abolish the truth. There is manifestly plently for us to "judge", or rather, oppose: atheism, agnosticism, and everything that flows from the "Enlightenment" and the French Revolution. We passively tolerate so much that comes from satan ("rock" music, fashionable "-isms", sacrilegious entertainments, blasphemous art) and yet we think our culture is threatened if someone speaks Spanish or if someone wears a turban. We must be sufficiently alert to discriminate between what comes from God (no matter how exotic its outward form) and what does not.

Our judgements must be totally divorced from denomination. We must be able to oppose the "bad" (even though they be of our own religion), and acclaim the "good" (even though they belong to a strange religion). This injunction may sound platitudinous, but almost no one follows it instinctively. We must be capable of the cardinally important intuition that every religion – be it Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam – *comes from God and leads back to God*; in these latter days, we underestimate the "other religions" at our peril. Alas, very few (be they Christians, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, or anything else) are able to make this angelic leap of faith – for many bad reasons, as well as for one good reason, namely that each religion has within it a verse corresponding to "No man cometh to the Father but by Me".

It is precisely this "absolute" in each religion that makes it a religion, but it is difficult for most people to realize the *simple* truth that the absolute, being in definition supra-formal, must needs – within the formal world – espouse many forms. It cannot be otherwise, despite the providentially "absolutist" text within each religion. To understand this truth, at least theoretically, is the *first* necessity in the present age. But unfortunately, like so many good things, this area has been partially taken over by the devil, in the shape of the cults, the "New Age" movement, etc. One might say that it is in this area above all that the teachings and elucidations of the perennialists have an indispensable rôle to play.

What we learn from the traditionalists' writing is that the essential is to see beyond the form to the content, and, within the content of the various religions and cultures, to see the one Truth and the one Way to salvation. Supra-formality, of this kind, is possible only on the basis of understanding in depth – and consequently respecting – the meaning and function of the various revealed forms, which in reality are different languages and pathways of the one Divine Message.

The Multiple Facets of Isma'ilism

by Diana Steigerwald

Preamble

Shi'ism has remarkably influenced the destinies of Islam in two ways: in the political field and, more particularly, in the theosophical domain. As Friedlaender states: "We are now able clearly to pursue the rise and the development of political parties within Islam and the manifold tendencies that were working under the surface"[1]. We have a better notion of the development of religious thought in Shi'ism principally due to the labour of Henry Corbin who has edited and commented on many important treatises.

As far as Isma'ilism is concerned, remarkable progress began in 1930. Wladimir Ivanow (1886-1970), was the pioneer in Isma'ili studies. Other western scholars in the field are: Rudolph Strothman (1877-1960), Louis Massignon (1883-1962), Marius Canard (1888-1982), Henry Corbin (1903-1978), Paul Kraus (1904-1944), Samuel M. Stern (1920-1969) Marshall G.S. Hodgson (1922-1968), Bernard Lewis, Wilferd Madelung, Heinz Halm, Yves Marquet. Important eastern scholars are Asaf 'Ali Fyzee (1899-1981), Husayn Hamdani (1901-1962), Abbas Hamdani, Mustapha Ghalib, Khodr Hamawi, Aref Tamer, Ismail I.K. Poonawala, Sami N. Makarem and last but not least Farhad Daftary who published a valuable compendium.[2]

[1] Israel Friedlaender, "The Heterodoxies of Shi'ites in the presentation of Ibn Hazm", *JAOS*, vol. 28 (1907): 3.

[2] Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis, their History and Doctrines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Historical Background

One of the main obstacles that prevents a proper understanding of the Isma'ili movement is the paucity of historical material and also the fact that only Sunni sources relating Isma'ili history survived. We can divide Isma'ili history into six important phases.

The Pre-Isma'ili Period: The first period extends from Imam `Ali to Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq. The Isma`ilis share common Imams with the Twelvers. The concept of *Imama* was established and formulated by the school of Ja`far. As Corbin said:

> "Up to the time of the sixth Imam, Ja`far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), Twelver and Ismaili Shi`ites both venerated the same Imamic line. Now, apart from the teachings of the first Imam that have come down to us, the great themes of Shi`ite gnosis have mainly been constructed around the teachings of the fourth, fifth and sixth Imams, `Ali Zayn al-`Abidin (d. 95/714), Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 115/733), and Ja`far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765). Any study of the origins of Shi`ism cannot therefore dissociate one branch from the other." [3]

We have access to some literature which was compiled after Ja'far al-Sadiq's lifetime. Among the most important works are: the *Najb al-balagha* [4] (sayings of 'Ali), the *Al-Sahifa al-kamila al-sajjadiyya* [5] of Zayn al-'Abidin and the *Tafsir* [6] of Ja'far al-Sadiq. At the death of Ja'far al-Sadiq, there was a split. Some disciples followed his son Isma'il and they were called the Isma'ilis; the others followed another son, Musa Kazim, and they were called the Twelvers.

