

which were modelled on the *fitna* *wa*. These must have played a key role in preparing the populace for the acceptance of Shi'ism under the Safavids.

Although much of what has been written in this chapter may appear to be the history of extremist (*ghuluww*) Shi'ism rather than Twelver Shi'ism, its relevance will become evident in the next chapter when the fusion of extremist Shi'ism and Twelver Shi'is under the Safavids is described.

6

Shi'ī Islam in Modern Times

AD 1500–1900

The Safavid Period (10th/16th–12th/18th Centuries)

Political Developments under Shāh Ismā'īl

The early history of the Safavids has already been described in the previous chapter. When Ismā'īl became the leader of the Safavid order of Sufis in 900/1494, the Aq-Quyūnlū Empire was being seriously weakened by civil war between rival claimants. Rustam, the Aq-Quyūnlū claimant who had killed Ismā'īl's brother, 'Alī, for a time pursued Ismā'īl and the latter went into hiding in Ardibīl and later in Lāhījān. But soon Rustam was embroiled in fighting other claimants and was killed in 1497 leaving Ismā'īl free to organise his followers.

It is clear that Ismā'īl was representing himself to his Turkoman Qizilbāsh followers at this time as not merely the representative of the Hidden Imam, but the Hidden Imam himself and beyond that even claiming divinity for himself. Ismā'īl's followers are said to have gone into battle without armour, confident that no harm would befall them, saying: 'Lā ilāhā illā Allāh, Ismā'īl walīyū'llāh (there is no god but God and Ismā'īl is the Friend of God)', thus equating Ismā'īl with the Imam 'Alī.

Gathering all his men from Anatolia and Syria, Ismā'īl (only twelve years old at this time), set out in 1499 to carve out an empire for himself. The initial campaign was not very successful, but after wintering his troops in Gilān, Ismā'īl in 1500 attacked the kingdom of Shīrvān whose rulers had killed his grandfather. The king of Shīrvān was defeated and killed and Baku captured. Then one of the Aq-Quyūnlū marched against him with four times as many troops as Ismā'īl had. But Ismā'īl defeated this army and the whole of Adharbāyjan fell into his hands. In the summer of 1501 Ismā'īl was crowned king in Tabriz. He proclaimed that the official religion of the new state would be Ithnā-'Ashariyya (Twelver) Shi'ism.

It took Ismā'īl another ten years to conquer all of Iran as far east as Herat as well as Diyārbakr and Baghdad in Iraq. During this time his Qizilbāsh troops served him with fanatical devotion and Ismā'īl incorporated within himself the military, administrative and religious leadership of the country. He instituted the post of *Ṣadr* whose function it was to co-ordinate the propagation of Shi'ism in Iran while the Safavid agents called *Khalīfas* were also busy in Syria and Anatolia.

It is probably insufficiently appreciated how close Ismā'īl came to winning over the Islamic heartlands ideologically. For even while he was conquering Iran, his emissaries were preparing the ground for an extension of his empire westwards. For several generations large numbers of the Turkoman tribes occupying west and central Anatolia had been devotees of the Safavid order and had assisted in the conquest of Iran. The rising Ottoman Empire claimed sovereignty over this area but it was obvious that its hold was shaky with the loyalty of many of the tribesmen leaning towards the newly-emerging Safavid state in Iran. Even the loyalty of the Janissaries, the pre-eminent corps of the Ottoman army, was in doubt since they were followers of the Bektāshī Sufi order and were thus outgrowths of the same religious roots as the Safavid order. Ismā'īl's religious poetry enjoyed wide circulation among the Bektāshīs. In Syria also there were large numbers of followers of the Safavid order and contemporary accounts of Aleppo, for example, speak of a 'party of Ardībīl' within the city¹ while the Mamluk state in Egypt was inclined to an alliance with the Safavids against the Ottomans. Thus Ismā'īl was poised to add eastern Anatolia, Syria and perhaps even Egypt to his domains after completing his conquest of Iran.²

So worried were the Ottomans that Sultan Bayazid II ordered large-scale deportations of Shi'is from eastern Anatolia to Morea in AD 1502. In 1511 Bābā Shāh-Qulī began a pro-Safavid revolt among tribesmen in the province of Tekke on the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia. The rebels advanced as far as Brusa before being defeated and driven back. The following year, 1512, Sultan Selim I acceded to the Ottoman throne and determined to act decisively against the danger of the whole of eastern Anatolia seceding to the Safavids. He drew up a list of every known Shi'i in his dominions and massacred them to the reported number of 40,000, deporting and imprisoning large numbers of others. In the same year one of Ismā'īl's close aides raised a force from among the Sufis of the Safavid order in eastern Anatolia and raided the Ottoman domains.

In 1514 Sultan Selim decided to march against Shāh Ismā'īl and reached the plain of Chāldīrān in Adharbāyjan with an army of over 100,000 men against which Ismā'īl could only muster 40,000. Although the Safavid forces had the advantage in the hand-to-hand fighting, the

deployment of artillery and hand-guns by the Ottomans (when the Safavids had had no experience of these) decided the day. The Ottomans won and occupied Tabriz. At this stage, instead of pressing home the advantage and overthrowing the Safavid state completely, Selim withdrew. This withdrawal has been attributed to the difficulties of the extended Ottoman lines of communication but may also have had something to do with fears of the effects that a prolonged campaign in Iran might have had on Selim's Janissary troops whose loyalty was under question because of their religious affinities with the Safavids through the Bektāshī Sufi order.

Had Ismā'īl won the day there was probably no other force in the Middle East that could have withstood him, and Anatolia, Syria and perhaps Egypt would have fallen easily to him. Whether Ismā'īl could have imposed Shi'ism on the population of such a large area in the same way as he did in Iran is a question that is as fascinating as it is impossible to answer.

Ismā'īl was a broken man after Chāldīrān. He retired to his palace and withdrew from active participation in the affairs of the state, leaving these to his minister, Mirzā Shāh-Husayn, an Iranian, whose power grew so great that he was eventually assassinated in 1523 by Turkoman Qizilbāsh. In the following year, on 23 May 1524, Shāh Ismā'īl himself died.

