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Introduction: Return to the Earliest Sources

Our teaching is arduous;
the only ones who can withstand it are
a prophet sent to men, an angel of Proximity,
or an initiated one whose heart has been tested by God for faith.

The entire doctrinal structure of Imamism is dominated by the fundamental figure of the Guide par excellence, the imam. It must however be immediately added that if this importance is well known in itself, its “why” and its “how,” its nature, and its meaning, all founded on ideas that can be considered as original in early Islam, remain to be clarified. Our focus in this study will thus be Imamology and, within this framework, it seems essential to define “Imam” as well as can be done by using the words of the imams themselves. For reasons that will be examined in this introductory chapter, only the doctrine in its earliest formative phase will be considered (that is, the period covered by the lives of the historical imams); our study will take place by using the imams’ own words (*aḥādith*, *akhbâr*) pronounced theoretically between the middle of the first/seventh century and the beginning of the fourth/ninth century. In order to arrive at this strictly Imamite definition and to analyze its consequences, the themes studied will naturally be those that constitute so many “distinctive traits” of this early Imamism, traits that give it a certain originality within the early stages of Islamic thought. Our work is thus founded on doctrinal and dogmatic tradition, and not on the juridical tradition that differs little from the Sunni tradition;¹ the Sunni tradition will be of use to us only in an indirect and secondary manner.

The impressive dimensions of this corpus, its abstruseness, its lack of homogeneity and intrinsic logic, its need for systematic examination, and the complexity of the subject make the task a difficult one. These factors, in addition to the originality and the flagrant “heretical” character of a number of fundamental ideas, are undoubtedly the essential reasons for the absence of a synthetic and exhaustive study of this phase of Imamite doctrine. We have

thus felt it necessary to pull together all the information available on this subject, less with a view to drawing definitive conclusions that would be impossible to formulate clearly given the present state of our knowledge, than to compiling an anthology of documents from which future research might draw.

Our first need was to recognize and catalogue sources, to identify their nature and their aims, and to set apart those texts that, too often, have been considered as belonging to the original doctrine that was thought to be to homogenous and unchanged. We shall begin with an examination of the current point of view according to which Imamism is a "rational theology" of the Mu'tazilite type. Two facts are at the base of this idea that, to our view, immediately distorts any approach to the question. First of all, the imams have always said that *'aql* (often translated by "reason") is the "organ" through which their doctrine is understood. Secondly, quite early in the history of Imamism, a current that might be called "rationalist" became predominant. We shall thus first of all attempt to define *'aql* in the way that the imams meant it to be understood. This definition, far from dialectical and logical reason, tends to show that rational, or rather "rationalized," Imamism appeared, if not quite late, at least after the time of the imams. An outline of this evolution will help us to identify the sources belonging to the original current of Imamism, before its rationalization. Since the science of Imamite hadith and its criteriology of authenticity both appeared quite late, it would appear that only those criteria that have their genesis in doctrinal history could help us, first, to discern which sources arose out the early doctrine, and second, to prevent confusion between the early doctrine and later ideas. This methodological presentation thus entails four points: the idea of Imamite *'aql* in its original acceptation; the distinction of two Imamite traditions, each with its own nature and each with an entirely different vision of the world; the identification of those sources that belong to the original tradition; and finally the authority and the nature of Imamite hadith. These four points may be considered as epistemological elements constituting in themselves four different introductory criteria for understanding all that will be dealt with in the present study.

I-1. HIERO-INTELLIGENCE AND REASON

The *'aql* that is translated, depending on the context, by "reason," "intellect," "intelligence," or even "science" or "discernment" is a complex and delicate notion that covers a great semantic field, especially in the first centuries of Islam and previous to its conceptual quasi-stability after the systematization of Islamic dogmatic theology and philosophy. Islamologists and Arabists continue to research the precise early meaning of the word and to shed light on its many facets.² Before the advent of Islam, it seems that the term had no special importance; it merely meant "good sense." Etymologically, *'aql* was "what was tied to an animal's feet to restrain it"; its abstract meaning might thus be

said to refer to that faculty that restrains human beings from foolishness. In pre-Islamic practical morality, 'aql seems to have been eclipsed and even pushed into the background by the rich idea of *ḥilm*,³ an attitude of tremendous importance in Arab tribal mentality that included numerous character traits "from serene justice and the measure of longanimity and indulgence to self control and dignity of demeanor."⁴ It is important to point out here that it is *ḥilm* that stands in opposition to *jahl* and *safah*, that is, ignorance (not involuntary lack of knowledge, but "guilty ignorance"), the ignorance of one who believes himself to be free of faults and who makes no distinction between what is good for him and what is harmful. This is the *ḥilm* that gave those who possessed it, especially the tribal notables (the *sayyid*), unquestionable moral and social authority. This conceptual situation changes with the text of the Qur'an. Although the term 'aql itself is absent from the Qur'an, the simple form 'aqala/ya'qilu alone appears over fifty times, where it is used in the same syntagms of syntactical and stylistic structure as the verbs *tafakkara* (to think about God's Signs [*āyât*]), to remember them, to meditate on them), *tadhakkara* (to keep God in one's memory), *sha'ara* (to grasp intuitively the meaning of God's signs), *faqiha* (to understand, to grasp especially the Word of God), and finally 'alima (to be familiar with and to know how to recognize God's signs). Here 'aql is opposed to *jahl*, the ignorance of the impious. From this point on the root covers a *religious* semantic field, and the idea is elevated to a sacred, transcendent dimension. It would be possible to think that the faculty of practical "good sense" before the time of Islam became, through the Qur'an, the faculty of religious "Good Direction" that to a certain extent takes the place of the *ḥilm* of the *jāhiliyya*.⁵ The 'aql found in the Qur'an may be considered a kind of consciousness or perception of the divine, simultaneously consisting of immediate meditative reflection, remembering, intuiting, and deep knowledge that imply assent and submission to divine authority.

