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Occultation in Perpetuum: Shi'ite Eschatology and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis

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Content

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Coming Soon?	6
Worth the Wait	9
The Dream Deferred	15
Vox Populi, Vox Dei	19
The Hidden Hand	25
Conclusion	29

Executive Summary

This essay examines the assertion, widespread in both media and academia, that the Islamic Republic of Iran – and especially the current government under Ahmadinejad – is actuated by a powerful, Shī‘ite-based messianism. Much evidence appears at first glance to support this assessment: not only the statements and actions of the new, charismatic president, many of which reference the imminent return of the Hidden Imām, but also, and more fundamentally, the widespread perception of Shī‘ism – the state religion of Iran and spiritual force behind the Islamic Revolution – as an endemically and fervently apocalyptic creed. These two factors have combined with the pervasive impression created by many analysts that Iran’s rulers live on the brink of the Eschaton, and seek to expedite its arrival by initiating a worldwide cataclysm.

The author rejects this outlook, arguing instead that religio-historical developments in the medieval and modern periods gradually turned Twelver Shī‘ism into the most resolutely *anti-messianic* movement in Islam, perhaps in the world. As portrayed by the sources available to us, Shī‘ism was from the very outset an affair of specifically *passive* resistance, which was restrained still further by a strongly conservative and prudent streak. The one and only manifestation of radical rebellion approved by Twelver historiography is the uprising of Ḥusayn (680 CE), and even this event was soon metamorphosed into a deliberate Christ-like act of self-sacrifice geared toward moral, not political, redemption. From that time forward the strain of Shī‘ism that would ultimately win out made a point of fiercely condemning and ostracizing all movements for messianic restoration. Although a formally chiliastic element was incorporated into “mainstream” Shī‘ism with the “occultation” of the final imām (873 CE), the expectation of this shadowy figure’s return was pushed off until the end of history, and began to function as an antidote, not a catalyst, to messianic radicalism.

Even before the imāms exited the stage, the professional scholars of Shī‘ism were usurping their role and replacing their (already subdued) charisma with the regulating force *par excellence*: legalism. Throughout the middle ages the jurists or *mujtahidūn* extended their sway at the expense of any and all “extremist” impulses and became a consistent focus of antidisestablishmentarianism. By the time Shī‘ism was imposed as the official state religion of Iran in the sixteenth century, the clerical class had not only superseded the imām(s) as leaders of the community, they had arrogated to themselves practically all of his (their) authority. The increasing power of the ‘*ulamā*’ eventually paved the way for their accession to power in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a unique achievement in Islamic – and perhaps in world – history facilitated specifically by the *continuing irrelevance of the Hidden Imām*.

In the final section of this paper the oft-heard claims regarding the supposedly millenarian Ḥojjatiyyeh/Mahdaviyyeh are addressed and debunked. While it is imperative that the U. S. and E. U. spare no efforts to prevent the Islamic Republic from obtaining nuclear capability, this is not due to any inherent “End of Days” outlook informing Iranian policy. This alternative view of the subject harbors significant implications for the West’s present and future dealings with the Shī‘ite world.

Introduction

Early in 2005 the writer of these lines was listening via the Internet to an Iranian radio station called *shabake-ye-īthārgarān*¹, “The Self-Sacrificers’ Network,” and specifically to a daily broadcast entitled *barnāme-ye-pāyān-e-jahān*, “The End-of-the-World Program.” The speaker on that occasion, a middle-ranking cleric from the city of Khorramshahr, was propounding a novel interpretation of an ancient Islamic tradition, which read:

From ‘Ā’isha, that the Messenger of God, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, said: “The one-eyed Anti-Christ will be a Jew, and he will emerge from among the Jews of Isfahan, travel until he reaches the Land of Syria, and enter Palestine through the Lydda gate. He will begin the battle against the Muslims from there, and then the original companions of Jesus the son of Mary will descend and kill him, and utterly eradicate his people.”²

To the creative cleric delivering that day’s lecture, the intent of this medieval eschatological passage was obvious: it referred to Shaul Mofaz, then defense minister of the State of Israel. Mofaz was born in 1948 (like the Zionist Regime!) to a *Jewish family in Isfahan*; he emigrated to Palestine as a youth, entering that country *through the Lydda airport*; he joined the army soon after his arrival and began *battling the Muslims* from his new base; and he has, as everyone knows, *only one eye*.³ How did he come to be named Shaul? After the Saul of old who, by the ruse of changing his name to Paul, infiltrated Christianity and carried out the mission he had been assigned by the Jews: to corrupt and undermine the pure faith that Jesus had brought. For this reason enmity has reigned between “Shaul” and ‘Īsā from that time until the present. And who are “the original companions of Jesus the son of Mary” described in the ḥadīth? The three Magi, of course, who came to visit the manger, and they – no less than Christ’s arch-enemy of

¹ Unhappy with more strictly academic methods of transliterating Persian to English, which for the most part ignore the needs of proper phonetic pronunciation in favor of alphabetical correspondence, I have opted in this paper for a system that attempts to navigate between the pitfalls of each. Macrons are employed to indicate long vowels, but – for instance – *kasras* are rendered with an “e” (*Eslām, zabān-e-pāk*) because that is how they sound in Persian. Most consonants have been transliterated as from Arabic, but writing *Ridā* instead of *Rezā* seems counterproductive to me, and so I have chosen the latter alternative. Some well known names, like Khomeini or Ahmadinejad, have been left as they usually appear in the English press.

² ‘an ‘Ā’isha, *raḍiya Allāhu ‘anhā, qālat: qāla rasūl Allāh, ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam: a’war al-masīh al-dajjāl sawfa yakūnu yahudiyan, wa-sawfa yakhruju min yahudiyyat Iṣfihān ḥattā ya’ī al-shām madīnat Filistīn bi-bāb Lidda, wa-yuqātilu al-mu’minīna min hunāka wa-yanzulu aṣṣābu ‘Īsā b. Maryama al-awwalīn wa-yaqtuluhi wa-yuhliku qawmahu al-ḥarth wa’l-nasl* (various versions of this ḥadīth may be found especially in the *fitan* sections of both the Sunnī and Shī’ī canonical collections; for a partial list of other recensions see Shihāb I-Ḍīn Abū Maḥmūd b. Tamīm al-Muqaddasī, *Muthīr al-Gharām ilā Ziyārat al-Quds wa’l-Shām* [Beirut: Dār al-Majīd, 1994], pp. 103-4, *Bāb Halāk al-A’war al-Dajjāl bi’l-Shām wa-Muqāṭalatuhi al-Ṭā’ifa al-Manṣūra ilā an Yaqtuluhi al-Masīh ‘Alayhi al-Salām*).

³ Wrong defense minister, but why nitpick?

Isfahanic stock – hail from Iran.⁴ So it is the Islamic Republic of Iran that is destined, according to this ancient prophetic prognostication, to “descend and kill” the Israeli warlord Mofaz and “utterly eradicate his people.” “These events,” concluded the radio-preacher, “are already underway.”

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I have been asked by those who commissioned this study to address the following question: “Can we see a translation of apocalyptic Shī‘ite beliefs and fervor into a specific and distinguishable Iranian strategic idea or even one with operational fallout (i.e. with reference to WMD)?” Since my answer to this question is a tentative “no,” I consider it my duty to preface what follows with a short list of concisely stated reasons why, despite the conclusions of the present paper, it is nevertheless imperative that America, Europe and Israel spare no effort to prevent the Islamic Republic from obtaining the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons. These reasons are as follows:

1. A vast chasm separates the worldviews and aspirations of Islamist Iran from those governing modern Western states and societies, a contrariety so fundamental that it renders the arrival at a *modus vivendi* between the two sides nearly impossible and leads each to envision the other in fiercely diabolical terms. When such a high probability of conflict exists, the possession by *both* parties of weapons of mass destruction is a recipe for international cataclysm.⁵

⁴ Not for nothing are Iranians, after the revolution no less than before, commonly said to suffer from a cultural “personality split” that pits their religious faith against their national affinity. Here is a Muslim fundamentalist preacher positively referencing – even identifying his own polity and society with – figures straight out of the Zoroastrian *jāhiliyya*.

⁵ The Iranians admittedly could, and sometimes quietly do, argue that the very opposite is true: that when the eruption of hostilities between two actors seems imminent, it is obviously better for the survival of the species as a whole if *neither* side can boast a nuclear arsenal, but barring that unrealistic scenario, the next best situation is for *both* camps to be armed with atomic weapons, thus engendering the much-touted stalemate known as Mutually Assured Destruction. No nuclear nation has ever directly attacked another nuclear nation even with conventional weaponry, let alone with WMD, and therefore a nuclear Iran would be a boon to planetary peace and stability, the argument goes (whereas a non-nuclear Iran essentially represents the same temptation to the U. S. that Japan did during WWII). To the widely heard Western parry that the MAD theory is not applicable to Iran because it is a country run on other-worldly, not this-worldly, principles, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khāmene’ī has of late begun to offer an intriguing riposte. The “personification of international arrogance” (i.e. the U. S.), he says, claims that the Islamic Republic must be denied access to nuclear technology because its religious fanaticism and consequent “irrational” criteria for action make it a dangerously unpredictable state, whereas America, the Western-European countries and Israel – because these and other “civilized” members of the nuclear club are not governed by medieval metaphysics and impassioned messianism but by modern science and secular democracy – may be trusted to act in a more “logical” fashion and avoid a scenario of Mutually Assured Destruction. Khāmene’ī asserts that the diametric opposite is the case: the policy options open to the leaders of Iran are restricted by an immutable, eternally valid and sacred system of law, to which Shī‘ite Muslims owe their absolute and abiding allegiance above all else: if anyone is “predictable” in the current conflict, it is the Islamic Republic, whose hands are permanently tied by the *sharī‘a* (which, as the much maligned by rarely read “Qom *fatwā*” clearly established, permits the use of nuclear weapons *under certain very limited circumstances* – a statement applicable, the Rahbar argues, to the military policies of every nuclear nation

2. The methods of striking at American, European, Israeli, Arab, Kurdish and other targets employed by the Iranians to date have almost invariably involved a smokescreen. They have often managed – by hiring available and eager proxies – to “cover their tracks” and obscure from clear view the actual *source* of the attack, thereby rendering it extremely difficult to pin the blame where it belongs and identify the actor that needs to be punished and neutralized. Given the success rate of this method so far, one should expect the Iranians to continue employing it: though it is unquestionably harder to conceal the ultimate provenance of a nuclear weapon, it is not impossible. An atomic Iran could charge a more-or-less independent Islamist entity – Hizbullah, al-Qaeda, the Chechen Vis Haji, Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi, Islamic Jihad, a radical cell within Hizb al-Tahrir, even Hamas – with the delivery to the desired address of a nuclear payload (including a “dirty bomb,” which is even harder to trace), in the hopes that at least some doubt would be sown among the governments of the already fractitious West regarding the full responsibility of the Islamic Republic and the consequent morality of counterlaunching at Tehran. Such a scenario at least partially undermines the deterrent value of Mutually Assured Destruction.

