Absent yet at All Times Present: Further Thoughts on Secrecy in the Shi’i Tradition and in Sunnī Mysticism

Ausente pero siempre presente: reflexiones sobre el secreto en la tradición ši’í y en el misticismo sunní

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Introduction

Taqiyya (prudence, the concealment of true beliefs, or dissimulation) plays a double role in the Shi’i tradition. To begin with, taqiyya...
serves the Shi’i believers as a means of self-protection against their Sunni rivals. Given that the Shi’is were (and still are) a minority in the Islamic world and that the Shi’i claims have always posed a religious-political threat to the very foundation of the Sunnî worldview, the Shi’is were compelled early on in their history to devise a mechanism that would allow them to maintain their faith while living under (often hostile) Sunnî rule. At the same time, taqiyya entails an important esoteric aspect: it is designed to safeguard the secrets of the Shi’i faith and to hide them from the uninitiated, be they Sunni Muslims or the common Shi’i believers, who are unable to comprehend the subtle mysteries of their own religion. From this perspective, the Shi’i faith may be perceived as an esoteric tradition. In fact, it seems that from a relatively early stage in their history, the Shi’is, or more precisely, Shi’i imâms such as Muhammad al-Bâqir (died circa 114/732) and Ja’far al-Ṣâdiq (died 148/765) as well as their close followers viewed their faith in just this way. It comes as no surprise that in many Shi’i sayings, concealing Shi’i beliefs and, at times (depending on the circumstances), manifesting non-Shi’i doctrines are presented as a religious obligation of the utmost importance.1

A similar phenomenon is found in Sunnî mysticism. In order to protect himself, the mystic, who is often confronted by fierce opponents – the religious scholars (‘ulamâ’) who firmly adhere to the exoteric dimensions of the Qur’ân and the shari’a (the religious law), the theologians who view the human intellect (‘aql) and human consideration (nazâr) as the sole means of understanding religion, and the rulers with whom the former two groups tend to cooperate – is obliged to conceal his mystical experiences and mystical knowledge from the eyes of others. However, this concealment is also meant to guard the divine, mystical secrets from the common Muslims, who are unworthy of them. Secrecy in Sunnî mysticism thus functions both as a self-defense mechanism and as an esoteric device.2

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Elsewhere I have discussed the relation between the Shiʻi-Ismāʻili concept of taqiyya and the notion of secrecy in the writings of the well-known Sunnī mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʻArabī (560/1165-638/1240). I have also alluded to the possibility of earlier historical links between Shiʻi esotericism and Sunnī mysticism. More specifically, in various Shiʻi traditions (ḥadīths) contained in Ithnā-ʻAsharī (Twelver) and in Ismāʻili sources, the ideal Shiʻi believer is portrayed as a hidden saint who worships God piously and assiduously, maintains an ascetic lifestyle, and, above all, conceals the secrets of his faith from the profane eyes of others. The combination of these traits grants the believer mystical abilities and miraculous powers. The figure of the hidden saint that emerges from such Shiʻi traditions is quite reminiscent of the ethical-psychological ideals espoused by various Sunnī mystics and particularly by the malāmatiyya, those who follow “the path of blame” (malāma). According to the malāmatiyya, the mystic should internalize his spirituality and hide his mystical achievements in order to prevent his lower self or ego (nafs) from taking pride in them. Consequently, the malāmatiyya disapproved of performing religious, ascetic, and mystical activities in public, and some malāmatīs even took to openly commit sins so as to attract criticism and condemnation.

In what follows I shall attempt to analyze an early tradition (ḥadīth) which is found in Shiʻi and in Sunnī sources alike and which depicts the ideal believer as a hidden saint. The aim of this analysis is twofold: first, to illustrate the way in which both the Shiʻi tradition and Sunnī mysticism incorporated similar, early ḥadīths in their discussions of the hidden saint; and second, to emphasize the significant role of the Shiʻi tradition in the development of this theme in Islamic mysticism.

**Trials and Tribulations**

In a tradition attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, the latter is reported to have said:

> Blessed are the strangers and the hidden ones who if present, are unknown, and if absent, are not sought after. Every grey and dark trial (fitna) will be removed from

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4 On the malāmatiyya see Sviri, “Ḩakim Tirmidhi and the Malāmatī Movement in Early Sufism”.

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them. They are the lamps [that light] the right path; Allāh loves and admires them more than those who are admired [by men].

