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Sects in Islam

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines the divide between the Sunni or mainstream Islam and the Shi'i branches of Islam. There are many types of Shi'ism, the largest being the Imami or Twelver Branch of Shi'ism, which is the religion of the majority of Muslims in Iran, southern Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Lebanon. The discussion provides a historical overview of the divide between Sunnis and Shi'ites before raising the question of the renewed political thrust of the once politically quiescent Shi'ism in modern times, beginning with its construction as a radical ideology in Iran in 1979. It holds that the Sunni-Shi'ite divide is effectively more a political and sociological category than a theological one, as it becomes significant only at times of political and social upheaval.

Keywords: Sunni, Islam sects, Shi'i, Imami, radical ideology, Iran, Sunni-Shi'ite divide, political upheaval

ISLAM in the modern world is divided principally between the Sunni and Shi'i branches.¹ This broad division hides many other more subtle differences, such as the various Sufi orders and competing doctrines in both. There are also schisms between Sunni groups, notably the SalaW/Wahhabi² advocacies against both traditional and reformist trends in current culture and politics. The Sunni branch, with its divisions, comprises the great majority of Muslims in the world, estimated at 85 per cent or more (estimates vary widely) of the estimated one billion or more Muslims in the world. Shi'ism constitutes a minority (estimate, 11–15 per cent of Muslims) with concentrations in certain countries and regions, mainly Iran, Iraq, India/Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Lebanon, and the Gulf.³

Sunni Islam is considered, by its adherents and many commentators, as the 'mainstream', the 'church' (though only metaphorically, as there is no equivalent concept or institution in Islam), while the Shi'a and others are 'sects'. Sunnis refer to themselves as *ahlu al-sunna wal-jama'a*, the people of the *sunna*, the correct norm (of the Prophet), and *jama'a*, indicating both the body of believers and their consensus. As against this honorific self-image, the Shi'a are referred to, disparagingly, as *al-rafidha*, the rejectionists—that is, those who have rejected community and consensus. The Shi'a also see themselves as

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dissidents, but naturally, in favour (p. 546) of righteousness and legitimacy, holding that rule and leadership belong to the Imam, a divinely inspired, infallible (*ma'sum*) figure, descended from the lineage of the Prophet through Ali and Fatima, but who is currently 'hidden' (for the mainstream *Imami Shi'a*), and will reveal himself in a messianic event to come (Richard 1995: 15–48). There seems, then, to be a tacet agreement that the Shi'a are sectarian, and a discussion of Islamic sectarianism has to be about Shi'ism and its branches. And there are many offshoots from 'mainstream' Shi'ism which are active in the modern world. There may also be an argument for considering Salafis/Wahhabis as Sunni sects. They are sectarian in that they consider all other Muslims to be deficient in their faith and practice, and are actively hostile to Sufism, popular religiosity, such as the visitation of tombs, as well as being fiercely hostile to the Shi'a (Roy 2004: 232–89).

The main Shi'i populations in the modern world are called 'Twelver', or Imami Shi'a, following a line of twelve Imams, the last of whom 'disappeared' in 874 (Richard 1995: 40–3). They have much in common with the Sunnis in terms of belief, ritual, and law. They agree on the text of the Qur'an and on the sanctity of the traditions of the Prophet, though they favour different narrations of these traditions. They agree on the 'five pillars': *tawheed*, affirmation of the unity of God and the prophet hood of Muhammad (though the Shi'a add to their call to prayer an affirmation of the friendship of Ali with God); the daily prayers, though the Shi'a allow the reduction of the five prayers to three; the fasting of Ramadan; the giving of alms (with some different categories for the Shi'a); and the obligation of haj, pilgrimage to Mecca. The Shi'a also believe in the merit of pilgrimage to the holy shrines of their Imams, though these are not alternative to the Mecca *haj* and do not rank as equal to it. Shari'a law is common to the practice of both Sunna and Shi'a, with differences in detail relating to ritual, family, and some transactions. We shall note in what follows the major differences between Sunnis and Twelver Shi'a as being ones of authority, culture, philosophy, and ethos.

There are many sects active in the modern world which hold various esoteric doctrines which share a veneration of Ali and his lineage, the best-known example being the Ismailis (Daftary 1990). These differ from both Sunni and Twelver Shi'i Islam in that they do not observe the centrality of the Qur'an and the five pillars, but believe in the sanctity of alternative texts which contain esoteric scriptures, often accessible only to an initiated elite. These are often the religions of isolated communities, many based in remote mountain regions, historically with low levels of literacy. The spread of literacy in the modern world has made conditions more difficult for many of these esoteric religions, such as the Druze in Syria/Lebanon/ Palestine, the Alevis in Turkey, and the Ismailis. They have responded by coming forth as ethnic or cultural communities, drawing on religious content mostly for traditions, symbols, and communal leadership.

