

SHI'A

**ALLAMEH
SAYYID MUHAMMAD HOSSEIN TABATABAI**

**TRANSLATED BY:
SAYYID HOSSEIN NASR**



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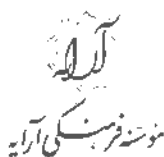
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SHI'A

(شیعه در اسلام)

Allameh Sayyed Muhammad Hossein Tabatabai

(مؤلف: علامه سید محمد حسین طباطبائی)

Translated by: Sayyid Hossein Nasr

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Transliteration

Arabic Letters

symbol transliteration

ا	b
ب	t
ت	th
ث	j
ج	h
ح	kh
خ	d
د	dh
ذ	r
ر	z
ز	s
س	sh
ش	ṣ
ص	ḍ
ض	t
ط	z
ظ	'
ع	gh
غ	f
ف	q
ق	k
ك	l
ل	m
م	n
ن	h
ه	w
و	y
ي	ah; at (construct state, and in certain words where the Persian pronunciation has been retained)
آ	(article) al- and 'l (even before the antepalātals)

Long Vowels

آ	ā
أ	ū
إ	ī

Short Vowels

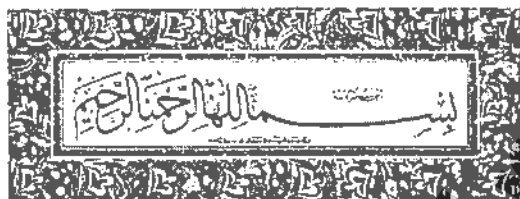
ا	a
و	u
ي	i

Diphthongs

او	au
اي	ai
يو	iy (Final Form ī)
اوو	uww (Final Form ū)

Persian Letters

پ	p
چ	ch
ز	zh
گ	g



BISM-ILLAH-IR-RAHMAN-IR-RAHEEM

(In the name of God, the most Compassionate,
the Merciful)

AL-HAMDU L'ILLAH
(All praise be to God)

أَدْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمِ وَالنَّوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ
وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ
وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُنْزِلِينَ

*Call unto the way of your Lord with wisdom and good
exhortation, and reason with them in the best way.
Lo! Your Lord best knows those who go astray from
His path, and He knows best those who are rightly
guided.
(Qur'an, 16:125)*

PREFACE

By: Sayyid Hossein Nasr

The Study of Shi'ism

Despite the vast amount of information and the number of factual details assembled during the past century by Western scholarship in the fields of orientalism and comparative religion, many gaps still exist in the knowledge of the various religions of the world, even on the level of historical facts. Moreover, until recently, most of the studies carried out within these fields have suffered from a lack of metaphysical penetration and sympathetic insight. One of the most notable omissions in Western studies of the religions of the East, and of Islam in particular, has occurred in the case of Shi'ism. Until now, Shi'ism has received little attention; and when it has been discussed, it has usually been relegated to the secondary and peripheral status of a religio-political "sect," a heterodoxy or even a heresy. Hence, its importance in both the past and the present has been belittled far more than a fair and objective study of the matter would justify.

The present work hopes to redress partially the lack of accessible and reliable English-language material pertaining to Shi'ism. It is the first of a series of books designed to bring to the English-speaking world accurate information about Shi'ism through the translation of writings by authentic Shi'ite representatives and of some of the traditional sources which, along with the Qur'ân, form the foundation of Shi'ite Islam. The purpose of this series is to present Shi'ism, as a living reality as it has been and as it is, in both its doctrinal and historical aspects. Thereby, we can reveal yet another dimension of the Islamic tradition and make better known the richness of the Islamic revelation in its historical unfolding, which could have been willed only by Providence.

This task, however, is made particularly difficult in a European language and for a predominantly non-Muslim audience by the fact that to explain Shi'ism and the causes for its coming into being is to fall immediately into polemics with Sunni Islam. The issues which thus arise, in turn, if presented without the proper safeguards and without taking into account the audience involved could only be detrimental to the sympathetic understanding of Islam itself. In the traditional Islamic atmosphere where faith in the revelation is naturally very strong, the Sunni-Shi'ite polemics which have gone on for over thirteen centuries, and which have become especially accentuated since the Ottoman-Safavid rivalries

dating from the tenth/sixteenth century, have never resulted in the rejection of Islam by Anyone from either camp. In the same way, the bitter medieval theological feuds among different Christian churches and schools never caused anyone to abandon Christianity itself, for the age was one characterized by faith. But were Christianity to be presented to Muslims beginning with a full description of all the points that separated, let us say, the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the Middle Ages, or even the branches of the early church, and all that the theologians of one group wrote against the other, the effect upon the Muslims' understanding of the Christian religion itself could only be negative. In fact, a Muslim might begin to wonder how anyone could have remained Christian or how the Church could have survived despite all these divisions and controversies. Although the divisions within Islam are far fewer than these in Christianity, one would expect the same type of effect upon the Western reader faced with the Shi'ite-Sunni polemics. These controversies would naturally be viewed by such a reader from the outside and without the faith in Islam itself which has encompassed this whole debate since its inception and has provided its traditional context as well as the protection and support for the followers of both sides.

Despite this difficulty, however, Shi'ism must of necessity be studied and presented from its own point of view as well as from within the general matrix of

Islam. This task is made necessary first of all because Shi'ism exists as an important historical reality within Islam and hence it must be studied as an objective religious fact. Secondly, the very attacks made against Islam and its unity by certain Western authors (who point to the Sunni-Shi'ite division and often fail to remember the similar divisions within every other world religion) necessitate a detailed and at the same time authentic study of Shi'ism within the total context of Islam. Had not such a demand existed, it would not even have been necessary to present to the world outside Islam all the polemical arguments that have separated Sunnism and Shi'ism. This is especially true at a time when many among the Sunni and Shi'ite *'ulamä* are seeking in every way possible to avoid confrontation with each other in order to safeguard the unity of Islam in a secularized world which threatens Islam from both the outside and the inside.