The Pre-Fatimid Period: The second period runs from Isma'il (*circa* 147/764 or later) to Radi al-din 'Abd Allah (d. *circa* 268/882) and

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[3] Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, translated by Philip Sherrard in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993): 31.

[4] Compiled by Sayyid Sharif al-Radi (d. 406/1015). This compilation was translated by Syed Mohammed Askari Jafery in 1960 in *Nahjul Balagha* (New York: Tahrike tarsile Qur'an, 1981).

[5] These supplications of Zayn al-'Abidin (d. 95/713) were compiled several times; the latest version was established by al-Shahid al-Awwal (introduction of William C. Chittik, p. xxi). This compilation was translated with an introduction and annotation by William C. Chittick in *The Psalms of Islam* (Great Britain: The Muhammadi Trust, 1988).

[6] According to Paul Nwyia there is a *Tafsir* attributed to Ja'far al-Sadiq which has a strong Sufi colouring. See his article "Le Tafsir Mystique attribué à Ja'far Sadiq", *Mélanges de l'Université de St-Josef*, vol. 43 (1968): 181-230.

is called the pre-Fatimid period. It was a period of *satr* (concealment); the Imams were *mastur* (hidden from the public). (The concept of *mastur* must not be confused with the Twelver idea of *ghayba* which means that the Mahdi is occulted until the Day of Resurrection). In this complex situation, Jabir ibn Hayyan wrote many treatises on alchemy and on the mystical science of letters. The Encyclopaedia of Ikhwan al-safa' was composed by authors who had a vast knowledge of Hellenic literature and of the various sciences existing during that time.

The Fatimid Period: The Fatimid period started with 'Ubayd Allah (d. 322/934) and ended with al-'Adid (d. 567/1171). An Isma'ili state was established in Ifriqiyya (Tunisia) and later in northern Africa. The University of al-Azhar was founded around 360/970. The Isma'ili theosophy was gradually structured by Nasafi (d. 331/942), Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 322/933-4), Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (IV/Xth century) and Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 363/974), among others. Later Isma'ilism received an official form through the labours of Hamid al-din Kirmani (d. 412/1021) and Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 481/1087). At the death of al-Mustansir bi-Allah, a split occurred between the western Isma'ilis (followers of Musta'li) and the eastern Isma'ilis (followers of Nizar). The legitimate heir to *Imama*, Nizar, was dethroned in favour of al-Musta'li. The Mus'taliyan continued to rule the Fatimid state until the death of the caliph al-Amir (d. 524/1130). Then the center of the *da'wa* was transferred to Yemen and at the end of the XVIth century the headquarters were moved to India where the Musta'liyan are called Bohras. The lineage of al-Musta'li was extinguished with his grandson al-Tayyib b. al-Amir who disappeared in 526/1131 and became the awaited Imam. After the death of al-Amir, his cousin al-Hafiz took over the control of the Fatimid state and proclaimed himself Caliph. The followers of the lineage of al-Hafiz are called Hafiziyya. The last Fatimid Caliph, al-'Adid (d. 567/1171) was probably assassinated by Salah al-din (popularly known as Saladin), the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty.

The Alamut Period: The Alamut period extended from Nizar to Rukn al-din Khurshah. The Nizari Isma'ili state was established in Alamut by Hasan-i Sabbah. The *shari'a* (religious Law) was abolished and the *Qiyama al-Qiyama* (Great Resurrection) was proclaimed by Hasan 'Ala

dhikri-hi al-Salam in 559/1164. According to Henry Corbin:

> "What the proclamation implied was nothing less than the coming of a pure spiritual Islam, freed from all spirit of legalism and of all enslavement to the law, a personal religion of the Resurrection which is spiritual birth, in that it makes possible the discovery and the living realisation of the spiritual meaning of the prophetic revelations."[7]

Later Jalal al-din Hasan re-established the religious law (*shari'a*) in order to improve his relations with Sunnis. Alamut was destroyed by the Mongol Hulagu in 654/1256, but Isma'ilism survived in Persia under the cover of Sufism.