3. Another element that may weaken the force of MAD in the case of Iran is religious – but not messianic – in character. I refer to the deeply ingrained Shī’ite tradition of martyrdom. The willingness and even eagerness to die, individually or *en masse*, for the sake of a given spiritual-military goal is a notion that goes back to the earliest days of Islam, whose adherents are urged by countless dicta emerging from the classical texts to “love death as others love life.” Martyrdom is, however, quite distinct from messianism in Shī’ite theology and historiography. Among Shī’ites, the quest for martyrdom receives its premier impetus (after the Qur’ān) from “the oppressed and persecuted imāms,” none of whom died naturally according to Shī’ite lore, and especially from the third of these, Ḥusayn, the *sayyid al-shuhadā’* (prince of martyrs), whose demise along with his family at the hands of the Umayyads in 680 CE resonates powerfully among all of today’s fedayeen (including Sunnīs). Shī’ite messianism, on the other hand, has its roots in the only imām of the twelve who *wasn’t* martyred, the five year old Muḥammad son of Ḥasan who disappeared from human view in 873 CE and whose second advent is still awaited by believers. Thus, though a willingness to risk the deaths of millions of members of the Iranian population as a result of a nuclear counterattack cannot (so this study will argue) be derived from Shī’ite *eschatology*, it could still conceivably be sought in Shī’ite *martyrology*.

on earth). The West, on the other hand, places not God’s unchanging law but man’s capricious legislation in the driver’s seat: it is *Western* leaders, unhampered by anything but their own moral and intellectual whim, who could decide one fine day to annihilate hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings with nuclear weapons, including masses of their own citizens who would be killed in the inevitable counterattack. This Western unpredictability is a direct result of the *estekbār* (arrogance) inherent in their secular philosophical system, which holds at bottom that man is the final reference and measure of all things, as opposed to the humility of the Muslims who submit to the judgment of a higher power. Whatever one may think about the validity of such Iranian arguments, awareness of their existence is important.

4. It cannot be denied that Iran has legitimate security concerns – involving potential threats from Russia, India, Sunni Pakistan, the resurgent Taliban, Turkey, an unstable Iraq, not to mention the U. S. – and that these concerns, together with a desire for the prestige and leverage afforded by nuclear status, constitute the genuine motivation behind the Islamic Republic’s drive for nuclear capability. Nevertheless, once acquired, the possibility that an Iranian atom bomb will be used not in a defensive but in an offensive context is palpable, especially given current President Ahmadinejad’s repeated demand that Israel be “completely wiped off the face of the earth” (*mahv-e-kāmel-e-Esrā’īl az safhe-ye rūzegār*). The ever-increasing demonization and dehumanization of the population of the Jewish state is preparing the moral ground in the Muslim world (and even in some places outside of it) for that population’s mass extermination. In the framework of a serious escalation – a phenomenon more common than ever these days in the Middle East – their own vitriolic rhetoric might easily run away with the leaders of the Islamic Republic, and an Iranian nuclear warhead find its way to Tel-Aviv. Such an eventuality would lead in turn to a regional and probably worldwide nuclear holocaust.

5. Finally, the acquisition by Iran of a nuclear weapon or weapons will unquestionably inaugurate a Middle East arms race, thereby tripling and quadrupling the chances that a nuclear exchange will eventually take place.

For all of these reasons and not a few more, the conclusions that follow regarding the specific question of the impact of Shī’ite messianism on present-day Iranian strategy should not in any way be construed as suggesting that a nuclear Iran is not a frighteningly dangerous prospect. As shall become clear, however, I believe that these conclusions *do* harbor significant implications for other aspects of the American and overall Western confrontation with Iran.

Coming Soon?

How influential is the reinvigorated Shī'ite messianic fervor coursing through segments of the Iranian populace and government on the policies of the Islamic Republic? In what ways does the tense expectation of the imminent reappearance of the Hidden Imām – evoked most palpably and immediately by the speeches and gestures of Maḥmūd Ahmadinejad – affect the short and long term goals of this uniquely theocratic regime? How do apocalyptic notions of mass catastrophe as a prerequisite for this reappearance impact on the behavior of those who seek to “hasten the End?” Before attempting to answer these questions, we have to examine the premise upon which they are all based: that post-revolutionary Iranian Shī'ism is messianist. I will argue that this premise is fundamentally mistaken. I will further assert that even were one to accept that the Islamic Republic is currently experiencing some sort of “End of Days” fever, Shī'ite eschatology as understood in the Islamic Republic (and in the medieval Muslim sources) is diametrically contraindicative to the inauguration of a nuclear holocaust.

Certainly the notion that Iran since Khomeini has witnessed a revival of interest in, and an eagerness for the return of, the Mahdī (the “Rightly Guided One,” the Muslim savior) can find a degree of support, at least at first glance. This is all the more true since Ahmadinejad’s election nearly two years ago. The charismatic president’s messianic-sounding words and deeds – allocating \$17 million dollars in government funds to the refurbishment of a mosque in Qom which houses the Well of Jamkārān, whence some believe the Twelfth Imām will reappear; having his new government sign a “pact” with that same Imām which was then thrown down that same well; pushing for the paving of a broad highway from Ray to Tehran so that his “Anticipated Excellency” will be able to travel the distance in comfort with his whole retinue in train; confident declarations to the effect that Israel will soon evaporate from the face of the earth together with all of Islam’s enemies; the president’s enthusiastic description to Ayatollah Javadi-ye-Amoli of the thoroughgoing fascination that greeted his U. N. address, during which – so he claimed to have been told by one of the Arab-Muslim listeners – his person was “encircled by an aura of heavenly light”; his letter to President Bush, so reminiscent of the Prophet Muḥammad’s epistle to the kings of old, in which he suggested in not so many words that America’s elected leader convert to Islam; his recent allusions to communications he purportedly received from the Hidden Imam and from Allāh Himself – all of these examples and others like them have been endlessly bandied about in the Western press of late, and combine to create the impression of an impassioned and ecstatic, not to say hallucinatory and delusional, executive who (moreover) presides over a cabinet handpicked from among his cronies in the paramilitary *Basij*, an organization whose members were recently praised by Supreme Leader Khamene’i for harboring “a special connection with the Mahdī” (*Basījīyān ertebāt-e-khāṣṣī bā baqiyat Allāh dārand*).⁶

⁶ “Bayānāt-e-Maqām-e-Mo’azzam-Rahbarī dar Āstāne-ye-Sālrūz-e-Taskhīr-e-Lāne-ye-Jāsūsī va Rūz-e-Mellī-ye-Mobārezeh bā Estekbār,” *Jomhuri-ye-Eslāmī*, 8.13.06.

This group of dangerous dreamers is in turn perceived by pundits and even many serious Iran-*shenāsān* (Iran specialists) to be the tip of a gargantuan chiliastic iceberg subsuming important groups within the government apparatus, large sections of the military and even the populace, all of whom are wittingly or unwittingly implementing policies inspired by the radical, messianist-oriented wing of the Shī'ite clerical class. The clandestine Hojatiyyeh society, one of whose key figures, Ayatollah Mesbāḥ-e-Yazdī, is also considered to be Ahmadinejad's personal *marja'* (Focus of Imitation, i.e. religious guide), is often specifically referenced in this connection, and is lumped together with a more general trend or tendency whose purveyors are referred to as the *ta'jiliyān* or "hasteners [of the End]." Ahmadinejad's self-proclaimed intention to pick up where Khomeini left off, rekindle the enthusiasm felt during the first years of the revolution and carry through to fruition the august project that the founder began, all make even more germane in this connection the direct link established by Khomeini himself between the events of 1979 and the Muslim messianic advent:

"We place this revolution into the hands of the Mahdī: if God please, let this revolution be the first step toward the appearance of The One Whom God Has Preserved, and let it pave the way for his arrival!"⁷

In the first months after the revolution Khomeini himself was often associated in popular imagination with the the Hidden Imām – hence the tenaciousness of his title: "The Imām" – and the conscious atavism of Ahmadinejad's administration has significantly led to its members being dubbed "the ambassadors (*wukala'*, Pers. *vokala'*) of the Imām," a deliberately ambiguous designation that simultaneously evokes both the modern and medieval figure (the occulted Mahdī, as we shall see, was represented successively by four such "ambassadors" during the first stage of his "absence").

