An Early Shi‘i Cosmology

Kitāb al-ashbāḥ wa l-aẓilla and its Milieu

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Introduction

One of the chief theological controversies in the Shi‘i community of Iraq in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries revolved around the nature of the Imams. Part of their followers viewed them as knowledgeable leaders of the community, while another attributed to them divine characteristics, viewing them at times as God’s appointees charged with the mission to regulate the affairs of the world, and at times as God’s incarnations on earth.1 By the outsiders, these ardent followers of the Imams were called with the Arabic term ghulāt (pl. of ghālin) i.e. “extremist,” for their “extreme” devotion to the Imams.

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Among the teachings of these “extremists,” which so enraged later heresiographers, were the belief in reincarnation, transformation into non-human forms, and the ability of a believer to become close to God.

While the Imams themselves were mostly uneasy to accept the allegiance of these ardent adherents,2 they still had many followers among them, and throughout the second/eighth century, the ghulāt freely mixed with their opponents, whom they derisively called “shortcomers” (muqaṣṣira)—for falling short in their devotion to the Imams. In the third/ninth century, however, the tensions began to exacerbate, and the muqaṣṣira, who were beginning to crystallize into a Shi’i (Imami) orthodoxy, succeeded in demonizing and marginalizing the “extremists.”3 Eventually, early in the fourth/tenth century, one branch of the ghulāt, called Nuṣayris after one of their leaders Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr (d. after 254/868), left Iraq and established their center in a more tolerant north Syria.4

While in Iraq, the ghulāt produced religious literature, most of which is now lost. A few of their works have survived due to the efforts of Nuṣayīs, who transported some of them to Syria. Several of the original extant ghulāt treatises have been preserved in the collections of the Syrian Ismailis, who took over the main Nuṣayrī strongholds in the sixth/twelfth century, taking possession of their writings as well.5 Besides, many ghulāt texts have survived fragmentarily, quoted in the writings of the Nuṣayrīs, and many, though perished, are known by their names—listed in Nuṣayrī books and Twelver Shi’i biographical dictionaries.6

For most of the twentieth century, the study of the ghulāt worldview was chiefly based on outsider accounts—rijāl works, heresiographies, and a few historical chronicles. Because of their polemical nature, it has always been a matter of debate whether, or to what degree, such accounts reflect the truth

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3 Modarressi, Crisis and Consolidation, pp. 29-49.