The Ginanic Period: The Ginanic period began with Shams al-din Muhammad and ended with Khalil Allah III. The Isma'ili *da'wa* in India began during the early Fatimid period. Ibn Hawshab (Mansur al-Yaman) sent his nephew Haytham as a missionary to Sind. The *da'wa* was destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazna in 401/1010. It reappeared later in the VIII/XIV century during a period of concealment (*dawr al-satr*) and developed in India where the Isma'ili faith was propagated. During that time, *Imama* was perpetuated under the mantle of Sufism in Persia. The Pirs started to preach in northern India, more particularly in Punjab, Sind and Kashmir; eventually the process of conversion reached the south. The Imam Qasim Shah sent Pir Shams to India where he made Multan his headquarters. His disciples were known as Shamsis. Pir Sadr al-din became famous, because he was considered the founder of the Khoja community. He was succeeded by Hasan Kabir al-din. One of the grandsons of Hasan Kabir al-din, Nar Muhammad Shah, composed ginans in which he declared that his father was Imam and that he was himself a successor to *Imama*. The Imam-shahi originated in this time of turmoil.

The Agha Khan Period: The current period is the Agha Khan period. Until recently, the Imams were living in the Indian subcontinent, but they have now relocated to Europe. His Highness Prince Karim Agha Khan, the spiritual head of the largest group of Nizari Ismailis, lives in France.

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[7] Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, translated by Philip Sherrard in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 95.

Multiple Influences

The complexity of Isma'ilism relies on its multiple facets. We will look at three major facets of Isma'ilism: 1) Neoplatonism during the Fatimid period, 2) the Sufi influence in Persia, and 3) Vaishnavism in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent.

Neoplatonism in Isma'ilism during the Fatimid period

Isma'ilism developed a complex and rich theosophy which owed a great deal to pre-Islamic Neoplatonism. The process of translating philosophical and scientific works started seriously during the 'Abbasid period, especially during the reign of the Caliph al-Ma'mun. This Caliph supported the cause of the Mu'tazilites who were trying to apply Greek thought to Muslim dogmas. Al-Ma'mun created the *Bayt al-Hikma* (the House of Wisdom) which included an Institute and a library for translation and research.

In the IIIth/IXth century the translations from Greek to Arabic proliferated, at first by the intermediary of Syriac, then directly. The teams of translators consisted of Christians, Jews and, later, Muslims. Plotinus was not known under his real name, although the impact of his thought on the Muslim world was greater than the impact of Aristotle. The Muslims did not know any of his work; the *Enneads* were rife with changes and paraphrases and were known incorrectly as the *Theologia of Aristotle*.[8] This work had the most important impact on the philosophical tradition of Islam, where the Neoplatonic scheme is that of the One from which emanates the Intellect and the Soul.[9] The *Theologia of Aristotle* also played a significant role in the development of Isma'ilism.[10]

The most important Isma'ili compendium of scientific works is the *Rasa'il al-Ikhwan al-safa'*, where the Greek philosophical influences

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[8] Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 9: "...the notorious *Theology of Aristotle (Theologia Aristotelis)*, and *The Book of Pure Good*, known in Latin as the *Liber de Causis* and in Arabic as the *Kitab al-Idah fi al-Khayr al-Mahd*. Both may be described as, at least, indirect products of Alexandrine philosophical milieu. The first has nothing to do with Aristotle but summarises, with some external padding, Plotinus' *Enneads*, Books IV-VI; the second, also attributed to Aristotle, is based upon Proclus' *Element of Theology*."

[9] See the work of al-Farabi, *Mabadi' ara' ahl madina al-fadila* translated by Jaussen Youssef Karam et J. Chlala edited in Cairo in 1949. In this treatise he developed a Neoplatonic scheme of 10 intellects.

[10] See the cosmology developed by Abu 'Abd Allah al-Nasafi, Abu Hatim al-Razi and later by Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani.

are clearly manifested. The authors, known as the Ikhwan al-safa', relied greatly upon hermetic symbols for the development of their own theosophy. The *Rasa'il* was also influenced by neo-Pythagorean arithmetical theories, the authors basing themselves on the Pythagorean principle: "The beings are according to the nature of the number."[11] They were inspired by an assertion attributed to Pythagoras: "In the knowledge of the properties of numbers and in the way they are classified and ranked in grades resides the knowledge of the beings of God."[12]

The Ikhwan al-safa' realised that each number depends on the preceding number and can be decomposed, unit by unit, till one arrives at the first, the source of all numbers. But from the One "we can not withdraw anything... because it is the origin and the source of number."[13] According to the Ikhwan al-safa', beings are like numbers: they come from God and return finally to Him. This is an illustration of how they adapted Pythagorean theories to their fundamental belief in a hierarchical world.