Early Imamism, which will be defined later, exploits this religious domain of 'aql to the extreme, going so far as to turn it into a capital aspect of its dogma in general, and of its Imamology in particular. According to the imams, 'aql is the best if not the only way of approach to and understanding of their teachings;⁶ in other words, without 'aql the sayings of the imams remain incompletely understood, ineffective, or even incomprehensible. This is undoubtedly why Muḥammad b. Ya'qûb al-Kulaynî (d. 328–29/940–41) began the dogmatic part of his colossal *Kāfî* with the "kitâb al-'aql wa-l-jahl."⁷ A thematic division of the traditions that make up this "book" will help us better to grasp the definition given by the imams of this important idea.

a) The Cosmogonic Dimension of 'aql

In a famous tradition (attributed to the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Şâdiq) known as "the tradition of the armies of 'aql" (*ḥadîth junûd al-'aql*), a number of fundamental aspects of the cosmogonic dimension of 'aql are outlined. 'Aql, pro-

ceeding from the God's Light, was the first of God's creations;⁸ it is characterized by its submission and its will to be near God:

God—may He be glorified and exalted—created *'aql* first among the spiritual entities; He drew it forth from the right of His throne (*'arsh*), making it proceed from His own Light. Then He commanded it to retreat, and it retreated, to advance, and it advanced; then God proclaimed: "I created you glorious, and I gave you pre-eminence over all my creatures."⁹ Then Ignorance (*al-jahl*) was created; seeing its pride and its hesitation in approaching God, He damned it: "Then, from the briny ocean God created dark Ignorance; He ordered it to retreat and it retreated, to advance and it did not advance. Then God said to it 'Certainly you have grown proud,' and He damned it and chased it from His presence."¹⁰ *'Aql* and Ignorance then see themselves endowed with 75 Armies (*jund*) that are respectively the same number of moral and spiritual qualities and defects; they are elevated to the rank of cosmic powers and counter-powers, locked in combat from the origin of the universe. "Then God endowed *'aql* with 75 armies; when Ignorance saw God's generosity toward *'aql*, it became ferociously hostile and said to God: "O Lord, here is a creature similar to me [Ignorance is also a spiritual entity, a nonmaterial counter-power]; you have privileged it and made it powerful. I am its adversary and I have no power. Give me troops like those of *'aql*." And God replied, "So be it, but if you revolt again I shall banish you and your troops from my Mercy." Ignorance accepted this condition and God gave it 75 Armies.¹¹ The list of *'aql*'s Armies and their corresponding opposites from the Armies of Ignorance follows.¹²

Throughout this study it will be seen that Imamite doctrine constantly had recourse to parallelling, if not identifying, *'aql*, its Armies, and the Imam and his faithful, on one hand, and Ignorance, its Armies, and the enemies of the Imams on the other.¹³ The cosmogonic dimension given to *'aql* and its Armies seems to be the result of a doctrinal development that breaks the mold of Qur'anic definitions and turns it into a kind of cosmic Morality, a metaphysical prototype of human morality, at war with cosmic Immorality.

b) The Ethical-Epistemological Dimension

On the human level, *'aql* is not just an acquired quality, but a gift from God. One might call it an innate faculty of transcendent knowledge, developed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual. On this level it is nevertheless different from *adab*, a good education, a kind of profane morality that is at the same time both the source and the result of secular knowledge: " *'Aql* is a favor from God," says 'Alī al-Riḏā, the eighth imam, "whereas good edu-

cation is a quality acquired with difficulty. He who works to achieve a good education can succeed, while he who works to attain 'aql only increases his ignorance."¹⁴ 'Aql cannot be acquired by human effort; man has no control over its presence. This aspect of 'aql is illustrated by a dialogue between the sixth imam and one of his disciples.¹⁵ The latter said, "one man knows the totality of my message [*kalâm*: perhaps some kind of doctrinal explanation?] after a few phrases; another does not understand me until my explanation is completed; a third, after having heard all that I had to say, asks me to explain again." Ja'far responds, "Do you know why that is? It is because the first is he whose embryo was kneaded with his 'aql at the time of conception. The second is he whose 'aql was instilled at the breast of his mother. The third is he whose 'aql was composed in adulthood."¹⁶ All man can do is to develop, to actualize 'aql, this divine gift in the potential state; it is actualized with the aid of 'ilm, the initiatory knowledge taught by the imams in different fashions.¹⁷ "Under the direction of his 'aql," says Abû 'Abdallâh Ja'far al-Şadiq, "which God has bestowed upon him as a support, an ornament, and a guide to salvation, the possessor of 'aql (*al-âqîl*) realizes that God is Truth, that God is his lord, that there are things that God loves and others that He does not love, that both obedience and disobedience toward God exist; and he also finds that by 'aql alone one cannot grasp [the depth of] all this, that only sacred Knowledge ('ilm) and its development can help man, and that without this Knowledge, 'aql is of no assistance . . ."¹⁸ Inversely, knowledge, or rather recognition of true Knowledge, that taught by the imams, is only possible through 'aql.¹⁹

c) The Spiritual Dimension

In a long speech addressed to the famous Hishâm b. al-Ĥakam (who probably died shortly after 179/795–796),²⁰ the seventh imam, Mûsâ al-Kâzim outlines the different spiritual aspects of 'aql.²¹ He discusses almost all Qur'anic references where the root 'aqala/ya'qilu appears, and presents 'aql as a faculty for apprehending the divine, a faculty of metaphysical perception (identified with *başar*, interior vision), a "light" (*nûr*) located in the heart, and through which one can discern and recognize signs from God.²² This presentation remains within the framework of definitions that differ from the Qur'anic context, as we previously explained. One quite important point of doctrine is also mentioned: while the prophets and the imams constitute the "exterior proof" (*ḥujja zâhira*) of God, 'aql is the "interior proof" (*ḥujja bâṭina*).²³ The highly spiritual and religious dimension of 'aql stands apart from the constant parallels established between the imam (exterior 'aql) and 'aql (the interior imam).²⁴ The latter is a kind of "subtle organ" of religion, without which man is cut off from his relationship with the divine plan. Without 'aql, man is without religion; that is, without that which can "tie" him back to God, man then forgets his condition as creature and falls into an impious selfishness. It is undoubtedly in this sense that 'Alî's words, as they are reported by Ja'far al-Şadiq,

must be understood: "Self infatuation is proof of the weakness of 'aql."²⁵ According to a tradition attributed to the first imam, 'Alî b. Abî Tâlib, the angel Gabriel appeared to Adam and proposed, following a command from God, that Adam choose from among three things: 'aql, modesty (*hayâ*'), and religion (*dîn*). Adam chose the first of these and the angel asked the other two to depart, abandoning Adam; they replied that they had received an order from God to remain always in the company of 'aql, wherever it was.²⁶ "He who has 'aql," says Ja'far, "has a religion, and he who has a religion wins Paradise."²⁷

d) The Soteriological Dimension

The soteriological dimension was adumbrated in Ja'far's words cited previously. In the absence of 'aql, the "organ" of religion, there can only be false religiousness, an appearance of piety, hypocrisy. When someone mentioned the 'aql of a man obsessed by prayers and ablutions, Ja'far replied that such a man could not have 'aql, since he was obeying Satan.²⁸ Later, responding to the question "What is 'aql?" he said: "That by which the All Merciful is worshipped, and through which Paradise is won." Then he was asked, "Then what was it that Mu'âwiya had?"²⁹ "It was trickery, a satanic attitude resembling 'aql, but it was not 'aql."³⁰ The quality of the religion of each thus depends on the quality of his 'aql,³¹ which is why it is the criterion by which men will be judged at the Last Judgment. According to a tradition reported by the fifth and eighth imams, Muhammad al-Bâqir and Abû al-Hasan 'Alî al-Ridâ, when God observes 'aql's submission and desire for proximity to Him, He will solemnly announce: "By My Glory and My Majesty, I have not created any creature dearer [or in another version, better] than you, and I offer you in your entirety only to him whom I love. It is taking only you into consideration that I command and that I forbid, that I punish and that I reward."³² Al-Baqîr further says, "At the judgment on Resurrection Day, God judges His servants according to the degree of 'aql that He has given them in this world."³³ As is known, in Imamite doctrine the coming of the resurrection is intimately tied to the "Return" of the hidden imam and to his final mission of definitively conquering the forces of Ignorance; one of the phases of this mission consists in completing and unifying the 'aql of the handful of faithful who have resisted this period of spiritual darkness: "At the time of the Return, God will place the hand of our *qâ'im* on the head of the faithful; through this hand, they will have their 'aql unified and their *hilm* completed."³⁴

