

# Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of Muslims to the American shores. The increased presence and visibility of Muslims in America means that Islam can no longer be characterized as a Middle Eastern or South Asian phenomenon. Given that it is the fastest growing religion in America, Islam is now a very American phenomenon.

The composition of the American Muslim community is far from homogeneous. In fact, American Islam is a mosaic of many ethnic, racial, sectarian, and national groups. Most scholars who have studied Islam in America have limited their research to the majority, Sunni Muslims. Even in academic discourses and classes, most discussions equate Islam in America with the Sunni experience or with that of the indigenous African American Muslims. Very little has been written about the origins and experiences of minority groups within the American Muslim community.<sup>1</sup> Those who restrict their study to a generalized analysis of Muslims in America tend to ignore the nuances that characterize and differentiate the diverse Muslim groups in America. This monolithic view has also obscured the proper recognition and understanding of the religious experience of a significant religious minority in America. This study will examine the origins and contemporary experience of the Shi'i community in America.<sup>2</sup>

## *The Origins of Shi'ism*

The term *Shi'a*<sup>3</sup> refers to the partisans of 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. For the Shi'is, 'Ali was the legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad having been designated by him at Ghadir Khum and at other occasions.<sup>4</sup> Shi'is further maintain that differences within the Muslim community regarding succession to the Prophet began even before he died, referring specifically to

the Prophet's companions' refusal, at his deathbed, to give him pen and paper so that he could dictate his wishes to them.<sup>5</sup> Shi'is believe that the companions conspired to dispossess 'Ali of his rights as the rightful and divinely appointed successor of the Prophet.

While the majority of Muslims affirmed the leadership of the first four caliphs, Abu Bakr (d. 634), 'Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 644), 'Uthman b. 'Affan (d. 656), and 'Ali b. Abi Talib, Shi'is rejected the authority of the first three caliphs. With the coming of 'Ali to power in 656 CE, Shi'ism emerged as an effective religio-political movement. The massacre of Husayn, the son of 'Ali, and his forces at Kerbala by the Umayyad caliph Yazid (d. 684) in 680 CE was an important milestone in Shi'i history; it affirmed notions of injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet and exacerbated a passion for martyrdom. Due to the brutal nature of his death and close connection to the Prophet, Husayn has been revered in both Shi'i and Sunni literature. He is also admired for not compromising his principles against the threats of a dictator, preferring instead to die rather than live in humiliation.

The Shi'i view that the rights of 'Ali and the family of the Prophet (also called the *ahl al-bayt*) were usurped by the companions meant that from the very beginning, Shi'ism rose as a dissenting group in opposition to the Muslim majority. This dissent manifested itself in different forms during the course of Shi'i history. Initially, Shi'i protest expressed itself by contesting Abu Bakr's succession to the Prophet, advocating instead the succession of 'Ali based on the principle of divine designation. Later conflicts between 'Ali and Mu'awiya (d. 679), Husayn and Yazid, and the various Shi'i revolts against both the Umayyad and 'Abbasid dynasties were further manifestations of these differences.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, political opposition and rebellion against a central, Sunni-dominated government formed the basis of the development of a distinct sectarian movement that postulated its own concept of religious authority and leadership.

Shi'i theology and jurisprudence took definitive shape in the times of the fifth and sixth Imams, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 733-37) and Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765). The latter, in particular, was largely responsible for the construction of a Shi'i legal edifice and the explication of the Shi'i doctrine of the imamate. Three principles taught by Ja'far al-Sadiq encapsulate the authority of the Imams: *nass*, *'ilm*, and *'isma*. The doctrine of divinely sanctioned authority or divine designation (*nass*) stipulates that 'Ali had been designated by the Prophet to succeed him, inheriting, in the process, his many traits. To distinguish between the divinely designated

Shi'i Imams and local prayer leaders, I will refer to the former by using a capitalized I. When referring to local scholars or prayer leaders, I will use a lower case i.

The question of *nass* is important: it links the Imams in a concatenated chain culminating in the ultimate source of authority, the Prophet. The belief in *nass* is significant in the Shi'i conceptualization of the Imam's authority because it restricts the leadership to a single candidate by negating the claims of rival contenders to the imamate. For the Shi'is, any claim to political authority without proper designation is viewed as a political innovation because it lacks divine mandate.

