Who are The Shia?

Unity is the goal of Islam. In this way it can demonstrate the divine nature of God. But divisiveness has been a feature of Islam since its early days due to the obstinacy of "tribal" conflict (really large family units) and our human nature – our hunger for power and riches. These divisions appeared early in the history of Islam. Envy and malice were rife even in Muhammad's household in the Medina period. But in our day these attitudes have broken out again in Yemen, in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, in Bahrain, in Iraq and in Syria. Civil wars between Sunni and Shia Muslims are growing in other parts of the Muslim World.

Muhammad had great affection for Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, who, in return, paid that debt by loyalty and courage in the cause of the spread of Islam. On one occasion Muhammad commended Ali publicly saying, *"To look upon Ali is devotion. I am the city, Ali is the gate."* In those days in Medina there were many lightning raids and there was rapid expansion. Medina itself was a large armed base for these warlike raids and it was teeming with fighters.

Violence erupted after Muhammad's death. Abu Bakr (632-634 A.D.) adopted the title of Caliph (meaning successor of the Prophet). Ali wasn't present at that time. He was away on a raid. He only recognised Abu Bakr's leadership after many months. The next Caliph was Umar (634-644 A.D.). The Muslim Empire continued to expand rapidly under his leadership, but on November 3rd 644 A.D. he was killed in the mosque in Medina by a Persian slave who was a convert to Islam.

The selection of the 3rd Caliph was Uthman ibn Affin who was an early convert to Islam, but came from the Umayyad tribe. This tribe had severely persecuted the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca finally resulting in the Hijrah (flight). Muhammad and Ali both came from the Hashemite tribe. Uthman was about 70 years old when he became Caliph. He was a weak leader. By this time Muslim soldiers had conquered Persia, Afghanistan and Egypt. Open revolt broke out between the Muslim armies in Egypt and in Persia. They marched to Medina. Uthman was 82 years old by now. In June 656 A.D. soldiers broke into his room and killed him.

Five days after his death Ali was elected Caliph. Ali was now faced with the decision what to do with the mutinous soldiers who had killed Uthman. He did nothing. The Umayyad tribe then claimed that Ali was complicit in the murder and this led to civil war and the birth of the rift between the Sunni and the Shia.

Ali was the first cousin of Muhammad and the husband of his favourite daughter, Fatima. He was the father of his only two surviving male descendants Al Hasan and Al Husayn. Ali was perhaps the third person to believe in the prophethood of Muhammad. He was by nature affable, pious and very valiant in battle. There was a sizeable party both in Mecca and Medina that supported the belief that God and his Prophet from the beginning had clearly designated Ali as the only legitimate successor to Muhammad and that the first three Caliphs had cheated him out of his rightful office.

Throughout this power struggle Aisha, the wife of Muhammad and the daughter of Abu Bakr, was plotting – first against Uthman and then against Ali. Ali's downfall was made certain by the refusal of his allies, the Kharijites, to make any compromise with Uthman's family/tribe – the Umayyads.

There was a battle near Basra in southern Iraq in December 656 A.D. between Ali's forces and the forces of the Umayyads called "The Battle of the Camel" after the camel Aisha rode. Aisha was captured and Ali's opponents lost. Ali moved his capital from Arabia to Al-Kufah in southern Iraq.

The Umayyads moved their base to Damascus. So the great issue now became where should the centre be that ruled all Muslim affairs? Should it be Al-Kufah or Damascus – Iraq or Syria?

For four years Ali tried to rally the people to himself by invoking the 6th pillar of Islam – Jihad (Holy War). In one sermon he declared, *"Jihad is one of the gates of Paradise. I have summoned you to fight that host day and night covertly and overtly. I urge you to attack them before they attack you."* So with such words he urged the Muslims with him to attack their fellow Muslims – the Umayyads.

On a plain, called Siffin, near the river Euphrates there was "The Battle of Siffin" in July 657 A.D. between Ali's army and the Umayyad army. After several skirmishes the final encounter took place. Ali's forces were winning and at this point the Umayyad leader resorted to a trick. He appealed that the decision about who won the battle should be decided by the Quran. They stopped fighting.