This 'aql is thus a cosmic entity, the "imam" of the forces of Good in perpetual struggle against the forces of Evil directed by Ignorance. It is reflected in man as an intuition of the Sacred, as a light in the heart, making him a soldier of the "imam," of religion, and thus of God; it helps man to fight against the darkness of impious ignorance, and guarantees him salvation. "The beginning of all things," says Ja'far al-Sadiq, "their origin, their force and their

prosperity, is that 'aql without which one can profit from nothing. God created it to adorn His creatures, and as a light for them. It is through 'aql that the servants recognize that God is their creator and that they themselves are created beings, that He is the director and they are the directed, that He is the eternal and they are the ephemeral; they are guided by their 'aql when they observe God's creation, His heavens, His earth, His sun, His moon, His night and His day. . . . It is thanks to 'aql that they can distinguish what is beautiful from what is ugly, that they realize that darkness is in ignorance and that light is in Knowledge."³⁵

It is clearly seen that this 'aql, which might be translated by "hiero-intelligence," is different in its definition as well as in its implications, from that 'aql to which we are accustomed in theological texts. Depending on the context, the latter is translated by "reason," "intellect," "faculty of dialectical reasoning," "discernment," and so on. Although all these nuances may not be equal to one another, it might nevertheless be said that, to a general degree, the 'aql of the theologians, even Imamite theologians, is the "organ" of the rational, while for the imams it is just as much the faculty of apprehending the rational as it is the "organ" for perceiving the suprarational, this second domain both including and superseding the first; it is the human counterpart to the cosmic entity, the first entity created by God.

The semantic slide from the Qur'anic idea of 'aql, of which the early Imamite 'aql appears to be a doctrinal development, to the logical 'aql of the theologians appears to have taken place under the influence of Aristotelian texts translated into Arabic and the establishment of the dialectical methodology of *kalâm* (especially Mu'tazilite), from as early as the third/ninth century.³⁶ A look at the word in its philological context illustrates the rationalist evolution of the meaning of 'aql. At the very beginnings of Islam, 'aql was seen as the opposite of *jahl*, the impious ignorance of a person who is unconscious of the sacred, of God, of his Signs and his Mercies; by the beginning of the third/ninth century, its opposites, at least in popular language, were words like *junûn* (madness, lack of good sense) or one of its synonyms, or *safah* (in the sense of "lack of the facility of logical reasoning," the opposite of *safah* being *hikma*).³⁷ It must nevertheless be added that the new acceptance of 'aql never goes so far as to be equivalent to the almost "profane" meaning that it had before Qur'anic revelation; the idea from that time on found itself in a religious universe and the term was used, with very few exceptions, in religious contexts. In Sunni hadith, such as it is recorded by the authoritative compilations, 'aql almost always has the technical meaning of *fiqh*, as the equivalent to "price of blood" (*diyya*). In the *kalâm*, the term is almost a synonym of *'ilm*, in the sense of knowledge (religious or not) that comes either from sacred texts or from perception or our own knowledge of ourselves. Under the influence of a basically Neo-Platonic system of thought, with the first philosophers the idea wavers somewhere between theological concepts

and a profane science of the soul. Among certain philosophers, it achieves the rank of a sacred cosmic entity having its potential counterpart in the human soul. Thus, 'aql is not secularized, but rather rationalized and humanized, in a culture where reason and man cannot be conceived of except through their relation with God. In the Imamite milieu, al-shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) seems to be the first great theologian to found his theological argumentation on 'aql in its new acceptance, that is, as dialectical and logical reasoning.³⁸ Although in the definitions that he gives of the word he remains faithful to those of the imams,³⁹ he nevertheless feels forced to adopt the same usage as the Mu'tazilites in order to be able to confront them in theological polemics.⁴⁰ In his disciple al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), also a disciple of the famous Mu'tazilite thinker 'Abd al-Jabbār (415/1025), 'aql appears to be completely devoid of its early meaning and becomes a synonym of "reasoning" (*istidlāl*)⁴¹ and "faculty of dialectical speculation" (*naẓar*).⁴² The intellectual influence of these thinkers in a particular doctrinal and historical context (cf. later discussion) was such that the rationalist tendency became, thereafter, the majority and dominant view within Imamism; this view has existed up to the present day. The new idea of 'aql supplanted the previous one, and there remained between the two only a homonymous relationship open to confusion. The early 'aql was defined as the axis of the religion of the imams, like an indispensable key for opening the mysteries of their teachings and for opening oneself to these teachings. The spiritual vision attained by virtue of this hiero-intelligence allowed one to distinguish the true from the false, light from darkness, Knowledge from Ignorance, in short, the doctrine of the imams from other doctrines. This doctrine, as will be seen in the present study, essentially consists of cosmogonic, mystic, esoteric, even magical and occult elements, that is, nonrational elements. It is through a kind of phenomenon of "resonance," of mystic synergy, that "the interior imam" or the 'aql of the faithful believer (that is, the true Shi'ite [*al-mu'min*]⁴³), recognized and believed in the truth of the words, acts, and gestures, regardless of how incredible and nonrational they were, of the exterior 'aql that the historical imams were. Through the "light" of hiero-intelligence, the religious consciousness of the faithful Imamite not only perceived cosmogonic data, inspired Knowledge, or the miraculous powers of the imams and other esoteric and occult elements that made up the essentials of basic Imamite doctrine as credible, but this light elevated these elements to the level of articles of faith. It happened this way because hiero-intelligence made all these elements look like so many Signs and gifts from God. The confusion between this hiero-intelligence and dialectical reasoning (both of which are referred to by the word 'aql) is all the more serious here, since dialectical reasoning, which exists at a different epistemological, perceptual, and conceptual level, naturally rejects the nonrational; therefore religious consciousness is modified, since reasoning, even religious reasoning or reasoning evolving in a religious context, can neither

perceive nor accept hiero-intelligence's intuitive and mystical "resonance" with the "miraculous," as a matter of faith. Al-Mufid criticizes his master Ibn Bâbûye in the name of reason.⁴⁴ Al-Sharîf al-Murtaḍā, even more intransigent, goes so far as to censure al-Kulaynî and others, accusing them of having introduced into their compilations a great number of traditions which appear absurd in the light of reason.⁴⁵ Al-shaykh al-Ṭûsî (d. 460/1067) did likewise in his compilation of traditions about the hidden imam, by saying nothing about all the traditions of esoteric or occult character, traditions which he knew through one of his own sources, the *Kitâb al-ghayba* written by al-Nu'mânî Ibn Abî Zaynab (d. circa 345/956). Because of the homonymy, these thinkers neglected the semantic slide in the idea, and believed they were working in the name of the 'aql so lauded by the imams.⁴⁶ The imams were censured at the same time that their directives were believed to be followed.

