mourning for Husayn which take place every year during the month of Muharram and which are the most visible affirmations of personal allegiance in the Shi'i world.

Chapter four describes those performances which took place in Karachi over the first ten days of Muharram 1404 A.H./1983 C.E. The activities at several sites throughout Karachi are presented and analyzed. Chapter five examines the controversial practices of self-flagellation and fire walking associated with mourning for the family of the Prophet.

CHAPTER ONE

# The Nature of Shi'ism in Its South Asian Context

On a warm Thursday evening in Karachi the congregation is just finishing its evening prayers. In the hall adjacent to the mosque, people are gradually gathering around the *minbār*, the staircased pulpit at the front of the room. Some pass through the small room located just to the side of the hall and touch or kiss the relics--some of them made of gold and silver—which have been given as pious offerings to indicate the donors' devotion to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. To one side of the *minbar* a small boy recites poetry in Urdu in memory of the slain Imam Husayn, the martyr of Karbala. Little by little, the room fills with men. Some sit quietly near the rear of the room with tape recorders, preparing to make a permanent record of the evening's performance so that they can ponder more carefully at a later time the things they will hear this evening. Others sit nearer to the *minbar* and, upon taking their seats on the floor, begin to sob almost immediately. As the crowd grows in size, salutary shouts of "*Ṣalāvāt Muhammad wa Al-e Muhammad*" can be heard. A man shouts out "*Nade Haidarī!*" and is answered with a stirring chorus of "*Yā 'Ali!*" Suddenly, from the side of the hall a small man dressed in long coat and lambswool Jinnah cap walks to the *minbar*. Seating himself upon it, he adjusts the microphone and recites a formulaic *khuṭba* in Arabic. He begins slowly and methodically—first reciting a verse of the Qur'an and then explicating it in a purposive manner. As he proceeds, he gradually becomes more animated. As he makes the points of his argument, he gestures with his hands—at times slapping his knees and calling on the crowd to offer salutations to the family of the Prophet. At times he finds himself interrupted by shouts from the crowd of "*Ya 'Ali!*" The tone of his speech grows increas-

ingly more emotional. At a certain point in his presentation his demeanor shifts. He begins to tell a story—the tragic account of the martyrdom of Husayn. Although his audience has heard this tale many times before, its impact has not diminished in the countless retellings. At the first mention of the field of Karbala, some of the men in the audience begin to cry uncontrollably and beat their chests. The sound of women's voices wailing can be heard rising up from the other side of the curtain which divides the room.

The man on the *minbar* himself begins to sob as he speaks of the heat of the desert and the thirst of the innocent children. He praises the courage of the comrades of Husayn and condemns the cruelty of the troops of his adversary Ibn Ziyad. The images are familiar, but they still evoke waves of sorrow from the crowd. The man on the *minbar* begins to speak in the present tense. These are no longer events occurring in a far distant past, but a present reality. One sees the body of the slain 'Abbas, the standard-bearer of Husayn. One hears the parched cries of the child Sakina. Once more the evil Hurmula slays the infant 'Ali Asghar as he is held up in the arms of the Imam. Once more Husayn dies a stranger in a land far from his home. And yet it evokes the same degree of sadness from the crowd as if they were hearing it for the first time. The entire crowd is wrapped in grief. Tears stream from the eyes of the men in the audience. At the conclusion of the narrative the man on the *minbar*—the teller of the tales—collapses in tears before his audience. As the performance ends and the crowd collects itself, those who have come to mourn the sufferings of the martyrs of Karbala have reaffirmed their loyalty and devotion to them. They will also take home with them whatever new insights into their religion they may have learned from the discourse which preceded their tearful encounter with the story of Karbala. To the extent to which the man on the *minbar*—the *zākir*—was able to elicit tears and impart information, he has succeeded in his task.

## Mourning Rituals and Their Role in Shi'i Piety

The performance described above, known in South Asia as a *majlis* (plural *majālis*) or lamentation assembly, is one of a large complex of ritual activities in Shi'i piety which center around the act of mourning. Such rituals are referred to collectively as *'azādārī* and are an essential part of Shi'i practice. Although they take place throughout the year, they are most prominent during



the ten-day annual observance of the martyrdom of Husayn held during the first part of the lunar month of Muharram. These rituals of mourning for the martyred Imam Husayn and his companions are perhaps the most visible and provocative of all Shi'i religious performances. The nightly gatherings of *majalis* during those ten days are occasions both for the presentation of religious discourses and the shared and public expression of a grief that is central to Shi'i piety. Included among the other acts of *'azadari* performed during this period are elaborate mourning processions (*julūs*). These processions are occasions for the public display of evocative visual representations of Karbala. These include representations of the tomb of Husayn; the Imam's mount, *Zūljinah;* the standard of his brother 'Abbas topped with the five-fingered hand of Fatimah; and the coffins of the Imam and his companions. Such symbols serve as intense reminders of an event which, after nearly fourteen centuries, still triggers passionate devotion in the hearts of believers. For some this devotion manifests itself in acts of physical mourning: the image of men lashing their backs with knives or chains, or walking upon fire and coals in mournful solidarity with Husayn is evidence of the compelling nature of this grief in the context of Shi'i piety.

The intensity of this grief is a reflection of the love and devotion for the Prophet and his family which underlies it. Shi'i rituals of lamentation should not be taken as evidence of an obsession with suffering and sadness per se. The roots of Shi'i ritual are not to be found in a pathological attraction to grief—as is suggested by the sort of media analysis which understands Shi'i Islam as a religion with a persecution complex[1]—but rather in Shi'i Muslims' devotional allegiance to the Prophet Muhammad and his family. This can be adduced from the importance of celebratory rituals and manifestations of piety which are unrelated to mourning. Attempts to define Shi'i piety solely in terms of a religion of revolt or despair miss the point of Shi'i rituals of mourning, which must be understood against the backdrop of the metaphysical assumptions about the family of the Prophet which define Shi'ism as a religious structure.