Besides the principle of divine appointment, the authority of the Imam came to be measured by the *'ilm* (divinely bestowed knowledge) that the Imam had reportedly inherited from the Prophet. The possession of divinely bestowed knowledge is important in the study of the Shi'i concept of religious authority because, in the absence of any political investiture, this was the only factor that could prove the claim to imamate when disputes arose regarding the identity of a true successor of an Imam. Knowledge thus becomes the source of authority and the only feasible means to legitimize any claim to authority.

The Shi'is also maintain that the *'ilm* of an Imam is transmitted in a linked chain to all subsequent Imams. Although the authority and charisma of an Imam can, theoretically, be inherited by any one of a number of his sons, it is the belief in the divinely inspired knowledge that restricts them to a particular individual. *'Ilm* acts as a mitigating factor, ensuring that only one candidate among several contenders for the imamate can inherit the Imam's charisma. The twin principles of *nass* and *'ilm* are pivotal to the Shi'i theory of leadership as they guarantee and protect the divine message from adulteration by transmitting it through a divinely protected chain of authority. Acknowledging the correct Imam becomes equivalent to accepting the original source of authoritative guidance, the Prophet.<sup>7</sup>

Shi'i understanding of sacred history further stipulates that this *'ilm* and the concomitant authority be fully retained in a particular line of the Prophet's family, i.e., the *ahl al-bayt*. It was therefore related from Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam, that *'ilm* should not be sought from the East or the West; rather, it was to be acquired from the *ahl al-bayt* only.<sup>8</sup>

To serve as exemplary models, the Imams, like the Prophet, are believed to possess *'isma*, the trait of immunity from sins. *'Isma* is important in the Shi'i concept of authority and essential to the Imams' mission to set paradigmatic precedents because the community cannot follow one

whose actions are immoral or sinful. The principle of *'isma* also means that as exemplary models, the pronouncements of the Imams acquire normative force. Due to the Shi'i belief in the Imams' immunity from error, the principle of *'isma* can serve as a polemical weapon, for it is meant to "protect the law against the corruption which, in the Shi'i view, the use of arbitrary individual reasoning (*ra'y*, *ijtihad*) of the Sunnite lawyers and the unreliable transmission of *hadith* by the Sunnite traditionalists introduced in it."<sup>9</sup> It is this notion of the divinely inspired leadership of the Imams that distinguishes Shi'ism from the majority Sunnis.

Since they realized the futility of armed revolts against the political authority, the Imams, starting with Ja'far al-Sadiq, taught the doctrine of dissimulation (*taqiyya*) rather than political activism. Henceforth, Shi'is were to conceive of jihad in terms of keeping their faith intact and paying allegiance to the Imam rather than staging armed revolts against political authorities. Jihad was declared to be in abeyance until the time of the Mahdi, the promised messiah. He was expected to establish the kingdom of justice and equality and to eliminate injustice and tyranny. Belief in the Mahdi was predicated on numerous apocalyptic traditions relating to the events anticipated to unfold when the messiah reappears.

A turning point in Shi'i history came in 874 CE when the eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari, died. Amid competing claims for succession, his infant son Muhammad was proclaimed to be the twelfth Imam and promised messiah. This group formed the backbone of the Twelver Shi'is, the largest of the Shi'i factions. It is with *this* group that the rest of this book will be concerned.

The twelfth Imam was believed to have entered a "minor" occultation from 874 to 940 CE. During this time, he reportedly communicated with agents, four of whom attained prominence. When the fourth agent died in 940 CE, the Imam was reported to have entered a "major" occultation. It was believed that he would not be accessible to his followers until his reappearance. The appearance of this eschatological messiah would coincide with the establishment of the kingdom of justice and equality.

### *Shi'ism during the Occultation*

During the absence of the twelfth Imam, the apolitical Shi'i scholars composed many juridical and theological tracts. The most famous of these is al-Kulayni's (d. 939) monumental work, *al-Kafi fi 'Ilm al-Din*. The political milieu ameliorated for the Shi'is in the tenth century when the Buyids

(945–1055) came to power in Baghdad. Shi'i jurists now filled the leadership vacuum that was engendered by the major occultation. Under state patronage, they used the more sophisticated intellectual tools of theology (*kalam*) to vindicate beliefs in the imamate and the occultation of the Imam.<sup>10</sup> Prominent scholars like Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn al-Saduq (d. 991), Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Nu'man al-Mufid (d. 1022), 'Ali b. al-Husayn Sharif al-Murtada (d. 1044), and Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Tusi (d. 1067) composed important theological and juridical tracts. Shi'i works in biography, ethics, exegesis, and history were compiled by these and other scholars of the time.

