The Consolation of Theology: Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiliasm to Law in Shi'ism

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According to a central tenet of Imami or Twelver Shi'ism,[1] the twelfth Imam disappeared in the year 874 C.E., and his absence or occultation (*ghayba*) will last until his *parousia* (ẓuhūr) at the divinely guided Mahdi at the End of Time. The development of the doctrine of occultation has not received any systematic treatment as such in modern historical and critical scholarship.[2] Henri Corbin, it is true, has offered a general interpretation of its significance,[3] but his analysis is phenomenological rather than historical, and it draws inordinately on the mystical and theosophical trends in Shi'ism after the Mongol invasion, at the expense of addressing the formative era. The idea of the occultation of an apocalyptic leader from the eyes of mankind had chiliastic origins and was adopted in a desperate effort to resolve the immediate problems of Imamate and succession in the second half of the ninth century.[4] This idea, however, underwent a series of subtle modifications and developed into a doctrine

[1] The Twelver or Imami Shi'ism represents by far the largest surviving Shi'ite sects. It is the religion of the majority of the population of Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain and is widespread in Lebanon, Pakistan, India, and elsewhere.

[2] The important works that touch on the issue, however, are 'A. Iqbal, *Khāndān-e Nawbakhtī* (Tehran, 1932/1311); M. G. S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 75 (1955) (hereafter cited as "Early Shi'a"); E. Kohlberg, "From Imamiyya to Ithnā-'asharīyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 39 (1976); H. Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1993); M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le Shi'isme originel* (Paris: Verdier, 1992). The last work is now available in English translation as *Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[3] Henri Corbin, "L'Imâm caché et la rénovation de l'homme en théologie shi'ite," *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 28 (1959), "Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité shi'ite," *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 29 (1960), and *En Islam iranien*, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–72).

[4] S. A. Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi'ism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1996).

that resulted in a basic transformation of the Imamate from a legitimist theory of authority of the descendants of 'Ali into a principle of salvation. This transformation was of critical importance to the long-term survival of Imami Shi'ism and its expansion as the major variant of Islam.

The development of the Shi'ite doctrine of occultation, furthermore, illustrates important aspects of Max Weber's notion of rationalization when applied to the world religions of salvation. It can be viewed as a case of the rationalization of a fairly common religious theme of disappearance-*parousia* through specific theological elaboration. The elaboration consisted in the containment of the chiliastic notion of occultation through its absorption into a nomocratic theology. The most fundamental step in this process of absorption, and one that gave it the character of rationalization, was the acknowledgment of the pertinence of "rational proof" to occultation, as to all fundamental tenets of religion. This acknowledgment came with the rejection of chiliastic sectarian withdrawal, willingness to engage in rational dialogue to promote the Shi'ite faith, and the acceptance of the surrounding world, which entailed accommodation to the pluralistic religious universe of tenth- and eleventh-century Islam.

I. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Islam is quintessentially a prophetic religion, and the Qur'an presents Prophecy—that is, the progressive mission of a chain of Prophets from Adam to Muhammad—as God's primary instrument for the guidance (*hudā*) of mankind. According to the *shī'a* (party) of 'Ali as organized into the Imami Shi'ite sect by his descendants Muhammad al-Baqir (died 733) and Ja'far al-Sadiq (died 765), the divine guidance of mankind continued after the death of Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, through a line of Imams. The Imams as the charismatic leaders of the community of believers and its authoritative teachers in religion thus became the pillars of the Shi'ite faith and the central figures in its economy of salvation through divine guidance. This centrality of the Imams to Shi'ite Islam made the inevitable crisis of succession caused by the Imam's death a chronic threat to the survival of the community. The crises of succession also militated against the institutionalization of a stable system of authority. The most serious crisis of succession began on January 1, 874, when the eleventh Imam, Hasan ibn 'Ali al-'Askari died "and no offspring (*khalaf*) was seen after him."[5] A nascent hierocracy of the learned (*ulema*) of the community had to assure the survival of Imami Shi'ism despite the

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[5] Sa'd ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ash'ari al-Qummi, *Kitāb al-Maqālat wa'l-Firaq*, ed. M. J. Mashkur (Tehran, 1963), p. 102.

removal of its main pillar, the Imam. To make sense of this crisis while retaining its control, the Imami leadership had little choice but to borrow the idea of occultation from the chiliastic extremists and asserted its authority on behalf of "the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali," who was said to be in hiding and was eventually identified as the Qa'im (apocalyptic redresser) and the Mahdi (rightly guided, messianic leader). Resort to this chiliastic notion, however, was soon counterbalanced by the adoption of the tools of rational theology from the Mu'tazila who were its pioneers in Islam.

The chiliastic idea of the occultation of an Imam who would soon reappear as the Qa'im to lead the armed uprising had made its appearance in Islamic history before the end of the seventh century and was maintained by a variety of "gnostic revolutionaries" in the early eighth century.[6] Chiliasm and the apocalyptic mood prevalent during the 'Abbasid revolution (744–63) also affected Imami Shi'ism and resulted in the definitive reception of the idea of occultation. The bearers of the apocalyptic and chiliastic early Shi'ism in eighth-century Iraq were disprivileged natives, Mandean, Persian, and other non-Arab clients (mawālī) and followers of the aristocratic Qurayshite Imams who descended from 'Ali and the daughter of the Prophet (who had no surviving son).[7] To these were added the ninth-century converts in Iran, the Persian clients, many of whom must have come from the frustrated neo-Mazdakite millenarian groups that had followed Abu Muslim during the 'Abbasid revolution. For the Imams, the problem was one of religious discipline and social control of "extremist" (ghālī), chiliastic tendencies. This control was partial, and quite a few extremist ideas concerning the charismatic and superhuman status of the Imams penetrated the Shi'ite orthodoxy as a result of the pressure from below. An extremist position, whose proponents became known as the "Mufawwida," considered the Imams supernatural beings to whom God had delegated (fawwaḍa) His powers of creation and command.[8]

[6] The term used by S. Wasserstrom, "The Moving Finger Writes: Mughira b. Sa'id's Islamic Gnosis and the Myths of Its Rejection," History of Religions 25, no. 1 (1985): 27.

[7] Wasserstrom, pp. 4–5, 8–11. This picture of the social background of the early extremist Shi'ite sects emerges clearly from the articles by W. F. Tucker, notably, "Rebels and Gnostics; al-Muġira ibn Sa'id and the Muġiriyya," Arabica 22, no. 1 (1975): 33–47, "Bayan b. Sam'an and the Bayaniyya: Shi'ite Extremists of Umayyad Iraq," Muslim World 65, no. 4 (1975): 241–53, and "Abu Mansur al-'Ijli and the Mansuriyya: A Study in Medieval Terrorism," Der Islam 54 (1977): 66–76.

[8] Modarressi, chap. 2. The terminology of the careful description of the delegationist tendency in Qummi, Maqālāt, pp. 60–61 (German trans. with commentary in H. Halm, Die islamische Gnosis [Zurich and Munich: Artemis, 1982], pp. 231–32), suggests the influence of the gnostic neo-Platonic idea of the Word of God as a second creator or Demiurge (I. Friedlaender, "Jewish-Arabic Studies. 3," Jewish Quarterly Review, n.s., 8 [1912–13]: 254–56). The nameless Eternal One delegates the creation and management of the world to a

The organization of Imami Shi'ism into a sect by the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, in the mid-eighth century required serious disciplining of chiliastic extremism.[9] The seventh Imam, Musa ibn Ja'far (died 799), greatly consolidated the organization and fiscal administration of the Imami Shi'ite community by appointing agents in various districts. The agents began to display marks of increasing independence from the later Imams and constituted a nascent hierarchy of the learned (*ulema*), which survived the disappearance of the Imam and completed the sectarian transformation of Shi'ism in the tenth century. Paradoxically, the absence of the Imam enabled this hierarchy to find a solution to the chronic crisis of succession in the long run and to evolve a stable system of authority.