## Shi'ism Defined

Shi'ism is one of the two major schools of thought and practice in Islam. It takes its name from the arabic word *shī'ah* meaning "party of" or "supporters of" and refers specifically to the supporters of 'Ali b. Abu Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the

Prophet Muhammad. ʿAli is believed by the Shiʿa to have been designated by God and Muhammad as the rightful successor to the authority of the Prophet. The second major school is commonly referred to as Sunni Islam—a shortened form of *ahl al-sunnah wa-l jamāʿah* (the people of the custom and the community). This has emerged as the majority school.

Perhaps because of the numerical superiority of the Sunni school, it has been common in Western scholarship to define the parameters and characteristics of Shiʿi Islam by comparing and contrasting it with the majority Sunni school. This approach denies to Shiʿi Islam its intrinsic sensibilities and identity. Some Islamicists have gone so far as to argue that the majority Sunni school represents orthodox Islam and that Shiʿism—and by extension Sufism, even though this mystical form of piety has normally flourished within a Sunni milieu—is a dangerous heresy which has continually threatened the mainstream of Islamic thought and practice. This has been the stated position of such influential "Orientalist" scholars as Gibb[2] and Goldziher.[3] It can also be found in the writings of important modern Muslim commentators such as Fazlur Rahman.[4] This argument supposes that the intention of God and Muhammad was that the Islamic *ummah* (the community of all Muslims) would organize itself along the lines of Sunnism. While it is possible to understand the motivations and precommitments of Muslim scholars in this matter, it is surprising that so many non-Muslim writers have entered so vigorously into what is essentially a normative theological debate. Perhaps the answer can be found in the spirit of rationalism that permeated scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the golden age of Orientalism. It is likely that the Orientalists sought out those elements of Islam which mirrored their own predilections. They turned with particular favor toward those branches of Islam which rejected as irrational and superstitious the miraculous and mystical dimension of religion. For the Orientalists, Shiʿi and Sufi Islam, both full of miraculous narrative, were seen as intrusions into the pure—if somewhat arid—monotheism of Muhammad as propagated by such groups as the Wahabis, the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, and the Deobandis. Thus in much Orientalist scholarship Shiʿi and Sufi Muslims are presented as something less than paradigmatic members of the community of Islam and are described and defined by the ways in which they differed from the "true" Islam.[5]

This tendency can be further illustrated by the way in which scholars of Islam incorporated the theological language of church history in setting up categories for the study of a non-



Christian religion. The history of Christianity was written in such a way as to picture an orthodoxy continuously at war with heresies which threatened its unity. Ernst Troeltsch, himself trained in church history and drawing on the work of Max Weber, used the Christian and European categories of sect, cult, and church as the basis of a typology of religious organization. This typology is also prevalent in Orientalist scholarship. While it is possible that these categories may be useful in understanding the development of Christian sectarianism, they cloud the reality of the development of different schools of thought in Islam. Such a position assumes that Sunnism always existed as an "orthodoxy" against which "sects" such as Shiʿism struggled for adherents—a position which is historically inaccurate. And yet this is the position held by a great number of Islamicists, who define Shiʿism oppositionally by demonstrating how it diverges from the "true" Islam.

Obviously, such an approach is unacceptable for any objective description or analytical exploration of Shiʿism. Research into Shiʿi thought and practice either through the study of textual materials or through ethnographic methods must take into account the ways in which the members of that community define themselves. Shiʿi Muslims do not primarily define themselves oppositionally; they define themselves first and foremost as Muslims, and they consider their forms of piety to be an authentic—to their minds, the most authentic—response to the event of the Qurʾanic revelation. Like all Muslims, they find justification for their practices in the Qurʾan and in the lives of the Prophet, his companions, and family. They define their beliefs in positive terms—a belief in God and his Prophet that is supported by and coupled with a belief in the doctrine of *imāmat* (divinely designated leadership). A consequence and characteristic of this belief is an emotional devotion to the cause and persons of the *ahl al-bayt* (the household of the Prophet).

One useful way of distinguishing between Sunni and Shiʿi piety has been suggested by Professor Karrar Hussain.[6] It relies on the fact that Islam as a cultural phenomenon can be best defined as a series of responses to both a man—the Prophet Muhammad—and a book—the Holy Qurʾan. It is a response to what Marshall Hodgson has called "the Qurʾanic event,"[7] an event which is seen by all Muslims regardless of their "sectarian" affiliation as the crucial occurrence in the history of the world. The crucial distinction between the Shiʿi and Sunni schools of Islam can be discovered most clearly in their respec-

tive attitudes toward the relationship between "the Man" and "the Book."[8]

These attitudes are reflected in the familiar *ḥadīth* (report concerning the Prophet) of "the pen and ink." According to this *hadith*, when the Prophet was upon his deathbed, he said: "Prepare ink and paper that I will have a letter written for you which will be a cause of guidance for you and prevent you from being misled." 'Umar, the future second caliph of the Islamic state, replied: "His illness has run out of hand and he is delirious." He then added: "For us the book is sufficient."[9]

From the Shi'i perspective such a statement verges on blasphemy. According to Shi'i prophetology, for the Prophet at any time to be out of his senses is an impossibility, as his station demands that he always be fully conscious. Furthermore, the Shi'a declare emphatically that the book is in no way sufficient. Shi'ism has argued consistently for the necessity of a living interpreter of the Qur'anic event.[10]

As Karrar Hussain has argued, for the Shi'a the proof of the verity of the Qur'an lies with the Prophet. The Qur'an is the word of God because Muhammad has declared it to be so. As Hussain, himself a Shi'a, stated during a series of public lectures on the Qur'an during Ramadan in 1983: "I have no way of knowing that the Qur'an is the book of God, except that the Man has told me that it is. And he has never lied to me."

He has further argued that the existence of the Qur'an is historically preceded by that of the Prophet. At the time when 'Ali, Abu Bakr, and Khadijah accepted Islam, there were but a few verses of the Qur'an in existence, and thus it could not have been the Qur'an which was the focus of their allegiance. Their allegiance was first to the man Muhammad and only secondarily to the book which he was revealing. According to this argument, it was the exceptional character and personality of Muhammad which provided them with proof of the verity of the book.[11]

For the Sunnis, however, this argument is reversed. The Qur'an is its own proof by virture of its *i'jāz* (miraculous uniqueness). The proof of the verity of the Prophet's claim to be the messenger of God is the fact that he is designated as such by the Qur'an. Thus, in Sunni Islam "the book" takes a degree of primacy over "the man."[12] There is in this an important distinction between the positions of Sunni and Shi'i Islam. For the Shi'a, the proof of the verity of the book lies in the man, whereas for the Sunni the proof of the man lies in the book. To put it in a slightly different way, for the Shi'a it is evident that the Qur'an



is the book of God because the Prophet has said that it is, whereas for the Sunni it is clear that Muhammad is the Prophet of God because the Holy Qur'an has so designated him.

