



“They Killed Him Not” *The Crucifixion in Shi’a Isma’ili Islam*

***“They killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them.”
- Holy Qur’an 4:157***

***“Think not of those who are slain in God’s way as dead. Nay, they live,
finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord.”
- Holy Qur’an 3:169***

**Khalil Andani
2011**

“They Killed Him Not”: The Crucifixion in Shi‘a Isma‘ili Islam

By: Khalil Andani

wa-mā qatalūhu wa-mā salabūhu wa-lākin shubbiha lahum

“They killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them.”

(Holy Qur’an 4:157)

As observed by millions of Christians around the world, Good Friday marks the day when Jesus Christ was crucified. For Christians, this event is the climax of sacred history: the death of Christ on the Cross is believed to have redeemed and cleansed the sin of humanity. Indeed, the efficacy of the entire Christian doctrine – adhered to by the largest number of people in the world – depends upon the event of the Crucifixion. Interestingly, the faith of Islam, the second largest religion in the world after Christianity, seems to offer a completely different understanding of this event – it appears to deny the Crucifixion altogether. The only verse of the Holy Qur’an which speaks of the Crucifixion is 4:157 quoted above.

Over the history of Islam, most Muslim commentators have come to deny that Jesus was ever crucified at all, with many holding that a substitute was crucified in his place¹. But does this view accurately reflect the Qur’anic position? It is necessary to examine the full context of the above verse – a verse which is too often referred to only in isolation. The group of verses which immediately precede the verse in question discuss the misdeeds of the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*):

In that they broke their covenant; that they rejected the signs of God. That they slew the Messengers in defiance of right; that they said, "Our hearts are the wrappings (which preserve God's Word; We need no more)";- Nay, God hath set the seal on their hearts for their blasphemy, and little is it they believe;- That they rejected Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge; That they said (in boast), "We killed the Messiah, Jesus the Son of Mary, the Messenger of God.";- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not:- Nay, God raised him up unto Himself; and God is Exalted in Power, Wise.

- Holy Quran 4:155-157

The Qur’anic denial of the crucifixion must be understood in its proper context: the Qur’an is only denying that the People of the Book crucified Jesus – and this appears to be in response to their boasting to have done so. A neutral reader may easily conclude that the Qur’an intends to say that the death of Jesus was ultimately due to God’s will and not the desires of those who may have actually killed him. One then wonders: how did the view that Jesus was not crucified take root in the Islamic world?

Interestingly, the earliest textual evidence stating that Muslims deny the historical event of the crucifixion is not actually Muslim at all - it comes from the writings of the Christian Church Father, St. John of Damascus.² He made the statement to his Christian flock in the eight century, asserting that the Qur’an denied Christ’s crucifixion for his own polemical purposes of refuting the early success of Islam. While it is true that most

¹ See Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 1-5.

² Ibid., 7.

Qur'anic commentators came to deny the crucifixion of Jesus, this view is not actually rooted in the Qur'anic verses but comes from *tafsir* which rely on other material from extra-biblical Judeo-Christian sources³. But the denial of the historical crucifixion was only one view among others on the subject to emerge from the Islamic world. There have been alternate interpretations of the same Qur'anic verses which collectively offer a range of perspectives on the crucifixion – from total denial to actually asserting that the crucifixion did take place historically. Todd Lawson explains that:

John of Damascus's interpretation of the Qur'anic account is, in fact, unjustifiable. The Qur'an itself only asserts that the Jews did not crucify Jesus. This is obviously different from saying that Jesus was not crucified. The point is that both John of Damascus and many Qur'an exegetes (Arabic *mufasssirrūn*), though not the Qur'an, deny the crucifixion. The Qur'anic exegesis of verse 4:157 is by no means uniform; the interpretations range from an outright denial of the crucifixion of Jesus to a simple affirmation of the historicity of the event.⁴

The false presumption that the Qur'an flatly denies the crucifixion of Christ has served as a great obstacle and roadblock in Christian-Muslim dialogue. If all Muslims and the Qur'an unanimously denied the crucifixion then this would indicate a point of great divergence between Christianity and Islam. For this reason, many Christians and Westerners easily dismiss the Qur'an as 'fiction' because they believe it denies a clear historical event. After all, how could a religious text be so misinformed about a fact of history? But, if the Qur'an does not actually deny the Crucifixion, then this changes the mode of interfaith dialogue completely.

One of the schools of Islamic thought and philosophy which actually affirmed the historicity of the Crucifixion on a Qur'anic basis and, in fact, glorified it, is the tradition of Shi'a Isma'ili Islam. Isma'ili Islam, a branch of Shi'a Islam, recognizes the spiritual and religious authority of a living *Imam* in every age who is directly descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and his wife Bibi Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. The present *Imam* of Shi'a Isma'ili Islam is His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV who is the 49th hereditary *Imam*. Under the leadership of their *Imams*, the Isma'ili Muslims take an esoteric and intellectual approach in understanding the Qur'an and the practice of Islam. Over the centuries, the intellectual thinkers and philosophers of Isma'ili Islam developed an elaborate metaphysics, philosophy, cosmology and esoteric exegesis (*ta'wil*) – including specific material concerning the life, spiritual function, and crucifixion of Jesus.

The Isma'ili Muslim philosophers of the tenth and eleventh century were able to achieve a remarkable reconciliation and rapprochement between the Qur'anic and Christian views of the Crucifixion. While affirming the historicity of the event (in common with Christians), the Isma'ili philosophers were still able to deny Christ's death from a more spiritual perspective which they saw reflected in the Qur'anic verses:

The Isma'ili scholars of the tenth and eleventh centuries saw perfect harmony between this Qur'anic verse and the Gospels, as for example when Jesus instructed his followers to fear not the one who can kill the body but fear the one who can kill both the body and the soul. Thus it is equally possible to state that these Muslim exegetes may also have been 'correct'.⁵

³ Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, 12.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

In fact, some of the Isma'ili philosophers actually emphasized the importance of Christ's death on the Cross from an esoteric perspective and saw in it an immense eschatological meaning. Finally, the Isma'ili thinkers, relying on the method of *ta'wil* (esoteric exegesis), perceived great spiritual truths hidden in the symbolism of the Cross – the same truths which they saw symbolized in the words of the Islamic testimony of faith known as the *Shahada*.

This article explains the Isma'ili Muslim understanding of the Qur'anic verses on the Crucifixion, the meaning of the Crucifixion in Isma'ili eschatology and the esoteric exegesis (*ta'wil*) of the Cross, according to the Isma'ili philosophers. These Isma'ili Muslim perspectives were articulated in the tenth and eleventh century when Isma'ili philosophy underwent a great flowering. But there is reason to believe that such perspectives, due to their pluralistic, ecumenical and esoteric outlook, can play a great role in the modern age towards opening further doors of understanding and recognition between the faiths of Christianity and Islam.

The Isma'ili View of the Crucifixion



***Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead.
Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence
of their Lord.***

(Holy Qur'an 3:169)

All Muslims recognize Jesus as a great Prophet and Messenger of God. Like the Gospels, the Qur'an refers to Jesus as the Messiah or Christ (*al-Masih*) sent to the Children of Israel in the footsteps of Moses and the Hebrew Prophets.⁶ Interestingly, the Qur'an also refers to Jesus as God's Word (*kalimat*) and God's Spirit (*ruh*) breathed into the Virgin Mary.⁷ In Islam in general and in Isma'ili thought in particular, Jesus and his mission are of great importance as he is the precursor and forerunner of Muhammad who was the Seal of the Prophets.