The attitude of this group of *'ulamä* is of course in a sense reminiscent of the ecumenism among religions, and also within a given religion, that is so often discussed today in the West. Most often, however, people search in these ecumenical movements for a common denominator which, in certain instances, sacrifices divinely ordained qualitative differences for the sake of a purely human and often quantitative egalitarianism. In such cases the so-called 'ecumenical' forces in question are no more than a

concealed form of the secularism and humanism which gripped the West at the time of the Renaissance and which in their own turn caused religious divisions within Christianity. This type of ecumenism, whose hidden motive is much more worldly than religions, goes hand in hand with the kind of charity that is willing to forego the love of God for the love of the neighbor and in fact insists upon the love of the neighbor in spite of a total lack of the love for God and the Transcendent. The mentality which advocates this kind of 'charity' affords one more example of the loss of the transcendent dimension and the reduction of all things to the purely worldly. It is yet another manifestation of the Secular character of modernism which in this case has penetrated into the supreme Christian virtue of charity and, to the extent that it has been successful, has deprived this virtue of any spiritual significance.

From the point of view of this type of ecumenical mentality, to speak approvingly of the differences between religions, or of the different orthodox schools within a single religion, is tantamount to betraying man and his hope for salvation and peace. A secular and humanistic ecumenism of this kind fails to see that real peace or salvation lies in Unity through this divinely ordained diversity and not in its rejection, and that the diversity of religions and also of the orthodox schools within each religion are signs of the Divine compassion, which seeks to convey the

message of heaven to men possessing different spiritual and psychological qualities. True ecumenism would be a search in depth after Unity, essential and Transcendent Unity, and not the quest after a uniformity which would destroy all qualitative distinctions. It would accept and honor not only the sublime doctrines but even the minute details of every tradition, and yet see the Unity which shines through these very outward differences. And within each religion, true ecumenism would respect the other orthodox schools and yet remain faithful to every facet of the traditional background of the school in question. It would be less harmful to oppose other religions, as has been done by so many religious authorities throughout history, than to be willing to destroy essential aspects of one's own religion in order to reach a common denominator with another group of men who are asked to undergo the same losses. To say the least, a league of religions could not guarantee religious peace, any more than the League of Nations guaranteed political peace.

Different religions have been necessary in the long history of mankind because there have been different "humanities" at human collectivities on earth. There having been different recipients of the Divine message, there has been more than one echo of the Divine Word. God has said "I" to each of these 'humanities' or communities; hence the plurality of

religions.’¹ Within each religion as well, especially within those that have been destined for many ethnic groups, different orthodox interpretations of the tradition of the one heavenly message, have been necessary in order to guarantee the integration of the different psychological and ethnic groupings into a single spiritual perspective. It is difficult to imagine how the Far Eastern peoples could have become Buddhist without the Mahayana school, or some of the Eastern peoples Muslim without Shi’ism. The presence of such divisions within the religious tradition in question does not contradict its inner unity and transcendence. Rather it has been the way of ensuring spiritual unity in a world of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Of course, since the exoteric religious perspective relies on outward forms, it always tends in every religion to make its own interpretation the only interpretation. That is why a particular school in any religion chooses a single aspect of the religion and attaches itself so intensely to that one aspect that it forgets and even negates all other aspects. Only on the esoteric level of religious experience can there be understanding of the inherent limitation of being bound to only one aspect of the total Truth; only on the esoteric level can each religious assertion be

¹ See F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, translated by Lord Northbourne, London, 1965, especially Ch. IX, “Religio Perennis.”

properly placed so as not to destroy the Transcendent Unity which is beyond and yet dwells within the outward forms and determinations of a particular religion or religious school.

Shi'ism in Islam should be studied in this light: as an affirmation of a particular dimension of Isl which is made central and in fact taken by Shi'ites to be Islam as such. It was not a movement that in any way destroyed the Unity of Islam but one that added to the richness of the historical deployment and spread of the Qur'anic message. And despite its exclusiveness, it contains within its forms the Unity which binds all aspects of Islam together. Like Sunnism, Sufism and everything else that is genuinely Islamic, Shi'ism was already contained as a seed in the Holy Qur'ān and in the earliest manifestations of the revelation, and belongs to the totality of Islamic orthodoxy.¹

Moreover, in seeking to draw closer together in the spirit of a true ecumenism in the above sense, as is advocated today by both the Sunni and Shi'ite religious authorities, Shi'ism and Sunnism must not cease to be what they are and what they have always been. Shi'ism, therefore, must be presented in all its fullness, even in those aspects which contradict Sunni interpretations of certain events in Islamic history, which in any case are open to various interpretations. Sunnism and Shi'ism must first of all remain faithful

¹ See S. H. Nasr, *ideals and Realities of islam*, Leaden, 1966 C h. IV, Sunnism and Shi'ism.

to themselves and to their own traditional foundations before they can engage in a discourse for the sake of Islam or, more generally speaking, religious values as such. But if they are to sacrifice their integrity for a common denominator which would of necessity fill below the fullness of each, they will only have succeeded in destroying the traditional foundation which has preserved both schools and guaranteed their vitality over the centuries. Only Sufism or gnosis (*'irfān*) can reach that Unity which embraces these two facets of Islam and yet transcends their outward differences. Only Islamic esotericism can see the legitimacy and meaning of each and the real significance of the interpretation each has made of Islam and of Islamic history.

Without, therefore, wanting to reduce Shi'ism to a least common denominator with Sunnism or to be apologetic, this book presents Shi'ism as a religion, reality and an important aspect of the Islamic tradition. Such a presentation will make possible a more intimate knowledge of Islam in its multidimensional entity but at the same time it will pose certain difficulties of a polemical nature which can be resolved only on the level which transcends polemic, altogether. As already mentioned, the presentation of Shi'ism in its totality and therefore including its polemical aspects, while nothing new for the Sunni world, especially since the intensification of Sunni polemics during the Ottoman and Safavid

periods would certainly have an adverse effect upon the non Muslim reader if the principles mentioned above were to be forgotten.

In order to understand Islam fully, it must always be remembered that it, like other religions, contained in itself from the beginning the possibility of different types of interpretation (1.) that Shi'ism and Sunnism, while opposed to each other on certain important aspects of sacred history, are united in the acceptance of the Qur'ān as the Word of God and in the basic principles of the faith; (2) that Shi'ism bases itself on a particular dimension of Islam and on an aspect of the nature of the Prophet as continued later in the line of the Imāms and the Prophet's Household to the exclusion of, and finally in opposition to another aspect, which is contained in Sunnism; (3) and finally, that the Shi'ite-Sunni polemics can be put aside and the position of each of these schools explained only on the level of esotericism, which transcends their differences and yet unites them inwardly.

