

Tarikh  
Series # 3

# SHI'ISM IN THE **EARLY** GHAYBA PERIOD

By: Dr. Liyakatali N. Takim

## RESOURCE PAPER

The Resource Paper Series is designed to provide materials to facilitate the implementation of the curriculum outlined in the Curriculum Development Process (CDP) Report.

"This religion will be carried in every century by an upright person through whom the invalid interpretations will be nullified and the deviation of the extremists and false claims of the ignorant persons (jahilin) will be refuted."

**Prophet Muhammad  
(S.A.W.)**

# **RESOURCE PAPER SERIES**

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**To Make a Difference in the Quality of Our Madrasah and Our Children's Islamic Identity**

# RESOURCE PAPER

## Shi'ism in the Early *Ghayba* Period

*By: Dr. Liyakatali N. Takim*

"This religion will be carried in every century by an upright person through whom the invalid interpretations will be nullified and the deviation of the extremists and false claims of the ignorant persons (jahilin) will be refuted."

**Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)**

This study examines the pivotal role that Shi'i 'ulama' and traditionists played soon after the twelfth Imam (A.S.) went into ghayba. Starting with the time of Kulayni, the study shows that the scholars played different roles. They transmitted traditions of the Imams, protected and guided the Shi'i community, and defended Shi'i beliefs against their adversaries. The study also examines Shi'i history within the wider framework of the Sunni milieu. Thus, it examines the Shi'i century when the Buyids came to power and afforded patronage to Shi'i scholars and discusses the impact of the Seljuq dynasty on the Shi'i community during the times of Shaykh Tusi.

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# Shi'ism in the Early Ghayba Period

## Framework for Studying the Subject

In most *madaris*, the history of Shi'ism is often taught within the context of the historical lives of our Imams. However, little is either known or taught of our history after the twelfth Imam (A.S.) went into the minor occultation (*ghayba*) in 864 C.E. or the major occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubra*) which began in 940 C.E. Yet, it is necessary to trace the continued evolution of Shi'i community and polity and to assess the impact of broader geo-political developments on their historical evolution. This paper deals with the period immediately after the *ghayba* of the Imam and focuses on the critically important challenge that the Shi'i community faced for the first time now that the Imam was not physically present to provide leadership for the community.

This study will examine how Shi'i scholars or '*ulama*' rose to the challenge and filled the vacuum in the leadership created by the occultation of the Imam (A.S.). In particular, it will emphasize the prominent role they played in exercising *ijtihad*, i.e., interpreting the revelatory sources so as to guide the Shi'i community during the early *ghayba* period. In this way, they were fulfilling the role envisaged by the Prophet (SAW) who said, "This religion will be

carried in every century by an upright person through whom the invalid interpretations will be nullified and the deviation of the extremists and false claims of the ignorant persons (*jahilin*) will be refuted.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Objectives of the Unit:**

The object of this unit is to familiarize students of the *madrasa* with Shi‘i history after the *ghayba* of the twelfth imam. This paper will examine the historical experience of the Shi‘i community after the *ghayba* of the imam, the role of the ‘*ulama*’ in molding the lives and religious practices of the Shi‘is in their times and the scholars’ response to the socio-political challenges they encountered. More specifically, the paper will examine the interaction that these scholars had with Sunni scholars of their times and discuss how Shi‘i scholars were able to state and defend Shi‘i beliefs like the necessity of the Imam, the infallibility of the Imams, and the whole question of the occultation of the twelfth Imam. In the process, the Shi‘i ‘*ulama*’ were also able to refute the arguments of their opponents. It should be noted from the outset that due to the brief scope of this paper, it proposes to examine the lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Kashshi, *Ikhtiyar*, 4.

only some of the many scholars in the period under consideration.



## **The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam (A.S.)**

### **Description:**

A turning point in Shi‘i history came in the year 874 C.E. when the eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-‘Askari, (A.S) died. Amidst competing claims for succession the twelfth imam (A.S.) was acknowledged by a group as the Imam of the time based on numerous traditions reported from the Prophet and the Imams (A.S.). This group formed the backbone of the Twelver Shi‘is, the largest of the Shi‘i factions. It is with this group that the rest of the article will be concerned.

The twelfth Imam entered a ‘minor’ occultation or *ghayba* from 874 to 940 C.E.. During this time, he communicated with agents four of whom attained prominence. The agents acted as intermediaries between the Shi‘is and the Imam and performed a wide range of functions, including transmitting messages and responses from the Imam, and even collecting the *khumus* and other contributions from the community. An important point of note is that the letters that the Shi‘is received from the Imam from the first to the last agent were all in the same handwriting, proving that these were written by the Imam himself.

Before the fourth agent, ‘Ali b. Muhammad b. al-Sammari died in 940, the Imam wrote a letter to him, informing him that he should not appoint a successor after him because the Imam would enter a ‘major’ occultation. The Imam would only appear at the end of time, when Allah wishes. The appearance of the eschatological messiah would lead to the establishment of the kingdom of justice and equality.

