Shiism and Sunnism, Iran and Islam
The Continuity of Zoroastrian Beliefs in Iran

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The terms “Shiite” and “Sunni” today are often used without knowing how they are differentiated. The differences between them are not merely one of theology. Due to lack of separation of Religion and State within many Islamic countries, they translate often directly into the practical, economic and political sphere. The present work examines the belief systems of Sunnism and Shiism, traces their roots and examines their differences from a Shiite point of view. It becomes evident that the beliefs which make up Shiism, while Islamic in appearance, are traceable to Zoroastrianism and were inherited from the pre-Islamic days of Iran.

The term Islam means submission, resigning one’s will, by implication to the will of Allah. The term Sunni denotes a follower of the sunnat or Tradition of the prophet of Islam. The Traditions, or Hadith, are episodes in early Islam and the life of the prophet that have been used together with the Qur’an to form the basis of Islamic law, Sharia, as well as to later interpret the law, which is done through analogies, personal interpretation, and gathering consensus among the clergy. Shiites follow the Traditions of the prophet or Imams which have been approved and handed down by the Imams as being authentic. As the term Sunni also has ethnic connotations which are not the subject of the present work, we will often refer to Sunnism where appropriate as orthodox Islam. Shiites regard the Imams as the legitimate successors to the prophet, while Sunnis regard the Caliphs.
In the West and generally outside the Moslem world, by default Islam is known as Sunnism. This due to the fact that Islam is a predominantly Arab religion, began in Arabia, had an Arab founder, most Arabs follow Sunnism, and over 90% of the population of Moslems in the world are Sunni. Inside Iran, however, Islam is known as Shiism, so much so that among traditionalists and common people being Sunni is regarded as being kafar, or infidel. Iran to-day is known as a Moslem country, but not of the majority, orthodox sect of Islam. As it is the largest Shiite country, at about fifty five million souls, what is seen of it in the outside world is seen as representative of Shiism. The next largest Shiite country, Iraq, at nearly twenty million, was part of Iran at the time of the advent of Islam, and over the centuries the capital city of Iran, Ctesiphon, was not in the Persian heartland but in the flatlands of Iraq, where now its relics remain. The beliefs and values of the people of any country with a large population are varied, as would be expected, but there are certain unifying principles, such as the belief in the Justice of God, that hold true for as population. In terms of doctrines of religion, Shiism is defined by the major and minor tenets that codify it, dating back, as with Sunnism, to about a thousand years ago.

Shiism in Iran has survived to the present regardless of whether the rulers or dynasties were Sunni Turkomans or Shiites. For most of Iran’s post-Islamic history, the ruling dynasts have been Turkomans, most of whom have been Sunni to start, and were within a couple of generations persianized, become closer in outlook to Shiism, and then Shiite. The Mongols (early 1200s) and Tatars (late 1300s) respectively invaded and destroyed much of Iran, ruled what remained of it for a total of a century and a half. But within a couple of generations they took on the native culture and religious beliefs and began to promote it. This was not only in the religious, cultural and artistic domain but entered the political domain.

It was under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722 AD) that Iran regained its status overall as a major political entity. Although the Safavid kings of Iran were of Turkish origin, and hence closer in kin to the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire (1500-1917), the Safavids were upholders and defenders of the faith and culture they had grown up with and absorbed. Their lineage from multiple ancestors that was made-up to create their legitimacy, going
back to the prophet of Islam in one line of the family, to pre-Islamic Iran in another line, and to others, was a means first of unifying the country and second of gaining widespread acceptance. At that time there were also Sunnis in Iran. This was more due to the path that history took than ideology. Early in the Safavid dynasty Shiism was declared officially in Iran as the state religion.

Although the differences between Shiism and Sunnism are significant, the root cause of the many major problems seen today between or inside Islamic countries ought not be attributed to such differences, but to the fact that, in varying degrees in Islamic countries, separation of Religion and State is absent. Islam in origin sought to control both religion and state. By comparison, in origin, Christianity was largely faith (thus ‘leave to Caesar what is Caesar’s).

As with Christian sects, Shiite or Sunni beliefs in their completeness may not be adhered to by every single individual of the faith, but held to in various degrees, and it is over a population that they are best seen. Many individuals may be nominally Sunni, and not necessarily follow the Sunni beliefs. Among millions of Moslems, whether Shiite or Sunni, individuals may differ from the official belief or creed in their sect. What is known as the official creed applies and holds more over a group, not necessarily any single person. Likewise among the leaders there is variation. There have been notable religious leaders in Iran who follow the established principles of Shiism, and there have been those who do not, and call their ideology “pure Mohammedan Islam” to avoid being identified with Sunnism.

The religious establishment in either sect vies, through Islamic law, sharia, to act as a state. As a result of control of religious secular affairs, the differences mentioned between Shiism and Sunnism then show themselves in the practical and political sphere. This control of secular affairs is also evident in the various formulations and statements of articles of faith in Islam. In the centuries following the advent of Islam there arose

\[b\] Ayatollahs Shariatmadari and Taleghani (both deceased); Montazeri of Iran (under house arrest 1997-2003; released since to avoid an uprising but under censorship and surveillance), Ali Sistani of Iraq may be deemed as examples largely of bona fide Shiism. There are many lesser known ones.
various sects, with ideologies differing on various articles of faith, for example on Free Will over one’s own actions. We can see such development during a similar period of major changes in religion: In the centuries following the restoration of the Jews by the Persians, begun under Cyrus the Great (ca. 537 BC), a number of sects in Judaism emerged, though after a longer gestation period than in Islam. With respect to the example cited of Free Will over one’s actions, some, such as Sadducees\(^c\) and, later, Christians, held to the doctrine of Free Will over one’s actions; others such as the Essenes did not. Judaeo-Christianity today is generally based on Free Will. A notable exception in Christianity today is Calvinism, and its descendant Presbyterianism, which believe in predestination. However, predestination, having been born and being active in a space, time and arena not under one’s control is a different issue than having no control over one’s own actions. It will be addressed in more detail later.

