

Chapter 2: Towards a Definition of Shī‘ism

As we have seen before, “election,” “option,” and “inclination” are some of the comprehensive meanings the Greek language gave to the term *hairesis*. These meanings were passed into Latin, with the necessary etymological adjustments, as *hoeresis* which conveys the ideas of “opinion,” “dogma,” “party” and “sect.” Dictionaries define the meaning of “sect” as a “body of people sharing religious opinions who have broken away from a larger body.”

It is often used as a term of disapproval and is thus inconsistent with its original meaning of “doctrine of a particular teacher who developed it and explained it and which is accepted and defended by a group of followers.” By straying from their original meanings and etymological roots, the words “heresy” and “sect” have been applied for centuries to those who professed “false” beliefs worthy of excommunication. In this limited sense, the word “heresy” has more in common with the Hebrew term *herem*, meaning excommunication and anathema, and the Arabic word *harām*, from the root *harrama*, which means to deprive, to anathematize, to remove and to excommunicate.

The words “heresy” and “sect” were used in ancient times to describe various schools of philosophy. Over the course of centuries, however, the terms acquired pejorative connotations which eventually came to dominate and replaced their original meanings. The terms “heresy” and “sect” came to be commonly applied to all religious groups which broke away from an original doctrine and who were in disagreement with the dogmas and rituals which were officially orthodox.

For the Roman Catholic Church, all protestant sects born from the Reformation were, in a strict sense, “heretical” and “heterodox” from the moment they broke away from the Vatican. From around 1971, the term “heretic,” with all of its connotations, was suppressed from the Catholic ecclesiastic lexicon.¹

Consequently, there are no longer any “heresies,” these having been replaced with “mere doctrinal errors” which do not merit excommunication. The modern mentality was evidently unsatisfied with its classical lexical heritage and along with the older terminology it developed a wide body of new definitions. The Western world uses these terms in so many contradictory ways that they do not have a constant meaning.

They apply them to religious phenomenon which they view with suspicion but which they rarely try to understand. This state of confusion is created by the modern habit of calling everything into question.² It is also a reflection of the total failure of the “opinion-makers” who insist on taking the concept of “sect”—as vague as it may be as their sole starting point.

As Rudolf Otto has explained, the use and misuse of terms like “sect” and “fundamentalism” quickly reaches an irrational point. What is most surprising, however, is that this feeble conceptual chain has been forged and molded to subject the same unknown enemy who frequently changes forms like a many-sided protease. The multitude of contradictory definitions proposed by the “opinion-makers”—in a dry attempt to describe diversity—actually impede proper classification.

The situation further complicates itself when some Orientalists, rather than researching thought, move on to studying ideological struggles. As a result, they divide themselves between scientific and political work. If we focus so much on this issue, it is because our critical stance requires us to do so. We are well within our rights to criticize the attitude of those who, deliberately or involuntarily, by a mere concession to modern language, spread falsehood and error.³

It is as if the terms “sect” and “fundamentalism” were merely simple theological references or epithets without any moral implications. We must ask ourselves: Is it really possible that the richness of classical definitions and terminology has been reduced to the point of describing general ideological types?

It should be noted that the term “sect” is unduly applied to Shī‘ite Islām without doctrinal justification and without paying attention to whether such a definition is actually compatible with its perfectly orthodox and traditional spirit. If this is not a case of terminological standardization, then what is the point of insisting on its application? Should the generic sense of “sect” be applied by default to every religious minority on the basis of the same rigid and arbitrary interpretation?

We refer, of course, to those scholars who fancifully turn every minority tradition into a “sect” without considering the true meaning of its definition. In fact, these scholars often label certain religious groups as “sects” when their followers are numerically equal to the main groups within their tradition. Certain religious minorities which are considered as “sects” in the West are perfectly orthodox religious expressions.

Such is the case with Shī‘ite Islām in the Middle East, Buddhism or Taoism in the Far East, to mention some of the most common examples. But, as we have seen, the tendency to give Shī‘ite Islām the stigma of “sect” is premeditated. It is not by chance that some “opinion-makers” and Orientalists have agreed on applying this term. The definition of “sect,” as they know better than anyone else, can conveniently be substituted—in a theological and philosophical sense—by the more insidiously political and provocative one which defines a sect as a “group of partisans with extreme and violent ideas.”