Jesus occupies a pre-eminent position in Isma'ili philosophy in which he is regarded as being one of the 'Possessors of Resolution' (*ulu'l-azam*)⁸ and a Speaking Prophet or

⁶ Qur'an 5:46 – "And in their footsteps, We sent Jesus the Son of Mary, confirming the Law (*al-tawrat*) that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Law that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear God." Compare this with Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew 5:17-18 – "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them".

⁷ Qur'an 4:171 – "Christ Jesus the Son of Mary was a Messenger of God, and His Word (*kalimatu*), which he bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit from Him (*ruhu minhu*)..."

⁸ There are five Prophets in Islam known as the *Ulu'l-'Azam* which means 'the Possessors of Resolution'. This term is used in the Qur'an 46:35 – "Therefore have patience as the *Ulu'l-'Azam* from the Messengers". They are mentioned as a group in two Qur'anic verses: 33:7 – "And remember We took

Proclaimer (*Natiq*) of which there have been only six (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad).⁹ In the entire Cycle of Prophecy, Jesus represents the esoteric or solar aspect of Prophecy known as the *walayah* and his function was to reveal the esoteric content (*batin*) of the Law (*shari'ah*) of Moses, thus fulfilling its ultimate purpose. It is not surprising then to see why many Isma'ili philosophers devoted great attention to the figure of Jesus, his mission and the esoteric meaning of various symbols and events in his life.

In Isma'ili philosophy, each great Prophet or *Natiq* (Speaking Prophet) is the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the Universal Intellect. In various forms of Islamic gnosis and philosophy, including Isma'ili thought, the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kull*) is the first being originated directly by God while the rest of Creation is created through the Universal Intellect. This is evident in many *hadiths* accepted by both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims where the Prophet himself states that "the first thing created by God was the Intellect (*'aql*).” According to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, this Intellect is the primordial Light which was manifest in the Prophet Muhammad and the first Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib:

Two thousand years before creation, Muhammad and 'Ali were one Light (*nur*) before God.¹⁰

In another *hadith*, the Imam describes the Intellect (*'aql*) as the first spiritual entity to be created from God's Light:

God – may He be glorified and exalted – created Intellect (*'Aql*) first among the spiritual entities. He drew it from the right side of His throne, making it proceed from his own Light.¹¹

In Isma'ili thought, God Himself transcends all attributes, descriptions, and names including the categories of being and non-being, unity and multiplicity, and even existence and non-existence. In the Isma'ili metaphysical worldview, all of the attributes and qualities of greatness, majesty and perfection, particularly those of an anthropomorphic nature, pertain to the Universal Intellect and not to God Himself who utterly transcends such qualities. The Universal Intellect encompasses all divine attributes and all of existence within itself and is, technically speaking, the 'First Cause' and the 'Necessary Being' (*wajib al-wujud*) of the onto-cosmological hierarchy which gives rise to the physical world. The person of the Speaking Prophet (*Natiq*) and his lineal descendant, the *Imam*, is the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the Universal Intellect¹² – in the manner of a mirror which reflects an object without actually

from the prophets their covenant: As (We did) from thee: from Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary: We took from them a solemn covenant"; 42:13 – "The same *Din* has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah - the which We have revealed to thee - and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in *Din*, and make no divisions therein: to those who worship other things than God, hard is the (way) to which thou summon them. God chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him)."

⁹ For the Isma'ili concept of *Natiq* or Speaking Prophet, see Shafique Virani, *The Days of Creation in the Thought of Nasir-i Khusraw*, published in *Nasir Khusraw: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, Khujand, 2005, Publishing House "Noshir", 74-83, also published online on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website.

¹⁰ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, (SUNY Press, 1994), 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8

¹² This is part of standard Fatimid Isma'ili doctrine. For example, Nasir-i Khusraw writes: "This is because in this world, the Universal Intellect (*'Aql-i Kull*) is the true *Imam* (*Imam-i haqq*).” See *Shis Fasl*, transl. W. Ivanow as "The Six Chapters", (Bombay: The Ismaili Society, 1949). Seyyed Hossein Nasr, speaking about the Prophet Muhammad, writes: "He is *inwardly* identified with the Logos and the Divine Intellect."

constraining or incarnating that object¹³. Henry Corbin has collectively referred to these concepts as “Imamology”, according to which the figure of the Prophet or *Imam* possesses two distinct natures or layers of being – a created human nature and an eternal divine nature.¹⁴ This Imamology becomes relevant in understanding Isma‘ili “Christology” which informs the Isma‘ili Muslim understanding of the Crucifixion.

Several Isma‘ili philosophers of the tenth and eleventh centuries commented on the Crucifixion including the Ikhwan al-Safa, Ja‘far ibn Mansur al-Yaman, Abu Hatim al-Razi, Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani and al-Mu‘ayyad fi’l-Din al-Shirazi. All of them are in agreement in affirming the historicity of the Crucifixion, confirming that it was indeed Jesus himself who was crucified and not a substitute as maintained by many other Qur’anic commentators.

For al-Mu‘ayyad fi’l-Din al-Shirazi denying the historicity of the Crucifixion is to contradict a historical fact established by the testimony of two major religious communities, the Jews and the Christians. Even the prominent Sunni Muslim theologian al-Ghazali eventually came to affirm the Crucifixion, most likely learning this from the Isma‘ili sources.¹⁵ The Ikhwan al-Safa go as far as to narrate the entire story of Jesus’ Crucifixion in their Epistles as follows:

So Jesus went the next day and appeared to the people and summoned them and preached to them until he was seized and taken to the king of the *banu isra’il*. The king ordered his crucifixion, so his *nasut* (physical body) was crucified, and his hands were nailed to the wooden cross and he stayed crucified from morning till evening. And he asked for water but was given vinegar [to drink]. Then he was pierced with a lance and buried in a place near the cross while forty troops guarded the tomb. And all of this occurred in the presence of the disciples. When they saw him they knew that it was he CERTAINLY and that he had [not] commanded them to DIFFER ABOUT IT. Then they gathered three days later in a place. And Jesus did appear to them and they saw that mark which was known by them. The news was

See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1966), 99. Most recently, the Aga Khan IV, the present *Imam* of the Isma‘ili Muslims, formally endorsed the definition of the *Imam* as a *mazhar* at the Ismaili Paris Conference of 1975.

¹³ See Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, (Kegan Paul International, Institute of Ismaili Studies: New York, London), 48. To be precise, the *locus of manifestation* is not merely the body of the *Imam*, but the purified human soul of the *Imam* which is *effaced* before the Divine. Far from being *shirk*, the concept of *mazhariyyah* articulates the most radical and deepest notion of *tawhid*; for the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) is itself nothing and empty before the Divine Names and Attributes which are only *reflected* in the locus while not actually residing in it.

¹⁴ One may object to the notion that the Prophet of Islam possesses both a human nature and a divine nature and oppose this as *shirk*. However, the verses of the Qur’an clearly attribute many of the Names and Attributes of God to the Prophet Muhammad. For example, God is *al-Rahman* and the Prophet is *rahma* (21:107); God is *al-Rahim* and the Prophet is *rahim* (9:128); God is *al-Ra’uf* (Most Compassionate) and the Prophet is *ra’uf* (9:128); God is *al-Nur* (The Light) and the Prophet is *nur* (5:15) and luminous lamp (33:46); God is *al-Shahid* (The Witness) and the Prophet is *shahid* (witness) (33:46); God sends *salawat* (blessings) and the Prophet sends *salawat* (9:103); God is *al-Wali* (The Guardian-Friend) and the Prophet is *wali* (5:55); God is *al-Afw* (The Pardoner) and the Prophet pardons the believers (5:13); God is *al-Hadi* (The Guide) and the Prophet is the guide of the believers (45:25); God is *al-Azim* (The Great) and the Prophet’s is *azim* (68:4); He who gives their allegiance (*bay’a*) to the Prophet has given it to God and the Prophet’s hand is the Hand of God (48:10); He who obeys the Prophet, obeys God (4:80). Thus, Shi‘ite Imamology is based upon this Qur’anic Prophetology. See also Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Reflections on Quranic Prayer*, (Institute of Ismaili Studies: London, 2011), 74.