It has to be remembered that the idea of certain agents who transmitted the teachings and instructions between the Imams and their followers was not a new one. Even during the times of the Imams, their companions and disciples often acted as intermediaries between the Imams and the Shi‘i community. In another resource paper, I have examined how the companions of the Imams would transmit their teachings after studying with them in Medina. In addition, these companions would perform a wide array of other administrative and scholarly functions.

### **The ‘*Ulama*’ During the Minor Occultation**

During the minor occultation, the Shi‘i scholars composed many tracts in the juridical (legal) and theological fields. The most famous of these scholars is Muhammad. b. Ya‘qub al-Kulayni (d. 939). His canonical

work, *al-Kafi fi 'Ilm al-Din* is considered to be one of the four main Shi'i texts. Kulayni wrote this book in response to a request from one of the Shi'is who asked him to compose a text that would suffice in the acquisition of religious knowledge. Kulayni spent almost twenty years in compiling his text, as he moved from Rayy in Iran to Baghdad, which was, at that time, one of the major centers of *hadith* collection.

During the times of the fifth and sixth Imams, the Shi'i center of intellectual activities was Kufa, although a number of the Imams' disciples also lived in Qum. It was in Kufa that a number of prominent disciples of Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq (A.S.) lived and interacted with scholars from others school. With time, Baghdad eclipsed Kufa as a place of learning. Baghdad became a center for *hadith* collection and famous for the translation of Greek works and other scientific accomplishments. It was in Baghdad that transmitters of traditions from different cities would meet to narrate and listen to *ahadith*. Kulayni migrated to Baghdad to collect and publicize Shi'i *hadith*. *Al-Kafi* was then taught and propagated by Kulayni's students like al-Nu'mani and other transmitters to whom Kulayni had read his work.

Kulayni's book has about 16,200 traditions, most of them from the fifth and sixth Imams. He divided his work

into three sections, *Usul*, *Furu'*, and *Rawda*. The first section deals with Shi'i beliefs and theology whereas the second section pertains to matters concerning religious practices. The third section of Kulayni's work, *al-Rawda*, deals primarily with ethical and moral issues.

Almost three quarters of the traditions (11,819) are included in *Furu' al-Kafi*. They represent, in the form of *hadith* reports, the rulings by the Imams on various *fiqh* issues. Kulayni divides his *furu'* work into several chapters with separate headings. Under each chapter, he cites all the relevant *hadith* reports from the Imams that pertain to that topic with their chains of transmission (*isnad*). For example, under the section of the times of *salat*, Kulayni cites various traditions from the Imams to support the legal opinion on the topic. By citing traditions from the Imams on Shi'i law, Kulayni was challenging the views enunciated by Sunni scholars and providing an alternative to their schools of law (*madhahib*). It has to be remembered that before his time, Shi'i *hadith* were scattered in different books, it was Kulayni who played the indispensable role of collecting and compiling these into a single work, and arranged it under separate *fiqh* topics.

Although Kulayni is known for this work, he actually composed many other books in other fields. Later scholars wrote commentaries on *al-Kafi* discussing and

analyzing his traditions at length. Kulayni died in the year 940 and is buried in the Karkh section of Baghdad.

## **The Shi'i century (945-1055)**

### **Description**

The period between the years 945-1055 is often known as the Shi'i century as the 'Abbasid caliphate came under Shi'i control. This period is known as the Shi'i century as it was in this era that three Shi'i dynasties were established. The Hamdanis ruled in parts of Syria (Aleppo and Hims), whereas the Fatimids had conquered and controlled Egypt. In 945 the Buwayhids (also called Buyids) seized control of Baghdad. There is some controversy as to whether the Buyids were Zaydi or Twelver Shi'is. However, under the Buyids, Shi'i scholars were afforded an opportunity to express themselves and openly declare and defend their beliefs. The Buyids controlled most of Iraq and Iran and supported the Shi'i scholars to an unprecedented extent. Shi'is engaged in intellectual debates more freely and visibly. They were also able to defend their beliefs and refute the accusations from Sunnis. From the year 963, major Shi'i events like al-Ghadir and Muharram were marked in public and shrines were erected over the graves of the Imams. This period coincided with the coming of the major occultation. The Buyids were overthrown by the Sunni Seljuqs in 1055.

## **Shi'i 'ulama' in the Major Occultation (*al-Ghayba al-Kubra*)**

Due to the major occultation of the Imam (A.S.), the role of the Shi'i 'ulama' in this period became even more significant. The absence of the Imam in public meant that the 'ulama' had to lead and guide the community. Through their extensive writings and lectures, they proved to the Shi'is that the Imam was alive and would return to establish the kingdom of justice and equality. Due to their writings in legal and theological fields, they guided the masses in religious affairs and challenged Sunni views and practices. One of the most prominent scholars of the time was Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Babawayh, also known as Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 991).

Al-Saduq was a scholar who spent most of his time living in Qum. The significance of Qum as a center of Shi'i intellectual activities has to be understood. Although Iran did not formally become a Shi'i state until 1501 when the Safawids took power, Qum was always predominantly a Shi'i city from the eighth century onwards. Many Shi'i 'ulama' lived there and propagated Shi'i doctrines. In addition, the fact that Ma'suma, the sister of the eighth Imam, was buried there attracted a lot of Shi'is to the city.