The arbitrators met between Ma'an and Petra (in southern Jordan today), but there was no clear outcome. The very fact that Ali had given way to arbitration, alienated many of his own followers. These people are called Kharijites – now a new sect of Islam that still exists in different forms.

Early in January 661 A.D., as Ali was on his way to the mosque at Al-Kufah, he was hit on the head with a poisoned sword that penetrated his brain and he died. He was killed by a Kharijite. Ali was buried in Al-Najaf. Today there is a great mosque built over his tomb and it has developed into a great pilgrimage centre for Shia Muslims.

In some ways Ali dead proved to be more effective than Ali alive. He gained more as a martyr than he lost in his lifetime. His son, al Hasan was more at home in the harem than on the throne. He retired to a life of ease and pleasure in Medina. He died at the age of 45 – possibly poisoned (a claim made by the Shia). So al-Hasan was a *shahid* (martyr).

Ali's opponent, Mu'awiyah – an Umayyad, was proclaimed Caliph in 661 A.D. and he made his capital in Damascus. He died in 680 A.D. and his son Yazid ruled from 680-683 A.D. Ali's son, Al Husayn, refused him any allegiance and prepared for another round of battles. From Mecca, Al Husayn wrote to his Kufan allies for aid. On his way north, he discovered that the Kufans were reluctant to help, yet he went on to confront a sizeable Umayyad army. He was killed fighting at Karbala on the Euphrates in southern Iraq. Karbala is now a major pilgrimage centre in Iraq. The death of Al Husayn was on the 10^{th} of Muharram 680 A.D. To this day the 10^{th} of Muharram is a day of Shia fasting and mourning.

At the time, the death of Al Husayn appeared to have little political significance. But subsequently it became the catalyst of the Shia movement with all its religio-political implications.

The two cities Al Najaf and Karbala are the two major centres of both scholarship and pilgrimage for the Shia. With the death of Ali, the "Reformation Period" of the Caliphate that had begun with Abu Bakr ended. The Umayyads introduced the hereditary principle into the Caliphate – never yet entirely abandoned in the Sunni world.

The Shia Movement has at least three names:

- **Shia al-Bayt** – the party of the prophet's family
- **The Imamis** – the followers of the Imam
- **The Twelvers** and other numbers

There are several characteristics that distinguish the Shia from the Sunnis. There are perhaps five significant categories of difference:

1. Dynastic
2. Ethnic
3. Esoteric
4. Messianic
5. Dogmatic

We will look at each of these in turn.

1. The Dynastic differences between the Shia and the Sunnis

The central issue was who should rule the Islamic State. According to the Sunnis, Caliphs should be appointed on a hereditary basis. There were others who felt that the Caliph appointed should be a Meccan of outstanding merit and could be open to any pious Muslim even if he was of African origin!

But for the Shia, the spiritual and temporal headship of Islam belonged exclusively to Ali's house by right and this was intended by Muhammad from the beginning. The Umayyads also worked on the hereditary principle, but the Umayyads had bitterly opposed Muhammad while he was living in

Mecca, since he came from a different clan – the Hashemites. It was largely the Umayyad clan that forced Muhammad and his followers to leave Mecca and migrate to Medina – the Hijrah.

So in the eyes of many Muslims of that time, the Umayyads were power-hungry usurpers only concerned with pleasure, power, wealth and prestige rather than with true religion.

The Shia believe that Muhammad transferred his succession to Ali and his children through Fatima, Muhammad's daughter and the prophet's grandchildren (al Hasan and al Husayn). So the torch of leadership was to be handed down only through Ali's seed. Muhammad apparently said, *"You, Ali, are to me what Aaron was to Moses."* But this does not necessarily imply the hereditary principle. Yet this is the belief that has been hammered into the minds of the Shia. It is of no value to question this in discussions with Shia friends.

The Twelvers: Who are they?

