

Ismā'īlī Contributions
to
Islamic Culture

edited by
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Tehran 1977
Imperial Iranian Academy
of Philosophy

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Tehran, Iran, P.O. Box 14 – 1699

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Jacket designed by Liz Laczynska

The Ismā'īlī Response to the Polemic of Ghazālī

by

Henry Corbin

(translated from the French by James Morris)

The Ismā'īlī Response to the Polemic of Ghazālī

I

Despite the many fruitful labours of the past thirty years, we still possess only a small part of the vast Ismā'īlī literature with its manifold branches. Since research into this literature requires a certain philosophical education and a taste for the so-called "esoteric" sciences, researchers in this field will never be too numerous, and progress in it will necessarily be rather slow. It is with all the more pleasure, then, that one greets the truly exemplary edition of the first volume of the *Lectures* (*Majālis*) of Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn Shīrāzī that has recently been prepared by Professor Ḥamīd al-Dīn Ḥātim.¹ One can only hope for more such editions of Ismā'īlī texts. We ourselves have devoted one year of classes at the École pratique des Hautes-Études in Paris to the important work which is the subject of this paper.² Since then, another courageous Ismā'īlī scholar, Mr. Muṣṭafa Ghālib, living in Beirut, has begun to edit this text. We had strongly encouraged him in this work, and had sent him the text of a preface which he had kindly requested from us. But unfortunately, since the tragic events in Beirut and in Lebanon, we have had no further word of our Ismā'īlī colleague there, nor of the printing of his edition, which had already begun.

The work in question is an Ismā'īlī reply to the polemic undertaken against the *Bāṭiniyya* by the famous theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). This polemical treatise is supposedly well known, because it was very partially edited by Ignaz Goldziher.³ But, in fact, the actual details of the work have remained virtually unknown until the present, because, rather than a true edition, Goldziher's work is really only a selection of certain passages – passages unfortunately chosen under the influence of the misleading climate of opinion concerning Ismā'ilism which was current in his day. The particular

choice of quotations is aggravated even more by Goldziher's own commentaries, which is why Ismā'īlīs today rightly consider this book to be defamatory, despite the excuses that might be given concerning the editor's times and circumstances. It is painful to realize that a man like Goldziher seems here to have completely failed to sense the distinctively *religious* aspect of the Ismā'īlī phenomenon, that which constitutes the essence of *bāṭinī* Islam and its *intelligentia spiritualis*. To speak so summarily of a "sectarian nihilism" is deliberately to overlook, among others, such Ismā'īlī declarations as this: "The followers of the exoteric [*ahl al-zāhir*] are not Muslims so long as they do not acknowledge *ta'wīl*, since the exoteric [*zāhir*] is meaningless when it is deprived of the esoteric [*bāṭin*], because the exoteric only subsists through the esoteric." It is difficult to consider as "nihilists" those men who precisely wished to insure the *zāhir* through the *bāṭin*. Undoubtedly, two different conceptions of the "phenomenon of the [revealed] Book" confront each other here, because there are also those who do deny the *bāṭin*. But in any case, esotericism is something quite different from any form of "nihilism"!

Morally speaking, the case of Ghazālī seems more questionable than that of Goldziher. And indeed the Ismā'īlī response reveals, along with sustained indignation, a certain scandalized surprise that a man like Ghazālī could lower himself to such a work, simply gathering together all the accusations in the different heresiographers, without ever referring to an authentic Ismā'īlī source. The very least one can say is that here Ghazālī shows himself a bit too close to the concerns of the governing powers. Did he realize that fact, and did that fact perhaps contribute to the great spiritual crisis in his life? Al-Mustazhir acceded to the throne of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate in Muḥarram 487/January 1094. It was in Dhu'l-Qa'da 488/November 1095 that Ghazālī abandoned his important posts in Baghdad to devote himself to the life of a wandering Sufi. Thus, it was in this short interval of time that his major anti-Ismā'īlī work was composed; this coincided with the end of the reign of the Fātimid Caliph al-Mustanṣir bi'llāh (487/1094), the exact period when the Ismā'īlī community split into the two main branches which still exist today: those of the Nizārīs and the Musta'lis.

The complete title of Ghazālī's work is *Kitāb faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya wa faḍā'il al-mustazhiriyya* (*The Shames of the Bāṭi-*

nites and the Excellences of the Supporters of al-Mustazhir). According to the shorter and more common usage, it is called simply *al-Mustazhirī*. However, this was not the only work in which Ghazālī sought to attack the Ismā'īlīs. This in itself leads one to doubt the opinion still widespread today in Shī'ite circles, according to which Ghazālī is supposed to have repented and ultimately to have gone over to the doctrines of those he had earlier opposed. In any case, some Shī'ites have had quite a different attitude towards him, since Muḥsin-i Fayḍ, one of the most famous pupils of Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, in the seventeenth century, respectfully attempted to rewrite in Shī'ite terms the whole of Ghazālī's immense *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*). We hope that someone will one day undertake a detailed comparison of these two works.

In any case, Ghazālī's work, as it was known through the fragments published by Goldziher, could only reinforce the preconceived opinions concerning the Ismā'īlīs which had been taken solely from the heresiographers. For far too long, the history of religions in general, and the history of *Islamic* philosophy in particular, did not even suspect that there might have been a massive Ismā'īlī response to Ghazālī, thanks to which – along with the other Ismā'īlī texts published in the past thirty years – one can better comprehend the internal drama of Ismā'īlism, as a secret, esoteric society which was suddenly thrown into the open light of the political arena through the triumph of the Fāṭimids.

This response was the work of 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd, the fifth *dā'ī* of the post-Fāṭimid period in the Yemen (d. 612/1215; cf. W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature*, pp. 69–70, note 234). We have been able to utilize photocopies of a manuscript of this work whose source – as is customary – must remain secret. The title of the work is *Dāmigh al-bāṭil wa ḥatf al-munāzil* (*The Destroyer of Error and the Death of He Who Would Defend It*). The work is a true *summa*, containing in its two volumes no less than 1250 pages (with 15 lines per page, and 8–10 words per line). Nothing is left out, and the tone of the writing is quite severe: Ghazālī is never cited as anything but a "heretic" or "one gone astray" (*māriq*). Here, almost a century after the end of the Fāṭimids, the Ismā'īlī defensive has preserved all of its vitality. The work itself is divided into twelve books (*bāb*). The first two make up a vast introduction, criticiz-

ing the intention of Ghazālī and the method of his work. The author cuts Ghazālī's text up into small sections, which he quotes literally in their entirety, and then responds to them, point by point. Thus, one of the first advantages of *Dāmigh al-bāṭil* is that it provides us with the complete text of Ghazālī's treatise, a text which must be collated with the unique manuscript that Goldziher had at hand when preparing his edition.

Since, even after this work has been edited and published, the Arabic text will still be inaccessible to those without knowledge of Arabic so long as it remains untranslated, we have summarized here the content of each of the twelve books (*abwāb*), following the author's own analysis. One will immediately realize all the more how little Goldziher actually revealed to us of Ghazālī's work.

BAB I: In which are set forth the life of this "heretic" (Ghazālī), his transgression of true religion, his variations through the different doctrines and schools, sometimes to strengthen them and sometimes to destroy them; then coming back to them again, sometimes to agree with them and sometimes to reject them – why all that should be called transgression and apostasy against Islam, or indeed Satanism (*tashayṭun*) and heresy. All of this is contained in one chapter (*faṣl*).

BAB II: In which is refuted the praise he had given to his book, and the different explanations he had given for each of its sections (*abwāb*).

BAB III: In which is refuted his *Bāb I*, where he described the procedure he would follow in composing his work.

BAB IV: The refutation of his explanation, in his *Bāb II*, of the different denominations which are included among the *Bāṭiniyya*, and of his supposed explanation of the reasons which led them to undertake all the trouble and sufferings of the *da'wa*.

BAB V: The refutation of his *Bāb III*, in which he speaks of their trickery in dissimulating their intentions (*talbīs*), and claims to reveal the reasons why people are taken in by their ruses.⁴

BAB VI: The refutation of his *Bāb IV*, concerning the *bāṭinī* doctrine, both generally and in specifics.

BAB VII: The refutation of his *Bāb V*, concerning their *ta'wīlāt* (spiritual interpretation) of the exoteric (*zāhir*) aspect of the Qur'ān and the proofs which they construct on the basis of numerological realities.

BAB VIII: The refutation of his *Bāb VI*, concerning the manner in which they present their philosophical proofs of the superiority of their doctrine, in which Ghazālī claims to show the falsity of those proofs.

BAB IX: The refutation of his *Bāb VII*, in which he claims to show the falsity of their arguments in support of the doctrine of the investiture (*naṣṣ*) of the immaculate and sinless Imām (*al-Imām al-ma'sūm*).

BAB X: The refutation of his *Bāb VIII*, concerning the legal situation of the *Bāṭiniyya*, in which he claims to show that one must cut all ties with them (*tabarra'*), call them unbelievers (*takfir*), and may rightfully take their lives.