Thus, Shi'ism can be defined as the *school of thought in Islam which stresses 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*. The method of distinguishing between the two major schools of Islam on which this definition is based is nonjudgmental. It is based upon the intrinsic natures of the two schools rather than on a simple comparison of the minority to the majority school. Most importantly, when tested in the field by interviewing Muslims of both persuasions, it became clear that both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims found this to be a fair and inoffensive way of distinguishing between the two schools.[13]

## The Consequences of Personal Allegiance in Shi'i Islam

This emphasis on allegiance to "the man" has important consequences for Shi'i thought and practice—including Shi'i ritual. For the Shi'a, to be a Muslim is to offer allegiance to a person as well as to a message. This view of Islam as a personal allegiance facilitates the generation of sacred narratives about the persons to whom allegiance is due. The personal histories of the Prophet and his *ahl al-bayt* have become important as sources of spiritual training and focuses of ritual activity. Therefore, any understanding of Shi'i thought and practice must begin with an examination of Shi'i attitudes toward the *ahl al-bayt*—in particular, 'Ali, Fatimah, and the Imams—which underpin the entire system.

A central principle of Shi'i Islam is the importance of devotional allegiance—both individual and communal—to the person of the Prophet. This allegiance is understood both in political and spiritual senses and includes allegiance to those understood to be the legitimate successors to the Prophet's authority. Shi'i Islam believes in the necessity of a living guide for the Muslim community. This is the basis of the theory of *imamat*: that after his death the Prophet had intended 'Ali, his son-in-law and cousin, to succeed him and that after 'Ali authority would be designated to certain of those from among his descendants through Fatimah, his daughter and sole source of grandchildren. It is further held that 'Ali's right to succession was usurped by Abu Bakr and 'Umar, the first two caliphs of the Islamic state.[14] Western writers have tended to emphasize the political dimension of these events. While their political importance

should not be denied, in the minds of many Shi'a the argument with the Sunni position does not focus on the issue of the political office of the caliphate. Political authority is indeed a part of the problem, and for Sunni Muslims it may be the central issue. But for the Shi'a the central problem is not that of the early Muslim community's rejection of 'Ali's right to the caliphate but rather its rejection of his inherent station as Imam. In Shi'i thought the Imamate is a spiritual station which remains an intrinsic characteristic of the person of the Imam whether or not it is recognized by anyone else. That 'Ali should have been the caliph, and would have been if the people had chosen wisely and in accordance with the wishes of God and his Prophet, is not questioned by the Shi'a. The caliphate was indeed his due. But in the final analysis his acceptance of the role of caliph is left to the will of the people, whereas his role as Imam is a matter of designation (*naṣṣ*) both by God and the Prophet and can be neither questioned nor removed. For the Shi'a the Imamate is something much greater than a mere political office. It is an office of miraculous power and carries with it both mystical and soteriological dimensions.

It should be emphasized that the Shi'a do not understand the concept of Imamate as something external which has been tacked onto Islam. They offer evidence for their position from both the Qur'an and *hadith* literature—just as the Sunnis do for their religious positions. Part of their argument is based on Surah 2:124 of the Qur'an, in which God promises that he will make of Ibrahim and his descendants Imams. They argue that this not only justifies the existence of the station of Imam but that it proves the station of Imam to be higher than that of prophet because Ibrahim was already a prophet at that time when God promised to make him an Imam, and surely God was not intending to lower Ibrahim's status. This commonly held attitude should not be taken as an indication of *ghūllūw* (extremism); the Shi'a do not place 'Ali at a level higher than Muhammad, as Muhammad is said to contain both prophecy and Imamate in his person. But 'Ali's excellence is thought to be second only to that of the Prophet. Like the prophets, 'Ali and the Imams are thought to be *ma'ṣūm* (protected from error). They are the guides of the community, possessing extraordinary and esoteric knowledge and wisdom. The metaphysical status of 'Ali and Muhammad is made especially clear in the famous *hadith* in which the Prophet declares that he and 'Ali shared a preexistence before the creation of the universe. According to this *hadith* the Prophet was reported to have said that God had created



a light before the creation of the world and that he and 'Ali were taken from that light. The light was then placed into the loins of Adam and passed down uncorrupted through the lineage of Ibrahim until it was divided between Abu Talib and 'Abdullah—the respective fathers of 'Ali and Muhammad. This light was then rejoined when 'Ali married the Prophet's daughter Fatimah. It then was split again with the birth of her two sons, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn.[15] For the Shi'a the Prophet and his family are more than simply human beings as they represent the existence of a preexistent prophetic light in the world. Thus, the usurpation of 'Ali's right to the caliphate is seen as an implied rejection of that prophetic light.

This light imagery is an important part of Shi'i narratives. Of particular importance is the famous *Ḥadīth Kissa'* (*hadith* of the cloak) which Shi'i families sometimes use ritually as a way of invoking the *ṭufail* (intercession) of the *ahl al-bayt*. In this narrative the Prophet calls together the four closest members of his family—'Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husayn—one by one under his cloak. The angel Jibra'il appears and declares that he has come because he was attracted to the brilliant concentration of light on the earth which could be seen all the way up in the heavens.[16] These five "Persons of the Cloak" collectively as well as individually are the center of much devotion in Shi'i piety. In South Asia they are known as the *panjatan pāk*—the pure five—and they are symbolized by the ubiquitous Fatimid hand in which each of the five fingers represents one of the five *ahl al-bayt*.

