

## Preface

Islam is a major world religion as well as civilisation, with some 1.3 billion Muslims scattered in almost every region of the globe, especially in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Currently, around 15 per cent of the Muslim population of the world belong to various communities of Shi'i Islam, with the Ithna'asharis or Twelvers accounting for the largest numbers. The Ismailis, Zaydis and 'Alawis represent other important Shi'i communities.

In addition to their significant number, around 200 million, Shi'i Muslims have played a crucial role, proportionally greater than their relative number, in furthering the intellectual and artistic achievements of the Islamic civilisation. Indeed, the Shi'i scholars and literati of various Shi'i branches and from various regions, including scientists, philosophers, theologians, jurists and poets, have made seminal contributions to Islamic thought and culture. There have also been numerous Shi'i dynasties, families and artists as well as a variety of institutions of learning in Islam. Amongst such Shi'i dynasties, particular mention may be made of the Būyids, the Fatimids, the Hamdanids and the Safawids as well as a host of lesser or local Shi'i dynasties of North Africa, the Middle East and India. All in all, Shi'i Muslims have contributed significantly over the entire course of Islamic history to the richness and diversity of the Islamic traditions, enabling Islam to evolve and flourish not merely as a religion, but also as a major world civilisation. In spite of its relative significance, however, Shi'i Islam has received very little attention in the West, in both medieval and modern times. With a few exceptions, the state of Shi'i studies has not fared much better in Muslim countries.

Sunni authors belonging to different literary and scholarly traditions were not in general interested in collecting accurate information on Shi'i Islam and its internal divisions, as they treated all Shi'i interpretations of Islam as deviations from the 'right path'. Medieval Europeans' knowledge and perceptions of Shi'i Islam were even more deficient and fictitious since their overall knowledge of Islam was extremely limited. Such knowledge that medieval Europeans did have was rooted more in their 'imaginative ignorance' than in any accurate sources of information to which they could have obtained access if they had so desired. The earliest Western impressions of Islam, which were retained for several centuries, were almost exclusively rooted in religious polemics, since the medieval Europeans intended to uphold the theological claims of Christianity and to disclaim those of the Muslims. This basically negative perception of Islam was retained for almost a thousand years.

If the medieval Europeans remained incredibly ignorant about the most basic aspects of the Islamic message, they doubtless knew even less about its internal

divisions, including especially the Sunni–Shi'i division, and the intricacies of interpretation within the Islamic communities and their distinctive tenets. With the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion of Safawid Persia in 907/1501, the ground was laid for better availability of information on Shi'i Islam to Westerners who visited that country. However, European scholars, trained in theology and philological studies, had not yet found access to Islamic texts that would lead to a breakthrough in their study of Islam free from the assumptions of anti-Islamic polemics of the earlier generations. By the dawn of the 19th century, European orientalists were finally ready to investigate Islam as a religion in a scholarly and systematic manner with the goal of understanding rather than condemning it.

Scientific orientalism, based on the study of textual evidence, effectively began in Europe with the establishment in 1795 of the *École des Langues Orientales Vivantes* in Paris, with A. I. Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), the most distinguished orientalist of his time, appointed as the first Professor of Arabic at that academic institution. European scholars now started to produce their studies of Islam on the basis of the Arabic texts, then available mainly in manuscript form, and the Islamic tradition itself. However, the bulk of the original texts then available in France, Germany and other European countries had been written by Sunni authors and reflected their particular perspectives since few Shi'i texts had found their way to European libraries during the 19th century. Consequently, the orientalists studied Islam according to the Sunni perspective of their manuscript sources and, borrowing classifications from their own Christian contexts, they too treated the Sunni interpretation of Islam as 'orthodoxy', in contrast with Shi'ism which was taken to represent a 'heterodoxy' or, at its extreme, a 'heresy'. The Sunni-centric approach to the study of Islam has continued to hold prominence to various degrees in Western scholarship in the field.

However, it is clear that terms such as 'heterodoxy' and 'orthodoxy' are not appropriate in the context of Islam and its study. Even the term 'schism' or 'split' does not fit closely the origins and development of the various branches of Islam and its early history. The split that led to the emergence of the two main divisions of Islam – Sunni and Shi'i – does not, however, explain the development of the various understandings of political and religious authority that took quite a while to formulate, since the schism had originally taken place in the first century of Islam along with the events commonly associated with it. Even the features that the two major divisions and their sub-branches acquired following the split went beyond the original cause of the split and took a very long time to crystallise. Among these are: the distinctive interpretation of religious authority and the special place of the Imam, the distinctive legal tradition, distinctiveness in worship and rituals, and the places of pilgrimage.