BAB XI: The refutation of his *Bāb IX*, which contains the philosophical and theological arguments by which he attempted to prove that, in his opinion, the true Imam of his time was al-Mustazhir.

BAB XII: The refutation of what he calls a "refutation" in his *Bāb X*; moreover, several chapters recapitulating what has been said by way of refutation of all the supporters of this heretic, who oppose the true men of God (*ahl al-Haqq*) and men of honour. We take refuge in the friendship of those who are masters of spiritual direction and truthfulness. "This will be the final *Bāb* of this book. May the divine Grace aid us in attaining the goal we have aimed for."

As one can see, this immense work, in order to give a pertinent response to Ghazālī, is thus required to take up all the major themes of Ismā'īlī gnosis. It constitutes an important episode in the history of theosophical religion, in respect of its consciousness of being the true and truthful interpreter of the prophetic revelation. Its author, we may recall once again, died in 612/1215. Let us mention a few other relevant dates: It was on 8th August, 1164 that Nizārī Ismā'īlism, in the person of the Imām Ḥasan – '*alā dhikrihi al-salām* – had proclaimed the Great Resurrection at Alamūt.⁵ Suhrawardī, renewer of the

“Theosophy of Light” of the sages of ancient Persia, died a martyr in 1191. And Ibn ‘Arabī died in 1240.

II

It is with *Book* (or *Bāb*) *III* that one enters into the heart of the polemic. The author uses Ghazālī’s own words and method against him. Does not Ghazālī himself acknowledge the *bāṭin* (the esoteric)? Does he not know the *ḥadīth* which affirms that there is no verse of the Qur’ān that does not have its exoteric and esoteric meaning? How, then, can he pretend to anathematize those who profess the same doctrine as himself?

While *Book III* is very short (a single *faṣl*), *Book IV* covers seventeen chapters of varying length. It is the only one that we can concentrate on within the limits of this article. Its theme is quite important. Among all the different names which have been given them – and that Ghazālī passes over with a rather suspicious complacency – which are the ones that the Ismā’īlīs themselves recognize as legitimate? The names which Ghazālī mentions are those that one encounters in all of the heresiographers: *Bāṭiniyya*, *Qarāmiṭa* (Carmathians), *Khurramiyya* or *Khurramdīniyya*, *Bābakiyya*, *Muḥammira*, *Sab’iyya*, *Ismā’īliyya*, and *Ta’līmiyya*. It is noteworthy that several of these names tend to connect Ismā’īlism to certain Iranian religious movements of the first centuries of the Islamic era, and thereby even to the religions of pre-Islamic Persia. For example, the epic story of Bābak-i Khurramī, in Adharbayjān (Azarābādghān) continued the movement of the *Khurramdīniyān*, whose origins go back to the Mazdakites of ancient Persia, a movement whose true meaning has often been misunderstood.

Our author’s first point of reply is this: “Of all the sects which this ‘heretic’ [Ghazālī] enumerates and describes, of all the names and surnames which he variously arranges, there is only one, of a single branch, that concerns us, and that is the name *Ismā’īliyya*, Ismā’īlīs.⁶ This name designates those whose [spiritual] ancestry goes back to Mawlāna Ismā’īl ibn Ja’far al-Ṣādiq, ibn Muḥammad al-Bāqir, ibn ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Taḳī, ibn ‘Alī al-Murtaḍā al-Waṣī. This is our inherent name. It is our honour and our glory before all of the other branches of Islam, because we stand on the Path of the Truth, in following our guides the Imāms. We drink at an

abundant fountain, and we hold firmly to the guiding lines of their *walāya*. Thus they cause us to climb from rank to rank among the degrees of proximity [to God] and excellence.” (*Faṣl 1*)

It is precisely when Ghazālī takes it upon himself to discuss this line of ancestry and their denomination as “Seveners” (*Sab'iyya*), that our Yemeni *dā'i* begins to show his error and his ignorance. Does not Ghazālī know better than to say that the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il ibn Ja'far is the seventh Imam since Muḥammad, whereas in fact, counting from the Prophet, he would be the eighth (*Faṣl 8*)?⁷ The *dā'i* has no trouble showing that Ghazālī must have been completely unfamiliar with the books of the *Ahl al-bayt*, since their genealogy is widely known. “How, then, does this heretic dare to make an incursion into the esoteric, while he is already ignorant of what is perfectly obvious and precise?” What is perfectly obvious is that the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il is the seventh Imām, *not* in counting from the Prophet, but rather beginning with the Imām Ḥasan ibn 'Alī. The custom is that one does not count in the heptad of Imāms the one who was its origin or founder, the *Asās* – in this case, the Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Now, in counting from the Imām Ḥasan ibn 'Alī as the first Imām, the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il is actually the seventh Imām, the seventh of the Mutimmīn (“those who complete”). It is evident from this that there is a divergence between the Ismā'ilīs and the numerical order of the Imāms in the usage of the “Twelver” Shī'ites.⁸

The attack and defence in *Faṣl 9* are less clear: “Most of them,” wrote Ghazālī, “claim for Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il the rank of a prophetic mission [*manṣib al-nubuwwa*]. And that has continued among his posterity.” The reply: “That is the view of a certain branch of extremists [*ghulāt*]. Thus this blow does not even reach us, since we have previously been careful to dissociate ourselves from such people.” The *dā'i* then refers to the Qur'ānic testimony: “Muḥammad is not the father of any man among you, but he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets” (33/40). One has the impression here that the attack and the defence both avoid the true question. There is a theme current in Ismā'ilī imamology that designates the seventh Imām as the seventh *Nāṭiq* of a cycle. In essence, the qualification as *Nāṭiq* belongs to the Prophet, who “proclaims” a new *Sharī'a*. The seventh Imām does not proclaim any new *Sharī'a*, but he

unveils ("proclaims") all the hidden, esoteric meanings of the prophetic revelations given during the course of the cycle which he himself brings to an end in announcing the *Qiyāma* ("Resurrection"). It is for this reason that he receives the title of *Nātiq*. He does for the *ta'wīl* what the Prophet has done for the *tanzīl*. It would seem that Ghazālī misunderstood the actual meaning of the qualification as "prophet" which was conferred upon the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl, and that, given this confusion, the Yemeni *dā'ī* did not feel any need to go more deeply into this question beyond the simple affirmation that there could not be another prophet after Muḥammad.⁹

As for the name of *Sab'iyya* or "Seveners", already raised by the mention of the seventh Imām, the discussion gives one the impression that the Yemeni *dā'ī* preferred to reply to Ghazālī by an *ad hominem* argument, rather than to correct his false account by explaining the true Ismā'īlī doctrine. Undoubtedly there are important reasons, above all the necessity of *kitmān*, inspiring this tactic, which consists in saying that this "heretic" (Ghazālī) wrongly criticizes the Ismā'īlīs, because the doctrine is precisely what he himself professes in his other books. He should begin by sweeping in front of his own door. This is the sort of *ad hominem* approach one finds in the two following chapters.

Ghazālī attributes the name *Sab'iyya* or "Seveners" to two causes: The first could be called "historiosophical", in the sense that it concerns the Ismā'īlī conception of sacred history; the second is cosmological. The first is refuted in *Faṣl 11*: "The first reason", says Ghazālī, "is that there are seven periods comprised in the Imāmate, and that their end, with the seventh Imām, marks the end of a cycle – and this is what they understand by the *Qiyāma* [the "Resurrection"], although these cycles succeed one another endlessly." What Ghazālī says is almost correct, but goes to one side of the issue, since he does not explain the true Ismā'īlī meaning of the *Qiyāma*. This failure is immediately taken up by the *dā'ī* 'Alī ibn Muḥammad, who stressed that the "theosophical secret" (*sirr al-ḥikma*), which concerns the number and the order of succession of the Imāms, was unknown to Ghazālī. The *dā'ī* himself does not say what the secret is, but he does state that Ghazālī's remarks to the effect that the seventh Imām is the resurrection are false. "Because, if the resurrection does coincide with the moment when the seventh and last of the Imāms appears, this is not at all

to say that the Imām is the resurrection; no, it is rather a condition, a sign, and a beginning.” Here is where the *ad hominem* argument enters in. Ghazālī speaks of cycles “which succeed one another without end”. But that is a conception of the world like that of the *Dahriyyūn* (believers in the eternity of the world), and contradicts the very notion of the *Qiyāma*. Such is not at all the Ismā'īlī doctrine, but rather precisely that taught by Ghazālī in one of his books. (The book in question is one entitled *al-Nuqat wa'l-'uyūn*, something like “*The Points and the Targets*”. We will allow our *dā'ī* the responsibility of attributing it to Ghazālī.) There would perhaps have been opportunity here to explain the true sense of *Qiyāma*, the original reason for the succession of cycles of epiphany (*dawr al-kashf*) and occultation (*dawr al-sitr*), and the length of a cycle (seven millennia, followed by the millennium of the Imām of the resurrection). But it was much easier to be done with the matter by claiming that this “heretic” reproaches us for holding a doctrine which we do not teach, but which he himself really does profess.