The term *fitna* (plural: *fitan*) may denote any temptation or affliction whereby one’s faith is put to the test by God. However, the specific *fitna* to which this tradition seems to refer is that of discord or civil conflict among the believers. As is well known, such *fitnas* had erupted during the first two centuries of Islamic history; they were often perceived by the members of the nascent Muslim community as signs of the looming end of time, as eschatological trials and tribulations that only the true believers could endure. In a slightly different version of the tradition, it is said that

the most fortunate one during trials is the hidden, God-fearing man: if he appears, he is unknown, and if he is absent, he is not sought after. The most wretched one during [trials] is the loud-voiced [or: eloquent] preacher, or he who rides [his beast] at a gentle pace.

This tradition, which appears in other versions as well in different Sunni sources, can be dated at least to the first half of the 2nd/8th cen-

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8 See, for example, Ibn Qutayba, *’Uyūn al-akhbār*, vol. II, p. 352: “Allāh loves the hidden, God-fearing, and innocent ones who when absent, are not sought after, and when present, are unknown. Their hearts are the lamps [that light] the right path; they will be extricated from [or: will extricate themselves from] every grey and dark [trial]” (Ishāq b. Sulaymān < his brother [Ṭalha b. Sulaymān] < al-Fayyād [b. Ghazwān] < Zubayd al-Yāmi < Mu‘ād b. Jabal < the Prophet: Inna llāh yuhhibbu al-akhiyā’ al-atiqiyā’ al-abriyā’ al-ladhina idhā ghābū lam yuṭafaqādī wa-ṣaṣrā ḥḍarārā’ lam yu’rafi qulībhum maṣābīh al-hudā...
ward – a period that witnessed several fitnas. One may assume therefore that this tradition reflects an early attitude of neutrality and noninvolvement in religious-political disputes; rather than actively participating in them, the true believer should withdraw from society and remain hidden from his fellow man.

Moreover, it seems that this attitude also entailed a strong anti-governmental sentiment. The tradition analyzed here appears in a letter that Salama b. Dinār – an ascetic from al-Madīna, who died sometime between 130-140/747-758 –¹⁰ is said to have written to Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri, the well-known muhaddith and scholar (died 124/742).¹¹ In his letter, quoted by Abū Nu‘aym al-İsfahānī in Hilyat al-awliyā’, Salama b. Dinār severely criticizes al-Zuhri for his close contacts and collaboration with the “oppressive” and “unjust” Umayyad regime:

Know that there are two kinds of dignity: one that Allāh, may He be exalted, effects by means of His friends (awliyā’iḥi) for His friends who are unknown and concealed. They have been described by the messenger of Allāh, may Allāh’s prayers and blessings be upon him: ‘Allāh loves the hidden, God-fearing, and innocent ones who when absent, are not sought after, and when seen are unknown. Their hearts are the lamps [that light] the right path; they will be extricated from [or: will extricate themselves from] every black and dark trial’. These are the friends of
Allāh concerning whom Allāh, may He be exalted, said: ‘Those are Allāh’s party; verily, they are the successful ones [Q 58: 22]’. As to the second kind of dignity, Allāh, may He be exalted, effects it by means of His enemies for their friends. He casts love for the [latter] in the hearts of the former, or: He casts love for the former in the hearts of the latter; people honor the [friends of Allāh’s enemies] because [Allāh’s enemies] honor them; and people desire what they possess because they desire it. ‘Those are Satan’s party; verily, they are misled [Q 58: 19]’.  

In Salama b. Dinār’s view, the true friends of God are anonymous; attaining fame and dignity by serving the ruler is a clear sign that one belongs to “Satan’s party”. This anti-governmental stance is likewise echoed in various other versions of the tradition.  

In addition to its political implications, this tradition also reflects an ethical-psychological ideal according to which religious activities should be performed in private, away from the eyes of others. In one version that addresses the issue of jihād – a religious obligation closely linked to asceticism and piety in the early history of Islam – it is stated that


13 See, for example, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, al-ʾAWlīyā’, p. 12: “Among the kings of the world to come is one who [is characterized by the following:] if he speaks, he is not listened to; if he is absent, he is not sought after; if he asks in the presence of a ruler, he is not permitted [to do so]. Were his light on the day of resurrection to be set over the inhabitants of this world, it would fill them with light” (al-Ḡāsim b. Ḥāshim < Muḥammad b. Sa‘īd al-Qurashi al-Bāṣrī < Abū Ḥātim )Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abd Allāh < Awd < al-Ḥasan < the Prophet: Inna min mulūk al-ākhīra man in nataqa lam yunṣat lahu wa-in ghaba lam yuṭaqad wa-in ḥāfīza  

lam yuwazzawaj wa-in ista’dhana  
alā‘ala al-dunyā la-malā’ahum nūrān).  

may Allāh have mercy on a servant who is on His path: if there is a military expedition, he participates in it, and if there is an army unit, he sets off with it; if he is absent, he is not sought after, and if he is seen, he is unknown. Blessed is he, blessed is he.\(^{15}\)