Devotion to Muhammad and the *ahl al-bayt*—in particular, the People of the Cloak and the Imams (and to some extent anyone who can show a genealogical connection with 'Ali and Fatimah)—is thus a central, if not the central motif, of Shi'i piety. Shi'ism is the primary vessel for that element of Islamic piety which Marshall Hodgson has designated as "'Alid loyalism." Hodgson defines 'Alid loyalism as

> that varied complex of special religious attitudes associated with loyalty to the 'Alids (descendants of 'Ali)—not only reverence for the 'Alids themselves, but certain exalted ideas about Muhammad's person and the supposition of a secret teaching he transmitted especially to 'Ali and so on—whether these attitudes appear among Jama'i Sunnis or among those who, by explicitly rejecting the *jama'ah*, identified themselves as Shi'is in the proper sense.[17]

Although 'Alid loyalism is most obvious in Shi'i piety, this con-

cept is also crucial for any comprehensive understanding of Islam—either Sunni or Shi'a—in South Asia. In Pakistan and North India, and particularly in Sindh and Multan, devotion to the 'Alid cause and to 'Alid personages is not limited to the Shi'i community but can also be found among Sunni Muslims. This is especially true among those Sunnis influenced by the Sufi tradition. Furthermore, ritual acts of piety associated with devotion to the *ahl al-bayt* are frequently to be found in non-Shi'i contexts.

## Devotion to the *Ahl al-Bayt* in Shi'i Piety

Devotion to the *ahl al-bayt* which is inherent in the concept of 'Alid loyalism is thus understood as the central motif of Shi'i piety on which all other aspects of piety can be said to rest. The lives of the fourteen *ma'ṣūmīn* (the Prophet, Fatimah, and the twelve Imams) are held up as examples for the rest of humanity. Furthermore, the *ahl al-bayt* represent real individuals who may continue to influence peoples' physical and spiritual lives.

It may be objected that by raising devotion to the family of the Prophet to a central position in Shi'i piety I am belittling the importance of Shari'ah, or Islamic Law, in Shi'ism. I do not mean to imply that Shari'ah is unimportant in the lives of Shi'i Muslims (or that antinomianism is rampant among the South Asian community where I did my field research). As Hodgson has indicated, Shari'ah-mindedness—the sense of allegiance to an autonomous body of religious law—is a crucial element of Twelver Shi'i piety.[18] However, on the basis of my own field observations and interviews, I would argue that devotion to the family of the Prophet constitutes the bedrock of Shi'i piety. While it is undoubtedly true that obedience to the Shari'ah is an important part of piety and that the *'ulamā*, or religious scholars, because of their knowledge of that law, play an important role in South Asian Shi'ism, the fulfillment of legal obligations can be seen as one result of devotion to the Prophet and his family. One follows the law as an expression of one's devotion, but love (*muḥabbat*) comes first. For example, it is commonly held that devotional rituals of an emotive nature—such as mourning for Husayn—can, in some instances, make up for lapsed Shari'ah obligations.[19] On more than one occasion during field interviews I was told, in reference to my own religious situation, that it was not so important whether or not I was nominally a Muslim as long as I held the *ahl al-bayt* in love (*muhabbat*) and respect (*iḥtirām*).



## The Importance of Narrative in Shi'i Piety

One source of the popularity and vitality of Shi'i forms of piety can be found in the strong narrative dimension inherent in 'Alid loyalism. Just as the Prophet is the proof of the Qur'an because of his character, the Imams inspire allegiance because of their personalities and virtuous actions. 'Alid loyalism focuses its attention on the human component of the Qur'anic event, emphasizing loyalty to "the man" Muhammad and by extension to his descendants. The meaning of life, the intention of religion, and the proper modes of behavior for human beings can be sought not only in explicit revelations from God to human beings through a prophet who is understood merely as a channel for divine revelation, but also in the sacred and mythological history of Muhammad and his family—a history replete with miraculous events and wondrous occurrences. It is a history rich with compelling drama and high tragedy. In the context of ritual and narrative the sacred heroes and heroines of Islam can be encountered in the performance of acts of extreme compassion, bravery, and sacrifice. These exceptional people are held up as paradigms of behavior. The Prophet and his family are understood as having lived lives full of incidents which are meaningful signs for those possessing the spiritual insight to read them. For Shi'i Muslims the root paradigms of Islam are most clearly articulated in narratives about the *ahl al-bayt*.

The importance of this narrative dimension is difficult to overestimate. As Abdulaziz Sachedina has noted, the formal theology of Shi'ism is almost identical with that of the Mu'tazilites.[20] But Mu'tazilism was too dry and arid to appeal to more than a small intellectual elite. It is not primarily theology which attracts people to a religious movement. The theological ideas of the Mu'tazilites survived, but they needed an emotional vehicle to carry them. That vehicle was the dramatic nature of Shi'i narrative which, wedded as it was to the lives of people who were not only companions of the Prophet but his blood kin as well, allowed the people who told and remembered those narratives to enter into a vicarious experience of intimate allegiance to him.

## The Role of the Miraculous in Shi'i Narrative

A good part of the power of these narratives arises from the nature and status of their protagonists as they are understood in the Shi'i community. Because of their exceptional character—the

fact that they were all *ma'sum* and in some sense participants in the prophetic light—the Prophet and the Imams are thought to be capable of performing miracles. The performance of these miracles is not relegated to some past history; the Imams are believed in some sense to be still living and available to believers. One reason for this belief is the complementary belief that all of the Imams were martyred. As the Qur'an assures Muslims that martyrs do not die but instead live in a paradisical state, it is commonly believed that their *tufail* can be sought and that by this intercession—which sometimes can be obtained simply by being in proximity to symbols of their power and authority—not only spiritual but mundane difficulties can be removed by miraculous means. Thus, the possibility of encountering the miraculous is an important element of Shi'i piety.