In what follows I will elaborate on the sociology and politics of some of these groups. These are interwoven with historical narratives.

The Genesis of Shi'ism

The major source of sect formation in Islam is the Shi'ite schism, which is traced by Muslims to their early history. The word 'Shi'a' means 'partisans', in this case of 'Ali bin Abi-Taleb (Ali in what follows), cousin of the Prophet and husband of his daughter Fatima. Their two sons, Hassan and Hussein, were the only male issues from the line of Muhammad. The conflict that gave rise to the dissidence of the Shi'a was the succession to Muhammad at his death in 632.

The Holy Family

The Shi'ite faith revolves around the story of the injustice and suffering that befell *Ahlu al-Bayt*, the people of the House of the Prophet, at the hands of usurpers and tyrants. The story runs as follows.

The Prophet, in the Shi'ite narrative, had designated Ali as his successor, but his wishes were bypassed by his senior companions, who supported one of their number, Abu-Bakr, for the succession, to be followed by 'Umar, then 'Uthman. Ali succeeded as the fourth Caliph only in 656 till his assassination in 661. Ali's Caliphate was troubled by constant challenges from various quarters, culminating in the battle of Siffin with Mu'awiyah, governor of Syria, in 658, in which the latter gained the upper hand and established his rule in Damascus, soon to become the Caliphate of Islam at the death of Ali in 661. Henceforth, in the reckoning of many Muslims, and not just the Shi'ites, Islamic rule became that of dynastic kingdoms, still labelled 'caliphate' (with religious connotations of succession to the Prophet), but in fact a departure from the 'sacred history' of the Rashidun (rightly guided) rule of Muhammad, then of his four Companions.

Mu'awiyah bequeathed the Caliphate to his reportedly dissolute and oppressive son Yazid, a byword for godlessness and tyranny in Muslim history. Yazid had reached an agreement with Ali's elder son Hassan, who, apparently, conceded the Caliphate and led a quiet life in Medina, only, according to the Shi'a, to be poisoned at Yazid's command. The younger son, Hussein, took up the claim to legitimate rule of Muslims, supported by the people of Kufa in Iraq. He travelled in an entourage of his family and retainers from Medina, aiming for Kufa, to lead his followers there, only to be intercepted by Yazid's men, who besieged his party, preventing them from access to the waters of the Euphrates. The tale of this siege, the suffering and thirst of the holy family, especially the infants, the brave fight of (p. 548) the men, and the ultimate martyrdom of Hussein and his male companions, and the capture and humiliation of the women, these tales constitute the legends and symbols of martyrdom constitutive of Shi'a faith and culture, as well as that of many mystics of Islam (Richard 1995: 27-33).

The Sanctity of Ali

The twelve Imams of the mainstream Shi'a start with 'Ali bin Abi-Taleb. His sanctity is the *raison d'être* of Shi'ism and of many of the smaller Alawite sects. Shi'i doctrine rests on the sanctity of the lineage and house of the Prophet, and the belief that Muhammad designated Ali as his successor. Each Imam is believed to have designated his successor, following divine guidance (Richard 1995: 15–48). This doctrine is at odds with the Sunni belief that any righteous and sane Muslim male can be acclaimed as Caliph, with a strong presumption that such a prince should be a descendant from the tribe of Quraysh, that of the Prophet. Seeming Sunni egalitarianism in this respect is made ambiguous by this stipulation, as well as by its acquiescence in dynastic kingdoms.

In addition to the charisma of lineage, 'Ali is credited with superior personal qualities of courage, strength, wisdom, beauty, and righteousness. To mystics, both Sunni and Shi'i, he is the 'Perfect Man'. There are also suggestions of a special relationship to God. The Shi'i call to prayer (*azan*) includes an affirmation that Ali is the friend, *wali*, of God (*ashahdu anna aliyan waliyu allah*). The mystical and less 'orthodox' Shi'a, as well as the other Alawite sects, go much further in the sanctification of Ali. These groups are known as *ghulat*, literally 'exaggerators' or extremists. In many narratives in this vein, Ali is given precedence above Muhammad in his relation to God. Some, such as the Ahli-Haqq sect in Kurdistan are known as *Ali Allahis*: that is, believers in the divinity of Ali (van Bruinessen 2000a: 245–65). The Alevi and Bektashis of Turkey and the Balkans appear to postulate a 'trinity' of God, Muhammad, and Ali, as phases or incarnations of the same essence (Shankland 2003: 80–4). These beliefs are denounced as heretical by Twelver Shi'a and their orthodox ulama. However, elements of these beliefs seem to creep into popular legends and mystical speculations. Tales of Ali's ainity to God and of his superlative qualities, such as his incarnation as a lion, are common in popular and mystic beliefs among people who are formally mainstream Twelver Shi'a. These themes lead to accusations of *shirk*, polytheism, levelled at Shi'a by their Sunni opponents, especially in the contemporary demonization of Shi'a by the Salafis/Wahhabis.

