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On the Ismaili Understanding of History: A Doctrine of Cyclical Time

Muzaffer TAN, Dr.

Ankara University, Faculty of Divinity

Abstract:

Ismailism, one of the most important branches of Shî'a, approaches the history as the entire of cyclical processes. This approach that can, therefore, be called as the theory of cycle/cycles (*dawr/adwâr*) constitutes the basic principle of Ismaili understanding of history. Thus, this theory must be put correctly so that the Ismaili understanding of history should be understood properly. In addition, in parallel with the developments in the Ismaili teaching, this theory has been subjected to some transformations. Therefore, it is more proper, as to Ismaili, to speak of various theories of *dawr* rather than only one. The paper will deal with the transformations in question and evaluations that took place in course of time. The periods during which these transformations happened will be restricted mainly to three distinct periods as Early Ismailism, Fatimid Ismailism and Nizari Ismailism.

Key Words: Cyclical Time, Ismailism, Adwâr, Speaker Prophets, Nutaqâ, Seven Epochs, Abû Hâtim al-Râzî

Early Ismailism, as the period of fermentation and incubation of the Ismaili movement (Corbin; 1953, 7), is the most obscure major phase in the entire history of Ismailism. It extends from the proto-Ismaili origins of the movement, in the middle of the 2nd/8th century, to the establishment of the Fatimids by the 'Ubayd Allâh al-Mahdî in the year 297/909, a period of almost one and a half centuries (See

Daftary, 1990; 91). Although almost nothing is known about the early History of Ismailism, it can be assumed at least that up to the time when 'Ubayd Allâh al-Mahdi openly claimed his imamate and thus split up the movement into two branches in 286/899, Ismaili mission was grounded mainly upon the *parousia* of Muhammad b. Ismâîl, the seventh and last imam as an awaited al-Mahdi or al-Qâim, riser. Therefore, the Ismaili teaching, including the understanding of history, can be said to have established itself, in all respects, upon this major notion.

As can be concluded from a number of Ismaili and non-Ismaili works, the (hiero)-history of mankind divided by the early Ismailis into seven main epochs (*adwâr*), one of which were being represented by the seven speaker prophets (*al-nutaqâ*), the last being the seal of the series. This series of seven nâtiqs were recognized as law-announcing prophets, the so-called *ulû'l-azm* or the prophets with resolution. They were consisting of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Muhammad b. Ismâîl, grandson of b. Ja'far al-Sâdiq respectively. Each of these *nâtiqs* was also succeeded by a legatee (*wasî*) also called foundation (*asâs*) or silent one (*sâmit*) who would reveal the unchangeable esoteric truths (*haqâiq*) hidden in the religious law (*sharî'a*) of their own era but not bring a sacred law, thus being "silent". The legatees of the first six eras were Seth, Shem, Ismâîl, Aron, Sham'ûn al-Safâ and Alî b. Abû al-Tâlib. They each, as Corbin said, forms a sort of syzygy with his wasî, i.e. Adam-Seth, Noah-Shem, Abraham-Ismâîl, Moses-Aaron, Jesus-Sham'ûn, Muhammad-Ali (Corbin, 1983; 184). Furthermore, each *wasiy* was also succeeded by seven imams called *mutimm*, completer (pl. *atimmâ*) who guarded the true meaning of the message in both exoteric (*zâhir*) and esoteric (*bâtin*) aspect (See, al-Nawbakhtî, 1936; 61-64; al-Qummî, 1963; 81-83; Mansûr al-Yaman; 1948, 198; Ja'far b. Mansûr al-Yaman, 1984; 30, 42, 63, 71, 128).

As for the Qâim, he was the absolute authority, as the last of the prophets, manifesting the hidden meanings (*haqâiq*) of all religious laws revealed in the past. The seventh imâm of each *dawr* became the nâtiq of the following *dawr*, abrogating the *Sharî'a* or sacred law of the previous *nâtiq* and promulgating a new one While the first six epochs were called, as a whole, the era of concealment (*dawr al-satr*), the seventh and last one, on the contrary, was designated the era of revelation, or manifestation, since in this era the truths would be fully revealed to mankind, thus would be a dawr of spiritual knowledge with no need for religious laws (See al-Nawbakhtî; 1936, 61-63, al-Qummî, 1963; 84; al-Sijistânî; 1966, 181; Madelung, 1988; 94; Stern; 1983, 49ff; Daftary; 1990, 104-105, 139). Within this scheme we can recognize the element of continuation of prophecy or divine guidance. There also seems to be a sense of culmination of human history, that is, the advent of a messianic figure, the Qâim.