It is therefore not surprising that until the middle of the 20th century, systematic progress in Islamic studies had not led to any significant improvement in the scholarly investigation of Shi'i Islam and its various branches, as genuine Shi'i textual materials of any genre remained relatively inaccessible to Western scholars. Subsequently, a selective group of scholars sought to devote more serious attention to the study of Shi'i Islam. Led by Louis Massignon (1883–1962), these scholars investigated Shi'ism with particular reference to its spiritual, esoteric and mystic dimensions,

and as manifested in its Twelver and Ismaili traditions. The contributions of Henry Corbin (1903–1978) were also invaluable in understanding Shi'i thought in general and its theosophical and metaphysical aspects as developed particularly in Iran. By the 1960s, a number of Islamicists and religious scholars belonging to the Twelver community had also taken the initiative of elaborating the doctrines of their branch of Shi'i Islam on a more systematic, though still traditional, basis. These religious scholars, such as 'Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1903–1981), also held teaching sessions at the religious seminaries of Iran, notably those in Qumm, Isfahan and Mashhad. These institutions have continued to train impressive numbers of Twelver Shi'i scholars in Iran.

All in all, Shi'i studies have remained extremely marginalised in the Muslim countries outside Iran and Iraq with their vibrant religious seminaries and Shi'i theological traditions as well as extensive collections of Shi'i manuscripts. In Iran itself, Islamic studies predominantly imply Shi'i, and more specifically Twelver Shi'i, studies, with full consideration of the fields of theology, philosophy and jurisprudence, as well as the Shi'i contributions to Qur'anic and *ḥadīth* studies.

A new interest in the study of Shi'i Islam in Iran, and to some extent globally, was kindled by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Islamic Revolution proved to be not only a turning point in the socio-political fabric of Iran but also in the popularity of the Iranian form of Twelver Shi'ism and its theological underpinnings, under the leadership of a politically powerful class of clerics. As a result, attention has been increasingly devoted to a series of new research topics such as relations between Shi'i Islam and the authority–power structure of the state. At the same time, a great number of primary sources, including the classical texts of Twelver Imāmi Shi'i tradition as well as Twelver works on history, theology and jurisprudence, are continuously edited and published under the auspices of Iran's religious seminaries. In sum, contemporary Iranian scholars and institutions have been making systematic contributions to the field of Shi'i studies.

In the West, meanwhile, a select group of scholars belonging to a new generation, partially represented in this volume, have been producing some of the most influential works on various aspects of Shi'i Islam. However, it should be noted that few scholars, in the West or in Muslim countries, have concerned themselves with all branches of Shi'i Islam. In more recent decades, only Professor Wilferd Madelung has made original contributions to the study of the Twelver, Ismaili and Zaydi branches of Shi'ism, while Professor Josef van Ess has investigated theological aspects of the various Shi'i traditions.

With these conceptual and historical points in mind, we have organised the chapters in this volume into eight main parts. These are: history and historiography, Qur'an and its Shi'i interpretations, Shi'i *ḥadīth*, Shi'i law, authority, theology, rites and rituals, and philosophy and intellectual traditions. The introductions to each of the parts aim to provide an overview of that particular sub-field in the study of Shi'i Islam within the more general context of Shi'i and Islamic studies. They examine issues of methodology and recent developments in their respective sub-fields and represent a comprehensive overview of the topic, the state of research in that particular sub-field,

how it has developed so far, primary aims at the current stage of its development and what needs to be done to further future research. Moreover, the author of each introduction has taken a unique approach to writing them for pragmatic reasons, in order to avoid repetitions and also to provide an extensive overview of the field in general.

The introductions are followed by what may be termed 'case studies' (studies on a particular topic), which are meant to explicate the type of issues and questions raised in the introductions and those that exist in the contemporary study of Shi'i Islam, along with the methodologies and tools of research that are currently used to address these issues. Although the introductions refer to these case studies, they do in fact use the case studies to exemplify and highlight issues wherever appropriate without, however, limiting themselves to these alone. Of course, we acknowledge that these eight parts/topics do not cover all aspects of Shi'i Islam, but going beyond this would have made the project unmanageable. It is hoped that the volume will inspire further research and discourse in the field leading to more exciting avenues for research in these and other areas. This collective volume is also the second volume in the Institute's *Shi'i Heritage Series* of publications, which is a new venture that aims at promoting better understanding of and excellence in research in the field of Shi'i studies.

In 2010 The Institute of Ismaili Studies organised a colloquium entitled *The Study of Shi'i Islam: The State of the Field, Issues of Methodology and Recent Developments* to coincide with this volume. The colloquium aimed at providing a productive atmosphere for the exchange of ideas and scholarship by bringing together a large number of contributors to the volume and others. The panels reflected all sections represented in this volume. While focusing on the state of the field itself, the colloquium enabled serious discussions on current issues in the study of Shi'i Islam. By providing leading as well as young scholars in the field with the opportunity to meet and discuss the state of the field and their current research, it sought to realise the aims of the Institute in promoting the understanding of Shi'i Islam and enhancing further research.

We would like to thank all the contributors to this volume and all those who attended the colloquium for embarking on this journey with us and providing insights into the current state of the field. Some of the chapters have been translated from French or Arabic especially for the volume, for which we thank Nuha al-Shaar, Maria De Cillis, Russell Harris and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov. We would also like to express our gratitude to Kutub Kassam for his editorial skills, to Nadia Holmes who meticulously prepared the various drafts of this volume, and to Hamid Haji for having skilfully performed various editorial tasks.

FD and GM  
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