In the last years of the ninth and the first years of the tenth centuries, the leader of the Imami community in Baghdad, Abu Sahl Isma'il ibn 'Ali al-Nawbakhti (died 923), and his contemporary in central Iran, Ibn Qiba al-Razi, took the first steps to detach the idea of occultation from its chiliastic matrix by recasting it in a theological framework.[10] Although containing the kernel of later developments, these early theological statements were too closely tied to the concrete circumstances of the succession of "the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali"[11] and, in any event, had little immediate effect on the morale of the Shi'ite community, which was devastated by the fact of the disappearance of the Imam in the period of perplexity (*ḥayra*) it had inaugurated.

Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni's (died 940 or 941) monumental compendium of Imami traditions, *al-Kāfī*, is the most important product of the era of perplexity and can serve as the backdrop to the developments we wish to study. It is a work of staunch traditionalism, striking in its theological naiveté and innocence of philosophy.[12] Its topical arrangement of traditions conveys a picture of the place of humanity in a sacred cosmos that we can accept as the underlying mythopoetic constitution of the universe in early tenth-century Shi'ism and one close to its original

single person who is incarnated in Muhammad, 'Ali, and the Imams to whom the divine names pertain. For the parallel Jewish delegationism, where the role of the Demiurge is played by the chief angel Metatron, "the lesser YHWH," see P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, trans. A. Pomerance (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 132–34.

[9] Hodgson, "Early Shi'a."

[10] S. A. Arjomand, "Imam *Absconditus* and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation: Imami Shi'ism around 900 CE/280–290 AH," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (in press).

[11] This is the mode of reference to the hidden Imam, who is not named in these early statements.

[12] It was the fruit of Kulayni's studies with the traditionists of the region of Qumm and Rayy but was committed to writing during Kulayni's residence in Baghdad and fell flat in the rationalist circles of the Caliphal capital (W. Madelung, "KULAYNI," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2d ed. [Leiden: Brill, 1986], 5:362–63).

solution to the problem of the meaning of life. This picture mingles the natural and the supernatural but is coherent as a solution to the problem of meaning and therefore architectonically rational. Its book on the Imamate, *Book of the Proof* (*ḥujja*) [*of God*], shows the Imams as the pre-eternal pillars of the sacred cosmos. They are the proofs of God to humankind and His instruments of guidance (*hudā*) or salvation, incarnations of light and reason (*'aql*), and are supported in this world by "the army of reason" in their combat against the forces of darkness embodied in their enemies, "the army of ignorance (*jahl*)." The world could not be without an Imam in any age.[13]

A number of significant developments in making sense of the disappearance of the Imam occurred during this era of perplexity. The mythical number twelve, the number of the tribes of Yahweh and the disciples of Christ, had had its appeal for the Shi'ite scholars.[14] 'Ali ibn Babuya (died 940–41), a rich merchant who was among the learned of the Shi'ite community in Qumm, stumbled on the set of traditions by Sunni transmitters from the time of the 'Abbasid revolution that predicted the number of the Imams or Caliphs from the Quraysh (Muhammad's tribe) would be twelve and used them as a step toward the solution of the perplexity surrounding the question of the Imamate, arguing that there had to be twelve Imams and the successor of the eleventh must therefore be in occultation.[15] Kulayni was probably following his example when incorporating some traditions fixing twelve as the number of the Imams into the later editions of his compendium,[16] as was Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Nu'mani in the *Book of Occultation*, written in the middle of the tenth century.[17] In his despair in this time of "trial" (*miḥna*), tribulation, and sedition (*fitna*), Nu'mani, like the other traditionists, ignored the earlier steps taken toward a theology of occultation by Razi and Nawbakhti and seems to offer only an apocalyptic consolation: "Know that God revives the earth after its death . . . (Qurān 30:18). Indeed God revives it by the justice of the Qa'im upon his *parousia* after its death due to the injustice of the Imams of error [i.e., illegitimate rulers]."[18]

[13] For details, see Amir-Moezzi.

[14] U. Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shi'a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 54.

[15] Modarressi (no. 2 above), p. 102, citing 'Ali b. Babuya, *al-Imāma wa'l-tabṣira min al-ḥayra* (Beirut, 1987), pp. 142, 151.

[16] For this hypothesis, see Modarressi, pp. 100–103.

[17] Modarressi, p. 103, n. 259: Nu'mani (n. 18 below) probably did so independently of Kulayni.

[18] Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Ja'far, Ibn Abi Zaynab al-Nu'mani, *Kitāb al-ghayba* (Beirut, 1983), p. 14. The words are attributed to the sixth Imam.

II. THEOLOGY: HIDDEN GOD, SEALED PROPHECY, AND THE HIDDEN IMAM

The beginnings of the theological understanding of occultation belong to the decade around 900 C.E. From the sociological point of view, this was a period of dominance of the Shi'ite office-holding aristocratic families, notably the Nawbakhtis, who had risen to prominence in the service of the Sunni Caliphal government.[19] The recovery of the early theological statements and the full development of a theology of occultation, however, took place during the long "Shi'ite Century,"[20] from the 930s to 1055. In the latter period, the Imami theologians enjoyed the protection of the Shi'ite rulers and viziers and rose to the task of putting an end to the period of perplexity by equipping Imami Shi'ism with a rationalized legal and theological system that obviated the need for the presence of an Imam. By doing so, they completed the transition of Imami Shi'ism from chiliasm to law.

The Buyid brothers, sons of Buya the fisherman, came from the region of the Daylam, which was probably converted to Islam by the missionaries of the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism in the ninth century. They established an empire in Iran in the second quarter of the tenth century and seized power in Baghdad in 945 while maintaining the 'Abbasid Caliph as a puppet figurehead. The Buyids strengthened the corporate organization of the descendants of 'Ali as a privileged estate in major cities. The Sharif (honorific title of the descendants of the Prophet) Abu Ahmad Husayn ibn Musa, a descendant of the seventh Imam Musa ibn Ja'far, was appointed their chief alderman (naqīb al-nuqabā') in 965, with a mandate for the reorganization of the 'Alid estate.[21] He remained a powerful presence in Baghdad for over four decades, as did his sons, the Sharifs al-Radi and al-Murtada who succeeded him and, enjoying the support of several Shi'ite viziers and rulers, presided over the considerable growth and far-reaching legal and theological rationalization of Imami Shi'ism.

The great traditionalist Shaykh al-Saduq, Abu Ja'far Muhammad (died 991), son of 'Ali ibn Babuya, visited Baghdad in the 960s but returned to spend the last decades of his life at the Buyid capital of Rayy near his

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[19] Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate" (n. 4 above), sec. 3.
[20] The expression "the Shi'i Century" is Hodgson's. See his *Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:36–39.
[21] Strictly speaking, the Talibid estate—that is, the descendants of Abu Talib, 'Ali's father and Muhammad's uncle. Rukn al-Dawla's Mu'tazilite viziers, 'Abbad ibn al-'Abbas and his famous son Sahib ibn al-'Abbad, were favorably disposed toward the 'Alids and appointed descendants of a son of the ninth Imam, Musa ibn Muhammad al-Mubarqa', as their aldermen in Qumm; see A.-A. Faqihi's *Tārīkh-i Qumm* (Qumm: Hikmat, [1972/1350]), pp. 106–7, 139, and his *Āl-i Būya* (Tehran: Saba, 1978/1357), pp. 376–79.

native city of Qumm. Other scholars, however, such as Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Dawud (died 978), another "Shaykh of the people of Qumm in his time," moved to Baghdad permanently. Muhammad ibn Ahmad appears to have been the first jurist to develop what might be termed the "political ethic" of the era of occultation, with a tract on working with the state ('amal al-sulṭān), which was to be developed by the Imami jurists of Baghdad in the subsequent generations.[22] What concerns us here more than such lateral ethicolegal implications of the acceptance of occultation is its theological understanding, which became definitive in this period.