The aforesaid esoteric and gnostic Ismaili system of thought, according to which the divine truth was concealed in esoteric aspects of religion, basically consists of a cyclical view and cosmology of history of mankind, and was reflecting, to an extent, a variety of influences such as Hellenic, Judaeo-Christian, Gnostic as well as eschatological ideas of the earlier Shiites, and was developed in terms of the eras of different prophets recognized in the Quran. This cyclical conception was also combined with the Ismaili doctrine of the imamate inherited from the earlier Imamis (Cf. Walker, 1978; 355-366; Jamal, 2002; 11).

Early Ismailis held, as stated by al-Nawbakhtî and al-Qummî, both of which contain the two of the oldest extant accounts of the Ismaili doctrine that the paradise of Adam was granted to Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl as the Qâim al-Mahdî, in which all the forbidden things were liberated (See al-Nawbakhtî, 1936; 63; al-Qummî; 1963, 83-84). Viewing from this perspective, all the religious laws brought by the prophets in the past including the Prophet Muhammad would naturally lose their validity. Therefore, the claims laid in some late sources (al-Baghdâdî, n.d.; 257ff; al-Dailamî, 1987; 14-16) that Ismailis held some antinomian (*ibâhî*) views may have reflected, in a sense, this approach allegedly adopted by them. In this sense, Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl, as the Qâim al-Mahdi, has been considered to have promulgated a new *sharî'a* and thus abrogated the previous one, i.e. the sharia of the Prophet Muhammad, the nâtiq of the sixth prophetic era. Nevertheless, in order to abrogate the sharî'a of the sixth era, the Qâim had to reappear in the world. Therefore, it seems that Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl was granted so crucial a place in early Ismaili thought that it would not be untrue, in a sense, to divide the history of mankind into two parts, namely, before Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl and after him. In other words a lawless, antinomian state prevails over the world in the cycle of the Qâim, just as it did in that of Adam. However, when compared with later sources written by Ismaili authors, these accounts sould not be forgotten to contain certain mistakes or distoritons, including, for example, the counting Ali among the great prophets with resolution (*ulû al-'azm*) and the notion of new sharî'a given to the Qâim (See Nomoto, 1999; 86, 102).

Although Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl was regarded as the seventh and last imam who combined in himself the features of both *nâtiq* and *asâs* and would initiate last epoch by abrogating the law of Islam, his own divine message would not entail a new law, however, but would consist of the full revelation of the esoteric truths concealed in all the previous messages, the immutable truths of all religions. Thus, in this final, messianic age there would be no need for religious law. Accordingly, Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl, the last of the *natiq*s and imams, would rule in justice as the Qâim and would then bring to an end the physical world. His *dawr* would thus mark the end of time and human history (Ibn Hawshab, 1948; 189, 191-92, 197 ff.;

Ja'far b. Mansûr, 1984; 14, 104, 109; al-Sijistânî, 1966; 181-93; al-Qâdî al-Nu'mân, 1960; 33, 40, 42; also see Corbin, 1983; 30 ff.; Walker, 1978; 355-66).

Despite partly, the traces of this cyclical understanding of history may be found in a number of early Shiite extremist (*ghulât*) ideas. In this sense, particularly al-Khattabiyya, an extremist Shiite sect, has an important place. While some prominent heresiographers, such as al-Ash'arî (324/936), al-Baghdâdî (429/1037) and Nashwân al-Himyarî (573/1175) associated the view of *nâtiq* and *sâmit* imams with al-Khattâbiyya (al-Ash'arî, 1965; 9; al-Baghdâdî, n.d.; 218; Nashwân al-Himyarî, 1948; 166), al-Qummî stated that al-Khattâbiyya held that there had to be two messengers in every era, the enunciator and silent (al-Qummî, 1963; 51). Furthermore, as stated by Nashi al-Akbar (293/905), al-Harbiyya, a Kaysanite sect, is said to have upheld a sort of the idea of seven eras (al-Nâshî al-Akbar, 1971; 39), according to which after the coming of seven Adams and their descendants to the world respectively, the subjugation would come to an end at the end of the final seventh era. Although, this doctrine does not exactly fit in with the earliest Ismaili cyclical view of history, however, it may least be argued that there had already been an epistemological milieu in the region to foster this view before all else in Iraqi cultural setting, which was most likely penetrated in a way into the Ismaili thought and paid the way for the future Ismaili view of history.

