Shi'ites and Sunnis

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by William VanDoodewaard, Islam United? A Comparison of Shi'ite and Sunni Belief and Practice, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada: 1995.

To the casual Western observer, the religion of Islam often appears as a monolithic entity. This image of Islam is often reinforced from various directions. Spike Lee's recent motion picture Malcolm X shows the famed black leader, turning away from the aberrant and racist Nation of Islam, to the real Islam portrayed in the hajj - Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca.

In Mecca, Malcolm, along with the moviegoers, is powerfully impressed with the cohesiveness and sense of oneness in Islam. Malcolm becomes a devout Muslim, striving to do good and help the oppressed after his return to America. The prevailing concept of the oneness of Islam is further reinforced by Muslims who often argue that the differences within Islam are minor and inconsequential, especially in contrast to the numerous denominations and sects found under the banner of Christianity in the world of today. Yet, despite the images and affirmations the question remains: how valid is the assertion that Islam is united in essential belief, though differing in minor points? In order to begin to answer this question, and to develop a deeper understanding of Islam, the historical origins, theological and legal distinctives, and the practical ramifications of the variations within Islam must be examined. The focus of this article is to compare Shiite with Sunni Islam.

The Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his introduction to Allamah Tabatabai's Shiite Islam, states, "the issues which .. arise [in a comparison of Shiism and Sunni Islam] .. if presented without the proper safeguards and without taking into account the audience involved could only be detrimental to the sympathetic understanding of Islam itself."

Attempting to explain differences Nasr argues that in Islam "real peace or salvation lies in Unity through this divinely ordained diversity and not in its rejection." However, "Shiism and Sunnism must not cease to be what they are and what they always have been… [and] therefore [Shiism] must be presented in all its fullness, even in those aspects which contradict Sunni interpretations.."

Nasr's concern to maintain the unity of Islam is evident as he attempts to reconcile this with the differences within Islam, yet his statements lead one to wonder whether he believes contradictions are divinely ordained. Other religious scholars are more skeptical in light of what they view as a prevalent uncritical approach to the study of Islam. Andrew Rippin argues that "such naive historical study seems to suggest that Islam is being approached with less than academic candor."

In order to fully understand Shiism and how it differs from Sunni Islam, the historical origins of Shiism must be considered. According to Allamah Tabatabai, the history of Shiism begins with Muhammad's acceptance of Ali's response to the invitation to become successor and inheritor. Upon the death of Muhammad, the majority of the Muslims quickly selected a caliph - who was not Ali. The minority group who protested this decision became known as the party or Shi'a of Ali. Here, according to Shiites, is the beginning of Shiism. However, Bernard Lewis, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, disagrees with this as being evidence of the distinctive historical origin of Shiism. He states,

The early history of Shiism is still very obscure. Most of the expositions that have come down to us are the work of theologians, both Sunni and Shiite… They were all written at later dates and often read back into the past the ideas and conflicts of later times. In doing so, they tend to systemize and stabilize much that was shifting and chaotic. In time, the Shi'a crystallized… marking them off from Sunni Islam… In early times this had not yet happened. The Muslims were still a single community, in which various groups formed and broke up, following different doctrines

and leaders and changing them with bewildering ease.

According to John L. Esposito, "the revolt of Ali's son Husayn, led to the division of the Islamic community into its two major branches, Sunni and Shia." Whatever the case may be of actual historical origins, in order to understand the fundamental beliefs of Shiism, and to see how they differ from Sunnism, it is important to understand what Shiism views as its own historical origin and development.

The Shiite scholar, Allamah Tabatabai, as stated previously, sees the roots of Shiism in Muhammad's acceptance of Ali as his successor. According to Tabatabai, Muhammad "clearly asserted that Ali was preserved from error and sin in his actions and sayings."9 Not only was "whatever he said and did in perfect conformity with the teachings of religion" but "he was [also] the most knowledgeable of men in matters pertaining to Islamic sciences and injunctions."

After the death of Ali, the Shiites became an often persecuted minority - especially under the reign of Mu`awiyah. The second Imam, Hasan, was killed under Muawiyah. Husayn, the third Imam, along with numerous citizens of Medina were massacred under the authority of Yazid, the son of Mu'awiyah, during his reign as caliph. According to John Esposito, the memory of these and following tragedies and martyrdoms "provided the paradigm of suffering and protest that has guided and inspired Shii Islam." While not found in Sunni Islam, the ideas of martyrdom and survival through persecution have become a distinct part of Shiite religion, and are celebrated and remembered during the lunar months of Muharram and Safar.