¹⁵ Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, 78.

spread among the *banu isra'il* that the Messiah was not killed. So the tomb was opened and the *nasut* (physical body) was not found. Thus, the troops DIFFERED AMONG THEMSELVES and much idle chatter ensued, and the story was complicated.¹⁶

The Isma'ilis thus affirm fully that Jesus died in the conventional sense – his physical body was crucified and killed. In fact, the Qur'an confirms in other verses that Jesus did actually die but that his death was ultimately due to the Will of God and not merely the desires of Jesus' enemies:

Behold! God said: "O Jesus! I will cause you to die (*mutawaffeeka*) and raise thee to Myself and purify thee of those who disbelieve; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: Then shall ye all return unto me, and I will judge between you of the matters wherein ye dispute."

- Holy Quran 3:55

And when God will say: "O Jesus, did you say to men, Take me and my mother for two gods besides God?" He will reply: "Glory be to Thee! it was not for me to say what I had no right to say. If I had said it, Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy mind. Surely Thou art the great Knower of the unseen. I said to them naught save as Thou didst command me: Serve God, my Lord and your Lord; and I was a witness of them so long as I was among them, but when Thou didst cause me to die (*tawaffaytanee*) Thou wast the Watcher over them. And Thou art Witness of all things."

- Holy Quran 5:116-117

The Arabic words used above, *mutawaffeeka* and *tawaffaytanee*, translated as God taking Jesus' soul at death, occur throughout the Qur'an to describe the act of God or His Angels taking souls of people when they die.¹⁷ Thus, the Qur'an asserts that Jesus *did* actually die but attributes his death to God's Will and not the agency of Jesus' enemies. In this sense, Todd Lawson remarks:

To return to our theoretical reader, they could hold a view that, whoever the THEY might be, it is clear that it is God himself who determines such important matters as the fate of his Son. Thus, even if to all outward appearances THEY did actually KILL AND CRUCIFY Jesus, it was only through the mysterious working out of the will of God, what Muslims might refer to as divine permission (*idhri*). THEY ultimately had no agency in the matter: 'it only appeared so to them'.¹⁸

Immediately, it may seem that affirming Jesus' Crucifixion runs contradictory to the Qur'an's denial: "*They killed him not, nor crucified him, but it was made to appear to them (4:157)*". One of the keys to understanding the Isma'ili interpretation of this verse is the concept of *nasut* (human nature) and *lahut* (divine nature). For the esoteric schools of Islam such as Sufism and Isma'ilism, the person of the Prophet or the *Imam* possesses two distinct natures or layers of being. The first is his human nature called the *nasut* and the second is his celestial or divine nature called the *lahut*. The divine nature (*lahut*) is the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kull*) which is also called the Light of Muhammad (*nur Muhammad*) or the Light of Imamat (*nur al-imamah*) and it is this Light (*nur*) which is manifested in the subtle soul of the Prophet or *Imam*. The *nasut* (human nature) of the

¹⁶ Ibid. 86

¹⁷ See Qur'an 4:97, 47:27, 6:61, 22:5, 2:234 for these occurrences.

¹⁸ Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, 8.

Prophet or Imam is his physical body which is merely the 'cover' for the subtle soul and not the essence of his personality¹⁹. It is in this sense that the Ikhwan al-Safa used the word *nasut* in the earlier quoted passage. With regard to these two natures being present in the Prophet Muhammad, the contemporary Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes:

The Prophet possessed eminently and in perfection both human (*nasut*) and spiritual (*lahut*) natures. Yet, there was never an incarnation of the *lahut* in the *nasut*, a perspective which Islam does not accept. The Prophet possessed these two natures and for this very reason his example makes possible the presence of a spiritual way in Islam.²⁰

The *nasut* and the *lahut* remain as two distinct natures or layers of being; they do not intermix or mingle but exist in a union without confusion. Jesus, being one of the great Prophets of Islam, also possesses the same two natures. The Isma'ilis were able to both confirm and deny Christ's crucifixion in accordance with this duality: for it is only the physical body or the *nasut* of Jesus which was crucified on the Cross; the divine reality or *lahut* of Christ was unaffected and can never be subject to death. Christ's subtle soul and the Light (*nur*) manifested through it could never be crucified. The Isma'ili philosopher al-Mu'ayyad, in order to support the position that Christ could never die *in reality*, cites the following Qur'anic verse:

Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord.

- Holy Qur'an 3:169

In a similar vein, an anonymous Isma'ili text states:

The immaterial soul and the Sublime Temple of Light cannot be killed or crucified, nor even die. That which dies is only the 'superficial covers' of the body made of flesh and blood, which are nothing but an outward representation (*mithal*) of the immaterial Temple of Light.²¹

Thus, Jesus with respect to his pure soul and his essential reality – the Light (*nur*) of God – did not die in reality (*'ala haqiqah*). The immutability and ineffability of the Light of God (*nur Allah*), manifested in the Prophets and the Imams, is conveyed in the following Qur'anic verse:

They desire to put out the Light of Allah (*nur Allah*) with their mouths, and Allah will not consent save to perfect His Light (*nur*), though the unbelievers are averse.

- Holy Quran 9:32

The idea of Christ possessing two natures is not at all foreign to Christianity. While the schools of Islamic thought and mysticism speak of the *nasut* and the *lahut*, traditional

¹⁹ For more on the concept of *lahut* and *nasut* in Isma'ilism, see Sami N. Makarem, "The Philosophical Concept of the Imam in Ismailism", *Studia Islamica*, Volume 27 (1967). See also Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Times and Ismaili Gnosis*, Tr. Ralph Manheim and James Morris, (London: Kegan Paul International in association with Islamic Publications Ltd., 1983)

²⁰ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, 90.

²¹ Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, 89.

Christology sees Christ as both fully human and fully divine²². Theological differences notwithstanding, it is not difficult to see that the *nasut* and *lahut* of Islamic thought correspond to the human nature and divine nature of traditional Christology. This is made clear in the Bible, particularly in the Gospel of John which clearly distinguishes between the historical and eternal natures of Christ. For example, when Christ said to the people, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), the words “I am” pertain to Christ’s eternal or divine nature, which is what Muslims call his *lahut* and what Christians call the *Logos* or Word. The Qur’an speaks of the *lahut* or divine nature of Christ when it refers to him as the Word (*kalimah*) and Spirit (*ruh*) of God²³. All Christians and Muslims would readily agree that Christ could not be killed or crucified insofar as his true reality was God’s Word and Spirit. In this sense, some contemporary Muslim thinkers like Mahmoud Ayoub are in agreement with the overall Isma’ili perspective:

The Qur’an is not here speaking about a man, righteous and wronged though he may be, but about the Word of God who was sent to earth and returned to God. Thus the denial of killing of Jesus is a denial of the power of men to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is for ever victorious.²⁴