Ahmadinejad's verbal antics over the past two years, combined with the increasingly tense situation surrounding the nuclear issue, have lead to a seemingly endless medley of repetitious clichés in the press and, unfortunately, even in academia regarding the Islamic Republic's "apocalyptic" philosophy and the influence thereof on the country's short- and long-term strategic objectives. Long-standing and widespread assumptions about Shī'ism being the most messianic of Islamic sects – indeed, it hosted the very inauguration of Muslim messianism – have furnished the basis for a plethora of assertions to the effect that Iran's leaders are living at the juncture between the end of this world and the beginning of the next. As recently as March, 2007, a highly respected Israeli army intelligence think-tank put out an information packet entitled *Hithazkut Tofa'at ha-Meshihiyut be-Iran* – "The Burgeoning Phenomenon of Messianism in Iran" – a document which cites no internal Iranian or Persian sources and which recycles for the umpteenth time a series of superficial platitudes about the current regime. The report speaks knowingly about "the genuine, heartfelt belief of Ahmadinejad and his cohorts in

⁷ "Sokhan-e-Rahbar beh Monāsebat-e-Majles-e-Yādbūd-e-Shahīd Beheshtī," *Ettelā'āt*, 9.23.85: "īn enqelāb-ra beh dast-e-Mehdī mīseporīm va īn enqelāb moqaddame-ye zohūr va zamīneh-sāz-e-zohūr haḍrat-e-Baqiyat-Allāh kh^wāhad būd en shā'a Allāh."

the *imminent reappearance* of the Hidden Imam, as well as in the *outbreak of a war of Gog and Magog with Israel and the West* as a *necessary prerequisite* of the Mahdī's advent."⁸ Untold articles and even full-length books have been written – none of them adducing a shred of evidence but all of them displaying an unfaltering confidence – based on the premise that the Islamic Republic is a hot-bed of eschatological excitement. Taken all together, it is not hard to see why, from an untrained bird's eye view, post-revolutionary Iran appears to be in the thralls of a major messianic delirium, and today more than ever.

But appearances can be deceiving, and it is necessary to look below the surface if we are to understand the genuine currents that run through Iranian society and inform its religio-political culture. In what follows I will advance what I would imagine is the counter-intuitive argument that contrary to conventional (and even a great deal of scholarly) wisdom, Shi'ism in general, and post-revolutionary Iranian Shī'ism in particular, is not only not messianic or apocalyptic in character, but is in fact the fiercest enemy of messianism to be found anywhere in the Muslim world or in Muslim history.

Going below the surface means, first and foremost, going back in time. The revived respect among analysts and academicians for the power of faith – in no small part the result of lessons gleaned from the rise of radical Islam – has engendered an atmosphere conducive to what would only recently have been disparaged as the “orientalist” or “essentialist” study of classical religious doctrines and paradigms. It is now once again recognized that unless the past roots of a phenomenon are probed, its present will forever remain an enigma. A knowledge of the historical circumstances under which Shī'ite messianism arose is therefore crucial to understanding its role in present day Iran.

⁸ “Hitḥazkut Tofa'at ha-Meshiḥiyut be-Iran,” Merkaz ha-Mayda' le-Modi'in u-le-Ṭeror, Ha-Merkaz le-Moreshet ha-Modi'in, 1 March, 2007.

Worth the Wait

The notion of the “occultation” (*ghayba*) and eventual “return” (*raj‘a*) of a revered sacred personage at the time of (what appears to the uninitiated eye to be) his death is almost as old as the institution of the Shī‘ī imāmate itself.⁹ The earliest claim of this sort seems to have been put forth in connection with Ḥasan and Ḥusayn’s half-brother Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyyah at the time of his passing around the year 700 CE,¹⁰ and from that point forward during the decades and centuries to come scores of imāms from dozens of different branches of Shī‘ism were regularly consigned to “occultation” in place of death. But the first and most fateful instance of a disappearance *long before death* was that involving the five year-old son of Imām Ḥasan al-‘Askarī and twelfth descendent of the Prophet Muḥammad, who vanished in 873 CE.¹¹ This holy personage, whose name was also Muḥammad, spent the first 72 years of his “absence” in a mode known as the Lesser Occultation (*al-ghayba al-ṣuḡhrā*), during which time he was considered to be in indirect communication with his Shī‘ite followers through a series of four “agents” or “ambassadors” (*wukalā’, sufarā’*). The last of these died in the year 945 CE having refused on his deathbed to name a successor, at which point the absent imām receded still deeper into the murky recesses of the Greater Occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubrā*), a state and an epoch which has lasted from that time until the present and during which the Awaited Savior has lost all contact with his flock.

Why did the Twelver Shī‘ites – one of whose *fundamental and defining articles of faith* is that the world cannot exist for even a single instant without the hands-on guidance of a chosen imām¹² – banish their own imām to the outer reaches and essentially excommunicate him? Why would they allow for the creation of a situation in which “no one can contact [the imām] or benefit from him in any way” (*lā yablughuhu aḥadun walā yastafīdu minhu shay’*)?¹³ Rightly refusing to accept the various assertions of later Sunnī heresiographers and Shī‘ite theologians in this regard – to the effect that, for instance, by the year 945 the hidden imām had far exceeded the average human life expectancy and therefore believers would no longer credit the idea that anyone was conversing with him – modern scholars have pointed us in a more fruitful direction of

⁹ *Ghayba-raj‘a* is, of course, even older than Shī‘ism, Christ being only the most famous illustration of this concept from the pre-Islamic period.

¹⁰ Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Kitāb Fīraq al-Shī‘a* (Istanbul: Maṭba‘at al-Dawla, 1931), pp. 25-6: “*Fīraq qālat inna Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya huwa al-mahdī sammāhu ‘Alī mahdiyyan lam yamut wa-lā yamūt...wa-lākin nahu ghāba wa-lā yudrī ayna huwa wa-sa-yarja‘u wa-yamluku al-ard...wa-hum awwal man qāla bi-ghayba wa-raj‘a.*”

¹¹ Another well-known and influential instance was the sixth Fātimid caliph al-Ḥākim, incarnate deity of the Druze, who disappeared into the Egyptian desert sometime around the year 1020 CE, and whose reappearance is still awaited.

¹² “He who dies without knowing the imām dies an infidel”; “Even if only two people remained in the world, one of them would have to be the imām”; “The world cannot be devoid of a *hujja* for even a single instant”; see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi‘ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 71, 256 and 104.

¹³ Abū al-Qāsim ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī al-Sharīf al-Murṭadā, *al-Risāla fī al-Ghayba* (Najaf: al-Maṭba‘a al-Haydariyya, 1382/1962), p. 122.

inquiry. In the year 945 CE, the Buwayhids (or Buyids), a Persian military dynasty which had declared its allegiance first to Zaydī and then to Twelver Shī‘ism, was consolidating its conquests in the Eastern half of the Abode of Islam. This was unprecedented: a Shī‘ite ruler sat on the throne and told even the ‘Abbāsīd caliph what to do. Certain highly knowledgeable Western students of Shī‘ism have argued that in light of this development, the Baghdad-based controllers of Shī‘ite doctrine were forced to further distance their already absentee celestial sovereign so as to obviate the spectre of “dual loyalty.”

Though I agree that there is a direct connection between the Buwayhid invasion and the final dissolution of the Twelfth Imām, I will argue that the issue was slightly different. In order to do so, I must ask the reader to accompany me even further back in time. Shī‘ism was born out of a protest against what certain Muslim purists or idealists saw, at least in retrospect, as the sundering after the Prophet Muḥammad’s death of the *riyāsa* (political-military authority) from the *imāma* (spiritual-religious authority), the former having gone to Abū Bakr and his successors among the Rāshidūn, Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd caliphs, while the latter remained in the hands of the *ahl al-bayt*, Muḥammad’s direct descendents through Fātima and ‘Alī. The historian al-Ṭabarī records an exchange that took place between ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās and ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb when the latter was caliph. ‘Umar asked Ibn ‘Abbās whether he knew the reason why Quraysh had not supported the claims of the Banū Hāshim – that is, the claims of ‘Alī – in the contest for succession after the Prophet’s death. When Ibn ‘Abbās confessed ignorance of the matter, ‘Umar continued:

I know the reason: because the Quraysh did not like to allow both the prophethood (*nubuwwa*, a.k.a. the *imāma*) and the caliphate (*khilāfa*, a.k.a. the *riyāsa*) to be combined in your house, for with this you would feel arrogant and rejoice.¹⁴

Many are the candid admissions of this sort emerging from proto-Sunnī sources to the effect that pragmatics, not idealism, dictated the course of events in the post-Muḥammadan Islamic polity, and led to a convenient bifurcation of religious and secular authority.¹⁵ Shī‘ism’s seminal *raison d’être* was, more than anything else, the quest to reunite these two dimensions under the auspices of the Prophet’s progeny.

¹⁴ Cited in S. Husein M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi‘a Islam* (London: Longman /Librairie du Liban, 1976), 66.

¹⁵ Such admissions include the purported correspondence between the Prophet’s grandson, Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, and Mu‘āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān, child of Muḥammad’s fiercest enemy and founder of the Umayyad dynasty. According to some versions of this correspondence, Mu‘āwiyah frankly admitted the “priority and preferred status” of Ḥasan due to his piety and propinquity to the Prophet, but goes on to argue that “I have a longer period of reign (as governor of Damascus) and am more experienced and better at politics than you” (cited in S. Husayn M. Jafri, *Origins and Development of Shi‘a Islam* (London: Longman, 1976), p. 136.

But this was soon to change. Having failed miserably to regain the *riyāsa* with the catastrophe of Ḥusayn at Karbala in 680 CE, those Shī‘ites who would eventually become Twelvers (or, at least, to whom the Twelvers would eventually look back upon as their ideological progenitors) abruptly shifted their focus away from political struggle and toward cultivating the *imāma*, which became the strong and intricately constructed leg upon which “Imāmī” Shī‘ism stood for the next two centuries. Meanwhile the other leg – the *riyāsa*, the aspiration to political-military authority – was utterly neglected and even disparaged. Weeping for the past replaced fighting for the future as the preeminent Shī‘ī imperative, and all those from that time forward who nevertheless persisted in drawing the sword on behalf of Shī‘ism’s original ideals, attempting to regain the *riyāsa* for the *ahl al-bayt* by force of arms; all those who would not be tempered and continued to seek Muḥammad’s heavenly light in the breasts of his linear descendents; and all those of any shape or form who advanced the claim (and as we noted above, a great many did) that their particular “imām” had not really died but was waiting in the wings of “occultation” and would return sometime soon as the savior-mahdī; all of these individuals and groups were *fought tooth and nail* by the emerging jurists and theologians of the latent Twelver line, and were violently ejected from the fold as *ghulāt*, “exaggerators.”

