

Ghuluww in History and Islamic Thought: An Overview of the Case of Imāmī Shī‘ism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the intricacies involved in defining ghuluww (religious extremism) in Imāmī thought. It explores exegetical and historiographical perspectives, and a selection of ḥadīth all to demonstrate the variegated nature of the discourse surrounding this subject. Imāmī scholars such as Sayyid al-Khoei and Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī felt it necessary to limit the boundaries of who constitutes a ghālī to those who ascribed divinity to the Prophet or the Imams. Part of the reason for such caution is that ghuluww entails kufr (disbelief) or the anathematisation of an individual, which in turn carries profound social-juristic implications. The ḥadīth traditions selected for this study present a snapshot of this broader discussion which entails a constant intellectual mediation between recognising God’s ultimate power possessed solely by Him, while on the other hand His bestowal of fantastical attributes and abilities upon select individuals among His creation. Therefore, the sheer inculcation of such attributes (as per post-formative Imāmī thought) such as knowledge of the future or certain miraculous feats unknown and deemed impossible for the average fallible human being, does not entail the divination of such gifted individuals. Rather, it is indicative that God can and does bestow gifts upon His creation as He wills, and this does not compromise God’s ultimate transcendence.

KEYWORDS: Ghuluww, Imam, Divine Lordship, Divine

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delegation, God-given knowledge

Introduction

Religious extremism or radical theological beliefs has been a matter of contention since the first century of Islam. *Ghuluww* is a term that will be defined during the course of this paper as being largely elastic and subjective outside of those clear traditions from the Fourteen Infallibles which stipulate what it is and who it may be applied to. The very elasticity of this term and the incredible social-political implications in its usage is what makes it so litigious.

This paper will set out to explore the etymological, political, and theological history of this term as it pertains to Imāmī Shī‘ism in an attempt to explore how it has been negotiated so to appreciate the multivocal nature of this concept when viewed from a variety of vantage points. This objective of the aforementioned method of analysis is to demonstrate that *ghuluww* and *ghulāt* are not terms that can be so easily applied to any group or individual who has distinctive beliefs due to its highly coloured history. Rather, it requires a nuanced approach in differentiating between the potential greatness in human beings and the Creator who bestowed that greatness upon them.

Put differently, whatever potential human beings have to perform any number of great acts, that potential derives from an unlimited, powerful creator who placed that within them. Throughout history, various Muslim groups have made the misjudgement of either denying the greatness (*azama*) of human beings or the ultimate power belonging to the Creator to bestow such potential upon creation. Or conversely, upon observing historical personalities with certain uncanny abilities (attributed to them) the assumption is made that such feats are impossible for a human and hence that person “must” necessarily be classified as a god of sorts or have divinity ascribed to such an individual.

Ghuluww and its Qur'anic Etymology and Exegesis

The verbal noun *ghuluww* is derived from the trilateral root *gh-l-w*, and in terms of its literal lexical meaning there does not seem to be any divergence among the famous lexicographers. The noun as well as the verb *ghalā* or noun *ghuluww* literarily means to “exceed or go beyond its limit” (*jāwaza ḥaddahu*).² It is also likened to firing an arrow high up into the air which again denotes an attempt to do something outlandish or to attempt at piercing the air.³ The root word is also used to describe an item that is overpriced or even a plant that has grown unusually tall, in both cases again conveying an exceeding of normal limits.⁴ For instance, it is even used to convey when someone is exceedingly overweight or plump (*ghalā bi-hā ‘aẓmun*) or when used in form VI, “they were exorbitant in respect to the dowry or gift to the bride” (*taghālaw fi l-ṣadāq*).⁵

As for the Qur'an, the term *ghuluww* has been used twice as a verb, firstly in Q 4:171:

﴿يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ وَلَا تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلَّمْتَهُ آَلَقَاهَا إِلَى مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ فَآمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ثَلَاثَةٌ ۚ أَنْتَهُوا خَيْرًا لَكُمْ إِنَّمَا اللَّهُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ وَلَدٌ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَكَفَى بِاللَّهِ وَكِيلًا﴾

O People of the Book! Do not exceed the bounds in your religion, and do not attribute anything to God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of God, and His Word that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him. So have faith in God and

² Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fi gharīb al-Qurʾān* (Dār al-Shāmiyya: 1991), 613. Cf. Khālīd b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (Hijrat Publishers: 1989), 4:446; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Dār Ṣādiq: 1991), 15:133.

³ Al-Farāhīdī, 4:464.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ E.W. Lane, *English-Arabic Lexicon* (Islamic Texts Society: 1984), 2:2287.

His apostles, and do not say, “[God is] a trinity.” Relinquish [such a creed]! That is better for you. God is but the One God. He is far too immaculate to have any son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth, and God suffices as trustee.

The early Qur’anic exegete, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) points out that *taghlū* here is indicative of *tafraṭū* which is synonymous with the meaning of exceeding the limits and going beyond the boundaries in words or beliefs.⁶ It is also worth noting that the vast majority of Qur’anic exegetes when defining *ghuluww* associated it with *ifrāṭ* or *furūṭ* (which is used in eight various forms in the Qur’an), except in the case of the latter where it indicates going to excess accompanied with neglect and failure.⁷

For example, in Q 18:28 it states regarding those attached to this world such that they forget God: “... His doings have become rife with shortcomings” (*kāna amruhu furūṭa*), al-Ṭabarsī cites various exegetes before him such as al-Muqātil and al-Jubbā’ī who describe it as being *ifrāṭ wa tajāwuz al-ḥadd* (going to excess and passing the boundary); in other words, to characterize a lifestyle that has gone to extremes.⁸

Q 5:77 states:

﴿قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا أَهْوَاءَ قَوْمٍ قَدْ ضَلُّوا مِنْ قَبْلُ وَأَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَضَلُّوا عَنْ سَوَاءِ السَّبِيلِ﴾

Say, “O People of the Book! Do not unduly exceed the bounds in your religion and do not follow the fancies of a people who went astray in the past, and led many astray, and [themselves] strayed from the right path.”

