Introduction

In 1998, I was living in Syria and studying Arabic at the language center of the University of Damascus. I had also arranged classes in Islamic law in Sayyida Zaynab, a small suburb of Damascus built around an important Shī'ī shrine, which contained a number of formal schools for the training of Shī'ī religious scholars.[1] The Muslim month of fasting (Ramaḍān) that year fell in January. Ramaḍān is a festive month in which Muslims abstain from food, water, and sex each day from sunrise to sunset. I often broke my fast in Sayyida Zaynab, as many schools would open their doors to the public near sunset and provide free food and drink. After the evening prayer, a scholar would offer a small talk centered on ritual or theology in simple Arabic that even I (as a student) could understand with little difficulty.

One day, the talk was given by an extremely distinguished scholar who was in Damascus representing a prominent Iranian Grand Ayatollah (the most senior scholarly title in Twelver[2] Shī'ism). He began by identifying the five central pillars of Shī'ī Islam (these are discussed further in subsequent chapters) as (i) the belief in one God, (ii) the belief in Muḥammad as the last Prophet, (iii) the belief in the Day of Judgment, (iv) the belief that God is just in a manner humans can rationally understand, and (v) the belief in Imāms, divinely inspired leaders descended from the Prophet. The first three pillars were foundational to Islam and anyone who accepted them was unquestionably a Muslim. This meant that all Sunnīs were Muslims and had to be treated as coreligionists rather than as apostates or heretics. The acceptance of the final two pillars established that an individual was

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[1] In many works, the Shī'a are referred to as "Shī'ites" as a result of a translation convention adopted by early European and American scholars. I use the term "Shī'a" for the larger community and the term "Shī'ī" as an adjective (e.g., "a Shī'ī belief"). "Shī'ī Muslim" denotes a single believer.

[2] In the interests of clarity, I use the term "Twelver" throughout the book to describe the group that came to be known as the Twelver Shī'a. This is anachronistic because the term would have made little sense before the disappearance of the Twelfth Imām in 874.

not just a Muslim but a Shī'ī Muslim as well. The scholar marked this distinction through the use of the term "believer." Both Sunnīs and Shī'a were Muslims. The Shī'a, however, were also "believers," which placed them in a more select category with access to a greater truth.

The scholar's creation of a hierarchy of belief deftly affirmed the unity of the larger Muslim community while preserving the special status of the Shī'a. It managed to deemphasize religious differences even as it maintained the theological independence of Shī'ism. This tension between a broad Muslim collective and a discrete Shī'ī identity is a central feature of Shī'ī history. In many respects, it is difficult to differentiate between Sunnī and Shī'ī Muslims. Both groups share the same prayer ritual, fast during the same month, and perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, variations persist in the structure of the prayer, the rules for breaking the fast, and the order and form of the rites of the pilgrimage. The relevance of these differences has varied over time depending on social and political factors, as discussed throughout the book.

When Muslims are asked to explain the differences between Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam, they usually cite the historical disagreement over the succession to the Prophet or variations in ritual such as the placement of the hands in prayer. The theological explanation given by the Shī'ī scholar in my anecdote is rare. Yet it is theology that supports and reinforces historical disputes or minor ritual variations. To make sense of the terms "Sunnī" and "Shī'ī," it is necessary first to document theological differences and then to explore their implications. These implications are not obvious, and they are often shaped by historical context and communal need. This book traces the development of Shī'ī communities by examining the dynamic interplay between theology, memory, and historical circumstance.

Subtle differences in theological interpretation among the Shī'a themselves influenced their remembrance of the past. In other words, the Zaydī, Ismā'īlī, and Twelver Shī'a offered competing visions of the early history of Islam that aligned with their particular theological outlooks. As the experiences and circumstances of each Shī'ī community changed, they continually reimagined their past to make sense of their present. The evolution of each Shī'ī group was thus a constant negotiation of theology, narrative, and historical contingency. Each group was also in continuous conversation with different Sunnī communities. At times, these relations were cordial and cooperative; at other times, they could be quite hostile and antagonistic.