Let us examine the Neoplatonic influence on the conception of God of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, a Fatimid *da'i*. The God of Plotinus is described as the One or the Good. Plotinus adopted an expression taken from Plato: "The Good beyond being".[14] The One therefore for Plotinus has no definition. We find in the Arabic Plotinian source this saying: "Whoever wishes to describe the Almighty Creator must remove from Him all attributes..."[15] Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani developed a conception of God which, according to him, avoided two common mistakes: *tashbih* (anthropomorphism) and *ta'til* (agnosticism).[16] Al-Sijistani argued that we can only know God, the second hypostasis of the Neoplatonic scheme, through the Intellect (*al-'Aql*).[17] Plotinus argued that all

[11] *Rasa'il ikhwan al-safa'*, vol. 3, (Cairo, 1928): 200.

[12] *Rasa'il ikhwan al-safa'*, vol. 3, p. 200.

[13] *Rasa'il ikhwan al-safa'*, vol. 3, p. 236.

[14] *Republic*, VI, 5091 B.

[15] *Fi al-'ilm al-ilahi (Epistolia de Scientia Divina)*, Ed. by Badawi in *Aflutin 'inda al-'arab*, (Cairo: Maktabat an-Nadah, 1966): 183.

[16] See the first chapter on *Tawhid* in the treatise of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Al-Iftikhar*, Ed. by M. Ghalib (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1980): 23-33; Paul E. Walker, "An Isma'ili Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God", *A.J.A.S.*, vol. 2 (1974): 11.

[17] Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Al-Maqalid*, (Ms. of the library of Abbas Hamdani): 19-23; Paul E. Walker, "An Isma'ili Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God", *A.J.A.S.*, vol. 2 (1974): 15.

attributes must be removed from God. God is therefore outside being (*aysiya* or *hasti*) and not-being (*laysiya*).[18] But al-Sijistani developed his own original method of recognising the Unicity of God (*Tawhid*).[19] This method proposes a double negation. Thus, for example, God is both not-being and not not-being. By according primacy to this double negation, nothing could be said about God that is merely either positive or negative.[20]

Sufi aspects of Nizari Isma'ilism in Persia

The most important debate in western thought is the perpetual conflict between the platonic world and the peripatetic world. We can note that in Isma'ilism this problem is solved by the role of the Imam, who belongs to the physical and the spiritual world. The basic question that is encountered in Isma'ili treatises is the problem of the reconciliation of intellect (*'aql*) and revelation (*tanzil*). Nasir-i Khusraw, in his work entitled *Jami' al-Hikmatayn*[21], tried to reconcile the two: the Greek philosophy which is based on *burhan* (demonstration) and the Isma'ili theology which is based on revelation and on the *ta'wil* (spiritual exegesis) of the Imam.

Abu al-Fath ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 548/1153) in his *Milal wa al-nihal* described the Fatimid Isma'ilism as *da'wa qadima*, "the ancient *da'wa*", opposing it to the Isma'ilism of Alamut described as *da'wa jadida*, "the modern *da'wa*" or "the reformed *da'wa*".[22] The proclamation of the "Great Resurrection" (*Qiyama al-Qiyama*) at Alamut revealed the essence (*batin*) of Isma'ilism while in the Fatimid period the essence remained veiled. We can oppose these two periods

[18] Paul E. Walker, "An Isma'ili Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God", *A.J.A.S.*, vol. 2 (1974): 16.

[19] Paul E. Walker, "An Isma'ili Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God", *A.J.A.S.*, vol. 2 (1974): 20.

[20] Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Iftikhar*, MS. Great Mosque copy in microfilm (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub, n.d.): f. 9b; Paul E. Walker, "An Isma'ili Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God", *A.J.A.S.*, vol. 2 (1974): 17.