(p. 549) The Theology of Imamism

A central belief in mainstream Islam, both Sunni and Shi'i, is that Muhammad was the last Prophet, the 'seal of Prophethood', *khatim al-anbiya'*. They recognize a line of prophets, starting with Adam and continuing with the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, and Muhammad is the last in that line. Any claim to prophethood after Muhammad (and there were many) is considered to be dangerous heresy. Shi'ite Imamism surreptitiously subverts this orthodoxy without acknowledging that it is doing so. Shi'i theology builds the argument from the assumption of God's fundamental justice: he cannot leave mankind without an inspired guide, who is the Imam. God leaves on earth a *hujja*, 'proof' from the lineage of 'Ali through Hassan and Hussein (Watt 1973: 274–5). God delegated to the Imams spiritual rulership over the whole world, which must always have such a guide (Arjomand 1984: 35). The Imamate, then, is part of God's kindness, *lutf*, to believers. The

Imam is not, strictly speaking, a prophet. He does, however, enjoy divine inspiration, which makes him free from sin and error, *ma'sum* (Arjomand 1984: 35). Some Shi'ite divines (including Ayatollah Khomeini) have sought inspiration, or illumination, from the Imam, through ascetic exercises, under expert guidance, of fasting, prayer, and continuous wakefulness, culminating in mystic states and dreams (Mottahedeh 1986: 138–44, 182–3). These themes are part of the more philosophical orientation of Shi'ite religious education as compared with its Sunni counterparts. The Sunnis have tended to distrust reasoning and speculation, emphasizing the unfathomable will of God. The Imami Shi'ites adopted *Ijtihad*, or systematic deduction and interpretation of the sacred sources, as part of the profession of the cleric and the jurist, while many Sunnis (not all) have limited or denied the legitimacy of this activity (Zubaida 2003: 24–7). The Shi'i *mujtahid*, therefore, enjoys a greater degree of autonomous authority than the Sunni cleric. In modern times (since the nineteenth century) both Sunni reformists and fundamentalists have declared the validity of *Ijtihad*. But in the Sunni context the opening of *Ijtihad* serves to challenge the authority of traditional ulama in favour of intellectuals and ideologues.

This line of theological reasoning, and the 'technology' that goes with it, are widespread in mystical Islam. Sunni mystics seek illumination through their saints, dead spiritual ancestors in the line of succession of their mystic orders (*tariqa*). They are 'born again' after attaining illumination and can perform miracles (Nicholson 1921: 1–76, 77–142; Zubaida 2003: 35–9). At the intellectual level, mystics seek signs of the Perfect Man, the Pole (*Qutb* or *Wali*), who can merge with manifestations of the Hidden Imam. These beliefs are the points of contact between Shi'ism and some Sufi orders. Many Sufis venerate Ali and the Twelve Imams, as we shall see (Arjomand 1984: 66–84). These beliefs are also at the base of the hostility of mainstream 'ulama, both Sunni and Shi'i, to mysticism. Not surprisingly, it is seen (p. 550) to infringe the orthodox insistence on the end of prophethood. It also calls into question the authority of the clerics.

Hussein and the Cult of Martyrdom

The narrative of the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala in 680 is the 'founding myth' of Shi'ite culture, around which many other themes are woven. The martyrdom of Hussein and his entourage is commemorated in the mourning rituals of the month of Muharram, and especially its tenth day, Ashura, the day of Hussein's death. So much of the Shi'i calendar revolves around these events and figures, which distinguish Shi'ite culture and rituals from their Sunni counterparts. The rituals are marked by processions, self-flagellation, and preachers recounting the bloody events and suffering of the holy party, eliciting tears, lamentations, and breast beating. Passion plays of these events are staged in some places. In addition to their mosques, the Shi'a also have 'Husseiniyas', assembly halls dedicated to the rituals of commemoration. Karbala, the location of the martyrdom, thus became a sacred site, a shrine to Hussein. The myth has it that his head was returned to the spot forty days after his death, an occasion for further gatherings and rituals in the shrine, called *al-araba'in*, fortieth day, or *radd al-ras*, the return of the head. Curiously, the Sunni Egyptians hold a counter-myth which asserts that Hussein's head

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was brought to Cairo and buried at the site of the Mosque of al-Hussein, a central monument in the city to the present day. Hussein became *Sayyid al-Shuhada'*, the Prince of Martyrs, not only for Shi'ites, but also for many pious Sunnis. The cult and ritual of his martyrdom, however, is largely confined to the Shi'a, though also celebrated by some Sunni Sufis.