They are a major group of the followers of Ali. The Twelver Shia continued to have a hard time under the Abbasid dynasty. They were the descendants of the Hashemite clan as was Muhammad. Al Abbas was an uncle of Muhammad. The descendants of Al Abbas soon became the champions and levellers of the anti-Umayyad movement. They chose as their base a little village south of the Dead Sea but right on the caravan route from Yemen and the pilgrim roads. The Shia, the Abbasid forces and many Muslims from eastern Persia and Afghanistan formed a coalition against the Umayyads. The coalition defeated the Umayyads following the fall of Al Kufah on October 30, 749 A.D. and the first Abbasid Caliph was enthroned. After a second battle on the Zab river in northern Iraq, Damascus was finally captured in April 750 A.D.

The last four Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty proved incapable, dissolute and degenerate. They were far more interested in their wine cups and far more absorbed in music than in the Quran and the affairs of state. They developed the harem institution and there was general moral decline. The Umayyad state had become, in effect, an ordinary secular state.

The Abbasid Dynasty moved the centre of Islam from Damascus to Iraq (Baghdad). The Abbasids ruled from 750-1258 A.D. what characterised Abbasid rule was that it was international rather than just Arab – i.e. from the Arabian Peninsula. But the Shia fared no better under the Abbasids than under the Umayyads.

One of the Caliphs, Mutawakkel, destroyed the tomb of Ali at Najaf as well as Husayn's tomb in Karbala. This earned him the hatred of all the Shia down through the ages.

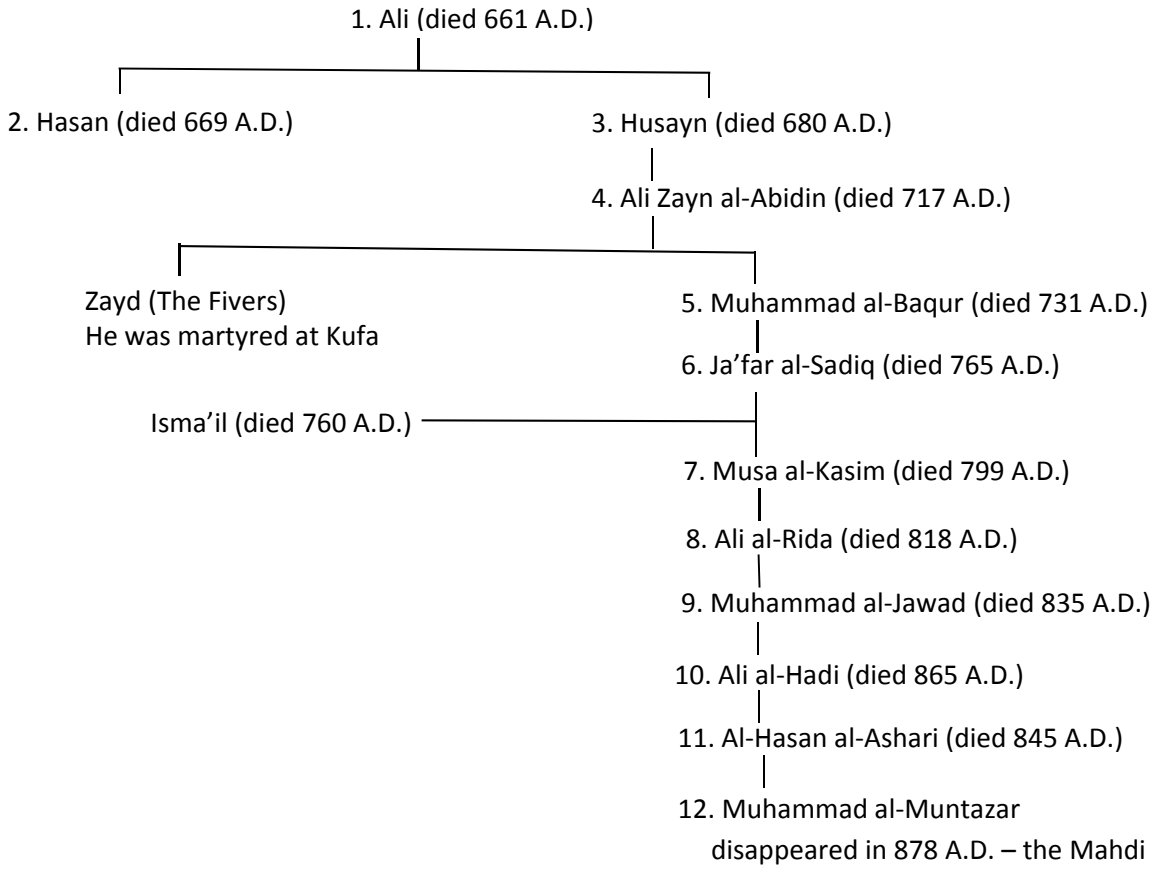
During this period, the Shia developed the principle of dissimulation (*taqiyah*) due to either caution or fear. They became a suppressed minority again.

