Chapter Nine

THE POLARIZATION OF SUNNISM AND SHĪʿISM

In the history of Islamic religion the main feature of the century from 850 to 950 was that it became polarized into definite Sunnite and Shīʿite forms. The Muslim scholarly tradition has no conception of development, and so the Sunnites see Sunnism as having been the belief of Muslims from the beginning. Modern scholars using the concept of development, on the other hand, can show how Sunnism gradually attained a fuller and more precise formulation of its beliefs, as circumstances forced the Muslims to decide between rival interpretations of basic texts.

It was in the aftermath of the Inquisition that Sunnism may be said to have become the official religion of the caliphate. The policy of the Inquisition was abandoned by a series of measures in the first two or three years of the reign of al-Mutawakkil (847–61), and from this time onward Sunnism was the form of religion followed, at least *de facto*, by the ʿAbbāsid caliphs. Apart from this political decision, however, various other processes were taking place which together led to the consolidation of Sunnism in something like its final form.[1]

One of these processes was a clearer formulation of the basic principles or 'roots' of jurisprudence, and a widening area of agreement between jurists.[2] Previously each of the main centres of legal thought had tended to go its own way and had merely said, 'The teaching of our school is . . .', or had supported it by reference to a distinguished earlier member of the school. In time, however, some points of law came to be justified by quoting a Ḥadīth about something Muḥammad had said or done; this, of course, was in those cases where there was no clear Qurʾānic statement, or where the interpretation of the Qurʾān was disputed. As a result of the work of the jurist ash-Shāfiʿī (767–820) the methodological superiority of justifying legal principles by Ḥadīth came to be generally recognized and all the schools began to claim that their teachings were in accordance with Qurʾān and Ḥadīth as two 'roots' of law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). Ash-Shāfiʿī also

introduced other two 'roots', 'analogy' (*qiyās*) and 'consensus' (*ijmāʿ*), but not all the schools recognized these. By about 900 the four Sunnite schools or rites (*madhāhib*) which still exist—Ḥanafites, Ḥanbalites, Mālikites and Shāfiʿites—had a fairly definite shape, and there were also some minor schools which subsequently faded away. No new school with a distinctive methodology was founded after this date.

The development of jurisprudence led to advances in the study of Ḥadīth.[3] Much care was taken in distinguishing 'sound' Ḥadīth from others by scrutiny of the *isnāds*, and great collections of Ḥadīth were formed for legal purposes. The best known are those of al-Bukhārī (d.870) and Muslim (d.875), and in the course of the tenth century these and four others came to be accepted as specially authoritative, and are sometimes described by the occidental term 'canonical'. This was another aspect of the consolidation of Sunnism.

Something similar was happening in Qurʾānic studies.[4] The interpretation of the text of the Qurʾān had always received much attention from Muslim scholars, and by about 900 there was wide agreement about the interpretation of many verses. All that was best in the work of the previous two and a half centuries was taken up into the great Qurʾān-commentary of aṭ-Ṭabarī (d.923), which faithfully preserves the more important divergent views on questions of interpretation. Another scholar Ibn-Mujāhid (d.935) devoted himself to the study of the variants in the Qurʾānic text, and as a result of his work seven sets of readings came to be accepted as equally correct.

In the elaboration and formulation of Sunnite dogma there was also a growing measure of agreement. This came about despite the fact that there were two opposing trends in respect of what might be called theological method. Something has already been said about Kalām or rational theology, and an account has been given of the views of men like Ḍirār and the Muʿtazilites. Vehemently opposed to these Mutakallimūn were the Ahl al-Ḥadīth, the 'people of the Ḥadīth', who probably included most of the serious scholars of the period and not merely the specialists in the study of Ḥadīth. The Ahl al-Ḥadīth contained many shades of theological opinion, but the majority of them were in a general sense 'conservative'. In contrast many of the Mutakallimūn, especially the Muʿtazilites, might be called 'liberal' or 'radical'. Earlier Western students of these matters tended to think that all practitioners of Kalām were Muʿtazilites up to the time of al-Ashʿarī; but the researches of the last forty years have made it clear that in the ninth century there were Mutakallimūn whose dogmatic position was closely akin to that of the 'conservatives' among the Ahl al-Ḥadīth.

