

The Origins of the Sunni/Shia Split in Islam

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Introduction

The Shia shahadah (declaration of faith) states:

"There is no god but Alláh, Muhammad is the Messenger of Alláh, Alí is the Friend of Alláh. The Successor of the Messenger of Alláh And his first Caliph."

If you are already familiar with standard Sunni beliefs, you will immediately notice the addition to the shahadah regarding Imam Ali (ra), cousin of the Prophet (pbuh), husband of his daughter Fatima, father of Hassan and Hussein and the second person ever to embrace Islam. The term Shia or Shi'ite derives from a shortening of Shiat Ali or partisans of Ali.

History

Ali is the central figure at the origin of the Shia / Sunni split which occurred in the decades immediately following the death of the Prophet in 632. Sunnis regard Ali as the fourth and last of the "rightly guided caliphs" (successors to Mohammed (pbuh) as leader of the Muslims) following on from Abu Bakr 632-634, Umar 634-644 and Uthman 644-656. Shias feel that Ali should have been the first caliph and that the caliphate should pass down only to direct descendants of Mohammed (pbuh) via Ali and Fatima, They often refer to themselves as ahl al bayt or "people of the house" [of the prophet].

When Uthman was murdered while at prayer, Ali finally succeeded to the caliphate. Ali was, however, opposed by Aisha, wife of the Prophet (pbuh) and daughter of Abu Bakr, who accused him of being lax in bringing Uthman's killers to justice. After Ali's army defeated Aisha's forces at the Battle of the Camel in 656, she apologized to Ali and was allowed to return to her home in Madinah where she withdrew from public life.

However, Ali was not able to overcome the forces of Mu'awiya Ummayyad, Uthman's cousin and governor of Damascus, who also refused to recognize him until Uthman's killers had been apprehended. At the Battle of Suffin Mu'awiya's soldiers stuck verses of the Quran onto the ends of their spears with the result that Ali's pious supporters refused to fight them. Ali was forced to seek a compromise with Mu'awiya, but this so shocked some of his die-hard supporters who regarded it as a betrayal that he was struck down by one of his own men in 661.

Mu'awiya declared himself caliph. Ali's elder son Hassan accepted a pension in return for not pursuing his claim to the caliphate. He died within a year, allegedly poisoned. Ali's younger son Hussein agreed to put his claim to the caliphate on hold until Mu'awiya's death. However, when Mu'awiya finally died in 680, his son Yazid usurped the caliphate. Hussein led an army against Yazid but, hopelessly outnumbered, he and his men were slaughtered at the Battle of Karbala (in modern day Iraq). Hussein's infant son, Ali, survived so the line continued. Yazid formed the hereditary Ummayyad dynasty. The division between the Shia and what came to be known as the Sunni was set.

An opportunity for Muslim unity arose in the 750's CE. In 750 except for a few who managed to flee to Spain, almost the entire Ummayyad aristocracy was wiped out following the Battle of Zab in Egypt in a revolt led by Abu Al Abbass al-Saffah and aided by considerable Shia support. It was envisaged that the Shia spiritual leader Jafar As-Siddiq, great-grandson of Hussein be installed as Caliph. But when Abbass died in 754, this

arrangement had not yet been finalised and Abbas' son Al Mansur murdered Jafar, seized the caliphate for himself and founded the Baghdad-based Abbassid dynasty which prevailed until the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258.