The lives of 'Ali and Muhammad provide the Shi'a with a rich source of these narratives, many of them embued with the wondrous and the miraculous. These narratives are available both in bound editions and in inexpensive pamphlets which can be purchased in the bazaars around Shi'i religious centers. They also find their way into the content of *qawwālī* (Sufi music) and *na'ats* (devotional songs about the Prophet). A great deal of this literature concerns 'Ali—his exceptional abilities, his compassion toward his enemies, his dealings with the invisible world of the *jinn*, his miraculous birth and childhood, and his special and extremely close relationship with the Prophet. Much of this literature carries about it the fragrance of popular devotion and folk religion. For this reason some of the more educated Shi'a with whom I had conversations denied the authenticity of much of it—particularly that which imparts a supernatural quality to the Prophet himself, such as accounts that he left no footprints on sand but did leave them on stone or that he was constantly shadowed by a cloud. But more often than not the sources for these narratives can be found in the Persian and Arabic writings of accepted authorities such as Shaykh Mufid and Allamah Majlisi.

Miraculous occurrences are a part and parcel of the Shi'i vision of the universe. One of the common terms for miracles is *kharq-i 'ādat*, which means "a break in the habitual."[21] The role of the miraculous in Shi'i narrative is often connected with the recurrent theme of persons seeking or recognizing the need for giving allegiance to the Imam. In such narratives the Imams demonstrate their authority through miracles. Such a break in the normal patterning of events is given to prophets and other holy personages as a proof of their claims to religious authority. Whereas prophets and Imams can work actual miracles, Sufi



saints are deemed capable of *karāmāt*, a lesser form of this type of occurrence.[22]

Once again, the source of this belief is to be found in the Qur'an and *hadith* literature. The Qur'an itself is replete with miracles of earlier prophets; for example, Jesus' speech in the cradle and the parting of the Red Sea. And, although there has been a tendency to discount the miraculous elements of Islam among nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islamic reformers, who claim that *the* miracle of the Prophet is the incomparable Qur'an itself, such early biographies of the Prophet as that of Ibn Ishaq contain accounts of miracles. Tabari's history is also full of miraculous signs in the lives of the prophets and Imams.

It is not surprising that such stories are focused upon by later Shi'i writers. Majlisi devotes an extremely long chapter to the miracles of the Prophet in his Persian work *Ḥayāt-ul Qulūb*,[23] a primary source for the *majlis* reciters of Pakistan. Mufid includes a lengthy chapter on the miracles of Imam 'Ali in his *Kitāb al-Irshād*.[24]

Shaykh al-Mufid lists categories of miracles and also gives as a reason for the existence of such phenomena that in them "normal human behavior is transcended and in it there is a great wonder and an illustrious miracle to the minds of men."[25] These miracles are thus seen as evidences for the verity of the claims of the Imams to spiritual authority. This is particularly apparent in his chapter on 'Ali in *Kitab al-Irshad*. Mufid credits 'Ali with perfect knowledge, which he possessed even as a child. In the manner of the Islamic Jesus, he is shown as preaching from the cradle. Mufid notes his exceptional military prowess, including feats of strength and bravery which (he argues) could only emerge from a divine source. Mufid even assigns to the miraculous the fact that 'Ali's reputation as a great and good man has survived despite constant Ummayyad propaganda against him. Most importantly, he notes the ability of the Imams and prophets to know "hidden things." Included in this category of miracles is 'Ali's knowledge of the treacherous deception of his former supporters Talha and Zubayr and the hidden deformity of a man from among the Kharijites.[26]

Knowledge of this kind is common in stories about the Imams who would, when approached by enemies who had come to curse them, reveal to them events in their past which they could not possibly have known by rational means. Such stories often end with the conversion of the enemy to the cause of the Imam. As Michael Gilsenan has pointed out in his study of Egyptian Sufism, this ability to know the hidden events of a person's life

is one proof of the power of a saint. Such knowledge of what is hidden in a social sense is a metaphor for knowledge of what is hidden in a religious sense.[27] And, of course, the Imams are said to have esoteric knowledge of the Qur'an which is thought to have been passed on from the Prophet himself.

The primary function of the miraculous as outlined by Mufid is to demonstrate the authority of the Imam. The ability to work miracles is taken as evidence of spiritual authority. Perhaps foremost among these abilities are the special cognitive powers of the Imams which allow them to understand the hidden meanings of things. These are represented in stories of the miraculous abilities of the Imams to know secret things. Such stories provide a means for reflecting upon the relationship between the exterior (*ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*bāṭin*). In them mundane secrets become metaphors for a greater form of hidden knowledge. Furthermore, the account of a miracle may have both inner and outer meanings, allowing for a multivocality which enhances the power of the miracle story.

## Miraculous Narratives as Breaks in the Rational

An important element of miracle tales is the creation of a literary reality which facilitates belief in the possibility of a nonrational order which transcends the logical categories of day-to-day experience. In fact, this creation of a "subjunctive realm"[28] in which the improbable is imagined and experienced is a major motif in almost all of Shi'i ritual piety.

Within such narratives, a miraculous act is often preceded by an illogical and threateningly irrational activity which is either alleviated, explained, or inexplicably known by the Imam—although the event occurred far from the Imam's physical proximity and was thus hidden from him. This type of occurrence is particularly common in the ahistorical *mu'jizat kahanis*, or miracle stories, which are commonly used for the making of spiritual vows called *mannats*. Often the protagonists of these stories initially find their physical situation miraculously and inexplicably changed for the better—often from poverty to wealth through the blessing of a holy personage. But by forgetfulness or unthankfulness—generally the omission of a promised pious action—conditions become reversed in the extreme. The new situation often constitutes a break in the predictable structure of reality which proves to be extremely disorienting.



For example, in one such miracle story a man and his wife awake to find their home destroyed and their children dead. They further discover that whatever food they attempt to eat becomes putrid before it reaches their mouths. In another story a couple who have rejected the miraculous power of the *ahl al-bayt* eventually find themselves jailed by a king who believes that they have murdered his son (as a melon which they had in their possession has miraculously assumed the shape of the young prince's severed head). In the end it is only through the intervention of the *ahl al-bayt*, who remind these unfortunate couples of unfulfilled actions and advise them of means to fulfill them, that things are restored to normal.[29]

These situations possess many of the characteristics which Turner ascribes to liminality. Miraculous occurrences provide an arena in which one is forced to think in terms removed from those of the normal day-to-day world of ordinary social relations. The witness to a miracle is forced to focus upon transcendent realities. In the context of Shi'i Islam, these greater realities are connected with claims of spiritual authority. When one accepts the authority of the Imams—which ultimately comes from God—then one's life proceeds predictably and satisfactorily. But forgetfulness produces a state which makes the world thoroughly irrational; it is only by the intervention of the Imams (again in miraculous fashion) that the true nature of reality—that is, the proper nature of authority—can be reflected upon and proper allegiances can be restored.