⁶ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Dār al-Ma‘rifa: 1992), 4:24.

⁷ Elsaïd M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Brill: 2008), 702-703.

⁸ Abū Faḍl al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma‘ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Naser Khosrow Publications: 1993), 4:719.

In both these verses there is a clear warning to the People of the Book to be careful not to elevate their religious personalities to sons of God or to assume there is some ontological equivalency between a great religious personality and God, which seems to be the inherent problem in trinitarian doctrine. Both the Jews and the Christians have been condemned by the Qur'an for elevating their religious personalities or prophets either to become sons of God or lords; thus this seems to be the root of *ghuluww* as viewed through the lens of these two verses.⁹

For example in Q 9:30 it states: "The Jews said that Uzayr is the son of God" or in Q 9:31: "They took their rabbis and their priests as lords instead of God (*arbābaban min dūn allāh*)." Interestingly, Shaykh al-Ṭūsī adds a further element to the definition of *ghuluww* by stating that the Jews committed *ghuluww* in the case of 'Īsā, and both Christians and Jews committed *ghuluww* in their rejection of Prophet Muḥammad's prophethood and their accusing him of falsehood.¹⁰ As will be seen shortly, this form of *ghuluww* also involves exceeding in admiration of such priests to the extent of blindly following them over what is seen to be clear dictates of God.

The central concern of the Qur'an is with either attributing sonship to God or in taking lords other than God as is evident in Q 3:64:

﴿قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

Say, "O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but God, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him, and that we will not take each other as lords besides God." But if they turn away, say, "Be witnesses that we

⁹ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Malakiyān, *al-Ghuluww fī muṣṭalaḥ al-milal wa-l-niḥal wa-l-rijāl* (Ma'had Adīb al-Fiqh al-Jawāhirī: 2018), 17.

¹⁰ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Dār Iḥyā' Turāth al-'Arabī), 3:607.

are Muslims.”

In this regard, Shaykh al-Ṭūsī combines his commentary on Q 9:31 with Q 3:64, citing a tradition from Imam al-Ṣādiq which is presumably in relation to either verse, and says: “What they worshipped instead of God, and surely they prohibited for them what was made permissible, and made permissible for them what was made impermissible, and that was the act of taking lords instead of God.”¹¹

According to al-Ṭabarsī, there exists disagreement as to the precise meaning of “lords” in both Q 9:31 and Q 3:64 in so far as it could mean simply they set up human beings as objects of worship (*‘ibāda*) or as well as following their priests or rabbis in opposition to what God has clearly prohibited or permitted, thus in doing so they took them as lords, albeit not in the sense of literally worshipping them but rather symbolically.¹² To this effect, al-Ṭabarsī cites an instructive narration of Prophet Muḥammad in which he was specifically asked about this verse, to which he replied to the assertion that the priests and rabbis were not being worshipped but their declarations were being followed (in opposition to clear scriptural guidance) to which the Prophet replied: “It is that (*huwa dhālika*).”¹³ In the case of them literally being deemed as lords or the act of taking lords other than God, ‘Allāma al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī in reference to this verse describes this type of lordship (*rubūbiyya*) as an empowerment of human beings to the extent of not needing to rely on God anymore.¹⁴

Another example of *ghuluww* can be seen in *Sūrat Nūḥ* in which his community is told by those who reject Noah: “Do not abandon your

¹¹ “*Mā ‘abadūhum min dūn allāh wa innamā ḥarramū la-hum ḥalālan wa aḥallū la-hum ḥarāman fa-kāna dhālika ittikhādh al-‘arbāb min dūn allāh.*” Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 2:488.

¹² Al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma‘ al-bayān*, 2:767.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur‘ān* (Mu‘assasat al-‘Alamī lil-Maṭbū‘āt: 1997), 3:288.

gods. Do not abandon Wadd, nor Suwā', nor Yaghūth, Ya'ūq, and Nasr."¹⁵ According to al-Ṭabarsī these idols were initially a group of pious people (*qawmun ṣāliḥūn*), whose admirers were tempted by Satan to draw images of them so that they may feel closer to them, however this resulted in them becoming idols of worship.¹⁶ Therefore, in this case we see a connection between iconography and *ghuluww* which also speaks to certain iconoclastic trends in Islamic history at least as reflected in the 6th/12th century commentary by al-Ṭabarsī. Upon examination of the verses pertaining to *ghuluww* in the Qur'an and Arabic lexicography, the essential problems lie in taking otherwise gifted human beings as gods or in attributing some form of ontological equivalency between God and them. This slippage or intentional ontological conflation as we shall see was at least partially responsible for the development of early *ghulāt* sects.