Mostly based on the advent of the Mahdi-Qâim Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl and the discontinuity of imamate after him, this original doctrine of imamate would be subjected to some fundamental changes put into effect by 'Ubayd Allâh al-Mahdi, the future founder of Fatimid rule, soon after he succeeded to the central leadership of Ismaili mission in region of 280s/890s. The third great master of the Ismailis, Muhammad Abû al-Shalaghlagh died leaving behind no male heirs; he had designated his nephew 'Ubayd Allah as his successor. Until now the great master of the sect was only regarded as the representative (*hujja*) of the awaited Mahdi (Halm, 1991; 170-719

Nevertheless, 'Ubayd Allâh had in effect elevated himself and his predecessors from the *hujjas* of the expected Qâim to actual imams, in other words, the denial of recognizing the Mahdiship of hidden imam Muahmmad b. Ismâ'îl, on whose behalf the da'wa had been so far conducted (Daftary, 1990; 123-139; Hamdani-de Blois, 1983; 173-207), in spite of the widespread belief that the concealment of the seventh Imam was still in force. Thus, from 286/899 onward, with the doctrinal reform of 'Ubayd Allâh al-Mahdi the Ismaili movement was split into two rival factions. One faction remained loyal to the central leadership and acknowledged continuity in the imamate, recognizing 'Ubayd Allâh and his Alid ancestors as their imams, which was in due course incorporated into the Fatimid Ismaili doctrine of the imamate. On the other hand, the dissident one known as Qarmatians, in ref-

erence to Hamdân Qarmat, the chief missionary of Ismaili dawa in Iraq, rejected 'Ubayd-Allâh's reform and maintained their original belief in the Mahdiship of Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl (See al-Nuwayrî, 1948; 216, 227-232; Ibn al-Dawâdârî, 1961; VI/65-68; Daftary, 1990; IV: 825-32).

As a consequence of this paradigmatic fundamental change, Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl would no longer be regarded as the awaited Mahdi-Qâim, but only as the seventh imam of the era of the prophet Muhammad (Ja'far b. Mansûr al-Yaman, 1984; 21, 57, 101, 164; al-Qâdî al-Nu'mân, 1964; 40 ff). Nevertheless, 'Ubayd Allâh's idea on Mahdiship required modifications of the function of the Mahdî, if the new doctrine was to adapted to actual realities; especially because the 'order' traditionally expected upon the advent of the Mahdi had not yet materialized. Consequently, the task of the Mahdi was now redefined to essentially encompass the defense of the Sharia by means of sword, rather than abrogating the sacred law of Islam and establishing the rule of justice throughout the world. As a result, this event for those who were loyal to 'Ubayd Allâh symbolized the end of the *dawr al-satr* and the beginning of the *dawr al-kashf* (See Daftary, 1990; 128-29).

As for the original doctrine, it was later re-elaborated by some eminent Ismaili missionaries, particularly by those conducting the *da'wa* in Iran and Transoxiana. Among them were the dâis Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Nasafi (333/944, Abû Hâtim al-Razî (322/934) and Abu Yaqûb al-Sijistânî (361/971), the foremost early Ismaili theologians who played a significant role in the understanding of early Ismaili thought in the eastern part of Islamic world. This missionaries, though formerly refused to acknowledge the imamate of 'Ubayd Allâh al-Mahdî, retained the original doctrine and expected the return of the hidden Qâim, Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl; Abû Hâtim al-Râzî and al-Sijistânî dissociated in the time of caliph Muizz (341-365/953-975) from the Qarmati wing and recognized the Fatimid doctrine of imamate, however (See Ivanow, 1955; 87-122; Madelung, 1961; 101-114; Corbin, 1987; 187-193; Stern, 1983; 30-46).

It seems that the views of the dai Nasafi who reaffirmed the imamate of Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl and also introduced a type of Neoplatonic philosophy, which he elaborated in his work *Kitâb al-Mahsûl*, into Ismaili thought and soon gained widespread acceptance within the various Qarmati circles, in fact, played an important role, as Daftary has noted, in unifying the ideas of the dissident eastern Ismailis who lacked central leadership (Daftary, 1990; 167). According to Al-Nasafi, who argued that with the advent of Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl the era of Islam came to an end and, thus, the seventh and last era of human kind was inaugurated by him, there would be no need for the Islamic sharî'a. It was most probably because of this notion that he inclined to hold a sort of licentious views (See Madelung, 1988; 99). Al-Razi who wrote his Book of Correction, *Kitâb al-Islâh* particularly in criti-

cism of some aspects of al-Nasafî's *Kitâb al-Mahsûl* objected persistently to the antinomian tendencies apparent in some of the teaching of al-Nasafi. Contrary to al-Nasafî he affirmed that both Adam, the first speaker-prophet (*nâtiq*), and Jesus, the fifth, had brought a religious law and strongly argued that all esoteric truth inevitably requires an exoteric law (Kirmânî, 1960; 176, 194).

