

The Great Schism of Islam

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Introduction

Islam, a religion of a billion people around the world, is broadly split into two theologic philosophy followers—Shi'as and Sunnis, ala, the Catholics and Protestants in the West, though with a very different twist. Though Shi'as represents only about 10% of the total Muslim population, historically there has been great tension between the two theologic followings. Iran and Iraq are the most populous Shi'a-dominated countries. Saudi Arabia is strictly Sunni-dominated. As we examine the changing landscape of an insecure world, the split between these two factions of Islam can lead to new threats to regional as well as the world peace. The purpose of this article is to establish the reasons for the fundamental differences between Sunnis and Shi'as belief system and to comment on why there is such great animosity between them, despite the declaration (Fatwa) by the revered Al-Azhar Foundation that Muslims are free to practice whatever belief they find consoling to them.

Shi'ism may be defined in two ways: opposition to the majority (Ahl us-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'ah, or the Sunnis) and a theological movement of Islam.

According to Shi'as, the theological foundations of Shi'ism existed from the very beginning, thus making Shi'ism a political and religious phenomenon; however, Sunnis and some scholars of Islam believe that Shi'ism began as a political movement, and then added theological dimensions and aspects as later Shi'as propounded distinct doctrines, beliefs, and practices. Whether Shi'ism evolved as a religio-political movement or a political movement that attained religious overtones perhaps will never be known for sure. In addition, it doesn't matter in understanding present-day Shi'ism.

Opposition

The word "Shi'a" comes from the label "Shi'at Ali," meaning the "Party of Ali." The Shi'a came about in opposition to the majority of Muslims who, after the death of Muhammad, acknowledged Abu Bakr, a senior companion in the Muslim community and father-in-law of Muhammad, as the caliph or successor to Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community. The Shi'as were opposed to this because they believed, as did Ali, that Ali was nominated by Muhammad to lead the Muslim community after Muhammad's death.

Abu Bakr became the caliph due to various circumstances. The senior companions and leaders of the Muslim community agreed to Abu Bakr becoming Muhammad's successor because they did not oppose Abu Bakr or the system that would choose the caliph. According to the majority of Muslims, Muhammad did not leave any explicit instructions regarding who will lead the Muslim community after he dies.

Ali was opposed to Abu Bakr for various reasons. One reason was because he believed he was nominated by Muhammad to succeed him. On his way back from what would be his last hajj, Muhammad stopped at Ghadir Khumm and announced his nomination of Ali as his successor, which the Muslims gathered there acknowledged. (This event is celebrated as Eid Ghadir Khumm by Shi'as to this day.) Such an arrangement, if made, was not upheld by the leading figures of the post-Muhammad Muslim community. Another reason Ali was opposed to Abu Bakr was because of two conflicts involving Ali's family and Abu Bakr's family: Abu Bakr usurped land that was bequeathed to Fatimah by Muhammad (Fatimah was Muhammad's daughter from his first wife, Khadijah; Fatima was also the wife of Ali) and the hatred 'Aishah, Muhammad's youngest and most favorite wife, had for Ali and Fatimah.

Regarding the nomination, where the Shi'as accuse the Sunnis of ignoring the nomination, the Sunnis accuse the Shi'as of inventing the event.

Under the reign of Uthman, the third caliph, the political opposition aspect of the Shi'at Ali came to the forefront. Because of nepotism and the favoring of Arabs over locals, the caliphate's popularity under Uthman plummeted. In addition, the military was upset when they were forbidden to take land as booty of conquest. Groups upset with Uthman or that had grievances against him flocked to Ali and his supporters.

Even though the majority of Muslims recognized Ali as the fourth caliph, Uthman erected a major problem for any harmony or cooperation in the Muslim empire: Mu'awiyah ibn Abu Sufyan. Abu Sufyan, the father of Mu'awiyah, was one of Muhammad's bitterest enemies; he conveniently converted to Islam after Mekkah was conquered by the Muslims. Abu Sufyan was the leader of the Umayyad clan, which Uthman was a member of. The elevation of the Umayyad clan, with its past strenuous opposition to Islam and the seemingly un-pious nature of its leading members, enraged many Muslims. Uthman appointed Abu Sufyan as governor of Syria. When Abu Sufyan died, the governorship (and leadership of the Umayyad clan) passed to his son Mu'awiyah, setting a dangerous precedence. When Uthman was killed, Mu'awiyah challenged Ali's claim to the caliphate.

