

Secrets of the Assassins

Peter Lamborn Wilson

“Fascinating material on the Ismaili sect and on Hassan i Sabbah... the only spiritual leader who has anything significant to say in the Space Age.”

— William S. Burroughs, in a review of Peter Lamborn-Wilson’s **Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy**.

After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the new Islamic community was ruled in succession by four of his close Companions, chosen by the people and called the Rightfully-guided Caliphs. The last of these was Ali ibn Abu Talib; the Prophet’s son-in-law.

Ali had his own ardent followers among the faithful, who came to be called Shi’a or “adherents”. They believed that Ali should have succeeded Mohammad by right, and that after him his sons (the Prophet’s grandsons) Hasan and Husayn should have ruled; and after them, their sons, and so on in quasi-monarchical succession.

In fact except for Ali none of them ever ruled all Islamdom. Instead they became a line of pretenders, and in effect heads of a branch of Islam called Shiism. In opposition to the orthodox (Sunni) Caliphs in Baghdad these descendants of the Prophet came to be known as the Imams.

To the Shiites an Imam is far more, far higher in rank than a Caliph. Ali ruled by right because of his spiritual greatness, which the Prophet recognized by appointing him his successor (in fact Ali is also revered by the sufis as “founder” and prototype of the Moslem saint). Shiites differ from orthodox or Sunni Moslems in believing that this spiritual pre-eminence was transferred to Ali’s descendants through Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter.

The sixth Shiite Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, had two sons. The elder, Ismail, was chosen as successor. But he died before his father. Jafar then declared his own younger son Musa the new successor instead.

But Ismail had already given birth to a son — Mohammad ibn Ismail — and proclaimed him the next Imam. Ismail’s followers split with Jafar over this question and followed Ismail’s son instead of Musa. Thus they came to be known as Ismailis.

Musa’s descendants ruled “orthodox” Shiism. A few generations later, the Twelfth Imam of this line vanished without trace from the material world. He still lives on the spiritual plane, whence he will return at the end of this cycle of time. He is the “Hidden Imam”, the Mahdi foretold by the Prophet. “Twelver” Shiism is the religion of Iran today.

The Ismaili Imams languished in concealment, heads of an underground movement which attracted the extreme mystics and revolutionaries of Shiism. Eventually they emerged as a powerful force at the head of an army, conquered Egypt and established the Fatimid dynasty, the so-called anti-Caliphate of Cairo.

The early Fatimids ruled in an enlightened manner, and Cairo became the most cultured and open city of Islam. They never succeeded in converting the rest of the Islamic world however; in fact, even most Egyptians failed to embrace Ismailism. The highly evolved mysticism of the sect was at once its special attraction and its major limitation.

In 1074 a brilliant young Persian convert arrived in Cairo to be inducted into the higher initiatic (and political) ranks of Ismailism. But Hasan-i Sabbah soon found himself embroiled in a struggle for power. The Caliph Mustansir had appointed his eldest son Nizar as successor. But a younger son, al-Mustali, was intriguing to supplant him. When Mustansir died, Nizar — the rightful heir — was imprisoned and murdered.

Hasan-i Sabbah had intrigued for Nizar, and now was forced to flee Egypt. He eventually turned up in Persia again, head of a revolutionary Nizari movement. By some clever ruse he acquired command of the impregnable mountain fortress of Alamut (“Eagle’s Nest”) near Qazvin in Northwest Iran.

Hasan-i Sabbah’s daring vision, ruthless and romantic, has become a legend in the Islamic world. With his followers he set out to recreate in miniature the glories of Cairo in this barren multichrome forsaken rock landscape.

In order to protect Alamut and its tiny but intense civilization Hasan-i Sabbah relied on assassination. Any ruler or politician or religious leader who threatened the Nizaris went in danger of a fanatic’s dagger. In fact Hasan’s first major publicity coup was the murder of the Prime Minister of Persia, perhaps the most powerful man of the era (and according to legend, a childhood friend of Sabbah’s).

Once their fearful reputation was secure, the mere threat of being on the eso-terrorist hit-list was enough to deter most people from acting against the hated heretics. One theologian was first threatened with a knife (left by his pillow as he slept), then bribed with gold. When his disciples asked him why he had ceased to fulminate against Alamut from his pulpit he answered that Ismaili arguments were “both pointed and weighty”.

Since the great library of Alamut was eventually burned, little is known of Hasan-i Sabbah’s actual teachings. Apparently he formed an initiatic hierarchy of seven circles based on that in Cairo, with assassins at the bottom and learned mystics at the top.

Ismaili mysticism is based on the concept of ta’wil, or “spiritual hermeneutics”. Ta’wil actually means “to take something back to its source or deepest significance”. The Shiites had always practised this exegesis on the Koran itself, reading certain verses as veiled or symbolic allusions to Ali and the Imams. The Ismailis extended ta’wil much more radically. The whole structure of Islam appeared to them as a shell; to get at its kernel of meaning the shell must be penetrated by ta’wil, and in fact broken open completely.

The structure of Islam, even more than most religions, is based on a dichotomy between exoteric and esoteric. On the one hand there is Divine Law (shariah), on the other hand the Spiritual Path (tariqah). Usually the Path is seen as the esoteric kernel and the Law as the exoteric shell. But to Ismailism the two together present a totality which in its turn becomes a symbol to be penetrated by ta’wil. Behind Law and Path is ultimate Reality (haqiqah), God Himself in theological terms — Absolute Being in metaphysical terms.

This Reality is not something outside human scope; in fact if it exists at all then it must manifest itself completely on the level of consciousness. Thus it must appear as a man, the Perfect Man — the Imam. Knowledge of the Imam is direct perception of Reality itself. For Shiites the Family of Ali is the same as perfected consciousness.

