Hiding in Plain Sight: The Practical and Doctrinal Significance of Secrecy in Shi`ite Islam

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> To hide and to unveil, to contain and to release—this is the rhythm of secrets and also of the sacred.[1]

As PAUL JOHNSON makes poetically clear in the introduction to his study of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblè, there is an etymological and practical connection between conceptions of the sacred as found in many religions and the imperative of secrecy with regard to those same sacred realities. The sacred is precisely that which is "secreted" away, preserved, and protected by silence from the profane and the ordinary, but also selectively "secreted" or revealed to those properly initiated. Secrecy and the sacred are perhaps understandably most associated in religions or religious tendencies that have more esoteric conceptions of religious truth and/or hierarchical notions of human spiritual qualification and access to that esoteric truth, as well as in religions affiliated with minority, marginalized, or threatened communities. Secrecy is correspondingly less pronounced in religions that stress the transparency of religious truth, are founded upon more egalitarian conceptions of access to religious knowledge and experience, or are socially secure, perhaps even

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[1] Johnson 2001: 4.

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hegemonic, within their major spheres of influence (Johnson gives the example of Protestantism; we could also give the example of Sunni Islam).

Much of the work on secrecy and religion in recent years has been done in the context of anthropological studies of contemporary religious groups, whose use of secrecy is largely related to their minority or marginalized status. The practice of secrecy serves a number of important aims for such religions—from the need for survival, to the need to deflect social criticism, to the desire to attract new members, drawn by the allure of access to secret knowledge and experience and membership in an exclusive society. Given the sociological and anthropological nature of these studies, most of the authors devote their efforts precisely to understanding the social practices and purposes of secrecy, rather than to discovering, evaluating, or "exposing" the actual content (real or imagined) of the secrets themselves. In short, they are committed to examining secrecy as a "discursive strategy" with practical, social aims and argue that the phenomenon of secrecy in religion can and should only be studied in this way. Hugh Urban (1998) is concerned with this issue, in part, as a matter of scholarly ethics—seeking to define not only what it is *possible* for an academic researcher to know, but also what is *proper* for the researcher to seek to know, or to disclose, about the object of his/her study. At what point, he asks, do the boundaries of the sacred, as defined by the religion in question, have to be respected by the scholar's agnostic and/or respectful silence?

In this study, I intend to examine the phenomenon of secrecy in a very different, medieval Islamic context—namely, that of Shi`ism in its formative period. While a number of intellectual and ideological tendencies are represented in early Shi`ite literature, all groups and tendencies within the movement stressed the importance of secrecy regarding the leadership, membership, and doctrines of the Shi`ite community. This entailed both discreetly concealing controversial doctrines of, or information about, the Shi`ite movement, as well as employing active—and at times surprisingly deceptive—strategies of "dissimulation" (*taqiyyah*) with regard to one's affiliation with it. Many non-Shi`ite Muslims and Western scholars view Shi`ite doctrines about secrecy and concealment skeptically, seeing in them nothing more than a pragmatic tactic for ensuring survival in a context of public opprobrium and political persecution.[2] In this article I will argue that secrecy was more than merely

[2] See, for example, Goldziher 1981: 180–181, where he also says that this policy of *taqiyyah* resulted in a state of "suppressed fury" among the Shi`ites that in turn engendered "unrestrained hatred and fanaticism" among them.

pragmatism, that it had both a practical and a doctrinal significance for the early Shi`ite community. To the extent that Shi`ites considered their unique spiritual beliefs to be esoteric in nature, and their leadership and membership to be divinely selected on the basis of their intrinsic spiritual character, secrecy was a natural, doctrinal corollary to the sacredness of both. Given the controversial nature of such beliefs, and Shi`ite opposition (sometimes open, sometimes deferred) to the religio-political authorities of the early Islamic state, secrecy also served as a strategy for survival and self-perpetuation.

The doctrinal importance of secrecy in early Shi`ism parallels the importance of secrecy in other traditions, particularly mystical or esoteric traditions, such as Kabbalah in Judaism or even Sufi mysticism within Islam itself; and the Shi`ite practice of secrecy and dissimulation as a strategy of survival and self-perpetuation has much in common with similar tactics employed by other minority or threatened religious communities, such as those discussed by Hugh Urban or Paul Johnson. However, the role of secrecy in Shi`ism differs from all of these cases in that it is a *historical* case—that is, while active dissimulation (*taqiyyah*) may still be employed by Shi`ites today for a variety of practical purposes, the widespread practice of secrecy and dissimulation was limited primarily to the early, formative period of Shi`ism, when the revered line of Shi`ite spiritual leaders, the Imams, was physically present and actively guiding their community. While other scholars have argued for reserving judgment on the *content* of secrecy, while concentrating on the more empirically knowable and verifiable *strategies and sociological effects* of secrecy, with early Shi`ism, we have a case in which much (if not all) of this content is now published and widely known, and has been for many centuries. From this aspect, we are in a much better position in this case to examine and understand the relationship between the practical and doctrinal importance of religious secrecy, and between the content of secrets and the social strategies they serve, though, from another aspect, we are at a disadvantage.

While scholars of contemporary religious movements might be dealing with walls of secrecy that continue to be maintained, they are also capable of witnessing firsthand the tangible practices or effects of secrecy. In our study, we will have to rely on texts and historical reports which are (1) often cast in doctrinal terms, only hinting at the actual social practices, modalities, or effects of secrecy, (2) at times cryptic or seemingly self-contradictory, and (3) at a significant historical remove from contemporary Shi`ism. Despite these limitations, however, this focus offers us the opportunity to test the interpretative and analytical value of contemporary theories about the function and importance of secrecy in

religion by applying them to the radically different context of historical Shi`ism. Furthermore, because both the doctrinal content and practical significance of secrecy can be studied in this case, we will also be able to assess the relationship between the two.

SUNNI–SHI`ITE DIFFERENCES AND THE DOCTRINAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SECRECY IN SHI`ISM

To begin with, we should contextualize Shi`ism in its conversation with Sunni Islam. The religious *ethos* of Sunni Islam is based upon strong notions of a united religious community (*ummah*) that collectively preserved the Qur'an, transmitted Prophetic traditions, and when necessary, made religious and ethical decisions on the basis of the "consensus (*ijmā`*) of the community." Membership in this community (although disputed as a matter of theological doctrine for centuries) was essentially based on the open testament (*shahādah*) to faith in God and Muhammad and outward conformity to the rituals and laws of Islam. Doctrinal and practical correctness were located with the majority, and this notion underlay the Sunni view that the most trustworthy traditions from Muhammad were those most publicly and widely disseminated and that the collective moral inclinations of Muhammad's generation, in particular, were a legitimate source of religious law. Moreover, the Sunni Islamic tradition understood the political successes of Islam, and perhaps also the triumph of its own religious perspective within Islam, as signs of divine favor and sanction.

While Sunni Islam represents the dominant, majority form of the religion, Shi`ite Islam developed quite early on as a distinct minority religious perspective that philosophically inverted and challenged many of these same principles. The starting point of all Shi`ite thought is the belief that Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law and close confidant, `Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, represented the unique and perfect reservoir of all religious knowledge as bequeathed to him by the Prophet. Shi`ites assert that `Alī alone knew the authoritative version of the Qur'an, the order in which the verses were revealed, their correct inward and outward meaning, the habits, customs, and teachings of Muhammad, and how these precedents should be applied to everyday Muslim life. Shi`ites further believe that `Alī's superior religious knowledge and unrivaled closeness to the Prophet were well known throughout the community and that Muhammad publicly announced his desire for `Alī to succeed him in spiritual authority over the Muslim community. Thus, when Muhammad's community overlooked `Alī for the position of caliph, or successor to Muhammad, they simultaneously contradicted Muhammad's explicit instructions and

deprived themselves of the benefits of `Alī's superior religious knowledge. The majority, then, far from being the repository of correct doctrine and practice, had placed themselves in serious religious error and cut themselves off from true guidance. Twelver Shi`ism, the dominant form of Shi`ite thought, asserts that `Alī passed this knowledge on to his descendants—eleven of whom, along with `Alī, came to be designated as the canonical line of "Imams" or infallible spiritual guides who preserved "true religion" among themselves and their followers and served as a continuing basis of spiritual charisma for 3 centuries after the death of Muhammad.