The Early *Ghulāt* and Beliefs regarding the Ahl al-Bayt

Early Shī'ī theological and heresiographical literature is replete with tales describing the early groups whom Sean Anthony describes as “transgressive Shiites” instead of extremists, since the term “extremist” in contemporary English conveys terrorism or some sort of political violence in the name of religion.¹⁷

I would tend to concur with this definition as it will be seen within the context of early Shī'ī movements that there were numerous groups and personalities that attached themselves to various figures from both the Twelver line of Imams and otherwise, only to ascribe attributes that would be deemed heretical by the Imams and later Shī'ī heresiographical writers. The reason I am limiting myself largely to Shī'ī heresiography is for the simple fact that for Sunnī theologians and heresiographers, the definition of *ghuluww* was much broader to essentially include large

¹⁵ Q 71:23.

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 10:547. Cf. al-Malakiyān, 15.

¹⁷ Sean Anthony, “*Ghulāt*,” EI3.

parts of what was the predominant belief among the Imāmiyya, such as the rejection of the moral uprightness of the first three caliphs prior to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.¹⁸ Therefore, for the purpose of this section I will limit myself to references largely from Shī‘ī sources or those academic studies that draw upon them such as the influential work of Wadad Qadi, while providing some necessary historical background.

Throughout the Umayyad period, the accusation of *ghuluww* was used for political purposes to silence dissent especially with respect to the Khawārij. In fact, each group claimed to have the final say regarding the definition of *ghuluww* in the Qur’an and hence used it as a harpoon to discredit competing religious movements.

For example, the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 99-101/717-720) accused the Qādariyya (those who believe in free will of human beings) as having gone to extremes in their beliefs (*ghāla fi l-qawl*).¹⁹ For other Umayyad caliphs, any act of disobedience to them was deemed an act of *ghuluww*. It is for this reason that we must be cautious in deriving any authoritative meaning of this term when we come across the usage of this epithet in the works of historiography and theology.

The earliest sect of *ghulāt* is the Saba’iyya, who were named after their alleged Jewish convert and founder, ‘Abdullāh b. Saba’. Early sources, such as the history of Sayf b. ‘Umar, which have been highly coloured by anti-Shī‘ī polemics, describe Ibn Saba’ as a *ghālī* because he cursed the enemies of ‘Alī. The sources are replete with claims and counterclaims to which the late Murtaḍā ‘Askarī asserted that most of the tales surrounding Ibn Saba’ are just that, tales or myths. But nevertheless, the term *ghuluww* or *ghālī* was used to describe something unpalatable for some Muslims groups.

According to other reports, Ibn Saba’ believed that ‘Alī did not die but will return to rule the Earth; again, this was deemed by some Sunnī

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

heresiographers to be *ghuluww*. According to later Shīʿī sources such as al-Ashʿarī, Ibn Sabaʿ believed ʿAlī to be a deity. The question that Wadad Qadi raises in this regard, which I deem to be a valid one, is the following: how do we settle on a definition of *ghuluww* especially if it entails someone being expelled out of the fold of Islam, and is *ghuluww* simply a wild idea or notion?²⁰ She raises some important questions here in order to force us to be more precise and cautious in how we use this term. During the first two centuries of Islam this continued to be debated as we can see in the case of Mukhtār and his followers.

In fact, the *ghulāt* as a group first appear in a report by Abū Mikhnaf who narrates stories of the Kufan women, Hind bt. al-Mutakallifa al-Nāʿiẓiyya and Laylā bt. Qumāma al-Muzaniyya, in whose homes “would gather every *ghālī* from the Shīʿa to converse (*kāna yajtamiʿū ilayhā kullu ghālin min al-shīʿa*).”²¹ While we cannot be precise as to what was discussed in these homes, what we do know is that those who gathered in these homes were later known for claiming to prophesise the future, like the soothsayers of pre-Islamic Arabia. It should also be mentioned that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya clearly denounced this *ghuluww*.

In order to encapsulate the various groups that emerged after Mukhtār, the heresiographers use the term Kaysāniyya to indicate an umbrella group that held an array of beliefs. Among these alleged controversial beliefs of the Kaysāniyya was the charge that the first three caliphs before ʿAlī were guilty of infidelity (*kufr*) due to their rejection of ʿAlī’s Imāmate after the death of the Prophet. Or for example, it was claimed that Ibn Ḥanafiyya never died but was rather trapped in the mountains of Ruḍwā only to eventually return as the Maḥdī (messiah).

Furthermore, there were antinomian tendencies arising from such groups which believed part of the *sharīʿa* was abrogated or even conferring prophethood on some of their leaders such as Bayān b. Samʿān who believed in anthropomorphism, such as claiming to

²⁰ Wadad Qadi, “The Development of the Term Ghulāt in Muslim Literature” in *Shīʿism ed. Etan Kohlberg* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing: 2003), 208.

²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya: 2005), 3:489.

see God.²² Another group was led by Abū l-Khaṭṭāb, known as the Khaṭṭābiyya, who ascribed divinity to Imam al-Ṣādiq, as well as having antinomian beliefs. Madelung characterises this movement as ‘Abbāsīd Shī‘ī *ghuluww*.

