

### **The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology, and Law**

*Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, eds.*  
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Shi'i Islam is a broad subject encompassing history, theology, ritual, culture, and other topics. Several current monographs provide an overview of one or more of these subject areas. Two examples that come to mind are Pedram Khosronejad's edited volumes on Shi'i pilgrimage, ritual, and material culture, *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam* (2011) and *Saints and Pilgrims in Iran and Neighboring Countries* (2012). While these volumes help us understand the pilgrimage practices, art, and other cultural expressions of Shi'ism, they are not focused on the fundamentals, such as the movement's history, various theological schools, legal traditions, and textual sources. *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology, and Law* helps to fill this void with its large and serious collection of essays on Imami, Ismaili, and Zaydi Shi'ism.

The volume is organized into eight sections: "History and Historiography," "The Qur'an and Its Shi'i Interpretations," "Shi'i Hadith," "Shi'i Law," "Authority," "Theology," "Rites and Rituals," and "Philosophy and Intellectual Traditions." Contributions include essays by some of the greatest contemporary scholars working in Shi'ism, including Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Etan Kohlberg, Sajjad Rizvi, Maria Massi Dakake, and Wilferd Madelung.

*The Study of Shi'i Islam* opens with a preface that includes a succinct and important discussion about the marginalization of Shi'ism in the academy. The reasons for the lack of attention, which has been somewhat remedied in recent years, include a worldview that used Western Christianity to create categories of Islam and the popularity of scientific Orientalism. As the

editors point out, “the orientalist studied Islam according to the Sunni perspective of their manuscript sources and, borrowing classifications from their own Christian contexts, they too treated the Sunni interpretations of Islam as ‘orthodoxy,’ in contrast with Shi’ism which was taken to represent a ‘heterodoxy’ or, at its extreme, a ‘heresy’” (p. xvi). In much of western academic scholarship, Sunni Islam has been presented as the proper, ordered Protestant version of Islam and Shi’ism as its Catholic antithesis, complete with saints, shrines, and relics.

The first section contains an introduction and three additional chapters on the origins of Shi’ism, the field’s approach to the Ismailis, and the status of the Fatimids in Islamic history. Written by Wilferd Madelung, the introduction includes a survey of the field of Islamic studies, which has at times been negligent in its study of non-Sunni Islam. Madelung then moves on to a beautiful description of early Islamic history, focusing on the Quraysh, the Prophet’s life, the years surrounding his death, and the tensions between Ali and the other three caliphs. As Madelung argues, a critical reflection of both Sunni and Shi’i sources needs to take place, that is free of both sectarian and academic biases, for the history of Islam is “still awaiting critical, unbiased investigation” (p. 16).

The remaining chapters in this section present reflections on early Shi’ism that take into account some of the problems in the field. Amir-Moezzi starts at the beginning by focusing on the phrase *dīn ‘Alī* (the religion of Ali), asking, “Is this not the same as Islam, as Muhammad’s religion?” (p. 17). This is the starting point for this section and the book at large, and points to the larger issues surrounding sectarianism in the study of Islam.

Each section of the book starts with an introduction, an innovative and clever way of organizing each unit that provides a framework for the following chapters. In the second section, Meir Bar-Asher gives us a survey of Shi’i *tasfīr* that includes an extensive reflection on Qur’anic exegesis as well as the Shi’i approaches to *tasfīr*. Even for a novice in Shi’i studies, this is an indispensable resource for the teaching of Islamic studies courses ranging from the Qur’an to Islamic history. Bar-Sher does us the favor of including a wide range of Shi’i voices – Imami, Zaydi, and Ismaili – rather than privileging one school of thought over the other. The remaining chapters in this section examine Shi’i exegesis in historical perspective, exegesis and its relationship to esoteric interpretations of the text, *ta’wīl* and mystical thought, and the question of authority. Students interested in gender and other identities situated in power dynamics may find this last chapter espe-

cially illuminating; Bar-Asher asks important questions about privilege that need attention.

The third section examines the Hadith, the great corpus of literature that stands alongside the Qur'an. Etan Kohlberg's introduction provides a clear and useful explanation of the differences between Sunni and Shi'i hadiths as well as the status of these reports in the Imami, Zaydi, and Ismaili communities. This crucial aid points out the differences among various strains of Shi'i thought that help determine their various legal systems. This essay is followed by Maria Dakake's investigation of early Shi'i writings and their contributions to a counter-narrative that is distinct from Sunni sources. As she argues, the Shi'i corpus

presents a direct contrast to some of the prevailing conceptions of knowledge and its transmission in the contemporaneous Sunni tradition, and this points to a unique and coherent Shi'i view of the nature of religious knowledge which was consistent with its larger theological premises, and which existed as a subtext of Shi'i sectarian differences with the non-Shi'i community. (p. 201)

The two remaining chapters in the section cover pre-Buyid hadiths and the hadith of the "pen and paper," in which the Prophet reportedly wished to write something on his deathbed. The focus here is on the variety of reports surrounding this episode and how they contribute to our understanding of Hadith as a genre. As the author of this chapter, Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, puts it, "the main value of such a story is not whether what it tells us is true or false, but rather what is its purpose" (p. 231).