The doctrines of religion in Islam, or their status as major or minor tenet, are not explicitly listed and differentiated in the Qur’an, but, as with other religions such as Judaeo-Christianity, outlined in the ideology of those who interpreted it, and in particular of the sects that emerged.

As today Sunnism in terms of population, and identification with Islam in the outside world, is the larger and dominant sect of Islam, so too were the Pharisees then in Judaism. A consequence of accepting the Free Will of man is giving up the all-powerfulness of God. This would then detract from the power of a religious establishment which seeks to be the chief interpreter and arbiter in society of the will of God. Such was the case with Sunnism, as it was with the Pharisees. The polemics are similar, and we find them recurring in different societies through the ages. While logically and philosophically the issues conceivably could be settled, politically they have shown themselves over the course of history as more or less incapable of being settled. But of more significance than the academic value is the social impact. In the marketplace of ideas with societies under secular rule with free press, and protected under the checks and balances of a democracy guaranteeing individual rights, it would be not be hard to see which of the two sets of ideologies discussed herein would thrive and succeed.

\(^c\) 2nd century BC to 73 AD and the fall of the Judaic state.
Principles of Sunnism

Traditionally, the five main articles of belief in Sunnism have been:

- Monotheism and Prophethood (*Shahada*)
- Prayer (*Salat*)
- Alms (*Zakat*)
- Fasting in Ramadhan (*Sowm*)
- Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*)

There are no categories of major and minor articles in Sunnism as there exist in Shiism. The first in the list is the statement required of converts, called the *Shahada*, or “bearing witness”, how *There is no god but Allah, and that Mohammed is his prophet*. These two parts form separate principles in Shiism, where the conception of God, interpretation of monotheism and record of the prophethood differ from Sunnism, a fact that will be addressed later. Prayer was customary in both Arabia and Iran prior to Islam. In Arabia, it was directed to the idols in Mecca. In Iran it was directed to *Ahura Mazda*, the Wise Lord that Zoroaster had taught.

Mohammed the prophet of Islam shattered the idols in Mecca, and prayers of the Arabs and those they converted were directed toward Allah. Initially, Moslems were to pray toward Jerusalem. After the Jews of Arabia refused to accept conversion to Islam, the prayers were directed at Mecca. Alms play the same role in a secular government as taxes; they are not particularly religious or spiritual. When given to the needy and poor, however, they acquire such connotations. Fasting was proscribed under Zoroastrianism, for it led the believer away and independent from the good creation. As regards *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, practically all of the rituals and practices associated with the Hajj have been retained from the time of idolatry, before Islam. In Islam that age is referred to as the age of ignorance. The practice of Hajj has continued, almost unchanged, after Islam.
Major Principles of Shiism

The major principles of Shiism (variously referred to as tenets, doctrines, principles, articles of faith) are:

- **Monotheism** (Allah as the sole god)
- **Prophecy** (Mohammad as his prophet)
- **Afterlife**, resurrection
- **Justice** (as inherent quality of God) and **Free Will** (of man)
- **Imamate** (divinely inspired religious leaders)

There is no intended priority in the above list, except that the starting point is monotheism, and that the two listed last, Justice and Imamate, are not shared by Sunnism. They were added by Shiism. Since, over the course of centuries and rivalry with Sunnism, admission that the two doctrines were ‘added’ would have been tantamount to an admission that they were not part of Islam, Shiism developed with the assumption that they were an integral part of Islam from the origin. Some basis can be found for them in the Meccan verses (610-622 AD) of the Qur’an. During that time, however, the religion had only a handful of converts. That was not the Islam that was carried by the invading Arabs over the Middle East. Those being converted would not have known about the Meccan period.

The meaning and implications of the first three major principles listed are different in Shiism in general and in Iran in particular, than in Sunnism. We will first examine the two principles special to Shiism and then the three that, ostensibly, are shared with Sunnism. This order is because the two that special to Shiism affect the meaning and interpretation of the first three in Shiism. In addition to the five major principles of Shiism listed, there are ten minor ones.
Justness in God and Free Will of Man

Shiism holds Justice to be an intrinsic aspect of God. This is one of the concepts at the core of Zoroastrianism, where it occurs in its scriptures as Asha as forming part of the godhead, the qualities which define Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord. It also occurs as Arta in ancient Persian, as attested in the inscriptions from about 450 BC. Asha and Arta in their wider meaning are intended to refer to a cosmic and universal order which includes righteousness, morality, justice. An extension of this doctrine, the intrinsic character of Justice in God, is that Shiism holds that God cannot be the author of Evil, and is purely Good. Evil as in Judaeo-Christianity is attributable to Satan, which is to be overcome at the End of Time. The role of Satan was adopted from the Evil Spirit in Zoroastrianism, Ahriman. The quality of justice in God acts to inculcate morality and righteousness in man. The conceptions of God and Satan in Shiism derive respectively from Zoroastrian Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord) and Angra Mainyu (the Evil Spirit).

