LADY OF THE WOMEN OF THE WORLDS

EXPLORING SHI'I PIETY AND IDENTITY THROUGH A CONSIDERATION OF FATIMA AL-ZAHRA'

by

Ruth E. Rowe

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF NEAR EASTERN STUDIES

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Graduate College of

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2008

STATEMENT BY THE AUTHOR

This thesis has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for a Master of Arts at the University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of the source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the copyright holder.

SIGNED: _____Ruth Rowe_____

APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below.

_____Scott Lucas_____ _____5/13/08_____

Scott Lucas Date

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals and institutions have been instrumental in facilitating my work and encouraging me throughout the process of writing this thesis. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and thank the faculty and staff of the Near Eastern Studies Department at the University of Arizona for offering me the opportunity to study Islam. My research was also enabled by means of the impressive resources of University's library and by the Center of Middle Eastern Studies, whose members kindly granted me two academic-year FLAS fellowships to study the Arabic language. In addition, I would like to thank all my teachers and fellow students from whom I have learned and studied Arabic since beginning in Fès, almost four years ago.

I also must acknowledge the kindness and patience of my thesis advisor, Scott Lucas, who first offered me a serious glimpse into the realm of *hadith*s, the Qur'an, and Islamic thought, and without whom I would not be as familiar with or love Islam as much as I do. I would also like to acknowledge the support and wonderful feedback provided by my thesis committee members: Linda Darling, who first encouraged me to study Fatima and expand that study into a thesis; Richard Eaton, whose enthusiasm for and knowledge of South Asia is inspiring; and Anne Betteridge, whose kind guidance concerning all things Iranian is something for which I will remain grateful. I would also like to thank Babak Rahimi of the University of California in San Diego for sharing with me the drafted version of his documentary, *The Muharram Mystery of Bushehr*.

I would also like to acknowledge the unwavering support of my friends and family, without whom this project would have been far less enjoyable: Tory, for listening to me gush over beautiful al-Husayn and for lending me her old laptop when mine died in the midst of writing; Zohra, for helping me negotiate the Persian words and for dancing with me; Rachael, for finally finding the plural of *dais*; Danielle, Maisa, Micah, Tara, and Tam, for their encouragement, enthusiasm and support; my mother and father, for always having my back; and my sisters, for indulging me.

And, as always, I owe everything to the birds in *jinan al-sabil*, without whom I would not love all of this as much as I do.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explore and survey the different understandings of Fatima bt. Muhammad "al-Zahra'" in different Shi'i social, religious, and political contexts. This investigation situates Fatima within a larger Islamic conceptualization of the saint or holy figure. Her liminal status in close proximity to the divine grants her a potency that facilitates her continued importance to Shi'i Muslims, though her memory differs in time and place. The contexts for this discussion range from Arabia in the centuries after her death, Safavid and Qajar Persia and modern Iran, and South Asia. Memories of Fatima reflect the concerns of Shi'i communities, political and religious leaders, and individuals for whom she remains a saint; she serves as a mechanism by which holiness is accessed and communities and persons are created, consolidated, preserved, and understood. For the scholar, Fatima provides invaluable insight into creative religious change through the lens of the Shi'i Islam.

1.
LADY OF THE WOMEN OF THE WORLDS
A brief introduction

In his prayer-book *Mafatih al-jinan*, which contains centuries of traditional Shi'i devotions, 'Abbas al-Qummi (d. 1941) includes a prayer of salutation to be read at the grave of Fatima al-Zahra'. The daughter of the Prophet Muhammad is described within it as the "lady of the first and last women of the worlds" (*sayyidat nisa' al-'alamin min al-awwalin wa al-akhirin*).[1] This is an especially appropriate title for Fatima, given that she has served as a holy figure for many Muslim communities since the 7th century, a saint in many "worlds." But, Fatima is relevant not only to women in different historical contexts, but to a variety of people: pious persons, kings, politicians, and scholars, among others. Fatima also brings into question the desire of any historian to define a historical figure based on a single life-narrative, and she reflects those worlds over which she is *sayyida* as much as she is honored by people in them.

This paper is not, in any sense, an exhaustive survey of Fatima's roles and importance in Shi'i piety and religious politics. I will provide, instead, a series of examples and varying historical contexts in which there exist paradoxically disparate but contiguous "Fatimas." It is through an exploration of these contexts that one can understand not only Fatima al-Zahra' herself, but also the "space," "text" and historical figure that such a person represents: the "holy subject," in a sense, because Fatima's potency, I will argue, is tied inextricably to notions of God and human holiness. Fatima is a tool in Muslim piety that believers can use to relate to God; she exists at the interface between the divine

[1] 'Abbas al-Qummi, *Mafatih al-jinan* (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa', 1983), 384.

and the profane, as does any saint. In occupying such a space in Shi'i piety, then, Fatima "lives" unbounded by any "historical," human lifetime. She is therefore of interest to historians not only for how she *was*, but for how she is remembered to have been (how she *is*, how she *becomes*). It is by means of her memory that notions of Shi'i identity, community, and power can be elucidated in various historical contexts.

While I will briefly describe early biographies of Fatima and occasionally make mention of her role among Sunni Muslims, this paper will focus upon a survey of her prominence and importance in Shi'i society and discourse from the birth of the Shi'i community in the late 7th century to post-revolutionary Islamic thought in Iran at the turn of the 21st century. Fatima is in many ways a figure who is at the center of a negotiation of identity and of past and present within Shi'i society. This negotiation is, in Fatima's case, centered on a *person within and as tradition*. I will explore Fatima as *invented tradition*, but without implying any inauthenticity in the ways in which she is invoked. She is a figure in history who is socially creative, who provides a means by which social actors situate themselves within their given present. She was and is a means of engagement with the past, present, and future, whether for political legitimacy, religiosity, or the definition of idealized womanhood. In that sense, Fatima is a historical being whose importance cannot be contained within a single biography, time-period, devotional practice, or even gender. Fatima, in being remembered in countless ways and for various purposes, brings to the fore questions about the nature of the historical subject itself, and specifically the nature of the holy subject.

It is with this holiness that one must begin.

2.
HOLY FIGURES AS THE VEILS OF GOD
Regarding Islamic holiness and Fatima's subsequent role in history

> From al-Miswar b. Makhrama, the Messenger of God said: "Fatima is part of me, so whoever angers her, angers me."
>
> al-Bukhari's *Sahih* [2]

> How can the temporal tell about the eternal? ...God transcends form and letters. His speech is outside of letters and voices, but He implements His speech through whatever words, voices, or languages He wills.
>
> Rumi [3]

Fatima al-Zahra', as a Shi'i figure of devotion, might be said to have as many faces as there are communities and individual believers; her relevance is not limited to or determined by her single, human lifetime. As the wife and mother of *imam*s and the daughter of Muhammad, she occupies a space in sacred genealogy and religious memory that would afford her even a vicarious holiness were she not believed to possess any herself. However, Fatima is not without her own sanctity in the memories and practices of the generations of Muslims who have lived in the millennia after her death. Before discussing specific examples of how Fatima has been remembered in different historical contexts and what such varied memories have facilitated or illustrated, I want to begin with an exploration of how one might conceptualize holiness and the holy person, in addition to how one might study such a person historically. This discussion will provide

---

[2] Muhammad b. Isma'il al-Bukhari, *al-Jami' al-sahih* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra, 1872/73), 200. Or, in the following chapter, *Fada'il ashab al-nabi*: *Manaqib qarabat rasul Allah wa manqibat Fatima 'alayha al-salam*. Also, for a useful compilation of *hadith*s concerning Fatima, see 'Abd al-Mu'ti Amin Qal'aji, *Manaqib 'Ali wa al-Hasanayn wa ummihima Fatima al-zahra'* (Aleppo: Dar al-Wa'i, 1979), 239-74.

[3] Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Signs of the Unseen: the Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. W. M. Thackston, Jr. (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1994), 41.

the theoretical and religious substrate and framework with which I will engage the investigation of Fatima's historical role and presence.

On the level of Shi'i piety as one of the *Ma'sumun*, the "Infallible Ones,"[4] I would suggest that Fatima serves for Muslims as a human vehicle for God's holiness on earth. I propose, then, that it is within her role as an Islamic "saint" that she makes accessible the divinity of God to those who lack familial closeness to the Prophet or mystical closeness to God. Margaret Smith, in her work on the celebrated female Sufi Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801), notes that before Sufism arose as a mode of Islamic practice, women like Fatima and Amina (the Prophet's mother) were recognized as saints.[5] What is "saint" in Islam? And do only Sufis occupy that space? Frederick Denny, in his discussion of Sufi sainthood, notes that the English term "saint" is problematic in describing the Islamic holy person. The Arabic word that is often being translated, *wali*, is concerned more with the *relationship* (with God) embodied in the saint than a quality or virtue.[6] However, the early Christian saint – the category of which colors the English-language understanding

---

[4] In Imami Shi'ism, the holiest of spiritual leaders are the Fourteen Infallible Ones (or the "Fourteen Very-Pure," as Henry Corbin translates): Muhammad, Fatima, her husband 'Ali, their sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and the subsequent nine *imam*s. Their holy infallibility, *'isma*, is inherited, and the bloodline's holiness is guaranteed as it is linked directly to Fatima (and thus her father) and first *imam* 'Ali. The original family of Muhammad, Fatima, 'Ali, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn are also often called the *ahl al-kisa'* ("those of the cloak," based on various *hadith*s in which Muhammad wraps the other four in his cloak), or, in the South Asian context, the *Panjtan Pak* for both Imami and Isma'ili Shi'a.

[5] Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* (1928; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 137.

[6] Frederick Denny, "'God's Friends:' the Sanctity of Persons in Islam," in *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions*, ed. Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 70. *Wali*, in Arabic, comes from the verb *waliya*, "to be close to." Thus, when not translated as "saint," *wali* has been also translated as "friend" (and *wali Allah* as "friend of God"). I will discuss the term *wali* in more detail shortly.

of the term – was positioned in this intercessory space.[7] Because Sufism developed as a means by which mystics might move closer to God, so must the veneration of those Sufi saints be located in a similar context.[8] Sainthood is as much an attribution as a quality, based upon the holy person's perceived and actualized closeness with God. And surely, not only Sufis can be remembered as occupying such an intermediary space!

In this paper I will refer to Fatima as a saint, though she was never a Sufi *shaykha*. I use the term with the recognition that she has been located historically as an intermediary and intercessory figure whose holiness stems from her liminal position between the created, human world and the divine. Traditionally, it is through saints like Fatima that Muslims have accessed the divine power of God, whether for pious or political reasons. When a deity cannot be experienced directly by those whose religious practice is not explicitly mystical, figures like Fatima are the loci for an individual or a community's connection to and experience of that divine reality. To use a metaphorical framework drawn from Islamic discourse, Fatima's position in Shi'i religiosity has been, throughout history, like that of a human veil covering a god who might otherwise be inaccessible.

The religious metaphor of the veil appears in Sufi theological writings, most often with regard to how the earthly world and its inhabitants are positioned in contrast and connection to the divine world and the creator. In his seminal and influential Sufi manual, *al-Risala al-qushayriyya*,[9] Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072) of Khorasan devotes a

---

[7] Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1982), 136, 140, 143-44.
[8] Denny, 73.
[9] The translator of *al-Risala*, Alexander D. Knysh, enthusiastically calls it the "most popular Sufi manual ever" (Abu 'l-Qasim al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism: Al-risala al-*

small section to describing the mystic's understanding of *al-satr*, the veil. He notes that "the ordinary folk are covered by concealment, whereas the elect are witnessing the permanent self-manifestation [of God]."[10] However, even the elect (the Sufis/mystics) cannot bear direct witness to the True Reality that is God without being "completely annihilated;" even Muhammad asked that his heart be veiled.[11]

Scholar and Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) also treats Sufis as a spiritual elite able to better perceive a god who is veiled from humanity. He spends a whole chapter of his short, mystical work *Mishkat al-anwar* ("The Niche of Lights") to explore the notion of God's veiled concealment as expressed in an allegedly prophetic *hadith*: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him."[12] Al-Ghazali places these veils between God and his creatures (the *mahjubun*, "the veiled"), and the composition of the veil, hiding God from human view, is dependent upon the human being.[13] These veils are reflective of the person's soul; if a soul exists in "sheer darkness," that darkness will veil the person from God, for example.[14] Al-Ghazali's understanding of the veil locates its origins in the (faulty, non-divine) human experience, though he also recognizes that were the veils absent, as in a pure mystical experience, the face of God

---

qushayriyya fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf, trans. Alexander D. Knysh [Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007], xxiv).

[10] Al-Qushayri, 96.

[11] Al-Qushayri, 97.

[12] Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights: Mishkat al-anwar*, trans. by David Buchman (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 44. Al-Ghazali does not provide the source for this *hadith*, though it appears in his *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, as well. In the Arabic, *hijab* is used for "veil."

[13] Al-Ghazali, 44. Also, see pp. 45-53 for a description and discussion of the levels of veiling.

[14] Al-Ghazali, 46.

would "burn up everything perceived by the sights and insights of the observers."[15] Such an annihilation of all phenomena, including self, is not an intended or possible goal for all Muslims. They must then, using Al-Ghazali's metaphor, live and relate to God within a veiled state by means of those veils, which are symbolic of their apparent separation from God.

Writing in Damascus in 1227, the great Andalusi *shaykh* Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) likens Paradise, *al-janna*, to God's veil and then that veil to the human being. God, speaking to his created, says,

> And my paradise is nothing other than you, for you veil me with your essence (*dhat)*. For I am not known except by you, just as you are not [existent] except by me. For whoever knows you, knows me, while I am not known [if] you are not known.[16]

God is known *via* human beings, his creations, a sentiment that is mirrored commonly in other Sufi works; in a popular divine *hadith*, God claims that he was a hidden treasure and created man to be known.[17] In both this *hadith* and in Ibn 'Arabi's thought, humans act as mechanisms by which other human beings might access and comprehend the divine, providing a concept and a form to what is otherwise non-conceptual and formless. Fatima, saintly in a general sense, occupies this space more explicitly as an intercessor/intermediary to Muslim devotees; it is through her, for example, that God might be known to humanity (and humanity might relate itself to God, ultimately).

---

[15] Al-Ghazali, 51.

[16] Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus al-hikam* (Beirut: Dar Sader, 2005), 53. This quote is part of Ibn 'Arabi's particular commentary on verse 30:89 of the Qur'an, wherein God says, "Enter my paradise!" Thus, the first-person voice of God is, while technically Ibn 'Arabi's writing, a sort of direct continuation and interpretation of his (God's) own words.

[17] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 188-89.

Saints and prophets are the result of an inevitable rift between the holy and earthly realms, however much such a rift is illusory for its human presumption of duality. Holy persons are necessary, however, not only because they provide an interface between earth and heaven for the benefit of other human beings, but also in that God cannot be comprehended or experienced by humans without his "veils." The celebrated Persian poet-*shaykh* Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) engages this understanding of the veil in his recorded *Discourses* (*Fihi ma fihi*). At times he treats the device of the veil metaphorically to indicate all human desires (for food, companionship, etc.), which "veil" and stand as substitute, in a sense, for the ultimate human craving for God. Even the mystic's desire to experience God is a kind of veil because of its fundamental human-ness,[18] though it is a necessity, as normal humans cannot experience God directly:

> God has created these "veils" for a good purpose. If He showed His beauty without a veil, we would not be able to bear it or benefit from it because we are benefited and strengthened *indirectly*.[19]

The veils of desire, then, both conceal and connect the divine to human beings. In another discussion, Rumi describes Muhammad's prophetic "intoxication," wherein he would speak "while beside himself, [and then say] 'God spoke;'" while Muhammad's tongue moved, it was God that directly animated it.[20] The Prophet's earthly form served as a vehicle for the divine, just as the Qur'an, for instance, serves as such a vehicle in the declaration that it was deliberately composed in the Arabic language to guide believers.[21]

---

[18] Presumably as it implies a duality of believer/God that would, eventually, be dissolved.
[19] Rumi, 36-37, my emphasis.
[20] Rumi, 41.
[21] For verses in the Qur'an about the efficacy of its being revealed in the Arabic language in order to guide Arab peoples to the truth, see 12:1-3, 16:103, and 19:97, among others.

In the second quotation that prefaces this section, Rumi rhetorically asks if it is possible for something temporal to speak of the eternal. How does the earthly describe or access the divine? In his answer, he says that God uses earthly forms – human words and speech, for example – to connect to his creatures. God inspires his prophets and saints so that ordinary people who are caught up in the mundane world might remember the pure nature within them that is ever mindful of God. The function, then, of these holy persons is to *remind* humans of God[22] and of the fact that his face is everywhere, despite all that veils it from human sight and experience.[23] Later in the *Discourses*, Rumi asserts that form is to be attacked as only a shell.[24] As a veil separating the Sufi from God, form is something to be rent in one's mystical search for God's omnipresent face and reality.

At the start of this section I suggested that one could liken holy human beings – "saints" in a generic sense – to veils. One can characterize them as intermediary figures who provide a non-abstract link between the holy (God) and the profane (this world). However, many of the Sufi *shaykh*s just discussed consider the veil a hindrance that must be dissolved in the mystical quest for divine union. What role, then, can the saint have as a veil, if the veil might be seen as an obstruction? In Sufi thought, in a very general sense as we have seen, the world and its constructs (desires, speech, even Paradise) serve as conceptualizations that veil the direct reality of God from mankind; this veiling is both a blessing and a cause for forgetfulness. In the ordinary understanding of phenomena, God

---

[22] Rumi, 34-35.

[23] "And God's is the east and the west: and wherever you turn, there is God's countenance (*wajh*). Behold, God is infinite (*wasi'*), all-knowing (*'alim*)" (Qur'an 2:115). Please note that for all full-verse quotations of the Qur'an, I am using the translations from *The Message of the Qur'an*, trans. Muhammad Asad (Bitton: The Book Foundation, 2003).

[24] Rumi, 42.

exists separate from his believers. Mystics are those who seek to bridge or deny this separation, even at the cost of their own "separate" existence from God – but how might others connect to him if theirs is not an explicitly mystical path?

That I have selected a Sufi concept to frame an otherwise largely "exoteric" discussion of Fatima al-Zahra' is not without cause. Sufis, as mystics, are personally and directly concerned with experiencing God, an activity that mirrors, in some ways, how Shi'i Muslims (and lay-people, more generally) relate to their saints: as a means of getting closer to the divine via wholly created and constructed concepts (the saint and his or her charisma). Rumi notes that the body ("form") is important in that "without it neither can works be effected nor can the goal be reached."[25] In the 13th century Persian work, *Rawda-yi taslim*, a compilation of the teachings of Shi'i scholar Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274), a Shi'i view of sainthood is put forth with regards to the prophets and *imam*s:

> In so far as human beings are unable to be receptive to His Almighty Command without mediation, it was necessary that there should be intermediaries vis-à-vis the Divine Command. Those people whose consciousness (*khatir*) behaved as does a [translucent] glass held up to the sun were the Prophets.[26]

The likening of prophets to transparent glass through which the light of God is known is parallel to my use of the veil metaphor. The *imam*, in turn, is that person who allows that prophetic, holy light to be realized in the intellects of gnostics.[27]

Furthermore, the 20th century Iranian religious scholar, 'Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (d. 1981), does not hesitate in considering the "esoteric" aspects of

---

[25] Rumi, 21.
[26] Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Paradise of Submission: a Medieval Treatise on Isma'ili Thought*, trans. S. J. Badakhchani (London; New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2005), 109.
[27] Tusi, 111.

Shi‘i Islam. The ‘Allama, who studied (both on his own and with a teacher) the *Fusus al-hikam* of Ibn ‘Arabi,[28] writes that the gnostic is one who sees the world as a mirror of divine Reality, a visible means of comprehending and making apparent the “Invisible Deity.”[29] He notes that such an individual recalls, the Qur’an in mind, that “the world and its phenomena are all and in every aspect signs and portents of God.”[30]

While the Shi‘i tradition has never been wanting for esoteric interpretation, Shi‘i Sufis have been somewhat scarce, comparatively. Shi‘i *tariqa*s (orders) did arise in Persia from the 13th century onward alongside Sunni orders who mystically favored ‘Ali, Fatima’s husband and the first Shi‘i *imam*, and his family.[31] The sectarian affiliation of these orders was often ambiguous; for example, the Safaviyya order, named for Shaykh Safi al-Din Ishaq (d. 1334), would produce the messianic Shah Isma‘il (d. 1524), the first Safavid emperor who declared Ithna‘ashari Shi‘ism the state religion. But the order did not originate as Shi‘i, and when it “changed” is unknown.[32] Nur al-Din Muhammad Ni‘matullah b. ‘Abdallah (d. 1431), founder of the Shi‘i Ni‘matullahiyya order, writes in his poems that the selfhood of the world is but the world-as-veil, and that world “arises from the diffusion of His universal Being.”[33] His conception of how creation relates to God (as a mere sign of God’s being) is very much the sort of theology found in Ibn

---

[28] Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, *Shi‘a*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1981), 23.
[29] Tabataba’i, 112.
[30] Tabataba’i, 116.
[31] J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders of Islam* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99.
[32] Trimingham, 99-101.
[33] Edward G. Browne, *The Tartar Dominion (1265-1502)*, vol. 3 of *A Literary History of Persia* (1902-; repr., Bethesda: Iranbooks, 1997), 472. See also Trimingham, 101-2.

'Arabi's or Rumi's thought. Can we then conflate Shi'i and Sufi conceptions of holiness and, then, conceptions of "sainthood?"

Vincent Cornell, in his seminal work on Moroccan Sufism, notes that it is essential to understand sainthood as it functions socially and doctrinally, and he distinguishes (but does not separate) an individual's state of being a saint (*walaya*) from how his or her saintly actions are experienced by others (*wilaya*).[34] In that sense, we can see the *wali* as a person who *has* sainthood from within and *is given* sainthood by his or her followers. The holy person exists, then, in a circle of affirming and re-affirming relationships with the divine and mundane worlds. Ibn 'Arabi discusses *walaya*, in particular, at length in his writings, and he locates it as a spiritual position occupied by those saints (*awliya'*) in following Muhammad's prophetic example, though the former cannot be prophets themselves.[35] So, "sainthood" is based upon both a connection to the divine and also the ordinary people who seek that connection and accomplish it by the mediation of others.

As I mentioned briefly above, the Sufi "saint" is often translated from the Arabic *wali* (friend), whose holiness results from personal spiritual practice. In Shi'ism, the *imam* is also considered the *wali Allah*, but by benefit of sacred genealogy, following in Muhammad's footsteps and acting as an intermediary figure between Muslims and the divine.[36] For example, in a prayer to Fatima in the *Mafatih al-jinan*, one recites, "Witness, [O Fatima], that I am pure by your *walaya* and the *walaya* of the descendents

---

[34] Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 272-73. For an exploration of possible meanings of *walaya, wilaya*, and *wali*, see Cornell, pp xvii-xxi.
[35] See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 47-59.
[36] Trimingham, 133-37.

of your house, upon them all may God grant blessings."[37] Thus, the *walaya* of the *Ma'sumun*, their holy post, is the means by which the Shi'i Muslim is purified, as they mediate that access to the divine. J. Spencer Trimingham distinguishes Shi'i and Sufi Islam based on this apparent difference in the conception of human holiness: the Shi'a require the "mediatory" *imam* while the Sufis do not, accessing God directly.[38] This distinction ignores, however, the fact that tombs of Sufi saints are venerated by non-Sufis in the same sense that *imam*s' tombs are often venerated (by non-*imam*s); the Sufi him- or herself might not need an intermediary, but those non-mystics venerating his or her memory do. So, we might approach the Shi'i *Ma'sumun* and Sufi *shaykh*s in a similar manner with regards to what appears to be a parallel if not entirely identical sainthood.

In his consideration of holy "charisma" in Islam, Liyakat N. Takim states, "it is through [the *imam*s] that God can be worshipped and known."[39] Takim goes on to locate the holy figure – whether Shi'i, Sunni, or Sufi – in this intermediary position between God and mankind. Takim particularly relies on Rudolf Otto's articulation of holiness in his consideration of divine charisma. Otto (d. 1937) was an influential Lutheran theologian and philosopher who understood the divine both in terms of its rational/moral aspects and its wholly irrational/"numinous"[40] qualities. Otto views the mystical path to

---

[37] Al-Qummi, 87.
[38] Trimingham, 136.
[39] Liyakat N. Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 26.
[40] Otto's term "numinous" comes from the Latin *numen*, "divine power," and is that aspect of the divine that is wholly separate from ourselves; it is the non-rational, "unnamed something" (Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey [London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1926], 6) that inspires a sense of *awe*-full-ness (*mysterium tremendum*)

be a particular but not exclusive method of religious experience.[41] It is not only the mystics who might access non-rational holiness in addition to its moral aspects.[42] The numinous divine "comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise *out of* them, but only *by their means*."[43] A prophet is therefore to the religious sphere what the artist is to art;[44] he (or she) is a creative force *realizing* something non-rational and abstract. I propose, then, that the prophet or saint becomes a means of rationalizing holiness by which the non-mystic relates him- or herself to God/the Holy. In 'Allama Tabataba'i's words, noted previously, the world mirrors God; thus, it will be through that veil of the world that one can access the numinous divine, if indirectly. Holy persons are positioned in this liminal space of the world-veil.

In the Qur'an, God encourages Muhammad, the exemplar of Islamic sainthood, to say to mankind, "If you love God, follow me, [and] God will love you and forgive you your sins."[45] A Muslim is encouraged then, to relate to God through obedience to the Prophet's message and example. Muhammad was divinely inspired in order to guide people, to provide a model by which believers might become close to God (or, mystically-speaking,

---

in us (Otto, 12-13). Fascinatingly, Otto is also concerned with "veils," though he never uses the term as such. He stresses that all the "Greek words" and categories that he or anyone uses to describe the holy/numinous are not real; the divine is, fundamentally, *a priori* and non-rational, however much we try to rationalize it to benefit our understanding (Otto, 116). Again, we find that human conceptualization veils God/the divine, though such concepts are necessary.

[41] Otto, xii.

[42] Otto, xiv-xvi.

[43] Otto, 117.

[44] Otto, 182.

[45] Qur'an 3:31.

realize their natural closeness to him).[46] Annemarie Schimmel locates the figure of the Prophet at the center of Islamic practice, as it is through his being a "beautiful model" (*uswa hasana*) that Muslims are able to *be Muslim* through what she terms the "ideal of the *imitatio Muhammadi.*"[47] Muhammad is the "intermediate principle," the "suture between the Divine and created world... the isthmus between Necessary and contingent existence."[48] Muhammad is the ultimate, earthly link between Muslims (as creatures) to God, and so drawing near to Muhammad (by honoring him or following his example) is a means of drawing near to God. "Muhammadan" emulation/practice, as a pious act, is one that is therefore creative, as it is the cultivation of the pious person through contact and interaction with the Prophet's holy character.

Muhammad's holiness is not held exclusively in his particular person or memory, however. Indeed, it is through the posthumous perpetuation of his holiness (his *baraka*, often) that Shi'i religious identity formed. The Prophet's role as intermediary between God and mankind is preserved historically in the Fourteen Infallible Ones, who inherited his holy position of mediator between God and mankind by way of his daughter Fatima and his cousin and her husband, 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Takim notes that for the Shi'a "religious identity is conceived in terms of devotion to the imams,"[49] who also serve as

---

[46] For Muhammad as a guide, see Qur'an 3:31 and 7:158, among others; for Muhammad as a model Muslim, see Qur'an 33:21 (he is an *uswa hasana*); for verses about the fundamental closeness of God to all human beings, see Qur'an 50:16, 57:4, and 58:7.

[47] Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of The Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 55. For her treatment of Muhammad as a "beautiful model" for Muslims, see pp. 24-55.

[48] Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 134.

[49] Takim, 26.

exemplary models of piety for mankind.[50] Like Muhammad, whose *baraka* they share and make available on earth, the Fourteen *Ma'sumun* function as intermediary figures linking the profane to the divine. Fatima al-Zahra', though not an *imam*, is such a figure.

How might we approach Fatima, in particular, as an Islamic saint? Many scholars of Fatima, as I will discuss in the next section, have sought to locate her varying roles in Islamic piety as indicative of a changing ideal of womanhood as espoused by (male) historiographers. In such historiography, female figures are "preserved" historically (by men) as models for *women* in a given present. Just as Muhammad and the other male *Ma'sumun* might be considered moral and pious models for Shi'i men and remembered in such a light, Fatima is the figure of emulation available for women. Subsequently, some modern historians seek a "true" Fatima underneath layers of what is perceived as a historiographical bias, wanting to reveal Fatima's "her-story."[51] Fatima's being female is thus conceived as a central factor in how she is considered a saint.

Jamal Elias, in his treatment of women mystics in Islam, similarly distinguishes female holiness from male. He describes two paradigms of Muslim womanhood: the profane "female" and the ideal, divine "feminine."[52] The former is the ordinary woman, subordinate in nature to man, who aspires to emulate the celestial, saintly woman who is characterized by her purity. He discusses an array of women saints in the Islamic tradition who embody the holy feminine, mentioning briefly, for instance, that Fatima is an object of pious contemplation in Shi'i theosophic thought, whereby an individual

---

[50] Takim, 26-7.
[51] I will discuss the themes of this paragraph in more detail in the next section of the paper.
[52] Jamal Elias, "The Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism," *Muslim World* 78 (1988): 209.

(man) might access or know God.[53] Elias asserts that "through contemplating and emulating the example of a saintly woman, an ordinary woman, the trivialized female, can attain the level of glorified feminine."[54] But, while he focuses on male Sufi views of "woman" (female/feminine), Elias describes Islamic practice as fundamentally gendered, wherein gender is explicit and central to an understanding of God.

How critical is Fatima's gender and her embodiment of Elias' divine "feminine" to an understanding of her historical positions and functions in Shi'i piety? This question will be a central consideration throughout this paper. One can argue that Fatima's gender is important as it relates to women within a greater Muslim community (the Shi'a in particular) that has developed long after her life and death. I want to suggest, however, that Fatima is also a means of political legitimization and devotional reverence as much as symbol of ideal womanhood. She is a multi-functional, multi-potent subject (both as woman and as human being) and it is through the various ways that she has been "re-imagined" that we might more fully understand her role in various negotiated "presents" throughout history... presents of women, men, and communities as a whole.

Historiography, hagiography, and history itself are exercises of the present. Eric Hobsbawm asserts that scholars must constantly encounter contexts in which they find "invented traditions,"[55] practices that he defines as those necessarily constructed in a

---

[53] Elias, 218. This particular practice is based upon the assertion that "he who knows Fatima knows God," explicitly supporting her relevance to *male* mystics seeking closeness to God.
[54] Elias, 224.
[55] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *Inventing Traditions*, Canto edition, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.

"present" with legitimizing ties to a potentially imaginary past.[56] While Hobsbawm's treatment of invented traditions is not entirely applicable on all counts to looking at the history of Fatima al-Zahra', his understanding of the human negotiation of a present with imaginings of a past is pertinent. Therefore, I will explore ways in which Fatima, as a historical, sacred figure, has been invented, rather than seek to situate Fatima statically within a static chronology of history. Talal Asad's consideration of Islam as discursive tradition, manifesting at the interface of remembered, historical tradition and current practices, can be used to complement Hobsbawm. For Asad, such a tradition "addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present."[57] Fatima al-Zahra', with Hobsbawm and Asad in mind, becomes the past as it is both invented by and affirms the present. As a saint, she is both imagined relative to her devotees, contingent upon their historical contexts and religious conceptions, and located at the creative nexus of traditional past and evolving present.

It is to this final consideration of Fatima, as a means of social and personal religious creativity, that I now turn. Liyakat Takim notes, in his discussion of Sufi charisma, that "the holy man offers the profane world a sacred encounter."[58] The importance and potency of the holy figure is contingent upon the needs of the community in which he or she lives. It is perhaps for this reason that a variety of religious movements form with

---

[56] Hobsbawm, 1.
[57] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," in *Occasional Papers* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown, 1986), 14.
[58] Takim, 39.

"holy men" as their leaders.[59] Fatima, however, did not start a religious movement that she led during her human lifetime – unlike her descendents, for instance. Instead, it is from her (if not from her alone) that religious movements, communities, and persons *were made* and were justified. She becomes a "leader," a *sayyida*, by the memory of her religious and genealogical authority and potency. Her holiness is also never explicitly mystical in the sense of Takim's "holy man," though she does provide the "sacred encounter" posthumously to believers.

It is through this veil of human memory that I will consider Fatima. In her exploration of the figure of Muhammad in Islamic piety, Annemarie Schimmel does not attempt to separate the historical man from the attributions placed upon him in the centuries following his lifetime. She notes that Muhammad's centrality and importance to Muslims exists independent of what is "historically correct,"[60] and she does not attempt to "divest Muhammad's biography of the luminous haze of legends."[61] Egyptologist Jan Assman, in his discussion of the non-historical figure of Moses "the Egyptian" in European, Judaeo-Christian memory, terms this sort of history "mnemo-history," the discursive history of memories, the "past as it is remembered."[62] He treats history as a kind of mythology "woven into the fabric of the present,"[63] by which people

---

[59] Takim, 40. Here, the author does not discuss the leadership of holy men, per se, though in denying that such figures are homogenous in character, he mentions how they tend to lead a variety of religious movements.
[60] Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 4.
[61] Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 10.
[62] Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9.
[63] Assman, 14.

construct themselves via reconstructions (inventions, reinventions) of the past.[64] Assman is interested in the sometimes "marginal" threads of a particular trend in historical social memory.[65] He seeks to track Moses from context to context, as I will do with Fatima, in so doing allowing for an illumination that is more about those remembering than the one who is being remembered.