Yet even before Mu'awiyah could do anything, 'Aishah rose up against Ali, leading a battle against him. The battle ended only when 'Aishah's camel was struck. 'Aishah was captured and then freed. After 'Aishah's defeat, Mu'awiyah began to move against Ali. Ali and his supporters became stuck in a difficult predicament: they not only had to battle against other Muslims, but even those in their own ranks. When Ali agreed to negotiate with Mu'awiyah, in hope of working out a deal, a number of Shi'as defected to form their own group, known as the Kharijites. The Kharijites were puritanical and tyrannical. They believed that their interpretation of Islam was the only correct one, and that anyone who did not comply was guilty of infidelity. They ruled that since Ali agreed to something not permitted in the Qur'an (Ali should have unreservedly claimed his rightful position without compromise), he lost his divine mandate and rebelled against God. As an apostate, Ali was worthy to be killed, and so the Kharijites began moving against Ali and his supporters. In this manner Ali was stuck in a two-front war. His conquests against the

Kharijites alienated some Muslims who were shocked by such bloodshed. Eventually, according to the Shi'a, a Kharijite killed Ali in the mosque in Kufa.

Ali's desires was not simply the caliphate but to establish an imamate. An imamate differed from a caliphate in that the imam was a divinely-appointed person who has special knowledge and powers; like the caliph, the imam exercised temporal and religious authority over the Muslim lands. In the caliphate, questions pertaining to religion would be settled by experts in religion and by the consensus of the Muslim community (this consensus known as *ijma'*); but in an imamate all religious questions and issues are resolved or dealt with by the imam. Ali bore the title of "Imam," as would his sons Hassan and Hussein. The caliphs would not bear this title.

The opposition to Mu'awiyah did not stop. Ali's eldest son, Hassan, was expected to oppose him. But rather than risk further bloodshed, Hassan claimed religious leadership and handed, temporarily according to the Shi'a, temporal rule to Mu'awiyah. The Shi'as accuse Mu'awiyah of poisoning Hassan. After Hassan's death, Ali's second son, Hussein, was expected to take up the mantle of the Imamate and oppose Mu'awiyah. Hussein, however, refused to refute his brother's position, while Mu'awiyah was alive. So his supporters began trying to foment rebellion for when Mu'awiyah dies and Hussein leads an active campaign to regain authority over the Muslim community. Mu'awiyah does die, but his son Yazid becomes the caliph. Hussein refuses to recognize Yazid's authority, and the two are set to oppose each other. Under Mu'awiyah and Yazid, the people of Kufa continually begged for Hussein's moral, religious, and military guidance and leadership against the corrupt Umayyads. Hussein was cautious of the Kufans' requests and he investigated it carefully. Once Hussein set out for Kufa, Yazid took action and ordered his rulers there to squash any support for Hussein in Kufa. The pro-Yazid rulers were successful, but it was too late for Hussein to turn back. On the fields of Kerbala, Hussein, his accompanying family and friends, and his armed supporters fought against Yazid's forces. Most of the people were killed, including Hussein, who was decapitated and his head brought to Yazid. Some of Hussein's house's women and children were spared. Among the children was the person who would become Imam Zayn ul-Abidin, the highly respected sixth imam.

The incidence at Kerbala would have remained a political and military one had not the Shi'a begun to use it as a central element of their belief and religion. They resented the Umayyads for their massacre of Hussein and those who accompanied him, and the Shi'a would engage in public mourning every year since then. Often the mourning would accompany dramatic and emotional retellings of the incidence.

Compared to the Sunnis, who were dispassionate about the whole issue, the Shi'a harbored great emotions, feelings, and thoughts. The Umayyads were considered to be worse than demons, and they began to be cursed by the Shi'a. The Shi'a even began to curse the caliphs before Ali, accusing them of usurping Ali's position, powers, and authority.