In this book, I hope to shed light on the some of the questions that likely motivated a reader to pick it up in the first place: What are the differences

between a Shī'ī and a Sunnī Muslim? How did these differences develop over time in varying political contexts? Why do these identities appear to provoke so much conflict in the contemporary Muslim world? The first two questions provide the central framework for much of the material in Chapters 1 through 10. In the conclusion, I turn to the third question and demonstrate how a complex and historically informed understanding of Shī'ism can help us better understand the political developments in and religious geography of the modern Muslim world. Here I provide, for example, an analysis of the Sunnī–Shī'ī civil war that erupted in Iraq in 1996 that draws on theology (i.e., the Imāmate – Chapter 2), narrative (i.e., the disappearance of the twelfth Imām – Chapter 4), and historical experience (i.e., the relations between the Twelver Shī'a and political authority – Chapters 7 and 10).

I. PREVIOUS APPROACHES IN INTRODUCTORY WORKS ON SHĪ'ISM

This section focuses on previous introductory works on Shī'ism and is designed specifically for those interested in the history of the genre. Those readers with little interest in such matters may wish to proceed directly to the section titled "The Structure of the Book."

Most introductory works on Shī'ī Islam employ one of two approaches. The first rests on a historical framework that emphasizes a distinct moment of fragmentation in the early history of the Muslim community. It contends that when the Prophet Muḥammad died in the western Arabian town of Medina in 632, a dispute arose as to the identity of his successor. The majority of his Companions supported Abū Bakr, Muḥammad's father-in-law and close confidant, who led the Muslim community (*umma*) as the first caliph for two years and was followed, in turn, by three other prominent Companions (i.e., 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī). This group of four successors was revered by subsequent generations of Sunnī Muslims and labeled "the rightly guided caliphs." A minority of the Companions rejected the selection of Abū Bakr and argued that the strongest claim for succession rested with 'Alī, the Prophet's son-in-law and first cousin. This group was particularly devoted to Muḥammad's close family – referred to as the *ahl al-bayt* (lit. people of the house) – and maintained that the leadership of the Muslim community was the exclusive purview of the Prophet's direct descendants. The views of the first group are today associated with Sunnī Muslims, whereas those of the second characterize Shī'ī Muslims.

The second approach prevalent in introductory studies of Shī'ism utilizes a theological or legal framework. This involves summarizing the central theological tenets of Shī'ī belief with a particular emphasis on the Shī'ī institution of the Imāmate (the legitimate leadership of the Muslim community). Scholars of this variety often follow their theological analyses with an examination of Shī'ī legal principles and practices. The resulting works take the form of handbooks or primers recounting the basic beliefs of most Shī'ī communities. Most such introductions concentrate exclusively on the Twelver Shī'a, who constitute a vast majority of the global Shī'a population, while excluding numerically smaller groups such as the Zaydīs and the Ismā'īlīs.

Both of these approaches have some benefits, but they do not account for a dynamic and evolving Shī'ism, the modern manifestation of which is in fact the result of a significant number of theological and political compromises. The challenge lies in simplifying the history and theology of the Shī'a without losing its critical nuances. In this book, I attempt to strike such a balance by examining the foundational theological doctrines, historical narratives, and political developments of Shī'ism without drowning readers in a cacophony of names, dates, and technical terms. Thus, I begin with a discussion of the core theological beliefs that underlie contemporary Shī'ism. Many of these doctrines are later developments (dating from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries), but they have come to hold a central place in Shī'ī understandings of history, ritual, and politics. Moreover, they have profoundly affected the ways in which different Shī'ī communities remember the past, replacing the complexities of the first few centuries of Islam with a cohesive (but revisionist) narrative. Unlike previous introductions to Shī'ism, the present work covers the Ismā'īlīs and the Zaydīs in addition to the more populous Twelvers.

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into ten chapters organized into four distinct thematic sections. The first two sections highlight the fundamental beliefs of different Shī'ī communities and the ways in which these beliefs helped shape (and reshape) Shī'ī historical memory. The same dynamic is characteristic of memory in non-Muslim contexts (e.g., the American Civil War) and has been commented on by a long line of scholars going back as far as Thucydides, who remarked that people make "their recollection fit in with their sufferings."[3] The US Civil War, for example, is remembered

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[3] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, bk. II, chap. 7.

in fundamentally contradictory ways by different demographics. A white
Virginian landowner in the early twentieth century might have viewed it
as a failed struggle for southern independence. A black former slave may
have considered it a war for emancipation. A white conscript from New
York may have seen it as a rich man's war that simply exploited the poor.
Historical accounts written from each of these perspectives would have
been shaped by personal beliefs, values, and economic realities. The same
can be said of Shī'ī historical memory of the early Islamic period. It is
necessary, therefore, to identify the central theological beliefs of Shī'ism
before turning to Shī'ī historical narratives.