The doctrine of Free Will of man over his own actions is explicitly stated in Shiism and is a part and corollary to the doctrine of Justice of God. Free Will is part of the core of Zoroastrian belief, and has been so continuously from the start. These are important articles of faith which distinguish Shiism and Sunnism. The causative principle, Free Will, has been endowed to man by God. Though limited in practice and power, man in principle is autonomous and to the extent of his capabilities is capable of exerting that Free Will. Thus he becomes responsible for his own actions.

Within Islam, as might be expected, the doctrine of Free Will was put forth in the early 600s AD by a Persian, by name Sinbuyeh⁹, who had served in the elite cavalry of Iran prior to the conversion of Iran to Islam. Sinbuyeh was persecuted by the Caliphs and killed, as were others who had learned his teachings in this regard⁷. His belief in free will was inherited from Zoroastrianism, a concept that is traceable to the Zoroastrian heritage of Judaeo-Christianity, and likely entered Islam via Judaism.

⁹ The name Sinbuyeh has variants in the sundry primary sources where it is attested in connection with his enunciation, in Islam, of the doctrine of Free Will.
Predestination, Pre-determinism, Pre-Ordainment, and Fatalism

In the context of discussion of free will, the terms predestination, pre-determinism, pre-ordainment and fatalism are variously employed in the scholarly literature. As different authors may employ these terms in a different sense, it is necessary to differentiate and define them, for the purpose of the present work.

Predestination constitutes bounds on one’s course of life, bounds placed by the time and place of one’s birth, society, place of one’s family within that society, upbringing and later activity in adult life, that a person has no control over. Factors influencing predestination in the life of a person include the society he or she is born and active in, the economy, natural wealth and features of the country.

Pre-determinism is the equivalent of denial of Free Will over one’s own actions. In pre-determinism man’s actions are supposed to have been pre-configured, with man having no part in it. This belief is held by three of the four branches of Sunnism, and is one in which Sunnism and Shiism have stood in stark contrast against each other.

Predestination is indirectly attributable to God, pre-ordainment is a more direct attribution to God. In predestination God has set the general factors that place bounds on one’s course of life, for example through creating nature, but leaving nature to its physical laws. Shiism, Sunnism and other religions in general do not disagree over that. In pre-ordainment, it is believed that God takes direct action with respect to specific events or phenomena and exercises further influence, though without taking away one’s free will over his/her actions. In such definition of pre-ordainment, God would be made out to be a manipulative force.

Fatalism is tantamount to giving up hope, due to failure or a sense of predestination or ordainment as defined above, or due to circumstances beyond one’s control, despite believing in free will over one’s actions. While Shiites believe in Free Will, due to their experience throughout history, of their having built the country many times, to see it
destroyed, common people in Iran have also come to acquire a belief in fatalism which is apt to continue while such conditions prevail.

The daily struggle of man, whether in ancient times, medieval times, or present, has been that of earning a livelihood. The discussion of Justice and Free Will, thus, is as relevant to his condition today as it was then, and throughout history. To institute social justice and have a society of upright, happy citizens, this livelihood needs to be made without taking from others. Wealth continually needs to be created, to pay for the livelihood of the living. While the principles of Divine Justice and Free Will comprise part of the spiritual core of Zoroastrianism, which has therefore been inherited by Shiism, the creation of agrarian settlements and enterprises comprised the practical core of Zoroastrianism. The religion accorded man the highest status before God. It encouraged the creation of wealth from near nothing. It ordered and made habitable the wastelands, and built platforms for civilization to flourish. In the motto of Zoroastrianism, Good Thoughts, Good Word, Good Deeds, it is the practical and most difficult part that counts the most and has the most merit, in Divine Judgment. Based on these teachings, Iranians and other Zoroastrians such as Armenians created a wealthy agricultural society. This attracted the eyes of tribes and nations who sought and desired such wealth and power, without caring for how it was produced, ho it can be sustained, and the ideology behind it. Iran rebuilt itself frequently, after every war. The Arab invasions occurred ca. 635-650 AD. This differed in that while prior invasions were secular, the Arabs claimed Allah had entitled them to confiscate the wealth of the Persians and other agrarian nations, not only the physical wealth, but take their daughters from their families and for sale in the markets of Arabia, and massacre the rest towns and cities simply for not being Moslem. In claiming to have no free will in these actions, orthodox Islam absolved the Arabs of moral responsibility. After another round of rebuilding the country following the Arab invasions, came the Mongol and Tartar invasions. After multiple invasions over the centuries and destruction, survival and subsistence became the goal. This was possible because most of the population lived in remote mountain villages, where there was no concentration of wealth as in cities. The idea entered into the mind of the common Persian that rebuilding the country each time was fated to end in destruction again, thus the fatalism.
Imamate

This is the interpretation of religious law with the progress of society by divinely inspired human beings in Shiism, called Imams. Islamic law, Sharia, of Sunnism and Shiism are different, being based on different Traditions. In Sunnism, the body of religious laws is fixed, as of about a thousand years ago. Thus there is no position of imams as in Shiism with such status as described. Ministers in Sunni mosques are called Imams and have no sainthood or (as in the case of the 12th Shiite Imam) eschatological status to speak of.

In Shiism the Sharia may be reinterpreted continually by the religious leaders in the light of social, economic and scientific progress whereas in Sunnism it is fixed within the framework of the social conditions of a thousand years ago. Unlike Shiism, in Sunnism the Sharia is not adaptable to new conditions and the natural progress of society.