The case of 'aql shows first of all the need for paying particular attention to the technical terms of early Imamism: they must first be identified and recognized as such, since, given our mental habits, they can appear quite insignificant, with obvious meaning (as was seen in the case of *mu'min* and *imân*; the cases of terms such as 'ilm, qalb, shî'a, and others will be seen later); and they must next be placed within the framework of a critical reading of all the references offered by the texts, and this within the larger framework of a doctrinal history of early Imamism without which semantic evolutions might go unnoticed, and the phases of the doctrine thus remain confused.

The early idea of 'aql also shows the angle from which the imams wished the approach, the perception, and the manner of understanding their teachings to be undertaken. In its early acceptance, 'aql as "hiero-intelligence" may be considered as the organ of early Imamism's "world vision"; it is in attributing to 'aql the later meaning of "dialectical reasoning" that Imamism was looked upon as a "rational" doctrine, and thus the confusions and contradictions; this is why 'aql was reserved the place of prominence, as an essential introductory criterion, at the head of this study.

I-2 ESOTERICISM AND RATIONALIZATION

What has just been said about 'aql and its evolution may also be considered as a new piece to add to studies of the doctrinal history of the division of Imamites into what has now come to be called the Qumm School and the Baghdad School, or even the *akhbârî* (the traditionalists) and the *uṣûlî* (the rationalists).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it must be explained that our nonrationalist/rationalist division which, as shall be seen, corresponds to the Imamite esotericists and exotericists, does not always coincide with the *akhbârî* and *uṣûlî* division, since the former were not always esotericists, and the latter were not always exotericists. In spite of what has often been said, the division of Imamites into partisans and adversaries of the use of dialectical reasoning in cases of sacred concepts does not date from the eleventh/seventeenth century;⁴⁸ on the con-

trary, its first traces can already be felt in the proto-Shi'ites of the second-third/eighth-ninth centuries.⁴⁹ Actually, one could go back as far as the entourage of the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Şâdiq (d. 148/765) and discover the first tendencies toward this opposition between the adversaries and the partisans of the use of dialectical theology, *kalâm*. Heresiological and biobibliographical sources count a certain number of Ja'far's disciples as the very first *mutakallimûn* of Imamism: Zurâra b. A'yan (d. 150/767), Hishâm b. Sâlim al-Jawâlîqî, Muhammad b. al-Nu'mân *mu'min* (or, according to his adversaries, *shaytân*) al-Tâq, Hishâm b. al-Ḥakam (d. circa 179/795–96).⁵⁰ The theological doctrines of these thinkers have come down to us in fragments only, most of the time related by their adversaries. Furthermore, their ideological language was still at the stage of lexical and conceptual "exploration." It is nevertheless undeniable that they became accustomed to these theological polemics, and what we do know of their thoughts and of the titles of the treatises attributed to them shows that they actively contributed to the formation of the budding science of *kalâm*.⁵¹ On the basis of these facts, certain researchers have jumped to the conclusion that the imams, particularly the fifth and sixth imams, were themselves "theologians" who encouraged the study and use of *kalâm*.⁵² The imams were far from being in agreement with all the intellectual ideas and methods of their theologian disciples.⁵³ The latter did not profess a unique doctrine, in this case that of the imams; not only did they enter into conflict among themselves,⁵⁴ but (though it was rare) they openly opposed, even affronted, their "guides."⁵⁵ Examination of the still extant fragments of the teachings of these disciples gives evidence of, among other things, a strong Dayşânite influence in Hishâm b. al-Ḥakam⁵⁶ and ideas clearly colored by Murji'ism with a Jahmite tendency in Muḥammad b. Nu'mân and Hishâm al-Jawâlîqî.⁵⁷ It appears as though the imams occasionally tolerated the study and use of *kalâm* for certain disciples, essentially for reasons of a "tactical" order, particularly to be able to affront their adversaries during public debates, but also to safeguard the unity of the Imamite community threatened by sometimes violent differences of opinion and quarrels over matters of theology.⁵⁸ But these cases would have been exceptional, and what characterized their teachings from this point of view is undoubtedly a position that is frankly hostile to *kalâm* and to the use of dialectical and logical reasoning, in whatever form (*qiyâs, ra'y, ijtihâd*), in the domain of sacred concepts. The first compilations of Imamite traditions give evidence of this in numerous cases. "The partisans of analogical reasoning (*aşhâb al-maqâ'is*) were in search of [divine] knowledge, but their method resulted only in distracting them from the Truth; God's religion can not be acquired by analogical reasoning."⁵⁹

Samâ'a b. Mihrân (Abû Muḥammad al-Ḥadramî al-Kûffî, who died in Medina, a disciple of the sixth and seventh imams) said: "During our meetings we [the disciples] occasionally talk about something upon which, thanks to your blessed presence, we have a written document. But we also occasion-

ally come upon something about which we have no idea; in this event we compare it to that case which is most similar to it, and about which we have information, with the use of analogical reasoning (*'indanâ mâ yushbihuh fa-naqîsu 'alâ aḥsanih*)." The seventh imam, Musā al-Kāzim, said: "You have nothing to do with analogical reasoning (*wa mâ lakum wa li l-qiyâs*); those who came before you perished because of such reasoning. When it comes to a case about which you have received information, speak about it; otherwise, keep silent."⁶⁰

Someone asked Ja'far: "What is your personal idea (*ra'y*) on such a subject?" The sixth imam replied, "Silence. All that we [the imams] say comes from the Prophet. We have no personal ideas."⁶¹

"He who knows and venerates God abstains from speaking about Him [or: abstains from using *kalâm*—literally, the word—in what concerns Him]."⁶²

"Speak of God's creation and not of God Himself; using *kalâm* in what pertains to God only increases confusion (*tahayyur*, or according to another tradition: going astray, *tih*)."⁶³

"Perdition is the lot of the partisans of *kalâm* (*yahliku aṣḥâb al-kalâm*), and salvation is that of the "submissive" (*wa yanjû l-musallimîn*). The submissive are the nobles [of this Community] (*nujabâ'*)."⁶⁴

One of the principal effects of the rejection of *kalâm* and its methods of investigation by the imams was the predominance of the "traditionalist" tendency of traditionalists from what is now called the "Qumm School." It is to be noted that this took place during the period of the presence of the imams, and during both the minor Occultation (260/284) and the major Occultation (which began in 329/941).⁶⁵ This predominance appears to have been almost absolute: the defenders of the "Intermediary School" (midway between "traditionalism" and "rationalism") and the "rationalists" were quite minor figures.⁶⁶ It was only in the second half of the fourth/tenth century that the "rationalist" tendency of theologians and jurists of the "Baghdad School" began to take the upper hand, with the impetus of the monumental work of Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) and his direct disciples.

