

Outline of Differences Between Shi'ite and Sunni Schools of Thought

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Introduction

There is no difference of opinion amongst Muslim schools that the religion of Allah is Islam; that the only way to know Islam is through the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet; and that the Book of Allah is what is known as the Qur'an, without any "addition" or "deletion". The difference is in the interpretation of some of the verses of the Qur'an; and in believing or not believing some of the sunnah as genuine; or in its interpretation.

This difference of approach has led towards the difference in some basic principles and some laws of religion. As the basic principles of Islam are well known, I do not think it is necessary to enumerate all the beliefs. It will be sufficient if some of the important differences are described here to give the readers a fairly comprehensive idea of the main characteristics which distinguish the Shiats from the Sunnis.

All the Muslims agree that Allah is one, Muhammad (S) is His last prophet, and that one day Allah will resurrect all the human beings, and all will be questioned about their beliefs and actions. All of them agree that anyone who does not believe in any of the above three basic principles is not a Muslim. Also, they agree that anybody denying the famous tenets of Islam, like salat (prayers), sawm (fasting), hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), zakat (religious tax), etc., or believing that the famous sins, like drinking wine, adultery, stealing, gambling, lie, murder, etc., are not sins, is not a Muslim, though he might have been believing in Allah and His Prophet Muhammad (S). That is because to deny such things is like to deny the prophethood of Muhammad and his shariah (Divine Laws).

When we go further, we come across those subjects which are not agreed amongst Muslims, and the differences between different schools of Islam begin there. Many people think that the difference between Shi'a and Sunni is the issue of leadership after the death of prophet. This is true, but as a matter of fact, different leaders instruct different ways of approach to each issue. This may result to more differences as the the time goes. I try to briefly explain these basic differences here.

Person Of God

Some Sunni scholars hold beliefs which would imply that Allah has body, but not like the bodies that we know, of course. There are quite a number of traditions in Sahih al-Bukhari describing that God has a sign in his leg, and he put his leg over the hell and so on. For instance see Sahih al-Bukhari, Arabic-English version, 9.532s in which alleges Allah has a sign in His Shin (leg) and when He uncovers His Shin (leg) people will recognize Him. Or in the same volume see Tradition 9.604 and 9.510 where it is said that Allah has fingers! Please also see the consecutive articles given by Kaamran referenced to Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.

Wahhabis who follow Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) confirm that the organs of God is physical entity and Allah is firmly seated in the trone. However Ash'arites (followers of Abul-Hasan al-Ash'ari) which include a vast amount of Sunnis, do NOT interpret face, hand, and leg as physical organs. They believe that Allah has face, hand, and leg, but they say: "We do not know how."

The Shi'a firmly believe that Allah has NOT got a body, nor face, nor hands, nor fingers, nor legs. Shaykh Saduq, one of the most distinguished of Shi'a scholars says:

"Verily, Allah is One, Unique, nothing is like Him, He is Eternal; Hearing, Seeing, Omniscient, Living, Omnipotent, above every need. He cannot be described in terms of substance, nor body, nor form, nor accident, nor line, nor surface, nor heaviness, nor lightness, nor color, nor movement, nor rest, nor time, nor space. He is above all the descriptions which can be applied to His creatures. He is away from both extremes: Neither He is just a non-entity (as atheists and in a lesser degree Mutazilites implied), nor He is just like other things. He is Existent, not like other existing things."

Shi'i reference: Shi'ite Creed (al-Itqadat al-Imamiyyah), by Shaykh Saduq Of course, there are some verses in Qur'an which ascribe the words used for limbs to the person of God. But according to the interpretation of Shi'ite Imams, they are used in metaphorical and symbolic sense, not literal sense. for example, the verse (28:88) of Qur'an which says: "Every thing is mortal except His face" means 'except His person'. Surely, even Sunni scholars can not say that only the face of God will remain, while His other so-called limbs (either physical or not) will die! Similarly, Allah has used the word 'Hand' (Yad) in several places in the Qur'an. But it means His power and His Mercy, as in the verse (5:64): "But His hands are outspread".

In fact in the Qur'an and the Prophetic such mytaphorical meanings were greatly used. For example,

Allah describes his Prophets as:

"Men of Hands and vision." (Qur'an 38:45)

Even all Sunni scholars agreed that here 'hands' means power and strength. I should mention that the view of Shi'a is also different than Mu'tazalites who take God to the boundary of non-existence.

Can Allah Be Seen?

