Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and their Beliefs

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London: I.B. Tauris, 2017. 206 pages.

Research into the formative period of Shiʿi Islam has come a long way in the last couple of decades. This welcome development has been inspired, in particular, by the work of Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, whose main insight has been to posit that "ancient" Shiʿism is marked precisely by those doctrines and positions that the later rationalizing tradition rejected as "extreme" (*ghulūw*). This particular form of heretication and othering made

sense once the communities had been established; were seeking official recognition by the Abbasid and other royal courts; and developed the institutions of learning, as well as structures and hierarchies, visible in other Muslim confessions.

Nevertheless, there remained the questions of what made Shiʿi Islam distinct, how one could differentiate among those tendencies that defined themselves as Shiʿi, and what sort of construction was "extremism" (I recognize that this is a highly inadequate rendition of *ghulūw*). Amir-Moezzi's contribution is further complicated by Hossein Modarressi's groundbreaking study of the formative period during the early 1990s, in which he posited that *ghulūw* was exterior to the circle of the Imams and perceived as a constant contrast and threat to the moderation of the scholarly community that remains to this day.

Thus one finds that the classical era's rival tendencies of either "extremism" or "shortcoming" (*taqṣīr*) have been reproduced in more recent debates and even among the academics studying these issues. A significant part of those discussions was based on the use of both Shiʿi and non-Shiʿi heresiographical literature and rereading the classical Imami sources in the light of *ghulūw*. Nevertheless, for some time we have had a number of texts available that testify to the *ghulāt*'s beliefs, works surviving in Imami and Ismaili recensions, and also among the descendants of many of those *ghulāt* groups in Kufa and Syria, namely, the Nusayri-ʿAlawi communities of the Levant.

Asatryan, who has contributed by editing one such text, takes advantage of rereading these sources, in particular those associated with the heresiarch al-Mufaddal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfi, to rethink the formation of Shiʿi Islam and the construction of *ghulūw*. The recent (polemical Christian) publication of the works of the ʿAlawi tradition (*Silsilat al-Turāth al-ʿAlawī*) in Lebanon has provided researchers with texts that purport to come from within the tradition. These have been compared to the manuscripts available in London, Paris, and elsewhere that allow us to study that particular tradition's construction. In all, we now have thirty-six texts in our possession.

The study comprises six chapters that consider four central texts associated with al-Mufaddal: *Kitāb al-Haft* and *Al-Aẓillah* (sometimes conflated as one text), *Kitāb al-Ṣirāṭ* (recently edited by Leonardo Capezzone), and *Kitāb al-Ashbāḥ* (edited by Mushegh Asatryan), their textual milieu and their reception, not least the somewhat blurring of identities and textual affiliations in tenth-century Syria. In one recent study on the Nusayri-ʿAlawis, Yaron Freidman showed how, during the tenth and eleventh centuries, Syria's nas-

cent Nusayri thinkers often wrote recensions of texts for their own community and a *taqīyah* version for the wider Imami community, a practice that led to the adoption of *ghulāt* texts by the mainstream Imami tradition. The most obvious example of this is Husayn al-Khasibi's *Kitāb al-Hidāyah al-Kubrā*, which is popular among the hierocracy in Najaf. A brief appendix follows that traces fragments of the extant *ghulāt* texts.

Asatryan's thesis is that the leaders of the mature Imami tradition, especially from the period of the Twelfth Imam's occultation onward, made a sharp distinction between the moderates and the extremists and excised much of the latter group's material from their tradition. However, some elements did remain. Once defined, the *ghulāt* corpus was otherized and put into sharp contrast with the emergence of an Imami "orthodoxy," not least because the latter made its peace with the wider ʿAbbasid society. The Ghulat, on the other hand, remained oppositional, socially disruptive, and rebellious.

Chapter 1, on the *Kitāb al-Haft wa al-Aẓillah*, earlier studied by Heinz Halm, is a philological and structural examination of the text's sixty-seven chapters, at times comparing them with known doctrines that the mainstream Imami tradition rejected as extreme and with other acknowledged doctrines. The real problem is one of dating and recension. In that sense, one faces a similar problem when studying the work often regarded as the earliest Shiʿi compilation, the so-called *Kitāb al-Saqīfah* or *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays,* which probably underwent various redactions as well on its way from being an Imami text to a Twelver text. The *Kitāb al-Haft* may also have been transformed from a broadly Shiʿi text to a *ghulāt* (precisely. Nusayri) one, even though the most widely available edition came from Ismaili manuscript collections.