Shāh Ismā'īl's Religious Policy

Although Ismā'īl had proclaimed Twelver Shi'ism to be the religion of the state, there were anomalies in his position. The Safavids as a dynasty were greatly concerned by the question of legitimacy. Although in Sunni Islam the legitimacy of the *de facto* ruler had been established by Sunni scholars in the early medieval period, there had been no similar work done in Shi'ism and indeed no comparable circumstance had arisen in Shi'i history. Ismā'īl's own position rested on three bases: firstly, the ancient Persian concept of kingship which was expressed in the concept of the king being the 'Shadow of God on Earth'; secondly, on his position as head of the Safavid order of Sufis thus commanding the absolute obedience of his followers, the Qizilbāsh; thirdly, on the basis of an alleged descent from the Seventh Imam, he and the succeeding Safavids claimed to be the representative of the Hidden Imam, and, as such, to be imbued with infallibility (*'isma*).

It is this last claim which is the most interesting for it runs clearly counter to some of the most fundamental tenets of Twelver Shi'ism. Even if the Safavid claim to 'Alid descent is accepted (and most modern scholars consider it to have been a forgery), mere descent from the

Imams confers no spiritual or temporal authority. Twelver Shi'ism is quite clear that in the case of the Imamate, both heredity and designation (*nass*) are necessary, neither being acceptable without the other. Indeed, in the case of the four representatives of the Hidden Imam that existed during the Lesser Occultation (see pp. 162-5), designation was the only important basis of their authority for none of them was descended from the Imams. Moreover, the doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism are also very clear in stating that after the death of the fourth of these representatives and the start of the Greater Occultation, no-one can claim to be the special representative (*na'ib al-khāṣṣ*) of the Hidden Imam until the return of the Imam occurs. It was clearly impossible for the Safavids to claim designation (except in visions of the Hidden Imam) and the great stress in their propaganda on their descent from the Imams can only be seen as a smokescreen to hide the fact that this was an irrelevance. In fact, the Safavids were claiming power on the basis of a Zaydī-style Imamate (see pp. 49-50) while claiming to be Twelver Shi'is.

Why then was there no protest at this irreligious claim by Ismā'īl? There appear to be two factors involved in the lack of response by the ulama to his claim. Firstly, there were, by this time, very few prominent native Iranian Twelver ulama. The old Shi'ī centres in Iran, such as Qumm, Nishāpūr, Tūs, Kāshān and Rayy were no longer important centres of scholarship and were producing very few ulama and none of any prominence. Among Ismā'īl's own Qizilbāsh forces there appears to have been a profound ignorance of Twelver Shi'ism. When Tabriz was taken and Twelver Shi'ism proclaimed the religion of the state, for example, there was not a single book on Twelver Shi'ism to be found in Ismā'īl's army and eventually a copy of a book by 'Allāma al-Ḥillī was located in the library of a *qaḍī* of Tabriz to provide guidance on the new religion of the state. None of those appointed to the office of *Ṣadr* (in charge of the propagation of Shi'ism) in the early period had received formal training as Twelver ulama, and the Shi'ism of one of them was even in doubt.³ The Arab Twelver ulama resident in Iraq, Syria and Bahrain were the only ones that could have provided informed authoritative opposition to the Safavid claim. These were brought to Iran in increasing numbers, especially during the reigns of Ismā'īl's successors, but they probably felt their position, as immigrants dependent on the largesse of the state, too vulnerable to take on the Shāh and, in any case, it is doubtful if they would have wanted to undermine the newly-emergent state that was propagating Shi'ism and was under attack from Sunni powers. Thus in the early period of the Safavid dynasty there appears to have been an uneasy alliance between the state and the ulama with the state supporting the ulama by enforcing Shi'ism on the populace while the ulama supported the state and kept quiet about

the inconsistencies in the religious stance of the monarch.

It is clear that the Shi'ism that Ismā'īl was enforcing throughout his domain at this stage consisted of no more than the Shi'ī form of the call to prayer (*adhān*), the acknowledgement of 'Alī's position during the address in the mosque (the *khutba*) and the public cursing of 'Alī's enemies. For the majority of the people, it involved no more than exalting 'Alī and cursing his enemies. The tombs of Sunni saints and scholars were desecrated and here and there a few Sunni ulama resisted the change and were dealt with harshly. But there does not appear to have been the major upheaval and opposition that might have been expected in a predominantly Sunni country. This is undoubtedly due to the activities of the Sufi orders and the *futuwwa* brotherhoods who had been inculcating a love of 'Alī and the family of the Prophet among the people for the past two centuries. The religious toleration of the Ilkhanid and Timurid rulers had also served to diffuse much of the old Sunni-Shi'ī hatred.

Conscious of the fact that another Sufi order could emulate what the Safavids had done, Ismā'īl set about destroying the organised Sufi orders. The Sunni Naqshbandī and Khalwafī orders were extirpated. The Nūrbaḫshī and Dhahabī orders that were pro-Shi'ī were initially tolerated but gradually emasculated and lost their influence. Only the Ni'matu'llāhī order, which proclaimed itself Shi'ī on the establishment of the Safavid state and allied itself closely to the Safavids, was allowed to continue its activities without opposition.

Shāh Ṭahmāsp

At the time of Ismā'īl's death, his son Ṭahmāsp was only ten years old. There followed a decade of disorder when the various Qizilbāsh factions fought each other for supremacy until in AD 1533 Ṭahmāsp was able to assert his authority. But he was in a perilous position with the state severely weakened and serious incursions being made by the Uzbeks in the East and the Ottomans in the West. Between 1524 and 1538 there were five major Uzbek attacks and between 1533 and 1553 there were four major Ottoman invasions.

In 1555 Ṭahmāsp signed a peace treaty with the Ottomans and at about the same time moved his capital from Tabriz to Qazvin. The rest of his reign was comparatively tranquil.

On the religious side, Ṭahmāsp was still considered a divine figure by his Sufi followers but he had no inclination to assume this role and took steps to suppress the tendency to extremist Shi'ism (*ghuluwwa*) among his followers. He crushed one Turkoman tribe in 938/1531 for irreligion (*ilḥād*) and another group of Sufis who proclaimed him Mahdī in 1554.

Other manifestations of extremism such as the Nuqtavī movement (derived from the Hurūfīs of the previous century) were also suppressed and a community of them in Kāshān massacred in 983/1575.