Upon perusal of the Shī‘ī heresiographical literature, such as the work of the famous Imāmī scholars al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī (d. circa 4th/10th century) and Sa‘d b. ‘Abdullāh al-Ash‘arī al-Qummī (d. 300/912), we find that at least by the early 4th century prior to the major occultation, *ghuluww* was limited largely to anthropomorphism, reincarnation, or outright attribution of divinity to the Imams. For example, in an instructive description by the notable companion of Imam al-Kāzīm and Imam al-Riḍā, Yūnus b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 204/820), the *ghulāt* drew their ideas primarily from two basic tenets:

1. God presents Himself to whom He wills in whatever form He wills and how He wills in His justice ... therefore He views Himself as He views His creation (the two become one and the same in their presentation) *إِذْ يَرَى مِنْ نَفْسِهِ مَا يَرَى مِنْ خَلْقِهِ*. Based on that, it is not befitting (*lam yajuz*) for Him to present Himself to them except in a form (*mathal*) that they recognise.²³
2. The *ghulāt* say that He is in His essence (*dhātihi wa kunhihi*) a holy spirit (*rūḥ al-quḍus*), a dweller in a dwelling place and the dwelling place is His screen/veil (*al-maskūn ḥijābuhu*).²⁴

So, to summarise, the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd era *ghulāt* groups held an array of beliefs, some of which are shared by the mainstream Imāmiyya and some of which are not. For example, they believed in *raj‘a*, *badā’* (the belief that God can change His mind or decree), *tanāsukh* (transmigration of souls and/or reincarnation), *ḥulūl* (indwelling of souls – incarnation), *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism, i.e. that God can

²² Wilfred Madelung, “Kaysaniyya,” EI2.

²³ This belief alleges that God identifies with his own creation.

²⁴ Al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī and Sa‘d b. ‘Abdullāh al-Ash‘arī al-Qummī, *Firaq al-shī‘a* (Dār al-Irshād: 1992), 62.

descend in the material world), and antinomianism (denial of shari‘a or elements of it).

Let us now list the various beliefs or statements attributed (in sources post-dating their existence) to the *ghulāt*:

1. Claim that the Prophet or Imams or anyone else possesses divinity (*ulūhiyya*):
 - For example, the companion of ‘Abdullāh b. al-Rāwandī believed that al-Manṣūr was god (*allāh*) and he knew their secrets and their whispers (*ya‘lamu sirrahum wa najwāhum*).²⁵
2. Attribution of prophethood to anyone after Prophet Muḥammad:
 - Mughīra b. Sa‘īd and Bayān b. Sam‘ān and Buza‘y and Ṣā‘id considered themselves prophets (*naṣabū anfusahum anbiyā’*).²⁶
3. Transmigration of souls from one person to another (*al-tanāsukh*).

Let us now turn to the various narrations from the Imams to see how they dealt with these groups, and the balance that they struck in approaching the issue pertaining to their merits and the fundamental ontological separation between them and God.

The Traditions of the Infallibles: Recurring Themes and Lessons

What we will discern from a selection of traditions is that the Imams openly condemned the *ghulāt* as well as those who would seek to

²⁵ Sa‘d b. ‘Abdullāh al-Ash‘arī al-Qummī, *al-Maqālat wa-l-firaq* (Markaz-i Intishārāt-i ‘Ilmī wa Farhangī: 1981), 69. This trend of *ghuluww* was particularly poignant during the ‘Abbāsīd period within the general milieu of millenarianism, messianism, and revolution, all of which was encompassed by the ‘Abbāsīd revolution and the general religious and doctrinal environment of the 2nd-3rd/8th-9th centuries. It is also no coincidence that this was contemporary to the Imamates of al-Ṣādiq, al-Kāẓim, and al-Riḍā.

²⁶ Ibid, 55. In addition to this they believed the decedents of the Prophet were creating lords (*arbābun khāliqūn*).

belittle their position (*muqaṣṣira*). When we look at the ḥadīth literature as a whole, we notice an attempt to strike a balance between both. Furthermore, there is a clear emphasis upon the Imams as the servants of God and there always remaining an ontological incomparability between them and God, unlike the theological transgressions of the Jews and Christians.

حَمْدَوِيهِ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنِي مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَيْسَى، عَنْ يُونُسَ بْنِ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ، عَنْ بَشِيرِ
الدَّهَّانِ، عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ قَالَ: كَتَبَ أَبُو عَبْدِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ إِلَى
أَبِي الْخَطَّابِ، بَلَّغْنِي أَنَّكَ تَزْعُمُ أَنَّ الزَّانَا رَجُلٌ، وَأَنَّ الْخَمْرَ رَجُلٌ، وَأَنَّ الصَّلَاةَ
رَجُلٌ، وَأَنَّ الصِّيَامَ رَجُلٌ، وَأَنَّ الْفَوَاحِشَ رَجُلٌ، وَلَيْسَ هُوَ كَمَا تَقُولُ، أَنَا أَصْلُ
الْحَقِّ، وَفُرُوعُ الْحَقِّ طَاعَةُ اللَّهِ، وَعَدُوْنَا أَصْلُ الشَّرِّ، وَفُرُوعُهُمُ الْفَوَاحِشُ، وَكَيْفَ
يُطَاعُ مَنْ لَا يَعْرِفُ؟! وَكَيْفَ يُعْرِفُ مَنْ لَا يُطَاعُ!؟

Bashīr al-Dahhān relates from Imam al-Ṣādiq: “Abū ‘Abdullāh wrote to Abī l-Khaṭṭāb that: ‘It has come to me that you claim: fornication is a man, wine is a man, prayer is a man, and fasting is a man, indecencies is a man. It is not as you say; I am the origin of truth and the branches of the truth is obedience to Allah, and our enemies are the origin of evil and their branches are the moral indecencies. How then can the one who is not known be obeyed, and how can the one who is not obeyed be known?!’”²⁷