It is interesting to note that the first major theological elaboration of the issue of occultation in this period comes not from a rational theologian in Baghdad but from the leading traditionalist of Qumm. With the Buyids in power, the Shaykh al-Saduq, Ibn Babuya took a firm stand in accepting the pluralistic world of Islam and engaging in competition with its other mainstream and sectarian proponents. He is the first major figure to break with a fundamental premise of sectarian world rejection in Imami Shi'ism. Departing from the widespread belief among his coreligionists that the true Qur'an was in the possession of the Imams, Ibn Babuya accepted the official version of the Qur'an in the recension of the third Caliph, 'Uthman, affirming categorically in his creed that the Qur'an as revealed by God to Muhammad was identical with what is found "between the two covers."[23]

Although an outspoken critic of rational theology, Ibn Babuya nevertheless defensively appropriated important aspects of the rationalist theological approach, which he rejected in principle. When he set out to rectify the situation that his father had found so perplexing, the Shaykh al-Saduq inadvertently synthesized the pioneering rational arguments Nawbakhti and Razi had grasped onto ad hoc or polemically two generations earlier. In the long introduction to the book significantly entitled *The Perfection of Religion and Completion of the Blessing in Demonstrating the Proof of Occultation and the Removal of Perplexity,*[24] Ibn Babuya formulated his own

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[22] Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Najashi, *Rijāl al-Najāshī* (1407; Qumm, 1986–87), pp. 384–85. For the subsequent development of the political ethic of the era of occultation, see W. Madelung, "A Treatise of the Sharif al-Murtada on the Legality of Working for Government (*mas'ala fī'l-'amal ma'a-l sulṭān*)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43, pt. 1 (1980): 18–31; S. A. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 62–65.

[23] A. A. A. Fyzee, *A Shi'ite Creed* (Oxford, 1942), p. 85; Amir-Moezzi, p. 222.

[24] Ibn Babuya, Muhammad ibn 'Ali, al-Saduq, *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-ni'ma fī ithbāt al-ghayba wa kashf al-ḥayra,* ed. 'A. A. Ghaffari (Tehran, 1970/1390) (henceforth *Kamāl*). The title alludes to Qur'an 5:5: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion," which the author, on the authority of Salman al-Farsi, takes as a reference to the day of designation of 'Ali by the Prophet as his successor (pp. 276–77).

explanation of the cessation of historical Imamate and occultation, which clearly amounted to a *theology* of occultation.

In the preface, he tells us how he found the Shi'ite ulema of eastern Iran and Transoxania in doubt and perplexity because of the length of the occultation and the cessation of all news from the absent Imam. While preoccupied with this matter, the hidden Imam appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to "write at once a book about the occultation, and mention in it the occultation of the Prophets, peace be upon them."[25]

This reference to prophetic parallels must have suggested to Ibn Babuya the solution to the crisis caused by the absence of the Imam. According to the Islamic doctrine, Prophecy was the link between the hidden God and humanity, to assure the latter's salvation. The link is in no way broken by the absence of Prophets, or the fact that Muhammad was the last of them and their Seal. Similarly, a theological doctrine of occultation could obviate the need for the presence of the Imam without invalidating the idea of the Imamate as the continuation of Prophecy. A hidden Imam could be the perfect link between the hidden God and humanity in a new stage of the history of salvation. What was needed was to make sense of the cessation of the historical Imamate and occultation in terms of theology and theodicy.

"I woke up in panic to prayer and weeping, and to grief and suffering, until dawn broke. When I rose in the morning, I began composing this book, obeying the order of God's appointee (*walī allāh*) and His proof [i.e., the hidden Imam]." Thus begins Ibn Babuya's theological introduction, which has the quality of translation from a dream in the form of a string of extended comments on the intermittently invoked Verse 2:28 of the Qur'an: "And when thy Lord said to the angels, 'indeed, I am setting a viceroy (*khalīfa*) in the earth.'"[26] Central to his theological commentary is the construction of a parallel system between Prophecy and the Imamate as divine institutions for the intermittent guidance of mankind, "If the Qur'an had not revealed that Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets, it would have been necessary to have a Messenger in every period. But as this is certain, the possible meaning that there would be a Messenger after him is eliminated, and the remaining rational possibility is that the invoked image pertains to the viceroy."[27] After confirming that the selection of the viceroy is God's exclusive prerogative, that the viceroy must

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[25] Ibid., p. 3.

[26] Ibid., p. 4. It should be pointed out that Ibn Babuya's interpretation of Qur'an 2:28 (and of the other verses cited below) is original and cannot be found in 'Ali b. Ibrahim al-Qummi's (died 919) commentary on the Qur'an, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, 2 vols., ed. Tayyib al-Musawi al-Jaza'iri (Qumm, 1967–68/1387).

[27] Furthermore, "as is customary practice when a king appoints an oppressor, one can infer the oppression of the appointer from that of his appointee, and when [the appointee]

exist, be unique, and be infallible,[28] Ibn Babuya explicitly affirms that in Qur'an 2:28 "is a strong proof for the occultation of the Imam."[29] He also sees God's viceroyalty implied in the Qur'anic Verse 11:17: "And before him is the book of Moses for an Imam and a mercy," and affirms that "the Imams are all a single *shar*ʿ (divine norm)."[30]

In Ibn Babuya's system of salvation of humankind, the presence of the Prophets and the Imams is only intermittently required, since their function as the agency of the divine guidance can be fulfilled during their absence. The occultation of the Imamate is thus the strict parallel of the termination or sealing of Prophecy with Muhammad's mission.

Ibn Babuya returns to comment further on implications of the Qur'anic Verse 2:28 for God's friends, the believers, who are "guided to honorable obedience, which is conducive to the attestation of the oneness of God and to the denial of God Most High's default, tyranny and violation of rights": "Through a just Imam the ants, mosquitoes and animals from the first to the last attain happiness, as proven by this saying: 'We have not sent thee, save as a mercy unto all beings.' (Qur'an 21:107) . . . We therefore say there is a need for the Imam for the world to remain in the state of well-being (ṣalāh)."[31]

The Imam as the proof of God is thus required by the cosmic constitution. This proof need not be manifest but could equally be absent from the senses. To reaffirm this point, Ibn Babuya draws on the Qur'anic verses that speak of the Unseen (*ghayb*, from the same root as *ghayba* [occultation]) as a divine sign posted for the guidance of mankind. He cites the sixth Imam's comment on Qur'an 2:1–2: "the indubitable Book, a guidance to the God-fearing who believe in the Unseen":

The Unseen is the absent proof (*al-ḥujjat al-ghā'ib*). This is proven by the words of God Most High (10:21): "They say, 'Why has a sign (*āya*) not been sent down upon him from his Lord?' Say: 'The Unseen belongs only to God. Then watch and wait; I shall be with you watching and waiting.' Thus the Most High tells us that the sign is the Unseen, and the Unseen is the proof." This is confirmed in God's saying (23:52): "and We made the son of Mary and his mother, to be a sign," meaning a proof.

God's revelation of the tidings of the Unseen (*ghayb*) to Joseph (Qur'an 12:103) is similarly cited to reinforce the conviction of the existence of

is just, one can infer from his justice the justice of the appointer. It is therefore established that the viceroyalty of God (*khilāfat allāh*) requires infallibility, and the viceroy (*khalīfa*) can only be infallible. . . . The case with the viceroy [of God] remains until the Day of Resurrection" (Ibn Babuya, *Kamāl*, pp. 5–6).