The Isma’ili philosopher Abu Hatim al-Razi employs a most interesting hermeneutical approach to the Qur’anic verses of the Crucifixion by comparing them to passages from Jesus’ own words as recorded in the Gospels. Razi, reflecting the position of his Isma’ili colleagues, highlights the duality of Christ’s soul and the body. To establish this, he refers the following words of Christ:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

- Gospel of Matthew 10:28

Reflecting the ecumenical and pluralistic perspective of Isma’ili Islam in general, Razi quotes the Bible to demonstrate that both the Qur’an and the Bible are in agreement concerning the death and crucifixion of Jesus. This approach contrasts with that of other Qur’an commentators who assert that the text of the Gospels was subject to corruption (*tahrif*) – a view which tends to damage Muslim-Christian relations at the outset. For Razi, the difference between the Qur’an and the Bible lies in their interpretation (*ta’wil*) and not the essential message of each text. Razi also refers to the Qur’anic verses 2:154 and 3:169-70 which teach that the martyrs are not really dead but are alive with God and concludes that Jesus was killed only in body but not in soul. The following quote from Razi’s *A’lam al-Nubuwwah* shows his reconciliation of the Qur’anic and Biblical passages:

²² The Christian doctrine of the hypostatic union of two natures was set forth in the Confession of Chalcedon.

²³ One may oppose the idea that the Qur’an affirms the divine nature of Christ by referring to other verses where the divinity of the Son of Mary is outright rejected such as Qur’an 5:72 - “They are unbelievers (*kafirun*) who say, ‘God is the Messiah, the Son of Mary.’” However, according to the esoteric exegesis of this verse provided by Ibn al-Arabi, one of the greatest Sufi masters in Islamic history, the words ‘Son of Mary’ (*ibn Maryam*) refer specifically to the human nature (*nasut*) of Jesus and not his divine nature. Thus, the Qur’an is condemning only those who equated or confused Christ’s human nature (*nasut*) with his divine nature (*lahut*).

²⁴ Mahmoud Ayoub, *The death of Jesus: Reality or Delusion*, published in *Muslim World* (1980), 70: 91–121.

An example of this is in the Evangel (*al-Injil*) is [to be found] in the Gospel of John (*Bushra Yuhana*): 'The Messiah died in body (*bi-al-jasad*), whereas he is alive in the spirit (*bi-al-ruh*).' So they thought that he who died in the body was delivered from sin. And in the Gospel of Luke (*Bushra Luqa*) [it is said]: 'I say to you, oh my dear friends (*awliya'i*), do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot do more than that'... And in the Gospel of Matthew (*Bushra Matta*) [it is said]: 'Do not fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul, and do fear the one who can [both] destroy the soul and cast the body into the fire [of hell]'... these passages from the Gospels are consistent with the Qur'an in terms of their actual meaning, since both the scriptures attest that Jesus could not be killed in the full sense, that is, in both body and soul.²⁵

The Qur'an, after stating that "they killed him not, nor crucified him", goes on to say that "but so it was made to appear to them" (*wa-lakin shubbiha lahum*). For Razi, the key to resolving the entire issue lies in the proper understanding of this phrase. What 'appeared' to be actually crucified was only Jesus' body - his human nature (*nasut*) – but his enemies could not crucify his soul. Thus, Razi achieved a remarkable reconciliation between both the Qur'anic and Biblical descriptions of Jesus' Crucifixion.

The Isma'ili position on the Crucifixion can be summarized as follows:

- Historically, Jesus was crucified and killed; there was no 'substitute'.
- That which 'appeared to them' (*shubbiha lahum*) as being crucified was precisely the body or human nature (*nasut*) of Jesus.
- Christ's soul, as the manifestation of his divine nature (*lahut*), could not be killed and this is what the Qur'an speaks of when it says "they killed him not, nor did they crucify him".
- The Bible and the Qur'an are thus in agreement over the Crucifixion.

This understanding of the Crucifixion goes a long way to bridge the Christian and Qur'anic positions. If the Qur'an does not actually deny the historical crucifixion of Jesus, then Muslims can join Christians in recognizing the historical event, although they may not attribute to it the same theological significance. At the same time, the Christians can agree with the Qur'an and Muslims on the fact that Jesus did not die in reality and that Christ's divine nature, as the Word of God, is not subject to death. But for both Christians and Muslims, the Crucifixion can be appreciated as the unfolding of God's Will in human history; that despite its outward appearance, the Crucifixion was actually a victory for both Jesus and God. This is especially true for the Isma'ili philosophers, for whom the Crucifixion does hold a special esoteric importance and this will be explored in the following section.

²⁵ Abu Hatim al-Razi, *A'lam al-Nubuwwah*, quoted in Shin Nomoto, *Early Isma'ili Thought on Prophecy According to the Kitab al-Islah by Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. ca. 322/934-5)*, 2006, PhD thesis, McGill University, p. 252-3.

The Esoteric Significance of the Crucifixion



Jesus, on whom be peace, informed his community that the Lord of Resurrection, of whom he was the harbinger, will unveil the realities hidden in the forms of the religious laws, the people will know them and be unable to deny them. This would be like a whole population seeing someone crucified.

(Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani)

Contrasting the idea that Jesus was truly killed and crucified, the Qur'an simply states that God "raised up" or "exalted" him to Himself:

Nay, God raised him up (rafa'a-hu) unto Himself; and God is Exalted in Power, Wise.

- Holy Qur'an 4:158

Behold! God said: "O Jesus! I will cause you to die and raise thee (raafi) to Myself and purify thee of those who disbelieve."

- Holy Quran 3:55

There was a tendency among some Qur'anic commentators to read "raising up" to mean that God literally took Jesus' physical body to Heaven and that He will return him to earth before the Day of Judgment. However, there are no other Qur'anic verses using the same Arabic word *rafa'a* which can support such a reading. God does not reside in a physically 'high place' and thus there is no question of an object being literally 'raised up' to Him. The word *rafa'a* is never used in the sense of heavenly ascent or *miraj*. On the contrary, it is used in the sense of God honouring and exalting His Messengers or other objects in greatness and spiritual status. For example, the Qur'an uses the same word as follows:

Those apostles We endowed with gifts some above others: to one of them God spoke; others He raised to degrees (wa- rafa'a ba' zahum darajaat).

- Holy Qur'an 2:253

It may be asked then – in what way did God actually exalt Jesus in spite of the fact that he was crucified and killed by his enemies? The irony of it all is that the net effect of Christ's Crucifixion turned out to be the exact opposite of what his enemies had intended. In Christ's time, crucifixion was the most harsh and embarrassing form of punishment and execution. The enemies of Jesus intended to degrade and humiliate him by having him hung on a cross and crucified in public. But ironically, Jesus and his message are remembered through history and around the world precisely *because* he was crucified. The harshness and severity of the Crucifixion have touched the hearts and

minds of people of all places and times. Despite the fact that his enemies tried to silence his message and eliminate his charismatic personality by crucifying him, Jesus and his message continue to radiate through human history. And it is in this sense that God exalted and honoured His Messiah despite the attempts of his enemies to subvert him.

For the Isma'ili philosophers, the Crucifixion of Christ as a public event witnessed by a multitude holds a great symbolic and eschatological significance. As previously noted, Isma'ili philosophy holds that God has sent six great Messengers, called *Natiqs*, to the world since the time of Adam. Each *Natiq* inaugurated a great 'Cycle of Religion' which lasted about one thousand years in which the Scripture and the religious law (*shari'ah*) consisting of the exoteric (*zahir*) rituals and commandments prescribed by the *Natiq* had authority over the people²⁶. The coming of a new *Natiq* ended one cycle and began a new one, abrogating the religious law of the previous *Natiq*. For example, the religious law prescribed by Noah was known as the Noachide laws, the law delivered by Moses was called the *Torah* or the Mosaic Law, and the law revealed by Muhammad is what Muslims refer to as *Shari'ah* in the formal sense.

