

A Living Religion with Exalted Teachings

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Our purpose in this article is not to give a full and detailed presentation of Shi'ism and the condition of the Shi'ites throughout the world, for this subject can only be treated justly through several books and studies. Rather, our purpose is a short and condensed presentation, which is at the same time clear and explanatory of Shi'ism and its followers for those not acquainted with the principles of our thought or those who have encountered deficient and malicious presentations.

Since this article is being published by a major center of Shi'ite learning it can provide the answer to many questions and problems that have arisen in this domain.

1. Shi'ism in the contemporary world.
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Shi'ism in the contemporary world

Today, according to the latest statistics there are more than one hundred and thirty million Shi'ites in different parts of the world. They are concentrated mostly in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Turkey, Caucasia, Egypt and other Muslim countries of North and Central Africa.

From the quantitative point of view Shi'ism comprises about one fourth of the total Islamic community throughout the world. From the point of view of intellectual and scholarly activity a notable portion of the intellectual treasures of the Islamic world has been created by Shi'ite scholars.

Yet, unfortunately, still there are many people everywhere who are not acquainted with the principles of Shi'ite thoughts. Even our Sunni brothers who comprise three fourth of the Islamic community and in many countries live alongside us are not completely informed of our method of thought and beliefs.

For those who live in the East this situation should not cause much surprise for “agents of colonialism” who see the preservation of their interests in causing internal conflicts in this region, have explored every avenue possible to cause hatred and division between these two groups of Muslims. In order to achieve this end they have been inverted the truth itself.

As a consequence of this pessimism there have been occasional flights between the two groups of Muslims, flights which have incurred nothing but loss upon the Islamic community.

Yet, for those who had fixed their covetous eye on the extensive and vital resources of this region, such disputes were considered as a great victory. Fortunately as a result of the awakening of the East and the spread of means of communication as well as the disappearance of unworthy prejudices this situation has changed completely today.

This change is indicated by the fact that about 20 years ago on behalf of the professors and directors of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the leading centres of learning of the Sunni world, there were established a centre called “the centre for rapprochement between Islamic schools” with the collaboration of Shi'ite scholars.

The aim of this centre as certified by its name is to bring about familiarity and proximity between the Muslims of the world. Its members are comprised of well-known Shi'ite and Sunni scholars and by chance the general secretary is an Iranian Shi'ite.

This centre publishes a learning journal Risalat Al-Islam in which scholars of both schools write articles based on sound proofs in order to illuminate the minds of the general Muslim public throughout the world. The late rector of Al-Azhar University and the Grand Mufti of the Sunnis, Shaikh Mahmud Shaltut, for the first time declared openly the official recognition of the religious teachings of the Shi'ite school.

He permitted all Sunnis to perform their religious duties according to Shi'ite beliefs if they wish to do so, (Of course the background of this declaration had been prepared before by other scholars such as Shaikh, Abd Al-Majid Salim). This declaration had a very good effect on the general Muslim public opinion and was very effective in creating mutual understanding between the two groups. Only a few fanatically minded people were disturbed by it.

Centres of Shi'ite Learning

Shi'ism possesses several universities in different parts of the world where Islamic sciences can be studied. The most important among them are the centres of Najaf, Qum and Meshed. Most of the outstanding leaders of Shi'ism come from these three centres and all of them are professors who teach

in these universities. In these and other centres of learning there are numerous scholars, writers, propagators of the faith and preachers.

A relatively large number of students are studying in Qum, Meshed and Najaf. These students after terminating their studies are sent to different regions as directors of religious preachers. If necessary they are called upon to become teachers and lecturers in the centres of learning. An important segment of the scholarly and intellectual treasures of Islam has been written by Shi'ite scholars.

Also according to reliable and trustworthy documents at hands all or most of the Islamic sciences have been found by Shi'ite scholars, that is, they have been the first to create and establish those sciences, Shi'ite preachers are trained in such a way that contrary to other speakers they can deliver from memory and without any notes instructive, scientific and social lectures as well as warm and pleasing sermons, each exceeding one or two hours.