On the other side of the coin, Tahmāsp did much to encourage the spread of orthodox Twelver Shi'ism. The leading Shi'ī scholar of the day, Shaykh 'Alī ibn 'Abdu'l-'Alī al-'Amilī, known as Muḥaqqiq ath-Thānī or Muḥaqqiq al-Karākī (d. 940/1533), who had visited Iran in Shāh Ismā'īl's time, was now encouraged to settle in Iran. He travelled about the country propagating orthodox Shi'ism, appointing prayer-leaders in each town and village who could teach the people Shi'ism, and openly attacking Sunnism. It is reported that his open cursing of Abū Bakr and 'Umar had repercussions in Mecca and Medina where the Shi'ī ulama were persecuted in retaliation.⁴

Tahmāsp died in AD 1576 and was succeeded by his son Ismā'īl II. The latter was sympathetic to Sunnism and the fact that he thought it feasible to try to reverse Safavid religious policies and found support for doing so even in the capital city of Qazvin, shows how superficial conversion to Shi'ism had been in Iran up to this time. But the Qizilbāsh would not tolerate this and Ismā'īl II was assassinated after a reign of only one year. His successor, Sulṭān-Muhammad Shāh, was a weak and ineffectual ruler who reigned from 1578 until 1588 when he was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Shāh 'Abbās I.

Shāh 'Abbās I

'Abbās I came to the throne at a critical time in the fortunes of the Safavid Dynasty. The Qizilbāsh chiefs, under his father's weak rule, had lapsed into internecine warfare. The Ottomans and Uzbeks, taking advantage of the situation, had seized Ādharbāyjān and Herat respectively.

'Abbās I, realising that he could no longer rely on the Qizilbāsh, raised a standing army from the *ghulāms*, the Georgian and Circassian slaves which Tahmāsp had brought back from his campaigns. Using these, he launched a campaign in 1598 which drove the Uzbeks out of Khurāsān. In 1603 he started a campaign which lasted until 1607 and cleared the Ottomans from Ādharbāyjān. Finally in 1624 Baghdad and the whole of Iraq fell to the Safavid forces. This final victory was of great symbolic importance because of the existence in Iraq of the great Shi'ī shrines. In 1597 'Abbās I transferred his capital to Isfahan.

In the field of religion, the policies of Ismā'īl I in suppressing the organised Sufi orders and that of Tahmāsp in suppressing expressions of Shi'ī extremism (*ghuluww*) while encouraging the growth of orthodox Twelver Shi'ism were continued by 'Abbās I. The Nī'matu'lāhī order of Sufis that had allied itself to the Safavids and had been allowed to

continue under the early Safavids was now subjected to pressure and eventually withdrew to India.

The old Sufi organisation of the Safavid order had, by the reign of 'Abbās I, become an empty form. 'Abbās, having seen in his early years how fickle and unreliable was the loyalty of the Qizilbāsh, took every opportunity to undermine and diminish the importance of this aspect of his power base. In 1592 and again in 1614 a number of Sufis of Qarajadāgh, who were among the oldest adherents of the Safavid order, were executed on the charge of collaborating with the Ottomans, thus demonstrating how little was left of the old loyalty. Among the Georgian and Circassian slaves (*ghulāms*) who replaced the Qizilbāsh, the former appeal to *Shāfi'ī* (Sufi probity and obedience to the Shaykh) as the basis of loyalty to the Shāh was replaced by *Shāhī-sivani* (love of the Shāh).

At the beginning of his reign 'Abbās I was attracted by the Nuqtavī doctrine which was based on the old Hurūfī ideas. But in 1593 he turned on this group and had large numbers of them killed in Kāshān and Isfahan. From this date on 'Abbās I surrounded himself with orthodox Twelver ulama and worked towards the propagation of that doctrine.

During the reigns of his predecessors Iranians had been sent to Jabal 'Amil to study Shi'ism. After 'Abbās moved his capital to Isfahan in 1597, he built there a number of theological colleges (*madrasas*) and encouraged ulama from Jabal 'Amil and Bahrain to come to Iran and particularly to Isfahan. This heralded a major change in the education of Shi'ī ulama at the beginning of the 11th/17th century. Whereas Sunnis had since Seljuq times built up a system of education at religious colleges, Shi'ī religious students had tended to gather around individual prominent scholars, often being taught in the home of that scholar in the villages of the Jabal 'Amil or Bahrain or even in the town of Hilla. Now with the advent of a Shi'ī state that was able to fund such enterprises, the system of religious colleges was started in Iran and particularly in Isfahan. These were the precursors of the religious colleges that were built in Qajar times at Najaf, Qumm and Mashhad and are now the most important such institutions in the Shi'ī world.⁵

The principal centre of Shi'ī scholarship was thus transferred to Isfahan during the reign of 'Abbās I. A prominent role in this build-up of the importance of Isfahan as a religious centre was played by Mullā 'Abdu'lāh Shushtarī (d. 1021/1612). After spending thirty years studying in Najaf and Karbalā, particularly under Muqaddas Ardibīlī, Shushtarī arrived in Isfahan about one year after Shāh 'Abbās transferred his capital there. He became the principal religious teacher in the town and it is stated that, whereas when he arrived there were only 50 students in Isfahan, by the time of his death, fourteen years later, there were over

1,000. The leading Shi'ī scholar of the time was Shaykh Bahā'u'd-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn al-ʿAmilī al-Jubā'ī, known as Shaykh Bahā'ī (d. 1031/1622). Shaykh Bahā'ī, in the breadth of his knowledge and his achievements in many fields, resembled Khwāja Naṣīrū'd-Dīn Ṭūsī. He was an eminent theologian, jurist, philosopher, mystic, astronomer and poet as well as playing a major role in the planning and construction of Isfahan.

By the reign of Shāh 'Abbās I, the claim by the Safavid kings to a semi-divine nature or to being the representative of the Hidden Imam was fading rapidly. 'Abbās I appears himself to have been a pious man. He greatly embellished the holy shrines at Qumm and Mashhad and performed several pilgrimages, on one occasion walking the entire distance from Isfahan to Mashhad on foot. Nevertheless, a few remnants of the old extremist trend remained, such as the custom of prostrating before the monarch (in Islam prostration should only be to God). The role of *Sadr*, which was a political appointment, was decreasing in importance, and a new position of *Shaykh al-Islām* was created to which recognised members of the ulama were appointed. This began the process of a separation between the church and the state, but during the days of 'Abbās I the position of the ulama, as newly arrived migrants, was too insecure and the position of the king too strong to allow any real independence to the ulama. For the time being, the state remained in firm control of the ulama.

