

Origin of Shi'ism: Political or Religious?

1. Introduction

In the polemical writings of the Sunnis, it is asserted that Sunni Islam is the "Orthodox Islam" whereas Shi'ism is a "heretical sect" that began with the purpose of subverting Islam from within. This idea is sometimes expressed by saying that Shi'ism began as a political movement and later on acquired religious emphasis.

This anti-Shi'a attitude is not limited to the writers of the past centuries, even some Sunni writers of the present century have the same views. Names like Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, Manzur Ahmad Nu'mani (both of India), Ihsan Ilahi Zahir (of Pakistan), Muhibbu 'd-Din al-Khatib and Musa Jar Allah (both from Middle East) come to mind. [1](#)

It is not restricted to the circle of those that graduated from religious seminaries and had not been in touch with the so-called academic world. Ahmad Amin (of Egypt) and Fazlur Rahman (of Pakistan) fall in this category.

Ahmad Amin, for example, writes:

"The truth is that Shi'ism is a refuge wherein which everyone who wishes to destroy Islam on account of enmity or envy takes shelter. As such, persons who wish to introduce into Islam the teachings of their Jewish, Christian or Zoroastrian ancestors achieve their nefarious ends under the shelter of this faith." [2](#)

Fazlur Rahman is an interesting case. After graduating from the Universities of Punjab and Oxford, and teaching at the Universities of Durham and McGill, he worked as the Director of the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Pakistan till 1968. He lost his position as the result of the controversy arising from his view of the Qur'an. Then he migrated to the United States and became Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago. In his famous book, *Islam*, used as a textbook for undergraduate levels in Western universities, Dr. Fazlur Rahman presents the following interpretation about the origin of Shi'ism:

"After 'Ali's assassination, the Shi'a (party) of 'Ali in Kufa demanded that Caliphate be restored to the

house of the ill-fated Caliph. This legitimist claim on behalf of the 'Ali's descendants is the beginning of the Shi'a political doctrine...

"This legitimism, i.e., the doctrine that headship of the Muslim Community rightfully belongs to 'Ali and his descendants, was the hallmark of the original Arab Shi'ism which was purely political...

"Thus, we see that Shi'ism became, in the early history of Islam, a cover for different forces of social and political discontent...But with the shift from the Arab hands to those of non-Arab origin, the original political motivation developed into a religious sect with its own dogma as its theological postulate...Upon this were engrafted old oriental beliefs about Divine light and the new metaphysical setting for this belief was provided by Christian Gnostic Neoplatonic ideas."[3](#)

He further comments: "This led to the formation of secret sects, and just as Shi'ism served the purposes of the politically ousted, so under its cloak the spiritually displaced began to introduce their old ideas into Islam."[4](#)

It is in this background that I find it extremely difficult to understand how a learned scholar, from Shi'i background, could echo somewhat similar ideas about the origin of Shi'ism by writing:

"Most of these early discussions on the Imamate took at first sight political form, but eventually the debate encompassed the religious implications of salvation. This is true of all Islamic concepts, since Islam as a religious phenomenon was subsequent to Islam as a political reality."[5](#)

"From the early days of the civil war in A.D. 656, some Muslims not only thought about the question of leadership in political terms, but also laid religious emphasis on it."[6](#)

Referring to the support of Shi'a of Kufa for the claim of leaders for 'Alids, the learned author writes:

"This support for the leadership of the 'Alids, at least in the beginning, did not imply any religious underpinning...The claim of leadership of the 'Alids became an exaggerated belief expressed in pious terms of the traditions attributed to the Prophet, and only gradually became part of the cardinal doctrine of the Imamate, the pivot on which the complete Shi'ite creed rotates."[7](#)

After explaining the failures and the martyrdom of the religious leaders who rose against the authorities, he writes:

"This marked the beginnings of the development of a religious emphasis in the role of the 'Alid Imams..."[8](#)

[2. The Beginning of Islam](#)

The Sunnis as well as the Shi'as believe that Islam is primarily a religion whose teachings are not limited to the spiritual realm of human life but also encompass the political aspect of society. Inclusion of political ideals in the religion of Islam does not mean that Islam started or was basically a political

movement. Look at the life of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). The Prophet's mission began in Mecca. There is nothing in the pre-*hijra* program of the Prophet that looks similar to a political movement. It was primarily and fundamentally a religious movement.

Only after the *hijra*, when the majority of the people of Medina accepted Islam, the opportunity for implementation of Islamic social order arose and so Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) also assumed the position of the political leader of the society.

He signed agreements with other tribes, sent ambassadors to kings and emperors, organized armies and led Muslim forces, sat in judgement, appointed governors, deputies, commanders, and judges, and he also collected and distributed taxes. Nonetheless, Islam was first a religious movement that later on encompassed political aspects of society. So to say that "Islam as a religious phenomenon was subsequent to Islam as a political reality" is historically an incorrect statement.