Al-Saduq is reported to have composed almost three hundred books on various topics. His father, 'Ali b. al-Husayn b. al-Babawayh (d. 940-41), who was a jurist and leader of the Shi'is in Qum in his time, met the third deputy of the Hidden Imam, Abu al-Qasim Husayn b. Ruh al-Nawbakhti (d. 937-38) in Baghdad and asked him several questions pertaining to Islamic law. Following this meeting, 'Ali b. al-Husayn wrote a letter to the agent of the Imam (A.S.) sending it through Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Aswad, so that the letter might be delivered to the Imam. In the letter he requested the Imam to pray for a son. He received a reply in which was written: "We have prayed to God for it [on your behalf], and you will be blessed with two pious sons." Afterwards, two sons were born to him; Abu Ja'far Muhammad (al-Saduq) and Abu 'Abd Allah al-Husayn. It is reported by the latter that al-Saduq used to pride himself on the circumstances of his birth, saying: "I was born through the prayer of the Sahib al-amr (i.e., the twelfth Imam)." In a rescript received from the Imam, al-Saduq was praised as an excellent jurist whom God turned to the advantage of the community. This account suggests that al-Saduq's father was in close contact with the deputies of the Imam, and had also met 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sammari (d. 940-41), the last agent of the twelfth Imam in the year 939-40.



A study of al-Saduq's collection of traditions reflects his long journeys undertaken in search of material at a young age, beginning in 950. His reputation as both a compiler and a teacher was well established very early in his life, and reference to it was made by some of his contemporaries, attributing his unusual intellectual maturity to the miracle of the last Imam through whose prayer he was known to have been born. Thus, Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Aswad, through whom al-Saduq's father had sent the letter to the Imam's agent, saw al-Saduq at the age of twenty lecturing on matters of *fiqh*. He was astonished at the grasp al-Saduq had of his subject matter and remarked: "There is no surprise to see you so well versed [*in fiqh*], because you were born through the prayer of the *Sahib al-amr*.

One of the most important of his works is called *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'ma*. In this work, Shaykh Saduq complains that during his sojourn in Nishapur, Khurasan, he noticed that some of the Shi'is doubted the existence and prolonged *ghayba* of the twelfth Imam. He therefore decided to write a book, proving that the Imam was alive by citing traditions from the Prophet and the Imams. The book also cites traditions on the need for an Imam at all times, and that the twelfth Imam would be the promised messiah. This book is an important work in

tracing traditions on the birth, occultation, and appearance of the twelfth Imam (A.S.) at the end of time.

Al-Saduq's contribution to Shi'i sciences lies in his major work on *fiqh* known as *Man la Yahduruh al-Faqih* (a title that approximates to "Every man his own lawyer)." This is one of the four major Shi'i *fiqh* works. Like Kulayni, al-Saduq compiled *hadith* reports according to the chapters in *fiqh* using relevant *ahadith* from traditional sources reported by the disciples of the Imams. As it was intended to serve practical needs of the Shi'i community; al-Saduq collected not only the *hadith* of the Imams, but also the opinions and the *ijma'* (consensus) of the Shi'i jurists up to his own time, by citing both traditions and judicial decisions based on the interpretation of these traditions.

In addition, Shaykh Saduq wrote an important work outlining the Shi'i creed. This work, called *The Shi'ite Creed*, has been translated into English and is available. The value of the work is that it is one of the earliest book extant outlining articles of Shi'i beliefs. It was thanks to the efforts of such '*ulama'* that the doubts of the Shi'is were put to rest. They were convinced of the *ghayba* of the Imam and of his reappearance at the end of time.

As was the custom of the Muslim traditionists, al-Saduq gathered around him a number of students in

Baghdad, where he lectured on and transmitted Shi‘i *hadith*. Among these students was al-Mufid, the great Shi‘i theologian of the following generation, who transmitted all his books and traditions to Shaykh Tusi.

## **Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022)**

Shaykh al-Mufid, al-Sharif al-Murtada, and Shaykh Tusi were the foremost Shi'i jurists of their time, and held, in succession, a position of leadership within the Shi'i scholarly community in Baghdad. Together, their careers spanned nearly the entire period of Buyid control over the imperial capital—that is, from the mid-tenth century until 1055, when the Seljuqs conquered Baghdad. It is during this period, and in the works of these jurists, that Shi'i beliefs and practices were explained and defended against their adversaries.

Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Nu'man, known as al-Mufid and Ibn al-Mu'allim, was born near Baghdad in 948 or 950. He acquired his basic training in Qur'anic and Arabic studies under his father, who was a teacher by profession. Thereafter, he went with his father to Baghdad at the age of twelve (around 962), where he began to study theology. Since he lived under the Shi'i Buyid dynasty, al-Mufid lived under relatively favorable circumstances. Thus, he was able to participate actively in the intellectual debates.