The celebrated historian of India, Romila Thapar, also considers the importance of memory in historiography in her work about the temple at Somnath in Gujarat, which was raided by Mahmud Ghaznavi (d. 1030) in 1024 CE. Unlike Schimmel's and Assman's considerations of how particular individuals have been remembered throughout time, Thapar describes the shifting memory of an event, by illustrating that any object of historical inquiry might be reflected upon in this way. She asserts, "When social memory is introduced the point at which a particular reading of the event is used to construct such a memory becomes significant."[66] In other words, the "reality" of the event is realized *based upon* a later context in which it is being considered and remembered. For Thapar, social memory is not only inherited, but also invented,[67] a proposition reminiscent of both Asad's and Hobsbawm's theories of how people imagine themselves and their identities in conjunction with a given memory of the past.

---

[64] Assman, 9.
[65] Assman, 11; 16.
[66] Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: the Many Voices of a History* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), xi.
[67] Thapar, 206.

Thapar is also conscious of how historical events hold a creative power for those remembering them (the same could be said for remembered individuals). Memory is not static and often serves the interests of the present. She writes,

> Even where [memory] is present, it is continually refigured, creating alternate and sometimes competing interpretations. Such reconstructions are part of the *making of identities* and identities in history are neither permanent nor unchanging.[68]

Thus, through a consideration of how an event or person is remembered, the historian can not only begin to survey those particular transformations in time, but also explore how the event or person reflects transformations of the identities, cultures, and societies of those doing the remembering. Fatima, I suggest, is no different. The history of her memory that I will survey in this paper does not need to be independent of the biases of historiography or the miracles of hagiography – she is fundamentally linked, as a saint positioned between God and humankind, to those people who conceive her and her reality, whatever their purpose is in doing so.

Fatima al-Zahra', though neither a prophet nor an *imam*, can be included as both manifestation of a holy charisma initially embodied by her father and as role model for believers. In the *hadith* that prefaces this section of my paper, the Prophet is alleged to have stated that whoever angers his daughter angers him. Fatima is positioned as a kind of projection of her father, in a sense, a facet of his being; believers are recommended to treat her as they would treat him. Just as her father is remembered as a guide for Muslims, so is Fatima linked to and made to manifest a similar functional role throughout history. Saints are human vessels of divine holiness, making an unimaginable God

---

[68] Thapar, 207-8, my emphasis.

accessible and comprehensible. However, the role of a saint like Fatima is dependent upon human point-of-view, of human need. In Shi‘i piety, Fatima is remembered for her holiness but positioned according to the minds of believers in a given context. She is a mechanism by which Muslims can *relate themselves* to God and, in so doing, *create* themselves as pious persons – or as kings and queens, as Shi‘a, as women, or even as citizens of a modern, globalizing world.

In this way, any consideration of Fatima as a holy figure cannot only be concerned with the suggestion that she acts as a created veil of God. She and all holy figures are also the veils that humanity has placed over God in an attempt to reconcile the unknown, numinous divine with the known, ordinary profane world. It is in this position that Fatima is *remembered* to be potent. Through her invocation, earthly kings are linked to spiritual sovereignty, communities are constructed, and pious persons are formed... And, from the point of view of a scholar, the presumed relationship between God and mankind is illuminated. Of course, conceptions of kingship, community, and “Muslim” (or “Muslima” in particular) are in constant flux within the flow of history, as exemplified in the many Fatimas whom I will discuss in the following sections of this paper. Fatima is at once a single human being who lived a short human life that occurred in “the past,” and also innumerable figures in innumerable “presents” and worlds.

3.
THE DAUGHTER OF THE PROPHET
Islamic authority and identity in the centuries after Muhammad

> Therefore it behoveth a wife to... [take] pattern by Ayishah the Truthful and Fatimah the virgin mother (Allah Almighty accept of them twain!), that she may be of the company of the righteous ancestry.
>
> *Alf layla wa layla*: The Water-carrier and the Goldsmith's Wife [69]

The quote, above, from the *Thousand and One Nights*, is the final moral suggestion within a story about marital relations and adultery, in which the husband errs and the wife is left to deal with the consequences.[70] While an analysis of the story itself is not relevant here, the selection of the holy figures of Fatima and 'A'isha bt. Abi Bakr, a wife of the Prophet Muhammad, as models for behavior is particularly appropriate for the following section of this paper. Why these two women? The narrator provides a hint in the linking of the two ladies with "righteous ancestry," which allows for questions about the nature of both Fatima and 'A'isha's exemplariness and authority. Is theirs a vicarious ideal, drawn by blood from their fathers and consolidated by their husbands? Both women came to epitomize at times two distinct interpretations of the Islamic faith – Shi'ism and Sunnism – and the identity politics involved in such a contestation. In the following discussion, I will engage this concern over how we might conceptualize the womanhood and sainthood of Fatima in particular (and 'A'isha when appropriate), with regard to how Muslims came to characterize themselves in the centuries following Muhammad's death.

---

[69] *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night: a Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments,* trans. Richard Burton (New York: Heritage Press, 1934), 1663.
[70] See Mia I. Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 355.

As I briefly alluded to in the previous section, writing about female figures in history is often an exercise in reconstituting history's "truth" as a whole. Historian Joan Wallach Scott notes that there is a desire among some of her colleagues to identify and describe female figures in history in order to constitute or rehabilitate "woman" as a historical subject.[71] In the writing (re-writing?) of "her-story," social historians sought and continue to seek the female agent in history, presumably with the intent of making history subsequently more "true" or representative, perhaps, of humanity as a group of women as well as men.[72] Scott critiques this treatment of female history on the grounds that it necessarily particularizes women as historical subjects separate from the more universal, male history.[73] I would add, also, that such a focus on the female subject, however much "forgotten" or "devalued" in modern feminist eyes, often allows one to ignore the implications of the forgetting and devaluation of her-story as historical trends (beyond simple references to patriarchy or the universal "his-story"). Scott's critique is of special pertinence to the study of Fatima al-Zahra', who, as a female historical figure, was never forgotten so much as *re-imagined* countless times in the memories of both men and women.

The feminist "her-story" project is echoed in some ways by the modern, Western historian's desire to find the "real Fatima" beyond hagiography and religion in order to

---

[71] Joan Wallach Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 18.
[72] To say nothing of the inherent presumption about the duality of gender in such a project.
[73] Scott, 20-1, 25.

define and know a particular period of history.[74] Historians of Fatima often reach for the earliest Islamic writings, composed in the five or so centuries following her death in 632 CE, in their search for who Fatima "was."[75] However, as they note, these early centuries of Islamic history did not produce historians or biographical source material detached from the era's particular political and socio-religious circumstances. It was during these centuries that the Sunni and Shi'i communities were articulating notions of separateness and authenticity under political pressure from various sovereignties (the 'Abbasids, the Buwayhids, the Fatimids), whose civilizational identities were linked with Islamic culture – and, therefore, with its holy figures, whether male or female. In this particular section of the paper, I will be exploring some of these formative politics as embodied in the remembered figures of Fatima and 'A'isha within a discussion of the greater historical milieu present during the 9th and 10th centuries in the heartland of the nascent Islamic world.

However much I am primarily concerned with expanding and exploring Fatima as a multi-contextual historical figure, I should begin first with a brief biography, a "pieced-together" history of her human life. The sources from which her biography is taken provide the earliest instances of the ways in which Fatima bt. Muhammad was first described, conceived and elaborated. As Denise Spellberg notes, the early Arabic-language biographies and *hadith*s, however less apparently "fantastical" or embellished

---

[74] I will be making use of a variety of these important works in the following discussion of Fatima's biography/hagiography in the early Islamic period, particularly the works of Verena Klemm, Denise Spellberg, and L. Veccia Vaglieri (see subsequent footnotes for specific citations).

[75] I admit to having begun this project within this paradigm, myself.

than later Shi'i exegesis and hagiography, were written by historians with their own biases and religious and social investments in the history they were writing.[76] In order to chronicle how Fatima has been remembered throughout time and how she has manifested as a saint for Muslims, one must begin somewhere. In some ways, this historical Fatima is no less imagined as a sacred figure than she would be, later, if in different ways.

What is known of Fatima's temporal life? L. Veccia Vaglieri has attempted to consolidate the early 8th and 9th century Arabic sources, by distinguishing the figure of Fatima as a historical person from her role in devotional practice.[77] I will begin with her

---

[76] Denise A. Spellberg, "The Politics of Praise: Depictions of Khadija, Fatima, and Aisha in Ninth-Century Muslim Sources," *Literature East and West* 26 (1990): 145. I will explore Spellberg's thoughts on Fatima and 'A'isha in more detail later in this section.

[77] L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Fatima," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 2:841. I hope to eventually subvert or deny the importance of this distinction between "historical" and "devotional." Veccia Vaglieri bases this distinction on a discussion of the works of the influential scholars Henri Lammens (d. 1937) and Louis Massignon (d. 1962), both of whom wrote about Fatima, if with very different opinions about her. Lammens, a Belgian Jesuit who was distinctly unfavorable to Islam, characterized Fatima in 1912 (based on studies of original sources and presented by his own unsympathetic hand) as an entirely unimpressive figure: "Physically, Fatima had no particular advantages. Her weak constitution, her thinness, her anaemic coloring and her frequent infirmities made her unsuitable for the hard work which at that time was the lot of Arab women. Like all of Muhammad's real or imaginary children, she died young and expressed her discouragement in a final lament. Unless one sees her as does the Shia, one wonders how they attempted to make this ghost of a wailing woman interesting" (Henri Lammens, "Fatima and the Daughters of Muhammad," in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. and trans. Ibn Warraq [New York: Prometheus Books, 2000], 228). Alternately, Massignon was an Islamic scholar and Catholic mystic who experienced his mysticism through the lens of Islam and its saints; he saw Fatima as equivalent to Mary, in addition to conceiving of her as representative of all suffering intercessors whose pain brings salvation to others (see Mary Louis Gude, *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion* [London; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996], 55, 60, 207-208). He writes, concerning Fatima's role at the *mubahala* of Najran (which I will talk about in more detail shortly), that Fatima is "axial, privileged, and exposed; the sole 'carnal' connection between her father, her husband, and her sons; 'mother of her father (*umm abiha*),' unique principle of the perpetuity of the Race; chosen to bear the reversabilities of God's judgments: she is at the center of the '*five parental relations* who obscure divinity [within themselves]'… Fatima finds herself as the *human hostage of the affirmation of divine Inaccessibility* – facing Maryam, the *super-human hostess of divine immanence*" (Louis

"historical" Fatima (the appropriateness of the distinction notwithstanding), as she summarizes the general outline of Fatima's human life as it appears in Muslim consensus.[78] Fatima was one of the four daughters of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) and his first wife, Khadija bt. Khuwaylid (d. 619).[79] She was born either a few years before or after the start of her father's spiritual mission in the city of Mecca, and accompanied him on *hijra* in 622 CE. In Medina, she was betrothed to Muhammad's paternal cousin, 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661).[80] 'Ali was apparently quite poor, and he and Fatima lived a difficult life during the beginning of their marriage, which itself had occurred in the first year or two after the *hijra* to Medina. Fatima and 'Ali had five children: al-Hasan, al-Husayn, Umm Kulthum, Zaynab, and a son who died before being

---

Massignon, *La Mubahala de Médine et l'Hypérdulie de Fatima* [Paris: Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1955], 27).

[78] Veccia Vaglieri, 2:842-45. For a visual illustration of her relations, see Figure 1.

[79] Fatima's sisters were Zaynab, Ruqayya, and Umm Kulthum; the order of the girls' births is relatively uncertain, though they are said, most commonly, to have been born in the above order, with Fatima as the youngest (Veccia Vaglieri, 2:842). It should be noted, however, that the exact year of Fatima's birth is contested, which adds additional ambiguity to the already spare accounts of her life. If we believe, as per Sunni history, that she died at around age 29 (Tabari, *The Conquest of Arabia: the Riddah Wars*, vol. 10 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation*, trans. Fred M. Donner [Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993], 39), then she was born *circa* 603 CE, a few years before her father's prophetic mission. It is also popularly noted among the Shi'a that she died at around age 18, having been born five years *after* revelation (see, for instance, Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *Usul al-Kafi* [Beirut: Dar al-Ta'arif, 1998], 1:530). Either could be correct.

[80] According to Ibn Sa'd's biography (which I will talk more about shortly), both Abu Bakr and 'Umar had asked to marry Fatima before she was betrothed to 'Ali, though Muhammad refused them both (Veccia Vaglieri, 2:842); in Shi'i biography, Muhammad defended to members of the Quraysh tribe his choice of 'Ali (who was very poor; presumably in comparison to the tribal elites – such as, perhaps, Abu Bakr or 'Umar) by attributing the decision to divine miracle. He claimed that an angel had told him that the marriage (between Fatima and 'Ali) had occurred, in divine form, in heaven (Veccia Vaglieri, 2:846, in her discussions of the "devotional Fatima").

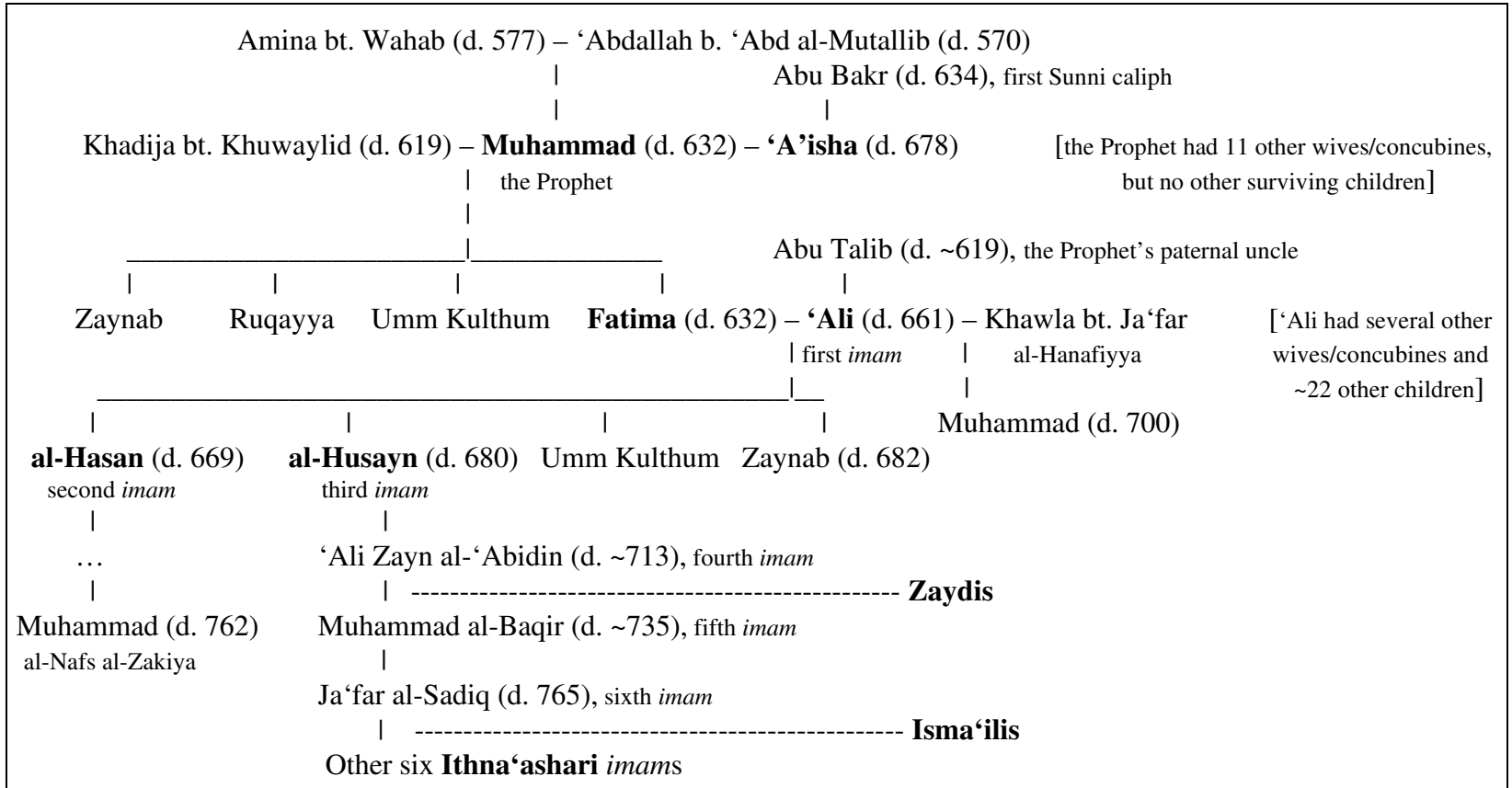

Figure 1: The family of the Prophet, with attention given to the Shi‘i imamate and its succession in the years after Muhammad’s death in *circa* 632.

born.[81] During her father's illness, Fatima was beside herself with grief, reassured only in being told by him that she would die soon after he did.[82] Fatima died in the year 632 CE, or thereabouts, not long after her father in her late teens or late twenties.

At the end of her summary of the "historical" Fatima, Veccia Vaglieri attempts to describe her appearance and personality, drawing from the work of Henri Lammens. She posits that "Fatima was certainly not a beautiful woman, for the sources are silent about her appearance, whereas they mention the beauty of her sister Rukayya."[83] Also, Veccia Vaglieri attempts to ascertain the character of Fatima, concluding that "she was hardworking, content to perform her domestic work diligently and patiently. She appears to have taken pleasure in helping others..."[84] Whether or not either of these assertions is true or well-grounded in the early sources, we can begin to see how Veccia Vaglieri is qualifying the idea of the "historical" in terms of Fatima. In attempting to provide a physical description, a "true" personality, Veccia Vaglieri is reconstructing a Fatima that was *real*, distinct from embellishment, sainthood, or cooption. However, is this Fatima more real than any other? Inquiries into the nature of a historical subject's life are as dependent on the figure being considered as much as the person describing him or her. Verena Klemm, in her study of Fatima's histories as they indicate the shifts in formative

---

[81] Their two daughters, Umm Kulthum and Zaynab, were named for Fatima's sisters. The third son, al-Muhsin, was either stillborn or miscarried. Among the Shi'a, Abu Bakr is often blamed for Fatima's miscarriage of al-Muhsin; in a fit of temper, it is alleged, he threw open the door to her and 'Ali's home, and Fatima was struck by it. The miscarriage of the child is remembered as martyrdom, in keeping with the popular Shi'i view that all *imam*s died as martyrs. This story also illustrates the religious politics of the Buwayhid-'Abbasid era, which pitted Shi'i adherents of the Prophet's direct descendents against those of Abu Bakr and the Sunni caliphate.

[82] Veccia Vaglieri, 2:844.

[83] Veccia Vaglieri, 2:845.

[84] Veccia Vaglieri, 2:845.

Islamic traditions, asserts that, regarding Fatima, "a clear cut separation of facts and fiction seems to be hardly achievable."[85] This would be problematic were the "fiction" less important than the facts, though I propose this is not the case.

Many of the events in Fatima's life – even her birth and exact date of death – are shrouded in uncertainty and multiple narratives. We have, as historians, a simple sketch of her life (as summarized above) in early Islamic sources, but not a concrete "person" in the ways that we often desire today as 21st century historians – especially in attempting to uncover the "real" Fatima as an individual and as a woman. For example, she is only mentioned a handful of times in her father's biography, *Sirat rasul Allah* by Muhammad b. Ishaq (d. 767), twice as an assistant to her father, and once as the reason for one of 'Ali's nicknames.[86] When Muhammad dies, the only reference to Fatima is to note that 'Ali and some of his companions "separated themselves in Fatima's house while the rest of the Muhajirin gathered round Abu Bakr" and his companions, debating succession.[87] This final invocation of Fatima, for all her absence, is very symbolic in hindsight, but hardly useful in reconstructing her character or life.

Much of what we know of the "historical" Fatima is derived from 9th century *tabaqat* (biographical dictionaries) and *hadith* literature, though even these accounts are

---

[85] Verena Klemm, "Image Formation of an Islamic Legend: Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad," in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Gunther (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 183.

[86] Fatima is asked by her father and then by 'Ali to wash their weapons during the battle at Uhud (Muhammad ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A translation of Ishaq's* Sirat Rasul Allah, Jubilee Series Edition, ed. 'Abd al-Malik b. Hisham and trans. A. Guillaume [1955; repr., Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997], 389). She is also mentioned at one point helping Muhammad bathe (Ibn Ishaq, 551). 'Ali is alleged to have put dust on his head when angry with Fatima instead of speaking to her, resulting in his nickname, "Abu Turab," or "father of dust" (Ibn Ishaq, 286).

[87] Ibn Ishaq, 683.

somewhat subjective in nature in that they were recorded only insofar as they might have reflected the historiographer's view of Fatima, her history, and Islam. Denise Spellberg is especially cautious in approaching these 9th century sources, observing in them male bias and idealization. Spellberg is particularly interested in approaching early accounts of Muslim women (Khadija, Fatima, and 'A'isha) as biographies written to depict women not as they had been but as the historiographers thought that they – and Muslim women contemporary to them – *should be*. Spellberg concludes that the histories (the *stories*) of these early Muslim women were "appropriated by male scholars as a means of controlling the options available to women."[88] While this assertion is far too simple in my mind, it is necessary to explore, at least, the potential "fictionality" or bias present in supposed historically revealing texts in order to begin to survey and understand Fatima's role in Islamic history.

In 9th century Sunni *tabaqat*, Fatima is described specifically in terms of her domestic activities, the poverty (and therefore blessedness) of her and 'Ali's household, and her exemplary status as she relates to her husband and father.[89] In her biography written by Muhammad Ibn Sa'd (d. 845) in his *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kubra*,[90] the fragmentary accounts surrounding her life (as recorded in earlier works) are elaborated into stories.[91]

---

[88] Spellberg, *Politics of Praise*, 145.
[89] Spellberg, *Politics of Praise*, 136.
[90] This multivolume work provides biographies of *hadith* narrators organized by the relation of the individual to the Prophet, containing genealogical details as well as many actual *hadith*s. The last volume is devoted to women (Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to* Who's Who [Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994], 5; and Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 29).
[91] Klemm, 186

These elaborated narratives focus on her roles as daughter, bride, and wife,[92] all of which are references to her family relationships (as opposed to her as "an individual," so to speak);[93] her biography was the "literary medium of the legacy and actions of the Prophet,"[94] and thus Fatima's stories needed to be Muhammad's stories, too (*Islamic* stories).

Fatima is characterized somewhat differently in 9th century Sunni *hadith* collections. It is in the *hadith* that Fatima is "spiritualized,"[95] expressed as a religious (holy) figure outside of a domestic role or accounts of events in her life. In these collections we find the beginning of a proliferation of honorifics and spiritual titles attributed to Fatima (and to other important Muslim women).[96] It is in this context that Fatima is described as one of the best women of the world, ruling in heaven.[97] She and Khadija, particularly, are linked with pre-Islamic holy women like Maryam and Asiya (Moses' adopted, Egyptian mother) perhaps in order to link Islam with past revelation.[98] Barbara Stowasser interprets these traditions as those that unite these holy women in "an archetype of righteousness"[99] and ideal, pure femininity: that of virgin/mother (however

---

[92] Klemm, 189
[93] Klemm, 190.
[94] Klemm, 186.
[95] Klemm, 193.
[96] Spellberg, *Politics of Praise*, 136-37.
[97] Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59-60, from her summary of a discussion of some of the *hadith*s in the *Qisas al-anbiya'* of Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). For a fascinating comparison of Fatima and Maryam in particular (as holy beings) within qur'anic exegesis, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Qur'anic Exegesis," *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981).
[98] Stowasser, 60.
[99] Stowasser, 60.

metaphorical). Fatima falls into this archetypal place in Sunni *hadith*s as both daughter (once-virgin) of Muhammad, then, and mother of his grandchildren.[100]

Spellberg asserts that these 9th century biographies and traditions were compiled by men for the sake of defining an ideal woman; Fatima is a woman situated within a domestic space, as mother and wife and daughter. Or, at least, these sources reflect who the historiographers thought Fatima should be, who a holy woman should be. I do not question this interpretation of Spellberg's; rather, I wish to question the nature of such historiography. What does the act of defining Fatima, of idealizing her, of *selecting* her history mean within the discourse of who Fatima "was" and "is?" Historiography, whether "secularly" in the form of historical chronicle or "sacrally" in *hadith* and hagiography, is a means of interface between a past and present, between making the former and being in the latter.

Klemm, whom I mentioned above as questioning the nature of any historical/ devotional distinction in the discussion of Fatima (or any saint), has a slightly more subtle view than that of Spellberg. She notes that these first recorded stories of Fatima's life were marked with fictional elements from the start, already introducing the imaginary into spiritual history.[101] Instead of focusing on possibilities of male bias, however, she identifies the actions of historiographers as "creative acts."[102] I find this approach to the historiographic act appealing, as it does not situate Fatima within a realm particular to

---

[100] Fatima's role as "virgin" has even been interpreted as more than metaphorical in some of the stories – she is presented as pure from defilement (Stowasser, 60), a re-virginalization of sorts that is of particular potency in Shi'i *hadith*s (see Stowasser, 80; Klemm, 201).
[101] Klemm, 183.
[102] Klemm, 183.

women only (as a man's ideal woman), but instead describes her as a figure that is engaged in the *creation* of a Muslim consciousness on the whole. To adapt Hobsbawm's idea of invented tradition, we can perhaps situate this creativity within a fashioning of identity. It is with this idea of creation-via-Fatima in mind that I now will discuss Shi'ism and the development of the Shi'i religious community in contrast with the Sunni in the centuries following the Prophet's death.

Verena Klemm notes that, beyond the 9th century *tabaqat* and *hadith* collections, Sunni traditions of thought concerning Fatima did not change very much.[103] However, beginning in the 10th century CE, a rich intellectual tradition regarding her (and the family of Prophet more generally) developed among the Shi'a in Iraq. Fatima was being re-imagined again within a specifically Shi'i Muslim consciousness, and certainly not for the last time.

As an illustration of this development of Fatima's role and importance for the evolving Islamic community, we can consider two accounts of a theological dispute in Medina with the Christians of Najran in circa 631, the "Mubahala."[104] In the 8th century during the early period of the 'Abbasid caliphate, Ibn Ishaq writes about the event in his *Sira* of the Prophet. He describes the event, wherein a group of Christians came to Medina to debate religion with Muhammad, in great detail, particularly with concern to

---

[103] Klemm, 193.

[104] *Mubahala* means "cursing one another" in Arabic; in this case, it indicates the call for a "contest of prayer," requesting that God curse the incorrect party in a given debate. This account is given as an explanation of verse 3:61 in the Qur'an, in which it is stated, "And if anyone should argue with thee about this [truth] after all the knowledge that has come unto thee, say: 'Come! Let us summon our sons and your sons, and our women, and your women, and ourselves and yourselves; and then let us pray [together] humbly and ardently, and let us invoke God's curse upon those [of us] who are telling a lie."

the names of the men involved and the content of the debate itself (which ends peacefully).[105] However, Muhammad is the only one remembered as representing Islam.

Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022),[106] writing in Baghdad in the 10th century, also includes an account of the Mubahala in his biographical work about the Shi'i *imam*s, the *Kitab al-irshad*. Al-Mufid was also writing under the 'Abbasid caliphate, though political power was by this time in the hands of the Persian Buwayhids (or Buyids), who were Shi'i themselves and thus allowed for the advancement of Shi'i thought during their rule. Al-Mufid's account of the Mubahala differs profoundly from Ibn Ishaq's, not with regard to the chronology of the event or the Islamic view of Christianity it presents, but in *who* is remembered to have defended Islam. Instead of the Prophet acting alone, he is accompanied by his beloved son-in-law, 'Ali, and grandsons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and by his daughter Fatima, "the dearest of people to [her father] and the closest to his heart.'"[107] This location of Fatima as nearest to the Prophet's heart implies both her actual, familial closeness to him (by blood) and a closeness based upon his affection for her, which honors her character. It mirrors, in a way, the *hadith* from al-Bukhari prefacing the first section of this paper in which Muhammad claims that all who anger Fatima anger him, as well. This actual and spiritual closeness to the Prophet Muhammad,

---

[105] Ibn Ishaq, 270-77.

[106] Officially, Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Nu'man al-Baghdadi al-Karkhi... *al-Mufid*, as he was eventually called, means "one who brings benefit."

[107] Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad: The Book of Guidance*, trans. I. K. A. Howard (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1981), 117. For the full account of the Mubahala in the *Kitab al-irshad*, see pp. 116-19. It must also be noted that the inclusion of 'Ali and Fatima and their two sons at Najran is not exclusively Shi'i – they are similarly represented in Sunni works from this time, as well. However, I have included this comparison of Ibn Ishaq's and al-Mufid's accounts of the Mubahala to illustrate this transformative period in Islamic history and memory, in which the remembrance of saints is a point of negotiation, whether for Sunni or Shi'a.

the exemplary holy person in Islam, is critical in the emergence of Fatima as a pivotal religious figure during the 8th through 10th centuries, for it is largely through Fatima, not ‘Ali, that the early Shi‘a sought legitimation.

Of course, the centrality of Fatima in later Shi‘i politics does not discount ‘Ali’s importance in the formation of Shi‘i Islam, for which he was the initial political focus and rallying point during the crises of succession in the 7th century. Shi‘ism developed as a political movement whose members (the *Shi‘at ‘Ali*) supported ‘Ali as Muhammad’s true successor and the fourth caliph in his conflict with Mu‘awiya (d. 680), who would become the fifth caliph.[108] ‘Ali was alleged to have been the first male convert to Islam,[109] and the Prophet was said to have named ‘Ali as his successor at Ghadir al-Khumm in 632, whereat Muhammad said to those present that their religion had been perfected and, in conclusion, “‘for whomever I am the authority and guide Ali is also his guide and authority.’”[110] However, the Prophet’s death not long after was followed by a series of succession crises, the first of which was resolved with Abu Bakr (d. 634) – and not ‘Ali – becoming the first caliph. ‘Ali did become caliph in 656 after the assassination of ‘Uthman in Medina, though he was never “generally recognized”[111] until much later.

---

[108] My summary of early Shi‘i history is drawn from what has been described, in far more detail, in Heinz Halm, *Shi‘a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997). See Figure 1 for genealogies relevant to this discussion.

[109] Ibn Ishaq names Khadija as the first convert to Islam (Ibn Ishaq, 111) and implies, controversially given his Sunni allegiances, that ‘Ali was the second (Ibn Ishaq, 113). Al-Mufid, alternately, names ‘Ali as the first convert, and implies Khadija was the second (Al-Mufid, 18-9). ‘Allama Tabataba’i concurs with al-Mufid, asserting that Muhammad first met ‘Ali when he descended from the cave of Hira’ after his first revelation; upon sharing what had been revealed to him with his cousin, the youth became the first Muslim (Tabataba’i, 150).

[110] Tabataba’i, 179. Additionally, for a discussion of Qur’anic verses that allegedly indicate ‘Ali’s rightful place as Muhammad’s successor, see Tabataba’i, 177-79.

[111] Halm, 5.

‘Ali left Medina, situated his caliphate in Kufa, and was assassinated five years later, in 661. During his tenure as caliph, ‘Ali battled Mu‘awiya, the governor of Syria who declared himself caliph a year before ‘Ali died.

The Shi‘at ‘Ali, then, were his supporters during his life who continued to favor his family after his death. Their identity was largely political until after ‘Ali’s son, al-Husayn, was killed at Karbala’ in 680. The group had invited al-Husayn to Kufa from Medina that year, and he and his party were massacred by the caliph’s troops on the way there, unsupported by their Kufan adherents and allies. Historians mark the event of al-Husayn’s death as the catalyst by which Shi‘ism, as a religious sect, had its advent.[112] This subsequent religiosity of the Shi‘at ‘Ali resulted from a shared feeling of guilt and need for penitence because of the tragic events at Karbala’, which infused the religion with an ethos of martyrdom and a willingness for self-sacrifice that was later ritualized in the *ta‘ziyeh* passion plays.[113]

Of the Shi‘i religious leaders, only ‘Ali was a caliph in the Sunni tradition; instead, the early Shi‘a identified a series of *imam*s who were recognized as the spiritual leaders of the community. ‘Ali was posthumously designated the first, followed by his two sons, and al-Husayn’s son ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin[114] (d. ~713) became the fourth. It was during the latter’s imamate in the decades at the turn of the 8th century that “Shi‘ism” began to be consolidated and internally contested under the organization of the *Tawwabun* (the Penitents), a group formed after the massacre at Karbala’ and led by associates of ‘Ali b.

---

[112] Halm, 16.
[113] Halm, 20. I will discuss the events at Karbala’ and the *ta‘ziyeh* in more detail later.
[114] Also known as ‘Ali b. al-Husayn, distinguished from his two brothers ‘Ali al-Asghar and ‘Ali al-Akbar, both of whom died at Karbala’ in 680.

Abi Talib.[115] It is in their propaganda and rhetoric that Fatima arises as a means of legitimation within the discourses concerned with who could serve as the Shi'i *imam* after al-Husayn's death. At this time, Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya (d. 700), a son of 'Ali b. Abi Talib by Khawla bt. Ja'far,[116] sought the imamate, bringing into question the criteria needed in an authentic *imam*. Was it descent from 'Ali, around whom the Shi'a formed, or descent from the Prophet via Fatima? It was Fatima, then, who was invoked by some in justifying the politically quiescent 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin as the authentic *imam*.[117] Indeed, the poet al-Farazdaq (d. ~730) supported Zayn al-'Abidin's cause by explicitly highlighting his close blood-connection with the Prophet and his daughter: "This is 'Ali [b. al-Husayn], whose father is the Prophet.../ This is the son of Fatima, if you are ignorant of him."[118] 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin's authority was figured to rest upon his proximity to Muhammad and Fatima, a closeness that was likened to that existing between a son and his parents, for how could a child of the Prophet and Fatima be denied temporal authority?