The late great leader and guide of the world of Shi'ism Ayatollah Burujirdi, showed much interest in making Shi'ism known to the whole world.

He was certain that if the beliefs of Shi'ite Muslims were to be made known to the world in a correct way they would be rapidly accepted and people would find in them a shelter within which they could find solutions for the social and moral difficulties facing the modern world. Islam can provide an answer for the needs of the humanity of our age. For this reason he endeavoured to send propagations of Shi'ism to Europe and America, and sent competent preachers of the faith to these regions.

Unfortunately the possibilities did not permit any more than this. In West Germany, in Hamburg (on the bank of the beautiful Alster lake) plans were made for a majestic mosque called "the Mosque of Iranian". This mosque which was the first Shi'ite religious building in the Western world has been constructed on a four thousand square meter area and with heavy expenses. A large number of Muslims, Shi'ite and Sunni alike perform their religious rites in this mosque.

Tourists visiting Hamburg come to see this beautiful and interesting mosque in which are combined Oriental and Occidental schools of arts and architecture and where the Oriental and Islamic aspects is very obvious.

In Shi'ite universities especially those of Najaf, Qum, Meshed and Tehran there are large libraries most of whose books consist of works of Islamic scholars. It is also of interest to note that the great Al-Azhar University of Cairo and the Islamic Qarawiyyin University in Morocco which are among the oldest universities in the world were founded by Shi'ites, the first by the Fatimid Caliphs and the second by the Idrisid Sultans.

The origins of Shi'ism

Occasionally, certain people, because, of misinformation or ill-intention, make it appear as if Shi'ism is something other than the religion promulgated by Muhammad upon whom be blessings and peace, the great leader of the Islamic world, and that Shi'ism came into being in later centuries.

The truth is that Shi'ism is nothing but Islam and Shi'ites consider as unworthy and without authority anything that has the least conflict with the religion of the Prophet of Islam upon whom be blessings and peace, and the Quran.

Al together it must be remembered that the Shi'ism is not a special religion vis-a-vis Islam about whose origin one could debate. Shi'ism from its own point of view is none other than the sacred religion of Islam itself as founded by the Holy Prophet, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (s.a.w.w.). Only Shi'ism believes that the best means to know Islam and the teachings of the Prophet is through his family who were the closest to him and were brought up in the atmosphere of revelation. Therefore the date or origin of Shi'ism is same as Islam itself.

The Quran, according to Shi'ism, is the most important untouched source of Islam which has reached us without any change from the Prophet. For this reason the Quran is made the criterion and means of judgement of the authenticity of falsehood of sayings which have reached us from the great leaders of religions, the means to judge between authentic sayings and those that are forged.

Any saying that has been handed down, if it accords with the Quran is acceptable and if not is rejected. Taking these truths into view, there is no need to remind people that Shi'ism begins with the first instance when the revelation described upon the Prophet of Islam.

The Shi'ites and other Muslims

What distinguishes the Shi'ites from other Muslims? The answer to this question is clear. The first point that distinguishes the Shi'ites from Sunnis is the question of succession to the Prophet. Shi'ism believes that the position of succession and vice-gerency (Caliphate) of the Prophet is a sacred and responsible function which like that of Prophet-hood itself must be designated by God. A person who occupies this position is called the Imam. The first Imam who was chosen by God through the Prophet was Ali (a.s.). After him eleven other members of the family of the Prophet were chosen for his position.

“The first of them is Ali Ibn Abi Talib (a.s.).” Ali (a.s.) was the cousin and son in-law of the Prophet and according to the confession of the scholars of Islam the most learned, self-sacrificing and courageous of the companions of the Prophet. He was the first man to accept the faith and never separated from the Prophet throughout his life. During the last year of his life the Prophet, while returning from pilgrimage to Medina in a place called Ghadir-e-Khum, officially designated Ali (a.s.) as his successor before a large gathering of Muslims.

Before this event he also had referred several times to this matter. Furthermore, the intellectual, spiritual and religious distinctions of Ali (a.s.) were such that there was no one more worthy of becoming the successor if the Prophet than he. However, after the death of the Prophet political and tribal competition prevented him from becoming officially the Caliph and leader of Muslims.