The “orthodox” Shī‘ī campaign against radical mahdism is retrojected in Twelver sources as far back as the incumbency of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib himself. A nebulous figure by the name of ‘Abd Allāh b. Sabā’ (or: b. al-Sawdā’) al-Ḥimyarī is saddled by that literature with the responsibility for spreading extremist ideas among the ranks of the first imām’s supporters, thereby seeking to pervert Shī‘ism at its very inception. He is described as having arrived in Medina from Yemen around the year 650 CE during the troublesome tenure of ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, and as having exploited the widespread dissatisfaction with this ruler’s nepotism and ineffectuality in order to bolster the position of his rival, ‘Alī. Ibn Sabā’’s propaganda did not confine itself, however, to contrasting the merits of the *ahl al-bayt* with the demerits of the Banū Umayya, but went so far as to attribute to ‘Alī – this perhaps later, when he had already become caliph – prophetic and even semi-divine status, and to argue that the great leader would not die but would rise up into the clouds and remain there until it was time for him to return and vanquish the enemies of the faith. (When Ibn Sabā’ was informed of ‘Alī’s murder he responded: “Even if you had brought us his brains in seventy bags, we would not be convinced of his death”).¹⁶ ‘Alī himself is credited with having declared Ibn Sabā’ and his followers infidels and burning them at the stake (“Now we *know* that you are God,” the ignited enthusiasts reputedly exclaimed, “for only God punishes with fire!”). This legendary precursor of the innumerable mahdist movements that would punctuate early Shī‘ism is thus portrayed as a dangerous deviation that must be, and that in fact was, eliminated by the representatives of right religion. In order to add insult to injury, Ibn Sabā’ is also depicted in both Sunnī and Shī‘ī works as black (“Ibn al-Sawdā’”) and Jewish.¹⁷

¹⁶ Israel Friedlaender, *The Heterodoxies of the Sh‘ites According to Ibn Ḥazm* (New York: J.P.S., 1909), Part 1, p. 45

¹⁷ E.g., al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Ta‘rīkh al-Rusul wa’l-Mulūk* (Ed. M. J. de Goeje *et al*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879-1901), vol. 4, p. 340: “*kāna ‘Abd Allāh b. Sabā’ Yahūdiyyan min ahl Ṣana‘ā*”;

The story of ‘Abd Allāh b. Sabā’ is most probably a backward projection of sentiments which, as we intimated earlier, ripened in certain circles in the years immediately following the ill-fated attempt by ‘Alī’s second son Ḥusayn to unseat the Umayyads in 680 CE. The profound trauma caused by that episode, in which this grandson of the Prophet, together with all the male members of Muḥammad’s line (save one), were mercilessly slaughtered on the plains of Karbalā’ *by their fellow Muslims*, led to what we might describe as a “loss of heart” amongst many of the members and followers of the *ahl al-bayt*. The sole surviving heir, Ḥusayn’s son ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, is thus said to have spent the entire remainder of his life doing nothing but praying and weeping, to such an extent that the callus on his forehead from prostration had to be shaved down once a month and the pool of tears left after his worship sessions required a mop. (It should be remarked, however, that ‘Alid “moderation” is in evidence even before the fall of Ḥusayn: witness the break between ‘Alī and the *Khawārij* which was prompted by the caliph’s willingness to compromise with the enemy Umayyads, and also the accommodationism of ‘Alī’s first born, Ḥasan, “through whom peace was made between two camps of Muslims” when he abdicated in favor of Mu‘āwīya).¹⁸

This inward turning of the imāmic focus continued apace during the lifetime of ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s first-born, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, and it is to this period and to this paragon that reports are traced to the effect that the primary task of the Shī‘ite is to “constantly bear grief for Ḥusayn and remain forever stricken with sorrow for him” and to the effect that the Prince of Martyrs himself refused the assistance of 36,000 jinn against the Umayyad army, explaining: “I am not at all keen on living in this world; I wish to meet my Lord. Whoever wishes to help me should merely weep for me.”¹⁹

The adherents of Zayn al-‘Ābidīn and Muḥammad al-Bāqir did not, however, represent the only strand of Shī‘ism at the time; indeed, they did not even constitute the majority (it is only in historical retrospect – under the influence of the eventual triumph of the Twelvers – that these particular scions of the *ahl al-bayt* are seen as part of the “central trunk,” while all other contemporary claimants are depicted as deviant). Many partisans of the Prophet’s House inclined after more activist brothers, cousins and other relations of these two paradigms of resignation, crowning their sword-drawing leaders with a halo of messianic restoration during their lives and then afterwards, either denying their deaths and awaiting their imminent return (the *wāqifī* position), or transferring allegiance onward to the Revered One’s offspring (the *qat‘ī* position). If we are to believe the heresiographies (*kutub al-milal wa’l-niḥal*) there were literally hundreds of

‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayna al-Firaq* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥikma, 1963), p. 235: “inna ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Sawdā’ kāna yu‘ayyin al-sabā’iyya ‘alā qawlihā wa-kāna aṣlahu min Yahūd al-Ḥīra, fa-azhara al-Islām.”

¹⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Fitan, Bāb Qawl al-Nabī li’l-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī*, 90: 20 (7109): “yuṣallāhu bihi bayna fi’tayni min al-Muslimīn.” The actions and ideologies of the *Khawārij* have many points of similarity with those of the *ghulāt* groups, and their name – which probably means not the commonly accepted “seceders” but rather “those who go out [to battle]” – recalls the *ghālī* approach of *khurūj* as opposed to the conservative attitude of *qu‘ūd* (see below).

¹⁹ Cited in Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982) (reference not definite).

such sects at certain points in early Shī'ite history, the most well-known and influential of which were: the Kaysāniyya, who declared their loyalty to a not very eager half-brother of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, Muḥammad b. al-Hanafīyya, revolted against the Umayyads in the 680s, and proclaimed their unwilling Master to be in temporary *ghayba* (occultation) upon his death in 700 CE; the Hāshimiyya, followers of Muḥammad b. al-Hanafīyya's son, Abū Hāshim, whose mystical-militant doctrine and widespread network of missionaries were eventually put into the service of the 'Abbāsīd revolt; the Zaydiyya, supporters of Ḥusayn's grandson and Muḥammad al-Bāqir's brother Zayd b. 'Alī, who was killed by the Umayyads shortly after his uprising in Kufa (740 CE); the Janāhiyya, participants in the similarly ill-fated Kufan insurrection (747 CE) under 'Abd Allāh b. Mu'āwiya, fourth generation descendent of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib's brother, Ja'far al-Ṭayyār; the Mughīriyya, who subscribed to the "concealment" and impending reappearance as the Mahdī of Ḥasan b. 'Alī's great-grandson, Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, whose revolt against the 'Abbāsīds was crushed in 762 CE; the Khattābiyya, followers of Ja'fār al-Ṣādiq's close personal friend Abū al-Khaṭṭāb al-Asadī who apotheosized the sixth imām and was publicly cursed by him in return; and of course the "Sevener" Ismā'īliyya and its innumerable derivatives, including the Nusayrīs, Carmatians, 'Alawīs, Nizārīs, Musta'īlīs, Fatimids, Druze, Assassins, etc.

While all of these *ghulāt* or "extremist" groups engaged in various forms of militant messianism and speculative apocalypticism,²⁰ the imāms and scholars of what would ultimately be defined as the duodecimal branch of Shī'ism cultivated a quiescent passivity and a theological moderation. "Those who are excessive in their love for us," cautioned a brother of Muḥammad al-Bāqir regarding the 'Alids, "are like those who are excessive in their hatred of us."²¹ Such sobriety stemmed not just from the despair engendered by the defeat of Ḥusayn in the past, but from the need to forestall persecution by the Sunnī majority in the present and future. In fact, however, the Imāmī Shī'ites were most concerned by – and saved their fiercest execrations for – not the Sunnīs but the overly enthusiastic factions within their own camp. The most prevalent appellation for proto-Twelvers in medieval sources – *rāfiḍa* or *rawāfiḍ*, meaning "rejectors" – derives, according to the best opinion, from their staunch opposition to the activist mahdist movements that arose within the 'Alid milieu in the eighth and ninth centuries CE.²² In other words, Shī'ism as we know it today came into being primarily as a *force for anti-messianism*.

Early Shī'ite history after the martyrdom of the third imām was thus witness to a constant competition between these two trends – the radical messianic and the

²⁰ For a good survey of the variant theosophies and cosmologies of *ghulāt* groups see Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. p. 64ff.

²¹ Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Kitāb al-Irshād* (trans. I. K. A. Howard. Horsham: Balagha Books, 1981), p. 403. "Because of you," Muḥammad is supposed to have told his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī, "two parties will come to ruin: those who hate you with a passion and those who love you with a passion" (Abū al-Faṭḥ Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal* (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1968), vol. 1, p. 19.