Fundamental Elements of Shi 'ism

Although in Islam no political or social movement has been separated from religion, which from the point of view of Islam necessarily embraces all things, Shi'ism was not brought into existence only by the question of the political succession to the Prophet of Islam—upon whom be blessings and peace—as so many Western works claim (although this question was of course of

great importance). The problem of political succession may be said to be the element that crystallised the Shi'ite, into a distinct group, and political suppression in late" periods, especially the martyrdom of Imam Hossein—upon whom be peace—only accentuated this tendency of the Shi'ite, to see themselves as a separate community within the Islamic world. The principal cause of the coming into being of Shi'ism, however, lies in the fact that this possibility existed within the Islamic revelation itself and so had to be realized. Inasmuch as there were exoteric and esoteric interpretations from the very beginning, from which developed the schools (*madhhab*) of the *Shari'ah* and Sufism in the Sunni world, there also had to be an interpretation of it which would combine these elements in a single whole. This was realized in Shi'ism, for which the Imām is the person in whom these two aspects of traditional authority are united and in whom the religious life is marked by a sense of tragedy and martyrdom. There had to be the possibility, we might say, of an esotericism—at least in its aspect of love rather than of pure gnosis—which would flow into the exoteric domain and penetrate into even the theological dimension of the religion rather than remain confined to its purely inward aspect. Such a possibility was Shi'ism. Hence, the question which arose was not so much who should be the successor of the Holy Prophet as what the function and qualifications of such a person would be.

The distinctive institution of Shi'ism is the *Imāmate* and the question of the *Imāmate* is inseparable from that of *wilāyah*, or the esoteric function of interpreting the inner mysteries of the Holy Qur'an and the Shari'ah.¹ According to the Shi'ite view, the successor of the Prophet of Islam must be one who not only rules over the community in justice but also is able to interpret the Divine Law and its esoteric meaning. Hence, he must be free from error and sin (*ma 'sum*) and he must be chosen from on high by divine decree (*nass*) through the Prophet. The whole ethos of Shi'ism revolves around the basic notion of *wilāyah*, which is intimately connected with the notion of sanctity in Sufism. At the same time, *wilāyah* contains certain implications on the level of the Shari'ah inasmuch as the Imām, or he who administers the function of *wilāyah*, is also the interpreter of religion for the religious community and its guide and legitimate ruler.

It can be argued quite convincingly that the very demand of 'All for allegiance (*bay 'ah*) from the whole Islamic community at the moment that he became caliph implies that he accepted the method of selecting the caliph by the voice of the majority which had been followed in the case of the three *Kholafā' Rāshidun* or "the rightly guided caliphs" before him

¹ On *Wilayah* see S. H. Nasr, *Ideals*, pp. 161-162, and the many writings of F. Corbin on Shi'ism, which nearly always turn to this major theme.

and that thereby he accepted the previous caliphs insofar as they were rulers and administrators of the Islamic community. What is also certain from the Shi'ite point of view, however, is that he did not accept their function as Imāms in the Shi'ite sense of possessing the power and function of giving the esoteric interpretations of the inner mysteries of the Holy Qur'an and the Shari'ah as is seen by his insistence from the beginning that he was the heir and inheritor (*wasi*) of the Prophet and the Prophet's legitimate successor in the Shi'ite sense of succession. The Sunni-Shi'ite dispute over the successors to the Holy Prophet could be resolved if it were recognized that in one case there is the question of administering a Divine Law and in the other of also revealing and interpreting its inner mysteries. The very life of 'All and his actions show that he accepted the previous caliphs as understood in the Sunni sense of *khalifah* (the ruler and the administrator of the Shari'ah), but confined the function of *wilāyah*, after the Prophet, to himself. That is why it is perfectly possible to respect him as a caliph in the Sunni sense and as an Imām in the Shi'ite sense, each in its Own perspective.

The five principles of religion (*usul al-Din*) as stated by Shi'ism include: *tawhid* or belief in Divine Unity; *nubuwwah* 01' prophecy; *Ma'ād* 'or resurrection; *Imā'mah* or the *Imāmate*, belief in the Imāms as successors of the Prophet; and 'Ac/I 01 Divine Justice. In the three basic principles—Unity, prophecy

and resurrection—Sunism and Shi'ism agree. It is only in the other two that they differ. In the question of the Imamate, it is the insistence on the esoteric function of the Imam that distinguishes the Shi'ite perspective from the Sunni; in the question of justice it is the emphasis placed upon this attribute as an intrinsic quality of the Divine Nature that is particular to Shi'ism. We might say that in the esoteric formulation of Sunni theology, especially as contained in Ash'arism, there is an emphasis upon the will of God. Whatever God wills is just, precisely because it is willed by God; and intelligence ('aql) is in a sense subordinated to this will and to the "voluntarism" which characterizes this form of theology.¹ In Shi'ism, however, the quality of justice is considered as innate to the Divine Nature. God cannot act in an unjust manner because it is His Nature to be just. For, Him to be unjust would violate His own Nature, which is impossible. Intelligence can judge the justness or unjustness of an act and this judgment is not completely suspended in favor of a pure voluntarism on the part of God. Hence, there is a greater emphasis upon intelligence ('awl) in Shi'ite theology and a greater emphasis upon will (*iradah*) in Sunni *kalām*, or theology, at least in the predominant Ash'arite school. The secret of the greater affinity of Shi'ite theology for the "intellectual sciences" (al-

¹ For a profound analysis and criticism of Ash'arite theology, see F. Schuon. "*Di lemmas of Theological Speculation*." *Studies in Comparative Religion*. Spring 1969, pp 66-93.