In Baghdad, he studied with a large number of Shiite *hadith* experts, including Ja'far b. Muhammad b. Qawlawayh (d. 978—79) and other leading theologians of his time. In 965-66 al-Mufid received an *ijaza* (permission) to transmit traditions from Shaykh al-Saduq. He transmitted

the latter's works to his pupil, Tusi. Within a short period, al-Mufid's scholarship and intellectual activities led to him being acknowledged as the leading Shi'i theologian and jurist in Baghdad. The biographer Ibn al-Nadim, writing in 987—88, refers to him as the *ra'is* or leading scholar of the Shi'is and that the leadership of Shi'i theologians culminated in him.

Al-Mufid lived in Darb al-Riyah in al-Karkh, the main Shi'i quarter on the west side of Baghdad, and taught at the mosque he had built adjacent to his house. He held a regular *majlis*, which was attended by the eminent scholars of his day and prominent figures, including the Buyid ruler, 'Adud al-Dawlah. Due to the Sunni-Shi'i riots in 1007, al-Mufid had to leave Baghdad and take refuge in Kerbala and Najaf temporarily.

It has been reported that when he was sleeping one night, al-Mufid saw Fatima al-Zahra (A.S.) in his dream. She brought her two sons with her, Imams al-Hasan and al-Husayn to his mosque near his home. She asked him to teach her two children. Al-Mufid was astonished at the dream. When he went to the mosque the following day, a woman called Fatima bint Nasr approached him with her two sons. Just as he saw in his dream, the lady asked him to teach her sons. She was a descendant of the Prophet and the mother of two famous scholars, al-Sharif al-Murtada and al-

Sharif al-Radi. The later compiled the *Nahj al-Balagha* whereas the former became a prominent Shi‘i scholar under the guidance of Shaykh al-Mufid.

Among al-Mufid’s other early teachers was a Shi‘i theologian called Ghulam ‘Abd al-Jaysh. He recognized al-Mufid’s intelligence and astuteness and recommended that he attend the lectures of another prominent theologian, ‘Ali b. ‘Isa al-Rumani (d. 994-95), who belonged to the Baghdad school of the Mu‘tazila. It was Rumani who, according to one version of the story, gave him the title *al-Mufid* (the beneficial), following a discussion with him. It is said that al-Mufid heard a Basran ask al-Rummani what he thought about the traditions of Ghadir al-Khumm, where Imam ‘Ali (A.S.) was appointed to succeed the Prophet (A.S.), and the Cave, where Abu Bakr stayed with the Prophet. Al-Rummani answered: “As for the tradition of the Cave, it is knowledge (*diraya*); as for the tradition of Ghadir, it is a report (*riwaya*).” Thus, al-Rummani implied that the story of the cave was more reliable than the event of Ghadir. Al-Mufid then asked al-Rummani as to what is the status of one who kills a just Imam. Al-Rummani replied that the killer is a grave sinner. Al-Mufid asked if Imam ‘Ali was a true Imam. Al-Rummani replied in the affirmative. "Then", said al-Mufid, "what about the Battle of the Camel and Talha, al-Zubair and ‘Aisha?"

"They repented," replied al-Rummani. "As for the event of the battle of the Camel," retorted al-Mufid, "it is knowledge (*diraya*). As for their repentance, it is a report (*riwaya*)." Al-Rummani then gave him the honorific title of "al-Mufid."

As '*ulama*' like al-Mufid had limited resources they would teach in their own houses or local mosques. For example, al-Mufid taught in the mosque he built next to his house in Baghdad. Similarly, al-Sharif al-Murtada and Shaykh al-Tusi taught in their houses in the Karkh area of Baghdad. Of all the teachers with whom Tusi had studied, al-Mufid figures most prominently in his writings. Tusi, in his biography of al-Mufid, after listing the latter's works, says: "I heard him discourse on all these books. Some of them were read to him; others I read to him several times while he listened."

It is with al-Mufid that we see a clear shift in the mode of Shi'i disputations with their adversaries. Whereas scholars before him would depend primarily on traditions to prove their points on Shi'i beliefs and practices, al-Mufid saw the need to use rational tools (*'aql*) in vindicating the arguments he put forth. Thus, he argued for the need for a divinely-appointed Imam, the rational necessity of the Imam being infallible and the belief in the

occult Imam based on both rational and traditional grounds.

Al-Mufid's scholarship and erudition are testified by the comprehensive works that he wrote in all the main disciplines of Islamic learning. For example, al-Mufid's *al-Masa'il al-Saghaniyya* is a response to accusations leveled by some Sunni scholars that some points of Shi'i law had violated the consensus reached by the community (*'ijma*). Al-Mufid refutes these accusations, citing credible traditions to justify the Shi'i position. He also refutes Abu Hanifa for deducing opinions using analogy (*qiyas*) and reasoning without evidence in previous texts or established precedents.

Shaykh al-Mufid is credited with writing over two hundred books in various fields of learning. One of the most famous books is *Kitab al-Irshad*, the book of guidance. Now translated into English, the book provides details of the lives of the Imams, their miracles, sayings, lifestyles and their contribution to society in their times. In addition, al-Mufid wrote five works defending and explaining the belief in the *ghayba* of the Imam.