[28] Ibid., pp. 9–10.
[29] Ibid., pp. 10, 12.
[30] Ibid., pp. 13–14.
[31] Ibid., pp. 8–9.

the hidden Imam as the unseen Proof of God.[32] Having thus moved to a high level of abstraction far above the actual existence and succession of an individual, "the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali," Ibn Babuya can end with the flourish that the enemies of the Shi'a who deny the existence of the Imam in occultation ignore God's wisdom and miss the manifestation of truth.[33]

This theological introduction is backed by a massive compilation of traditions, reports, and attestations that fall into two categories. Those in the first category report the occultation of prophets[34]—including Abraham, Noah, Moses, Ezra, Khidr, Jonah, Joseph, and Jesus—who, like the Imams, were proofs of God,[35] and other figures such as monks and kings, followed by a section on the longevity of biblical and mythical figures, all of which aim at making the long occultation of the hidden Imam plausible. It is interesting to note that, along these lines, Ibn Babuya transmits an extensive life of the Buddha.[36] Muhammad's temporary absences, too, are cited as precedents for the occultation of the twelfth Imam.[37]

The second and more important category of traditions consists of the Shi'ite reports and predictions of the occultation of the Qa'im. These con-

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[32] Ibid., p. 18. Elsewhere in the book, Ibn Babuya points out that God assigned his greatest name to the realm of the Unseen (pp. 639–41).

[33] Ibid., p. 20. In the same vein: "the case of he who believes in the Qa'im in his occultation is like that of the angels who obeyed God Most High in prostrating before Adam [God's first viceroy], and the case of he who denies the Qa'im in his occultation is like that of Satan in his refusal to prostrate before Adam" (p. 13).

[34] Among the numerous traditions reported to this end, one of the most interesting is attributed to the sixth Imam: "For the Qa'im is a tradition (*sunna*) from Moses, a tradition from Joseph, a tradition from Jesus and a tradition from Muhammad. As for the tradition of Moses, he is afraid and expectant, as for Joseph's, his brothers paid him homage and talked to him without knowing him; Jesus' tradition is perregrination and Muhammad's the sword" (ibid., p. 28).

[35] Ibid., p. 26. To strengthen the parallel further, Ibn Babuya refers to the followers of each prophet as his Shi'a. Thus, for instance, the Shi'a of Noah (p. 133), of Abraham (p. 141), of Moses (p. 146), and of Jesus (p. 160).

[36] The moral drawn from this life is that the Buddha as the king was often absent from his kingdom and eventually took off garments of kingship and handed them to his vizier in order to devote himself to teaching his subjects the wisdom of God, to awakening their minds to differentiating between truth and error, and to guiding them to the true religion revealed by God's prophets and messengers (ibid., pp. 636–37). The legend of the Buddha had been translated from Middle Persian into Arabic, presumably in the early 'Abbasid period, and thence, via a Georgian rendition, into the Greek as the story of Barlaam and Joasaph. Ibn Babuya's version contains three stories not found elsewhere. These additional stories have been published, with an English translation, by S. M. Stern and S. Walzer as *Three Unknown Buddhist Stories in an Arabic Version* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971).

[37] Muhammad's occultations are said to have occurred during his lifetime. Here Ibn Babuya cites as an example of misplacement of occultation the well-attested assertion by the future second Caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, immediately after Muhammad's death that he had gone into occultation, as Moses had done from his nation, and would reappear. 'Umar withdrew this assertion upon being admonished by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr (*Kamāl*, p. 31).

stitute the traditional proof of his existence—that is, proof on the basis of transmitted authority. There follow attestations to the birth of the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali and, finally, a collection of decrees issued by the hidden Imam from the holy seat. Ibn Babuya thus amasses all the available "traditional proofs" of occultation. Yet in his theological introduction, inspired by the vision of the hidden Imam, he can only make sense of occultation rationally: occultation is made intelligible by rendering the salvation of mankind through divine guidance independent of the presence of the Imam.[38]

Enjoying the patronage of the Buyid ruler, Rukn al-Dawla,[39] Ibn Babuya engaged in the promotion of Imami Shi'ism in competition with other religious groups, notably with the revolutionary Shi'ism of the Isma'ilis who drew their line of Imams not through Musa but through Isma'il, another son of Ja'far al-Sadiq. It was in a disputation concerning the absence of the Imam with an Isma'ili,[40] in the presence of Rukn al-Dawla, that Ibn Babuya put his theology of occultation in a nutshell:

You do not need proof of God Most High [just] because you do not see Him, and you do not require proof of the Prophet, peace be upon him, because you do not see him.

The opponent was quick to draw the correct inference:

This Shaykh says: Indeed the Imam is absent (ghāba) and cannot be seen, just as God Most High cannot be seen.[41]

A hidden Imam can serve the hidden God's purpose perfectly. This is how Ibn Babuya made sense of occultation. Although his rational arguments were minimal and there is little technical theological sophistication, Ibn Babuya has taken the fundamental step of ending the Shi'ites' perplexity by rationalizing the idea of occultation—that is, by making sense of the fact of the Imam's absence as a coherent element of the Shi'ite sacred cosmology and history of salvation.

By the time of Ibn Babuya, the question of the birth and succession of the son of Hasan ibn 'Ali had lost its practical urgency and was receding in historical memory. This released the basic (cosmo-)logical Shi'ite tenet—that no age could be without an Imam—from the burden of prov-

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[38] Ibn Babuya (ibid., pp. 6–7) also addressed the issue of occultation from the viewpoint of theodicy. He affirmed the validity of divine law independently of the presence of the Imam, but left the full implications of this affirmation to be drawn by his rationalist opponents a generation later.

[39] Faqihi, Āl-i Būya (n. 21 above), pp. 278–79, 462–81.

[40] The opponent is referred to as a mulḥid (apostate), which in the period usually means a revolutionary Isma'ili Shi'ite.

[41] Ibn Babuya, Kamāl, p. 88. Rukn al-Dawla is made to say this is a distortion the Shaykh's words and proof of defeat. In truth, however, the opponent's perception reaches the heart of the matter.

ing the birth and existence of a particular individual, thus freeing it to assume the quality of self-evidence. An Imam is necessary for the divine guidance and salvation of mankind, and if none is apparent, there must be an Imam in occultation.

III. THEODICY: THE HIDDEN IMAM AND THE LAW

In the year of Ibn Babuya's death, 991, the Persian Shi'ite vizier of the Buyid ruler, Baha' al-Dawla, Sabur (Shapur) ibn Ardashir, founded a great Shi'ite library in Baghdad, which became the scene of a brilliant Shi'ite intellectual activity in an intense dialogue with the Mu'tazilites. The resumption of the dialogue with the Mu'tazila after decades of perplexity gave the new generation of Imami theologians the instruments Ibn Babuya and the traditionalists of Qumm had lacked for the construction of a systematic theology of occultation. The most brilliant figure in the generation after Ibn Babuya was Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Nu'man, the Shaykh al-Mufid (948–1022), who received his theological training from a student of Abu Sahl al-Nawbakhti and from the Mu'tazila of Baghdad.[42] He, in turn, trained the rationalist doctors of the next generations, most notably the Sharif al-Murtada (died 1044) and the latter's leading student, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, the Shaykh al-Tusi (died 1067).

