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Sects in Islam: Sunnis and Shias

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Abstract

The majority of the world's Muslim population follows the Snni and approximately 10-15% of all Muslims follow the Shia (Shi'ite, Shi'a, shiite) branch. Shiite populations constitute a majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan. There are significant Shia populations in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen. Sunnis and Shias share most basic religious tenets. Their differences sometimes have been the basis for religious intolerance, political fighting, and sectarian rage and violence. This article includes a historical background of the Sunni-Shia and discusses the differences in religious beliefs and practices between and within each Islamic sect as well as their similarities. This article relates Sunni and Shia religious beliefs to discussions of terrorism and sectarian violence. In this article, the researcher tried to make a review on Islam and its branches, beliefs, forming and practices of each other.

Keywords: Islam- Shia- Sunni.

Introduction

The differences between the Sunni and Shia Islamic branches are rooted in disagreements over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad, who died in 632 AD, and over the matter of leadership in the Muslim community. History debates centered to award leadership to a qualified individual who would follow the customs of the Prophet to transmit leadership exclusively through the Prophet's bloodline. The question was settled when community leaders elected a companion of the Prophet's named Abu Bakr to become the first Caliph or "successor". Although most Muslims accepted this decision, some supported the candidacy of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima. Ali had played a prominent role during the Prophet's lifetime, but he needed seniority within the Arabian tribal system and was bypassed.

This situation was unacceptable to many of Ali's followers, who considered Abu Bakr and the two succeeding caliphs (Umar and Uthman) to be illegitimate. Ali's followers believed that the Prophet Muhammad had named Ali as successor and that the status was a violation of divine order. A few of Ali's partisans orchestrated the murder of the third Caliph Uthman in 656 AD, and Ali was named Caliph. Ali was assassinated in 661 AD, and his son Hussein (680 AD) died in battle against forces of the Sunni caliph. Ali's eldest son Hassan (d. 670 AD) is also revered by Shia Muslims, some of who claim he was poisoned by the Sunni caliph Muawiyah.

Those who supported Ali's ascendancy became known as "Shi'a," stemming from the term "shi'at Ali," meaning "supporters" or "helpers of Ali." Others respected and accepted the legitimacy of his caliphate and opposed political succession based on bloodline to the Prophet. This group, who constituted the majority of Muslims, became known as "Sunni," meaning "followers of [the Prophet's] customs [sunna]." The caliphate lowered as a religious and political institution after the thirteenth century, although the term "caliph" to be used by some Muslim leaders until it was abolished in 1924 by Turkey's first President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The abolition of the caliphate became a powerful religious and political emblem to some Sunni Islamic activists during the nineteenth and twentieth century's. They argued that leaders in the Islamic world had undermined the caliphate by abandoning the "true path" of Islam. Inspired by these figures, some contemporary Sunni extremists, such as Osama bin Laden and others, advocate the restoration of a new caliphate based on "pure" Islamic principles. The religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity that exists within the global Muslim community present obvious fightings to the reemergence of centralized, pan-sectarian, and widely recognized Islamic religious leadership.

International terrorism

Islamic theology and sectarian considerations are not sufficient explanations for instances of terrorism and political violence in the contemporary Muslim world. Political, social, and economic factors determine whether a given dispute reflects sectarian identities or transcends them. Sunni and Shia organizations and governments are known to collaborate when they perceive that their interests are the same in other side. In other instances (poole, 2002), theological differences can directly fuel sectarian hatred and violence. Members and supporters of terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and its affiliates exhibit regional and theological diversity that makes it difficult to identify shared motives that can be linked to specific religious doctrines. Many Sunni and Shiite Muslims refer to members and supporters of Al Qaeda and similar groups simply as takfiris (Arabic for "those who accuse others of apostasy") because of Al Qaeda's habit of denouncing individuals who don't accept a narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam as non-believers and legitimate targets.