'ulum al-'aqliyah) lies in part in this manner of viewing Divine Justice.¹

Shi'ism also differs from Sunnism in its consideration of the means whereby the original message of the Qur'anic revelation reached the Islamic community, and thereby in certain aspects of the sacred history of Islam. There is no disagreement on the Quran' and the Prophet, that is, on what constitutes the origin of the Islamic religion. The difference in view begins with the period immediately following the death of the Prophet. One might say that the personality of the Prophet contained two dimensions which were later to become crystallized into Sunnism and Shi'ism. Each of these two schools was later to reflect back upon the life and personality of the Prophet solely from its own point of view, thus leaving aside and forgetting or misconstruing the other dimension excluded from its own perspective. For Shi'ism, the "dry" (in the alchemical sense) and "austere" aspect of the Prophet's personality as reflected in his successors in the Sunni world was equated with worldliness, while his "warm" and "compassionate" dimension was emphasized as his whole personality and as the

¹ See S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, Introduction; also S. H. Nasr, *Sciences and Civilization in Islam*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1968, Chapter II.

essence of the nature of the Imams, who were considered to be a continuation of him.’¹

For the vast majority of the Islamic community, which supported the original caliphate, the companions (of the Prophet represent the Prophet’s heritage and the channel through which his message was transmitted to later generations. Within the early community, the companions occupied a favored position and among them the first four caliphs stood out as a distinct group. It is through the companions that the sayings and manner of living (*sunnah*) of the Prophet were transmitted to the second generation of Muslims. Shi’ism, however, concentrating on the question of *wlāyah* and insisting on the esoteric content of the prophetic message, saw in ‘All and the Household of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*), in its Shi’ite sense, the sole channel through which the original message of Islam was transmitted, although, paradoxically enough the majority of the descendants of the Prophet belonged to Sunnism and continue to do so until today. Hence, although most of the Hadith literature in Shi’ism and Sunnism is alike, the chain of transmission in many instances is not the same. Also, inasmuch as the Imāms constitute for Shi’ism a continuation of the spiritual authority of the Prophet—although not of

¹ This idea was first formulated in an as yet unpublished article of F. Schuon entitled *Images d’Islām*, some elements of which can be found in the same author’s *Des Éwige i Vorganglichkeit* translated by T. Burckhardt, Weileimi Oberbayern, 1970, in the Chapter entitled “Blick auf den Islam,” pp. 111-129.

course his law bringing function—their sayings and actions represent a supplement to the prophetic *l* and *sunnah*. From a purely religious and spiritual point of view, the Imam may be said to be for Shi'ism an extension of the personality of the Prophet during the succeeding centuries. Such collections of the sayings of the Imāms as the *Nahj al-Balā* of 'Alī and the *Usul al-Kāfi* containing sayings of all the Im are for the Shi'ites a continuation of the hadith collections concerned with the sayings of the Prophet himself. In many Shi'ite collection of hadith, the sayings of the Prophet and of the Imāms are combined. The grace (*barakah*)¹ of the Qur'ān, as conveyed to the world by the Prophet, reached the Sunni community through the companions (foremost among them were Abū-Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman 'Alī and a few others, such as Anas and Salman), and during succeeding generations through the 'ulamā and the Sufis, each in his own world. This *barakah*, however, reached the Shi'ite community especially through 'Alī and the Household of the Prophet—in its particular Shi'ite sense as referred to above and not simply in the sense of any Alid.

It is the intense love to, 'Alī and his progeny through Fāṭimah that compensates for the lack of attention

¹ This term is nearly impossible to translate into English, the closest to an equivalent being the word "grace." if we do not oppose grace to the natural order as is done in most Christian theological texts. See S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge (USA), 1964, PP 105—106.

towards, and even neglect of, the other companions in Shi'ism. It might be said that the light of 'All and the Imāms was so intense that it blinded the Shi'ite to the presence of the other companions, many of whom were saintly men and also had remarkable human qualities. Were it not for that intense love of 'All, the Shi'ite attitude towards the companions would hardly be conceivable and would appear unbalanced, as it surely must when seen from the outside and without consideration for the intensity of devotion to the Household of the Prophet.

Certain the rapid spread of Islam, which is one of the most evident extrinsic arguments for the divine origin of the religion, would have been inconceivable without the companions and foremost among them the caliphs. This fact itself demonstrates how the Shi'ite views concerning the companions and the whole of early Sunnism were held within the religious family (that of the whole of Islam) whose existence was taken for granted. If Islam had not spread through the Sunni caliphs and leaders many of the Shi'ite arguments would have had no meaning. Sunnism and its very success in the world must therefore be assumed as a necessary background for an understanding of Shi'ism, whose minority role, sense of martyrdom and esoteric qualities could only have been realized in the presence of the order which had previously been established by the Sunni majority and especially by the early companions and their

entourage. This fact itself points to the inner bond relating Sunnism and Shi'ism to their common Qur'ānic basis despite the outward polemics.

The barakah present in both Sunnism and Shi'ism has the same origin and quality, especially if we take into consideration Sufism which exists in both segments of the Islamic community. The barakah is everywhere that which has issued from the Qur'an and the Prophet, and it is often referred to as the "Muhammadan barakah" (*al-barakah al-muhammadiyah*).

Shi'ism and the general esoteric teachings of Islam which are usually identified with the essential teachings of Sufism have a very complex and intricate relationship.¹ Shi'ism must not be equated simply with Islamic esotericism as such. In the Sunni world, Islamic esotericism manifests itself almost exclusively as Sufism whereas in the Shi'ite world, in addition to a Sufism similar to that found in the Sunni world, there is an esoteric element based upon love (*mahabbah*) which colors the whole structure of the religion. It is based on love (or in the language of Hinduism, *bhakta*) rather than a pure gnosis or *ma'rifah*, which by definition is always limited to a small number. There are, of course, some who would equate original Shi'ism purely and simply with

¹ See our study "Shi'ism and Sufism; their Relationship in Essence and in Historical Religions Studies", October, 1970, pp 229-242 also in our *Sufi Essays*, Albany, 1972.

esotericism.¹ Within the Shi'ite tradition itself the proponents of "Shi'ite gnosis" (*'irfān shi'i*) such as Sayyid Haydar Amuli speak of the equivalence of Shi'ism and Sufism. In fact, in his major work, the *Jāmi' al-Asrār* (Compendium of Divine Mysteries), Amuli's main intention is to show that real Sufism and Shi'ism are the same.² But if we consider the whole of Shi'ism, then there is of course in addition to the esoteric element the exoteric side, the law which governs a human community. 'All ruled over a human society and the sixth Imām Ja'far al-Sādiq founded the Twelve-Imām Shi'ite school of law. Yet, as mentioned above, esotericism, especially in the form of love, has always occupied what might be called a privileged position within Shi'ism, so that even the Shi'ite theology and creed contain formulations that are properly speaking more mystical than strictly theological.