Faced with simplistic and reductionist interpretations which are obsessed with grouping all religious minorities under one general label, the indiscriminate application of the term “sect” continues to be

accepted. This is despite the fact that the commonly accepted meaning of the term is nothing more than a convention or a deep-rooted prejudice accepted by all without reserve.

Even among educated people, the very idea of “sect” always presupposes a deep-rooted reactionary and intolerant attitude, which is how the *factio* [sect] can be recognized and differentiated from the other majority “factions.” If anything novel is added to this connotation, it reduces itself to concrete applications that are called upon by the same semantic concessions of language that adapt to changing circumstances. We refer specifically to the neologism “fundamentalism” which implies an entire axiological classification which, when dealing with Shī‘ite Islām, even descends to the basest contempt.⁴

The term “fundamentalist” can be correctly applied to American Protestantism since its attitude and behavior is consistent with such a definition. However, the new tendency is to give the term a political sense linking it even more strongly with Shī‘ite Islām. The use of the term “fundamentalist” in a political sense is really a recent development. It traces back to the famous controversy between American Protestants and the supporters of Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

The dispute centered on the question as to whether state education should be separated from religion as a means to promote the atheist doctrine of evolution which is incompatible with the idea of God and divine creation.⁵ At that time, the use of the term “fundamentalist” was far from commonplace.

The term “fundamentalist” has acquired a political connotation which every day is more effectively integrated into the vernacular, becoming normal in English and standard in other Western languages. It is applied to a series of Islāmic groups which resist and reject any type of Western interference. It should be noted that the French prefer the term *intégriste* and the Spaniards the word *rigorista* when they try to define the same phenomenon.

Due to limitations of time and space, we cannot examine in depth the reasons why the Western world insists on applying “sectarian” and “fundamentalist” labels to Shī‘ite Islām. For the sake of brevity, we will limit ourselves to saying that the application of such terms to Shī‘ism is a form of reductionism which attempts to tarnish an entirely orthodox expression of Islām. Not only do such labels impoverish understanding and distort definitions, what is worse today is that they are used without any conceptual contact with the true reality of its thoughts and doctrine.

Such definitions are often taken “lightly” because they do not destroy the doctrines of Shī‘ite Islām. Nonetheless, we must avoid indiscriminately applying such labels to Shī‘ism and other schools of thought since they imply inclusion or exclusion of Islāmic doctrines on the basis of the one and only orthodoxy.

The same definition of “sect,” with some slightly different shades, prevails among the Orientalists who wrote about Sūfism and Islāmic gnosis in the nineteenth century. Likewise, certain Orientalists have applied the label of “sect” to Shī‘ite Islām. They were fond of giving a Christian character to certain

Shī'ite beliefs and practices rather than recognizing them as entirely Islāmic in origin. These Arabists preferred the term “sect” to that of “heresy.”

They categorized Muslims on the basis of Christian standards. For them, the “heretics” were those Muslims who broke away from the doctrinal unity of the Islāmic “Church” while the “sectarians” were those who broke away from its socio–political hierarchy. In this respect, it is important to remember that, Saint Augustine, particularly in his admonitions against the Pelagian, Manichaeian, and Donatist heresies, rejected reductionism.⁶ He categorically warned how difficult, if not impossible, it was to give a definition of “heresy” that corresponds exactly to its essential characteristics. For that reason, he warned against the temptation of labeling doctrines as “heretical” considering how harmful the label of “heretic” can be.⁷

From a subjective psychological perspective, the characteristics of heretics include intolerance, obstinacy, rebellion, and unsociability. Those who hold erroneous, misguided or false ideas, yet believe with good faith that their doctrine is the same as taught by the Church, cannot be labeled as heretics or sectarians.⁸

Imbued with such ideas, some Orientalists use the Catholic concept of heresy as their theoretical framework. As a result, they labeled the Sūfīs as heretics because they were “mystics” who believed in doctrines which differed from those of the majority orthodox Sunnī “Church.” Despite the fact that they profess the same fundamentals of faith, the Shī'ites were labeled as sectarian because they broke away from orthodox Sunnism.