All of the religious laws contain hidden, esoteric (*batin*) meanings pertaining to the eternal truths or realities (*haqa'iq*) of spirituality which are common to all faiths and all human beings. The processing of disclosing the esoteric meaning of the religious law and unveiling the spiritual truths from its symbols and parables is called *ta'wil*. Each of the six *Natiqs* was accompanied by a dignitary called the *Asas* who was responsible for the *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation) of the religious law. The *Asas* accompanying the first six *Natiqs* were Seth, Shem, Ishmael, Aaron, Simon Peter, and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. The *Asas* succeeded the *Natiq* and was himself succeeded by a series of Imams who continued both the functions of *ta'wil* and the interpretation of the religious law until the coming of the next *Natiq*.

After the six Cycles of the six *Natiqs*, the sixth being the Prophet Muhammad, still to come is the Seventh *Natiq* who is called the "Lord of the Resurrection" (*Qa'im al-Qiyamah*). He begins the Seventh Cycle which is the culmination of the previous six. Unlike the first six *Natiqs*, each of whom delivered a religious law, the function of the Lord of Resurrection or *Qa'im* is to reveal the esoteric (*batin*) and spiritual realities (*haqa'iq*) hidden and symbolized by the religious laws. While the first six *Natiqs* were all lawgivers, the Lord of Resurrection is responsible for spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) and his Cycle is called the Cycle of Unveiling (*dawr al-kashf*) or the Cycle of Resurrection (*dawr al-qiyamah*). The first six cycles of the lawgiving *Natiqs* are compared to the first six days of the week while the Seventh Cycle of the Resurrection is likened to the Sabbath Day of rest and retribution. This is the context and background which gives rise to an "Isma'ili Christology" which will now be explained.

For the Isma'ili thinkers, Jesus role and sequence in the Cycle of Prophecy is unique as he came between Moses and Muhammad, the latter being the last Prophet before the coming of the *Qa'im al-Qiyamah*. Christ's function is important because unlike the other *Natiqs*, he did not actually bring a new religious law. The Isma'ili philosophers noted that Christ's message was not a religious law (*shari'ah*) but a spiritual way (*tariqah*) which constituted the inner meaning of the Torah or the Law of Moses. This is also evident in the original name of the Christian faith which was called the Nazarene

²⁶ What follows regarding the Seven Cycles, the *Natiq*, the *Asas* and the Lord of Resurrection is described in Shafique Virani, *The Days of Creation in the Thought of Nasir-i Khusraw*.

‘Way’ (*hodos* in Greek) which was the complement of the Mosaic ‘Law’. Jesus was the ‘Prophet of the esoteric’, unlike Moses or Muhammad whose public preaching was exoteric²⁷. This is why the Qur’an specifically refers to Christ as the ‘Word of God’ and the ‘Spirit of God’ because these terms designate the spirit or inner meanings of the religious laws as explained by Sijistani:

Furthermore, Christ is kindred to the Spirit of God and the Word of God, for it was blown into Mary so he would grow and be born. You should know that all the religious Laws are like bodies for the Word of God, and the Word of God is like the Spirit animating all the religious Laws.²⁸

Jesus as the fifth *Natiq* is understood to be a preview or type of the seventh *Natiq* – the Lord of Resurrection. Jesus provided a partial or potential unveiling (*kashf*) of the spiritual realities (*haqa’iq*) to his disciples – the full disclosure of which will be brought by the *Qa’im al-Qiyamah*. This is perhaps why the Qur’an appears to refer to Christ as the Sign (‘*alam*’) of the Hour of Resurrection – the latter referring to the *Qa’im* himself:

wa innahu la’ailmun li’l-ssa’ati
And verily, he shall be a Sign of the Hour.
- Holy Qur’an 43:61

Sijistani commented on the above Qur’anic verse according to which Jesus is being described as a ‘Sign of the Hour’, the ‘Hour’ referring to the *Qa’im al-Qiyamah*. For Sijistani, Christ was a recapitulation and perfection of Adam, the first *Natiq*, in that he had access to the knowledge (symbolized by the Forbidden Tree) which Adam did not. The Tree that was forbidden to Adam, according to Isma’ili philosophers, signifies the *Qa’im* and the ‘gnosis of Resurrection’ (*ilm al-qiyyamah*). But Christ, being the ‘new Adam’, did have access to this gnosis which he shared with his disciples and this is why Christ serves as a forerunner of the *Qa’im*.

In Christ, the image (*mithal*) of Adam became a visible event (*didar*); for he gave from that Tree from which [Adam] had been debarred. Indeed, while spreading the True Knowledge and Wisdom, which was transmitted among his disciples, Jesus did not alter the Law of Moses except that he changed the Sabbath to Sunday. His constant concern was to give his disciples [the capacity to see] ‘colour’ – that is, the colours of the spiritual [world] up to the moment when he left this world... Yet God has [also] given an account of Christ to the effect that he is the sign of the Final Rising of Liberation, which means that whatever Knowledge and Wisdom Christ revealed to his disciples, that Knowledge belongs [properly] to the Lord of the Final Rising of Liberation (*khudawand-i rastkhiq*).²⁹

Jesus, as the bringer of esoteric gnosis, was not just a great Prophet but he was the harbinger of the *Qa’im al-Qiyamah*. One could even say that Jesus as the Fifth *Natiq* was a ‘*Qa’im* in potentiality’, serving as a preview of the Seventh *Natiq* who will be the

²⁷ See Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, 34 – “Christ and the Christian revelation, on the other hand, represent the esoteric aspect of the Abrahamic tradition, the internal dimension of the primordial religion, which is a spiritual way rather than a law. Christ did not bring a new revealed law or *shari’ah* but a way (*tariqah*) based on the love of God.”

²⁸ Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Discourse 6, transl. Paul Walker, published in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, Volume II, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mehdi Aminrazavi, 114.

²⁹ Ibid., 113-114.

‘*Qa'im* in actuality’. Christ’s function as the harbinger of the *Qa'im*, however, was most evident in his Crucifixion. Sijistani describes this as follows:

Cross is the name for the piece of wood on which a man is crucified so that the whole population may see him, and what is crucified on it is a dead body. Jesus, on whom be peace, informed his community that the Lord of Resurrection, of whom he was the harbinger, will unveil the realities (*haqa'iq*) hidden in the forms of the religious laws (*shara'i*), the people will know them and be unable to deny them. This would be like a whole population seeing someone crucified. They would recognize that person and understand his real form, although previous to this most of them were ignorant of him. It is in this sense that he called his day ‘the day of unveiling’, just as God has said: ‘On the Day when matters will be completely unveiled and they will be called to prostrate’ [Qur’an 68:42]. What is crucified on the wood becomes something unveiled, although previously it was something concealed... The wood Jesus was crucified on was provided for this purpose by a group other than his own and these people were the ones who crucified him on it openly and manifestly. Accordingly the explanation that the *Qa'im* and his deputies (*khulafa*), on whom be peace, will reveal concerns the sacred laws of the messenger-prophets who have come before them.³⁰