In addition to its law and the esoteric aspect contained in Sufism and gnosis, Shi'ism contained from the beginning a type of Divine Wisdom, inherited from the Prophet and the Imāms, which became the basis for the *hikmah* or *sophia* that later developed extensively in the Muslim world and incorporated into its structure suitable elements of the Graeco-

¹ This position is especially defended by H. Corbin, who has devoted so many penetrating studies to Shi'ism.

² See H. Corbin's introduction to Sayyid Haydar Amuli *La Philosophie Shi'ite*, Tehran-Paris, 1969.

Alexandrian, the Indian and the Persian intellectual heritages. It is often said that Islamic philosophy came into being as a result of the translation of Greek texts and that after a few centuries Greek philosophy died out in the Muslim world and found a new home in the Latin West. This partially true account leaves out other basic aspects of the story, such as the central role of the Qur'ān as the source of knowledge and truth for the Muslims; the fundamental role of the spiritual hermeneutics (*ta'wil*) practised by Sufis and Shi'ites alike, through which all knowledge became related to the inner levels of meaning of the Sacred Book; and the more than one thousand years of traditional Islamic philosophy and theosophy which has continued to our day in Shi'ite Persia and in adjacent areas.¹ When we think of Shi'ism, we must remember that, in addition to the law and the strictly esoteric teachings, Shi'ism possesses a "theosophy" or *hikmah* which made possible the vast development of later Islamic philosophy and the intellectual sciences from the beginning, enabling it to have a role in the intellectual life of Islam far outweighing its numerical size.

The respect accorded to the intellect as the ladder to Divine Unity, an element that is characteristic of all of

¹ The only history of philosophy in Western languages which takes these elements into account is H. Corbin (with the collaboration of S. H. Nasr and O. Yahaya), *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, vol. 1, Paris, 1964.

Islam and especially emphasized by Shi'ism, helped create a traditional educational system in which rigorous training in logic went hand in hand with the religious and also the esoteric sciences. The traditional curriculum of the Shi'ite universities (*madrasahs*) includes to this day courses ranging from logic and mathematics to metaphysics and Sufism. The hierarchy of knowledge has made of logic itself a ladder to reach the suprarational logical demonstration, especially *burhān*—or demonstration in its technical sense, which has played a role in Islamic logic that differs from its use in Western logic—came to be regarded as a reflection of the Divine Intellect itself, and with the help of its certainties the Shi'ite metaphysicians and theologians have sought to demonstrate with rigor the most metaphysical teachings of the religion. We see many examples of this method in the present book, which is itself the result of such a traditional *madrasah* education. It may present certain difficulties to the Western reader who is accustomed to the total divorce of mysticism and logic and for whom the certainty of logic has been used, or rather misused, for so long as a tool to destroy all other certainties, both religious and metaphysical. But the method itself has its root in a fundamental aspect of Islam—in which the arguments of religion are based not primarily on the miraculous

but on the intellectually evident¹— an aspect which has been strongly emphasized in Shi'ism and is reflected in both the content and the form of its traditional expositions.

Present State of Shi'ite Studies

Historical factors, such as the fact that the West never had the same direct political contact with Shi'ite Islam that it did with Sunni Islam, have caused the Occident to be less aware until now of Shi'ite Islam than of Sunnism. And Sunni Islam, also, has not always been understood properly or interpreted sympathetically by all Western scholars. The West came into direct contact with Islam in Spain, Sicily and Palestine in the Middle Ages and in the Balkans during the Ottoman period. These encounters were all with Sunni Islam with the exception of limited contacts with Ismā'ilism daring the Crusades. In the colonial period, India was the only large area in which a direct knowledge of Shi'ism was necessary for day-to-day dealings with Muslims. For this reason the few works in English dealing with Twelve-Imām Shi'ism are mostly connected with the Indian subcontinent.² As a result

¹ This question has been treated with great lucidity in F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, translated by D. M. Matheson, London, 1963.

² See, for example, J. N. Hollister, *The Shi'it of India*, London, 1953; A.A.A. Fyzee, *Outlines of Muhammadan Law*, London, 1887; and N.B. Baillic, *A Digest of Muhammadan Law*, London, 1887. Of course in Iraq also the British were faced with a mixed Sunni—Shi'ite population but perhaps because of the relatively small size of the country, this contact never gave rise to serious scholarly concern with Shi'ite sources as it did in India.

of this lack of familiarity, many of the early Western orientalist brought the most fantastic charges against Shi'ism, such as that its views were forged by Jews disguised as Muslims. One of the reasons for this kind of attack, which can also be seen in the case of Sufism, is that this type of Orientalist did not want to see in Islam any metaphysical or eschatological doctrines of an intellectual content, which would rank of it something more than the famous "simple religion of the desert." Such writers therefore had to reject as spurious any metaphysical and spiritual doctrines found within the teachings of Shi'ism or Sufism. One or two works written during this period and dealing with Shi'ism were composed by missionaries who were particularly famous for their hatred of Islam.¹

It is only during the last generation that a very limited number of Western scholars have sought to make a more serious study of Shi'ism. Chief among them are L. Massignon, who devoted a few major studies to early Arab Shi'ism, and H. Corbin, who has devoted a lifetime to the study of the whole of Shi'ism and its later intellectual development especially as centered in Persia, and who has made known to the Western world for the first time some of the metaphysical and

¹ We specially have in mind D. M. Donaldson's *The Shi'ite Religion*. London, 1933, which is still the standard work on Shi'ism in Western Universities. Many of the works written on the Shi'ites in India are also by missionaries who were severely opposed to Islam.

theosophical richness of this as yet relatively unknown aspect of Islam.¹ Yet, despite the efforts of these and a few other scholars, much of Shi'ism remains to this day a closed book, and there has not appeared as yet an introductory work in English to present the whole of Shi'ism to one who is just beginning to delve into the subject.