Among his works on Islamic law (jurisprudence) is *al-Muqni'a*, on which Tusi wrote a commentary entitled *Tahdhib al-Ahkam*. This work, on the one hand, shows the scheme of al-Mufid's arrangement of *fiqh* chapters;



and on the other, it demonstrates Tusi's intellectual development under him because it includes not only traditions dealing with jurisprudence, but also narratives touching upon theological issues that had attained prominence at that time.

Tusi had probably begun to write this commentary at the age of twenty-five and had completed the section dealing with prayers before al-Mufid's death. Among al-Mufid's famous work is the *Amali*, lectures that were dictated to his students and the general public over a period of seven years. This book has also been recently translated into English.

Al-Mufid remained the leading theologian and jurist of the Shi'is until his death in November 1022. Al-Sharif al-Murtada performed the ritual washing of the corpse; it is reported that a crowd of eighty thousand people attended his funeral.

**‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Musawi al-Sharif al-Murtada  
(d.1044)**

‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Musawi, known as al-Sharif al-Murtada, was born in Rajab 966 to a prominent family who were descendants of Imam ‘Ali (A.S.). As a youth, he studied under Shaykh al-Mufid along with his brother al-Sharif al-Radi. While both were accomplished in the fields of law, theology, and poetry, al-Radi excelled particularly in poetry and al-Murtada became better known as a jurist and theologian.

When Shaykh al-Mufid died in 1022, al-Sharif al-Murtada became the leading Shi‘i jurist in Baghdad in addition to being an important notable and political figure. Known also as *‘alam al-huda* (the banner of guidance), he lived first in al-Surah but, when his house there was burned in 1024, he moved to Darb Jamil in Baghdad. He was also socially and politically active during his time. Al-Murtada was given the title *naqib*, meaning chief or head of the descendants of Imam ‘Ali (A.S.). He was also a judge (*qadi*), one who administered the judicial affairs of the Shi‘is.

Even though al-Murtada lived under more favorable political circumstances under the Buyid regime, there were many Sunni-Shi‘i riots that he had to contend with. He tried

to reduce Sunni-Shi'i tensions in Baghdad, often intervening in disputes. He also mediated in the various conflicts between the caliph, the Buyid ruler, the army, certain gang leaders, and the inhabitants of al-Karkh. For example, he was entrusted with taking an oath of allegiance to the Buyid ruler Musharrif al-Dawlah from Turkish soldiers in 1024. Just following *'eid al-adha* in December 1029, al-Murtada led a delegation of notables to the caliphal palace to apologize for a Shi'i attack on a Sunni preacher that the caliph had appointed to preach at the Buratha mosque. Through such social and political functions, al-Murtada was securing the interests and safety of the Shi'i community.

Like his teacher al-Mufid, al-Murtada wrote copiously, defending Shi'i beliefs against the Sunnis. He was a brilliant theologian who used rational tools to articulate and defend Shi'i beliefs. He defended the belief in the *ghayba* of the Imam on intellectual grounds rather than depending on traditions only. In this, he followed the example of his teacher, Shaykh al-Mufid. One of his best works is titled *al-Shafi'i fi'l Imama*, the complete pronouncement on the imamate. In this work, al-Murtada refutes the arguments of those who objected to the Shi'i belief in the imamate, especially the objections raised by a prominent Mu'tazili theologian, al-Qadi al-Jabbar. His other

important works deal with the infallibility of the Prophets and Imams. Al-Murtada also wrote a major tract on the permissibility of working for an unjust and tyrannical government (a treatise that has been translated into English) and another tract concerning the convening of Friday prayers during the *ghayba*.

Al-Murtada also attempted to reach a rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi'is. Thus, in his comparison between Sunni and Shi'i law, al-Murtada emphasized the similarities rather than differences, trying, in the process to reach a rapprochement without denying the differences that existed between them. Al-Murtada also wrote a work on comparative law, comparing Sunni and Shi'i views on points of law. He argued for the acceptance and validity of the Shi'i school of law.

Al-Sharif al-Murtada's work, called *al-Intisar*, presents the different opinions on the points of law that the Shi'is hold with respect to their Sunni opponents. Al-Murtada's purpose in writing this book seems to be to remove obstacles between the Shi'i jurists and the majority Sunni-controlled, legal system and to get Shi'i law accepted as a legitimate alternative to the Sunni *madhahib*.

The introduction to this book indicates that the Sunnis had argued that Shi'is were beyond the pale of orthodoxy. They used this charge as an excuse to deny the

Shi'is from debating on legal topics and from the entire system of legal education and scholarship. Al-Murtada aims to counter Sunni arguments, proving that Shi'i opinions are just as authoritative and valid as those of the Sunnis. Al-Murtada mentions, whenever possible, the Sunni jurists who have held the same opinions that the Shi'is in those rulings for which the Shiites had been criticized.

