

CHAPTER THREE

THE EARLY SHĪ'ITES

Although the Shī'ites and the Khārijites were at opposite poles theologically for most of the Umayyad period, and were in this way complementary, their history was altogether different. Among the Shī'ites there were none of the intellectual debates that took place in Khārijite circles in Basra. For much of the time Shī'ism was quiescent, and anything that was happening was happening under the surface. Then suddenly, when a leader appeared, there would be an explosion. This is perhaps inevitable in a movement which places the emphasis on the leader.¹

On the death of 'Alī in 661 some of his followers were inclined to support the claims of al-Ḥasan, the son of 'Alī and Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima; but al-Ḥasan had no political ability or ambition, and readily gave up his claims in return for the payment of a substantial sum of money by Mu'āwiya. In the troubled period following the death of the latter in 680 al-Ḥasan's full brother al-Ḥusayn was encouraged to lead a revolt in Iraq. The promised support was not forthcoming, but al-Ḥusayn and his small band could not be prevailed on to surrender and were eventually massacred by a vastly superior army at Kerbela (Karbālā') in October 680. These tragic events are still annually commemorated by Shī'ites with a kind of Passion Play during the month of Muḥarram—the Arabic month in which the original disaster occurred. In 684 in the confusion of the civil war a group of men from Kufa calling themselves the Penitents raised an army of 4,000 men, not only to show their penitence but also to avenge al-Ḥusayn. When they marched against an Umayyad force, however, they were utterly defeated. Thus the beginning of the Shī'ite movement was a series of political failures.

The next event in Shī'ite history is slightly more successful and, apart from that, of great significance. This is the rising of al-Mukhtār in Kufa from 685 to 687. Up to this time all the Shī'ites, or at least all the prominent Shī'ites, had been Arabs. In Kufa, however, al-Mukhtār was also joined by *mawālī* or 'clients' and, because of

tension between the Arabs and the clients, was more and more forced to rely on the latter. Though the rising was crushed by Ibn-az-Zubayr's general, it had sufficient success to give the clients the idea that they had a certain amount of political power if they wielded it aright. A man could become a client in various ways, but the clients intended in this context are probably all non-Arab Muslims. A member of one of the protected communities of Christians, Jews, etc., on becoming a Muslim left his own community and was attached as client to an Arab tribe (presumably because the Islamic community was regarded as a federation of Arab tribes). This was an inferior status, however, in some respects, and as more non-Arabs became Muslims there was a growing volume of dissatisfaction with it and a demand for equality. The clients attracted to Shī'ism appear to have included both persons from the older strata of the population of Iraq (who may be called Aramaeans) and persons of Persian stock. In the Persian empire under the Sasanian dynasty Iraq had been persianized somewhat, while Aramaean culture had spread in Persia proper. In Iraq there was a long tradition of divine kingship, and it would therefore be natural for the Aramaeans in particular to adhere to an Islamic sect which emphasized charismatic leadership. There were many Persians among the Shī'ites during the Umayyad period, but it must be borne in mind that the close identification of Shī'ism with Persia only dates from the sixteenth century. Nevertheless the rising of al-Mukhtār is an important stage in the development of Islam as a religion, because from this time onwards Shī'ism was linked with the political grievances and aspirations of non-Arab Muslims.

For fifty years after the death of al-Mukhtār in 687 there was no overt political activity among the Shī'ites, though Shī'ite religious ideas were doubtless spreading quietly beneath the surface. There are frequent references to the sub-sect which supported al-Mukhtār, though they are called not Mukhtārites but Kaysānites.² This is doubtless a nickname intended to emphasize their non-Arab character, since Kaysān was a prominent client. As signs of collapse became evident in the Umayyad regime, the Shī'ites appear once more on the political stage. Two leaders were executed in Kufa in 737 and another in 742, all suspected of organizing an underground resistance. In 740 there was a serious insurrection under a great-great-grandson of Muḥammad called Zayd, but it was quickly suppressed. Still more serious for the Umayyads was the revolt of 'Abd-Allāh ibn-Mu'āwiya, a great-grandson of Muḥammad's cousin Ja'far; this lasted from 744 to 747. Finally, the movement which replaced the Umayyads by the 'Abbāsids had much Shī'ite support, and on the religious side might be regarded as primarily a manifestation of Shī'ism. It remains to look at the theological developments accompanying these external events.³