---

[115] Syed Husain Mohammad Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 222.

[116] A later wife of 'Ali's after Fatima's death. For a comprehensive list of his wives and twenty-seven children, see al-Mufid, 268-69.

[117] Jafri, 229, 237. Indeed, the first real split in the Shi'a party occurs at this time between those willing to support al-Mukhtar b. Abi 'Ubayda al-Thaqafi (d. 687) in his active policy against the Umayyads or with 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin. Al-Mukhtar was allied with Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya, and this was one of the reasons al-Mukhtar's plans for revenge (and repentance) were rejected by the *Tawwabun*, as they sought to follow an *imam* linked to the Prophet himself (Jafri, 228, 236). However, eventually, it seems, a number of *Tawwabun* by the end of the 7th century did, in fact, declare allegiance to Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya as the *imam* of the Shi'a (Jafri, 244-45). For further descriptions about the different "Shi'isms," so to speak, contesting for authority during the early 8th century, see Jafri, 262-64.

[118] Jafri, 244, quoting the poet al-Farazdaq.

This early era of Shi‘i Islam was clearly characterized by tensions stemming from who was and/or could be the legitimate leader of the new Shi‘a community. Because of this tension, various factions developed and debates began concerning what should constitute politico-religious authority. However, by the term of the fifth *imam*, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. ~735), there were rivalries even within the small group of Fatima's descendents. One of those intra-communal challenges to Muhammad al-Baqir's claim to the imamate came initially from Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiya (d. 762),[119] who later focused his attentions on and led a revolt against the second ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (d. 775) while Muhammad al-Baqir's son, Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765), was *imam*.

Al-Nafs al-Zakiya was a descendent of al-Hasan on his father's side, granting his movement the possibility of authority drawn from direct prophetic descent via Fatima. Indeed, it was this descent that he invoked in his bid for power against both rival Shi‘a factions and the ‘Abbasids who had declared themselves the *ahl al-bayt* upon seizing power from the Umayyads in 749 CE.[120] An illustration of this latter conflict can be found in the letters exchanged between al-Nafs al-Zakiya and al-Mansur. Among other examples illustrating al-Mansur's lack of adequate ancestry, al-Nafs al-Zakiya writes, "'We are the children of the Prophet's daughter Fatima at the time of Islam, and you are not.'"[121] Al-Mansur's response in turn questioned the legitimacy of the entire Shi‘a project:

> "Most of your pride is based on descent from the mother's side, which would only deceive the uncouth and the common. God has not made the women like uncles,

[119] Jafri, 247.
[120] Jafri, 274.
[121] Jafri, 278, quoting al-Nafs al-Zakiya.

> father, fathers-in-law and the responsible relatives... As for your claim that you are the son of the Apostle of God, Almighty God has rejected such a claim when he said, 'Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets.' *But you are the children of the daughter*. Verily it is a close relationship, but she is a woman who can inherit but cannot become an Imam. How on earth then could the Imamate be inherited through her?"[122]

How on earth, indeed? And yet, Fatima is the only direct link to the Prophet. 'Ali may have been a cousin (and is certainly held in high esteem!), but he was not the child.

The insistence of some Shi'a on the prophetic descent of the *imam*s, a point of major contestation during the first centuries after Muhammad's death, indicates a concern with how religious and political authority could be negotiated. The influence of the Shi'i imamate as held by the descendents of al-Husayn had waned since his death at Karbala', only to be revived under the sixth *imam*, Ja'far al-Sadiq, upon his reinterpretation of the imamate as a separate post from that of caliph. Al-Sadiq pronounced that an *imam* had to be a descendent of 'Ali and Fatima, granted the imamate by the previous *imam*, and in possession of inherited, *religious* knowledge.[123]

It is this religious knowledge (*'ilm*), alleged to have been divinely bestowed upon the *imam*s by God, which I will now discuss to explore further Fatima's role in the formation of early Shi'i identity. Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni (d. ~939), in his seminal collection of Shi'i *hadith*s compiled in pre-Buwayhid Baghdad, *Usul al-kafi*, includes a few traditions concerning the nature of the *'ilm* as it was initially described by Ja'far al-Sadiq some two centuries previous. The divine knowledge of the *imam*s, like

---

[122] Jafri, 278-79, quoting al-Mansur, my emphasis. For more on the conflict between al-Nafs al-Zakiya and al-Mansur, see Jafri, 275-80.
[123] Jafri, 281-82.

Muhammad's Qur'an, was remembered in the 10th century to have been allegedly composed in a series of texts, the whole of which was named *al-Jafr*... And one of these holy books was the *Mushaf* ("Book") of Fatima, transmitted to her by the angel Gabriel in a manner, if not prophetic itself, mirroring her father's divine experience of revelation.

Syed Husain Mohammad Jafri notes that al-Kulayni's work includes a number of *hadith*s attributing supernatural qualities to the *imam*s propounded by semi-heretical (*ghulat*) Kufan sects of his time.[124] These groups initially formed to glorify and rally support for Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq in Kufa during those pivotal and transformative years of the imamate's history.[125] Jafri seems keen to disregard the supernatural aspects of the *hadith*s as propaganda, but one cannot ignore that any *hadith* recorded by al-Kulayni as *a remembered tradition*, however "false," expressed the concerns of those who sought to remember and pass it on. To better explore these concerns, I would like to contrast the *hadith*s of the *Mushaf* and the memory of Fatima al-Zahra' that they imply with a similar memory of another woman, 'A'isha bt. Abi Bakr (d. 678), as recorded in the history of al-Tabari (d. 923). This brief comparison will shed light on the formative and contested politics of Shi'i and Sunni identity as they had evolved since the time of al-Nafs al-Zakiya and al-Mansur to the 10th century of al-Kulayni and al-Tabari. We can also examine conceptions of human holiness claimed to be held by those close to (mirroring) Muhammad.

Denise Spellberg, in her exploration of the memory of 'A'isha, the third and most controversial wife of the Prophet and daughter of the first Sunni caliph Abu Bakr, notes

---

[124] Jafri, 303.
[125] Jafri, 300-4.

that "all Muslims, in the evolutions of their communal identities, defined themselves in relation to the posthumous legacies of the men and women of the first Muslim community."[126] 'A'isha married Muhammad in 623 CE when she was seven years old and was a widow ten years later.[127] She has been celebrated and honored often in her role as *muhadditha*, a narrator of prophetic traditions, given her close association with Muhammad as a favored wife. *Hadith* transmission, itself, is considered a particularly noble occupation as it honors and perpetuates the memory of Muhammad and his legacy for the Muslim community. 'A'isha, thus, becomes linked to this persistence of (Sunni) Islam,[128] in much the same way as Fatima has been a rallying invocation for Shi'i legitimists since al-Husayn's death at Karbala'.

The historian Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, writing contemporaneously to al-Kulayni, barely mentions Fatima in his *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, which chronicles Near Eastern history from creation to the 'Abbasid period. She is usually mentioned only in passing: her marriage to 'Ali;[129] the conceptions and births of her sons;[130] her "shunning" of Abu Bakr after her father's death when the former refused to grant her

---

[126] Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 11.
[127] For a brief summary of the likely dates and events of 'A'isha's life, see Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 3. Also, from what I have gathered, while 'A'isha is remembered to have married Muhammad at age seven, she did not move into his house until the age of nine (which is also sometimes given as the age at which she was married).
[128] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 25.
[129] Tabari, *The Foundation of the Community: Muhammad at al-Madina*, vol. 7 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation,* trans. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1987), 92.
[130] Tabari, *Foundation of the Community*, 142.

inheritance.[131] Despite a sympathetic presentation of ‘Ali and a tragic and moving account of the events at Karbala’ that relied heavily on the works of earlier Shi‘i historians Abu Mikhnaf (d. 774) and Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819), al-Tabari was not “pro-Shi‘a,” so to speak.[132] He was writing at a time heavily saturated with propaganda disseminated by the Isma‘ili Shi‘i community, and this led to a textual compromise in which ‘Ali is honored and Mu‘awiya is vilified,[133] and yet the primary legitimating figure for the 8th through 10th century Shi‘a – Fatima bt. Muhammad – is hardly present and ‘A’isha, her Sunni complement and rival, is honored explicitly.

Al-Tabari, in his account of Muhammad’s marriage to ‘A’isha that was consummated in 623 CE, includes a list of nine “special features... that have not been in any woman, except for what God bestowed on Maryam bt. ‘Imran.”[134] ‘A’isha details her almost-unique attributes as follows:

> “The angel brought down my likeness; the Messenger of God married me when I was seven; my marriage was consummated when I was nine; he married me when I was a virgin, no other man having shared me with him; inspiration came to him while he and I were in a single blanket; I was one of the dearest people to him; a verse of the Qur’an was revealed concerning me when the community was almost

---

[131] Tabari, *The Last Year of the Prophet: the Formation of the State*, vol. 9 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation,* trans. Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1990), 196-7.

[132] Boaz Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstruction of Tabari’s History* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 103, 234. Shoshan is particularly concerned with noting that al-Tabari was only a historiographer, whose point-of-view is evidenced not in the events he recounts but in the way those events are reproduced (Shoshan, 104-05). While it might be the case that al-Tabari is never really speaking in his own voice in his *History* (Shoshan, 113), that does not mean he is not expressing the concerns of his time.

[133] Shoshan, 104. Of course, the negative portrayal of Mu’awiya, an Umayyad caliph, serves ‘Abbasid interests outside of just trying to pacify the desires of the Shi‘a.

[134] Tabari, *Foundation of the Community*, 7. A century earlier Ibn Sa‘d, in his *Tabaqat al-kubra* (mentioned previously), included two similar lists of ‘A’isha’s attributes. One of these lists, transmitted via ‘A’isha herself, also noted that she was the only one of the Prophet’s wives to see the angel Gabriel (Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 29-31).

> destroyed; I saw Gabriel when none of his other wives saw him; and he was taken (that is, died) in his house when there was nobody with him except me and the angel."[135]

In a work concerned with chronicling a largely secular version of sacred history, what was the motivation in including such a tradition, particularly as it clearly is describing 'A'isha (or she is describing herself) long after her consummation of marriage? Two of al-Tabari's translators, W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald, propose in their preface to the seventh volume of al-Tabari's *History*: "the mention of the special features in 'A'ishah may have been circulated to off-set the extravagant praise by Shi'ites of Muhammad's daughter Fatimah."[136] Noting that Ibn Sa'd included similar lists of 'A'isha's attributes, Denise Spellberg identifies this attempt at praising 'A'isha as a means of praising her father, Abu Bakr, and the list in al-Tabari "*affirms a contested vision of 'A'isha's memory* within the Muslim community," at a time when the Shi'a were offering refutations of the Sunni memory of the Islamic past.[137]

The linking of 'A'isha to Gabriel in such early Sunni biographies, whether directly or via prophetic revelation concerning her, indicates a recognition of "her mediated, yet powerful proximity to the divine."[138] Fatima, among the Shi'a, is positioned in a similar place with regards to human holiness. An example of this "praise," paralleling in implication the treatment of 'A'isha by al-Tabari, can be found in the following two

---

[135] Tabari, *Foundation of the Community*, 7. Denise Spellberg deals at length with the memory of and communal negotiation of the time when "the community was almost destroyed," i.e. the allegations of adultery against 'A'isha (see Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 61-98.

[136] Tabari, *Foundation of the Community*, xviii.

[137] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 47-48, my emphasis.

[138] Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 47.

*hadith*s recorded by al-Kulayni in his *al-Kafi*. They concern Ja'far al-Sadiq's descriptions of the *Jafr*, the bound compilation of religious texts that constituted the material source of Shi'i *'ilm*. These texts were allegedly in the possession of the Shi'i *imam*, and included, in addition to the *Mushaf* of Fatima, the Torah, the Gospels, and other books of revelation attributed to the pre-Islamic prophets.[139] Regarding the *Jafr* and the *Mushaf*, al-Kulayni records the following authentic (*sahih*) tradition:

> Muhammad b. Yahya, from Ahmad b. Muhammad, from Ibn Mahbub, from Ibn Ri'ab, from Abu 'Abida said:
>
> "Some of our companions asked Abu 'Abdallah [Ja'far al-Sadiq] about the *Jafr*, and he said, 'It is an ox hide full of knowledge.'
>
> "... [and] someone asked, 'And what is the *Mushaf* of Fatima?'
>
> "And [Abu 'Abdallah] was silent for a long time and then replied, 'You, seeking what you will and what you do not [but which would enrich you]: Fatima survived the messenger of God by seventy-five days, and [during this time] a severe sadness entered her because of her father ['s death], and so Gabriel came to her and consoled her, and healed her soul and told her about her father and his place, and told her of what is [to come] after her concerning her descendents, and 'Ali was writing [all of] that... And that is the *Mushaf* of Fatima.'"[140]

And, in a weaker *hadith*,

> A number of our companions, from Ahmad b. Muhammad, from 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, from Hammad b. 'Uthman, said:
>
> "I heard Abu 'Abdallah say, 'The Zanadiqa[141] appear in the year 128 [~745 CE], and that I saw in the *Mushaf* of Fatima.'
>
> "I asked, 'What is the *Mushaf* of Fatima?'
>
> "He replied, 'When God had his prophet die, something of which only He knows came over Fatima because of [her father's] death and her grief, and so God

---

[139] Al-Kulayni, 1:296. These *hadith*s were taken from chapter 97 of the section of the *al-Kafi* entitled "*Kitab al-hujja*."

[140] Al-Kulayni, 297.

[141] The Persian word *zandaqa* means, generally, "heresy," with *zindiq* and plural *zanadiqa* meaning "heretic(s)." The term was appropriated from its Sasanid usage (the Zanadiqa were Manichaeans) by Umayyad and 'Abbasid administrators as they backed a religious inquisition against the "Zanadiqa" in the mid-eighth century – particularly during the reign of al-Mansur (Bernard Lewis, "Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam," *Studia Islamica* 1 [1953]: 54-56).

> sent to her an angel who comforted her distress and told her [things] ... and she made [them] known to [‘Ali], and so the Commander of the Faithful began to write all that he heard until a *mushaf* was fixed.’
>
> “Then [Abu ‘Abdallah] said, ‘As for [this *mushaf*], nothing is in it concerning allowances (*al-halal*) or prohibitions (*al-haram*), but in it is knowledge of what is [to come].’”[142]

Based on these two traditions, it is clear that the *Mushaf* was remembered as a text that had been communicated directly to Fatima by an angel, and while it did not contain revelation *per se*, it was comprised of a chronology of all events to come. Whether or not one believes in the authenticity of either these *hadith*s or the *Mushaf* itself, that they and others like them were recorded by al-Kulayni during the 10th century is significant. Fatima, during this time, was a figure who served a legitimating purpose for the Shi‘a, both among themselves and with the Sunnis, whose caliphate ostensibly governed all Muslims.

Al-Tabari’s *History* and al-Kulayni’s *al-Kafi* are not equivalent texts; one is historiography and the other a *hadith* collection. However, both are compilations of Islamic memories whose compilers identified with certain Muslim communities, and their validity *as* religious communities was not only under negotiation from within, but also in debate with one another over each other’s authenticity. Also, the two examples I have chosen here regarding ‘A’isha and Fatima are illustrative of a theme in which persons close to the Prophet are invoked and their exemplary status honored. And for what purpose? Given the community politics of the ‘Abbasid period, one can tentatively posit that the memories of Fatima and ‘A’isha that we uncover today as historians are infused and colored with the needs of those contesting not only the Shi‘i imamate or

---

[142] Al-Kulayni, 296.

Sunni caliphate (and those holy persons associated with each), but also Islam itself and what it was supposed to be and should become. Remembering ‘A’isha and Fatima is to remember not only Abu Bakr and ‘Ali, but *Muhammad.*

Given that the Prophet Muhammad serves as the ideal and ultimate saintly veil over the divine and means of linking oneself and one’s community with God, what sort of holiness is available to women who might be said to be remembered solely by their relationship to him as the prophet? Is Fatima (or ‘A’isha) merely a conduit between a (male-governed) community and her holy father? Ruth Roded, in her work on the presence of women in early Arab-language *tabaqat* literature, identifies what she calls the “Fatima” syndrome.[143] This textual malady is the inclusion of women in early biographical dictionaries only as they provided links between men.[144] Roded notes that Fatima herself appears to have been a less than central character in the early historical accounts; it is only later that she becomes a key religious figure in Islamic tradition. Roded implies that this later elaboration of Fatima was merely a means to secure legitimacy through her as the Prophet’s child: “it is difficult to escape the notion that Fatima is little more than a holy womb.”[145]

Indeed, we can see this tension over the actuality of Fatima’s holiness not only in modern historical scholarship, but also during the ‘Abbasid period, as with al-Mansur’s letter to al-Nafs al-Zakiya, in which he de-legitimizes the latter for claiming authority

---

[143] Like Ibn Sa‘d’s *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kubra*, mentioned previously.
[144] Roded, 22-23; her opinion is opposed to that positing that her presence can be attributed to a cultural/literary vestige of some sort of pre-Islamic matrilineal values; she views the presence of women in the *tabaqat* as independent of any “socioreligious prestige” (Roded, 24) conferred via maternal lines.
[145] Roded, 23.

through "*the daughter*." Is Fatima only a useful link in a genealogical chain? I would suggest that this interpretation, while not necessarily inappropriate, is too cynical, and can lead us to dismiss the ways in which Fatima's holiness was itself cultivated and remembered as her own. The focus on whether or not honoring her arises from an independent or contingent authority reflects the concern of some modern historians with historiographies of female historical subjects, as I discussed at length at the start of this section. While I cannot deny that Fatima possesses a contingent and inherited holiness, the role of the saint is a necessarily contingent one. While Fatima might veil Muhammad, Muhammad veils God; the *imam*s, too, possess only a contingent and genealogical holiness (derived from Fatima, no less), despite their being men. To mention again the accounts of the Mubahala at Najran, Fatima is included in al-Mufid's Buwayhid-era account of the story when she had been absent in Ibn Ishaq's two centuries before. Her position in the story and her qualification as the beloved of her father do not dissociate her from her male family members as an independent actor, but they do point to a recognition of her value.

The question then becomes, as I suggested in the introduction to this paper, how important is Fatima's gender in understanding her sainthood? While Roded is hardly positive in her depiction of Fatima (and other women) as important through a purely genealogical, historical and gendered role, we cannot discuss Shi'i history without engaging questions of genealogy and legitimacy and Fatima's role in both. Whether or not we reduce her to her reproductive merits and summarily dismiss her, we cannot ignore the centrality of those merits, so to speak, in Shi'i religious politics and identity.

From ‘Ali and Fatima there succeeded, according to the Ithna‘ashari Shi‘a, a total of eleven *imam*s, though there were several succession disputes along the way. The final crisis occurred in 873 when the 11th *imam*, al-Hasan al-‘Askari, died without a living, generally-known male heir.[146] This crisis caused immediate sectarianism, and eventually resulted in the recognition of a hidden twelfth *imam*, who would return at the end of time to lead the Shi‘i community. Thus the “Twelver” (*Ithna‘ashariyya* or *Imamiyya*) Shi‘a were conceived. This group recognized all twelve *imam*s, Fatima, and the Prophet himself as infallible, sinless members (the Fourteen *Ma‘sumun*) of a greater, familial “House of Sorrows” (*Bayt al-ahzan*) that was characterized by a history of martyred *imam*s. The spiritualization of these earthly rulers in the context of a single “house” emphasizes the importance of lineage connections – both to al-Husayn and ‘Ali, and to the Prophet through Fatima. This is especially true insomuch as it was attachment to this bloodline that granted spiritual authority: “The Shi‘a from early on emphasised the hereditary attributes of individuals and the importance of the imam’s kinship to the Prophet as prerequisites for possessing the required religious knowledge (*‘ilm*) and authority.”[147] If Fatima is the glue that attaches ‘Ali to Muhammad, is she anything more than that “holy womb?”

To continue to explore that question, I will now briefly finish up this section of my paper with a discussion of the conjunction of religion with politics and political power before engaging Shi‘i devotional memory in the following section. All of the three

---

[146] This is one general telling of many versions of this particular event in Shi‘i history, of course.
[147] Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Isma‘ilis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998), 24.

primary sects of the Shi‘a recognize spiritual genealogy as an important measure of authority. As just mentioned, the Imami Shi‘a recognize twelve *imam*s, all descendents of ‘Ali and Fatima (and Muhammad). The Isma‘ili Shi‘a also hold allegiance to the lineage of ‘Ali and Fatima, though their *imam*s claim descent from a different son (Isma‘il) of the sixth *imam*, Ja‘far al-Sadiq. However, the origins of their sacred genealogy are still those including al-Husayn and his parents and grandfather.[148] The Zaydiyya of Yemen, a quasi-Shi‘i sect established in the 8th century in reference to the brother of the fifth *imam*, do not recognize the same dynastic genealogy of *imam*s as do the Imami or Isma‘ili Shi‘a.[149] However, whoever is *imam* to the Zaydis must be a descendent of ‘Ali and Fatima.[150] This point of view is shared as well by various “heretical” Shi‘i sects; the Khashabiyya, for instance, also believe that the imamate is restricted to Fatima’s and ‘Ali’s descendents only.[151]

Thus, there is a communal emphasis on descent through ‘Ali’s sons with Fatima. This particular genealogy has not only been central to the ability of Muslims to situate themselves spiritually as Shi‘i, but has also been invoked in the formative politics of Shi‘i states and the political projects within them. In creating and situating political authority within religious contexts, we can begin to see the theoretical relevance in using Hobsbawm’s idea of invented tradition as it might be further qualified as invented

---

[148] See Daftary, 1-4; Halm, 24; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991), 40.
[149] See Halm, 21-22; Hourani, 39-40; Jafri, 266-67.
[150] Hourani, 61.
[151] Wilferd Madelung and Paul E. Walker, *Ismaili Heresiography: the “Bab al-Shaytan” from Abu Tammam’s Kitab al-Shajara* (Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 1998), 91. This view is shared by the Kamiliyya sect, who also invoke Fatima specifically as a point of reference (Madelung and Walker, 100). For further description and discussion of Shi‘i sects, see Tabataba’i, 75-84.

history, imagined history: as "self-fashioning," in a political sense. In these discourses of political power and legitimacy, Fatima (and her immediate family more generally) is invoked within contexts of negotiating the identity of the Shi'a community, thereby implying the "Shi'i-ness" of those associating themselves with her.

There have been three large, powerful Shi'i dynasties, historically, in the Arab the world. One of the first established was that of the Persian Buwayhids in Iraq, who ruled from 945 to 1055 CE during the 'Abbasid caliphate. It was during their rule that Shi'i thought flourished in the urban, intellectual capitals of Iraq.[152] The Buwayhids did not claim any sort of sacred lineage, however,[153] and did not rule using religion as a source of authority as explicitly as did the other two dynasties: the Fatimid caliphate and the Safavid empire. The Isma'ili Fatimids ruled in eastern North Africa from 909 to 1171 CE, contemporaneously with the Buwayhids in Baghdad, as a kind of "counter-caliphate"[154] to the Sunni 'Abbasids.

The Fatimid caliphate was established in Tunisia in 909 CE by exiled Isma'ili leader 'Abdallah al-Mahdi (d. 934) with the military help of Abu 'Abdallah al-Shi'i (d. 911), an Isma'ili preacher among the Berbers of North Africa. The caliphate was further strengthened after the caliph al-Mu'izz transferred the capital seat to Egypt in 973, occupying the city founded a few years previous after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt and naming it al-Qahira (Cairo), the "victorious."[155] The dynasty was called the "Fatimiyya" after Fatima bt. Muhammad, herself, through whom al-Mahdi traced his descent from the

---

[152] Klemm, 195.
[153] Daftary, 63-64.
[154] Halm, 95.
[155] Daftary, 79-81.

Prophet and his relationship to the first *imam*, ‘Ali. Claiming such a descent allowed for religious legitimation.[156]

During Fatimid rule, Fatima was mentioned (by epithet) on dinars in the 10th century as a means to bolster the legitimacy of the dynasty as one connected to the Prophet through her.[157] It was her memory that allowed for and transmitted legitimization to the ruling government. Whether we still qualify this as an instance of a woman providing the glue between two great men, or qualify her as a “holy womb,” Fatima was still a spiritual figure upon whom Fatimid spiritual authority derived its basis. One of the ways in which the Fatimid dynasty sought legitimacy as rulers was through claimed association with her, and she served as a vehicle in the minds of the Fatimids through which they might be conferred spiritual authority (ultimately from God). This power of Fatima’s was largely religious, as opposed to her acting solely as a model (if spiritual) for women.[158] Despite such a lofty position for a woman in the legitimizing, origin mythology of the caliphate, royal women within the dynasty as it ruled did not get accorded the same creative, genealogical spiritual power.[159] Fatima’s potency via her blood-descent from the Prophet was unique to her role and its ability to grant spiritual legitimacy to Fatimid (and Shi‘i,

---

[156] See Daftary, 68-73, for a presentation of the foundation of the Fatimid caliphate and pp. 63-114 for a discussion of Fatimid history more generally.

[157] Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini. *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 106-7.

[158] I discussed this idea of “Fatima as woman,” as a model for proper female behavior in the previous section about Sunni biography and *hadith*. I will return to it as it relates to Shi‘ism and Shi‘i practice shortly, but want to illustrate here how the “woman” aspect of Fatima’s historical space is not the only one.

[159] Cortese and Calderini, 65.

more generally) genealogical claims[160] – and this was a potency that was not so much feminine as religious.

I will discuss the Safavid empire, in turn, later in the following section, and engage questions of how saints are made to act within the political sphere as mechanisms by which politicians might access God and the authority that comes with such a relationship. As for this section, I want to conclude by positing that the centuries after Muhammad's death were formative not just for the Sunni Muslims or the Shi'a, but for the religion of Islam itself. This era and its thinkers were central in the development of Muslim communal identities, and therefore the personal identities of Muslims (*as* Muslims) within those religious communities. One of the ways identity was sought was through the lens (the veil, the memory) of Fatima al-Zahra', the daughter of the prophet who initiated the whole Islamic project. Fatima was not only a means of accessing Muhammad, but also, as we saw with the *hadith*s about her *Mushaf*, a means of accessing God and divine knowledge (and power).

As I have alluded to throughout this section, various genres of Shi'i writing proliferated from the 10th century onwards, particularly under the Buwayhids. Those works chronicling the miracles and sufferings of the *imam*s and Muhammad's immediate family, including Fatima, were especially favored.[161] These writings about Fatima marked a shift from the previous Sunni works in that they consisted of dramatizations and enrichments of those stories; they were full of miracles, folktale elements, and new

[160] Cortese and Calderini, 43-44.
[161] Klemm, 195.

symbolism.[162] It was also during this period of Islamic intellectual history that Fatima's body was purified; she was re-figured as a virgin (despite her marriage to 'Ali and their having children), for example, who never bled either in menstruation or in giving birth.[163]

It was during this era that the roots of the "devotional Fatima," whom Veccia Vaglieri distinguishes from any historical figure, were being cultivated.[164] Veccia Vaglieri identifies the creation and emergence of this new Fatima as problematic for historians, as her new characterizations might be seen to "subordinate facts to beliefs."[165] She thus distinguishes between the two Fatimas, by denying the immanence of the devotional woman in light of her historical roots. I am exploring Fatima's character and historical role for a different purpose, however. I do not deny that her human life is important in that the way it is remembered serves as a basis for the development of Fatima as a saint. But, as a saint, the devotional figure of Fatima cannot be set aside in favor of privileging what is, after all, only a memory of a life – and it is in her role as a venerated object that one can discuss the creative, inventive religious processes being undertaken by Shi'is in the construction of their identities. With that in mind, I will now head east from the Baghdad of al-Tabari, al-Kulayni, and al-Mufid and from Fatimid Cairo to explore how Shi'i communities continued to evolve and be negotiated in reference to Fatima bt. Muhammad.

---

[162] Klemm, 197-99.
[163] Klemm, 201; Veccia Vaglieri, 2:847.
[164] Veccia Vaglieri, 2:841 (and pp. 2:845-49, more generally).
[165] Veccia Vaglieri, 2:842.

4.
THE RADIANT
Creating "Shi'a" from Sind to Isfahan

> The virgin of the universe will drink [the holy water]
> and wed Syama, Lord of the three worlds.
> Pir Shams [166]
>
> O Fatimah, the bird of sorrow is fluttering in our house...
> 'Ali [167]

In the previous section of this paper I explored the development of the Shi'i and Sunni communities through the person of Fatima al-Zahra', who as a saint possessed an constantly negotiated identity within a changing Islamic memory. I raised questions about the importance of her being female in our understanding of her historical role, implying that while her gender is undeniably important and influential, her being a woman is not a necessarily defining characteristic in all aspects of her sainthood. In this section, I hope to illustrate Fatima's importance (along with her family) in the further development of Shi'i communities from the 13th through 18th centuries CE. In particular, I will discuss the history and 14th century oral poetry of the Isma'ilis of northwest India (Sind and Gujarat) with the intent to explore notions of conversion and community consolidation and preservation. I will then head north to discuss the course of the Safavid Empire (1501-1722) and the deliberate cultivation of Shi'ism by its shahs and religious leaders, and how the Shi'i community in Persia evolved subsequently up through the Qajar period (1794-1925). Throughout all of these centuries, while not necessarily the

---

[166] Tazim R. Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Isma'ili Muslim Saint, Pir Shams* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 264.
[167] Lewis Pelly, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain: Collected from the Oral Tradition*, (1879; repr., Farnborough, UK: Gregg International Publishers, 1970), 1:102.

most important Shi'i saint, Fatima is remembered. She is never forgotten, and in her persistence (or, in the continuance of the Shi'a remembrance of her) she evolves, manifesting in a myriad of shifting and ever-changing forms.

The first true "advent" of Islam in South Asia occurred 711-712 CE, when the young Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Thaqafi (d. 715) docked in Sind (the coast of today's Pakistan), seeking on behalf of the Umayyad governor of Iraq, al-Hajjaj, to quell piracy in the Arabian Sea and secure the trade routes. He arrived during a local power vacuum, and subsequently conquered much of Sind and Multan to the north.[168] Interpretations of Arab rule in Sind, which lasted until the arrival of the raiding Ghaznavid Turks in 1026, have been varied and primarily concerned with how one might view Arab rule and conversion to Islam during that time.[169] Despite the military nature of the conquest, it would appear, as illustrated in his letters with al-Hajjaj, that al-Thaqafi acted to deliberately secure the caliphate's trade interests in the area via a preservation of the local economic and social infrastructure of Sind.[170] As for his religious policy, al-Thaqafi considered Sindi Hinduism and Buddhism as scriptural religions and their adherents as *ahl al-kitab*, "people of the book."[171] Al-Thaqafi's approach to governance in Sind set a

---

[168] Derryl N. Maclean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), vii.

[169] See Maclean, pp 22-82, for a detailed analysis of how historiographers have approached the conquest of Sind and the place religion played in it. Some have focused on the conquest as violent and conversion forced, while others have emphasized it as peaceful, conversion occurring as a result of Islam's appeal. Maclean largely rejects both interpretations, centering his analysis, as I shall discuss again briefly in the body of this paper, on economics.

[170] Maclean, 38-39.

[171] Maclean, 40-41; Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 4-5. This policy mirrored those instituted in Persia and other lands conquered by the Arab armies in the century after Muhammad's death; however, non-Muslims in Sind were expected to pay the *jizya* tax.

precedent for Muslim rule in India, one in which local administrative structures are upheld and, over time, the rulers are incorporated into society as a whole. This tradition of continuity and social exchange is later reflected in the development of Islam, itself, in the subcontinent.

We can explore questions of conversion and "Islam" via a discussion of Shi'ism in northwestern India. While Shi'i Muslims had lived in Sind from almost the time of al-Thaqafi's conquest of the region and had participated in political movements to the west,[172] the Shi'i period of Sindi history that I am most interested in for this paper begins in the 10th century with the arrival of Fatimid Isma'ilis. During the rule of the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz (r. 953-75), the Fatimid *da'i* (preacher) in Sind was accused of heresy on account of "innovation" in allowing Zoroastrian converts to continue practicing aspects of their former religion.[173] This question of "innovation" is to characterize the course of Isma'ili Shi'ism in Sind, both as it evolved throughout the medieval period under the Nizari sect and as scholars have come to understand it as a tradition and community, today.

Understanding religious conversion is a necessarily difficult project, as it relies upon discerning processes of change more than the change that occurs before and after a single event. In Sind, the Islamic tradition that developed in the centuries following al-Thaqafi's conquest and the advent of the Fatimid *da'wa* was one whose spiritual leaders employed Hindu motifs and religious paradigms in their preaching and whose

---

[172] Notably, Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiya rallied support among the governors and peoples of Sind for his revolt against 'Abbasid caliph al-Mansur in 8th century (Maclean, 127-29). For a discussion of the pre-Isma'ili period Shi'ism in Sind, see Maclean, 126-30.
[173] Maclean, 132-33.

practitioners did likewise. Was this "innovation" for the sake of proselytism, incomplete conversion, or something else? Often, Sindi Islam, particularly under the Isma'ilis throughout the medieval period, has been understood by scholars as "syncretistic" or heterodox, and therefore not fully Islamic (or Hindu).[174] Tazim Kassam, in her translation and discussion of Nizari vernacular hymns (*ginan*s) from the 13th and 14th centuries, rejects the interpretation that such works are syncretistic for incorporating non-Islamic vocabularies and motifs.[175] Alternately, Tony Stewart, in discussing pre-colonial Islamic texts written in Bengal during the 18th century, proposes that instances of apparent religious "syncretism" of Islam and Indic religious systems might better be understood as deliberate attempts by Muslims to "translate" their beliefs into the local socio-religious medium,[176] without a "loss" of that Islam. Azim Nanji, also discussing the Nizari Isma'ili *ginan*s, agrees with Stewart, noting that the process of reformulating Islam in the Sindi context was, at heart, *Isma'ili* in motivation,[177] driven by a need to respond to the culture of non-Muslims and new converts in a non-Arab context.[178] The

---

[174] For example, see J. N. Hollister, *The Shi'a of India* (London: Luzac & Company, 1953), 360; also, for a summary of this scholarship, see Kassam, 9-26.