The Buyid era is a period of remarkable religious pluralism and intellectual conversation and competition among different religious and philosophical groups[43] in which our rationalist doctors participated vigorously. The Shaykh al-Mufid, known as "Ibn al-Mu'allim" (son of the teacher), was an intellectual par excellence. He had enjoyed the patronage of the powerful Buyid ruler 'Adud al-Dawla (died 983),[44] and was a prominent figure in the pluralistic intellectual milieu of Baghdad. The Sharif al-Murtada, although he succeeded his father as the alderman (naqīb) of the 'Alids and held such important offices as the judgeship of the ruler's court (mazālim), was also primarily an intellectual and a man of adab (literary culture) as well as of the religious sciences. The Shaykh al-Tusi was a prolific scholar and teacher with a rich library. In the Baghdad of their era, Shi'ites and Sunnis, Mu'tazilite rationalists and Hanbalite traditionalists lived side by side and engaged in polemical debates that increasingly gave way to factional violence and urban riots in the course of the eleventh century. It was in this milieu that the eleventh-century doctors remolded the sectarian outlook of Imami Shi'ism and created its nomocratic theology of occultation.

[42] W. Madelung, "MUFID," Encyclopedia of Islam, 2d ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 7:312.

[43] J. L. Kraemer, Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

[44] Faqihi, Āl-i Būya, p. 306.

The Shaykh al-Mufid initiated the systematic displacement of chiliasm by law. Building on an antichiliastic tradition of interpretation that saw each Imam as the redresser (*qā'im*) of the cause (*amr*) of the previous Imam,[45] he applies the term *al-imām al-qā'im* selectively to the sixth, seventh, eighth, and eleventh Imams.[46] The effect of the coupling of the terms "Imam" and "Qa'im" is clearly to de-apocalypticize the latter. The hidden Imam is the redresser (*qā'im*) (by implication, of the cause of Imamate) after the eleventh Imam whom God has "appointed an Imam in the condition of apparent childhood as he appointed Jesus, son of Mary, a Prophet in the cradle."[47] Mufid's continued reliance on recorded traditions as transmitted proof, however, preserved the chiliastic substratum of the notion of occultation: "Tradition about his occultation was established before his existence, and that about his turn in power was spread before his occultation. He is the Lord of the Sword among the Imams of guidance and the Qa'im (redresser) of truth, awaited for the reign of faith. There are two occultations for him; . . . at the end of [the second] he will rise with the sword."[48]

The traditional proof of occultation thus remained inescapably chiliastic, but not so the rational proof. The fundamental rational proofs of "the existence in every age of an Imam who is infallible and perfect, a resource for his subjects concerning the commandments of the law and the sciences in every age," is that without him "the duty-bound believers would lack an authority (*sulṭān*) by whose existence they could approach righteousness and steer away from corruption." This proof is the (cosmo-) logical proof with which we concluded Section II but restated in terms of a new theodicy to be discussed presently. It has all the formal logical power needed to establish the existence of an Imam *absconditus*. Mufid could and should have rested his case with it and have immediately inferred his final conclusion, "This is a principle which obviates the need for transmission of texts . . . as it stands on its own as a rational case, and its correctness derives from the firmness of reasoning." In other words, the Imamate of the hidden Imam can be established by rational proof, and traditional proofs for it are not strictly necessary. For rhetorical purposes, however, Mufid added as a further rational proof the lack of the

[45] Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *Uṣūl al Kāfī*, ed. J. Mustafavi (Tehran: 'Ilmiyya Islamiyya, n.d.), 2:469. 'Ali b. Ibrahim al-Qummi, *Tafsīr* (n. 26 above), 2:45. Ibn Babuya similarly refers to the hidden Imam as "the twelfth Qa'im among the Imams" (*Kamāl*, p. 639).

[46] Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Nu'man, al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *al-Irshād* (Qumm: Basirati, n.d.), pp. 220, 288, 304, 334.

[47] Ibid., p. 346; English trans. by I. K. A. Howard, *The Book of Guidance* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1981), p. 524.

[48] Ibid., p. 346; trans. pp. 524–25 modified. On the two occultations, see Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate" (n. 4 above).

necessary qualifications in anyone other than the son of the eleventh Imam, Hasan ibn 'Ali, who is the Mahdi.[49] This assertion shows the limits of Mufid's rationality, which is reached when he has to affirm that the hidden Imam is a real person. Mufid was clearly on the defensive against the Mu'tazila. "They are always reviling us," he complained, "for our doctrine of the occultation (*ghayba*) and for the fact that time has passed without the appearance of our Imam."[50] When his Mu'tazilite opponent pushes him into a corner by asking, "How is it possible for you, a proponent of Justice and Unity [of God], to believe in the Imamate of a man whose birth is not certain, to say nothing of his Imamate; and whose existence is not certain, to say nothing of his occultation? And now so many years have passed that those of you who believe say he is a hundred and forty-five years old! Is this possible in reason or revelation?" Mufid's reply is a modified form of a fallacious argument used by Ibn Qiba al-Razi a century earlier. No 'Abbasid Caliph, nor anyone else from the Quraysh is infallible, "so I know, by rational demonstration, that the Proof [of God] must be someone else, even though he is not apparent. For the Proof [of God] can only be someone who is protected from sin and error. . . . So he must be in hiding."[51]

The pivotal concepts taken from the Mu'tazila for Mufid's ethicotheological rationalization of Imami Shi'ism were those of the divine Justice (*'adl*) and Grace (*lutf*). The first concept makes it unjust for God to command the impossible, while according to the second concept, Grace is *wājib* (necessary or incumbent) on God in that he is obliged to order the world and to provide mankind with guidance. This means that God is morally obliged to send prophets to communicate His law to mankind. According to some of the Mu'tazila, the necessity of the Imamate could be established by rational arguments, which would make Imamate a rational necessity. In addition, the Mu'tazilite school of Baghdad maintained that God must work in the best interests of the majority of mankind. In his concisely formulated creed, Mufid integrates the idea of occultation into

[49] *Irshād*, p. 347; cf. faulty translation, pp. 525–26.

[50] M. J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022)* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1978), pp. 130–31; translation (from *Khams rasā'il fī ithbāt al-ḥujja* [Najaf, 1951], pp. 3–4) slightly changed. The Sharif al-Murtada, too, later admitted that occultation was a weak point in Shi'ite doctrine: "It is difficult for us to discuss the occultation (*ghayba*), while it is easy for them [our opponents] to disprove it" (A. Sachedina, "A Treatise on the Occultation of the Twelfth Imamite Imam," *Studia Islamica* 48 [1978]: 117).

[51] McDermott, pp. 130–31. Mufid modifies Ibn Qiba's argument (Modarressi [n. 2 above], pp. 157–62) by substituting, as its major premise, the necessity of the Imam's infallibility for the necessity of his designation (*naṣṣ*). This argument is in turn repeated by Murtada (Sachedina, "A Treatise," p. 120) who concludes that, as neither the manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) nor the actual dominion (*taṣarruf*) of the Lord of the Age (*ṣāhib al-zamān*) obtain, we are forced to concede his occultation.

the Shi'ite rational theology systematically by linking it to the fundamental Mu'tazilite tenet of Grace, and to the Shi'ite principle of Infallibility (of the divinely appointed Prophet and Imams), which acquires very different connotations in the new context.

The proof of the election of the prophets for the guidance of mankind is divine Grace, "because Grace is rationally necessary (*wājib fī'l-ḥikma*)."[52] The Prophet must be infallible because "Infallibility is Grace vouchsafed by God Most High to the one bound in duty (*mukallaf*) to prevent the occurrence of sin and abandonment of obedience."[53] As the Imam's function is "the general leadership in the affairs of religion and the world on behalf of the Prophet,"[54] he too must be infallible: "He is the guardian of the Sacred Law (*shar'*); if he were not infallible, there would be no security that it would not be added to or subtracted from."[55] In short, the existence of an infallible hidden Imam is a consequence of the Grace of God that inheres in the divine normative order instituted for the guidance of mankind.