Fighting and perhaps dying anonymously “on the path of Allāh” or “for Allāh’s sake” (fī sabīl allāh) merit divine mercy. Evidently, this version of the tradition aims at encouraging Muslims to perform the duty of jīhād and (by doing so) to avoid participating in religious-political disputes within the Muslim community. Yet the emphasis on anonymity implies that the desire for fame reduces the value of jīhād, or of any other religious action for that matter. This is clearly the case in other versions that link the tradition to the concept of riyawā’ (“hypocrisy”), i.e. when one performs a religious deed ostentatiously so that others may witness it and praise him for it:

[Even] a little hypocrisy is polytheism (shirk): Allāh loves the God-fearing, hidden, and innocent ones who if absent, are not sought after, and if present, are unknown. Their hearts are the lamps [that light] the right path; they will be saved from every grey and dark [trial].\(^{16}\)

The concept of riyawā’ and the assertion that it constitutes polytheism (at least to a certain extent) were to play an important role in the psy-


chological theories of Islamic mysticism, especially in the teachings of the *malāmatiyya*. In several sources, the statement “[Even] a little hypocrisy is polytheism” (or similar statements) appears as a separate *ḥadīth* and is not linked to the main body of the tradition examined here. It seems therefore that the original version of this tradition did not refer to the concept of *riyā‘*, though the ethical-psychological ideal of conducting one’s religious life in secret is indeed implicit in the notion of anonymity and withdrawal from society.

Secrecy

Let us now turn to the Shī‘i sources. In a tradition treating of the *fitna* and the eschatological events at the end of time, ’Ali b. Abī Ta‘līb is quoted as saying:

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There will be a time when no one will be saved except for the unheeded believer:19 if he is seen, he is unknown, and if he is absent, he is not sought after. Those are the lamps [that light] the right path and the waymarks during the night journey. They do not go about spreading calumnies and divulging secrets.20 Allāh will open for them the gates of His mercy and will dispel from them the harm of His revenge [or, according to another version: through them Allāh will open the gates of His mercy and through them He will dispel the harm of His revenge].21

In this version, a new element is added to the themes hitherto discussed: that of secrecy. In times of religious-political turmoil, the Shi‘ī believer ought to retreat from society and hide the secrets of his faith. These secrets presumably pertain to the imāms and perhaps also to various messianic beliefs. Avoiding “spreading calumnies [concerning the imāms] and divulging secrets” is meant to protect the imāms and their followers and safeguard the Shi‘ī faith itself. At the same time, the secrecy in which the believer cloaks himself entails an ethical-
psychological dimension: the hidden believer practices his religion in private and consequently his high spiritual status is known only to God.

Other Shi‘i traditions convey a very similar notion. For instance, one saying attributed to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq asserts that

\[ \text{blessed is the unheeded servant who knows men and accompanies them with his body, yet within his heart does not accompany them in their actions; they know him externally (fī al-zāhīr), whereas he knows them internally (fī al-baṭīn).} \]

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In this tradition, one may discern a remarkable shift from the external, social-political sphere to the inner, spiritual-psychological realm. Rather than physically withdrawing from society, the believer is portrayed as retiring internally from human vices. In respect of his body, he is simply one anonymous man among many; yet within his heart he is different and unique, standing apart from other human beings.

There is reason to believe that these ideas were already prevalent in the early Shi‘i milieu of the mid-8th century, among the circles of Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq.23 It was in this period which witnessed the decline of the Umayyad dynasty and the transition to the ‘Abbāsi regime that several fitnas arose. One may mention in particular the unsuccessful revolt of Zayd b. ‘Ali b. al-Husayn against the Umayyads in the year 122/740, as well as other revolts carried out by the Ḥasanī branch of the Shi‘a. These tumultuous events led Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, and their followers to adopt an attitude of noninvolvement in religious-political conflicts and of quietism (qu‘ūd).24 Such an attitude involved the practice of taqiyya and, in addition, the development of an ethical-psychological ideal according to which one must conceal his unique religious status from the eyes of others. The combination of these various elements – neutrality in civil conflicts, taqiyya as both a mechanism of survival and an esoteric


tool meant to protect the secrets of the faith, and, finally, the ethical-psychological ideal of hiding one’s spirituality – seems to be a specifically Shi‘i innovation that perhaps in turn influenced various Sunni circles. Do such statements as the one quoted above – “the most wretched one during [trials] is the loud-voiced [or: eloquent] preacher” – reflect the Shi‘i notion of secrecy? Were ascetic, pious Sunni scholars such as Salama b. Dinār, whose letter to al-Zuhri I have mentioned above, instrumental in passing this and other Shi‘i notions into the Sunni world? Salama b. Dinār resided in al-Madīna in the same period as Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, and according to Shi‘i sources, he was in contact with him as well as with his grandfather, the imām ‘Alī b. al-Husayn.27