Politically, the Shi'as were not only in the position of persecuted people. At one point, a Shi'a empire flourished from Morocco to Egypt. The Fatimid Empire was ruled by Isma'ili imams, who fulfilled the Shi'a aspiration of government under a divinely appointed imam. The Fatimid Empire, a rival caliphate to the Sunni caliphates, did not survive for long, partly because it was an empire of Sunnis ruled by Isma'ili Shi'as.

Historically, there have been and are two Shi'a movements: the Twelvers (or Ithna 'Ashari) and the Isma'ilis (sometimes also called the Seveners). Both have different lines of imams, although both lines were descendants of Hussein through his great-grandson Ja'far as-Sadiq. The Ithna 'Ashari follow the descendants of Ja'far's son Musa al-Kazim; Isma'ilis follow the descendants of Ja'far's son Isma'il (hence the name "Isma'ilis").

The Ithna 'Ashari Shi'a claim that Sunni rulers, even the Abbasids, had every imam, except for the first and last, killed (Ali was killed by a Kharijite; Mahdi is still alive). The Shi'a claim the Sunni rulers did this out of fear of the people supporting an imam-led revolt and out of jealousy of the imam's popularity. These reasons do make sense: most people opposed to the caliph would support the Shi'a imam. Whether Sunni rulers did have ever Ithna 'Ashari imam killed cannot be known conclusively either way.

A clan of the Qureish, the Abbasids, wanted to overthrow the Umayyads, and to do so they began getting the support of the Shi'a. They appealed to their relation to Muhammad (Abbas, from whom the Abbasids come, was Muhammad's uncle), this making the case that the Umayyads would be replaced by people from Ahl ul-Bait, which is what the Shi'a wanted. However, once the Abbasids took power, they divorced themselves from all promises or claims, and began ruling like another Sunni dynasty, including persecuting the Shi'a. From their experience with the Abbasids, the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'a reconfirmed their belief that the Sunnis and their leaders were unreliable, and that the Shi'a and their imam(s) should devote themselves to their personal, religious lives instead of attempting to establish a Shi'a empire. (Eventually, a Shi'a empire, in what is now Iran and parts of Iraq, would be established, but without the guidance or leadership of the imam.)

In 939 CE, Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth imam of the Ithna 'Ashari line, disappeared. According to Ithna 'Ashari belief, he will return close to the Day of Judgment. The disappearance of the imam did not stop or stifle the Shi'a movement. Shi'a doctrines, practices, beliefs, and jurisprudence survived and remained the guiding lights of the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'a.

Compared to the Ithna 'Ashari, the Isma'ili imams' line continued for a long time. The Tayyibi (or Musta'li) line of imams ended in 1130 (with the occultation of Tayyib, the twenty-first imam of the line) while the Nizari line continues to this day (with Shah Karim ul-Husseini Aga Khan IV, forty-ninth imam of the line). Presently, there are three large Isma'ili groups: the Nizaris (also known as Isma'ilis in general, or Aga Khanis in the South Asian subcontinent), the Da'udi Tayyibis (also known as the Bohras), and the Suleimani Tayyibis.

Theology

The Shi'a interpretation of Islam is different from the Sunni interpretation. Some people wish to play down the differences between the two groups, but this should not be done. The reality is that Shi'ism and Sunnism are two very different interpretations of Islam. Considering this, it is not surprising that many Sunnis do not consider the Shi'a to be proper Muslims, or that many Shi'as do not believe the Sunni are proper Muslims.

The key difference between the two is the role of the imam. Basically, the Shi'as believe in the imam having an important and even crucial role in the Muslim community; the Sunnis do not believe in any such important figure.

For the Sunnis, the caliph was the ruler of the Muslim community, the successor of Muhammad in terms of leadership and authority, and the titular head of Islam. At various times, caliphs had a lot of influence over theology, beliefs, and practices. However, the caliphs were normal people who, especially with the conversion of the caliphate into a dynasty, did not have to be particularly religious. The qualification of the caliph was simple: he had to survive becoming a caliph. If he survived his rivals, he was caliph. In essence, there was no difference between the caliphate system, so to speak, and a royal dynasty.