### *The Authority of Shi'i Scholars*

After the establishment of the Safawid dynasty in Iran in 1501, Shi'i jurists resorted to various types of hermeneutics based on rational grounds or traditions reported from the Imams in order to exercise greater control over the populace, especially after the scholars were incorporated into the state apparatus. Jurists (*fuqaha'*) like 'Ali b. al-Husayn al-Karaki (d. 1533) and Zayn al-Din al-'Amili (also called Shahid II; d. 1558) argued that in the absence of the Imam, greater religious authority was to be assumed by the *faqih* or jurist. The jurists could now occupy judicial and political offices. They could, for example, serve as judges, collect religious taxes, and enforce legal penalties on behalf of the Imam.

Under the Qajar dynasty in Iran (1794–1925), the '*ulama*' (scholars) further enhanced their authority as the sole exponents of the law. Usage of interpretive reasoning and the institutionalization and centralization of religious leadership crystallized eventually in the concept of *marji' al-taqlid* (imitation of the most learned jurist). Murtada Ansari (d. 1864) was recognized as the most qualified *marji'* (source of reference for juridical rulings) of his time. Later, the actions of a believer who did not adhere to a *marji'*'s rulings were deemed to be invalid. In postrevolutionary Iran, based on the controversial concept of *wilaya al-faqih* (comprehensive authority of a jurist), Ayatullah Khomeini (d. 1989) established a theocratic state. Claiming the same degree of authority as the hidden Imam, Khomeini argued that the function of a jurist was equivalent to that of an Imam.<sup>11</sup>

Even in contemporary times, Shi'i scholars continue to play prominent roles in the lives and religious practices of ordinary Shi'is as they interpret the sacred sources and articulate the normative practices for the Shi'i community all over the world (see chap. 4).

### *Methodology and Approach*

It is important that we view Shi'ism in America within the framework of the experience of a minority religious community. With this in mind, I explore the Shi'i self-understanding and expression in America, seeking to understand individual mosques/centers in terms of their internal environment—the ethnic backgrounds of their members, attitudes, and responses of leadership and constituents—and in terms of their relationship to the surrounding culture and its ethnic, social, civil, and political institutions.

I also examine the interaction between religion and culture, how Islam has shaped Shi'i civic and political consciousness in America, the connection between religious loyalty and ethnic identity, and the role of religious texts and authorities in shaping the Shi'i religious experience. Studying the variegated roles of American Shi'is portrays an image of their being active contributors to the American social and religious milieu. Of course, not all Shi'is define themselves or engage with others in similar ways.

Tracing the origins and establishment of an immigrant community is fraught with difficulties, especially when documented sources are almost nonexistent. In many instances, I have had to rely on anecdotal narratives from senior members of the Shi'i communities in Michigan City and Dearborn. In some cases, I have had recourse to archives from the Arab American Nation Museum in Detroit. These resources are used in conjunction with material interspersed in various ethnographic works and in different genres of literature that mention the presence of Shi'is in local communities.

Given the dearth of scholarship on the topic, much of my research is based on a survey, questionnaires, and formal interviews. The statistical data included in this book reflects a 2006 survey sent to 105 Shi'i centers in America. It generated thirty-two responses. Imams or other community leaders completed the survey. Questions that were posed included (1) when the center was established, (2) the ethnic composition of the members frequenting the center, (3) the contemporary challenges that the center encounters, (4) interfaith dialogue, (5) civic and political engagement, (6) youth involvement in the center, and (7) how the center identifies itself. I also asked some open-ended questions, which included the mission statement and vision of the center.

The results of the survey are tabulated in the appendix. My observations on the Shi'i community are also based on personal engagement,

insights, and knowledge of the community, all of which I have gained over a number of years. Immersion in the American Shi'i community has enabled me to comprehend the nuanced and variegated contours of various Shi'i groups. Yet, I am fully aware that many Shi'is will disagree with both my observations and conclusions. To them I say I hope we can agree to disagree, agreeably.

