

Shia versus Sunni, the World's Longest Running Feud By Professor Nazeer Ahmed

A hundred years from today, when a chronicler writes about the presence of Islam in North America, he may well record that one of the principal achievements of this presence was the healing of the Shia-Sunni split. It will be recorded that America brought together Shias and Sunnis in its embrace and made them rediscover the commonality of their faith transcending the distractions of history and tradition.

The world's longest running feud is not over Kashmir or Palestine or Chechnya, nor is it the Catholic-Protestant schism. It is the Shia-Sunni conflict. Measured in terms of historical longevity, it beats the Catholic-Protestant schism by a factor of three and the Palestinian conflict by a factor of more than twenty.

If a traveler from outer space were to visit planet earth, he/she would be astonished at the sheer tenacity of the passions and prejudices that govern human life. And the Shia-Sunni conflict would easily top the list of issues that arouse ugly passions.

Muslims vehemently deny it, but they have made Islam a parochial religion mired in the past. Islam was revealed as a universal deen from the heavens. Muslims have made it a religion based on history. What is preached is different from what is practiced. The transcendence of the Qur'an and the universality of the message of the Prophet have been replaced by the parochialism of those who claim to practice them. The contrast between Islamic precepts and Muslim practices is the most convincing illustration of how divine ideas get compromised when they are introduced into the matrix of human affairs.

The mutual misconceptions between Shias and Sunnis are mind-boggling. Talk to a taxi driver in Johannesburg or a porter in Kuala Lumpur, and you will hear an earful of misinformation about Shia and Sunni beliefs. Some Sunnis believe that the Shias have their own version of the Qur'an. The word Rafzi (a derogatory term meaning deviant) is repeatedly invoked in conversations. On the other hand many Shias believe that the Sunnis are turncoats and apostates who revel in the tragedy of Karbala.

The animosities and scornful labels have been there since the assassination of Ali ؑ in the year 661 CE. For a long time thereafter some (Sunni) Umayyads used to take the name of Ali ؑ with derision. Caliph Omar bin Abdel Azeed (d 719) put an end to this abhorrent practice. On the other hand, some Shias continue to send tabarra on the names of Abu Bakr ؓ and Omar ؓ to this day and to show disrespect to the name of Aisha (r).

The endless dispute is even more astonishing when you consider that it has its basis in history, not in doctrine. The origins of the dispute were forgotten, bitterness was entrenched and became a tool for politics and power. History was later elevated to dogma.

Much of the often bloody history of Shia-Sunni conflicts is well known. The Sunnis believe in the Ijmah of the companions. The Shias believe in the primacy of succession through Ahl e Bait. The former resulted in the institution of Khilafat, the latter in the evolution of Imamah and Wilayat. And the feud has continued long after either institution has ceased to have relevance to the contemporary world.

These differences were contained during the Khilafat of Abu Bakr ؓ and Omar ؓ but burst into the open with the assassination of Uthman ؓ. The ensuing civil wars were inconclusive and ended only after the assassination of Ali ؑ and the abdication of Hassan ؑ in favor of Amir Muawiya. The conversion of the Khilafat into a dynasty brought on the tragedy of Karbala, which is a benchmark in Islamic historiography.

Thereafter, the Shia movement went underground, focusing primarily on the social and the spiritual. The Abbasid revolution (750-51 CE) gave some hope for Shia-Sunni reconciliation. This was not to be. The Abbasids deftly used the Shias in the uprising but abandoned them once they were in power. The persecution of the Shias continued.

The subsequent centuries have been a continuous saga of political rivalries between these two groups. The Sunnis have been the dominant political group but on occasions the Shias have challenged the political primacy of the Sunnis. In 945 CE, the Ithna Ashari Buyids briefly occupied Baghdad only to be expelled by the Seljuk

Turks. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Fatimids, another branch of Shia Islam, successfully challenged the military primary of the Sunni Abbasids in Baghdad and ruled an empire extending from Morocco to Syria from their capital of Cairo. For over a hundred years, it was Sunni Islam that was on the defensive. There were Shia kingdoms as far away as Multan (Pakistan) and Samarqand (Uzbekistan). The Fatimid power shriveled from within due to its narrow social base (they were not successful in proselytizing the Sunnis) and received its coup de grace at the hands of Salahuddin Ayyubi (1171 CE).

With their political power fading, the Fatimids launched the deadly assassin movement. Many a stalwart historical figure fell to the dagger of the assassin. Included among these were the brilliant grand vizier Nizamul Mulk of Baghdad (1091 CE), Mohammed Ghori, conqueror of Delhi (1206 CE), the Atabeks Maudud (1127 CE) and Zengi (1146 CE) of Mosul. Salahuddin himself narrowly escaped the assassin's dagger on several occasions.

Following the destruction wrought by the invasions of Timur (1375-1402 CE) and his conquest of India, Persia, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, there were social and spiritual convulsions in the region of eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan. Several political-religious movements were born in this caldron. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, Safiuddin, a Persian-speaking Turk, established a military-religious cult around himself and founded the Safavid dynasty of Persia (1499). The Safavids waged a relentless war against the neighboring Sunnis in Samarqand to the North and the Ottomans to the West. Safiuddin adopted the Ithna Ashari version of Islam, persecuted the Sunnis and reduced them to a small minority in the Persian heartland. The Safavids were contained only after the Ottoman Turks defeated them at the battle of Chaldiran (1524). However, warfare continued with the Great Moguls of India over control of Afghanistan (1605-1655) and the Ottoman Turks over control of Azerbaijan (1595-1639). The Safavid-Mogul rivalry, which was an echo of the Shia-Sunni rivalry, extended even to the Sultanates of the Deccan and was a primary reason for the advance of Mogul armies into southern India under Shah Jehan and Aurangzeb (1640-1707).

