The Institute of Ismaili Studies

"**Diversity in Islam: Communities of Interpretation**"
The Muslim Almanac
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The death of the Prophet Muhammad after a brief illness confronted the nascent Muslim community (*umma*

subject. According to the Sunnis, who have always regarded themselves as the "true" custodians

authority in early Islam. It is clear, however, that from its inception the historical caliphate embodied not only aspects of the political but also of the religious leadership of the community, while different groups gradually formulated various conceptions of the caliphal religio-political authority and the caliph's moral responsibility toward the community. Abu Bakr led the Mar8Tius

providing spiritual guidance for the Muslims. According to the Shi'a, a person with such qualifications could belong only to the *ahl al-bayt*, eventually defined to include only certain members of the Prophet's immediate family, notably 'Ali and Fatima and their progeny. At any rate, it seems that 'Ali was from the beginning considered by his devoted partisans as the most prominent member of the Prophet's family, and as such, he was believed to have inherited a true understanding of the Prophet's teachings and religious knowledge or *'ilm*. According to the Shi'a, 'Ali's unique qualifications as successor to the Prophet held another dimension in that he was believed to have been designated by divine command. This meant that 'Ali was also divinely inspired and immune from error and sin (*masum*), making him infallible both in his knowledge and as an authoritative teacher or imam after the Prophet. In sum, it was the Shi'a view that the two ends of governing the community and exercising religious authority could be discharged only by 'Ali.

This Shi'a point of view on the origins of Shi'ism contains distinctive doctrinal elements that cannot be entirely attributed to the early Shi'a, especially the original partisans of 'Ali. At any rate, emphasising hereditary attributes of the individuals and the imam's kinship to the Prophet as a prerequisite for possessing the required religious knowledge, the Shi'a later also held that after 'Ali, the leadership of the Muslim community was the exclusive right of certain descendants of 'Ali, the 'Alids, who belonged to the *ahl al-bayt* and possessed religious authority. The earliest Shi'a currents of thought developed gradually, finding their full formulation and consolidation in the doctrine of the imamate, expounded in its fundamental form at the time of the imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE).

Pro-'Alid sentiments and Shi'ism remained in a dormant state during the earliest decades of Muslim history. But Shi'a aspirations were revived during the caliphate of 'Uthman, initiating a period of strife and civil war in the community. Diverse grievances against 'Uthman's policies finally erupted into open rebellion, culminating in the murder of the caliph in Medina in 656 CE at the hands of rebel contingents from the provinces. In the aftermath of this murder, the Muslim community became divided over the question of 'Uthman's behavior as a basis for justification of the rebels' actions, and soon the disagreements found expression in terms of broad theoretical discussions revolving around the question of the rightful leadership, caliphate or imamate, in the Muslim community. Matters came to a head in the caliphate of 'Ali, who had succeeded 'Uthman. 'Ali's caliphal authority was challenged by Mu'awiya, the powerful governor of Syria and leader of a pro-'Uthman party. As a member of the influential Banu Umayya and a relative of 'Uthman, Mu'awiya found the call for avenging the slain caliph a suitable pretext for establishing Umayyad rule.

It was under such circumstances that the forces of 'Ali and Mu'awiya met at Siffin on the upper Euphrates in the spring of 657 CE. The events of Siffin, the most controversial battle in early Muslim history, was followed by a Syrian arbitration proposal. 'Ali's acceptance of it and the resulting arbitration verdict issued sometime late

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The Muslims emerged from their first civil war severely tested and split into factions or parties that differed in their interpretation of the rightful leadership of the community and the caliph's moral responsibility. These factions, which began to acquire definite shape in the aftermath of the murder of 'Uthman and the battle of Siffin, gradually developed their doctrinal positions and acquired distinct identities as separate communities of interpretation. They also continued to confront each other in theological discourses as well as on the battlefield throughout the Umayyad dynasty and in later times. These parties acquired denominations that revealed their personal loyalties.