The Present Book

It was to overcome this deficiency that in 1962, Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University, who pursues the laudable goal of presenting Oriental religions to the West from the point of view of the authentic representatives of these religions, approached me with the suggestion that I supervise a series of three volumes dealing with Shi'ism and written from the Shi'ite point of view. Aware of the difficulty of such an undertaking, I accepted because of the realization of the importance which the completion of such a project might have upon the future of Islamic studies and even of comparative religion as a whole. The present work is the first in that series; the others will be a volume dealing with the Shi'ite view of the Qur'ân, written also by

¹ Some of the works of Corbin dealing more directly with Twelve-Imams Shi'ism itself include: "*Pour und Morphologie du la Spiritualite Shi'ite*," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXIX, 1960; "*Le Combat Spirituel du Shi'ism*," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* XXX, 1961; and "*Au pays de L'Imam cache*," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* XXXII, 1963. Many of Corbin's writings on Shi'ism have been brought together in his forthcoming *En Islam iranien*.

'Allamah'¹ Tabataba'i and an anthology of the sayings of the Shi'ite Imams.

During the summer of 1963 when Professor Morgan was in Tehran, we visited 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Hossein Tabātaba'i in Darakah, a small village by the mountains near Tehran, where the venerable Shi'ite Authority was spending the summer months away from the heat of Qum where he usually resides. The meeting was dominated by the humble presence of a man who has devoted his whole life to the study of religion in whom humility and the power of intellectual analysis are combined. As we walked back from the house through the winding and narrow roads of the village, which still belongs to a calm and peaceful traditional world not as yet perturbed by the sound and fury of modernism, Professor Morgan proposed that 'Allamah Tabataba'i write the general volume on Shi'ism in the series and also the volume on the Qur'ān. Later, I was able to gain the consent of this celebrated Shi'ite authority that he put aside his monumental Qur'ānic commentary, al-Mizān, to devote some of his time to these volumes. Having studied for years with him in the fields of traditional philosophy and theosophy, I knew that of the traditional Shi'ite authorities he was the one most qualified to write such a work; a work which would

¹ Allamah is an honorific term in Arabic, Persian and other Islamic languages meaning, "very learned."

be completely authentic from the Shi'ite point of view and at the same time based upon an intellectual foundation. I realized, of course, the innate difficulty of finding a person who would be a reputable religious authority, respected by the Shi'ite community and untainted by the influence of Western modes of thought and at the same time well enough conversant with the Western world and the mentality of the Western reader to be able to address his arguments to them. Unfortunately, no ideal solution could be found to this problem, for in Persia, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, there are today usually two types of men concerned with religious questions: (1) the traditional authorities, who are, as a rule, completely unaware of the nature of the psychological and mental structure of modern man, or at best have a shallow knowledge of the modern world, and (2) the modernized so-called 'intellectuals,' whose attachment to Islam is often only sentimental and apologetic and who usually present a version of Islam which would not be acceptable to the traditional authorities or to the Muslim community (*ummah*). Only during the past few years has a new class of scholars, still extremely small in number, come into being which is both orthodox and traditional in the profound sense of these terms and at the same time knows well the modern world and the language necessary to reach the intelligent Western reader.

In any case, since the aim of Professor Morgan was to have a description of Shi'ism by one of the respected traditional Shi'ite scholars, the '*ulamā*', it was necessary to turn to the first class, of which 'Allāmah Tabātabā'i is an eminent example. Of course, one could not expect in such a case the deep Understanding of the Western audience for whom the work is intended. Even his knowledge of Sunni Islam moves within the orbit of the traditional polemics between Sunnism and Shi'ism, Which has been taken for granted until now by him as by so many other of the prominent '*ulama* of both sides. There are Several types of Muslim, and in particular of Shi'ite, *ulama* and among them some are not well-versed in theosophy and gnosis and limit themselves to the exoteric sciences. 'Allāmah Tabataba'i represents that central and intellectually dominating class of Shi'ite '*ulamā* who have combined interest in jurisprudence and Qur'ānic commentary with philosophy, theosophy and Sufism, and who represent a more universal interpretation of the Shi'ite point of view. Within the class of the traditional '*ulamā*, 'Allamah Tabataba'i possesses the distinction of being a master of both the Shari'ite and esoteric sciences and at the same time he is an outstanding *hiakim* or traditional Islamic philosopher (or more exactly, "theosopher"). Hence he was asked to perform this important task despite all the difficulties inherent in the presentation of the polemical side of Shi'ism to a world that does not

believe in the Islamic revelation to start with and for whom the intense love of 'All and his Household, held by the Shi'ites, simply does not exist. Certain explanations, therefore, are demanded that would not occur to a person writing and thinking solely within the Shi'ite world view.

Six years of collaboration with 'Allamah Tabataba'i and many journeys to Qum and even Mashhad, which he often visits in the Summer, helped me to prepare the work gradually for translation into English—a task which requires a translation of meaning from one world to another, to a world that begins without the general background of knowledge and faith which the usual audience of 'Allamah Tabataba'i possesses. In editing the text so that it would make possible a thorough and profound understanding of the structure of Islam, I have sought to take into full consideration the differences existing between traditional and modern scholarship, and also the particular demand, of the audience to which this work is addressed.¹ But putting aside the demands made by these two conditions, I have tried to remain as faithful to the original as possible so as to enable the non-Muslim reader to study not only the message but also the form and intellectual style of traditional Muslim authority.

¹ For my own views on the relationships between Sunnism and Shi'ism, see *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. (Ch. VI.)