Why did Hussein march to his death in Karbala? As the Imam, with divine inspiration and foreknowledge, should he not have known what awaited him? These are questions asked by Shi'i intellectuals and divines, especially in the modern period, and contrasting answers are indicative of doctrinal positions, with political implications (Enayat 1982: 181-94). The traditional view is that Hussein's martyrdom was predestined, part of a cosmic history with a messianic culmination. Tales relate that at the Creation, Adam, wandering the world, came to the location of Karbala, where a great sadness descended upon him, and he caught his foot on a rock, causing it to bleed. God then revealed to him that the reason for his sadness and injury was the future martyrdom of one of his dear descendants. Adam cries and curses Yazid (Fischer 1980: 26). Hussein, in this conception, is a destined redeemer, like Christ, who died for humanity, for righteousness and against evil and tyranny. Through mourning him, the believers partake in this (p. 551) sacrifice and redemption. Modern(ist) Shi'i thinkers, especially those with political orientations, reject this view in favour of an activist Hussein (Enayat 1982: 181-94). He took up arms, against the odds, in order to set an example in fighting tyranny and evil. As such, he is an inspiration to all reformers and revolutionaries who challenge oppression and injustice. Such was the image of Hussein presented by the radical Ali Shri'ati (d. 1977), whose ideas were to pave the way for the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Richard 1995: 33-4). These are the 'two images of Hussein' in the *imaginaire* of the believers and mourners (Hegland 1983). The image of Hussein the redeemer who intercedes for those who mourn him is the most common and prevalent for much of Shi'ite history. The mourners associate Hussein's suffering with their own, crying for him and for themselves, and urging the saint to intercede for them and ameliorate their suffering. The other image of Hussein is that of the revolutionary exemplar, as we have seen. It is an image which emerges in modern times in the ideological construction of Shi'ism as a revolutionary ideology, as we see in the case of the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Fischer 1980: 12-27).

Sectarian Splits

Disputes over the succession of Imams led to further sectarian splits among the Shi'a. In succession to the fourth Imam, one party followed one Zeyd (d. 740) in preference to Al-Baqer, counted fifth by the Twelvers. This led to Zeydi Shi'ism, which became prominent in Yemen and other parts of Arabia. Zeydi Imams (the succession was not broken) were rulers of Yemen until the mid-twentieth century.

A crucial split was at the succession of the sixth Imam, Ja'far, when one party followed his by then deceased elder son, Isma'il (in effect designating Isma'il's descendants), in preference to the living son, Musa. The Isma'ili sect and its offshoots assumed great

importance in the medieval Muslim world. It became a dissident proselytizing group, activist and rebellious, in contrast to the quietism of mainstream Shi'a (Daftary 1990). Arjomand has argued that Ja'far, the sixth Imam, established the mainstream Shi'ites as a quietist sectarian community, participating in the wider society, and even serving the (illegitimate) government, while dissimulating their true beliefs. He did this by formulating a theory of the Imamate in spiritual and philosophical terms, steering it away from political dissent (Arjomand 1984: 35-9). This quietism was later reinforced by the doctrine of the Occultation of the twelfth Imam (more below). The Isma'ilis, by contrast, formed subversive secret societies which threatened the power of the Abbasid Caliphate, then of the Turkic military dynasties which ruled the Middle East. The notorious sect of the Assassins, based in Iran and Syria, was one branch of those Isma'ilis (Lewis 1967, 2003). Most notably, a rival (p. 552) Isma'ili Caliphate, the Fatimids, assumed power over Egypt and North Africa (969-1171) (Halm 1996). They left their imprint on the architecture of Cairo, including the establishment of Al-Azhar mosque and seminary, which survives to the present day as the foremost academy of Sunni Islam, having been appropriated by the Ayubid Sunnis at the fall of the Fatimids. The triumph of the Ayubids, the famous Salah Eddin or Saladin, initiated persecution of Shi'a in Egypt and Syria. Offshoots of the Isma'ilis survived till our time as sectarian communities, mostly with beliefs and practices considered heterodox and heretical by Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. The Druze of Syria/ Lebanon/Palestine are one such offshoot. The most prominent in the modern world are the Agha Khan Isma'ilis.