Once the Imam is realized, the levels of Law and Path fall away naturally like split husks. Knowledge of inner meaning frees one from adherence to outer form: the ultimate victory of the esoteric over the exoteric.

The “abrogation of the Law” however was considered open heresy in Islam. For their own protection Shiites had always been allowed to practise taqqiya, “permissible dissimulation” or Concealment, and pretend to be orthodox to escape death or punishment. Ismailis could pretend to be Shiite or Sunni, whichever was most advantageous.

For the Nizaris, to practise Concealment was to practise the Law; in other words, pretending to be orthodox meant obeying the Islamic Law. Hasan-i Sabbah imposed Concealment on all but the highest ranks at Alamut, because in the absence of the Imam the veil of illusion must naturally conceal the esoteric truth of perfect freedom.

In fact, who was the Imam? As far as history was concerned, Nizar and his son died imprisoned and intestate. Hasan-i Sabbah was therefore a legitimist supporting a non-existent pretender! He never claimed to be the Imam himself, nor did his successor as “old Man of the Mountain,” nor did his successor. And yet they all preached “in the name of Nizar”. Presumably the answer to this mystery was revealed in the seventh circle of initiation.

Now the third Old Man of the Mountain had a son named Hasan, a youth who was learned, generous, eloquent and loveable. Moreover he was a mystic, an enthusiast for the deepest teachings of Ismailism and sufism. Even during his father’s lifetime some Alamutis began to whisper that young Hasan was the true Imam; the father heard of these rumors and denied them. I am not the Imam, he said, so how could my son be the Imam?

In 1162 the father died and Hasan (call him Hasan II to distinguish him from Hasan-i Sabbah) became ruler of Alamut. Two years later, on the seventeenth of Ramazan (August 8) in 1164, he proclaimed the Qiyamat, or Great Resurrection. In the middle of the month of Fasting, Alamut broke its fast forever and proclaimed perpetual holiday.

The resurrection of the dead in their bodies at the “end of time” is one of the most difficult doctrines of Islam (and Christianity as well). Taken literally it is absurd. Taken symbolically however it encapsulates the experience of the mystic. He “dies before death” when he comes to realize the separative and alienated aspects of the self, the ego-as-programmed-illusion. He is “reborn” in consciousness but he is reborn in the body, as an individual, the “soul-at-peace”.

When Hasan II proclaimed the Great Resurrection which marks the end of Time, he lifted the veil of concealment and abrogated the religious Law. He offered communal as well as individual participation in the mystic’s great adventure, perfect freedom.

He acted on behalf of the Imam, and did not claim to be the Imam himself. (In fact he took the title of Caliph or “representative”.) But if the family of Ali is the same as perfect consciousness, then perfect consciousness is the same as the family of Ali. The realized mystic “becomes” a descendant of Ali (like the Persian Salman whom Ali adopted by covering him with his cloak, and who is much revered by sufis, Shiites and Ismailis alike).

In Reality, in haqiqah, Hasan II was the Imam because in the Ismaili phrase, he had realised the “Imam-of-his-own-being.” The Qiyamat was thus an invitation to each of his followers to do the same, or at least to participate in the pleasures of paradise on earth.

The legend of the paradisaal garden at Alamut where the houris, cupbearers, wine and hashish of paradise were enjoyed by the Assassins in the flesh, may stem from a folk memory of the Qiyamat. Or it may even be literally true. For the realized consciousness this world is no other than paradise, and its bliss and pleasures are all permitted. The Koran describes paradise as a garden. How logical then for wealthy Alamut to become outwardly the reflection of the spiritual state of the Qiyamat.

In 1166 Hasan II was murdered after only four years of rule. His enemies were perhaps in league with conservative elements at Alamut who resented the Qiyamat, the dissolving of the old secret hierarchy (and thus their own power as hierarchs) and who feared to live thus openly as heretics. Hasan II's son however succeeded him and established the Qiyamat firmly as Nizari doctrine.

If the Qiyamat were accepted in its full implications however it would probably have brought about the dissolution and end of Nizari Ismailism as a separate sect. Hasan II as Qa'im or "Lord of the Resurrection" had released the Alamutis from all struggle and all sense of legitimist urgency. Pure esotericism, after all, cannot be bound by any form.

Hasan II's son, therefore, compromised. Apparently he decided to "reveal" that his father was in fact and in blood a direct descendant of Nizar. The story runs that after Hasan-i Sabbah had established Alamut, a mysterious emissary delivered to him the infant grandson of Imam Nizar. The child was raised secretly at Alamut. He grew up, had a son, died. The son had a son. This baby was born on the same day as the son of the Old Man of the Mountain, the outward ruler. The infants were surreptitiously exchanged in their cradles. Not even the Old Man knew of the ruse. Another version has the hidden Imam committing adultery with the Old Man's wife, and producing as love-child the infant Hasan II.

The Ismailis accepted these claims. Even after the fall of Alamut to the Mongol hordes the line survived and the present leader of the sect, the Aga Khan, is known as the forty-ninth in descent from Ali (and pretender to the throne of Egypt!). The emphasis on Alid legitimacy has preserved the sect as a sect. Whether it is literally true or not, however, matters little to an understanding of the Qiyamat.

With the proclamation of the Resurrection, the teachings of Ismailism were forever expanded beyond the borders imposed on them by any historical event. The Qiyamat remains as a state of consciousness which anyone can adhere to or enter, a garden without walls, a sect without a church, a lost moment of Islamic history that refuses to be forgotten, standing outside time, a reproach or challenge to all legalism and moralism, to all the cruelty of the exoteric. An invitation to paradise.

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