The first point to be made is that although, as the sources suggest, there may have been widespread sympathy for the Shi'ite position, this position itself was still extremely vague. In particular there was no general recognition that the imams later acknowledged by the Imāmite and Ismā'īlite branches of Shi'ism, the descendants of al-Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī, had any special status or special gifts. The tendency was rather to consider that the charismata requisite for the position of imam belonged potentially to all members of Muḥammad's clan of Hāshim, whether descended from Muḥammad through Fāṭima or not. (Descent from Muḥammad never in fact was prominent in Shi'ite claims, but at most secondary, since the position of 'Alī was independent of this.) Thus al-Mukhtār claimed that he was acting on behalf of the imam Muḥammad ibn-al-Ḥanafīyya ('the son of the Ḥanafite woman'), a son of 'Alī but not by Fāṭima. Some held that the imam after him was his son, Abū-Hāshim. A small group for a time took as imam a great-grandson of al-Ḥasan, known as Muḥammad the Pure Soul (an-Nafs az-Zakiyya). The rising under the great-grandson of Ja'far (Muḥammad's cousin and 'Alī's brother) has already been mentioned. Finally, the 'Abbāsids at first claimed to have inherited the imamate from Muḥammad ibn-al-Ḥanafīyya and Abū-Hāshim, but at a later date (officially from about 780) asserted instead that the true imam after the Prophet was his uncle al-'Abbās, who was of course their ancestor.

Complementary to this acceptance of a variety of men as having the divinely given qualities needed for leadership of the Islamic community there is the fact that no group of importance recognized the descendants of al-Ḥusayn as having any special position. For later Shi'ite theory the first three rightful imams of the community after Muḥammad are 'Alī, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn; the fourth is the latter's son 'Alī Zayn-al-'Ābidīn, who died about 714; the fifth is his son Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d.733); and the sixth his son Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq (d.765). Even Imāmite sources, however, make it clear that these men, the fourth, fifth and sixth imams, were not active politically; and it would have been difficult for Muslims of this period to conceive of a religious claim that was not also a political one. Nothing at all is recorded of the fourth imam. Of the fifth imam it is reported that the men executed at Kufa in 737 and 742 claimed to be his emissaries; but there is confusion in the stories and it is doubtful if he gave them any support. The sixth imam, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, seems to have realized the possibilities of a Shi'ite movement and to have set about, doubtless with much caution and circumspection, organizing a body of supporters; but this would mostly take place before the end of the Umayyad period.

The Shi'ism of the Umayyad period was thus vaguer and more indefinite than later Shi'ism, and lacked any semblance of a coher-

ent theory. It was the manifestation of a deep unconscious need—a feeling in men's hearts that they would be happier and more satisfied spiritually if they had a charismatic leader to follow. The imam of whom the Shi'ites dreamed is precisely what is meant by a charismatic leader. The history of early Shi'ism, and indeed of much later Shi'ism also, is that of a pathetic quest for individuals to whom the dignity of imam may be attached. Most of those accepted as imam belied the hopes set on them; and yet the quest went on. The persistence of the quest shows the depth of the feeling involved. Men with political ambitions and qualities of leadership, but no shadow of a claim to the charismata of the Hāshimites, found a way of using this widespread desire for an imam. Al-Mukhtār, for example, asserted that he was acting as the emissary of a genuine imam, Muḥammad ibn-al-Ḥanafīyya; he may have had the consent of the latter in making this assertion, but it is certain that he received no active help from him. There are several later instances of a similar proceeding, and in some of them the imam invoked repudiated the self-styled emissary. Others seem to have resigned themselves to political inactivity in the foreseeable future; and they found a theological justification for this attitude in the theory that the imam was not dead but in concealment and that at an appropriate time he would return as the Mahdī or Guided One (a kind of Messiah) to right all wrongs and establish justice on earth.