3. The Origin of Shi'ism

The origin of Shi'ism is not separate from the origin of Islam since the Prophet himself sowed its seed by proclaiming the *wisaya* (successorship) and *khilafat* (caliphate) of 'Ali bin Abi Talib in the first open call to Islam that he made in Mecca.

Islam began when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) became forty years old. Initially, the mission was kept a secret. Then three years after the advent of Islam, the Prophet was ordered to commence the open declaration of his message. This was the occasion when Almighty Allah revealed the verse

"And warn thy nearest relations." (The Qur'an 26:214)

When this verse was revealed, the Prophet organized a feast that is known in history as "Summoning the Family - *Da'wat dhu 'l-'Ashira*". The Prophet invited about forty men from the Banu Hashim and asked 'Ali bin Abi Talib to make arrangements for the dinner. After having served his guests with food and drinks, but the Prophet wanted to speak to them about Islam, Abu Lahab forestalled him and said, "Your host has long since bewitched you." All the guests dispersed before the Prophet could present his message to them.

The Prophet then invited them the next day. After the feast, he spoke to them, saying:

O Sons of 'Abdu 'l-Muttalib! By Allah, I do not know of any person among the Arabs who has come to his people with better than what I have brought to you. I have brought to you the good of this world and the next, and I have been commanded by the Lord to call you unto Him. Therefore, who amongst you will support me in this matter so that he may be my brother (*akhh*), my successor (*wasiiyyi*) and my caliph (*khalifati*) among you?

This was the first time that the Prophet openly and publicly called the relations to accept him as the Messenger and Prophet of Allah; he also uses the words "*akhi wa wasiyyi wa khalifati*– my brother, my successor, my caliph" for the person who will aid him in this mission. No one answered him; they all held back except the youngest of them – 'Ali bin Abi Talib. He stood up and said, "I will be your helper, O Prophet of God."

The Prophet put his hand on the back of 'Ali's neck and said: "*Inna hadha akhhi wa wasiyyi wa khalifati fikum, fasma'u lahu wa ati'u* – Verily this is my brother, my successor, and my caliph amongst you; therefore, listen to him and obey."[9](#)

This was the first explicit statement because the audience understood the appointment of 'Ali very clearly. Some of them, including Abu Lahab, even joked with Abu Talib that your nephew, Muhammad, has ordered you to listen to your son and obey him! At the least, this shows that the appointment of 'Ali bin Abi Talib was clear and explicit, not just implied.

After that, the Prophet at various places emphasized the issue of loving his Ahlul Bayt, seeking guidance from them, and drew the attention of the people to the special status that they had in the eyes of God and His Messenger.

Finally, just two months before his death, the Prophet clearly appointed 'Ali in Ghadir Khumm as the leader (religious as well as political) of the Muslims. He said, "Whomsoever's Master I am, this 'Ali is his Master." He also said, "I am leaving two precious things behind, as long as you hold on to them both you will never go astray: the Book of Allah and my progeny."[10](#)

A lot has been discussed and written on these events. The reader may refer to the following works in English:

- *A Study on the Question of Al-Wilaya* by Sayyid Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, translated by Dr. P. Haseltine. (This treatise was first translated in India under the appropriate title: "*Shi'ism: the Natural Product of Islam*".)
- *The Origin of Shi'a and Its Principles* by Muhammad Husayn Kashiful Ghita'.
- *Imamate: the Vicegerency of the Prophet* by Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi.
- *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* by S. Hussain M. Jafari.
- *The Right Path* by Sayyid 'Abdulhussein Sharafuddin al-Musawi.
- "The Meaning & Origin of Shi'ism" by Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi in *The Right Path*, vol. 1 (Jan-Mar 1993) # 3.[11](#)

Anyone who reads these materials will see that the beginning of Islam and Shi'ism was at the same time

and that, just like Islam, Shi'ism was a religious movement that also encompassed social and political aspects of society. As Dr. Ja'fari writes,

"When we analyse different possible relations which the religious beliefs and the political constitution in Islam bear to one another, we find the claims and the doctrinal trends of the supporters of 'Ali more inclined towards the religious aspects than the political ones; thus it seems paradoxical that the party whose claims were based chiefly on spiritual and religious considerations, as we shall examine in detail presently, should be traditionally labelled as political in origin."[12](#)

It is indeed unthinkable that the famous companions of the Prophet like Salman al-Farsi and Abu Dharr al-Ghifari thought of 'Ali primarily as a political leader, and only later on started thinking of him as a religious leader also.

