

Introduction: The Issue at Hand

In a concise chapter dealing with Shī'ism, Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb echoes a persistent prejudice: the categorical affirmation that Shī'ite Islām, with respect to Sunnī Islām, is “the other main sect of Islām—the only important schismatic sect.”¹

To him, Shī'ism is the *ubi consistam* [essence] of the definition of sect which, according to his understanding, embraces diverse “systems of Islāmic doctrines and beliefs which are generally repudiated by the orthodox...as heretical” (81). To speak of “heresy” in Islām, however, requires a sufficiently clear understanding of its meaning.²

When Gibb uses the word “heretical,” however, he does not use it as descriptive adjective nor is he necessarily making a value judgment. For him, it is merely a matter of fact which needs to be analyzed. The most disturbing aspect of this conception of Shī'ism, however, is not the simplistic explanation it gives to its historical development, but rather its excessively broad scope. It does not say anything for want of saying too much.

Gibb attempts to give a broad definition of “sect” and “heresy,” applying it to everything in Islām that remotely resembles other Eastern traditions. The evidence he provides, however, is far too scarce. He insists on demonstrating, at any cost, that Shī'ism is inherently schismatic and sectarian.

He uses the literary elasticity of the word “sect” [in English] to explain that Shī'ite Islām, due to its minority status in the Muslim world, must constitute a doctrinal off-shoot or a split from the Islāmic majority. At the same time, he wishes to prove that true “orthodoxy” is to be found almost exclusively in the Sunnī doctrinal tradition.³

The erroneous application of the term “sect” to Shī'ite Islām, however, does not resolve the problem of its historical origin. A true understanding of Shī'ite Islām cannot be obtained through insufficient scholarship. It can only be reached through a close analysis of its religious and spiritual psychology as manifested in the Islāmic world.

The definition of Shī'ism as the only “sect” of Islām is due in part to its more profound esoteric character

which stands in contrast to the essentially exoteric character of Sunnī Islām.⁴ Although there are no substantial differences between the fundamentals of faith of Shī'ite and Sunnī Islām, Shī'ism seems to possess something more profound in the spiritual realm.

Despite this fact, Western scholars tend to view the differences between Shī'ite and Sunnī Islām as the result a mere political dispute relating to the succession of the Prophet Muhammad rather than a transcendental metaphysical matter.⁵ However, it is only through an understanding of the mystical dimension of Shī'ism that one can understand why it appealed to Hindus and Persians while at the same time some of the Arabs viewed it with reticence.

In fact, even when some scholars stubbornly persist on calling Shī'ism an “Aryan Persian creation,⁶” history is clear on the issue: Shī'ism was introduced into Persia in the 16th century by a Turkish dynasty, the Safavids, who were, as is well-known, a *tarīqah* or Sūfī brotherhood.⁷

Until then, the Persians were mainly Sunnis. Shī'ism was only unanimously accepted among them ten centuries after the death of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib and the events that contributed to the creation of Shī'ism.⁸

We are not going to get down to details at this point. For now, what needs to be stressed is the perfectly orthodox nature of Shī'ite Islām and its reality as an integral part of the Islāmic revelation.⁹

This fact is so clearly manifest that it cannot be overlooked on the basis of tendentious historical arguments that insist on confining Shī'ism within the imprecise bounds of concepts like “sect” or “heresy.” In this aspect, modern Western criticism of Shī'ism is unjustified and misguided. Contrary to the common views of Orientalists, Shī'ite Islām is not a “sect,” a “heterodox” form of Islām or anything else that fits into the definition made by Gibb or any other specialist.¹⁰

One of the most common mistakes made by Orientalists is the attempt to study Shī'ite Islām on the basis of such simplified sectarian parameters. It is all the worst when this approach reinforces the argument that Shī'ism is the result of a separation, when this Western concept of religious schism is totally alien to traditional Islāmic thought.

If we wish to move beyond these objections against the orthodoxy of Shī'ite Islām, we should first note that Westerners often consider Islām, in contrast to the multifarious branches of Christianity,¹¹ as a conglomerate of mutually contradictory doctrines which is patently not the case. We are not claiming that real differences never existed within Islām.