The Shia leader is called the Imam. His position is inherited from Muhammad via Ali and he not only inherited temporal sovereignty – i.e. political power – but also the prerogative of interpreting the law (Sharia) and as such was the infallible interpreter of the law. Together with his infallibility, there was the belief that the Imam had the divine gift that he could not lie!

So the Shia believe that the Imams are protected against all error and sin. Down through the Imams to the last Imam – the 12th (Ithna' Ashariyah) they all swore their allegiance to the descendants of Husayn (died 680 A.D.).

The 12th Imam (Muhammad Al-Muntazar) disappeared in 878 A.D. in a cave of the great mosque at Samarra without leaving any sons. The Shia believe he never died and since his disappearance he has been in a temporary state of occultation (*ghayhah*). They believe that in due time he will appear again as the Mahdi to restore the true Islam and then go on to conquer the whole world and usher in "the end times".

This Imam-Mahdi belief is a major difference between the Shia and the Sunnis. The Sunnis do not emphasise eschatology, except the Islamic State (Daesh) who believe the "Final Battle" will be fought on the plains of northern Syria east of Aleppo between a Sunni army and al-Rum (the area of the Eastern Roman Empire – Asia Minor – and in general said to be the Quranic phrase for what we now call the West).



Some of the Shia insisted that the Imamate belonged not to the 5th Imam but to his elder brother and there was a split among the Shia. All the while, bloody battles were raging along with assassinations that were carried out between the followers of Zayd (called the Fivers) and the followers of Muhammad Al-Baqar.

The Fivers: the followers of Zayd – often called Zaydis

They are a tolerant Shia sect. They don't believe in a hidden Imam. They don't practice temporary marriage (*mut'ah*) and they don't allow *taqiyah*. Fivers are mainly found in Yemen. There was another group on the Caspian Sea southern coast in Iran.

The founder of modern Yemen, Yahya Hamid al-Din, gained full independence in 1918. The Zayidis have been the military and social elite of Yemen. They are called Houthis.

The Isma'ili Shia

Isma'il died before his father the 6th Imam and there arose a new group that recognised him as the 7th Imam. They are known as Seveners or Isma'ilis.

To the Isma'ilis, Isma'il became the hidden Mahdi. The Isma'ilis sent out propagators of a doctrine known as *batin* (meaning esoteric). The Quran should not be interpreted literally, but allegorically. Religious truth had an "inner meaning" that was veiled from the eyes of the uninitiated. The newly initiated follower was cautiously – under secrecy – introduced to 7-9 graded stages (not so different from modern Freemasonry.)

The Isma'ilis also formed a sizeable group in northern Syria – a group that consider Ali as an incarnation of God. They are usually called Alawites. Alawites adopted a number of Christian festivals including Christmas and Easter. They sometimes use Christian names. Some believe they were once "nominal Christians" who passed straight into Isma'ilism.

There are other groups of Isma'ilis that don't function today – such as the Qarmatians (very similar to communism). In 930 A.D. they invaded Mecca and carried off the Black Stone. It was returned in 951 A.D. by order of the Fatimid Caliph.