In his academic work, *Islamic Messianism*, the learned scholar counts the civil war as the beginning of "religious Shi'ism": "From the early days of the civil war in A.D. 656, some Muslims not only thought about the question of leadership in political terms, but also laid religious emphasis on it."[13](#)

But in his article that was presented in a community gathering and published by one of the religious centers, he places the beginning of Shi'ism from the time of Ghadir Khumm. He writes, "The proclamation by the Prophet on that occasion gave rise to the tension between the ideal leadership promoted through the *wilaya* of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the real one precipitated by human forces to suppress the purposes of Allah on earth."[14](#)

This dichotomy between "the academician" and "the believer" is indeed disturbing. May Almighty Allah grant all workers of the faith the confidence to stand for their faith in all gatherings, of insiders as well as outsiders (*fis sirri wa l-'alaniyya*).

4. The Name "Shi'a"

A follower of Islam is known as "Muslim" whereas a Muslim who believes in Imam 'Ali as the immediate successor and caliph of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) is known as "Shi'a". The term "Shi'a" is a short form of *Shi'atu 'Ali* – follower of 'Ali".

Muslims take great pride in being affiliated to Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.), and rightly so. It is also a known fact among Muslims that Prophet Ibrahim was himself named as a "Muslim" by Almighty Allah.

"Ibrahim was neither a Jew nor a Christian but he was a sincere 'Muslim' (one who submits to Allah), and he was not one of the polytheists." (3:67)

What the people do not notice is that Almighty Allah has named Prophet Ibrahim as a "Shi'a" also; of course, not "Shi'a of 'Ali" but "Shi'a of Nuh". He says:

"Peace and salutation be to Nuh in the worlds...and most surely among his followers (shi'a) is Ibrahim..." (37:79-83)

So those who call themselves as "Muslims" and "Shi'as" are actually following the tradition established by Almighty Allah in being called as "followers" of pious believers just as Prophet Ibrahim has been described as a follower of Prophet Nuh.

- [1.](#) These writers represent the Salafi/Wahhabi camp, and their anti-Shi'a works have been distributed world-wide with the courtesy of the petro-dollars of certain Middle-Eastern countries, especially after the Sunni masses started getting inspiration by the revolution of Iran which was led by Shi'a 'ulama'.
- [2.](#) Fajru 'l-Islam, p. 33 as quoted and then refuted by Muhammad Husayn Kashiful 'l-Ghita', Aslu 'sh-Shi'a wa Usuluha (Qum: Mu'assasa al-Imam 'Ali, 1415) p. 140, 142; also see the latter's English translation, The Shi'a Origin and Faith (Karachi: Islamic Seminary, 1982).
- [3.](#) Fazlur Rahman, Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) p. 171-172.
- [4.](#) Ibid, p. 173.
- [5.](#) Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism (Albany: State University of New York, 1981) p. 4. Dr. Sachedina studied at the Universities of Aligarh (India), Mashhad (Iran) and Toronto. Islamic Messianism is a revised version of his doctoral thesis presented to the University of Toronto in 1976
- [6.](#) Ibid, p. 5.
- [7.](#) Ibid, p. 6.
- [8.](#) Ibid, p. 18.
- [9.](#) For references of this event and discussion on this event, see the chapter "Self-Censorship in Muslim History".
- [10.](#) For further discussion on the event of Ghadir Khumm, see the chapter "Ghadir Khumm & the Orientalists" below. For authenticity of this version of the hadith (that is, "Book of Allah and my progeny" as opposed to "Book of Allah and my sunnah"), see the Sunni author, Hasan bin 'Ali as-Saqqaf, "The Book of Allah and What Else?" The Right Path, vol. 6 (# 3 & 4 Oct-Dec 1997) p. 44-49.
- [11.](#) To this list we may also add The Succession to Muhammad by Wilferd Madelung published in 1997. This is the first study by a Western scholar of high stature who acknowledges that the caliphate of Abu Bakr was not unanimous, and that it was challenged by 'Ali bin Abi Talib and his followers. This is a new breakthrough in Western/non-Muslim scholarship which till now stated as a matter of fact that the Shi'a-Sunni dispute started only after the civil war, that is after the murder of 'Uthman bin 'Affan and during the battle between Imam 'Ali and Mu'awiya.
- [12.](#) S. Hussain M. Ja'fari, Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam (London: Longmans, 1979) p. 2. Also available online at: <http://www.al-islam.org/the-origins-and-early-development-of-shia-islam-...> [1]
- [13.](#) Islamic Messianism, p. 5.
- [14.](#) Sachedina, "Wilaya of Imam Ali and its Theological-Juridical Implications for the Islamic Political Thought" in Ghadir (Toronto: Islamic Shi'a Ithna-'Asheri Jamaat & NASIMCO, 1990) p. 54.

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