

# Isma'ili Thesis on the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

**Simonetta Calderini**

*Southlands College*

## **Abstract**

*Though it is widely assumed that Sunni Islam does not have an equivalent to the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy, Shii groups such as the Medieval Ismailis did have an organised teaching, spiritual, and temporal hierarchy. Evidence gathered from primary sources shows that this Ismaili 'ecclesiastical' hierarchy is strictly intertwined with the Ismaili interpretation of Neoplatonic cosmology as well as with the political authority of prominent medieval Ismaili dynasties.*

*It is widely accepted by scholars in Islamic studies that there is no ecclesiastical hierarchy in Islam or, in other words, that there is not one hierarchical body which can legislate in matters of religion and the authority of which is undisputed among Muslims. There are experts in religious matters, the 'ulama', with their theological and legal specializations. However, these are only individuals, and no matter how highly esteemed they are, they do not represent a full body. Even when Muslim scholars have presented elaborations of Islamic creeds, it is understood that they are no more than individual formulations of belief, not official ones. This assumption perpetuates a myth: the myth of one, static, uniform and united Islam. This is the Islam that many Sunnis would like to believe exists, and the Islam that several Western scholars find more convenient to study. Recent introductory books on Islam have just started to include chapters which reflect a more accurate story: there is not one Islam, there are several Islams, or to put it more moderately, there are several interpretations of Islam. There is the mystical way, with its hierarchy of spiritual masters and angels, there is popular Islam with its hierarchy of saints, and there is Shii Islam. Even though Shiism represents only 10% of the total Muslim population, it is nevertheless very active, articulated and in itself composite. This paper examines the authority of the "ecclesiastical" hierarchy, that is the teaching, spiritual and temporal hierarchy, in Medieval Ismailism. My aim is to establish a relationship between this hierarchy and the cosmological doctrines of Medieval Ismailism. Even though Ismailism is not the only Shi'i group in Islam to exhibit both an ecclesiastical hierarchy and a related cosmological structure (medieval Druze and Nusayri groups are two further examples), it has been chosen here because of the high degree of sophistication and the clarity in which these doctrines have been expressed.*

**Keywords:** *Ismailis, Cosmology, medieval Ismailism, Imam, shi'ism, 'ecclesiastical' hierarchy*

The Ismailis are a Shii group which originated during the 9th century and developed in some provinces of Iraq, Syria and Iran. They belong to the Sevener branch of the Shia (as opposed to the majority Shii branch of the Twelvers) and recognize the authority of a series of 7 imams, the last of whom is - according to the majority Nizari branch, the present Aga Khan Karim, the 49th in the line of Nizari Ismaili imams. The total number of Ismailis today is uncertain, varying according to different sources, from 1 million to 20 million. They are distributed in several countries in the Middle East as well as in Asia and Africa; in the present century, as a result of political and economic emigration, they also settled in America, especially Canada, and Europe. The Ismaili community in the UK is the largest in Europe (ca. 10,000) (1).

Ismaili doctrinal and political influence reached its climax between the 10th and 12th centuries, and is mainly represented by two Ismaili dynasties which ruled over Egypt, Tunisia, regions of Syria, Iran and the Yemen. They are the well-known Fatimid dynasty based in Cairo (909-1171) and the lesser-known Sulayhi dynasty in the Yemen (1038-1138).

As a branch of Shiism, Ismailism recognizes the authority of the Imam, who, after the Prophet Muhammad, is the representative of God on earth. The imam is both the spiritual and political leader of the community, he is appointed either by the Prophet (as in the case of Ali), or by the preceding imam. He has to be male, pious, and of a specific descent. He is infallible and the only official interpreter of Scripture.

When the Fatimid dynasty was in its hey-day, the imam was the political and religious figure-head of an articulated hierarchical structure every member of which was responsible to his own superior and thus directly to the imam. Changes, however, did occur and, in the case of Tayyibi Yemen, the dignitary below the imam, the Da'i Mutlaq, did in practise become the head of the hierarchy, while the imam was doctrinally still referred to, but declared to be "in hiding".