One of the central and distinctive Shiite doctrines, and an integral part of Shiite history, is the doctrine of the Imamate. The Shia Imam is the leader of the Shiite Muslim community and "must be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali, the first Imam." The Imam is "both sinless and absolutely infallible in his pronouncements on dogma and, indeed, in all matters." A sign of Allah's goodness towards mankind, the Imam enables the salvation of the creation by "providing a sure guide in the world and a certain answer to issues of dispute."

Andrew Rippin states "[Allah's] mercy and justice indicate that there can never be a time when the world is without an Imam, for if that were so, people would have no guidance and there would be no proof available of [Allah's] mercy towards His creation." Some more extreme Shii sects believe the Imam is "an incarnation of Allah and a bearer of the divine substance." All Shiites believe that one of the Imam's functions is to intercede on behalf of his followers in the hereafter.

The majority of Shiites believe there have been twelve Imams, with Muhammad al-Muntazar, also known as Sahib al-Zaman (the Lord of the Age), being the twelfth Imam. The twelfth Imam is believed not to have died, but has entered occultation - or to have disappeared. Yet, Shiites believe he will return "at the end of the world to vindicate his loyal followers, restore the community to its rightful place, and usher in a perfect Islamic society in which truth and justice will prevail."

As Allamah Tabatabai states, the five Shiite principles of religion are tawhid, nubuwwah, ma`ad, imamah, and`adl. Sunnism and Shiism agree on tawhid, nubuwwah and ma'ad, but differ on the other two.

The doctrine of the Imamate or imamah, creates a number of distinct differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam. Sunnis do not accept this doctrine, and consequently do not see the Imams as infallible, sinless, or as a source of absolute religious authority. Shiites believe that after the occultation of the twelfth Imam, the divine light or walayat was passed on to the mujtahid or more specifically to the ayatullahs, who "act as the interpreter of religion for the religious community." When the mujtahids are "unanimous on a religious precept and there are no objections.. [it is] proof that an infallible (imam) is satisfied."

The doctrine of the Imamate, however, leads to much deeper differences between the Shiites and Sunnis. According to Sunni scholar Fazlur Rahman, "the Shi'a.. which differs from orthodoxy doctrinally, also has an entirely separate body of Hadith." Shiites, in contrast to Sunnis, accept the hadiths of Muhammad and the Imams, as being of equal importance and validity.

The Shi'a also have different interpretations for parts of the Quran. According to the Sunnis "there is nothing in the Quran and the Tradition to support the Shia claim that the Imamate is one of the 'pillars' of religion." However, Shiites, especially in areas concerning the Imamate and esoteric interpretation of the Quran, disagree with Sunni interpretation and construction of Quranic verses - as in Surah 3:7. Another conflict of Quranic interpretation is Surah 3:110, where the Shiites instead

of reading the Arabic word umma in reference to peoples or community, read the word a'imma in reference to the Imams.

As the Shiites also historically do not accept the caliphs as the legitimate leaders of the Islamic community, there is the "tendency to suggest modifications to the [Quranic] text - citing additions, omissions, changes and alterations to the version promulgated by Uthman." The importance of these discrepancies is far reaching as the Quran and Hadith are the sources of authority for both Islamic law and theology. These serious questions about the essential foundations of Islam remain unresolved to the present.

Mohammed Arkoun, in the book Islam: State and Society, deals with the inter-related disciplines of Usul al-fiqh and Usul al-din. The Usul al-fiqh is accepted as authoritative and is a part of 'aqida or all beliefs and propositions accepted by Muslims without questioning and as a matter of faith.

Here is where the differences between the Shiite and Sunni Hadith present a glaring problem. As Arkoun states "the Quran and Hadith are accepted as stable, objective sources of the Law," yet, "the Hadith is presented in two very different corpus: the Sunni (Bukhari, Muslim and others) and the Shii (Kulayni, Ibn Babuya)." Arkoun continues to say, "add to this fact that the divergent readings and interpretations make the Usul less authoritative than it claims."

A consequence of the Usul al-fiqh being accepted as authoritative, "is that the authors must have reached the perfect required knowledge of Arabic so that there is no need for any revision of their work." This consequence, when met with the prevailing problems of Quranic interpretation between Shiites and Sunnis throughout Islamic history, leaves grave doubts about the authority of Islamic Sharia. Arkoun agrees, stating "if we raise problems of reading according to modern linguistics and semiotics … we can start a task never undertaken in Islamic thought: the critique of Islamic reason." Arkoun goes on to show that within Shiism, the Shii theory of ijtihad which relies on the authority of the Imams and marja' al-taqlid, is open to criticism in the same manner. Yet, in the scope of this article, the contradictory differences between Shiism and Sunnism in the area of Quran and Hadith are the most important, as they create solid evidence for a serious problem in Islam, caused by what otherwise might be excused as minor differences.