As a direct result of the above-mentioned difference, Sunni scholars believe that Allah can be seen. Some of them, like Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, say that He can be seen in this world, as well as in the world after. Others say that He can only be seen in the hereafter. (Reference: Sahih al-Bukhari, Arabic-English version, Traditions 9.530-532 which clearly state that God can be seen, and God changes His look to be recognized by people).

On the other hand, Shiats say that He cannot be seen physically anywhere, because He has no body, and because Allah says in the Qur'an:

"Sight cannot reach Him" (Qur'an 6: 103).

Sunni scholars use the following verse as their proof:

"Some faces on that day (day of judgement) will be fresh (blooming), looking towards their Lord" (Qur'an 75:22-23).

But in Arabic language the word "nazar" (looking toward) does not imply "seeing". Often it is said: "nazartu ilal-hilal falam arahu" which means "I looked towards the new moon (crescent) but I did not see it." Therefore, the verse does not imply that they will see God. According to the Shi'ite interpretation, the verse means that they will be looking forward to the blessing of Allah.

Attributes Of Allah

According to the Shi'a belief, attributes of Allah can be put in two distinct groups: first those attributes which denote His person, and second, those attributes which denote His actions. Shaykh Saduq says:

"For example, we say that Allah was from ever Hearing, Seeing, Omniscient, Wise, Omnipotent, Having power, Living, Self-existent, One and Eternal. And these are His personal attributes. and we do not say that He was from ever Creating, Doing, Intending, pleased, displeased, Giving sustenance, Speaking; because these virtues describe His actions; and they are not eternal; it is not allowed to say that Allah was doing all these actions from eternity.

The reason for this distinction is obvious. Actions need an object. For example, if we say that Allah was giving sustenance from ever, then we will have to admit the existence of sustained thing from ever. In

other words, we will have to admit that the world was from ever. but it is against our belief that nothing except God is Eternal."

Shi'i reference: Shi'ite Creed (al-Itqadat al-Imamiyyah), by Shaykh Saduq

It appears that the Sunni scholars have no clear view of this distinction, and they say that all His attributes are Eternal. This is the actual cause of their belief that Qur'an, being the Kalam (speech) of God, is Eternal, and not created. Because they say that He was mutakallim (speaking) from ever.

"Hanbalites" so far said that 'Not only were the words and sounds of the Qur'an eternal, so that even its recital was uncreated, but its parchment and binding shared the same qualities. In the Testament of Abu Hanifa a more moderate view is expressed: We confess that the Qur'an is the speech of Allah, uncreated, His inspiration, and revelation, not He, yet not other than He, but His real quality, written in the copies, recited by the tongues. The ink, the paper, the writing are created, for they are the work of man'(Revelation and Reason in Islam by A.J. Arberry, pp 26-27).

But since Shi'a distinguish between His personal virtues and His actions, they say:

"Our belief about the Qur'an is that it is the speech of God, and His revelation sent by Him, and His word and His book... And that Allah is its Creator and its Sender and its Guardian..."

Shi'i reference: Shi'ite Creed (al-Itqadat al-Imamiyyah), by Shaykh Saduq

Among the Sunnis, the bitter quarrel between the Mutazilites and the Asharites on this subject is well-known, and there is no need to release it here.

Some claim that every created thing has flaws in it and thus Qur'an should be eternal since it is without flaw. This argument is baseless since we Muslims believe that angels, though created, are flawless, otherwise how can we trust Gabriel when he brought Qur'an to the Prophet? How can you trust Prophet himself? Is Allah unable to create a flawless creature? As such, we believe that Qur'an as well as all other things in the universe are all created. Nothing is eternal except Allah. There is a tradition from the Prophet (S) which states that:

"(There was a time when) Allah existed, and there was nothing beside Him".

Place Of Reason In Religion

This is one of the most important distinction between the Sunnis on one side, and Shi'ites on another. To be more exact, I should have used the word Asharites, in place of Sunnis since a vast number of Sunnis nowadays are Asharites; Mutazilites have become extinct a long time ago, though some of the great scholars of the recent time like Justice Amir 'Ali were Mutazilites.

Anyhow, the Shiats say that irrespective of religious commandments, there is real merit or demerit in

different courses of actions, and it is because a certain thing is good that God orders it, and because the other is bad that He forbids it. Sunni scholars deny this conception. They say that nothing is good or evil in itself. Only what God has commanded us is good and what He has forbidden us is evil. If something is forbidden by God it is bad; then if God cancels the first order, and allows it, it will become good, after being bad.