The Ismaili ecclesiastical hierarchy was not believed to be a man-made organization, invented solely to meet some specific needs of the Ismaili community; it was felt to be part of a whole structure of beings and things which reflected the harmony and

the order of the universe. According to a widespread medieval "ideology", in the Middle East as well as in Europe down to Elizabethan times, there was a pervasive sympathy between the various components of the universe. Order, and therefore hierarchy, were to be found in the structure of the skies, in the organs of the human body and in society. One hierarchy reflected the other and parallels were often drawn between metaphysical, theological and social structures (2).

For this paper I am going to concentrate on the cosmologies elaborated mainly by two Ismaili scholars, Hamid al-din al-Kirmanî (d. 1021) and al-Mu`ayyad fi`l-din al-Shirazi (d. 1077); both are representative of the ideology of the Fatimid dynasty and therefore of its spiritual and political authority.

Ismaili cosmologies in general, and the cosmologies of al-Kirmanî and al-Shirazi in particular, are Neoplatonic. It seems that Neoplatonism was introduced into Ismaili doctrine as early as the end of 9th century, by one al-Nasafi (d. 943) and was then widely adopted by the Iranian branch of Ismaili intellectuals.

This early Neoplatonism consisted of a hierarchical system to explain the relation between the One and the existence of multiplicity. At the top of the hierarchy was the One, which was transcendent and beyond qualification, and it was followed by the Intellect and then the Soul, which, with its imperfection, was the cause for the material world. In Plotinus the whole process was one of emanation: from the overflow of the One derived the Intellect, and so on, in a process which was neither active nor intentional.

But this passivity could not be accepted by a prophetic religion of salvation like Islam. Consequently, Ismaili scholars modified the Neoplatonic system by starting the emanative process not at the level of the One, but at that of the Intellect. So the Intellect became the cause of emanation, but did itself not emanate from the One, it was instead originated by the One atemporally through the Divine Word. Emanation then occurred from the Intellect to the Soul, from the Soul to Nature, and to the elemental qualities. The hierarchy of emanation was a hierarchy of value and perfection, the Intellect was perfect, but the Soul was less so, imperfection (evil) being caused by distance from the source of origination (3).

Kirmanī followed the distinction between origination from the One and emanation from the Intellect; he called the One in more theological terms (*al-muta'ali*), that is the Highest/ the Transcendent [See TABLE I] (4). However, he modified the early Neoplatonic scheme by getting rid of the soul and multiplying the Intellect. From the One, through origination, occurred the First Intellect, and from this, through emanation, the second Intellect. From the Second Intellect emanated the Third, which was the origin of the material world. The emanative process was complete with the 10th Intellect.

This scheme is not as artificial as it may seem to us. For Kirmanī and his contemporaries, such a "philosophical" hierarchy fitted very well with the current version of Ptolemaic cosmology, according to which the Universe was made of nine or ten concentric spheres, arranged in hierarchical order, from coarse (the earth) to subtle (the sphere of the spheres) [See TABLE II] (5).

So far we have seen two hierarchies, that is two schemes, whether the language was philosophical or cosmological, by which value was assigned to specific members as parts of a whole (6). These hierarchies reflect a universal harmony and order which is ordained by God. Order is achieved when everything is put in its natural place, that is in the place intended by and assigned to it by God. Knowledge is nothing else but knowing the natural place of things and beings. Order and harmony were to be found in the universe as a whole and in every one of its elements. Order was in the heavens, as we saw, in nature, where the generations from mineral to vegetal to animal culminate in the human being. Order was in the human body with a hierarchy of organs (from leading organs like the heart and the brain to servant organs) as well as in society, with a leader on the one hand and his followers on the other.

In these hierarchies of beings, where does man stand? And how can he know his natural place? As culmination of the animal generation man embodies all the generations below it, his body being made of mineral, and vegetal elements. At the same time, through his soul, man partakes of the spiritual, divine world and it is towards this world that his aim ought to rest. However, because, alone among all creatures, man is endowed with

rationality and has the power to choose, he needs a guide to direct him to his natural place.