According o al-Nasafi, Adam was the first of prophets with resolution, but he promulgated no law, so that Noah was the first lawgiver (al-Kirmâni, 1960; 176 ff). The seventh of those with resolution, i.e. the Qâim, will also promulgate no law, since his function was to reveal the secrets of all the previous laws. This is all opposed by al-Râzî. According to him Adam was the "first enunciator-prophet and the first master of the sacred law," whereas the first of the "masters of resolutions" (ashab al-'azaim) was Noah. This was so, because Noah abolished the law of his predecessor Adam. Furthermore, al-Razi includes Adam among the "masters of sacred laws (*ashâb al-sharî'a*)", not among the "possessors of resolution", i.e. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. This was, according to him, due to the fact that since there had not been any law before Adam, did not fulfill the function of '*azm* (al-Kirmânî, 1960; 176). He also argued that the Prophet Muhammad was the last natiq to compose sharî'a that will last up to the the-Qiyâmah (al-Râzî, 1998; 60-61). In this argumentation we can see the first step in al-Razi's refutation of al-Nasafi's view of Adam, and his notion of the development of sacred laws through the series of the prophets (Somoto, 1999; 99).

As we learned from the statements of al-Razi, al-Nasafî argued that since Adam did not bring any *shariah*, he led the people of his age to the teaching of the unity of God (*tawhid*) and this could be achieved without labour. However, al-Razi object to this opinion arguing that this idea cannot be confirmed by any means since the knowledge of the unity of God cannot be grasped without the labours, rules and instructions (al-Razi, 1998; 79). al-Razi distinguished Adam and the Qâim from other prophets giving them unique positions in sacred history: "And no sacred law preceded the first, which he would have had to abrogate. And the last will not compose any sacred law, which he would have had to abrogate. Friday is not counted with them; rather Friday is unique in the name of feast, just as the first is unique in the name of the beginning. That is, it (i.e., Friday and the Qâim) is a unique one in the name of the seventh cycle. And at its end the authority will return to the way it was when it began. This is just as the first possesses alone the beginning" (al-Razi, 1998; 64).

al-Sijistani, in this debate between al-Nasafi and al-Razi, sided with al-Nasafi saying that Adam and the Qâim resemble each other because neither of them brought a sacred law. Through sacred law, he pointed out, the religious order has been maintained by forbidding the people from neglecting the hierarchy, from obeying

the antagonist. Likewise he presents a negative view of the external rules, instructions and labours of which sacred law is thought to consist. According to him, these hinder people from recognition of real tawhid (Nomoto, 1999, 102-103; cf. al-Kirmânî, 1960; 193-94).

To sum up, al-Razî, stated that Adam did promulgate a law and the expression *ulû'l-'azm* is applied to those lawgivers who abolished the law of their predecessors. Hence Adam, contrary to al-Nasafî, was a lawgiver but could not be counted among those with resolution, nor can the Qâim, who does not abolish the law of Muhammad, but manifests its hidden meaning (Stern, 1983; 32).

In addition, there existed another point about the sub-motifs of the history of the prophets. This is the concept of *fatrah*, interval or interregnum. According to him, there was a *fatrah* between the seventh imam and advent of the nâtiq who would inaugurated the new era. During this interval the religious hierarchy was headed by twelve *lâhiqs* residing in the twelve provinces (*jazâir*) of the earth. One of the twelve lâhiqs was the lieutenant (*khalîfa*) of the absent imam and as such he was entitled to act as an authoritative arbiter among them (Madelung, 1988; 99). Additionally, according to his doctrine, though this interval had commenced as from Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl, the era of Islam and sharî'a would continue up to the advent of Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl as the awaited Mahdî-Qâim and the seventh nâtiq (Madelung, 1961; 101-104; Stern, 1983; 30; Corbin, 1987; 187-193). It may be concluded that Abû Hâtim regarded himself as the authoritative arbiter in question, i.e. the lieutenant of Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl, and thus superior to the other *lawâhiq* of this era. Nevertheless, it is not clear that the other dais recognized this view introduced by Abû Hâtim.