[175] Kassam, 19.

[176] Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving the Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory," in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, ed. Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 365. Stewart rejects syncretism as a means of understanding religious systems that employ a variety of symbols from apparently disparate religious sources because of the negative connotations of the term, which implies that the "syncretistic" tradition in question is "an unnatural admixture" of two different faiths (Stewart, 264). Such an understanding necessarily renders inauthentic, in a sense, that tradition.

[177] Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Isma'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1978), 132.

[178] Nanji, 35-36. However, Nanji is at times unclear in his rejection of the view that Sindi Isma'ili Shi'ism was a syncretistic blend of Vaishnava Hinduism and Islam. He unequivocally disclaims syncretism at the end of his book in that it implies "some vague, unilateral concept of Islam or Ismailism as the standard being used to evaluate the validity of the Tradition as a related

"indigenization," culturally and linguistically, of Nizari Isma'ilism in the *ginan*s was done, then, to "maximize [the *ginan*s'] impact" on the non-Muslim population.[179] Can we attribute change in the Islamic discursive tradition to the need of Isma'ili *da'i*s and *pir*s (holy men/Sufi *shaykh*s) to create (via conversion) a community of believers?

The Nizari Isma'ili tradition is remembered to have had its advent in Sind during the 12th century, when the first *pir*s (spiritual guides) were sent there at the behest of the Nizari *imam*.[180] After the death of the 7th Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir in 1094 CE, there was a succession dispute between his two sons, the elder Nizar and younger al-Musta'li, who was installed as his father's successor to the caliphate. Al-Musta'li had Nizar imprisoned and killed when he revolted in 1095. The Nizari Shi'a were those (largely Persian) Isma'ilis who, after Nizar's death, were loyal to the new *da'i* in Isfahan, Hasan al-Sabbah (d. 1124), an associate of al-Mustansir and supporter of Nizar's claims to rule. Sabbah cut ties with Cairo after Nizar's death and established an independent *da'wa* from the Isma'ili fortress of Alamut in the Alborz Mountains, which he had conquered in 1090. There, Nizari Isma'ili rule was established, and it persisted until Hulëgu Khan took

---

phenomenon" (Nanji, 131). However, in an earlier chapter describing the Fatimid *da'wa* outside of Egypt, he states, "the diversity of such adherents [to Isma'ili Shi'ism] was potentially a seed-bed for the rise of a wide variety of heterodox beliefs, *particularly in the case of Sind*, where the converts brought with them a deeply-rooted background of varied practices" (Nanji, 35-6, my emphasis). I have tried to incorporate Nanji's useful ideas and analyses without trying to reconcile this apparent contradiction, and do so with the opinion that concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are not only problematic, but largely irrelevant to my discussion.

[179] Ali S. Asani, "The Ismaili Ginans as Devotional Literature," in *Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research, 1985-1988*, ed. R. S. McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 102.

[180] Kassam, 62.

Alamut and its neighboring forts between 1256 and 1270 CE.[181] The loss of these cultural and political strongholds in addition to continued massacres of Shi'a by the Sunni-sympathizing Mongol armies, devastated the Nizari community, and many likely fled to India.[182]

The Isma'ili missionary project (*da'wa*) in northwestern India (Sind, Gujarat), tied to the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and later to Alamut, had been active since the 9th century. The Nizaris of Sind, then, after the Mongol invasions, were left with the task of preserving their religion in the face of immense pressure; in order for the community to endure in Sind and avoid Sunni oppression, the Nizaris had to "vanish… under the ostensibly Hindu-Muslim syncretic identity of Satpanth Isma'ilism."[183] However, while Tazim Kassam is determined to emphasize the *taqiyya*-based purpose for such development of the apparent "syncretism" in the medieval *ginan*s, one cannot dismiss entirely the importance of proselytism and inspiring conversion in the *da'wa* project from its inception. Indeed, even Pir Shams, the 14th century poet whose hymns Kassam translates, explicitly calls out to non-Muslims in his *ginan*s, exclaiming, for example, "O Hindus! On and on why wander in circles?/ Drink in the pure Light (*nur*)!"[184]

---

[181] Kassam, 51-54; Tabataba'i, 81-82. These Nizari Shi'a are also known as the *Hashshashun*, or "Assassins."

[182] Kassam, 69-70.

[183] Kassam, 71. *Satpanth* or "True Path" Isma'ili Shi'ism is Kassam's favored name (self-ascribed by the Satpanth community) for what others have sometimes referred to as Indian Nizari Isma'ilism. I will use both interchangeably in the following discussing of the *ginan*s, as appropriate.

[184] Kassam, 352. It must be said that Kassam is not rejecting wholesale the didactic/inspiring-conversion aspect of the *ginan*s; rather, she is very wary of its possibly implying that the Satpanth tradition is syncretistic and therefore not a "proper" sort of Isma'ilism (Kassam, 118).

The word *ginan* comes from the Sanskrit *jnana*, which means "contemplative or divine knowledge."[185] In practice, these poems were and continue to be an "integral part of communal worship;"[186] they were composed and ritually recited in a variety of vernacular Indian languages and considered by Isma'ilis as "a sacred corpus of devotional and didactic poetry composed by their *da'is* or *pirs.*"[187] As mentioned before, these hymns are full of Hindu motifs and symbols that not only translate Islamic holy figures into a Hindu religious context, but also, I would argue, reflect a fundamentally *Indian* view of the role religion – in this case, Islam – plays in the lives of its practitioners.

The *ginan*s as a corpus were composed from the 12th century onwards, during the same time that Hindu *bhakti* (devotion) movements were developing and popular.[188] *Bhakti* is an approach to the personal deity/divine – usually embodied as Shiva or Vishnu (via his avatars)[189] – that stresses loving devotionalism to that deity as a means of gaining a release from the cycles of *samsara*, the apparent earthly world.[190] While not all of Pir Shams' *ginan*s, for example, are entirely devotional in the *bhakti* sense (though some

---

[185] Nanji, 7; Asani, 101.
[186] Kassam, 4.
[187] Kassam, 2. Ali Asani notes, additionally, that the *ginan*s are the "embodiment of the faith; the substantiation of the truth that the pirs conveyed" (Asani, 103). Indeed, the point that *ginan* etymologically denotes "wisdom" points to the value ascribed to the teachings of the Satpanth/Nizari spiritual leaders (and the value of the *ginan*s themselves).
[188] Kassam, 36; Nanji, 45.
[189] Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi (the Goddess) are the primary devotional deities of traditional Hinduism (see Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia B. Talbot, *India Before Europe* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 13).
[190] For more on *bhakti*, see Asher and Talbot, 108-14.

certainly are),[191] almost all honor ‘Ali as the Vaishnava *bhakta* would honor Vishnu, and they all treat the wisdom (*jnana/ginan*) of the hymns as a means to escape the ceaseless cycling of the mundane world – a distinctly Indian religious goal.[192] I do not suggest that these Indian elements render these poems un-Islamic; on the contrary, I think they express an awareness of both an unconverted audience and the mind of the convert who still understands the world (say, as *samsara*) in a certain fashion. Thus, the *ginan*s appear to occupy a discursive space which both seeks to enlarge (via conversion) the community and also to foster and preserve it. In regards to Fatima, she and her immediate family members (as the Panjtan Pak, “the Five Pure Ones”) figure in this poetry and for the Nizari/Satpanth community as loci in which religious systems were translated and preserved. The process of “indigenization” of Islamic holy figures like Fatima is one of creation, development, and consolidation within this particular Islamic community.

---

[191] Pir Shams expresses very *bhakti*-like themes in a number of his *ginan*s that Kassam translates. For example, he understands God as personal and immediate: “My heart is my prayer-mat, and Allah is my judge;/ My body is my mosque./ Indeed, He is Allah!” (Kassam, 232) Also, Pir Shams metaphorically relates his spirituality in terms of his being a woman, a very common trope for male *bhakta*s: “I deserted my steadfast husband while he was asleep;/ I left my dear child swinging in its cradle./ I removed some milk from my breast and left it in the oven;/ Then I departed for the portal of my Lord (*deva*)” (Kassam, 227). And an additional and explicit example of *bhakti* in Pir Shams works is a *ginan* in which he declares his adoration for ‘Ali (as Vishnu’s avatar Krishna): “Alas, I have been struck by love (*mahobat*) for you!/ O my beloved Saheb! My heart has been swept away by love!/ Permit our eyes to meet, O my precious Saheb!” (Kassam, 205) However, none of these three themes is present in all of Pir Shams’ works. Instead, each points towards the spiritual context from which he was trying to communicate. For examples of *ginan*s in which Pir Shams calls Satpanth Isma‘ilism *bhakti* and/or its practitioners *bhakta*s, see Kassam, 297-98, 301-02.

[192] For example, “Pir Shams said: ‘O Devotees!/ Learn about the primordial times; / That ancient worship (*puja*) is with you—/ make it your emancipation (*nirvana*)!’” (Kassam, 305) Or, “O Careless Ones! Why go round and round in circles?/ Concentrate on the religion (*dharma*) of *Satpanth*!” and do this by serving “the manifestation (*avatar*) of ‘Ali” (Kassam, 345). I will discuss the Vishnu-‘Ali equivalence in a subsequent footnote.

To explore the understanding of the Panjtan Pak (Muhammad, Fatima, ‘Ali, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn) among the Isma‘ili Shi‘a of Sind, we can turn now to the *ginan*s of Pir Shams, a somewhat legendary spiritual *shaykh* who lived and preached during the 14th century.[193] He encouraged his followers to worship the Panjtan Pak “day in day out,” in order to “get across to the other shore.”[194] In so doing, he locates them at the center of Satpanth devotionalism; it is *through* worshiping and honoring these holy five (‘Ali in particular) that one is released, that one can get closer to God. As to the nature of these holy persons, they were created from divine light (*nur*) on the day that the world was created.[195] Pir Shams elaborates,

> From the Light (*nur*) of the *Panjtan Pak*,
> [Pole Star] Dhruva was created.
>
> It took him 70,000 years to ascend,
> and it will take him the same to descend.
>
> Prophet (*nabi*) Muhammad is the name of that star,
> and ‘Ali is [his] crown.
>
> Around his beautiful neck flashes
> the brilliant Light (*nur*) of Fatimah.
>
> Bathed in Light (*teja*) between his two ears,
> are the Imams Hasan and Husayn.[196]

Pir Sadr al-Din (d. ~1420), another beloved spiritual leader of the Satpanth Isma‘ilis to whom a number of *ginan*s are attributed, describes the Prophet’s family in a similar way:

> He made Muhammad Mustafa from His holy forehead, and the Lord Ali was Himself manifested as Ali. He created the blessed Lady Fatima from His holy

---

[193] For a discussion of Pir Shams’ possible historical identities, see Kassam, 75-85. His tomb in Multan is venerated today as that of Shams-i Tabriz, the mystical beloved of Jalal al-Din Rumi (Kassam, 78; Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 72).
[194] Kassam, 201-02.
[195] Kassam, 348.
[196] Kassam, 354.

> breast, and the light of His two eyes were the blessed Imams Hasan and Husain, who bring comfort to the heart.[197]

These holy Shi'i figures are conceived as bearers of the divine light from which they were created, and they are able to impart this light ritually to devotees. One of the methods of acquiring this holy light is through the *ghat* ritual, in which blessed, holy water (in a pot, or *ghat*) is distributed among those present and drunk.[198] The sharing of the water represents "the public experience of the same ecstasy which is achieved inwardly" via meditation.[199] Pir Shams accords Fatima the role of illustrating the holy nature of the *ghat* ceremony:

> Only the brave will know about the rite of *ghat*
> named after the water-pot (*kumbha jal*);
> The virgin of the universe drinks it
> and weds Syam, Lord of the three worlds.
>
> She is called Bibi Fatimah—
> know that she is the virgin of the universe;
> Says Pir Shams with certitude,
> "Establish the *ghat* in this world of rebirth (*samsar*)!"[200]

Fatima is not only linked to the *ghat* ceremony in these verses, but she is also incorporated into the Indian *bhakti* tradition as the wife of Syam, which is an epithet of Krishna, one of the most celebrated avatars of Vishnu. As I mentioned previously, 'Ali is translated into Hindu mythology as Vishnu, most popularly as the tenth and final avatar of Vishnu (traditionally, Kalki) who will come as the Mahdi to destroy Kalinga, the

---

[197] Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans* (London: Routledge, 2000), 109.
[198] Shackle and Moir, 13.
[199] Shackle and Moir, 21.
[200] Kassam, 288. For a similar *ginan*, as quoted prefacing this section, see Kassam, 264-65.

embodiment of this degenerate age (*kali yuga*).[201] ‘Ali as the final incarnation of Vishnu (as himself *as Vishnu*)[202] is explored most thoroughly in the classic ten-part poetic cycle *Das avatara*, attributed in its first form to Pir Sadr al-Din.[203] In the *ginan*s from which the *Das avatara* developed, Fatima was often translated as the equivalent to a variety of Hindu deities: Shakti, the divine feminine; Saraswati, the daughter of Brahma (who is equated to Muhammad);[204] or Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu.[205]

Whether or not we consider the Indic, non-Muslim vocabularies of the *ginan*s as an aid to proselytize or a means of community preservation during a time of persecution, this reformulation of Islamic motifs was connected to concerns of identity. Fatima al-Zahra’ and her immediate family are the sources of Satpanth Isma‘ili *bhakti*, in a sense. Through devotion to these figures, as a Vaishnava would devote him- or herself to Vishnu or a *bhakta* of the Goddess would devote him- or herself to Devi, the believer was able to access God. Furthermore, as the loci of the building and consolidation of a community, the Panjtan Pak serve as a mechanism by which the Shi‘a community was

---

[201] Nanji, 113, discussing the *Das avatara*.

[202] ‘Ali being made equivalent to Vishnu accounts for what might appear as a blasphemous treatment of his character in many of Pir Shams’ *ginan*s. Vishnu is the beloved deity in Vaishnava *bhakti*, honored as the Lord by which the devotee might be liberated from *samsara*. Thus, the Islamic holy figure associated with such an aspect of the divine (and Vishnu *is*, in a sense, only one aspect of a greater and more abstract “God”) would hold a central place in Muslim *bhakti* poetry like Pir Shams’ *ginan*s. In that sense, to use my veil-metaphor from the first section of this paper, Vishnu-‘Ali (as the same divine being) serves as a veil over a more abstract concept of divinity; devotion to Vishnu-‘Ali is a means by which the Muslim might access that divine. For ‘Ali as Vishnu (Narayana, the “eternal one”), see Kassam, 234. For ‘Ali as the tenth avatar of Vishnu, see Kassam, 240-43. For ‘Ali as the Creator/God, see Kassam, 244-45 and 266.

[203] Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 73. Or, alternately, to Pir Shams (Nanji, 145).

[204] Nanji, 117. In Bengali vernacular works from the medieval period she is also linked to Shakti, in addition to other female deities (Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983], 94).

[205] Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 74.

imagining itself. Fatima was, after all, associated with the *ghat* ceremony, which was a *public* ritual by which a community could mimic her drinking of blessed water and be similarly blessed. As a religious community, the Ismai'ilis of Sind were devotees to holy persons (both the Panjtan Pak and their *pir*s and *shaykh*s) as a method of reaffirming that identity. This role for Fatima, as a point of social and communal creation, will find its parallels in evolution of Shi'ism in Safavid and Qajar Iran, to which we will now turn.

By the end of the era of the Isma'ili *pir*s of the 15th century, much of the lands and societies of Central Asia were in flux as various people and groups contested for political power. After Alamut was surrendered to Hulëgu Khan in 1256, the Mongol armies pushed west, sacking Baghdad in 1258 and ending the 'Abbasid caliphate. Hulëgu Khan (d. 1265) remained in Persia following his conquests and married his sons into houses of local rulers, thereby unifying the region under the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256-1335), based in Tabriz.[206] In 1363 CE, Timur (d. 1405) seized Transoxiana from the Chagatai *khan*s and was eventually crowned in Balkh in 1370, pushing into Persia, Iraq, and the Caucasus during the last decade of his life.[207] During the first half of what would be a politically tumultuous 15th century, the Timurids fought for sovereignty in their western lands, losing Tabriz (the future Safavid capital) and Isfahan to the Turkoman Qara Quyunlu in 1458, the tribe that, in 1467, was defeated in turn by the Aq Quyunlu.[208] Succession

---

[206] René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, trans. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 254-56, 366.
[207] Grousset, 411-34.
[208] Grousset, 459, 462.

disputes were rampant in the east, and the only "oasis in the midst of desolation"[209] to be found was in Herat under Timurid prince Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469-1506).

Writing in this politically and religiously liminal period was Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi (d. 1504), whose tragic and emotive work chronicling the battle in 680 CE at Karbala', entitled *Rawdat al-shuhada'* ("Meadow of the Martyrs"), would fundamentally influence the nature and expression of Shi'i piety in the coming centuries.[210] Kashifi was Shi'i by birth, married to the sister of the Naqshbandi Sufi poet-*shaykh* 'Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492), and employed in Sunni-dominant Herat by the Timurid ruling family, who were pro-Shi'i themselves. Needless to say, the religious atmosphere in eastern Persia was ambiguous at the end of the 15th century, and it was in this time of political and religious change that Kashifi composed the *Rawdat* in 1502 CE as commissioned by the last effective ruler of the city, Bayqara, before it was conquered first by the Uzbeks and later the Safavids.

Kashifi likely drew on a "well-developed oral repertoire of [the events at] Karbala'"[211] in order to reformulate the stories, complete with music and song, into "a Persian drama of vividness and emotional impact."[212] Fatima becomes an object of pity, the epitome of motherly compassion, arriving on the Day of Judgment with her sons'

---

[209] Grousset, 465.
[210] Abbas Amanat, "*Meadow of the Martyrs*: Kashifi's Persianization of the Shi'i Martyrdom Narrative in the late Timurid Herat," in *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 250.
[211] Amanat, "Meadow of the Martyrs," 259.
[212] Amanat, "Meadow of the Martyrs," 251. I will discuss the "Persian-ness" of the subsequent *ta'ziyeh* passion plays later in this section.

bloody and poisoned garments; those who weep as she wept will be redeemed.[213] She is the "paradigm of familial agony" in a drama whose melodramatic tone is "intended to reinforce bonds of loyalty among the 'partisans' (*shi'a*) of 'Ali's House."[214] Kashifi's tragic and dramatic vision of Karbala' and a humanity whose "very essence... is ingrained with grief"[215] was to have a profound effect on the practice of Shi'i piety (and the institutionalization of that piety, in turn) during the Safavid Empire and beyond.

The Safavi family can be traced to a Sufi order founded at the start of the 14th century by Safi al-Din Ishaq (d. 1334) in the city of Ardabil, situated just west of Caspian Sea in northwestern Iran. The Safaviyya order, from its advent, actively proselytized throughout Iran, eastern Anatolia, and the lands of the Ilkhanids, though it was not until Safi al-Din's grandson, Khvaja 'Ali (d. 1427), was *shaykh* at the end of the 14th century that the order "first assumed an unequivocally Shi'ite character."[216] The first Safavi *shaykh* to be given the title *sultan*, however, and actively seek temporal power was Junayd (d. 1460), whose great political and ideological rivals were the Shi'i Qara Quyunlu Turks of Azarbayjan.[217] This legacy of Safaviyya spiritual authority (and its Anatolian adherents, the Qizilbash), Shi'i sectarian affiliation, and political and military activity were to propel the boy Isma'il Safavi to power at the turn of the 16th century as the self-proclaimed *Mahdi*, the

---

[213] Amanat, "Meadow of the Martyrs," 265.
[214] Amanat, "Meadow of the Martyrs," 266.
[215] Amanat, "Meadow of the Martyrs," 265.
[216] Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 8-10, 13. As I mentioned briefly in the first section of this paper, sectarian ambiguity among Sufi orders, who often traced their lineage to 'Ali while not necessarily "being Shi'i," was common in Persia during this period.
[217] Savory, 16-17. The Safavis defeated the Qara Quyunlu in 1467, subsequently taking on their one-time ally, the Aq Quyunlu, from whom Isma'il seized Azarbayjan in 1500 CE.

"rightly guided one" who will herald, as per Shi'i eschatological thought, the end of all times and the advent of a spiritual age.

Abbas Amanat describes that the claims of Isma'il as the "zenith of an epoch of intense though diffused messianic yearnings,"[218] and indeed it was in his role as semi-divine shah, the *wali Allah*, the son of Muhammad and Fatima, as even God himself,[219] that Isma'il rallied his Qizilbash supporters. Amanat observes,

> It was the successful fusion of chiliastic aspirations of the time with the rustic extremism of the Turkoman nomads of Anatolia and northwestern Iran, the chief supporters of the movement, that gave the Safavids the potency most other movements lacked.[220]

In 1501, after taking the Aq Quyunlu capital of Tabriz, Isma'il was crowned the first Safavid shah, and he declared immediately that Ithna'ashari/Imami Shi'ism would be the official religion of his empire.[221]

The city of Tabriz and Persia, in general, were largely Sunni at the turn of the 16th century, and thus Shi'i Islam had to be deliberately and more extensively propagated to secure a legitimate rule for the Safavi family.[222] The religious quality of the Safavid shah was one of the primary sources of his power, drawing as it did upon traditions of divinely-appointed Persian kings and the claim that Isma'il and his successors were not

---

[218] Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 14.
[219] Kishwar Rizvi, "Gendered Patronage: Women and Benevolence during the Early Safavid Empire," in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, ed. D. Fairchild Ruggles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 125; and Savory, 23-24.
[220] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 14.
[221] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 105-9; Savory, 26.
[222] Savory, 28-30.

only the heads of the Safaviyya Sufi order, but representatives of the holy Shi'i *imam*s on earth.[223] With so much of the ruling family's legitimacy based upon a religious substrate that situated them as holy descendents of 'Ali and Fatima, it was essential to assure the cultivation and persistence of that substrate. During the first century of Safavid rule under Shah Isma'il I (d. 1524) and his son Shah Tahmasp (d. 1576), the whole Safavi royal family shared in the holy power and divine, political appointment that characterized this imperial ideology, which was grounded in "tribal, Sufi, and Shi'i concepts of authority."[224] We can explore these conceptions via the ways in which Fatima al-Zahra' was invoked during this period as means of legitimation and negotiating ideas of the divine in human form.

Among the Safavid princesses, "Fatima" and her epithets were used as titles. For example, the daughter of Tahmasp, Pari Khan Khanum (d. 1578) was honored as *Fatima al-zamani*, "Fatima of the Age." Her sister-in-law and rival, Mahd-i 'Ulya (d. 1579), was entitled *Zahra'*, "the Radiant," and *Dhurriya tayyiba sayyidat al-nisa'*, "the lawful progeny" of the lady of all women.[225] Also at this time, Safavid chroniclers privileged unmarried and therefore childless royal daughters,[226] which one can attribute to the honor bestowed upon similar sacred women of the Islamic canon: "the virtues exemplified by Fatima and Maryam, such as virginity, purity, and celibacy, were highly regarded traits in

---

[223] Savory, 2-3.
[224] Rizvi, 123.
[225] Rizvi, 126. For Pari Khan Khanum, see also Maria Szuppe, "La Participation des Femmes de la Famille Royale à l'Exercice du Pouvoir en Iran Safavide au XVI^{e} Siècle (Première Partie)" *Studia Iranica* 23, no. 2 (1994): 241.
[226] Indeed, Pari Khan Khanum never appears to have married, despite having been betrothed at the age of ten or eleven (Shohreh Gholsorkhi, "Pari Khan Khanum: a Masterful Safavid Princess," *Iranian Studies* 28, no. 3-4 [1995], 146).

a woman of the Safavid court."[227] While perhaps not invoked for purposes of piety, Fatima appears to have served in the Safavid court as a means of manifesting the "divine feminine" that she was remembered to embody, as per Jamal Elias' notion of female holiness, in the Safavid princesses who sought to embody that holiness.

During the first century of Safavid rule, princesses in court were immensely influential as valid embodiments of Safavi divine charisma: "Along with their brothers, princesses in the seventeenth-century were blinded for fear that they might lay claim to the throne... in theory, then, all females, whether they were descended through male or female lines, could rule." [228] The consideration of all members of the family as holy persons and therefore politically viable persons most likely stems from a Turko-Mongol cultural legacy in which the "dynastic house" was the seat of a shared political power.[229] Similarly, because of shared religious authority, "men and women received respect and veneration, and their status was elevated almost to sainthood."[230] The Safavis were objects of popular devotion, then (as holy people), in addition to being viewed as possessors of orthodox religious (and cultural) authority. However, this notion of the

---

[227] Rizvi, 128.

[228] Kathryn Babayan, "The 'Aqa'id al-Nisa'': A Glimpse at Safavid Women in Local Isfahani Culture," in *Women in The Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 352.

[229] Babayan, "The Aqa'id al-Nisa'," 352-53; Szuppe, 213. Kishwar Rizvi, alternately, attributes the sharing of divine/political power to a Shi'i Islamic base, noting the veneration of Fatima (and therefore the honoring of royal/holy women) as an explanation for why royal women in the classical Safavid period were viewed as possible rulers in addition to wielding immense amounts of influence in court (Rizvi, 124). However, the inclusion of women as political persons waned after the death of Shah Tahmasp in 1576 and the following struggle for power between Pari Khan Khanum and Mahd-i 'Ulya. By the era of Shah 'Abbas (r. 1588-1634), the latter's son, the overt political power of women in the Safavid court had faded, while Shi'i Islam had not... quite the contrary. For more about the Pari Khan Khanum and her political ambitions, see Babayan, "The Aqa'id al-Nisa'," 352-56, and Gholsorkhi, 147-155.

[230] Rizvi, 125.

royal family unit's power was changing by the end of the 16th century, as there emerged theories of limiting legitimacy to the patrilineal line. This change possibly occurred because of the institutionalization, by this point, of explicitly Imami Shi'ism with its tradition, however much including Fatima at its base, of a patrilineal inheritance of divine authority.[231]

Despite Isma'il's adoption of Ithna'ashari/Imami Shi'ism as the state religion in 1501, it was not until the messianic Islam that the Safavis had cultivated waned in the court at the end of the 16th century that an Imami "orthodoxy" could develop.[232] This interval between the adoption of Ithna'ashari Shi'ism and its institutionalization can be attributed to the power of the Qizilbash, the Turkoman military corps and backbone of the Safavid state at its inception, and their eventual decline. The Qizilbash were at once warriors for the shah and his disciples as the Safaviyya *shaykh*,[233] and their affluence in court perpetuated the messianic Islam they practiced. Initially, it was through their support that Isma'il came to power and did so naming himself the divine Mahdi.[234] Attacks by the orthodox-minded *'ulama*' on this messianic, court-centric Qizilbashi Islam was minimal in the early 16th century, as Sufi Islam and its permutations were held in high regard by Iranian intellectuals.[235] However, the association of the Qizilbash in a military capacity *against* various claimants to the throne during the succession crisis after Tahmasp's death

---

[231] Babayan, "The Aqa'id al-Nisa'," 356-57.
[232] Kathryn Babayan, "Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas: the Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran," in *Safavid Persia: the History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 119-20.
[233] Rizvi, 123.
[234] James J. Reid, *Tribal Society in Islamic Iran 1500-1629* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1983), 21-22.
[235] Babayan, "Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas," 125.

in 1576 led Shah ‘Abbas to eventually seek alternative sources of support.[236] He adopted instead a *ghulam* (slave) corps composed of non-Turkoman soldiers, in addition to deliberately seeking to undermine Qizilbashi tribal alliances.[237] These policies, among others, not only reorganized the political structures and aristocracy of the empire, including the apparent exclusion of women from politics, but they also reflected and aided in the reformulation of nature of Safavid Islam. The Shi‘i, anti-Qizilbashi orthodoxy was only able to institute their interpretation of Imami Shi‘ism after the political (and religious) power of the Qizilbash waned in the court, and were able to do so by rejecting all forms of Safavid Sufism on the grounds that it was heretical and beyond the “boundaries of legitimacy.” [238]

The initial adoption of Shi‘ism as the empire’s official religion and the attempts to establish it as orthodoxy allowed for the eventual centralization of the Safavid empire, eventually in Isfahan under Shah ‘Abbas. Also, through its institutionalization Iranian Shi‘ism could be formalized, even as Sufism declined, not only as a source of legitimacy but as a proper practice of Islam. Kathryn Babayan locates the eventual tensions between the purist and the Sufi *‘ulama’* in the latter’s claims to saintliness, which the purists sought to reserve for the awaited Mahdi, thereby equating Sufism with heresy.[239] While the purist *‘ulama*’ still entertained messianic leanings, they rejected the spiritual authority granted Sufi intellectuals and even the shah himself.[240] Babayan concludes that these

---

[236] Savory, 78.
[237] Babayan, “The Aqa’id al-Nisa’,” 358-61; Savory, 78-84.
[238] Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas,” 119-20.
[239] Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas,” 126-27.
[240] Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas,” 119.

religious disputations and the eventual success of the purists stemmed from a desire "to control access to channels of communication with God."[241] Of course, this is not a goal unique to the Ithna'ashari *'ulama*' of 17th century Safavid Iran; in any context wherein religious and political authority are intertwined, one would anticipate that the control of the former would inform the accessible and popular power of the latter. Holy persons also became a locus for contestation, as it is through them (as veils) that divine power might be mediated. However, while the holiness of Sufis was cast aside under the Safavids from the reign of Shah 'Abbas onward, the holiness of the *Ma'sumun* was not. In fact, their holiness was deliberately cultivated.

This cultivation of Shi'i saints as devotional figures in particular (and in exclusion) was as much a political tool as a means of promoting a particular form of piety. The epitomic leader of this movement was Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi (d. 1699), who, despite the irony of being the son of a leading cleric of the Sufi *'ulama'*, led a crusade against gnostic philosophy and Sufism during the reign of Shah Sulayman (r. 1666-94). By the 17th century, Ithna'ashari Shi'ism had become the mechanism by which the Safavid state maintained its power, and "with the crystallization of [its] theology, the *mujtahids* became the most powerful members of the religious classes."[242] To consolidate the *mujtahidi* authority of the purist clerics, the religious legitimacy of the Sufi elites had to be subverted. One of the ways in which this occurred was a refiguring of the Imami devotional literature;[243] al-Majlisi, himself, confirmed his adherence to

---

[241] Babayan, "Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas," 131.
[242] Savory, 193.
[243] Amanat, *Renewal and Resurrection*, 15.

these figures of veneration, writing books on the Prophet, Fatima, and the twelve *imam*s.[244] This was not a secularization or "rationalization" of Safavid religious formulations, but a re-negotiation (or re-emphasis) of those persons available as mediators of divine power.

To illustrate this point, I want to briefly explore a selection of *hadith*s from al-Majlisi's immense compilation of Shi'i traditions, *Bihar al-anwar* ("Oceans of Lights"). Those I will discuss here are drawn from al-Majlisi's chapter on the divine nature of the *Ma'sumun*, in which the special and exclusive holiness of Fatima's family and the *imam*s is laid out unequivocally:[245]

> And from *Kitab al-'Al* by Ibn Khalwayh [d. ~980], as reported from Abu Muhammad al-'Askari by his sons, who said that the Messenger of God said:
>
> "After God created Adam and Eve, they strutted around in Paradise; Adam said to Eve, 'God never created anything as beautiful and excellent as ourselves.'
>
> "God requested of Gabriel, 'Bring my two servants to the highest paradise of Firdaws.'
>
> "When the two entered Firdaws, they saw a servant-girl upon a velvet-covered dais (*darnuk*) among the various daises of Paradise, with a crown of light on her head and two drops of light in her ears, and she illuminated all of Paradise (*al-jinan*) with the excellent beauty (*husn*) of her face. Adam asked, 'Beloved Gabriel, who is that girl whose beauty illuminates all of Paradise?'
>
> "[Gabriel] replied, 'That is Fatima, daughter of Muhammad, who will be a prophet from among your descendents at the end of time.'
>
> "[Adam] asked, 'And what is that crown upon her head?'
>
> "[Gabriel] replied, 'Her husband (*ba'al*), 'Ali b. Abi Talib.'
>
> "[Adam] asked, 'And what are those two droplets at her ears?'
>
> "[Gabriel] replied, 'Her two sons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn.'
>
> "[Adam] asked, 'Beloved Gabriel, did [God] create them before me?'

---

[244] Arjomand, 152-53; see also Halm, 111-12.

[245] Of course, in this case the origin or authenticity of these *hadith* is largely irrelevant, as it is their inclusion in Majlisi's works that is significant. The traditions I have here were apparently drawn from much earlier works, but it is in their selection by al-Majlisi in the 17th century that we might explore his own motivations.