Such guidance is provided by religion, which is the link between the spiritual and the material world, between God and man. In particular, guidance occurs through the religious institution of persons whose task is to regulate the affairs of mankind and to implement the divine-natural law. For the Ismailis, this institution is represented by the Ismaili da'wa (7).

Historically, the Ismaili da'wa was instrumental in paving the way to the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty. When in power, the dynasty, unlike other dynasties before it (such as the Abbasids), did not get rid of its propaganda organization, but still relied on it especially with regards to education (training of religious ranks, but also collection of religious taxes) and propaganda itself (which was never for mass conversion, but functioned as external relation of the dynasty, including trade) (8).

During Kirmani's lifetime, the Fatimid imam al-Hakim (reign. 996-1021) relied heavily on the da'wa to maintain his authority, by expanding its organization and making it separate (almost independent) from the administrative and judicial authority. A new title was created for its leader: the da'i al-du'at (9).

Doctrinally, this emphasis on the da'wa is reflected in the elaboration of a neat hierarchical system which represented the link between the philosophical/metaphysical world and the physical, material world. This link was called by scholars "the world of religion", which was structured according to the hierarchy of the Ismaili da'wa. Kirmani was one of those Ismaili intellectuals (and da'is) responsible for the doctrinal elaboration of such an intermediary world.

Following the divine, universal order and harmony, the ecclesiastical hierarchy mirrored all other hierarchies; it was composed of 10 ranks and was a hierarchy of value where each rank had its rationale in the rank above itself. [See TABLE III: ecclesiastical hierarchy] (10)

Ranks 1,2,3, are comprehensive ranks, like the outer spheres of the universe are comprehensive spheres (sphere of the fixed stars, sphere of the spheres and the embracing sphere), while the remaining ranks are equated with the 7 planets.

The first rank, the Prophet of the present cycle, Muhammad, is the lawgiver and the Scripture giver, while the Asas, Ali, is the interpreter of both law and Scripture. In the philosophical hierarchy the first rank (first Intellect) was the cause for the existence of the other intellects. Similarly, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Prophet is the cause for the existence of all the other ranks (which are called the natural intellects).

In the philosophical hierarchy there was a difference of coming-into-being between the First Intellect (originated) and the other Intellects (emanated). Similarly, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Prophet is chosen by God, while all the other ranks are appointed by the preceding rank. Therefore, emanation is equated to the appointment of imams (11).

Kirmani himself gives a graphic example of this parallelism, as well as others, in a scheme of superior ranks and inferior ones. [See TABLE IV] (12). The categories are philosophical in the first column, cosmological in the second, ecclesiastical in the third and theological/doctrinal in the last column. Every rank of the ecclesiastical hierarchy has a specific task to carry out within his/her own doctrinal capabilities.

It is unclear to what extent these ecclesiastical ranks actually reflected existing ranks at any given time or in any particular area of Ismaili propaganda. These terms do occur in several Ismaili and non-Ismaili texts from an early date not necessarily in the same order as the one provided by Kirmani. Moreover, several synonyms existed for some of the ranks (f. e. *janah/da'i*). What is of relevance here is that a hierarchy did exist from early times (well before the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty) and that the principle underlying the whole system was the concept of obedience.

Every Ismaili author makes this point very clear; Kirmani, for example, says that obedience to the highest living authority, that is the imam, is equivalent to obedience to God (13). Furthermore, obedience to the ranks as a whole is also equivalent to obedience to God (14).

Authority and obedience in Ismailism are related concepts; this relation is familiar for scholars of religion. Authority, that is the right to command and to be obeyed, is according to Ismailism,

of divine origin. Ultimate authority lies with God and, at the same time, the existing authority was instituted by God itself.

In Ismaili terms, all hierarchies in the universe come from God and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the da'wa, is - as we saw- the essential link between God and the individual believer. To resist the authority of the da'wa or to rebel against it, is to rebel against God.

Christian scripture describes in similar terms authority and obedience: "Whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me, rejects the One who sent me" (Luke 10.16). Medieval Christian monastic orders made obedience to the superior the basic element of life within monastic communities. There, as in Ismailism, obedience served the purpose of strengthening the cohesion of the community under the authority of a representative of the divine (15).

