

Disputes between Shi'a/Sunni Politics and Jurisprudence

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In the early days of Islam and its embryonic culture and civilization, there were no such things as the concepts of ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah, Shi'ism, Mu'tazilah, etc. There were only Islam in its original and purest form, the first and best generation of Muslims (sahabah or the companions), and the most exemplary Muslim community which was conceived and molded by the heavenly vision of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Of course -- in addition -- as time passed, there quickly emerged all those intrinsic and somewhat foreseeable issues and challenges that the people were confronted with and had to come to terms with if they wished to succeed in making any civilizational impact. The mentioned concepts were the products of subsequent times and subsequent generations that were characterized by people's different mindsets, spiritual dispositions and socio-political ambitions.

The subject of caliphate was always a pure political matter. All the misunderstandings and conflicts that revolved around it were simply political in nature too. There was nothing authentic that suggested spiritual investiture of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, or anybody else, after the Prophet's death. The caliphate of 'Ali b. Abi Talib as the fourth rightly guided caliph and, to some extent, the political activism of his two children, Hasan and Husayn, denote a time when the rule came to ahl al-bayt, but as soon as it came, it went away from them. It nested with their bitterest adversaries, firstly with the Umayyads and then with the 'Abbasids.

When Mu'awiyah b. Abi Sufyan opposed 'Ali's appointment as the fourth caliph, he did not covet the post for himself. His original main concern was avenging the third caliph 'Uthman's murder. In the course of events, however, the caliphate started gradually to turn its back on 'Ali and his camp, and was gliding towards Mu'awiyah and his camp. When he so realized, he, in turn, hastened to welcome and embrace it. Mu'awiyah knew that he was not better than 'Ali. He also knew that his claims for the caliphate and leadership of Muslims were not even close to 'Ali and his own claims. But the general events and sentiments were increasingly working against 'Ali and in favor of Mu'awiyah.

Mu'awiyah is believed to have never changed this attitude of his. At the same time, however, he firmly believed that in difficult times such as his he was the most suitable and beneficial ruler, hence he firmly clung to it. He knew that he had most to offer for the sake of safeguarding the interests of the community. He is thus reported to have once said to the people: "O people, I am not the best among you. There are those who are better than me, the likes of 'Abdullah b. 'Umar, 'Abdullah b. 'Amr and many other nobles. However, I could be the most beneficial and most prolific ruler to you, and the most devastating force for your enemies."

Henceforth, ahl al-bayt continued to oppose the unjust and oppressive rule of both

the Umayyads and 'Abbasids. Their political activism fluctuated between peaceful pursuits and revolutionary actions.

However, the opposition of ahl al-bayt remained just that: valid political resistance. They still believed that they were more qualified for the caliphate than the incumbents. They never forgot the sacrifices and sufferings their forefathers had gone through for the cause. But that belief was a general sentiment not only within the circles of ahl al-bayt, but also in the orb of almost every legitimate oppositional tendency and movement. Loving and honoring ahl al-bayt is paramount in the Islamic message. Thus, apart from the Umayyads, few would have disagreed that ahl al-bayt deserved the leadership of Muslims more than the Umayyads.

It follows that there was nothing extraordinary in the thinking and doing of the members of ahl al-bayt in the political arena.

In defense of his palpable penchant for ahl al-bayt, and implying at the same time the consequentiality of the same behavioral pattern and that it cannot be confined exclusively to Shi'ism, especially its fanatical and unorthodox wings, Imam al-Shafi'i wrote in a well-known poem of his:

"If the love of the members of the House of the Prophet is Rafd (literally 'rejection', an indication of belonging to an extremist Shi'i division Rafidiyyah);

Let mankind and the Jinns testify that I am a Rafidi."

Centuries later, a similar couplet by a South Arabian sage 'Abd al-Qadir al-'Aydarus echoed the similar disposition and style:

"I love the Prophet Muhammad and his family,
If that makes me a Shi'i, that is fine with me."

Thus, a sincere and sensible love for ahl al-bayt is a clear sign of Sunnism. It is integral to the Sunni framework of values and beliefs. It forms what could be dubbed as "Sunni Shi'ism". Such a privilege cannot be hijacked and manipulated by extremist Shi'is. Accordingly, failing to show any affection and reverence for ahl al-bayt, or doing so but in an excessive and infatuated manner, are in equal measure outright deviations.

However, concurrently with the political activism of the majority of ahl al-bayt and their leaders, there existed extreme ideological elements which from time to time managed to raise their ugly heads.

The first seeds of those extreme tendencies were sown as early as during the turbulent caliphate of 'Ali when some traitors, fanatics and hypocrites realized that the situation had become conducive to unleashing their intrigues and plots. Henceforth, they used to resort to their methods whenever given a chance and were trying to bring on board the leading members of ahl al-bayt who nevertheless never stopped dissociating themselves from them and their malpractices. They planned to exploit political Shi'ism as a platform for transforming the whole Shi'i culture into a conglomerate and complex ideological system.