Shi'as had a totally different outlook on how the Muslim community should be organized. The Shi'a believed that the imam was someone who was chosen by God, which was demonstrated by being nominated to become the next imam by the previous imam. Usually, the imamate passed down from father to son, although it did not pass down because the next imam was the incumbent imam's son: it passed down because he was chosen by the incumbent imam. The succession of imam in the Ithna 'Ashari line went orderly from father to son (with the exception of Ja'far as-Sadiq, concerning whose designation there was a dispute). An example from the Nizari Isma'ili line demonstrates the concept of nomination or designation, known as nass in Arabic. Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III was the forty-eighth imam of the Nizari Isma'ili Shi'as. In his will, he designated his grandson, Shah Karim ul-Husseini, to become the next imam. Prior to Sultan Muhammad Shah's death, most Nizari Isma'ili Shi'as expected Aly Khan, son Sultan Muhammad Shah and father of Shah Karim ul-Husseini, to become the next imam. Sultan Muhammad Shah, for his own reasons, passed over his son and gave the imamate to his grandson. Within a short period of time, the entire Nizari Isma'ili community accepted their late imam's will: the imam designated someone to be an imam, who had to be accepted by his followers.

The qualification for the imam is also simple: he had to be a descendant of Hussein, the son of Ali. Practically, there was more to this: the imams always had a reputation of piety, devotion, and religious acumen. All Shi'as (except Zaidi Shi'as) believed that the imam were ma'sum or infallible, pure, sinless, and perfect. There is great devotion in Shi'ism for the Panj Tan-e-Pak (a Persian phrase) or the Pure Five: Muhammad, his daughter Fatima; her husband, Ali; and Ali's sons from Fatimah, Hassan and Hussein. Also highly held were Zainab, Ali's daughter, and Abbas, Ali's son from his other wife, Fatima bint Huzam ibn Khalid. An imam, according to Shi'a belief, could do no wrong.

An imam's importance derived from his relation to Muhammad and because of the belief that the light of God rested on the imam. This light (called "nur") was with Ali and with all subsequent imams. The nur can rest on only one person at a time, which is why the succession disputes were significant in Shi'a eyes: there cannot be two or more legitimate imams with nur. This nur renders the imam infallible, pure, sinless, and perfect; this nur also endows the imam with special knowledge and wisdom that only the imam has. These facts make the imam suitable for religious and temporal leadership and authority.

The imam was not only simply a ruler or, from a Muslim perspective of the ruler of the Muslim community, the shadow of God on earth: the imam was essential for salvation. There is a widespread belief that in order to go to Heaven, one must acknowledge and swear allegiance to the correct imam. Ithna 'Ashari Shi'as do this with their devotion to Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi and their following a cleric; Nizari Isma'ili Shi'as do this by pledging allegiance to their imam through a representative of the imam in the local congregation; Musta'li Shi'as do this by swearing allegiance to the imam's representative (in place of the imam, who is in occultation). Considering this view, Sunnis, who do not pledge allegiance to anyone, are doomed. Sunnis are also doomed because of the acts of their rulers, for which the Sunnis are unapologetic, and because of their refusal to acknowledge the true tenets of Islam.

Shi'as and Sunnis have the same Pillars for Islam, but articles of faith and belief differ. Crucial for the Shi'as is belief in the imamate, which is absent from the Sunnis' faith.

Sunnis do not believe in being on their own, however. Until Kemal Ataturk abolished the caliphate, the Sunnis believed in the position of the caliph and in the institution of the caliphate. There was a great uproar when the caliphate was abolished, but nothing could be done to revive it, so Sunnis came to live with it. There is a large number of Sunnis who desire to bring back the institution of the caliphate. The Sunnis, like the Shi'as, want to see Islam united under one ruler. Sunnis and Shi'as differ as to who that ruler should be, how they ruler should come to power, and what qualifications there should be for the position of the ruler. This is not solely a Shi'a-Sunni debate: Sunnis and Shi'as cannot agree amongst themselves who the ruler should be.