Al-Mu`ayyad fi'l-din al-Shirazi (d. 1077) was another leading da'i of the Fatimid dynasty. His doctrinal system differs slightly from Kirmani's, especially with regards to the number of hierarchical ranks and the function of the philosophical hierarchy. However, he develops the concept of obedience already present in Kirmani and takes it a step forward: each rank of the ecclesiastical hierarchy hides, in potentiality, a superior rank. In particular, each rank is potentially the imam, the highest living authority. As a result, rebellion to any rank, even the lowest, is like rebelling against the Imam and, ultimately, God itself (16).

This concept of obedience to the rank above became the key to the cosmology and authority structure of Yemeni Tayyibi Ismailism (1131-1539). During the last years of the Sulayhi dynasty in Yemen, Queen Arwa broke her allegiance to the Fatimid line of Imams, thereby making her da'wa independent from that of Fatimid Egypt. The imam Tayyib was declared to be in hiding in 1130 and Queen Arwa appointed a da'i mutlaq (Missionary general) to represent him and to look after the da'wa and the community. After the death of Queen Arwa and the end of the Sulayhid dynasty, the Missionary General became the highest living rank and his position became hereditary.

Doctrinally, Tayyibi scholars make the concept of obedience to the rank superior to one's own of paramount importance.

Obedience to one's superior is obedience to God: he who does not acknowledge the superiority of the rank above one's self, falls from his position and descends to lower levels (17).

Cosmologically and philosophically, obedience is the key to the understanding of the origin of the material world. This is exemplified by the so-called drama in heaven (of gnostic origin): the Third Intellect, while acknowledging the excellence of the First Intellect, hesitated in recognizing the precedence of the Second Intellect. This hesitation was the cause of its deficiency. Because the First Intellect was hidden in the Second Intellect, this hesitation became disobedience and caused the Third Intellect to fall from its position. From it derived the nine spheres, while from the Second Intellect derived the other Seven Intellects (18).

It is interesting here to note the relationship between a new minority group and the elaboration of an appropriate cosmology. What is at stake is the preservation and the identity of a minority group, which needs a strong social grip to continue and exist. The group exercises this grip on its members by developing a strong sense of hierarchy and duty.

The same happened in Ismailism when it needed to maintain its identity within Islam. It also happened in Tayyibi Ismailism when it wanted to differentiate itself from Fatimid Ismailism.

A final comment needs to be made about this relationship between the concept of authority within a community and the elaboration of its cosmologies (19). We have seen that in the case of Fatimid and Tayyibi Ismailism such a relationship did indeed exist. But which influenced which? Did the community, and therefore the concept of authority, influence cosmology? Or vice-versa?

Sociologists would support the first argument: they would take the community and its social structure as the prototype for the elaboration of cosmology. In my opinion this approach constitutes a misinterpretation of the underlying worldview of medieval Islam (and of course of Medieval Christendom). For an Ismaili of the Middle Ages order and hierarchy were not superimposed by the community, nor were they artificial or man-made. Rather, order and hierarchy were natural and divine. Only when they stop being perceived as natural and divine, can

order and hierarchy be interpreted as social or political constructs. (Only) then order stops being expressed by authority, and becomes instead power and oppression.