The fourth section focuses on Shi'i law. Mohyiddin Yahia authors the introduction, which, in contrast to the previous sections, discusses each of the chapters that follow. He also uses the example of temporary marriage (*zawāj al-mut'ah*) to discuss larger issues involving Sunni and Shi'i legal traditions. Here, the author concentrates on the Imami tradition, the ways in which it relates to Shi'i *fiqh* in general, and the differences between earlier and later Shi'i approaches to the law. The remaining chapters examine disparate topics that fall under the umbrella of law. The first, by Christopher Melchert, focuses on Islamic piety, the development of such Shi'i devotional traditions as mourning; recollection (*dhikr*), a central practice among Sufis; fasting and extra prayers; and other traditions that resemble *taṣawwuf* (Sufism).

The author also makes a connection to Sunni Islam by describing the "considerable overlap between Shi'i and Sunni sayings about renunciation"

(p. 293) and suggesting that some of what we think of as Shi'i may in fact be Sunni. As for the link between Shi'ism and Sufism, this is left open-ended with the comment that "the Twelvers seem to have been opposed to them from the start" (p. 294). This leaves the reader no choice but to identify Shi'i piety with those practices so common in various Sufi orders, whether it was disavowed by Imami authorities or not.

This question of authority is taken up in the fifth part, which examines questions surrounding doctrine, power, and authority in Shi'ism. Andrew Newman's introduction covers a wide breadth of topics, all of them important for the chapters that follow. He begins by discussing the state of the field and the contributions of scholars like Amir-Moezzi, Rahnema, and Dabashi, and then goes on to talk about more recent trends in scholarship, including the attention given to non-Twelve branches as well as political Shi'ism such as Hezbollah. He concludes by presenting the three chapters in this section, including his own on Twelver theology and its inclusion of "non-elite voices" (p. 389). All of these contributions provide a more complicated picture of Shi'i authority than is often assumed. As Sajjad Rizvi writes, "The theological and philosophical structure in a sense took precedence over any corroborating scripture—it was the heart of the believer illuminated by the love and fidelity to *walaya* that guided one to truth" (p. 410).

Part 6 includes two essays on theology, prefaced by Madelung's introduction, in which he provides a succinct and helpful summary of the subject. For those unfamiliar with the impact of Mu'tazilite theology on Islam or on the Zaydi point of view, this is an indispensable resource. Madelung also highlights the Imamate, various schisms within Shi'ism, and the classical philosophical influences on Shi'i theology. His chapter follows the introduction on early theology in the work of al-Kulayni, which examines some large theological questions, among them free will and God's omnipotence, as well as the Mu'tazilite voice within these debates. Like much of the book, it is a useful resource for the classroom, in teaching about Islamic theology, some of the early debates surrounding serious issues, and the influence of Greek thought on these questions. The other chapter in this section, authored by Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke, takes up the work of al-Tusi and its reception among Shi'i thinkers.

The following section examines rites and rituals, a particularly interesting topic given the numerous supplications, gatherings, pilgrimages, and commemorations popular in Shi'ism. Gerald R. Hawting points to this rich culture in his introduction, which includes numerous commemorations of the deaths of martyrs as well as other important occasions. He also argues that some of

the practices in Shi'i Islam may reflect traditions of other Abrahamic faiths that are rooted in the past. For instance, "Although it is understood primarily as a ritual of commemoration, it is clear that 'Ashura has its roots in ancient ideas of sin and atonement" that has an association with "the Day of Atonement in Judaism" (p. 505).

The following chapter focuses on this solemn occasion – 'Ashura – by looking at its performance in Lebanon and India. In this chapter, Sabrina Merwin provides us with a detailed account of the Battle of Karbala, in which Husayn, the Prophet's grandson, was killed along with most of his companions. This event sets up the five rituals that comprise 'Ashura: the pilgrimage (*ziyārah*) to Husayn's shrine, the gathering at which mourning is expressed (*majlis Husaynī*), the public processions (*mawkib Husaynī*), the self-mortification (*zanjīr/tatbīr*), and the dramatic re-enactments of the battle in the form of "passion plays" (*ta'ziyah*). She also discusses the gendered aspects of these rituals, the representation of religious imagery, and the religious authorities' attempts to curb the practice of self-mortification. The final chapter examines the Ismailis of Central Asia and their ceremony of the Luminous Lamp (*Chiragh-i rawshan*), in which a series of rituals culminates in the lighting of a lamp.

The final section in this volume focuses upon philosophy, a vast and rich subject that is at times more theological than the tradition of *falsafah* with which some Islamic scholars are more familiar. As Daniel De Smet writes in his introduction, some of these works would be considered "a form of theology, mixed with mystical and 'esoteric' speculations" (p. 545). He goes on to define general concepts in the field of philosophy and then Shi'i philosophy, providing a history, discussing Ismaili Neoplatonism, and outlining Twelver Shi'i philosophical thought and theology. After this useful project, the two remaining chapters take up two individuals – Shahrastani and Ibn Sina – and examine their contributions to Shi'i philosophy and Islamic thought in general.

The volume ends with Azim Nanji's epilogue, a thoughtful albeit brief one-page reflection on the study of Islam and Marshall Hodgson's contribution to it, which as he writes, "overturned the assumption of a normative Islam" (p. 599). This is the final contribution in this fine collection of scholarship, and serves as a reminder of the rich, varied, and complex tradition that constitutes Islam, to which the Shi'as have contributed a great deal.

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