The doctrines which characterize Isma'ilis and their offshoots are known as *batini*, inner or esoteric. These are similar to Neoplatonic ideas that the external, observable phenomena, as well as the explicit texts (including the Qur'an) are partial or distorted or illusory, and that 'inner' truths can be obtained only by mystical means, and through the special charisma of holy personages. These truths, then, are not accessible to ordinary people, but only to a hierarchy of the learned, the initiates, and those with hereditary charisma, the highest being the Imams. The ultimate truth will be attained only with the messianic manifestation of the last Imam. These doctrines are, naturally, seen by orthodox Muslims, Sunni and Imami Shi'ite, to be heretical and subversive.

Mahdism/Millennarianism

In Shi'ite, and some other Muslim, parlance, the 'Mahdi' is a kind of messiah. His 'return', or manifestation, is expected to usher in a period of supernatural bliss: peace, justice, and prosperity in the world, guided by a divinely inspired messiah. The prospect of a Day of Judgement, the resurrection of the dead and the separation and eternal life of the righteous from the damned, is well attested in the scriptures and traditions of Islam. The idea of the messiah, however, is tenuous, with no clear attestation in the scriptures and different narratives in the traditions. Prophetic narratives (*hadith*) are cited which assert that a Mahdi, from the clan of the Prophet, will appear, in some versions, together or just before, the Christian Jesus, son of Mary. These narratives underpin some Sunni beliefs in a coming Mahdi, but that is distinct from the Shi'ite Mahdi as the revelation of the

Hidden Imam, a belief also shared by many Sufis. Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century North African historian and sociologist, in his famous *Muqaddimah*, or Preface to the study of history, reviewed Mahdist narratives at length, and was sceptical about the authenticity of the cited *hadith*. He dismissed messianic ideas, which appealed (p. 553) to the 'stupid masses' (Ibn Khaldun 1958: 156–200). In the Shi'ite tradition, in contrast, the messianic expectation is clearly defined. The Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, according to the legend, was born in Samarra, the political capital of the Abbasids, where his father, the eleventh Imam, Hassan al-Askari, was imprisoned and later poisoned. Al-Mahdi then disappeared in 874 at the age of 8, in order to be saved from the persecution of the authorities. Yet this disappearance is mystical. He continued to communicate his guidance to the community through agents, *wakil*, until the death of the last of them in 941. The years 874–941 are known as the period of the 'minor occultation', when the Imam still communicated with the community. There followed the greater occultation, which continues to the present. The twelfth Imam is a living, but absent Imam. He is *Imamal-Zaman*, the Imam of all time. He will reveal himself in the fullness of time and bring justice and bliss on earth (Richard 1995: 40–8).

Mahdist Movements

Millenarian movements appeared at various times and places in Islamic history. They were not confined to Shi'i locations. One of the most prominent on the world stage was the Sudanese Mahdi in the nineteenth century (1844–85), which fought British forces and established a Mahdist state till finally overrun. Muhammad Ahmad, believed to be the Mahdi, was a Sufi leader with tribal connections. He modelled his organization, his companions, and the phases of his movement on legends of the Prophet Muhammad and various messianic myths (Holt 1970). There were many minor Mahdist risings in rural Egypt in the nineteenth century. These are examples of Sunni Mahdism, which does not refer to the Shi'ite *Imam al-Zaman*.

The most remarkable effervescence of Mahdism, however, was in nineteenth-century Iran, in a specifically Shi'ite context (Bayat 1982; Arjomand 1984: 253–7). The Qajar state (1779–1925) was weak and decentralized, with wide powers in the hands of local elites, including religious magnates (*mujtahids*). European intrusion, primarily by Britain and Russia, led to dislocations in this fragmented polity. Part of the response consisted of many movements which combined religious ideas with reformist aspirations, often directed against the religious establishment of ulama, seen as reactionary and obscurantist. Some of these movements were secret societies, such as Freemason lodges. Others were religious movements with strong Mahdist elements. The most prominent was the Babi eruption (Cole 1998: 17–48). Sayid Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–50), a merchant from Shiraz, declared himself to be the Bab (the gate) to the Mahdi, then declared that he was indeed the Mahdi. (p. 554) He proclaimed justice and freedom, and attacked the clergy and their religious absolutism. He and his sister also proclaimed liberation of women from traditional bonds. As the Mahdi, he could dispense with the law of the clergy and bring new enactments. This movement found great favour among

swathes of the urban population. Predictably, Shirazi was arrested by the authorities and condemned to death by the clergy for heresy. His followers then engaged in violent eruptions in many cities, and he was executed. Clandestine societies of his followers then split into factions, the most successful of which was the Baha'i religion, founded in 1863 by Mirza Hussein Ali Nuri (1817–92), known as Bah'ullah (glory of God). Bah'ullah was eventually exiled to Ottoman Baghdad, where he continued his proselytizing for Babism. He gradually developed his own much more pacific and modernist version of messianism, and declared himself to be the awaited one, falling out with his brother, Subhi-Azal, who headed the remnants of the Babis. The modernity, reformism, pacifism, and ecumenism (he declared the validity and affinity of all religions) of the Baha'i teaching attracted many in Iran and some in Ottoman lands. Baha'ism became a world religion, with communities of followers in the Middle East, India, and the West, but has continued to be persecuted as a heresy in Islamic lands till the present day (Cole 1998: 17–48).