The imam also has a role in Shi'a eschatology (or beliefs related to the Day of Judgment). According to the Ithna 'Ashari and Tayyibi Shi'as, the imam will emerge from hiding before the Day of Judgment; according to the Nizari Isma'ilis, the imam will activate his role as the Qaim and usher in the Day of Judgment. No Shi'a sect places emphasis on the reappearance of Isa ibn Mariam (commonly known as Jesus Christ). Curiously, many South Asian Sunnis believe that both al-Mahdi and Isa ibn Mariam will reappear before the Day of Judgment.

For the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'as, the martyrdom of Hussein, commemorated on Ashura or the tenth of the month of Muharram, plays a major role in the religious life of the Ithna 'Ashari and Tayyibi Isma'ili Shi'as. (Nizari Isma'ili Shi'as do not believe in commemorating Ashura because they believe that the light, essence, and spirit of all the

imams are the same, meaning that the essence of Hussein resides in the living imam, and there is no need to mourn one who is still living.) Every year, these Shi'as commemorate the martyrdom with passion plays, emotional retelling of the events at Kerbala, and public displays of mourning that in some places are accompanied with self-mortification. This commemoration worries Sunnis, as it is an annual reminder of why Shi'as should hate the Sunnis.

According to the Shi'as, Ali and imams were integral parts of Islam as revealed to Muhammad. Common Shi'a belief is that God revealed to Muhammad a verse at Ghadir Khumm on his way back from what would be his last Hajj: "O Messenger! Preach you whatever has been sent down to you from your Lord; and if you do it not, then you have not preached His Message. Allah shall protect you from men. Allah does not guide a disbelieving people" (5:67, Surat-ul-Ma'ida). According to Shi'a interpretation, God revealed this when Muhammad was nervous about announcing that Ali would succeed him: Muhammad feared the opposition that would arise from disappointed people who had other plans in mind. After announcing Ali's nomination, God revealed another verse: "This day I have perfected your Religion for you and have completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your Religion" (5:3). According to some Shi'as, the message Muhammad was sent to relay was simply announcing Ali's position as leader of God's people: all the rest are simply additions to the main message.

The Sunnis despair of the above theological innovations, as they see them. For them, Muhammad is the paramount personality in Islam. They despise what they see as Shi'as coming close to worshiping Ali, ignoring Muhammad, and cursing and hating the Rightly-Guided caliphs (al-Khalifat ur-Rashidin: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali). They do not like the exaggerations, dramatics, and hysteria displayed on Ashura. They condemn the differences the Shi'as have brought into prayer, belief, and religion. The Sunnis also pay respect to the descendants of Muhammad, known as Syeds. But they do not worship them or claim they are essential for salvation. They blame Shi'as for the disturbances created by Uthman's assassination: some even accuse Shi'as of killing Uthman. They do not understand the loathing the Shi'a have for the Sunni caliphs or for the Sunnis themselves.

Another significant theological division relates to the sources of jurisprudence. The Sunnis believe in four schools of jurisprudence, each with equal validity and importance. Where each school dominates is a matter of tradition and geography. These four schools base themselves on the Qur'an, ahadith (statements of Muhammad and senior members of the early Muslim community), sunnah (the example of Muhammad and senior members of the early Muslim community), ijma' (consensus of the community), qiyas (analogy), and aql (reason). Today, the traditional authorities are the Qur'an, ahadith, sunnah, and shari'ah. None of the four schools are followed by the Shi'a. The Shi'as base their jurisprudence on the Qur'an, ahadith (statements of Muhammad and the imams), sunnah (example of Muhammad and the imams), and the writings of the imams. The Shi'as have two models of jurisprudence: akhbari and 'usuli. The word "akhbari" actually refers to reports, much like the ahadith and sunnah of the Sunnis. The usulis, on the other hand, do not depend on such reports: "Usuli" refers to "usul" or principles, meaning this

model is based on the principles of Islam (as understood at the time) rather than reports looking back into the past. Usuli Shi'as, the majority of Ithna 'Ashari Shi'as, practice taqlid, which is when a Shi'a (called a muqallid, which means "emulator") emulates or follows or adheres to a religious cleric (mujtahid). The mujtahids practice ijtihad, which refers to solving problems by thinking them through, even if it means introducing an innovation. The very source of the term "Sunni" emphasizes the differences: the Sunnis follow the sunnah and jama'a (community) whereas the Shi'as don't.