The other work to which it can be compared is the Ismaili *Kitāb al-Kashf* attributed to Jaʿfar b. Mansur al-Yaman. The text's themes are clear enough: there is a cosmic drama in which the forces of God and His "friends" are arraigned in a conflict with the forces of evil. The truly good are never extinguished, and thus Imam Husayn and Jesus, in this docetist account, did not actually die. The material world and the unfolding of history are somewhat illusory. The Shiʿi problem of "the light of the truth" being swamped and set aside by evil during the course of history is overcome by denying history's reality, a solution that is, in many ways, just a more exaggerated manner of resolution than one finds in the counterhistory of the Imami tradition.

The following chapter examines how al-Mufaddal and some of his associates were otherized by the heresiographical literature, especially by al-Najashi, and contains a section on the *aẓillah* group of texts (which

perhaps should have been a separate chapter). One of the points that Asatryan makes is that *ghulūw* is a construction developed by the Imams to retain control of developments in far-away Kufa. The themes found in the textual cycle can be seen in existing Imami texts: the cosmogony of the archetypal friends of God and their enemies, the manifestation of the light of God and the shadows, the seven Adams and a nod to cyclical history, and the spiritual entities and the lights of the throne. Clearly a common Shiʿi patrimony splintered and took on a stricter doctrinal meaning and differentiation.

Chapter 3 examines the intra-Shiʿi polemics around this patrimony and focuses on certain key themes: the notion of privileged door-keepers or gates to the Imams' doctrine; the debate over *tafwīḍ* and whether it constituted a delegation of divine authority or an arrogation through the divinization of the Imams; antinomianism and the law's status; and the nature of written transmission, which was significant in Imami circles.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift to the reception of *ghulāt* ideas among the Nusayris. The former looks at the roles of Khasibi, Hasan al-Harrani, and Muhammad al-Jilli in forming a Nusayri tradition, as well as their marginal role in Imami literature. Harrani's *Tuḥaf al-ʿUqūl* in particular remained a popular hadith collection in Imami circles during the middle period, as attested to by many manuscripts. The second chapter, on the *Kitāb al-Ṣirāṭ* and *ghulāt* cosmogony, focuses on showing that crystallized divergence of what became characterized as *ghulāt* material from the cosmogonic material found in the Imami tradition. The primary distinction in the final chapters between the true rejectors and the true believers, as well as between the light that is unappreciated and the darkness, remained a binarism that did not disappear from Imami texts. Asatyran does a good job of explaining how this divergence came about and how the problem of dating makes it well nigh impossible to actually determine exactly what has always been considered "extreme." What I would have liked to see is how the themes and ideas recognized as *ghulūw* in the tenth century could also be found in the texts of the authoritative Imami tradition.

We live at a time in which sectarianism and anti-Shiʿi bigotry is rampant, and in which the Nusayris and Imamis are conflated for political reasons. What Asatryan's study shows is that the process of heretication is fluid. That process and the means of today's heretication need to be understood. How are issues of commonality the same as points of divergence? Just as the category of "Muslim" is a label of commonality and "gens" is the question of distinction, such also is the case with "Shiʿi." In the current context, no Shiʿi would want

to be characterized as being among the *ghulāt* or associated with the Nusayris. But neither do they necessarily want to be subsumed into an Islam dominated by a Sunni supremacy that fails to recognize their distinction.

This is not a new problem. The entire vocabulary of faith is at stake in such a rethinking of tradition. Islam needs to be rethought in Shiʿi terms – and then *ghulūw* has to be rethought as well. By allowing *ghulūw* to be characterized historically and normatively in terms of criteria determined by Sunni normativity (such as the divinisation of the Imams, rejecting the counternarrative opposed "to what really happened," and the law and its discontents), we cannot account for what the Shiʿi tradition understood to be *ghulūw* and the limits of the ontological status of the Imams, the cosmos, and the nature of human history.

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