The beliefs of Abū l-Khaṭṭāb would seem to imply that these acts taken on some human form, which is perhaps linked to the *ghulāt* doctrine of *tanāsukh*, which clearly in this case the Imam has absolutely repudiated. Furthermore, as per al-Ash‘arī al-Qummī, Abū l-Khaṭṭāb and his group, the Khaṭṭābiyya, were among those who ascribed to antinomianism in so far as allowing alcohol, fornication, and other such sins, believing these to now be allowed since the love of the Imam (who for them

²⁷ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār ma‘rifat al-rijāl with glosses of Mīr Dāmād* (Āl al-Bayt Institute: 1984), 2:577.

is a god or a form of god) is all that matters to them.²⁸ Clearly, the Imam forbade such beliefs and castigated those who ascribed to such doctrines. We see the fear of antinomianism throughout the traditions as they pertain to the *ghulāt*, which seems to be for just cause. When we look at the various splinter Shī'ī sects, including the Nuṣayrīs – they have largely annulled many of the practices that were believed to be compulsory.

وَعَنْهُ، قَالَ: أَخْبَرَنَا الْحُسَيْنُ بْنُ عُبَيْدِ اللَّهِ، قَالَ: أَخْبَرَنَا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ يَحْيَى الْعَطَّارُ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنَا أَبِي، عَنْ أَحْمَدَ بْنِ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ خَالِدٍ، عَنْ الْعَبَّاسِ بْنِ مَعْرُوفٍ، عَنْ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنِ مُسْلِمٍ، عَنْ فَضِيلِ بْنِ يَسَارٍ، قَالَ: قَالَ الصَّادِقُ (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ): إِحْذَرُوا عَلَى شَبَابِكُمُ الْغُلَاةَ لَا يُفْسِدُوهُمْ، فَإِنَّ الْغُلَاةَ شَرُّ خَلْقِ اللَّهِ، يُصَغَّرُونَ عَظَمَةَ اللَّهِ، وَيَدْعُونَ الرُّبُوبِيَّةَ لِعِبَادِ اللَّهِ، وَاللَّهُ إِنَّ الْغُلَاةَ شَرٌّ مِنَ الْيَهُودِ وَالنَّصَارَى وَالْمَجُوسِ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا. ثُمَّ قَالَ (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ): إِنِّي نَارٌ يَرْجِعُ الْعَالِي فَلَا نَقْبَلُهُ، وَبِنَا يَلْحَقُ الْمُقَصِّرُ فَنَقْبَلُهُ. فَقِيلَ لَهُ: كَيْفَ ذَلِكَ يَا ابْنَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ؟ قَالَ: لِإِنَّ الْعَالِي قَدْ اعْتَادَ تَرْكَ الصَّلَاةِ وَالزُّكَاةِ وَالصِّيَامِ وَالْحَجِّ، فَلَا يَقْدِرُ عَلَى تَرْكَ عَادَتِهِ، وَعَلَى الرَّجُوعِ إِلَى طَاعَةِ اللَّهِ (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) أَبَدًا، وَإِنَّ الْمُقَصِّرَ إِذَا عَرَفَ عَمَلًا وَأَطَاعَ.

Imam al-Ṣādiq said: “Caution/protect your youth from the *ghulāt*, do not allow them to get corrupted. For surely the *ghulāt* are the most evil of God’s creation, for they belittle God’s greatness, and they claim lordship for the slaves of God. Surely, by God, the *ghulāt* are more evil than the Jews and the Christians and the Zoroastrians

²⁸ Al-Ash‘arī, *al-Maqālāt*, 51. Here al-Ash‘arī says: “They [the Khaṭṭābiyya] making licit (*abāhū*) all of the illicit (*maḥārim*) including fornication, ... stealing, drinking wine, abandoning prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage, and allowing [making licit] swearing testimony upon each other [cursing and anathematising one another or accusing each other of *kufir*].”

and those who associate partners [with God].”²⁹ Then he said: “To us returns the *ghālī* but we shall not accept him, and the *muqaṣṣir* (shortcomer) catches up to us and we shall accept him.” It was then said to him: “And how is that the case ...?” [The Imam] replied: “Because the *ghālī* made it a custom/habit to abandon the prayer, alms (*zakāt*), fasting, and pilgrimage. And he [the *ghālī*] is not able to leave his custom/invented practice and return to obeying God, ever again. As for the shortcomer, when he knows, he acts and obeys.”³⁰

Much like the previous ḥadīth, it is clear that Imam al-Ṣādiq was very concerned with the extremist tendencies in the community, especially as it pertained to ascribing divinity or lordship to the Imams and abandoning the *sharī‘a*. Here the Imam makes a clear distinction between those who fall short in their practice, and the *ghulāt* who haughtily create new customs, which is essentially an act for forming a new religion by abandoning the necessary aspects of belief and practice (*ḍarūriyyāt al-dīn*).³¹ The youth can especially fall prey to any extreme tendencies it would seem, and there was a concern that such practices would destroy the community from within. It also for that reason perhaps that the Imam says that the *ghulāt* are more wretched than the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and polytheists.³² Of course, such language must not be understood to promote violence or bigotry; here the Imam is referring to what the Qur’an views as heretical beliefs (as

²⁹ Reference to Q 22:17.

³⁰ Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Amālī* (Dār al-Thaqāfa: 1993), 650.

