the Shia doctrine has always declared null and void. The Shias believe that the right to become the ‘Commander of the Faithful’ (Arabic *Amir al-Mu’mineen*) was divinely vouchsafed for Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and his heirs in succession after him. They quote an obscure Prophetic saying to establish the evidence of their claim that is known among the Shias as *Hadeeth-e-Ghadeer*: it reads, “Whosoever I am (Muhammad) the Master of, so is this ‘Ali his Master too.” Thus, historically speaking, the very death of the Prophet of Islam can be deemed as the event of the friction of Muslim Ummah. The protest grew stronger with the passage of time primarily under the Umayyad Dynasty, particularly in the wake of various events of hostility and violence in which individuals closely or distantly relating to the

Prophet's Household were assassinated. After the tragic event of Karbala in 684 CE, when Hussain, the revered grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and his family were assassinated, the crude Shia movement quickly assumed the shape of an organized religious group in its own right. The assumption of a distinct religious identity with its own ideological fountainhead was chiefly a reaction to the political hegemony of the Umayyad Dynasty. Once having come to its own, the Shia doctrine attempted to trace its origin in the political scenario developed after Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE. Since the whole ideological growth of the Shia doctrine took place under Umayyad rule, it became inherent in the Shia psychology to detest and rebuke as a religious obligation everything that belongs either to the Umayyads or to those who, allegedly, did not side with Ali and his successors. Overall, seeking after its doctrinal nature, the Shia cult can be declared a 'political school of thought'. Soon afterwards, however, the purity of the political character was lost into the religious fervor of the protestant-adherents and a new school of religio-political thought got birth from the very political psychology of the Shias.

The Shias further have three main factions within the cult itself, namely ***Ithna' 'Ashariyyah*** (the Twelvers), ***Zaidiyyah*** (the followers of *Zaid ibn 'Ali Zain al-Aabideen*), and ***Isma'iliyyah*** (the followers of *Isma'il ibn*

Ja'far al-Saadiq). However, the major faction has always been the followers of the Twelver Doctrine. This schism of the Shias was yet again based upon the politics of the cult, for the conflicts of succession always haunted their unity.

A critical psycho-analysis of the Shia ideology will systematically strip it of its theological foundations and expose the obsolescence of its doctrine. In fact, the Shia doctrine is the most frustrated and outdated doctrine among all major Muslim paradigms. The Shia movement, originally, began as a protest against the political usurpation of non-Hashmites, i.e. those not directly coming of the tribe of the Prophet, after the Prophet's death. Therefore, the movement owes its *raison d'être* to the ideology of God-directed and God-permeated politics. They have always believed that "Imam", a divinely appointed spiritual leader of the rank of a Prophet, will lead and guide Ummah politically as well as spiritually. In other words, the 'sacred' and the 'secular' have been coalesced in the Shia doctrine in order to baptize their assorted materials as a self-consistent 'holy idea'.

Twelver Shias, the major faction of Shias, remained until 17th century CE an esoteric sect with its mystery practices—that may well label Shiaism as a 'mystery cult' of the nature of the ancient Near Eastern cults. The real test of the Shias approached twice in the

history of Islam: firstly in Egypt when the Isma'ilis came to power in 9th century and secondly in Iran when the Safvids erected their rule in 17th century. The Shias, thus, achieved first time ever what they had always dreamed of as a distinct religious sect: the political authority. However, the inception of Shia regimes both in Egypt and Iran brought no change in the existing theology of the movement whatsoever and thus could not deliver. It continued to mourn and protest the 'heinous usurpation' of the Companions of the Prophet who had neglected the legitimacy of 'Ali and his descendants. They did not abandon to mourn their political deprivation despite having achieved the long-desired authority and a sovereign state to practice it. Now they could plant the ideology of the Shiaism in its pragmatic form, as was previously claimed. Instead, the protest and mourning practices, having been institutionalized, took solid religious shape, as they began to be intensely practiced after the declaration of *Fiqh al-Ja'far* as the state-religion, particularly, in Iran.