Al-Murtada also points out that when the Shi'is are in complete disagreement with the Sunnis on a certain matter, they have sound evidence to support their views. This evidence includes texts from the Qur'an or *ahadith* from the Prophet and the Imams. Because Shi'is legal opinions are supported in this fashion, he argues, they are as legitimate as Sunni opinions, and the Sunnis should accept them as such. In addition, he further contends that since the Shi'i scholars have a sound legal basis for deducing their *fiqh*, the Sunnis should accept their rulings (*fatawa*) as valid, and should not reject their opinions on the points of law merely on the basis of their failure to agree with those of the Sunni jurists.

Al-Murtada also insists that the Shi'i opinions are not innovations, but have been handed down from the Imams, so that the Sunni accusations against them are invalid. Just as the Sunni jurists project the opinions of al-Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa back to the early years

of the Muslim community, al-Sharif al-Murtada maintains that the Shiite jurists' opinions may be traced back to Imams Zayn al-‘Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir, and Ja'far al-Sadiq (A.S.), who were, after all, more knowledgeable and authoritative than the Sunni scholars. Al-Murtada further argues that the Shi‘is also transmit these opinions from Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (A.S), and trace their rulings back to him.

Al-Murtada further argues that the Sunnis should grant the Shi‘is what they have granted to Abu Hanifa and al-Shafi'i or other scholars like Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari. He states that you allow Ibn Hanbal and Tabari to hold differing opinions in certain issues but do not allow the Shi‘is to differ in those same issues. This is an injustice to the Shi‘is and a wrong against them.

Al-Murtada then questions his accusers premise, claiming that some of the opinions of al-Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa were probably innovations. He goes on to claim that Abu Hanifa arrived at unprecedented opinions through the application of analogy (qiyas), which the Shi‘is do not accept as a valid method of legal reasoning:

A testimony of his scholarly activities is the report that when he died, al-Murtada's library contained almost 80,000 books. In addition, he would often give stipends to

his students to support them, a lot of this coming from the income of his property. Like Tusi, his students acted as his representatives in different parts of the Islamic world. Many would write to al-Murtada asking him for his *fatawa* on various *fiqh* related issue. When he died in 1044 at the age of eighty, he had spent almost sixty years in the public life of Baghdad. He attracted a large number of students who came to his home to study under him. His influential socio-political position meant that, due to his efforts, the Shi‘is became an established and recognized school in the ‘Abbasid capital. Due to his enormous influence in Shi‘i circles, al-Murtada is mentioned in some circles as a *mujaddid* (renewer of faith).

## **Muhammad b. al-Hasan Tusi (d. 1067)**

Abu Ja‘far Muhammad b. al-Hasan Tusi was born in Tus, near Mashhad in October 995. In 1018, at the age of 23, he went to Baghdad to study under Shaykh al-Mufid until the latter’s death in 1022. He then studied under al-Sharif al-Murtada for 23 years. Upon al-Murtada's death in 1044, Tusi became the leading scholar of the Shi‘is and the focal point of Shi‘i studies in Baghdad until the Seljuq conquest in 1055.

The coming of the Sunni dominated Seljuq dynasty was a great blow to the Shi‘is. The Seljuqs conquered the whole of Iran and Iraq and entered Baghdad in 1055. They supported Sunni traditionalists and riots against the Shi‘i began. The Shi‘is, who had been given much protection by the Buyids were now persecuted and suffered immensely. For example, Abu ‘Abd Allah b. al-Jallab, the head of a cloth-merchant guild, was accused of being a Shi‘i, executed, and hung above the door of his shop.

From the relative calm and freedom under the Buyids, the Shi‘is had to now resort to *taqiyya* to ensure their survival. Shaykh Tusi’s library in Baghdad was burnt, his house in al-Karkh was looted, and his notebooks and a chair from which he used to lecture were burned along with three white banners that Shi‘i pilgrims used to carry to Kufa. To escape the attacks, which the Seljuq regime



failed to stop, Tusi had to migrate to Najaf, where he spent the rest of his days. During this period, the Shi'is were cursed in public in some parts of the Muslim world and even the shrine of Imam Husayn (A.S.) was attacked in 1095. The powerful minister of the Seljuqs, Nizam al-Mulk was the chief opponent of the Shi'is. It was only when he was assassinated in 1092 that the situation of the Shi'is improved to some degree.

After he migrated to Najaf, Tusi laid the basis of the Shi'i intellectual activities in Najaf. This culminated in the development of a religious seminary there. Tusi's son and grandson remained in Najaf, retaining the importance of the place for religious education. One of the most interesting anecdotes regarding Tusi is the following:

The great traditionist of the Qajar period, al-Mirza Husayn al-Nuri (d. 1902), relates a story that he found inscribed on the reverse of an old manuscript of Tusi's monumental work on *fiqh*, *al-Nihaya fi Mujarrad al-Fiqh wa al-Fatawa*, and which he also found written in the handwriting of several jurists in another place:

It is reported on the authority of the jurist Shaykh Najib al-Din Abu Talib al-Astarabadi (may God have mercy on him) as follows: "I found in the book *al-Nihaya*, in the library of the *madrassa* in Rayy, that it is written: It has been communicated to us by a group of our reliable associates that

they were conversing and conferring about the way the book *al-Nihaya* was organized and the contents thereof under various rubrics. Each one of them raised an objection to one or the other of the laws mentioned by Shaykh Tusi, and they said that these were not without flaw. Following this discussion, they agreed and decided to go on pilgrimage to the tomb of Imam ‘Ali (peace be on him), in Najaf. (This happened when Shaykh Tusi was still alive.) Tusi, unlike any other time before this, was on their mind because of the matter of *al-Nihaya*. They concurred that they would fast for three days and then perform the major ritual ablution (*ghusl*) on Thursday night. They would pray and would request their Master, Amir al-Mu’minin [Imam ‘Ali], to answer their prayer, so that he might clarify for them the points they had disputed about [in *al-Nihaya*]. This they did and Amir al-Mu'minin [Imam ‘Ali] presented himself to them in their sleep and said, "No author has composed a book of the *fiqh* of the *Al Muhammad* [i.e., the Imams] more reliable and worth emulating and referring to than *al-Nihaya* . . . about which you are at variance [with him]. The book is thus because the author depended on the sincerity of his intention on God in writing it for which he has the station and nearness in respect to God. Hence, do not be obstinate in the matter of establishing the authenticity of that which the author has ensured in his work. Act upon the rulings

thereof and endorse its injunctions. Indeed, he suffered hardship in its careful organization and its arrangement: and he strove to disseminate the true rulings in all places.”

When they got up from their sleep each one approached the other and told what he had dreamt the previous night, which pointed to the soundness of Tusi’s work (*al-Nihaya*) and confidence in its author. They all agreed that each one of them should write down his dream in a manuscript before uttering it. They did so and on comparison they found that the dream was both in word and in meaning, contrary to their own ideas regarding Tusi’s book. They got up and dispersed, feeling satisfied with the outcome of their writing the dream and proceeded to see Shaykh Tusi. When the Shaykh saw them he said: “You did not have faith in what I told you of the book *al-Nihaya*, until you heard from the pronouncement of our Master, Amir al-Mu’minin (peace be on him).” They were astonished to hear that and asked him how he knew about it. Tusi said: “Amir al-Mu’minin presented himself to me as he did to you. Then he conveyed to me what he had told you.” He then described his dream circumstantially. “This is the book on which the Shi‘i jurists belonging to *Al Muhammad* have based their opinions.”

More than three hundred students studied under Tusi. His work demonstrates his mastery of Shi‘i law. As a

matter of fact, two of his books, *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* and *al-Istibsar*, are counted as among the main Shi‘i books on law. Tusi wrote a book in almost every field of Islamic studies, ranging from the night prayers, ethics, Islamic law, *usul al-fiqh*, to the biography of the companions of the Imams. A measure of his scholarship can be discerned from the following; Tusi’s *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* alone comprises of 13,590 traditions spanning 10 volumes. His *Istibsar* comprises four volumes and *al-Mabsut* has six volumes, demonstrating his skills in independent reasoning, *ijtihad*.

In his work on the principles of deriving the law (a book called *‘Uddat al-Usul*) Tusi explains the methods and lays down the principles for resolving contradictions between various traditions. He also argues for and demonstrates the validity of traditions reported by a singular reporter (called *al-Khabar al-Wahid*) and also elaborates the sources of Islamic law.

Tusi was interested not only in the law but also in *hadith* and those who reported traditions from the Imams. This led him to write two books on such transmitters of traditions, a science called *‘ilm al-rijal* (biographical literature). Tusi’s other book in *‘ilm al-rijal* called *al-Fihrist* was composed in response to those who attacked the Shi‘is for not have any renown scholars or books. Tusi refuted this charged not only by naming major Shi‘i scholars during

their times of the Imams but also by mentioning the books they composed. He also wrote a book on comparative Islamic law (called *al-Khilaf*) where he compared Shi'i and Sunni law. Here, he records the opinions of different schools of law and then compares them with Shi'i rulings on the same issue. In the process, Tusi was demonstrating the superiority of the opinions held by the Shi'is. In addition, Tusi also compiled a voluminous and important *tafsir* (commentary) on the Qur'an. Here, he preserved the traditions of the Imams that relate to the various verses of the Qur'an and cites the circumstances under which the verses were revealed.

In his *Kitab al-Ghayba*, Tusi cites traditions from previous Imams predicting the *ghayba* of the Imam, the necessity of having an Imam at all times even if he is in *ghayba* and the events that will occur when the Imam comes back from occultation. He also cites numerous reports on the four agents of the Imam during the short occultation, their activities, and functions.

Tusi chose a middle way between rationalism and traditionalism. It was in Najaf that Tusi wrote his *al-Mabsut* in which he juxtaposed rational principles like *ijtihad* with traditional methodology like reliance on traditions. He used

reasoning to deduce verdicts from traditional sources. He also undertook to articulate and defend Shi'i beliefs and practices based on reason and tradition.