Faṣl 12 stresses this position even more. The section taken from the text of Ghazālī explains the name *Sab'iyya* by the cosmology which they profess. This cosmology attributes to each of the seven planets from Saturn to the Moon the successive governance of one of the seven millennia in a heptad. This, Ghazālī argues, is “a belief taken over from the heretical astrologers, and inclined toward the doctrines of the dualists [*thanawiyya*] concerning a Light whose parts, mixed with Darkness, are actually governed by the seven planets”. The *dā'ī*'s reply once again consists essentially in turning Ghazālī's own argument back against him, by showing that he was himself one of those “heretical astrologers”. He therefore refers at length again to the same book of Ghazālī already mentioned in the preceding chapter. It appears that in that book Ghazālī claimed that everything which happens under the sphere of the Moon is under the governance of the “Giver of Forms” (*Wāhib al-suwar*), or the Active Intellect, the tenth of the hierarchy of Intelligences, which the theosophers identified with the Holy Spirit. He likewise spoke there of the eternity of the celestial spheres, which is enough to show that “he gives witness against himself, in professing the same heresy of which he accuses others”. Even more seriously, “the arrow of his trickery comes back upon him, in that he goes much further than the dualists

themselves. For he affirms the existence not of two gods, but of the *ten* gods which he calls Intelligences [*'uqūl*], claiming that each of them gives existence to the next, giving rise to its being after it did not exist, and that each of them causes a heaven to exist". To turn the tables in this fashion is perhaps allowable in the circumstances, but one does have the impression of listening to a dialogue of the deaf.

For one has to be astonished that at this precise moment in the dialogue – although he may explain the point somewhere else in the work – our author fails to mention that the Ismā'īlī *da'wa* itself professed a cosmology including a hierarchy of ten Intelligences. Admittedly such a cosmology is not to be found in the earliest authors, such as Nāṣir-i Khusraw, but one does find the very same Avicennan hierarchy of ten Intelligences, for example, in the great Iranian Ismā'īlī thinker Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 1037), even a little before Avicenna himself. This hierarchy of ten cherubic Intelligences (*Karrūbiyyūn*, *Kerubim*) may even be presupposed in the whole Ismā'īlī conception of *tawhīd*. On this point we owe precisely to these Yemenite Ismā'īlīs of the old, post-Fāṭimid *da'wa* certain clarifications which, up to now, have not been found anywhere else. As they conceive the emanation of this hierarchy, it is the site of a grandiose cosmic drama, perhaps comparable only to the dramatic cosmogony of a Kabbalist such as Isaac Luria (sixteenth century). To his "breaking of the vases" occurring in the worlds prior to our own, there corresponds in the Ismā'īlī schema the drama of the third Intelligence, the spiritual Adam (*Ādam rūhānī*), the Angel of humankind, whose sin disrupts the whole cosmic process. The anthropological and ethical consequences are comparable in both conceptions, and they have a remarkably contemporary philosophical reality. Now, the son of our fifth *dā'ī*, Sayyidnā Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Walid, seventh *dā'ī* in the Yemen (d. 667/1268), himself composed a treatise dealing with these things, which we ourselves edited and translated into French more than fifteen years ago.¹⁰ So why is it that in this passage our *dā'ī*, perfectly aware of these doctrines, says not a word about them while refuting Ghazālī, and does not even mention that he might have something to say about them later on? It seems that he has obeyed to the letter the strict rule of the esotericist: Return the opponent's attack and undermine his positions, but without betraying one's own secrets, the *sirr al-ḥikma* with which

one has been entrusted. This is the way a true *bāṭinī* should behave.

Bāṭiniyya, the esotericists (the “interiorists”), is precisely the title *par excellence* which Ghazālī gives to the Ismā'īlīs. And they are quite proud to accept it: “If one should call us that, it is because we believe that for every exoteric meaning [*ẓāhir*] of the holy Book, there is an esoteric sense [*bāṭin*] which is its true meaning. That is our firm belief, and the very form of our divine service. And it is also that to which the Book of God refers, that to which the Messenger of God called men, and that for the sake of whose transmission [*ta'lim*] he has established his *waṣī* [spiritual successor] and the Imāms who are his successors. We shall set forth the proofs verifying all that when we come to the passage where it will be necessary to demonstrate the bases of the esoteric *ta'wīl*. Then we shall give arguments that will put an end to all uncertainty, and will take away the veils from the hearts of those who are still hesitant and undecided.” (*Faṣl 1*)

Here, at least, we are told that the crux of the question will be treated later (in *Bāb VII*). However, already here in *Faṣl 2* and *3* of *Bāb I* our *dā'ī* touches on the questions of *ta'wīl* (anagogical interpretation) and of the *bāṭin* (the inner meaning, or esoteric). He asks himself how a man like Ghazālī could reproach the *Bāṭiniyya* for professing that the literal, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) matter of Qur'ānic verses and of the traditions has an inner, esoteric sense (*bāṭin*), which is related to the exoteric in the same way as the kernel is to the shell. There are Qur'ānic verses which affirm this reality, such as the following: “Do they expect something other than its *ta'wīl*?” (7/51), and the Prophet himself several times solemnly affirmed that each verse of the Qur'ān has its esoteric aspect, and that in turn has its esoteric sense, and so on until there are seven (or seventy) levels of esoteric meaning. But Ghazālī then goes on to insinuate (*Faṣl 3*) that, from the point of view of Ismā'īlī esotericism, he who is content with the exoteric sense remains under the weight of burdens and chains – i.e., under the obligations of the *Sharī'a* – whereas those who attain the gnosis of the esoteric sense are the people intended in the Qur'ānic verse (7/156), speaking of the Prophet “who lightens their burdens and removes the chains that had crushed them”. On the other hand, the ignorant persons who reject the esoteric are those referred to by the verse 57/13: “Between them there is raised a wall, which has a door on the inside [i.e., on its esoteric face] which opens on the divine

Mercy, whereas on the outside [i.e., on the exoteric aspect], opposite it, there is the divine Severity."

Indeed, what Ghazālī reports here is almost correct, except that it is completely deprived of any nuances. Ismā'īlī gnosis – as indeed any other gnosis – has never been monolithic. One could draw from it conclusions that would do away with the letter of the *Sharī'a*. That tendency was always latent in Bāṭinism, and found its most powerful expression in the reformed Ismā'īlism of Alamūt, at the time of the proclamation of the Great Resurrection (cf. above; but this occurred more than half a century after Ghazālī's time). But one could as well draw more ascetic conclusions, ones which would all the more reinforce the observance of the *Sharī'a*, inasmuch as one granted it the necessary role of support of the *Haqīqa*, the esoteric truth. Both Twelver Shī'ism and Fāṭimid Ismā'īlism devoted themselves, at least apparently, to maintaining this precarious equilibrium. But Ghazālī allows no such nuances in his judgement, hence the irritation of our *dā'ī*. "What this heretic states, according to what was told him concerning the Bāṭinites, is pure pretence without even the beginning of a proof." He protests that he and his co-religionists "have no relation at all with anyone who would be unfaithful to any of the prescriptions of the *Sharī'a*, pretending to base his actions on the esoteric sense, so as to exclude the literal, exotic sense".

This question is a serious one. The fifth *dā'ī* returns to discuss it at greater length in *Book IV* of this work, in regard to two other names falsely attributed to the Ismā'īlīs, names which could lead to confusing them with the Carmathians or with other sects of an Iranian origin, such as the *Khurramiyya* or the *Bābakiyya*.

III

The figure of Hamdān, the Carmathian, has already been the subject of many studies, because the question of the relations between the Ismā'īlīs and the Carmathians revolves around him. We are concerned with it here because Ghazālī raises the issue at this point so as to "compromise" the Ismā'īlīs in the eyes of the caliph Mustazhir. And if we cite the whole story of Hamdān's "conversion" to esotericism, it is because this story bears a striking resemblance to the beginning of an Ismā'īlī initiatic tale of the fourth/tenth century that we have studied at

length elsewhere, the *Book of the Sage and the Disciple* (*al-ʿĀlim wa'l-ghulām*).¹¹ This story, in addition to being a unique little literary masterpiece, is an admirable description of the method followed by the Ismā'īlī missionary, and of the spiritual stages of the new follower up to the moment that he himself receives the initiation and becomes a *dā'ī*, going off to convert the people of his own town and calling them, through different and moving stories, to respond to the *da'wa*, the "Ismā'īlī Convocation" that calls them to the "true religion." The tale is certainly a monument of Ismā'īlī spirituality, but so strongly marked by what would become the spirit of the reform of Alamūt that we ourselves thought it possible to detect certain Carmathian influences in it. For its vehemence and boldness are quite the opposite of that prudence exhibited by our Yemeni *dā'ī*. In these two texts, we have, as it were, two extremes of Ismā'īlī theosophy; that is why we have stressed their importance here.

