

## **Development through Contestation: the Consequences of Interaction between Shi'ism and Sunnism between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Century**

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Ibn Taymiyyah, the Hanbali jurist and theologian, is said to have proclaimed that the sixty years' reign by an unjust ruler was preferable to one night of anarchy. He further elucidated that an absolutist state was necessary for the protection of religion, and conversely the guidance of religion was a precondition for the prevention of tyranny. Perhaps Taymiyyah's views come as no surprise when one considers that the scholar lived during an age of crisis in the Islamic lands—one that followed on the heels of a prolonged period of dissolution of Abbasid absolutism and was exacerbated by the Crusades and, especially during Ibn Taymiyyah's lifetime, by the cataclysmic Mongol invasions.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, an analysis of the political events and religious developments during the period from the Abbasid golden age in mid-eighth century to the end of the Shi'i century in mid-eleventh century paints a more complex picture of the interaction between state absolutism and religion.

The development known as “the Shi'i century” between the mid-tenth and the mid-eleventh century—referring to the flowering of Shi'i doctrinal literature, as well as the rise of the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and the Twelver Shi'i regime of the Buwayhids in the central Islamic lands of Iran and Iraq<sup>2</sup>—and the codification of Sunni Islam around the same time period were made possible by a number of seemingly disparate factors. The political prominence of Shi'ism was helped by the dissipation of Abbasid absolutism, since the Baghdad regime had hitherto been extremely active in suppressing its political manifestations. The religious codification of Shi'ism, on the other hand, surprisingly had begun during the Abbasid golden age between the mid-eighth and the early-ninth century. The caliphate of the age, in marked contrast

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1. *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, s.v. “Ibn Taymiyya,” by H. Laoust, accessed March 25, 2012, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-taymiyya-SIM\\_3388?s.num=9](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-taymiyya-SIM_3388?s.num=9).
  2. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 36, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894.0002.001>.

to its insistence on political absolutism, had fostered unfettered cultural production. The regime had especially encouraged the outward flow of culture from Iraq, the centre of Shi'i literature and intellectual tradition. Significant though it was, the Fatimid patronage merely continued this tradition of Shi'i literary production and helped to refine Ismaili thought. Buwayhid support for Twelver ideas in Baghdad contributed somewhat to the development of Twelver Shi'ism as a system of belief and to the institutionalization of certain public expressions of the faith. Finally, in the face of the ascendancy of Shi'i ideas, a rival Shi'i caliphate in Egypt, and de facto rule in the central lands by the Twelver-minded Buwayhids, the declining Sunni Abbasid caliphate was forced to codify Sunnism in an effort to politically unify the umma once again under an Abbasid banner and to delegitimize the Shi'i regimes. In effect, while state patronage was an undeniably important factor for the development and codification of the central tenets for both, the ongoing contestation between Shi'i and Sunni doctrines after the dissipation of Abbasid absolutism played a far more central role in their maturation process.

By the middle of the ninth century, the absolutist political tradition that the Abbasids had inherited from the Sasanian Empire reached its nadir. The regime's absolutism had always been faced with political challenges from many quarters of Islamic thought, including the Kharijis and various Shi'i sects such as the Zaydis, Twelver Shi'is, and Ismailis. These opposing parties had markedly differing views on the ideal constitution and administration of the Islamic state. The Kharijis and the Zaydis, for example, were informed by a revolutionary impulse and inspired by the small-scale, face-to-face political communities of early Islamic caliphates that were built on the basis of the caliph's personal responsibility towards the umma. The Ismailis, in sharp contrast to the egalitarian Kharijis, proposed a hierarchical regime. As believers of *Batin*—hidden or esoteric meaning—their system of rule would focus on an imam-ruler whose legitimacy was based on divine inspiration.<sup>3</sup> As was the case with the other Shi'i groups, Twelver Shi'is concentrated on erecting a just and incorruptible political entity across the Islamic lands in which power would be concentrated in the hands of an imam descended from the family of Ali. They, however, believed that the last imam had gone into miraculous occultation and would only reappear before the end of the world to lead the umma. As a result, the Twelvers had a rather

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3. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 473, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894.0001.001>.

uneasy relationship with the caliphate since its presence only served to underscore the caliph's lack of divine inspiration and the caliphate's illegitimate claim of rule over the umma. Nonetheless, as "quietists", they rejected the activist tendencies of other Shi'i sects.<sup>4</sup>