Partisan violence in Iraq

In Iraq, Sunni-Shia relations have been complicated by the shift in power dynamics that accompanied the dismissal of the Sunni-dominated Saddam Hussein regime, which ended centuries of Sunni political dominance. Remaining Shia resentment and Sunni fears associated with this shift have helped change local and individual political or economic disputes into broader sectarian confrontations in some cases. Both Sunni and Shia rebellious groups have conducted attacks on coalition and Iraqi government forces and civilians since 2003. Although major Shia political factions largely renounced violent tactics in favor of political participation during 2005 and 2006, intra-Shia political competitions have led to outbursts of

violence, particularly in southern Iraq. Similarly, from 2006 through 2008, Sunni Iraqis in Baghdad, Al Anbar province fought against predominantly Sunni rebellious groups, foreign fighters, and Al Qaeda.

Fundamental beliefs and splitted practices

Although there are significant differences between Sunni and Shia Islam, the two Islamic cults share common traditions, beliefs, and doctrines. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the messenger of Allah. All believe that they must comply with the revelations given to the Prophet by Allah and by the hadith. The concepts of piety, endeavor for goodness, and social justice are fundamental to Islamic belief and practice. Muslims are expected to live in agreement with the five columns of Islam: (1) shahada—recital of the faith "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet"; (2) salat—five compulsory prayers in a day; (3) zakat— giving donations to the poor; (4) sawm—fast from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan; and (5) hajj—making a religious expedition to Mecca once during a lifetime if one is physically and financially able to make.

The essential sources for Islamic jurisprudence, be it Sunni or Shia, are the Quran, the sunna as passed on in the hadith, qiyas, ijma', and ijtihad. The primary function of the learned religious leaders is the interpretation of shari'a. There are no organized laws in either Sunni or Shia Islam.

There are other sources for the interpretation of law, and these sources are similar among Shias and Sunnis. Shia hadith differ from Sunni hadith, mostly in that they involve the sayings of the Shia imams who are considered to have been divinely inspired. Shia legitimate interpretation also allows more space for human thinking than Sunni elucidations does.

Sunni islam: forming and basic principles

Religious practices and beliefs

The large number of Muslims today is Sunnis. They accept the first four Caliphs as the rulers who followed the Prophet. In theory, Sunnis believe that the leader (imam) of the Muslim society should be selected on the basis of shared agreement, on the existing political order, and on a leader's individual excellences. This prosposition has been inconsistently practiced within the Sunni Muslim community all over history. Sunni Muslims do not confer on human beings the exalted status given only to prophets in the Quran (Dunn, 2001), in contrast to the Shia reverence of imams. Sunnis have a less intricate and arguably less powerful religious grading than Shias. In contrast to Shias, Sunni religious preachers historically have been under state control. At the same time, Sunni Islam gravitates to be more flexible in allowing lay persons to serve as prayer leaders and preachers. In their regularly practices, Sunnis and Shias exhibit astute differences in the performance of their obligatory prayers. Both groups share a similar perception of basic Islamic beliefs.

Islamic Law

In Sunni Islam, there are four schools of jurisprudence that offer different interpretations of legal verdicts affecting the lives of Muslims. The four schools of jurisprudence depend mostly on analogy as a way to conceive legal judgement, and they also give different power to the sayings of the Prophet and his companions (hadith) within their decisions. In some secular countries, like Turkey, the opinions released by religious intellects represent moral and social principles for how Muslims should practice their religion and are not considered lawfully irrevocable.

The four legitimate schools, which vary on certain opinions from strict to broad legal interpretations, are the (1) Hanafi: this is the oldest school of law. It was founded in Iraq by Abu Hanifa (d. 767 AD). It is widespread in Turkey, Central Asia, the Balkans, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh; (2) Maliki: this was founded in the Arabian Cape by Malik ibn Anas (d. 795 AD). It is widespread in North Africa, Mauritania, Kuwait, and Bahrain; (3) Shaf'i: this school was founded by Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 819 AD). It is widespread in Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, parts of Yemen, Indonesia, and Malaysia; and (4) Hanbali: this was founded by Ahmad Hanbal (d. 855). It is widespread in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, parts of Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

Partisan divisions

Sunni Islam has had less notable sectarian divisions than Shia Islam. The Ibadi cult, which is centered in Oman, East Africa, and in parts of Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia, has been sometimes misstated as a Sunni cult. Ibadi religious and political dogma normally is similar basic primary doctrine, although the Ibadis are neither Sunni nor Shia. Ibadis believe forcefully in the existence of a Muslim society and dispute that religious leaders should be chosen by community leaders for their knowledge and devotion, without regard to race or ancestry.