The Imams are believed in Shiism to descend, father to son, from a legendary marriage between the son of Ali (who was a cousin and first convert of the prophet) and a Persian princess, who like other female was taken captive to the markets of Arabia to be sold. Legend has it that in the market Ali objects, saying you cannot sell the daughters of kings. Then it is agreed that she will choose her own man, whereby she chooses Hossein the young son of Ali. She was older, wiser, more cultured and educated than him. Hossein under her influence becomes persianized, and later becomes a martyr in fight against the Arabs. In the world view of Iranians this wedding has served to preserve the lineage in the tradition of kingship. In Islam or among the Arabs there was no such tradition of descendency in leadership or government, whether through the male or female line. It should be clear that the patrilineal descendency in Imamate was modeled after the patrilineal kingship in Iran. The Imams are regarded as saints in Shiism, and are believed to have descended through Ali and thus be of the line of the prophet. For Iranians the martyrdom of Hossein in the collective mind of the nation is modeled after

Scholarship does not have a consensus about this particular marriage. Mary Boyce of the University of London, scholar of Zoroastrianism, does not regard it as certain. However, myths can in the collective mind of a nation can often exercise greater influence and impact than facts.
that of the gallant prince Siavash in the national Epic of Iran who dies at the hands of Iran’s enemies. The nobility, innocence and characteristics of Siavash were in the public mind transferred to Hossein.

Traditionally, in kingship in Iran, the quality of khvarenah, or Divine Grace, is deemed to be in whoever is in position of leadership. When embodying khvarenah, leaders are no longer given to their own whim, desires and preferences but seek to interpret and enact the will of God to bring about justice on earth. While in history mostly identified as the essential qualification of a king, khvarenah was not exclusive to kings but all in a position of leadership. The equivalent of this quality of khvarenah was ascribed to the Imams during the first two centuries of Islam when Iran did not have kings of its own.

Shiism started initially as a political movement following the death of the prophet (632 AD), in recognizing his cousin Ali as the legitimate successor to the prophet. From the point of view of Shiites, Ali had been a convert at a young age and as such had learned the new religion, whereas those who were promoted by the Arab majority to be Caliph after the death of the prophet, Abubakr Omar, Osman, were elders of the tribe before Islam and had clung to the old ways. The Arabs were more concerned about the political entity that had been created, not which of the followers most closely adhered to the pre-Hegira (622 AD) teachings of the prophet. Shiism thus regards Ali as the true successor to the prophet and the first Imam. In actual practice Ali became the fourth, in succession after the prophet.

Within Shiism, most believe in twelve Imams, thus the name “Twelver Shiism”, the sect of the vast majority in Iran. Minority sects slightly differ. The Ismailis for example believe in seven Imams. All Shiites believe in the Imams in succession, father to son. The twelfth or last Shiite Imam disappeared ca. 870 AD. This period coincided with the emergence of the first Iranian dynasties after Islam, such as the Taherian (early 800s AD), who would then be possessing the khvarenah. This continuity ensured in the World view of Shiism the existence on Earth of the guiding spirit of God, either in an Imam or a

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*There had been precedence before for the line to be preserved occasionally through female monarchs, such as two who reigned for brief periods shortly before the end of the Sasanian dynasty.*
King. The twelfth Imam is believed to return in the End of Days as Mahdi, world-savior or Messiah. For Shiites there can be no Imams in the sense described beyond the twelve.

The Shiite conception of Mahdi, or Messiah, follows directly from that of Saoshyant, or world-savior, in Zoroastrianism. But in Sunnism, where God is the author of both good and evil, there is no eschatological role left to play for the Mahdi.

**Monotheism**

We see from the above the difference among the two sects in the conception of God. Thus the meaning of God in Shiism is different from that in Sunnism. By definition in Shiism, there cannot be a God that is not inherently just and righteousness. Allah is most often cited during prayers recited in Arabic. For the Iranians, the meaning and conception of God is closely associated with in the native term khoda, which conception continues from before Islam and imparts to the notion of higher being in their mind qualities of Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord in Zoroastrianism. The word khoda has been postulated to be the root of God in Germanic languages, and likely comes from huda\(^8\) in the Gathas of Zarathustra, meaning *the One from whom emanates Good*.

With regards to God himself in Sunnism it is believed that Allah’s divine doctrines are held and preserved by Allah in heaven on tablets. In Shiism it is believed that God is pure spirit, having no need of preserving what it knows in material form. Even his names in human languages are for the convenience of communication of mankind and not part of God. Thus we see that the qualities of Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord in Zoroastrianism, remained in the mind of the Iranians and by extension Shiites and change of name for official purposes to Allah was of little consequence to inner belief. The Sunni belief in an independent Qur’an is viewed in Shiism as a remnant of idolatry and polytheism. Sunnism holds that the Qur’an was not created, and thus on a par with God himself. Shiism sees having two uncreated, eternal entities, God and the Qur’an, as abrogating

\(^8\) In two parts, *hu* meaning Good, beneficent, and *da* meaning ‘[He] from whom emanates’. 
monotheism, and thus rejects that notion. In Shiite belief, the Qur’an has been created, and God is the sole uncreated, eternal entity.

**Prophecy and Prophethood**

Ostensibly, both Shiism and Sunnism profess to have as their prophet the prophet of Islam. However, their conceptions of the prophet are shaped by his the *Hadith*, episodes of his life, in English referred to as the Traditions. For the Shiites, only the Hadith which have come down via the Imams and thus bear their approval as to authentic, are valid. Shiism views the Imams as the legitimate successors of the prophet, and of that lineage. But the opinion of the Imams was partly shaped by the environment in which they found themselves. After Ali none of the Imams held political office, The political office was seen within Shiism as usurped by Sunnis. In Shiism the Imams are regarded as saints.