To our knowledge, none of the scholars who dealt with this aspect of early Imamism asked the simple yet essential question, What was the effect of this passing from "traditionalism" to "rationalism," a transition that definitively (up to the present day) gives the predominant place to the "rationalists," on basic Imamite doctrine? What were the implications of the "rationalization" of Imamism (which began in the fourth/tenth century and continues up to the present day) for a very great majority of Twelver theologians, jurists and thinkers? What was the Imamite "worldview" before this change, and what did it become thereafter?

It would appear that a thematic comparison of the greatest early sources of Imamite traditions might open up a field of research and demonstrate a historical point of capital importance for the whole doctrinal evolution of

Imamism. We shall certainly compare the treatment of typical Imamite themes, and we shall do this through the most famous of the early sources, taken in chronological order. Three major themes in Imamite dogma will be used as guideposts: 1) cosmogonic data; 2) information on the miraculous and occult aspects of the imams, particularly where these concern their Knowledge and their supernatural powers; and 3) those data pertaining to what the imams thought of the Qur'an.⁶⁷ The oldest large compilation of Imamite dogmatic traditions known to us is that of Şaffâr al-Qummi (d. 290/903), the *Başâ'ir al-darajât*; it will thus serve as the basic source for our comparison.⁶⁸ Other texts to be examined include the *Uşûl min al-kâfi*, by al-Kulaynî (d. 329/940), some of the dogmatic works written by Ibn Bâbüye (d. 381/991), and some of the works of al-Mufîd (d. 413/1022) and of his disciple al-Sharîf al-Murtaḍâ (d. 436/1044).

Şaffâr gives extensive details about cosmogony and the pre-existence of the imams, and he presents these details methodically: 1) the pre-eternal luminous entities of the imams; 2) the initiation of pure spiritual entities in the original worlds of the "shadows" (*'âlam al-aẓilla*) and the "particles" (*al-dharr*); 3) the pre-existential "Pacts" (*al-mîthâq*); 4) the creation of the spirits, the hearts and the bodies of the imams and their faithful, on the one hand, and of the "Enemies" of the imams and their partisans on the other; 5) the miraculous conception and birth of the imams; 6) the "clairvoyance" of the imams applied to men's "clay" in order to know their destiny and characteristics.⁶⁹ Al-Kulaynî will touch on all six of these subjects, but in a less-than-complete manner, as he deals with a smaller number of traditions.⁷⁰ Ibn Bâbüye transmits the first five series, taking care to "dilute" them among other categories of information.⁷¹ Al-Mufîd and al-Murtaḍâ transmitted only certain elements of the fifth series.⁷²

Exactly the same situation can be seen in a number of details concerning the imams' Knowledge (*'ilm*) and their supernatural powers (*a'âjîb*), which, it might be added, are inextricably linked. On their Knowledge, for example: 1) knowledge of the Invisible World; 2) knowledge of the past, the present, and the future; 3) knowledge of the hermeneutic science (*ta'wîl*) of all previous sacred books; 4) knowledge of all languages, the language of the animals and the birds, of inanimate objects, and of the "metamorphosed" (*al-musûkh*); 5) the column of light (*'amud min nûr*) that the imam can visualize at will to see the answers to all his questions; 6) "the marking of the heart" (*al-nakt fî l-qalb*) and "the piercing of the eardrum" (*al-naqr fî l-udhn*), as occult means of the "transmission" of Knowledge.⁷³ On their supernatural powers: 1) possession of the supernatural power of the Supreme Name of God and of sacred objects that belonged to the prophets; 2) the power to bring the dead back to life, to communicate with the dead, to heal the sick; 3) the powers of clairvoyance, of "clairaudience," of physiognomy; 4) instantaneous displacement in space and walking on clouds; 5) the practice of divina-

tion (*fa'l*) and magic (*sihr*); 6) relations with the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad.⁷⁴

As far as the problem of the Qur'an, the first compilations of Imamite traditions report quite a large number of statements according to which after the death of the Prophet, the only integral version of the Qur'an, containing all the mysteries of the heavens and the earth, of the past, the present, and the future, was in 'Alī's possession. According to the imams, the Vulgate compiled during 'Uthman's caliphate was a falsified, altered, and censured version that contained only a third of the integral Qur'an; this latter Qur'an is said to have been transmitted secretly from one imam to another up to the time of the hidden imam, who took it with him into his Occultation. Humanity will know the integral Qur'an only after the return of the Madhī.⁷⁵ But from Ibn Bâbüye's time on, not only are these traditions passed over in silence, but 'Uthman's Vulgate began to be considered as containing the integrality of the Divine Message revealed to the Prophet. It is further said that the words of the imams are aimed only at the suppression of 'Alī's commentaries (*tafsîr*) and hermeneutical glosses (*ta'wil*) by Sunni authorities.⁷⁶ These positions have been defended, with a few exceptions among the *akhbârîs*, by all the great Imamite thinkers up to the present day.⁷⁷

Another great domain where this progressive silencing of certain kinds of traditions is felt is that of the hadith that deal with the twelfth imam, and more specifically with the twelfth imam's "companions" (*aṣḥâb*) or "troops" (*jaysh*, pl. *juyûsh*) at the time of his return and his last battle against the unjust. In our comparison, we will use as a basic source the *Kitâb al-ghayba*, by Ibn Abî Zaynab al-Nu'mânî (d. circa 345/956), the oldest great compilation on the subject extant. We will compare the presentation of certain themes from this work with those of Ibn Bâbüye's *Kamâl al-dîn wa tamâm al-ni'ma* and al-Ṭûsî's (i.e., Abû Ja'far al-Ṭûsî, d. 460/1067) *Kitâb al-ghayba*.