### Notes

- 1) For a general and overall descriptive history of the Ismailis see Daftary, F., 1990, *The Isma'ilis: their history and doctrines*. C.U.P., Cambridge etc.; there are two relatively recent bibliographies on Ismailism, the first, which deals mostly with primary sources is Poonawala, I., 1977, *Biobibliography of Isma'ili literature*. Undena Publications, Malibu; the second, which includes secondary sources is Tajdin, N., 1985, *A bibliography of Ismailism*. Caravan Books, Delmar.
- 2) For an overview of medieval thought in Europe and the concept of order and hierarchy see Lovejoy, A., 1960, *The Great Chain of Being*. Harper & Row, New York. For the same topic in Renaissance England see Collins, S.L., 1989, *From Divine Cosmos to Sovereign State: an intellectual history of consciousness and the idea of order in Renaissance England*. O.U.P., Oxford. The same issues in medieval Islam are dealt with by Al-Azmeh, A., 1986, *Arabic thought and Islamic societies*. Croom Helm, London, especially pp.1-7 and 38-9.
- 3) On the adoption of Neoplatonism by Islamic Shii groups and the reasons behind it see Netton, I., 1982, *Muslim Neoplatonists: an introduction to the thought of the Brethren of Purity*. Allen & Unwin, London; and Walker, P.E., *Early philosophical Shiism*. C.U.P., Cambridge 1993, in particular pp.146-9 and 151-3.
- 4) Al-Kirman, H., 1953, *Rahat al-'aql*. eds. M.K.Husseini and M.M.Hilmy, Brill, Leiden and Cairo, pp.140-1, 128, 138. There is to date no comprehensive study on the doctrine and background of Kirmani, who has been acknowledged as being one of the most influential Ismaili scholars. There is, however a very good work on his cosmological doctrines, Peterson, D.C., *Cosmogony and the Ten Separated Intellects in the Rahat al-'Aql of Hamid al-din al-Kirman*, PhD thesis, Univ. of California, Los Angeles 1990; on the ecclesiastical hierarchy see Dodge, B., "Fatimid hierarchy and exegesis", **Muslim World**, 50 (1960), pp. 130-41 and on the distinction between origination and emanation Makarem, S., "Ismaili and Druze cosmogony in relation to Plotinus and Aristotle", in Marmura, M.E. (ed.), 1984, *Islamic theology and philosophy*, SUNY Press, Albany pp. 81-91.
- 5) For a representation of the concentric spheres see the diagram by al-Biruni in Blacker, C. and Loewe M. (eds.), 1975, *Ancient cosmologies*. Allen & Unwin, London p.153.
- 6) For some definitions of "hierarchy" see Webb, G., "Hierarchy, angels and the human conditions in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi", **Muslim World**, 81, 3-4 (1991), p.245 and Barnes, R.H., De Coppet, D. and Parkin, R.J. (eds.), 1985, *Contexts and levels: anthropological essays on hierarchy*, Jaso, Oxford, in part. quotation on p. 9.

- 7) The Arabic term da'wa has as its first meaning that of "invitation, appeal" but it also includes that of "adoption of the cause of the imams", therefore "mission, propaganda organization". On the relationship between religion (din) and da'wa in Ismailism see my article " 'Alam al-din in Ismailism: world of obedience or world of immobility?", **BSOAS**, 56, 3 (1993), pp. 459-469.
- 8) Shaban, M.A., 1986, *Islamic history*. CUP, Cambridge.vol 2, p. 200.
- 9) Assaad, S.A., 1974, *The Reign of Hakim bi amr Allah: a political study*. The Arab Institute for Research and publishing, Beirut, pp. 86-7 and Bryer, D.R.W., "The origins of the Druze religion", part I, **Der Islam**. 52 (1975), pp. 62-3.
- 10) Kirmani, *Rahat*, pp. 134-5.
- 11) Kirmani, op. cit., p. 124.
- 12) Kirmani, op.cit., p. 138.
- 13) Kirmani, "Risalat mabasim al-bisharat bi'l-imam al-Hakim" in Hussein, M.K. (ed.), 1962, *Ta'ifat al-duruz*, Dar al-ma'arif, Cairo p.58.
- 14) Kirmani, 1960, *Kitab al-Riyad*, ed. A. Tamir, Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut p.146.
- 15) For the reference to Christian orders see Constable, G., "The authority of superiors in religious communities", in Makdisi, G. (ed.), 1982, *La notion d'autorite au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident*. Presses Universitaire de France, Paris, pp. 190-204. Other valuable articles in the same collection include Madelung, W., "Authority in Twelver Shiism in the absence of the Imam" *ibid.*, pp. 163-74; Makdisi, G., "Authority in the Islamic community" *ibid.*, pp 117-26, and Watt, W.M., "Authority in the thought of al-Ghazali" *ibid.*, pp. 57-67.
- 16) Shirazi, M., 1984, *Majalis*, vol. 3, ed. M. Ghalib, Dar al-Andalus, Beirut, p. 60. On Shirazi see Hamdani, A., "The Fatimid da'i al-Mu'ayyad: his life and work", in Kanji, A.R. (ed.), 1973, *The great Ismaili heroes*. Shia Ismaili Association for Pakistan, Karachi, pp. 41-7; and Peerwani, P., "Ismaili exegesis of the Qur'an in al-Majalis al-Mu'ayyadiyya of al-Mu'ayyad fi al-din al-Shirazi", **BRISMES** Proceedings of 1988 International Conference on the Middle East, pp. 118-27.
- 17) Hamidi, I., *Kitab kanz al-walad*. ed. 1971, M. Ghalib, Dar Sadir and F. Steiner Verlag, Beirut and Wiesbaden pp. 74-6.
- 18) Hamidi, op.cit., pp. 80-1.
- 19) On the link between the elaboration of cosmology and social order see Douglas, M., 1973, *Natural Symbols: explorations in cosmology*. Barrie & Jenkins, London pp. 169-71 and 179-80.