[21] Nasir-i Khusraw, *Kitab Jami' al-Hikmatayn*, Ed. by Henry Corbin and Mohammed. Mo'in (Tehran-Paris: Bibliothèque iranienne, 1953); Henry Corbin, *Le Livre réunissant les deux sagesses*, Etude préliminaire, (Tehran-Paris: Bibliothèque Iranienne, 1953); Translated and annotated by Isabelle de Gastines in *Le Livre réunissant les deux sagesses*, (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

[22] Abu al-Fath ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, Ed. by Muhammad Fath Allah Badran, (Cairo, 1947-1955): 427.

by asking ourselves: were not the Fatimid trying to sacrifice the *batin* (inward) whereas Alamut was sacrificing the *zahir* (outward)? Perhaps the brilliant (outward) power of the Fatimids was in fact incompatible with the true (inward) nature of Isma'ili faith. Only in Alamut, and even later when it survived under the mantle of Sufism, could Isma'ilism reveal its true greatness.[23]

The reforms of Alamut were initiated by two individuals: Hasan-i Sabbah (d. 518/1124), the founder of the Alamut state, and Mawlana Hasan 'ala dhikri-hi al-salam, who proclaimed the Qiyama in 559/1164. During the *Qiyama al-Qiyama*, the Imam was integrally manifested, *zahir* and *batin* were in concomitance, all the believers knew the *batin* of the *zahir* and they were mystically united with the Imam. The religious Law (*shari'a*) was abolished mainly because the individuality of the disciple was understood as having disappeared in the Divine essence.[24] Henceforth the inner meaning of religion was emphasised over the external aspects of earthly life bound by *shari'a*.

When Isma'ilism later survived under the mantle of Sufism, its essence did not change, because Isma'ilism is essentially an esoteric and a mystical faith.[25] Wladimir Ivanow noted that Persian Isma'ilism took a strong Sufi colouring. He attributed this solely to the need for *taqiyya* (dissimulation [in order to protect oneself]), because the Isma'ilis lived in a climate of persecution, and it suited their need for security to

appear as a Sufi order.[26] According to Ivanow, all Persian mysticism springs from Isma'ilism.

Isma'ilism and Sufism share common parentage since they are both linked with the esoteric dimension of Islamic revelation. They have influenced each other in innumerable ways. "There is ample historical evidence that certain Isma'ili Imams, from the Safavid period up until the third Agha Khan in the present century, were intimately connected with"[27] Sufi orders.

Vaishnavism in Nizari Isma'ilism of the Indo-Pakistan Sub-continent[28]

The Ginanic literature developed mainly from the XIVth century to the XIXth century. It is an excellent example of the synthesis between Hinduism and Isma'ilism. Before their conversion, the Isma'ilis were Hindus believing in cycles of reincarnations. They wanted to escape the *samsaric* wheel of birth and rebirth. They believed in ten *avataras* of Vishnu. They admitted that nine *avataras* already came on earth and they were expecting the coming of the last *avatara*.

The main goal of the *da'wa* was to reformulate the Isma'ili doctrine of Alamut in Hindu terminology. The first Pirs who were Iranians transmitted the teaching (*ta'lim*) of the Imam to the disciples. They wanted to transmit the essence (*batin*) of the faith. Following Hindu customs, the Pirs composed religious songs (bhajans, garbis and ginans) to propagate Nizari Isma'ilism without imposing a foreign structure of thought. The process of conversion was gradual and adapted to the Hindu mind.

Hindu symbols were used to facilitate conversions: the Qur'an was considered the last sacred Book, the Atharva-Veda. Islam was described as the religion of the final period, Kali-yuga, announced by Hindu prophecies. Prophet Muhammad was represented as Brahma. The Imam 'Ali became the 10th *avatara* of Vishnu.

[23] See the commentary of Henry Corbin of *Jami' al-Hikmatayn* in *Le Livre réunissant les deux sagesses*, p. 10 ; H. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, p. 141: "Au fond, le triomphe politique marqué par l'avènement de la dynastie des Fatimides du Caire apparaît comme un paradoxe. Dans quelle mesure une sodalité ésotérique était-elle compatible avec l'organisation officielle d'un État?"

[24] Diane Steigerwald, "L'Imamologie dans la doctrine ismaélienne nizarienne", M.A. thesis, (McGill University, 1986): 48; part of the content of the proclamation is as follows: "Mawla-na (notre Seigneur) est le Résurrecteur (*Qa'im al-Qiyamat*); il est le Seigneur des êtres; il est le Seigneur qui est l'acte d'être absolu (*wujud mutlaq*); il exclut toute détermination existentielle, car il les transcende toutes; il ouvre le seuil de sa Miséricorde, et par la lumière de sa Connaissance, il fait que tout être soit voyant, entendant, parlant pour l'éternité."