²² Friedlaender, *Heterodoxies*, p. 137ff; supplement with W. Montgomery Watt, "The Rāfiḍites: A Preliminary Study," *Oriens* 16 (1963) and Etan Kohlberg, "Rāfiḍa," *IEJ*.

conservative minimalist – for the hearts and minds of believers, with the latter for the most part at a distinct disadvantage. But around the time of the sixth *ithna ‘asharī* imām, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765 CE), a number of factors – including the savage repression of messianic revolts, the failure of any of the “occulted” imāms to resurface, and the undeniable prestige of al-Ṣādiq himself – led to a slight shift in favor of the “moderate” Shī‘ite camp, such that when a long-time Kaysanī *ghālī* (“exaggerator”) like Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī repented of his ways and returned to the proto-Imāmī fold, he could employ an already common verbal usage and declare: *taja‘fartu* – “I have ‘Ja‘far-ed.”²³

This improvement in their fortunes allowed Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and his “legitivist” successors to intensify even further their anti-mahdist rhetoric and efforts. In their doctrine they pushed off the Advent to the end of history, at which time the Qā‘im would rise – though not from the dead – and fill the world with justice and fairness to the degree that it is currently filled with injustice and oppression (*yamla’u al-arḍa qiṣṭan wa-‘adlan kamā muli’et jawran wa-zulman*). In the meantime, they argued, there was nothing to do to further this distant goal of re-uniting spiritual and temporal power in the hands of the Ḥusaynids; indeed, doing anything at all toward that end was strictly forbidden. If the motto of the messianist revolutionaries was *khurūj* – going out and fighting for the cause – the watchword of these pacific Shī‘ites was *qu‘ūd* – sitting at home and doing nothing.²⁴ The experience of passively waiting and hoping for the Mahdī was made tantamount to the experience of actually receiving him (*intizār al-faraj min al-faraj*). Indeed, words were put in Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq’s mouth to the effect that the messianic advent was not a desideratum at all: “Why do you wish for the Qā‘im to make haste? By God, his clothes are rough, his food is coarse barley and he [offers] nothing but the sword and death in the shadow of the sword.”²⁵

²³ Heinz Halm, *Shi‘ism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 29.

²⁴ Meir Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shī‘ism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), p. 48.

²⁵ Cited in David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), pp. 227-8.

The Dream Deferred

So soon after its inception, then, “orthodox” Shi‘ism had already developed an impressive expertise in *repressing the messianic aspirations of its adherents*. Practicing the quietism he preached, Ja‘far al-Šādiq is said to have been offered the caliphate – the *riyāsa par excellence* – on a silver platter by Abū Muslim, the leader of the ‘Abbāsid revolution, but to have *declined in favor of his books*.²⁶ (In later years yet another major *ghulāt* faction, the Khurramiyya, venerated and awaited the post-mortem advent of this same Abū Muslim, and was severely vituperated by the Imāmiyya).²⁷ The cognomen of al-Šādiq’s son Mūsā – the seventh imām according to the Twelvers – was al-Kāzim, “the one who keeps [his anger] inside.” More indicative still of this increasingly introverted and anti-radical outlook is the story of Ja‘far’s grandson, ‘Ali al-Riḍā. As is well known, the sixth ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Ma’mūn summoned this eighth Shī‘ite imām to his roaming headquarters in North-Eastern Iran and revealed to him his plan to designate al-Riḍā as his successor. What is less well known is that – according to Abū’l-Faraj al-Isfahānī’s *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn* – the imām *vociferously refused the honor* and had to be *threatened with decapitation* in order to make him cooperate, and that – according to al-Kulīnī’s *Uṣūl min al-Kāfi* – al-Ma’mūn had wanted to step down immediately in favor of al-Riḍā, but the latter had demurred and only accepted the heirship on condition that none of the actual authority and responsibility of the caliphate be bestowed upon him.²⁸ Also not generally remarked is the fact that not long after al-Riḍā was purportedly poisoned by al-Ma’mūn, the historian al-Ya‘qūbī describes the excellent rapport between a delegation of prominent Shī‘a and the same caliph: as if to hint that the demise of the succession plan – and the Imam who was willing, however reluctantly, to go along with it – was not an unwelcome *denouement* in their eyes.²⁹ To such an extent was the acquisition of *riyāsa* by the *ahl al-bayt* – Shi‘ism’s original mission and *raison d’être* – now anathema to the Shī‘a, whose scholar-jurists engaged in ever more rarefied pursuits that would not suffer contamination by the trappings of power.

This class of scholar-jurists, the *‘ulamā’*, was a natural outgrowth of the increasing intellectualization and decreasing radicalism of the Shī‘ite experience. Shi‘ism had been born of a refusal on the part of certain Muslims to succumb after the Prophet’s death to what Max Weber has called the “institutionalization of charisma.” While the majority of Muslim believers were satisfied to progress from the prophetic stage of dynamic leadership and ideological upheaval to the post-prophetic stage of codification and maintenance, the backers of ‘Alī and Fātima’s line displayed an unwillingness to abandon the immediacy and euphoria of a divine apostle in their midst, and sought, as it were, to make the revolution permanent. Such a level of millennial energy is, however, impossible to preserve forever; indeed, it tends to consume itself in a short, incandescent burst of activity and then disappear. Thus, although the *ghulāt* of

²⁶ M. A. Shaban, *The ‘Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 167.

²⁷ Wilfred Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Oxford: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988), p. 77.

²⁸ D. G. Tor, “A Historiographical Re-examination of the Appointment and Death of ‘Alī al-Riḍā,” *Der Islam* 78 (2001), p. 118.

²⁹ Aḥmad b. Abī Ya‘qūb b. Ja‘far al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh al-Ya‘qūbī* (Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1960), vol. 2, p. 469.

each generation may be said to have harkened back to the original radical impetus by erupting in chiliastic supernovas of resistance, the more stable and consistent “backbone” of the Shī‘a – the “mainstream” that would someday become the Twelvers – soon found itself “institutionalizing” no less than the Sunnīs had.

Though the faction of Islam that became the Shī‘a continued, after the demise of Muḥammad, to tender their allegiance to a potentially volatile personage who was purported to be in direct contact with the deity – whereas the Sunnīs followed not so much an individual as the legal and literary tradition that had taken his place – nevertheless the Shī‘ite imāms themselves began to channel their charisma into precepts enshrined in texts, and by so doing provided a model for the behavior of their own more intellectually inclined adherents. Muḥammad al-Bāqir received his cognomen not due to his supernatural qualities, transcendent disposition or even leadership capability, but in recognition of his talent for “splitting open” (*baqara*) and penetrating to the heart of abstruse legal and exegetical problems. His son Ja‘far was so widely recognized a scholar that Sunnī jurists of the stature of Abū Ḥanīfa and Malik b. Anas studied under him, and he significantly became the eponymous founder of the fifth school of Islamic law (*al-madhhab al-Ja‘farī*).³⁰ His hangers-on and those of his successor imāms engaged increasingly in the study of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *sharī‘a* (positive law), emphatically conservative occupations which are in every way diametrically contraindicative to the cultivation of genuine messianism and apocalypticism.

The new Shī‘ite sages soon outshone their own imāms in these ever more central religio-intellectual pursuits, and the latter often found themselves dependent on the former, sometimes even for their very position. The imāms themselves were more-and-more relegated to the background – ostensibly (and on some occasions in truth) for their protection from the ‘Abbāsids – while the learned lawyers took the helm. By the time of the ninth and tenth descendents of the Prophet’s line (Muḥammad al-Taqī and ‘Alī al-Naqī), the imāms were essentially hidden away from their own devotees – even their identity was kept secret, and it became nothing less than a religious obligation to deny them³¹ – while a select clique of scholar-jurists played the role of intermediaries between the beclouded shepherd and his scattered flock. It thus represented no great upheaval for the Shī‘ite community but rather a continuation of already extant trends when the ‘Abbāsids brought the tenth imām to their new capital in Samarra and kept him and his son, the eleventh imām al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī, under virtual house arrest. The sacred

³⁰ Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shī‘ite Religion: A History of Islam in Persian and Irak* (London: Luzac & Co., 1933), p. 132.

³¹ Already in the time of the sixth imām we have (probably retrojected) statements which indicate this trend, such as the following admonition of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq to Mu‘allāh b. Khunays: “Keep our affair secret, and do not divulge it publicly, for whoever keeps it secret and does not reveal it, God will exalt him in this world and put light between his eyes in the next, leading him to paradise. O Mu‘allāh! Whoever divulges our affair publicly and does not keep it secret, God will disgrace him in this world and will remove the light from between his eyes in the next, and will decree for him darkness that will lead him to the Fire. O Mu‘allāh, verily *taqiyya* (prudent dissimulation) is of my religion and of the religion of my father, and one who does not keep *taqiyya* has no religion” (Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī [Kulīnī], *al-Kāfī fī ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* [Beirut: Dār al-Ḥikma, 1982], vol. 2, p. 488).

figure-head thereby faded even further from view and the purveyors of scholarly knowledge gained almost exclusive control.³² The few learned associates granted access to the imām by the ‘Abbāsids seem to have already styled themselves his “agents” (*wukalā*). Viewed from such a perspective, it is hardly surprising that this process of diminution was soon advanced one final stage toward its culmination, with the actual “disappearance” (*ghayba*) of the five year-old twelfth imām in 873 CE and the purported mediation between the Absent One and his adherents through the good offices of “agents” belonging to the powerful clerical-judicial class. This was, albeit, the co-optation of a tenet that had up till that point characterized the very *ghulāt* whom the proto-Twelvers had so vociferously opposed, but like certain other *ghālī* notions that eventually insinuated themselves into the worldview of Shī‘ī “orthodoxy,” the institution of *ghayba* was tamed by the conservative Imāmī scholars, and made to serve the quietism that had become their hallmark.

Then suddenly in the mid-tenth century CE, the Buwayhids achieved something unprecedented (and, we would argue, ultimately unwelcome): they succeeded through their conquests of the *mashriq* in gaining genuine *riyāsa* (political-military authority) for the Twelver Shī‘ites, and thereby positioned themselves to become the dominant force in that faith. These Daylamite *condottieri* first carved out an empire on the Iranian plateau and then entered Baghdad in 945 CE, leaving the ‘Abbāsīd caliph on his throne but ruling in his name. The ‘*ulamā*’ were at a disadvantage in the ensuing intra-Shī‘ite power struggle: the Buwayhid sword was potentially stronger than the clerical pen, and the Twelver scholars now saw the intricate spiritual-legal edifice they had so painstakingly constructed over the previous centuries threatened. Thus did the realization of the original Shī‘ite dream – the dream of attaining power – represent a nightmare for the Shī‘ite *ulamā*, first because a new force was introduced that could undermine or out-muscle their fledgling authority, and second (and more fundamentally) because the very phenomenon of Shī‘ite empowerment was inimical to the ramified learning institution which had become the butter on their bread and the meaning of their lives.