The fact that true religious knowledge resided with the `Alid Imams came to mean that participation in the "true" religious community depended not only on outward testaments of faith or ritual practice, but also on a deep spiritual attachment to and loyalty or devotion (*walāyah*) toward `Alī and his descendants.[3] The Imams and their followers came to see themselves as the spiritual heart or center of the larger Muslim community—a notion symbolically and vividly expressed in Shi`ite traditions that liken the Imams and their followers to the Ka`bah in Mecca.[4] Understanding themselves as the spiritual core of the Muslim community and the sacred vessel of religious truth, Shi`ites were undeterred by their minority position or the sometimes terrible persecution they suffered at the hands of the ruling authorities. Although at various points in Islamic history, the Shi`ite perspective came in and out of popularity with ruling dynasties or the intellectual classes, Shi`ite traditions insist that the number of true Shi`ite believers is always small.[5] The smallness of their number, as well as the cycles of persecution they faced, only strengthened their sense of being an elite and elect community, designated by God for a spiritual mission that would require them to make difficult but ultimately salvific sacrifices—salvific for themselves in an otherworldly sense, but also for the survival of true religion and religious knowledge within a largely misguided Islamic *ummah*.[6] From the Shi`ite perspective, then, religious truth resided, not with the majority,

[3] See, for example, Barqī 1370AH: 150, h. 68, 69; `Ayyāshī 1961, 1: 386, h. 137; Kūfī 1992, 1: 139–140, h. 168–169.

[4] Ibn Bābawayh 1971: 28, h. 95; Kulaynī 1983, 2: 26, h. 4, 5, p. 52, h. 3; Barqī 1370AH: 285, h. 425; Ibn Bābawayh 1993, 1: 179–180, 409–410.

[5] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 241–244.

[6] Shi`ite tradition often defined non-Shi`ite Muslims as "misguided" Muslims, usually indicating that they were not full believers, but were also not properly considered unbelievers, or outside of the Muslim community proper. See Kulaynī 1983, 2: 24–25, h. 4. For the distinction between unbelief (*kufr*) and the state of being misguided (*ḍalālah*), see Barqī 1370AH: 154–155; Daylamī 1988: 124.

but with a small, spiritual elite dwelling within the larger *ummah*. Spiritual righteousness was not proved by worldly success; rather God's chosen ones could expect to be tried with suffering and worldly defeat as part of their spiritual vocation. Religious identity and faith were not based on outward practice, but on inward love and attachment to the Imams of the family of the Prophet.

This profoundly different perspective on the nature of religious truth led to the development of an apparently contradictory pair of religious imperatives. One stressed the virtue of martyrdom (*shahādah*), self-sacrificing witness for religious truth, amidst a society that had turned away from it—an ideal most fully glorified in the massacre of `Alī's son and the third Shi`ite Imam, Ḥusayn, but also expressed in the words and actions of other well-known Shi`ite martyrs. The second, by contrast, placed a premium on the survival of Shi`ism's religious message, and the protection of the Imams and their disciples who carried the "unadulterated" truth of Islam within themselves, and so therefore on secrecy, concealment (*kitmān*), and "dissimulation (*taqiyyah*)" of their true religious views. This emphasis on secrecy was related to issues of both prudent practice and fundamental religious doctrine and represented an aspect of Shi`ite thought in which the two overlapped, each profoundly influencing the other. In fact, the principle of secrecy in Shi`ism underlies and gives a certain unity to many of the distinct, and sometimes peculiar, aspects of Shi`ite thought and practice and is deeply embedded in the spiritual perspective and symbolic matrix of Shi`ite thought.

VEILS BEHIND VEILS: WHAT WAS (IS?) THE SECRET IN SHI`ISM?

Giving an overview of Georg Simmel's early work on secrecy in religion, Johnson identifies four types of religious groups practicing secrecy: (1) a hidden group of people; (2) a group composed of "public" persons who hide their religious affiliation as a group; (3) a group whose members' identities are known, but whose rituals or "conditions for membership" are hidden; and (4) a group whose "existence, membership, and procedures are public, but whose interpretations of those procedures are regarded as secret."[7] None of these categories makes for an easy fit with early Shi`ism. The group was well known to exist; its leaders and leading members, while occasionally striving to conceal their identities (hence making it nearly fit the second category), were often widely known to be

[7] Johnson 2001: 27.

affiliated with Shi`ism. There were few official "rituals" that distinguished Shi`ites from Sunnis in its early history; it was rather their religio-political views, and the belief that their Imam was the locus of legitimate religious and political authority over the Muslim community and the sole source of Prophetic knowledge and charisma that had to remain hidden. This would seem to place Shi`ites, again only partially and imperfectly, in the fourth category as well. Perhaps it is most important to note that, for Shi`ites, what remained secret and what could be said in public changed over time. In other words, the boundaries of secrecy shifted in relation to Shi`ites' changing historical circumstances.

The religio-political claims of the first three Imams and their followers were generally well known; but after the devastating massacre of Ḥusayn and his followers at Karbala in the year 61/680, both the Shi`ite leadership and its followers seem to have gone largely underground, or at least to have downplayed their religio-political perspectives, even if their pro-`Alid sympathies were well known. As persecution of the Shi`ites intensified in the later Umayyad era (early second/eighth century), the most important "secret" that had to be kept from the larger Islamic public was the identity of the living Imam. Shi`ites considered the regnant Imam to be the living embodiment of Prophetic charisma at any given time, and so the only true and infallible spiritual guide within the Islamic community. His very presence was said, in some traditions, to be a support for the world without which, it would cease to exist.[8] Thus his safety, and the safe transferal of his authority to his successor upon his death, had to be insured and safeguarded above all else. The unparalleled spiritual authority the Imams had in the eyes of their followers, and their concomitant claims that all authority over the Islamic community outside of themselves was intrinsically illegitimate, were, of course, politically subversive views that were not tolerated by the ruling caliphs and authorities; hence both the identity of the Shi`ite Imam, and the nature of his authority, had to be treated with sensitivity by both the Imam himself and his followers. Moreover, a belief in the Imams' absolute authority also entailed a belief in the culpable error of those who pretended to exercise authority over the community in the Imams' rightful stead (including the first two revered caliphs of the Islamic tradition—Abū Bakr and `Umar), as well as of the majority of Muslims (including the Prophet's revered companions) who recognized the pretenders' authority. Thus Shi`ite views regarding the Imams' authority were both politically dangerous to the ruling powers and religiously offensive to many Muslims.

[8] See, for example, Kulaynī 1983, 1: 252–253, h. 1.

Throughout the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, the successive Imams were hidden in one form or another. The fifth and sixth Imams (al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq) lived fairly public lives as widely-recognized scholarly religious authorities, but reportedly attempted to "hide" their leadership of the Shi`ite community, as well as their secret teachings meant only for their Shi`ite disciples. The seventh through eleventh Imams lived in a more physical form of "absence," for these later Imams spent most of their years either as prisoners of the reigning `Abbasid caliphs, or else as "honored" members of their court—unable to leave the constant surveillance and virtual "house arrest" of the `Abbasids and their entourage. At the end of the third/ninth century, however, the Twelfth Imam, reportedly seen by less than a handful of Shi`ites, was believed to have gone into nearly complete hiding immediately after his birth, communicating with the Shi`ite community only through a series of four intermediaries. When the last of these intermediaries died in the first half of the fourth /tenth century, the Twelfth Imam is believed to have entered a state of full "occultation (*ghaybah*)." This new development raised the idea of the "hiddenness" of the Imam to a new level—this was both a mystical and indefinite form of hiding, for the last Imam was believed to exist on earth in a real but physically intangible, ageless and timeless state, guiding the Shi`ite community through a continuous but imperceptible form of inspiration, revealing himself only in dreams and visions to the spiritually worthy and not leaving his state of occultation until he rises to herald in the events of the end-times.

Hence while the primary "secret" of Shi`ism was the nature and identity of the Imams themselves, the boundary of this secrecy shifted over time. At first the Imam was a well-known public figure, whose inward spiritual qualities, teachings, and leadership alone were kept hidden; subsequently, the Imam becomes "physically," if partially, hidden through political incarceration and surveillance; finally, the Twelfth Imam becomes in every way a hidden reality—hidden absolutely, indefinitely, and existentially.