### *Studies on Shi'ism in America*

To date, there has not been a comprehensive study of the American Shi'i community. Academic studies of Shi'i Muslims have often been inserted within the framework of and discourse on Sunni Islam. When scholars have discussed Shi'ism in America their approach has been ethnographic, primarily because the ethnic diversity of American Shi'ism has encouraged the study of local communities rather than the Shi'i community in its entirety. In her pioneering ethnographic study, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*, Linda Walbridge focuses on the history and contemporary challenges of the Lebanese community in Dearborn, Michigan. Vernon Schubel has discussed the ritual activities of the Khoja Shi'i community in two articles,<sup>12</sup> while Ron Kelley has written on the Iranian community in Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup> In an article, Abdulaziz Sachedina examines how the Shi'is have adapted to the challenges of living in the American milieu,<sup>14</sup> and I have explored the challenges confronting the American Shi'i community in two articles.<sup>15</sup>

None of these works has studied the American Shi'i community in depth. In particular, questions regarding identity, acculturation, and authority within the American Shi'i community have received scant attention. There is a lack of understanding regarding how different Shi'i ethnic groups have adapted their cultural and religious expressions in the American context. In the present work, I have tried to fill a crucial gap in the existing literature on this important yet neglected Muslim group.

### *The Present Study*

To understand the history and subsequent development of Shi'ism in America, chapter 1 traces the origins and experience of the early Shi'i community. In discussing the matrix of forms through which the culture of the different Shi'i groups is expressed, I argue that scholars should abandon the essentialist, monolithic worldview of Shi'ism; nor should

they see the American Shi'i community as singular. On the contrary, differences, both sociological and cultural, run deep within the community. As a matter of fact, it is possible to speak of a "rainbow" nature of Shi'i Islam in America.

The second chapter examines the establishment of early Shi'i institutions and how these have catered to the growing needs of the community. Increased migration from various parts of the world has resulted in the American Shi'i community becoming more fragmented as bonds of common faith are replaced by ties to common origins, ethnicity, and culture. This chapter also explores how members of the Shi'i community have engaged the challenges of cultural negotiations, redefinitions, and reappropriation in a new cultural context, and how they have pursued different ways to adapt to the American milieu. I focus on the Shi'is' historical, ideological, and ethnic backgrounds as these are the realms in which cultural symbols and behavioral patterns become codified in community life.

An important dimension of the Shi'i existence in America is the community's relationship with fellow Muslims. Relations between Shi'is and Sunnis in America have been contingent on political circumstances in the Middle East and South Asia. Chapter 3 discusses how political and ideological battles abroad have impacted Muslims in different spheres of their American lives. The chapter argues that polarization within the Muslim community has been exacerbated by the influx of conservative immigrants. Immigration has resulted in the spread of a conservative spirit in many institutions, accentuating sectarian divisions and disputes between the two schools of thought. Hence, there is a tendency to replicate what prevailed abroad, making America a battleground for sectarian differences.

The Shi'i experience in America is different from that of the Sunni because of the influence exerted by Shi'i scholars who are responsible for reinterpreting the relevance of Islamic norms in the modern era. Chapter 4 explores how living in America has forced contemporary Shi'i jurists to respond to the challenges of living as a minority group in America. The contemporary reformulation of Islamic law entails a meticulous examination of discrete components interspersed in different genres of both classical and modern juridical literature. To comprehend the development and interpretation of sacred texts and their implication for Muslims in America, it is essential to engage jurists who have played a significant role in the exposition as well as interpretation of those sacred texts that have shaped Shi'i religious practices and expression in the United States.

The fifth chapter explores some of the outreach and proselytization (*da'wa*) activities of the Shi'i community in America. Besides immigrants and American-born Shi'is, the Shi'i community is also composed of an increasing number of African American converts. The chapter discusses the appeal of Shi'ism for the African American community and examines the interaction between black and immigrant Shi'is. Like other immigrants, Muslims have been defined as alien. This categorization became more entrenched since the horrific events of September 11, 2001, and is directed at Muslims who, perhaps more than any other immigrant group, are more vulnerable to stereotypes and attacks. This chapter also considers the impact of the events of 9/11 on the Shi'i community and the community's attempts to reconstitute a religious and an American identity in the face of demonization and stereotypical images propagated in the media.