**Afterlife**

Both Sunnism and Shiism believe in *Mo’ad*, meaning judgment day resurrection and afterlife. However, the stage one must pass through, Heaven or Hell, loses its significance in Sunnism, a belief system in which there is no Free Will over one’s actions. Without Free Will there can be no responsibility. Hence, Divine Judgment and subsequent sentencing to Heaven or Hell would lose its basis. Without Heaven or Hell, there can be no afterlife, whether they be considered an intermediary stage (where wicked souls are purified in Hell) to everlasting life or the abode of everlasting life in themselves.

**Relation of God to Man in Sunnism and Shiism**

In Sunni Islam, God is seen as far above human beings. There is little in the way of spiritual connection between God and man. It would be blasphemy to think so. Man in Sunni Islam has a distant and outward relation with God, who hovers above him.
In Shiism, Imams interpret the will of God. Man and God can be connected through the Rooh ol-Ghodos, the Holy Spirit, which derives, with minor alteration of sense, from its Zoroastrian precursor Spenta Mainyu. The presence of the Holy Spirit in Shiism is not limited to Imams alone, but extends to poets, leaders and other human beings. Thus the spirit of God in Shiism is in, as well as above, man. The divine spirit of kingship, khvarenah, enables and entitles leader to rule with justice, whereas the Holy Spirit expresses itself through man in words.

**Reasons for Differences Between Shiism and Sunnism**

The differences between Shiism and Sunnism came to exist historically due to a number of reasons which include:

1) Since Islam was spread by force rather than be inculcated, and had little to inculcate, Iranians naturally carried their beliefs from their pre-Islamic religion into Shiism. Other peoples such as those in the Levant also carried their beliefs into Islam. As their language has become Arabic, they are known today as Levantine Arabs, but there is a general awareness among them of the differences in Sunnism as well as culture between them and Arabs of the Persian Gulf. Under the Roman Empire in the Levant, just prior to Islam, much of the population was Christians or of smaller sects. Since forcibly converted, their beliefs likewise remained with them and were carried into Islam.

2) Sparseness of Population. The Iranian population, with 90% of it being dispersed through the mountains in hamlets, was at least geographically not amenable to being conquered. Throughout history to conquer Iran meant to conquer its cities, never to conquer the population in the country, in the remote villages, which comprised the vast majority. The incomparable Ibn Khaldun, a statesman of his day, a great philosopher of the fourteenth century (whose roots were in Andalusia, Spain) in his timeless masterpiece

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* The debate over whether physical or just spiritual is not settled.

1 Estimate of the modern era: 60,000
Prolegomena to History, writing in the context of the advent of Islam, observes: “Arabs can gain control only over flat territory”, and explains further:

“Every stronghold and locale that seems difficult to attack, they bypass in favor of some less difficult undertaking. They do not attack it. Tribes that are protected against the Arabs by inaccessible mountains are safe from their mischief and destructiveness. They would not cross hills or undergo hardship and danger in order to get to them.

Flat territory, on the other hand, falls victim to their looting and prey to their appetite whenever they have the opportunity of gaining power over it, when there is no military force, or when the sovereign power is weak. Then they raid, plunder and attack that territory repeatedly, because it is easily accessible to them. Finally, the inhabitants succumb utterly to the Arabs and they are pushed around by them in accordance with changes of control and shifts of leadership. Eventually, their civilization is wiped out.”

“Mark how all the countries of the world which have been conquered and dominated by the Arabs have had their civilization ruined, their population dispersed, and even the soil itself apparently transformed. Thus, Yemen is in ruins, except for a districts; similarly Iraq, which was so flourishing under the Persians, is completely ruined; so too is contemporary Syria...”

In the Arab invasions of the Middle East following the advent of Islam, the Arabs gained control over the flatlands of Iraq, which was then part of Iran. The sections of Ibn Khaldun’s Prolegomena describing the Middle East, in particular Arabs and Persians, ought to serve as required reading for statesmen today dealing with the region, for the same beliefs, values and attitudes are active today, applied merely to a different setting and time, a more advanced state, in the material world.

The principles of Shiism in Iran were implemented and enacted in government when there was a native ruler, partaking of the culture and values of his people. This has been less often the case, in the post-Islamic history of Iran.

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1 Charles Issawi of Oxford University on Ibn Khaldun: “More than any of his contemporaries, whether European or Arab, he tackles the kind of problem which preoccupies us today...
Due to such differences between Shiism and Sunnism, Islamic fundamentalist sects in Saudi Arabia such as the Wahhabs and Salafis regard Shiites as infidels or apostates and as a solution promote the wholesale elimination of Shiite populations. From their point of view Shiites are not and never became Moslems. They are seen as takfiris by Shiites and moderate Sunnis, a word meaning extremists who label others kafir, infidel.

3) Islam upon entry to Iran, had little in the way of doctrine to inculcate. What it required from a convert, in or outside Iran, was to accept Allah and his prophet, and attest that “there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is Allah’s prophet”. Indeed, there was little or no inculcation inside Arabia either. In the Qur’an verse 49:14 states: “The Arabs say we have become faithful. Say unto them, you have not become faithful, you have become Moslem.” Through the history of conversions we observe that becoming a Moslem was a nominal and political change. It involved little change of belief system in any spiritual sense. Thus for those who did so willingly, as some in Arabia, or of those who did so forcibly, as nearly all the rest, becoming Moslem involved no inner change of faith.