Shāh 'Abbās died in AD 1629 and was succeeded by his grandson Shāh Ṣāfi. This monarch appears to have been addicted to opium and alcohol and to have had little interest in the affairs of state. Under his rule Baghdad was lost to the Ottomans in 1638 and Qandahar to the Moguls of India in the same year. He died in 1642 and was succeeded by his son, 'Abbās II, who was eight-and-half years of age.

'Abbās II had some of the character of his great-grandfather and succeeded in reviving the fortunes of the dynasty to an extent. Qandahar was recaptured in 1648 and the frontiers were maintained intact. Although also addicted to wine, 'Abbās II did not allow affairs to slip from his grasp and was for the most part just and tolerant as a ruler.

The School of Isfahan

The major intellectual development in Islam during this period began during the reign of Shāh 'Abbās I but reached its full flowering in the reigns of his successors. This was the development of *Ḥikmat-i Ilāhī* (*al-Hikma al-Ilāhiyya*), divine philosophy or theosophy, under what has come to be called the Isrāqī (Illuminationist) school of philosophy or the so-called 'School of Isfahan' (see pp. 217–19). The origins of this

school within an Islamic context go back to Shihābu'd-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī (killed in Aleppo in 1191) who believed that to obtain true wisdom it was necessary to develop both the rational and the intuitive aspects of the mind. While the former could be achieved through the philosophy of Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), the latter required the purification of the soul which could best be achieved through asceticism, mysticism and gnosis. The School of Isfahan also drew on the works of Sayyid Ḥaydar ʿAmulī and Ibn Abī Jumhūr in bringing together Sufism and the esoteric aspects of Shi'ism.

The founder of the School of Isfahan was Muḥammad Bāqir Astarābādī, known as Mīr Damād (d. 1040/1631). The greatest figure in this school was Ṣadrū'd-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Shīrāzī, known as Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640). Other prominent names in the movement include Abū'l-Qāsim Astarābādī, known as Mīr Fīndiriskī (d. 1050/1640), and Mullā Rajab 'Alī Tabrizī (d. 1080/1669). Mullā Ṣadrā retired at one stage of his life to Kahak, a village near Qumm. Subsequently, an important branch of this movement was centred in Qumm with the presence there of Mullā 'Abdu'r-Razzāq Lāhijī (d. 1072/1661), Mullā Muḥsin-i Fayḍ of Kāshān (d. 1091/1680) and Qāḍī Sa'īd Qummi (d. 1103/1691). Mullā Muḥsin-i Fayḍ is of great importance also as a scholar of Shi'ī *ḥadīth*. His book, *al-Wāfi*, which is a synthesis and commentary on the four early canonical books of Shi'ī *ḥadīth*, is considered one of the most important works on this subject.

So influential became the *Ḥikmat-i Ilāhī* movement that it embraced several prominent individuals from both the state and the orthodox Shi'ī ulama. The Grand Vazir of 'Abbās II, Sayyid Ḥusayn, Sulṭānu'l-'Ulamā (d. 1064/1654), was a patron of this circle as indeed was 'Abbās II himself. Mullā Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī (d. 1070/1659), a noted jurist and father of the even more famous Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, was connected with this circle, as was Mullā Muḥammad Bāqir Sabzivārī (d. 1090/1679) who was appointed *Shaykh al-Islām* of Isfahan.

Shāh Sulaymān

'Abbās II died in 1666 and under his successor Shāh Sulaymān the decline of the Safavids resumed. Sulaymān abandoned himself to the pleasure of wine and the harem and took no interest in the affairs of state. His successor Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Shāh began his reign in 1694 as a pious and austere man but soon declined into drunkenness and debauchery. He too refused to involve himself in the business of governing the country, leaving this to ministers and the eunuchs of the Court as well as to the increasingly powerful mujtahids.

The only reason that the Safavids remained in power for as long as

they did was the fortunate circumstance that the powers on their borders were not in a position to attack them. The Ottoman Empire was embroiled in Europe, the Mogul Empire was in decline and the Uzbeks had disappeared from the scene. When the end came for the Safavids, it was the result of a revolt from within their own borders. The Ghilzay Afghans rose in rebellion. At first it would appear that they, being Sunnis, only wished to throw off the Shi'i Safavid yoke, but when they saw the Safavid forces collapse before them, they pushed on in anticipation of booty. With an army of only twenty thousand, they penetrated to the heart of the Safavid realm and took Isfahan in October 1722, terminating effective Safavid rule.

The Ulama of the Late Safavid Period

In the religious sphere, the ulama of the late Safavid period, who were mostly Iranians, had a much firmer power base within the country and thus felt secure enough to take an increasingly independent stand *vis-à-vis* the Safavid state. Already by the reign of Shāh Sulaymān, foreign observers such as Chardin noted that the ulama were saying that these immoral Safavid kings were not worthy of kingship and that the mujtahid is the real ruler as representative of the Imam.⁶ This must, however, have remained a minority view among the ulama for although the *nā'ib al-'imam* concept (see p. 190) was developed in this period, there is nothing in the important Shi'i works of this time to indicate that they considered this concept to include political rule. This idea of the mujtahid as the ideal Shi'i ruler had to await Āyatullāh Khumayni in the twentieth century for its full development (see pp. 195-6).

It cannot, however, be denied that the ulama were taking an increasingly prominent role in the affairs of the country and were becoming more assertive with respect to their demands. This process came to a head in the time of Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (who became *Shaykh al-Islām* of Isfahan in 1687 and Mullābāshī - Head Mullā - in 1694) and particularly during the reign of Shāh Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, which began in 1694.

It is necessary to take a close look at the activity of Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/1699) since he was one of the most powerful and influential Shi'i ulama of all time and since his policies and actions reorientated Twelver Shi'ism in the direction that it was to develop from his day on. Majlisī was an important scholar in his own right. His encyclopaedic collection of *ḥadīth*, the *Bihār al-Anwār*, would alone have established his reputation but he was one of the most prolific writers and produced numerous other works that have continued to be important. It is, however, in the social and political role that he played rather than in his scholarly work that his importance lies.