Obviously one should also bear in mind other information that we have concerning Ḥamdān the Carmathian. Here we must limit ourselves to the texts gathered by the late W. Ivanov, to whom our Ismā'īlī studies owe so much, even if his personal philosophy was quite their opposite.¹² The events in question took place between 250/864 and 269/882, at first in the district of Nahrayn. A man named Ḥusayn, an Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* from Ahwāz in Khūzistān, succeeded in converting several important figures in the area, among them a very gifted man, Ḥamdān, called "the Carmathian" (cf. below the story of this "conversion" translated from the passage of Ghazālī). After that we hear no more of the *dā'ī* Ḥusayn; all attention is focused on this Ḥamdān.

W. Ivanov has brought together several pages of an Ismā'īlī treatise, *Asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, which reveal some important details about the methods and organization of Ismā'īlī propaganda in the time of the Fāṭimids.¹³ (We are not going to discuss here the hypotheses which have been given concerning the original form of the Arabic word which has been translated as the "Carmathians."¹⁴) Ḥamdān became a chief *dā'ī*, probably for all of Mesopotamia. His brother-in-law, ʿAbdān, acted as his secretary and representative. After 261/875, their headquarters was at Kalwādhā, near Baghdad. Then, probably around 286/899, there were some very important changes. Ḥamdān seems to have "forsworn" his allegiance to the *da'wa* and then disappeared.¹⁵ His secretary was killed, and another *dā'ī* succeeded

him. But just what were these important changes? It seems that W. Ivanov was probably correct in speaking of a "disillusionment among the Carmathian brethren".¹⁶ Unfortunately, we have today virtually none of the pre-Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī literature. That is why we attach all the more significance to the initiatic tale that we mentioned above.¹⁷ If we read with sympathy and in detail the account that Nāṣir-i Khusraw has left us of his visit to the tiny Carmathian state of Bahrayn, an ideal state if ever there was one,¹⁸ we may be led to believe that the Carmathians had separated themselves from that movement which was to end in the enthronement of al-Mahdī and the foundation of the Fāṭimid state. It was asking too much of these esotericists, that they should make accommodations with a temporal and political caliphate.

Without going into any more detail on the Carmathian question, which remains quite complex, these few facts should give sufficient resonance to the passage taken from Ghazālī's text (*Faṣl 4*). We shall point out some of the resemblances to the book entitled *The Sage and the Disciple*. The response of our *dā'ī* is quite calm: What is there at all reprehensible in the story of Ḥamdān's conversion? In *Faṣl 5*, Ghazālī will try to take advantage of this story, but the *dā'ī* opposes him with still another kind of *ad hominem* argument.

Faṣl 4:¹⁹ "And then this 'heretic' [Ghazālī] continues: As for the Carmathians, they take their name because of their relation to a man called Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ, who was in the beginning one of their preachers [*dā'ī*]. Some people responded to his call, and in consequence they were called the *Qarāmiṭa* or *Qarmaṭiyya*. As for Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ himself, he was a man of Kūfa, who had an inclination toward the spiritual life. One day a Bāṭinite *dā'ī* ran into him on the road, where Ḥamdān was driving a flock of cattle. Ḥamdān said to the *dā'ī*, whom he did not know and of whose mission he was quite unaware: 'I see that you are travelling and have come a long way. Where are you going like that?' The *dā'ī* mentioned a little town which happened to be Ḥamdān's own. So Ḥamdān said: 'Climb up on one of these cows, and rest a while from your walking.' Now, the *dā'ī* at once recognized that this was a man with a vocation for the spiritual life and religious things, so he began to work on him, taking his spiritual inclination into account:

The *dā'ī*: I have received no order to do that.

Ḥamdān: So you only act on orders?

The *dā'ī*: That is right.

Ḥamdān: On whose orders, then, do you act?

The *dā'ī*: On the order of my Lord and yours, to Whom belong both this world and the other world.

Ḥamdān: So He is Lord of the two worlds?

The *dā'ī*: You are right. But God gives his Lordship to whomsoever He pleases.

Ḥamdān: And what is your aim in coming to this country?

The *dā'ī*: I want to call its inhabitants from ignorance to true Knowledge, from Wandering in error to the right direction, and from the state of the damned to that of the Blessed. I would like to deliver them from the depths of poverty and servitude and give them something that would relieve them of their weariness and troubles.

Ḥamdān: Well, then, save me! And may God have rescued you! Give me this Knowledge by which you will give me Life, for I need nothing more than that of which you spoke.

The *dā'ī*: But I have been ordered not to reveal the hidden secret to anyone until I have judged them to be worthy of my trust and have received their oath.

Ḥamdān: And what does this oath concern? Tell it to me, because I am ready to take it.

The *dā'ī*: It is that, before me and before the Imām, you take upon yourself the oath and pact with God [*mūthāq*], which is never to disclose the secret of the Imām that I am about to tell you, and never to betray my own secret.

And then Ḥamdān took this oath."

If one compares this to the beginning of the *Book of the Sage and the Disciple*, one cannot help being struck by the parallelism between the two stories and even the dialogues. In both, the Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* does not give a public sermon, does not address himself to the multitude. His mission is to discover, from individual to individual, those in whom he can detect the spiritual aptitude to respond to the *da'wa*. Then he must provoke in that person the inner awakening which will lead him to ask certain questions. That is the *dā'ī*'s task, to raise the dead – the spiritually dead, of course. ("I myself was dead, but God gave me Life again. Now I must give to those who will come after me the trust which has been confided in me."²⁰) Just like the neophyte in the initiatic tale ("Is there a Way to Life for me?"²¹), Ḥamdān here

longs for the gift of Knowledge that will give him Life. But in both stories, the neophyte must begin by giving his solemn oath not to reveal to the profane that lofty Knowledge which can only be told to those capable of understanding it, and who will likewise take the same oath.²² Like Ḥamdān Qarmāṭ, the neophyte in the *Book of the Sage and the Disciple* will also become a responsible *dā'ī*, and the story of his work in that case fills the second half of the book. Indeed, one wonders whether it is Ḥamdān the Carmathian who resembles the archetypal hero of the initiatic tale, or whether it is not rather this hero who conforms to the ideal that is typified in the personage of Ḥamdān.

In any case, far from finding anything reprehensible in the conduct of Ḥamdān, our Yemeni *dā'ī* sees it in certain quite familiar characteristics: "If what this 'heretic' [Ghazālī] says is true, according to someone who told him the story, then so what?! There is nothing in it that might shame someone who, in his written work, professed that sort of thing, since that is just the conduct of the *Ahl al-dīn* [the members of the esoteric religion], and the mode of action of those who are spiritual guides toward God. The Holy Book and Tradition [*Sunna* in the Shī'ite sense of the word] give witness to this sort of conduct, and there is no blame or wrong in saying it for which anyone could be accused or censured" (*Faṣl* 4).

But Ghazālī's passionate opposition cannot be so easily disarmed. In the passage of *Faṣl* 5 he continues: "Then the *dā'ī* gave his instruction in the sciences of his ignorance [*sic.: funūn jahlihi*], in such a manner as to bring about Ḥamdān's gradual allegiance, until he had seduced him completely. Then he completely acquiesced in whatever the *dā'ī* asked of him. At that point he himself began to preach the *da'wa* [the "Call"], and became one of the sources [*aṣl*, or an authority] of this *da'wa*. His followers were named Carmathians." This time, our Yemeni *dā'ī* loses his patience and traps Ghazālī in an *ad hominem* dilemma, one resulting from his own words: "If the *dā'ī* that this 'heretic' [Ghazālī] mentions recognized in the one whom he called [Ḥamdān Qarmāṭ] the aptitude that is presupposed in this sort of Call, then that was, after all, his duty, and there is nothing in that to deserve any blame. But on the other hand, if he had recognized in him something incompatible with that to which he called, it is quite inconceivable that the person who was called, if he had the least bit of intelligence, would have

received and followed that Call. Thus the intention of this 'heretic' [Ghazālī] in that of which he accuses Ḥamdān and his *dā'ī* – that is, of teaching [*ta'lim*] and letting oneself be taught [*ta'allum*] sheer ignorance – is nothing but a totally groundless and idiotic opinion, that can only be explained by his malevolent aims."

IV

Ghazālī, however, tried to push things even further in his book. After having suggested this association of the Ismā'īlīs with the impious Carmathians who had pillaged the Temple of Mecca, he goes on to try to associate them, through certain other names that have been used of them, with some Iranian religious movements of the first Islamic centuries that had themselves grown out of religious movements in pre-Islamic Persia. This information may be quite interesting for the historian of religions and the phenomenologist of religious matters, but it was a great deal less so for our strict Yemeni *dā'ī*.