Thus Umayyad Shi'ism is a veritable chaos of ideas and attitudes. A beginning of order was introduced by the idea of designation (*naṣṣ*)—this involves the view that there is only one imam at a time and that the imam designates his successor. In the Umayyad period, however, this was not wholly effective, since different groups recognized different imams. A different line was taken by the Zaydites, the followers of the Zayd who revolted in 740. They would have nothing to do with the idea of a hidden imam; one of the conditions of being imam was that the claim to be such was made publicly (and, of course, was made effective by military success). Zayd's revolt was a realistic attempt to provide an alternative government to that of the Umayyads. He therefore tried to gain the support not merely of the Shi'ites but also of the main body of Muslims, and to do this he made the assertion that, though 'Alī was the rightful imam after the Prophet and superior to Abū-Bakr and 'Umar, the 'imamate of the inferior' (*imāmat al-mafḍūl*) was permissible. This concession, however, seems to have alienated the more thorough-going Shi'ites and may have contributed to Zayd's failure.

The 'Abbāsīd movement shows a mixture of genuine religious feeling (though perhaps not in the top leadership) and shrewd political calculation. Realizing how widespread Shi'ite sympathies were, they claimed to be the rightful imams through inheritance by desig-

nation from Muḥammad ibn-al-Ḥanafīyya. Because they saw the weakness of this claim, however, in much of their propaganda they simply called for support for 'him of the family of the Prophet who shall be chosen'; and by the time it was made public who this was they were already in power. To gain the Zaydites they maintained that they were seeking vengeance for the blood of Zayd. Another of their aims was the defence of 'the weak', which in fact meant the clients or non-Arab Muslims; and actually much of the support for the 'Abbāsids came from the clients, and their leading general, Abū-Muslim, was himself a client. The volume of support for the 'Abbāsids from the clients meant that, when they achieved control of the caliphate, clients, especially Persians and persianized Aramaeans, received a due share of power, and the inferior status of the non-Arab Muslims gradually disappears. The success of this at least partly Shī'ite movement in 750 is another stage in the development of Shī'ism, but, as will be seen, its immediate effects are difficult to assess.

NOTES

1. J. Wellhausen, works mentioned in n.2/1. Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shī'ite Religion*, London 1933, gives the material from the Imāmīte sources but without full discussion; S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, London 1979, a critical account by a Shī'ite of the period to 765.
2. *EI*², art. Kaysāniyya (W. Madelung), follows the heresiographers. The name Saba'iyya was also used in the period round about 700, but there is some obscurity about it and about 'Abd-Allāh b. Saba'; see *Formative Period*, 59-61.
3. *Formative Period*, ch.2. I. Friedlaender, 'The Heterodoxies of the Shiites in the presentation of Ibn Ḥazm', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, xxviii (1907), 1-80; xxix (1909), 1-183.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GENERAL RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

Up to this point the discussion has been of 'heretical' sects, and the question naturally arises whether there was at this time a body of 'orthodox' opinion and, if so, whether anything more can be said about it. The form of this question, however, is not altogether satisfactory. The term 'orthodox' applies in the first place to Eastern Christendom, where there was an authority to say what was 'orthodoxy' or 'right belief' and what was 'heresy'. In Islam, however, there was no such authority. There was only the main or central body of opinion in the various schools or sections of the community. In these, too, there was not always the emphasis on the intellectual aspect of religion that there was in Eastern Christendom (though such an emphasis is sometimes found). Thus it is best in Islamic studies to avoid the term 'orthodox' and to ask instead whether there was a central body of moderate opinion.

There is not the same objection to the term 'heresy'. The Arabic term *bid'a* roughly corresponds to the English in effect, though it has a different connotation. *Bid'a* properly means 'innovation', and the implication of this term is that the true belief and practice is the original belief and practice—'innovation' is not confined to intellectual matters. This serves to explain why the central body of opinion in Umayyad Islam has not been much studied and why it is difficult to investigate. Muslims of the centre were quite happy to write about the divergent views of the sects; but when it came to the views of their own party they considered that these were in essence identical with those of Muḥammad and his Companions, and therefore they tended to hide any changes and developments or pass them over in silence. There is thus no material for the direct study of this central body, but only large masses of semi-relevant material in biographical dictionaries and similar works—and so far only a beginning has been made with the investigation of all this.¹

There is evidence to show that there always was a central body of moderate opinion, but some greater precision is desirable. Early in the