Mahdism has come to prominence in the current politics of the Middle East. We noted the resurgence of Mahdism in the turbulent years of the mid-nineteenth century in Iran and Sudan. The upheavals in Iraq after the American invasion of 2003 have similarly given rise to millenarian aspirations. But millenarian themes also have a function in political calculations. In Iraq, the main conduit of these aspirations and themes is the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr (International Crisis Group 2006). This is a populist movement and militia, appealing primarily to poor and disenfranchised urban youth, the second generation of migrants from the most impoverished and isolated region of the marshes of southern Iraq. Their leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, lacks the credentials of the religious establishment, which he challenges, and depends on the charisma of lineage from his father and uncle, both important figures in the political transformation of modern Shi'ism, and both killed by Saddam Hussein. Mahdist themes in this context serve as a position from which Sadr and his supporters can disregard if not dismiss establishment authority. The appeal to the authority of the Mahdi, and the expectation of his imminent reappearance (with hints of special communication), imply that conventional authority of legal and ritual texts is redundant.

Similar political calculations can be discerned behind the Mahdist assertions of Iranian President Ahmedinejad (elected in 2005). His radical populism is disapproved by the state religious establishment of Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, and the conservative clerics. He has no religious authority to challenge them on their own grounds. So his intimations of direct communications from the Hidden Imam and his imminent reappearance allow him to belittle the authorities ranged against him. If you have a direct line to divinely inspired authority, why do you have to bother with earthly clerics?

(p. 555) Sufism and Sectarianism

Sufi beliefs, rituals, and modes of organization are widely diverse. Some are pacific and contemplative, some militant and armed; some are sophisticated intellectual and aesthetic doctrines, others are magical and charismatic; some are 'orthodox' and

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observant of ritual and legal obligations, others are highly heterodox and syncretistic (the nearest to sectarian Islam). In all cases, however, Sufi orders comprise modes of social organization, authority, and solidarity. In some cases Sufi orders are superimposed on other associations, such as craft guilds and urban quarters. In other cases they act as secret societies and avenues of political intrigue. Generally, Sufi orders are not considered sectarian in themselves, as their adherents are most commonly Sunni Muslims, with some being associated with Twelver Shi'ism or Isma'ilism. However, many of the formally Sunni orders engaged in beliefs and rituals which were close to Shi'ite and Alawite themes. A notable example is the Bektashi order in the Ottoman world (Birge 1937).

Bektashis and Aleyis

There are common religious themes, which include devotion to Ali and his descendants, which feature in many of the heterodox and syncretistic religions of Anatolia, Kurdistan, Central Asia, and the Balkans (what had been called 'the Turko-Iranian world'). They contain elements of Islam, alongside traces of Turkic shamanism, Iranian Manichaeism, and various folk beliefs (van Bruinessen 2000a: 245-302). Historically, these syncretistic religions animated the tribal surges which brought both the Ottoman and the Safavid dynasties to power. The armies of the Safavids were known as 'Qizilbash', red heads, on account of the red headgear they sported. This designation has persisted to the present to describe various sectarian Alevi communities, ranging from Afghanistan to Albania and Bulgaria.

Under the Ottomans, the Bektashi Sufi order, mentioned above, was adopted by the Janissaries, a military force that was the mainstay of the Empire in its heyday. Bektashi beliefs were very similar to those of the Qizilbash and the Alevi of Anatolia. They celebrated the cult of Ali, the Twelve Imams, as well as their founding saint Hajji Bektash, to whom they attribute miraculous and almost divine character. Hajji Bektash is an important symbolic figure in the founding myths of the Ottoman dynasty in the fourteenth century. However, the Ottoman sultans soon distanced themselves and their administration from heterodox and charismatic religion in favour of Sunni orthodoxy and its legal apparatus. The heterodox beliefs and practices, however, persisted in the Sufi orders, to which the highest elements of (p. 556) court society belonged for much of their history. The Mevlevi order ('whirling dervishes') was that of the court and high society, while the Bektashi was that of the soldiery. They all had a special place for the passions of Ali, Hassan, Hussein, and Fatima, and many continue to the present day ritually to mourn Hussein and the martyrs at Ashura. Yet, they are all formally Sunnis. Janissary soldiers and generals would engage in ceremonies celebrating the cult of Ali and his descendants, and in mystical exercises involving music, dancing, drink, and drugs (all strongly disapproved of in orthodox Islam, Sunni and Shi'i), but their legal status, in terms of family affairs, inheritance, and property, was that of regular Sunnis.