Al-Nu'mânî, one of al-Kulaynî's disciples, reports a considerable number of traditions of a miraculous, esoteric, or occult nature, and he presents them in a quite coherent, well developed manner. As examples, let us take another look at the six series of traditions: 1) the conception, the birth, and the supernatural abilities of the twelfth imam; 2) the Madhī will bring a new Sunna; 3) the length of his governance before the arrival of the final resurrection; and regarding his "companions": 4) they will be non-Arabs (*'ajam*) and will essentially do combat with Arabs and "Muslims" (because of their treachery in dealing with the imams); 5) they will be granted supernatural powers; and 6) they will be initiated to the esoteric teaching of the imams.⁷⁸

Ibn Bâbüye deals with series 1, 3, 5, and 6 in a much less exhaustive fashion than al-Nu'mânî, and reports a considerably smaller number of traditions.⁷⁹ In al-Ṭûsî's work, only certain elements of the first series are treated.⁸⁰ Tables 1 and 2 present a schematic view of the preceding material.

	Şaffâr	Kulaynî	Bâbûye	Mufîd	Murtadâ
Cosmogony and "pre-existence"	1 to 6	1 to 6	1 to 5	5	5
The imams' Knowledge	1 to 6	1 to 4	1 to 3	3, 4	3, 4
The imams' Powers	1 to 6	1, 2, 3, 5	1, 2, 3, 5	1, 3	1, 3
The imams' "Qur'an"	+	+	—	—	—

Table 1.

	Nu'mânî	Bâbûye	Tûsî
"Non-rational" information about the hidden imam and his companions	1 to 6	1, 3, 5, 6	1

Table 2.

It must be repeated here that we have chosen only six of many representative themes in a few areas. The original Imamite doctrine, presented through the words of the imams and registered by the first compilers, of which Ibn Bâbûye represents the last great name, was clearly of "heterodox" esoteric and mystical—indeed, even magical and occult—character. As was stated at the outset in this introduction, we are here looking at only doctrinal and dogmatic tradition, not juridic tradition, which has few dissimilarities with the Sunni juridic tradition. The Occultation (minor as well as major) and the consequent absence of the Impeccable Guide (*ma'sûm*) to head the Imamite community constitute major events with diverse implications for the evolution of the history of Imamite doctrine. We shall return to this topic. From the time of the Occultation, around the middle of the fourth/tenth century, in a time profoundly marked by theological, and especially Mu'tazilite, rationalism, Imamite theologians and traditionists appear to have seen themselves confronted by "nonrational" teachings for which they had great difficulty finding theological as well as Qur'anic bases of justification. No longer having a "visible" imam to lead them, living in a socially hostile and politically unforeseen milieu,⁸¹ and in a time that intellectually tended toward rationalism, Imamite thinkers appear to have felt forced to make a compromise between safeguarding the original doctrine and their concern for not brutally clashing with the dominant ideologies. Through shaykh Şaffâr al-Qummî, living during the period from the presence of the imams to Ibn Bâbûye, living at the time of the major Occultation and passing through al-Kulaynî, writing at the time of the minor Occultation, we are witnesses to a progressive silencing of a number of traditions. One result of this progressive silencing is that these essentially Imamological traditions, with a quite original metaphysical and mystical (and thus "heterodox") scope in Islam, take a turn toward rationalization and

attempts at rapprochement with “orthodox” positions, attempts led by al-Mufīd and al-Murtaḍā. A second result is the generally open and violent condemnation of these same traditions in the name of “reason.” The original tradition that might be called “esoteric nonrational Imamism”⁸² is reported especially by the “traditionalist” traditionists of the “Qumm School”; this is the tradition that is meant when we refer to “early Imamism”; it is this tradition that is the object of the present study, and it is not to be confused, especially where Imamology is concerned, with the later tradition called “theological-judicial rational Imamism,” influenced by Mu‘tazilism and represented especially by the “rationalist” theologians and jurists of the “Baghdad School.” It is the confusion between these two Imamite traditions of quite different natures and “visions of the world” that is in large part responsible for the incoherencies, extrapolations, and contradictions that can be seen in a great number of studies on Imamism. Recognition of the early suprarational esoteric tradition constitutes our second methodological criterion, since it is in relation to this tradition that we can measure the degree of fidelity of the sources to the original doctrine.

1-3. THE SOURCES

In order to identify the early Imamite doctrine with appropriate specificity and to define the Imamology that it encompasses, we will base our inquiry on the sources of “esoteric nonrational Imamism” of which Ibn Bābūye’s dogmatic work constitutes, from the early times, the last basically faithful representation. The sources upon which this study lays its foundation are, above all, the first great systematic compilations of Imamite traditions. The earlier writings, as far as we can judge from the rare manuscripts that are extant and from information furnished by biographical and biobibliographical works, were small collections of hadith, gathered by the followers of the imams, on specific themes belonging primarily to the field of jurisprudence.⁸³ A number of these collections appear to have been inserted into later works. Next, despite a certain “rationalist” reticence regarding certain traditions that they have contained ever since the time of shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), these sources are considered to be an integral part of the patrimony inherent in Imamism. In effect, after al-Mufīd’s attacks against the nonrational aspects of “traditionalist” Imamism and the censure of these aspects by al-Murtaḍā—measures that might have been most characteristic of early Imamism, but that simultaneously guaranteed the survival of the doctrine—a certain balance between “rationalism” and “traditionalism” was reestablished by al-Ṭūsī. Showing due respect to early Imamite scholars, and especially cognizant of the authority of the *āḥād* traditions as useful sources for law and theology,⁸⁴ al-Ṭūsī managed to rehabilitate in a definitive and fairly complete manner the early compilations of the “traditionalist” kind.⁸⁵ But given the predominance of the “rationalist” current, the attitude of the majority of Imamite thinkers toward these

compilations remained basically ambiguous: their authors continued to be respected, their works continued to be copied, but, with a few later exceptions, an almost absolute silence reigned regarding those traditions that “posed problems”; it was only the juridical sections of these compilations of the traditions that in no way conflicted with the “rationalist” convictions and ideas of the majority that were used, commented, or meditated upon.⁸⁶

The traditionists whose compilations constitute the basic sources for this work are, in chronological order:

al-shaykh al-Şaffâr al-Qummî, Abû Ja'far (or Abû l-Ḥasan) Md b. al-Ḥasan b. Farrûkh al-A'raj (d. 290/902–903), a contemporary of the tenth and eleventh imams; he was probably the disciple of the eleventh, and an acquaintance of his son, the hidden imam, the awaited Mahdî; he was the first systematic compiler of traditions about Imamite Imamology, constituting the basis of early Twelver metaphysics and mystical theology.⁸⁷ His greatest work, the only one extant,⁸⁸ is entitled *Başâ'ir al-darajât fî 'ulûm âl Muḥammad wa mâ khaṣṣahum Allâh bihi*,⁸⁹ better known under the abbreviated title *Başâ'ir al-darajât*, edited in Iran under the title *Başâ'ir al-darajât fî l-maqâmât wa faḍâ'il ahl al-bayt 'alayhim al-şalawât*.⁹⁰