Theological Differences and Attempts at promoting Unity

The line of Mohammed (pbuh) through Ali and Hussein became extinct in 873CE when the last Shia Imam, Al-Askari, who had no brothers disappeared within days of inheriting the title at the age of four. The Shias refused, however, to accept that he had died, preferring to believe that he was merely "hidden" and would return. When after several centuries this failed to happen, spiritual power passed to the ulema, a council of twelve scholars who elected a supreme Imam. The best known modern example of the Shia supreme Imam is the late Ayyatollah Khomeini, whose portrait hangs in many Shia homes. The Shia Imam has come to be imbued with Pope-like infallibility and the Shia religious hierarchy is not dissimilar in structure and religious power to that of the Catholic Church within Christianity. Sunni Islam, in contrast, more closely resembles the myriad independent churches of American Protestantism. Sunnis do not have a formal clergy, just scholars and jurists, who may offer non-binding opinions. Shias believe that their supreme Imam is a fully spiritual guide, inheriting some of Muhammad's inspiration ("light") . Their imams are believed to be inerrant interpreters of law and tradition. Shia theology is distinguished by its glorification of Ali. In Shia Islam there is a strong theme of martyrdom and suffering, focusing on deaths of Ali and, particularly, Hussein plus other important figures in the Shia succession. Shi`ism attracted other dissenting groups, especially representatives of older non-Arab (Mawali) civilizations (Persian, Indian, etc.) that felt they had not been treated fairly by the Arab Muslims.

Sunnis and Shias agree on the core fundamentals of Islam - the Five Pillars - and recognize each others as Muslims. In 1959 Sheikh Mahmood Shaltoot, Head of the School of Theology at Al Azhar university in Cairo, the most august seat of learning of Sunni Islam and the oldest university in the world, issued a fatwa (ruling) recognizing the legitimacy of the Jafari School of Law to which most Shias belong. As a point of interest, the Jafari School is named after its founder Imam Jafar Sidiq who was a direct descendent through two different lines of the Sunni Caliph Abu Bakr. And Al Azhar University, though now Sunni, was actually founded by the Shia Fatimid dynasty in 969CE.

However, there remain significant differences between the two forms of Islam and these are what tend to be emphasized. Many Sunni's would contend that Shias seem to take the fundamentals of Islam very much for granted, shunting them into the background and dwelling on the martyrdoms of Ali and Hussein. This is best illustrated at Ashura when each evening over a period of ten days the Shias commemorate the Battle of Karbala, with a wailing Imam whipping the congregation up into a frenzy of tears and chest beating. It is alleged that instead of missionary work to non-Muslims, the Shia harbor a deep-seated disdain towards Sunni Islam and prefer to devote their attention to winning over other Muslims to their group. There is ongoing violent strife between Sunnis and Shias in Pakistan. On the other hand, in recent years there has been signification co-operation between the two groups in the Lebanon. And some of the most dynamic developments in Islam today are taking place in Shia-dominated Iran.

Practical Differences

On a practical daily level, Shias have a different call to prayer, they perform wudu and salat differently including placing the forehead onto a piece of hardened clay from Karbala, not directly onto the prayer mat when prostrating. They also tend to combine prayers, sometimes worshipping three times per day instead of five. The Shias also have some

different ahadith and prefer those narrated by Ali and Fatima to those related by other companions of the Prophet (pbuh). Because of her opposition to Ali, those narrated by Aisha count among the least favored. Shia Islam also permits muttah - fixed-term temporary marriage - which is now banned by the Sunnis. Muttah was originally permitted at the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and is now being promoted in Iran by an unlikely alliance of conservative clerics and feminists, the latter group seeking to downplay the obsession with female virginity which is prevalent in both forms of Islam, pointing out that only one of the Prophet's thirteen wives was a virgin when he married them.

Shias Today

Iran is overwhelmingly Shia. Shias also form a majority of the population in Yemen and Azerbaijan and 40 to 50% of the population of Iraq. There are also sizeable Shia communities in Bahrain, the east coast of Saudi Arabia and in the Lebanon. The well known guerilla organization Hizbollah, which forced the Israelis out of southern Lebanon in 2000, is Shia. Worldwide, Shias constitute ten to fifteen percent of the overall Muslim population.

Within Shia Islam there are different sects. Most Shias are "Twelvers", i.e. they recognize the 12 Imams. There are also Sevener and Fiver Shias who don't recognize the later Imams.

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