At the same time many of the outstanding personalities among the well-known companions and aides of the Prophet remained faithful to him and were proud to follow him. But in order not to create any dissension or breach in the ranks of Muslims, they did not oppose openly the Caliph of the time. But after 25 years of the Caliphate the Muslims turned to Ali again and selected him as their leader.

Without doubt the period of rule and Caliphate of Ali (a.s.) which was unfortunately short, having lasted about five years, and which terminated with his martyrdom, was the most perfect and exalted example of just and truthful government and fight against all unjust inequalities. This is a matter which no historian can deny. Today his meaningful and wise sayings have survived and make known his school. The Shi'ites of the world boast in having such a leader. Even the word Shiah which etymologically means "partisan" of "follower" has come into being through the fact that the members of this group are the partisans of such a leader.

Shi'ites believe that after Ali (a.s.), eleven of his descendants became consecutively the successors and vice-gerents of the Prophet and with Ali (a.s.) himself comprise the "Twelve Imams." Their names are as follows:

1. Ali Ibn Abi Talib.
2. Hasan Ibn Ali.
3. Husain Ibn Ali.
4. Ali Ibn Al Husain.
5. Muhammad Ibn Ali.
6. Ja'far Ibn Muhammad.
7. Musa Ibn Ja'far.
8. Ali Ibn Musa.
9. Muhammad Ibn Ali.
10. Ali Ibn Muhammad
11. Hasan Ibn Ali.

12. Muhammad Ibn Hasan (Al-Mahdi).

From these excellent leaders we have today available abundant traces of Islamic sciences.

Shi'ism believes that the earth can never be without the special representative of God (the prophet and their vice-gerents). They have been ordered to guide, lead and train the people of the world and continue to do so. Shi'ism believes that the twelve Imam is right now alive and endowed with a long life. This matter is neither beyond the power of God, which all religious people believe in nor against the principles of modern biology.

Shi'ites, like all Muslims, believe that finally a day will come when mankind will reach an impasse because of injustice, struggles, wars and bloodsheds. Then with a sacred spiritual revolution guided by one of the descendants of the Prophet the face of the world will change completely. Peace, justice and faith in God will dominate everywhere and all peoples and nations will live in a lasting peace and tranquillity. Only, Shi'ism believes that the leader of this revolution will be none other than the Twelve Imam.

Shi'ites beliefs

Shi'ism believes that Islam is not only a series of commands or ceremonial regulations which man performs at particular hours or days of the week. Rather, it believes religion is comprised of a series of exalted instructions and beliefs and a group of life-giving regulations and laws which are intertwined with man's individual and social life. The aim of religion is to provide guidance for man in all aspects of life. The basis of Shi'ite beliefs like those of other Muslims, is threefold:

A. Divine Unity

Shi'ism believes God to be one without any associate or progeny. Shi'ism is violently opposed to every form of polytheism, and deviation from Unity of God and also to taking all kinds of human beings as lords besides God and addressing prayers to them.

Shi'ism believes that God is the creator of the whole universe, and therefore holds that throughout the Universe nothing is created but for a benefit and a purpose.

Shi'ism believes that God is neither body nor matter. Rather, He is above all that is material and therefore has no specific place or location. He is omnipresent and omniscient. He is closer to us than ourselves. He sees everything and hears every sound but His vision and hearing are not as in our case with eyes and ears.

The near and remote past and future for Him and all things indifferently known, and evident in His knowledge. He has even knowledge of thoughts that pass through our minds. He is one in every way and does not consist of parts. Even His Qualities, such as His power and knowledge, are identical with His Pure Essence. His Being has no beginning nor end. It is pre-eternal and post-eternal (He exists

from eternity to eternity).

He is in every way Absolute Being. His Qualities do not resemble the qualities of the creatures for these are in all aspects limited; whereas, He is in every way unlimited. Forgiving the sins of His servants is solely at His own absolute discretion, and nobody not even the prophet of Islam or the Imams can do anything for remission of the sins except by His permission.