> "[Gabriel] replied, 'They existed in the concealed [places] of God's knowledge for four thousand years before you were created.'"[246]

In this *hadith*, the holy family is remembered to have existed before the creation of the human form (in Adam and Eve), elevating them, in a way, above any human kind of excellence.[247] Fatima, as a symbol for her progeny, is celestial and unimaginably sublime (her face, after all, somehow illuminates the heavens). This beyond-human holiness is elaborated in a more general sense in an earlier tradition:

> From the book *Fada'il al-shi'a* by al-Saduq [d. ~991] and from his *isnad*, as narrated by Abu Sa'id al-Khudri:
>
> "We were sitting with the Messenger of God when he received a man who said, 'O Messenger of God, tell me about God's saying to Iblis, "You were arrogant lest you were among the High Ones." Who are those who are higher than the angels?'
>
> "The Messenger of God replied, 'Myself, 'Ali, Fatima, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn. We were in the pavilion (*suradiq*) of the Throne singing praises to God, and the angels were singing our praises, before God created Adam by thousands of years. When God created Adam, he commanded the angels to prostrate themselves to [Adam], though we were not commanded to bow. All the angels except for Iblis prostrated themselves; Iblis refused, and so God said to him, "You were arrogant lest you were among the High Ones," i.e. those five persons whose names are written in the Throne's pavilion. For we are the gate (*bab*) of God from which he bestows [his blessings], and by [means of] us the rightly guided are shown the way. For whoever loved us loved God, and he made them inhabit his Paradise, and whoever despised us despised God, and he made them inhabit his fire...'"[248]

In this tradition, which al-Majlisi chose to begin his chapter on the nature of the *Ma'sumun*, we are introduced to a conception of their holiness that not only transcends human form and time, but also that of the angels. We also can read, explicitly, how they

---

[246] Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1956-), 25: 5-6. See also, Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague; Paris; New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 61.

[247] See also Ayoub, 58.

[248] Al-Majlisi, 25: 2.

occupy that liminal, veil-like place between God and his creation; here, they are the *bab*, the gate, and it is through them that God can be known. Just like the *hadith* from al-Bukhari's *Sahih* that I quoted at the preface to second section of this paper, there is a similar positioning of the holy person in this tradition; one's behavior towards Muhammad and his family is one's behavior towards God, just as in the previous *hadith* where we are told that whoever angers Fatima angers her father.

A number of traditions about Fatima al-Zahra' included by al-Majlisi also elaborate upon her attributes as such a saint. In one, the Prophet is asked, even, whether or not his daughter is human, to which he replies that she is a human *huri* whose food is her prayer.[249] Qualifying Fatima in association with light was evident in al-Kulayni's *al-Kafi*, too, where he records a tradition recounting the 6th *imam* Ja'far al-Sadiq's exegesis of the famous "Light Verse" in the Qur'an.[250] In the tradition, Fatima is understood as both a space for the lights of her sons and a light in her own right:

> *God is the light of the heavens and the earth, and the likeness of his light is as a niche* – Fatima – *in which is a lamp* – al-Hasan - *and the lamp is in a glass* – al-Husayn – *and the glass is like a glittering star* – Fatima is the glittering star among the women of the people of the earthly world...[251]

The Arabic for "glittering star" is *kawkab durri*, a term that is also mentioned in one of al-Majlisi's *hadith*s, in which the crown of light Fatima will wear on the Day of Resurrection will shine as one. She will ride a ruby-eyed, heavenly she-camel and say to humankind, "My god and my lord are wiser than those who wronged me... my god and

---

[249] Al-Majlisi, 43: 4 (*hadith* 3). See also, al-Majlisi, 43:7 (*hadith* 8).
[250] Qur'an 24:35.
[251] Al-Kulayni, 251 (the verse is in italics). See also, Ayoub, 57; Klemm, 202; and for further instances of associating Fatima with light, see Veccia Vaglieri, 847.

my lord are my descendents and my Shi'a..."[252] Here, this eschatological position of Fatima emphasizes not only her own importance in Shi'i memory, but also privileges the Shi'i community itself, the community that such a glorious Fatima al-Zahra' honors.

While this brief selection of traditions from the late 17th century *Bihar al-anwar* does not even scratch the surface of its contents, one can see in even these few *hadith*s a concern with human holiness as manifested in Fatima and her family members. What are the attributes of the saint? To what sort of intermediary being should subjects of the Safavid shah be devoting themselves in their practice of Islam? As evidenced in his religious writings, al-Majlisi sought to detach popular devotion from the Sufis, as represented by his political rivals, the gnostic, Sufi philosophers. He could then undermine their religious and political power while legitimizing his own and that of the Shi'i orthodox establishment. Al-Majlisi attacked Sufism directly, as well, asserting that it was a "hellish growth" and "defilement," and it was under his direction as the *shaykh al-islam* that Sufi practices and beliefs were condemned as religious innovation and heresy.[253]

The later Safavid period was one of change, as one can see in the writings and theological approach expressed in al-Majlisi's religious thought. Shi'ism was being formalized and, importantly, *taught* to the people under Safavid rule, which satisfied both

---

[252] Al-Majlisi, 43:219. For Fatima as such a "mistress of the day of judgment," see Ayoub, 212-16.

[253] Savory, 237-38. The office of *shaykh al-islam* was established in 1687 to serve as the highest voice for the orthodox authority (Savory, 234). See also Arjomand, 109.

the pious and political ambitions of the religious elite.[254] Thus, while the policy of deliberately discouraging what was considered religiously heterodox was being deliberately enforced under the rule of Shah 'Abbas (d. 1634), the ideology of using popular devotionalism as a political tool remained.[255] This devotionalism was directed to the Shi'i "saints" of Fatima and 'Ali's family, who were remembered as holy martyrs and subsequently mourned. Under the Safavids this mourning was more formally ritualized, and the mourning rituals, particularly those during Muharram in remembrance of the events at Karbala',[256] came to constitute "a sort of catalyst of emotive feelings of persecution... which could always be utilized in some way to fulfill political aims."[257] By patronizing the ceremonies that developed, the later Safavid shahs were able to seek religious legitmacy from their pious subjects, consolidating the political power with which that legitimacy was intertwined.

Mourning rites performed during the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram in memorial of the Karbala' have been modes of Shi'i pious expression since the Buwayhid era in the 10th and 11th centuries.[258] In addition, the early written accounts of

---

[254] For discussions of the how foreign Shi'i scholars were invited to Persia to facilitate the propagation of Shi'ism (though they came in only limited numbers under later Safavid rule), see Arjomand, 106-7; Jean Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II. The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 140; Halm, 44.

[255] Arjomand, 109; Calmard, 171.

[256] The massacre at Karbala' occurred on the 10th of Muharram ('Ashura') in 61 *hijri* (680 CE). Mourning rites have been subsequently established during the ten days leading up to the event (and also during the preceding months), focusing on different martyred *imam*s in turn, but centered upon al-Husayn and his death in particular.

[257] Calmard, 141.

[258] Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama* (London; Portland: Frank Cass, 2004), 33; Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of *'Ashura'*," *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993), 163, 169. Initially, observances of memorials were most likely practiced in private,

Karbala', even in Sunni sources like al-Tabari's *History*, are not without a sense of epic, fated tragedy; when al-Husayn foretells his own death to his sister Zaynab, her weeping and pleas that she would die in his place move al-Husayn to tears.[259] It is in the Safavid period, however, that stories of the events of Karbala' were recited in public and performed dramatically.[260] These performances drew their content from works like al-Kashifi's *Rawdat al-shuhada'*, mentioned above, and other collections of religious poetry, a genre which flourished under the Safavids and state-sanctioned Shi'ism.[261] After the fall of the Safavid dynasty to Afghan invaders in 1722 CE, the political and social tensions under a series of non-dynastic rulers led to a further embellishment of the Muharram ceremonies via "folk mysticism" into the full-fledged dramatic performance of the *ta'ziyeh* passion play.[262] The *ta'ziyeh* was institutionalized under the patronage of the Qajar dynasty (r. 1795-1925), particularly during the mid-19th century under Nasir al-Din

---

evolving into the institution of the *hoseyniyyeh*, a place in which to observe these practices with others, in the 10th century (Nakash, 163).

[259] Tabari, *The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiyah*, vol. 19 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation*, trans. I. K. A. Howard (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 118. For an analysis of al-Tabari's recount of Karbala' as a tragedy (even Aristotelian in its proportions), see Shoshan, 233-52.

[260] Malekpour, 55 (as *rowzat*); Nakash, 169 (as *shabih*, or "carnival-play").

[261] Malekpour, 14, 52, 55; Nakash, 170. Malekpour is keen to link the Muharram rituals and *ta'ziyeh* passion plays to a specifically Iranian cultural context, not only Safavid but also pre-Islamic. He discusses the tradition of mourning tales and rituals in Sumer (Malekpour, 38), the elements of martyrdom and theatre in Zoroastrian scriptures (Malekpour, 7-11), and the mourning rites of Siavush (Malekpour, 32, 43-49). While Malekpour is careful to point out that there is no proof that pre-Islamic drama in Persia influenced the emergence of the Muharram ceremonies in the 17th century (Malekpour, 10), his presentation of Shi'ism is figured as a passionate and distinctively *Iranian* (not "Persian," even) faith (Malekpour, 12).

[262] Nakash, 171. For more on this intermediary period, see Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 30-33. The Persian *ta'ziyeh* comes from the Arabic *ta'ziya*, which means "consoling" or "solace."

Shah (d. 1896), who had the famous Takiyeh Dowlat, the national theatre house, built in Tehran in 1869.[263]

Ta'ziyeh, as "a ritualistic form of theatre,"[264] is performed via the dialogue of its characters, who are in this case the figures of Shi'i sacred history. While not all *ta'ziyeh* performances during Muharram are tragedies, the main "episodes" (*vagheh*) are centered upon the Karbala' narrative.[265] An important aspect of the *ta'ziyeh* performance is the lack of fixed boundaries between the actors and the audience, so that the actor of Shimr can weep *as a spectator* even as he kills al-Husayn in the play.[266] Indeed, the purpose of performing and watching the *ta'ziyeh* is to cultivate sorrow in the audience, the aim of which is to "purify [them] of their sins and give them a sense of holiness."[267] The feeling of a communally shared sorrow over the martyrdoms of the *imam*s has always been of importance within Shi'i identity,[268] and by means of the *ta'ziyeh* it is cathartically expressed. Fatima al-Zahra' appears as a central character in a number of the *ta'ziyeh* episodes, primarily and particularly in the role of mourner, the weeping mother who will lose every member of her holy family. It is through Fatima's mourning, then, that the Qajar Shi'i community could mourn. [269]

To explore Fatima's role in the *ta'ziyeh* plays, I will examine a selection of excerpts from a series collected from oral tradition in the 1860s and translated by Sir Lewis Pelly,

---

[263] Malekpour, 1, 137; Nakash, 172.
[264] Malekpour, 98.
[265] Malekpour, 76, 82.
[266] Malekpour, 102-03.
[267] Malekpour, 110.
[268] Halm, 16-20.
[269] See also Ayoub, 144-45. And for a discussion of Fatima as the "weeper," see Ayoub, 170, 173, 175, 179, etc.

the British Secretary of Legation in Persia. Pelly's collection includes episodes that tell stories from the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime through to the Day of Resurrection, though the greater part centers on the Karbala' narrative. Fatima, I would suggest, acts as a conduit for Shi'i sentiments; she is their symbol, the saint whose sorrow and sacrifices they must, too, suffer. On his deathbed, Muhammad tells her,

> If, O Fatimah, thou spendest but one day peaceably with 'Ali, thou shalt be exalted in the Day of Judgment above the very throne of God. If ungrudgingly thou bearest with his poverty and need in this world, as soon as thou enterest the grave thou shalt find thyself amidst the meadows of Paradise.[270]

Here, Fatima is enjoined to suffer hardship *with 'Ali*; she must, somehow, both cope with her grief at her father's death and protect her children in the face of the trials to come. While the miseries inflicted upon Fatima, as illustrated in these examples, are particular to her and her descendents, they can be seen to figure as emblematic for the Shi'i community as a whole. After being told by a prescient 'Ali the coming suffering to be endured by her children at the hands of Abu Bakr and his successors,[271] she declares, "There is nothing in this world but what tends to misery and woe."[272] 'Ali calls hers a "contagious melancholy,"[273] which tellingly describes the nature of her sadness as one that will be shared. Her character in the *ta'ziyeh*, among others, appears to symbolize Shi'i suffering not only at the hands of oppressors, but also as a means of redemption.

One episode in Pelly's collection is devoted the performance of Fatima's descent into grief and her eventual death. Her sorrow is such that that she keeps her neighbors awake:

---

[270] Pelly, 1:82.
[271] Pelly, 1:94-100.
[272] Pelly, 1:100.
[273] Pelly, 1:94.

> *The People of Madinah... (Addressing 'Ali).* Oh prince of believers, we have come to our last breath on account of Zahrah's continual weeping and wailing. Forbid her, we pray thee, from crying day and night. Tell her to be quiet either at night or in the daytime, that we may, too, have a period of rest.
>
> *'Ali*.—Alas! the fire of these your sad words has consumed my heart; the arrow of your petition has bent my back like a bow. You have made me very distressed by your request. How can Fatimah cease from weeping since her mother and father are both dead?
>
> *Fatimah*.—Alas! alas! again 'Ali's groanings are heard. Wherefore has 'Ali the deliverer arisen and come forth from the Mosque? Why is Abu-turab ['Ali] shedding twilight on the moon? Why does he let fall stars on the sun?
>
> *'Ali*.—My sun-like face, O Fatimah, has become a pale moon through thee; my sighs and groans are on account of thy weeping and impatience. Multitudes of men and women are complaining of anguish through thy sad cryings. Have pity on these poor people; they are Musulmans after all.[274]

'Ali and their children try to quell Fatima's weeping, but in vain. Her sorrow cannot be contained, and she insists on washing the garments that her family members will wear when they are killed (or, in Zaynab's case, shamed).[275] While in a swoon of sorrow, an angel appears to her with a group of *huri*s to be her servants, just as they will serve believers in Paradise. Fatima asks, "On whom else will God bestow such nymphs?" And the angel replies, "To those who truly weep for Husain."[276] Later, Fatima describes to her daughter Zaynab the woes that will befall the family:

> *Fatimah.*—Husain's body shall receive no washing, no lotus leaves' powder, and no camphor when he dies.
>
> *Zainab.*—But why, dear mother? What is his fault?
>
> *Fatimah*.—His camphor shall be the dust of Karbala.
>
> *Zainab*.—O ye Musulmans, weep on for him.[277]

One can see in her persistence and sharing of grief a persistence and sharing of Shi'i memory. As the actor who plays Fatima weeps, so will the audience, and in so doing

---

[274] Pelly, 1:112-13.
[275] Pelly, 1:117-18.
[276] Pelly, 1:120.
[277] Pelly, 1:131.

they both remember her as a sort of metaphorical part of themselves by which they create themselves *as Shi'a* (as Muslims). When Zaynab asks what to do on the day her beloved brother is to be killed at Karbala', Fatima replies, "Kiss his dear throat, and remember me."[278]

The suffering of the characters, like Fatima, in the *ta'ziyeh* is presented in a way that is made accessible to the audience. The actors of the villains weep with the audience for the *ta'ziyeh*'s tragic content and the knowledge that it is through that weeping that one is saved. The act of ritual participation in the tragedy of Karbala', mourning as sacred persons mourn, is a means of directly connecting oneself to that sacred past and those persons: "The act of weeping joins the past with the present by linking Husayn's experience to that of the believer in his lifetime."[279] Devotional practices like the *ta'ziyeh* can be seen as a means of renewing and reconnecting with the *imam*s and with Fatima,[280] and, perhaps on another level, with renewing a connection to oneself and one's community as *Shi'i*, however unconsciously, in contrast to Islamic practice outside of Qajar Persia.[281]

A useful way of thinking about the *ta'ziyeh* passion plays is through the lens of anthropologist Victor Turner's ritual theory. In his exploration of ritual and its place within culture and life, he uses the term *communitas* to describe the spontaneous

---

[278] Pelly, 1:130.
[279] Nakash, 165.
[280] Ayoub, 153-54.
[281] Negar Mottahedeh, "Ta'ziyeh: A Twist of History in Everyday Life," in *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourse in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scott Aghaie (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 29.

dissolution of boundaries between "self" and others during a ritual experience.[282] *Communitas*, that sense of "community" derived from ritual, often has a feeling of holiness to it, Turner notes, as it "levels" and "strips" all people to an equality based upon their shared, fundamental natures after the dissolution of the structures of created relationships of difference.[283] One can see this spirit of *communitas* manifesting in the *ta'ziyeh* performances in that they affirm and consolidate the audience as mourners and therefore as "Shi'a," in a generic sense. This is done not only through the cultivation of sorrow in participants, but through the *ta'ziyeh* discourse itself, wherein afflicted mourners, symbolic of and holy ideals for the Shi'i community, are granted Paradise.

This emphasis on Fatima's suffering and the suffering of all the *imam*s, finds its mirror in the actual political marginalization of the Shi'i discourse and the Shi'a themselves in the larger Sunni-dominated Muslim community.[284] Likewise, Safavid and Qajar rulers in Persia could patronize mourning ceremonies as a means of seeking legitimacy from their subjects. These political leaders could then both "create themselves" (as linked to the practice of veneration) and create a greater community of Shi'a over which they were shah. Muharram ceremonies, even as they were practiced during the Buwayhid era, serve as "vehicles for invoking the memory of Karbala and reinforcing Shi'i collective memory."[285] Fatima is located within that invocation as a

---

[282] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), 96-97, 127.
[283] Turner, 128.
[284] Klemm, 195.
[285] Nakash, 181.

pious model acting out a sacred history that is, ultimately, timeless in its re-location in the present.

However, this creation and affirmation of a sanctified "Shi'i" community via Muharram ceremonies is not the same in other contexts. Likewise, Fatima's role as a pious model in Shi'i ritual piety has sometimes been located as contextually particular to women. To explore these two points and what this means for my usage of *communitas* in understanding Shi'i mourning rituals, I will briefly examine Muharram as it was remembered in India, contemporaneously to Qajar Iran in the 19th century, in addition to examining Fatima's importance to female Shi'a in both Persia and South Asia. Does the participation of Sunnis and Hindus in the Muharram *julus* (processions) subvert the affirmation of Shi'i *communitas* or community? And, does Fatima's special importance in certain uniquely female rituals indicate her irrelevance to male Shi'a as a pious model?

While the Shi'i Safavids ruled Persia, the ostensibly Sunni Mughal emperors held court in Hindustan beginning with the rule of the Timurid prince Babur (d. 1530) in 1526 and ending, officially, with the exile of Bahadur Shah II (d. 1862) to Burma by the British in 1858. While Mughal rule was significantly more relaxed (generally) in terms of allowing religious plurality than were the Safavids, the princes and princesses of the court were nonetheless concerned with Islam and Islamic saints as sources of legitimation and as a means, per the latter, of expressing personal piety.[286] Just as in the Safavid court, both men and women in the Mughal court took the names of sacred Islamic figures

[286] Many of the Mughal emperors (and the sultans before them) paid their respects as pilgrims and patrons to various Sufi shrines and tombs in India, particularly that of Hasan Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 1236) in Ajmer (Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 130).

as titles, thereby linking themselves to those saints and presenting themselves, to a degree, as their living embodiments. Jamal Elias, whom I mentioned in the first section of this paper, is particularly concerned with these titles as means of empowering the earthly "female" by means of realizing the holy "feminine" within her. He notes that Jahanara Begum (d. 1681), the daughter of the fifth Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (d. 1666), was known as *Fatima-yi zaman*, the "Fatima of the Time,"[287] just as Pari Khan Khanum had been in Persia a century before. However, Mughal royals drew from different sources, on the whole, than their Safavid neighbors; men were often likened to Solomon or Timur, while women were linked to sacred women like Khadija or 'A'isha, who figure more often in the Sunni canon.[288] Unlike Persia by the 19th century, most South Asian Muslims were Sunni, and most South Asians were non-Muslim, which allowed for a different set of tensions, compromises, and negotiations of identity.

While the Isma'ili community in Sind existed from the 10th century onward, the Shi'a as associated with royal courts and political power developed most enduringly in the Deccan during the 14th century. The sultans of these new kingdoms practiced Ithna'ashari Shi'ism, whose adherents had first arrived in greater numbers after the Mongols

---

[287] Elias, 222-23.

[288] Gregory C. Kozlowski, "Private Lives and Public Piety: Women and the Practice of Islam in Mughal India," in *Women in The Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 472. Maryam (the mother of Jesus) was also particularly honored among the Mughals as she was equated with Alanquwa, the semi-mythical progenitor of both Timur and Chingiz Khan (d. 1227); according to legend, she was a virgin princess impregnated by a ray of light. She and the Mongol/Timurid ancestry she represented were honored in the Mughal court via references to Maryam in art, royal titles, and chronicles like the *Akbar-nama* (Asher and Talbot, 138, 191, 206).

conquered Persia and the 'Abbasid caliphate's lands in the 13th century.[289] The earliest of these sultanates was the Bahmani kingdom, founded by Hasan Gangu (d. 1358), likely a Persian, after he and other Deccani nobles revolted against Tughluq rule in Delhi in 1347 CE.[290] However, new communal tensions developed under the Bahmanis between Deccani Sunnis and the *afaqi* (foreign) mercenaries from Iran and Central Asia who were largely Shi'i.[291] A similar situation was to be found in Ahmadnagar during the rule of the Nizam Shahi dynasty (1494-1636), whose second king, Burhan al-Din (d. 1553) was particularly Shi'i in his religious leanings, a partiality which led to tension between Deccani Sunni and *afaqi* communities under his rule.[292] Other great Shi'i dynasties of the Deccan were the 'Adil Shahis of Bijapur (1489-1686) and the Qutb Shahis of Golkonda and Hyderabad (1512-1687), whose founder, Sultan-Quli (d. 1543), was a Qara Quyunlu Turk who had served the earlier Bahmani state.[293] Despite some communal tension between Sunnis and Shi'a (as immigrants) and the outlawing of Shi'i ritual practice under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (d. 1707) after conquering Hyderabad in 1687 CE,[294] the observance of Muharram, for instance, continued in the Deccan and was a multi-communal commemoration.

In the 19th century, contemporary to the *ta'ziyeh* plays in Persia, Muharram was observed in India by means of gatherings (*majlis*) and processions (*julus*), in which tall,

---

[289] Hollister, 102.
[290] Asher and Talbot, 75; Hollister, 103; Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 51.
[291] Asher and Talbot, 76; Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 54. Under the Bahmanis, this tension eventually resulted in a massacre of *afaqi* elements in 1450.
[292] Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 55.
[293] Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 56-62. See also, Asher and Talbot, 166.
[294] David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Practice in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 17.

colorful standards topped with the 'hand of Fatima,' whose five fingers symbolize the Panjtan Pak (Muhammad, Fatima, 'Ali, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn), were carried.[295] Banners were also sometimes made to symbolize a single member of the Prophet's family; for example, among the Deccani Shi'a in the 19th century, Fatima's standard (*alam*) was processed on seventh of Muharram.[296] Miniatures of al-Husayn's tomb (*ta'ziya* or *tabut*) were also carried in the processions and either buried in the earth or immersed in a river.[297] In Lucknow, a city in modern day Uttar Pradesh in which Shi'ism flourished under the Awadhi *nawab*s from the late 18th century onward, Muharram rites were often undertaken in an *imambara* (house of the *imam*). There, as well as in people's homes, *ta'ziya*s, made from "the purest silver down to bamboo and paper," would be housed, some of which would later be carried in procession on the tenth of the month.[298] Of particular interest to my discussion here is the participation of non-Shi'a in these 19th century rituals.

David Pinault, in his study of modern Muharram practices in India, notes that during the 19th century, the identity of the average person was often bound to his or her patron (regardless of the latter's religion) and not to communal ideas.[299] He also describes

---

[295] Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 120.
[296] Ja'far Sharif, *Islam in India or the Qanun-i Islam: The Customs of the Musalmans of India*, trans G. A. Herklots (London; Dublin: Curzon Press, 1972), 162. It is unlikely that this day is particular to Fatima or the procession of her *alam*; in Calcutta, for instance, the seventh of Muharram was a day in which many standards were carried in procession throughout the day, in addition to various other mourning practices (Garcin de Tassy, *Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays*, trans M. Waseem [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995], 55-57).
[297] De Tassy, 53.
[298] Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussalmauns of India* (1832; repr., Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 18. For more on the *imambara*, see Ali, 19-21.
[299] Pinault, *Horse*, 17.

religious practice at that time as "darshanic," focused on contact with the divine as facilitated by sight or touch, wherein the emphasis was on devotionalism and not any one religion.[300] Claudia Liebeskind in her study of Awadhi Sufi saints and shrines in the 19th and 20th centuries, notes that Hindus sometimes constituted half of a given shrine/saint's disciples (*murid*s), and that these individuals would follow the instructions of that Sufi *pir* as a means of being a pious Hindu.[301] Juan Cole explains that Muharram in 19th century Awadh also served as such a mediator between communities, though Sunnis carried different *alam*s, for instance, than did the Shi'a, while Hindus mourned al-Husayn as another deity in their pantheon.[302] Furthermore, many Shi'i practices during Muharram were inspired by Hindu religious observances (either during Muharram or other Hindu festivals).[303] Garcin de Tassy, in his description of Islamic festivals in 19th century India as drawn from Urdu texts, notes that the submergence of the *ta'ziya* of al-Husayn in a river on the tenth day of Muharram paralleled the similar treatment of the image of the Hindu goddess Durga on the tenth day of her *puja* (ritual of worship).[304] With various religious groups participating in the Muharram rites in South Asia, can it be correctly argued that it is through those rites that Shi'i communal identity is invoked and

---

[300] Pinault, *Horse*, 17-18.
[301] Claudia Liebeskind, *Piety on its Knees: Three Sufi Traditions in South Asia in Modern Times* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64-65, 84, 135-36.
[302] J. R. I. Cole, "Popular Shi'ism," in *India's Islamic Traditions 711-1750*, ed. Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 330-32.
[303] Cole, 331-32.
[304] De Tassy, 33. De Tassy's original *Mémoire sur des particularités de la religion musulmane dans l'Inde, d'après les ouvrages hindoustani* was published in Paris in 1831. For a list of the Indian works from which de Tassy prepared his descriptions, see pp 29-31.

consolidated, as I implied was the case concerning a role of the *ta'ziyeh* in Iran (and Fatima's role within them in particular)?

Another potential challenge to my community-consolidation thesis in this section is a more subtle one, arising from a consideration of Fatima's role in Shi'i *female* piety during this period (and later). It is necessary to engage this topic, however briefly, as Fatima's position as a woman's role model becomes of particular relevance in the next section's discussion of modern Iran. It is also common, as I mentioned earlier in this paper, that scholars look at female piety through the lens of female saints in particular (and often in exclusion), which is something I am also interested in exploring. Can Fatima serve as a pious model for women *and men*, as I would suggest above regarding the Qajar *ta'ziyeh* and her role as holy and exemplary mourner? One cannot deny the impact of Fatima (or other female characters in the *ta'ziyeh* dramas) on Qajar women during the 19th century. It was via the *ta'ziyeh* play that the covered holy, female face (or, male actor's face) was introduced.[305] The face veil became a defining, visual attribute of holy women, emphasized in *ta'ziyeh* paintings during the Qajar period: "The translation of history into the present of the *ta'ziyeh* performance made the usage of veiling arbitrary, by extension, in pictorial form."[306] Later, in the early 20th century, one observes a paradoxical switch in the presentation of women, where one finds the female

[305] Peter J. Chelkowski, "Iconography of the Women of Karbala: Tiles, Murals, Stamps, and Posters," in *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourse in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scott Aghaie (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 123-24; Mottahedeh, 33.
[306] Mottahedeh, 33.

character on stage without a face-veil and all women in the audience wearing one.[307] Negar Mottahedeh also interprets the scene in one of the plays, in which Fatima washes the blood-stained clothes of her children and grandchildren, as deliberately domestic. It was therefore a means by which men and women in the audience could relate to Fatima as a woman, doing familiar, "female" activities,[308] particularly in her popularly understood role of the perfect mother.

In a couple of works from the 19th century detailing Islamic practice in India, Fatima is most often engaged in relation to women's rituals, in relation to the Muharram observances or otherwise. The first I want to consider is a compilation of memoirs and anecdotes published in 1832 by a Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, the British wife of a Lucknavi Shi'i noble and eventual administrator in Awadh during the early 19th century. Little is known about this lady, other than to note that she married Hassan Ali while he was working in Britain, and lived with his family in Awadh from 1812 to 1828.[309] She mentions Fatima and her "pure life" in particular association with female piety among her Shi'i acquaintances, noting that Fatima is "greatly esteemed as an example of female excellence, whom they strive to imitate as much as possible, as well in religious as in moral and domestic duties."[310] Mrs. Ali also describes a *hadith* in which the poverty of

---

[307] Chelkowski, 125-26.
[308] Mottahedeh, 37. While not entirely relevant here, it is also important to note that wealthy Qajari women often patronized private, women-only *ta'ziyeh* plays within their homes, within which female actresses performed. These plays were "rare and rarely documented," and continued to be hosted until the 1920s (Mottahedeh, 35).
[309] For an exploration of what we know of her and her husband, see W. Crooke's introduction to her *Observations* (Ali, vix-xvii).
[310] Ali, 97.

Fatima and ‘Ali’s house is overcome when Fatima, ever the concerned mother working tirelessly in her home, prays and acts virtuously and is therefore rewarded by God.[311]

This association of Fatima with the domestic and female avenues of Shi‘i piety is found likewise in the *Qanun-i islam*, a work commissioned by the British East India Company to detail Muslim customs in the Deccan, primarily those of the Sunni community. It was written in “Deccani Hindustani” in 1832 by a *munshi* (clerk) in Madras, Ja‘far Sharif. Sharif is concerned with Fatima primarily as she serves as an object of devotion in certain female rituals. Among the Deccani Shi‘a in particular, he notes, female-specific meals were prepared while intoning Fatima’s name and then offered to her.[312] For example, regarding Deccani Muslims generally, Sharif describes how, in the ninth month of a woman’s pregnancy, her female family members and friends prepared and blessed a meal in Fatima’s name, distributing it to virtuous women of their acquaintance.[313] Also, in pre-nuptial ceremonies, a meal was often prepared in Fatima’s name, with the recognition that she was “the model of all wifely virtues.”[314] Diane D’Souza, writing about modern Shi‘i women’s ceremonies in Hyderabad, interprets similar rituals as gatherings that facilitate the maintenance of social networks among women, in conjunction with maintaining relationships with Shi‘i saints.[315] In a sense,

---

[311] Ali, 108-10.
[312] Sharif, 138.
[313] Sharif, 20.
[314] Sharif, 69. Curiously, Fatima was also associated with having sanctified the use of toothpaste, thus allowing it to be held in high-esteem; indeed, part of the exchange of love between a new bride and groom was an exchange toothpaste (Sharif, 72, 306).
[315] Diane D’Souza, “Devotional Practices among Shia Women in South India,” in *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation, and Conflict*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), 188, 202.

then, these pious practices, and Fatima as a holy locus within them, allowed for the creation and affirmation of a specifically *female* "Shi'i" identity.

Despite the fact that the Muharram rituals and Fatima herself serve to promote or enhance a community either beyond the limits of "Shi'a" or more particularly located within it, as among Shi'i women, these rituals remain relevant as loci of self and communal creation. Indeed, I do not think that the aforementioned challenges to proposing that Shi'i ritual consolidates Shi'i community and identity are necessarily at odds with the idea that both *communitas* and community are created and confirmed in these practices. Victor Turner notes that rituals "might be said to 'create' society,"[316] the society that exists "outside" of the ritual space. Ritual both arises from and *makes* life and the people who live; thus, I propose that Shi'i rituals and the saints presented within or presiding over them are inherently *creative*, indicative of the believer's constant negotiation of their position in relation to God.

In this section of my paper I have discussed the ways in which Fatima has been remembered from among the Satpanth Isma'ilis of 14th century Sind and Gujarat to the courts of the Safavid empire to the passion plays of the Qajar period in the mid-19th century. In all these contexts, if in different ways, Fatima appears as an illustration of self- and community-negotiation. She is the wife of Krishna, the title of princesses, and the mourner by whom a whole community can weep and seek salvation. Fatima, as a saint positioned liminally between God and mankind, facilitates, therefore, the ways in which people construct their own identities and the identity of the divine. I will now turn

[316] Turner, 117.

to a number of “Fatimas” in the Muslim worlds of the 19th and 20th century as she is remembered in light of religious reformism and “modernity,” keeping in mind again her plural nature as a locus of human creativity regarding the relation between the human and God.

5.
THE EXEMPLAR
Islamic reform and the reconsideration of the saint

A man of insight,
shall not be happy with the religion of his forefathers.
Ghalib [317]

In the previous sections of this paper, I have explored Fatima's holy presence and meaning in Shi'i piety and religious politics, particularly as it related to the creation of Shi'i communities from the early centuries of Islam onward. Fatima, I would suggest, served as a point of social, religious, and pious creativity in those various communal contexts, and the manner in which she was invoked reflected the concerns of those remembering her. In this last section of the paper, I want to consider Fatima al-Zahra' as she has been imagined in the 19th and 20th centuries, and how these recent memories of her reflect a negotiation of holiness in the Islamic (and global) community that finds its source and exists as part of an emerging discourse of Islamic reformism and "modernity." I do not want to imply that the world in which we live now is innately "modern" in opposition to times past. Rather, I want to consider the discourse of modernity as it has affected and been conceived to affect the practices of Islam in the past century or so. How are piety, religion, and the pious person reformed, reformulated, and created now? I will attempt to answer this question through a consideration of both Islamic reform and

[317] A couplet from the *Divan* of celebrated 19th century Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib (d. 1869), translated and quoted by Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 185. While Ghalib was discussing the Prophet Abraham in the poem from which the above verses were excerpted, the apparent underlying sentiment was seized on by progressive intellectuals during the 1930s in India (Hyder, 182-85).

how Fatima al-Zahra', herself, has been "reformed" in the modern period, particularly among the Shi'a and their socio-religious and political leaders in Iran, Lebanon, and South Asia.

Religious reform is not a new or "modern" phenomenon unique to the intellectual milieu of the 19th and 20th centuries; one can effectively argue, for instance, that the negotiation of Sunni and Shi'i identity in the 9th and 10th centuries reflected a concern of those communities' elite with forming (and reforming in contrast) the proper way of being Muslim. Likewise, the project of the orthodox *'ulama'* in the later Safavid empire was concerned with reforming what was considered an improper expression of Islamic piety; Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi and his colleagues sought to re-identify, after all, the proper sources of grace for believers, redirecting their devotion to exclusively "orthodox" Shi'i saints. In many ways, the actors in these movements were interested in religious reform in its basic sense: how does one and/or should one relate to God given this worldly context, one's reality? And each context was modern in its time, the "now" for those concerned.

