

Introduction

In the Name of Allah the Compassionate the Merciful

All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all worlds

The present work is in large a summarized version of *Shi'i Islam: Origins, Faith and Practices* (2003, ICAS Press) by the same author. This shorter version aims to briefly address main issues related to Islam in general and Shi'i Islam in particular. These two works represent a modest attempt to fill some of the gaps that exist in the field of Islamic studies in general, and Shi'i studies in particular.

Though simply and clearly written, they are outcomes of more than twenty years of involvement in Islamic studies, and based to some extent on two series of lectures about Shi'i Islam delivered to English audiences: a first set of some fifty lectures delivered at Jami'at al-Zahra (the leading Islamic Seminary for Women) in Qum, Iran in 1995 and 1996, and a second set of some thirty lectures delivered at the Manchester Islamic Institute and the Shi'a Welfare Centre in Manchester, England in 1998 and 1999.

The first chapter begins by expounding both the literal and technical meanings of the term Shi'a", and references are made to statements of famous scholars in this regard. Then it proceeds to study the origins of Shi'i Islam and how it came into existence.

The second chapter studies the sources of Shi'i thought, i.e. the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the reason and consensus. Discussing the status of the Qur'an, the chapter goes on to establish that the Shi'a like other Muslims believe that the Qur'an which is present today is an embodiment of Divine revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. The chapter continues by explaining the second most important source, i.e. the Sunnah, which includes the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Qur'an itself asks Muslims to take the Prophet as their role model, to refer to him to judge and settle their conflicts, and speaks of the Prophet as the one who recites, teaches and explains the Qur'an. In this chapter there is also a discussion about the household of the Prophet (Ahlul Bayt) and their role in presenting the Sunnah. Then there follows a discussion about the importance of the reason and its role in understanding Islamic beliefs, values and practical laws. Finally there is a discussion about legal

consensus (al-ijm,') and how it is viewed with respect to the Sunnah in the Shi'i perspective.

The third chapter studies fundamental doctrines of the Shi'i faith. Along with Unity of God, prophethood and resurrection which constitute the Principles of Religion (Islam and other Divine religions), some important additional doctrines such as Divine justice and imamate are studied. These doctrines may partly be shared by other Muslims, but the Shi'a are those who believe in all of them.

The fourth chapter is a very brief account of Shi'i practices along with brief reference to the objectives and principles underlying them. These practices are in principle shared by all Muslims, though there may be some differences in particulars among different Islamic schools.

The fifth and final chapter is a short discussion about the Shi'a world today. This chapter starts with a brief account of the latest statistics about the present Muslim and Shi'i population of the world. There is also a breakdown of religious affiliations of some countries with a long history of Shi'i presence therein. Though there are no accurate and approved statistics on the current Shi'a population in the world, efforts have been made here to collect the best available.

I should also note that the author is sincerely and wholeheartedly committed to Islamic unity and hopes that this work can serve as a modest step towards Muslim brotherhood. In fact, one of the best means in achieving this unity and brotherhood is to know each other and to overcome the historical prejudices that prevent objective understanding between each other. According to an Arabic proverb, "People are enemies of what they ignore"–.

A careful study of all major Islamic schools shows that what they have in common is much more than what they differ. All Muslims believe in the same God, the same Prophet and the same Qur'an. They all believe in the Day of Resurrection and Divine rewards and punishments. They all say their daily prayers towards the same direction, that is, Mecca. They all fast the whole month of Ramadan.

They all perform pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) at the same time. They all believe in giving alms, enjoining the good and prohibiting the bad. They all believe that they should make friends with the people of faith and good intention and get away from enemies of God. They all adhere to the same virtues and values.

According to the Qur'an, all believers are "brothers". Regardless of their colour, race, gender, and denomination, there are certain duties towards each other that faith brothers and sisters must discharge. Once Mu'alla b. Khunays asked Imam Sadiq about what one Muslim owes another. Imam replied: "There are seven duties incumbent upon him. Should he neglect but one of them, he is not a friend or a servant of God, and truly he has done nothing for the sake of God". Then Imam mentioned the following:

- a) Wish for your brother what you wish for yourself, and wish that what you do not desire for yourself should not befall your brother.
- b) Do not make your brother angry, but seek to please him and obey his wishes.

- c) Help him with your soul, your tongue, your hands and your feet.
- d) Be his eye to see by, his guide and his mirror.
- e) Do not eat your fill when he is hungry, nor drink and clothe yourself when he is thirsty and naked.
- f) If he has no servant, but you do, it is incumbent on you to send your servant to him to wash his clothes, cook his food and spread out his mattress.
- g) Accept his promise and his invitation; visit him when he is sick, attend his funeral, and see to his needs before he asks you, hurrying to do them if you can.^{[1](#)}

Unfortunately, there have always been some short-sighted people among each group or sect who have tried to magnify the differences and have called for separation instead of unity and brotherhood. They hasten to find some excuses to call anyone who disagrees with them a k, fir (disbeliever) or a mushrik (polytheist) and any act that does not please them bid'ah (heresy). Of course, there are disbelievers and there are heretics, but one must be very cautious in applying these terms.

Great Islamic leaders and scholars, whether they be Sunni or Shi'a, have never attached these labels to each other. In this way, they have represented in their fatwas, sayings and deeds the real spirit of Islam, this harmonious and universal message of peace, justice, unity and mercifulness.

Islam brought unity and solidarity for those who suffered a lot from enmity and hostility (3:103). This act of unifying people is highly esteemed as a Divine act (8:63). On the contrary, it was the action of people such as Pharaoh to disunite people (28:4). The Qur'an warns believers that if they start conflicting each other they will weaken and they will, therefore, be defeated (8:46). In fact, the call for unity is not limited to Muslims. The Qur'an invites all people of faith such as Christians and Jews to unify their efforts and concentrate on their common ground (3:64).

Let us hope and pray that day by day this sense of unity and solidarity becomes stronger and intensifies.

At the end, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the individuals and organisations that have encouraged me, especially Ayatullah Muhsin Araki, Islamic College for Advanced Studies and the Ahlul Bayt Assembly of UK and the Republic of Ireland in London. Last but certainly not least, I would like to express my feelings of deep gratitude to God for all His favours that He has bestowed upon us in the past and in the present.

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^{[1](#)}. Muzaffar, pp. 76 & 77

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