The famous al-Kulaynî, Abû Ja'far Md b. Ya'qûb al-Râzî (d. 329/940); there is no need to review his life, although it is little known, or his personality.⁹¹ We will use the part of the *Uşûl* from his *Kitâb al-kâfî fî 'ilm al-dîn*,⁹² and the final volume of this work, entitled *Kitâb al-Rawḍa min al-kâfî*.⁹³

Shaykh Ibn Abî Zaynab al-Nu'mânî, Abû 'AbdAllâh Md b. Ibrâhîm b. Ja'far “al-Kâtib” (“the scribe,” because of the position he occupied especially with al-Kulaynî), who died around 345 or 360/956 or 971, a disciple of al-Kulaynî, among others. Of his life, we know only his teachers in Qur'anic science and hadîth, and that he traveled in search of Imamite traditions.⁹⁴ He is also known as the compiler of the *Tafsîr* of the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sâdiq.⁹⁵ His primary work, the *Kitâb al-ghayba*, is the first great systematic compilation of traditions about the twelfth imam, his Occultation, his Return, and, in a general sense, the principal ideas of Imamite eschatology in its early stage.⁹⁶

Ibn Bâbüye (Arabized form: Ibn Bâbawayh), shaykh al-Şadûq, Abû Ja'far Md. b. Abî l-Ḥasan 'Alî b. Mûsâ al-Qummî, born circa 311/923, and who died in Rayy in 381/991–92; he is too well known to be briefly dealt with here.⁹⁷ In the fifth/eleventh century, al-Najâshî and al-Ṭûsî attributed to him 193 and 43 works, respectively; except for about 20, the rest of these writings appear to be lost; in the last century, al-Khwânsârî drew

up a list of 17 works, and more recently, F. Sezgin has counted 20.⁹⁸ As basic sources we will use his main doctrinal works, which abound in Imamological themes, although these are presented in a more “moderate” fashion than was the case for the works of his predecessors, like *‘Ilal al-sharâ’i’ wa al-ahkâm wa al-asbâb* (a voluminous collection of traditions on the reasons and first causes of all things, from the time of the creation up to juridical details),⁹⁹ *Kamâl (ikmâl) al-dîn wa tamâm (itmâm) al-ni‘ma fî ithbât al-ghayba wa kashf al-hayra*, about the Madhî, his two Occultations and his Return,¹⁰⁰ *Kitâb al-tawhîd*, a book of hermeneutic, theological, and Imamological traditions,¹⁰¹ *al-Amâlî (al-Majâlis)*, accounts of the author’s hadith dictation sessions, containing traditions on diverse subjects, a number of which are esoteric and mystical in character,¹⁰² *‘Uyûn akhbâr al-Riḍâ*, a large monograph dedicated to the sayings, actions and other details of the eighth imam, ‘Ali b. Mūsā al-Riḍâ,¹⁰³ *Ṣifât al-shî‘a* and *Faḍâ’il al-shî‘a*, two small collections of traditions on the qualities that the “true faithful” of the imam ought to have; a number of them are of “initiatory” character.¹⁰⁴ Other works by Ibn Bâbûye will be used as secondary sources, given the smaller number of esoteric, mystical, or Imamological traditions that they contain (for example, *Ma‘anî al-akhbâr*, *Kitâb al-khiṣâl*, *al-Muqni’ wa al-hidâya*, *Kitâb man lâ haḥḍuruhu l-faqîh*, *Risâlat al-i‘tiqâdât . . .*¹⁰⁵).

We have additionally made use of a certain number of other early sources for our work, sources that in our opinion, and given the perspective of the present work can be used only as secondary sources:

- a) Works whose Imamological and esoteric aspects, two aspects that are inextricably interconnected and that constitute the nexus of the problem we are dealing with, are not immediately evident, perhaps intentionally, as will be seen in the final part of the present work. In this category, one might name the *Kitâb al-mahâsin* by Abû Ja‘far Aḥmad b. Md. al-Barqî (d. 274/887 or 280/893),¹⁰⁶ and especially the writings attributed to the imams themselves, writings whose authenticity, of course, is yet to be seriously called into question: *al-Ṣaḥîfat al-Sajjâdiyya*, by the fourth imam, ‘Alî b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sajjâd (d. 92/711),¹⁰⁷ Ja‘far al-Ṣâdiq, the sixth imam’s *Tafsîr*,¹⁰⁸ and the *Tafsîr* by the eleventh imam, al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarî (d. 260/874).¹⁰⁹
- b) Sources whose attachment to “esoteric nonrational Imamism,” that is, to the original doctrine, is only partial: the *Tafsîr* of the early Imamite commentators like Furât b. Ibrâhîm al-Kûfî (d. 300/912),¹¹⁰ ‘Alî b. Ibrâhîm al-Qummî (d. 307/919),¹¹¹ and Md b. Mas‘ûd al-‘Ayyâshî (d. 320/932)¹¹² or three other early texts: the *Kâmil al-*

ziyârât by Ja'far b. Md b. Ja'far Ibn Qûlûye al-Qummî (d. 369/979), a collection of traditions about pilgrimage to holy places; the author, a traditionist and jurist, one of al-Mufîd's teachers, borrows frequently from al-Kulaynî and Ibn Bâbüye.¹¹³ The *Kifâyat al-athar fî l-naṣṣ 'alâ l-a'immat al-ithnay 'ashar* by 'Alî b. Md. b. 'Alî al-Khaz-zâz al-Râzî (d. in the second half of the fourth/end of the tenth century), a collection of traditions that tend to prove the regular "investiture" of the twelve imams; the author was, among others, a follower of Ibn Bâbüye.¹¹⁴ The *Muqtaḍab al-athar fî l-naṣṣ 'alâ 'adad al-a'immat al-ithnay 'ashar* by Aḥmad b. Md b. 'UbaydAllah Ibn 'Ayyâsh al-Jawharî (d. 401/1101), a collection of traditions aimed at showing that the number of imams was predestined.¹¹⁵ Given the relatively small number of traditions that might be classified as "nonrational," the rather frequent use of dialectical reasoning, and at the same time the acceptance of a great number of *âḥād* traditions, one might think that these authors considered themselves affiliates of the "Intermediary School" of Imamite traditionists and jurists.