The chapters in Section 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) focus on the theological
framework held in common by most modern Shī'ī communities. Chapter 1
examines the seminal Shī'ī doctrine of rational divine justice (*'adl*) accord-
ing to which God is just in a manner than can be rationally understood
by human beings. In other words, God's actions are always just by human
standards. They can be explained by reference to our common under-
standing of justice. This idea has profound implications for free will and
motivated many Shī'ī scholars to advocate for revolution for the purpose
of establishing a just social order. It certainly provided the impetus for the
founding of Zaydī and Ismā'īlī states throughout history and contributed
to the growth of modern Twelver political activism.

Chapter 2 focuses on the institution of the Shī'ī Imāmate (the legiti-
mate leadership of the Muslim community). Related to the doctrine of
divine justice, the Imāmate is an important arena of contention among
the three Shī'ī communities at the heart of this study. Although every Shī'ī
group restricts the office to descendants of the Prophet through 'Alī, they
differ on issues such as the Imām's primary role or the scope and source
of his knowledge. Is the Imām simply a scholar entrusted with creating
and administering a state founded on Islamic principles of justice, or is
the Imām a divinely inspired figure whose religious interpretations are
protected from error and beyond human scrutiny?[4]

It is important to bear in mind that the theological distinctions made in
the first section are in no sense inevitable. They were later developments
that won acceptance in Shī'ī scholarly circles. There is often a tendency
to seek "essential" differences between Sunnism and Shī'ism to explain in
a definitive manner the split in the Muslim community. This approach
misconstrues the Sunnī–Shī'a divide and borders on a deterministic

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[4] Shī'ī groups also differ regarding the importance of the Imām in the salvation of the community on
the Day of Judgment. This topic is particularly relevant in Chapters 6 and 8 (for the Ismā'īlīs) and
Chapters 7 and 10 (for the Twelvers).

explanation of the historical development of two equally plausible interpretations of Islam. I foreground theology strictly to provide context for the history. As mentioned earlier, this is because Shī'ī theology helped shape the Shī'ī community's remembrance of its past.

The second section of the book turns to the historical memory of different Shī'ī groups. Here it is necessary to distinguish between moments that unite a community and others that fragment it. A contemporary example of such a distinction might be found in American discourse on immigration. There is a broadly accepted narrative that claims that the United States is a land of opportunity for immigrants, who can achieve wealth and status through hard work. The biography of Andrew Carnegie serves as a unifying narrative for this broad American ideal. On the fragmentary side are narratives of dissent and polarization embodied perhaps in labor history. Some interpretations of the Pullman Strike of railroad workers in Chicago during the summer of 1894 focus on the disruption of the economy, whereas others emphasize the drive for social justice and humane working conditions.[5] In this case, an event serves to fragment social groups or economic classes on the basis of their specific interests.

A similar dynamic of unifying or fragmenting historical narratives is evident in Shī'ī historical works. The summaries of Chapters 3 and 4 that follow contain a lot of names and dates. There is no need to commit them to memory at this point. They will be discussed again with more context and background in the chapters themselves. At this point, I am simply flagging their importance for interested readers.

Chapter 3 explores narratives that unite the Zaydī, Ismā'īlī, and Twelver Shī'a. These include (i) the succession to Muḥammad and (ii) the massacre of Ḥusayn (Muḥammad's grandson) and his followers in the Iraqi region of Karbala in 680. Although all three Shī'ī groups ascribe a critical importance to these events, they offer quite different narratives of them, reflecting each group's specific theological views. The Zaydīs, for example, articulate a predominantly political narrative that differs sharply from the grand cosmological narratives of the Twelvers and the Ismā'īlīs. This chapter also discusses ritual commemorations of the appointment of 'Alī as the Prophet's successor and the massacre of Ḥusayn, which played a central role in the coalescence of Twelver and Ismā'īlī communal identity.

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[5] The most popular interpretation of US history from the perspective of labor might be Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, c1980).