There was, indeed, a significant analogy between the positions of the two camps in this mid-tenth century contest for Shī‘ite leadership. The Buwayhids were forced to share their power to at least some symbolic degree with the caliph to whose legitimacy they paid lip service; the ‘*ulamā*’ were forced to share their power to at least some symbolic degree with the (hidden) imām to whose legitimacy they paid lip service. Both *riyāsa* and *imāma* were thus divided internally. The ‘*ulamā*’ consequently sought to bolster their position in preparation for the up-and-coming struggle with the Buwayhids by *completing* their conquest of the *imāma* and making themselves the only spiritual-religious game in town: the messianic figure of the Hidden Imām Mahdī whose presence still overshadowed them and to whom they were forced to turn, through the medium of his “ambassadors,” for every matter of consequence, must be neutralized. He was, therefore, exiled in 945 CE to the furthest parts and declared incommunicado (*al-ghaybā al-kubrā*, the Greater Occultation): as the Buwayhid horse trotted into Baghdad, the

³² Etan Kohlberg, “Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period,” in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shī‘ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 38-9.

Mahdī's mule plodded out, never to be seen or heard from again. All religious decisions were from that point forward the sole prerogative of the professional jurists and theologians, in whose eyes – though they could never admit as much in so many words even to themselves – their own legal-doctrinal expertise had become far more valuable than the eschatological charisma of the ethereal Imām.

Vox Populi, Vox Dei

In the end, the Buyid state disintegrated to be replaced by Sunnī Ghaznavids and Seljuks and their Turkic successors, affording the Shī‘ite *ulamā’* another five centuries – before the *riyāsa* was in the hands of Shī‘ites again under the Ṣafavids – to shore up their fortress of conservative legalism and mundane ritualism against the potential radical inroads of the Hidden Imām-Mahdī. During this time they went themselves one better, and after having earlier neutralized the power of the imām through the expedient of exile so that he would not *undermine* or *detract* from their authority, they now managed to make his continued existence in limbo the very *bulwark* of their authority – their infallible authority. This they achieved through the notion of *niyāba ‘amma* or “the general representation [of the hidden imām].” Whereas when the imām was in the Lesser Occultation (873-945 CE) his will was conveyed to the world by individuals (the “agents”), now, in the time of the Greater Occultation, his will is conveyed to the world – so this new doctrine held – by the consensus of the *ulamā’*.³³ This move made the Shī‘ite clerics the undisputed masters of the *imāma* (and paved the way for their acquisition of more and more power in the temporal sphere, as well).

The concept of *niyāba ‘amma* evolved hand-in-hand with another important idea: *ijtihād*. Among the Sunnīs somewhat earlier – not long after after *they* had lost the last charismatic figure in *their* midst (i.e. Muḥammad) – questions regarding the legitimate bases of authority and parameters for decision-making in the post-prophetic era led to the formation of two increasingly distinct schools of thought. The first school, generally styled *ahl al-ra’y* (the advocates of logical demonstration), held that qualified jurisconsults should bring their independent reasoning (*‘aql*) and intellectual effort (*ijtihād*) to bear on the sources of law (especially the Qur’ān and exempla) in order to flesh out the Muslim legal system. The opposing camp, most often referred to as *ahl al-ḥadīth* (the advocates of tradition) asserted that no matter how qualified, scholar-jurists should not be permitted to employ their own discursive logic in order to derive the law from scripture and prophetic reports. Instead, they must base themselves directly and without extrapolation on the latter two sources, merely transmitting their contents to ensuing generations (*naql*) and imitating the precedents they had established (*taqlīd*). Though the thoroughgoing “closure of the gate of intellectual effort” (*insidād bāb al-ijtihād*) in the third century after Muḥammad’s death has been placed in doubt by modern scholars, it may still be safely said that in the medieval Sunnī world the un-creative transmission of and adherence to precedent (*taqlīd*) ultimately won the day.

A similar struggle informed Shī‘ī scholarship after the final departure of the Hidden Imām, but with opposite results. In the tenth and eleventh centuries CE the Twelver *ulamā* also split into two factions over (their own version of) the question of *ijtihād* versus *taqlīd*, with those supporting the former approach assuming the sobriquet “*usūliyyūn*” (i.e. those who exploit the principles of jurisprudence [*uṣūl al-fiqh*] in order

³³ Hossein Modarressi Tabataba’i, *An Introduction to Shī‘ī Law: A Bibliographical Study* (London: Ithaca Press, 1984), pp. 7-9.

to arrive at novel rulings) while those who backed the latter outlook took the name *akhbāriyyūn* (i.e. those who restrict themselves to conveying prophetic and imāmic reports [*akhbār*] as they are to future generations). The first school emphasized the primary role of the scholars; the second stressed the centrality of the imāms, both past and present (i.e. absent). Unlike in Sunnism, in Shī‘ī *fiqh* it was the *uṣūlī-ijtihādī* school that prevailed.³⁴ This development was both a cause and a consequence of the institution of *niyāba ‘amma*, because the effective exertion of authority in the name of (really *instead* of) the occulted imām required the agility, maneuverability, flexibility and independence afforded by the methods of *ijtihād*. Shī‘ī clerics became *mujtahidūn* (a title not used, for the most part, by Sunnīs), for whom cerebral discussion and casuistic debate had become the essence of religion and whose own intellectual ability had entirely supplanted the sway of the imām(s).³⁵ Qom in central Iran, since the tenth century CE the world capital of Twelver orthodoxy, soon saw its shrine to imām ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s sister Fātima al-Ma’sūma encircled and upstaged by a dozen or more *madāris* (study centers).

The emergence of the *mujtahids* had a further consequence significant for our purposes. Only upper echelon Shī‘ī scholars who had mastered the gamut of legal sciences were granted the right to exercise *ijtihād*,³⁶ whereas the remaining, lower level ‘*ulamā*’, as well as the populace at large, were expected to practice *taqlīd* and emulate (i.e. obey without question the decisions of) the *mujtahids*. This division of Shī‘ite society into a vast majority of *muqallidūn* and a tiny minority of *mujtahidūn* placed a great deal of religious power into the hands of the latter, power that would prepare them to meet the new challenges waiting in the wings.

The most momentous of these challenges (though at the same time an unprecedented opportunity) was the rise of the Ṣafavid dynasty in early 16th century Iran. This Sufi order turned ‘Alid army conquered most of modern-day Iran by the year 1510, and forcibly converted the entire populace to Twelver Shī‘ism. The Ṣafavids presented a problem for the orthodox ‘*ulamā*’ – many of whom had been “imported” by the new rulers from Lebanon, Syria, Baḥrayn and elsewhere to help consolidate the new state religion – for two essential reasons: (1) because like the Buwayhids, they had regained the *riyāsa* for the Shī‘a and thereby set themselves up as a rival locus of authority within the Twelver community, and (2) because *unlike* the Buwayhids, the Ṣafavids were bona fide *ghulāt*, deviant “exaggerators” who harbored heretical beliefs about the founder of their dynasty, Esmā‘īl, to wit: that he was in contact with the Hidden Imām, or was himself the imām, or was an incarnation of the deity (so strongly did this king’s *qizilbash* followers believe these things that they reputedly went into battle without armour, trusting in their leader’s supernatural protection).³⁷ As Mangol Bayat writes:

³⁴ Norman Calder, “Doubt and Prerogative: The Emergence of an Imami-Shi‘I Theory of Ijtihad,” *Studia Islamica*, 70 (1991).

³⁵ Sa‘id Amir Arjomand, “The Consolation of Theology: Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiasm to Law in Shī‘ism,” *Journal of Religions* 76 (1996).

³⁶ On occasion masters would issue *ijtihād* certificates to their students for one or two areas of law only.

³⁷ Roger M. Savory, “Some Reflections on Totalitarian Tendencies in the Ṣafavid State,” *Der Islam* 53 (1976), p. 231.

Shah Ismail had come to power at the head of an extremist messianic revolutionary movement that supported his claim to divine authority. The historical background of the Sufi order he headed, his ability to fuse personal political ambitions with religious zeal to fight a holy war, the nature of his religious ideology – all bear characteristic features of the militant, basically heretical groups which moderate Imamis had until then relentlessly condemned.³⁸

In view of this situation, the orthodox scholars set to work doing what they did best, what they had always done: repressing mahdism. Three or four decades into the Ṣafavid reign and the *'ulamā'* had already won: the eschatological enthusiasm was considerably muted – reduced to the platitudes about a glorious future advent that had served for centuries to dampen more than excite radical messianism – and the Ṣafavid sovereigns were cut down to size, relinquishing their halo and relegating theological and even juridical authority to the learned men of the academies. Those Sufis who persisted in their mystical-messianic veneration of the Great Guide on the Iranian Throne were rounded up and massacred by those very same objects of adoration at the behest of the *mujtahids*. Yet another millenarian movement had been crushed by the Shī'ī clerical establishment.³⁹

Two more consequences or concomitants of the growth of uṣūlism are relevant to our inquiry. The first is that by the late medieval period the notion of *niyāba 'amma* had empowered the Shī'ī scholars to such a degree that practices that had once lain fallow in deference to the authority of the imām and because his indispensable supervision was necessary yet lacking – practices such as public prayers in the mosque on Fridays, the collection of the alms tax (*zakāt*) and the fifth (*khums*), drawing the sword in jihād, and more – were now restored at the discretion of the *ulamā'*, to whom the reinstated taxes were all remitted. This in turn built up the Shī'ite clerics' spiritual, moral, legal and economic power to an immense degree.⁴⁰

The second development is perhaps of even greater significance. Around the time of the rise of the Qājārs (circa. 1800) – the next major dynasty after the Ṣafavids – the uṣūlīs under their *mujtahid* leader Vāḥed-e-Behbehānī scored a signal victory over Akhbārī elements that had been enjoying a brief revival of influence, and exiled them permanently from Iran. Soon thereafter, however, the uṣūlī establishment was sent reeling by three successive waves of *ghulāt* activity which kept it busy from one end of the nineteenth century to the other: the Shaykhī, Bābī and Bahā'ī sects, each of which took advantage of the Shī'ite millenium to put forward claims relating to the imminent

³⁸ Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socio-religious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 18.