Be that as it may, it is impossible to determine whether or not the tradition analyzed in this article originated in Shi‘i circles, in al-Madīna or elsewhere. Its isnāds in various sources include transmitters from Egypt, Syria, Baṣra, and Kūfah, Shi‘is and Sunnis alike. All we can say is that this tradition reflects certain pietistic attitudes that were most likely formed during the religious-political upheavals in the first half of the 2nd/8th century. Their roots perhaps go back even earlier, to the 1st/7th century and its fitnas. It appears though that the Shi‘i milieu played a significant role in the formation of these attitudes and in the development of their ethical-psychological and esoteric dimensions.

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25 See above n. 7.
26 See above n. 12.
27 He was one of their many “companions” or “students” (aṣḥāb); see al-Ṭūsī, Riḍā al-Ṭūsī, p. 114; Ibn Shaḥrahūshīb, Maṣāqīb al-Abī Tālib, vol. III, pp. 312, 400; al-Khū‘i, Mu’jam riḍā al-hadith, vol. IX, p. 215.

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Later Developments

In both Sunnī and Shi‘ī sources, the hadīth examined above was elaborated on and incorporated into lengthier traditions aimed at portraying the figure of the hidden saint. In these traditions, the ideal believer is depicted not only as one who shuns religious-political disputes, worships God in private, and (in the Shi‘ī case) keeps the secrets of his faith hidden, but also as a wandering, pious, and ascetic man who maintains an austere lifestyle and spends his days and nights praying, reciting the Qur‘ān, fasting, and crying. Furthermore, the figure of the hidden saint is juxtaposed with that of the profane and unjust ruler: whereas the latter symbolizes the decadent aspects of man and the defilement of his role as God’s vicegerent on earth (khalīfa), the former is viewed as the true “friend of God” (wali) whose presence in the world, albeit hidden, guarantees its very existence and the wellbeing of mankind. The hidden saints thus form a ‘shadow cabinet’ – a clandestine, spiritual alternative to the corrupt political leadership of the Muslim community. From this perspective, the descriptions of the hidden saint in Sunnī and Shi‘ī sources are rather subversive, although the supreme status of the awliyā‘ is presented as spiritual, not political, and is said to be fully revealed only at the end of time.

A long tradition treating of Uways al-Qarani will serve to illustrate these themes as they were developed in the Sunnī world. Uways, who was to become an important figure in Şūfīsm, was allegedly a contemporary of Muḥammad who hailed from the Yemen.29 According to the tradition, upon a visit of Uways to the Prophet’s mosque,30 Muḥammad said to his famous companion, Abū Hurayra:

Oh, Abū Hurayra, the inhabitants of Paradise have kings and chiefs, and this black man [Uways al-Qarani] has become one of them. Oh, Abū Hurayra, Allāh, may

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29 According to the Şūfi tradition, Uways enjoyed ‘telepathic’ communication with the Prophet, and, accordingly, is the prototype for mystics who receive their spiritual instruction from an invisible master – either from the spirit of a dead prophet or saint, from a living but physically absent teacher, or from God Himself. Often, these ‘Uwaysī’ mystics are presented as hidden saints. See Baldick, J., “Uways al-Karani” and “Uwaysiyya”, in *EF*, vol. X, p. 958; Hussaini, “Uways al-Qarani”; Zakharia, “Uways al-Qarani”.

30 Thus according to Abū Nu‘aym al-İsfahānī’s Ḥilyat al-awliyā‘; however, according to the version found in Kitāb al-futūh by the earlier Ibn A’tham al-Kūfī (died. 314/926), Uways did not visit the Prophet’s mosque (see the references below in notes 32-33). Indeed, most sources assert that Uways was a tābi‘ī and did not meet the Prophet in person, although the Prophet was familiar with him and recognized his high spiritual status.
He be exalted, loves from among His created beings the pure, hidden, and innocent ones whose heads are disheveled, whose faces are dust-colored, and whose stomachs are empty [...] When they ask to enter in the presence of rulers, they are not permitted [to do so]; if they ask delicate [women] in marriage, they are not married [to them]; if they are absent, they are not sought after; if they are present, they are not summoned; if they appear, their countenance does not cause joy; if they are sick, they are not visited; and if they die, they are not seen.