The cyclical prophetic view of hierohistory elaborated by the early Ismailis was also retained by the Fatimid Ismailis, who refined or modified certain aspects of it, especially in connection with the duration of the sixth *dawr*, the era of Islam; the number of imams during that era; and the *Qâim* and his functions. In this sense, the reforms made by the fourth Fatimid caliph, al-Mu'izz li-Dîn Allâh (341-365/953-975) in the Ismaili teachings worths mentioning. Indeed, in order to gain the support of the dissident Ismailis, i.e. Qarmatis and to re-establish ideological unity of the Ismaili movement and to utilize them in the service of his eastward drive to conquer the Abbasid lands, he did some revision in the Fatimid Ismaili teachings and accommodated some of the beliefs of the dissident Ismailis. The reform of Mu'izz implied a partial return to the doctrine of the imamate held by the majority of the early Ismailis. This reform found expression mostly in the works of al-Qâdî al-Nu'mân and Ja'far b. Mansûr al-Yaman, the foremost Ismaili authors of the time (See Daftary, 1990; 177).

In his treatise, *al-Risâla al-Muzhiba*, al-Qâdî al-Nu'mân who also explicitly allowed for more than one heptad of imams in the sixth era of hierohistory, the era of the prophet Muhammad, introduces a different picture of the Fatimid doctrine of the imamate incorporating the doctrinal reform of Mu'izz. According to al-Nu'mân, the Qâim essentially has three degrees (*hudûd*), the degree in the corporeal world, the degree of resurrection in the spiritual world, and lastly, the degree of reckoning the last judgement. More specifically, he mentions two corporeal degrees for the Qâim, the degree of nâtiq and that of the rightly-guided deputies (*al-khulafâ al-râshidûn*). The Qâim first appeared, al-Nu'mân says, at the end of sixth era as the seventh imam of the era of the Prophet Muhammad. He had thus attained his first corporeal degree in the person of Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl, as the seventh nâtiq without bringing a new *sharî'a* (al-Numân, 1956; 70).

Al-Mu'izz, too, speaks of the seven eras of the *nâtiqs* and mentions the Qâim as the seventh natiq and the seventh imam of the era of Muhammad, often referred to as *al-Qâim bi'l-haqq al-nâtiq bi'l-sidq*, clearly intending to refer to Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl (See Daftary, 1990; 178). Nevertheless, since the Qâim appeared at the time of *satr*, his revelation, too, had remained concealed, which consisted of the interpretation of the inner meaning of the religious laws (al-Numân, 1956; 71). This is why the Qâim appointed *khulafâ* for himself in whom he attained his second corporeal degree. So, since these *khulafâ* had already fully assumed his functions, the Qâim would reveal the inner meaning of laws and carry out the deeds only through these *khalifâs*, who were initially hidden, but starting with 'Ubayd Allâh, became manifest. They would continue to rule up to the end of the corporeal world, the last them being the *hujja* of the Qâim. Thereafter, before finally going up to unite with the universal soul, the Qâim would obtain a new degree, appearing in the *dawr al-jirm* (the era of the spiritual world of stars) and passing judgement on mankind (al-Nu'mân, 1956; 66, 74, 79; Daftary, 1990; 178). By means of this reform, as Daftary noted, it is obviously that al-Mu'izz introduced remarkable changes in the Fatimid doctrine of imamate. He once again attributed to Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl, as the seventh imam of the era of Islam, the rank of the Qâim and the nâtiq of the final era, but with a different interpretations compared to that held by the pre-Fatimid Ismailis, that is, since Muhammad b. Ismâ'îl had appeared in the time of the complete concealment (*dawr al-satr*), his functions were to be undertaken by his *khulafâ*, the Fatimid caliphs, who were his descendants (Daftary, 1990; 179).

In addition, some authors of the Fatimid period also introduced new concepts into the cyclical understanding of history. The Persian Nâsir Khusraw (471/1078), for instance, speaks of the continuity of the imamate referring to the seven imams succeeded the Prophet Muhammad without further explanation. However, he clear-

ly describes that the seventh imam will be the *Qâim-i qiyâmat*, possessing the rank of resurrection. According to him, the Qâim who will appear after the six imams succeeding the Prophet Muhammad, the sixth nâtiq, will not bring a new sharî'a, but instead, as the seventh nâtiq, will pass final judgement over mankind under divine guidance. Furthermore, he distinguished between a grand cycle (*dawr-i mehîn*), encompassing the entire sequence of the seven *nâtiqs*, and a small cycle (*dawr-i kehîn*), coinciding with the latter part of the grand cycle and including the era of Islam and thereafter (For more information see Daftary, 1990; 219 ff.)