The reader must therefore always remember that the arguments presented in this book are not addressed by 'Allamah Tabātabai to a mind that begins with doubt but to one that is grounded in certainty and is, moreover, immersed in the world of faith and religious dedication. The depth of the doubt and nihilism of certain types of modern man would be inconceivable to him. His arguments, therefore, may at times be difficult to grasp or unconvincing to some Western readers; they are only so, however, because he is addressing an audience whose demand for causality and whose conception of the levels of reality is not identical with that of the Western reader. Also there may be explanations in which too much is taken for granted or repetitions which appear to insult the intelligence of the perspicacious Western reader in whom the analytical powers of the mind are usually more developed than among most Orientals.¹ In these cases, the characteristic manner of his presentation and the only world known to him, that of contemporary Islam in its traditional aspect, must be kept in mind. If the arguments of St. Anselm and St. Thomas for the proof of the existence of God do not appeal to most modern men, it is not because modern men are more intelligent than the medieval theologians, but because the medieval masters were

¹ On this important question of the difference between the Oriental and Western dialectic see F. Schuon, "La dialectique orientale et son enracinement dans la foi," *Logique et Transcendance*, Paris, 1970, pp. 129.196

addressing men of different mentalities with different needs for the explanation of causality. Likewise, 'Allamah Tabātabai offers arguments addressed to the audience he knows the traditional Muslim intelligentsia. If all of his arguments do not appeal to the Western reader, this should not be taken as proof of the contention that his conclusions are invalid.

To summarize, this book may be said to be the first general introduction to Shi'ism in modern times written by an outstanding contemporary Shi'ite authority. While meant for the larger world outside of Shi'ism, its arguments and methods of presentation are those of traditional Shi'ism, which he represents and of which he is a pillar. 'Allamah Tabataba'i has tried to present the traditional Shi'ite point of view as it is and as it has been believed in and practiced by generations of Shi'ites. He has sought to be faithful to Shi'ite views without regard for the possible reactions of the outside world and without brushing aside the particular features of Shi'ism that have been controversial.

To transcend the polemical level, two religious schools would either have to put aside their differences in the face of a common danger, or the level of discourse would have to be shifted from the level of historical and theological fact, and dogmas to purely metaphysical positions. 'Allamah Tabātabai has not taken either path but has remained content

with describing Shi'ism as it is. He has sought to do full justice to the Shi'ite perspective in the light of the official position that he holds in the Shi'ite religious world as he is a master of both the exoteric (*zāhir*) and the esoteric (*bātin*) sciences. For those who know the Islamic world well, it is easy to discern the outward difficulties that such an authority faces in expounding the total view of things and especially in exposing the esoteric doctrines, which alone can claim true universality. He is seen in this book as the expositor and defender of Shi'ism in both its exoteric and esoteric aspects, to the extent that his position in the Shi'ite world has allowed him to speak openly of the esoteric teachings. But all that is uttered carries with it the voice of authority, which tradition alone provides. Behind the words of 'Allamah Tabataba'i stand fourteen centuries of Shi'ite Islam and the continuity and transmission of a sacred and religious knowledge made possible by the continuity of the Islamic tradition itself.

The Author

'Allamah sayyid Muhammad Hossein Tabātaba'i¹ was born in Tabriz in AH (lunar) 1321 or AH (solar) 1282, (AD 1903)² in a family of descendants of the

¹ An account in Persian of 'Allamah Tabatabai by one of his outstanding students. Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Ashtiyāni, can be found in *Ma'ārif Islami* vol. V, 1347 (A. H. solar), pp. 48-50.

² Since the beginning of the reign of Reza Shah, the Persians have been using even more than before the solar hegira calendar in addition to the lunar, the former for civil and daily purposes

Holy Prophet which for fourteen generations has produced outstanding Islamic scholars.¹ He received his earliest education in his native city, mastering the elements of Arabic and the religious sciences, and at about the age of twenty set out for the great Shi'ite University of Najaf to continue more advanced studies. Most students in the madrasahs follow the branch of "transmitted sciences" (*al-'uluām al-naqliyah*) especially the sciences dealing with the Divine Law, *fiqh* or jurisprudence, and *usul al-fiqh* or the principles of jurisprudence. 'Allamah Tabātaba'i, however, sought to master both branches of the traditional sciences: the transmitted and the intellectual. He studied Divine Law and the principles of jurisprudence with two of the great masters of that day, Mirzā Muhammad Hossein Nā'ini and Shaykh Muhammad Hossein Isfahani. He became such a master in this domain that had he kept completely to these fields, he would have become one of the foremost mujtahids, or authorities in Divine Law, and would have been able to wield much political and social influence.

But such was not his destiny. He was more attracted to the intellectual sciences and he studied assiduously

and the latter for religious functions. In the present work, all Islamic dates are lunar unless otherwise specified.

¹ The title "Sayyid" in 'Allāmah Tabātaba'i's name is itself an indication of his being a descendant of the Prophet. In Persia the term 'Sayyid' (or Seyyed) is used exclusively in this sense. While in the Arab world, it is usually used as the equivalent of "gentleman" or "Mr."

the whole cycle of traditional mathematics with Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Khansari and traditional Islamic philosophy, including the standard texts of the *Shifa'* of Ibn Sin the *Asfar* of Sadr al-Din Shirazi and the *Tamhid ai-Qawa'id* of Ibn Turkah, with Sayyid Hossein Badkoba'i himself a student of two of the most famous masters of the school of Tehran, Sayyid Abu'l-Ijasa Jilwah and Aqa 'Ali Mudarris Zunūzi.¹

In addition to formal learning, or what the traditional Muslim sources call 'acquired science' (*'ilm Husuli*), 'All Tab sought after that "immediate science" (*'ilm Huduri*) or gnosis through which knowledge turns into vision of the supernal realities. He was fortunate in finding a great master of Islamic gnosis, Mirz 'Ali Qadi who initiated him into the Divine mysteries and guided him in his journey toward spiritual perfection. 'All Tab once told me that before meeting Qadi, he had studied the *Fusus al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi and thought that he knew it well. When he met this master of real spiritual authority, he realised that he knew nothing. He also told me that when Mirz 'Ali Qadi began to teach the *Fusus*, it was as if all the walls of the room were speaking of the reality of gnosis and participating in his exposition. Thanks to this master, the years in Najaf became for 'All Tabataba'i not only

¹ On these figures, see S.H. Nasr, *The School of Ispahan*, "Sadr al-Din Shirazi" and "Sabziwari" in M. M. Sharif (ed), *A History of Muslim philosophy*, vol. II, Wiesbaden, 1966.

a period of intellectual attainment but also one of asceticism and spiritual practices, which enabled him to attain that state of spiritual realization often referred to as becoming divorced from the darkness of material limitations (*tajrid*). He spent long periods in fasting and prayer and underwent a long interval during which he kept absolute silence. Today, his presence carries with it the silence of perfect contemplation and concentration even when he is speaking.