## The Relationship between 'Ali and Muhammad as a Paradigm in Shi'i Narrative

Stories of the special relationship between 'Ali and Muhammad constitute an important source for Shi'i narrative. This relationship is a paradigmatic one for the community. If one of the functions of miraculous narrative is to allow the believer to step outside of his or her day-to-day reality in order to reflect upon the deeper meaning of things in the form of powerful symbols, then one of the most ubiquitous and powerful of these points of reflection is the relationship between the Prophet and 'Ali. As Shi'ism is the religion of personal allegiance to the Prophet, 'Ali is the paradigm for all subsequent Islamic behavior in that he is the perfect servant of the Prophet.

The clearest statement of their relationship is to be found in the story of the event at Ghadir Khumm. The circumstances of

this event are known to all Shi'a and the day of its anniversary is an occasion for community celebration. The narrative states that while returning from his final pilgrimage to Mecca the Prophet stopped at the well at Ghadir Khumm and asked the crowd accompanying him: "Am I not closer to you than you are to yourselves?" The crowd answered in the affirmative, and the Prophet said: "I leave you two things that if you hold to them you shall not err. One is the book of God and the other is my *ahl al-bayt*." He then called 'Ali up in front of the crowd and said: "Whoever I am the *mawla* of, this man 'Ali is his *mawla*. Oh God, befriend whoever befriends him and be hostile to whomever is hostile to him and support whomever supports him and desert whomever deserts him."[30]

The translation of the word *mawla* is problematic. It means both "servant" and "master." It also means "friend." For the Shi'a this event is evidence that the Prophet indeed had intended for 'Ali to be his political successor, for to simply swear friendship to him publicly in such an ostentatious manner would have been unnecessary. The narrative implies that there is a strong connection between obeying 'Ali and obeying God—equating the state of being God's friend with that of being the friend of 'Ali.[31]

The intimate relationship between 'Ali and the Prophet is delineated even more clearly in the story of the night on which the Prophet made the Hijrah from Mecca to Medina. This narrative is a favorite one of readers of *majlis*, and it is often embellished with greatly emotive language. According to this narrative, before the Prophet embarked for Medina, a plot had been hatched by the Quraysh to assassinate him. The angel Jibra'il informed the Prophet of this plot, and the Prophet went to see 'Ali. Muhammad told him of the nature of the plot—to murder him in his sleep—and requested that 'Ali should sleep that night in his bed in order to conceal his departure. As recorded by Majlisi, 'Ali's reaction is significant. He first asks if this action will in fact ensure the safety of the Prophet. Having been assured of this, 'Ali laughed, thanked God for the privilege of risking his own life for that of the Prophet, and fell to the ground in adoration. He then rose and said: "Go wherever God has commanded; let me be your sacrifice. Order what you please and on my life I will do it; and in this and in every other matter I supplicate the grace of God." Majlisi then notes that Muhammad compares 'Ali's willingness to sacrifice himself to that of Isma'il. Thus the love between 'Ali and Muhammad is shown to be congruent to that between Ibrahim and his son.[32]



The Shi'a believe that the Qur'an refers to this event in Surah 2:208: "There is also a man who sells his soul for the sake of those things which are pleasing to God." This aspect of 'Ali, that he is a man who has sold his soul to God, is one that is used very effectively in the oral performance of *majlis*. In *majlis* 'Ali is put forth as a paradigm for the proper attitude of submission to God's will. He has sold his soul to God by having offered his life in loving devotion to the Prophet. By giving himself to the Prophet he has sold himself to God. As one *zakir* puts it, 'Ali—who has normally *shab bedār* (one who seldom slept)—"sold his *nafs* (soul) to Allah and thus on this one night slept peacefully and without fear." 'Ali dedicated his spirit solely to God, and "what greater jewel is possible than this—bringing his will fully and totally into accord with God's will."[33]

At this point the *zakir* from whom I have taken this account almost takes this line of reasoning to the point which some might misconstrue as *ghulluw* or 'Alid extremism when he says: "Before [this night] it was the *nafs* [soul] of 'Ali, but after that night of the Hijrah this *nafs* no longer remained 'Ali's. Rather the *nafs* of 'Ali became the *nafs* of Allah; where it was the hand of 'Ali it has become the hand of Allah. Where it was the tongue of 'Ali it has become the tongue of Allah; where it was the eyes of 'Ali they have become the eyes of God. . . . Who is like this 'Ali . . . whose intention are God's intentions?"[34]

Although this passage is related in a Shi'i work, the close connections between Shi'i spirituality and Sufism can be clearly seen. This transformation of the *nafs* through dedication to the Prophet can be seen as the model for Sufi practice in which the *nafs* of the neophyte is transformed by devotion to the shaikh—who in one sense serves as a metaphor for the Prophet—so that the *nafs* of the devotee is brought into the proper relationship with the moral order of the universe as intended by God. It also should be noted that in the Sufi path *vilāyat-i murshid* (devotion to the spiritual master) ultimately leads to *vilāyat-i rasūl* (devotion to the Prophet) and ultimately to *vilāyat-i khuda* (devotion to God).

This understanding of the symbolic power of the relationship between God, the Prophet, and 'Ali is difficult to overestimate. If Muhammad is God's beloved and the center of the spiritual hierarchy on Earth, then 'Ali as the finest example of devotion to the Prophet becomes a model for all Muslims. A proper understanding of the relationship between these two men becomes an essential element in the lives of those wishing to live a deep spiritual life. Again their mutual relationship is structurally like that

of the Sufi shaikh and his disciple in the condition of *fanā fī-shaykh*, in which the self of the disciple is annihilated in the self of the master.