They did indeed exist, particularly during its initial period between the seventh and tenth centuries. It was then that a great variety of philosophical, theological and theosophical theories started to manifest themselves in all areas of Islāmic thought. These different ideological currents that flourished were not “sects” in the true sense of the term and are most adequately called “schools of thought.”¹² While some of them survived to the present, most of them have disappeared, leaving us only their names.¹³

In any case, we must not overlook the process of cultural and ideological interaction which takes place when Islām comes into contact with foreign cultures. Such contact is an important aspect of what differentiates the Islāmic tradition from others. Although there are many traditions within the tradition, Islām has always maintained its cohesion and unity, a fact that often draws the attention of outside observers.

Although Islām is united, it is not uniform. The sciences studied in any traditional civilization—namely, a civilization based on divine revelation—depend on the metaphysical principles and the religious fundamentals of that revelation. Consequently, Islāmic doctrines, regardless of their modes of expression, have always reflected and echoed the central doctrine of divine unity [*tawhīd*]. It is due to the centrality of *tawhīd* that Islām was capable of integrating various systems of thought into its perspective and final objective.

The presence of diversity within the Islāmic tradition does not undermine its transcendence and interior unity. Rather, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains, it is the means that assures the spiritual unity in a world composed of a conglomerate of diverse cultures, languages and races (*Shī'ite Islām* 3–28). It is in this sense that it is appropriate to speak of sects. In order to avoid any possible misunderstandings, however, it is essential to clarify the sense of the term. [14](#)

[1.](#) Editor's Note: The author quotes from the Spanish translation. For the original English, see H.A.R. Gibb's *Mohammedanism*, especially chapter 7 “Orthodoxy and Shī'ism.”

Author's Note: The book is not very favorable towards Islām. For starters, it defines Islām as “Mohammedanism” when it is well-known that Islām does not demand a personal adherence to the Prophet like that of Christianity towards Jesus.

Editor's Note: As Massignon explains: “If Christianity is fundamentally the acceptance and imitation of Christ before the acceptance of the Bible, Islām, on the contrary, is the acceptance of the Qur'ān before the imitation of Muhammad, as the Prophet himself explicitly declared” (94–95).

[2.](#) Author's Note: Like some modern Muslim authors, the only thing that Gibb retains from Shī'ite Islām is that it is a religious minority whose historical development has been, to a certain extent, interpreted as a “heresy,” although without the annoying nuance that word has acquired in the West. Be that as it may, none of the many schools of Islām are willing to accept such a label, particularly as it is understood by Westerners, with all of its pejorative connotations.

If, under certain circumstances, anyone has labeled himself as a “heretic,” it has been as an act of opposition against all “heretics,” those who have made “order” out of their own “disorder,” considering it an “orthodox” norm. Shī'ism is a reaction, if we can say so, against those who have become “disordered.” It can thus be seen as a “disorder” which attacks the previous “disorder” in order to reestablish the old original order, from which the Muslim majority has become “separated.”

On this basis, it can be understood why Imām al-Shāfi'ī called himself a “heretic” (*rāfidī*, from the Arabic “rejecter”) when he declared that “If loving the Family of Muhammad is 'heresy'...May the Two Precious Treasures testify that I am a 'heretic!'” (in *kāna hubbu ʿAlī Muhammad rafḍun fa ushḥidu al-ṭhaqalayni annī rāfidī*). One can be a “heretic” with respect to another “heresy” as in the case of Prophet Abraham who, according to Islāmic tradition, confessed to being a “heretic.” The same applies to Muhammad with respect to the idolaters.

Editor's Note: With its balance between the exoteric and the esoteric, Shī'ism can also be viewed as the true legacy of

complete Islām which reestablishes its function in the face of incomplete Islām which is either legalistic in the cases of Sunnism or spiritual in the case of Sūfism.

3. Editor's Note: Merely because Shī'ites are a minority does not mean that Shī'ism is heterodox. Tājīn argues that the Shī'ites are representatives of Islāmic orthodoxy and that they are followers of the prophetic Sunnah [Tradition]. See, *The Shī'ah: The Real Followers of the Sunnah* / al-Shī'ah hum ahl al-sunnah. In Shī'ite eyes, the Imams are the personification of the Sunnah. They are al-sirāt al-mustaqīm [the straight path], al-'urwā al-wuthq [the insoluble bond] nūr Allāh al-hādī [the guiding light of Allāh] al-imān wa al-Islām [the faith, Islām] wa al-sunnah wa al-salām [the prophetic tradition and peace].