It may be helpful here to recall some of the antecedents, going back to Sassanian Iran, which historians generally grant to the sects that will be discussed in *Faṣl* 6 and *Faṣl* 7. In general, their common antecedent was the Mazdakite movement, in the reign of Qobād (*Kawād*) the First (d. 531), a movement which appears to have been a sort of reform of Manichaeism. Recent research has moderated a great deal the more extreme judgments that were once made of this sect.²³ It takes very little indeed for any non-conformist movement to find itself accused of all sorts of "communist" practices and monstrous immoralities by the heresiographers – and then by historians who follow their accounts with too much naive confidence. Certainly, the Iranologist of our own time will want to explore the real influence that Iranian ideas could have had on Ismā'īlī theosophy at its different periods. For example, the "form of Light" that becomes connected with the member at the moment of his initiation; the "drama in Heaven" and the work of the Demiurge; the declaration of the Khurramiyya that two things are necessary for salvation: true knowledge of the Imām and the restoration (or transmission) of the trust confided in the one (the gnosis) – all of these are themes that could be more deeply studied, in pointing to ties between the ancient gnosis and that of the Ismā'īlīs.²⁴ But Ghazālī's writing has no such

intention of enriching religious phenomenology. Rather, he is aiming to denounce what appears to him as a connivance between the Ismā'īlīs and the Iranian sects – a ploy that will make more credible his accusation that the Ismā'īlīs are heretics who use their “gnosis” as an excuse for abandoning the *Sharī'a*.

Faṣl 6 comprises a long selection from Ghazālī on the Khurramiyya who, he adds, are also known as the “Mazdakites”. The Persian word *khurram* means agreeable, delightful, smiling, pleasing – whatever men take pleasure in contemplating (one is reminded of the “gai savoir” in our civilization of Occident in France). In fact, this was a true religious movement whose efforts lasted for several centuries. One can trace a sort of line of affiliation between the Mazdakites, the *Khurramiyya*, *Khurramdīniyya*, and the *Bābakiyya*, because all of these movements agree in their conclusions, although differing in many of their premises.²⁵ Ghazālī mentions the *Khurramiyya* and the *Khurramdīniyya* with all the usual judgements: “These are people whose doctrine consists in rolling up the carpet of obligations of the *Sharī'a*, so as to render men free to follow all their pleasures and passions . . . in permitting freedom of sexual relations and declaring as permitted all sorts of things prohibited by the religious laws”. But the Yemeni *dā'ī* remains quite calm: “If what this ‘heretic’ [Ghazālī] says is true, according to someone who told him the story [the same formula used before in referring to the case of Ḥamdān the Carmathian], then that is fine, since these men have already found their judgement in the opprobrium that they have received in this world [. . .]. As for us, we swear before God that we have nothing at all to do with anyone who would perform the sort of actions that this ‘heretic’ has been told about.”

Faṣl 7 is the longest of all in *Book IV* of *Dāmigh al-bāṭil*. It is introduced by a long selection from Ghazālī concerning the personage of Bābak Khurramī. With him, Ghazālī has evoked the whole religious drama of Adharbayjān in the course of our ninth century – a story that we cannot even summarize here.²⁶ For a long time, the followers of the heroic Bābak were victorious. In the end, it was Afshīn, the general in charge of the armies of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Mu'taṣim, who eventually overcame them. He even tried to save Bābak, but the latter had refused all compromise. Ghazālī has happily included in his description a short phrase full of meaning for the Iranologist: He mentions “that the followers of Bābak traced their ancestry

to the prophetic mission of a man who was one of their hereditary princes prior to Islam, by the name of Sharwīn".²⁷

This short phrase takes on an extraordinary resonance from the fact that Adharbayjān was the scene of the epic story of the *Bābakiyya*. For it was to Adharbayjān that the Sassanian Magi had "transferred" the holy places of the hagiography of the prophet Zoroaster. And some three centuries after Bābak, Suhrawardī, "restorer of the philosophy of the sages of ancient Persia", studied there in Adharbayjān, at Maraghah. Certain important Ismā'īlī treatises treat of Zoroaster as a "notable of the period of Abraham".²⁸ It would seem that both the *Ishrā-qiyyūn* as well as the Ismā'īlīs felt a spiritual necessity to connect the line of ancient Iranian prophecy to the line of Semitic prophecy in the Bible and the Qur'ān. This fact has not been much noticed before, but perhaps the future will soon reveal its importance for our own day.

To be sure, these were not the sort of things that occupied Ghazālī's mind – for him, the important task was to denounce the immoral activities attributed to this sect. But such were not the considerations of our Yemeni *dā'ī*, either. He responds to Ghazālī's serious accusations by quoting long passages which are all the more valuable to us in that they come from texts which are otherwise quite unknown.

"Here is what we have to say in reply," he writes. "All that is a tale whose depravity corresponds to the state of the one who told it and the person who reports it [i.e., Ghazālī]. May God curse the man who invented it, the one who reports it, and anyone who believes it [. . .]. If it were not that someone might suspect that we were trying to avoid replying to any point at all in the accusation of this 'heretic' [Ghazālī], we would certainly avoid even mentioning the scandalous and atrocious sorts of things with which he tries to defame us."

Admittedly, the goal of every follower of the Imāms is to attain the *Haqīqa*, the knowledge of the esoteric sense (*bāṭin*) of the Revelation. But is there a single word in the speeches of a single Imām which would justify libertinism and the abandonment of the practices of the *Sharī'a*, with the excuse that one has "realized" the esoteric truth? Our *dā'ī* gives a great number of supporting quotations in this *Faṣl* 6; here we can only mention their existence, while quoting a few lines from some of the principal ones. There is the biting response of Mawlānā 'Alī (*Asās* of the Imāmate, and the First Imām for the Twelver

Shī'ites) to a group of businessmen who had come to find him, saying: "We are your Shī'ites, O Amīr of the believers!" The Imām looked at them for a long while, and then said: "No! I don't recognize a single one of you, nor do I see in you any trace of what you have claimed. For our Shī'ites are watchers of the Sun, the Moon, and the stars [which alludes to their vigilant observation of the canonical hours of prayer]. Our Shī'ites are men who are hungry, and have an empty stomach [nothing here, in short, that would fit the libertines mentioned by Ghazālī]. One can recognize their religious state [*ruhbāniyya*] from their faces. He is not one of our Shī'ites who would take something wrongfully, do violence to men, or seize what does not belong to him."

Similarly, certain men of Kūfa had been outraged at the fact that Mufaḍḍal, the *famulus* of the Sixth Imām (Fifth in the Ismā'īlī order) Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, had replied, when asked about the number of Shī'ites there, that their number was very few. The Imām admitted that he was quite correct: "Those men are not our Shī'ites, because if they had been, they would not have been upset with your reply. And moreover, God has described our Shī'ites as being quite unlike such men. No one is truly a Shī'ite of Ja'far but he who has sewn up his tongue [i.e., who observes the "discipline of initiatic secrecy", the *kitmān*] and who works for his Creator [. . .]. He is one of Ja'far's Shī'ites who passes his nights awake in prayer, and whose days are spent in fasting; he who forbids himself all profane enjoyments out of respect for God and ardent aspiration for us, the members of the prophetic Household [*Ahl al-bayt*]." These words are all the more important in that one owes to the Imām Ja'far so many crucial statements about esotericism, such as the following: "Our cause is the truth, and the truth of the truth [*ḥaqq al-ḥaqq*]; it is the exoteric, the esoteric of the exoteric, and the esoteric of the esoteric."²⁹

The Yemeni *dā'ī* cites letters of Fāṭimid Imāms throughout the rest of this *Faṣl* 6. First of all, there is a letter that the Imām al-Mu'izz li-dīn Allāh (fourth Fāṭimid Caliph, 341/953–365/975)³⁰ wrote in his own handwriting to his *dā'ī* Muḥammad ibn Katām.³¹ We can only cite a few lines: "I swear to God! If the exoteric [*ẓāhir*] did not have any virtue or value as intercession [*shafā'a*], then our Prophet Muḥammad would have been without both as well [since his mission as prophet only concerned the *ẓāhir*]. May wretchedness, total wretched-

ness, be the fate of whoever ceases to be preoccupied with the *zāhir* and tries to use something else to lead him to the divine Mercy, after he has stopped observing the exoteric [. . .]! One should ask such stupid people: Is the gnosis of theosophical truths [*ma'rifat al-Haqā'iq*] somehow possible without the practice of works [of piety], or is it not indeed impossible without them [. . .]? Tell them: These works, such as the Prayer and the rest, which in your opinion you should abandon once you have learned of their esoteric truth – are these works part of religion [*dīn*, the *res religiosa*], or is it really true that they are not part of it? If these practices imposed by the *Sharī'a* are indeed an integral part of that Religion which has been brought by the Prophets and Messengers, then whoever abandons them is at the same time abandoning Religion, and thus becomes an unbeliever [*kāfir*]. And if they should respond to you in saying that in their eyes these practices are not an integral part of Religion, then the one who instituted them must have been a *dā'ī* who was calling men to something other than Religion. But God Himself denies them on that point, when He says: 'The True Religion before God is Islām' [3/17], the "eternal Religion [*dīn qayyim*]", and the "religion of Abraham the pure *ḥanīf*" [6/162] [. . .]. One day they will find themselves face-to-face with their works;³² then they will repent, but it will be too late for their repentance to have any effect."