In the century after the "greater occultation," we witness the collection, publication, and "canonization" of the traditions and teaching of the Imams, as well as the formulation, of official Shi`ite books of theology and law. While this is certainly due, in large part, to the rise of a pro-Shi`ite dynasty in control of the caliphal center at Baghdad at this same time, we should also consider the extent to which this new openness was facilitated by the very hiddenness of the Imam. As long as the Imams had been physically present, the idea that one such Imam would eventually rise up to restore authority over the Islamic community to the family of the Prophet represented a continuous and imminent threat to the ruling caliphs. After the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, however,

this future rising was redefined in more eschatological and less immediate political terms; and the efforts of Shi`ite scholars in the post-Occultation period to codify the Imams' teachings as a substitute for their direct guidance, implicitly suggested that this future rising was expected only in a very distant, almost mythic, apocalyptic future. With the immediate political threat of Shi`ism significantly diminished in the eyes of the reigning Islamic authorities, Shi`ites' ability to be open about their identity and beliefs correspondingly increased.

This dynamic, while *sui generis* in many ways, nonetheless has some parallels with similar processes identified by Johnson in his study of the Candomblè in Brazil. He notes a somewhat analogous pattern by which the Candomblè religion, as it became more socially acceptable and legally tolerated, also became more public about its own existence, doctrines, and at least some of its practices. But as some of what was formerly hidden became open, or even deliberately displayed in public, other "secrets" moved to a deeper level of hiddenness—obscured not only by the silence of the initiated, but also by the distracting display of other, no longer hidden, ritual procedures. In Shi`ism, as the teachings and doctrines of the former Imams became openly published and confessed by many Shi`ites, the most secret thing of all—the Imam himself and his infallible guidance—became openly acknowledged but hidden beyond reach.[9]

Johnson's study of the Candomblè, like Urban's study of the Kartabhaja group in India, suggests that this parallel movement toward social acceptability and confessional openness is often accompanied by a corresponding attempt to move the most secret and/or controversial practices and teaching into an even deeper state of hiddenness—a phenomenon apparently witnessed in the Shi`ite case in the form of the full occultation of the Twelfth Imam. But was there something more that went into "deep occultation" with the Imam himself? Was the secret knowledge alluded to in Shi`ite tradition merely the practical knowledge of the Imam's identity or the identity of his followers, was it knowledge of the Imams' superior interpretations of the Qur'an, or was it something still deeper—an unspeakable, mystical gnosis that only a minority even of Shi`ites could comprehend? The largely conservative and rationalist architects of post-Occultation Imami Shi`ite theology and law sought to discredit those who claimed or suspected this last possibility, and made efforts to downplay or excise the more supernatural and/or controversial teachings

[9] Here, too, we might mention an interesting parallel with Hugh Urban's observation that as the actual teachings of the Kartabhaja masters were published and made accessible to the larger public, the inner meaning of those teachings continued to be hidden and accessible only to the initiated through oral transmission from a living guru (see Urban 1998: 236).

ascribed to the Imams, many of which were put into circulation by disciples with questionable or exaggerated interpretations of the Imams' authority. While the inaccessibility of the Imams certainly allowed a number of false teachings to flourish among certain extremist Shi`ite groups, the extent to which Shi`ite scholars in the decades after the occultation sought to eliminate controversial or problematic teachings recalls something of the "sanitizing" process Hugh Urban describes as taking place in certain religions as they attempt to adopt a more public and acceptable face.[10] Yet regardless of whether this mystical and esoteric legacy actually existed, the belief in and transmission of this legacy was never entirely or permanently suppressed. The fourteenth century mystical Shi`ite thinker, Haydar al-Āmulī, and the Shi`ite theosophical School of Isfahan a few centuries later, would revive interest in gnosis and mysticism as an intrinsic, if *hidden* part of the Imams' legacy. We cannot here evaluate this later development fully, but we should consider how these layers of secrecy and their historical dance of concealment and revelation, suppression and re-emergence, bear a certain resemblance to the function of secrecy as described in other religious contexts.

SECRECY AS A SPIRITUAL IDEAL IN SHI`ITE HADITH LITERATURE

Kulaynī's canonical collection of Twelver Shi`ite tradition, *al-Kāfī*, has two chapters on *taqiyyah* and *kitmān*, respectively. While the terms are often used rather synonymously—for example, they are both juxtaposed with the negative quality of *idhā`ah*, or the indiscriminate dissemination of Shi`ite views—*taqiyyah* pertains primarily to an individual's efforts to conceal the identity of the Imam, or his/her own religious affiliation to Shi`ism, while *kitmān* more commonly refers to concealing the religious teachings of the Imams, especially when they would be viewed as particularly controversial by the non-Shi`ite majority. The traditions found in Kulaynī's chapter on *taqiyyah* and *kitmān* leave little room to doubt the essential role that secrecy played in Shi`ite religious life. We are told, for example, that a person who has no *taqiyyah* has no religion (*dīn*)[11] and no faith (*īmān*),[12] that God is worshipped by

[10] See Urban 1998: 228–229.

[11] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 220, h. 2. Note that this idea is also found in Kharijite tradition. The Kharijites, like the Shi`ites, represented a minority religious perspective within the Islamic community, and faced similar state persecution. However, Kharijites were more likely to express their views to the larger Islamic society—often violently.

[12] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 220–222, h. 5, 12. See also Ḥimyarī 1993: 25.

nothing more beloved to Him than *taqiyyah*,[13] and that concealing the secrets of Shi`ite doctrine (*kitmān*) represents nothing less than "*jihād* (holy struggle) in the path of God."[14] In fact, so long as the forces of religious oppression and subversion hold dominance over the Islamic community, one tradition states, God can only truly be worshipped in secret.[15] In seeking to legitimate the practice of *taqiyyah*, Shi`ite tradition invokes a number of prophetic precedents. It cites, for example, the Qur'anic passage in which Moses is told not to revile the gods of the unbelievers, lest they retaliate by reviling Moses' one, true God.[16] Perhaps most poignantly, Shi`ite traditions compare the situation of the Shi`ites to that of the Qur'anic "people of the cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*)"—a group of believing men, living in profoundly irreligious and immoral times, who slept hidden in a cave for three hundred years, before being miraculously revived when the religious climate had changed.[17] As these traditions assert, the vocation of the *aṣḥāb al-kahf* was not to openly confront the religious corruption of their time, but rather to hide in the remoteness of a cave, where their religious belief was preserved through a supernatural slumber—a perfect metaphor for hiddenness and silence in the interests of preserving religious truth.[18]

In Shi`ism, as in other religious traditions, secrecy and hiddenness are associated with the mystical and esoteric tendencies within those religions, as well as with the general idea that certain forms of spiritual knowledge could not be understood or tolerated by all, and Shi`ite traditions speak explicitly of the difficulty of the Imams' teachings.[19] Like Jewish Kabbalists and other mystical groups, Shi`ites held that these more esoteric doctrines were concealed or encoded within the literal message of accepted scriptural texts, but that they alone held the keys to unlock them. In fact, Shi`ism developed, quite early on, an elaborate system of esoteric Qur'an interpretation (*ta'wīl*) that demonstrated the rootedness of their perspective in the sacred Qur'anic text. However, *taqiyyah* and *kitmān* in the Shi`ite perspective were not just about keeping esoteric doctrines out of the hands of the unworthy, they were also about survival—survival of the Imams, their community of disciples, and through them, their teachings. If the doctrinal importance of secrecy was related

[13] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 220, h. 4.

[14] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 228–229, h. 16.

[15] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 221, h. 7.

[16] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 126, h. 3, commenting on Qur'an VI:108.

[17] Qur'an XVIII: 9–26.

[18] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 221, h. 8; Kāhilī 1951–52: 114.

[19] Traditions to this effect are cited widely throughout Shi`ite literature, see Kulaynī 1983, 1: 466–468, h. 1, 2, 4; Majlisī 1957–73, 2: 183–197, 208–213; Ḥaḍramī 1951–52: 65.

to the esoteric content of Shi`ite teachings, it was also connected to the notion that the survival and preservation of the Shi`ite tradition was a good in and of itself. Shi`ite tradition considered failure to exercise proper secrecy with regard to sectarian issues a moral crime of great magnitude, and one set of traditions dramatically equates revealing the secrets of the Imams with "killing" them,[20] presumably because such indiscretions placed the Imam and his followers in mortal danger.