³¹ This is a point emphasised by Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī in his discussion on *ghuluww* and the issue of ritual impurity by rejecting the transcendence of God (*tanzīh rabb al-‘ālamīn*). Cf. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī, *Jawāhir al-kalām fī sharḥ sharā‘i‘ al-islām* (Mu’assasat al-Murtaḍā al-‘Ālamiyya: 1996), 2:459.

³² As an interesting point, I am not sure how these traditions would fit with a belief in soteriological pluralism. The tone and language seem very strong with regards to the “heretical” beliefs of others.

was previously discussed).

Once again, we see in this tradition and numerous others from the Imams that those ascribing physical qualities to God and bringing Him down to the human level are acts of taking human beings as lords and gods.

This the *ghulāt* were guilty of, and as we shall see in the next section, these are some of the beliefs that the *fuqahā'* have also classified as *ghuluww* in their discussion pertaining to their ritual impurity (*najāsa*).

However, for the Imāmiyya (Twelver Shī'a) this should not negate the belief that God can and has instilled greatness (*‘aẓama*) in His chosen servants, whether they be prophets, Imams, or other pious individuals. The issue at hand is the attribution of divinity to such individuals. Needless to say there can exist a spectrum by which such concepts can be debated and discussed. This is precisely what Ayatollah al-Khoei discusses in his jurisprudential discourse. He emphasises that *ghuluww* as a technical concept has certain acts or beliefs associated with it that yield disbelief (*al-asbāb al-mūjiba lil-kufr*).

Therefore, any strange belief or extraordinary idea cannot classify someone as a “*ghālī*” and hence have that person be classified as a disbeliever. One of these beliefs would be for a person to “believe that ‘Alī (or any other human being) is the sublime lord who came down to Earth in a physical body” which entails two things: anthropomorphism and rejection of God’s divinity (*ulūhiyya*).³³

Sayyid al-Khoei then makes a critical point which is that this does not even necessitate someone to reject the divinity of God all together, but rather even believe that all the matters pertaining to legislation and creation (*al-tashrī‘ wa-l-takwīn*) return to the hand of Imam ‘Alī or any of the other Infallibles. Again, the emphasis here is not on rejection of their greatness or God blessing them with incredible abilities as human beings that stand out from the rest of His creation.

³³ Shaykh Mīrzā ‘Alī al-Gharawī, *al-Tanqīh fi sharḥ al-‘urwat al-wuthqā taqrīrāt al-abḥāth al-sayyid Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū‘ī* (Mu’assasat al-Khū‘ī al-Islāmiyya), <http://www.al-khoei.us/books/?book=1&part=1>.

Rather, it is just that they are God's creation and a marvel at that, and hence it is for God to be glorified as the fashioner, creator, and the sustainer who gifted such incredible guides and remarkable intelligent beings to shepherd His creation to the shores of salvation. The problem with the *ghulāt* was that they simply failed to understand the radical ontological distinction, whereas the *muqaṣṣira* failed to understand the greatness in such human beings. They felt it was necessary that God and only God have knowledge of people's thoughts (for example), heal the dead, or even have some knowledge of the future (whatever it is that God granted them in terms of knowledge).

Therefore, Sayyid al-Khoei again points out that to believe for example that an angel brings down the rain by the permission of God or brings the dead back to life with the permission of God does not entail the rejection of divinity nor a necessary article of faith (*darūriyyāt al-dīn*).

The following narrations shed further light on this matter:

قَالَ لِي أَبُو خَالِدِ الْكَابُلِيِّ: أَمَا أَنِّي سَأُحَدِّثُكَ بِحَدِيثٍ إِنْ رَأَيْتُمُوهُ وَأَنَا حَيٌّ فَقُلْتُ
صَدَّقْتَنِي، وَإِنْ مِتُّ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَرَاهُ تَرَحَّمْتَ عَلَيَّ وَدَعَوْتَ لِي. سَمِعْتُ عَلِيَّ بْنَ الْحُسَيْنِ
عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ يَقُولُ: إِنَّ الْيَهُودَ أَحَبُّوا عُزَيْرًا حَتَّى قَالُوا فِيهِ مَا قَالُوا فَلَا عُزَيْرَ مِنْهُمْ
وَلَا هُمْ مِنْ عُزَيْرٍ، وَأَنَّ النَّصَارَى أَحَبُّوا عِيسَى حَتَّى قَالُوا فِيهِ مَا قَالُوا، فَلَا عِيسَى
مِنْهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ مِنْ عِيسَى. وَأَنَا عَلَى سُنَّةٍ مِنْ ذَلِكَ أَنَّ قَوْمًا مِنْ شِيعَتِنَا سَيُحِبُّونَا حَتَّى
يَقُولُوا فِينَا مَا قَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ فِي عُزَيْرٍ، وَمَا قَالَتِ النَّصَارَى فِي عِيسَى بْنِ مَرْيَمَ، فَلَا
هُم مَنَا وَلَا نَحْنُ مِنْهُمْ.