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Alevism is the religion of large numbers of the Turkish population (estimated at 14–20 million, or 20–30 per cent), ethnic Turks and Kurds (van Bruinessen 1996; Shankland 2003). It has close parallels with Bektashis, notably the sanctity and charisma of Hajji Bektash (whose shrine in eastern Anatolia is a site of pilgrimage). Yet, it is clearly a sectarian community, distinct from Sunnis in its beliefs, rituals, and social organization (van Bruinessen 1996). Alevi communities were, for the most part, peasant communities in remote mountain areas, ruled by religious communal leaders who claim esoteric knowledge and scriptures. This is the general pattern of heterodox sectarian communities in the region, which survive to the present, defying the hostility and persecution from Sunni and Shi'i authorities, often by virtue of their mountain isolation, and in some cases of military prowess. The modern world of the nation-state and widespread literacy has made these religions less viable, with the tendency for these sectarians to come forth as ethnic groups with political aspirations.

Sectarianism in Modern Politics

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 raised the question of the political thrust of Shi'ism. It had been argued that the challenge to the legitimacy of worldly rule is inherent in *Welayat-i faqih* (the rule of the jurist) and has manifested itself in the radical ideology of the revolution. We have seen, however, that Shi' communities, for much of their existence, were politically quiescent, and had a religious rationale for their quietism. The ideology of the revolution was not Shi'ism as such, but a particular construction of the doctrine in relation to that moment in Iranian history. Indeed, the senior traditional clerics of Shi'ism, in Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere, were sceptical if not openly critical of Khomeini's construction of Shi'ism in his doctrine of *welayat-i faqih*, to the effect that in the absence of the Imam, the Just Jurist is the supreme political as well as religious authority in the community (here identified with the nation-state) (Zubaida 1993: 1–37). This doctrine has provided Iranian clerics with the justification for assuming the commanding powers in the (p. 557) state and the economy. The death of Khomeini in 1989, however, has increasingly deprived this doctrine of his charisma, a charisma lacking in his successors. Many Iranians, especially the younger generations, have come to see this rule as a cynical ploy of power-hungry and corrupt clerics.

Sects and Communal Politics

The politics of sectarianism is not always to do with religion as such, but with the sect as an 'ethnic marker' of communal boundaries and interests. Solidarities and tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is do not always stem from religious similarity or difference, and many 'secular' members of these communities may participate in them. Iranian nationalism, for instance, has Shi'ism as a historical and symbolic component, in distinction and opposition to the Sunni Ottoman world, and subsequently to the predominantly Sunni Arab neighbours. By the same token, the Arab Shi'ites in Iraq and the Gulf are often torn between Arab or Iraqi nationalism and links with Iranian co-

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religionists, especially after the revolution of 1979. Their national loyalty is often questioned by their Sunni compatriots.

These communal formations and boundaries are constructed in different forms following the political situations in which they occur. A good example is that of Iraq in recent decades. Sunnis and Shi'is did not constitute unitary and antagonistic communities, but each comprised diverse social and regional segments, ranging from rural, tribal peoples to urban intelligentsias and business communities. Many of them, particularly the urban classes, rejected sectarian politics in favour of a national outlook (Jabar 2003: 41–72; Zubaida 1991). Yet, sectarianism was forced upon them by a ruling clique, that of Saddam Hussein and his junta, which rested its power and security on tribal and sectarian solidarities. A series of conflicts, notably the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–8, then the Gulf War of 1990–1 and the uprisings that followed the Iraqi defeat, and finally the American invasion of 2003, all these sharpened the sectarian boundaries, overriding the urban 'national' classes in favour of sectarian populism (Zubaida 2005).

Sectarian politics is also a feature of Syria, where the ruling clique derives some of its power from the solidarity of the Alawi networks, though with more complex links with other elites in army and business.