The Sunni pietistics movement called "Wahhabism" has become widely known in recent years and is possibly the most extensive revivalist movement in the Islamic world.1 This movement, established in Arabia by the scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791 AD), is considered to be a result of the Hanbali school of law (Brasted, 2001). Abd al-Wahhab supported a return to the orthodox practice of the "fundamentals" of Islam, as manifested in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the eighteenth century, Muhammad ibn Saud, founder of the present-day Saudi lineage, formed an association with Abd al-Wahhab and merged the contrastive tribes in the Arabian Cape. There has been a close relationship between the Saudi reigning family and the Wahhabi religious establishment. The most traditional interpretations of Wahhabi Islam view Shias and other non Wahhabi Muslims as protestors and unbelievers. Subsequent the 1979 Soviet seizure of Afghanistan and Shia Islamic revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia's ruling Sunni kingly family began more actively advance Wahhabi religious doctrine abroad and Saudi individuals and organizations since have funded the construction of Wahhabi-oriented mosques, religious schools, and Islamic centers in dozens of countries. The constituents of Saudi funded religious programs vary from apolitical to activist relying on its sources and sponsors in the kingdom.

Shia Islam: forming and basic principles

Originally, the Shia movement gained wide admirers in areas that now include Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and parts of Central and South Asia. In most of the world, Shias would continue as a minority. Today, according to some considers, Shia Islam is practiced among about 10% to 15% of the world's Muslim population.

Leadership of the Muslim Community

For Shias, the first true leader of the community is Ali, who is considered an imam, a term used among Shias not only to testify to leadership abilities but also to mean blood relations to the Prophet Muhammad. As Ali's successor took over leadership of the Shia community, the functions of an imam became more clearly explained. Each imam chose a successor and, according to Shia beliefs, he passed down a type of sacred knowledge to the following leader. Imams performed as both spiritual and political leaders. But as Shias lost their political challenges with Sunni Muslim rulers, imams aimed on developing

a spirituality that would serve as the main of Shia religious practices and beliefs. Shias believe that when the line of imams descended from Ali religious leaders, known as mujtahids, obtained the right to interpret religious, mystical, and legal knowledge to the community. The most erudite among these teachers are known as ayatollahs.

Shia practices and primary beliefs

Shia religious practice focused on the memento of Ali's younger son, Hussein, who was martyrized near the town of Karbala in Iraq by Sunni forces in 680. His death is celebrated each year on the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram in a grave and sometimes violent ritualistic memento known as "Ashura," marked among some Shias by the ceremony of self-flagellation. As a minority that was often oppressed by Sunnis, Shias found consolation in the Ashura ritual, the revealing of the martyrdom of Hussein and the moral lessons to be learned from it, which strengthen Shia religious traditions and practices.

Twelver Shiism

Twelver Shiism—the most common form of Shiism—is widespread in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Twelvers accept a line of twelve flawless imams descendent from Ali and believe them to have been divinely scheduled from birth. The twelve imams are viewed as sanctuaries of the piety and as the designated interpreters of law and theology. Twelvers believe that the twelfth imams "disappeared" in the late ninth century. This "hidden imam" is supposed to return to guide the community. Following the twelfth imam's disappearance a "pacifist" tendency emerged among Twelvers who "chose to take back from politics and anticipate his coming."2 In the twentieth century, changes in the political view of the Middle East led to a new competing "activist" tendency among Twelver groups in Iran and Lebanon, represented by the late Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

Ismaili

Although most Shias agree on the basic assumption that Ali was the first legal imam, they challenge on his successors. The Ismailis, who are the second largest Shia sect, broke off in the eighth century, recognizing only the first seven imams (the seventh was named Ismail, hence the names "Ismaili" and "Sevener"). Historically and at least until the sixteenth century, the Ismailis were far more disposed than the Twelvers to following military and territorial power. In the past, they instituted powerful ruling states, which played notable roles in the development of Islamic history. Today, Ismailis are dispersed all over the world but are prominent in Afghanist, in India, and in Pakistan. There are also Ismaili communities in East and South Africa.