The urge to reform or purify Islamic practice, furthermore, has inspired a variety scholars throughout Islam's history.[318] The Islamic reformism that I am concerned with in this section, then, is the sort that emerged in response to particular 19th and 20th century social trends, questions, and events that produced a new "modern" for Muslims (and all people) that required negotiation. Lara Deeb explores quite well this concern with "being modern" and its potency in shaping piety in her ethnography of the Shi'i community of

---

[318] Julian Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 12.

Beirut at the turn of the 21st century. She resists identifying where a scholar might locate "modernity" or a "modern" people (particularly in relation to Islam), and focuses instead on understanding how "being modern" is of concern and understood by Lebanese Shi'a.[319] Deeb's focus is on the negotiation of modern identity from inside a community, not on the (scholar's) categorization of that community as modern or not. I find this approach a particularly fair and useful one in a consideration of religious change during the past two centuries, as Fatima serves as a method for such a negotiation by members of the Shi'i community.

Whether deliberately or not, Muslims, like all people today, have had to negotiate their position within this "modern" context (our world), and one of the many responses to its stimuli is what I will term Islamic "reformism."[320] How might we characterize and contextualize this reform, particularly with regards to its views on sainthood? In seeking the correct, pure version of one's religion, I would suggest, one might turn to that faith's saints as human beings who are conceived as mediators between this world (that is changing) and the divine. Claudia Liebeskind, in her preface to discussing Sufism and Islamic reformism/revivalism in India, takes a distinctly Weberian approach to

---

[319] Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 14-16.

[320] Reformist Islam has also been called "revivalist," "fundamentalist," and "Islamist," all of which pertain to a similar intellectual movement (sometimes coupled with politics), but which possess additional connotations of meaning. I've chosen "reformist" as it is a largely neutral term and describes what I consider to be the central drive of its adherents, who seek a re-forming of their religion as it must/should be or, more powerfully, *is*. I consider the reformist to be negotiating his or her identity as Muslim in continuity within previous conceptualizations of correct "Islam-ness," not only for his or her deliberate identification with an imagined past, but for being the current manifestation of a continuous process of religious negotiation that has been going on since Islam's advent in the 7th century. I hope my earlier and upcoming discussions of Fatima adequately illustrate and support this understanding.

understanding religion, characterizing the reformists' Islam as "this-worldly" in its focus, in opposition to "other-worldly" forms of Islamic piety.[321] Reformists devalued the practice of Islam that was concerned with "God's mysteries and with God's capacity to intercede for men on earth,"[322] an intercession often embodied in holy persons like Sufi saints (and perpetuated in their shrines). Julian Johansen, alternately, identifies a number of controversial themes within the debates between proponents of Sufism and those opposed to it as a valid form of piety, many of which center upon the status of holy Islamic figures, particularly the (Sufi) saints as intercessors.[323]

The status of the Prophet Muhammad, alongside Sufi saints, is also of central concern in reformist discourse, and often Muhammad serves as a religious role model for reformist thinkers in their promotion of a more "original" Islamic practice. In India, for example, the *tariqa muhammadiyya*, the "way of Muhammad," was conceived in the 18th century as a mystical path based upon the exclusive imitation of the Prophet's *sunna*.[324] This *tariqa* was later politicized by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (d.1831) in the early 19th century to rally support for his campaigns against Sikhs in the Punjab;[325] notably, Barelwi also promoted the idea that there were no saintly intermediaries between God and human beings, and that the best practice of Islam was one obedient to law.[326] The preservation and celebration of Muhammad's particular holiness (and relevance) is not universal,

---

[321] Liebeskind, 30.
[322] Liebeskind, 38.
[323] Johansen, 9.
[324] Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 218-19.
[325] Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 225. For more Muhammad-centric political and religious movements in other parts of the world, see Schimmel, 225-27.
[326] Liebeskind, 37-38.

however. Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi "al-Afghani" (d. 1897), for example, who was immensely influential in the Egyptian reform movement, asserted that the infallibility of prophets was particular to their time and context, and conceived of prophecy as a "craft."[327] But, even in al-Afghani's rejection of a prophet's infallibility, one can observe a concern with identifying the loci of holiness or its emulation. There were many strains of reformism in the 19th century, though all its intellectuals shared a basic concern with promoting what they perceived as a purer Islamic practice (which produced purer practitioners) that was inspired, usually, by an original, pure (often prophetic) Islam. Typically, this reform proposed a re-situation of the believer *vis-à-vis* God and Islamic saints, the latter of whose intercessory attributes might be deemed, in turn, impotent.

As for the historical context of Islamic reform, speaking of 19th century India Rafiuddin Ahmed asserts that reform movements (like the *tariqa muhammadiyya*) "represented essentially the response of the *ulema* to the loss of their old world – gone with the decline of Muslim power in India – which they sought to regain by a return to the primitive purity of Islam."[328] In the Arab lands, similar sentiments were instrumental in inspiring communal revolts in Lebanon in the 1860s, which were exacerbated by European influence interference and Ottoman attempts for direct control in the region.[329] In a general sense, it was during the 19th century that British colonial imperialism matured in South Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, introducing new form of knowledge, law, bureaucratized education and conceptualizations of identity while

---

[327] Johansen, 13, 102.
[328] Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41. This point-of-view is shared by Liebeskind, 35.
[329] Hourani, 277.

serving as a foreign sovereign.[330] The expansion of European political power more generally and its cultural (and religious) trappings penetrated into colonized societies, and its systematizing and rationalist character was absorbed and reproduced.[331] Islamic reformism, as one product of and response to imperialism, was a means by which one could create and foster a specifically Muslim identity. And in the religiously plural society of South Asia, the colonial legacy included a greater emphasis on communal (Sunni *or* Shi'i *or* Hindu) identity in particular.[332] Religious "syncretism," anathema to both the post-Enlightenment values of classifying groups of people and imperial Britain's policy of divide-and-rule, is a concern that persists to this day. It appears not only in the opinions of Deobandi reformists,[333] for example, but in continued Sunni/Shi'i communal conflicts, such as those in Lucknow in the 1970s,[334] and even within a concern with whether or not Sindi Isma'ilis (and their *ginan*s) are Muslim at all.[335] Religious reform in the 19th and 20th centuries was, at its root, a modern trend and a means by which people could negotiate their place as "modern" (even via an attachment to a golden past) in a world whose social, political, and technological circumstances were rapidly transforming. It is then not surprising that such reformers sought, in South Asia for example, to "do away with 'Pirism,' which appeared to them as one of the reasons for the poverty and

---

[330] See Hourani, 302-314; Liebeskind, 10-28.
[331] Liebeskind, 10-11.
[332] Hyder, 85.
[333] Liebeskind, 38. The Deoband was a reform movement that was institutionalized in a seminary by the same name in Uttar Pradesh, founded in 1867. The Deobandis were concerned with Sufi reform, and opposed to the "elevation of saints to an exalted status" (Liebeskind, 38).
[334] Pinault, *Horse*, 19-20.
[335] Asani, 107.

backwardness of the people."[336] But why were certain religious institutions found to be inappropriate in this new, "modern" context? What allowed for an identification of saints with that backwardness and a past worth reforming (or denying), even as another was elevated and valued?

Certainly, one can neither associate by rote Islamic reformism with an opposition to Sufism as an esoteric, "traditional" approach to Islam, nor can one propose with any accuracy that reformist Islam became the only "modern" practice of the religion, particularly in comparison to those "Islams" it opposed. In the Middle East and North Africa, for instance, despite criticism by pro-Wahhabi reformists and other modernists, the influence of Sufi orders did not appreciably decline in the 19th century, though Sufis did respond and adapt given those critiques.[337] We also cannot presume that the values of Islamic reformism and those of Sufism are necessarily counter to one another, nor can we say that communalism is a necessary product of the former. The Indian Sufi *shaykh* Warith 'Ali Shah (d. 1905), for example, who traveled throughout the Islamic world during his lifetime, was distinctly esoteric and reformist in his spiritual thought. Warith 'Ali Shah refused to pray as an intercessor for his followers, and dissociated his mysticism from order-centric Sufism, seeking instead to return to the roots of Islam and early Sufi practice.[338] He had disciples from many religious traditions, asking of them only that they believe in love and the oneness (*tawhid*) of their particular deity.[339]

---

[336] Schimmel, *Indian Subcontinent*, 138.
[337] Hourani, 312.
[338] Liebeskind, 180-81, 201.
[339] Liebeskind, 191, 199.

And just as Warith ‘Ali Shah’s multi-communal Sufism flourishes today, so are there still multi-communal Muharram observances in modern Hyderabad,[340] for example, despite a reformist concern with Shi‘i practices as inappropriate for Sunnis or Muslims in general. Rafiuddin Ahmed, noting how some Indian reformists identified 19th century Bengali practices such as Muharram “un-Islamic” (or at least un-Sunni) describes how the “emotional veneration of Bibi Fatimah, the mother of the martyrs,”[341] was denounced by reformists. Despite that, traditionalist theologians, even while condemning aspects of Muharram, “recognized the importance of the Karbala tragedy and even invested Bibi Fatimah with extraordinary qualities which had no scriptural basis.”[342] From this example, we can observe that there was not a single response to how saints might be understood, illustrating both their ambiguous identities in the modern context and those identities of Muslims concerned with comprehending them.

My treatment, above, of 19th and 20th century Islamic reformism focused on primarily Sunni reformist responses to the social, religious, political, and cultural contexts of the modern era, al-Afghani notwithstanding. The concern with and question of sainthood, central in a discourse interested in negotiating a modern Muslim’s relationship with God, was particularly embodied in the consideration of Sufism as it might be representative of a backward, non-rational, or incorrect approach to practicing Islam. But what of Shi‘ism and its saints? I mentioned that, in India in particular with its history of communal diversity, Shi‘i Islam in its popular form was often rejected by Sunni reformists.

---

[340] Pinault, *Horse*, 21.
[341] Ahmed, 63.
[342] Ahmed, 64.

However, the place of its holy persons was somewhat ambiguous, as I suggested with Ahmed's discussion of Bibi Fatima. How are the Shi'i *Ma'sumun* negotiated in the modern period in light of reformist discourses? What role do they play in these re-examinations of Muslim identity, and what do these new roles signify regarding that identity? I want to explore these questions in the rest of this section, though before I do so I would like to propose a method for thinking about Islamic reformism and why "saints" like Fatima might figure as a central component in its negotiation of a modern, Muslim identity and, therefore, a useful lens for scholars to approach that reform.

My understanding of the modern Muslim's rejection or continued recognition of holy, human figures is drawn from Robin Horton's theoretically intellectualist approach to religion, wherein the cosmological form of a given religious system is seen to reflect, though not passively, the socio-cultural circumstances in which its believers find themselves.[343] In a sense, I have been channeling this understanding throughout this paper, in that I have sought to discuss Fatima al-Zahra', in addition to serving as a point of religious creativity, as a reflection of the concerns of those who invoke and create her. Horton's conception of religion is especially useful, however, in this discussion of the modern Fatima, as he directly engages the relevance of spiritual beings in a given religion as dependent upon their "thereness," their applicability: "Where spiritual beings no longer feature in the theories used in the explanation, prediction and control of the world,

[343] Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 354-55.

the sense of 'thereness' evaporates, and communion [with them] becomes difficult if not impossible to attain."[344]

It is from his application of intellectualist theory to conversion to Islam and Christianity in West Africa that I draw most of my inspiration. Horton proposes that one can understand the "conversion" to monotheist traditions by previously animist societies as a process which reflects those societies' changing relationship with their environment; the more the "local" is diminished in the face of a global world, the less relevant lesser deities and local spirits are in the negotiation of a person's life and identity. Richard Eaton, in his analysis of conversion to Christianity of the Naga peoples in the hills between Assam and Burma, uses Horton's religious theory and asserts that a "high god" who is abstract, omnipotent, and omnipresent is seen to fit better with an ever widening conception of the world in which local deities are rendered impotent.[345] Conversion, then, is not a switch from one faith to another, but an innovative process of change *from within* a group of people (or a person); it is a "creative elaboration in response to the challenge of new experience."[346] I would like to suggest, with Horton's and Eaton's points in mind, that we can understand religious change *within* a single tradition like Islam as similar to this understanding of conversion, particularly if we observe that the reformist's concern is often with "returning" to the worship of a single, high god, and/or recognizing a single saint (typically, Muhammad) to the exclusion of other, sometimes locally situated (if in practice only) holy persons. Reformist Islam reflects a transformation in how Islamic

---

[344] Horton, 373.
[345] Richard M. Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49-51, 72-75.
[346] Horton, 316.

cosmology is conceived, and this is particularly informative regarding what it means with respect to shifts in *people's worlds*, both earthly and divine, particularly in those circumstances in which the holiness of saints like Fatima *is not* set aside and how.

With that lengthy, if necessary, discussion of religious reformism, I will begin my exploration of the "modern" Fatima, both as she is invoked by both Islamic reformists (of varying sorts) and those Muslims responding (in various ways) to that contemporary religious discourse. I return now to 19th century Qajar Persia, this time to explore how she was invoked in Shi'i theosophy and by the revolutionary Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi al-Bab (d. 1850), the founder of the Babi movement.

Despite the popularity of *ta'ziyeh* and Qajar support of the dramas, no real social cohesion was generated in 19th century Iran.[347] By the middle of the century, the country was "on the verge of civil war, financial bankruptcy, and religious revolution,"[348] the latter of which had resulted from a crisis of faith born of facing the apparent vitality of Christian Europe and the Persian *'ulama'*'s rejection of any reform associated with the West. The *qiyama*, the Day of Judgment heralded by the arrival of the Mahdi, was envisioned at this time not as the end of the world, but as "a revolutionary change in the world."[349] In 1848, within this period of social, cultural, and religious tension, Shirazi publicly declared himself the *Bab*, "the gate" (or deputy/incarnation), of the 12th *imam* on earth, a declaration which presumed not only a period of religious reform, but religious revolution as the *qiyama*.

---

[347] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 25.
[348] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 24.
[349] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 28-29.

Shirazi was born in 1819 to a family of merchants, though even as he took up trade as his profession, his passion was mystical contemplation. He journeyed to Iraq in the early 1840s and studied Shi'i mystical philosophy under Sayyid Kazim Rashti (d. 1843), the foremost Shaykhi scholar in Karbala'.[350] Shirazi's mysticism drew much of its metaphor and inspiration from early Shaykhi gnosticism, a school of thought which was established under Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i (d. 1826) and his successor, Rashti, in Karbala' at the end of the 18th and start of the 19th centuries.[351] Shaykhi thought was heavily influenced by the celestial, hierarchical worlds (each associated with aspects of the human being) that were elaborated in the mystical theosophies of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1191) and Ibn 'Arabi. In the Shaykhi understanding, the *Ma'sumun* originated in the world of the deity (*lahut*), as "precosmic eternal entities" (in the words of Henry Corbin), and were the reason for which God created the universe.[352] In the writing of Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani (d. 1870), another disciple of Ahsa'i, Fatima serves in the divine world as the supra-celestial earth out of which the totality of the spiritual entities of the twelve *imam*s arises. Her radiant light, as *al-Zahra'*, contains the entirety of the universe, and she manifests divine wisdom and the Soul (*nafs*):[353]

> She is the eternally feminine in man, and that is why she is the archetype of the heavenly Earth; she is both paradise and initiation into it, for it is she who

---

[350] For more on Rashti, see Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 40-42.
[351] It should be noted that Karbala' had become the center of Shi'i thought in the mid-18th century after the fall of the Safavids in Isfahan (Nakash, 168).
[352] Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 58-60; Bayat, 42-49.
[353] Corbin, 63-69.

> manifests the divine names and attributes revealed in the theophanic persons of the Imams...[354]

The understanding of Fatima as the reality of the divine earth is also present in Shirazi's writings, as is the goal of reviving in the human sphere the divine beings;[355] Fatima and her love is understood as Paradise, in which all believers will dwell forever.[356] As for this human world, revelation was seen by Shaykhi thinkers as constantly evolving, re-initiated by each *imam* of the time; this was a belief that was not only characteristic of Kazim Rashti's thought,[357] but would appear to inspire Shirazi's own understanding of his mission.

Shirazi declared, privately to his family and associates, that he was to be the *bab* of the hidden *imam* in 1844, and began gathering disciples. The first eighteen of his followers were each given a letter from *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*, and were considered to be living corporeal embodiments of these holy letters (the *horuf-i hayy*) and also the symbolic reincarnations of the fourteen *Ma'sumun* and the four archangels.[358] These first disciples were the actual return of those holy figures within Shirazi's literally

---

[354] Corbin, 66. There are many parallels between this gnostic understanding of Fatima and the *hadith* I translated earlier from the *Bihar al-anwar*, in which Adam encounters Fatima in Firdaws and is told that the lights emanating from her crown, ears and heart are 'Ali, her sons, and her father. In Corbin's understanding of Kirmani's thought, Fatima as "Earth" in *lahut* (the divine world) serves as the substrate from which the fullness of divine light (the Pleroma), embodied in her male relatives on our earth, can arise.

[355] Todd Lawson, "The Authority of the Feminine and Fatima's Place in an Early Work by the Bab," in *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the* Marja' Taqlid, ed. Linda S. Walbridge (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105, 109.

[356] Lawson, 115.

[357] Bayat, 52-54.

[358] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 176, 191.

revivalist spiritual system, which sought to "reconstruct the world."[359] The emanation of Fatima al-Zahra' was identified in the radical Iraqi Babi leader, Persian-born Fatima Zarrin Taj Baraghani (d. 1852), also commonly known as Qurrat al-'Ayn ("solace of the eye") and Tahireh ("pure"). Baraghani never met the Bab, but she entered his movement intuitively after having studied Shaykhism under Rashti.[360] She was an immensely controversial figure, having appeared in public on the first day of Muharram in 1845 without black mourning garb or a face-veil; she has since been considered the first Persian woman to unveil on her own initiative. This enraged a number of the Babi elite who wrote to Shirazi complaining of her behavior, but he responded with an unequivocal defense of Baraghani, identifying her as a leader in his movement.[361] Later, she was exiled from Karbala' for challenging Usuli *mujtahid*s to a *mubahala*, and eventually deported from Iraq to her birthplace, Qazvin. At the 1848 Badasht conference of Babi leaders in Khorasan, she unveiled for a second time and declared that all *shari'a* was abrogated, and while her stance was summarily rejected at first, she slowly gained influence and support among the other leaders. She was imprisoned in 1850 and strangled to death two years later after she proved to be unhelpful under questioning

---

[359] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 193; Bayat, 101-02.

[360] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 295-99. As the incarnation of Fatima al-Zahra', Baraghani claimed purifying sight, able to bless food (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 304).

[361] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 304-07; see also Bayat, 90-91. While Baraghani did remove her face-veil and her inner circle of followers were primarily women (poets, nobles, family members), she provides no real commentary on women in her own writings (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 304, 330). Her radicalism was not at all feminist in nature, apparently, but was a mechanism to express her religious convictions in a movement that emphasized the transcendence of previous (pre-*qiyama*) Islamic practice.

concerning the attempt of militant Babis to assassinate the Qajar ruler Nasir al-Din Shah (d. 1896).[362]

Fatima Baraghani was, on the whole, a very different figure than the Fatima al-Zahra' provided in Shi'i tradition. Abbas Amanat notes, "Qurrat al-'Ayn's Fatima was one of independent will and action" who saw herself manifesting a 'primal truth' in her symbolic embodiment of Fatima al-Zahra'.[363] One need not see, as Todd Lawson insightfully notes, the philosophy of the Babi movement and its adherents as breaking with the past as much as making it immanent, revivifying it; Fatima Baraghani *was*, in a sense, Fatima al-Zahra'.[364] The Babi movement was not so much a break with the past as a reconstruction of it within the society of mid-19th century Persia.[365] In Shi'i thought, the arrival of the Mahdi was to herald a return to the prophetic age, "a return to the age of religious creativity" in which a *new* religious dispensation could be constructed.[366] However, within such a model – and it was this model that Shirazi invoked – "Shi'ism" and Islam necessarily become defunct upon further revelation.[367] Thus, the Babi movement engaged a literal religious revivalism in which Islamic cosmology was not only re-negotiated (and made immanent), but Islam itself was transcended. As the Babis saw

---

[362] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 308-30; Bayat, 110-15.
[363] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 331.
[364] Lawson, 95-96.
[365] Mangol Bayat spends a number of pages discussing the socio-economic system proposed by the Babis, in which was "reflect in striking fashion the original egalitarian spirit of the early Muslim community" (Bayat, 104). Outside observers called the movement's egalitarianism and value of shared property both socialist and communist (Bayat, 116, 119), though doctrinally Babism supported the establishment of a saintly theocracy (Bayat, 107).
[366] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 6.
[367] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 6-7.

themselves living at the time of *qiyama*, so then was Islam abrogated, just as Baraghani declared at Badasht.

The Babis did, clearly, engage the notion of sainthood and its place in society, not only confirming the relevance of the holy person but directly recognizing those figures as *alive*. Subsequent reformists, however, did not follow such an explicitly spiritual route after the Babi movement, increasingly militant following the conference of Badasht and the execution of Shirazi in 1850 CE, proved ineffective against the Qajar state and its adherents were massacred after a series of revolts in Mazandaran in the early 1850s. The reformist Iranian intellectuals of the later 19th century were convinced that "principal causes of the social decay, injustice, and oppression they saw in Iran lay in human ignorance and an archaic sense of values, and that only with scientific knowledge could their society be liberated."[368] One of these individuals was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, whom I mentioned earlier in this section. While inspired by Shaykhi theology and friendly to Babis, al-Afghani's reformism was unequivocally secular.[369]

The secularism of late 19th century reformism was inspired as a means of preserving Iranian identity from perceived social decay, and coupled with other forms of Iranian dissent, according to Mangol Bayat, culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 CE.[370] At the turn of the 20th century, Qajar Iran suffered under "virtual domination of the country by England and Russia, societal dislocations, decline of the native

---

[368] Bayat, 133.
[369] See Bayat, 143-48.
[370] Bayat, 178.

industries, economic stagnation, and lawlessness,"[371] against all of which the constitutional movement was positioned. The secularist ideals of reform possessed by many revolutionaries (among other inspirations for revolt) were actualized under the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979), during which religion was effectively detached from official politics, *ta'ziyeh* productions were officially forbidden, and a top-down plan for Iranian secular modernization was instituted.[372] This alienation of the religious classes and eventually lay Iranians, as well, under the Pahlavis was one of the root causes for both the failed uprising against the state in June of 1963 and the successful revolution in 1979. While both economic and political factors were also instrumental in both,[373] I would like to focus on the 1978-79 revolution as a religious, social, and cultural revolution that coalesced in the 1960s and 1970s under clerical leaders like Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeyni (d. 1989). To consider the anxieties of this era in Iran, I will first explore the depiction of Fatima al-Zahra' in the work of Muslim lay intellectual 'Ali Shariati (d. 1977) in the early 1970s.

We can observe in Shariati's Fatima a tension that exists, particularly in the 20th century, concerning a Muslim's relationship with a saint as he or she might be either emulated and/or adored. Shariati was one of the most influential ideologists for the

---

[371] Mohsen S. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: from Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (Boulder; London: Westview Press, 1988), 51. For more on Western penetration into Iran, the constitutional movement and the role of the *'ulama'* within it, see Milani, 44-45, 48-57.
[372] Bayat, 191-92; Milani, 60-62; Mottahedeh, 38-39 (though, some Muharram practices still occurred despite the government's restrictions [Mottahedeh, 28]).
[373] Milani, 79-86,

Iranian revolution in 1979.[374] He was born in a small town in Khorasan, growing up in the pilgrimage city of Mashhad where his father was a preacher. He attended university there, studying religious history and sociology, before writing his doctorate on Persian philology at the Sorbonne in France.[375] He taught as a professor in Mashhad and later in Tehran, devoting "his life to the propagation of his revolutionary interpretation of Islam."[376] By the mid- to late 1970s, his works on Islam, though banned by the government, "circulated widely, although clandestinely, and grew in popularity. Being religious was no longer regarded as a backward, but if anything, as a liberal attitude."[377] Here we can see a fundamental change in the values of an Iranian modern, secular identity that was so influential a century before and gave rise to the regime whose policies were being challenged in the 1970s. As anthropologist Anne Betteridge observed at that time among young women in Shiraz, religion had become fashionable, a newly negotiated "modern" that rejected, as per Shariati, both traditional Shi'i piety and Western modernity.[378]

We can easily situate Shariati, in that sense, at a potent modern crossroads between conceptions of traditional Persian Shi'ism and European (and Iranian) modernity. Shariati termed his own Shi'i beliefs as "'Alid Shi'ism" (a term rather explicitly reformist in connotation) in deliberate contrast to what he conceived to be "Safavid Shi'ism," the

---

[374] Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1981), 215.
[375] Keddie, 215.
[376] Farzin Vahdat, *God and the Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 136.
[377] Anne H. Betteridge, "To Veil or Not to Veil: A Matter of Protest or Policy," in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, ed. Guity Nashat (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 112.
[378] Betteridge, 111-13.

corrupted practices of the more immediate historical past.[379] He also systematized his reformist interpretation of Shi'i Islam in order both to detach himself from the "petrified," official Islam with which he had been saturated in his youth and to re-animate a modern, activist Shi'i religious politic.[380] He sought to promote an understanding of Islam and Islamic practice as sociological instead of metaphysical.[381] Shariati positioned himself within a pre-existing religious space which he then re-configured as separate from and yet drawing upon a past conception of that religion. Shariati's depiction of Fatima is located likewise in the space between past, present and future, in which modern identities are being negotiated.

For Shariati, Fatima al-Zahra' must be a model for women to emulate and not only a saint. In 1971 he gave a lecture on women at the Hoseyniyyeh Irshad in Tehran,[382] the notes of which were used as the basis for his famous book, *Fatimeh fatimeh ast* ("Fatima is Fatima"). In it he details the modern Iranian woman's relation to modernity (Western and Iranian), in addition to how she might also relate to her religion. He states, in his introduction to the book,

> [Women] want to decide for themselves. They want to develop themselves. They need a model, an ideal example, a heroine. For them, the problem of 'Who am I?

---

[379] Keddie, 217-20. "Safavid" Shi'ism, for Shariati, was mixed with politics and borrowed rituals which, "making it a means of political enslavement" and "a religion of the vanquished" (Keddie, 218).
[380] Keddie, 220.
[381] Farah Azari, "Islam's Appeal to Women in Iran: Illusions and Reality," in *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam*, ed. Farah Azari (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), 28.
[382] The Hoseyniyyeh Irshad was a religious center/organization founded in Tehran in 1967 by a group of *'ulama'* and Muslim intellectuals. Shariati, while a professor in Mashhad, commuted to Tehran to give a number of lectures there from 1968 until the center was shut down by the government in 1974 (Laleh Bakhtiar, *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman* [N.p.: ABC International Group, 1996], xxviii-xxx; Milani, 144-45).

> How do I become?' is urgent. Fatima, through her own 'being,' answers their questions.[383]

Shariati locates the modern Iranian woman in an ambiguous position as a result of the modern situation and, likewise, grants her an ambiguous, incomplete identity. He rejects both the traditional Iranian woman whose religion was "generally limited to such folk practices as rowzeh [lecture and mourning] and sufreh [ritual meal],"[384] and the modernized woman who imitated the West as projected by the media. He provides, as an alternative source of identity, the person of Fatima al-Zahra', who becomes both Shariati's answer to the Iranian woman's quest for self in the decade preceding the Islamic Revolution and, also, a means by which women might fashion themselves. This latter function of Fatima is particularly important, as it places the power of self-transformation (into both "pious Muslim" and "modern Iranian") in the hands of the believer. Fatima, as a saint, serves as a human role model and not a being to be venerated. In this understanding of sainthood, the action of the believer is re-located, and self-transformation does not occur, in Shariati's opinion, through devotion to Fatima, but through the emulation of Fatima. As Marcia K. Hermansen explains regarding Shariati's rejection of Fatima's role as intercessor, "one has to be affected emotionally, intellectually, and in his or her whole nature by this exemplar in order to *make*

---

[383] 'Ali Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, n.d.), 20.

[384] Marcia K. Hermansen, "Fatimeh as a Role Model in the Works of Ali Shariati," in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, ed. Guity Nashat (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 89. I will talk more about the continued practices of *rowzeh* and *sofreh*/*dastarkhan* in Iran and India at the end of this section.

oneself."[385] The saint is not an intercessor, but a means of inspiration for self-development.

One can see a re-negotiation of self and the person's relation to saints (and, indeed, sainthood itself) in Shariati's depiction of Fatima. Why did he select her as his exemplar to inspire the young, modern women of Iran? Shariati is somewhat ambiguous in his explanation. Fatima is rooted centrally in both Islamic history and memory; she was and remains great, he asserts, because she loved and was beloved by her father, the Prophet Muhammad.[386] As Shariati claims, "Fatima is the woman that Islam wants a woman to be."[387] In this way, he was undeniably invoking Fatima's position in sacred history and genealogy as well as in social, Islamic memory. To be *pious*, one should look to Fatima. However, at the end of his book, he rejects identifying her only insomuch as "Fatima is the daughter of Muhammad." He concludes, instead and in a deceptively simple phrase, that, "Fatima is Fatima."[388] In this final sentence, Shariati veritably removes Fatima from history and her historical relationships. He liberates her, in a sense, from any trappings of identity that are not explicitly "her own" (as represented in her name). Thus, Shariati draws on Islamic values and memory to promote the relevance of Fatima in the lives of young Iranians, and summarily rejects them both in order to empower her as a role model for independent, self-defining women. Fatima is the answer to those first two questions that he identified in his introduction as being of concern to modern women: Who am I?

---

[385] Hermansen, 93 (my emphasis).
[386] Shariati, 135-39.
[387] Shariati, 224.
[388] Shariati, 226.

How do I "become?"[389] Here we can identify, explicitly, the anxieties of the reformist that I mentioned at the start of this section, which center upon, as per Deeb's analysis mentioned above, the articulation of how one should "be modern" from one's own side in relation to sacred history.

Thus, Shariati's writings on Fatima become an especially useful source for our understanding of how reformists are re-examining and reforming the notion of the Islamic religious figure. He acknowledges that little is known of the historical Fatima, though this does not dissuade pious Shi'a from devoting themselves to her. Shariati does not identify this devotion as a fault of theirs, but instead as an attestation to Fatima's potency as a holy, *but human* figure. These traditional devotees love her and her family and are inspired to love by means of her.[390] However, Shariati expresses the concern that this mystery obscures her inasmuch as it has allowed her to be hidden behind "the eternal praise, eulogies, crying and lamentations,"[391] as if there not only was a "more real" Fatima to uncover, but one distinct from the venerated al-Zahra'. This aim to uncovering the true Fatima is not unique to her discursive circumstances; Shariati is also concerned that Iranian women are obscured likewise, known only in reference to their sons,[392]

---

[389] Shariati, 121.
[390] Shariati, 24-5.
[391] Shariati, 57.
[392] Shariati, 108. Fascinatingly, in his description of this particular problem, Shariati uses as an example that a woman in Iran is only known as "Mother of Hasan;" Of course, if Fatima were ever to be referred to by her *kunya* only, she would herself be only "Mother of Hasan," *Umm al-Hasan*. Was his example an allusion to Fatima, linking her obscurity in devotion to an obscurity of the average Iranian woman in tradition? In many ways this would be complementary to his thought as a whole, in which he is enjoining Iranian women to *be Fatima*.

imprisoned within traditions.[393] Shariati's re-claiming of Fatima is parallel, then, to a re-claiming by and for all women in Iran, whose modern identity is "going through the stages of [its] infancy."[394] I would also suggest that this reconstitution of modern, Islamic identity being promoted by Shariati in *Fatimeh fatimeh ast* is not exclusive to women. The author is a man, after all, and it is he who is propagating the message and is suggesting the reform of his entire society in doing so.[395] Hence, Fatima al-Zahra' is presented as an Islamic role model, socially and individually. Shariati's act of "reclaiming" her, repositioning her within a modern, progressive Iranian consciousness, is an act of creativity, of *making*, of both Muslim women and men.

Shariati's act of social creativity and repositioning engages the tension I mentioned above: in invoking Fatima as a model for women, Shariati also invokes her as a spiritually potent Islamic holy person, even when that potency inspires non-rational devotionalism. In *Fatimeh fatimeh ast*, Shariati rejects

> the traditional concept of 'saints' interceding on behalf of believers... On the other hand, he thought that every human society was in need of external guidance from above in the form of 'models,' such as religious saints or mythical figures.[396]

How then do we reconcile the role model with the saint? I suggested, above, that Robin Horton's intellectualist approach to understanding religious change is useful in approaching Islamic reformism in the 19th and 20th century, and might be helpful here in

---

[393] Shariati, 118.
[394] Azari, 31.
[395] Shariati later emphasizes in *Fatimeh fatimeh ast* Muhammad's position as a Prophet *without sons*: "And now, Muhammad is the Prophet. In the city, filled with the most significant waves of happiness, he has the power and greatness which a human being could never conceive of" and "this man has four daughters" (Shariati, 132). Also, interestingly, Shariati himself had only daughters (Keddie, 216), which likens his situation as a father to that of Muhammad.
[396] Vahdat, 146.

answering that question. Shariati invokes Fatima as a saint, but ultimately values her not as a means of a person's accessing God, but instead as a means by which a person (woman in particular) might access and transform the self and society. Shariati notes himself that "['Ali's] wife, Fatima, is a perfect example of an ideal woman, of what a woman could be and no one has become."[397] The role of the saint has been changed, removed from that intermediary space between the divine and mundane that invests him or her with spiritual potency. In light of Horton's theories, I would propose that such a change, even if only rhetorical, indicates a shift in how individuals are seeking to relate to themselves in the modern, globalizing world. The saint has always been a figure by which communities and persons were created, but the direction of that creativity has shifted its focus, in theory, from God to self.

