

Doctrines of Shi'i Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices

*Ayatullah Ja'far Sobhani (tr. and ed. Reza Shah Kazemi)
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The growing interest in Shi'ism in the western world since the Iranian revolution has resulted in the publication of numerous books and articles on Shi'i Islam. Most studies, however, focus on Shi'ism's historical development, highlight differences between Shi'i and Sunni Islam, or discuss Shi'i political behavior in the context of the politics of violence. This book by Ayatullah Ja'far Sobhani, an eminent scholar of Shi'ism and professor of Islamic studies in the Hawzah 'Ilmiyah of Qum (Iran), is a notable exception. The author is a Qur'anic commentator, a prolific writer, a biographer of the Prophet and Imam 'Ali, and has written several books on theology and jurisprudence.

Sobhani opines that modern man (*sic*) is turning to religion once again because of his (*sic*) disillusionment with technological innovation and scientific advancement. The author seeks to meet this need by presenting an authoritative yet objective account of Shi'i Islam from within, and the Shi'is' perception of their tradition and of themselves without exaggeration and distortion.

The book is a useful source for non-specialists as well as advanced readers who want to learn about the contemporary expression of Shi'i tradition from an authoritative source. As Shah Kazemi states in his introduction, the book presents an account of the mainstream religious thinking of contemporary Iran's official religious establishment, yet is not influenced by the revolutionary environment. It follows the traditional format and lines of argument laid out by previous Shi'i 'ulama.

The book is divided into three chapters, preceded by the translator's forward and the author's preface. In chapter 1, Sobhani establishes a philosophical framework within which he presents the doctrines of Ithna 'Ashari Shi'ism. Chapter 2 discusses some legal issues and principles of Shi'i theology. In the third chapter, Sobhani departs from the traditional paradigm of Shi'i treatises and addresses some controversial and contested legal issues and challenges.

Of particular importance is an explanation of such controversial practices as *ghuluw* (i.e., exaggeration about the Ahl al-Bayt) or disrespect

toward the Companions. While he rejects such practices, he describes and defends others as differences of opinions among schools of law and thought.

Pilgrimage to the shrines of Imams and saints (*ziyarat*) often has been misunderstood or criticized by other Muslims. Sobhani argues that every shrine or sacred site is, in a sense, a prototype of the Ka'bah, where man returns to his primordial self. He emphasizes that *ziyarat* is not the worship of what is other than God, and therefore is not an innovation (*bid'ah*). Veneration and reverence must be differentiated from worship. One does not worship the Prophet, the Imams, saints, or one's parents because they possess independent power to change one's life or destiny, but respects them because they are pious and righteous slaves of God. One's worshipping them is like prostrating before an idol, whereas one's respecting and loving them is like the angels' prostrating before Adam, Abraham, and Joseph because they were honored in the spiritual realm. These actions "are rooted in a principle enshrined in the Qur'an and hadith."

As for the Imams' infallibility (*'ismah*), Sobhani argues that infallibility is not the Prophets' sole prerogative, for a person can be protected against sin and error without being a Prophet. The Qur'an gives the Virgin Mary, who was considered *ma'sumah*, as an example. If God wills to purify a person from sin, He can, as He purified the Ahl al-Bayt according to Qur'an 33:44 and the *hadith thaqlayn*: "Just as the Qur'an is immune against all types of errors, so are the Imams immune from all mental and volitional sins."

Another controversial and specifically Shi'i practice is prostrating upon the earth, a stone, or a piece of clay or wood. Sobhani says that this practice originated during the Prophet's lifetime, as Jabir ibn 'Abdullah al-Ansari also has testified. The Shi'is do not prostrate to the stone or the clay, he adds, for the stones and earth are prostrated upon (*masjudun 'alayhi*) and not prostrated to (*masjudun lahu*). This is the outward expression of Shi'iah humility before the Divine Presence.

Still another controversial practice is combining the noon and afternoon or the evening and night prayers. Sobhani emphasizes that prayers must be performed separately and at preferred times, but argues that this practice is not particularly Shi'i, for, in principle, all schools of law permit it under certain circumstances. He provides evidence from such authoritative sources as *Sahih Muslim*. The most controversial practice, even among some Shi'is, is that of expedient dissimulation (*taqiyyah*). Although such Muslim thinkers as Ibn Tamiyah have criticized *taqiyyah* as a practice that

makes the tongue speak contrary to the heart, Sobhani demonstrates that Qur'an 16:106 and 111:28 permits it "when the fundamentals of the faith are in danger."

The book ends with a discussion of Shi'i contributions to Islamic civilization and the author's plea for Muslim unity. He urges Muslims to have constructive debates on issues of secondary importance, but to base their reasoning on scholarly research and reliable sources. He himself uses sources whose authenticity is acknowledged by Shi'i and Sunni scholars alike. He does not resort to polemics, and his arguments are free of jargon and assertions.

The translation is excellent and professional, but Shah Kazemi has done more than just rendering the text from Farsi into English. His extensive notes, glossary, bibliography, elaboration, and explanation of technical terms bring out historical-cultural aspects that are not directly discussed in the text. This places the book in a proper context and makes it easier for nonspecialists to understand. Shah Kazemi has rendered a great service to the field of Islamic studies and must be commended for making this book accessible to English readers.

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