The Assassins were another group. Originally this was mainly a Persian group. The founder was Hasan ibn-al-Sabbah – a Persian. In 1090 A.D. he gained possession of a mountain fortress – Alamut in the Alburz Mountains. From there surprise raids were made and they reduced assassination to an art. The Assassins also developed a base in Syria – in Aleppo. These people still survive in India and Tajikistan under the leadership of the Aga Khan.

The Twelvers

Muhammad al-Muntazar disappeared and so created the legend of Muhammad the Mahdi (the expected one). With him the line of the Imams ended.

2. The Second Factor in the Rise of the Shia: Ethnic Differences

During the early stages of the movement, most Shia were Arabs from the northern and central parts of Arabia. However, with the rapid expansion of Islam out of this area, a growing number of "non-Arabs" – i.e. not from the central parts of Arabia – were being converted to Islam. These people were known as the *muwali* (clients). Arabic was becoming the language of worship and more, but they retained their strong ethnic identities – Arameans, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Persians.

The Arabs were in control of all the funding arrangements in these conquered lands and they imposed a tax on these client peoples. There was much corruption among the tax collectors and the governors of the different provinces oppressed their various subjects.

Many of the *muwali* joined the Shia as a protest movement against oppression and discrimination. Gradually Shi'ism became the national religion of Persia, southern Iraq and much of Yemen.

The legalism of orthodox Islam had little appeal to the Persian mind since they were seeking mystic experiences or an esoteric faith to satisfy the longings of their hearts and minds.

3. The Esoteric factor in the Rise of the Shia: a religion of martyrs and saints

The Shia became a magnet for the disaffected segment of legalistic Sunni Islam. Today there are large numbers of Shia in Lebanon who were *muwali* of non-Arab stock. Others live in India and Pakistan and often collide with their Sunni neighbours.

So many people see the Shia as a protest movement – essentially social and political – against the oppressive attitude of the ascendant Sunni Arabs from central Arabia. It was not until the 16th century – over 600 years after the disappearance of the 12th Imam – that the Safavid dynasty in Persia managed to impose Shi'ism as the official religion of Persia. The reign of Shah Ablas I (1587-1629 A.D.) was the high point of Safavid wealth and power.

An expert in oriental art and literature would recognise the superlative quality of Persian art and poetry – possibly an Aryan trait. The Persians left the Sunni Arab Empire and turned defeat into victory, filling the vacuum of what was originally a Bedouin society. They made a splendid artistic contribution to world art.

Sunni Islam forbids the representation of animals and humans in art, but this prohibition is not so in the art of Persia. Even Muhammad has been depicted in Persian paintings. A nation so gifted and so proud demanded and got a religious philosophy of its own that is, at the same time, more fanatical and more libertarian than that of the Bedouin Arabs. Perhaps the pendulum has swung the other way, to some extent, since Ayatollah Khomeini.

The word "esoteric"" means private or secret – that which is restricted to a special group of those who have been initiated into the group. Christian "mysteries" are open to all so Christianity is an "exoteric" faith.

There is an element of mysticism in all Shia thought – not surprising for an Aryan – and less Semitic desire for such experiences. This is short of the pantheism further east in Asia, but it has developed some of its tendencies.

Some estimate there are about 44 different sects among the Shia – many of them esoteric. The Shia believe that God gave a special revelation to Fatima, Muhammad's daughter and Ali's wife, and this is still in the possession of the 12th Imam. So the Imam has further insights into the mysteries of the

universe and the future. The Prophet Muhammad possessed the gift of revelation. The Imams had the gift of interpretation. So today, it is the chief Ayatollah who interprets the mind of God to the people. This would be the equivalent of an infallible Pope to Catholics.

The Imam has been given the perfection of all "spiritual gifts". A *Nabi* (prophet) sees "the angel" and hears the angel who brings the revelation. The Imam does not see an angel but only hears his voice.

