Sunnism and Shi’ism: A Concise Historical Summary

Not long after Muhammad’s death in 632, the nascent Islamic community he created experienced significant fissures over the issue of succession and political authority. The majority of early converts to Islam believed that sovereign authority passed to those companions closest to the Prophet who were elected his caliphs (khalifa, i.e., successor, or viceroy) from the leadership of the Quraysh, Muhammad’s tribe. The first caliph was Abu Bakr, whose daughter, ‘A’isha was one of the Prophet’s wives. Following the murder of the third Caliph, ‘Uthman (644-56), ’Ali, both a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad (’Ali had married his daughter Fatima,) claimed the caliphate. But he was opposed by kinsmen of ’Uthman and others, including ’A’isha, who disputed the legitimacy of his claim. ’Ali established his caliphate in Kufa (656-61) while the dissenters opposed him from Basra. They were defeated by ’Ali, but he was now confronted by Mu’awiya, a close kin of ’Uthman. The ensuing battle at Siffin on the upper Euphrates was halted by a joint agreement to accept arbitration. In the course of months of discussions, ’Ali himself was assassinated and Mu’awiya became caliph. He established his caliphate in Damascus where he became not only the founder of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) but of the first Islamic empire.

In time, out of this turmoil two major and distinct renditions of Islam emerged - sunnism and shi’ism (the original meaning of shi’i is “party”, i.e. party of ’Ali). The result has been the theological and political bifurcation of the Muslim community that continues today. Briefly, sunnism, to which the vast majority of Muslims subscribe, is rooted in the belief of a unity of the Quran, the sharia (Islamic law), and the sunna (the actions and habitual practices of the Prophet), a oneness that accommodates some differences in the interpretation of sharia by the various schools of law. For sunnis, it is the sunna (along with the Quran), that defines the rules of right conduct, and is the fundamental guide to the moral obligations of Muslims. As indicated, sunnis believed that succession to the Prophet rightfully belonged to his closest companions who were among the leaders of the Quraysh tribe.

Those who became shi’i Muslims, insisted that ’Ali, was the rightful caliph and that rulership should pass after Ali to the children born of his wife Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter. The shi’is believed that since the community’s leadership rightfully passed from the Prophet to his kin ‘Ali and then to ’Ali’s children by Fatima, authority belonged to the shi’i imams who ultimately derived their authority by being descended from Muhammad. Included in this hereditary transmission, it was believed, was divine inspiration that, in turn, endowed the shi’i imams with sovereignty by divine right thereby producing a highly authoritarian type of rule. Shi’ism, however, separated into three factions, the Zaidis (the smallest group, located mainly in Yemen), the Ismailis (who recognize the leadership of the Agha Khan and are found primarily in Pakistan, India, and East Africa), and the Ithna ‘Asharis, or Twelvers, representing the great majority of shi’is who are concentrated chiefly in Iran and Iraq. Each sect devised its own version of sharia. The Ithna ‘Asharis are so called because they believe that the Twelfth Imam became occult, i.e., became the hidden imam who will one day return to establish an exquisitely ideal holy leadership.

These issues carry over into the sunni-Twelver shi’i variances in their respective theories of law, governance, and the Muslim polity, i.e., the umma. The concept of “state” the western sense did not become an integral part of Muslim political thought until the 19th century when European nations colonized most of the Islamic world. Although Twelver shi’is share with sunnis the basic notion that the Quran and the sunna constitute the fundamental source of divine revelation, the Twelvers imbue Islamic law (sharia) with other characteristics that sharply distinguish it from the sunni perceptions of law. The Twelvers compiled their own body of hadith (traditions and sayings of the Prophet) and only those hadith transmitted through one of their recognized imams are taken to be valid. Unlike the sunnis, they reject the idea that human reason (qiyas) and consensus (ijma’) have a place in the application of Islamic law. Only the divinely inspired imams, who combine in themselves supreme religious and political authority, have the right to interpret and adjudicate sharia. Nevertheless, the Twelvers, like conservative sunnis, came to recognize, out of practical necessity, that human intellect (‘aql), or reason, had to be accepted and legitimized as a practice.
A balanced understanding of shiism requires mention of significant exceptions to the traditional picture. Not all the shi'i religious authorities subscribed to the notion of that in the absence of the Hidden Imam political authority had to be exercised by imams. Some believed that a government headed by a moral ruler who was not a member of the ulama (theologians) who abides by the basic precepts of sharia and the Quran was acceptable. Some also held the view that until the return of the Hidden Imam, the world is going to be imperfect and that if a Muslim ruler governed in a manner that enabled devout Muslims to lead moral lives, he was entitled to their obedience because the alternative could be anarchy. In the words of one authority: “better a little injustice than chaos.” Nor, in the modern era, were all shi'i theologians opposed to modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries, as long as the particular actions of the government were perceived to have resulted in the moral and overall betterment of the community.

In conclusion, in the Twelver conception of the theocratic state, religious, political, and legal authority are unitary in their nature and purpose in that they are all expressions of the same divine will; as such, their functions must be signified through a leader who is similarly imbued with divinely rooted authority traced to the Prophet, namely the imams. Only in this way can the community of true believers be rightly guided and the state, law, and government receive moral legitimacy. Twelvers, reject all pre-Islamic practices and customs and believe that reform began with the spiritual mission of the Prophet.

For Sunnis, the Islamic body politic was also a theocracy, but a mixture of pre-Islamic tribal customs and hierarchies and Islamic doctrine, with the ruler and his rule subject to the requirements and limitations of Islamic law, that is, to the perceived word of God. Sunnis apprehend the Islamic polity and government under sharia as a transformation from a pre-existing system, with some aspects that could be Islamicized, into one that conformed to the ideal political community created and ruled by the Prophet and continued by the first four “Rightly Guided” caliphs.