The long letter of the Imām al-Mu'izz is followed by a spiritual testament (*waṣiyya*) of the Imām al-Ḥākim bi-amr Allāh, the sixth Fāṭimid caliph (386/996–411/1021) and an impressive youthful figure, who has taken on a theophanic significance for Druze esotericism, and who has been the subject of a moving fictional biography by our Gérard de Nerval.³³ The *dā'ī* to whom this *waṣiyya* is addressed is none other than Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī – already mentioned above – one of the most famous names and most profound thinkers of the Ismā'īlī *da'wa*, who at that time was in charge of the *da'wa* for the *jazīra* of the two 'Irāq's (i.e., Mesopotamia and western Iran).³⁴ Here once again we can quote only a few selected lines: "Keep up all of my prescriptions to you concerning the service of God [. . .]. Keep alive the tradition of our ancestor the Messenger of God, through the Call [the *da'wa*] to true *tawḥīd* [. . .]. Urge the believers to remain attached to all the obligations of religious practice, to all the other obligations of their allegiance, and to the loyalty which is incumbent upon them and

which is written in the book of their deeds. And know that our protection extends only to those who put into practice the Book of God and the tradition of the Messenger of God, and who serve God through their devotion to us. Teach this to all of our friends [*awliyā'*] as our word."

This testament is followed by a long and instructive letter by an anonymous *dā'ī*. Its last lines summarize once again all the intentions which our Yemeni *dā'ī* has had throughout this *Faṣl* 6: "Of course we do not deny at all that what the Prophet has revealed necessarily requires a *ta'wīl*. But the nature of things is such that the *ta'wīl* also requires the exoteric divine service [*ibāda ṣāhira*]. Any *ta'wīl* that would result in the abolition of practical works and the exoteric divine service must be a false *ta'wīl*. One should pay no attention to such a thing." Later on (in *Faṣl* 13), our *dā'ī* adds a note of humour, in citing this Qur'ānic verse: "Those to whom the Torah has been given, and yet do not conform their lives to it, are like the donkey that one uses to carry books" (62/5).³⁵

All of these different passages that we have quoted from *Faṣl* 6 also show us the consistent position of our Yemeni *dā'ī*. In short, it is this: The Ismā'īlīs support the necessity of both the *bāṭin* and *ta'wīl*. The Sunnis oppose them, in claiming that whoever would support the necessity of the *bāṭin* and of *ta'wīl* is in reality aiming to destroy the exoteric and to do away with the obligations of the *Sharī'a*. The Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* – and with him all of Ismā'īlism – protest that this is a false method of reasoning, and denounce it as ill-intentioned sophistry. The esoteric is the inner truth of a statement, practice or event which, if they were reduced simply to their *ṣāhir*, would lack any spiritual efficacy. There is thus an unbreakable solidarity and an essential interdependence between the *bāṭin* and the *ṣāhir*. They are, as it were, the two foci of the ellipse that is constructed by the *da'wa*; if one of them were to disappear, the whole thing would collapse.

This was also essentially the position of all the esoteric masters in Twelver Shī'ism; and indeed, in a certain sense, it resembles the difficult dilemma of primitive Judaeo-Christianity, in the early community led by "James the Just" in Jerusalem, as it was faced with Pauline Christianity: Does the acceptance of the message of Jesus understood as the *Christos* necessarily imply that one reject the Mosaic Torah? That was an unbelievably serious risk, if one considers the cosmic reso-

nances and correspondences which Jewish theosophy has perceived in the precepts and observances of the Torah. And the Islamic esotericists, the Ismā'ilīs and the 'urafā' among the Twelver Shī'ites, have recognized similar correspondences in relation to the *Sharī'a*. Here one has the initial outline of a comparative study that has not yet been undertaken.

V

Our Yemeni *dā'ī*, 'Alī ibn Muḥammad, therefore represents in its complete and authentic form what is usually called the *da'wa qadīma*, the ancient *da'wa*, which continued the Fāṭimid *da'wa* in the Yemen after the actual disappearance of the Fāṭimid Caliphate. However, the philosopher would ask himself quite different questions than the historian. In particular, the "Ismailiologist" philosopher, having been well instructed by the replies of the Yemeni *dā'ī*, cannot help asking himself the question: What would an Iranian Ismā'īlī – one who had heard at Alamūt the proclamation of the Great Resurrection (*Qiyamāt al-qiyāma*) by the Imām Ḥasan, 'alā dhikrihi al-salām, on 8th August, 1164 – have replied to the polemic of Ghazālī? And what would he have thought of the reply of the Yemeni *dā'ī*, his contemporary, to Ghazālī's attack? Perhaps he would have remarked that in the end this defence, although quite valuable, remained on the level at which *action* and *contemplation* are placed in contrast, if not indeed in opposition – where there is still another level, more profound or more lofty, at which the two coincide, the level of the esoteric of the esoteric (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*). Here once again this notion of the ultimate identity of action and contemplation might lead to a comparison with the cosmogony and eschatology of Isaac Luria of Ṣafed, the great renewer of the Kabbalah in the sixteenth century. The philosopher can ask himself this sort of question because, unlike the historian, he is not tied to the events of the past, but rather is concerned with the future. And Ismā'īlī philosophy, which was once at the forefront of Islamic philosophy, must – if it wishes to regain that position – ask questions such as these, which will enable it to retain *all* of its traditions.

One of these questions is in a way already posed for us by *Faṣl 14* of *Book IV* of *Dāmigh al-Bāṭil* – the section whose essentials we have tried to outline here, without forgetting that the entire

work includes eight other “Books”. This *Faṣl 14* is devoted to still another among the different names that Ghazālī mentions as having been given to the Ismā'īlīs, that of the *ta'limiyya*. What he says about this name is literally true, but since it is lacking in the proper nuances, it almost entirely fails to describe the reality of the specifically Ismā'īlī conception of *ta'lim*. Literally, the term means to teach something to someone; it indicates education, or instruction in a doctrine. According to Ghazālī, the esotericists of his time made a distinction between that truth which is knowable by personal judgement (*ra'y*) – and which can never be more than an opinion – and that Truth which is only knowable through *ta'lim*, a teaching whose guarantor is the sinless, immaculate Imām (*al-imām al-ma'sūm*). Thus, according to Ghazālī's interpretation in the passage cited in *Faṣl 14*, the Ismā'īlīs and esotericists (*Bāṭiniyyūn*) are those who would destroy all personal knowledge with the intention of replacing it with a knowledge gained through authority. But in fact, the real situation bears no relation at all to this simplistic explanation.

First of all, in the Ismā'īlī context, or in that of Shī'ism in general, the word *ta'lim* can only retain all its proper resonances if one translates it as “initiatric knowledge”, or “initiatric doctrine”. Now an initiatic understanding, knowledge transmitted through *initiation* into a doctrine, is something quite different from a “dogmatic” or “authoritarian” knowledge. (a) The opposition which is intended by the contrast between “initiatric knowledge” (*ta'lim*) and “knowledge through personal opinion” (*ra'y*) primarily concerns the relative degree of certainty which is possible in each case. This degree of certainty must be understood: (b) in its relation to the “content” which is the object of knowledge, and (c) in its relation to the mode in which the knowledge is received.

(a) One could say that the contrast between the two degrees of certainty here is analogous to that which the Greek philosophers made between *noēsis* (intellection) and *doxa* (opinion), or between a knowledge according to the truth (*kata alētheion*) and a knowledge according to opinion (*kata doxan*). It is the same sort of problem that, among the Twelver Shī'ites, underlay the beginnings of the split between the two theological schools of the *Uṣūliyyūn* and the *Akhbāriyyūn*.³⁶ The *mujtahids* among the *Uṣūliyyūn* agree that they can arrive at nothing better than a probable opinion (*ẓann, maẓinna*). The *Akhbāriyyūn* could not content themselves with this – and there were

even some important philosophers and theosophers among their number (Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, Qāḍi Sa'īd Qummi). A *ta'wīl* is not something that one can simply improvise; the esoteric meaning is not at all a simple personal opinion.

Since these terms have not been properly understood, this situation has often been misunderstood in the West. The *Ikh-wān al-Ṣafā'*, for example, have been taken, along with the Ismā'īlīs, as champions of "free thought", although that was not at all what was at issue here. For the instruction which is intended by the word *ta'līm*, the knowledge which was transmitted by initiation, concerned something quite different from "philosophy", at least in the sense "philosophy" has taken on in the West ever since the Enlightenment. Descartes, for example, could compose a *Discourse on Method*, or his *Philosophical Meditations* all by himself. But knowledge that is transmitted through initiation is neither the chance discovery of a single philosopher, nor some dogmatic affirmation of a theologian. Beyond both *'aql* (the intellection of the philosopher) and *naql* (the corpus of theological tradition), initiatic knowledge also requires *kashf*, inner discovery or intuition. This is enough to indicate that the "subjective, personal" aspect remains significant for both the seeker and the disciple, since the *ta'līm* can only be transmitted to the initiate if he has the necessary intuitive ability to comprehend the *bāṭin* which is revealed to him, i.e., the ability to transmute all literal forms into symbols. This ability is precisely what the *dā'ī* must recognize in any potential neophyte, before he can proceed any further.

