



Foreign Policy Research Institute

FOOTNOTES

Vol. 15, No. 2

The Newsletter of the Wachman Center

May 2010

SHIISM: WHAT STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW

By John Calvert

John Calvert is Fr. Henry W. Casper SJ associate professor of history at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. This essay is excerpted from his book “Divisions within Islam,” part of a 10-volume series for middle and high school students on the World of Islam, put out by Mason Crest Publishers in cooperation with FPRI. Also see his “Sunni Islam: What Students Need to Know” at: <http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1501.201004.calvert.sunniislam.html> For information about the series, or to order, visit: http://www.masoncrest.com/series_view.php?seriesID=90

Shiism is the second-largest denomination of Islam, after Sunni Islam. Today, the Shia comprise about 10 percent of the total population of Muslims in the world. The most important group within the Shia is the “Twelvers,” so called for the 12 Imams, or leaders, they venerate. The largest concentrations of Shia Muslims are found in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where they make up 89 percent of the country’s total population; Iraq, where they comprise 63 percent of the country’s total; and Lebanon, where they are 41 percent of the total population. Numerically significant Twelver Shia communities also exist in the Arab Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, and northeastern Saudi Arabia), Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Subgroups within the Shia include the Zaydis, who exist mostly in Yemen; and the Ismailis, who live mainly in India, in East Africa and in scattered communities in North America and Western Europe.

In terms of beliefs and religious practices, Sunnis and Shia have much in common. Both communities believe in God (Allah) and his prophet Muhammad; each regards the Qur’an as the exact word of God; and each upholds the obligations to pray, fast, dispense charity, and perform the hajj at Mecca. Where the two branches differ is over the question of who should hold the political leadership (*Imamate*) of the Islamic community. The Sunnis believe that the Prophet Muhammad died without saying anything about who should take his place as leader of the Muslims. Therefore, the Muslims at Medina took the initiative and chose from their ranks the Rashidun caliphs. Following the Rashidun, the Ummayyad and Abbasid caliphs provided the Sunni Muslims with leadership.

In contrast to the Sunnis, the Shia believe that Muhammad did in fact name a successor: Ali ibn Abi Talib. According to Shia tradition, a few weeks before his death, at a place called Ghadir Khumm, Muhammad took Ali by the hand, raised it, and proclaimed before the Muslims who were assembled there, “Everyone whose patron I am, also has Ali as patron. O Allah, befriend every friend of Ali and be the enemy of all his enemies; help those that aid him and abandon all who desert him.” On the same occasion, the Shia believe, Muhammad underlined his trust in Ali in uttering these words: “I leave behind you two things which, if you cleave them, you will never go astray—that is, the Book of Allah and my offspring from my family [Ahl al-Bayt].”

For the Shia, Muhammad’s statements at Ghadir Khumm confirm his—and God’s—trust in Ali. Muhammad’s affection and support for Ali were evident from the beginning. Ali was both Muhammad’s cousin and his son-in-law—he was married to Muhammad’s daughter Fatima. Having no surviving male heir, Muhammad loved Ali’s sons, Hasan and Husayn. Moreover, Ali had been the first male to believe in Muhammad and the divine message that he preached. In the Shia view, these distinctions pointed to Ali’s position as legitimate heir to Muhammad.

However, Ali was at first prevented from assuming the Imamate. As discussed earlier, other Companions of the Prophet—Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman—assumed the Imamate instead.¹ Only in 656 did the Muslims at Medina elect Ali as community leader. In the Shia view, this is a position that he should have held up on the death of Muhammad. Almost immediately,

¹ See “Sunni Islam: What Students Need to Know,” by John Calvert, Footnotes, April 2010, accessed at: <http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1501.201004.calvert.sunniislam.html>

Mu'awiyya, the Muslim governor of Syria, challenged Ali. The brief civil war between the two produced no clear victor. However, Ali's murder in 661 at the hands of a dissident group called the Kharijites cleared the way for Mu'awiyya to secure his claim to the caliphate. Mu'awiyya made sure that his son, Yazid, succeeded him. The dynasty that Mu'awiyya founded is the Umayyads, named after the clan within the Quraysh tribe to which he belonged.