**Origins of the Beliefs of Shiism and Sunnism**

Other than Imamate, the beliefs of Shiism were adopted and carried over from an early sect in Islam called the Mo’tazelites, meaning those who became detached. Beliefs in the justice of God and Free Will of man over his actions and other beliefs combined with Imamate to make up Shiism. The Mo’tazelites were closely identified with the Qadarites or “Free-Willers”, and were known as the majoos of Islam, meaning the Magians of Islam (the Magi being priests of Zoroastrianism, such as came to see Jesus). In the Tradition, by extension majoos refers to the laity also. This because the doctrines of the Mo’tazellites and Qadarites were adopted from Zoroastrianism. They existed under an Islamic veneer. Their reputation may be traceable to one of the Hadith, or Traditions of the prophet. Although the authenticity has not been established, the prophet of Islam is reported as referring to those who believe in Free Will as the majoos, or Magians of

Moreover, his positive outlook and matter-of-fact style render him particularly congenial to the modern mind.”
Islam. Regardless of valid origin of the Hadith, it shows how those who believed in Free Will were viewed by the mainstream, the Ash’arites, from whom derives Sunnism.

The Shiite belief in the inherent Justness of God, or what he expects of man, is regarded as heresy in Sunnism, orthodox Islam. Sunnism holds that the actions of individuals are predetermined by Allah. Thus individuals see themselves absolved of moral responsibility for their actions. The justness of God then is of little consequence, for he supposedly has predetermined their actions.

As regards Judgment Day, the notion of the narrow Bridge of Sirat in Islam derives directly from the Chinvad bridge in Zoroastrianism, whereby it narrows for the unrighteous, passing over it, and they tumble down into hell, but the righteous pass over to paradise. But with man having no Free Will over his actions, this doctrine loses its significance and validity, for there is nothing to judge. The inherent contradiction in this belief, where humans who have no free will are yet are to be judged for their actions, has continued, because another tenet Shiites have added, that of logic, is absent in Sunnism. It stipulates that the doctrines of religion representing the almighty have to be consistent. It requires that the mandates of religion be logical and cannot exist in a contradictory state.

In orthodox Islam, Allah does not have to be consistent, and can according to his whim, change from moment to moment. By extension, since the followers believe their actions are preordained by Allah, they also need have no consistency. Since in orthodox Islam Allah is believed to have predetermined man’s actions, the human being supposedly deprived of Free Will is absolved of moral responsibility. The large-scale violence frequently committed during the history of Islam, in particular its early establishment and expansion, pillage, robbery, attacks on caravans, plunder, murder, rape, kidnapping and sale of women, massacre of whole cities and town, in short destruction of civilization as Ibn Khaldun described, were regarded warranted as acts predetermined by Allah. Under the pretense of having no free will the Arab invaders committed such acts upon the civilian populations with impunity. From the point of view of civilian victims it was a way to commit evil under the guise of Allah. Those were powerful incentives to continue the path of contradictory beliefs, for the invading Arab armies would claim they were
sent by Allah as well and forcibly equate Allah with God as conceived in Zoroastrianism and Judaeo-Christianity for the civilian victims. They would claim Allah had given them the wealth developed by the Persians and Byzantines over the centuries.

This of course has not been true of all Sunnis throughout history. There have existed a significant proportion of nominally Sunni Moslems who do not subscribe to such beliefs of Sunnism. What has been here described here as orthodox Islamic beliefs is held at its core, by Islamic fundamentalists then becomes diluted over the course of the population. Besides Good and Evil, which both may be regarded as primal and hence to nonbelievers arbitrary, there is what we may call the neutral region of logic, reason, checks and balances and rationality. When subject to this neutral check and balance, ideologies that lack self-consistency or exist in contradiction tend to disappear over time. When light is thrown on a subject, it generally works to the advantage of Good.

According to the Book of Idols, describing the time before of Islam, Allah was identified with one of the idols being worshipped in Mecca, the idol of the tribe of Qoreish. Each tribe had their own idol. The Qoreish was the strongest tribe and tribe of the prophet of Islam. At the advent of Islam, the idols were broken. Allah was apotheosized and elevated to the status of God on a par with Zoroastrianism and Judaeo-Christianity. Apologists later have advanced the notion that Allah was a contracted form of al-elah, meaning the god. If so, the fact that still remains that prior to Islam the name was directed at the idol and there was no conception of a spiritual God.

The prophet of Islam at the outset tried to teach ethics to his people. He was a true prophet, seeking to improve the condition of mankind. Verses of the Qur’an that dated to then Meccan period (610-622 AD) of Islam speak of peace, reconciliation, toleration and eschatology. They are more supportive of Shiism than they are of Sunnism. During the Meccan period (610-622) there were but a handful of followers in Islam. After the Meccans launched an attempt to assassinate the prophet, he had to flee to Medina and thereafter fight battles against his adversaries. That formed the start of the Moslem calendar (Hegira, being 622 AD). The Medinan verses speak of war, destruction, raids, and acts of warfare taking of the property of non-Moslems. It is during the Medinan
period (622-632 AD) that hundreds of thousands join Islam in Arabia, who then convert the rest by force. However, since no inculcation of religion can take place for hundreds of thousands over such a short period, the newcomers impart to it their own values and identity rather than be changed by it. What Islam did for them was to create esprit de corps, what Ibn Khaldun in Arabic calls 'asabiyya. Until the point of Islam the tribes had been in warfare with each other, except for a traditional three-month period of peace every year. Islam united them. They were not agrarian. They lived in abject poverty. The thought of confiscating the wealth of the Persians, Romans and others, forcibly taking their women from them and selling them in the markets of Arabia were the motivators of the Arabs, now united. They then continued on to overthrow the governments of established civilizations of Rome and Persia which at that point in history had weakened and exhausted each other in wars.