The foremost representative of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth in the first half of the ninth century was Aḥmad ibn-Ḥanbal (780–855).[5] From him

the Ḥanbalite legal school took its name, and there was a distinctive Ḥanbalite theological tradition closely associated with the legal school. His eminence came partly from his outstanding intellectual ability and partly from the fact that in the Inquisition he was one of the few ulema who refused to make a public profession of belief in the createdness of the Qur'ān. Several credal statements have been preserved setting out his position (and that of most of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth) on the doctrinal questions which had hitherto been discussed, such as God's determination of events. Some of these credal statements may have been slightly modified by the later Ḥanbalites who transmitted them, but there is no change of substance. Emphasis was placed on the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, and Aḥmad ibn-Ḥanbal insisted that even the human utterance (*lafẓ*) of the Qur'ān was uncreated. The close relation of religion and politics in Islam is shown by the fact that there is an article to the effect that 'the best of the community after the Prophet is Abū-Bakr, then 'Umar, then 'Uthmān, then 'Alī'. Despite earlier questioning of the position of 'Uthmān this became the final Sunnite position.

Throughout the ninth century and later the Sunnite position was also being given fuller formulation by the Ḥanafites, the followers of Abū-Ḥanīfa in law and, to a great extent, also in theology.[6] Though the Ḥanafites believed in the use of reasoning in legal matters (and are prominent among the Ahl ar-Ra'y, the upholders of individual reasoning in law), not all of them allowed the use of reasoning in questions of doctrine. This did not greatly affect their credal statements, however. These are ascribed to Abū-Ḥanīfa himself, but are clearly later. Thus the creed called the *Waṣiyya* or 'Testament' of Abū-Ḥanīfa appears to date from about 850, whereas that known as *Al-fiqh al-akbar II* is possibly half a century later, since it expresses a more developed doctrine of the attributes of God. The latter also asserts that man's utterance of the Qur'ān is created, whereas the earlier *Waṣiyya* is silent on this point and in general closer to the views of Aḥmad ibn-Ḥanbal. Both have an article about the four caliphs. Perhaps the most important difference between the Ḥanafites and the Ḥanbalites is that the Ḥanbalites maintain that faith increases and decreases, while the Ḥanafites deny this; the point at issue seems to be whether faith is taken to include activity (acts of obedience) or is thought of primarily as involved in membership of the community.

There were also Mutakallimūn during the ninth century whose doctrinal position was not far removed from that of the Ḥanbalites and Ḥanafites. The most influential seems to have been Ibn-Kullāb, who died shortly after 854, and who was remembered for his elaboration of the doctrine of the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God.[7] For a time there was a group of Sunnite Mutakallimūn known as the Kullābiyya, and

it was apparently to this group that al-Ash'arī attached himself when he abandoned the Mu'tazilites (as will be described in the next chapter).

Another group took shape in the eastern provinces in the later ninth century with its centre at Nishapur. These were the Karrāmites, the followers of Ibn-Karrām (d.869).[8] In the tenth and eleventh centuries they were a political force of some importance and appear in general histories of the region and period. It is difficult to reconstruct Ibn-Karrām's doctrines from the few scattered statements that have been preserved, but he seems on many points to have been close to the Ḥanafites, though also opposing them on a few.

Despite the cleavage between the Mutakallimūn or rational theologians of a Sunnite persuasion and the Ahl al-Ḥadīth who objected to 'rational' arguments, there was increasing agreement about the doctrinal or dogmatic statements constitutive of Sunnism. These agreements arose out of the discussions described in previous chapters. Against the Khārijites (and with the Murji'ites) it was agreed that sinners whose intellectual belief was sound were not excluded from the community because of their sin. Against the Shī'ites it was agreed that the first four caliphs were genuine caliphs, and that the chronological order was the order of excellence. Against the Qadarites and Mu'tazilites it was agreed that all events are determined by God. It was also agreed that the Qur'ān was the uncreated word or speech of God, though there were differences of opinion about the human utterance of the Qur'ān.

While there was thus a consolidation by the early tenth century of the main ingredients of Sunnism, it was only somewhat later that the various groups recognized one another as fellow-Sunnites. Part of the difficulty was that there was for long no Arabic term with the precise connotation of the English word 'Sunnites'. The nearest equivalent is the phrase Ahl as-Sunna wa-l-Jamā'a, 'the people of the Sunna and the community', but it was perhaps only towards 1100 that this was widely accepted as including all those whom we would call Sunnites. At earlier dates when the phrase Ahl as-Sunna or some variant is used it may have a different sense or refer to only one of the groups now included among the Sunnites. The same applies to the adjective *sunnī*. Yet, even if full Sunnite self-awareness and mutual recognition only came about in the later eleventh century, there are good grounds for holding that the essential polarization of Islam into Sunnite and Shī'ite happened in the early tenth century.