This esotericism adds to the received text of the Quran such phrases as will enhance the status of Ali and his descendants. For example in Sura 4:166 "*God bears witness to you by divine knowledge* (here the Shia text of the Quran adds 'concerning Ali') *and the angels bear witness."*

In Sura 5:67, "*O Apostle, pass on what has been revealed to you by the Lord* (the Shia text adds 'about Ali')"

In Sura 3:11, "*You are the best nation raised up, you enjoin what is good and forbid what is vile."* The Shia replace 'nation' with 'Imams'.

The case for these additions is not proven from any of the early manuscripts of the Quran that have been found.

Today the Isma'ilis and the Druze survive as the clearest of esoteric cults under the umbrella of Shi'ism. The Isma'ilis combine the Iranian ideology of grace, gnostic speculation and Manichaean religion which is essentially a dualistic faith – light against darkness. Manicheans taught that the way to salvation was the way of the ascetic. They borrowed some Buddhist laws and prohibitions. The founder was Mani – a Persian. As in the Pythagorean system, the number seven acquired a sort of sacred symbolism.

So there are seven legislating prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Muhammad Atem. There are seven steps in the cosmology: God, the Universal Mind, the Universal Soul, Primal Matter, Space, Time and World.

The Quarmatian group of the Shia, that started around 871 A.D., was a secret society. Initiation was necessary for admission in seven different steps of admission. It supported itself on a series of taxes. It also proscribed not only a community of common property, but also of common wives! They stressed tolerance and equality and formed themselves into trade guilds.

The Druze in Lebanon are derived from Hakim – the Fatimid ruler in Egypt around 1021 A.D. This group was driven out of Cairo and they emigrated to Syria. The original Druze leader was al-Dazari (a cobbler). He was apparently a Turk. At the beginning they were a "closed community" – i.e. you had to be a direct descendant of the original Druze families that emigrated from Egypt. So they are both a tribe and a religious group. Hakim eventually went mad and proclaimed that he was God!

The Druze divide their community into two groups – those who possess "the mysteries" and the ignorant who don't. This is typical of esoteric class division.

4. The Messianic Factor that distinguishes the Shia

For us, as believers in the Lord Jesus, this is the most intriguing part of Shi'ism. The Shia Messiah is a composite figure that is embodied in the Imamate collectively and particularly important are the 1st, the 3rd and the last Imams. Each of these three reflects the traits of a popular Messiah – idealised, romanticised and calling for devotion that is little short of adoration for the victim that was killed for his people. It was for them he enjoyed pain, trial and death. In the end he will return to earth as intercessor, mediator or saviour. Many Shia sects see the Imam as partaking of the divine nature.

The strange disappearance of the 12th Imam merely adds to the element of mystery that surrounds the Imamate. Some of the Shia go to very extravagant lengths – the belief that Ali, Fatima and Husayn were created before Adam! So there are notions of pre-existence and quasi-divinity associated with the Mahdi concept.

Let us look at the sacrificial role of the Imam – the victim – the martyr. Here we find the most sensational feature of Shia practice – one that is commemorated in their distinctive day – **Ashura**. Muharram is the first month of the Muslim calendar. The 10th day of this month is observed by the

Sunnis as the day that Adam and Eve were created. It is a minor feast day. But for the Shia the 10th of Muharram is a far more memorable day. The first 10 days are spent in lamentation, recalling Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala. The story of his death is re-enacted by setting out his trials in the desert, his fortitude and his cruel death. Many of the celebrants cut their bodies with knives and parade in the streets streaming with blood in scenes that remind us of Kings 18:28 (the account of Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Ba'al) ***"And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them."*** It is a day of atonement for sins. Tears shed during Ashura have atoning worth. [Compare this with Ps. 56:7.]

These portrayals in plays telling events in a graphic way are rather similar to the graphic portrayals in passion plays that can be seen in parts of Catholic Europe and in the Philippines. These scenes and "plays" are held in several of the Shia centres.

Here are a few extracts from the drama of "Husayn's Passion" that show the intensity of feeling in the soul of the Shia. You may discern some parallels with Christianity in these lines.

