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Shi'ism and Sunnis: Conflict and Concord

"Shi'ism and Sunnism: Conflict and Concord" is a topic of both historical and ideological interest. Enayet gives a brief but comprehensive account of the development of the two sects in an objective manner. So far as the origin of Shi'ism is concerned, Enayet has referred to the view of Montgomery Watt, who holds that early Shi`is came mostly from south Arabian tribes among whom kings were treated as semi-gods. Here lies the mischief of the famous Orientalist, and it is a matter of regret that Enayet, acquainted with Shi'i faith and its origin, has quoted him without any critical remark.

What M. Watt and likes of him impose upon Muslim scholars are their mental fabrications, knowing that whatever they utter would be accepted by many intellectually backward Easterners. Watt wants to establish a relationship between Shi'i belief in the infallible Imams and `semi-divine kings.' On the other hand Louis Massignon traces back the origin of the Shi'ah faith in the aspirations of middle class artisans, and this sociological treatment finds more emphatic expression in the Marxist analysis of the Shi'ah faith.

A Russian history of the world advances the view that the supporters of `Ali and al-Husayn (A) belonged to the class of landless soldiers camped at Kufah and Basrah cantonments. Even if the latter interpretation may hold some ground, the former, i.e. Watt's view,. is totally baseless. Shi`ism's origin can be traced back to the teachings of the Quran and the life of the Prophet (S).

As said earlier, in the beginning there were not two different versions of Islam but only one. Both the Shi'ah and the Sunnis trace back their origin to the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet (S). Why some Muslims took the side of 'Ali (A) against Mu'awiyah, apart from sociological reasons, can be explained only in the terms of Islamic teachings.

The majority of Muslims, who were later identified as Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, owed their allegiance to 'Ali (A),. who was unanimously elected caliph after, `Uthman. The later differences have their origin in the interpretation and implementation of the tenets of the faith, which had, of course, socio-political implications too. Enayet is justified in suggesting that the distinguishing features of Shi`ism, in relation to Sunnism, should be sought mainly in its ethos.

I would like to suggest that the fundamental principles of Shi'ism are the same as those of Sunnism. Emphasis on *`ismah, wilayah* and *Imamah* on the one hand, and on *ijma`* on the other is only of secondary importance. With this difference in emphasis emerged a unique ethos under the influence of socio-politico-cultural factors that distinguished Shi'ism from Sunnism.

This ethos is grounded in the remembrance of the martyrdom of al-Imam al-Husayn (A). The author, in the second and the last chapter, has rightly given due importance to it. But his conjecture that Shi'ism nurses a particular emotionalism is a bit exaggerated, for he contends that it issues from the peculiar Shi'i philosophy of Imamate.

His assessment of Shi'i emotional attitude on the basis of *elegia* (*marthiyyah*) *is* also one-sided. He has ignored other aspects of Shi'i literature, particularly poetry, which is rich in a deep sense of commitment to Islamic and human values of justice, selflessness, sacrifice, and love of truth.

These values of literature cannot be called eulogizing of suffering and asceticism, as Enayet has called them. He knows fully the significance of *marthiyyah* literature, but fails to appreciate its real value. Some of his observations regarding the Shi'i ethos are also subject to question; that, for instance, it is an attitude of mind that refuses to admit that majority opinion is necessarily true or right; or that the Shi'ah are usually concerned with personalities.

Both these observations are incorrect. The belief in infallibility of the Imams in no way can be explained in this way, for the Shi'ah faith also holds that prophets are equally infallible. They argue that a person prone to errors of judgement and sin cannot lead people spiritually.

The Mu'tazilites, known for their strict adherence to the dictates of reason, accepted the Shi'i belief in Imamate without questioning its much propagated `irrationality'. They rather advanced arguments in its favour. The statement that the Shi'i faith in the infallibility of the Imams is a perfect safeguard against the majority view is equally wrong.

Here the concern is not for personalities, but for certain fundamental principles and facts. Enayet's claim that the Shi'ah attitude is determined by `persons' is a distortion of facts. Similarly the statement that the Shi`ah usually abstained from politics is historically wrong, for the basic difference between the majority view and the Shi'i view originated in socio-political attitudes and issues.

Moreover, it amounts to claiming that the Shi'ah had no interest in political affairs, which is denying the truth. Basically, the Shi'i-Sunni difference is political, not religious in essence. The Shi'ah tried to uphold the values and norms of social and political life in strict adherence to the teachings of Islam. The author has quoted the criticism of Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Amini without their critical evaluation. He himself has tried to discover some similarity between the Shi'i practice of *taqiyyah* and esoterism, which is again an over-simplification.

The esoteric attitude is purely spiritual, while *taqiyyah is* an attitude determined by socio-political

conditions. During the later centuries this practice has proved to be more harmful than useful for the Shi'ah themselves. So far as the justification of *taqiyyah is* concerned, Amini, who levels many an objection against Shi'i practices, accepts the validity of *taqiyyah,* and even admits that the Sunnis also followed it to some extent, for it is an expedient method to ensure the survival of a faith under hostile regimes.

In the last chapter, Enayet deals with it separately. Sunni scholars have been critical of this notion and its practice, but actually it does not in any way affect the cause of Muslim unity; it is rather instrumental in acquiring it. In the modern Shi'i thought, the practice of *taqiyyah* has been critically examined. *Taqiyyah* comes from the root `*waqa'* in Arabic, which means `to shield' or `to guard' oneself, the same root from which the important word *taqwa* (piety, or fear of God) is also derived. In English it may be translated as `dissimulation' or `expedient concealment'.