For Sijistani, there is an analogy and symbolism between the Crucifixion of Christ and the spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) which will be accomplished by the *Qa'im al-Qiyamah* during the Cycle of Resurrection. The Crucifixion of Jesus was a public event visible to the masses and the multitude of people. For Sijistani, the very publicity and enormity of the Crucifixion was itself a spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) – in that it was the most public manifestation of Jesus and his mission. The fact that Jesus was crucified in public and before a multitude foreshadows the future *Qa'im* who will unveil the esoteric truths of all religions publicly and openly before the multitude of humanity. The Crucifixion of Jesus, the Fifth *Natiq*, symbolizes and alludes to the true unveiling (*kashf al-haqiqi*) which will be accomplished by the *Qa'im al-Qiyamah*, the Seventh *Natiq*:

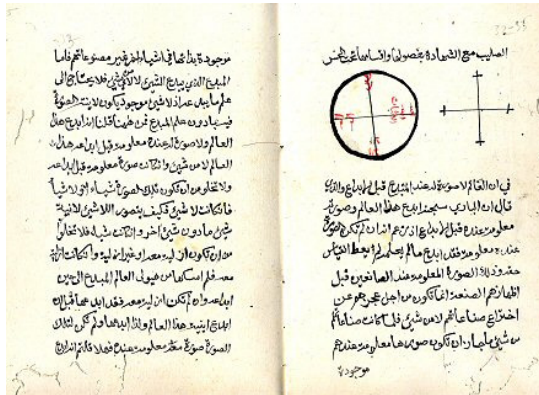
Thus, Jesus' mission and status were made known to the people of his time primarily through the enormity of the crucifixion. Furthermore, his being crucified foreshadowed the *Qa'im*'s mission of unveiling to all humanity the spiritual realities of the truths hidden in earlier religious law.³¹

In this sense, the Isma'ili philosophers not only affirmed the historical crucifixion of Jesus but they revered the event as a demonstration of God’s Will being unfolded in sacred history. The Crucifixion event is not only significant because of Jesus, but also because of the object he was crucified upon – the Cross. For Isma'ili gnosis, the Christian Cross contains a profound esoteric and metaphysical symbolism. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to state that the Cross, for Isma'ili thinkers, symbolizes all the metaphysical and religious truths of Isma'ili philosophy. This symbolism of the Cross will be discussed in the next section.

³⁰ Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Yanabi*, transl. Paul Walker, “The Wellsprings of Wisdom”, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1994), 93-94.

³¹ Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, 84.

The Symbolism of the Cross



The Cross thus becomes a clear sign and evidence of the ranks of the hierarchy. [Christian] veneration of it is something required of them, as, similarly, our veneration of the Shahada is [required of us].

(Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani)

In appearance, the Christian Cross and the Islamic *Shahada* evoke completely different outlooks and meanings. The symbol of the Cross communicates ‘mystery’ – the mystery of the ‘Christ Crucified’ which is the mystery of God’s immanence – the Son of God incarnating on earth and experiencing death on the Cross. The *Shahada*, on the other hand, evokes a sense of certainty – the certainty of the absolute unity of God who neither begets nor is begotten. In their external appearance the Cross and the *Shahada* appear to be communicating entirely different and perhaps conflicting visions of the truth. But in the Isma‘ili worldview, the Cross and the *Shahada* are exoteric (*zahir*) symbols conveying the same esoteric (*batin*) meanings and essential truths (*haqa’iq*). The Isma‘ili philosophers performed esoteric exegesis, known as *ta’wil*, to unveil the esoteric meanings hidden in the *Shahada* and the Cross to demonstrate their unity at the spiritual level. The sources for this Isma‘ili *ta’wil* are the *Kitāb al-Yanabi* of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, the *Sara’ir an-Nutaqa* of Ja’far ibn Mansur al-Yaman and the *Wajh-i Din* of Nasir-i Khusraw.

The *ta’wil* of the Cross and the *Shahada* is very much related to what Isma‘ili thinkers call the “World of Faith” (*‘alam al-din*). The World of Faith consists of two realms – an upper celestial realm and a lower terrestrial realm³² each of which contains a number of ranks (*hudud*)³³. The celestial realm consists of spiritual beings which are universal and eternal. They are originated by God’s Command and are the celestial intermediaries between God and the physical world. The two highest ranks of the celestial realm are the Universal Intellect (*al-‘aql al-kull*) and the Universal Soul (*al-naqf al-kull*).

The terrestrial realm includes God’s Emissaries - the Prophets and the Imams, the teaching hierarchy over which they preside known as the ‘Ranks of Faith’ (*hudud al-din*),

³² The terms ‘celestial’ and ‘terrestrial’ should not simply be equated with the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘physical’. The celestial realm consists of spiritual beings which are universal and supra-individual, such as the Archangels. The terrestrial realm includes the world of individual souls, the world of subtle bodies, and the world of physical bodies. These realms are called ‘terrestrial’ because they are ontologically lower than the celestial realm and receive their form and qualities from the celestial realm. In contrast to the celestial realm, the terrestrial realm consists of beings which possess individuality – such as *jinn*, human souls, etc.

³³ The term *hadd* (plural: *hudud*) is an Arabic word which means ‘limit’, ‘horizon’, or ‘rank’. In the religious and spiritual context, every being in the World of Faith has its own *hadd* in gnosis – its spiritual limit or horizon – and the arrangement of such beings is known as the *hudud*. Every soul in the spiritual world has its own *hadd* based on its purity and rank of knowledge. This system of spiritual ranks was formalized where certain ranks undertook specific functions in the World of Faith.

the initiates (*murids*) who receive and respond to this teaching as well as the very substance of the knowledge and gnosis which is transmitted through the Ranks of Faith. At the beginning of each prophetic cycle, the two highest ranks of the terrestrial hierarchy are the *Natiq* (the lawgiving Prophet) and the *Asas* (the successor of the *Natiq* and bearer of the esoteric meaning of the law). Subsequently, after the departure of the *Natiq* and the *Asas*, the two highest ranks of the religious hierarchy are the Imam and his supreme *Hujjah* – the dignitary who serves as the highest deputy of the Imam and the “Gateway” (*bab*) to the Imam’s knowledge. The entirety of both the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies is called the *Da’wah* (the Summons) because the function of the hierarchies is to summon all beings to *tawhid* – the recognition or realization of the unity of God. Thus, the *Da’wah* is rooted ‘in Heaven’ in the celestial ranks and is manifest ‘on earth’ through the terrestrial ranks. The *Natiq* and *Asas*, and later the Imam and *Hujjah*, each in their respective ages, are the earthly representatives of the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul.

The Isma‘ili thinkers see the structure of both the Cross and the *Shahada* as symbolizing and representing the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies (*hudud*) of the World of Faith. This symbolism is very much related to the occurrence of specific numbers – where each number represents a particular rank (*hadd*) or ranks (*hudud*) of the celestial or terrestrial realms. Sijistani observes that the *Shahada* comprises of two parts (negation and affirmation) which consist of four words – *la, ilaha, illa, and Allah*. Similarly, the Cross consists of two parts which consist of four branches – up, down, left and right. Sijistani’s explanation is as follows:

The *Shahada* is built on denial and affirmation, beginning with denial and ending with affirmation. Similarly, the Cross is two pieces of wood: a piece that stands on its own and another piece whose placement depends entirely on the place of the other. The *Shahada* is four words. Likewise the Cross has four extremities. The end fixed in the ground has the position of the Master of the Interpretation (*ta’wil*). The end opposite this, high in the air, has the position of the Master of Divine Inspiration (*ta’yid*). The two ends in the middle, which are to the left and the right, indicate the Follower and the Speaking-Prophet, of whom one is the master of natural composition (*tarkib*) and the other master of scriptural compilation (*talif*).³⁴