(b) The content of the knowledge transmitted by initiation is neither pure philosophy nor pure theology, but rather something essentially "theosophic", in the etymological sense of the Greek word *theosophia*, which is the exact equivalent of the Arabic *ḥikma ilāhiyya*, or "divine wisdom". Theosophy does not reveal the "mystery of mysteries" (*ghayb al-ghuyūb*); it can only approach it from afar and give an intuitive sense for the point in the divine Mystery from which all the worlds are manifested. Whether one considers the theory of *Sephirōth* in the Jewish Kabbalah; the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiya*, in Ismā'īlī and Shī'ite theosophy; the "Drama in Heaven", and the correspondence between heavenly and earthly hierarchies and periodic cycles of prophecy in Ismā'īlī gnosis; or the *Ungrund* and the *Urgrund* and its primordial theophanies in Jacob Boehme – none of these could be arbitrarily reconstructed,

through trial and error or by means of exploratory syllogisms, in the same way as the *Discourse on Method*. Such things are rather an age-old treasure, a "hidden treasure" that can only be transmitted to "the one who knows", its legitimate inheritor, because he alone is capable of understanding it.

(c) This special legitimacy is also indicated by the third characteristic which differentiates Ismā'īlī *ta'lim* from ordinary knowledge, and which it shares in common with Shī'ite gnosis, what is called in Persian *'irfān-i shī'ī*. What is involved is a knowledge which is itself gnosis, the knowledge that is salvation (hence the symbol of the "Ark of salvation", *Safīnat al-najāh*). Nothing could be more different from a dogmatic affirmation than a symbolic truth offered in the course of an initiatic ritual. For initiation *initiates* one into a knowledge that is not only inseparable from life, but in fact *is life* itself. Whoever would discuss such a symbol, then, as though it were a philosophic proposition or a theological dogma, shows by that very fact that he is not its legitimate inheritor. Whether one refers to the fragment of the dialogue between Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ and his *dā'ī* (section III above), or, even better, to the initiatic tale that makes up the *Book of the Sage and the Disciple*, one always comes back to this fundamental affirmation: "I was dead and God made me Living." To ask for *ta'lim*, for gnosis, is to ask: "Is there a way to Life for me?" Further on in that tale, the Shaykh says, speaking of his son: "Ṣāliḥ is not dead, and henceforth he will never die. He is living for all eternity." For he had found Life in the true sense of the word, which is not that of biological "life", but rather of the spiritual Life which alone will allow one to leave this world alive. "Those Ignorant ones, who fail to see the hidden meaning that is the Spirit and the Life of things, deal with nothing but a corpse."³⁷

Therefore there can be no perpetuation of Tradition that is not a perpetual rebirth, "renaissance", since it must consist in transmitting the "hidden trust" to the legitimate inheritor, for whom this trust is *life*, and who in turn will transmit it to someone *living*. The most distressing question of our times is to know how, very shortly, this "hidden trust" will be transmitted. For its transmission presupposes a certain spiritual pedagogy which can teach one to go beyond the scientific evidence of laboratories and also the ideological dogmatism of the rampant secularized theologies. Several centuries ago, Ismā'īlī *ta'lim* was at the forefront of such a pedagogy. The separation of the Tree

of Life from the Tree of Knowledge was Adam's great sin, the one which the Kabbalah indicated symbolically as the "ravaging of the plantations". This ravaging appears to us today so widespread and of such an intensity, that to combat it will require the combined forces of all the *Bāṭiniyyūn* among the *Ahl al-kitāb*.³⁸ It is in this way that the conception of an "Abrahamic ecumenicism" must find its contemporary meaning and realization.

Notes

1. *al-Majālīs al-mu'ayyadiyya li-sayyidinā Hibat-Allāh al-Mu'ayyad fī'l-dīn al-Shīrāzī* (470 H.), Bombay: 1395/1975, 519 pages. Besides giving a good critical apparatus, which mentions the Qur'ānic references, and an analytical table of contents, Professor Ḥamīd al-Dīn Ḥātim has also included marginal indications of the contents of the work, a feature that makes the book much easier to read. These "Ismā'īlī Lectures" of Mu'ayyad Shīrāzī are divided into eight "centuries", thus totalling eight hundred lectures in all! This first, closely printed volume includes only the first "century" (*al-mi'yāt al-ūlā*). Therefore, we wish our hardy editor good progress in the rest of his work, with the hope that the seven remaining volumes may appear as soon as possible, perhaps with a general index to all eight volumes.
2. See our report in the *Annuaire de la Section des Sciences Religieuses de l'École pratique des Hautes-Études* (Sorbonne), for the year 1971–1972, pp. 247–50.
3. *Streitschrift des Ghazālī gegen die Bāṭiniya-Sekte*, Leiden: 1910; offset re-edition, Leiden: 1956.
4. This refrain is taken up by all the hostile heresiographers, who describe a series of initiations through which the disciple is supposedly "raised" gradually to an increasing state of impiety. It is odd that one finds no trace of any such thing in any known Ismā'īlī books. Their hierarchy of *ḥudūd* has nothing at all in common with these imaginary backwards pseudo-initiations.
5. Cf. H. Corbin, "Le huitième centenaire d'Alamūt", in the journal *Le Mercure de France*, February, 1965.
6. Let us recall here the sometimes neglected distinction between Ishmaelites (*Ismā'ēlites*) and Ismā'īlī (*Ismā'ēliens*). "Ishmaelites" is an ethnic distinction, indicating the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham – i.e., the Arabs. "Ismā'īlīs" is a religious name, indicating the Shī'ite followers of the Imām Ismā'il, son of the Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. Thus, the merchants to whom Joseph was sold by his brothers were Ishmaelites, not Ismā'īlīs; and the grand-masters of Alamūt were Ismā'īlīs, not Ishmaelites.
7. The divergence between the Ismā'īlī and Twelver Shī'ites, as is well known, began concerning the succession to the Imām Ja'far (d. 765). The problem was caused by the untimely death of the Imām Ismā'il. For the Twelver Shī'ites, the Imām Ja'far legitimately transferred the investiture of the Imāmate to his other son, the Imām Mūsā al-Kāzim. But for the Ismā'īlīs, the investiture should have passed on to the Imām Muḥammad Ismā'il. Concerning Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il, see W. Ivanov, *Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids* (here abbreviated as *Rise*), Bombay, Islamic Research Association, 1942, pp. 240–8, translated from the book *Zahr al-ma'ānī* of Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn.

8. See the extraordinary praise of the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il by Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn, *op. cit.*, in W. Ivanov, *Rise*, pp. 242 ff.: "There has never been another Imām like him, because he was the Seventh Imām, the one who possessed authority, who was not in hiding, who had the divine Glory and Light, and was the interpreter of esoteric knowledge. He was the crown of the cycle to which he belonged, and the ultimate limit who put the final seal on the *Sharā'i*." For the hypercritical Ivanov, all of this is "fiction". But the philosopher, on the other hand, realizes that a "traditional" or "emblematic" history can teach one quite different things than the so-called "positive" histories. We can say no more of this here, except that the categories of historicism are completely inappropriate for the understanding of the truths that are at issue here.
9. *Faṣl 10* of Ghazālī's work mentions the statement of a "certain specialist in the science of genealogies", according to whom the Imām Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il supposedly died without leaving any descendants. Our *dā'i* simply replies by referring to the traditionally accepted genealogy. We may recall it here: Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 765), and Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il. Then the three Imāms who were in concealment: 'Abdallāh al-Riḍā', Aḥmad al-Wafī, and Ḥusayn al-Taḳī. And finally, the beginning of the Fāṭimid dynasty, with 'Ubaydallāh al-Mahdī (909–34). Cf. R. Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte der Ismailiten*, Gottingen: 1943, p. 59.
10. Cf. H. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne* (Bibliothèque Iranienne, vol. 9), Tehran and Paris: 1961. The treatise of the seventh *dā'i*, *Kitāb al-mabda' wa-l-ma'ād* ("Cosmogony and Eschatology") is the second treatise which we edited and translated in this trilogy.
11. Cf. H. Corbin, "Un roman initiatique ismaélien du X^e siècle" (abbreviated here as *Roman initiatique*) in *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, Université de Poitiers, XV^e année, n° 1, January–March 1972, and n° 2, April–June 1972, pp. 1–25 and 125–142. The same text, but with a more extensive prologue and postlude, appeared in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 39/1970, Leiden: 1973, pp. 41–142, under the title: *L'initiation ismaélinne ou l'ésotérisme et le Verbe*.
12. Cf. W. Ivanov, "Ismailis and Qarmatians", in *Journal of the Bengal Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1940, pp. 43–85, and *Rise*, pp. 74 ff., who refers to the earlier works by S. de Sacy and De Goeje and to their sources: Abū Muḥsin and al-Ṭabarī. There is no need here to enter into the discussions and polemics surrounding these questions, most of them turning on more or less tacit presuppositions.
13. Cf. W. Ivanov, *Rise*, pp. 100 ff. of the Arabic section.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
17. Cf. note 11 above. One must add to it the *Kitāb al-rushd wa'l-hidāya* (*The Book of Righteousness and True Guidance*) – cf. W. Ivanov, *Studies in Early Persian Ismailism*, second edition, Bombay: 1955, pp. 29–60 – and of course the Persian *Umm al-kitāb*, which has been translated into Italian by Pio Filipponi-Ronconi.
18. Cf. *Sefer Nameh, relation du voyage de Nassiri Khosrau . . .*, published, translated and with notes by Charles Scheffer, Paris: 1881, pp. 225–30 (here translated into English): "The people pay neither tax nor tithe. If someone falls into poverty or indebtedness, they advance him money until his affairs are back in order. If someone has contracted a debt, his creditor can only demand back the capital. Every foreigner who knows a trade, when he arrives in Lahsa [= *al-Ahsā'*], receives a certain sum of money which he can use until he has assured his means of existence. . . ." Abū Sa'id (d. 301/913) was the founder of the Qarmatian dynasty ruling over Bahrayn. "When one questions the inhabitants as to which sect they belong to, they reply that they are Abū Sa'idīs'. They do not