The Prophet declared that Uways al-Qaran belongs to this group of hidden saints, and went on to enumerate his spiritual qualities and physical features. Uways is described, *inter alia*, as wearing a lower wrapper (*izār*) and an upper garment (*ridā*’) made of wool (*ṣiyf*), as being “anonymous among the habitants of earth yet known among the inhabitants of heaven”, and – like the Prophet himself! – as enjoying the right of intercession (*shaṭa’a*) on judgment day.31 Moreover, according to the tradition, the Prophet advised ’Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ’Ali b. Abī Ṭālib – two of the future four “rightly-guided Caliphs” – to seek Uways out and to have him beg Allāh’s pardon for them.32 The tradition then describes how, for many years, ’Umar and ’Ali searched for Uways and how, when finally meeting him and conversing with him at length, they came to realize his spiritual superiority over them.33

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31 In this tradition, the spiritual status of Uways is linked to and perhaps even equated with that of the Prophet; see also Zakharia, “Uways al-Qaran”, especially pp. 233, 244-246, 254-256.
In this tradition, 'Umar and 'Alī may be regarded as symbolizing the ideal ruler in accordance with the Sunnī and Shi‘ī worldviews: 'Umar represents the just Sunnī caliph and 'Alī the Shi‘ī imām par excellence. The tradition thus places the hidden saint above the ruler in terms of their spiritual status, and in so doing, reflects a critical approach towards both the Sunnī and Shi‘ī conceptions of political-religious power. Notwithstanding the God-given right of the caliph or imām to rule the Muslim community — nowhere in this tradition does Uways challenge the political authority of 'Umar and 'Alī — the saint occupies a higher rank in the spiritual hierarchy of mankind, to such a degree that even the caliph or imām must seek his intercession before God. Furthermore, as stated above, the presence of the hidden saint guarantees the very existence of creation and the wellbeing of mankind: it is through him rather than through the ruler that divine benefits are bestowed on the world and divine chastisement is averted.34

In contradistinction, the Shi‘ī sources naturally uphold the supreme status of the imām, who is perceived as the only rightful ruler and the sole mediator between man and God. Nevertheless, the imām’s true followers and supporters, his close shī‘a (“party”), are presented as hidden saints who, in addition to leading an ascetic and pious life, practice taqiyya and avoid divulging the secrets of their faith. In a tradition attributed to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the latter is quoted as saying:

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34 See also the words of the Prophet to Usāma b. Zayd, in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādi, al-Muntakhab min kitāb al-zuhd, pp. 118-119: “[...] Through them the earthquakes and trials are averted” [...] bihim tuṣraflū al-zalāzil wa-l-ṣītan); “Know, Usāma, that the closest ones to Allāh on the day of resurrection are those whose grief, thirst, and hunger in this world have lasted long, the hidden and innocent ones who when seen, are unknown, and when absent, are not sought after. They are known among the inhabitants of heaven and are concealed from the inhabitants of earth [...]” (Wa-lam yā Usāma anna aqrab al-nās ilā llāh yawm al-qiyāma man tāla ḥuznūhu wa-‘atshahu wa-jū’hū fi al-dunyā al-akhfiyā’ al-abrār al-ladhīna idhā shuhidū lam yu’raflū wa-‘dhih ghabū lam yuftaqadū yu’raflāna fī ahl al-sannā yakhfawna ‘alā ahl al-arḍ [...]”; “The earth weeps when it loses them, and any town that does not have [at least] one of them suffers the wrath of Allāh. Usāma, if you see them in a village, know that they guarantee the safety of its inhabitants; Allāh will not chastise any people among whom they are present” (Tabkī al-arḍ idhā faqadathum wa-yashkaṭu llāh ‘alā kull balad laysa fīhī minhum aḥad yā usāma idhā ra‘aytuhum fī qaryā fā-lam annahum amān li-tlik al-qaryā fī ahl al-qaryā lā yu‘adhdhibu llāh qawman hum fihi); cf. the versions in Ibn ‘Asākir, Ta’rīkh madinat Dimashq, vol. VIII, pp. 76-80; al-Makki, Qūt al-qulūb, vol. II, pp. 278-279; al-Ghazāli, Ihyā‘ al-ulam al-dīn, vol. III, p. 81.
Our party consists of those whose voices do not exceed their ears, whose hatred does not exceed their own bodies, who do not praise us in public, who do not sit in company with those who charge us with vices, and yet do not quarrel with those who hate us. If they meet a believer [i.e. a Shi’i], they show him respect, and if they meet an ignorant one [a Sunni], they shun him [...]. Our party consists of those who do not howl like dogs nor covet like crows, who do not beg our enemy even when dying of hunger.

When asked where these believers might be found, Ja’far al-Ṣādiq replied:

[They are to be found] at the ends of abode to another. Those are the ones whose lives are serene and who wander from one abode to another; if they are seen, they are unknown; if they are absent, they are not sought after; and they are not anxious about dying [...].