Chapter 4 examines divisive narratives that reflect the fragmentation of the larger Shī'ī community. These include (i) the revolt of Zayd b. 'Alī (a grandson of the earlier-mentioned Ḥusayn) in Kufa in 740, (ii) the disputed succession to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (a great-grandson of Ḥusayn) in 765, and (iii) the occultation of the twelfth Imām in 874. Zayd's revolt became the basis for the Zaydī prototype of the Imāmate. The Ismā'īlīs grafted a number of important doctrinal beliefs onto their accounts of al-Ṣādiq's succession, emphasizing the designation and death or disappearance of his eldest son, Ismā'īl. The occultation of the twelfth Imām provided the Twelvers with their most distinctive feature: a belief in a hidden Imām who remains the titular head of the larger community.

After covering the theological and narrative foundations of Shī'ism, the book turns, in the third and fourth sections, to the historical development of Shī'ī groups. The third section weaves together material from the first two sections to evaluate the influence of political and social forces on the emergence of the "classical doctrines" of Zaydī, Ismā'īlī, and Twelver Shī'ism. Chapter 5 focuses on a series of oscillations in Zaydī Shī'ism between Sunnī and Shī'ī theological positions. Chapter 6 examines the development of an Ismā'īlī Shī'ism that had to balance the expectations of a living Imām with the reality of his potential human failings. Chapter 7 traces the shift that took place in Twelver Shī'ism as the authority of the Imām was increasingly appropriated by religious scholars.

The fourth and final section of this book documents more recent developments in the three Shī'ī communities. Recent is, of course, a relative term. These chapters specifically examine those shifts and transformations over the past few centuries that directly resulted in the current formulation of Zaydī, Ismā'īlī, and Twelver Shī'ism. Chapter 8 highlights fissures within Zaydism along tribal and genealogical lines. These divisions became particularly potent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when they were exploited by groups backed (financially and politically) by the Saudi state. Chapter 9 discusses changes in (Nizārī) Ismā'īlism ushered in by the community's recent Imāms (known by the title Aga Khan), including the conscious production of a transnational community vested in global humanitarian causes. Finally, Chapter 10 confronts the dramatic politicization of the Twelver Shī'a over the past half century as evidenced by the writings of secular and religious scholars.

Each of the ten chapters concludes with a list of recommended readings for further study. These lists provide structured guidance for those seeking more detailed information in a particular area or those interested in recent scholarly developments in the study of Shī'ism. The reading lists also

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include the primary and secondary sources used in the course of a given chapter. The lists are provided in lieu of detailed footnotes, which are minimized in the interest of readability.

iii. a user's guide

The structure of this book is intentionally flexible and provides multiple avenues for approaching the study of Shī'ism. Although a chronological reading (beginning with Chapter 1 and proceeding through Chapter 10) is strongly recommended, readers may choose to take a different approach if they are interested in a particular aspect of Shī'ism (e.g., history) or a specific Shī'ī group (e.g., the Ismā'īlīs). The discussion that follows outlines the benefits of a few strategies. There are certainly others that may be employed at a reader's discretion.

For those with some background in Islam, I suggest a cover-to-cover reading. Such an approach begins with the current theological edifice of Shī'ism (Chapters 1 and 2) before turning to its historical narratives with an understanding that theology influenced the Shī'ī remembrance of the past (Chapters 3 and 4). This strategy conforms to one of the central premises of the book – namely, that it is important to understand the belief structures of Shī'ī groups before plunging into a dizzying array of names and places. It then traces the evolution of different Shī'ī groups into the modern period (Chapters 5–10). This is not a conventional structure for an introductory work, but it is one that provides the best context for the growth and development of Zaydī, Ismā'īlī, and Twelver Shī'ism.

For a novice with no background in Islam, the best approach might involve reversing the first two sections, thereby privileging historical narratives over theology. This would entail beginning with Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on key moments in Shī'ī history while also providing a broad chronology of the Prophet's life and a significant amount of historical context for the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. Theological elements are mentioned in the historical chapters, but these remain fairly accessible. Readers could then turn to Chapters 1 and 2, which examine more abstract doctrines such as free will and the nature of evil. Such a reading foregrounds the intrigues, rebellions, and succession disputes that feature heavily in the early history of Islam.

The book may also be used as a primer for individual Shī'ī groups. For example, if a reader is exclusively interested in Zaydī Shī'ism, he or she may follow the first two sections with Chapter 5 from the third section and Chapter 8 from the fourth section. This sequence would provide a

strong theological and historical understanding of Zaydī Shī'ism coupled with an examination of its evolution into the modern period. A similar strategy is feasible for Ismā'īlī (particularly Nizārī) Shī'ism (the first two sections together with Chapters 6 and 9) and for Twelver Shī'ism (the first two sections together with Chapters 7 and 10).