The Four Words of the *Shahada* and Four Branches of the Cross stand for the Four Great Ranks - the two highest celestial ranks which are the Universal Intellect (Master of Divine Inspiration) and the Universal Soul (Master of Natural Composition), and the two highest terrestrial ranks which are the *Natiq* (Master of Scriptural Compilation) and the *Asas* (Master of Interpretation) at the beginning of each prophetic cycle. Subsequently, in the course of the prophetic cycles, the *Imam* and the *Hujjah* succeed the ranks of the *Natiq* and the *Asas*. In every age, the Intellect and the Soul ‘in Heaven’ are represented ‘on earth’ by the *Natiq* and the *Asas* and thereafter by the *Imam* and his *Hujjah*. Sijistani explains that the Imam and the *Hujjah* are the ‘two Branches’ of the terrestrial world, the *Natiq* and *Asas* are the ‘two foundations’ of the terrestrial world, and the Intellect and Soul are the ‘two Roots’ of the celestial world:

Imam and *Hujjah* are called in a word the Two-Branches. The meaning of the Branch (*far’*) is linked with the Root (*asl*). Therefore when you talk about the Branch, it must correspond to the Root, that is to say, *Imam* and *Hujjah* are the Two-Branches corresponding to the Two-

³⁴ Sijistani, *Wellsprings*, 94-95.

Roots. There are Two-Foundations (*asasan*) in the physical world, while the Two-Roots (*aslan*) are in the spiritual world.³⁵

The four words of the *Shahada* are an expression of unity and oneness – the entire *Shahada* being a single statement bearing witness to the unity or oneness (*wahda*) of God. Similarly, the four dimensions of the Cross are also centred and rooted in unity – the central intersection point of the Cross representing the unity of the entire structure. Ja'far ibn Mansur al-Yaman highlights the central root of the Cross as follows:

You will find in the center of the Cross an intersection and this intersection holds the four Ranks (*hudud*) and is its center... This means the root is one, and it unites the four pillars of the universe, and the four, the seven, and the twelve are all connected to this root.³⁶

The metaphysical oneness symbolized by the content of the *Shahada* and the centre of the Cross is the Command (*amr*) of God. This Command (*al-amr*), Word (*kalimat*) or Origination (*al-ibda*) is God's Unity or Oneness (*wahda*) from which emanate all the ranks (*hudud*) of the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies. From the Command, the Universal Intellect is originated. From the Universal Intellect, which is the source of all divine inspiration and all being, emanates the Universal Soul. The Universal Soul transmits the divine inspiration (*ta'yid*) to the *Natiq*, *Asas*, *Imam* and *Hujjah* who then convey it to the rest of the hierarchy. All these ranks are symbolized and encompassed in structure of the Islamic *Shahada* and the Christian Cross.

It is even possible, notwithstanding the difference between Islamic and Trinitarian theology, to outline a correspondence³⁷ between the celestial and terrestrial ranks (*hudud*) of Isma'ili gnosis and the theology of Christianity. For example, the Command (*amr*) or Word (*kalimat*) of Isma'ili metaphysics corresponds to the Father, the First Person of the Christian Trinity. The Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul respectively correspond to the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, respectively the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity³⁸. In fact, the early Church Fathers of Christianity often identified the Divine Intellect of Neoplatonic thought with the Son of God as the Second Person of the Trinity:

The three Neoplatonic hypostases are ordered hierarchically – Intellect emanates from the One, and Soul from Intellect – and so seem not to correspond to the co-equal persons of the

³⁵ Sijstani, *Khams Rasa'il Isma'iliyyah*, p. 154, cited in Shigeru, Kamada, 'The First Being: Intellect ('*aql/khiradh*) as the Link Between God's Command and Creation According to Abu Ya'qub al-Sijstani', *The Memoirs of the Institute of Oriental Culture* (University of Tokyo), 106 (March 1988), 1–33.

³⁶ Jafar ibn Mansur al-Yaman, *Sara'ir wa Asrar an-Nutaqa*, ed. Mustafa Ghalib, (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus), 215-216, transl. Seth 'Abd al-Hakeem Carney, *The Paradise of Enlightenment: A Treatise on Ontology, Exoteric and Esoteric Imamah, and Spiritual Practice in Seven Chapters*, unpublished.

³⁷ The correspondence between the ranks (*hudud*) of Isma'ili Islam and the theology of Christianity outlined below is based on our own analysis and is not found in any classical Isma'ili or Christian text. Nevertheless, we believe that it can serve as the basis of an 'esoteric' interfaith dialogue between Isma'ili Islam and Christianity.

³⁸ For more on the correspondence between the three highest ranks (*hudud*) of Isma'ili metaphysics – the Command (*amr*), Intellect ('*aql*) and Soul (*nafs*) – and the Three Persons of the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), see Khalil Andani, "The Metaphysics of the Common Word: A Dialogue of Eckhartian and Isma'ili Gnosis", *Sacred Web*, Volume 26 & 27, ed. Ali M. Lakhani (www.sacredweb.com).

Christian Trinity. But it was common place among the Church Fathers to identify Intellect with the Son of God (his Wisdom or *logos*).³⁹

The rank of the *Natiq* and the *Imam* – the locus of manifestation of the Universal Intellect in Isma‘ili gnosis, corresponds to the person of Jesus – the incarnation of the Son of God in Christianity. The rank of the *Asas* and *Hujjah* – the manifestation of the Universal Soul, corresponds to the Virgin Mary – who in certain interpretations within Christianity was as a ‘quasi-incarnation’ of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ In fact, the Isma‘ili philosophers identified Jesus and his Virgin Mother respectively as the *Imam* and the *Hujjah* of their time. The parallel between the figure of the *Imam* in Isma‘ili Islam and that of Jesus in Christianity was stressed by the Isma‘ili philosophers. There is also a *hadith* according to which the Prophet Muhammad said to the first *Imam*, Hazrat ‘Ali:

Something in you [Ali] is like Jesus the Son of Mary, and if I were not afraid that certain groups in my Community might say about you what the Christians said about him, I would reveal something about you that would make people collect the dust from under your feet in order to get its blessing.⁴¹

The first *Shahada* of Islam, *la ilaha illa Allah*, is then joined to a second *Shahada* – *Muhammadu’r-Rasuli’llah* (Muhammad is the Messenger of God). This second *Shahada* represents the meeting of the Eternal with the historical – as it was the historical person of Muhammad who revealed the first *Shahada* to his community, after which it became a revealed and revered symbol of Truth for Muslims. Similarly, the historical Jesus was crucified upon the Cross and it is after the historical Crucifixion that the Cross became a holy symbol for the Christian community:

Just as the *Shahada* is only completed by its being associated with Muhammad, may the prayer of God be on him and his family, similarly the Cross only became venerable after the Master of that era (i.e. Christ) was found on it.⁴²

According to Sijistani, the Cross *should* be revered by Christians because of the esoteric meanings and eternal truths (*haqa’iq*) which it symbolizes and that such ‘veneration is required of them’ just like Muslims are required to venerate the Islamic *Shahada*. This statement, shown below, is remarkable in itself as it presents a case of a thinker of one religion upholding and reinforcing the primary symbol of another religion:

The Cross thus becomes a clear sign and evidence of the ranks (*hudud*) of the hierarchy. [Christian] veneration of it is something *required* of them, as, similarly, *our* veneration of the *Shahada* is [required of us].⁴³

The Cross is thus a revered symbol for the Isma‘ili Muslim philosophers just as it is for Christians. Jesus’s passion and struggles in carrying the Cross through the Stations of the Cross hold great significance for an Isma‘ili initiate; as it is not merely a piece of

³⁹ Jeffrey E. Brower, Kevin Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35.