After drawing these dogmas from Christian doctrine, Orientalists rushed to apply them to Shī'ism, labeling it as “heretical,” “schismatic” and “sectarian” merely because it represented a minority tradition, a fact which *in se* and *per se* [in and of itself] does not constitute heresy. They failed to heed Saint Augustine's warning that appearances can be deceiving. ⁹

They reduced Shī'ism to the level of a “heretical sect” despite the fact that there are no doctrinal differences between Sunnī and Shī'ite Islām. Unfortunately, some contemporary Orientalists—the heirs of the old mentality—continue to stubbornly label Shī'ism as a “sect” outside the fold of Islām. Although Shī'ites profess to be Muslims and share the same beliefs as Sunnis, they are, in the eyes of these specialists, openly sectarian extremist heretics.¹⁰

In short, the tendency of some Orientalists to separate Shī'ite Islām's visible or exoteric aspects—social and political—from its esoteric aspects—mystical and metaphysical—started in the nineteenth century and intensified in the twentieth and early twenty–first century. According to Alessandro Bausani, the increasingly radical differentiation between a political and religious Shī'ism provides an opportunity for Arabists and Orientalists to eclipse the West from the spiritual, metaphysical and esoteric aspects of a formal traditional expression (4: 112–15).

We have reason to fear that this initiative is a last ditch effort on the part of the West to subject one of

the last genuine reserves of traditional thought into an indefinite zone of relative obscurity and of temporal oversight. In other words, when some Orientalists and “opinion-makers” take interest in Shī‘ite Islām, these professional polemicists are motivated by a desire to create a false and distorted image of Shī‘ism, isolating and stressing its exclusively political aspect.¹¹ Is this not a most extreme case of ideological “fundamentalism?”

The one thing these theories—and others which are even more groundless and fanciful—have in common is a desire to single handedly understand the global reality of Shī‘ite Islām in all of its dimensions: exoteric and esoteric, political and religious, metaphysical and spiritual. But in fact, the only thing they want to retain from their research is that Sunnī Islām is the rule and Shī‘ite Islām is the exception.

The Shī‘ites, they claim, view themselves as a small flock of chosen ones. They are those who split from the orthodox majority, those who were schismatic, who sought to foment dissent, spread discord, and provoke division, because of some political question related to the succession of the Prophet.¹² As will be seen, these claims made by scholars are based exclusively on Sunnī sources.¹³

And it is these Sunnī scholars who brought the idea to Western scholars that, like the councils of the Christian Church, the election of the Caliph or successor of the Prophet can be decided “democratically” by means of consensus [*ijmā‘*].

1. Editor's Note: This was an extension of the innovations agreed upon by the Second Vatican Council which was held between 1962 and 1965. It included liturgical reform, called for mass to be held in the language of the people and not Latin, removed the requirement for religious dress for nuns as well as the need for women to cover their hair while in Church.

2. Editor's Note: Modern popular thought is characterized by cynicism and contradictory reasoning. This attitude can be traced back to Descartes who, by calling everything into doubt, laid the foundations of modern philosophy.

3. Editor's Note: The author alludes to the Qur'ānic verses:

There will every soul prove [the fruits of] the deeds it sent before: they will be brought back to Allāh their rightful Lord, and their invented falsehoods will leave them in the lurch. (10:30)

[In such falsehood] is but a paltry profit; but they will have a most grievous Penalty. (16: 117)

These our people have taken for worship gods other than Him: why do they not bring forward an authority clear [and convincing] for what they do? Who doth more wrong than such as invent a falsehood against Allāh (18:15).

4. Author's Note: Recent studies fully illustrate the changes the term “fundamentalism” has undergone from a theological sense to an ideological one. See E. Patlagean and A. Le Boulluec, *Les retours aux Écritures: Fondamentalismes présents et passés* (Louvain: Paris 1993); especially J. Bauberot, “Le fondamentalisme: Quelques hypothèses introductives, *ibid*, 13–30 ; J. Ségué, “Le rapport aux Écritures dans les sectes de terrain protestant” *ibid* 31–46; and tracing the modern misguided aberrations we already denounced, we must also present the contrasting opinion of M.A. Amir-Moezzi, “Réflexions sur une évolution du shī‘isme duodécimain: tradition et idéologisation.” *Ibid* 63–82.

5. Editor's Note: For a scientific attempt to refute of the theory of evolution, see Ḥarūn Yahyā's *Evolution Deceit*.

6. Editor's Note: Pelagianism is the “heresy” originated by Pelagius. It denied original sin and the need for baptism, and held that grace was not necessary for salvation. It asserted that free will and the law are sufficient for man to live without sin. It arose in a reaction to Gnosticism and Manichaeism, in the interests of a higher morality which Pelagius found lacking in Rome.