The middle Abbasid caliphate was particularly vulnerable to these calls for political reform because the prolonged civil war from 809 to 833 AD over succession claims had greatly weakened it.<sup>5</sup> The war was followed by the formation of a unique military elite. The demographic make-up of the military was composed mostly of slave soldiers of Turkic origin, as well as mercenaries recruited from minority groups living in the fringes of the empire such as Daylamites, Armenians, and Berbers—was an unprecedented occurrence in the Islamic world. Additionally, its political power far outstripped the political influence exercised by previous military elites such as the Khurasaniyya army. Eventually the Turkish military leaders became the de facto leaders of the state, ushering in a new political tradition in which the Abbasid caliph became a mere figurehead, and the military commander, known as the *Amir al-Umara*, came to effectively rule the Islamic world.<sup>6</sup> The Buwayhids would later utilize their Daylamite heritage in order to gain crucial support of the Daylamite infantry in the Abbasid army and benefit from the amir al-umara tradition to rule from Baghdad for roughly a century from 941 to 1048 AD.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the political position of the Abbasids was greatly worsened by the deteriorating economic condition and heightened social tensions. Historian Marshall Hodgson argued that economic failure contributed at least as much to the decline of the Abbasid absolutism as political failure.<sup>8</sup> The agricultural economy of the Sawad in Iraq had been a central source of revenue for the Abbasid regime. A multiplicity of factors such as unfavourable geological changes in the Diyalah basin, salinization of the earth due to prolonged over-cultivation of the land, and damage caused to the irrigation and canal systems during the civil war significantly lessened the return of both revenue and agricultural yield during the period in

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4. Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 94.

5. Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2004) 147.

6. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 169.

7. *Ibid.*, 227

8. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 483, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894.0001.001>.

question.<sup>9</sup> The economic crisis magnified already-existing regional divisions and especially aggravated class antagonisms. A number of rebellions were launched independently in far-flung corners of the Abbasid Empire, yet relied on a similarly constructed message of erasing the class distinctions and founding an egalitarian, regionally-based Muslim society. Often these revolts were ideologically informed by the aforementioned political challengers such as the various Shi'i sects or the Kharijis. The series of small-scale rebellions by the Ismaili-minded Qaramita from 897 AD onward is a prime example of such a social movement. The Qaramita revolts were believed to have been directed from the western edge of the Syrian Desert by the charismatic 'Ubayd Allah, who later capitalized on his mobilization experience and strong base of Ismaili followers in order to become the first Fatimid ruler in North Africa in 997 AD.<sup>10</sup>

In other cases, local rulers took advantage of the Abbasid administration's weakness to become virtually independent principalities with regional economic and political autonomy. Such was the case in Egypt and Syria where, although they continued to acknowledge the Abbasid Caliph in name, the Tulunids and later the Ikshidids established independent dynasties. Even though the Fatimids rejected the previous two dynasties' treaty arrangements with the Abbasids, they continued and improved upon the legal and economic systems developed during the preceding era.<sup>11</sup> Thus, one can trace the origins of the two most prominent and powerful Shi'i regimes, the Ismaili Fatimids in Egypt and the Twelver-minded Buwayhids in Iraq and Iran, to the gradual weakening of the Abbasid absolutism between the ninth and tenth centuries.

The Shi'i century was marked by more than just Shi'i political dominance. It was also distinguished by the pre-eminence of Shi'i scholarship and literature and the development and codification of different systems of beliefs within Shi'ism. Hodgson accounts for the "disproportionate number of [Shi'i] scholars and litterateurs, even in fields other than explicitly religious" during this period by noting that a rich intellectual tradition was already entrenched in the Shi'i communities of Iraq. During the golden age of the Abbasid caliphate, the regime was extremely liberal-minded when it came to fostering unrestricted cultural production, and was especially focused on the diffusion of cultural products from Iraq to the rest of the Islamic

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9. Ibid., 483–485.

10. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 285.

11. Ibid., 313.

territories. Many of the old families of Iraq had inherited Shi'ism since it had been prominent in Kufa. As these families formed the upper bourgeoisie, mercantile class during the Abbasid period, they were also at the forefront of cultural production. Much of first and founding articulations of Shi'ism, such as the *Nahj al-Balaghah* or the compilation of Ali's sayings collected by al-Sharif al-Radi, can be traced to the contributions of this particular class during the Abbasid golden age.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, the culture-cultivating power of the upper bourgeoisie families was discernible even during the Buwayhid period. In addition to cultural openness, the golden age of the Abbasids was manifested in the infusion of scholars from across the Islamic lands into Baghdad's cultural scene. The increased social mobility during the Abbasid period meant that a scholar could, given certain talents, rise in social stature anywhere within the Islamic territories without the mediation of familial connections, tribal allegiances, or local ties.<sup>13</sup> The commercial district of al-Karkh thus became established as a principal stronghold for Shi'i scholarship during the early Abbasid period. In tenth century Baghdad, although the Buwayhids themselves did not patronize scholars housed in the district, the Shi'i merchant families close to the Buwayhid court formed the majority of their benefactors and continued to foster the production Shi'i religious literature, often with a Twelver flavour, at al-Karkh.<sup>14</sup>

Hodgson further contends that while Fatimid patronage of Ismaili scholarship indeed produced substantial refinements, the Buwayhid contribution to the maturation of Twelver Shi'i tenets was possibly only of secondary significance.<sup>15</sup> Although Hugh Kennedy disagrees with Hodgson's assessment of Buwayhid involvement in the development of Twelver belief system—for he contends that Buwayhid presence in Baghdad was instrumental for the development of Twelver Shi'ism “both as a system of belief and a religious community”<sup>16</sup>—both historians agree that the institutionalization of certain public expressions of Twelver beliefs was made possible

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12. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History In a World Civilization Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 36–38, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894.0002.001>.

13. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History In a World Civilization Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 305, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894.0001.001>.

14. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 226.

15. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History In a World Civilization Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 36–38, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894.0002.001>.

16. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 225.

through Buwayhid benefaction. Public rituals and celebrations such as the public denigration of the first two caliphs, festivals commemorating the mourning for al-Husayn on his death anniversary on 10 Muharram and those celebrating the acknowledgement of Ali by the Prophet as his successor at Ghadir Khumm on 18 Dhul-Hijja, as well as the development of a pilgrimage tradition around the tombs of the members of the ‘Alid family, were first carried out in Buwayhid Baghdad; many of these rituals have since become part and parcel of modern-day Shi’i practice across the world.<sup>17</sup> One potential reason for the particular public manifestations of Twelver belief system prevalent in Baghdad and much of Iraq and Iran during this time can be attributed to the fact that after a century and a half of Abbasid absolutism, the Shi’i community perceived a possibility to assert their difference and visibly separate themselves from the Jamah-i-Sunni. Baghdad under de facto Buwayhid rule thus served as the perfect staging ground for this project of Shi’i differentiation.

One of the most interesting chapters of the Buwayhid rule in Baghdad concerns Abbasid caliph al-Qadir’s efforts to codify Sunni Islam. Al-Qadir was the twenty-fifth Abbasid caliph who served as a figurehead for the Buwayhid rulers from 991 to 1031 AD. Despite his powerlessness, al-Qadir was determined to stem the tide of infusion of Shi’i ideas in Baghdad in both the Twelver form through the encouragement of the Buwayhids and in the Ismaili form through the propaganda efforts of the Fatimid dais. The Abbasid caliph’s pre-occupations seem to have been twofold: first, he had wished to struggle against any religious doctrine, such as Shi’ism, Mu‘tazilism, or A‘sharism, that was contrary to Sunnism; and second, he had aimed to reduce the threat to the Sunni Abbasid caliphate from Fatimid quarters through religious renunciation. The Caliph was especially vigilant against the reading of khutbas in the name of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim in Iraq. When in 1010 AD the amir of al-Mawsli professed allegiance to al-Hakim and read the khutba in his name, al-Qadir immediately dispatched an emissary to the chief amir of the region to effect the restoration of the khutba in his name. Additionally, he wrote and read a manifesto publicly in his palace in November 1011 AD which questioned the legitimacy of the Fatimid claim of being descended from Ali and condemned the

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17. Schimmel, *Islam*, 21.

Fatimid Ismaili doctrine as “an enemy of Islam.”<sup>18</sup> His most significant and enduring contribution to the codification project was the text *Risalaal-Kadiriyya*. Written in 1018 AD, this text clarified “a Sunni doctrinal and ritual position to counter that of the Shi’i.”<sup>19</sup> By the time of his death in 1031 AD, the caliphate managed to regain some of the lost prestige because of the Caliph’s efforts to provide a definition for Sunni Islam against the advances of Shi’i ideas. However, this did not result in the reestablishment of the Abbasid caliphate’s political power. The refinement and institutionalization of Sunni Islam begun by the al-Qadir continued through to the Seljuk era. The system of madrassahs or Sunni colleges was devised by the famed Seljuk wazir Nizam al-Mulk in 1067 AD, and it soon spread throughout the Islamic territories and acted as bastions of Sunni learning.<sup>20</sup>

Even though Ibn Taymiyyah’s proclamation about an absolutist state nurturing religious ideas seems to be intuitively true, careful consideration of the the political and religious developments, specifically the struggle between Shi’ism and Sunnism, in the Islamic territories between the ninth and the eleventh centuries reveals quite a different picture. In fact, the dissolution of Abbasid absolutism contributed most significantly to the rise of the Shi’i political powers between the mid-tenth and mid-eleventh centuries in Islamic history. Religious codification of Shi’ism and production of Shi’i doctrinal literature, on the other hand, were more highly encouraged by the Shi’i community during the Abbasid golden age when the Sunni caliphate was experiencing the peak of its absolutism. Similarly, Sunni Islam was codified and institutionalized by a declining Abbasid caliphate to counter the perceived threat from the ascendant Shi’i political powers during the Shi’i century. Notwithstanding the importance of state patronage, it was in fact the contestation between the two doctrines that affected their growth more than other factors.

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18. *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, s.v. “al-Kadir Billah,” D. Sourdel, accessed March 24, 2012, [http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam\\_SIM-3761](http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-3761).

19. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 229.

20. *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, s.v. “Saldjukids,” C. E. Bosworth, accessed March 24, 2012, [http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam\\_COM-0984](http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0984).

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