Such a system arrests development in society. The built-in inability of Sunnism to progress with the times has meant, for example, we never hear of work in science, medicine, philosophy, mathematics, as having originated in Arabia. Indeed, as the great scholar of the science of history, Ibn Khaldun, tells:

“It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs . . . This has occurred in spite of the fact that Islam originated as an Arab sect with an Arab founder. The reason for this is that, at the beginning, the Muslim sect knew neither learning nor crafts, owing to the simplicity of the nomadic life . . .

Now, as we have stated before, crafts are peculiar to sedentary peoples, the Arabs being of all men the least disposed towards them. Hence when these sciences developed in a sedentary environment the Arabs forsook them. The civilized sedentary people at the time were Persian, or those who were politically and culturally subject to them, and therefore had developed a skill in the sciences and the crafts owing to a long tradition of civilization under Persian rule.

Thus the founders of grammar were Sibawaih and, after him, al-Farisi, and az-Zajjaj. All of them were of Persian descent. They were brought up in the

k Book of Idols, in Arabic called the Kitab, or book, of al-Asnam (idols)
Arabic language and acquired knowledge of it through their upbringing and through contact with Arabs.

They invented the rules of grammar and made it into a discipline for later generations. Most of the hadith scholars who preserved traditions of the prophet for the Muslims also were Persians, or Persian in language and breeding because the discipline was widely cultivated in Iraq and regions beyond. Furthermore, all the great jurists were Persians, as is well known. The same applies to speculative theologians and to most of the Qur’an commentators. Only the Persians engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works . . .

The intellectual sciences were also the preserve of the Persians, left alone by the Arabs, who did not cultivate them. They were cultivated by arabicised Persians, as was the case with all the crafts, as we stated at the beginning . . .

This situation continued in the cities as long as the Persians and Persian countries Iraq, Khurasan, and Transoxiana, retained their sedentary culture. But when those cities fell into ruins, sedentary culture, which God has devised for the attainment of the sciences and crafts, disappeared from them.” 6

Richard Frye, Harvard University: “The remarks of Ibn Khaldun are not in dispute”.7

**Minor Articles of Faith in Shiism**

There exist other important differences between Shiism and orthodox Islam. The major differences discussed herein are often the determinant of actions in the political and practical domain. Without knowing the facts hereunder, statesmen and policy makers would not be equipped to make the decisions and judgments needed of them.

There are ten minor articles of faith in Shiism. While the five major articles discussed have to do with spiritual matters, the minor articles mostly concern outward acts and secular, practical aspects of religion which otherwise would be the domain of government. They are not the primary focus of the present work, They are largely secondary to the main problem within and between societies, of instituting justice among
the citizens and among the nations. The Minor Articles are traditionally listed in the following order:

1) Prayer (Persian namaz, Arabic Salat)
2) Fasting (Persian roozeh, Arabic sowm)
3) Pilgrimage (Arabic Hajj. Employed in both languages.)
4) Alms (Arabic Zakat. Employed in both languages.)
5) Tithes (Arabic Khoms Two-tenths payable as tax. Employed in both languages.)
6) Holy War (Arabic Jihad. Employed in both languages.)
7) Promotion of what agrees with interests and law of Islam (persianized Arabic, Amr be Ma’roof.)
8) Preventing what may run counter to interests and law of Islam (persianized Arabic, Nahy az Monker.)
9) Love the community of believers (Arabic Tavalla, employed in Persian)
10) Keep Distance from non-believers (Arabic Tabarra, employed in Persian)

The first of these, prayer, is in Iran is a continuation of the same practice from before Islam, where Persians would pray five times a days. Prayer today in Islam is also five times a day, as is done to-day, whether in Sunnism or Shiism. Fasting was prohibited under Zoroastrianism, as it detached the follower from concerns for the earth and agriculture. Going on a pilgrimage to the Hajj was of course not a practice of pre-Islamic Iran. It was a practice of pre-Islamic Arabia, which practice has remained the same from before Islam. For Shiites to-day, pilgrimage to the holy sites at Najaf, Karbala in Iraq, and for Iranians in particular, to Mashhad in northeast Iran, are as significant as Hajj in Mecca, if not more. Articles 4-6, Alms, Tithes and Holy War are most likely of Islamic origin. Taxes were part of the responsibility of secular governments in Iran prior to Islam, not religion. However, alms can be given also privately and voluntarily to the poor. Of particular note is Article 5, Khoms, or the two-tenths tax reflecting the status and historical development of the two sects. In Sunnism, Khoms is a tax to be paid to the
ruling authority of Islam (then Caliphate) on spoils and booty captured in raids or war against others. In the spread of Islam, there was no institution of the military distinct from the civilian in Arabia. They attacked civilian population of other nations seeking to acquire their wealth. In Shiism, Khoms is a tax based on one’s own economic productivity and has nothing to do with booty or spoils taken in war. Shiites were not the belligerent party within Islam, but the martyrs and victims. The last four in the list show the influence of the dualism in Zoroastrianism. However, they are altered under the influence of Islam in that they are intended in an outward and not spiritual sense. In brief, articles 7-8 enjoin the support of what is in line with the Sharia in society and the prevention of what may run against it. Articles 9-10 enjoin the promotion of welfare of the Islamic community, and standing against those opposed to Islam.

