

Shi'a Spirituality

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The idea of the Imam as one who can lead others to a correct understanding of the Qur'an is only but one instance of the general function of the Imam as divine guide, but it is a pivotal one. The knowledge possessed by the Imams and by which they guide is an esoteric knowledge, not only in the sense that it involves going beyond the surface literal meaning to a deeper meaning.

The difference between Sunni and Shia Islam is often portrayed as a disagreement over the political leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), and it is alleged that the Shia believe in something like royal succession through an inherited right to rulership.

However, the issue of communal leadership is only the manner in which a more fundamental difference came to the surface. The more fundamental difference is the religious authority the Shia attribute to the Imams (peace be upon them) on the basis of their selection, esoteric knowledge, and precedence in virtue. So, we could say that the most fundamental characteristic of Shia spirituality is the particular way in which the Shia view what in contemporary English is called spirituality, for what distinguishes the Shia is precisely the belief that the spiritual life of Islam – individually and collectively – can only be sustained through the guidance of the Imams. S. H. M. Jafri concludes his study of *The Origins and Development of Shia Islam*¹ with this comment:

"The actual disagreements between the Shi'is and the Sunnis in certain details of theology and legal practices were not as important as the "Spirit" working behind these rather minor divergences. This "Spirit", arising from the differences in the fundamental approach and interpretation of Islam... issued forth in the Shi'i concept of leadership of the community after the Prophet. It is this concept of divinely-ordained leadership which distinguishes Shi'i from Sunni within Islam."

The fundamental difference of which Jafri speaks, and that is the basis for the Shia ideas about religious leadership (*Imamat*), is the belief that divine guidance is given to the community through the person of the Prophet as well as the revelation of the Qur'an, and continues after the Prophet by virtue of the divine selection and esoteric knowledge transmitted to the Imams. In a famous hadith, it is reported that

the Prophet said: "I am leaving you with two weighty things (*Thaqalayn*). If you take hold of them, you will not stray after me: the Book of Allah and my kindred, my household (Ahlul Bayt)." This is sometimes explained, in part, in terms of the esoteric knowledge of the proper interpretation of the Qur'an transmitted through the Imams. In the Qur'an, it is written:

"It is He who has sent down to you the Book. Parts of it are definitive verses [literally signs (ayat)], which are the mother of the Book, while others are metaphorical. As for those in whose hearts is deviance, they pursue what is metaphorical in it, courting temptation and courting its interpretation (ta'wil). But no one knows its interpretation except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge (al-rasikhuna fi al-'ilm); they say, 'We believe in it; all of it is from our Lord.'" (3:7)

The Shia interpret the phrase ***"those firmly grounded in knowledge"*** as referring to the prophets and Imams. After naming the twelve Imams, Shaikh as-Saduq writes in A Shi'ite Creed:

"Our belief regarding them is that they are in authority (*Ulu al-Amr*). It is to them that Allah has ordained obedience, they are the witnesses for the people, and they are the gates of Allah and the road to Him and the guides thereto, and the repositories of His knowledge and the interpreters of His revelations and the pillars of His unity.

The idea of the Imam as one who can lead others to a correct understanding of the Qur'an is only but one instance of the general function of the Imam as divine guide, but it is a pivotal one. The knowledge possessed by the Imams and by which they guide is an esoteric knowledge, not only in the sense that it involves going beyond the surface literal meaning to a deeper meaning, but in the sense that this knowledge cannot be completely communicated to anyone but the next Imam, and the guidance of the Imams must be calibrated so as to impart only as much knowledge as the follower has the capacity to receive.

Despite the distinctiveness of the Shia views of Islam with respect to spirituality, no one should imagine that this is an obstacle to good fraternal relations among Muslims across sectarian lines. The sort of spirituality found among the Shia is also found to varying degrees among a wide spectrum of Muslims who, in matters of Islamic jurisprudence, follow one of the Sunni schools of thought. Much, for example, can be found in common between Sufi and Shia spirituality.

The Sufi orders trace their initiatic chains to Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) and believe that religious guidance is given by God not only through the Qur'an but by the living example of the Prophet and his successors. We can also find other Muslims who seek to go beyond the dry letter of the divine law to uncover the ethos of Islam by following its spiritual path under the guidance of the Qur'an and the examples of its greatest leaders.

The fruits of the spiritual life of Islam should be evident in all the pursuits of the believer. We fall far short, but we pray that God may grant us His spiritual gifts to share with our brethren in faith so that we may form the community He intended for us as a mercy and benefit to all mankind, Insha'Allah.

1. <https://www.al-islam.org/the-origins-and-early-development-of-shia-islam...> [3]

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