The first point that must be noted is that Majlisī was all-powerful in whatever field he chose to initiate his policies. The government of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Shāh made almost no effort to control his activities. The three inter-related areas in which Majlisī exerted his efforts were: the suppression of Sufism and philosophy, the propagation of a dogmatic legalistic form of Twelver Shi'ism and the suppression of Sunnism and other religious groups.

Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Shāh had come under Majlisī's influence whilst still in the harem. When it came to the coronation ceremony, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn insisted that it be Majlisī who invested him with the symbols of state. He then asked Majlisī what he desired by way of recompense. Majlisī requested royal decrees forbidding the drinking of wine, the practice of faction-fighting and the sport of pigeon-flying. In addition, he asked for the expulsion of all Sufis from Isfahan. The decree forbidding the drinking of wine had later to be revoked when the Shāh himself became addicted to alcohol, but the attack on Sufism continued.

In the preceding chapter and this chapter, it has been seen that up to the time of Majlisī, Shi'ism and Sufism were closely linked and indeed Sufism had been a vehicle for pro-Shi'i sentiment among the Sunnis. Even the most eminent members of the Shi'i ulama in the preceding centuries had come under the influence of Sufism and such persons as Ibn Tāwūs, 'Allāma al-Ḥillī, Shāhid al-Awwal, Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī, Shāhid ath-Thānī and Shaykh Bahā'ī were either sympathetic to Sufism or considered themselves practising Sufis. Even Majlisī's own father, Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī, was a member of the Dhahabiyya Sufi order. In addition, the development of the School of Isfahan could be considered (and was considered by Majlisī) as a form of philosophical or 'high' Sufism.

Majlisī set out to counter and reverse this trend of Sufism and philosophy in Twelver Shi'ism. Sufis, whether they were the wandering dervishes of 'low' Sufism or the philosopher-ulama of 'high' Sufism came under relentless pressure from Majlisī and his Shari'a-minded colleagues. The Sufi teachings of the mystical union with God and its connotations were stated to be heresy (that 'foul and hellish growth') while the philosophers of the School of Isfahan were considered 'followers of an infidel Greek'.⁷

The process of suppressing Sufism pursued vigorously by Majlisī and his contemporary Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī (d. 1104/1693) was, in fact, an intensification of a trend that had begun in the previous generation of ulama. One of the teachers of both Majlisī and al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, Muḥammad Ṭāhir ibn Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shirāzī (d. 1098/1686) had been active in preaching against Sufis and had written a treatise in refutation of Sufism.⁸ This process continued among the succeeding

generations of ulama, several of whom distinguished themselves as persecutors and even slayers of Sufis. The ultimate result of this was that Sufism was divorced from Shi'ism and ceased to influence the main stream of Shi'i development. Philosophy was also down-graded and ceased to be an important part of studies at the religious colleges. There was some degree of rehabilitation of these subjects in later years (see p. 218), but for the most part the distrust of and distaste for these subjects engendered by Majlisī has remained the attitude of the majority of the ulama to the present day.

The second area in which Majlisī exerted himself was in the propagation of the 'dry', formal, dogmatic, legalistic style of Shi'ism that he considered to be the true Shi'ism. Up to this time, it would be true to say that Shi'ism had sat lightly on the population of Iran, consisting mostly of mere expressions of love for 'Alī and hatred of the first three Caliphs. Majlisī sought to establish Shi'ism firmly in the minds and hearts of the people. This he did in three main ways. Firstly, he encouraged many specifically Shi'i rituals such as mourning for the Imam Husayn and visitation (*ziyāra*) of the tombs of the Imams and *Imāmzādas* (descendants of the Imams). This last activity he invested with unprecedented importance and was largely responsible for a great elaboration of the rituals involved. Secondly, he emphasised the soteriological aspects of Shi'ism, stressing the concept of the Imams as mediators and intercessors for man with God. Thirdly, he wrote a large number of books on theology, history and manuals of ritual in Persian, thus bringing this knowledge to the level of understanding of ordinary Iranians. Although the writing of books of Shi'i doctrine and law in Persian was begun as early as the reign of Shāh Ismā'īl by Kamālū 'd-Dīn Husayn Ardebīlī,⁹ Majlisī was the first to write in Persian so much, on such a wide range of subjects and in a manner that could be understood by the ordinary people.

The third direction in which Majlisī exerted his efforts, and which was in obvious parallel to his goal of propagating Shi'ism, was in suppressing Sunnism. Although much of western and central Iran was now Shi'i, the Afghans in Khurāsān remained for the most part obstinately Sunni. Other Sunni strongholds included the Kurds in the west and the Muslims of the Caucasus. Majlisī waged a relentless campaign of persecution wherever he found any Sunnis. But in this aspect of his policies Majlisī failed. Not only did he fail in converting these remaining pockets of Sunnism but he aroused such resentment and hostility that he sparked off the Afghan revolt that toppled the Safavid dynasty and brought Iran back under Sunni rule.

Paradoxically, then, Majlisī's activities both partially caused the revolt that replaced a Shi'i dynasty with Sunni rule and also established

Shi'ism sufficiently firmly within the hearts of the Iranian people to ensure that the efforts made in the post-Safavid period to return Iran to Sunnism would fail. Apart from the two Majlis, father and son, the prominent ulama of the late Safavid period were: Mullā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ibn Aḥmad Māzandarānī (d. 1081/1670); Mullā Muḥammad Baqir ibn Muḥammad Mu'min, known as Muḥaqqiq Sabzivārī (d. 1090/1679); Aqā Husayn ibn Muḥammad, known as Muḥaqqiq Khwānsārī (d. 1098/1686); Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī (d. 1104/1693); Sayyid Ni'matullāh Jazā'irī (d. 1112/1700); Sayyid Mīr Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Khātūnābādī (d. 1116/1704), who succeeded Muḥammad Baqir Majlisī to the position of *Shaykh al-Islām* of Isfahan; and Shaykh Sulaymān ibn 'Abdu'llāh, known as Muḥaqqiq al-Bahrānī (d. 1120/1708).