The shallow nature of the doctrine is immediately out when we objectively analyze its political ideology in the post-Imamat era, which they style as the era of ignorance and disorder. This belief grants Shias a most desired opportunity to erect the concept of a messianic deliverer, a Messiah of the kind of Christ, called "Mahdi", 'the Divinely Guided'. This end-time savior bears a great deal of resemblance with the New

Testament Christ in all major aspects including inception, disappearance and 2nd coming. Muhammad al-Mahdi, they say, is the Son of 11th Imam, Hasan 'Askari, and he disappeared during the Abbasid reign in a cave near Samara, Iraq, when the Caliph's forces were chasing him. The Abbasid Caliph wanted to slay the 6-year old 'miracle-working' spiritual leader of the Twelvers, for he feared sedition and rebellion from his party. The whole conception appears to have been borrowed from Christianity, especially from the versions of Christianity then extant in Arabia and its surrounding, particularly the Monophysites and Nestorians.

After the disappearance of al-Mahdi, Shias came to believe in two transitions of "Mahdi Disappearance/Occultation" they term "**Ghaibat al-Sughrāh**" (Minor Occultation) and "**Ghaibat al-Kubrah**" (Greater Occultation). The Minor Occultation continued for a little more than half century of Mahdi's disappearance, and a few chosen individuals, four canonized by the Orthodoxy, were believed to have esoteric connections with him. Here these mouthpieces of Imam Mahdi acted in the fashion of the "Apostles of Christ" who Jesus Christ, according to Christian doctrine, chose to express his will. Mahdi acted in a like manner in the Shia paradigm and chose four such individuals (Arabic *al-Nuwaab al-Arba'a*, "the Four Leaders") that he was satisfied with to reveal Shia

“Kerygma”. Hence, the will of the final Imam mattered in every issue of religious as well as worldly import among the Twelver Shias and it is why the Imam continued issuing his verdicts for a few generations from the lips of his elects. However, this age of Minor Occultation, all of a sudden, came to an end with the utter stoppage of its all-powerful ‘hidden’ communication after 67 years of the Disappearance event. The Imam stopped revealing himself to anyone after the death of his final *Safeer*, “Ambassador”. This, in other words, meant that Imam Mahdi denounced electing Shia individuals anymore and disowned his community *en toto*. Ever since the death of the last Ambassador of Imam in 941 CE, the Shias have been praying as a religious obligation for the appearance of the ‘Hidden Imam’, Al-Mahdi. The Shia “Apocalypse” will take place, according to popular belief, at the end of Greater Occultation.

The Shia rationale of Hadeeth radically differs from its counterpart Sunni Hadeeth methodology. They do not, *per se*, distinguish between a statement of Prophet Muhammad and the statements of the twelve Imams in regard to their theological importance. *Ja’far al-Saadiq*, the 6th Shia Imam, is reported in *Kaafi Kulayni* as laying out the Shia vision of Hadeeth; he contends that the words of an Imam are the words of the Prophet and the words of the Prophet are God’s words. We must do well to bear in mind that Prophet Muhammad appears

merely the figurehead of the cult, whereas Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, is the nucleus of Shia doctrine. The dynamic mechanics of the cult originate from the sermons of *Ja'far al-Saadiq*, hence the Twelver cult is jurisprudentially named as ***Fiqh al-Ja'fariyyah***. The most practical theological books among the Shias after Quran itself are “*Kaafi fi 'Ilm al-Deen*” by *Muhammad ibn Ya'qoob al-Kulayni* and “*Man laa Yahduruhu al-Faqih*” by ‘*Ali ibn Baabawayh Qummi*, both written in 10th century. According to both of these books of Shia Hadeeth discipline, there is a huge debate in Shia doctrine over the survival of the original Quran—whether or not the Quran survived the age of usurpation and chaos after Prophet’s death. One group believes that the Quran is intact and was never tampered with, but its impeccable knowledge is with the Imams—that is to say Imam are the infallible exegetes of Quran. On the other hand, a goodly number believes that today’s Quran is incomplete and its complete copy was the codex of ‘Ali, which is now in the possession of Imam Mahdi.

Although a number of attempts have been made to systematize Shia theology, it still remains inconsistent with the major portion of the Quran. Moreover, Shia theology appears self-contradicting with its paradoxical parables regarding God, the Prophet, his Household,

his Companions and even the Messianic figure of Mahdi.