The fifth and sixth Shi`ite Imams, Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 117/733) and his son, Ja`far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), who were the most public figures among all of the twelve Imams, and also the primary advocates of *taqiyyah* and *kitmān* in the *ḥadīth* literature, seem aware of the tension between their emphasis on secrecy and survival, and the noble examples of martyrdom from the Shi`ite past. One disciple questioned al-Ṣādiq about a well-known statement from `Alī in which he permitted his followers to curse him under compulsion, but never to religiously dissociate from him. Yet, when the disciple asks al-Ṣādiq if it was really required to choose death over dissociation from `Alī, al-Ṣādiq denies this, citing the example of the pro-Shi`ite figure, `Ammār b. Yāsir, who in the early days of Islam had reverted to outward pagan practice in order to avoid persecution.[21] Al-Ṣādiq even questions the stoic martyrdom of the early Shi`ite, Maytham al-Tamār, wondering aloud why he did not choose the path of *taqiyyah*.[22] Al-Bāqir seems more inclined to view both martyrdom and *taqiyyah* as equally worthwhile choices. When told that two Shi`ites had been seized and compelled to renounce their allegiance to `Alī, and that one had done so and was set free while the other had refused and was killed, the Imam remarked that the first man was well-versed in his religion (knowing the wisdom of *taqiyyah*), while the second was "eager for paradise."[23]

THE PRACTICE OF SECRECY

Despite the dialectical tension between the ideal of religious martyrdom or "witnessing" and the imperative of secrecy and discretion, the idea that Shi`ite teachings and Shi`ite identity were to remain secret was intellectually and doctrinally consistent with Shi`ism's emphasis on esoteric knowledge and with Shi`ite elitist and electionist notions of their own identity and hierarchical views regarding access to religious knowledge.

[20] Barqī 1370AH: 256. See also, Ḥimyarī 1993: 23.
[21] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 222, h. 10.
[22] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 223, h. 15.
[23] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 224, h. 21.

But sociologists of religion have also identified secrecy as a "discursive strategy" with a number of tangible, social uses and particular sociological effects.[24] Hugh Urban, for example, discusses the use of secrecy as a strategy for the accumulation of "cultural" or "social" capital, particularly among groups disenfranchised or marginalized in the dominant social hierarchies of their environment. In the context of the Kartabhaja group that is the focus of his study, he theorizes that the sense of belonging to a "secret society" or of being a member of a hidden elite with exclusive access to religious secrets acted as a form of compensation for the socioeconomic marginality and helplessness of many of the group's members, helping the movement to thrive among the lower social classes.[25] Urban and Johnson also relate the phenomenon of secrecy to the need among small religious groups to define boundaries of group membership, establish internal hierarchies, and foster strong bonds within the group.[26] Finally, following Foucault, they also argue that secrecy has dual and somewhat paradoxical sociopolitical uses: it can "reinforce" and "mystify" the authority of existing elites, helping to further establish their dominance, but may also work to "subvert, challenge and undermine"[27] existing power structures by creating a "hermeneutic space"[28] or an "area of tolerance" in which alternate or subversive social structures or religious interpretations might dwell, as they seek to consolidate themselves and draw in new members.

In the Shi`ite case, it is clear that some similar sociological processes are at work as well. However, there are also important distinctions to note. Shi`ites were certainly a persecuted religious minority throughout much of their early history, but there is no clear correlation with other, non-religious sources of marginality (socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and so on). While some early pro-`Alid tribesmen may have been motivated by economic and social disadvantages they faced because of the tribal nepotism of `Alī's caliphal predecessor, `Uthmān, and while Shi`ite anger at Umayyad officials was occasionally fueled by economic grievances,[29] a brief survey of the names found in Shi`ite biographical dictionaries suggests that many Shi`ites were drawn from the middle classes of merchants

[24] See Urban 1998: 210–213; Wasserstrom 1999: 241 and Johnson 2001: 7–8.
[25] Urban 1998: 210, 219–220, 236. See also Johnson 2001: 79.
[26] Urban 1998: 221, 236; Johnson 2001: 17.
[27] Urban 1998: 221–222.
[28] Johnson 2001: 5.
[29] See, for example, Ṭabarī 1964: 113, where the early Shi`ite martyr, Ḥujr b. `Adī's protest against the Umayyad governor is supported by others angry at the government's withholding of stipends and rations.

and craftsmen, and many leading members of the community hailed from prominent families. There certainly were poor Shi`ites, but there is no indication that their poverty provided the sociopolitical impulse for their religious affiliation. However, a number of Shi`ite traditions do suggest that the Shi`ite sense of membership in a group of religious elites may have served to ease their religio-political frustration and give meaning to their religious struggle and persecution; and while Urban suggests that secrecy might help a religious minority conceal its smallness from its own members and outsiders,[30] Shi`ites seemed to take spiritual solace in the belief that the number of true believers is always small.[31]

Secrecy, however, certainly does seem related to the process of boundary formation and the establishment of internal hierarchies in early Shi`ism. Not only did membership in the group mean access to the Imams' secret teachings withheld from the general public, it also required that the disciple keep those secrets hidden, and the practices of *taqiyyah* and *kitmān* are presented as essential, qualifying virtues of the Shi`ite believer.[32] Moreover, the extent to which one was required to practice *taqiyyah* was said to be directly related to the level of one's spiritual advancement, with one tradition stating that the closer one comes to the knowledge of the true authority of the Shi`ite Imams, the more intense the requirement of *taqiyyah*.[33] It is often pointed out that Shi`ism is not technically a "sect" of Islam, and does not fit the Weberian definition of this term. This is so because Shi`ism pre-dates the majority perspective of Sunnism as an organized system of religious views, and so cannot be said to have seceded from an existing "orthodox" community. Moreover, Shi`ites always considered themselves to be part of the larger Islamic *ummah*, even if they have tended to view themselves as the best part of that *ummah*—preserving the pure and unadulterated message of Islam within a larger Islamic community that has neglected some if its most essential aspects. In one curious tradition, al-Bāqir likens the minority Shi`ite community to a single white hair on a black bull, or else to a single black hair on a white bull.[34] Shi`ites formed part of the collective of the Islamic community, just as the individual hairs on the bull collectively formed his coat. Yet as the single white hair on the black bull, they represented that community's purest part; as the single black hair on the white

[30] Urban 1998: 245.
[31] Barqī 1370AH: 120, h. 95; Kulaynī 1983, 2: 243, h. 5.
[32] See, for example, Majlisī 1957–73, 68: 149, h. 1.
[33] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 17.
[34] Majlisī 1957–73, 68: 85–86, h. 9, 11.

bull, they represented its most inward and hidden aspect. They were from one perspective an intrinsic part of the Islamic community, and from another, its inversion.

The boundary between the Shi`ite community and the non-Shi`ite majority was a "perforated" one; at a certain level and to a certain degree, Shi`ites were expected to intermingle with the larger Islamic community, participating with them in certain religious rituals and showing charity and benevolence toward them as their brothers in Islam. It was access to the secret teachings of the Imams that served as a source of solidarity among the Shi`ites, and marked a boundary between Shi`ites and non-Shi`ites that was ideally invisible to non-Shi`ites. Secrecy thus entailed not only concealing the Imams' teachings, but also one's own identity by co-existing peacefully with the non-Shi`ite majority—neither seeking converts among them nor offending their religious sensibilities by speaking openly of controversial Shi`ite doctrines. Shi`ites were instructed to speak to non-Shi`ites only about religious views they held in common and to avoid open proselytization.[35] Shi`ites were advised to engage ritually and socially with their non-Shi`ite neighbors: "Be an ornament for [the Imams], not a shame for them: pray with [non-Shi`ites], visit their sick, attend their funerals, but do not let them outdo you in any good thing, for you are first among them. Verily God is worshipped by nothing greater than *taqiyyah*."[36] Shi`ites are to avoid identifying themselves as followers of the Imams,[37] for true Shi`ites remain hidden, such that "when people see them, they do not recognize them, and when they are absent from them, they do not miss them."[38]

Perhaps the most important practical, social function of secrecy in the Shi`ite tradition, other than pure survival, was the creation of "discursive" or "hermeneutic" space in which Shi`ite doctrine could be developed and systematized as a minority religious perspective under the vigilant eye of the political authorities. While the space secrecy provided could have been used to organize active rebellions against the ruling powers, we see that in the case of Twelver Shi`ism—the majority form of Shi`ism—this space was primarily used to develop their religious opposition as an intellectual perspective. In fact, it is the fifth and sixth Shi`ite Imams, who did the most to develop Shi`ite doctrinal and legal positions, while defusing the more

[35] Zarrād 1951–52: 114; Ibn Bābawayh 1990b: 102, h. 38; Kulaynī 1983, 2: 126, h. 3.
[36] Ibn Bābawayh 1990b: 102, h. 38, see also 102, h. 39; Kāhilī 1951–52: 114.
[37] Kulaynī 1983: 222–223, h. 5.
[38] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 238–239, h. 27. This idea seems to parallel certain mystical Sufi notions of the hiddenness of the true saints and spiritual guides.