The author of this book, Luis Alberto Vittor, does not make an exclusive claim to orthodoxy; rather, he recognizes the orthodox nature of mainstream Sunnī and Shī'ah Islām. This is the same position taken by Seyyed Hossein Nasr who writes that “Shī'ism and Sūfism are both, in different ways and on different levels, intrinsic aspects of Islāmic orthodoxy” (Sūfī Essays 104–105). According to Nasr, Sunnism and Twelve-Imām Shī'ism stand in the middle of the spectrum of Islām as far as orthodoxy and heterodoxy are concerned (The Heart of Islām 86). In Western studies, however, “orthodoxy is limited to its exoteric aspect” (86) which is inadequate as “[t]here is an exoteric orthodoxy and orthopraxy and there is an esoteric orthodoxy and orthopraxy” (86).

Exoterically, in practice, Wahhābis and Kharijites are orthodox. Esoterically, in spirit, in scriptural interpretation, they might be viewed as heterodox by mainstream Sunnis and Shī'ites. If they are hostile towards the Ahlul Bayt and their followers, Shī'ites would view them as heretical. So long as they observe the sharī'ah, the Sūfis and the Ismā'īlis are orthodox. In orthopraxy, there is no objection against the Ahmadiyyah. It is in their 'aqīdah [creed], their belief in a prophet after Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allāh, where their heresy lies.

It should be noted, however, that the followers of Mīrzā Ghulam Ahmed split into two camps after his death: one who believed that he was indeed a prophet, the Messiah and the Mahdī, and one who believed that he was not a prophet, but a reformer (and the Messiah and the Mahdī based on a weak tradition within the corpus of Bukhārī). The former are known as the Ahmadī, and the latter are known as the Lahori Group. Muhammad 'Alī, the author of *The Religion of Islām*, was a member of the Lahori group, known as the Lahori Ahmadis. The Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islām, the Five Percenters, the Ansār, and other cults, are evidently outside the fold of Islām in 'aqīdah [creed], orthodoxy, and orthopraxy.

4. Editor's Note: As Nasr notes, “the esoteric dimension of Islām...in the Sunnī climate is almost totally connected with Sūfism” (Sūfī Essays 105).

5. Editor's Note: This is also the attitude of many Sunnī scholars. As Sayyid Muhammad Rizv summarizes:

In the polemical writings of the Sunnis, it is asserted that Sunnī Islām is “orthodox Islām” whereas Shī'ism is a “heretical sect” that began with the purpose of subverting Islām from within. This idea is sometimes expressed by saying that Shī'ism began as a political movement and later on acquired religious emphasis. (Chapter 1)

As Jafrī explains, “It is...difficult to speak, at any stage of its existence, about the 'political' Shī'ah as distinct from the 'religious' one” (2). The historian Matti Moosa acknowledges that “Shī'ism, or the support of 'Alī, grew in the early period of Islām as a spiritual movement, based on the assumption that the leadership of the Muslim community was a spiritual office and that 'Alī had been singled out from among all Muslims to fill it” (xv). Moosa confirms that:

It was in the time of 'Uthmān that the term Shī'ite, which until then had had only a spiritual connotation, began to assume a political significance. Those supporting 'Alī became known as the Shī'ites [partisans] of 'Alī, while those supporting 'Uthmān became known as the Shī'ites [partisans] of 'Uthmān. (xv)

The faction of 'īshah, Talhah and Zubayr [called the “People of the Camel” or ash'ab al-jamal] and the Syrians [ahl al-Shām] were also known as the shī'at Mu'awiyah (Jafrī 95–96).

6. Editor's Note: As Massignon explains, “the theorists deny the authenticity of Islāmic mysticism, which is portrayed as a

form of the racial, linguistic, and national reaction by the Aryan peoples, particularly the Iranians, against the Arab Islamic conquest. Renan, P. de Lagarde, and more recently Reitzenstein, Blochet, and E.G. Browne, have helped to spread this theory” (46).

7. Editor's Note: The Safavids were a dynasty that ruled Persia from 1501 to 1736. Founded by Ismā'īl, leader of the safawī Sūfī brotherhood, they imposed Twelver Shī'ism as their state religion for political purposes. At a time when various Muslim groups were vying for power, each claiming the right to rule, the Twelvers did not present a political threat since Imām Mahdī was in Occultation and would only return towards the end of the world.

