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HPPD7008: Principles and Roots of Islam

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Explore the dimensions of religious diversity within either (1) Sufism or (2) Shi'ism explaining approaches to ideas of religious authority and spirituality and how they differ from other forms of Islamic expressions.

Introduction:

All Muslims, regardless of their sectoral beliefs, commonly believe in the concept of 'oneness of God' (*Tawhid*) and profess the acceptance of the Prophet as the final messenger of God (*Nabuwah*). They also believe in the scripture, 'The Quran' to be God's word sent to mankind to guide them on the right path and the existence of the 'last day of judgment' (*Qiyamah*). Beyond these fundamental concepts, the community has evolved over the ages effecting a multitude of interpretations of scripture and perceptions of events. The major differentiation in the community occurred after the death of the Prophet. The community split into two major differentiation; The Sunni and Shi'i (also known as the Shia) traditions. The major reason for this split was differing perspectives on the authority of both the groups. The difference in authority also affected diversity in their interpretations and their doctrines on spirituality. This essay shall discuss one Shi'i community; The 'Nizari Ismailis' of the Jafari tradition in detail comparing its approaches to authority and spirituality in relation to the larger Sunni tradition. First, the paper shall introduce the Nizari Ismailis, then explore notions and approaches to authority and later move on to expound dimensions of spirituality in both the traditions.

The Nizari Ismailis:

The Nizari Ismailis belong to the Fatimid Shi'i branch. They follow the lineage of Ismail, son of Imam Dja'far al Sadik' (765), thus they are recognized as Ismailiyya or Ismailis. As they accept the doctrines propounded of the Imam Dja'far al Sadik, they are acknowledged as the 'Jafari' tradition. They are a minority community among the Shias. They differ from the Twelvers and the Bohra community through their allegiance to Ismail the older son of Imam

Baqir and Nizar the older son of Caliph of Egypt Imam al- Mustansir (1036-1094). The other two communities believe in the younger sons of the two Imams; Musa Kazim and al Mustea'li. The Nizari Ismailis also believe in the philosophy of adhering 'present and living' guide and thus give their allegiance to their Ima Shah Karim al Husseini, 'The Agakhan' accepting as their spiritual guide.¹

Authority in Islamic tradition

The community differed in their ideology of the right successor to take on the leadership of the community after the death of the Prophet. The Shia² believed that it should be Imam Ali as the Prophet had proclaimed at the pool of Gadir,³ while the Sunni's believed it should be Abu Bakr a close companion and family of the Prophet. In his final message, the Prophet is known to have quoted a significant hadith (sayings) known as '*Hadith al Thaqaalayn* (the hadith of the two weighty matters)⁴. The Prophet had said to have left behind 'two weighty matters' after his death. One is the scripture, 'The Quran' and the other is his family also known as 'People of the house' (*Ahl al- Bayt*).⁵ The community is also divided on their understanding of the 'people' who were to be included as 'people of the house'. These points shall be further explored in the paper.

Approach to authority in the Sunni tradition

The Sunni tradition claims Abu Bakr to be the right successor after the Prophet. Among the prime arguments forwarded are, that he was a part of the Prophets family, his father in law, thus fulfilling the requirement of being one among the 'people of the house'. He was one of

¹ Madelung, W. 2012. '*Ismā'īliyya*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

² Madelung, W. 2012. '*Shī'a*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

³ Amir-Moezzi, M.A. 2014. '*Ghadīr Khumm*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE

⁴ Sobhani Jafar Ayatollah. 2001. *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam; A Compendium to Imami Beliefs and Practices* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institut of Ismaili Studies)

⁵ Sobhani Jafar Ayatollah. 2001. *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam; A Compendium to Imami Beliefs and Practices* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies)

his oldest and closest companions. He had been the only one to accompany the Prophet while migrating to Medina, led prayers substituting him by his permission and fought many battles with him. However, after the Prophet, Abu Bakr claimed only to be a worldly leader and a keeper of the book. Many people opposed him as a usurper of the rights of Imam Ali who was believed to have been proclaimed a spiritual and worldly successor by the Prophet himself at the pool of Gadir.

Over time, the authority in Sunni Islam evolved in two segments; material and spiritual. The worldly authority was claimed by the ‘rightly guided Caliphs’ who were the first four caliphs after the Prophet’s death, the fourth caliph being Imam Ali who also served as the protectors of the Quran.⁶ Following the four caliphs, the role of caliphs varied in different periods and dynasties. Later, the *Ulama* (religious scholars) took over the religious authority of the community claiming knowledge in scripture. The ulama’s too were divided into four different schools of law; The Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi’, and Hanbali.⁷ Thus, this also brings us to the understanding that as the Sunni tradition lacks one central authority, there can be innumerable religious scholars that account for a multitude of interpretations within the community.