revolutionary inclinations of some of their disciples, who are also the most ardent advocates of *taqiyyah* and *kitmān* in Shi`ite literature; and this is largely a reflection of their own intellectual prominence and wider public role as religious intellectuals. While these two Imams resided in Medina, the majority of their followers were based in the `Iraqi city of Kufa, with smaller communities of Shi`ites residing in other regional centers. Although the distance between Kufa and Medina was significant, Shi`ite sources indicate that Shi`ite delegations from Kufa would periodically make the journey to the Imam in Medina, often doing this as part of—or under the cover of—making the required *ḥajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Given the relative proximity of Mecca and Medina, some Shi`ites may have taken an extended stay of weeks or months in Medina to attend the Imam's private and public teaching circles (*majālis*) after completing the *ḥajj*, or else met the Imam during the *ḥajj* proper. In many Shi`ite traditions, the Imams render spiritual advice to their disciples in the very public context of performing the circumambulation of the Ka`bah. Amid thousands of pilgrims from all over the Islamic world participating in this ritual, the Imam's speaking to, or moving with, a crowd of `Iraqi or other disciples would hardly attract notice or suspicion. One can easily see how the intensely public nature of the *ḥajj* provided an ironically private "space" for the Imams to convey their teachings. As we shall see, the idea of hiding in openness, or concealing inward religious difference within outward religious conformity, is a constant theme in Shi`ite doctrine and practice. In the remainder of this article I will discuss the strategies they used to accomplish this, and the ways in which these strategies were integrated and consistent with fundamental Shi`ite doctrines, regarding the nature and spiritual status of the Imams and their community within the larger Islamic *ummah*.

STRATEGIES OF SECRECY: REVEAL AND CONCEAL, SEMANTIC GAMES

Secrecy and *taqiyyah* were practiced, in the first instance, both by and for the Imam himself. While the intellectual prominence of al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq within pro-`Alid circles was undoubtedly known to the ruling authorities of their time, pains were to be taken to conceal their identity as Imam and the extent of the authority vested in them by their close disciples. Al-Ṣādiq, for example, almost always abstained from mentioning himself as the living Imam,[39] and in one case, when a disciple asked if he

[39] See, for example, Kulaynī 1983, 1: 241, h. 2 and 2: 19–21, h. 6, 9; `Ayyāshī 1961, 1: 252.

was the successor to his father, al-Bāqir, and thus the current, living Imam, al-Ṣādiq simply laughed (refusing a direct answer), but then allowed the disciple to kiss his hand in a show of obeisance.[40] In another case, the Imam praised the action of a disciple who, when he passed al-Ṣādiq on a public road, averted his head and pretended not to know him.[41] In Shi`ite traditions, the Imam is sometimes generically referred to as *al-`Ālim* or "the learned one"—a title that applied to countless other scholars in the Islamic society of this time, and thus, one that would not necessarily attract notice, should a reference to the Imam using this title be overheard by outsiders. Yet among Shi`ites there would be no doubt that the speaker was referring to the Imam, because from the Shi`ite perspective, the title could only rightfully belong to the Imam, with his unrivaled access to religious knowledge. It is also worth noting that in Shi`ite traditions, the Imams are usually identified by their patronyms—such as "Abū Ja`far" or "Abū `Abd Allāh"—titles that lacked a certain personal specificity and so perhaps also served to obscure the identity of the Imam to whom those traditions were attributed.[42]

The fifth and sixth Imams, who taught and lectured publicly on religious issues, were apparently attentive to their audience when deciding whether to reveal sensitive teachings. In several instances, before discussing a controversial doctrinal point, the Imam reportedly took demonstrative measures to ensure that his words could not be overheard.[43] The Imams also reserved the right to refuse to answer questions posed to them about controversial issues, particularly if they felt the questioner could not be trusted to keep the teachings secret.[44] For example, al-Ṣādiq declined to explicitly mention the spiritual significance of love (*ḥubb*) of `Alī and his descendants, because of the presence of a disciple who had a reputation for spreading his teachings outside of Shi`ite circles.[45] On another occasion,

[40] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 243–244, h. 15.

[41] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 221–222, h. 9. There seems to have been a pervasive reluctance to mention the existing or living Imam by name, and this continues to this day, in a sense, in the prohibition against mentioning the name of the Twelfth, occulted Imam, who is said to have disappeared in the fourth/tenth century, but to be an intangible, but mysteriously present and guiding Imam for the Shi`ite community until his reappearance near the end of time.

[42] Note that this tradition continues with regard to the Twelfth and hidden Imam, in that he should only be referred to by his titles (*al-Qā'im, al-Ḥujjah*), but his name, as a matter of dogma, is never to be mentioned openly.

[43] See, for example, Kulaynī 1983, 1: 294–296, h. 1 and 316, h. 1.

[44] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 268–269, h. 8, 9.

[45] Ṭūsī 1969: 336–337, n. 617. In another tradition al-Bāqir abruptly cuts short his teaching, saying that he could only reveal more if he could find secure "vessels" and a "resting place" for such knowledge—and two important commentaries on Shi`ite hadith gloss these terms, respectively, as "hearts that conceal and preserve secrets" and as "heart[s] empty of all distractions that might prevent them from grasping, accepting and preserving the truth." See Kulaynī 1983, 1: 285, h. 3.

al-Bāqir explained to his disciples that the Prophet Muhammad had inherited the knowledge of all previous prophets, and that he later conveyed this knowledge to `Alī. Al-Bāqir was asked if this meant that `Alī's knowledge exceeded that of certain prophets, and he responded: "Do you hear what he say?! Verily God opens the ears of whomever He wills. I said that God collected for Muhammad the knowledge of the prophets and that [Muhammad] gathered all of this [and gave it] to the Commander of the Faithful [i.e., `Alī]. And he asks me if [`Alī] is more knowledgeable than some of the prophets!"[46] The Imam's response, it will be noticed, does not answer the question. His words point to the inescapable, if controversial, conclusion that `Alī's knowledge surpassed that of the pre-Islamic prophets, and yet he refuses to make a direct, indicative statement on this sensitive issue, which could be recorded and circulated to his detriment. He simply establishes the premises and leaves his disciples to follow them to their natural end.

In numerous Shi`ite traditions, the context for the Imam's speech is a public or semi-public gathering, in which both Shi`ites and non-Shi`ites might be present. When the Imams spoke in such contexts, or even when they were speaking to a group of Shi`ites who were considered to have varying levels of religious understanding or trustworthiness, they are often represented as speaking cryptically, using gestures, pauses or momentary silences to conceal the real meaning of their words, and sometimes employing terms or ideas used and accepted throughout all forms of Islamic discourse, but which had been assigned particular sectarian meanings. This seems to have allowed the Imams to speak publicly and unimpeachably about controversial Shi`ite views by hiding them, so to speak, under the cover of mainstream Islamic religious discourse. Paul Johnson notes that through the practice and use of secrecy, a religion's inner core is located "not only in the hidden room of initiation but also in discourse, such that physical space yields to discursive space."[47] In some ways, this is an apt description of Shi`ism in this period, where the physical distance of the Imam from the majority of his followers, and his need to occasionally communicate teachings to them in public forums, required the creation of a sectarian mode of discourse, a terminology—in this case, based very much on standard Qur'anic and Islamic religious language—that could serve as an acceptable outward container for controversial esoteric or sectarian teachings.[48]

[46] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 279–280, h. 6.
[47] Johnson 2001: 19.
[48] Here, there are clear parallels with Hugh Urban's discussion of the Kartabhaja's use of the "encryption of texts" and their development of a "sophisticated system of esoteric discourse and the coded transmission of information." He even notes that the Kartabhaja did this by co-opting "hegemonic language" and "endow[ing it] with radically subversive hidden content" (1998: 228–230).