35 In other words, their voices are soft and quiet, testifying to their gentle, modest character (see al-Māzandarānī, Sharḥ usūl al-kāfī, vol. IX, p. 174), or alternatively, to their discretion as regards the secrets of their faith. Cf. the version in al-Qādi al-Nu‘mān, Da‘īm al-islām, vol. I, p. 80: “those whose knowledge does not exceed their ears” (man lā ya’dū ‘ilmuhu samā’ahu) – i.e. they are discrete, or alternatively, their knowledge is solely based on what they hear from the imāms – on their teachings.

36 That is, they are able to control their hatred (see al-Māzandarānī, Sharḥ usūl al-kāfī, vol. IX, p. 174; and cf. the version there: “whose hatred does not exceed their hands”), or alternatively, they are critical only of themselves and do not show hatred towards anyone else.


38 Cf. al-Majlisi, Biḥār al-anwār, vol. LXV, p. 165: “and yet do not quarrel with those who are loyal to us” (wa-lā yuḥāṣīmu lānā walīyān).

39 That is, they remain quiet and do not contend with the Sunnis, thereby revealing the secrets of their faith. Alternatively, they are in control of their carnal desires (see al-Māzandarānī, Sharḥ usūl al-kāfī, vol. IX, p. 175).

The hidden saint of the Shi‘i type maintains utter loyalty to his *imām*, yet is careful not to reveal the secrets pertaining to this loyalty and to his faith. From an ethical-psychological perspective, he is a quiet, introverted, and anonymous person; his spiritual energies are turned inward and are focused on his own self and its blemishes rather than on the imperfections of others.

**Conclusions and a Few Remarks Concerning Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī**

The tradition analyzed in this article seems to have its origins in the *fitnas* of the 2nd/8th and perhaps even the 1st/7th centuries. The religious-political conflicts that tore the Muslim community apart gave rise to a pietistic attitude of noninvolvement and withdrawal from society in times of civil strife, an attitude that also entailed a strong anti-governmental sentiment. Early versions of the tradition, which can be dated at least to the first half of the 2nd/8th century, portray the ideal believer as a righteous, hidden man who retires from the company of men and chooses to practice his religion in solitude. In the course of time, from the 8th and 9th centuries onwards, additional elements were added to these features of the ideal believer. The latter was described as a pious, ascetic, and wandering man – as a true saint in the full sense of the word, whose mere presence in the world ensures its existence as well as the physical and spiritual wellbeing of mankind. The ethical-psychological ideal of hiding one’s religious accomplishments from the eyes of others – an ideal that was to gain much importance in Sunnī mysticism, particularly for the *malāmatiyya* – was likewise pro-

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nounced. Moreover, the hidden saint was presented as an alternative, albeit not in the political sense, to the spiritually inferior rulers of the Muslim community.

In the Shi‘i tradition, probably from a relatively early stage in its formation (the mid-8th century), these themes were closely linked to the concept of secrecy. In Shi‘i hadiths attributed, among other imāms, to Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the ideal believer is depicted as an ascetic, pious, anonymous, and wandering man who practices taqiyya and is careful not to divulge the secrets of his faith. The practice of taqiyya is meant to guarantee the safety of the imāms and their followers and to conceal the sacred Shi‘i teachings from the profane eyes of the uninitiated. From an ethical-psychological point of view, it is designed to maintain the believer’s modesty and humility.

Both Sunnī mysticism and the Shi‘i tradition incorporated similar, early hadiths in their discussions of the hidden saint, and can therefore be seen as two branches deriving from the same roots. To these common roots one may add various pre-Islamic traditions in which the notion of the hidden saint figures as well. However, the motif of secrecy in this context seems to be unique to the early Shi‘i milieu; it resurfaces later on in Sunnī mystical writings. Accordingly, one may conclude that the early Shi‘i milieu contributed much to the development of the idea of the hidden saint, particularly in its ethical-psychological and esoteric aspects.

Further evidence for this Shi‘i contribution may be gleaned from the sayings attributed to Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, the well-known Sunnī mystic who lived in Egypt and died circa 245/859-860. One of the main themes in the sayings ascribed to Dhū al-Nūn is the figure of God’s friends (awliyā‘). They are typically described as maintaining an ascetic and devotional lifestyle and as being anonymous; they pas-

41 For example, the idea according to which the existence of the world depends upon a fixed number of righteous men who live in every generation is already found in Rabbinical literature of the Talmudic era; see The Babylonian Talmud, Yomā, 38:b and Hagigah 12:b; Ginzberg, The Legends, vol. I, pp. 250-253, vol. V, p. 239 n. 164; Sviri, “The Emergence of the Holy Man and the Spiritual Hierarchy in Islamic Mysticism: Biblical (and other) Echoes in a Muslim Woman’s Dream”; see also Fenton, “The Hierarchy”.