## Appendixes

### TABLE I

Kirmani's philosophical hierarchy  
The Transcendent - al-Muta'ali

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1 - The First Intellect / The First Originated Being

- 2 - The Second Intellect / The First Emanated Being
  - 3 - The Third Intellect / Prime Matter (origin of material world)
  - 4 - The Fourth Intellect
  - 5 - The Fifth Intellect
  - 6 - The Sixth Intellect
  - 7 - The Seventh Intellect
  - 8 - The Eighth Intellect
  - 9 - The Ninth Intellect
  - 10- The Tenth Intellect / It completes the emanation
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TABLE II  
Cosmological hierarchy

- 1 – Earth
- 2 - Sphere of the Moon
- 3 – Mercury
- 4 – Venus
- 5 – Sun
- 6 – Mars
- 7 – Jupiter
- 8 – Saturn
- 9 - Sphere of the fixed stars
- 10- Ninth sphere / Sphere of the spheres

The cosmological hierarchy was usually represented by a series of ten, or more, concentric circles (the spheres) with earth at the centre, surrounded by the sublunary sphere and by the spheres of, respectively, Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sphere of the fixed stars and the sphere of spheres.

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TABLE III  
Al-Kirmani, H., *Rahat al-'aql*. eds. M.K.Hussein and M.M.Hilmy, Brill, Leiden and Cairo 1953, pp.134-5

- Ecclesiastical hierarchy
- 1 - The Prophet
  - 2 - The Foundation (Asas)
  - 3 - The Imam
  - 4 - The Gate (Bab)
  - 5 - The Proof (Hujja)
  - 6 - The Missionary of the Message (Da'i al-Balagh)
  - 7 - The Missionary General (Da'i Mutlaq)
  - 8 - The Missionary Limited (Da'i Mahsur)
  - 9 - The Legate General (Ma`dhun Mutlaq)
  - 10- The Legate Limited (Ma`dhun Mahsur)
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TABLE IV

Al-Kirmani, H. 1953, *Rahat al-'aql*, eds. M.K.Hussein and M.M.Hilmy, Brill, Leiden and Cairo, p.138

THE SUPERIOR RANKS      THE INFERIOR RANKS

The First Existent =The First Origin- ated being	The highest sphere	The first existent	Revelation
The second Existent =First Emanated Being	the Second sphere	the Found- ation interpretat- ion	Allegorical
The Third Existent	Saturn	the Imam	Authority
The Fourth Existent	Jupiter	the Gate	Power
The Fifth Existent	Mars	the Proof	Decision on truth and falsehood
The Sixth Existent	the Sun	the Mission- any of the message about the return	Necessity & instruction about the return
The Seventh Existent	Venus	the Mission- any General and inward worship	Teaching of superior ranks worship
The Eighth Existent	Mercury Missionary	the Limited inferior ranks worship	Teaching of and outward worship
The Ninth Existent	Moon	the Legate General	Taking of the oath and covenant
The Tenth Existent	Sublunary world	the Limited Legate	Attraction of affiliates