To put it bluntly: the Shi'a do not understand the Sunni, and the Sunni do not understand the Shi'a, and neither sides has any motivation or desire to understand each other. Theologically and jurisprudentially, they live in different worlds.

Differences in Practice of Islam

Islam in practice differs greatly between the Sunnis and the Shi'as. The prayers are different, the call to prayer is different, the times for prayers are different, the rules of prayer are different, the statement of faith is different, and various other religious practices are different between the two groups. These differences run so deep that Sunnis and Shi'as very rarely, if ever, pray together or in the same place. The only prominent exceptions to this are Mekkah and Medinah. In interest of fairness, not even all Shi'as pray together: Ithna 'Ashari Shi'as pray in imambargahs; Isma'ilis pray in jamatkhanas. Sunnis tend to be segregated by religious movement or ethnicity.

It would be impractical to list everywhere that Shi'as and Sunnis differ. Many differences are discussed above or may be extracted from the above.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Shi'ism and Sunnism are part of the same religion. Despite their divergences, there is much in common between them to consider both movements as parts of Islam. However, the Great Schism will always be an obstacle to Muslim unity. For many centuries, Shi'as and Sunnis have distrusted each other, maligned each other, and avoided each other. In some areas of the world (an example is Pakistan), sectarian violence between Shi'a and Sunni rips communities apart.

Furthermore, the Iranian Revolution put down the Shi'a notion of political non-involvement. Prior to the Revolution, the Shi'as believed that they should wait for al-Mahdi to reappear and establish the right government by himself. This is because Shi'as cannot be successful in any such experiment in nation-building: their history is one of persecution, failure, violence, and blood, and there was no reason to believe anything would make it different. Now, with political non-involvement out of the way, Ithna 'Ashari Shi'as have developed a political consciousness and do not refrain from involvement in politics. This can cause more disturbances between Sunnis and Shi'as. Examples of such disturbances are evident in Bahrain, Sa'udi 'Arabia, and Iraq. However, the martial spirit, which has gripped parts of Sunnism, has not arrived into Shi'ism. For now, Sunnism is more a threat to Shi'ism than Shi'ism is to Sunnism. Militant Sunni movements also tend to be anti-Shi'a.

These differences also affect Muslim unity vis-à-vis the interference of foreign powers in the Muslim world. Iran could have foiled coalition plans to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, but it did not. On the other hand, militant Sunni groups poured soldiers into both states. Iran's condemnation of the West was less enraged, less vehement, and less violent than that from the Sunni people. (Sunni states are another matter.) Not even the Irani people were as outraged as the Sunni people. This isn't because Shi'as are positively inclined to foreign interference but because the Shi'as could make gains with the success of coalition forces: the freedom and liberation of the Iraqi Shi'as and the alleviation of the threat of a Sunni invasion (or violent campaigns) from Afghanistan. This shows that in various situations, the status, opinions, and reactions of both divisions differ along with what each side may lose or gain. It is a significant point that the terrorist acts in Iraq are by Sunni groups, not Shi'a, even though the Shi'a want coalition forces out as much as the Sunnis. (With the coalition troops gone, a Shi'a takeover of Iraq would become easy.)

To be realistic, relations between the two divisions will remain poor. It may be possible for both to come to terms as Catholics and Protestants have: cooperation without alliances. At some point, the world of Islam will need this. A constantly divided world of Islam prevents any development or international maturity for any Muslim state. Shi'as and Sunnis may not pray together, but they might be able to work together to create a better world for Muslims all over.