While the most important event during this period from a Shī'ite standpoint was the creation of Imāmite Shī'ism, the other two main branches gained greater definiteness by becoming associated with particular political entities. In 909 an Ismā'īlite dynasty, the Fāṭimids, managed to establish itself in Tunisia, and then in 969 conquered

Egypt and moved its centre of government to the new city of Cairo. Before the Ismā'īlites had their success in Tunisia, the Zaydite form of Shī'ism had become virtually restricted to two small independent states, one to the south of the Caspian Sea and the other in the Yemen. An account of the theological elaboration of Ismā'īlism and Zaydism will come more appropriately a little later (ch.16).

The distinctive feature of Imāmite Shī'ism is the recognition of a series of twelve imams, and for this reason they are sometimes called 'Twelvers', in Arabic Ithnā'ashariyya.[9] The earlier imams appear to have been recognized in some sense by those Muslims of Shī'ite sympathies usually called Rāfiḍites by their opponents; but it was argued above that neither the imams themselves nor their followers claimed that they were the rightful rulers of the whole Islamic empire. The followers were in fact divided into many rival groups. One Shī'ite writer describes fourteen groups as existing after the death of the Eleventh Imam, and another as many as twenty. Some seventy years later, however, virtually all these rival factions had been welded together into a single Imāmite sect. It is for this remarkable fact that we now seek an explanation.

The following are the twelve imams eventually recognized:

1. 'Alī ibn-Abī-Ṭālib (d.661)
2. al-Ḥasan ibn-'Alī (d.669)
3. al-Ḥusayn ibn-'Alī (d.680)
4. 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn (d.714)
5. Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d.733)
6. Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq (d.765)
7. Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d.799)
8. 'Alī ar-Riḍā (d.818)
9. Muḥammad Jawād at-Taqī (d.835)
10. 'Alī an-Naqī (d.868)
11. al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī (d.874)
12. Muḥammad al-Qā'im (in occultation).

In each case son follows father, except that al-Ḥusayn followed his brother al-Ḥasan.

Al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī died on or about 1 January 874, apparently leaving a son Muḥammad who mysteriously disappeared either about that time or a year or two later. The details are obscure and much disputed. What is certain is that before long a group of the followers of the imams asserted that the Twelfth Imam had gone voluntarily into concealment or occultation (*ghayba*), that he was no longer subject to mortality, and that at the appropriate time he would return as the Mahdī to right all wrongs. They also asserted that he was represented on earth by a *wakīl* or 'agent', one of their number, who was possibly held to be in contact with the imam. There were disputes as to who was *wakīl* at a given time, but it came to be generally

accepted that the fourth *wakīl* in the series died in or about 940 and was not replaced by a fifth. This marks the beginning of the greater occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubrā*) which still continues, during which period there is no *wakīl*. The previous period, during which there was a *wakīl*, is known as that of the lesser occultation.

The public declaration of the lesser occultation was a deliberate political act which had several advantages for those responsible. It put an end to the bickering between rival claimants to the imamate and their supporters, and so offered the possibility of a united movement. It removed the control of this movement from the imams, whose political competence was slight, into the hands of men with experience of public affairs and considerable political skill. It cleared these men of the suspicion of plotting against the 'Abbāsids, and yet permitted them to be critical of 'Abbāsid policies. The fact that the Imāmites referred to themselves as 'the élite' (*al-khāṣṣa*) and to the Sunnites as 'the common people' is in keeping with the further fact that the establishment of Imāmism is known to have been the work of a few wealthy and influential families. Prominent among these was the Āl Nawbakht, from whom came the second *wakīl* and also the man credited with the intellectual formulation of Imāmite beliefs, Abū-Sahl an-Nawbakhtī (d.923), as well as the author of an important work on 'The Sects of the Shī'a', al-Ḥasan ibn-Mūsā an-Nawbakhtī (d.c.922).

The passage from the lesser to the greater occultation, which is linked with the death of the fourth *wakīl* in or about 940, is also, it would seem, a deliberate political act. Because of the date it is presumably connected with the final loss of political power by the 'Abbāsid dynasty. For over a century governors of distant provinces had been asserting a degree of autonomy and insisting that the caliph nominate their sons (or other relatives) to succeed them. In due course governors of less distant provinces followed, and finally in 936 the caliph of the day was unable to avoid nominating one Ibn-Rā'iq, governor of Basra, as 'chief emir' (*amīr al-umarā'*) to be in charge of the army, police and civil administration at the centre of the caliphate. In 945 he was followed, as effective ruler of the central Islamic lands, by the Buwayhid (or Būyid) dynasty of emirs. There was still an 'Abbāsid caliph (until 1258), but he had no political power, only certain ceremonial and spiritual functions.