Aside from differing inheritance laws, the Shiite law

or Sharia is largely similar to that of Sunni Islam. Yet for the Shiites, a body of Hadith distinct from that of the Sunnis is the basis for religious ritual in which the Sunnis do not partake. One of these is the passion play during the month of Muharram, part of the festival of Ashura - a commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn. "There are also at this time elaborate street processions in which people chant, cry and sometimes beat themselves in order to participate in the passion of the Imam."

Though many traditional Sunnis do not accept art forms depicting human beings, or practice drama, the Shia do. Pilgrimage to holy places such as the tombs of Imams and saints also has a greater emphasis in Shiism than Sunnism.

Some of the other distinctly Shiite beliefs and practices include taqiyah and mutah. Taqiyah is when "a man hides his religion or certain of his religious practices in situations that would cause definite or probable danger as a result of the actions of those who are opposed to his religion or particular religious practices." This doctrine is based in part on Surah 3:28, and Surah 16:106.

The second practice, mutah, is based on the historical precedent set by the actions of the companions of Muhammad, such as Zubayr al-Sahabi, as well as the teachings of the Imams, both of which are contained in their Hadith.

The differences between Shiism and Sunnism are numerous with many details, as well as larger topics such as eschatology and divine justice, left untouched in this article. Though this article has dealt primarily with the beliefs and practice of "twelver" Shiites, there are also numerous other sects within Shiism such as the Zaydi, Ismaili, Nizari, Mustalis, Druze, and Muqannaah. Some scholars also argue that the Babi, Bahai, and Batini sects should be considered as derivatives of Shiism, though Shiite scholars such as Allamah Tabatabai say they "should not in any sense be considered as branches of Shiism." However, even the very existence of different sects of Islam ought be viewed as a deep dilemma within Islam in light of Quranic injunction:

"And be ye not among those who join gods with Allah, those who split up their religion and become sects, each party rejoicing in that which is within itself!" (Surah 30:31-32)

"As for those who divide their religion and break into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least." (Surah 6:159)

In conclusion, while it is true that Shiism and Sunnism are united in many ways, the blatant differences in fundamental areas, such as the composition and interpretation of the Quran and Hadith, leave profound problems for Islam as a body of religious belief. Many Islamic scholars and leaders, for whatever motivation, have chosen to continue to avoid or ignore this difficult reality. The questions remain unanswered.

Comparisons with Christianity

As Christians, our response is that it is clear that Islam is not a unified, coherent body, as so often is claimed in contrast to the apparent differences between various Christian denominations. Indeed the differences between conservative Protestant (Christian) groups which hold to the Bible as the inspired, inerrant, infallible and complete Word of God show far more unity, the differences being a result of interpretation of Scripture, rather than having differing scriptures as within the body of Islam.

We believe the central problem of Islam is not merely its lack of formal adequacy in its claims of religious authority (the problem not only of conflicting internal claims as seen between Shiite and Sunni, but also of revelation in the Quran and Hadith which conflict with the Judeo-Christian Scripture, which the Muslim sources claim as being their own roots, albeit now "corrupted.") but perhaps more profoundly the lack of material adequacy.

Islam fails to honestly and adequately deal with how sinful man can ever be renewed to fellowship with a perfectly Holy and Just God. Islam claims that a simple adherence to the "five pillars" is all that is ultimately required. True enough, the hadith allow for many more, at times conflicting practices aimed to earn righteousness; but if God is Holy and who He is claimed to be, then only complete righteousness, a fully pure and holy life, can meet up to His standards for living.

No individual can hope to be absolutely perfect in heart and action; and indeed even if one were so from this moment on it would not eradicate the debt owed for previous sins and shortcomings, but would merely be giving what is owed to God at that present moment of life. It would not annul previous wrong.

The Bible alone clearly and adequately deals with the situation of sinful individuals before a truly Holy God. There it is clearly shown that the heart problem of every individual, the evils in this world are rooted in the sinfulness of the human heart. The message of the Gospel (Injil) is that the One True and Holy God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem men from their sins; to pay for what they could never hope to pay by all their good deeds.

The life of the Christian (one who trusts in Jesus as Lord and Saviour) then is dedicated to striving to live a holy life out of thankfulness for the forgiveness one has asked for and received from God, through Jesus Christ. The motivation is not fear, or the desire to try one's best to be good enough in the sight of our Holy and Righteous God to be allowed into eternal paradise; no it is thankfulness and gratitude for the gift of salvation freely offered to all who long to live rightly before God, who realize their sinfulness, and trust in the work of Jesus to forgive.

Jesus said,

"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (John 8: 12) "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." (John 3:16-21)