In other words, the Shiats say that God has forbidden us to tell lie because it is bad; the Sunnis say that lie has become bad because God has forbidden it. Shiats recognize the relation of cause and effect. Sunni scholars deny it. They say that there is no cause except Allah. And it is just a habit of Allah that whenever, for example, we drink water He quenches our thirst.

Based upon the above difference of attitude about the position of reason in religion are the following differences: Shiats say that God never acts without purpose or aimlessly. All His actions are based on wisdom and intelligent purpose (e.g., Because it is not commendable, rationally, to act without purpose). The Sunni scholars on the other hand, because of their denouncement of rational merit or demerit, say that it is quite possible for God to act aimlessly.

It follows that, according to the Shiats, God does nothing which has inherent demerit in it. The Sunnis deny it. Shiats say that all actions of Allah are intended for the benefit of His creatures. Because He Himself has no need; and if His actions become devoid of benefits for His creation also, they will become aimless, which is rationally not commendable. The Sunnis deny it, because of their stand about rational merit or demerit.

Grace (Lutf Or Tafaddul)

Based on the above differences, there is a difference about their attitude towards the Grace of Allah. Shiats say that the Grace is morally incumbent upon Allah. They say Grace is the actions of God which would help to bring His creatures closer to His devotion and obedience and facilitate their moral correction (which is) morally incumbent on Him. Allah has commanded us to be just, while He Himself treats us with something better, namely Grace (tafaddul). The Sunni scholars, on the other hand, say:

"God leads astray whom He wills and guides to right path whom He wills, and it is not incumbent upon God, the Most High, to do something that may be best for the creature."

Sunni reference: Creed of an-Nasafi

God's Promises

Based upon Shi'a position on Justice and Grace, they say that:

"Whatever God has promised as reward for a good work, He will fulfill it; but whatever He has threatened as punishment for a bad work, it is upon His decision. If He enforces the punishment, it will be according

to His Justice; but if He forgives it, it will be according to His Grace."

Shi'i reference: Shi'ite Creed (al-Itqadat al-Imamiyyah), by Shaykh Saduq

Shi'a is confronted both by the Kharijites and Mutazilites on one side and the Asharites on other side. The Mutazilites and Kharijites say that it is incumbent upon God to fulfill His threats also. He has no power to forgive.

The Asharites, on the other hand say that it is not incumbent upon Him even to fulfill His promises of rewards. They go so far as to say, "Even if Allah wants to send the prophets in Hell, and Satan to Paradise, it is not against virtue, because there is no inherent demerit in any action."

Why Believe In God

The Shiats say: Man is obliged by his reason to know God, and to obey His commands. In other words, necessity of religion is proved, first of all, by reason. Sunni scholars say it is necessary to believe in Allah, but not on the account of reason. It is necessary because Allah has ordered us to know Him. According to the Shi'ite point of view, this type of proof creates vicious circle. Believe in God. why? Because God has ordered it. But we do not know who God is. Why should we obey Him?

Limit Of Law

The Shiats say: God cannot give us a command beyond our strength, because it is wrong rationally (La Yokalleffollaho nafsan illa vosaaha). Some Sunni scholars do not agree with it.

Our Actions: Taqdir

Are our actions really ours? Or we are just a tool in the hands of Allah!

Shi'a scholars say:

"Taqdir means that, Allah possesses foreknowledge of human action, but He does not compel anybody to act in any particular way"

Shi'i reference: Shi'ite Creed (al-Itqadat al-Imamiyyah), by Shaykh Saduq

The above quote gives evidence to the fact that according to Shi'a, human has option either to obey God's rules, or disobey. To make it clear, it should be explained here, that man's conditions or actions are of two kinds

(i) Those actions about which he can be advised, ordered, praised or blamed. Such actions are within his power and are dependent upon his will.

(ii) Such conditions about which he cannot be praised or blamed, like life, death, etc. Such conditions are outside of his sphere of will or power.

For example, we can advise a patient to consult this or that doctor and remain under his treatment; but we can not advise him to become cured. Why this difference? Because getting treatment is under his power, but getting cured is not in his power. It is something which comes from Allah.

Freedom of action is a gift of Allah. He has given us power, freedom, strength, limbs, wisdom and everything with which we do any work.

Therefore, we are not independent of Allah, because our freedom is not only given but even sustained by Him. However our actions are not compelled by God, because He, after His showing us the right and wrong ways, and after His encouraging us to do right, has left us to our own free will. If we go wrong, it is our own choice. Shaykh Saduq stated:

"Our belief in this respect is what has been taught by Imam Jafar al- Sadiq (the sixth successor/grandson of Prophet): There is no compulsion (by God) and no relinquishing the authority (of God); but a condition between these two conditions. Then Imam was asked: How is it? He said: Suppose you see a man intending to commit a sin; and you forbade him; but he did not listen to you; and you left him; and he did commit that sin. Now when he did not pay attention to you and you left him, nobody can say that you ordered him or allowed him to sin."