Two years before his death, Mufid wrote a short tract refuting the objections to the Shi'ite belief in the occultation of the Imam, the most significant being that the occultation resulted in the abeyance of divine law. Mufid counters, "This occultation does not disturb anything that is needed for the preservation of the Sacred Law (*shar'*) and the community (*milla*), . . . which [the Imam] delegated to his Shi'a. . . . There is no need for him to undertake this himself, as the mission of the prophets, peace be upon them, is manifest through their followers and confessors to their truth . . . and the same is upheld by their followers after their death." In both cases, those invested with authority can undertake this function, and

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[52] Shaykh al-Mufid, *Muṣannafāt al-shaykh al-mufid* (1413; Tehran, 1992), vol. 4, *Nukat al-I'tiqādiyya*, p. 35.

[53] Ibid., p. 37.

[54] Ibid., p. 39.

[55] Ibid., p. 40. Mufid goes on to state that "the Grace that is incumbent upon God in the matter of the Imamate is to appoint an Imam and make Imamate his duty. God Most High has done this, and has not disturbed what is incumbent. The disturbance of what is incumbent is the doing of the subjects. God has made it incumbent on these subjects to follow the Imam, obey his commands and prohibitions, and make him their master. If they do not do so, they have disturbed what is incumbent, and their perdition is their own doing" (p. 45). This argument was later repeated by Tusi as a rebuttal to a Sunni critique of Murtada's argument from *lutf* (Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Tusi, *Kitāb al-ghayba*, ed. A. B. al-Tihrani [1385; Najaf, 1965], pp. 7–8 [hereafter cited as *Ghayba*]). Elsewhere, Mufid elaborates the argument that the believers are dependent on the Imam of every age in matters of the Sacred Law. His presence is therefore needed "for establishing such obligations as prayer, almsgiving, *hajj*, and holy war—in all these God would be morally obliging them to do what they cannot fulfill." And it is impossible for God the Merciful to command the impossible (McDermott, p. 121).

there is no need for the prophet or the Imam to do so in person.[56] Furthermore, Mufid drew on the Mu'tazilite doctrine of best interest to justify occultation as being in the interest of the believers. The Imam "is actually obliged to hide himself from us so that we may come to know and obey him in a way that merits us a greater reward, greater than our knowledge and obedience would have gained were he visible and the obligations and uncertainties of the occultation removed. . . . Thus the Imam is prohibited from appearing when he knows that obedience to the Imam in his occultation is nobler than obedience done with him apparent."[57]

With the ethicotheological rationalization of Shi'ite beliefs by Mufid in dialogue with the Mu'tazila, the concept of occultation is detached from its apocalyptic context. The Grace of God obtains during the occultation as during the time of the presence of the Imam because the instrument of divine guidance is the law and the correct interpretation of the scripture. The occultation of the Imam simply means the devolution of (unmediated) responsibility for its observance on the duty-bound individual. The theology of occultation thus makes the law effective independently of the presence of an Imam. It is no accident that the first half of the eleventh century is also the period of the development of the science of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) in Imami Shi'ism; nor that our three doctors, Mufid, Murtada, and Tusi, are the chief architects of the Shi'ite legal science.[58]

Mufid's student, the Sharif al-Murtada made the Mu'tazilite idea of Grace the cornerstone of the Shi'ite theology of the Imamate. In his *Kitāb al-shāfī fī'l-imāma*,[59] he argues that the rational necessity (*wujūb*) of the Imamate entails that "it is necessary under any condition so long as ethical obligation remains in effect," while its traditional proof establishes that "it is necessary that there be an Imam who is a protector for the Sacred Law and who upholds the legal rules of the community (*aḥkām al-milla*)."[60] The first is "an argument for the necessity of the Imamate based

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[56] Shaykh al-Mufid, *al-Fuṣūl al-'ashara fī'l-ghayba* (1370; Najaf, 1951), p. 28. In practice it is possible for the law to fall into abeyance, but "if the Imam goes into occultation (*ghāba*) from fear of a group of oppressors for his life, and because of this the punishments are forfeited and commandments neglected, and corruption on earth results from it, the cause of this is the oppressors, not God" (p. 29).

[57] Ibid., pp. 80–81; trans. McDermott, *Theology*, p. 125, somewhat modified.

[58] R. Brunschvig, "Les *uṣūl al-fiqh* imâmite à leur stade ancien (Xe et XIe siècle)," reprinted in *Études d'Islamologie* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1976), 2:323–34.

[59] Shaykh al-Tā'ifa Ali Ja'far al-Tusi, *Talkhīṣ al-Shāfī*, ed. H. Bahr al-'Ulum (1383; Najaf, 1963) (hereafter cited as *Shāfī*). The treatise was a rebuttal to Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar's (died 1025) Mu'tazilite critique of the Shi'ite theory of Imamate.

[60] Ibid., p. 68.

on reason, not tradition, which establishes it as a prerequisite for the completion of what is demonstrably an instance of Grace in rationally-established [moral] obligation."[61] The second argument is traditional—that is, based on transmitted authority (sam').[62] However, even when Murtada purports to deal with the traditional proof based on transmission, his thesis is entirely a rational proposition and can be stated as "the Sacred Law needs a guardian against incorrect interpretation, and *therefore* its guardian has to be infallible."[63] Traditions such as "The world will not remain empty of the proof of God [i.e., the Imam]" can be adduced to support it, but the thesis itself is a rational construct at a considerable distance from them.

In a short tract written specifically on occultation, Murtada represents the infallible Imam as a symbol of theodicy and his occultation as the confirmation of moral responsibility (taklīf) of the believers.[64] Murtada adds an interesting sociological dimension to the familiar Imami reasoning with regard to the identity of the hidden Imam. As the false view of the chiliastic sects, "our fellow Shi'ites who disagree with us," "has been nullified by their becoming extinct or few in number, . . . there remains no alternative but [to accept] our doctrine (madhhab). . . . It follows then that the Imam is the son of Hasan and no one else, and we find him hidden from our eyes."[65]

By 1040, the last of our rationalist doctors, the Shaykh al-Tusi, had reached the conclusion that a systematic theory of the Imamate was essential to a legal and moral philosophy that could serve as a foundation of the Shi'ite legal science. The topic of Imamate was intimately linked to ethics; moral obligation (taklīf), he asserted, "is not completed without the Imamate."[66] "If the duty-bound individual (mukallaf) does not know the Imamate as being rationally established Grace, he is led to doubt concerning the justice of God Most High, and this disturbs the condition of moral obligation."[67] In 1055–56, at the very end of the Shi'ite century in

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[61] Ibid., 1:69.

[62] Ibid., 1:113.

[63] Or in his words: "As it is established that the Sacred Law of our Prophet is eternal, and the interest in it unchanging for all bound in duty until the coming of the Hour, it follows by necessity that there should be a protector for it. . . . Therefore it is necessary that there be an infallible protector for it to make it secure from change, alteration and mistake for those bound in duty (ibid., pp. 133–34).

[64] Sachedina, "A Treatise" (n. 50 above), pp. 122–24. It is also interesting to note that Murtada does not consider the knowledge of the *rationale* of occultation is a moral duty; his own attempt to demonstrate it rationally is only "an act of supererogation" (ibid., pp. 122–24).

[65] Ibid., pp. 119–20.

[66] Shāfī, 1:59.