Abū Khālid al-Kābulī narrates from ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (Imam al-Sajjād): “I heard ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn say: ‘Surely the Jews loved ‘Uzayr to the extent that they said about him what they said, and ‘Uzayr is not from them nor are they from ‘Uzayr. And the Christians loved ‘Īsā to the extent of saying what they said about him, and ‘Īsā is not from them nor are they from ‘Īsā. I am upon [practicing] the

Sunna [of the Prophet] in regard to that. A group from our Shi‘a shall love us to the extent of saying [things] about us that the Jews say regarding ‘Uzayr and what the Christians [say] about ‘Īsā b. Maryam, so they are not from us and we are not from them.”³⁴

Once again as we see from the Fourth Imam, the problem is not with the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt having exceptional knowledge bestowed upon them by God, nor is the problem in them being purified from sin, or even possessing a reserved status with God such that the rest of creation would rely upon their guidance and knowledge for their salvation. Rather, the danger in the view of the Imam lies in reproducing the theology of the Jews and the Christians as presented in the Qur’an as per his explanation.

Furthermore, in a lengthy report detailing the gathering of jurists and theologians with Imam al-Riḍā, he emphasised (similar to the earlier Imams) the importance of never losing sight of the fact that prophets and Imams are slaves of God; they rely upon God for their salvation just as all humans ultimately do.³⁵ To this effect he cited a statement of the Messenger of God who said: “Surely God chose me as a slave prior to taking me/choosing me as a prophet.”

They worship God as his slaves; if anything, paradoxically it is this *maqām* (position) that becomes their greatest distinction itself and the cause for their incredible knowledge, and even abilities granted to them by God such as physiognomy (*‘ilm al-firāsa*), and this power of insight to read people and understand them has been given in its most supreme form to the Imams.³⁶ Ma’mūn is then clearly intrigued

³⁴ Al-Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār*, 120.

³⁵ Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (al-Ṣadūq), *Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā* (Jahān Press: 1958), 2:201.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 200. Imam al-Riḍā says (as a part of the longer tradition):

قَالَ: وَمَا مِنْ مُؤْمِنٍ إِلَّا وَلَهُ فِرَاسَةٌ يَنْظُرُ بِنُورِ اللَّهِ عَلَى قَدْرِ إِيْمَانِهِ وَمَبْلَغِ اسْتِبْصَارِهِ
وَعِلْمِهِ، وَقَدْ جَمَعَ اللَّهُ لِلْأَئِمَّةِ مِنَّا مَا فَرَّقَهُ فِي جَمِيعِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ.

by this line of thought so he asks the Imam to shed further light upon the status of the Imams, to which Imam al-Riḍā answers by stating that they have been endowed with a purified sacred spirit (*bi-rūḥin min-hu muqaddasa muṭahḥara*) which has only been given to the Messenger of God and the Imams accompanied by a column of light, all of which is a source of extraordinary guidance given to them by God.

Once again, this is a point that was lost upon the *ghulāt*, that God's chosen ones manifest the truest greatness through their most profound reverence of God Himself, and this in turn further imbues them with His divine guidance and blessings, all of which manifest in them being chosen guides who have been endowed with special knowledge, unlike the rest of creation. The Imam then goes on to cite the Qur'an:

﴿قَالَ اللَّهُ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى مَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُؤْتِيَهُ اللَّهُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحُكْمَ وَالنُّبُوَّةَ ثُمَّ يَقُولَ لِلنَّاسِ كُونُوا عِبَادًا لِي مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَلَكِنْ كُونُوا رَبَّانِيِّنَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تُعَلِّمُونَ الْكِتَابَ وَبِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَدْرُسُونَ وَلَا يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تَتَّخِذُوا الْمَلَائِكَةَ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ أَرْبَابًا أَيَأْمُرُكُمْ بِالْكَفْرِ بَعْدَ إِذْ أَنْتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

It does not behoove any human that God should give him the Book, judgement, and prophethood, and then he should say to the people, "Be my servants instead of God." Rather [he would say], "Be a godly people, because of your teaching the Book and because of your studying it." And He would not command you to take the angels and the prophets for lords. Would He call you to unfaith after you have been Muslims?³⁷

Therefore, once again we see the emphasis placed on servitude of God, and comprehending the purpose of prophecy as not creating mythical demigods but in further glorifying God for sending and creating such guides who in no way, shape, or form can ever be compared to God Himself, who is ontologically removed in terms of His essence from such a comparison ever being made. However, this again does not in any way

³⁷ Q 3:79-80.

negate God's blessing and endowment of special knowledge given to His chosen ones, whether it be al-Khiḍr, Jesus, Solomon, Muḥammad, or any of the Infallibles after him.

Imam al-Riḍā then goes on to narrate the tradition of Imam 'Alī:

قَالَ عَلِيٌّ (ع) يَهْلِكُ فِيَّ اثْنَانِ وَلَا ذَنْبَ لِي، مُحِبُّ مُفْرِطٌ، وَمُبْغِضٌ مُفْرِطٌ، وَأَنَا
أَبْرَأُ إِلَى اللَّهِ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى مِمَّنْ يَغْلُو فِيْنَا وَيَرْفَعُنَا فَوْقَ حَدِّنَا كِبْرَاءَةِ عِيسَى ابْنِ
مَرْيَمَ (ع) مِنَ النَّصَارَى

Two groups shall perish/be destroyed and there is no sin upon me [in this regard]: the excessive lover and the excessive hater. I dissociate with God from whomever goes to extremes regarding us and elevates us above our limit, just as Jesus son of Mary disassociated from the Christians.