Perhaps the most well-known way in which the Imams were reportedly able to communicate sectarian meanings in mainstream discourse was through their unique and sometimes very peculiar interpretation of Qur'anic verses. As we have seen, the Imams claimed to have access to the only complete commentary on the Qur'an as transmitted from the Prophet to `Alī. While the fundamental Shi`ite doctrine of the `Alid imamate is nowhere explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, Shi`ite commentary on the Qur'an identified a host of Qur'anic terms as references to the knowledge and authority of the Imams or else to the special distinctions of their followers. When the Qur'an speaks of "those firmly-rooted in knowledge [who alone know the interpretation of the Qur'an]"[49] or "those in possession of authority (*ulu'l-amr*),"[50] Shi`ite tradition understands these as references to the Imams. The Imams are also identified with the Qur'anic "landmarks" that God placed in the earth for the guidance of mankind;[51] with the "people of remembrance" whom the believers should consult in matters of religion;[52] and with Qur'anic references to divine light[53] and guidance.[54] In this way, Shi`ites argue that the doctrine of the imamate and the spiritual distinction of the Imams is contained (or concealed) within the literal meaning of the Qur'an. Shi`ite tradition also identified certain Qur'anic categories of pious persons as referring to their followers. For example, the Qur'anic "*ulu'l-albāb* (people of understanding),"—a category of spiritually perspicacious believers—are exclusively identified with the followers of the Imams.[55] A tradition attributed to al-Ṣādiq glosses the Qur'anic statement that Satan has no power over God's "devotees (`*ibād*)," by saying that the latter refers to the Shi`ites exclusively.[56] The Shi`ites are identified with the Qur'anic "best of creatures"[57] and "those true to their trust,"[58] and are frequently considered the sole

[49] A Qur'anic category of individuals mentioned in III:7, who in some interpretations of this verse, are said to be those who know the inner meaning of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an (Kulaynī 1983, 1: 269–270).
[50] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 262–263.
[51] Qur'an XVI:16; Kulaynī 1983, 1: 263–264.
[52] Qur'an XVI:43; Kulaynī 1983, 1: 267–269.
[53] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 249–252.
[54] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 247.
[55] For a reference to the *ulu'l-albāb*, see Qur'an XXXIX:9. Kulaynī 1983, 1: 269, h. 1, 2; Barqī 1370AH: 127–128, h. 134.
[56] Ahwāzī 1983–84: 129, h. 137.
[57] Ahwāzī 1983–84: 129, h. 140, in reference to Qur'an XCVIII: 7.
[58] Ibn Bābawayh 1990a: 61, in reference to Qur'an XXXIII: 23.

recipients of extraordinary types of divine forgiveness and leniency mentioned in the Qur'an.[59]

This kind of Qur'anic interpretation obviously served the doctrinal purpose of providing evidence for the presence of distinctly Shi`ite beliefs regarding their Imams and community in the universally accepted Qur'anic scripture. On a more esoteric level, it served a profound spiritual purpose, similar to that of other mystical modes of commentary on sacred texts. For Jewish Kabbalists, Sufi mystics, and also for esoteric Shi`ites, the scriptural text was not so much a wall circumscribing human religious knowledge, but rather a window whose apparent boundaries, for the spiritually adept, opened onto a much deeper and more comprehensive reality.[60] However, we should also consider the practical role sectarian exegeses may have played, and the subtle impact that the promulgation of these interpretations within the Shi`ite community may have had on their religious consciousness. To the extent that the sectarian referents assigned to various terms in the Qur'an were well known to their disciples, the Imams had the possibility of teaching in mixed sectarian company, and communicating religious meaning on two levels. On one level, the Imams' words and recitation of particular Qur'anic passages simply reiterated mainstream Islamic ideas about the importance of following learned guides in religion, and the spiritual distinctions and favors awaiting the believers in the next life; on another level, however, they could be understood as references to the Imams and to the Shi`ite community, respectively and exclusively. Thus for those who knew the Shi`ite sectarian interpretation of Qur'anic verses, and held it to be absolutely true, given their faith in the infallible knowledge of the Imams, Shi`ite sectarian views were effectively reinforced every time they read those passages from the Qur'an. A Shi`ite and a non-Shi`ite listening to the same passages of the Qur'an might well understand largely or even entirely different religious messages. Thus the Qur'an, whose literal text is considered beyond criticism, and is identical for Shi`ites and Sunnis, became capable through interpretation of conveying and reinforcing a wide range of controversial and uniquely Shi`ite views.

Outside of Qur'anic interpretation, Shi`ite traditions sometimes use other elements of conventional Islamic discourse publicly to conceal sectarian truths inwardly. This might be described by Eliade as "phanic" speech, which simultaneously transmits and conceals esoteric content by

[59] See traditions in Barqī 1370AH: 128, h. 126 and 158, h. 94; Ahwāzī 1983–84: 29, h. 51; Majlisī 1957–73, 69: 172–173, h. 19; Ḥusayn b. `Uthmān 1951–52: 111.

[60] Wasserstrom identifies "transparency" as a core concept in the writings of Scholem, Eliade and Corbin (1999: 58, 85–86).

using speech intended to mislead the uninitiated; or as Scholem might say, it is a matter of "protecting secrets better by pronouncing them than by keeping silent about them."[61] In one interesting example, al-Bāqir instructs his widely-respected disciple, Abān b. Taghlib, to publicly relate, on his authority, a statement that the Islamic testament of faith (*shahādah*) was God's "fortress" and that whoever entered this fortress would avoid divine punishment. Abān is surprised and confused, since the tradition suggests that all individuals, regardless of sectarian affiliation, can avoid hellfire by simply stating the basic Islamic formula of faith. Al-Bāqir then explains that the statement is true on one level, but not complete, for most people do not know that those who do not pay spiritual allegiance to `Alī and his descendants will be stripped of their *shahādah* on the Day of Judgment.[62] This part, it was understood, Abān was to keep to himself.

One of the most controversial aspects of Shi`ite thought was their attitude toward the first two caliphs, Abū Bakr and `Umar, whom Shi`ites consider the archenemies and persecutors of the family of the Prophet, even while most members of the Muslim community consider them to be perfect embodiments of Islamic virtue. This naturally made it rather dangerous for Shi`ites to speak in openly derogatory terms about these two figures. One of the most interesting pairs of terms used to cryptically refer to Abū Bakr and `Umar are "*jibt*" and "*ṭāghūt*." The names *jibt* and *ṭāghūt* appear in the Qur'an (IV:51) as false idols, and both terms are primarily defined as "anything which is worshipped other than God," whether it be an idol, a devil, a soothsayer, a sorcerer, and so on.[63] However, in Shi`ite tradition, "*jibt*" and "*ṭāghūt*" were also unmistakably used as code names for the first two caliphs. In one tradition, the Imam urges his followers not to mention [Shi`ite views of] *jibt* and *ṭāghūt* or other controversial Shi`ite doctrines in the interest of *taqiyyah*.[64] In another case, al-Ṣādiq lists the renunciation of "*jibt*" and "*ṭāghūt*" among the seven things one must do to be considered a true believer.[65] Renunciation

[61] Wasserstrom 1999: 28, 33. Hugh Urban also discusses this as a "discursive procedure that permits people to seem to be revealing knowledge while maintaining its secrecy. . . ." (1998: 239).

[62] Ibn Bābawayh 1972: 7; Daylamī 1988: 357.

[63] According to some early traditionists, these terms referred to the leader of the Jews and the Christians, respectively; whereas Ibn `Abbas used to relate that they referred to the leaders of the two Jewish clans of Medina, Ḥuyayy b. Akhtab and Ka`b b. Ashraf, respectively (see, Ibn Manẓūr 1988, 2: 164 and 8: 170–171).

[64] Majlisī 1957–73, 24: 303, h. 14.

[65] Ibn Bābawayh 1990b: 104, h. 41 (Note: the list only comes to "seven" if one counts dissociation from *al-jibt* and *al-ṭāghūt* as two separate things.) See also, Majlisī 1957–73, 53: 115–116, h. 21.

of false idols (taken literally) is an obvious prerequisite of "true belief" in mainstream Islamic terms, while renunciation of the two as a cryptic reference to Abū Bakr and `Umar represents an exclusive and controversial Shi`ite position. This use of commonly accepted Islamic religious ideas to refer to specific, and often political or controversial, Shi`ite notions, like the Shi`ite system of Qur'anic interpretation that invested universally recognized scriptural passages with very specific sectarian content, allowed the Imams and their followers to effectively "hide in plain sight" and conceal their sectarian teachings within the terminology of accepted orthodoxy.

STRATEGIES OF SECRECY—WRITING AND ORALITY

Despite its use of widely accepted terms of discourse to convey its sectarian views, early Shi`ism did stand apart from the Islamic intellectual culture of its day in the use of the writing and written texts as a means of transmitting religious knowledge. This notion seems to run against the grain of other mystical or minority religious groups, in that it is more common for such groups to maintain that the secrets or hidden content of their religion is contained in the oral teachings of the master rather than in written texts. Certainly, in some respects, this is also true of Shi`ism, in that one needed to rely on the living Imam's oral interpretations and exegeses of sacred texts and on his personal guidance in order to properly integrate the truths of the Qur'an or religious doctrine in one's own spiritual life. Yet Shi`ites, more often than other groups in the earliest period of Islamic history, tended to write down their traditions.