One result of proclaiming the greater occultation was to put an end to the office of *wakīl*, and this was presumably intended. Rivalries for the position of *wakīl* had certainly hindered the unification of the various potentially Imāmite groups. It may also be that the office of *wakīl* had proved less influential in practice than had originally been hoped for, perhaps because of the decline of caliphal power and the increase of that of military commanders. Many of the leading

Imāmites were financiers who had been involved in the money affairs of the 'Abbāsids, and they may have been adversely affected by the financial breakdown which accompanied the decline of 'Abbāsid power. All in all it looks as if the doctrine of the greater occultation led to the abandonment of an active political role by the Imāmites. There had always been a quietist strain in Shī'ism, as was seen in the application of messianic ideas to 'Alī and his descendants during the Umayyad period. Now it was possible for Imāmites, while waiting for the hidden Imam, to tolerate and give some support to the actual ruler without becoming deeply involved in politics. This would seem to make of Imāmite religion a personal and private affair.

It may be that the creation of Imāmite Shī'ism by proclaiming the doctrine of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam was in some sense a response to the consolidation of Sunnism as described above. What is certain is that most of the vague and divergent beliefs of a Shī'ite character which had been prevalent up to this time disappeared through being taken up into the unified belief of Imāmism. The Imāmites, to judge from various facts such as their use of the term 'the élite', were not nearly so numerous as the Sunnites. Yet it seems likely that most of the populations of the main provinces of the Islamic empire were either Sunnite or Shī'ite, and thus there is some justification for speaking of polarization.

During the late ninth and early tenth century the ṣūfī (mystical) movement experienced a period of advance, and this might appear to constitute a third element in Islamic thought along with Sunnism and Shī'ism.[10] This is not so, however. Each ṣūfī certainly had his own theological position; for example, Louis Massignon in his great study of the ṣūfī al-Ḥallāj (d.922) had a long chapter on his dogmatic theology (ch.12). In most cases, however, these views of the ṣūfīs were those of one or other of the Sunnite (or, less frequently, Shī'ite) groups. Apart from 'mystical theology', which was of no concern to dogmatic theologians, there was no sufficiently coherent body of distinctively ṣūfī theology to be argued against. Massignon suggests, however, that the theologians' discussions of apologetic miracles, found from the time of al-Bāqillānī (d.1013) onwards, were triggered off by the claims of al-Ḥallāj. The group of ṣūfīs who came nearest to being a school of dogmatic theology were the Sālimiyya, who came into existence shortly before 900 and can be traced for about two hundred and fifty years. They take their name from Ibn-Sālim (880-967), who was a follower of the ṣūfī Sahl at-Tustarī (d.896).[11] Their views will be mentioned later.

NOTES

1. For the chapter generally: *Formative Period*, ch.9, esp. 256-71.
2. Legal schools: N. J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law*, Edinburgh 1964; Schacht, *Introduction to Islamic Law* (n.4/2).
3. *EI²*, art. Ḥadīth (J. Robson).
4. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Edinburgh 1970, 167-70, 45-50.
5. *EI²*, art. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (H. Laoust); *Formative Period*, 291-5.
6. *Formative Period*, 131-4, 285f.; Wensinck, *Muslim Creed* (B/E), has translations of the Ḥanafite creeds *Al-fiqh al-akbar I* and *II* and the *Waṣiyya*.
7. Ibn-Kullāb: *EI²*, supplement, art. Ibn Kullāb (J. van Ess); *Formative Period*, 286-9.
8. Ibn-Karrām: *EI²*, art. Karrāmiyya (C. E. Bosworth); *Formative Period*, 289-91.
9. Massignon, *Passion²*, i.350-68 (E.T., i.307-22), the fullest account of the period from 874 to 941; Watt, 'The Significance of the Early Stage of Imāmite Shī'ism', in N. R. Keddie (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Iran*, New Haven 1983, 21-32; also in German in K. Greussing (ed.), *Religion und Politik im Iran*, Frankfurt am Main, 1981, 45-57.
10. Ṣūfism: A. J. Arberry, *Sufism*, London 1950; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill 1975; J. van Ess, *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārit al-Muḥāsibī*, Bonn 1961; Louis Massignon, *Passion²* and *Essai²* (as in B/E).
11. Ibn-Sālim: (Abū-l-Ḥasan or Abū-l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn-Muḥammad al-Baṣrī); Massignon, *Passion²*, i.631; ii.140f. (E.T. i.582; ii.130f.), correcting statements in *Passion¹*, 361f. and *Essai²*, 294-300. See also pp.109-10 and n.14/29.