B. The Sending of Prophets

Shi'ism believes that God, in order to guide His creatures and lead them from the darkness of guidance and misery to the light of knowledge and happiness, has sent a number of prophets. God has created man for felicity and happiness and has created the means for the attainment of this end in the existence of the Universe itself.

Sending prophets is also with the purpose of perfecting this goal. That is why the teachings of the prophets and the divine laws are always the supplement for creation organisation of human being. Any law which is opposed to righteousness the primordial and creation nature of man is surely not revealed by God.

Shi'ism believes that the aim of the prophets has never been to propagate unintelligible matters such as the endurance of every kind of disagreeable situation and torture or sacrifice for the sins of others. Rather, their aims has been that same correct instruction and training, the strengthening of moral principles and the relation between men, and the establishment of the principles of justice among mankind.

The Quran in many verses has clearly reminded man of this truth. Shi'ism respects all prophets of God without exception but believes that as a result of the passage of time their holy books have become mixed with all kinds of superstitions and have suffered various forms of deviations. A living witness to this fact is the unjust and childish qualities mentioned in these books about God and His prophets.

According to Shi'ism all the prophets of God, even Muhammad, Moses and Jesus Christ are recognized as the servants of God, but they were qualified and obedient servants whom God inspired. That is their convictions that all the prophets and Imams have neither committed and sin nor any omission or error during their life time.

C. The Day of Resurrection

Shi'ism like all Islam believes that at a determined time all men will be resurrected in another world which is everlasting and eternal and will receive the reward or punishment of their good or evil works. The least good or evil action is accounted for and its account is preserved by God. No one will be treated with injustice or oppression.

Those who have performed good works shall go to eternal paradise in which is found every kind of spiritual and corporeal blessing and evil doers will be sent to the inferno unless they repent in this world, and repentance means that one should seriously and willingly repent for their past sins, and decide definitely not to adhere to such sins in the future, and to indemnify and make good what would be deemed indemnifiable and where they have infringed and violated the rights of other individuals, to restore and repair them to the rightful party, for after all nothing is hidden from God.

Distinctions of Shi'ism

Shi'ism shares the three above mentioned principles with other Muslims but there are two points which are its distinguished marks:

1. Belief in the Twelve Imams who are the vicegerents of the Prophet and whose account has already been given.
2. Belief in Divine Justice. By this is meant that Shi'ism believes God never deals with injustice or oppression toward His creatures, for injustice and oppression towards others is a sign of either ignorance or lack of power whereas God is omniscient and omnipotent. As a consequence of this principle Shi'ism also believes that all human beings possess the freedom of will. No one is forced to obey or rebel. The destiny of each person is in his own hands. No one bears the weight of the sins of others no is anyone punished for the wrong doings of others.

Sources of Shi'ite religious instructions

Shi'ism has received its religious instructions which concern all aspects of private and social life from the closest source of knowledge to the Prophet, that is, the household of the Prophet (the Twelve Imams) who have received their knowledge either directly or through intermediaries from the Prophet himself. In this method Shi'ism relies on a completely authenticated saying of the Prophet which all Muslims remember from him: "I am departing from you but I leave among you two precious things: the Quran, the book of God, and my household who will never separate from each other".

In order to discern and distinguish religious obligations Shi'ism follows, in addition to the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams, that which meets the consensus of the Ulama (learned men) and also that which reason can judge with certainty. These four principles (the Quran, traditions of the Imams, consensus of the Ulama and reason) are called the fourfold proofs.

Shi'ism believes that it is a duty of religious scholars to investigate these sources and deduce the religious obligations and instructions of Islam from them. In contrast to Sunnism, Shi'ism holds that this right is not limited to a determined number of individuals but all religious scholars have the right to investigate the sources of the religious injunctions and to deduce the obligations and instructions of Islam from them.

Or one could say that the gate of Ijtihad (giving judgement and opinion on religious matters) is open to all the Ulama. In the principles of Islamic injunctions and laws there is no difference of opinion between Shi'ite and Sunni scholars.