It must be reiterated that as per this narration, *rubūbiyya* is not the Imams having special knowledge of what we do not know or even in them being guided by the light of God to see things that we cannot see, or having knowledge of past and future of what God endows them with; rather, *rubūbiyya* is to take human beings as gods, and this was what the Imam was charging the *ghulāt* with. Is believing in *raj'a* (the return to this world of certain individuals such as the Imams) or circumstances in which fate can change (*badā'*) a type of *ghuluww*? Or, is it *ghuluww* to believe in circumstances when God gives the dead the ability to hear voices that convey *salām* (greetings of peace) to them after their death? No, it is not. That is why scholars such as Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) accepted such beliefs. In fact, he said we collectively (*kāffatan*) accept this and that it is possible to accept such a notion as an intellectual-rational belief.³⁸

³⁸ Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Nu'mān (al-Mufīd), *Awā'il al-maqālāt* (Dār al-Mufīd: 1993), 72-73. He says: "*Hādihā madhab fuqahā' al-imāmiyya kāffatan* (this is the school of thought of the Imāmi jurists collectively)," although he has heard that Banū Nawbakht had a disagreement on this matter. Al-Mufīd does not provide any further details in this regard. Al-Mufīd also explains that

That being said, these suppositions could be debated, but what is reflected among the vast majority of Imāmī theologians such as al-Mufīd is that such beliefs do not constitute *ghuluww*, which in turn results in anathematisation or rendering a Muslim to be a non-believer. Accepting the notion that the Infallibles can hear voices after their death (when people visit their graves, for example) does not imply that they are *al-samīʿ al-ʿalīm* (all-hearing and all-knowing, which are attributes that belong solely to God); it means they have been endowed with a special blessing, but this is not absolute; it is always limited and cannot necessarily be applied to everything and every circumstance; it is *mā shāʾ allāh* – as God wills.

Put differently, at issue is not God’s power in essence (*dhāt*) but His power and ability to bestow by means of *mawhiba* (divine endowment) upon His creation. Ultimately, even if a belief is debated or even controversial, that does not immediately classify it as being *ghuluww*. It is for this reason Hassan Ansari in his discussion on *Ziyārat al-Jāmiʿa* states explicitly that the fantastical attributes of the Imams as described in this devotion are not synonymous with how *ghuluww* was defined in classical heresiographical literature and to make such an association is a mistake.³⁹ Again, this does not imply that such attributes are never open to differences of opinion either in their interpretation or in accepting the historical validity of such reports, for that is not the issue at hand in this paper. Rather, does accepting such beliefs necessitate the charge of *ghuluww*? The answer to which is most likely, no.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this paper that differing beliefs or even those things classified as an outright superstition by some does not necessarily constitute *ghuluww*. This term has been subject to a long

this ability is due to God’s graces (*laṭāʾif allāh*) upon these chosen servants such as the Prophet and the Imams. See: Ibid.

³⁹ Hassan Ansari, *Aṣālat al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa*, <https://ias.academia.edu/HassanAnsari>.

and contentious political-sectarian history in which orthodoxy was largely defined by the majoritarian Muslim theology, and then those who veered too far from those set limits could be described as *ghulāt* (extremists or transgressive Shī'a).

That being said, among the Imāmiyya there tends to be a collective understanding (albeit not without exceptions) that the burden of proof to determine *ghuluww* and accurately charge someone with such is to ascribe divinity or lordship to human beings. The ultimate fear or overarching concern can be found throughout the Qur'an which constantly warns its reader of the past "extremism" of the Christians and Jews. The inherent concern is to conflate the one who has received a gift (whether it be exclusive knowledge or an uncanny ability) with the One who bestowed it upon him or her.

Put differently, the ontological reality of radical separation between the bestower and the bestowed must be kept in view so to avoid the pitfalls of *ghuluww*. It is perhaps for this reason that we come across numerous traditions from the Prophet and the Imams that absolutely emphasise their humility and constant remembrance of God. They are described as the servants of God par excellence and any fantastical attributes which they may possess is but tentative and subject to God's grace as they are but His chosen servants.

That being said, none of this negates the evident hierarchical structure that is perpetuated in Imāmī theology in which God is the creator and sustainer and the Prophet and the Imams receive this grace (*lutf*), and in doing so become the chosen guides for humanity, without whom humanity would be in utter disarray for the very reason that they are (in Imāmī theology) the means created by God in order to deliver human beings to the shores of salvation. Along the way it is believed by the Imāmiyya that the Prophet, Fāṭima, and the Twelve Imams have been given extraordinary abilities as a means of manifesting their sublime existence as being slaves of God (*ibād allāh*).

That is not to say that *ghuluww* is not a concern among the Imāmiyya, for certainly it is, but this concern is limited to clear antinomian

tendencies (such as the abrogation of *ṣalāt* or allowance of alcohol consumption) along with the ontological conflation between God and His creation. An example of such conflation or blurring of lines would be when a human being becomes the source of sustenance, or he or she becomes *al-rāziq* (the sustainer) or as Ṣāhib al-Jawāhir (author of the famous work, *Jawāhir al-kalām*) mentions, *ghuluww* could be to say: “The Commander of the Faithful is the creator.”

Another example would be to attribute prophethood to someone other than Prophet Muḥammad after his death (*al-nabuwwa lil-ghayr*) which would render someone a non-Muslim in a jurisprudential sense.⁴⁰ Consequently, the concern of this paper has been to present a broad outline of the debated nature of what constitutes *ghuluww* and the general contours of the discussion as presented in a selection of exegetical works, ḥadīth, and heresiographical literature.

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⁴⁰ Al-Najafī, 2:459.

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