The formerly fringe Alawi/Alevi⁴ sects noted above present interesting political phenomena in various countries. Included in this category are the Druze in Lebanon, (p. 558) Syria, and Palestine/Israel, the Alawis (or Nusairis) of Syria, the Alevis of Turkey, and the Yazidis of Kurdistan (mainly Iraq). We saw that these were mainly esoteric religions, which had departed from mainstream Muslim observances and scriptures, in favour of particular scriptures and rituals which segregated a class of religious virtuosos with access to inner secrets from the common believers who followed them. Typically, the Druze distinguished between a hereditary religious class of *'uqqal*, the wise, and ordinary believers, in turn divided between chiefly families and commoners. This esotericism could not survive general literacy and European intrusion into the inner sanctums. Elements of religious belief and ritual in these religions have lost their importance (barring elements of popular religiosity, saint worship and pilgrimage), in favour of their solidarities as ethnic communities. For the Alawis of Syria this has taken the form of cementing the solidarity of a political and military ruling class, in the form of the Asad family and its networks. In Turkey, the Alevis, mostly of peasant and rural provenance, emerged in modern Turkish politics and society as an ethnic community campaigning for recognition and political participation. Its leaders have been mainly supportive of the official secularism of the Turkish Republic, which they see as protection against Sunni hostility (Shankland 2003). But in reality, the secular Turkish Republic includes an implicit model of the Turkish citizen as a Sunni Muslim (Cagaptay 2006), thus militating against the Alevi quest for equality. The Isma'ili followers of the Aga Khan have benefited from his prominence on the world stage, and have formed a transnational community of wealth and influence, now aided by the fast pace of globalization. One trend among Isma'ilis, supported by their Imam, is the attempt to gain Islamic respectability by gestures of

adherence to some elements of mainstream Islam. This trend can also be found among some Alawis and Alevis (van Bruinessen 2000b).

Conclusion

Sects in Islam, and the divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ites, are prominent issues on the world stage, entering into regional and international politics, cultures, and conflicts. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ushered in the Islamic Republic. The politics of that republic and the perception of its actions in other Islamic lands have had contrasting echoes, of Islamic unity on the one side and of its sectarian Shi'ite character on the other. Khomeini issued a clarion call for Islamic unity against the West which found ready response among many radical Sunni Muslims, enthusiastic about the idea of an Islamic revolution. At the same time, the Islamic Republic was (p. 559) unmistakably Shi'ite, its sectarian character merging with Iranian nationalism. This Shi'ite Iranian nationalism was sharpened with the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–8, in which the Iraqi Ba'athist regime appealed to Sunni sectarian sentiments in rallying the predominantly Sunni Arab world. The only Arab ally of Iran was Syria, seen to be ruled by an Alawi sectarian elite, though a predominantly Sunni population. More recently, in the 1990s and 2000s, the success of the Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah in standing up to Israel and scoring notable successes, has earned it credit with Sunni Arab nationalists, who also admire Iranian rhetoric against Israel. On the other side, the Sunni Arab governments and many of their peoples are highly antagonistic to what they see as Iranian and Shi'ite threats in their region. The ascendance of Shi'ite parties in the Iraqi government and the sectarian civil war there fuel the hostility. Sunni Arabs fear a Shi'ite Iraq allied to Iran, with the sympathy and support of Shi'ite populations in Arabia and the Gulf, forming a 'Shi'ite crescent' threatening the Sunni world and the Arab nation. This hostility is reinforced by the religious sentiments of Wahhabi/SalaW Muslims, dominant in Saudi Arabia and highly influential throughout the Sunni world, who have always considered the Shi'a to be heretics and enemies of the true Islam. Sectarianism, then, has become a central axis in the geo-politics of the Middle East region. With globalized and transnational Islam, these sentiments and hostilities have spread far and wide, in Europe and elsewhere.

In this chapter we have surveyed the historical evolution of sectarian divisions in Islam and their mutations. These continuing divisions are now reconstructed as important elements in the discourses and politics of government, law, revolution, and geo-political confrontations. We should note, however, as a sociological point, that sectarian boundaries are not 'natural' lines of conflict, emanating from deep historical essences of faith. I hope to have demonstrated here that sectarian divisions, like other religious or communal differences, only become politicized and ideologized under particular conditions, such as the construction of Shi'ism as a radical ideology for the Iranian Revolution.

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Also Enayat (1982); Richard, (1995); Roy (2004); and Zubaida (1993).

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Notes:

- (1) A note on terms: Shi'a is the generic plural; Shi'i and Shi'ite are interchangeable terms, nouns and adjectives, referring to persons and attributes.
- (2) 'Salafi', meaning the adherence to the doctrines and practices of the ancestors, and 'Wahhabism', the ruling doctrine of the Saudi dynasty, have tended to merge in modern advocacy and propagation, both being literalist and 'fundamentalist'.
- (3) See Wikipedia entry 'Demographics of Islam', which sums up various estimates and lists proportions of Sunni/Shi'i populations by country.
- (4) Alawi is Arabic, Alevi the Turkish pronunciation. As it happens, they refer to different groups: Alawis, predominantly in Syria, are also known as Nusairis; Alevis, a different sect, are mainly in Turkey.

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