Shi'i reference: Shi'ite Creed (al-Itqadat al-Imamiyyah), by Shaykh Saduq

In other words, we believe that God has given us power and will and then has left us free to do what we like. At the same time, He has taught us through prophets, what is right and what is wrong. Now, as He is Omniscient, He knows what will be our actions in different times of our life. But this knowledge does not make Him responsible for our actions more than a meteorologist can be responsible for cyclones and storms, if his forecasts comes true. True forecasts are the result, not the cause of the impending event. The Sunni scholars on the other hand say that Allah is the

Creator of all of our acts:

"No act of any individual, even though it is done purely for his benefit is independent of the will of Allah for its existence; and there does not occur in either in physical or extra terrestrial world the wink of an eye, the hint of a thought, or the most sudden glance, except by the decree of Allah...of His power, desire and will. This includes evil and good, benefit and hurt, success and failure, sin and righteousness, obedience and disobedience, and polytheism or belief."

Sunni reference: al-Ghazali (as quoted in Shi'a of India, p43)

Prophethood

Based upon their belief of Lutf (Grace), the Shiats believe that it is incumbent upon Allah to send prophets and their successors in this world to put people on right path. The Sunni scholars say that it is not incumbent upon Allah, because they do not accept necessity of Grace.

Sinlessness

The Shiats and Sunnis in first instance, and then the Sunnis among themselves, disagree about the theory of Ismah (sinlessness; protection) of the prophets. What is our conception of sinlessness? It is the Grace of Allah which helps a person to refrain from sins, without effecting in any way his will and power. A Masum (sinless person) has power to commit sins; but he does not even think about sins because his spiritual standard is so high that such inferior things do not enter his mind.

The Sunni scholars do not speak with one voice in this subject:

1. They first differ about the point when sinlessness of prophets begins. Some Sunnis say it is after the declaration of prophet-hood; others say that it is since childhood.
2. The scope of sinlessness before declaration of prophet-hood: Some Sunni scholars say that it covers all sins; the majority say that they are protected from KUFR (infidelity) only.
3. The scope of sinlessness after declaration of prophet-hood: It is agreed that the prophets do not tell lie after prophet-hood. But what about other sins? Some Sunni scholars say that they commit other sins either intentionally or unintentionally; but the majority say that they could commit it unintentionally, but not intentionally.
4. The minor sins: Some Sunni scholars say it was possible for prophets to commit minor sins, even intentionally. But that they were protected from such minor sins which might have degraded them in the eyes of people.

The Shi'a point of view about sinlessness is that all the prophets were sinless and infallible; they did not commit any sin, whether capital or minor, and whether intentionally or unintentionally; and that they were sinless from the beginning of their life till their last breath. About the prophets, Shaykh Saduq wrote:

"Their word is the word of God, their order is the order of God, their forbidding is the forbidding by God ... And that the Chiefs of the prophets are five, and they are (called) 'Ulul-Azm' and they are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (be blessings of Allah upon them all) and that Muhammad is their Chief and best of all."

Imam (Leader)

Shiats say that Imam must be appointed by God; that appointment may be known through the declaration of the Prophet or the preceding Imam. The Sunni scholars say that Imam (or Caliph, as they prefer to say) can be either elected, or nominated by the preceding Caliph, or selected by a committee, or may gain the power through a military coup (as was in the case of Muawiyah).

Shi'a scholars say that Imam must be sinless. The Sunni scholars (including Mutazilites) say that sinlessness is not a condition for leadership. Even if he is tyrant and sunk in sins (like in the case of Yazid, or Today's King Fahd), the majority of the scholars from the schools of Hanbali, Shafi'i, and Maliki discourage people to rise against that Caliph. They think that they should be persevered.

Shiats say that Imam must possess above all such qualities as knowledge, bravery, justice, wisdom, piety, love of God etc. The Sunni scholars say it is not necessary. A person inferior in these qualities may be elected in preference to a person having all these qualities of superior degree.

Shiats say that 'Ali was appointed by Allah to be the successor of the Prophet, and that the Prophet declared it on several occasions. More than one hundred of those occasions are recorded in the history. The Sunni scholars believe that the Prophet did not appoint anybody to be his successor. This is despite the fact that there are many traditions in the six authentic Sunni collections which support this assignment.

Wassalam.

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