Those who expressed a special loyalty or devotion to Ali took the title *Shiat Ali*, "the party (or faction) of Ali." From this phrase comes the simpler name, Shia. Gradually, over a period of three or four centuries, the Shia formed a distinct group, or sect, within Islam. Specifically, Shia doctrine holds that not only Ali, but all of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through the line of Ali and Fatima, were most qualified to hold supreme political and religious authority over the Islamic community. Each descendant named the person within the family lineage who should succeed him. The Shia refer to these descendants of the Prophet as Imams (not to be confused with the prayer leader of a mosque, who is also called an imam). According to the Shia, the Sunni caliphs, including the Rashidun, Umayyads, and Abbasids, were usurpers who took over the leadership of the Islamic community by means of force and cunning. The authority of the Sunni caliphs, in the Shia view, is illegitimate.

For the Shia, the Imam is the inheritor of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Imams thus have a special religious role that the Sunni caliphs did not possess. According to the Shia, God granted Muhammad special wisdom, which he transmitted to Ali, the first Imam. This wisdom then passed to the other descendants of Ali and Fatima. The Imams are not prophets. Both Shia and Sunnis agree that prophecy ended with the death of Muhammad. However, in the Shia view, the Imams are infallible. Because God preserves them from sin and error, their judgment on religious and worldly affairs is perfect. They can understand the hidden meanings of the Qur'an. Moreover, their insight allows them to interpret scripture in ways that take into consideration the changing circumstances of daily life. In some ways, the Shia Imams fulfill the role of community consensus in the Sunni tradition. Whereas in Sunni Islam, religious understanding emerges from the common agreement of the Islamic community, particularly the religious scholars (ulama), in Shiism understanding comes from the expert guidance of the Imams.

One of the key statements in the Qur'an around which much of the understanding on this issue rests is the verse "O believers! Obey God and obey the Apostle and those who have been given authority among you" (Qur'an 4:59). For Sunnis, "those who have been given authority" are rulers (caliphs and sultans), but for the Shia this expression refers to the Imams.

The Imams provided religious guidance to their followers and contributed to the development of Shia thought. For example, the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq (705-765), formulated the basic principles of Shia law. However, with the exception of Ali, the Sunni caliphs—Umayyad and Abbasid—never allowed the Imams to assume their roles as religious and political leaders of the Muslim community. The Sunni authorities persecuted and harassed the Imams and their followers. The Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid had the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, killed. The Shia doctrine of *taqiyya* ("religious dissimulation"), by which the Shia considered it acceptable to conceal one's true allegiance in the face of adversity, derived from this situation of persecution.

The Shia hold Ali's second son, Husayn, whom they count as the third Imam, in high regard. During the first year of the caliph Yazid's reign, men who had supported Husayn's murdered father persuaded him to challenge the authority of the new Umayyad caliph. Husayn complied with the request and left Mecca with a force of 72 fighting men and their families. His destination was the city of Kufa in Iraq, where he could count on considerable support in his effort to assume the leadership of the Muslims. However, before Husayn reached Kufa, a much larger Umayyad force attacked his party at a place called Karbala. The Umayyads subjected Husayn's companions to an unrelenting volley of arrows. One by one, Husayn's supporters fell until among the fighters, only he remained standing. Finally, they Umayyads killed Husayn in the fighting. The Umayyads took captive the surviving women and children and decapitated the bodies of the fallen fighters, leaving them unburied. The massacre took place in the year 680, on October 10—the 10th (*Ashura*, in Arabic) of the Muslim month of Muharram. Afterward, Yazid's victorious army took Husayn's head to the Umayyad capital of Damascus and put it on display. However, Husayn's son Ali, known as Zayn al-Abdin, survived Karbala to carry on the genealogical line. The Shia consider him to have been the fourth Imam.

In the Shia perspective, Husayn is a great martyr, someone who sacrificed his life for justice and the greater good. Each year, on the 10th of Muharram, Shia communities everywhere commemorate Husayn's death in public processions of mourning and reenactments (*ta'ziya*) of the tragedy at Karbala. The latter usually take place in large halls called *husaniyyat* built near mosques or in town and city squares. Accompanied by poems and lamentations, actors portray Husayn and his companions and the Umayyad leaders held responsible for the massacre. For the Shia, the story of Husayn's martyrdom calls to mind the suffering that takes place in the world, and the fact that sometimes injustice and tyranny will triumph over justice and goodness. The ritual mourning for Husayn enables Shia to come to terms with this reality and dedicate themselves to God's truth. Throughout history, Shia have reviled unpopular governments by associating them with the opponents of the Imam Husayn.

The Shia venerate the tomb of Husayn at Karbala, that of Ali at Najaf, and the tombs of other subsequent Imams as shrines. Shia will attempt to visit these holy places as pilgrims and will make every effort to bring the bodies of their dead relatives for burial in their environs.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org.