The advances of those bogus Shi'is were successfully kept at bay until the influences of genuine members of ahl al-bayt started to fade dramatically. Numerous precarious political and religious situations, plus the mounting number of years and generations that stood between the people and the initial ground-breaking meaning and struggle of the shi'atu 'Ali ('Ali's party), was taking its toll on the people. It was a time when the Shi'i political activism and its conceptualized objectives were started to be altered to the tune of the ideologies, beliefs and goals of the extremists.

It was a time, furthermore, when both parties became opportunists, embarked on a marriage of convenience, and when they institutionalized Shi'ism not only as a unified political, but also a comprehensive religious faction with a set of major and minor sects within its fold, which at all levels was supposed to rival Sunnism and Sunnis. It was also a time when the concept of ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah (the people of the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the consensus of the Ummah or Muslim community) was crystallizing. The concept might have seemed too exclusive to Shi'is as a consequence of which they decided to initiate an alternative conglomerate block, an alternative religious tradition within Islam.

When around the same time, a few powerful Shi'i dynasties were set up to symbolize and spearhead the latest developments, the split between the two poles widened and was never to be bridged again. The sectarian conflicts became real and, what was most damaging, they were conducted at the level of institutions. They thus were omnipresent. They were military, religious, socio-economic and intellectual in character. Hence, moderate political Shi'ism was defeated forever, yet it became virtually extinct. Its radical and ideologically renegade type prevailed. The most important Shi'i dynasty, which has left an undeletable mark on the exacerbating of total Sunni-Shi'ah confrontations, was the Fatimid dynasty.

Fabrications, distortions, lies and exaggerations were the rule of the day in the process of finally transforming Shi'ism from sheer political activism to a complex system, creed and ideology.

Since the dawn of the Islamic message, beginning with the Prophet's era, Muslims coined different terms in order to describe those who followed the religious path trodden by the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions, and those who did otherwise. Of those terms, most commonly utilized were ahl al-sunnah (the people of the Prophet's Sunnah) for true believers and the true followers of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and ahl al-bid'ah (the people of religious innovations) as well as ahl al-dalalah (the people of error and misguidance) for those who deviated from the clearly delineated Islamic right path.

Among the first persons who officially in academic circles used the ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah idiom were Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi and Ibn Jarir al-Tabari. In the introduction to his famous treatise on Islamic creed or aqidah (al-'Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah), Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi said that the book was an exposition of the creed of the ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah in accordance with the understanding of Muslim jurists, in particular from the Hanafi madhhab or school of thought.

During and in the wake of some early and most decisive religious and socio-political events that shook the Muslim world to its core, the concept of ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah with its most notable conceptual and practical dimensions evolved. It became vital that in face of those calamities, the majority or mainstream Muslims remained united, well-organized and structured as implied by the notion of jama'ah, and abided fully by the injunctions of the Book of Allah (the Qur'an) and the Prophet's Sunnah as the most truthful interpretation and application of the Qur'an.

Everyone's role, especially those of the political, religious and intellectual leaderships, was needed. The nucleus of the Islamic message had to be unanimously preserved at all costs, around which the Ummah could always gather and draw there from its identity and strength.

The issues of faith or creed ('aqidah) were most critical, in that the proponents of every form of innovation, perversity, skepticism and heresy were desperately looking for an ideological buttressing for what they were up to, so as to enhance the prospects of their ideas' acceptance and longevity.

The matter of fully establishing and safeguarding the concept of ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah was helped by the fact that around the epoch in question - especially the 2nd, 3rd and early 4th AH / 8th, 9th and early 10th CE centuries -- all aspects of mainstream orthodox 'aqidah were permanently purified of all the traces of centuries-old religious innovations and heresy, and as such were codified and recorded in the form of books and epistles. Moreover, what later became known as the six canonical hadith collections were around the same time also accomplished and put in wide circulation. Major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) were likewise recognized and followed.

And as the final ingredient, political will and courage were secured, especially from the 'Abbasid administration, in particular following the demise of mihnah, as well as from the Ayyubids and then the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt, which were earlier ruled by the Shi'ah Fatimids, and from the Saljuqs, the victors over the Shi'ah Buyids.

Finally, it goes without saying that most Sunni-Shi'ah misunderstandings and disputes that run through the veins of the mainstreams of both poles are due to only certain political and fiqh, or jurisprudence, questions and concerns where plenty of leeway is granted for ijtihad or independent judgments and opinions, provided they are based on, and driven by, spotless sincerity, honesty and faith. Some of those grave questions and concerns have been blown out of all proportion and have overly been tainted with ideological colors and zeal.

In reality, Sunnis and Shi'is have more in common and enjoy better prospects for constructive dialogue and cooperation than what at first glance appears to casual observers.

Sooner rather than later, such a potential will have to be seriously looked into and made the most of by the people of good will on both sides.