³⁹ This process, which also involved the increasing marginalization of the dynasty's Turkish *qizilbash* base in favor of the Persian bureaucratic class, is best elucidated in Roger M. Savory, *Iran under the Ṣafavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁴⁰ See Juan R. I. Cole, "Shī'ī Clerics in Iraq and Iran, 1722-1780: The Akhbārī-USulī Conflict Reconsidered," *Iranian Studies* 18/1 (1985).

arrival of the imām. The orthodox *mujtahids* were as resolute as ever in response, employing methods ranging from excommunication to persecution to outright execution to nip these messianic movements in the bud.

Partially as a result of the need to galvanize and organize against these threats, the *uṣūlīs* took steps beginning in the 1830s to reinforce and codify the all-important relationship between *mujtahidūn* and *muqallidūn*. The notion was propounded and gradually accepted that in an ideal state there would be a lone *mujtahid* standing at the top of the clerical hierarchy to whom all others owed allegiance. He would be the single, supreme *marja' al-taqlīd*, Focus of Emulation, and would enjoy unchallenged authority. This ideal was realized almost completely three times in the nineteenth century, in the persons of Ayatollahs Najafī, Anṣārī and Shīrāzī.⁴¹ And so we have come full circle: from the *niyāba khaṣṣa*, the individual representation of the absent imām during the Lesser Occultation (873-945), to the *niyāba 'amma*, the collective representation of the occluded imām during the subsequent Greater Occultation (945-____), and now in the nineteenth century back to the *niyāba khaṣṣa*, in the form of the concentration of all religious authority in the hands of a single jurisconsult. The difference between the first and third stages of this process is essential, however: while the *wakīl* of the twelfth imām in medieval Baghdād was perceived as the mere spokesman of his master, the *marja'* of modern Twelver Shī'ism – who cannot be the imām's spokesman because the imām does not speak to him or to anyone else – has for all intents and purposes *usurped the position and power* of the Hidden Master. The Grand Ayatollah(s) is able to issue commands based on the dictates of his own autonomous reasoning because the imām is silent.

Whether they knew it or not, this steady stream of theological-legal adjustments and reinforcements paved the way for the clerical class of the Twelver Shī'a to take one final, giant step. Stronger, more confident and better organized than ever before and unchallenged masters of the *imāma* – the spiritual-religious authority – they were now poised to reach out and snatch the long coveted (but also long feared) *riyāsa* – the political-military authority – from the Pahlavī successors of the Qājārs. Khomeini and his revolution were the logical conclusion of the multi-stage process of *de-messianization* we have been tracing. In other words: all of those centuries of impressive Shī'ite clerical achievement, now culminating in 1979 in the glorious realization of the primeval Shī'ite dream of reuniting sacerdotum and imperium in a bona fide Islamic Republic – all of it was and continues to be based on one essential, indispensable prerequisite: **that the Mahdī stay far away.**

Mahdism has thus been for centuries the inveterate enemy of Shī'ism, and the Twelvers have proven exceptionally talented at suppressing this enemy. From the burning of medieval *ghulāt* to the shooting of 19th century Bābīs, no one puts down messianic movements like orthodox Shī'ites. Any time in history that a door has been opened that purportedly led to the Hidden Imām – or through which the Hidden Imām was supposed to be able to re-enter our world – the Shī'ite *ulamā'* have done everything

⁴¹ Meir Litvak, *Shī'ī Scholars of Nineteenth Century Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 2.

in their power to slam it shut. And practice makes perfect: they are better today at subduing such “*motamahdiyān*” than every before in their history, having honed their methodology down to a science.

It is no coincidence that for over a millenium now the Sunnī world, which adopted the concept of the Mahdī from the Shī‘a early on, has had to contend with considerably more messianic pretenders than the Twelver Shī‘ites. No year better illustrates this ironic phenomenon than 1979: while the experience of leading Islamic history’s most glorious revolution did not induce Khomeini to declare himself (or anyone else of consequence to declare him) the Mahdī, across the gulf in Saudi Arabia a young Sunni zealot named Juhayman – who had a chip on his shoulder but, unlike Khomeini, no achievements to his credit – took over Mecca’s sacred precinct with some 250 armed cohorts and declared his brother-in-law Qaḥṭān the Muslim messiah. **Shī‘ism, contrary to popular belief, is the antithesis and nemesis of messianism.** No mahdī will arise in revolutionary Iran, and neither will any genuinely mahdist movement: the *marāji‘ al-taqlīd* (focii of imitation, Grand Ayatollahs), to one of whom every Iranian Shī‘ite owes allegiance, will simply not allow it.

Even the much touted Shī‘ī apocalyptic, so carelessly referenced (for instance) by the Israeli army intelligence report we cited at the outset of this paper, does not play an influential role here. That report, the reader will recall, cited “the genuine, heartfelt belief of Ahmadinejad and his cohorts in...the outbreak of a war of Gog and Magog with Israel and the West as a *necessary prerequisite* of the Mahdi’s advent.” This embarrassingly unfounded statement, a product of the reliance on clichés rather than research, places Armageddon’s cart before the Mahdī’s horse: if anything, the Savior arrives *first* in Shī‘ite eschatology, and only *then* inaugurates the campaign to take over the world. The only factor described anywhere in the sources as possibly facilitating or accelerating the return of the Hidden Imām is the diffusion of promiscuity, and one does not see the Iranians working toward that goal. It is worth noting, as well, that in the rare instances in which Shī‘ite eschatological scenarios leave the realm of generality and delve into detail, we see that Imāmī arms at the climax of history will be turned first and foremost against the *ghulāt*.⁴² When the Mahdī comes, the messianists had better head for the hills.

Equally important is the fact that Shī‘ī apocalyptic cycles – as David Cook has amply demonstrated – are largely (and half-heartedly) *borrowed from Sunnī tradition*, where the subject is far more developed.⁴³ The reader versed in such matters will have noticed, for instance, that the eschatological ḥadīth report utilized in the radio sermon cited at the beginning of this paper – a report that included no reference to the Hidden Imām of the Shī‘ites – was transmitted by none other than Muḥammad’s wife ‘Ā’isha, a Sunnī heroine whom the Shī‘ites detest and excoriate more than any other figure (the

⁴² E.g. Howard, *Irshād*, 552-3. Jews and Christians are even less important foes than Sunnīs in Shī‘ite apocalyptic, and barely receive mention (see Cook, *Studies*, pp. 211-213).

⁴³ Cook, *Studies*, p. 189ff: “Compared to Sunnī Apocalyptic, Shī‘ī eschatological forces are rather haphazard groups with no mention of a real army in the usual sense” (p. 205); “Apparently the whole Jesus-Dajjāl cycle is a loan from Sunnī apocalyptic, and so it is hardly developed at all”; etc.

“End of the World Program” was an isolated, short-lived phenomenon in the Iranian media, and content of that sort is far more prevalent in Sunnī countries). It is also noteworthy that unlike their Sunnī counterparts, Twelver Shī‘ite scholars were quite hostile to any attempts to set times for the appearance of the Mahdī: it was best to leave the Advent in a distant future fog.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Cook, *Studies*, pp. 18 and 227.

The Hidden Hand

A few paragraphs must now be devoted to the “Ḥojjatiyyeh” society, another by-word which – together with its cognate “Mahdaviyyeh” – has been tossed around endlessly by pundits, politicians and even professors ever since the accession of Ahmadinejad. Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for instance, regularly makes much of this organization in speeches and interviews – despite his abject dearth of knowledge on the subject – comparing it, *inter alia*, to the Branch Davidian cult of David Koresh:

I was looking for an analogy to try to explain to Americans what it is that is so dangerous about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. You remember those crazy people in Waco, Texas?... the Ḥojjatiyyeh is that kind of cult. It’s the cult of the Mahdi, a holy man that disappeared a thousand years ago. And the president of Iran believes that he’s supposed to – that he was put here on Earth to bring this holy man back by inaugurating a great religious war between the true Muslim believers and the infidels. And millions will die in this Apocalypse, and the Muslims will go to heaven.... Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, is first trying to develop nuclear weapons and then going about his mad fantasy of global conflict.⁴⁵

There are more fundamental mistakes in this passage than we have time to enumerate, but one of them, at least, should be addressed. Far from being composed of radical messianists who seek to usher in the apocalyptic millenium, the Anjoman-e-Ḥojjatiyyeh, founded in the mid-twentieth century by Shaykh Maḥmūd-e-Ḥalabī, was and remains an *ultra-conservative* association devoted to the *suppression* of a particular latter-day messianic movement that claims that the Hidden Imām is already here: the Bahā’ī. It advocates, in perfectly traditional, orthodox Twelver fashion, the pious and passive practice of “awaiting” the Savior, but specifically *discourages and condemns as heretical* any active effort to hasten his arrival. The organization’s name does indeed derive from one of the many titles of the Hidden Imām – *al-Ḥujja*, “the Proof” – but this title was deliberately chosen from among all the others in order to signify the Ḥojjatiyyeh’s staunch opposition to any involvement in the political affairs of this world (“[the appellation *ḥujja*] emphasizes the religious and spiritual aspects of [the imām’s] function, as opposed to [designations like] *al-Qā’im* or *Ṣāḥib al-‘Amr* which convey his role as the ideal ruler of Islam who will restore Islamic justice to the world”).⁴⁶ Indeed, so apolitical, non-radical and anti-messianic are the ideas of this group that it viewed Khomeini’s doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*velāyat-e-faqīh*), together with the revolution it helped engender, as essentially *ghuluww* phenomena, a position which led to

⁴⁵ CNN, 17.11.2006 (Glenn Beck Program),

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/061117/gb.01.html>

⁴⁶ Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi’ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 68.