Tusi died in Najaf in December 1067 and was buried in his house there. Due to his prominent role in Shi'i *fiqh*, Tusi has been called Shaykh al-Ta'ifa, the shaykh of the community. 'Allama Hilli refers to Tusi as Imam al-A'zam, the great imam of the community. Subsequent scholars have largely, though not exclusively, relied on his many works. His legacy and contribution to the various fields of Islamic studies remains unsurpassed even in modern times.

### **Analysis:**

The significance of the brief historical account of the '*ulama*' cited above needs to be properly comprehended. Scholars like Kulayni played an important role in the transmission of Shi'i *hadith*. He gathered traditions from various teachers and sources that were compiled during the times of the Imams. He then compiled and arranged these according to proper chapters for posterity. It was because of the pivotal role that he played that he has attained such an important place as one of the great Shi'i *muhaddithun*, narrators of Shi'i *hadith*. He also played the important role of preserving Shi'i *hadith* from

falling into oblivion. It should be noted that it would be a mistake to assume that the whole of *al-Kafi* is completely authentic. Shi‘i scholars have confirmed that many traditions in *al-Kafi* are not reliable.

Later scholars like al-Mufid, al-Sharif al-Murtada, and Tusi went beyond the compilation of traditions. They used reasoning as a potent weapon in the elaboration and defence of Shi‘i dogma. They also took over the mantle of leadership of the Shi‘i community at a critical juncture in Shi‘i history, when the twelfth Imam (A.S.) entered the major occultation. It was due to their elaboration of Islamic law and *tafsir* of the Qur’an that the Imams’ teachings survived for future generations.

Amidst competing factions that sought legitimacy by claiming to be “orthodox,” the ‘*ulama*’ made a major contribution in expressing and articulating Shi‘i beliefs and practices, positing, in the process, a “normative” view of Shi‘ism. In their various functions, several features can be detected; these include identification and acknowledgement of the correct authority of the Imam, consolidation (defence of beliefs), and proselytization (literary activities, discourses).

Due to the efforts of the ‘*ulama*’ the Shi‘is became fully autonomous and independent of the wider Sunni community. As the actual state fell short of the Shi‘i vision of the ideal, the tension between the two was resolved by

the coexistence of the Shi‘i community with the real, that is, a distinct community which had its own ritual practices, accepted the authority of a separate charismatic leader, and transmitted its own distinct legal and theological traditions, existed in the midst of a hostile majority. As the ideal could not be actualized, it was to exist within the real. In a sense, the Shi‘is constituted a community within a community, preserving religious and communal independence from the political structure, and maintaining autonomy from the *de facto* regime.

### **Short and Long Term Effects**

The contribution of the ‘*ulama*’ had both short and long term impact. In the short run, they were able to provide religious guidance to the Shi‘is of their own times and to respond to the accusations from their Sunni counterparts. Gradually, the role and the functions of the scholars within the community increased. Through their literary, juridical, and polemical activities, the ‘*ulama*’ transmitted the religious tradition that would shape the beliefs and ritual practices of later generations. They also collected *hadith* from the various books that they inherited and compiled these into major books of *fiqh*.

In the long run, the traditions they transmitted, the books of law they composed, the rulings they



issued and their responses to questions formed the basis of the elaboration and elucidation of subsequent scholars. Later scholars (*muta'kkhirun*) used the opinions of earlier scholars (*mutaqaddimun*) as a basis to elaborate on principles of deriving laws that were not explicitly stated in the texts and to practice *ijtihad* so as to meet to the needs of different eras. Thus, in their juridical treatises, later scholars frequently cited the opinions of and differences between the earlier scholars before giving their own *fatwa* on a particular legal issue. In the absence of the Imams, it was the Shi'i scholars who filled the indispensable position of the leadership of the community.

### **Evaluation:**

Teachers who teach the role of the Shi'i '*ulama*' should teach it in the wider context of the socio-political milieu and challenges that the scholars faced. They should also examine their contribution not only in terms of guiding the Shi'i community but also to respond to the criticisms levelled by their Sunni interlocutors. Teachers should further examine how the Shi'i scholars reacted to the favorable Buyid regime and the adjustments these scholars had to make when the Sunni Seljuq dynasty came to power in 1055. It is only by analysing the broader socio-political

milieu that the pivotal role of the Shi‘i *‘ulama*’ can be fully comprehended and appreciated.

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## **NOTES**

# RESOURCE PAPER

## SHI'ISM IN THE EARLY *GHAYBA PERIOD*

This study examines the pivotal role that Shi'i 'ulama' and traditionists played soon after the twelfth Imam (A.S.) went into ghayba. Starting with the time of Kulayni, the study shows that the scholars played different roles. They transmitted traditions of the Imams, protected and guided the Shi'i community, and defended Shi'i beliefs against their adversaries. The study also examines Shi'i history within the wider framework of the Sunni milieu. Thus, it examines the Shi'i century when the Buyids came to power and afforded patronage to Shi'i scholars and discusses the impact of the Seljuq dynasty on the Shi 'i community during the times of Shaykh Tusi.

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