The upholders of 'Uthman as a just caliph, commonly designated as 'Uthmaniyya, had accepted the verdict of the arbitrators appointed at Siffin and held that 'Uthman had been murdered unjustly. Consequently, they repudiated the rebellion against 'Uthman and the resulting caliphate of 'Ali. In addition to the partisans of Mu'awiya, the 'Uthmaniyya included the upholders of the principles of the early caliphate, namely the rights of the non-Hashimid early Companions of the Prophet to the caliphate. The partisans of 'Ali, the *Shi'at 'Ali*, who now also referred to themselves as the *Shi'at ahl al-bayt* or its equivalent *Shi'at al Muhammad* (Party of the Prophet's Household), upheld the justice of the rebellion against 'Uthman, who, according to them, had invalidated his rule by his unjust acts. Repudiating the claims of Mu'awiya to leadership as the avenger of 'Uthman, they now aimed to re-establish rightful leadership or imamate in the community through the Hashimids, members of the Prophet's clan of Banu Hashim, and notably through 'Ali's sons. However, the support of the *ahl al-bayt* by the Shi'a at this time did not as yet imply a repudiation of the first two caliphs.

The Khawarij

The Khawarij, who originally seceded in different waves from 'Ali's Kufan army in opposition to his arbitration agreement with Mu'awiya after the battle of Siffin, shared the view of the Shi'a concerning 'Uthman and the rebellion against him. They upheld the initial legitimacy of 'Ali's caliphate but repudiated him from the time of his agreeing to the arbitration of his conflict with Mu'awiya. They also repudiated Mu'awiya for having rebelled against 'Ali when his caliphate was still legitimate. The Khawarij were strictly uncompromising in their application of the theocratic principle of Islam expressed in their slogan "judgment belongs to God alone." Even caliphs, according to them, were to submit unconditionally to this principle as embodied in the Qur'an. If caliphs failed to observe this rule, then they were to repent or be removed from the caliphate by force despite any valuable services they might have rendered to Islam. This is why they equally condemned 'Uthman and 'Ali and also dissociated themselves from Mu'awiya who had unjustly challenged 'Ali's initially legitimate caliphate.

The Khawarij posed fundamental questions concerning the definitions of a true believer, the Muslim community, its rightful leader, and the basis for the leader's authority. As a result, they contributed significantly to doctrinal disputations in the Muslim community. The Khawarij adhered to strict Islamic egalitarianism, maintaining that every meritorious Muslim of any ethnic origin, Arab or non-Arab, could be chosen through popular election as the legitimate leader or imam of the community. They aimed to establish a form of "Islamic democracy" in which leadership and authority could not be based on tr

Rejecting the doctrine of justification by faith without works propounded later by other communities of interpretation, the Khawarij professed a form of radical puritanism or moral austerity and readily considered anyone, even the caliph, as an apostate, if in their view he had slightly deviated from the right conduct. By committing a minor sin, a believer could thus become irrevocably an unbeliever deserving of dissociation. The Khariji insistence on right conduct, and the lack of any institutional form of authority among them, proved highly detrimental to the unity of their movement, characterised from early on by extreme factionalism. Heresiographers name a multitude of Khariji "sects," most of which were continuously engaged in insurrectional activities especially in the eastern provinces of the Muslim world where they controlled extensive territories in Iran for long periods.

The Azariqa represented the most radical community among the Khawarij. They considered as polytheists (*mushrikun*) and infidels (*kuffar*) all non-Kharijis and even those Kharijis who had not joined their camp. They held the killing of these

appealing to the *mawali*, the non-Arab converts to Islam who, under the Umayyads, represented a large intermediary class between the Arab Muslims and the non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic state. The *mawali*, comprised of Aramean, Persian, and other non-Arab Muslims, represented second-class citizens in comparison to Arab Muslims. As a large and underprivileged social class

prayer and fasting, as not binding on those who knew and were devoted to the true imam from the *ahl al-bayt*. Consequently, they were often accused of advocating that faith alone was necessary for salvation, and of tolerating libertinism. Much of the intellectual heritage of the Kaysaniyya was later absorbed into the teachings of the main Shi'a communities of the early Abbasid times. Politically, too, the Kaysaniyya pursued an activist policy, condemning Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman as well as the Umayyads as usurpers of the rights of 'Ali and his descendants, aiming to restore the caliphate to the 'Alids. As a result, several Kaysani groups, led by their various *ghulat* theorists, engaged in revolutionary activities against the Umayyad regime, especially in or around Kufa, the cradle of Shi'ism. However, as all these Shi'a revolts were poorly organised and their scenes were too close to the centers of caliphal power, they proved abortive.

In the meantime, there had appeared a second major branch or wing of Shi'ism, later designated

around 732 CE, a century after the death of the Prophet. It was during the long imamate of al-Baqir's son and successor Ja'far al-Sadiq that the Shi'a movement of his uncle Zayd ibn 'Ali unfolded, leading eventually to the separate Zaydi community of Shi'ism.

