

Schools of Thought in Islam

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Islamic jurisprudence has developed over fourteen centuries. Over that span of time, various schools of jurisprudence have emerged, each with its own interpretation and application of the Sharia. Many schools splintered farther, creating schools following different interpretive approaches and applications.

The flourishing abundance of ideas and views attests to the intellectual depth and breadth of Islamic jurisprudence.

However, nothing precludes a given state from codifying the Sharia so as to provide for more certainty of the law and clarity and consistency in its application. Many Muslim states have done so, the most advanced being Egypt, where the presence of the thousand-year-old Al-Azhar University (originally devoted solely to Islamic studies but now to all disciplines) and centuries of legal tradition have converged to make Islamic law a source of inspiration for the entire Muslim world.

The interior of the Prophet's Mosque at Madinah with its qiblah, or prayer niche, which indicates the direction of Makkah. (Aramco World Magazine, November-December, 1991; photo Abdullah Dobais).
The Sunni and the Shia

The Sunni tradition, which today comprises approximately 85-90 percent of all Muslims, differs from Shia tradition, which comprises the remainder of the Muslim world. The distinction between the two traditions essentially derives from different approaches to governance. The Sunni believe, based on specific provisions of the Qur'an and the Sunna, that the Muslim people are to be governed by consensus (ijma') through an elected head of state, the khalifa, according to democratic principles. The Shia, however, believe that the leader of Islam, whom they refer to as the imam rather than the khalifa, must be a descendant of the Prophet. The concept is the basis for a hereditary hierarchy in the Shia tradition.

The Shia movement dates from the period when a group of Muslims wanted Ali ibn abu Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, to become the khalifa instead of Abu Bakr, who had been elected the first khalifa following the death of Muhammad in 632. They advanced his candidacy on the basis of heredity. However, they were out voted. Ali ultimately became the fourth khalifa, succeeding Uthman, who succeeded Umar, who succeeded Abu Bakr. But Ali was overthrown by the rebellion of



Muawia, the governor of Syria, whose seat was in Damascus. Muawia rebelled against Ali because he attributed the assassination of his kinsman Uthman to Ali's followers. Ali was subsequently assassinated after losing the Tahkim (arbitration) to Muawia. His followers then constituted what would today be called a political party to reinstate him and to secure succession to the Khalifa.

In 680 Hussain, one of Ali's sons, led a number of Muslims who were then rebelling against the ruling khalifa to try to establish in the area between Iran and Iraq a caliphate based on heredity from the Prophet. However, Hussain was lured into Iraq, and there at a place called Karbala he and his followers were massacred. Hussain's martyrdom spurred the Shia movement in Iraq and Iran. The anniversary of Karbala is commemorated every year by the Shia population. In Iran, in particular, it is conducted by means of a large popular demonstration in which people publicly weep and flagellate themselves as a sign of their remorse.

The political rift between followers of the principle of election and those favoring descent from the Prophet generated some other differences between Sunni and Shia approaches to jurisprudence. For example, the Shia view the sayings of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, and his cousin Ali (Fatima's husband), the fourth khalifa of the Islam, as equally authoritative as the Sunna of the Prophet. The Sunni do not. There are other differences involving the structure of Islam, such as existence of an organized Shia clergy, which does not exist in the Sunni tradition. Among them the Shia allow the imam much wider latitude in government than the Sunni ever could in light of the principles of consensus and equality. The most important of all differences between Sunni and Shia relates to the interpretation of the Qur'an. The Sunni look more to the letter of the Qur'an; the Shia look more to its spirit. In Arabic the distinction is referred to as al-dhaher (the apparent) versus al-baten (the hidden) meaning of the Qur'an. Thus the Shia religious hierarchy plays a determining role in interpreting the Qur'an. This role reinforces their spiritual and temporal influence in Shia society.

O ye who believe! Be steadfast witness for Allah in equity, and let not hatred of any people seduce you that ye deal not justly. Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty. Observe your duty to Allah. Lo! Allah is informed of what we do.

Qur'an 5:8

And hold fast, All together, by the rope which God (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude God's favour on you; For ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace, Ye became brethren; And ye were on the brink of the pit of fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth God make His signs clear to you: that ye may be guided.

Qur'an 3:103

Sunni Jurisprudence

The Sunni follow any one of four major schools on jurisprudence founded by imams ibn Hanbal, abu Hanifa, Malek, and el-Shafei, scholars of the ninth to eleventh centuries. These schools, referred to respectively as the Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafei, are followed by different Muslim states either entirely or in part. Egypt is traditionally Maliki. Saudi Arabia is traditionally Hanbali, although the country follows more closely the teachings of imam Muhammad Abdal-Wahab, a Hanbali reformer of the early 1800's. Even though there are differences in interpretation of the Sharia among these authorities, they are all recognized as valid.

In its most glorious period, from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, Islam produced a legal system founded on scientific knowledge and nurtured by a faith that has endured the test of time. But during that period it was *ijtihad* (progressive reasoning by analogy) which produced the most far-reaching developments. Reformers like *ibn Taymiyah* (late 1200's) was one of many great jurist-philosophers who opened new horizons in the knowledge and understanding of Islam's application to the needs of society. But in the twelfth century, *ijtihad* was pronounced ended by some theologians of the time. They argued that all that was to be known was known. Consequently, Islamic jurisprudence became somewhat stagnant until its contemporary resurgence under the aegis of Al-Azhar scholars and other modern reformers of the last two centuries, such as *al-Ghazali*, *al-Afghani*, and *Muhammad Abdu*. Contemporary jurisprudential developments continue the work begun in past ages, meeting individual requirements and collective demands for resolving the problems and conflicts of modern life, while remaining compatible with Islam.

Laila and Majnun from the famous poem by Jami, 1571. (Aramco World Magazine, March-April 1987; photo Ergun Çagatay)
Sufism

The Sufi movement is a mystical strain in Islam which reflects the need of individuals to transcend formal religious practices in order to attain higher levels of spiritual fulfillment. The Sufis are represented in all schools of thought in Islam and found in all Muslim communities. Because of its mystical, spiritual character, Sufism appeals more to individuals and small groups. It does not constitute either a sect or a school of thought, but is rather a spiritual or transcendental practice which persists despite criticism from orthodox theologians. Sufis believe they follow the Prophet's mysticism, particularly during the Meccan period of the revelations. Thus, in their practices there is much meditation and solitary or group recitation of prayers and incantations of their own religious formulas. They seek a life of ascetic piety, shunning worldly pleasures and seeking the inward purity of a relationship with God through love, patience, forgiveness, and other higher spiritual qualities.

The tomb in Lahore of *Data Ganu Bakhsh*, one of the many Sufis who brought Islam to Asia by peaceful means. (Aramco World Magazine, November-December, 1991; photo Nik Wheeler). Their influence on the development of Islam is more significant than is usually recognized. Their ascetic piety and rigidly ethical conception of Islamic society have influenced generations of Muslims. They have also had from time to time strong political influence. What characterizes Sufis the most is their "inwardism" or belief that the *Sharia* only regulates external conduct, whereas inward feelings are matter strictly between each person and the Creator. Because of their emphasis on the love of God, they have developed the doctrine of *Tawakul* (reliance on God), which is central to the relationship between Man and God. Sufism also has had a significant impact on the practical aspects of administering a state.

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