The clearest example of this for the Shi'a is to be found in the incident at Mubahila, which is referred to in the Qur'an (Surah 3:61). According to the Qur'anic narrative, the Prophet challenged the Christians of Najran to a spiritual contest calling the curse of God upon the liar. They agreed to meet at Mubahila on the next day. The Prophet was told by God to bring his sons, his women, and his self (*nafs*). The story ends with the Christians backing down and asking to be allowed to keep their own religion. The story is important for the Shi'a because Muhammad appeared with Hasan and Husayn, his sons; Fatimah, representing his women; and 'Ali, as his *nafs*. Accordingly, Muhammad equates his own self with 'Ali, and 'Ali is henceforth known as *nafs-i rasul* (self of the Prophet). According to Shi'i sources commenting on this event, the Christians were so moved by the divine radiance emanating from the *panjatan pak* (the pure five—Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husayn) that they were afraid to risk debating the Prophet.[35]

Two other stories indicative of this special relationship between 'Ali and Muhammad are particularly well known and used in the Shi'i community. One concerns the miraculous birth of 'Ali. According to tradition, 'Ali was born inside the *Ka'bah*, the holiest shrine of Islam. After his birth the Prophet entered the holy structure and, upon touching his tongue to 'Ali's, 'Ali recited the *shahādah* (confession of faith) or (according to some) a verse of the Qur'an. Thus, 'Ali is identified with Jesus, who is depicted in the Qur'an as speaking revelations in the cradle.[36]

An even more popular story among South Asian Shi'a is the narrative of the siege of the Fort of Khaybar. The following version is an amalgam of several versions in both English and Urdu, oral and written.[37]

Involved in an extremely difficult and lengthy siege at the Jewish fort of Khaybar, the Prophet—who was suffering from a severe headache—gave his standard to Abu Bakr, who was repulsed from the walls of the fort and forced to retreat. He then passed the standard to 'Umar, who could do no better. The Prophet then said: "Tomorrow I shall hand over my standard to one who loves God and his Prophet and who is the beloved of the Lord and his Prophet and who is a fearless charger who never turns his back upon a foe. At his hands, the Lord will give victory." Of course, all of the Prophet's companions were anxious to be so honored. 'Ali was apparently out of the running for this honor, as he was suffering from ophthalmia and thus was temporarily blind. However, when he awoke the Prophet sought out 'Ali but could not find him. He was informed that 'Ali was a great distance away and unable to see. But 'Ali was summoned and appeared before the Prophet (some say that this was caused to happen miraculously). The Prophet then took 'Ali's head in his lap and applied his saliva to his eyes as a balm. At that instant his eyes were miraculously healed. 'Ali took the banner and armed with his sword, *Zūlfiqār*, stormed the citadel and defeated the inhabitants of the fort. At one point 'Ali singlehandedly removed the door of the citadel, which seven other persons later could not move, and used it as a shield. From above an angel was heard to announce: "There is no hero but 'Ali and no Sword but *Zūlfiqār*."



Because of this victory 'Ali was given the title "Mushkil Kusha," which means "remover of difficulties." 'Ali is thought by many to be the remover of difficulties both mundane and spiritual. The formulaic call "*Ya 'Ali Madad*" ("Oh Help, 'Ali") is commonplace not only in speech but also in written form on objects such as necklaces and bumperstickers. It is even repeated—in South Asia—by many Sunni Muslim as well, for 'Alid devotionalism often transcends the ordinary divisions between Sunni and Shi'a.

## The Self-Understanding of the Shi'a vis-à-vis the Larger Islamic World

I have attempted to define Shi'ism on its own terms as that religious school of thought in Islam which emphasizes the personal relationship between the believer and the Prophet. The accompanying emphasis on narrative as a way of learning proper Islamic values and behavior and the metaphysical character of the family of the Prophet are important characteristics of Shi'i Islam which are independent of its relationship with the larger Islamic world. Shi'i piety, however, emerged amidst struggles for power in the Islamic world, and there are ways in which the Shi'a understand their faith in an oppositional fashion.

'Alid loyalist attitudes have been greatly influenced by the history which forged the early Islamic community. They represent one way of interpreting the social drama which began when the Prophet came down from Mount Hira for the first time and be-

gan to preach his message, which implied not only a change in spiritual direction but also in social and economic loyalties. The majority of the Quraysh—the leading tribe of Mecca, of which Muhammad's clan of Banu Hashim was a prestigious but economically weak part—were caught on the horns of a dilemma. As Hodgson has pointed out, loyalty to this new entity of Islam consisted of two elements—a loyalty to the message and a loyalty to the messenger himself.[38] As the Prophet gained important converts and the number of Muslims increased, it was at least theoretically possible (and from the Shi'i perspective this is exactly what happened) that the Quraysh, in recognizing the attraction and power of the message, could simply have adopted the Qur'an as a central focus of piety and left the Meccan social system and its hierarchies basically intact.

But for many, loyalty to the message meant loyalty to the messenger as well. Particularly during the early portion of Muhammad's career, when the Qur'an was but a few verses and there was no way one could speak of a full-fledged Shari'ah law, membership in the community was determined to a large degree by allegiance to the person of the Prophet. It might be possible for the Quraysh to tolerate the message and coopt it to fit their own ends, but the Prophet as a leader represented a distinct threat to the Meccan system.

A period of crisis reached its peak with the event of the Hijrah. The Quraysh had grown fearful enough of the Prophet's authority that, regardless of the social consequences, they deemed that he should be killed. The Prophet thus set out to found a new community in Medina and began a period of struggle which culminated in the conquest of Mecca and the final reaggregation of the Muslims to the larger Meccan community, with the Quraysh accepting the Prophet's authority over them.

With the death of the Prophet, however, the old tensions reasserted themselves. The lines were drawn between those who emphasized the authority of the man and those who emphasized the authority of the book. Some Muslims went so far as to argue that in the absence of the Prophet *zakāt* (almsgiving) was no longer mandatory, as they had given allegiance only to him. In the Shi'i view of history the initial breach between the Quraysh and the Muslims was never truly healed. The Muslims of the Quraysh, after the death of the Prophet, attempted to organize the Muslim *ummah* around the Qur'an and the Sunnah not only of the Prophet but of the companions of the Prophet as well, thus cloaking their own political decisions with an air of religious legitimation. The Prophet was merely the supreme



model of the proper follower of the message. The center of piety was to be the Qur'an, and allegiance to the Prophet was relegated to a lower status than allegiance to the Qur'an. As the Shi'a look back on this period of Islamic history, the rights of Banu Hashim, in particular the right of 'Ali to the caliphate, were denied in spite of the explicit wishes of the Prophet. Banu Umayyah—the Prophet's former enemies—were given preference, and the *ahl al-bayt* were oppressed or ignored.