- c) Finally, early sources whose authenticity and integrality have not yet been established with certainty, for example, the *Nahj al-balâgha*, a collection of remarks, advice, letters and sermons attributed to the first imam, 'Alî b. Abî Tâlib (d. 40/661), compiled by al-sharîf al-Raḍî (d. 406/1016; he was the elder brother of al-Murtaḍâ),¹¹⁶ or the *Ithhbât al-waṣiyya li l-imâm 'Alî b. Abî Tâlib*, attributed, especially by the Shî'ites, to the famous al-Mas'ûdî (d. 345/956), author of the *Murûj al-dhahab*; it is a treatise whose purpose is to prove the authenticity of the succession of the cycles of the Imamate as being an esoteric part of lawgiving prophecy, from the time of Adam up to Muhammad.¹¹⁷

To define the question before us with the greatest historical specificity possible, that is, the question of the definitions of the Imam given by the imams through the early doctrine of "esoteric nonrational Imamism," we cannot allow the use of secondary sources without the greatest of prudence, and then only when their statements corroborate or complete those of our primary basic sources.

1-4. THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF IMAMITE TRADITIONS

By "traditions" we are here translating the terms *sunna*, *ḥadîth*, *khavar*, *athar*, *riwâya*, which the early texts use indifferently to refer to sayings of the Prophet, of his daughter Fâṭima and the twelve imams, that is, the sayings of the "Fourteen Impeccables" (*ma'sûm*). Let it be repeated that there are two

distinct kinds of traditions in Imamism: there are first of all the juridical traditions like those found in juridical compilations such as the *Furû'* in al-Kulaynî's *Kâff*, Ibn Bâbüye's *Kitâb man lâ yaḥḍuruḥu l-faqīh*, Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsî's *Tahdhīb al-aḥkâm*, or the summary of this last work by its author, *al-Istibṣâr fî mâ' khulifa fīhi min al-akhbâr*.¹¹⁸ It has of course been noticed that, with very few exceptions, this Imamite juridical tradition looks very much like the Sunni tradition, as a result of the absence of dogmatic traits that are properly speaking Shî'ite. As has already been said, the Imamite *fiqh* is not really distinguishable from the Sunni *fiqh* except on a small number of points, and in the essential chapters of both canon law and civil law the fundamentals are almost identical; the points of divergence from Imamite law generally do not differentiate it from Sunni law any more than do the four great schools.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, the second category of Imamite traditions, those which might be called dogmatic or doctrinal traditions, is of a very different nature and tenor. Someone even vaguely familiar with the literature of Sunni hadith will no doubt have a clear sense of disorientation when approaching the Imamite doctrinal tradition. Although both categories of traditions may be called "Imamite traditions" because of their both being founded on the words of the imams, it is the second, to the extent that it is clearly distinctive in comparison with the Sunni tradition, that needs to be studied as Imamite tradition properly speaking; it is here that we find the truly original characteristics of the doctrine. The true axis around which Imamite doctrinal tradition revolves is that Imamology without the knowledge of which no other great chapter, as is the case with theology or prophetology, could be adequately studied. The Imam being in this case the center of everything, it is in relation to him that the nature and the authority of hadith can be considered.

According to the early writings of the imams, the Qur'an and the hadith (i.e., the prophetic traditions reported by the imams as well as the traditions of the imams themselves) constitute the only two authorities, absolute and complementary, to which the faithful should refer for all matters regarding their religion.¹²⁰ The Qur'an (in its integral version withheld by the imams, a subject to which we shall return at length) and the hadith are considered to contain all the answers to all the questions, be these on day-to-day matters or on matters of cosmic, metaphysical, or theological nature. "There is nothing with which a verse of the Qur'an or a tradition does not deal," says Ja'far.¹²¹ Every thought, word, or deed should be based on hadith or the Qur'an, and preferably on the Qur'an, since it is supposed to be the basis of all hadith; hadith only explain and clarify what the Qur'an already contains in a manner that is more or less understandable to the common believer. "Everything should lead back to the Qur'an and Tradition," says the sixth imam. "A hadith that contradicts God's Book is nothing more than a well-disguised lie."¹²² The Prophet, in his function as messenger of the Divine Word, and the imam, in his function as exegete initiated and inspired by this Word,¹²³ are the only persons

capable of explicating the Qur'an by traditions. 'Alī, the first imam, states: "The Qur'an contains the knowledge of the past and that of the future up to the Day of Resurrection; it serves as your arbiter, and it clarifies there where you may stray; ask me [for the science of the Qur'an] and I shall teach it to you."¹²⁴ Ja'far says: "The Prophet, God's messenger, engendered me, and I contain the Knowledge of the Qur'an, the Book that contains the beginning of creation as well as all that will take place up to the Day of Resurrection; it contains the account of the events of the heavens and the earth, those of Paradise and of Hell, those of the past and of the future, and I know all of this as clearly as if I saw it written on the palm of my hand. Yes, God has puṭā clear explanation of all things in the Qur'an."¹²⁵ The sayings of the imams are by nature as sacred as are those of the Prophet; indeed, they are even as holy as are the words of God; this is explicitly expressed in a tradition that goes back to Ja'far, a tradition the importance of which various commentators have emphasized: "My speech is identical to that of my father, his speech is identical to that of my grandfather, that of my grandfather identical to his father al-Ḥusayn, his identical to that of al-Ḥasan, his identical to that of the Prince of believers [*amīr al-mu'minīn*, i.e., the first imam, 'Alī], his identical to that of the Prophet, and his identical to the Word of God."¹²⁶ Another important point of doctrine comes out of this tradition, that of the "unity" of the teachings of the imams. The imams have never ceased to reiterate that their teachings constitute an indissoluble whole that must be known in an integral manner.¹²⁷

Taking as a foundation the words of the imams regarding the criteriology of hadith, one realizes that, on the basis of these words, it is difficult to find systematically applicable principles to verify the authenticity of traditions. It is true that at this time (the first three centuries after the *hijra*), even among traditional Sunni Muslims where the need for presenting guarantees of authenticity was becoming more and more important, the rules for critiquing hadith were only partially elaborated. Ibn Ishāq (d. 150–51/767–68), in his *Sīra*, and even Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) in his *Muwattā* sometimes present complete chains of transmission (*isnād*), and sometimes partial chains, but also sometimes no chains at all.¹²⁸ The first systematic treatises of the "science of hadith" were to be composed more than a century later: *The Kitāb al-jarḥ wa l-ta'dīl* by Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/939), *al-Muḥaddith al-fāṣil bayn al-rāwī wa l-wā'ī* by Abū Md al-Rāmhurmuzī (d. 360/971), or the *Ma'rifa 'ulūm al-ḥadīth* by al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405/1014).¹²⁹ But this historical reason is not the only cause for the absence of a critical methodology of hadith in those around the imams; reasons of a purely doctrinal order have also played a role. The solidity of the chain of transmission in no way has the same importance in Sunni Islam. Actually, among the Sunnis, one of the fundamental criteria for the authenticity of a chain is the authority of the Companions of the Prophet. Among the Imamites, not only is the near-totality of these Companions looked upon with a lack of respect, but they are consid-