'Allāmah Tabataba'i returned to Tabriz in AH (solar) 1314 (AD 1934) and spent a few quiet years in that city teaching a small number of disciples, but he was as yet unknown of the religious circles of Persia at large. It was the devastating events of the Second World War and the Russian occupation of Persia that brought 'Allāmah Tabataba'i from Tabriz to Qum in AH (solar) 1324 (AD 1945). Qum was then, and continues to be, the center of religious studies in Persia. In his quiet and unassuming manner, 'Allāmah Tabataba'i began to teach in this holy city, concentrating on Qur'ānic commentary and traditional Islamic philosophy and theosophy, which had not been taught in Qum for many years. His magnetic personality and spiritual presence soon attracted some of the most intelligent and competent of the students to him, and gradually he made the teachings of Mulla Sadra once again a cornerstone of the traditional curriculum. I still have a vivid memory of some of the

sessions of his public lectures in one of the mosque-madrasahs of Qum when nearly four hundred students sat at his feet to absorb his wisdom.

The activities of 'Allāmah Tabataba'i since he came to Qum has also included frequent visits to Tehran. After the Second World War, when Marxism was fashionable among some of the youth in Tehran, he was the only religious scholar who took the pains to study the philosophical basis of Communism and supply a response to dialectical materialism from the traditional point of view. The fruit of this effort was one of his major works, *Usūl falsafah wa rawish-i ri'alism* (The Principles Of Philosophy and the Method of Realism), in which he defended realism—in its traditional and medieval sense—against all dialectical philosophies. He also trained a number of disciples who belong to the community of Persians with a modern education.

Since his coming to Qum, 'Allamah Tabataba'i has been indefatigable in his efforts to convey the wisdom and intellectual message of Islam on three different levels: to a large number of traditional students in Qum, who are now Scattered throughout Persia and other Shi'it lands; to a more group of students whom he has taught gnosis and Sufism in more intimate circles and who have usually met on Thursday evenings at his home or other private places; and also to a group of Persians with a modern education and

occasionally non-Persians with whom he has met in Tehran. During the past ten or twelve years, there have been regular sessions in Tehran attended by a select group of presume, and in the fall season by Henry Corbin, sessions in which the most profound and pressing spiritual and intellectual problems have been discussed, and in which I have usually had the role of translator and interpreter. During these years, we have studied with 'All Tab not only the classical texts of divine wisdom and gnosis but also a whole cycle of what might be called comparative gnosis, in which in each session the sacred texts of one of the major religions, containing mystical and gnostic teachings, such as the *Tao Te-Ching*, the *Upanishads* and the *Gospel of John*, were discussed and compared with Sufism and Islamic gnostic doctrines in general.

'Allamah Tabataba'i has therefore exercised a profound influence in both the traditional and modern circles in Persia. He has tried to create a new intellectual elite among the modern educated classes who wish to be acquainted with Islamic intellectuality as well as with the modern world. Many among his traditional students who belong to the class of 'ulamā have tried to follow his example in this important endeavor. Some of his students, such as Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani of Mashhad University and Murtada Mutahhari of Tehran University, are themselves scholars of considerable reputation. 'Allamah

Tabtaba'i often speaks of others among his students who possess great spiritual qualities but do not manifest themselves outwardly.

In addition to a heavy program of teaching and guidance, 'All Tab has occupied himself with writing many books and articles which attest to his remarkable intellectual powers and breadth of learning within the world of the aditi0fi Islamic sciences.¹

Today at his home in Qum, the venerable authority devotes nearly all of his time to his Qur'ānic commentary and the direction of some of his best students. He stands as a symbol of what is most permanent in the long tradition of Islamic scholarship and science, and his presence carries a fragrance, which can only come from one who has tasted the fruit of Divine Knowledge. He exemplifies in his person the nobility, humility and quest after truth, which have characterized the finest Muslim scholars over the ages. His knowledge and its exposition are a testimony to what real Islamic learning is, how profound and how metaphysical, and how different from so many of the shallow expositions of arms of the Orientalist or the distorted caricatures of so many Muslim modernists. Of course, he does not have the awareness of the modern mentality and the nature of

¹ See the bibliography for a complete list of the writings of 'Allamah Tabâtabai.

the modern world that might be desired, but that could hardly be expected in one whose life experience has been confined to the traditional circles in Persia and Iraq.

A word must be added about the system of transliteration of Arabic and Persian words and the manner in which reference is made to Islamic sources. In the question of transliteration, I have followed the standard system used in most works on Islam, but in making reference to Islamic books, I have sought to remain completely faithful to the original manuscript. The author, like most other Persian writers, refers to the very well-known Arabic works in the Persian-speaking world in their Persian form and to the less well-known in the original Arabic. For example, the history of al-Tabari is referred to by the author as *Tārikh T'abari* using the *idafah* construction in Persian, which gives the same meaning as the word "of" in English. This may appear somewhat disconcerting to one who knows Arabic but not Persian, but it conveys a feeling for the spiritual and religious climate of Persia where the two languages are used side by side. In any case, such references by the author have been transliterated according to the original. I have only sought to make them uniform and to give enough indication in the bibliography to make clear which author and which work is in question.

In the bibliography also, only the works referred to by 'Allamah Tabātabā'i as his sources have been included, and not any secondary or even other primary ones which I could have added myself. Also, the entry in the bibliography is according to the name of the book and not the author, which has always been the method used in Islamic circles.

For technical reasons, diacritical marks on Arabic words which have become common in English, and italics in the case of all Arabic words appearing in the text, have been employed only in the index and at the first appearance of the word.

In the end, I should like to thank Professor Kenneth Morgan, whose keen interest and commendable patience in this project has made its achievement possible, and Mr. William Chitticks, who has helped me greatly in preparing the manuscript for publication.

Sayyid Hossein Nasr

Tehran

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