The spread of Shī'ism also helped protect the Safavids from the Ottoman threat to the West and from the Uzbeks from the East. The Safawī period was a golden age for Shī'ite scholarship and produced such prolific scholars as 'Allāmah Majlisī, author of *Bihār al-anwār*. While this work is monumental in size, it is flawed in many aspects:

- 1) the author was unable to review it and correct it;
- 2) it is an exceedingly late compilation of traditions; and
- 3) it contains an enormous quantity of false and fabricated traditions.

Despite the author's enormous and commendable effort, the work has been given undue importance in recent times.

Contemporary Iranian scholars have warned readers about this work, reminding them that it should not be placed on par with other more complete and reliable books of hadīth. While Majlisī planned to subject the traditions to critical analysis and due categorization, he died before being able to do so, and the subsequent Editors of his work have left it as such, without the editing it requires.

8. Editor's Note: As Massignon explains, “In reality, Shī'ism, which is presented to us as a specifically Persian Islamic heresy, was propagated in Persia by pure Arab colonists, who had come from Kāfah to Qum” (46). All of the 3,000 *tawwābīn* were Arabs (Jafrī 232). For more on the falsity of the Persian origin of Shī'ism, see Tājīn's *Then I was Guided* 158–59.

9.] Editors' Note: As Nasr has observed, “The reality of Shī'ism and Sūfism as integral aspects of the Islamic revelation is too dazzlingly clear to be ignored or explained away on the basis of a tendentious historical argument” (*Sūfī Essays* 104).

10. Editor's Note: Nasr is correct when he states that “One should never refer to Shī'ism as a whole as sect, any more than one would call the Greek Orthodox Church a sect” (*Heart of Islam* 87). As Jafrī explains, “In the infant years of Islamic history, one cannot speak of the so-called 'orthodox' Sunnah and the 'heretical' Shī'ah, but rather of two ill-defined points of view that were nevertheless drifting steadily, and finally irreconcilably, further apart” (2).

11. Editor's Note: Christianity is divided into three major branches: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. There are further subdivided into rites and sects which number in the thousands. The Holy Qur'ān criticizes the schisms of the Jews and Christians (98:4; 10:93).

12. Editor's Note: The Arabic term for “school” is *madhhab*. In Islam, there are numerous schools of jurisprudence, schools of recitation of the Qur'ān, schools of Qur'ānic commentary, schools of prophetic traditions, and schools of philosophy, rendering the Wahhābī refutation of *madhāhib* senseless. The Islamic intellectual tradition was one of tolerance. The early Muslims argued with the best arguments, following the commandment of Allāh:

“Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance” (16:125).

While there were thousands of rays of reason, they all radiated from the same sun of *tawhīd*. The Prophet and the Imāms debated and discussed in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance with Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Manicheists, polytheists, and atheists. As Nasr explains, “On the basis of the Qur'ānic doctrine of religious universality and the vast historical experiences of a global nature, Islamic civilization developed a cosmopolitan and worldwide religious perspective unmatched before the modern period in any other religion” (*The Heart of Islam* 40).

The decline of Islamic civilization and culture is, in part, the result of the imposition of official orthodoxies. The exponential growth of science and scholarship in the early days of Islam was cut short when freedom of thought was suppressed and dogmas came to dominate.

The phenomenon of rapid evolution that came about through Islām applied to exegesis, jurisprudence, grammar, and a whole host of sciences. W.F. Albright's description of “cultural revolution” easily applies to Islām: “When a culture is replaced by another culture we almost always note a sudden change, a real mutation, with changes taking place in one generation which under normal circumstances would take a millennium” (88).

[13.](#) Editor's Note: The existing schools of Sunnī jurisprudence include the Hanafī, Shāfiʿī, Mālikī and Hanbalī. Other, no longer extant Sunnī schools of fiqh, include the Zāhirī school from al-Andalus, the Jarīrī school founded by Tabarī; and the schools of al-Aẓwārī, Hasan al-Basrī, Abū 'Uyaynah, Ibn Abī Dhu'ayb, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Ibn Abī Dīwān, and Layth ibn Sa'd, among others.

[14.](#) Editor's Note: The author is alluding to Descartes' statement: “I will not argue with you unless you define your terms.”

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