The Uṣūlī-Akḥbārī Division

It was during the 11th/17th century that another issue came to the fore among the Twelver Shi'i ulama and this was the controversy between the Uṣūlī and Akḥbārī Schools. Since it was the Uṣūlīs who eventually won this debate two hundred years later at the end of the 12th/18th century, Shi'i historians have tended to view the struggle from the Uṣūlī point of view which seeks to represent the Akḥbārī position as an innovation started by Mullā Muḥammad Amin Astarābādī (d. 1033/1623) at the beginning of the 11th/17th century. It is clear, however, from the writings of the Akḥbārīs themselves (and is probably a closer approximation to the true position) that the Akḥbārīs represented a stream of thought that had been present among Shi'i ulama from the earliest days of Twelver Shi'ism and that the controversy only occurred because of the increasing predominance of the mujtahids. The nature of the Akḥbārī position is detailed elsewhere in this book (see pp. 222ff.) but can be briefly described here as being against *ijtihād* and the increasingly dominant position of the mujtahids in Twelver Shi'ism. It sought to establish Shi'i jurisprudence on the basis of the Traditions (*Akḥbār*) rather than on the rationalist principles (*Uṣūl*) of jurisprudence used in *ijtihād*.

It is probable that there had always existed within Twelver Shi'ism a school of thought that rejected the rationalist ideas of the majority and decried the increasing use of reason rather than Traditions as a source of law. The Akḥbārīs themselves pointed to such figures as Kulaynī, Ibn Bābūya, and other eminent Shi'i ulama of previous generations as having been basically in line with their mode of thinking.¹⁰

The advent of the Safavid dynasty had presented a large number of questions of jurisprudence to the ulama and it may be that too free a use of

the licence granted them by the practice of *ijtihād* provoked the Akhbārī reaction. Certainly Muhaqqiq al-Karaki had been criticised on this score.¹¹

Thus rather than being an innovator, it may be that Muhammad Amīn Astarābādī was merely vocalising a sentiment that had been current among the ulama. Certainly there was no immediate outcry against Astarābādī's attack on *ijtihād* and mujtahids, while several ulama of the first rank either adopted this position or were at least favourably disposed towards it. Thus, for example, of the 'three Muhammads' of modern times in the field of the study of *ḥadīth* (see p. 174), two (Mullā Muḥsin-i Fayḍ and al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī) were outright Akhbārīs, while the third, the formidable Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī, was by no means against the Akhbārī position and even praised Astarābādī in his major work, *Bihār al-Anwār*.¹² Other prominent ulama who were either Akhbārī or favourable to the Akhbārī position were Sayyid Ni'manu'llāh Jazā'irī (d. 1112/1700), Muhammad Taqī Majlisī, the father of Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1070/1659), Mullā 'Abdu'llāh Tūnī (d. 1071/1660) and Shaykh Yūsuf al-Bahrānī (d. 1186/1772).¹³ At Bahrān, the leading Shi'ī scholar Shaykh 'Alī ibn Sulaymān al-Bahrānī al-Qadāmī (d. 1064/1653), known as Umm al-Ḥadīth, adopted the Akhbārī school and Bahrān became predominantly Akhbārī. The small group of Shi'ī ulama at Mecca and Medina which included Mullā Muhammad Amīn Astarābādī himself were Akhbārī. The Akhbārī doctrines were also well received in Jazā'ir (Shatt al-'Arab region of southern Iraq),¹⁴ Najaf and Karbalā¹⁵ and, indeed, it is reported that by the end of the Safavid period the Akhbārīs were predominant in the shrine cities of Iraq.

The Popular Religion

With the advent of a Shi'ī state under the Safavids and the gradual conversion of most Iranians to Shi'ism, there were, of course, many major developments in the popular religion in Safavid times. Most of these developments occurred towards the end of the Safavid era. The role of Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī in promoting Shi'ism at the popular level has been noted above.

The main trends in the evolution of the popular religion in this period was the increased importance of pilgrimages made to the shrines of the Imams (in Iraq and at Mashhad) and the descendants of the Imams (called *Imān-zādas*). There was also an increased popular involvement with Muharram ritual commemorating the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn at Karbalā (see pp. 240ff.). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kamālū'd-Dīn Ḥusayn, known as Wā'iz Kāshifī (d. 910/1504), although

a Sunni, had written a work called *Rawḍat ash-Shuhadā* which portrays the events of Karbalā in an emotive manner in the Persian language. During the Safavid period it became popular to organise meetings at which this book was recited to the accompaniment of much weeping and wailing. These meetings became known as *Rawḍa-khānī* (recital of the *Rawḍat ash-Shuhadā*) and the reciters became known as *Rawḍa-khāns*, which soon became a profession in its own right. The Safavids were, of course, not averse to this development since not only did it strengthen the hold of Shi'ism upon the population but increased enmity of the people towards the Ottoman Turks who as Sunnis were identified with Husayn's enemies at Karbalā.

For the ordinary people, the late Safavid period marked an important watershed during which the influence of the Sufi orders and their spiritual leaders, the *mursheids*, declined under attack from the ulama. The latter, and especially Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī, were able to assume some of the aura left vacant by the Sufi *mursheids*, but, to a far greater extent, the devotion of the common people was transferred to the persons of the Imams, who now became the spiritual intermediaries and intercessors of the masses. Pilgrimages to their shrines, and the Karbalā mourning ceremonies, of course, greatly facilitated this process.

Shi'ism in the Arab World

To the west of Iran, Shi'ism was on the defensive. In Iraq, Hilla, which had been the most important centre of Shi'ism in the pre-Safavid era, declined markedly and there is not one important scholar of this period named as being from that city, although it remained predominantly Shi'ī. Similarly, by the early part of this period Mosul in north Iraq and Aleppo in north Syria had ceased to be important Shi'ī centres and lost most of their Twelver Shi'ī population. Najaf and Karbalā were, however, growing in importance during this period. The residence in Najaf of Muqaddas Ardebīlī (d. 993/1583), one of the foremost Shi'ī ulama of his age, drew to that town numerous students from Iran and the Jabal 'Āmil. Although Najaf had been a centre of Shi'ī studies since the time of Shaykhū't-Ṭā'ifa, the building of religious colleges there, as in Iran, dates from this period. Two brief periods of Safavid rule over Iraq resulted in some repair and construction around the holy shrines.