All forms of concealment are not permissible in the Shi'i faith, but only four under particular conditions:

(1) the enforced (*ikrahiyyah*), under an oppressor;

(2) precautionary or apprehensive (*khawfiyyah*), related to performing acts and rituals according to fatwa's of Sunni theologians;

(3) arcane (*kitmaniyyah*), concealment of faith and number and strength of one's co-religionists in times of weakness;

(4) symbiotic (*mudaratiyyah*), participation in the social and religious functions of the majority community for strengthening Islamic unity.

Hamid Enayet holds that in recent times there is an obvious attempt at bridging the gap between the Shi'ah and the Sunnis. He has surveyed a number of tendencies that have helped to attain the end of unity. In the new Shi'i books the role of the first three caliphs has been re-evaluated. Abu Bakr and `Umar have been separated from the third caliph `Uthman.

The tone of criticizing the first two caliphs is less harsh than in the case of `Uthman. Enayet has referred to many modern Arabic and Persian books in this context, but I would like to refer to a controversy with regard to the caliphate of the Banu Umayyah initiated by a book *Khilafat e Mu'awiyah wa Yazid,* written by a fanatic Sunni Pakistani scholar, Mahmud `Abbasi, in which he inadvertently made baseless allegations against 'Ali (A) and al-Husayn (A), quoting extensively from early sources. However, in most of the cases the quotations were taken and used out of the context with an ulterior motive. I do not consider any Shi`i work in refutation of this book worth mentioning.

Yet the two most convincing rebuttals came from Sunnis, one was written by the founder-leader-ideologue of the Jama'at-eIslami, Abu al-'A`la Mawdudi, under the title *Khilafat wa mulukiyyat,* and the other was written by the famous scholar of Urdu and man of encyclopaedic works,

Niyaz Fatehpuri.

It would not be inapt to mention that these two critics of the above–mentioned book held the third caliph responsible for the emergence of the monarchical rule of the Banu Umayyah. Enayet has referred to such critical appraisal of Islamic history by Arab Sunni scholars also, which paved the way for a better inter–sectarian understanding. The works of Taha Husayn and `Umar Abu al–Nasr, Sunni Arab scholars, showed the same critical re–evaluation of the rule of the first four caliphs.

Rewriting of Islamic history from a truly objective, unbiased viewpoint has been instrumental in bringing the two communities closer to each other. Modern Shi`ah historians have conceded that despite the questionable mode of the election of the first two caliphs, their political integrity could not be doubted. The Shi'ah have reshaped their arguments in support of extolling `Ali (A) and his descendants with emphasis on their human, down–to–earth qualities.

Both the sects, or more appropriately, schools, as called by some modern writers, are trying to play down their mutual differences and highlighting the points of agreement. For this trend of rewriting history, Enayet has used the term of historical revisionism, which is not a proper term to express the content carried by it. Another important departure from the past was marked by acceptance of the principle of *ijtihad* by Sunni scholars, particularly by Jamal al–Din Asadabadi, `Abduh, and Iqbal.

The Sunnis accepted *ijtihad* as an important source of legislation, but they had practically blocked the road for any original thinking on the matters of reframing the laws in accordance with changing times. The Shi'ah, with their emphasis on `aql, kept the door of new thinking on legislation open, and they gave much scope to reason for exercising its power. In recent times, the Shi'i view of *ijtihad* has found many defenders and champions among Sunni theologians.

Similarly the notion of *ijma`* (*consensus*), which was emphasized much by the Sunnis and was given only a very minor role to play in legislation by the Shi'ah, came to be accepted as the basis of democratization by Shi'ah scholars. Thus, theoretically the scope of agreement was broadened and differences were minimized. Under the leadership of Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut of al–'Azhar University was established an organization to promote unity among Shi`ah and Sunnis,

As a first step towards attaining it the Ja'fari school of fiqh was included in the curriculum of al–'Azhar. Authorizing instruction in Shi'ah jurisprudence meant the recognition of Shi'ism on an equal footing with the four orthodox Sunni schools of fiqh.

The *fatwa* of Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut was published (in 1959) under the title "Islam: the religion of unity," and it was prefaced by two arguments: the historical argument reminded about mutual respect and tolerance between different legal schools of Sunnis as well as the Shi`i school; the pragmatic argument emphasized the harmful practical effects of blind prejudice against one another among Muslim schools of fiqh.

It was argued that the spirit of *ijtihad,* which could help in promoting unity and was meant to generate a feeling of mutual respect, and encouraged plurality, degenerated into antagonism, and new avenues of free dialogue were shut down. Shaltut holds that all schools of fiqh should be ready to accept from one another any idea which conforms to Islamic principles, and can together ensure the welfare of family and society.

By way of example he mentions his own *fatwa* in favour of the Shi'i rejection of the validity of suspended divorce and divorce by triple repudiation in one sitting. In another *fatwa* he confirmed the validity of worship according to the Imamiyyah Shi`i doctrine.

The old authentic Shi'i classics of fiqh and *tafsir* were published under the auspices of al'Azhar. The post–revolutionary Iran launched a concerted movement of Islamic unity supported by a *fatwa* of Imam Khumayni, which permitted the Shi'ah to offer prayers behind a Sunni imam, for the sake of expressing solidarity with all the Muslims. Enayet has referred to this *fatwa.*

These and other moves towards attaining the goal of Islamic unity have paved the way for new creative thinking with immense possibilities to meet the political and social requirements of the modern age. In this respect, the radically new but truly Islamic concept of *ijtihad* can be applied to the current issues, and be made more relevant to contemporary Muslim politics.

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