By the time of al-Mustansir, further heptads of imams after Muhammad b. Ismâîl came to be allowed. For example, Muhammad b. b. Ali al-Sûrî (487/1094), one of the foremost Fatimid author of the period, held that there would be imams and bâbs between the Mahdi, i.e. Ubayda Allah *al-Sa'îd* who had already appeared and the awaited Qaim. They would continue to exist in the intervening period as the groups of seven, *al-asâbi'* (al-Sûrî, 1955; 67- 68). The last imam of the second heptad (*sab'*) was al-'Azîz b. al-Mu'izz al-*Murtajâ*. The Qâim would appear among the descendants of the caliph al-Mustansir (al-Sûrî, 1955; 69). Al-Sûrî's account obviously displays the adaptation of the earlier doctrine to the realities encountered by the Fatimid imams after the completion of the second heptad of imams, and similarly to that made in the time of al-Mu'izz (Daftary, 1990; 218). Subsequently Tayyibi Ismailis introduced a number of innovations into the earlier Ismaili interpretation of hierohistory. For example, among them were the concept of grand eon (*kawr a'zam*). This grand eon was composed of countless cycles, each divided into seven *dawr*s, which would be consummated in the *qaim* of the "great resurrection" (*qiâmat al-qiâmât*). (Hamidî, 1971; 205-227; Walid, 1961; 121-128; Daftary, 1990; 140-141).

Finally briefly speaking of the cyclical view of Nizârî Ismailis of the Alamut period (487-654/1094-1256) in Persia, they were not particularly concerned with the earlier cyclical view of history, though they generally considered the notion of seven prophetic eras. However, they allowed for transitory eras of resurrection (*qiâmat*) during the *dawr* of the Prophet Mohammad. In their opinion, in this era, i.e. the era of Islam, there could be occasional expectant eras of resurrection, each offering a foretaste of the *qiâmat* that was to occur at the end of Mohammad's era, opening the seventh and final millennium in the religious history of mankind. According to them, the condition of *qiâmat* could in principle be granted at any time, to mankind as a whole or to the elite, by the current Nizârî imam, for every imam was potentially also a *qâim*. As a result, in the era of Muhammad human life could alternate, at the will of the imam, between *dawr*s of *qiâmat* and *satr*, the normal condition of human life (Daftary, 1990; 386 ff., 404 ff., 410-11; Corbin, 1987; 117 ff.; Hodgson, 1955; 148 ff., 225-38;).

Conclusion

Consequently, the Ismaili understanding of history has established itself, as a typical Shiite approach, upon the history of imams. In this sense, it may be argued that this understanding of history was constantly reconstructed, to a large extent, under the influence of historical developments and most often in a retrospective manner. This practical/pragmatic approach allowed the Ismaili doctrine of imamate in times of crisis, in a sense, to reconstruct itself within the new forms. In this sense, it can further be said that the expectation of the return of Muhammad b. Ismail as the Qâim-Mahdî was mostly a method utilized, in accordance with the political conditions of different periods, to keep the hopes of people alive.

However, it may be argued that the radical changes made by 'Ubayd Allâh in the original Ismaili doctrine of imamate were largely forced by the then socio-political circumstances. Indeed, the intensive expectation of advent of Mahdi both in Imami and Ismaili circles, as well as the disappointment during and after the concealment of the twelfth imam within the Twelver Shiites, forced 'Ubayd Allâh to make some reforms, at all costs, including the split of the movement, in the doctrine of imamate. Thus, the view that the imams, i.e. the Fatimid caliphs were descendants of Muhammad b. Ismail had a vital importance for the political legitimacy of Fatimids vis-à-vis Abbasids. Likewise, as in the time of Mu'izz, the amendments in different periods to the Fatimid doctrine of imamate were made for the same reasons.

As for the Nizari doctrine of imamate, the constant vitality and continuity of teaching of resurrection (*qiyâmat*) was the most practical way to be applied, when considered the then geographical, military and political position of the Nizari state of Alamut, for keeping up the loyalty of Nizari-Ismaili masses to the imam, and thus maintaining the survival of the Nizari state.

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