PART TWO

FAITH AND THOUGHT

Introduction

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In keeping with the Qur'anic promise, 'We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth' (41:53), Ismaili thought as a whole may perhaps be characterized as a major endeavour to read the 'signs of God' in nature and history rather than to make the divine essence itself the subject of theological discourse. The classical Ismaili thinkers represented in Section I of this part, such as Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, or Nāṣir-i Khusraw, distinguished themselves from both the 'attributist' and the 'anti-attributist' schools of mainstream Muslim theology by refusing to project any notions that could be seen as explicitly or implicitly anthropomorphic, including those hidden in the simple profession of monotheism or *tawḥīd*, on the absolutely transcendent Originator of all. By the same token, they also set themselves apart from the mainstream philosophical tradition, arguing that 'existence' itself belongs to the domain of the originated and thus cannot be applied to the Originator, whose pure identity is beyond intellectual reach. 'Absolute existence,' therefore, refers not to the Originator, but to the absolutely primordial act of origination (*ibdāʿ*) – a crucial point made particularly explicit by Nāṣir-i Khusraw, and which was similarly taken up later by Sufi and Shiʿi critics of the popular version of the mystical doctrine of the 'unity of existence.' The 'necessary being,' then, is the 'First-Originated,' that is, the Cosmic or Universal Intellect, which, paired with its immediate 'Follower,' the Universal Soul, sets the stage for everything else in creation. Adopting earlier Neoplatonic models of thought with variations, Fatimid as well as related thinkers, such as the anonymous author(s) of the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, rediscovered harmony in spiritual hierarchies that mark and govern both the visible and the invisible worlds, and beauty in nature and art.

From the point of view of the philosophy and sociology of religion (Section II), the most important contribution of the *dāʿīs* was doubtless their embedding of the 'world of religion' (*ʿālam al-dīn*) into such universal patterns. As can be seen from the place occupied by prophecy in the very structure of al-Sijistānī's *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, a universal process of prophetic revelation (which tends towards total unveiling [*kashf*] with the coming of the *mahdī* or *qāʾim*), esoterically patterns the history of mankind as a whole. For Nāṣir-i Khusraw, human reason, being a 'trace' of the Universal Intellect, is far from contradicting Revelation. In his *Jāmiʿ al-ḥikmatayn*, a book which suggests that the 'two wisdoms' are ultimately one and the same, he strongly argues – as the celebrated Sunni philosopher Ibn Rushd

(Averroës) would do later – that scientific enquiry into nature is itself a religious duty. In the words of Nāṣir's teacher, the grand *dāʿī* al-Muʾayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, 'The conviction of the people of truth is that all the sciences, including the rational ones which the philosophers claim [as their own], are collectively present in the sciences of the prophets – may [God's] peace be upon them – and have diverged and branched out from there.' As a result, a general hierarchy of Being and Knowledge is being suggested, which of course entails the affirmation of the continued existence of the imamate in one form or another, and its function as a guiding principle. This is the main theme of Section II, which also includes samples taken from famous Nizārī texts.

With Section III, we turn from the universal to the individual, and more specifically to the individual believer's way of acquiring spiritual growth and higher levels of knowledge through initiation. The section begins with two lively descriptions of a beginner's approach to Ismailism, taken from quite different milieus: the classical initiatory tale known as the *Book of the Master and the Disciple*, and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's personal account of his own initiation. The need for higher knowledge through interpretation of scripture is, then, demonstrated in a series of rational arguments propounded by al-Kirmānī, while al-Sijistānī points to the very source of prophetic inspiration in a more mystical way. Finally, a number of concrete examples of Ismaili *taʾwīl*, suggesting a common spiritual origin of religious symbols in various scriptural traditions, conclude this section.

Section IV begins with a discussion of the notions of 'faith' (*īmān*) and *islām* as conducted by the widely recognized 'founder' of Fatimid Law, al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, who is known for his faithful recording of the imam's instructions. Next, the less well-known but important 'rules of conduct' for a *dāʿī* by Aḥmad al-Naysābūrī, paves the way for ethics proper, in which field a significant part is naturally given to the great philosopher Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. The chapter on 'The refinement of character' from the standard philosophical account of Nizārī Ismailism, the *Paradise of Submission*, which bears the mark of al-Ṭūsī's influence though not necessarily of his pen, shows how ethics is governed by the recognition of, and love for, the 'truthful master of the time,' the imam. The following sample, al-Ṭūsī's short but masterful treatise on the deeper sense of the profoundly Shiʿi notions of 'solidarity' and 'dissociation' (known in Persian as *tawallā* and *tabarrā* respectively) ends up on a distinctly mystical note. As is known, certain mystical trends also characterize later Nizārī developments, which are represented here by an as yet little-known epistle on spiritual edification by the 10th/16th-century *dāʿī* and poet Khayrkhwāh-i Harātī.