When faced with a contemporary challenge the Ulama of a particular tradition referred to four sources for a solution, they are; the Quran, The Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), the Sunna (actions of the prophet) and consensus. “The act of deducing specific religious rulings from these principles, in accordance with particular conditions clarified in the science of jurisprudence is called ‘ijtihād’ or ‘applied reasoning’.”⁸ The scholars of jurisprudence bifurcate ijtihad into two categories: ‘restricted ijtihad’ and ‘unrestricted ijtihad’. Restricted ijtihad refers to applying ijtihad within the framework of a particular tradition (*madhab*) i.e; a religious

⁶ Sourdel, D., A.K.S. Lambton, F.d. Jong, and P.M. Holt. 2012. '*Khalīfa*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

⁷ Gardet, L. 2012. '*Ilm al-Kalām*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

⁸ Sobhani Ja'far Ayatollah. *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam. A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies)

scholar from a particular tradition, for example; Shafi' tradition is allowed to apply the religious ruling of only the Shaafi madhab. Unrestricted ijtiḥad allows the religious scholars "to draw inference from any framework given within the specific system of *fiqh*, (jurisprudence) whether the outcome is in accordance with the given system or not". Muslims consider the Prophet to be a perfect man and try to emulate him and his teachings in all spheres of their lives. However, due to the change in age, time, and geographical locations the Muslims today face many more new challenges that may not have been experienced in the Prophet's time. Thus, it is to be accepted that there is a need to appropriate religious rulings in accordance with current situations. However, after a historic event in the year 1226, 'all the doors of unrestricted ijtiḥad were closed for religious scholars'. Thus, from then Ijtiḥad in Sunni tradition only allows for religious rulings as agreed and conceded by the religious authorities of a particular tradition. As opposed to this, The jurisprudence of Shiism believes in a comprehensive system of moving between Quran, ḥadith, sunnah, intellect, and consensus and have not been restricted by anything other than these sources. "A major factor making for this living and self-regenerative system of Shi'i jurisprudence is the prohibition of following a dead mujtahid (religious scholar). One can only follow a living mujtahid who has his finger on the pulse of the social conditions of his time". Thus, it can be inferred that as compared to a Sunni religious scholar, a Shia religious scholar would be more equipped to engage and respond to matters concerning faith and contemporary issues of the community.

Approach to Authority in Shi'i tradition

In addition to the event of proclamation of Imam Ali as his successor at Gadir e- Khumm, the Shia's cite '*Ahl al Kisa*' the 'event of the cloak'⁹ as another evidence of Imam Ali as among the only five people approved by the Prophet the 'People of the house' ('*Ahl al- Bayt*'). This

⁹ Shah- Kazemi Reza. 2015. '*Imam Ali*', in Daftary Farhad, Sajoo B. Amin, and Jiwa Shainool (ed.) *The Shi'i World; Pathways in tradition and modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers In association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies .), pp. 36-37

evidence is provided as a refute to the Sunni claim who considers the Prophets extended family also to be part of 'Ahl al- Bayt'. Referring to scripture, the Shi'i doctrine believed in God's justice of sending a guide in each age and time, " divine justice necessitates that God sends an Imam out of his kindness (*luft*) to provide the correct interpretation of his revelation".¹⁰ The Shi'i sect is comparatively more integrated on authority as they believed in one central leadership for both spiritual and worldly matters. Initially becoming partisans of Ali¹¹ they invoked him to be their 'Mowla' or leader, however with the passage of time, the Shi'i's too disintegrated into varied communities of interpretation, but each community too was headed by a central authoritative figure for both worldly and spiritual guidance.

The Nizari Ismailis, as adherents of the Jafari tradition, derive their philosophies from the Quran, the Hadith (teachings of the Prophet) and their Imams who they believe are descendants from the Prophets progeny. They base their belief from the verse from the scripture which indicates 'an authority figure from among the community who is also the knower of all the command' also known as the '*uli'l amr*'. The literal term means 'those who are vested in authority'. The verse, "O you who believe! Obey Allah, obey the Prophet and those in (divinely granted) authority among you.." (The Quran 4: 59).¹² Referring to scripture, the Shi'i doctrine believed in Allah's justice of sending a guide in each age and time. They believe that as was Imam Ali given the authority to explain Allah's message to the believers, so will be an Imam in every age. The Imam's are necessitated to be from the progeny of the Prophet and are hereditarily appointed as a successor by their previous Imams through the concept of '*nass*' and '*Ilm*'. The literal meaning of '*nass*' is to 'to raise' or 'to elevate something so that it is visible to all'.¹³ The Nizari Ismailis believe that the Imam of the time is divinely appointed by