- Husayn cries, *"I am the prey of the arrow of affliction. They are going to kill me for no crime or guilt save that I am the Prophet's grandson. Is there anyone to pity our condition? If I wish, I could make the moon fall, but I die offering myself as a sacrifice for the sins of my people, that they should be saved from wrath. I am the Intercessor at the Resurrection."*

  So Husayn is raised to the rank of intercessor and expiator for sins. He meets the need for a mediator between God and man that needs to be met at Golgotha in history or at Karbala in legend.

- A Persian pilgrim told of a prophet near Tabriz ((Northwest Iran) who was sentenced to death by the authorities. They bound him to a cross with two friends. After hanging for hours, he was fired on by the soldiers. His friends were killed, but he remained unhurt. The bullets went through the cords that bound him to the cross and he fell safely to the ground. The Persian commented, *"We too have sons of God in our village"*.

The last of the 12 Imams was Muhammad Al-Muntazar who vanished down a well near Baghdad or perhaps he was spirited away. Though he disappeared, Twelver Shia believe he is still alive and will appear on the last day.

Ibn Khaldun records that devout Shia would gather at the well and beg the absent Imam to appear. The last surviving companion of the Mahdi announced that all communications with the Mahdi would cease until the period of occultation was over. Then the 12th Imam (the Mahdi) with the prophet Jesus – the two pure immaculate ones – would destroy the anti-christ and the whole world would enter the fold of Islam.

The problem of these expectations is that neither Husayn nor Muhammad Al-Muntazar explicitly asserted such claims as have been made concerning them. The role of the Lord Jesus is all inclusive. He is the One who has paid the price for all our sins. What the Shia believe to be true of Ali is in fact completely true of the Lord Jesus. He is the One who is coming again and who will put an end to all evil at His second coming. The claims of the Shia Imams have been made in a way that defies the laws of logic and obscures the hope of glory!

5. The Dogmatic Factor among the Shia that makes them different from the Sunnis

I am going to use the term 'dogmatic' loosely, applying it to the dogma and legal differences between the two major groups of Muslims – the Sunni and the Shia.

Of course there is a large measure of agreement between the two groups. Both accept the Quran as supremely authoritative in matters of faith and practice. Both revere the memory of the founder, Muhammad, though for the Shia the focus of veneration includes his daughter Fatima and his cousin and grandson. Much of the tradition is accepted jointly by the Sunnis and the Shia, but the latter have their own collections of Hadith. There are five in all.

Our concern here is to highlight the major differences and disagreements.

- **The Role of the Imam**

  For Sunnis, the Imam is primarily the leader at congregational prayers. Muhammad once declared that the man must be familiar with Muhammad's book. He should act as the Imam for the people.

  For the Shia, the Imam is the object of reverence, almost semi-divine in status. It is an article of the faith that all the Imams were created from pre-existent life. Imams are free from sin and error. In this area of infallibility there is a further dispute. The Sunnis rely on *"ijtihad"* (an Islamic legal term meaning "independent reasoning". It is one of the four sources of Sunni law.) The religious scholars who are engaged in these tasks are called the *mujtihad*. But there has been no reliable *mujtihad* since the founders of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). In Arabic, the word "*hukm*" means arbitration or judgement. But with no central legal system in the post-Medina Muslim community, there is no agreement among the Sunnis and the Shia. So it is unlikely that new light will dawn on the Sunna. But the Shia hold that such a role is still available to the representatives of the Imam and through the 12th Imam – the Ayatollah (meaning 'Sign of God'). This includes Ayatollah Khomeini and his current successors.

- **The Principle of Religious Dissimulation** (*Taqiyah*)

  This is a precautionary denial of religious belief in the face of potential persecution. It is stressed by Shia Muslims when they are living in an environment of persecution by the Sunni majority. The concept is based on the Quran Sura 3:28 and 16:1066 as well as the Hadith.

  The Shia poets praised the great enemies the Umayyad Caliphs to their face while secretly loathing them.