[25] Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophique islamique*, p. 142: "L'événement ne signifia nullement la fin de l'ismaélisme réformé d'Alamut; celui-ci ne fit que rentrer dans la clandestinité en prenant le manteau (la *khirqa*) du soufisme. Son action sur le soufisme, et en général sur la spiritualité iranienne, présuppose des affinités foncières qui font envisager sous un jour nouveau le problème même des origines et du sens du soufisme."

[26] Wladimir Ivanow, "Tombs of some Persian Ismaili Imams", *JBBRAS*, vol. 14 (1938): 49; Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964): 139; Wilferd Madelung, "Isma'iliyya", *EI*, vol. 4 (1978): 210: according to Madelung, Imams until the 19th century belonged to the sufi order Ni'mat Allahi.

[27] N. Pourjavady and P.L. Wilson. "Isma'ilis and Ni'matullahis", *Studia Islamica*, vol. 41 (1975): 114.

[28] For this section see chapter III of my thesis: "L'Imamologie dans la doctrine ismaélienne nizarienne".

The term *avatara* can be defined as "a down-coming, a descent, an Epiphany of the Divine in human form." The *avatara* comprises many Imams living during a cycle. The last *avatara* extended from Imam Seth till the last Imam of the cycle. Usually the *avatara* is known by the most well-known Imam: `Ali represents the last *avatara*, Naklanki.

The word "Ginan" is derived from a Sanskrit word "*jñana*" which is defined as "contemplative or meditative knowledge".[29] In the Ginans, the Pirs revealed the *tafsir* (exegesis) of the Qur`an. The Ginans adopted the basic principles of Islam, in their essence. By converting Hindus to Islam, the Pirs explained that the recognition of the Prophet Muhammad and his progenitors led to the right path (*Satpanth*). The Ginans became therefore the guide of human conduct and encompassed every facet of human life. They prescribed the means by which mystical unity with God could be realised on earth.

In the IX/XVth century, Pir Imam Shah composed the longest version of the *Dasa avatara*,[30] in which the theme of creation was developed. In the beginning, there was Narayana. After a period of inactivity, from the Light of Narayana was created the *Panj tan-i Pak* composed of the Light of Narayana ('Ali), Brahma (Muhammad), Fatima, Hasan and Husayn. After the manifestation of the *Panj tan-i Pak*, there was another period of inactivity, and then from the Light of Brahma, all of the Universe appeared. These five Islamic figures, who are fundamental in Shi'ism, were thus explained and incorporated by the Pirs in their teachings.

According to this mythology, in the beginning of the first *yuga* (*krita*) or cycle of creation, Brahma gave birth to a son named Samkho who stole the four Vedas. Brahma sought the help of Narayana to retrieve the Vedas. Narayana appeared in his first shape as *Machh avatara* in order to fight Samkho. Samkho asked Narayana to permit him to manifest himself during the period of the nine other *avataras* to oppose him. This request was accepted in order to bring back the Vedas to Brahma. Narayana thus manifested himself during four *yugas* (*krita*,

treta, dvapara, kali). At the end of time, it is said that Nayarana will fight Samkho and defeat him. This mythical story is very similar to that formulated by a Yemenite Isma'ili, Idris 'Imad al-din (d. 872/1468), in his treatise *Zahr al-ma'ani*, which refers to "the implacable adversaries who appear from cycle to cycle until the form of Iblis is extinguished."[31]

Conclusion

Even though Isma'ili theosophy is multi-faceted, there are basic elements of the faith that reappear in every period of its history. The essence (*batin*) of Isma'ilism remains unchanged but the external aspect (*zahir*) changes. The Nizari Isma'ilis believe that the first man who existed on earth was an Imam and the last will also be an Imam, the Imam of the Resurrection. These two are in essence the same, the archetype of the Spirit that pervades the whole of creation. As Imam 'Ali is reported to have stated in the Sermon of the Great Declaration (*Khutbat al-bayan*): "I am the First and the Last." All Imams are thus understood in Isma'ili doctrine to be of one and the same essence transmitting the *Sophia Perennis* (Eternal Wisdom) to the seekers of enlightenment from generation to generation until the end of time.

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[29] Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Isma'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, (New York: Caravan Book, 1978): 7.

[30] Sayyid Imam-Shah, *Dasa Avatara*, translated by Gulshan Khakee in "The Das Avatara of Satpanthi Ismailis and Imam-Shahis of Indo-Pakistan", (PhD. Thesis, Harvard University, 1972).

[31] Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1983): 41.