42 For instance, in the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī; see the reference above in n. 3.


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sionately love God and enjoy intimacy with Him. Although the awliyā’ are physically present in the corporeal world, their hearts, spirits, or concentrated intentions (himam) travel in the upper, spiritual realms. The awliyā’ are God’s loved ones (aḥbāb, aḥibbā’), His elect (ṣafwa, asfīya’, khaṣā’is, khāṣṣa-khawaṣṣ, khirā/khiyara), and were chosen by Him prior to the creation of the world. Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī seems to have been one of the first mystics in the Sunni tradition who developed the idea of the hidden saint, and may be seen as a precursor to such movements as the malāmātīyya.

In one tradition that tells of his meeting with the ‘Abbāsī Caliph al-Mutawakkil (232/847-247/861), Dhū al-Nūn is reported to have said:

Allāh has servants who have worshiped Him in sincere secrecy, and so He has honored them with His sincere gratitude. They are the ones whose leaves pass empty with the angels, and, when reaching Him, He fills them with the secret of what


45 Nicholson (“A Historical Enquiry”, p. 311), perhaps basing himself on al-Hujwīrī (see al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-mahjūb, p. 125; see also Farīd al-Dīn `Aṭṭār, Tadhkirat al-awliyā’, vol. I, p. 114), writes that Dhū al-Nūn “was a Malāmatī, i.e. he concealed his piety under a pretended contempt for the law […]”. Indeed, according to the teachings attributed to Dhū al-Nūn, the ideal mystic conceals his religious and ascetic activities so as not to give himself unwarranted publicity (shuḥra); see, for example, al-Makki, Qīṭ al-qulāb, vol. II, p. 109; al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ‘ulīm al-dīn, vol. IV, pp. 337, 360; Farīd al-Dīn `Aṭṭār, Tadhkirat al-awliyā’, vol. I, p. 123. Moreover, the term malāma appears in one state-ment attributed to Dhū al-Nūn, though it is impossible to know whether he actually employed this very term; see al-Isfahānī, Hilyat al-awliyā’, vol. IX, p. 356: “[…] slay [or: subdue, chastise] your nafs with the weapon of blame” (qāla Dhū al-Nūn li-fatā min al-nusuṣāk yā faṭā khudh li-nafsika bi-sīlah al-malāma); see also Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Kawkab al-durūrī, pp. 169, 255-256.

46 On the historical questions related to this meeting, see Ebstein, “Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī”.

47 Or: “the utmost secrecy” and “His utmost gratitude” (bi-khālīṣ min al-sīrīr, bi-khālīṣ min shukrkīrī).

48 Suhufuhum. Suhuf (single: ṣuhīfa) signifies, inter alia, the celestial books in which the good and bad actions of men are recorded; see, for example, Q 81:10.
they [themselves] have revealed to Him in private. Their bodies are of this world, whereas their hearts are celestial, containing such knowledge as if they were worshipping Him together with the angels in those spaces and heavens.49

These righteous servants are God’s “friends and loved ones” who enjoy His protection against their enemies. They are appointed by God to cure the spiritual diseases of mankind and are responsible for reminding human beings of their duties towards their Lord. The *awliyā’* guarantee the existence of the world and the wellbeing of its inhabitants:

They are the pegs50 through whom the [divine] gifts are bestowed, the gates are opened, the clouds rise and appear, the punishment is averted, and both man and land are given water.51

The statement “Allāh has servants who have worshiped Him in sincere secrecy […]” is in fact a Shi‘ī *ḥadīth*, which is attributed in Shi‘ī sources to various *imāms*, including Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq.52 Judging by other


50 See Ibn Shu‘ba al-Harrānī, *Tuhaf al-‘uqūl*, p. 160 (‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib: “Allāh has servants who have dealt with Him in His sincere secrecy, and so He has shown them His sincere gratitude. Their leaves pass empty on the day of resurrection, and, when they stand before Him, He fills these leaves for them with the secret of what they [themselves] have revealed to Him in private”). Inna li-llāh ‘ibādan ‘amalīhu bi-khāliṣ min sirrihi fa-shakara lahum bi-khāliṣ min shukrihi fa-‘ūlā‘ika tamurrū ṣuḥufūhum yawm al-qiyāma firghan fa-idhā waqafū bayna yadayhi mala‘ahā lahum min sīr mā asarrū iwayhi); see also al-Majlisi, *Bihār al-anwār*, LXXV p. 64. Cf. Ibn Fahd al-Ḥilli, *Uddāt al-dā‘i*, p. 241 (Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq), where this tradition is followed by the phrase: “The angels who record [the actions of men] do not know what is between Him and these [servants], for the latter are too great” (ajallahun an tuṭṭali‘a al-ḥafaza ‘alā mā baynahu wa-baynahum); see also al-‘Āmilī, *al-