¹⁰ Haider Najam. 2014. *Shi'i Islam; An Introduction* (: Cambridge University Press)

¹¹ Daftary, F. 2008. '*Alids*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE

¹² Moman, M. 1985. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam; The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press)

¹³ Haider Najam. 2014. *Shi'i Islam; An Introduction* (: Cambridge University Press)

the command of Allah through '*nass*'. It is made public to all by the passing Imam. He cannot be elected or selected by the community. As is the divine command designated on him, he also inherits spiritual knowledge (*Ilm*) which is a divine inspiration through which he can guide the community. The Nizari Ismaili community give their allegiance to a 'present and living Imam' (guide) known as 'The Agakhan'. The Ismailis claim to be better equipped to deal with present-day challenges due to their living guide who instructs them on spiritual as well as material pursuits.

An important flaw pointed out by the Sunni Imam al Gazali against the Shi'i Nizari community is their doctrine of 'infallible Imam' ¹⁴ which assigns a state of divinity to their Imam- guide, purifying him of any err in the spiritual guidance of the community. It is responded by the Ismailis through the doctrine of '*Talim*' propounded by Hasan i-Sabbah in the 12th Century which proves essentiality and possibility of a living guide. The doctrine also counter argues the fallacy of the Sunni tradition in resorting to the Prophet's sayings and actions for the solution of contemporary challenges. ¹⁵

Spirituality in Islamic tradition

Most Sunni traditions and all of Shi'i sects commonly stress upon the significant role of the human intellect. They believe that 'The Quran' invites the believers to reflect upon its verses. They believe that Allah has placed responsibility upon man by giving him intellect so that he is able to differentiate ethical from unethical actions. Regardless of age and time, the Quran speaks to its reader guiding him and his conscience to contemplate the scripture to understand the inner meaning of faith, engage in ethical actions and raise his soul to higher realms of

¹⁴ Madelung, W. 2012. '*Imāma*', Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

¹⁵ Mitha Farouk. 2001. *Al- Gazali and the Ismailis*. (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies)

spirituality. However, as both Shia and Sunni differ in their perspective on authority, their doctrines towards intercession which impact their approach to spirituality also diverge.

Approach to Spirituality in Sunni tradition

Both Sunni and Shia traditions believe in the pillars of faith. However, Sunni tradition considers them as the most significant acts of worship (*Islam*) and faith (*Iman*) (49: 14) (3:19, 85). It is important to note at this point that, though both the traditions believe in the five pillars of faith, however, each sect assigns varying degrees of significance to each pillar, also the construct and comprehension of pillars for each sect is distinct. For example: 'Shahadah' is considered as the most important pillar. But Sunni Islam adherents bear witness only to the principle of 'Tawhid' (oneness of God) and 'Nabuwwah' (Prophet as messenger). But for the Shi's adherents 'Shahadah' is an act of faith, they add a third principle of 'Imamah' which prophesizing their witness to God. In addition to tawhid and Nabuwah, they bear witness to Imam Ali as the commander of the believers. In that manner, for the Shi'i's the principle of 'Walaya' ¹⁶ becomes one of the most important pillars in expression, practice, and belief of their faith. Mahmoud confirms that the five pillars are said to have been given by the Prophet in his final pilgrimage when he revealed God's final message, "Today have I completed your religion for you, fully bestowed my favor upon you and accepted Islam as a religion (*din*) for you" (The Quran 5.3). In the message, the '*din*' or Islam meant for some adherents all legal and religious institutions which included practices of faith which were interpreted by some scholars as a practice of the five pillars. In the Quran, the five pillars have not been mentioned together but in different verses at different situations of revelation. However, the hadiths (sayings) of the Prophet has given it its significance. The five pillars are; (1) Proclamation of the Shahadah: which means witnessing that God is One (Tawhid) and the Prophet is his final

¹⁶ Crow Douglas Karim. 2015. '*Imam Ja'far al Sadiq and the Elaboration of Shi'ism.*', in Daftary, Farhad, Sajoo Ameen Jiwa Shainool (ed.) *The Shi'i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies.), pp. 45, 61-62

messenger, (2) Reciting the ‘Salat’ or prayer five times a day, (3) Offering of ‘Zakat’ or alms which is seen as an act of purification, (4) performance of ‘Hajj’ or pilgrimage and finally (5) is practicing ‘Sawm’ or fasting during the month of Ramadan. The practice of these five pillars is thought of as worship and moral responsibility of every Practicing Sunni Muslim.¹⁷