- practise the canonical Prayer nor do they observe the Fast, but they admit that Muḥammad the Chosen did receive the gift of prophecy [. . .]. There is no mosque at all in Lahsa, and no place where one can do the Friday Prayer; they do not recite the *khutba* and do not perform the prayer. But a mosque has been built at the expense of a Persian named 'Alī ibn Muḥammad [. . .]. At the time of the Caliphs of Baghdad [*sic*] a ruler of Lahsa marched against Mecca at the head of an army. He seized the city [. . .]; and he tore the Black Stone out of the corner [of the *Ka'aba*] in which it was cemented and carried it back to Lahsa. . . ."
19. This entire passage concerning Ḥamdān, having been omitted by Goldziher, has remained unknown until now.
 20. Cf. H. Corbin, *Roman initiatique* (above, note 11), p. 2.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 23. See Gholam Hossein Sadighi, *Les mouvements religieux iraniens au II^e et au III^e siècle de l'hégire*, Paris: 1938; and Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sasanides*, second edition, Copenhagen: 1944, pp. 316 ff.
 24. Cf. H. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne* (above, note 10), index, under "Forme de lumière," and "manichéisme"; *Epiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose ismaélienne*, in *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 23/1955; and *De la gnose antique à la gnose ismaélienne*, in *Atti del Congresso Volta, Accademia Naz. dei Lincei*, Rome: 1956.
 25. One can find their sources discussed in Gh. H. Sadighi, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-6 (for the three possible explanations of the name *Khurramiyya*). For the connection between Mazdak and the *Khurramdīniyya*, see *ibid.*, p. 195. And see A. Christensen, *op. cit.*, pp. 339-44 on the five Elements of Light in Mani, reduced to three by Mazdak; and on the Governor of Light in Mazdak, who is aided by *four* powers, themselves surrounded by *seven* ministers, and revealing themselves in the interior of a circle of *twelve* spiritual beings. The object of his sect was to avoid everything that strengthened the attachment of the soul to matter and darkness. The sect was vegetarian, and Mazdak prohibited contradiction, hatred, and strife. Shahrastānī (Tehran lithograph, p. 124) alludes to certain letters comprising the "Supreme Name", which were only known to those among the Mazdakites "to whom had been revealed something of the Supreme Secret". One would like to know more about this, if there were some hope of one day rediscovering his original sources.
 26. Gh. H. Sadighi devotes some fifty pages to this epic story, pp. 229-80 in *op. cit.* The role of Afshīn, who was himself an Iranian prince, seems to have been rather complex: cf. Sadighi, *ibid.*, pp. 297-304. It appears that in reality he only supported the 'Abbāsid Caliphate of al-Mu'taṣim with a great deal of reticence, and that he would have liked to have come to an agreement with Bābak. The antagonism between Iranians and Arabs was at that time quite strong in the entourage of the Caliph. Afshīn himself had remained Zoroastrian, if not indeed Buddhist (cf. the books found among his possessions after his death, one of them containing an "idol"). His career came to a bad end with a trial, and he seems to have died of starvation (in prison).
 27. The identification of this figure is rather difficult: cf. Gh. H. Sadighi, *op. cit.*, p. 278, note 5.
 28. Cf. H. Corbin, *L'Archange empourpré, recueil de quinze traités et récits mystiques de Sohravardī*, Paris, Fayard, 1976; and *En Islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, tome IV, index, under "prophétisme", "Xvarnah", "Zoroastre", etc.
 29. Cf. H. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, tome I, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 61; and *En Islam iranien . . .* (note 28 above), tome I, pp. 116, 188 ff., 201. For the dispute between Mufaḍḍal and the Shī'ites of Kūfa, one in which

- the Imām Ja'far completely agreed with Mufaḍḍal, see 'Abbās Qummī, *Safīnah bihār al-anwār*, II, pp. 372.
30. Cf. W. Ivanov, *Ismaili Literature*, p. 31, numbers 59–62. Of his works we have a *Risālah al-rawda* (/ta'wīl al-Sharī'a), some *Munājāt* or "theosophical prayers" for each day of the week, a *Letter* to Ḥasan al-Qarmaṭi, a *Risāla masīhiyya*, which is a letter copied by the Bishop Paul of Damietta: cf. Louis Massignon, *Recueil de textes inédits*. . . , Paris: 1929, pp. 215–17. This Fāṭimid Imām, who deserves to be the subject of a monograph, ruled from 341/953 to 365/975.
 31. This letter itself and its destination are not mentioned in Ivanov's *Ismaili Literature*.
 32. This is an allusion to what is called *tajassum al-a'māl*, in which the actions and works of a man take on form and shape when they confront him after his *exitus* from the body. This is an aspect of Islamic personal eschatology which bears a striking resemblance to the encounter with the Daēnā, at the entrance to the Bridge Cinvat, in Zoroastrian eschatology (*Hādokht-Nask*). Cf. also Mullā Ṣadrā Shirazī, *Kitāb al-ḥikmah al-'arshiyya*, 2nd Part, third *ishrāq*, qā'ida 16. As for the respect due to the *zāhir*, compare this with the interpretation which Nāṣir-i Khusraw gave of the injunction: "When you fight, do not strike in the face." The great Ismā'īlī philosopher gives this *ta'wīl*: "Do not reject the *zāhir*, because it is the 'face' which is open to *ta'wīl*." See H. Corbin, *Étude préliminaire pour le "Livre réunissant les deux sagesse"* (*Jāmi' al-Ḥikmatayn*), (Bibliothèque Iranienne, vol. 3-a), Tehran and Paris: 1953, p. 143, note 260.
 33. Cf. W. Ivanov, *Rise*, p. 46; and, on the relation with the Druzes, *ibid.*, pp. 143–51 and *Ismaili Literature*, pp. 113 ff. The Imām al-Ḥākim came to the throne at the age of eleven, after the death of his father al-'Azīz. The anti-Fāṭimid propaganda tried to make him out to be insane, but without proving it. For the Druzes, Mawlānā al-Imām has had ten *theophanies*: The first was in the figure of the Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and the tenth was in the person of the Imām al-Ḥākim bi-amr Allāh.
 34. This is the great Iranian Ismā'īlī philosopher, Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī. Cf. H. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, tome I, pp. 130 ff., and W. Ivanov, *Ismaili Literature*, pp. 40–4. He is always given the title *Hujjat al-'irāqayn*. He kept in close touch with Kirmān, his birthplace, as is shown in two of his letters dated 399/1008. The exact date of his death is unknown; his last work (*al-Wā'iza*) is dated 408/1017, but it appears that he was still living in 412/1021. His works are quite numerous. Ḥamīd al-Dīn shows himself in them to have been a quite profound metaphysician. The best-known of his books is *Rāḥat al-'aql*, edited in Cairo by Kāmil Ḥusayn. We ourselves have devoted three years of classes to him: see the *Annuaire de la Section des Sciences Religieuses de l'École pratique des Hautes-Études* (Sorbonne), for the year 1956–1957, pp. 42 ff.; for 1957–1958, pp. 61 ff.; for 1958–1959, pp. 84 ff.
 35. The *Faṣl* 13, which is quite short, simply mentions the *Muḥammira* of Bābak's time (cf. Gh. H. Sadighi, *op. cit.*, index under that heading). Different explanations have been given of their name, such as that they dyed their clothes red (*ḥamra*), or that they considered all other men to be donkeys (*ḥimār*, *ḥamīr*). Our *dā'ī* replies that red is not the colour of Shī'ites, and that there are even more "donkeys" than those the *Muḥammira* might have intended.
 36. On this question, see H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien* . . . (above, note 28), tome IV, pp. 250–2.
 37. Cf. H. Corbin, *Roman initiatique* (above, note 11), pp. 4, 11, 125.
 38. Cf. Corbin, *L' "Orient" des pèlerins abrahamiques*, in *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*, 1977 session (forthcoming).