their official disbandment in 1984. The reason that the Ḥojjatiyyeh are associated with the slogan *mahdī biyā, mahdī biyā!* (Savior, come, Savior, come!) is because the members of this organization chanted this slogan immediately after the revolution *specifically in order to undermine the popular feeling that the Imām was already present in the person of Khomeini*. It's actual import was: "the Savior *has yet* to come, the Savior *has yet* to come!"⁴⁷ Netanyahu and the hundreds of other speakers, journalists and analysts who facilely bandy about the name Ḥojjatiyyeh and exploit it to depict the new Iranian government as living on the faultline between this world and the next could not have gotten it more wrong.⁴⁸

Ayatollah Mesbāḥ-e-Yazdī, the reputed senior figure of the now underground Ḥojjatiyyeh and supposed *marja'* of President Ahmadinejad – the cleric with whom Iran's supposed messianic fervor is most commonly associated these days – vociferously denies any connection with the clandestine society, and even were his past affiliation somehow proven, this would, again, show him to be nothing other than *vehemently anti-mahdist*. Mesbāḥ-e-Yazdī's extensive oeuvre, at any rate, evinces little evidence of the fanatical messianism so often attributed to him. Here is a passage from his *The Political Theory of Islam (Naẓariye-ye-Siyāsī-ye-Eslām)*:

We believe that during the occultation of the Master of Time (upon whom be peace), [the imām] did not leave the matter of government unattended, but made arrangements for it. These arrangements dovetail with the general Islamic (i.e. Shī'ite – Z. M.) theory regarding government, that is, investiture by God the Exalted, and thus the "jurist who combines all the necessary conditions" (*faqīh-e-jāme' ol-sharāyet*) is the individual whom the Absent One and God the Exalted have appointed to conduct the affairs of the believers at this time. This is the self-same theory that in the political philosophy of Islam (i.e. of modern Shī'ism – Z. M.) is called "The Guardianship of the Jurist." According to this theory two conditions – both of which we have outlined so far in this study – are necessary in order to designate a society as "Islamic": (1) an individual must hold sway who is possessed of the necessary characteristics according to the law of Islam regarding leaders and who embodies and epitomizes the morals of Islam and the traits of its founder the Prophet (may God's peace and blessings be upon him and his family); and (2) the laws and ordinances of the *sharī'a* must constitute the foundation of

⁴⁷ Yann Richard, *Shi'ite Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 108.

⁴⁸ It is true that an enthusiastic set of sentiments going by the name "Ḥojjatiyyeh" are currently making the rounds of some Iraqi Shī'ī militant organizations, but the situation in Iraq is not the situation in Iran (and never has been: Iraqi Shī'ism has always been more prone than its Iranian counterpart to radical or messianic tendencies – see Madelung, *Religious Trends*, 79 and 84).

the regime...The Master of Time (i.e. the Hidden Imām) has been obscured behind an impenetrable curtain for over a thousand years. We have no way of knowing when he will return to us, and it is expressly forbidden by the laws of God – and entirely ineffective besides – to take active steps to hasten His Advent. Therefore we are duty bound to erect institutions that will provide for the long term Islamic governance of our blessed country, and that is the significance of the institution of the Guardianship of the Jurist.

Here and throughout his many written works and lectures, Mesbāh-e-Yazdī blows no messianic trumpet (and while he often ends speeches and classes with a formulaic expression of desire to witness the imminent return of His August Excellency, it must be remembered that *every good Shī'ī does that*, including the likes of Khātāmī!). Mesbāh-e-Yazdī regularly cites and praises Khomeini (the man who disbanded the Hojjatiyeh) – indeed, he heads up the Imām Khomeini Foundation – and he focuses in his teachings on the construction of an Islamic society and government *within* the confines of history, not at history's end.

It is significant that the Hojjatiyyeh found Khomeini's philosophy too extreme. They were not the only ones. Just as Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi refused to support the insurrection – widely popular among his own students – of Navāb-e-Safavī and the Fedayeen in the 1950s,⁴⁹ so a great many high level clerics were hesitant about and even hostile to Khomeini's radical agenda.⁵⁰ Khomeini was, in the eyes of the conservative Shī'ite establishment (and despite his status as a *mujtahid* in good standing) a *ghālī* of sorts, indeed, a Zaydī *ghālī*. Like the fifth imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir's brother Zayd, who led an abortive uprising against the Umayyads in Kufa (and in turning away from whom the proto-Twelvers acquired the epithet *rāfiḍa*), Khomeini combined a moderate approach to Sunnism with a fierce resolve to take back the *riyāsa* by force. His success as opposed to Zayd's failure did make a difference: the unprecedented spectacle of be-turbaned *howzeh* graduates running the government – the pristine and most profound Shī'ite dream realized – could not but tempt even the most diehard of conservatives. Khomeini was more than a mere Ṣafavid to the Qom seminarians; he was one of them, and had empowered their kind in an unprecedented fashion. But he had still gone too far (indeed, his pro-active political outlook sometimes spilled over into the theological sphere and led him to make statements strongly reminiscent of Weber's "definition of charisma," such as: "We [Shī'ites] have always sat in our homes clutching our worry-beads and praying, 'May Allāh hasten [the Mahdī's] felicitous advent!' [*'ajjal Allāhu farajah*]. Well I say: it is *your* work which will hasten that advent!").⁵¹ Faced with this latest, newfangled *ghuluww*, the Twelver luminaries in the *howzehs* and *madrasahs* did

⁴⁹ See Ḥosayn 'Alī-ye-Montazerī, *Khāterāt* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2001), pp. 60-63.

⁵⁰ See David Menashri, *Iran be-Mahapekha*, esp. chap. 1; Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985), pp. 140-142.

⁵¹ "Khoṭbe-ye-Emām dar Masjed-e-Shaykh Lotf Allāh," *Nūr*, 5.11.80.

what they had always done on occasions when resistance was not an option: they waited in the wings until the effervescence died down, and then began the process of reclaiming the mantle of authority. Twelver anti-messianism had, it is true, gradually created over the centuries the conditions that allowed for Khomeini's achievement; but the same sentiments and attitudes were destined ultimately to undermine it. Religion is by nature counter-revolutionary.

Messianism is a mushy term and a nebulous phenomenon. Even if the Final Redeemer and eschatological scenario of a given religion has been effectively defused – as is the case in Twelver Shī'ism – there will always be individuals and groups that place a greater emphasis on such aspects than does the mainstream. In Shī'ism, if those individuals or groups go too far they have been and will be suppressed. But Ahmadinejad has *not* gone too far in that sense. His “messianic” acts and statements are as normative as dropping a message for the mahdī down the well of the Jamkārān mosque. Defanged messianism can and does co-exist quite comfortably with conservative religious tradition (the Jamkārān mosque is located in *Qom*). All pious Shī'ites pray for the return of the Hidden Imām just as all pious Christians pray for the return of Jesus and all pious Jews for the arrival of the *mashiah*. That does not mean that they run their lives or their politics based on this vague and distant wish.⁵²

⁵² There are exceptions, of course, such as Pentacostals and Dispensationalists in Christianity and Lubavitcher Hassidim in Judaism – the *ghulāt* of their respective faith communities.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that messianism or mahdism is not a potent force within Shī‘ism, and therefore not a genuine factor in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. This does not mean that American and international pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program should be ceased; it means that it should be increased sevenfold. Were the Iranian leadership truly convinced that the Eschaton was around the corner, no amount of sanctions or threats of military action would be effective. Since they are not in the least bit convinced of this, such measures – if pursued with resolution, wisdom and consistency (unlike the current state of affairs) – are likely to produce significant effects. Mass martyrdom might be acceptable to certain elements in the regime, but slow economic strangulation leading to intolerable levels of popular discontent are another story. As long as we persist in buying our own hype about the dangerously irrational and apocalyptically oriented Islamic Republic, we will continue to fear the Iranians more than we should, and this fear will paralyze us.

Other-worldly Messianism does not drive present-day Iranian policy. Nevertheless, when Ahmadinejad – or Khāmene’ī, or Mesbāḥ-e-Yazdī, or Jannatī, or Dāvūdī, or others – talk about the Hidden Imām and publicly pray for his return, this is more than mere lip service or the expression of some undefined longing connected to the far distant future. There is another, more metaphorical and less metaphysical level upon which mahdism operates in today’s Islamic Republic. It consists of a very this-worldly set of aspirations involving Iran’s burgeoning power and Islam’s ideological and political (and eventually military) ascendancy. The statements and speeches made by Iran’s leaders in connection with the Hidden Imām’s advent are almost invariably accompanied by their own translations and interpretations, which taken together boil down to the strong sense of mission and momentum afforded them by the original revolution and by recent international developments. They believe that Iran is going to raise up the humiliated head of the the Islamic world and preside over the process whereby its superior spiritual and moral (and political) system undermines – with or without the help of the sword (but most likely with) – the decaying edifice of the debauched and enervated West. And just as the original set of Shī‘ite clerical achievements detailed throughout this essay and climaxing in the revolution of 1979 required the suppression of ecstatic, other-worldly messianism, so the this-worldly “messianism” evinced by an ambitious Iran today requires the avoidance of another type of apocalyptic eventuality: nuclear conflict. For Iran to launch a nuclear weapon on any target would mean the end of her precious “messianic” dream of spreading Islam throughout the world under the aegis of Twelver Shī‘ism; it would mean the end of Iran.

The implications for American and European policy of this reassessment of Shī‘ite Iranian messianism are rife, but not on the nuclear level: there, as I have stated, other extremely compelling reasons exist for denying Iran the bomb, even though messianism is not one of them. The most important implications of the this-worldly Iranian-Islamist messianism I have just described are, to my mind, found in an area usually ignored by Western thinkers and policy makers. The greatest danger to the West posed by Iran and Islamism in the long run is neither a nuclear nor even a military danger

(though these dangers exist and must not be ignored) but a cultural-ideological danger. Iran and its far flung fundamentalist allies perceive the West as weak, disunified and decadent – and they are right. Monistic Islam becomes more sure of itself every day; pluralistic, post-modern America and Europe (and Israel) become less sure of themselves every day. It is this trend which must be reversed if liberal civilization is to have a chance at survival. Preventing nuclear proliferation is a piece of cake compared to that task.