

Can Shia Sunni Conflict be resolved?

Shia and Sunni are separated by a relatively small number of theological and legal differences. The breach between them concerns a very early chapter in Islamic history. While most of the community acquiesced to the assumption of power by the Umayyad family about three decades after the Prophet passed away, supporters of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, believed that the caliphate should have gone to his offspring. Ali's supporters, known as sh'iat Ali (Ali's party), sided with his sons, Hasan and Husayn, in their hopeless battle against the Umayyads. Since then the Sunnis have regarded the way events actually unfolded as constituting the legitimate course of history, while the Shiites regard Sunni Islamic history in its entirety as amounting to a usurpation of the Prophetic family's right to rule the community, and believe in a line of Imams descended from the Prophet.

However, apart from their claims regarding history and redemption, there is surprisingly little difference between the sects in terms of their legal traditions—with respect, for example, to the sources of lawmaking or specific legal rulings. The Sunni/Sh'ia divide, portrayed as a religious conflict, is actually an economic conflict. Caliphs and Imams who centralized rule of each of the two Muslim sects no longer exist as temporal leaders, and therefore no leadership, other than spiritual Imams, is a focus for a divide. Differences between the two Muslim groups on Mohammad's succession, Muslim prayer and Koran interpretation incite resentment between Muslim's extreme religious leaders, but are not sufficiently significant for many of the 1.2 billion Muslims to waste their time and energy in futile battles. A Muslim is defined by adherence to the five pillars of Islam. Both Sunnis and Shiites follow those principals and are therefore 'fellow' Muslims. The masses of Islam are no different than the masses of Protestants who don't care to whom and how their neighbor prays.

Moreover, The Sunni-Shia conflict may carry theological overtones, but it is centered on the political alliances that emerge in a region divided by religious sects. Analysts believe that emergence of the Shia Republic of Iran in the late 1970s exacerbated the Shia-Sunni divide. Serving as a kind of ethnic marker, being a Shiite in the Sunni-dominated Middle East region often translates into institutional discrimination and even accusations of being an agent of Iran.

In recent decades, attempts have been made to anchor Shia-Sunni reconciliation in legal terms. One of the major steps was taken by al-Azhar mufti Sheikh Mahmud Shaltut, who in 1959 declared the Imami Shia a fifth school of law, alongside the four recognized schools of the Sunni. Moreover, in recent years, many Muslim organizations in USA have made positive steps towards finding an amicable solution to the Shia-Sunni conflict. In this regard, one needs to mention the efforts of US based organization World Muslim Congress. The organization organizes regular events to eliminate misconceptions about Islam and also makes efforts to

eliminate the Shia –Sunni sectarian strife. A mention here needs to be made of the Communiqué of the Shia-Sunni Dialogue to Save Lives that the organization organized in Chicago in 2007. The resolution at the end of the program aimed engaged their local/national constituencies in the US in critical intra-faith dialogue and education about Shia-Sunni relations and promoting cooperation. The Salem Institute for Peace and Justice based in Washington is another institute that focuses on bridging differences between Muslim and non Muslim communities. The institute has organized a plethora of events globally to promote peace between Shias and Sunnis.

In retrospect it can be said that problems such as sectarian differences cannot be solved simply by wishing them away, by denying their salience or by attributing them to an external conspiracy. To ignore the problem will only make it worsen with every passing day, like a festering wound. Rather than turning a blind eye to the issue by simply mouthing pious slogans of the unity of the ummah, the Shia-Sunni issue (as well as, of course, the issue of differences between the various Sunni groups) must be directly addressed, in a spirit of genuine dialogue and free from polemical exchanges. The Quran itself exhorts Muslims to relate to others through love and gentle words. Mercifully, the vast majority of ordinary Shias and Sunnis, despite the negative images some of them might have of each other, do wish to live in peace and harmony with each other. It is among them that one must place one's hopes for serious dialogue initiatives to emerge. Increasingly, one expects, ordinary Muslims will come to realize that the politics of blind hatred and fierce intolerance in the name of Islam is a futile endeavor and violates the very basic tenets of this religion.