- ***Mutah* Marriages**

  The marriage laws of the Shia differ from those of the Sunnis in a number of details. The most striking of these is in *mutah* marriage – a temporary contract between a man and a woman for a specific period of time. This was a pre-Islamic tradition that still has legal sanction among Twelver Shia. *Mutah* means enjoyment. This seems to be the sole purpose of the short-term liaison. No witnesses are required for a valid *Mutah* contract.

  This custom was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia among the Bedouin where a host would offer a female relative for a night – sometimes even his own wife. The Shia claim that Muhammad permitted *mutah*. The Sunnis deny this on the grounds that he banned the custom at Khaybar after the battle that was fought there in 628 A.D. But Sura 4:28 gives the Shia the basis of the argument, *"Give to those who co-habit the dowry. This is the law. But it is no crime to make agreements over and above the law."*

  For *mutah* there needs to be a period that is fixed by both parties – a year, a month, a day – the link is severed when the term expires. Such marriages are common in rural Iran. The abuses of the system are not hard to imagine. It leads to the degradation of hapless women. It also makes practices that are much publicised – such as the execution of adulterers and adulteresses – an exercise in hypocrisy. Yet the Iranian leaders approve of *mutah* marriages and regard this practice as conforming to divine laws.

In Conclusion

Shi'ism is currently resurgent. In 1979, the Shah of Iran was deposed and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. Thus a train of events was set in motion, the results of which are causing tremors all over the Middle East and further afield. In the Near East, the Gulf states and Yemen and further afield, civil war has broken out between the Sunnis and the Shia.

In 1906, an earlier Shah issued an edict to the effect that it was for the doctors of religion to determine whether laws proposed in the National Assembly by politicians were in accord with the principles of Islam and to repudiate wholly or in part any proposed laws that were in variance to the Sharia. In such matters, a committee of religious experts would be obeyed. This arrangement should continue until the appearance again of the Mahdi.

But in 1979, after the Revolution in Iran, the expulsion of the Shah and the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini, a ruling was made that all laws passed by the *majlis* (parliament) had to be approved by a panel of Ayatollahs before passing into Iranian Law in the light of Shia jurisprudence. These Ayatollahs had the right to expel from the *majlis* any deputy of whom they disapproved. So the position of the religious leaders is higher than that of the President of Iran. The present position of the Ayatollahs is that they should participate, guide and control all political discussion in Iran and they can meddle wherever they wish.

The supporters of this form of Shi'ism are called Hezbollah (God's Party). This name covers a number of different organisations. There is the Hizb al-Dawah al-Islamiyya that was formed in Iraq by the Shia and outlawed by Saddam Hussein. In Lebanon the Hezbollah (Hisb Allah) was formed by the Shia clans in the Bekaa Valley and in the south of Lebanon as well as the large Shia population forced by the civil war into the slums of southern Beirut.

In general, Hezbollah fighters have become the "storm troopers" of Shi'ism. The Shia mosque has become the community's focus, meeting place and social centre. A committee made up of mosque members should distribute food to the needy. Many Ayatollahs in Iran would like to restrict oil production to prevent a great deal of the importation of products from the West – especially the consumption of luxuries such as computers and electrical goods.

In spite of the alleged triumphs of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, it has brought little benefit to the Iranian people and a great deal of carnage. It is estimated that the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) caused 1.5+ million deaths. Today civil wars between the Sunnis and the Shia are causing a great deal of carnage in Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Lebanon, Bahrain and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia as well as in Yemen. It is possible these are also spreading into Afghanistan, Pakistan and the wider Muslim World.

Among the Shia there is a strange ideology of martyrdom that must be kept alive while the youth in these countries die. The wars are very costly – not only in the deaths of the fighters, but also the deaths of the general population and the destruction of property and infrastructure. A great number of people are paying the price – usually the ordinary masses who are fleeing as refugees.

In the terrible days of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln had a word of comfort for his people in the "North": "This too shall pass away." But the civil war against the Shia seems to be getting worse! It is savagely destroying cities, towns and villages in parts of the Near East and parts of the Arabian Peninsula and no one appears to have a solution.