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# The Third Discussion: Spiritual Shi'ism and Political Shi'ism

Here I would like to draw attention to a point whose clarification I consider to be of the utmost importance. Some investigators try to distinguish between two aspects of Shi'ism, the first Spiritual Shi'ism and the second Political Shi`ism. Spiritual Shi ism is believed to be the earlier of the two.[1] It is also thought that the religious heads, or imams, of Imamate Shi'ism (descended from Husayn) had retreated from politics after the massacre of Karbala', devoting themselves only to guidance and worship, keeping aloof of worldly affairs.

The reality, though, is that Shi'ism has never at any time since its birth been a purely spiritual tendency. Rather, it was born in the midst of Islam as a thesis for the continuation by Imam 'Ali of intellectual, social and poetical leadership alike after the Prophet, in the manner illustrated above with respect to the conditions that had given rise to Shi'ism. Because of those conditions, it is not possible to isolate the spiritual from the political side in this thesis, certainly no more than it is to isolate it in Islam itself.

Therefore, Shi'ism cannot be subdivided in this way except in the event where it no longer implies defending the future of the Call after the Prophet, a future that is in equal need of intellectual authority as it is of political leadership over the Islamic experiment. And here there existed a wide range of allegiances to Imam `Ali among the Muslims, inasmuch as he was considered to be just the person fit to resume the role of governing arrogated by the three Caliphs.

This is precisely the loyalty that brought him to power after the Caliph `Uthman's murder.[2] But it was neither spiritual nor political Shi'ism, since Shiites believe `Ali to be an alternative to the three Caliphs, the Prophet's direct successor (*khalifah*). The allegiance extended by Muslims to the Imam had a wider range than Shi`ism proper, taken as a whole. But although spiritual and political Shi`ism developed within the broad limits of this loyalty, it cannot be regarded as an instance of a compartmentalized Shi`ism.

Imam `Ali commanded spiritual and intellectual loyalty from the most prominent Companions at the time

of Abu Bakr and `Umar – as illustrated by Sahnan, Abu Dharr, 'Ammar and others. But this hardly means that it was a spiritual Shi'ism divorced from the political side. It was an expression of faith by the Companions in Imam `Ali's political as well as intellectual leadership of the Islamic Mission after the Prophet. On the one hand, their faith in the intellectual side of his leadership was reflected in the spiritual fidelity alluded to above; on the other, their faith in the political was reflected in their struggle with the Caliph Abu Bakr, and against the attempt to divert power away from Imam `Ali toward another figure.3

In fact, the compartmental view of spiritual Shi'ism was not unrelated to the emergence of political Shi`ism. Nor did it arise in the mind of Shi'ite man except in resignation to a fait *accompli.*

As a definite formula for continuing the Islamic leadership in the hope of building the *Ummah – a* way of implementing the great drive for change begun by the Prophet – the embers of Shi`ism were all but put out inside and transformed into pure belief ensconced in the heart of man for solace and hope.

We now come to what is alleged to be the abandonment of politics and the withdrawal from worldly affairs by the Imams of the Household descended from Husayn. In the light of the foregoing, we might reiterate that Shi`ism made for the continuation of Islamic leadership, and that Islamic leadership simply meant pursuing that project of change which the Prophet had begun, in order to complete the construction of the *Ummah* on the basis of Islam.

It is not possible, therefore, to imagine the Imams relinquishing the political aspect without renouncing Shi'ism altogether. What contributed to the idea that they had abandoned the political aspect of their leadership was their seeming failure to mount military action to overturn the prevailing situation, the political aspect of leadership being taken strictly in its narrow military sense.

But there are many explicit utterances by the Imams which make it plain that an Imam is always ready to take the military course, provided he found enough assistance and the capacity to realize the Islamic objectives beyond the military campaign itself.4 When we trace the course of the Shi'ite movement, we notice that its leadership, comprised of the Imams of the Household, believed the transference of power alone to be insufficient.

The realization of change in an Islamic sense is impossible so long as this power was not shored up by a popular base conscious of the goals of power, believing in its theory of governance, acting to defend it, explaining its stances to the larger populace and braving the storms.