To understand why this is, we must consider the character of early Islamic intellectual culture. This culture explicitly favored orality, and particularly the oral transmission of religious knowledge, almost as matter of doctrine. The Qur'an was conveyed to the illiterate Prophet through direct speech, and was considered primarily an oral, recited text and only secondarily a written one. Moreover the nomadic or semi-nomadic culture of pre-Islamic Arabia favored cultural expression through orally recited poetry, and there seems to have been some deeply rooted suspicion among the Arabs of books and written documents, which could be surreptitiously forged and falsified—something viewed as less likely in the context of the face-to-face interaction between individuals that oral transmission required. Perhaps more important, however, was the prohibition on the writing of Prophetic tradition that was allegedly established by the second caliph, `Umar

b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 22/644).[66] Regardless of its historical authenticity, the attribution of a prohibition on written transmission to a figure as religiously prominent as `Umar was significant for the later determination of "orthodox" and "heterodox" means of transmitting religious knowledge, with oral transmission being clearly identified with orthodoxy.[67]

Nabia Abbot notes that this prohibition on writing carried much less weight among more heterodox groups in early Islamic society, who often ignored the second caliph's injunctions with regard to written transmission, and this must have been especially true in the Shi`ite case. Shi`ites consider `Umar to be one of the primary perpetrators of the historic injustice to the family of the Prophet, who played a key role in thwarting `Alī's immediate succession to Muhammad. Moreover, in Shi`ite accounts of the events after the death of the Prophet, issues of writing and written documents play an important role in the political marginalization of `Alī and his religious views. It is said that on his deathbed, the Prophet requested a pen and tablet be brought so that he could dictate his last will and testament, which Shi`ites believe included an explicit designation of `Alī as his successor. It is `Umar who is said to have denied the request by arguing that the Prophet was delirious and not mentally fit to give such a final testament.[68] A second equally well-known instance is the reported rejection by the first caliph, Abū Bakr, of `Alī's written codex of the Qur'an, with accompanying Prophetic commentary, which he compiled in the months after the Prophet's death.[69] This constitutes, of course, an important basis for the Shi`ite claim that their Imams alone know the complete Qur'an and its true interpretation, and that without the benefit of `Alī's codex and commentary, most of the Islamic community remained ignorant of the true meaning of the

[66] According to Islamic sources, `Umar collected and burned all written Prophetic traditions and records of this sort during his caliphate, fearing that they would confuse Muslims and detract from the absolute authority of the Qur'an. See Ibn Sa`d 1905–1940, 5: 140. There has been some academic discussion about the significance of `Umar's actions for the development of a predominantly oral cultural medium in early Islamic society. G.H.A. Juynboll has expressed skepticism about the authenticity and significance of the reports about `Umar (1983: 5), but in a more recent article and lengthy study of the issue of writing in early Islamic intellectual culture, Michael Cook also cites `Umar's reported prohibition on the writing of tradition as significant (1997: 502–503, 509).

[67] See, for example, Nabia Abbott's discussion of this (1957–72, 2: 7, 39, 52).

[68] See Ṭabarī 1964: 1806–1807, where `Umar is specifically identified as the one who refuses the Prophet's request; and Ibn Sa`d 1905–40, 2: 36–38, where `Umar is specifically identified as the main opponent of the Prophet's request in certain accounts but not in others.

[69] Ṭabarsī 1992, 1: 207. See also, Ibn Sa`d 1905–40, 2: 101, where `Alī's collection of the Qur'an after the death of the Prophet is noted without reference to Abū Bakr's rejection of it.

Qur'anic verses.[70] Thus in Shi`ite accounts of events following the death of the Prophet—accounts which in many ways represent the foundation of the Shi`ite perspective—religious truth is connected with written documents, and the subversion of religious truth is accomplished through their suppression. It is perhaps for this reason that, as Michael Cook notes, there is almost a complete absence of controversy over written transmission in Shi`ite tradition.[71] Writing also plays an important—if largely symbolic—role in discussions of the religious knowledge and spiritual authority of the Imams. Shi`ite tradition attributes the Imams' more esoteric forms of knowledge to a series of books, scrolls, or written documents that they held in their sole possession.[72] Thus writing played an essential role in some of the most fundamental of Shi`ite doctrines—from their view of events after the death of Muhammad to their understanding of the unique knowledge of the Imams.

On a practical level, however, writing would also have been a convenient means of transmitting information that was politically or religiously controversial. Because of the predominance and unique legitimacy of publicly and orally transmitted knowledge in dominant Islamic intellectual circles, written documents were inherently private ones. Individual scholars might keep written accounts of traditions, or legal opinions, as a personal *aide mémoire*, until they had learned the material competently by heart—after which they would either burn their written notes or bequeath them as a family legacy to their progeny[73]—but the written medium was not suitable to wide or public dissemination. It should come as little surprise, then, that the Shi`ite Imams, who encouraged their disciples to keep their teachings private and to remain aloof from public religious discourse (which was conducted, of course, through oral transmission) would frequently encourage Shi`ites to "write down" the traditions they had heard from the Imam—and therefore to keep them as a private legacy beyond the view of mainstream Islamic intellectual culture. Writing, therefore, had both doctrinal and practical

[70] For assertions of this claim, see Kulaynī 1983, 1: 284–286.

[71] Cook 1997: 483 and 444, where he notes: "I have encountered almost nothing of relevance in non-Sunni sources. The oralism of the old Kufan traditionists appears to have left no trace among the Imami [Shi`ites] or the Zaydis. . . ." He also notes the absence of controversy over this issue among the Kharjites—another minority perspective that emerged in the early Islamic period.

[72] For a variety of traditions on this issue, see Kulaynī 1983, 1: 281–284, 294–298, 319; al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī 1983: 190–193.

[73] See Abbott 1957–72, 2: 52, 62; Cook 1997: 476–480.

significance, serving the interests of both secrecy and survival, while also being symbolically consistent with the idea that true knowledge—whether it be knowledge of the Prophet's last will and testament, or else the unique esoteric knowledge possessed by the Imams—was held privately, rather than publicly.

Numerous traditions report the Imams' endorsement and encouragement of writing as a means for their followers to preserve their teachings. Al-Ṣādiq tells his disciples: "the heart trusts in writing"[74]—something that seems distinctly counter to the common Islamic notion that authenticity resided in oral rather than written transmission. He also instructs a group of his disciples gathered around him: "Write! For verily you will not preserve [this knowledge] if you do not write [it] down,"[75] and in another case he warns his disciples: "Preserve [this knowledge] in your books (*kutubikum*), for you will need them."[76] Issues related to the problematic nature of written documents in this early period and questions about the lack of accountability or reliable records of authorship are also occasionally addressed in Shi`ite traditions, with the Imams sometimes encouraging a certain amount of leniency in determining the authenticity of texts of questionable or unnamed authorship.[77] Of course, one should certainly approach these traditions with a heavy dose of caution. Forging traditions that communicated the Imams' uncritical endorsement of whatever could be found in this or that book, with or without an acceptable oral transmission pedigree, would certainly have been in the interest of those seeking to have any number of controversial ideas inserted into the Shi`ite record. Yet the potential for abuse of this policy does not allow us to dismiss the notion that early Shi`ites regularly recorded the teachings of the Imams in writing and viewed this as legitimate from a religious and intellectual point of view, since there are plenty of circumstantial details in the traditions indicating that Shi`ites used written texts to record and transmit what they had heard from the Imams.[78] It should also be noted that many of the primary sources that post-*ghaybah* Shi`ite scholars used to compile what became

[74] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 104, h. 8.

[75] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 104–105, h. 9.

[76] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 105, h. 10 (see also 105, h. 11). Of course, these traditions might well be intended to legitimate the process by which the canonical collections of Shi`ite hadith were compiled in the decades and centuries after the disappearance of the Imams, largely through explicitly written sources.

[77] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 104–106, h. 6, 15.