**Halal, Kosher and the Purity Rules of Zoroastrianism**

Purity laws passed form Zoroastrianism to Judaism following Cyrus’s liberation of the Jews from captivity in Babylon. From Judaism they passed into Islam. From Islam they passed to Shiism. In Iran they found themselves again on native soil.

**Conclusion**

Shiism ostensibly is an Islamic sect, and some of the minor beliefs of Shiism have Islamic roots. However, little or nothing in its major beliefs are traceable to Islam. The foregoing shows that virtually all major beliefs of Shiism derive from Zoroastrianism and pre-Islamic Iran. The articles of faith shared with Sunnism have a different meaning among Shiites. They are interpreted differently. They came into Shiism in the process of being carried by Iranians into Islam. Much of the belief system that Judaeo-Christianity inherited from Zoroastrianism after Cyrus the Great set the Jewish captives free, in particular eschatology, passed into Islam. Cyrus was their mashiah, or Messiah (Isaiah 45:1), whom they followed. From Islam it passed into Sunnism and Shiism. In Iran again these beliefs found themselves on their native soil.
The practical solution to the differences that exist between the two and their impact in the practical sphere lies in freedom-loving people on both sides. Such individuals by far comprise the majority in most Islamic countries, whether Sunni or Shi'ite. Under secular, rational governments freedom-loving people flourish. They work together, most of the time without sectarian differences posing a problem.

Orthodox Islam as described above may be found in its fundamental form among the extremists rather than among mainstream people. These differences as they translate into action that loom large when extremists run the governments in various countries will be narrowed when moderates on run the governments. Through the establishment of secular law, separation of Religion and State, evolution of democratic institutions in the future, the differences we have discussed, while remaining on the books as official creed from a thousand years ago, will in time and in practice disappear.

**Review of Prior Scholarship**

Given the history of Islam, the question posits itself why the ideas expressed have not been discussed before in Iran. Partly, it is due to the fact that the Iranian people as whole are not conscious of these facts. They regard their own beliefs as Islam, to the degree of regarding the beliefs of orthodoxy as those of infidels. But scholars have seen through it. By creating Shiism, Iranians imparted to the Islam that they were introduced to righteousness, the conception of a just God, Free Will and their conception of the Judgment Day, Messiah and Afterlife. Here we conduct a review of prior scholarship on the subject.

Richard N. Frye, Harvard University: “in the official religion of Persia is the belief that the twelfth *imam*, descended from ‘Ali, vanished and will some day reappear as the Messiah to lead his people to salvation. This concept is an ancient one in Iranian religious thought, for in the *Avesta*, long before the birth of Christ, the coming of a savior is predicted. Thus, native Iranian tradition reasserted itself after the Arab conquest.”
William S. Haas, Colombia University: “In Sufism, the Persian spirit maintains its purity. The Shia, on the other hand, is an admirable, though inevitably only partially successful attempt, to discard Islam; it is, psychologically speaking, more of an escape than a solution.”

Edward G. Browne, University of Cambridge, “Yet, after all, the change was but skin deep and soon a host of heterodox sects born on Persian soil –Shi’ites, Sufis, Isma’ilis, philosophers- arose”. These sects transformed the religion forced on the nation “into something which, though still wearing a semblance of Islam, had a significance widely different from that which one may fairly suppose was intended by the Arabian prophet”.

G. M. Wickens, University of Cambridge: “the Iranian component maintained its own distinct identity in a manner and a degree infinitely beyond any of the other cultural areas covered by the rapid spread of early Arab Islam.”

On the surface it may seem that Iran like the rest of the Middle East conquered by the Arabs at the time of the advent of Islam, would be Moslem, in the same fashion. But as Bernard Lewis, Princeton University, in the World of Islam, 1976, notes of Iran: The Exception: “There was one country, however, which though conquered by the Arabs and converted to Islam, nevertheless retained its own distinctive national identity. That exception is Iran.”

Richard N. Frye, Harvard University: “Persian artists painted the figures of men and women in their miniatures, and the wine of Shiraz, famed in poetry, is still consumed by the worthy citizens of that city. How can this be reconciled with the precepts of Islam? It is difficult, if not impossible. The answer, however, is partly that the Persians were Persians first and Moslems afterwards. Further, the answer is to be sought in the revolt of the Persians against orthodox Islam, their acceptance of a heresy, and their transformation of it into something more in accord with their own traditions. This heresy is the schismatic sect of Shiites.”
Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics on Islam: “Islam is the infinitive form of aslama, and means ‘to resign oneself’ . . . It is doubtful whether it ever had an ethical meaning attached to it. The commentators seem to be unanimous in using it in a mechanical sense.”

Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics: “The history of the conversion of Persia is not very well known, because it is to a large extent the story of an adaptation of a religious mentality to new forms without giving up any essential elements of the previous creed. All the traditions of Iran were preserved in Persia under a thin cover of Mohammedanism. Moreover, Zoroastrianism never completely disappeared from Persia.”
References


Mehdi Seraj-Ansari, *Shi‘eh Cheh Migooyad* (In Persian), 3rd printing, Tabriz, 1385 AH


7 Ibid. “The remarks of Ibn Khaldun are not in dispute by the extent of Iranian influences on Islam, the Arabs and the Arabic language needs to be examined and classified.”