Midway through the first century after the Prophet's death, the Shiite leadership, shunned from power, sought constantly to return to rule in the ways it deemed proper. It was convinced of the existence of popular bases of consciousness, or vigilant *Muhajirin, Ansar* and all those who emulated their best actions.

However, half–a–century later, when little remained of these popular bases, and with indecisive generations5 newly emerging under the influence of deviationism, the accession to power by the Shiite

movement would never have achieved the larger goal; the popular bases that reinforced consciousness and sacrifice no longer existed. In the face of this situation, there were only two possible avenues for action:

One, action for the sake of rebuilding the popular and conscious bases that could properly pave the way to a transfer of power.

Two, stirring the Islamic *Ummah's* conscience and will; safeguarding some degree of life and stalwartness to fortify the *Ummah* against abdicating unconditionally its identity and honour to deviationist rulers.

The first option was the one chosen by the Imams themselves; whereas the second was taken by the revolutionary partisans of 'Ali as they sought through fearless sacrifice to sustain the Islamic conscience and will. The Imams used to support the more sincere among them. Imam `Ali b. Musa al-Rida once said to Caliph Ma'mun, in reference to Zayd b. `Ali al-Shahid, that he was one of the learned from the House of Muhammad.

He was angered for the sake of God, fought enemies until he was killed in God's way. Abu Mus'a b. Ja`far has related to me that he heard his father Ja'far b. Muhammad say: "May God have merry on my uncle Zayd. He made summons on behalf of al-Rida, of the House of Muhammad. Had he triumphed, he would have fulfilled his promise. Zayd b. `Ali did not call what was not in his right to do so. He was more heedful toward God than that. He simply) said: I summon you to al-Rida, of the House of Muhammad."6

In one account, those of the House of Muhammad who ventured forth were mentioned before Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, who then answered, "I and my partisans will always be well so long as there is someone from the House of Muhammad who ventures forth. How I long for him to venture forth! And incumbent upon me is the maintenance of his dependents."7

In sum, the Imams' abandonment of direct military action against the deviationist rulers did not imply that they had foresaken the political aspect of their leadership and devoted themselves solely to worship. It expressed merely a difference in the form of social action, and was limited by the actual conditions. It also expressed a profound grasp of the nature of reform activity and the method by which to achieve it.

1. See Dr. Shaybi, al-Silah bayna al-tasawwuf wal-tashayyu I:12; Dr. `Abd al-`Aziz al Duri, Muqaddamah fi tar'ikh al-Islam, p. 72.
2. Cf. Ta'rikh al-Tabari II:696ff See also the description of the situation in Imam `Ali's Address, where he states, "Nothing was more delightful to me than people swarming around me, as hyenas do, from every side ...and gathered round like a resting herd of sheep (Nahj al-balaghah, ed. Dr. Subhi al-Salih, p. 48 ("al-Shaqshaqivyah")
3. See what Tabarsi relates in his al-Ihtijaj I:75.
4. Cf. Usul al-Kafi II:190 (Ch. "Fi qillat `adad al-mu'minin") (Tehran: al-Matba`ah al Islaamiyyah, 1388 AH).
5. Consider what Umayyid policy visited upon the Ummah in pastimes, buffoonery, wine drinking, and brutality and repression against all opponents. On this question, see al-Mas`udi, Muruj al-dhahab III:214ff; Ibn `Abd Rabbuh, al-Aqd al

farid V:200-02; Abu al-Faraj al-Asfahani, al-Aghani First Edition 7:6ff (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1407 AH). Concerning the Umayyids' frivolous use of wealth, see Sayyid Qutb, al-Adalah al ijtima'iyah fi al-Islam.

6. A1-Hurr al- Amili, Wasa'il al-Shiah, Fifth Edition, ed. `Abd al-Karim al-Shirazi XII:39 (Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyah 1401 - Imam. See the edited version, Mu'assasah Al al-Bayt (Qum) XV:54 ("Kitab al jihad")

7. Cf Ibn Idris, al-Sara'ir III:569 (Qum: Mu'assasah al-Nashr al-Islami), for `Abd Allah al-Sayyari's narration of words by someone from the Companions.

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