

Shia Islam

by Dr Andreas Maurer

Editor's note: At this time of conflict in Iraq, with daily news about the Shia and Sunni groups there, we include in this issue of *Seedbed* an outline drawn up by Dr Andreas Maurer to remind us of the views held by the Shia.

By literal definition, the Shia are known as *followers* – the followers of Ali, first cousin of Muhammad and the husband of his daughter Fatimah.

- The Shias maintain that Ali was the first legitimate Imam or Caliph, or successor to the Prophet and therefore reject Abu Bakr, Umar and Usman, the first three Caliphs of the Sunni Muslims.
- They are also called the *Imamiyahs* because they believe the Muslim religion consists in leaders of the faithful.
- The Sunni Muslims call them the *Rafizi*, or the *forsakers of the truth*.
- The Shias strenuously maintain that they are the orthodox Muslims and arrogate to themselves the title of *al-Muminun*, or the *True Believers*.
- Shia also believe that God made a special revelation to Fatimah, Ali's wife. (Sunni writers deny every word of these traditions.)

The spirit of division that appeared among the followers of Muhammad, even before his death, broke out with greater violence after it; and the rapid strides of his successors even to imperial power only afforded a wider sphere for ambition. The greatest and most radical difference between the Shias and Sunnis arises from the former maintaining the divine right of Ali to succeed to the Caliphate on the death of the Prophet. Ali's claim rested on the nearness of his kinship to Muhammad, of whom he was a cousin, and on his having married Fatimah, the only offspring of the Prophet who survived him. They also assert that he was expressly declared his successor by the Prophet himself under direct guidance from God (Sura 2:118/124).

The leading, or 'orthodox' sect of the Shias, the *Imamiyahs*, receive the following as the rightful Caliphs:

1. Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet
2. Al-Hasan, the son of Ali
3. Al-Husain, the second son of Ali
4. Ali, surnamed Zain ul-Abidin, the son of al-Husain
5. Muhammad al-Baqir, son of Zain ul-Abidin, the son of al-Husain
6. Jafar as-Sadiq, son of Muhammad al-Baqir
7. Musa al-Kazim, son of Jafar
8. Ar-Raza, son of Musa
9. Muhammad at-Taqi, son of ar-Raza
10. Ali an-Naqi, son of Muhammad at-Taqi
11. Al-Hasan al-Askari, son of Ali an-Naqi
12. Muhammad, son of al-Hasan al-Askari or the *Imam al-Mahdi*, who is supposed by the Shias to be still alive though he has withdrawn for a time. They say he will again appear in the last days as the Mahdi, or 'director' that the Prophet prophesied would appear before the Day of Judgment.

The contentions of the Shias regarding the succession have become endless, and of the proverbial 73 sects of Islam, not fewer than 32 are assigned to the Shias, and according to the *Sharhu 'l-Muwaqif*, there are as many as 73 sects of the Shias alone; the three principal ones are:

- *Ghulat*, or Zealots, the title generally given to those who, through their excessive zeal for the Imams, have raised them above the degree of human beings.

- *Zaidiyah*, those who separated after the appointment of Muhammad al-Baqir to the Caliphate and followed Zaid.
- *Imamiyah*, or those who acknowledged Jafar Sadiq as the rightful Imam to the exclusion of Ismail, and who appear to be what may be called the orthodox sect of the Shias.

Out of these three great divisions have grown innumerable sects, which would be tedious to define. All Shia religionists are more or less infected with mysticism. Many of the Shias have carried their veneration for Ali so far as to raise him to the position of a divine person, and most of the sects make their Imams partakers of the divine nature. These views have their foundation in the traditions already quoted, which assert the pre-existence of Muhammad and Ali, and they have undoubtedly been fostered by the Gnostic tendencies of all forms of Persian belief, especially Sufism.

The differences between the Shias and the Sunnis are very numerous, but the following are the principal points:

- The discussion as to the office of Imam.
- The Shias have a profound veneration for the Caliph Ali, and some of their sects regard him as an incarnation of divinity, whilst they all assert that next to the Prophet, Ali is the most perfect and excellent of men.
- They still possess *Mujtahids*, or enlightened doctors, whose opinion is final in matters of Muslim law and doctrine. The *Mujtahid* is the highest degree amongst Muslim doctors. The Sunnis say that in the present divided condition of Islam, it is impossible to appoint them, but the Shias still elect them in Persia, and the appointment is confirmed by the political authorities.
- They observe the ceremonies of the *Muharram* in commemoration of al-Hasan and al-Husain, whilst the Sunnis only observe the tenth day of the *Muharram* or the *Ashura*, being, they say, the day on which God created Adam.
- They include the *Majusi*, or fire worshippers, amongst the *Ahl ul-Kitab*, or people who have received an inspired record from God, whilst the Sunnis only acknowledge the Jews, Christians and Muslims as such.
- They admit the principle of religious compromise called *Taqiyah* (lit. *guarding oneself*) – a pious fraud, whereby the Shia Muslims believe they are justified in either smoothing down or denying the peculiarities of their religious belief in order to save themselves from persecution.
- There are also various minor differences in the liturgical ceremonies of the Shias, which will be found in the account of the liturgical prayers.
- The differences between the civil law of the Shias and Sunnis have been carefully noted in Mr. N. B. E. Baillie's introduction to his *Digest of the Imameea Code* (London, 1869).

Reference

Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, 1982.

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