The Zaydis and Imamis

Few details are available on the ideas propagated by Zayd and his original associates. Similar to

had largely aborted in the Abbasid cause. It was under such circumstances that Ja'far al-Sadiq emerged as the main rallying point for the allegiance of the Shi'as.

Maintaining the Imami tradition of remaining aloof from any revolutionary activity, Ja'far al-Sadiq had gradually acquired a widespread reputation as a religious scholar and teacher, and, besides his own partisans, large numbers of Muslims studied or consulted with him including

while others followed different 'Alid imams. At any rate, it was this subgroup of the Imamiyya that eventually became known as the Ithna 'Asharis, or the Twelvers. This title refers to all those Imami Shi'as who recognised a line of twelve imams, starting with 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and ending with Muhammad ibn al-Hasan whose emergence as Mahdi has been awaited since 873 CE. Twelver Shi'ism has remained the "official" religion of Iran since 1501 CE.

The Shi'a Ismailis

In the meantime, two other groups from the Imami Shi'as supported Ismail ibn Ja'far, the original designated successor of the imam al-Sadiq, on al-Sadiq's death. These Kufan-based groups represented the earliest Ismailis who were soon organised into a rapidly expanding community representing the most politically active wing of Shi'

Khariji condemnation of 'Uthman and 'Ali and their partisans as infidels. In fact, they preferred to suspend the ultimate judgment on all the parties involved in these conflicts. They supported some of the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphs while refuting others. Indeed, for several decades until 848 CE, Mu'tazilism was the official doctrine of the Abbasid court. However, by the latter decades of the ninth century CE, Mu'tazilism had become increasingly pro-'Alid, and it left permanent influences on Zaydi and Imami Shi'ism.

Emphasising rationalism, in the sense that a certain awareness is accessible to man by means of his intelligence alone in the absence of any revelation, the early Mu'tazilis became known for five principles on which they had reached a consensus of opinion. These principles, with a number of related theological issues, included the unity of God (*tawhid*) and the divine attributes, the justice of God (*adl*), and the theory of an intermediate state (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*), according to which a sinful Muslim cannot be classified either as a believer (*mumin*) or an infidel (*kafir*) but belongs to a separate intermediate category. Acknowledged as a major school of theology in early Islam, Mu'tazilism began to lose its prominence during the tenth century CE to other theological schools, notably Asharism and Maturidism.

The Community of the Ahl al-Sunna (Sunnis)

By the early Abbasid times, as noted, there had also appeared distinctive schools of law, such as the Hanafi and Maliki, named after their jurist-founders at the same time that Shi'a and Khariji communities were developing their own legal doctrines. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate the evolution of these legal schools and the early history of the various theological movements of the Abbasid times, including particularly the two most important schools of Sunni *kalam* founded by Abu a1-Hasan al-Ashari (d. 935-6 CE) and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944 CE). We have also refrained from considering the organised Sufi orders that later developed their own mystical interpretations of Islam and the spiritual path (*tariqa*) to "truth," transcending Sunni-Shi'a-Khariji divisions. Nor have we dealt with the inquiries of the *falasifa*, the Muslim philosophers who formulated highly complex metaphysical systems drawing on different Hellenistic traditions and the teachings of Islam. Nonetheless, our survey attests sufficiently to the prevalence of pluralism in early Islam, which was characterised by a diversity of communities, movements, and schools of interpretation, none having had any monopoly over the sole interpretation of the Islamic message.

Within this perspective, it is also important to bear in mind that by the second century of Muslim history, there was no single community representing even what eventually became the Sunni interpretation of Islam. It was over the course of Muslim history that the majority of Muslims thought of themselves as the *ahl al-sunna* (People of the *sunna*), or simply as the Sunnis. This designation was used not because the majority were more attached than others to the *sunna* of the Prophet, but because they claimed to be the adherents to the correct Prophetic Traditions, also upholding the unity of the community. Different currents of what later became identified as Sunni Islam were elaborated gradually, as in the case of Shi'ism and other interpretations of Islam. For instance, Sunni doctrine on the *imamate* drew on the ideas of the earlier 'Uthmaniyya and the Murjia, aiming to defend the historical caliphate against the threats posed by the claims of the opposition movements. However, Sunnis, too, differed among themselves on theological and legal doctrines. For instance, on the matter of defining fa96 ong on different

reflected in the cannonical collections of Sunni *hadith*

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