

The Shi`i Moment in the Middle East: Hope Grows in Unexpected Places June 18, 2003

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The Shi`is have taken center stage. Not since the golden age of the Fatimids (a powerful but short-lived Shi`i dynasty in tenth-century Egypt, which left behind some of the finest monuments in Islamic history) did so much hinge upon the orientation, choices, and positions of the Shi`is, as is now the case in the Middle East. At the very core of the present crisis, at the gateway to the future, stand questions of Shi`i identity and political expression—in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and the Gulf.

A minority within Islam, Shi`is were often marginalized and at times persecuted by the Sunni majority. The Shi`a (meaning faction or party—the same as the Hebrew word *si'ah*) of `Ali, the fourth caliph and Muhammad's own son-in-law, was indeed forged and shaped by the pain of defeat at the hands of Mu`awiyah, founder of the Omayyad dynasty, and the assassination first of `Ali and then of his two sons, Hasan and Husain. In many parts of the region they were driven into a shadowy existence, occasionally forced to resort to *taqiya*, secrecy, about one's religious affiliation. Even where a Shi`i majority was long established, as in Iraq, it failed to find an appropriate political expression. Only in Iran, through the choice of the Qajar dynasty, did the Shi`i version of Islam become predominant.

In modern times, a revolutionary version (or rather, perversion) of the Shi`i tradition was offered by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran. While still in exile in France, he introduced the totalitarian notion of *velayat-e-faqih* in Persian or *wali al-faqih* in Arabic—roughly translated as “obedience to the authoritative expert on religious law”—which served to obscure the true (and complex) nature of the Shi`i faith. The confrontation with the United States over the hostage crisis in Iran and the actions of Hizballah in Lebanon tragically tarred all Shi`is with the same brush and served to portray them and their faith, in the minds of many in the West, as the most fanatical, violent, dangerous, and hostile to Western values among all Muslims. The scenes of self-flagellation and symbolic bloodshed, common during `Ashura` (the day of mourning commemorating the loss of the battle of Karbala`, 680 C.E.) probably reinforce this violent, alien image.

The truth is more hopeful than the myth, in this case. The very circumstances of their emergence as a separate denomination place the Shi`is *closer* to Judaism (and Christianity) than the Sunnis in some important respects:

1. The sense that history can “go wrong” runs deep in the older monotheistic religions, with their narratives of exile and sacrifice, but does not sit well with the Sunnis, for whom the verdict of victory in Karbala`—the battle, in the year 680, in which the followers of `Ali were defeated—validates the subsequent political history. The Shi`is, on the other hand, took a more tragic view of human affairs—at least until Khomeini and his disciples, such as the Hizballah leaders in Lebanon, tried to turn their faith into a “theology of liberation” and an instrument of revolutionary political power.
2. In line with this tragic sense, Shi`is developed several versions of the messianic yearning for redemption. They are awaiting the return of an imam, a “leader in prayer,” a Shi`i term for the *khalifa* (“caliph”), who must be one of the true successors of `Ali's bloodline, who had gone into “absence” (*ghaybah*). Some Shi`is await the seventh imam, but the majority are “twelvers”—and for them, as for Jews and Christians with

- regard to their messianic beliefs, the imam's return would mark the culmination of history as we know it. In a way, Khomeini used these yearnings among Iranians to generate expectations (which he could not deliver) that transcend "politics as usual."
3. In the meantime (in this unredeemed world), for most Shi'is the state as such has no religious legitimacy. Accordingly, it does not have a role in the free play of religious opinion. Therefore, unlike Sunnis (and unlike some later evolutions in Orthodox Judaism of the concept of rabbinic authority) Shi'is never closed the gates of "exposition" or *ijtihad*, and remained organized in communities of study, focused on the hierarchy of knowledge and individual stature that gave teachers the title of *ayatollah* and *ayatollah 'uzmah* (grand ayatollah), culminating in the notion of a "source of emulation," *marja' taqlid*. None of this (until Khomeini) had anything to do with state power or coercion.

This is not an abstract historical debate. What these points convey is that the direction offered by the Iranian Islamic Republic is certainly not the only legitimate or preordained political expression of Shi'i identity; in fact, it runs against the grain of much older, more temperate, and even "democratic" traditions.

Insofar as they define the standing of a teacher not by his exercise of state power, but in terms of his moral and intellectual standing (determined by the choices made by individuals who accept him as their religious authority), such Shi'i traditions can be conducive to the rise of a democratic culture. These were exemplified in the recent past by prominent Iranians such as Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Grand Ayatollah al-Khoei (whose son Abdul Majid was murdered upon his return to Iraq in Najaf), both of whom rejected Khomeini's line. This position is personified today in Grand Ayatollah Sistani and his followers.

In fact, within the realm of such traditional hierarchies and interpretations, there is no reason why the problematic teachings of Khomeini's disciples in Qom (which many within Iran are coming to see as an aberration), should prevail over the more moderate opinions. Pro-Iranian, radical elements will be at work for some time, and close attention should be paid to the powerful tools of terrorism and subversion that Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and his Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) still wield. However, across the region, there are alternatives for Shi'is to embrace.

Just as there is more of a clash within the civilization of Islam than between Islam and the West, so too there is a fascinating conflict between these two forms of Shi'ite ideology. Not only Shi'ism itself, but Islam and the world have a profound stake in this struggle as well, which will have an impact upon human society at large.