Originally, an attempt to heighten human responsibility, it fell into the extreme of diminishing divine grace. Opposed by Saint Augustine of Hippo, the “heresy” and Pelagius were condemned by several synods (411–18). A form of the “heresy,” with

emphasis on free will, arose briefly (late 5th c.) in France but was condemned (528–9). Pelagianism long continued as a trend in Christian philosophy.

Manichaeism is the religion founded by Mani (c. 216–c.276), a Persian who held that the universe is dually controlled by opposing powers of good and evil, which had become intermingled in the present age, but at a future time would be separated and return to their own realms. Mani's followers were to aid this separation by leading an ascetic life. The religion spread widely in Asia and around the Mediterranean, but died out in the West by the 6th c., although it was a major religion in the East until the 14th c. It influenced several early Christian heresies.

Donatism is a 4th century schism in the North African Church which followed the apostasies during the Diocletian persecutions. Donatists held that sacraments were invalid outside the one visible Church, that sinners should be excommunicated, and that the State had no rights in ecclesiastical matters. It is named after one of its leaders, Donatus, who was bishop of Carthage. The schism drew from Saint Augustine his lasting definition of the nature of the ministry and sacraments of the Church.

7. Editor's Note: The Prophet has condemned the practice of takfir, namely, accusing Muslims of being infidels and unbelievers. The Messenger of Allah has said that: "If a Muslim calls another kafir, then if he is a kafir let it be so; otherwise, he [the caller] is himself a kafir" (Abu Dawud); "No man accuses another man of being a sinner, or of being a kafir, but it reflects back on him if the other is not as he called him" (Bukhari).

Likewise, the scholars of ahl al-sunnah have warned against the takfir of Muslims. Imam Abu Hanifah said that he did not consider anyone who prays facing the qiblah [Makkah] to be a kafir and that this was the consensus of the majority of 'ulam'. He wrote in his will that "The followers of Muhammad can be sinners but they are believers, not kuffir."

Imam Shafi'i said: "I do not consider anyone who prays to be a kafir on account of his sins." For more on this, see "Who is a Believer and who is an infidel?" in Nasr's *The Heart of Islam*. The general rule in Islam is to treat as Muslims all those who assert that they are Muslims unless their words, beliefs or actions clearly demonstrate the contrary. Abu Sufyan, Mu'awiyah and Yazid in days of old; the Shah of Iran and Saddam Husayn in recent times all claimed to be Muslim while waging war against Islam.

8. Editor's Note: Likewise, in Islam, God judges people according to their intentions: "Allah will not call you to account for thoughtlessness in your oaths, but for the intention in your hearts; and He is Oft-forgiving, Most Forbearing" (2: 225). While there are certain beliefs that lead to disbelief—for example, believing that the harām is halāl or the halāl is harām—this does not apply to those who do so out of ignorance.

9. Editor's Note: Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is known as the African Latin Church Father. He converted to Christianity through the influence of his mother, St. Monica. His speculation on freedom, history, time and the nature of man give him a prominent place in the history of philosophy. The profundity of his thought was such that both Catholics and Protestants look to him (esp. to his treatise on grace) for doctrinal authority. His *De civitate Dei* (413–26) has been the basis of much political theory. He sought to reconcile Platonic thought and Christian dogma, reason and faith.

10. Author's Note: For example, the Spanish Arabist D. Cabanelas, professor at the Universidad de Granada, believes that the label "sect" "must only be applied to those groups who are opposed to consensus on fundamental issues, who separate themselves from the orthodox Sunnah and form a dissident community... The faithful followers of 'Alī, on the other hand, were given the name of Shī'ites, openly dividing themselves into various sects, some of a markedly extremist character." D. Cabanelas, "No hay más Dios que Allāh," apud J. Samsó, J. Vernet, D. Cabanelas and J. Valle, *Así nació el Islam* (Madrid 1986) fasc 2, 23.

11. Editor's Note: This equally applies to some orientalists who take interest in Islam in general.

12. Editor's Note: As Fyzee explains, "earlier orientalists believed that Shī'ism was a pernicious corruption of Islam, concocted mainly, if not solely, for political reasons. Also that the Sunnī faith is the 'orthodox' faith and the Shī'ite, the 'heterodox' one" (3).

13. Editor's Note: The general acceptance of Sunnī views over "heterodox" Shī'ite views by orientalists demonstrates "[t]he profound Sunnī bias of Western scholarship on Islam" which Richard W. Bulliet observes.

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