[67] Furthermore, "as the Sacred Law institutes deeds that are instances of Grace (altāf) to duty-bound individuals until the coming of the Hour, if one does not know that the Sacred

the East with the coming of the Saljuqs to Baghdad, and just two years before the sacking and burning of the great Shiʻite library of Shapur b. Ardashir,[68] the Shaykh al-Tusi produced the *Book of Occultation,* whose first chapter, "On the Theology of Occultation" (*al-kalām fī'l-ghayba*), systematically integrated the conceptions of theodicy, Imamate, and occultation. Tusi asserts that

the necessity (*wujūb*) of the Imamate is proven under all circumstances, and given that the people are not infallible, and . . . there is no certainty about the infallibility of all for whom apparent Imamate is claimed, but to the contrary, their deeds and circumstances belie infallibility,[69] *we know that he whose infallibility is certain is absent (ghā'ib) and under cover. . . . We have no need for further argument to prove his birth and the cause of his occultation,* as truth is indeed not permitted to leave the community (*umma*). [Furthermore,] the argument for the occultation of the son of al-Hasan is derivative from the proof of his Imamate.[70]

Here we have a remarkable affirmation of Mufid's earlier assertion that occultation is the logical consequence of the necessity of infallible Imamate, and that concrete testimonies to the birth of the son of Hasan are, strictly speaking, redundant. Nevertheless, Tusi's rational theology of occultation is supplemented by the "traditional proofs" for the occultation of the twelfth Imam in the form of historical precedents of prophets in occultation, those who have enjoyed extraordinary longevity, and especially the predictive traditions of the Prophet and the Imams concerning the occurrence of the occultation, the identity of the Imam with the Qa'im-Mahdi, and the fixation of the number of Imams at twelve. The chiliastic, apocalyptic traditions are thus preserved alongside the theology of occultation but contained by it.

Tusi's attitude toward the apocalyptic traditions he reports on the Qa'im and the Mahdi is at times ambivalent. Their considerable influence on him notwithstanding, Mufid had rejected one cardinal Muʻtazilite position—namely, that the principles of religion can be discovered by reason alone—and had insisted instead on the indispensability of transmitted authority (*samʻ*) as well. In this, he was followed by his disciples,

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Law has a protector and a guardian who preserves it . . . , one does not feel secure to attain what is an instance of Grace for him, which again results in doubt concerning the justice of God" (ibid., p. 60). Tusi, who abridged Murtada's *Shāfī* on the Imamate while the latter was still alive, evidently did not think that his teacher's statements on occultation were emphatic enough (ibid., pp. 91–108, esp. p. 98, n. 1), and complied when a colleague pressed him to write a special book on occultation (*Ghayba* [n. 55 above], p. 2).

[68] *Shāfī,* 1:11–12.

[69] Tusi's reference is to the false assertions of the chiliastic sects (the Kaysaniyya, the Nawusiyya, the Fathiyya, and the Waqifiyya) "concerning all persons for whom they claim infallibility and occultation."

[70] *Ghayba,* p. 3; emphasis added.

including Tusi. The traditions on the Qa'im and the Mahdi and those predicting the occultation, therefore, constituted Tusi's proof of the existence and occultation of the Imam by transmitted authority. He was of course selective in his reporting of traditions. Rare are those, for instance, in which the hidden Imam is given the name Muhammad,[71] a name that is avoided in Tusi's own text where the formula "the son of Hasan" is regularly used. Nevertheless, when contradiction among the traditions is unavoidable, as in the case of the traditions reporting the death and resuscitation of the Lord of Time, Tusi recommends allegorical interpretation (ta'wīl) of "the singly reported traditions" (aḥād) in the light of the multiply reported (mutawātir) ones.[72]

The Shaykh al-Tusi represents the systematic theology of occultation as a set of three principles: "the necessity (wujūb) of leadership (riyāsa); the necessity of certitude concerning Infallibility; and [the principle] that truth (ḥaqq) does not leave the community."[73] As for the proof of the necessity of leadership, Tusi follows Murtada in claiming that it is to be an entailment of Grace and therefore among the rational necessities (wājibāt 'aqliyya). "It therefore becomes incumbent, as is the knowledge [of divine norms], whose incumbency upon the duty-bound individual (mukallaf) is inescapable."[74] Divine Grace is upheld through the Imam whether he is present or absent.[75] The existence of the Imam is incumbent on God, because it is incumbent on God to remove obstacles to the fulfillment of moral obligations; but if the Imam chooses to remain in occultation, the fault is not with God but with the people, especially those who have caused the Imam to go into hiding.[76] As for the second principle: "The status of the Imam requires the certainty of his Infallibility. The reason for our needing an Imam is our fallibility, because if the people were infallible, they would not need an Imam. . . . We are forced to conclude that whoever is not infallible needs an Imam; otherwise the need would be obviated, and if the Imam were not infallible, he would need another Imam."[77] Finally, the third principle states: "Truth cannot leave the community: We and our enemies are agreed upon this; our difference concerns its cause. For us, the age is not devoid of an infallible Imam for

[71] For a revealing instance, see Ghayba, p. 139.

[72] Ibid., pp. 260–61. The Shaykh al-Tusi also supplies a valuable history of the period of occultation from the death of the eleventh Imam to the cessation of all communication with the hidden Imam with the death of his last agent in 941.

[73] Ibid., p. 4.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., p. 7.

[76] Ibid., pp. 10–11, 64–65.

[77] Ibid., p. 15.

whom, as was pointed out, no error is permissible. Therefore truth does not leave the community because the infallible one is within it."[78]

The last two principles are really amplifications of the same principle of infallibility of the Imam as the Shi'ite source of the *certitudo salutis*. The infallibility of the Imam is in reality the expression of the certainty of divine guidance of mankind through Grace. Taken in conjunction with the obvious fallibility of the rulers and other claimants, it "proves" that the *infallible* Imam, the symbol of the certainty divine guidance, and the guardian of the immutable divine normative order, must be *absent*. The *occultation* of the infallible Imam is the logical corollary of God's guarantee of salvation through His Grace. Tusi's coupling of the Shi'ite idea of Infallibility with the Mu'tazilite idea of Grace enables him to argue that, as the claims for the infallible Imamate put forward by other groups are false, we are left with the belief of the Imami Shi'a in the Imamate of the son of Hasan; "and if this belief were also false, it would imply that truth would have to leave the community, and this meaning is false."[79]

Note the alchemy of theological rationalization at work here. Two extreme notions are made to neutralize one another by combination. The idea of the infallibility of the living Imam, which was originally contested by many moderate Imamis but was linked with the Imams' knowledge of the unseen and became central to the Mufawwida extremist position,[80] is rendered harmless by its combination with the chiliastic notion of occultation, and vice versa. The trick is done by the principle of Grace. As the present rulers and contenders are fallible, divine Grace requires that there be an infallible Imam *in occultation*. Infallibility of the hidden Imam as the symbol of theodicy, and of the certainty of divine guidance through the law, is neither extreme nor chiliastic. It has become theological.

The consequence of the Shaykh al-Tusi's systematic integration of the idea of occultation and the theory of the Imamate into a nomocratic theology is to make the Islamic normative order effective independently of the Imam and despite his absence. Tusi accordingly affirms Murtada's contention that the occultation, too, is an act of Grace toward the Imam's followers who observe divine norms and carry out their moral obligations because they expect the Imam's appearance. What is more, a hidden Imam makes the believers *more* constantly watchful of fulfilling moral duties and avoiding evil than a present Imam in a distant seat, who would

[78] Ibid. Later (pp. 65–66), Tusi confirms that the occultation of the Imam does not prevent the attainment of truth, which can be reached by reason or by transmitted authority.

[79] Ibid., p. 57.

[80] Modarressi (n. 2 above), pp. 9–11, 46–47.

be unable to monitor their behavior.[81] An actual Imam could make the Sacred Law effective by policing his followers, while a hidden Imam makes for self-policing and hence the more constant prevalence of the divine normative order.