[78] See, for example, Kulaynī 1983, 1: 104, h. 5 and 110–111, h. 13.

standard and canonical collections of Shi`ite hadith were explicitly written documents.[79]

SECRECY, TRUTH, AND CHANGE

An issue that frequently emerged in relation to *taqiyyah* and secrecy concerns the apparent consistency or lack thereof in the teachings and rulings of the Imams. Some of the Imams' closest disciples observed that the Imams did not always give consistent answers to religious questions. This is sometimes explained as a matter of *taqiyyah* given the non-Shi`ite status of the questioner or others present, and the Shi`ite should understand that the Imam is practicing *taqiyyah* in this situation.[80] In one case, Zurārah b. A`yan, a prominent disciple of the fifth and sixth Imams witnessed al-Bāqir giving different answers to the same question posed by three different Shi`ite disciples. When Zurārah questioned al-Bāqir about this, he replied that he did this in the interests of himself and his disciples, because if all his disciples related identical statements from him, people would surmise that these (controversial) teachings were authentically from the Imam, putting the Imams and their followers in danger.[81] The tradition thus suggests that the Imams at times deliberately placed their disciples in a situation where they would be relating conflicting statements on their authority—thereby creating confusion about the true teachings of the Imams among outsiders, and obscuring the vision of those seeking to indict the Imams over controversial issues.

Of course, recourse to notions of *taqiyyah* may have been a way for later scholars to resolve or explain away contradictions and changes over time in the teachings of the Imams, but insofar as the Imams may have actually dispensed contradictory advice on occasion, this raises questions about their ability to guide their followers under situations of

[79] Here, of course, we are thinking of the frequently mentioned "400 *uṣūl* (sing. *aṣl*)" or notebooks compiled by the followers of the Imams that purport to record—rather unsystematically, it would seem from those that still exist—the words of the Imams (particularly al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq) either directly from them, or more commonly, through the original disciples of these two Imams.

[80] See Kulaynī 1983, 1: 321, h. 2, where al-Bāqir explains contradictory interpretations he gives on a particular Qur'anic verse; and Kulaynī 1983, 1: 118–119, h. 3 where al-Ṣādiq tells a disciple who questions him about a piece of advice he had just given to a questioner that contradicted what the Imam had previously told him: "I answer the people (*nās*—a pejorative term in Shi`ite discourse that usually refers to non-Shi`ites) with "more or less"—that is, in accordance with their need or their ability to understand.

[81] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 119, h. 5.

intense secrecy. The substantial number of traditions addressing the issue of how Shi`ites were to circulate the Imams' teachings among themselves, and how Shi`ites were to respond when they encountered new traditions attributed to the Imams, suggests this was a serious question for Shi`ites of this time. Both al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq encouraged the development of a strong sense of community among their disciples—especially those far away in Kufa—that could serve as a network for sharing and preserving the teachings of the Imams.[82] But Shi`ites were to exercise extreme caution both in disseminating traditions they knew from the Imams and in accepting traditions attributed to them by others. One set of traditions instructs Shi`ites to weigh the content of traditions attributed to the Imams against principles found in the Qur'an to determine their authenticity.[83] But another tradition advises Shi`ites who come upon a previously unheard tradition, to "recoil from it and reject it and consider unbelievers those who favor it without knowing if it is [truthfully] related on our authority, for by doing this he abandons spiritual allegiance (*walāyah*) to us."[84] When encountering two contradictory traditions related from the Imams through reliable sources the Shi`ite is advised to postpone judgment until he can consult the Imam personally, or else that whichever of the two he decides to follow is permissible for him.[85]

This last directive raises an important issue that goes to the heart of Shi`ite notions of religious truth and correct practice. In Shi`ite tradition, the most important quality for a Shi`ite believer after faith in God and the Prophet, was absolute spiritual allegiance (*walāyah*) to the Imam. Thus if a Shi`ite had to choose between two traditions or sets of instructions reliably related from the Imam, then choosing either one in good faith was an acceptable course of action—it was not about this or that action *per se*, but about faithful trust in the superior spiritual knowledge and guidance of the Imam and the intention to submit to his authority to the best of one's ability. Moreover, as we have seen, the Imams' pronouncements were liable to appear inconsistent or to change over time—in accordance with the religio-political affiliations of his audience, the spiritual advancement of the disciple to whom he was speaking, or for reasons of

[82] See traditions indicating this concern in Ḥaḍramī 1951–52: 79; Qummī 1990: 136–137, h. 6, 8; Ibn Bābawayh 1990b: 91, h. 22; Kulaynī 1983, 2: 192, h. 2.

[83] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 123–124.

[84] Kulaynī 1983, 2: 226, h. 7.

[85] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 119–120, h. 7.

dissimulation (*taqiyyah*), secrecy or discretion. From the Shi`ite point of view, truth in its absolute sense was unchanging and was transmitted in its pure and complete form from the Prophet to the Imams, but the material or circumstantial manifestations of that truth were not necessarily static.

This notion of the preservation of a permanent truth amidst continual change lay at the heart of many peculiarly Shi`ite doctrines—such as *bada'*, the ability of God to alter a destiny He had Himself preordained; the notion that the Imams' knowledge was acquired not only through the inherited legacy of their predecessors, but also through miraculous inspiration and angelic communication on a continuing basis;[86] and the demand that every Shi`ite knows and follows "the Imam of his age,"[87] which after the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam was parlayed into the principle that a Shi`ite needed to follow a "living" scholar of Islamic law (*mujtahid*). These ideas have been amply discussed elsewhere, but the general principle they reflect, that of truth and stability amid change, bears significantly upon the issue of the legitimacy of *taqiyyah* or secrecy. If changing outward guises and façades were necessary to protect this essential truth of the spiritual reservoir of the Imams, then this was, at least in some historical circumstances, considered a greater spiritual good than stoic adherence to this or that interpretation of correct practice. "Anyone who knows that we speak only the truth" al-Ṣādiq states "should be satisfied with what he knows from us; and if he hears from us something different than what he already knows, he should recognize this as a defense from us for him [i.e., through *taqiyyah*]."[88] *Taqiyyah*, therefore, is located both in the Imam's new or altered instructions and in the disciple's following them.

On a practical level, the various measures taken to prevent the public spread of Shi`ite teachings protected the Shi`ite Imams and their followers, while also serving to distinguish Shi`ites from their Sunni counterparts. Sunni Islam placed great value not only on the wide and public dissemination of religious traditions, but on the preservation of those traditions crystallized in verbatim form going back to the Companions of the Prophet. This process was by nature not only public and democratic, but also profoundly conservative. Shi`ite transmission of traditions, at

[86] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 296, 298–310.

[87] See, for example, Kulaynī 1983, 1: 235, h. 2.

[88] Kulaynī 1983, 1: 119, h. 6. There is also a tradition in which the Imam instructs the disciple that when he hears one opinion from him on one occasion and a different opinion on another occasion, he should follow whichever opinion was issued most recently (Kulaynī 1983, 2: 221, h. 7).

least during the time of the Imams themselves, was by contrast based on more elitist notions of the nature of religious knowledge and was thus more private in nature. Yet while the Imams were alive, it was also very much a living tradition that understood and accepted outward change as a necessary means of preserving what Shi`ites viewed as ultimate religious truth. Thus not only the content of Shi`ite teachings but also the manner in which they were preserved and transmitted posed an ideological challenge to the dominant intellectual and religious culture of early Islam.

CONCLUSION

The Shi`ite practices of *taqiyyah* and *kitmān* have often been regarded skeptically by non-Shi`ite and western scholars, but secrecy and the dissimulation of sectarian affiliation were more than simply a survival strategy. Although they were undoubtedly related to the imperative of survival, they also had a deeper and more meaningful basis in Shi`ite thought. As a small and vulnerable community that nonetheless viewed itself as the true and unadulterated heart of the Islamic religion, its survival and the survival of its teachings were occasionally considered to take precedence over public truthfulness, confessional disclosure, and even the wider propagation of this "true faith." For Shi`ites, ultimate religious truth was not limited to this or that outward expression of faith or religious ritual, rather, it resided in the transcendent principle of the sacred character of the Imams. The very strategies of secrecy employed by the Shi`ite community, including the use of private, secretly transmitted written texts in a religious culture dominated by the oral and public dissemination of religious knowledge, and the use of sectarian messages and meanings encoded in the literal words of the Qur'an and in the public teachings of Shi`ite leaders and scholars, were themselves reflections of the more esoteric and spiritually elitist notions of religious truth that informed much of Shi`ite thought. Through the well-placed use of secrecy and dissimulation within a broader culture (including its own) that glorified martyrdom and witnessing, through the written transmission of its teachings in a culture dominated by orality as a matter of religious principle, and by imbuing Qur'anic passages and ordinary Islamic religious terms with particular sectarian referents, Shi`ites were able to simultaneously challenge some of the basic religious and intellectual assumptions of the non-Shi`ite Islamic majority, while also concealing, preserving, and transmitting their views through centuries of intermittent persecution.

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