During this period Lebanon, although nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, was effectively controlled by feudal overlords. In 1517, after he overcame the Mamluks, the Ottoman Selim I placed a Turkoman, Amir 'Assāf, in control of the region of Kisrawān (the coastal strip north of Beirut). With their seat in the village of Ghazir, the 'Assāf family ruled over this area for most of the sixteenth century until the last of them was

Schools within Twelver Shi'ism

In Chapter 3 the traditional account of the formation of the various Shi'i sects has been given. But in historical terms, it is extremely difficult to determine when exactly each group can be considered to have become a separate sect. There were two main periods of time when there was intensive religious speculation and a rapid evolution of groups and sects.

The first of these two periods was from about AD 750 to 950 in Iraq and in particular in Kūfa and Baghdad. Something of the nature of the speculations of this period can be discerned from the accounts already given in Chapter 3. It would appear that during this two-hundred-year period, the main body of Shi'a began to break up into a number of groups. At first the boundaries of these groups were ill-defined, but as time went by their distinctive differences became sharper and many died out. In general terms it can be said that the Shi'a broke into three broad groups: those who advocated political action, the political quietists and those attracted to esoteric and gnostic ideas. These became the Zaydī, Ithnā-'Asharī (Twelver) and Ghulāt/Ismā'īlī groups respectively.

The second period of intense religious speculation and rapid sectarian development occurred in the 15th century. During this time, in a broad crescent stretching from south-west Iran and eastern Iraq into north-west Iran and eastern Anatolia and across into northern Syria, there was a ferment of religious activity most of which would be described by orthodox Shi'is as 'extremist' (*ghuluww*) because of the exaggerated position given to 'Ali. But most groups honoured all of the Imams of the Twelvers. Included within the orbit of this religious activity was the Musha'sha' state in south-west Iran, the religious speculation of the Qara-Qaynūlū, the rising Safavid order in Ardībīl, the Bektāshī order in eastern Anatolia and the 'Alawīs (Nuṣayrīs) in north Syria. Some of these movements (the Musha'sha' and the Safavids) were absorbed into orthodox Twelver Shi'ism and influenced it. But others divided off into separate religious movements: the 'Alawīs (Nuṣayrīs), the Ahl-i-Haqq groups and the Bektāshīs.

The evolution of the Shi'i sects and schools may be represented thus

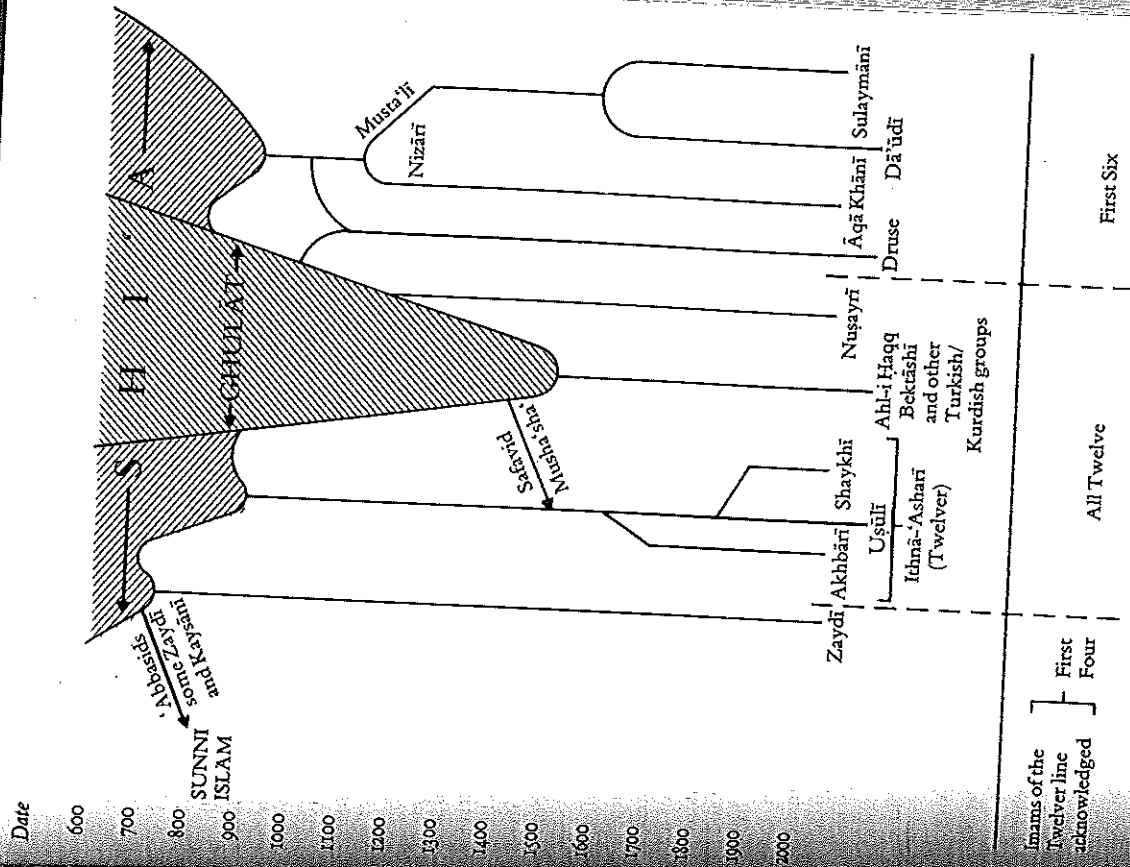


Chart 5, a diagrammatic representation of the emergence and evolution of Shi'i sects

diagrammatically (see Chart 5). The Ithnā-ʿAshariyya (Twelver) is the largest group of the Shi'a in the world today and the one with which this book is concerned. The vast majority of Twelvers belong to the Uṣūlī School and it is the tenets of this school that are described in the sections of this book and particularly in Chapter 10. There are, however, a small number of Twelvers who subscribe to the Akhbārī and Shaykhī Schools (for the history of these schools see pp. 117-18, 127-8, 135-6). Very little research has been done on these two minority schools in Twelver Shi'ism and so the details given about their doctrines below should only be regarded as tentative pending further research.

The Akhbārī School

As described in Chapter 6, this school, which probably represented a stream of thought within Twelver Shi'ism from its earliest days, first crystallised out as a separate movement in the wake of the writings of Mullā Muḥammad Amin Astarābādī (d. 1033/1623). It achieved its greatest influence during the late Safavid and post-Safavid periods but was crushed by the Uṣūlī mujtahids on the eve of the Qājār era.