Other Shia branches

The Zaydis, who admit the first five imams and deviate from the identity of the fifth, are a minority sect of Shia Islam, mostly found in Yemen. The Zaydis refuse the concepts of the imams' infallibility and of a "hidden imam." Other sects, such as the Alawites and Druzes, are generally supposed to be derived from Shia Islam (Dunn, 2004), although their religious practices are uncommunicative, and some do not regard their followers as Muslims. Alawites exist mostly in Syria and Lebanon. The Assad family that effectively has ruled Syria since 1971 are Alawite. Many Alawites interpret the pillars duties of Islam as

symbolic rather than applied, and commemorate a diverse group of Christian and Islamic holidays. In Turkey, the Alevis are an offshoot group of Shia Islam that has been often bewildered with Syrian Alawites or other Shias. Not much is known about their religious practices. Most Alevis are well unified into Turkish society and speak both Turkish and Kurdish. The Druze community was an eleventh-century offshoot of Ismaili Shia Islam and is concentrated in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Israel. Today, the Druze faith differs greatly from conventional Shiite Islam.

Conclusion

In this article, the researcher made a review on Islam and its branches especially Shia and Sunni. In this research, historical background of Islam and its branches were introduced. Then international terrorism and Partisan violence in Iraq were stated. Finally forming and basic principles of Islamic sects were introduced. The researcher discussed about leadership in Muslim community and matter of Caliphs in Islam and the disputation between Sunni and Shia and also Puritan Wahhabi were Introduces. At last other sects of Shia were discussed.

Due to Islam's great growth in the first two centuries of its beginning, there needed to be a greater assortment of Islamic laws for handling the different and fundamental needs of Muslims all over the Empire. The Qur'an and the Hadith were not comprehensive to contribute all the answers. For that reason, in the 8th century A.D., there emerged a school of legal authority that elucidated and enforced Islamic principles to different situations all over the Empire. However, different specialists argued with these experts in various aspects. This surpassed to a diversity of legal logic and thinking schools within Islam.

These dissimilar schools became different branches within Islam. The largest of the sects is the Sunni, which consists of 90% of all Muslims. The next two largest are the Shia and Sufi. After these, there are abundant separated groups which are known after the individual scholars who established them: Hanifa after Abu Hanifa, Maliki after Malik ibn Anas, Shafi'I after Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'I, Zaydi after Zayd ibn Ali, The Nusayri, Ismaili and etc.

The Sunni accentuate the power and domination of Allah and his right to do whatever he wants with creation and the world. In other words, absolute determinism is taught. Its ruler is the Caliphate, the formal Muslim ruler who is considered the successor or heir to Muhammad. This heir is not through inherited ancestry.

Shia doctrine includes a belief named as the five supports: they're Divine wholeness (tawhid), revelation (nubuwwah), rebirth of the soul and body at the Judgment (ma'ad), the Imamat (imamah), and lawfulness ('adl). The first three are found in Sunni Islam, although with some differences of prominence. The Imamat, however, is the significance of Shi'ism and the last, justice, is a legacy from the Mu'tazilites that their system is in different ways preserved in Shia theology. The Imamat, from the word "Imam" in the Shia attitudes, is the political and religious leadership of the Shia branch. This person obtains great power and authority. According to Shia doctrine, the Imam must be concerned biologically to Ali. The Imam is also free from any kind of sin and dependable on all substances of Islamic doctrine and will mediate for Muslims in the life after death. The Shia and the Sunni differ in some clarifications of the Qur'an and Hadith and even have a different perception of Hadith and the Sunni.Islam is not the undivided religion. There are many divisions and these divisions have subdivisions. The most notable point is that the Qur'an advices the Muslims to have no such divisions and separations. Provided that, this is the

condition, then the Muslim must confess that the separations within Islam are immoral but this is the nature of human that separate and set individually against one another.

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