Approach to Spirituality in Shi’i Ismaili tradition

The Shia Ismailis believe in the principle of ‘Imamat’,¹⁸ which is a belief in the ‘Imam of the time’ who is the holder of the divine authority through ‘*nass*’ concept. He (the Imam) guides the believers of the community towards the inner meaning of the faith. The literal understanding of the faith is known as ‘Zahiri’ which is ‘the exoteric’ meaning and the inner meaning is known as ‘batin’ or the ‘esoteric’ meaning. The Imam is also the authority who dictates the esoteric practices also known as the ‘shariah’ of the faith in order to guide the believers towards its inner dimensions; the esoteric interpretation according to the needs of the time. The Shia Ismailis also believe in balancing their spiritual and material lives. The Imam of the time is also responsible for providing direction in worldly matters, to be in harmony with attaining spiritual upliftment. As they give their allegiance to their Imam, the principle of Walaya (belief in successor through allegiance)¹⁹ hold significance in Shii Ismaili thought. The Imam is considered as the wali (successor) of the Prophet and a Walaya which means devotion, allegiance, and loyalty towards the successor becomes the most important pillar and a foundation of their faith. The Ismailis’ claim to be better equipped to deal with the contemporary challenges and achieve a balance between the material world and spiritual life as they have a living guide to guide them in their contemporary challenges.

¹⁷ Mahmoud M Ayoub. *Pillars of Islam- Islamic Studies Online* ()

¹⁸ Madelung, W. 2012. ‘*Imāma*’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition

¹⁹ Shah- Kazemi Reza. 2015. ‘*Imam Ali*’, in Daftary Farhad, Sajoo B. Aryn and Jiwa Shainool (ed.) *The Shi’i World; Pathways in Tradition and Modernity*. (London: I. B. Tauris Publication in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies), pp. 45-49

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be assessed that the doctrines and beliefs of both the traditions are rooted in the scripture as well as in historical contexts that shaped their ideologies. The communities were divided into their perspectives of authority after the Prophet and the people to be included as part of the Prophet's family or 'people of the house'. As Islam evolved through time and age, Sunni Islam was divided into material and spiritual leadership. The worldly authority was claimed by the four 'rightly guided Caliphs' who also served as the protectors of the Quran and later the role of caliphs varied according to change in dynasties in Muslim lands. The spiritual authority was claimed by the religious leaders who eventually, resorted to four major schools of thought. However, it could also be noted that this led to the decentralizing of religious authority. Individual search is also given significance in both the traditions but with an absence of one central religious authority in Sunni tradition, the community stays divided in its interpretations.

With reference to Jurisprudence (fiqh) as opposed to Shi'i religious scholars who enjoy unrestricted 'applied reasoning' (*ijtihad*), Sunni religious scholars have to comply with restricted '*ijtihad*'. This negatively impacts the rulings given by Sunni religious scholars. It can be inferred that as compared to a Sunni religious scholar, a Shia religious scholar is more equipped to engage and respond to matters concerning faith and contemporary issues of the community.

An important flaw pointed out by the Sunni Imam against the Shi'i Nizari community is their doctrine of 'infallible Imam' which was responded by the Ismailis through the doctrine of '*Talim*'. The doctrine also counter argues the fallacy of the Sunni tradition in resorting to the Prophet's sayings and actions for solution for contemporary challenges.

As perspectives towards authority for both the communities differ, it led to diversity in their doctrines on spirituality. Both belief in God, the Prophet, the scripture and the significance of intellect and reflection. Both Sunni and Shia traditions believe in the pillars of faith. However, however, each sect assigns varying degrees of significance to each pillar, also the construct and comprehension of pillars for each sect are distinct. The practice of five pillars is thought of as worship and moral responsibility for Sunni Muslims while for the Shi'i Muslim, the principle of '*Walaya*' (allegiance and loyalty) is also perceived as one of the most important pillars in expression, practice, and belief of their faith.

The Shi'i sect comparatively is more integrated on authority as they did believe in one spiritual and worldly guide which was initiated by Prophets grandson H. Ali. Referring to scripture, the Shi'i doctrine believed in God's divine justice necessitating a guide in each age and time, thus the Ismaili community gives their allegiance to the 'Imam of the time' who is the divine authority through the concept '*nass*' and '*ilm*'. The Imam leads the believers from the exoteric understanding of the esoteric meanings of the faith. The Ismailis' claim to be better equipped to deal with the contemporary challenges and achieve a balance between the material world and spiritual life as they have a living guide to inspire and direct them to overcome their contemporary challenges.

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