In essence, the Akhbārī movement was a rejection of the rationalist principles on which *ijtihād* and the whole of Shi'i jurisprudence had come to be based. Some Akhbārīs went further and also rejected the Mu'tazilī (i.e. rationalistic) basis of Shi'i doctrine also. In practice this meant a move towards the Sunni principles of jurisprudence (with the Imams taking over the position of the founders of the Sunni schools of law) and an almost-Ash'arī (i.e. Sunni) position in theology. In other words, had it succeeded, it would have brought Shi'ism very much closer to Sunnism and it is interesting to note that Nādir Shāh's attempt to make Shi'ism a fifth school of Sunni law coincides with the period when the Akhbārīs were at the peak of their influence. In turning away from the rationalist basis of the Uṣūlīs, many of the Akhbārīs turned their attention to 'non-rational' avenues of knowledge such as *kasf* (intuitive discovery of knowledge) and occult sciences.

The principal areas of difference between the two schools can be summarised as follows (although it should be appreciated that, at the start, there were not many differences between the two groups and the following represents their final positions which are much further apart):

SCHOOLS WITHIN TWELVER SHI'ISM

UṢŪLĪ SCHOOL

A. On the Sources of Doctrine and Law

1. The Uṣūlīs accept four sources of authority in matters of doctrine and law: the Qur'an, the Sunna, consensus (*ijma'*) and the intellect (*ʿaql*);
2. accept and use the literal meaning of the Qur'an and the Traditions claiming that it is possible to know the meaning of these through the use of the intellect (*ʿaql*);
3. consider the four 'canonical' books of Traditions (see p. 174) to contain many unreliable Traditions;
4. accept as authoritative only Traditions from the Imams transmitted through reliable Shi'is;

The Akhbārīs only accept the first two and some of them only the second (since the Qur'an can only be understood with the help of the Traditions);

consider that the Qur'an and Traditions can only be understood where their meaning has been made explicit by the commentary (*tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*) of the Imams;

consider the four books to be reliable;

allow a much wider search to be made for Traditions bearing on a particular problem, allowing Traditions from Sunni or other sources (provided the transmission is 'protected from fabrication') and even from an unknown source if there is good evidence supporting it.

recognise only two categories: *ṣaḥīḥ* and *ḍa'īf*; and

consider that what is derived from *naqlī* sources always has precedence over what is derived from the use of reason.

B. On the Principles of Jurisprudence

1. The Uṣūlīs accept *ijtihād*;
2. consider that decisions can be given on the basis of *ẓamm* (valid

The Akhbārīs reject *ijtihād*;

consider that decisions can only be given where there is certain

UṢŪLĪ SCHOOL

conjecture) achieved through *ijtihād*, in cases where certain knowledge ('*ilm*') from an explicit text in the Qur'an or Traditions is not available;

3. consider that knowledge was only obtainable directly from the Imams by those who were in their presence (i.e. that the legal decisions of the Imams may have been affected by individual circumstances and do not necessarily have general applicability) and so, during the Occultation, it is necessary to resort to *ijtihād*, and *fatwās* (legal decisions) can only be issued through use of this;

4. consider that through the use of *ijtihād*, the Traditions can be examined, one Tradition can be preferred over another contradictory one and practices can be derived from unclear and ambiguous texts; and

5. act on the basis of freedom and the permissibility of all actions if there is no clear text against it.

C. On the Position of the *Faqh* (jurist)

1. The Uṣūlīs divide men into two groups: mujtahid and *muqallid* (see p. 175);

2. consider that the unrestricted (i.e. fully competent) mujtahid is learned in all of the ordinances of the religion since the condition for issuing legal decisions is knowledge of a large number of

AKHBĀRĪ SCHOOL

knowledge through a relevant Tradition from the Imam;

consider it obligatory to refer to the Imams even if through an intermediary (i.e. a transmitted Tradition) and that these have general applicability and that *fatwās* can only be issued on the basis of a relevant Tradition;

use only explicit texts from the Imams; and

consider that in cases where there is no clear text, caution must be exercised.

The Akhbārīs hold that all men are *muqallid* to the Imam and it is not permissible to turn to a mujtahid;

consider that only the Imam is informed of all of the ordinances of the religion and that the only condition for issuing legal decisions is a knowledge of the terms used by the Imams and

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UṢŪLĪ SCHOOL

sciences, the most important of which is *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence);

3. forbid following (*taqlīd*) a dead *marja'*;

4. consider it obligatory to obey a mujtahid as much as it is to obey the Imam; and

5. consider that the use of *ijtihād* will result in a (heavenly) reward even if the decision is incorrect.

It can be seen from the above that had the Akhbārīs been successful, the ulama would have been restricted in the field of jurisprudence to only those areas in which there is an explicit Tradition (all other cases would have to go to secular courts). But the Uṣūlīs, through the use of *ijtihād*, can give a judgement on virtually any subject. The Akhbārī position also severely restricted the authority and prerogatives of the ulama and effectively negated the *Nā'ib al-'Amm* concept (see p. 190). It is not surprising that it was, in the end, decisively rejected by the ulama.

Today, Akhbārism survives in pockets throughout the Shi'ī world. It is perhaps strongest in Bahrain where a considerable proportion of the island's Shi'īs follow ulama of this school. There is also a band of territory stretching from the lands of the tribes at the western end of Lake al-Hammār (i.e. around Sūq ash-Shuyūkh) in southern Iraq to the Khurramshahr (Muḥammara) region of Iran where Akhbārism survives and there are one or two small Akhbārī religious schools (*madrasas*). The main centre of this area is the city of Baṣra and here the descendants of Mīrzā Muḥammad Akhbārī (see p. 135) continue to live and to lead the Akhbārīs of the area. There are also a few Akhbārīs in India. It has, however, continued to influence the mainstream of Twelver Shi'ism and not a few Uṣūlī ulama have questioned the extent to which *ijtihād* should be allowed. Even the late Āyatullāh Burūjirdī was said to have had doubts regarding the Uṣūlī position.²

The Shaykhī School

Whereas the Akhbārī School differed from the Uṣūlīs principally in the field of jurisprudence or the *furū'* (peripheral elements) of the religion, the Shaykhī School, founded by Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-Dīn al-

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knowing of a Tradition confirming the matter;

allow use of the decisions of a dead jurist;

reject this; and

consider that the issuing of a decree except on the basis of a reliable and explicit Tradition is blameworthy.