Finally, it is possible to read individual sections of the book in isolation. The first section's discussion of theology, for example, offers a detailed analysis of the central pillars of modern Shī'ism. It also addresses some of the critical differences between the Shī'a and other theological groups. In the process, the section explores the implications of numerous theological ideas and the ways in which these implications were either integrated or rejected by the later Shī'a. The first section thus focuses not only on the Shī'a but also on the broader landscape of early Muslim theology. In a similar vein, the second section explores key moments in the early history of the Muslim community, the third section surveys key historical transitions in Shī'ism, and the fourth section evaluates the impact of modernity on majority-Shī'ī regions of the Muslim world.

iv. disclaimers

It is necessary, in any introductory work, to make difficult decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of particular topics. This book is no exception: treatment of certain topics and subjects is either severely curtailed or altogether absent. The most striking omission is that of a broad survey of the basic principles of Islam. The current study is not intended as an introduction to Islam in the traditional sense. There is no discussion of the "pillars of Islam" or examination of the meaning of prayer or the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (the *Hajj*). The book assumes that readers understand that Muslims believe in the Prophet Muḥammad, pray five times each day, fast during the month of Ramaḍān, and conceive of the Qur'ān as the word of God. The Prophet's biography and the Qur'ān are discussed in the context of Shī'ī views of 'Alī, but they are not analyzed in their own right. In other words, this book is primarily about the Shī'a and their distinctive practices and beliefs; it is not an introductory work on Islam as a whole.

Ritual practice is an important topic that might merit an entire chapter or section of its own in an introductory work. There are a number of distinctive Shī'ī rituals that developed around the purported designation of 'Alī as the Prophet's successor and around the killing of Ḥusayn. The forms of these rituals vary from region to region under the influence of local cultural practices. In addition, as mentioned earlier, there are subtle

(and sometimes more pronounced) differences in the Shī'ī performance of universal Muslim rites such as the daily prayer, fasting in Ramaḍān, and the annual pilgrimage. Although pertinent rituals are discussed in some chapters, this book does not offer a comprehensive discussion of ritual itself. In those chapters in which ritual is particularly important, references to useful primary sources and secondary studies are provided in the lists of recommended readings.

This book also does not offer a detailed analysis of Sufi influences in Shī'ism (often referred to as *'irfān*). This is not meant to minimize the importance of Sufism. It may even be argued that Sufi thought was one of the guiding elements in the development of Ismā'īlī and Twelver Shī'ism. The absence of a specific chapter on Sufism stems from two considerations. First, there are numerous excellent introductory works on Sufism in print, some of which discuss its relationship with Shī'ism. In fact, the study of Sufism is arguably the most-developed and best-known aspect of the Muslim intellectual tradition. The benefits of repeating much of this material are outweighed by the need to discuss elements of Shī'ism (e.g., theology, historical memory) that are rarely found in introductory works. Second, although Sufism is not analyzed in its own right, it features prominently in Chapters 6 and 7 during discussions of Ismā'īlī and Twelver struggles to balance rationalist legal and mystical interpretations of core religious texts. The study of Sufism is thus partially integrated into relevant parts of the book.

Difficult choices also had to made with respect to the scope of the Shī'ī groups discussed in the book. There is little mention of early Shī'ī sects that have not survived into the modern period. In some instances, these groups may have encompassed a majority (or at least a plurality) of the overall Shī'ī population or articulated theological doctrines later adopted by a wide range of Shī'ī groups. A comprehensive historical survey would certainly need to address these groups, but the current study is primarily interested in the contemporary landscape of Shī'ism. Smaller communities of Shī'a with a localized presence are also notably absent in this book due to the space limitations of an introductory text. These include the Alawites (or Nuṣayrīs), power holders in Syria under the Assad regime; the Alevis of Turkey, who hold distinctive beliefs and practice unique rituals; and the Musta'lī Ismā'īlīs of Yemen and India.

A final point to bear in mind concerns the issue of perspective. The first two sections of the book rely on the writings of Shī'ī groups themselves. The theological framework that informs these chapters developed centuries after the death of the Prophet and then influenced historical memory. It is