

Shi'i Islam: An Introduction

Najam Haider

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In this detailed study of Shi'i Islam, Najam Haider provides a uniquely new approach, one that excels all other scholarly works available to date on the subject. This book is not just a description of differences between the two major branches of Islam, concluding with the natural outcome of the split within the community – Sunnis (roughly 80 percent) and Shi'is (20 percent) – as the historical conclusion of two interpretations of Islam. The Sunni interpretation is that immediately after the Prophet's death the Muslims elected his father-in-law and elderly Companion Abu Bakr as the community's political leader, followed by Umar, Uthman, and Ali. The Shi'i interpretation argues the Prophet's intention had always been for his son-in-law Ali to succeed him and that this was the wish of the Divine. This, they said, was their strongest claim maintained

through various interpretations of the Qur'anic verses and through several incidents from the Prophet's actions and sermons. In this regard, they prove their claim through the theological tenets proving the necessity of the Imamate, namely, the divinely appointed leadership of the community.

Keeping all of this in mind, the author shows that the study of Shi'i Islam does not stop with this early controversy, but has in fact been a dynamic and evolving stream of thought down to our own time. Within this evolution he includes the Twelver Shi'is, the Isma'ilis, and the Zaydis. The author does not dwell upon the minor differences between Shi'is and Sunnis; rather, he demonstrates a more detailed critical thinking and comprehensive look at the former's belief and the prophetic narrations (*aḥādīth*) concerning Ali's appointment as not just the community's political head, but also as the legitimate authority who would have complete leadership in political as well as religious issues. In that sense, the book reveals the clear dichotomy between the political authority possessed by Abu Bakr against the total legitimacy possessed by Ali.

Unlike other books on the subject, Haider does not end his thesis by maintaining that Abu Bakr's election was the main reason for the split and the ensuing intra-community violence. The author looks at Islam's complete historical record and shows that the main difference was a gradual development. The Shi'ah were influenced by the theological beliefs of groups like the Mu'tazilah, which engendered discussions and debates about the nature of God and where legitimate authority lies. Based on this new approach, one that includes the Shi'i renaissance in the Middle East in the aftermath of 9/11, his book opens up a new dimension in the scholarship that is only now beginning to learn about the Shi'i history of Islam not only from the traditional Sunni sources. The book enables scholars and political leaders to look at Islam's complete history through Shi'i sources.

In this regard, Haider's book is an invaluable source not only for scholars of religious studies, but also for the media, political leaders, and members of the general public who want to take a more complete look at the origin of this split and Shi'ism's historical development from that time to our own. The book shows that this development was gradual, for Shi'i scholars entered into theological discussions and debates with their Mu'tazili counterparts on the questions of the nature of God and legitimate religious authority. This period, which lasted from the seventh to the ninth centuries, resulted in this branch's theological consolidation, as history moved toward modernity, and resulted in three identifiable Shi'i groups: the Twelvers (Ithna 'Ashari) majority, the Seveners (Isma'ilis), and the Zaydis. Haider discusses all of them.

In their theological discussions and debates with the Mu'tazili and Ash'ari scholars, Shi'i scholars remained absolutely firm in their fundamental doctrine of the Imamate, namely, the legitimate leadership of the Prophet's progeny through his daughter Fatimah and her husband Ali. This fundamental Shi'i pillar holds that after the final Prophet died, a divinely guided Imam was needed to both interpret the Qur'an and guide humanity correctly. Interestingly, although the Mu'tazilais criticized this doctrine, many of their scholars saw the truth in Shi'i theology and converted. Many others went on to form the Ash'ari school, which eventually became the dominant Sunni school.

The study is therefore compelling, for it shows that Shi'ism was not a political movement based only on who would succeed the Prophet, but rather a genuine Islamic ideology, as shown by the above-mentioned scholarly debates. In all of this, the Shi'ah never considered Sunnis unbelievers. Haider makes a thought-provoking observation in his introduction: Those who accepted Abu Bakr's election were not considered unbelievers, but rather as Muslims and fellow coreligionists because they accepted Islam's three fundamental pillars, namely, total belief in the Unity of God, prophethood, and the Day of Judgment.

The difference is that the Shi'ah believed in two additional pillars: (1) God is Just and the Imamate and (2) that God appointed the Imams, the divinely appointed leaders, from the Prophet's progeny through Fatimah. In this regard, the author reflects upon an interesting sermon he heard in Syria from an Iranian clergyman who stated that the Shi'ahs are not just the Muslims (who accepted Islam), but also the *mu'min* (the true believers). It is this that gives Ali both total legitimacy and also total authority.

The book points out that the outbreaks of intra-community hostility and violence is the result of the theological crystallization after the Shi'i scholars' discussions and debates with their Mu'tazili counterparts. While both groups believe in One God, the concept of prophethood and the Day of Judgment among the Sunnis, who adopted Ash'ari ideas, remained firm in the belief that revelation determines God's Will. In asserting God's Will, the Shi'ah also considered the religious and political authority given to the divinely appointed Imams. Haider explains how these differing views led to the intellectual developments within these two groups. Therefore, it is mistaken to think that there has always been violence and conflict between them, for actually periods of mutual peace have been far more common.

Moreover, the author argues that this animosity and hostility were due to the social and political circumstances prevailing at the time, such as in Lebanon and, more recently, in Iraq. Other historical instances of violence were caused

by imperial dreams of ruling the vast and rich lands held by both indigenous Muslim rulers as well as foreign invaders bent on conquest and colonialism. He cites the Sunni Ottoman Empire versus the Safavid Shi‘i Empire, as well as the horrors of the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and European colonization during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The book’s ten chapters are divided into four sections. Starting with the fundamental Shi‘i beliefs in the first section, the author demonstrates the school’s historical development. In the fourth section, he discusses issues that developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to the involvement of Saudi-led groups exploiting tribal differences within the Zaydi community. The book also studies the Aga Khan’s efforts to promote his Isma‘ili community worldwide via humanitarian work. The author ends chapter 10 with a discussion of the dramatic evolution in the works produced by both religious as well as Shi‘i scholars. Here again, he has taken a unique approach and points to the historic evolution of Shi‘i Islam akin to the evolution of non-Muslim historical events.

The book’s main weakness is that the author, while clearly describing the necessity of the divinely guided Imams, has not clearly emphasized the importance of the Qur’an or of the divinely guided Imamate. After all, the fundamental requirement in the Shi‘i theology of God’s Grace upon humanity and His Divine Justice is based upon the belief of holding on to two things: the Qur’an and the Prophet’s progeny (the Ahl al-Bayt). Of these two, the Qur’an has more weight in the oft-repeated Ḥadīth al-Thaqalayn, where the Qur’an is referred to as *Thaqalu al-Akbar* (the greater weight of the two). This should have been included.

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