To explore this notion further, I would like to turn to other invocations of Fatima during these revolutionary decades. Under Khomeyni during both the revolution and the later Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, she was remembered and promoted by the clergy as the ideal woman in her role of mother, her children exemplars of piety. Faegheh Shirazi, in her discussion of how holy women have been depicted in modern Iran, observes that the ethos of martyrdom has become a particularly potent Shi'i ethos in modern Iran, and Fatima is remembered within its understanding of pious action. After the revolution, for example, cemeteries have been named *behesht* (Paradise), and one of the most popular qualifiers of these is *zahra*, as with the largest cemetery in Tehran, Behesht-i Zahra. This allows for such spaces of interment to be conceived as "the Paradise of Zahra" and each

[397] Shariati, 47.

person buried there to be her "martyred" child.[398] The explicit association of Fatima with her historical and sacred role as mother to the martyred *imam*s situates her in a specifically female-gendered space. Indeed, Fatima's alleged birthday is celebrated today in Iran as Mother's Day. However, in the role of mother, what does Fatima have to offer young, activist Muslim women who are encouraged to emulate her? Shariati negotiated this tension by identifying Fatima as both ideal mother and an activist. However, others preserved the values of domestic motherhood in Fatima and promoted her daughter, Zaynab bt. 'Ali (d. 682), in her stead as the active, Islamic role model for women in times of revolution and war.

A brief consideration of Zaynab will be useful in understanding both her mother and modern conceptions of sainthood. Zaynab's memory, historically, has been invoked in observance of Karbala',[399] as she was present at the massacre with her brother, al-Husayn, and later served as a righteous, pious critic of the Umayyads and a defending voice of the Shi'a in the courts of 'Ubaydallah b. Ziyad (d. 685), the governor of Iraq, and the new caliph, Yazid b. Mu'awiya (d. 683). In al-Mufid's *Kitab al-irshad*, as in other treatments of Karbala', Zaynab is portrayed both as tearful mourner[400] and sharp-tongued critic. When al-Husayn was killed she emerged from her tent and shamed those

---

[398] Faegheh Shirazi, "Daughters of Karbala: Images of Women in Popular Shi'i Culture," in *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourse in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scott Aghaie (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 95.

[399] For a number of translated eulogies about Zaynab dedicated in remembrance of Karbala', see Shirazi, 107-13. For a discussion of Zaynab as a model of resistance, see Pinault, *Horse*, 72-73.

[400] Al-Mufid, 348-49. For al-Tabari's account of the following events, see *The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiyah*, 165-67, 171-72. For brief summaries of Zaynab's role in modern Shi'i piety, see Deeb, 148-49, 162-64 (in Lebanon); Pinault, *Horse*, 77-79 (in Indian lamentation poetry), 83-85 (in Iran).

complicit in the act: "'Woe upon you (all), is there not a Muslim among you?' No-one answered."[401] When Ibn Ziyad mockingly asked how she could reconcile the decimation of her family with God's support of them, she responded that they died bravely as decreed by God, and the Umayyad "victors" would face them again as their adversaries on the Day of Judgment, with only their excuses as defense. When Ibn Ziyad attempted to kill her nephew, 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, she threw herself on the boy and declared that she would have to be killed as well.[402] Later, in the court of Yazid, whom 'Allama Tabataba'i remembers as lacking in any "religious character at all… [and] oblivious to the principles and regulations of Islam,"[403] Zaynab shamed the caliph into silence when he threatened to give her niece, Fatima bt. al-Husayn, to one of his men.[404]

The memories of Karbala' as preserved in Muharram observances and elegies were used as a method of legitimation for the revolution in 1978-79.[405] Zaynab, who was such a central character in these stories as a voice for and defender of Islam and the Shi'i imamate, was promoted as a role model for modern, activist Iranian women who sought to stand up, as Muslims, against an unjust regime. She was used to inspire "political opposition among women," while "in more peaceful times it is the Prophet's daughter and Zaynab's mother, Fatimah, who serves as the primary role model for women in

---

[401] Al-Mufid, 363.
[402] Al-Mufid, 365-66.
[403] Tabataba'i, 59.
[404] Al-Mufid, 369. In the account of this event, related on Fatima bt. al-Husayn's authority, Yazid became increasingly incensed as Zaynab continued to assert that he should not allow *as a Muslim* such an offense against her niece's honor. She scorns him as a commander of the faithful who is only oppressive in his actions. Afterward, when the man asked for Fatima again, Yazid cursed him.
[405] Shirazi, 94.

capacity as the ideal daughter, wife, and mother."[406] While these exemplars, manifested in a mother and daughter from Shi'i sacred history, are not necessarily in opposition to one another, their contextually contingent relevance and appropriateness as exemplars are illustrative of modern social tensions and values. The selection (or non-selection) of either sheds light on modern negotiations of gender roles in addition to roles of saints as somewhat "secular" figures.

Before and during the Iranian revolution, women's participation was encouraged by the clerical leaders, and indeed there was widespread support for the revolution among Iranian women.[407] Female activism was promoted as an Islamic value, and adopting the traditional *chador* (full-body veil) was a means of visually identifying oneself with the revolution and its pro-Islamic, anti-Pahlavi values.[408] For women in the 1970s, veiling, as with Fatima Baraghani removing hers in the mid-19th century as an activist statement of her faith, was a means of "being modern" as a modern, Iranian woman. Both Fatima and her daughter Zaynab served as the loci for embodying and/or becoming such a person in the context of the revolution. Their roles and attributes in sacred history were "secularized," in a sense, as they were invoked as *human* figures.

This "secular" kind of saint or sacred figure was appealing not only to the Shi'a in Iran. Musa Sadr (disappeared 1978), an Iranian *'alim* educated in Tehran in the 1950s,

---

[406] Betteridge, 119-20. One also finds similar concerns with relevant role models among women in 20th/21st century Lebanon: "[Other women] looked to Sayyida Fatima al-Zahra', for her knowledge of Islam, her abilities in teaching others, and her generosity. But by far the most common role model for pious Shi'i women was Sayyida Zaynab… [who] represents a woman in whom piety, humanitarian sentiment, and political awareness fuse into a perfect braid" (Deeb, 202).

[407] Betteridge, 110, 117.

[408] Betteridge, 110.

was a "Shi'i modernist" who also advocated an activist approach religious leadership; one should "embody Shi'i Islam's expectation that a religious leader had political obligations and prerogatives as well."[409] He settled in Tyre, Lebanon, in 1959, and was a hugely influential intellectual there until the civil war in the mid-1970s. Like the revolutionary thinkers in Iran, Sadr used the Karbala' story, "stripped of its sorrow and lament," in order to overthrow "the dominant Shi'i tradition of political quietism and withdrawal," thereby providing a new reading of the events as illustrative of political choice and courage.[410] He identified the true enemies of al-Husayn, the Shi'a themselves, as those who sought to ossify his example and not act on it, "to restrict the meaning of his life and martyrdom to tears and lamentations."[411] His treatment of Fatima al-Zahra is a particularly provocative and exquisite example of what I have been suggesting regarding the negotiation of sainthood and holiness in the past century. In a speech in Tyre before an audience of clerics, elites, and armed militants, after introducing Fatima as pure and virtuous, he noted how she was expected by her father to earn God's grace on her own merits, continuing by saying,

> "For us today, we see, oh Fatimah, daughter of the messenger of God, we are now beyond the stage of childhood and helplessness. We have come of age. *We need no trustees*. We have emancipated ourselves despite all the means adopted to keep us from learning and enlightenment. We have gathered in large number to say that we need no trusteeship. Oh Fatimah, we are in your path; and our path will lead us to martyrdom."[412]

---

[409] Fouad Ajami, "Imam Musa Sadr," in *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*, ed Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 427.
[410] Ajami, 439.
[411] Ajami, 441.
[412] Ajami, 444, from a translated quote of Sadr's speech (my emphasis).

In this speech, Sadr rejects the saint as an intercessor or intermediary between God and mankind; instead, the holy figures of Shi'i history and traditional devotion are reformed as human beings whose behaviors were just and justified, who might serve as *human* models for moral behavior, today. Fatima is not valued by Sadr as a miraculous human being imbued with God's holiness and light, but as a moral woman who was rewarded in Paradise for her pious, good *actions*.

The revolution in Iran began in 1978, a year after 'Ali Shariati died in Britain and Musa Sadr disappeared in Libya. Mohammed Reza Shah (d. 1980) had implemented a liberalization program in 1977 in response to pressures from his ally, the United States; this included a human rights initiative, which fatefully limited his ability to quell the protests of opposition groups by force. As a result, discontented Iranians began writing letters of complaint to the shah and later formed political associations in Tehran that were radicalized when Khomeyni was slandered in a Tehrani newspaper, an event which mobilized the opposition on defensively religious grounds.[413] The protests and sometimes violent responses by the government led to nationwide striking in the autumn of 1978, which effectively shut-down the country. Khomeyni unified then the various oppositional movements, from Islamist to constitutionalist to Marxist, against the shah's regime, and it was he who eventually emerged as the leader of a theocratic Iran after the shah's departure in January, 1979, allowing the revolution to be remembered as the *Islamic* revolution of Iran.[414]

---

[413] Milani, 184-91.

[414] Milani, 201-06. Indeed, many ideologically different opposition groups participated in the revolution, including individuals who were not Shi'i Muslim (Jews, Sunni Kurds, etc.)… to read

Under Khomeyni, Islamization policies were implemented in the new republic, some of which were concerned with social norms and morality. However, Khomeyni's Islamism was not the only means by which people translated newly institutionalized Islamic values into their modern lives. Hisae Nakanishi, in a discussion of the compulsory wearing of *hijab* (veil) by women in post-revolutionary Iran, explores the different ways in which Islam was negotiated among Iranians (here, women) in ways distinct from the governmental discourse.[415] She studied articles about marriage, women, and *hijab* in the biweekly newspaper *Payam-i Hajar*, published by the Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (WSIRI), an organization active since the late 1970s. Nakanishi identifies the views of the members of WSIRI as "Islamic reformist," their "viewpoint and interpretation of social and political events based on a set of values" that was at once largely supportive of the new government's ideals and independent from it.[416]

Within this discussion of women and veiling, Fatima is invoked both by the government and the authors of the articles in *Payam-i Hajar*. This is not that surprising, given that Fatima (and Zaynab) figured so prominently in Shariati's writings and as a means of mobilizing female support in the pre-revolutionary Islamist movement. As a means of promoting Islamic ideals, wearing *hijab* was made compulsory in 1983, and the

---

the revolution as Shi'i or even Islamic as it occurred, as opposed to how it was remembered, is to ignore many of its elements (Mary Hegland, "Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village," in *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie [London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], 218-19).

[415] Hisae Nakanishi, "Power, Ideology, and Women's Consciousness in Postrevolutionary Iran," in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, ed. Herbert L Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi (Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 83.

[416] Nakanishi, 85.

prototype for this visually potent symbol of Islam and female-ness was the "veiled Fatima."[417] Nakanishi interprets the government's promotion of veiling as largely manipulative, in contrast to its interpretation in *Payam-i Hajar* as a visual means of illustrating one's modern, Muslim identity – neither *gharbzadeh* ("West-struck") nor *sonnati* (traditional), the two categories of Iranian womanhood rejected by Shariati a decade before. While the government emphasized Fatima's domestic role and her place as Muhammad and 'Ali's great "assistant," the newspaper presented her as independent:

> [The *Payam-i Hajar*] projects Fatima as an ideal woman who is never passive and subordinated, knows her identity as a Muslim, and takes initiative in learning and participating in society as an independent person, not merely as an assistant to a man.[418]

Thus, the appropriateness of both veiling and identifying Fatima al-Zahra' as a role model is not being contested by these two contemporary interpretations of Islamic behavior for women; superficially, the governmental policy and the WSIRI's discourse on moral behavior are complementary if not the same. However, the sorts of Fatima invoked and therefore the sorts of Iranian woman created are very different, which is illustrative, I would suggest, of modern social tensions and Fatima's continuing potency and relevance as a figure to inspire change or their resolution.

Fatima continued to be at the center of such tensions into the 1990s, during which time she was invoked as a role model by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, a

---

[417] Nakanishi, 86.

[418] Nakanishi, 87. Indeed, the Islamic reformist orientation of the *Payam-i Hajar* is very much in line with Shariati's views on women (as politically and religiously active) and Fatima's relevance as a role model.

reformist Muslim, poet, and the alleged intellectual and spiritual head of Hizbullah.[419] Fadlallah was born in 1935 to a Lebanese religious family in the Iraqi city of Najaf, wherein the Shi'i *'ulama'* focused almost exclusively on legal studies (and not, say, mysticism and philosophy).[420] He eventually settled in Beirut, where his very controversial opinions on various aspects of Shi'i Islam gained prominence given that he has not "limited his role to simply that of an isolated jurist but has been active in philanthropic, political, and educational activities."[421] Fadlallah is also a critic of Khomeyni's and Musa Sadr's emphases on and action within Islamic movements that are driven by charismatic leaders and not the religious message itself.[422] Despite his popularity, he therefore stands at odds with many of his colleagues in the Shi'i religious establishment.

In *al-Zahra' al-qudwa* ("Al-Zahra' the Exemplary"), his book based upon a number of lectures given in Lebanon throughout the 1990s about Fatima al-Zahra', Fadlallah discusses at length the daughter of the Prophet. He admits that her historical life is obscured in the "darkness of history," but asserts that what is known allows her to be considered "the role model and most complete example for the Muslim person (*al-insan*

---

[419] Stephan Rosiny, "'The Tragedy of Fatima al-Zahra'' in the Debate of Two Shiite Theologians in Lebanon," in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religions, Cultures, and Political History*, ed. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 2000), 209. Hizbullah, a militant, political, and social welfare organization, formed from a number of Lebanese Islam-based resistance groups in the 1980s. Lara Deeb stresses, also, that Fadlallah's "spiritual leadership" of the group comes from the widespread influence of his religious teachings, not any direct participation on his part (Deeb, 82-84).

[420] Talib Aziz, "Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Marja'iya," in *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the* Marja' Taqlid, ed. Linda S. Walbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205.

[421] Aziz, 213.

[422] Aziz, 206-07.

al-muslim)."[423] Fadlallah says that Fatima is the lady of the women of the worlds not for her kinship, but for her virtuousness and humanity, and as such can be viewed as an example of how one might be generous to and love others, in addition to being culturally responsible.[424] While he does discuss Fatima as offering a particular, liberated and liberating voice to women in particular,[425] he is especially concerned with presenting Fatima as relevant to *all* Muslims, women and men.[426]

After noting how the Muslim community faces many current challenges that require a rational, active response, he invokes Fatima:

> From this comes our need for al-Zahra'… our need of her is our need for an exemplar (*qudwa*), a model (*mathal*), and an example (*namudhaj*); our need of her is our need for the identity (*shakhsiya*) that gathers within itself all the extant nationalities that balance and complete each other… She represented the depth of Islam within the depth of her character; she held within herself the human, Islamic virtues, and by considering that she is the lady of the women of the worlds (*sayyidat nisa' al-'alamin*), it is obliged [that we understand] that she is at the highest level in terms of spiritual and moral value.[427]

Furthermore, Fadlallah situates Fatima as a source of Islamic memory, which offers her a reality in the present time that is not based upon her intercessory role in Shi'i piety. She is present and "living," instead, because she serves as a model of emulation for living individuals, today:

> When we remember her we remember the message and her role within it, and we remember the movement of Islam by means of those dynamic issues in which al-

---

[423] Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, *al-Zahra' al-qudwa* (Beirut: Dar al-Malik, 2000), 121.
[424] Fadlallah, 57.
[425] "Why Fatima? Because she said to women: be a human being (*insan*) and do not be merely a female who is moved to action by her femininity to the extent that she loses her humanity; be a human being with God and with all people; be a human being in spirit and reason and action and not in body or form" (Fadlallah, 57).
[426] See Fadlallah, 29-36.
[427] Fadlallah, 38-39.

> Zahra' was a vivid element… and with that, we feel that she is with us in all of our problems, alive and living among us. For if there are individuals in history who are finished when they die, because their lives are epitomized [only] within the span of their years, then there are [also] individuals who remain alive as long as life persists, remaining wherever their message remains and there are people open to that message… and Fatima al-Zahra' is situated at the peak of those [latter] individuals, for you cannot remember the messenger of God without remembering her, his protégé and his soul, and you cannot remember 'Ali without remembering her, for she shared in his life and his suffering, and you cannot remember al-Hasan and al-Husayn and Zaynab without remembering her, for she is the secret of the purity in their childhoods and the personalities they had all their lives.[428]

Here, Fatima is a timeless herald whose actions and person epitomize the message of Islam for all eras and people. Fadlallah rejects the stories in which Fatima's endless weeping after Muhammad's death agitated her neighbors,[429] and declares that one should focus on her sorrow only insomuch as it indicates her dedication to Islam, for which she would sacrifice her life: "For we would not be capable if we are not open to her except in our sorrow, for the most important thing is that we are open to her regarding her message, because she lived her sorrow and her life for that message and did not, for a single moment, live for herself."[430] His Fatima is very human, even as an idealized role model, whose potency does not come from a closeness to God (which is not necessarily denied), but from her closeness *in action* to God's message, Islam.

The question of whether the Shi'i saint should be emulated and/or adored is not unique to Fatima. Mary Hegland also describes how views of al-Husayn, for example, shifted before and after the revolution in Iran. She attributes the evolution of "al-Husayn the intercessor" to "al-Husayn the exemplar" as one that mirrored the changing ways in

---

[428] Fadlallah, 39-40.
[429] Fadlallah, 72-73.
[430] Fadlallah, 40.

which Iranians related to figures of earthly (and spiritual) power.[431] The understanding of al-Husayn, first as a conduit of God's power and then as a revolutionary role model for Iranians,[432] shifted and offered new readings of sacred history and its subjects. Likewise, the different interpretations of Fatima that I have just discussed illustrate points of modern contestations regarding identity and self, in contention as they challenge previous models in determining new "presents." However, as Hegland notes with al-Husayn, one cannot assert that one interpretation necessarily supersedes or forbids the accommodation of the other.[433] As much as Islamic reformists offered new ways of being modern (via Fatima, for instance) to Muslims in the 20th century based upon the grounds that there was no longer a need for any truth in intercessory sainthood, these interpretations do not become the only Islamic "modernity."

To return briefly to Fadlallah, I would like to recount a debate that illustrates the modern negotiation of sainthood and the unresolved tensions and concerns within such a debate. This ideological confrontation occurred between Fadlallah and Ja'far Murtada al-'Amili (b. 1945), a Lebanese theological historian.[434] In one of his speeches in Beirut in 1993, Fadlallah rejected many of the Shi'i hagiographical traditions surrounding Fatima, instead asserting (much like Shariati) that she "could become a model for the modern activist Muslima and help her to reach even the highest level of religious authority."[435] As Fatima had been a human being she could therefore be a role model for human beings.

---

[431] Hegland, 220.
[432] Hegland, 221, 226.
[433] Hegland, 230.
[434] For more on al-'Amili, see Rosiny, 208-9.
[435] Rosiny, 210. Fadlallah was specifically talking about the religious authority accorded to *mujtahids* in the Shi'i legal tradition, opening up that social space to women.

This and many other of Fadlallah's opinions on Shi'ism were unpopular with his colleagues among the Shi'i *'ulama'*;[436] Al-'Amili, therefore, challenged Fadlallah's stance a few years later in a book entitled *Ma'asat al-zahra'* ("The Tragedy of al-Zahra'"), in which he "not only defends, but even exaggerates the miraculous aspects of Shi'i belief."[437] The debate between these two scholars is one in which the role of holy figures as available for emulation or for adoration is in question. In essence, what is being negotiated is the humanity or divinity of saints, from which is determined how Muslims are expected to relate to them and to construct themselves as Shi'i (as believers, as humans).

Claudia Liebeskind, regarding Sufism and modernity, muses on whether piety and holiness are lost in the modern experience of the world and in the negotiation of modern identity.[438] Within this section of my paper, I have attempted to explore the ways in which Islamic reformists have re-negotiated their own identities through the re-examination of human holiness, as embodied by both Sufis and the *Ma'sumun*. Is the saint who serves as an intermediary between the divine and earthly realms lost, and does the current memory of Fatima as an exemplar necessitate such a loss? A short, simple answer is "no," as the Fatima who is an object of devotion is not absent in modern Shi'i practices of piety, and those who relate to her as such a figure are not any less modern (or "more traditional") as contemporary persons than the reformists, though they relate to the sacred past in a different way. Before ending this section of my paper, I would like to

---

[436] Aziz, 211-12.
[437] Rosiny, 211.
[438] Liebeskind, 1.

briefly describe instances in which Fatima remains an intercessor, before concluding on the ways in which she has been remembered in the 19th and 20th centuries.

I will begin in Sind, where Islam was first introduced to the subcontinent by Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Thaqafi thirteen centuries ago. In his work on Shi'ism in Karachi undertaken in 1983, Vernon Schubel discusses the continuing potency of Shi'i saints as intercessors.[439] The expression of grief in *'azadari* (mourning rituals) remains a means by which the Shi'a of Karachi express devotion to the Prophet's family.[440] Holy persons like Fatima and her daughter Zaynab are believed to collect the tears of weeping *'azadari* participants, which they will present to God on Judgment Day as a testament to those individuals' piety and sincere faith.[441] In just that example alone, we can see that the Shi'i saints remain figures that act at the interface of piety between believer and God. Schubel notes, in fact, that the *Ma'sumun*, today, are conceived as both exemplary figures and immanent beings that can still exert an intercessory influence within people's lives.[442]

One of the topics Schubel explores concerning Shi'i piety in Karachi is its private manifestation, particularly among women via recitations of miracle stories (*mu'jizat*

---

[439] Karachi is the provincial capital of Sind, today (in the South Asian state of Pakistan); it has a sizeable Shi'i population, whose community is largely indistinguishable from Sunni Muslims in everyday life (Vernon James Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993], 9).
[440] Schubel, 13. The Arabic root, *'aza*, of the word *'azadari* is the same of that for the Arabic/Persian *ta'ziya/ta'ziyeh*, and means approximately the same thing (though, again, "*ta'ziya*" in South Asia describes the miniature tombs carried during *julus* and is not synonymous with *'azadari*). For a discussion of these and other terms, see Schubel, 72-73, 108.
[441] Schubel, 85.
[442] Schubel, 20. Because the *imam*s were martyred, they can exist "paradisiacally" as intercessors for believers (Schubel, 22).

kahani), which serve as a means for invoking the *Ma'sumun* and making requests of and promises to them.[443] The most popular of these *kahani*s (recitations) is the *Janab-i Sayyidah ki Kahani* or *Bibi Fatimah ki Kahani*, which is a miracle-story to be read solemnly as a group as if Fatima herself were present in the room.[444] In this story, a woman prays to Fatima to protect her son who fell into a kiln, and that prayer is answered.[445] For those women listening to the story, they are also expected to make prayers to Fatima on the condition that they hold a similar gathering in Fatima's honor if the prayers are answered. At the end of this specific *kahani*, one recites,

> God is all powerful, even to the point that he can raise the dead… make a vow that if God, through the intercession of Janab-i Sayyidah – Fatimah – delivers you from this sadness and misfortune and your child is restored to you safe and sound, then you, after making prostrations of thanks will hear the *kahani* of Janab-i Sayyidah Fatimah.[446]

Of course, as we read in that quote, it is *God*, not Fatima, who fulfils the request; Fatima is merely the mechanism (the veil) by which he acts and through which believers can make requests. This is illustrative of the role of intercessor, in general, and also points to how Fatima continues to be perceived in that capacity by modern South Asian Shi'a.

Fatima is also remembered in a similar way in the Indian Deccan by Hyderabadi Shi'i women, despite the fact that the Iranian revolution is remembered with pride and al-Husayn, for example, is invoked in some modern writings as a model for moral discipline

---

[443] Schubel, 36-37.
[444] Schubel, 39.
[445] Also with regards to this story, Fatima figures as the child's savior in her role of intercessor and "beloved of God" (Schubel, 49, 52).
[446] Schubel, 40. There is also another popular recitation called *Das Bibiyan ki Kahani* ("The Story of the Ten Women"), which honors various female Islamic saints – such as Fatima, Maryam, Hagar, etc. – who reconfirm "the importance of women in the history of Shi'i piety" (Schubel, 57).

only.[447] Hyderabad, former capital of the Qutb Shahi sultanate in the 16th and 17th centuries, remains influenced, culturally and religiously, by its Shi'i heritage and extant community.[448] Diane D'Souza, based upon her fieldwork from 1994 to 2000, describes the *dastarkhan*, or "meal-cloth," ceremony as an example of engaging Fatima al-Zahra' as a holy intercessor. The *dastarkhan* (equivalent to the Iranian *sofreh*) is a gathering, organized by women, to "remember, revere, and seek the intervention of sacred personalities and commemorate a fulfillment of a vow."[449]

In the particular ceremony described by D'Souza, a woman organized a *dastarkhan* because she had promised Fatima that she would do so if her prayers (for the health of a sick daughter) were answered.[450] In that way, the ceremony honors both the promise and Fatima herself, as a saint who can intervene in earthly life and grant respite to believers. Indeed, as with the *kahani*s in Karachi, Fatima is believed to be present during the ceremony.[451] However, the *dastarkhan*, while particular to Shi'i women, is not organized only to honor Fatima; any holy person (male or female) can be invoked,[452] thus belying any presumption of gender-specific practices of piety, wherein Bibi Fatima is accessible only to women and they are only interested in her intercession. Fatima also serves as

---

[447] Pinault, *Horse*, 165-66, 168. A discussion of these themes is also available in the following article (included in Pinault's book as a chapter): David Pinault, "Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations and the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases from Modern India," *History of Religions* 38, no. 3 (1999).
[448] Pinault, *Horse*, 16. Based on a census taken around the turn of the 21st century, of Hyderabad's five million people, 30% are Muslim and a third of those Muslims are Shi'a (D'Souza, 187).
[449] D'Souza, 188.
[450] D'Souza, 194.
[451] D'Souza, 195.
[452] D'Souza, 196.

inspiration to Indian Shi'i men during their self-flagellation practices during Muharram, as illustrated in a number of *nauha*s (lamentation poems) collected by David Pinault in Hyderabad and the Punjabi city of Lahore.[453]

At the start of this section, I made mention of 19th century Islamic reformism in South Asia, implying that one of the results of both the colonial circumstances that gave rise to it and the reformism itself was an increased concern with communal identity and boundaries. The Muharram processions in Delhi in 1935 were attended by Shi'is, Sunnis, and Hindus,[454] and this multi-communal participation in public Muharram rituals exists today to a large degree, though certain activities (like self-flagellation, which remains quite popular) are often articulated as particular to the Shi'i mourners.[455] David Pinault, attending the Muharram processions in the Ladakhi city of Leh, describes how Sunnis were actively participating in the processions during the mid-1990s as a "liturgical reflection" of a Sunni/Shi'i alliance of interests that resulted from a period of Muslim/Buddhist communal tensions.[456] However, local Buddhist monks also attended and respectfully observed the procession of al-Husayn's horse, Zuljenah (or, Dhu al-Janna),[457] indicating a trans-communal familiarity with and interest in others' religious practices. On the other hand, Pinault notes that, in Darjeeling during the 1990s, *ta'ziya*s were apparently no longer immersed in the local river at the end of the Muharram processions as was once the custom. One of the reasons given for the discontinuation of

---

[453] Pinault, *Horse*, 40-42, 80-81.
[454] Hollister, 173.
[455] Pinault, *Horse*, 21, 177-79.
[456] Pinault, *Horse*, 153.
[457] Pinault, *Horse*, 146.

this practice was that such an immersion was "Hindu," still practiced by participants in the *puja* for the goddess Durga, whose image is immersed in that same river at the end of her annual festival.[458] We can see from these examples that there is no single reality for either communal or trans-communal participation in ostensibly Shi'i public rituals – what is considered appropriate and to whom is still being negotiated, just as it always has been.

In Iran, alternately, the tension regarding saints existed in how they might be viewed, as moral role model or holy intercessor. Ingvild Flaskerud, in her study of visual representations of saints during Muharram in early 21st century Shiraz, observes the Shi'i *Ma'sumun* as both guides for Islamic behavior and loci of intercession between God and human beings.[459] Weeping during Muharram is a means of acquiring salvific merit,[460] in a similar sense as to what Schubel observed among Shi'a in Karachi. Thus, one's connection to and support of a holy being allows one to better "access" Paradise, so to speak. Similarly, the images of saints (paintings, tapestries, etc.) that adorn the temporary ritual spaces (*hoseyniyyeh, fatimiyyeh,* or *zeynabiyyeh*) serve, according to a *mullah* of Flaskerud's acquaintance, as intermediaries by which the mourner might connect more efficiently (and emotionally) with God.[461] Intercession is facilitated, therefore, not only via the memory of the saint, but allowed through the images and

---

[458] Pinault, *Horse*, 98.
[459] Ingvild Flaskerud, ""Oh, My Heart is Sad. It is Moharram, the Month of Zaynab:" The Role of Aesthetics and Women's Mourning Ceremonies in Shiraz," in *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*, ed. Kamran Scott Aghaie (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 66.
[460] Flaskerud, 66.
[461] Flaskerud, 68,75-76, 78-79.

spaces that represent them. But what of the tension present in this modern consideration of the intermediary saint?

Erika Friedl discusses Fatima and Zaynab as models for shaping and propagating Iranian ideas of "ideal womanhood" in the 1980s and early 1990s. She notes that Fatima "is presented as a model of a virtuous woman who bears her womanhood with humility, understanding, and endurance."[462] However, Fatima's virtues are hyper-realized and unrealistic, and therefore *not* easily accessible to Iranian women as those that can be successfully emulated: "Fatima the ideal, the idealized, woman is removed from ordinary women's everyday experiences: no woman in the shuffle of life has the moral strength to be obedient and quiet always, women say."[463] While Fatima is not serving as an intercessory being, here, her sainthood as indicative of her perfection of virtue, elevates her out of the reach of human women; Fatima is still embodying, if more ordinarily within her earthly behaviors (as wife, daughter, etc.), Elias' "divine Feminine." Her super-human qualities can be accepted religiously, but are not actually attainable, while her daughter Zaynab's activism is realistically applicable but not entirely lawful.[464]

Fatima is, therefore, even as moral model only, an ambiguous figure for Iranian Shi'a in terms of her humanity or saintliness (which is situated liminally between humanity and the divine). Often, today, holy persons like Fatima are considered to be both role models and intercessors. Azam Torab describes this dual functionality within a greater

---

[462] Erika Friedl, "Ideal Womanhood in Postrevolutionary Iran," in *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross-culturally*, ed. Judy Brink and Joan Mencher (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), 148.
[463] Friedl, 149.
[464] Friedl, 150-51.

discussion of gender, agency, and piety among women in modern Iran. In her ethnography of *jalasat* (prayer meetings), she notes that the gatherings are dedicated to Shi'i saints, most often to Fatima or al-Husayn, who are considered to be present at the meeting. The presence of these holy beings at the *jalaseh* allows for the consideration by those women in attendance, for example, that the food they prepare and eat is blessed.[465] The actual, living presence of saints, reflected in Fadlallah's assertion that some figures in history continue to live beyond the bounds of a human lifetime, is essential in many Iranians' understanding of the reality (and accessibility) of the holy figure.[466]

Torab also explores the role of saints in *sofreh-i nazri*, or "votive meal cloth," ritual (equivalent to the South Asian *dastarkhan*), in which a vow is made to a saint for intercession and an offering (*nazri*), often a meal, is prepared in return.[467] While the saints are seen to act as intercessors with God, they are also "looked upon as primary role models for morality and ethics."[468] Torab interprets this dual conceptualization of the Shi'i saints to indicate their "multi-vocality" as a religious symbol, serving as personal

---

[465] Azam Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Iran," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996), 236.
[466] I was able to view an in-progress, short documentary by Babak Rahimi chronicling the Muharram commemorations in the city of Bushehr, Iran, which included a fascinating exploration of this accepted, "living" reality of saints. A few days before 'Ashura', an apparition (a female figure wearing a black *chador*) was photographed in a mosque while a small group of men ritually beat their chests. It was presumed an accepted that the woman was Fatima, or possibly Zaynab (*The Muharram Mystery of Bushehr*, DVD, directed by Babak Rahimi [N.p.: n.p., 2006]; provided on request).
[467] Azam Torab, "Vows, Medianship and Gender: Women's Votive Meals in Iran," in *Gender, Religion, and Change in the Middle East: Two Hundred Years of History*, ed. Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flaskerud (New York; Oxford: Berg, 2005), 207, 210.
[468] Torab, "Vows, Medianship, and Gender," 209.

intercessors with God and the "community at large in matters of morality, ethics and politics."[469]

I do not want to imply with my explorations of Fatima's place in modern Shi'i consciousness in South Asia and Iran that she has only been conceived of as a role model in recent times, or that the emulation of saints, as opposed to their adoration, is necessarily "modern" while the latter is "traditional." Either conclusion is simplistic and would ignore the multi-functionality that saints like Fatima have always embodied, throughout history. For example, to return to 9th century Arabia, Denise Spellberg understands the *tabaqat* literature of that period to be illustrative of male biographers not only recording sacred biography but also imagining and scripting how they believed women should have acted and should continue to act.[470] However, I want to suggest that, during the past two centuries, the new negotiations of self and community reflect changing conceptions of the world and one's place within it as a Shi'i Muslim. I have sought to explore these negotiations via changing or contested conceptions of Fatima al-Zahra' and the lens of sainthood. I proposed earlier in this section that we might use Robin Horton's intellectualist theory of religion to aid us in understanding modern negotiations of sainthood. Here, I would suggest, the emphasis on saints' human qualities parallels a greater concern that Horton and Eaton identified with the reality of embodied holiness (the "local" saint or supernatural spirit) and, ultimately, with how humanity does or should relate to an abstract god (directly or indirectly). As Torab observes, "the roles played by the saints in people's everyday lives coexist sometimes in

---

[469] Torab, "Vows, Medianship, and Gender," 209.
[470] Spellberg, *Politics of Praise*, 130-132.

harmony, but also in tension with each other."[471] There is no single "modern" conception of Fatima the saint just as there is no single, "modern" Shi'i person.