It is here that the importance of mourning in Shi'i piety becomes crucially important. The importance of the mourning does not lie in the act of mourning itself but rather in the enormity of the crimes against the *ahl al-bayt*—as they are understood by the Shi'a—coupled with the innocence of the victims. The rejection and persecution of the *ahl al-bayt* is seen as a rejection of Islam itself. Fatimah, 'Ali, and the Imams became symbols of a trust betrayed.[39] The stories of their individual sufferings under what are seen to be unlawful usurpers became the substance of narratives recited in *majlis* which still inspire a mixture of grief and outrage; the Imams are seen as persons who remained true to their ideals even when ignored or abandoned by their friends. The chiliastic idea that a hidden Imam would return and bring about a just social order in a corrupt world became a rallying point for later Shi'ism, and 'Ali became a symbol of the oppressed and maltreated hero as well as an example for those who may have felt similarly ignored by the powers that be.

No other drama of this period of early Islamic history has so captured the imagination and ritual activity of Shi'i Muslims as the martyrdom at Karbala of Imam Husayn, the last living grandson of the Prophet and the last of the People of the Cloak who was killed by the official forces of the Islamic state. This event is understood by the entire Shi'i world as one of the definitive actions in all of world history.

Karbala is remembered through the recitation of narratives and the performance of ritual. The events of Karbala are central to Shi'i piety and therefore are focuses of intense ritual activity. The ritual approaches to the narrative of Karbala can be broadly broken down into two categories; those which are public and those which are more private and take place inside the home. Each of these two types of rituals will be dealt with separately in the succeeding chapters. Both types of rituals are clearly linked to the central attitudes of Shi'i piety. First of these is the belief that the Prophet had decided and designated that his proper successors were to be found among his descendants—in partic-

ular, 'Ali and his lineage through the Prophet's daughter Fatimah. This succession is not purely political in its nature but also metaphysical. This can be seen in the belief that Muhammad and 'Ali were created before the creation of the universe from a divine light. Connected with this is the belief that the special creation of 'Ali and Muhammad from this spiritual light and their especially close relationship with God has endowed them and their spiritual descendants with special abilities and powers. Furthermore, the miraculous abilities of the Imams are not something confined to a long dead past; rather, as the Imams are martyrs and thus still living, human beings have access to their power. Finally, there is the belief that the Prophet passed down a special form of knowledge to the Imams and that this knowledge allows the Imams to see what is hidden, both in a spiritual and a material sense.

Thus, narratives about the *ahl al-bayt* are an important element of Shi'i piety. A consistent theme in these narratives is that of humanity's rejection of "the Truth"—whether that rejection is the result of greed, ignorance, or simply forgetfulness and weakness. Ultimately, the rejection of the claims of the *ahl al-bayt*—replete with murder and betrayal, and culminating in the occultation of the last of the twelve Imams, who will return as an eschatological figure when human beings are finally ready to accept him—constitutes for Shi'i Muslims a rejection of the Prophet and of Islam itself. In the virtuous and heroic conduct of the *ahl al-bayt* in the face of every imaginable difficulty, Shi'i narrative presents the believer with a dramatic, evocative, and compelling paradigm of behavior.

As stated above, the most famous and most emotionally powerful of these narratives is that of the tragedy of Husayn at Karbala. The bare bones of the story are simple enough. Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, is called from Medina to Kufa by men who claim to be his supporters against the tyrannical despot Yazid b. Mu'awiyah b. Abu Sufyan. Yazid had demanded that Husayn offer to him an oath of allegiance, but Husayn refused. Husayn learned that Yazid planned to have him killed while he was in Mecca; so, in order to avoid bloodshed in the holy city, Husayn with his family members set out for Kufa in Iraq. In the Iraqi desert near the town of Karbala, Husayn and his small band were met by the forces of Yazid, under the command of Ibn Ziyad. Husayn was cut off from water and deserted by all but his closest friends and relations. His supporters in Kufa deserted him as well under pressure from Yazid's men. Husayn offered to go back to Mecca or to disappear into the



frontier, but Ibn Ziyad would accept nothing less than his oath of full allegiance to Yazid. One by one Husayn's companions—vastly outnumbered—went bravely to their deaths. His half-brother 'Abbas, while attempting to bring water for the child Sakina, was brutally murdered—his hands cut off to prevent him from carrying water back to the camp of Husayn. The infant son of Imam Husayn, 'Abdullah—better known as 'Ali Asghar—was shot by an arrow while the Imam, under a flag of truce, requested water for the innocent child. Finally, having watched all but one of his male relatives and companions—his own son 'Ali, who was ill in the tents of the women—go to their deaths, the Imam was cut down in combat, alone and thirsty in a strange land. His body was brutally trampled and his corpse left ignominiously naked in the desert, unburied. The women were paraded uncovered through the city of Damascus. The head of the last remaining grandson of the Prophet was carried into the city atop a pole. That such a thing could happen within living memory of the Prophet shocked the conscience of the Islamic world. That such a thing could happen at all still shocks the hearts of Shi'i Muslims, and in the yearly remembrance of this tragedy in the month of Muharram the Shi'a encounter the events of Karbala in a dramatic fashion.

It is not surprising that these events should constitute the central focus of the most important public rituals of Shi'i Islam. The remembrance of Husayn is performed with variations in the different cultural regions where Shi'i Islam established itself; yet, although each region has brought its own sensibilities to bear, the underlying emotion remains the same.

Devotional allegiance to the Prophet and his family, which is seen so clearly and forcefully in the Muharram rituals commemorating the battle of Karbala, finds articulation in numerous ways. Devotional allegiance has communal, familial, and personal dimensions. The following chapters examine some of the ways in which Shi'i Muslims demonstrate their love for the people of the Prophet in both public and private arenas.