The only difference of view is in certain aspects of the details of problems. Shi'ism holds that Islam is an everlasting religion which is at the same time easy one at all times and in all places Shi'ite scholars have collected the individual and social duties and instructions of Islam in detail in books called the "books of jurisprudence" (Fiqh) and have created numerous sciences for the refinement and examination of these injunctions.

Shi'ism like all of Muslims, believes that each Muslim must pray five times a day, must fast one month a year during Ramadhan and in case he possesses the financial and physical ability and means, to participate once during his lifetime in the great Islamic congress, the Hajj in Mecca and to perform special ceremonies that are full of majesty and spirituality with other Muslim brothers. Also each Muslim is obliged to pay to the public treasury of Islam a certain amount of his wealth (of course under special conditions) as Zakat in order to help defend the borders of Muslim countries.

Shi'ism also believes that in addition to this Islamic tax there is another tax described Khums for individuals having financial ability according to special regulations. Shi'ism also believes that in case Muslim countries are invaded by an enemy all who have the ability must take up arms and as a religious duty in the path of "defending" their homeland to fight with the enemy unto death. Martyrdom in such a path is considered as a great honour.

Moreover, all Muslims have the duty to act in correct and logical manner to guide and instruct individuals who have prevented the right way and to guide them towards the good and to combat individual and social corruption. This "great national supervision", following the inspiration of the Quran is called "*Amr Bi Ma'ruf Wa Nahy Anil Munkar*".

Social and ethical duties

Shi'ism believes that a true and conscientious Muslim is one who does not forget God under any condition, who is truthful, trustworthy, upright and friendly, who is aware of the condition of his brother Muslims and does not refuse any kind of help to them. (One must remember that Muslims address each other as brothers and this is the closest relation that exists between two human beings on the basis of mutual respect and inequality. In this matter they have been inspired by the Quran which says, "All Muslims are brethren").

No racial, class or family distinction can cause one person to become superior to another. The only distinction can cause one person to become superior to another. The only distinction is what pertains to piety and chastity. Therefore, from our point of view every form of racial discrimination is rejected.

Shi'ism possesses extensive teachings concerning rights which it has received from the Imams. Even the animals have rights to molest them without reason is condemned. On the contrary they should be protected.

Shi'ism asserts that no one should stop striving and trying in order to earn a livelihood and that no one should become a burden to society. At the same time striving to have a better life one should not disregard moral principles and virtue.

Shi'ism prohibits alcoholic beverages, narcotics, pork, gambling, sexual promiscuity and usury and its like. It considers the principle of cooperation as the most important basis of social life and the first duty of a Muslim toward others. Like other Muslims, Shi'ites consider human life as particularly significant so that for murder, blood-shed, and injury upon others heavy penalties have been foreseen in Islamic penal codes.

Also special rights and much importance are held for the family, the upbringing of children, kindness toward relatives, even distant ones, and neighbours. Shi'ism like the rest of Islam respects the rights of women as a basic principle of the family and in contrast to many other religions gives complete economic independence to women.

Like other Muslims, Shi'ites are permitted to have more than one wife but not only is the matter non-obligatory but has heavy conditions imposed upon it. Taking these conditions into consideration, only in case one's wife cannot bear children or perform the marital act or if a woman does not have someone to look after her and is in need of such care or in similar cases does marriage to more than one wife take place.

Contrary to what many westerners think, the number of men in Islamic countries having more than one wife does not exceed one percent. It is obvious that this polygamy under stringent conditions is quick, virtuous and cannot in any way be compared with the illicit and unconditional sexual relations of non-Muslim men with a large number of women.

Shi'ism believes that all Muslims should participate in all social and political problems that pertain to them and should pursue these problems with awareness. It is opposed to solitary life, retirement from the world and monasticism. Shi'ism believes that Islamic societies should base their rule upon the teachings and laws of Islam, and consider the welfare of the individuals with inspiration drawn from the teachings of Islam and according to the needs and requirements of the moment. They should try their utmost to advance in all spiritual and material domains.

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