52 See Ibn Shu‘ba al-Harrānī, *Tuhaf al-‘uqūl*, p. 160 (‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib: “Allāh has servants who have dealt with Him in His sincere secrecy, and so He has shown them His sincere gratitude. Their leaves pass empty on the day of resurrection, and, when they stand before Him, He fills these leaves for them with the secret of what they [themselves] have revealed to Him in private”), Inna li-llāh ‘ibādan ‘amalīhu bi-khāliṣ min sirrihi fa-shakara lahum bi-khāliṣ min shukrihi fa-‘ūlā‘ika tamurrū ṣuḥufūhum yawm al-qiyāma firghan fa-idhā waqafū bayna yadayhi mala‘ahā lahum min sīr mā asarrū iwayhi); see also al-Majlisi, *Bihār al-anwār*, LXXV p. 64. Cf. Ibn Fahd al-Ḥilli, *Uddāt al-dā‘i*, p. 241 (Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq), where this tradition is followed by the phrase: “The angels who record [the actions of men] do not know what is between Him and these [servants], for the latter are too great” (ajallahun an tuṭṭali‘a al-ḥafaza ‘alā mā baynahu wa-baynahum); see also al-‘Āmilī, *al-

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sayings that are ascribed to the latter and to his father and which convey similar ideas, it stands to reason that this tradition has its origins in the early Shi’i milieu of the mid-8th century. To be sure, it is impossible to know whether this or many other sayings attributed to Dhū al-Nūn were actually uttered by him, at least in their present form. Still, the links in this context between Shi’i esotericism and Sunni mysticism are significant.

It is noteworthy that in the aforementioned sermon Dhū al-Nūn is said to have delivered to al-Mutawakkil, the supreme status of the awliyā’ is particularly emphasized: they are the true mediators between God and creation and as such, their spiritual guidance of mankind is superior to the leadership of al-Mutawakkil and his ilk. This conception is of course common to the Shi’i tradition as well. Moreover, other sayings ascribed to Dhū al-Nūn which treat of the hidden awliyā’ likewise reflect conceptions that are characteristic of the Shi’i worldview.

Certainly, Dhū al-Nūn was by no means a Shi’i; nevertheless, he seems to have been familiar with Shi’i teachings and appears in the sources as a transmitter of several hadiths that go back to the Shi’i imāms, in-


See above notes 22-23, 40.


55 See, for example, al-Suyūṭī, al-Maknūn, p. 143: “Allāh has unique ones among His servants, noble and chosen ones among His created beings. They accompany this world with their bodies, while their spirits are hanging in the kingdom [of heaven]. Those are Allāh’s noble ones among His servants and His trustees in His land; they summon [men] to His knowledge and are the means of [reaching] His religion. How far [they are]! They have gone far and are unattainable, hidden in the lowlands and in the mountain roads. Yet the earth will never be vacant and free from one who establishes Allāh’s arguments against His created beings, so that, Allāh’s arguments will never cease to be […] Those are the ones whom [Allāh] has veiled from the eyes of His created beings and whom He has hidden from the evils and trials of this world […]” (Wa-qāla dhī al-nūn inna li-li-lāh khāṣṣa min ’ibādīhi wa-nujābā min khlaqihi wa-ṣaffī min bariyyatihī saḥībū al-dunyā bi-abdānhihim wa-arwāḥulhum fī al-malakūt mu’āllaqa ʿilā’ika nujābā’ allāh min ’ibādīhi wa-umānī’ allāh fī bilādīhi wa-l-dū’āt ʿilā ma’rūf thī wa-l-wasiṣla ʿilā dinīhī hayḥāta ba’dūdi wa-fāṭū wa-wārithum ba’tūn al-arḍ wa-l-fājāḥūhū ‘alā annahū lam takhlu li-ard ’an qā’im li-li-lāh bi-hujja ’alā khlaqihi li-āllā tabtulū hujaj allāh […] ʿilā’ika qawm ḥujabahum ‘an ‘uyūn khlaqihi wa-akhfāḥum ‘an āfāt al-dunyā wa-fitanīhā .

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cluding Ja’far al-Ṣâdiq. 56 Thus, the early Shi’i tradition contributed much to the development of the notions of secrecy and the hidden saint in Islamic mysticism.

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