⁴⁰ See St. Maximilian Kolbe, *Final Sketch*, Feb. 17, 1941, who remarked that the Holy Spirit was ‘quasi-incarnate’ in Mary. This area warrants further investigation.

⁴¹ Prophet Muhammad, quoted in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism*, (SUNY Press, 1994), 231.

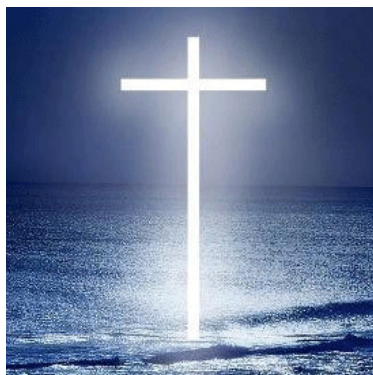
⁴² Sijistani, *Wellsprings*, 95.

⁴³ Ibid. 94.

wood which was carried by Christ but the entire celestial and terrestrial hierarchies – symbolized by the wooden Cross - were being ‘carried’ and ‘revealed’ by the person of Christ during the event of the Crucifixion. For the Isma‘ilis, the Islamic *Shahada* and the Christian Cross, in their esoteric meanings, are symbols for the perennial truths of the eternal Summons (*da’wah*) which extends to all people of all times, regardless of one’s formal religious affiliation. As expressed by Henry Corbin:

The Isma‘ili chapter of the spiritual history of Jesus closes with an allusion to the meaning that must be given to the instruction ordering everyone to “take up his Cross”. The symbol of the Cross...in its internal esoteric reality, involves the same significations as the Ark constructed by Noah and the four words that compose the *Shahadat*, the Islamic testimony of Unity. The symbol of the Christian Cross, thus integrated into the hierohistory of the eternal and unique *da’wat*, addresses to believers the same Call to faith and to a return to the suprasensory spiritual world, a Call that makes known to them its presence by unveiling for them the correspondences of universes that symbolize with each other. This Call may differ as far as exoteric aspects are concerned, but the spiritual hermeneutics of the prophets’ teaching, from one end of the cycle of earthly humanity to the other, preserve its unity. For esoterism, everywhere and always, leads to the same end.⁴⁴

The Cross of Light



And having thus spoken, he showed me a Cross of Light fixed, and about the Cross a great multitude, not having one form: and in it was one form and one likeness. And the Lord himself I beheld above the Cross, not having any shape, but only a voice.

(The Acts of John)

The Qur’anic view of the Crucifixion is not necessarily an outright denial of the event. But rather, as the Isma‘ili commentators show, the Qur’an is emphasizing a different aspect of the Crucifixion altogether. While Christians focus on the passion, suffering, and death of Jesus, the Qu’ran speaks from a more subtle and spiritual perspective when it proclaims that “they killed him not, nor did they crucify him, but it only appeared so to them.” As the Isma‘ili thinkers argue, it was only the human body or the *nasut* of Jesus that was killed and crucified upon the Cross while the eternal reality or *lahut* of Christ can never be killed or crucified. In other words, the historical *Jesus* may have died but the eternal *Christ* is ever-living. This view is extended by the Isma‘ilis to the person of the *Imam*: the ‘historical’ *Imam* lives and dies in the realm of nature (*dunya*), but the ‘eternal’ *Imam* is always present in the realm of Faith (*din*). This is why, for example, the Isma‘ilis do not mourn the death of Imam Husayn who was brutally martyred at Karbala, because, like Christ before him, the Imam was ‘raised’ unto God and remains forever alive in the Divine presence. One also finds this perspective, espoused by Isma‘ili Islam, existing during the first centuries of Christianity. According to a second century

⁴⁴ Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, (Westchester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), 126-130.

apocryphal Christian text known as the *Acts of John*, while the 'historical Jesus' was being crucified upon the 'Cross of Wood' in Jerusalem, the Apostle John ran up to the Mount of Olives where he encountered the 'eternal Christ' upon the 'Cross of Light'. For the Isma'ilis, the 'Cross of Wood', through the process of esoteric exegesis (*ta'wil*) and unveiling (*kashf*), can be *transfigured* into the 'Cross of Light' whereby the Cross can be contemplated as the symbol of the entire celestial and terrestrial hierarchies (*hudud*). The occasion of the Crucifixion, celebrated by Christians as Good Friday, becomes equivalent to the 'Night of Power' which for Isma'ilis symbolizes the manifestation of the Lord of Resurrection (*qa'im al-qiyamah*). For it is the *Qa'im's* unveiling (*kashf*) which transforms the inert 'Cross of Wood' into the living 'Cross of Light', which for Henry Corbin, amounts to a 'speculative Good Friday':

Jesus announced to his people that the Resurrector (*Qa'im*) would have the power to bring out the spiritual meaning of all things." even of a religion in which there had been no idea of this exegesis of the Spirit; similarly, it is possible to say that all the *hudud* are gathered together in the inert wood of the Cross. Yes, in this Night of Destiny, whose mystical *Light* has power to transfigure all things, it is given to the *Qa'im*, the Resurrector, to metamorphose this inert wood, to transfigure the apparent, exoteric evidence of the crucifixion. Then it becomes a prodigious Sign for the totality of the *hudud*, the companions of the esoteric sodality from Cycle to Cycle down to the consummation of our Aeon." These lines disclose a perfectly conscious Gnostic assertion, which bears witness to the extraordinary continuity of Gnosis. The gathering of all the *hudud*, discernible in the transfiguring light, is a vision similar to that of the Acts of John. We are entitled to say that the symbol of the Cross, as understood by our Ismailian, is and can only be the mystery of the Cross of Light of Gnostic Christianity, the Christianity which the Angel Christos revealed to John in the secret colloquy on the Mount of Olives. And if we were to speak here of a "speculative Good Friday," it would be in a sense totally alien to our theological and philosophical habits...⁴⁵

Perhaps it is only fitting that this article concludes with the actual passages from the *Acts of John* where the Apostle John encounters the 'Cross of Light':

I, then, when I saw him (Jesus) suffer, did not even abide by his suffering, but fled unto the Mount of Olives, weeping at that which had befallen. And when he was crucified on the Friday, at the sixth hour of the day, darkness came upon all the earth. And my Lord standing in the midst of the cave and enlightening it, said: *John, unto the multitude below in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and reeds, and gall and vinegar is given me to drink. But unto thee I speak, and what I speak hear thou. I put it into thy mind to come up into this mountain, that thou mightest hear those things which it behoveth a disciple to learn from his teacher and a man from his God. And having thus spoken, he showed me a Cross of Light fixed, and about the Cross a great multitude, not having one form: and in it (the Cross) was one form and one likeness. And the Lord himself I beheld above the Cross, not having any shape, but only a voice:* and a voice not such as was familiar to us, but one sweet and kind and truly of God, saying unto me: *John, it is needful that one should hear these things from me, for I have need of one that will hear... Thou hearest that I suffered, yet did I not suffer; that I suffered not, yet did I suffer; that I was pierced, yet I was not smitten; hanged, and I was not hanged; that blood flowed from me, and it flowed not; and, in a word, what they say of me, that befell me not, but what they say not, that did I suffer. Now what those things are I signify unto thee, for I know that thou wilt understand.*⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Corbin, *Cyclical Times and Ismaili Gnosis*, 101-102.

⁴⁶ *Acts of John*, 97-101, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, transl. M.R. James, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924)