All religious reform, as I have described and explored it, is predicated upon the privileging of a particular, imagined (perhaps even "invented," as per Hobsbawm) sacred past, older and purer than the most recent forms of "traditional" religiosity. The immediate past and its practices are considered backward in order to move the reformist and/or his or her community forward, and "being modern" is often negotiated by drawing from an older, purer vision of religious history. For the Babi movement, reformism of Islam meant a literal revival of its saints and a spiritual transcendence of the previous age. Among other modern Iranians, alternately, the memories of these figures from original Shi'i sacred history were revived in order to fashion the modern self and revolution *today*, for earthly purposes. Modern Shi'is like 'Ali Shariati and Musa Sadr, for example, sought an answer to Western modernity/"being-modern" in Shi'ism, in which they believed were "all the ingredients of a liberating, progressive, and modern ideology capable of neutralizing the cultural hegemony of the West in Iran, ending the endemic alienation of educated Iranians and protecting the country's national identity and heritage. The central theme… was the return to Iran's indigenous Shi'i culture."[472] Shariati politicized Shi'i religious concepts and figures to activate, literally, his audience and his Iran.[473] Ayatollah Khomeyni, on the other hand as an Islamist, sought to emulate the government during the time of the first *imam*s within his promotion of the *'ulama'*

---

[471] Torab, "Vows, Medianship, and Gender," 209.
[472] Milani, 139.
[473] Milani, 146.

leadership today.[474] He sought to revive a politic remembered in the actions of saints during their human lifetime, and thus he remembers Muhammad not only as the spiritual head of Muslims, but a head of state and commander of an army.[475] In South Asia, alternately, ideas of community and communal boundaries are in question as much as the nature of the saint itself, indicative of concerns with identity and, with regards to the Shi'i saints, how one can or should be situated with regards to the religious past.

The debates within and concerning "modernity" that I have briefly explored, above, are not only about the nature of religious figures or of the miraculous, but also about the nature of Muslims who are negotiating community and self within that modern context. Shariati framed the modern problem as one of identity, of self-situation, asking the deceptively simple question, "How do I become?"[476] This query is complemented by the religious debate over the constitution of Fatima's holiness between Fadlallah and al-'Amili, both of whom have ideas about how one must "become" and how one is and was in the past. Fatima, as the religious figure invoked as a lens in these discourses, is a means by which people are able and explicitly expected to *make themselves*. This making of self subsequently allows for the making of their society. Shariati writes, "Our people gather a culture around the door and roof of Fatima's house."[477] Fatima's house is a house of sorrow and holiness, it is her family, and it is a history whose rivers are "life-giving."[478] Through the modern becoming about which Shariati writes, a community is

---

[474] Milani, 149.
[475] Milani, 151.
[476] Shariati, 20.
[477] Shariati, 38.
[478] Shariati, 38.

created and is given life. However much Shariati's particular memory of Fatima and her saintly efficacy is rooted in his time and reflective of his particular concerns with "being modern," the idea that Fatima al-Zahra' and the other Shi'i saints are the means by which people and communities are made can be applied to contexts throughout Shi'i history and all of its many worlds.

6.
THE SAINT IN HISTORY
Fatima as a point, means, and method of religious creation

> May peace and God's mercy and his blessings be upon you, O Fatima, daughter of the messenger of God… I witness that you performed the proofs of your lord and that from your happiness so was the messenger of God happy, and from your being shunned, so was he disdained, and from your suffering, so was he hurt… because you were a part of him and his soul. I call as a witness God and his messenger and his angels [to say] that I am content with those with whom you were content… and loving to those whom you loved…
>
> Salutatory prayer to Fatima al-Zahra' [479]

'Allama Tabataba'i writes that the message of Shi'ism to the world is expressed in the single sentence, 'to know God:' "Or in other words, it is to instruct man to follow the path of Divine realization and the knowledge of God in order to gain felicity and salvation."[480] In many ways, such a message lies at the root of all religious faiths regarding how it is that their practitioners characterize the divine. It is with that divine characterization that I have been interested throughout this paper, particularly in terms of how people and communities have sought to mediate their understanding of the divine and themselves through other human beings, the saints. The holy figures of Shi'i Islam are the *Ma'sumun*, bound as they are to both the Prophet Muhammad and, then, to God. Vernon Schubel defines Shi'ism as "the school of thought in Islam which stressed personal allegiance and devotion to the Prophet and his family as the most crucial element and sign of one's submission to the will of God."[481] These holy individuals are thus essential elements in the Shi'i Muslim's identity in *being Muslim*, however that is

---

[479] Al-Qummi, 384-85.
[480] Tabataba'i, 215.
[481] Schubel, 17.

conceived in a given historical context. In the words of Liyakat Takim, "believers are to coalesce under the figure of the imam who, because of his charismatic qualities and divine appointment, becomes the edifice around which the religious aspirations of his followers are founded."[482] In this paper, I have sought to explore various Shi'i identities and politics as they have been negotiated within and by means of Fatima al-Zahra', who, while not an *imam*, serves as an essential saintly figure in Shi'i piety and provides insight into tensions within that piety and in communal and personal identity, more generally, as both have evolved historically.

In the first section of my paper, I argued that a useful way of conceptualizing holiness and sainthood in Islam is by using the metaphor of the "veil." The veil is a common metaphor in Sufi writings throughout the centuries as a means of expressing the relationship between the human heart and God; not only is God veiled to the believer out of necessity, but that veil can be considered to be manifest in the believer him- or herself, in the world, and in all of creation. Given that this metaphorical veil falls along the interface of the human and divine worlds as humans have distinguished them, so too have the saints, whether Sufi *shaykh*s or the Shi'i *Ma'sumun*, been similarly located. Holy persons are liminal beings, being human but far closer to the divine than the rest of humanity, mediating that interface along which any sort of spiritual veil would lie. Furthermore, it is through the saints that believers seek a largely abstract, inaccessible, unimaginable God. We read in the Qur'an that God is subtle, unfathomable (*al-latif*), and

[482] Takim, 26.

infinitely aware (*al-khabir*), beyond human perception.[483] Saints, as special human beings, bridge the potential conceptual chasm between believer and the divine. Through the Shi'i saints as intermediaries, then, an incomprehensible God can be worshipped and the believer can become pious.[484]

In the previous section, I quoted Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah's analysis of Fatima's sainthood, upon which he comments that she is the epitome of those historical persons who transcend their human lifetimes. I agree completely with this articulation, given that the saint is necessarily a person whose proximity to the divine grants him or her a persistent relevance in the lives of people. Fatima, as I noted earlier in this paper, has never been "forgotten" in history, as a woman or otherwise. Her memory and actual presence, often, have remained, which illustrates not only her spiritual potency, but also how important the non-saintly individual devotees are in conceptualizing and remembering the saint. In this paper, I explored the various memories of Fatima, through which I can now suggest that the only essential aspect of them (or of her) is that they necessarily *change* as people change.

Eric Hobsbawm has proposed that some traditions, which people root in past practices for legitimacy's sake, are in fact not historically situated, invented in a present time for that time and for the communities that claim the tradition.[485] This observation can be useful, if adapted, to what I have described with regards to Fatima. Hobsbawm was more concerned with instances in which there is social unrest, in which "new" is

---

[483] Qur'an 6:103.
[484] Takim, 26.
[485] Hobsbawm, 1.

emerging in (dangerous) distinction to the "old."[486] In some ways, the idea of the emergence of the "new" and its need to be rooted in the "old" is complementary to Fatima's role, for example, in the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate, al-Majlisi's Safavid orthodoxy, or in Shariati's negotiation of modernity in *Fatimeh fatimeh ast*, among many other examples. She rests along that saintly interface of pious (and communal and political) negotiation, in that discursively active space wherein Talal Asad, for instance, situates religion itself.

However, we cannot limit Fatima's "being invented" throughout history to Hobsbawm's ritual inventions, nor do I want to imply that an "invented" memory of Fatima is inauthentic in any way. Rather, the various memories of Fatima throughout the historical contexts that I have discussed illustrate the creativity of Shi'i Muslims in the negotiation of their selves and their faith, a negotiation which must always be changing. Fatima serves as a mechanism whereby the believer is not only connecting him- or herself to the divine, but also to a perceived past tradition and truth, a tradition made ever more potent by being distinctly religious in nature. In a sense, the "invention" or creation of Fatima is not so much an invention of tradition, but the situation of a sacred figure (in whatever capacity) in a present space. Thus, Fatima occupies a creative and dynamic discourse that creates and characterizes the interface between mankind and God and between human beings, as well.

Such holy figures as Fatima al-Zahra' also necessarily illustrate communal and religious tensions. In the second section of this paper, I explored the memory of Fatima

---

[486] Hobsbawm, 7.

in the first few centuries after the advent of Islam in Arabia, particularly as it might illuminate the formative Sunni/Shi'i communal tensions of that time period. The primary anxiety that I sought to discuss was that of gender and legitimacy, given that Fatima was the sole genealogical connection of the Shi'i religious leaders to the Prophet. Can Fatima in this historical context be understood only in her maternal capacity, providing a womb by which men connected to one another? The caliph al-Mansur articulated the contemporary relevance of this question, when he dismissed al-Nafs al-Zakiya's claims to religio-political authority on the basis of being a descendent of Fatima – in the caliph's eyes, she was but "the daughter." He saw this as a valid delegitimizing factor for this particular rival, even as the latter was quick to invoke her. Sunni historian al-Tabari, on the other hand, in one of his few mentions of her, notes that "while Fatimah was alive, 'Ali held respect among the people. After she died, their attention turned from him."[487] While al-Tabari might be more concerned, here, with undermining 'Ali as a valid successor to Muhammad than with honoring Fatima herself, I would suggest that it indicates her own usefulness in communal polemical discourse, despite her femininity. Indeed, I would suggest that, while aspects of Fatima's holiness are tied inextricably and importantly to her role as Muhammad's (female) child, all human holinesses are necessarily contingent and dependent, relying as they do on the divine and, in this case, the Shi'i people who seek to understand and manifest God's authority on earth.

Fatima was an integral means of constituting *Shi'ism* in the centuries after her death in *circa* 632 CE. She served as a link to Muhammad and to God, and from that position

---

[487] Tabari, *The Last Year of the Prophet*, 196-97.

she was imbued with a holy authority. She was also integral, as I explored in the fourth section of this paper, in constituting and preserving subsequent Shi‘i identities, for pious persons, communities and states. Among the Fatimids in Egypt and their mystical Isma‘ili successors in Sind, Fatima was a source of political legitimation in Cairo and communal creation in the Indus river delta to Gujarat. She served in a similar creative locus during the Safavid period in Iran, where she was invoked by princesses whose power was as much spiritual as temporal and by later religious scholars like Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi as a means of re-locating the bearers of human holiness and promoting a particular, “orthodox” interpretation of what Shi‘ism was “supposed” to be, in his and his peers’ eyes.

I explored this notion of religious creativity in a consideration of the Qajari era *ta‘ziyeh*, as well. Keeping in mind Victor Turner’s understanding of ritual *communitas*, the spontaneous “leveling” of the selves of ritual participants because of a shared, emotive experience, one can understand one of the creative aspects of the performance and audiencing of the *ta‘ziyeh* dramas. Vernon Schubel, looking at modern Sindi Muharram rites within this same theoretical lens, notes insightfully that rituals serve as performances “involving an encounter with powerful symbols” that direct and focus the views of participants on a “powerful Other,” as per Rudolf Otto’s ideas about holiness.[488] Fatima, in the Qajar *ta‘ziyeh*, was and remains such a symbol by which mourners can create and enact their community (as *Shi‘a*, weeping for their saints) and connect with God and salvation as pious persons. Schubel elaborates,

---

[488] Schubel, 2.

> This encounter with sacred history… allows participants to manifest a solidarity with the Prophet and his family and thus with the Shi'i community – for them the 'true Islam.' They are both internally transformed and have reaffirmed their loyalty to their community.[489]

Rituals and, in this case, the sacred histories and figures being invoked, are a means of accessing the divine. As with the Fatimids and Safavids creating communities (empires) via religious politics and the Sindi *pir*s remembering their saints in order to constitute and re-constitute their being Shi'a in South Asia, so too do the 19th century *ta'ziyeh* dramas and the various other rites today (*dastarkhan*, *sofreh*, *kahani*, Muharram *'azadari*) create and affirm specific pious identities.

Fatima al-Zahra' is positioned at the center of these creativities as a veil-like saint, and, as such, it is Fatima who also becomes a locus of tension when the conceived natures of self and divinity change. I attempted to explore this notion of self-negotiation in the previous section of my paper via the Islamic religious reform movements and their ideas about "being modern" in the 19th and 20th centuries. In particular, I was interested in how changing conceptions of sainthood and the efficacy/relevance of saints reflects concerns with and re-negotiations of Shi'i identity.[490] Islamic reformism was and is hardly a homogeneous project. However, its concern with self and "being modern"/modernity allowed for a re-examination of religion, holiness, and even God, if indirectly. The overarching reformist theme regarding saints was the re-identification of their holy potency; for some reformists, saints were not or no longer needed to be

---

[489] Schubel, 5-6.

[490] Which is not to say, of course, that there were not changes in identity throughout Islamic history! But, I am focusing on this particular kind of self-negotiation as it illuminates how piety is understood in the modern period, an understanding that will no doubt change, again.

intercessors, but should be considered to serve as human exemplars, instead. Fatima became a point of contention in this modernity of sainthood, particularly beside the memory of her "activist" daughter Zaynab. Who should and can Fatima be, now, and for whom? Martyr, mother, mourner, revolutionary, woman, Shi'i, Muslim. These various human offices, to all of which Fatima is considered relevant, can be idealized when infused, however secularly (so to speak), with her remembered holiness. However, in such a negation of self and the saints, holiness is re-assigned.

I proposed that Robin Horton's intellectualist theory of religion would be a useful lens through which we might consider the modernity of sainthood as expressed in the figure of Fatima al-Zahra' from South Asia to Lebanon. The theory identifies the essential connection between the understanding and characterization of religious cosmologies and the understanding of the earthly world and society at large. Richard Eaton, adapting Horton's ideas, elaborated that with the globalization of societies and that "broadening" of social conceptual horizons beyond the local, the necessary nature of how mankind relates to the divine changes. Local deities and spirits are not applicable to a non-local world, and a more abstract, single, great god is invoked in their places. I would like to suggest that, in a way, the "humanizing" of Shi'i saints in the past century and a half reflects such a concern; how does the modern, globally-focused person relate to the divine? Saints, vessels of divinity for believers, could be considered too small: backward, local, innovative for individuals who might instead seek to access God directly and view saints as moral examples only. Sufi thinkers often write, as I explored earlier, that the world is a veil over the face of God, as it is created just as humans and saints are;

thus, as the appearance and content of the earthly world changes, so must the appearance of the veil. While we certainly cannot conclude that saints like Fatima are lost as holy figures in the modern period, they are a point through which people are able to negotiate themselves, the world, and God. Saints are important, then, as they are conceptually located at the interface between the one who is re-imagining and that which is being re-conceived.

I have sought, throughout this paper, to explore what one might call the "holy historical subject," the person whose historical lifetime cannot adequately express their potency throughout time. While there are, no doubt, myriad examples of such lifetime-transcendent historical figures, saints like Fatima are able to be so effective and powerful in the long term because of their position as a link to God. Furthermore, a consideration of such a holy subject illuminates not only that person as a figure of devotion, emulation, or divine-negotiation, but also allows historians to explore the people, throughout time, through whom the memory of the saint is perpetuated. My exploration of Fatima al-Zahra' in this paper is as much about those who have loved her as the lady, herself.

Scholars, then, are afforded an exceptional opportunity in any consideration of the holy subject, as such a figure embodies religious change as it has been facilitated by people throughout history. In a sense, Islam has been reformed countless times since its inception in western Arabia during the 7th century, just as Fatima herself has been reformed continuously during those same centuries. It is essential to recognize this constantly dynamic nature of any religion if one is to study or attempt to define it. Furthermore, Fatima al-Zahra', in particular, also affords the scholar a lens through

which one might explore the too-simple delineations of "esoteric" and "exoteric" forms of Islamic piety, as she is a veil by which all Shi'a (not just mystics) can access the divine, if for a limited, ritually conscribed period. She also provides insight into the importance or lack thereof of gender in considering the Islamic saint, as her salvific efficacy can be attached to her femininity or exist distinctly from it. And, above all else, Fatima allows us to explore what "history," itself, means by bringing into question the nature of the historical subject itself.

Fatima and all other saints who are remembered and actively invoked in the lives of the believers of a particular faith allow us to re-examine the nature of the immanent historical subject in light of ascriptions of holiness and sainthood. If Fatima Zarrin Taj Baraghani, for example, *was* the emanation of Fatima al-Zahra' for the Babis, and if the latter is considered present during *dastarkhan* rituals in Hyderabad and, as a holy figure, necessarily bridges the gap between a Shi'i Muslim and God in *any* period throughout history, how can we limit our understanding of her to a single "historical," human lifetime? Can one distinguish between historical immanence and devotional, spiritual transcendence in a person who is (if *immanently* nothing else) *holy* in Islamic history?

Rather tellingly, 'Ali Shariati writes of Fatima's immediate family and descendents, asserting, "No religion, history or nation has a family such as this."[491] Fatima's family members were the primordial Shi'a, the first *imam*s, and all of them are, as holy figures, members of every Shi'i family and of religious consciousness as a whole. Verena Klemm writes that "saints and legends dwell in both immanence as well as in

[491] Shariati, 38. This is referring to the *Ma'sumun*, presumably, and not Muhammad's wives, of course.

transcendence, and connect these widely separated spheres for mere mortals."[492] Fatima occupies this space and manifests the necessary merging of the immanent and transcendent into a figure that *makes people*, that people use to make themselves and their communities and their deity. Fadlallah was right to identify her as a person who lives as long as her message (her memory) is living.

Within the histories of politics and devotion we can find a new sort of "historical" Fatima, the Fatima that acted and was made to act within various histories in her various incarnations and forms. She has existed for centuries within history as a woman with many faces. We might conclude by identifying her as both emotive and functional, inspirational and prescriptive, a woman for women and a woman for men and a Muslim for Muslims and a savior for those in need of God. She is necessarily complex, if nothing (or no one) else, and should be approached as such in order to better understand her role in history. Negotiating the nature of "truth" and "myth" is multi-layered, as it is both for scholars and for those they are studying.

Shariati writes, regarding his goals in *Fatimeh fatimeh ast*, "We are concerned with Fatima herself and the reality of Fatima. Whether she is born before or after the mission of the Prophet does not concern us here."[493] And what is the "reality" of Fatima, if not her date of birth? Of course, Shariati is expressing his particular idea of who she was and could be for his fellow Iranians in the 1970s. But, his view is as real as any of those that came before, in which Fatima was 'Ali-Krishna's virgin wife or the avenging, light-adorned angel of Judgment Day. Shariati states himself that "those who acknowledge

[492] Klemm, 206.
[493] Shariati, 137.

realities are people who know time moves. They know that society has a skin which it sheds."[494] History exists as a chronicle of change, and the holy subject, as I suggested earlier, is a fascinating window to understanding how it does.

Klemm notes that even the very early accounts of Fatima in Sunni biography and *hadith*s were themselves "creative acts"[495] that made history as much as they recounted it. If we focus on these "creative acts" as they might be manifest throughout Shi'i historiography, throughout Muslim practices and rituals and the trends within histories, who does Fatima become? In many ways, it was the creativity present in her elaboration, in her memory, that has allowed her to be a locus of Muslim social- and self-creation on a multi-contextual historical scale. It is because of this potency that she is remembered, at least up to this point in history, as timeless and as a lady elevated over many, many worlds.

***

> So be not displeased, O friend, that I speak of gazelles that move round the marble statues as 'a shining sun,'
> Or that I use metaphorically the necks of the gazelles, the face of the sun, and the breast and wrist of the white statue
> Just as I have lent to the branches (spiritual) endowments and to the meadows moral qualities, and to the lightning laughing lips.
>
> Ibn 'Arabi[496]

---

[494] Shariati, 80.
[495] Klemm, 183.
[496] Muhyi'ddin ibn al-'Arabi, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 70.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Rafiuddin. *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Ajami, Fouad. "Imam Musa Sadr." In *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, 425-53. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Ali, Mrs. Meer Hasan. *Observations on the Mussalmauns of India*. 1832. Reprint, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Algar, Hamid. *Religion and State in Iran 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.

Amanat, Abbas. "*Meadow of the Martyrs*: Kashifi's Persianization of the Shi'i Martyrdom Narrative in the late Timurid Herat." In *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, edited by Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri, 250-75. London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003.

---. *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Arjomand, Said Amir. *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Asad, Talal. "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." In *Occasional Papers*, 1-22. Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown, 1986.

Asani, Ali S. "The Ismaili Ginans as Devotional Literature." In *Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research, 1985-1988*, edited by R. S. McGregor, 101-12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Asher, Catherine B., and Cynthia B. Talbot. *India Before Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Assman, Jan. *Moses the Egyptian: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Ayoub, Mahmoud. *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shi'ism*. The Hague; Paris; New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978.

Azari, Farah. "Islam's Appeal to Women in Iran: Illusions and Reality." In *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam*, edited by Farah Azari, 1-71. London: Ithaca Press, 1983.

Aziz, Talib. "Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Marja'iya." In *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the* Marja' Taqlid, edited by Linda S. Walbridge, 205-15. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Babayan, Kathryn. "The 'Aqa'id al-Nisa'': A Glimpse at Safavid Women in Local Isfahani Culture." In *Women in The Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, edited by Gavin R. G. Hambly, 349-81. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

---. "Sufis, Dervishes, and Mullas: the Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran." In *Safavid Persia: the History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, edited by Charles Melville, 117-38. London: I. B. Tauris, 1996.

Bakhtiar, Laleh. *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman*. N.p.: ABC International Group, 1996.

Bayat, Mangol. *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982.

Betteridge, Anne H. "To Veil or Not to Veil: A Matter of Protest or Policy." In *Women and Revolution in Iran*, edited by Guity Nashat, 109-28. Boulder: Westview Press, 1983.

The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night: a Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments. Translated by Richard Burton. New York: Heritage Press, 1934.

Brown, Peter. *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1982.

Browne, Edward G. *The Tartar Dominion (1265-1502)*. Volume 3 of *A Literary History of Persia*. 1902-. Reprint, Bethesda: Iranbooks, 1997.

al-Bukhari, Muhammad b. Isma'il. *Al-Jami' al-sahih*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra, 1872/73.

Calmard, Jean. "Shi'i Rituals and Power II. The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion." In *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, edited by Charles Melville, 139-90. London: I. B. Tauris, 1996.

Chelkowski, Peter J. "Iconography of the Women of Karbala: Tiles, Murals, Stamps, and Posters." In *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourse in Modern Shi'i Islam*, edited by Kamran Scott Aghaie, 119-38. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Chodkiewicz, Michel. *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993.

Cole, J. R. I. "Popular Shi'ism." In *India's Islamic Traditions 711-1750*, edited by Richard M. Eaton, 311-39. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Corbin, Henry. *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*. Translated by Nancy Pearson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Cornell, Vincent J. *Realm of Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.

Cortese, Delia and Simonetta Calderini. *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Daftary, Farhad. *A Short History of the Isma'ilis: Traditions of a Muslim Community*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998.

Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Denny, Frederick. "'God's Friends:' The Sanctity of Persons in Islam." In *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions*, edited by Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, 69-97. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

D'Souza, Diane. "Devotional Practices among Shia Women in South India." In *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation, and Conflict*, edited by Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, 187-206. Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004.

Eaton, Richard M. *Essays on Islam and Indian History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Elias, Jamal. "The Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism." *Muslim World* 78 (1988): 209-24.

Fadlallah, Muhammad Husayn. *Al-Zahra' al-qudwa*. Beirut: Dar al-Malik, 2000.

Flaskerud, Ingvild. ""Oh, My Heart is Sad. It is Moharram, the Month of Zaynab:" The Role of Aesthetics and Women's Mourning Ceremonies in Shiraz." In *The Women of*

Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam, edited by Kamran Scott Aghaie, 65-91. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Friedl, Erika. "Ideal Womanhood in Postrevolutionary Iran." In *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross-culturally*, edited by Judy Brink and Joan Mencher, 287-313. New York; London: Routledge, 1997.

Gerhardt, Mia I. *The Art of Story-Telling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights*. Leiden: Brill, 1963.

al-Ghazali. *The Niche of Lights: Mishkat al-anwar.* Translated by David Buchman. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998.

Gholsorkhi, Shohreh. "Pari Khan Khanum: a Masterful Safavid Princess." *Iranian Studies* 28, no. 3-4 (1995): 143-56.

Grousset, René. *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*. Translated by Naomi Walford. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970.

Gude, Mary Louis. *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion*. London; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.

Halm, Heinz. *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*. Translated by Allison Brown. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997.

Hegland, Mary. "Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village." In *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, edited by Nikki R. Keddie, 218-35. London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

Hermansen, Marcia K. "Fatimeh as a Role Model in the Works of Ali Shariati." In *Women and Revolution in Iran*, edited by Guity Nashat, 87-96. Boulder: Westview Press, 1983.

Hobsbawm, Eric. "Introduction: Inventing Traditions." In *Inventing Traditions*, Canto edition, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1-14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Hollister, J. N. *The Shi'a of India*. London: Luzac & Company, 1953.

Horton, Robin. *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991.

Hyder, Syed Akbar. *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Ibn ‘Arabi, Muhyi al-Din. *Fusus al-hikam*. Beirut: Dar Sader, 2005.

---. *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*. Translated by Reynold A. Nicholson. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911.

Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s* Sirat Rasul Allah, Jubilee Series Edition. Edited by ‘Abd al-Malik b. Hisham and translated by A. Guillaume. 1955. Reprint, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Jafri, Syed Husain Mohammad. *The Origins and Early Development of Shi‘a Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Johansen, Julian. *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Kassam, Tazim R. *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Isma‘ili Muslim Saint, Pir Shams*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Keddie, Nikki. *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1981.

Klemm, Verena. “Image Formation of an Islamic Legend: Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad,” in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, edited by Sebastian Gunther, 108-208. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Kozlowski, Gregory C. “Private Lives and Public Piety: Women and the Practice of Islam in Mughal India.” In *Women in The Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, edited by Gavin R. G. Hambly, 469-88. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998.

al-Kulayni, Muhammad b. Ya‘qub. *Usul al-Kafi.* Beirut: Dar al-Ta‘arif, 1998.

Lammens, Henri. “Fatima and the Daughters of Muhammad.” In *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, translated and edited by Ibn Warraq, 218-329. New York: Prometheus Books, 2000.

Lawson, Todd. “The Authority of the Feminine and Fatima’s Place in an Early Work by the Bab.” In *The Most Learned of the Shi‘a: The Institution of the* Marja‘ Taqlid,

edited by Linda S. Walbridge, 94-127. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Lewis, Bernard. "Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam," *Studia Islamica* 1 (1953): 43-63.

Liebeskind, Claudia. *Piety on its Knees: Three Sufi Traditions in South Asia in Modern Times*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Maclean, Derryl N. *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*. Leiden: Brill, 1989.

Madelung, Wilferd and Paul E. Walker. *Ismaili Heresiography: the "Bab al-Shaytan" from Abu Tammam's Kitab al-Shajara*. Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 1998.

al-Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir. *Bihar al-anwar*. Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1956-.

Malekpour, Jamshid. *The Islamic Drama*. London; Portland: Frank Cass, 2004.

Massignon, Louis. *La Mubahala de Médine et l'Hypérdulie de Fatima*. Paris: Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1955.

McAuliffe, Jane Dammen. "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Qur'anic Exegesis." *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981): 19-28.

The Message of the Qur'an. Translated by Muhammad Asad. Bitton: The Book Foundation, 2003.

Milani, Mohsen S. *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: from Monarchy to Islamic Republic*. Boulder; London: Westview Press, 1988.

Mottahedeh, Negar. "Ta'ziyeh: A Twist of History in Everyday Life." In *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourse in Modern Shi'i Islam*, edited by Kamran Scott Aghaie, 25-43. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

al-Mufid, Shaykh. *Kitab al-Irshad: The Book of Guidance*. Translated by I. K. A. Howard. Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1981.

The Muharram Mystery of Bushehr. DVD. Directed by Babak Rahimi. N.p.: n.p., 2006.

Nakanishi, Hisae. "Power, Ideology, and Women's Consciousness in Postrevolutionary Iran." In *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, edited by Herbert L Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi, 83-100. Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

Nakash, Yitzhak. "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of *'Ashura'*." *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993): 161-81.

Nanji, Azim. *The Nizari Isma'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*. Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1978.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1926.

Pelly, Lewis. *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain: Collected from the Oral Tradition*. 1879. Reprint, Farnborough, UK: Gregg International Publishers, 1970.

Pinault, David. *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Practice in India*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

---. "Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations and the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases from Modern India," *History of Religions* 38, no. 3 (1999): 285-305.

Qal'aji, 'Abd al-Mu'ti Amin. *Manaqib 'Ali wa al-Hasanayn wa ummihima Fatima al-zahra'*. Aleppo: Dar al-Wa'i, 1979.

al-Qummi, 'Abbas. *Mafatih al-jinan*. Beirut: Dar al-Adwa', 1983.

al-Qushayri, Abu 'l-Qasim. *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism: Al-risala al-qushayriyya fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf*. Translated by Alexander D. Knysh. Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007.

Reid, James J. *Tribal Society in Islamic Iran 1500-1629*. Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1983.

Rizvi, Kishwar. "Gendered Patronage: Women and Benevolence during the Early Safavid Empire." In *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, edited by D. Fairchild Ruggles, 123-53. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Roded, Ruth. *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to* Who's Who. Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994.

Rosiny, Stephan. "'The Tragedy of Fatima al-Zahra'' in the Debate of Two Shiite Theologians in Lebanon." In *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religions, Cultures, and Political History*, edited by Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende, 207-19. Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 2000.

Roy, Asim. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Rumi, Jalal al-Din. *Signs of the Unseen: the Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi*. Translated by W. M. Thackston, Jr. Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1994.

Savory, Roger. *Iran Under the Safavids*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of The Prophet in Islamic Piety*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

---. *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*. Leiden: Brill, 1980.

---. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Shackle, Christopher and Zawahir Moir. *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Shariati, ‘Ali. *Fatima is Fatima*. Translated by Laleh Bakhtiar. Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, n.d.

Sharif, Ja‘far. *Islam in India or the Qanun-i Islam: The Customs of the Musalmans of India*. Translated by G. A. Herklots. London; Dublin: Curzon Press, 1972.

Shirazi, Faegheh. “Daughters of Karbala: Images of Women in Popular Shi‘i Culture.” In *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourse in Modern Shi‘i Islam*, edited by Kamran Scott Aghaie, 93-118. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Shoshan, Boaz. *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstruction of Tabari’s History*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004.

Schubel, Vernon James. *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi‘i Devotional Rituals in South Asia*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

Smith, Margaret. *Rabi‘a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam*. 1928. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

---. "The Politics of Praise: Depictions of Khadija, Fatima, and Aisha in Ninth-Century Muslim Sources." *Literature East and West* 26 (1990): 130-48.

Stewart, Tony K. "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving the Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory." In *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, edited by Richard M. Eaton, 363-92. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Szuppe, Maria. "La Participation des Femmes de la Famille Royale à l'Exercice du Pouvoir en Iran Safavide au XVI^{e} Siècle (Première Partie)." *Studia Iranica* 23, no. 2 (1994): 211-58.

Tabari. *The Foundation of the Community: Muhammad at al-Madina*. Volume 7 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation.* Translated by W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald. Albany: State University Press of New York, 1987.

---. *The Last Year of the Prophet: the Formation of the State*. Volume 9 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation.* Translated by Ismail K. Poonawala. Albany: State University Press of New York, 1990.

---. *The Conquest of Arabia: the Riddah Wars*. Volume 10 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation*. Translated by Fred M. Donner. Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993.

---. *The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiyah*. Volume 19 of *The History of al-Tabari: an Annotated Translation*. Translated by I. K. A. Howard. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Tabataba'i, Muhammad Husayn. *Shi'a*. Translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1981.

Takim, Liyakat N. *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

de Tassy, Garcin. *Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays*. Translated by M. Waseem. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Thapar, Romila. *Somanatha: the Many Voices of a History*. London; New York: Verso, 2005.

Torab, Azam. "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Iran." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 235-52.

---. "Vows, Medianship and Gender: Women's Votive Meals in Iran." In *Gender, Religion, and Change in the Middle East: Two Hundred Years of History*, edited by Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flaskerud, 207-22. New York; Oxford: Berg, 2005.

Trimingham, J. Spencer. *The Sufi Orders of Islam*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969.

Tusi, Nasir al-Din. *Paradise of Submission: A Medieval Treatise on Isma'ili Thought*. Translated by S. J. Badakhchani. London; New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2005.

Vahdat, Farzin. *God and the Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

Veccia Vaglieri, L. "Fatima." In *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, 2:841-50. Leiden: Brill, 1965.