IV. RATIONALIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SHI'ITE ISLAM

Max Weber's conception of the world religions remains fundamental to our analytical understanding of the history of religions, yet his key concept of rationalization has not been sufficiently refined for application to concrete cases. Weber himself may be held partly responsible for this. On the one hand, his tendency to separate magical religion from the world religions along some evolutionary path militated against a sharp distinction between "rationalization" and "disenchantment." On the other hand, the architectonic notion of rationalization as construction of a system of meaning that is implicit in his treatment of the world religions of salvation corresponds neither to the well-known distinction between value-rationality and the instrumental rationality in his discussion of types of social action nor to that between formal and substantive rationality in his sociology of law.[82]

Three general conclusions regarding rationalization in religion can be drawn from our study. The first is that theological rationalization is imposed on a nonrational—in this case, chiliastic—layer of belief. The superimposed rational layer contains the older one in both the senses of preserving it and placing it in a quarantine. But both layers continue to coexist. Second, our study suggests that the process of rationalization should not be viewed as the generic unfolding of universal reason. Rather, the direction of rationalization is determined by (a) the means conceived for the attainment of salvation as the ultimate goal of life in the soteriology of the religion under consideration—in this case of the Shi'ite economy of salvation, (b) the general character of the religious tradition itself—in this case, by the nomocratic tradition of Islam, and (c) the ideas of the opponents in the dialogue—in this case the Greek philosophical rationalism as transmitted by the Mu'tazila.

The third conclusion in part follows from the second. Rationalization in religion is an architectonic enterprise consisting in the construction of a coherent system of meaning. Value-rationalization (casuistic derivation of specific norms from general principles) and instrumental rationalization (pursuit of efficient means for generalized purposes) are secondary

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[81] *Ghayba*, p. 72.

[82] M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), chap. 6, as compared to pp. 24–26 and chap. 8.

aspects of the process. Our study suggests that the primary motive force of religious rationalization as the construction of a coherent system of meaning is rather the drive for consistency. If so, discourse among different religious schools and groups, and dialogue between religion and philosophy (and, by extension, other secular belief systems), supply the contents of the beliefs and principles to be made consistent, and thus determine the substance of rationalization.

Fourth, we have studied a case of rationalization within a world religion of salvation that was not accompanied by any significant disenchantment of the world. The first stage of this process of rationalization began by the Shi'ite doctors in dialogue with the Mu'tazila at the beginning of the tenth century and was completed by Ibn Babuya in its latter part. Considerable light is thrown on the dynamics of mutual articulation by the fact that this process was completed by a traditionalist who was drawn into rational dialogue with a strong school of rational theology by the acceptance of a world marked by religious pluralism. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Ibn Babuya's achievement had relatively little to do with technical reasoning. Instead, it was guided by an original vision of the meaning of the absence of the Imam in the Shi'ite cosmology and consisted in the locating of occultation within a coherent economy of salvation. It is interesting to note that we can find parallels for all the four aspects of rationalization in Hengel's noted study of the dialogue between Judaism and Hellenism.[83]

Let us now turn to the transformative consequences of rationalization. The mode of rationalization of the originally chiliastic notion of occultation by Ibn Babuya had permanent consequences for the development of distinctive Shi'ite piety. The hidden God had made his greatest name as a means to salvation a secret comprehensible only through gnosis. Why should his proof and the key to divine wisdom also not be a hidden Imam? The occultation of the Imam was indeed a necessary part of God's design for cosmic constitution. As was the case with the intertestamental "Merkavah mysticism," where God had hidden his countenance (*pānīm*) from the children of Israel and could be invoked by magicotheurgical adjuration,[84] the occultation of the last Imam made all other Imams other-worldly mediators and intercessors to be invoked by prayer and at their shrines. The belief in the science (*'ilm*) and miraculous power (*qudra*) of the Imams had always gone hand in hand for the Mufawwida (the proponents of the supernatural power and status of the Imams). Ac-

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[83] Some of the consequences of this dialogue are explicitly termed "rationalization." See esp. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 1:169–75, 230–35, 253.

[84] Schäfer (n. 8 above).

cording to the traditions reported in the *Kāfī,* the Imams, the Proofs of God were "carriers of God's throne (*'arsh*)" and "the carriers of [His] science and religion."[85] Their names, written on the divine throne, could be invoked by prayer. After the occultation, there was no obstacle to the spread of this belief as the power of the Imams was transferred to the other world; intercession in the other world becomes their main function. The belief that the Imams intercede for those who invoke them at their tombs was defended even by the rationalist Shaykh al-Mufid, though he had been told that the Nawbakhtis had rejected it. While considering the Imams natural human beings with normal bodies, Mufid maintained that their state changes altogether in the Garden of God: "They hear the words of those who address and invoke them in their magnificent, celebrated shrines. This is by a favor from God which . . . conveys their invocations from afar."[86] The doctrine of occultation thus radically changed the conception of the Imamate itself. The Imamate was transformed from a theory of authority to a topic in theology, and the Imams became otherworldly mediators and saviors in the Shi'ite economy of salvation.[87]

The second stage of the process, achieved by the three great Imami doctors of the eleventh century, was clearly driven by technical reasoning, but it built on Ibn Babuya's fundamental sense-making construction and drew its force and credibility from it. Needless to say, the rational superstructure gave a modified meaning and new implications to the notion of occultation. The change consisted in the integration of the belief in occultation into a theodicy in which Grace is incumbent on the just God who is obligated to provide guidance for mankind through the divine Law. The occultation of the infallible Imam thus acquires a meaning very different from the hiding of the apocalyptic Qa'im, the Lord of the Sword, and comes to signify the categorical validity of the normative order and its immediate incumbency on the duty-bound believer of the new Shi'ite nomocratic theology. The era of perplexity was definitively ended. The absence of the Imam was no longer cause for perplexity, because every believer knew what to do.

In short, the rationalist doctors of the second stage not only completed the task of establishing the theological necessity of occultation and the soteriological value of an Imam *absconditus,* but they also reconciled the idea of occultation of the Imam with a stable system of hierocratic authority based on rational jurisprudence. Their project became the reforming of Shi'ism into a competitive variant of Islam as a world religion in a

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[85] Kulayni (n. 45 above), 1:179–80; Amir-Moezzi (n. 2 above), pp. 80–81.

[86] McDermott, *Theology,* p. 113, citing Mufid's *Awā'il al-maqālāt.*

[87] S. A. Arjomand, "Religion, Political Action and Legitimate Domination in Shi'ite Iran," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 20 (1979): 106–9.

situation of religious pluralism. By integrating the theories of Imamate and occultation into a nomocratic moral theology, which supported a vigorous science of jurisprudence, they laid the normative foundations for the hierocratic authority of the Shi'ite jurist-theologians who acted as the carriers of Imami Shi'ism in subsequent centuries, to the establishment of the Safavid empire in 1501, and beyond it to the present.

The next three centuries were a period of enormous growth of Imami Shi'ite law in which chiliasm remained firmly contained. Only in the latter part of the fourteenth and throughout the fifteenth centuries, and under very different political circumstances, would the chiliastic Qa'im-Mahdi of the traditions burst through the rationalized integument of the theology of divine Grace and push aside the nomocratic order for millennial activism under the leadership of Mahdistic incarnations of divine charisma.[88] The same period also marked the beginning of the impact of Sufism on Imami Shi'ism that opened yet a third possibility, Corbin's favorite, the innerworldly hidden Imam as the symbol not of theodicy and nomocracy, but of spiritual perfection and mystical union.[89] However, the Safavid revolution that was set in motion by Mahdistic chiliasm at the very end of the fifteenth century resulted in the transformation of sectarian Shi'ism into the national religion of Iran. This transformation swung the pendulum once more from chiliasm to law and to the hierocratic system of authority whose foundation was the nomocratic theology of the rationalist doctors of the eleventh century.

[88] S. A. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (n. 22 above), chap. 2.
[89] See n. 6 above.