

The Major Difference Between the Shia and the Sunni

There is not a basic difference between the Shi'ites and Sunnites concerning articles of the Faith of Islam. There is, however, a disagreement between the two schools in the following two areas:

1. The Caliphate (successorship/leadership) which the Shia believe it is the right of the Imams of Ahlul-Bayt.
2. The Islamic rule when there is no clear Quranic statement, nor is there a Hadith upon which Muslim schools have agreed.

The second issue has root into the first one. The Shia bound themselves to refer to Ahlul-Bayt for deriving the Sunnah of Prophet (PBUH&HF). They do this in conformity with the order of Prophet reported in the authentic Sunni and Shi'i collections of traditions beside what the Quran attests to their perfect purity.

The disagreement about the caliphate should not be a source of division between the two schools. Muslims agree that the caliphate of Abu Bakr came through election by a limited number of people and was a surprise for all other companions. By limited number, I mean, the majority of the prominent companions of prophet had no knowledge of this election. Ali, Ibn Abbas, Uthman, Talha, Zubair, Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas, Salman al-Farsi, Abu Dhar, Ammar Ibn Yasir, Miqdad, Abdurrahman Ibn Owf were among those who were not consulted nor even informed of. Even Umar confessed to the fact that the election of Abu Bakr was without consultation of Muslims. (See sahih al-Bukhari, Arabic-English, Tradition 8.817)

On the other hand, election implies choice and freedom, and that every Muslim has the right to elect the nominee. Whoever refuses to elect him does not oppose God or His Messenger because neither God nor His Messenger appointed the nominated person by people.

Election, by its nature, does not compel any Muslim to elect a specific nominee. Otherwise, the election would be coercion. This means that the election would lose its own nature and it would be a dictatorial operation.

It is well known that the Prophet said: "There is no validity for any allegiance given by force." Imam Ali refused to give his allegiance to Abu Bakr for six months. He gave his allegiance to Abu Bakr only after the martyrdom of his wife Fatimah al-Zahra, Daughter of the Holy Prophet, six month after the departure of Prophet. (see Sahih al-Bukhari, Arabic-English version, Tradition 5.546). If refusal to give allegiance to an elected nominee was prohibited in Islam, Imam Ali would not have allowed himself to delay in giving his allegiance. In the same tradition in Sahih al-Bukhari, Imam Ali (AS) said that he had some rights in Caliphate which was not honored, and he complained why Abu Bakr should have not consulted him in deciding upon the ruler. He later gave his allegiance when he found that the only way to save Islam is to leave the isolation which occurred due to his refusal of giving the oath of allegiance.

What's more? The well known companions, Abdullah Ibn Umar and Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas, refused to give their allegiance to Imam Ali for the entire duration of his caliphate. (Ibn Al-Athir, his history Al-Kamil, v3, p98). But the Imam did not punish these companions.

If it was permissible for a Muslim, who was a contemporary of the caliph, to refuse to give his allegiance, it would be more permissible for a person who came in a later century to believe or not to believe in the qualifications of that elected caliph. In doing so, he would not be sinning, provided that the Caliph is not assigned by Allah.

The Shia 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 attempt to gain the power through a military coup (as was in the case of Muawiyah)

The Shi'a scholars say that a divinely appointed Imam is sinless and Allah does not grant such position to the sinful. The Sunni scholars (including Mu'tazilites) say that Imam can be sinful as he is appointed by other than Allah. Even if he is tyrant and sunk in sins (like in the case of Muawiyah and Yazid), 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 preserved although they disagree with the evil actions.

The Shia 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.