The Shia-Sunni split takes its deadly toll even today. In Iraq, not a day goes by when rival Shia-Sunni groups take the lives of hundreds of innocent people. Even assuming there are hidden hands behind this anarchy, the carnage is historic in its magnitude and can only result in the death of a nation. In Pakistan, intermittent attacks on Shia and Sunni mosques and places of congregation continue, hardening the ill will between the two communities.

Islam in America has a unique opportunity to heal these wounds. There are over three million Muslims in America. And there are over a million Iranians, a large majority of whom is Muslim. America has produced Muslim scholars of the first rank who have transcended Shia or Sunni labels and have made lasting contributions to Islamic sciences. The name of the eminent scholar Seyyed Hussein Nasr immediately springs to mind. America is the melting pot of nations. Muslims here are cosmopolitan. Shia-Sunni marriages and familial relations are commonplace in this land.

There are also pressures from modern geopolitics. Shias and Sunnis realize that they face common challenges. With this realization there have been attempts on the international scene to reconcile the opposing points of view. In 1959, the eminent scholar Shaikh Mahmoud Shaloot of Al Azhar issued a fatwa that "the Ja'fari school of thought, which is also known as 'al-Shia al-Imamiyyah al-Ithna Ashariyyah' (i.e., The Twelver Imami Shi'ites) is a school of thought that is religiously correct to follow in worship as are other Sunni schools of thought". It is also recognized that the Zaidiyah school of fiqh is also historically valid. In numerous writings Imam Khomeini encouraged the Ithna Ashari Shias to pray with the Sunnis. Unfortunately, such voices of reason were drowned out in the oil politics of the Gulf and the drum beats of the Iran-Iraq war.

This is not to minimize the obstacles to a Shia-Sunni reconciliation. There are religious leaders on both sides who are so mired in their own rote learning that they cannot separate what is history from what is doctrine. Many a mufti, when asked why it is not possible to have a common Shia-Sunni school of fiqh will throw up his hands in the air and declare: "Their sources are different. How can we even begin?" The process of fiqh is so institutionalized that a solution is unlikely to emerge from the traditional scholars.

Instead, reconciliation will emerge from the educated masses, the men and women of the soil who have their faith in the Qur'an and who love the Prophet. They will find the Shia and Sunni labels to be irrelevant. They will bypass the processes of the different schools of fiqh, but will find commonality in the conclusions, the

ethics and the injunctions for akhlaq (good character) derived there from. Does it matter what sources were used and what process of deduction was followed to establish the pre-eminence of Adl (justice) and Ehsan (the most beautiful deeds) in social relations? Aren't Adl and Ehsan dictated by the Divine Word? In the emergence of a common Muslim ethic, transcending the Shia and Sunni brands, the Internet can play a vital role. I urge the educated and qualified Muslim youth in North America to undertake this noble but challenging task using guidance from broad-minded ulema, Shaikhs and Imams wherever they may live and whatever their title may be.

Such a consensus emerged at least once before in Islamic history. Faced with the prospect of near annihilation from the Mongol invasions (1219-1302), the Islamic world turned its vision inwards. Nasiruddin al Tusi (d 1274), a distinguished scientist and man of letters, compiled his famous treatise Akhlaq e Nasiri (1273) as an ethical guide for Muslims. This book, written by a Shia scholar became required reading in the Sunni Mogul courts of India (1526-1707) and to a large extent governed their administration.

This then is our vision: Men and women arriving in America from distant shores wherein they faced prejudice and persecution will fuse together a new personality in this new land on the basis of Adl and Ehsan. They will enjoin that which is good and beautiful and forbid that which is extreme and offensive to others. They will be neither Sunni nor Shia but universal in character and uniquely Islamic believing in and practicing Adl and Ehsan. In Ehsan there is healing. In Ehsan there is forgiveness. In Ehsan there is love. In it there is divine presence.

In The Name of God The Compassionate, the Merciful

The Messenger of God has said, "Verily I am leaving with you the two most valuable and weighty objects: the Book of God and my household (the Thaqalain). Indeed these two shall not part with each other until they join up with me by the pond" (of Kowthar in Paradise on the Day of Judgement).

(The Prophetic Tradition of Thaqalain)

To Allah belongs all praise. Glorified is Thy Name, O God, bless Muhammed and his household who are manifestations of Your Beauty and Magnanimity and the secret treasures of Your Book, the Book that crystallises Your Oneness in all Your Names and Divine Attributes, including the one that none but Yourself knows. And let there be curse on those who oppressed the Prophet (SAW) and his household, those that belonged to the wretched pedigree.

At the outset to this prologue, it appears proper to briefly comment on the two most exalted and momentous objects of trust (The Thaqalain) , not on their transcendental, spiritual, or mystical aspects, an area into which pens such as mine are unable to venture as it is a domain of molk, the cognition of which covers all circles of beings, from earth to heaven (Malakoot-e-Aala) ... (4) and beyond to His Divine presence (Lahoot) ...(5) including circles that lie beyond the comprehension of our intellects. Nor do I mean to comment on that which has befallen humanity due to its negligence of the true nature and status of the greater trust (theql-e-akbar ...(6) = The Holy Quran) and that of the great trust (theql-e-kabir = The Household of the Prophet (SAW)), which is greater than anything except the great trust which is great in the absolute (akbar-e-mutlaq). Also I do not intend to recount here all that has befallen these two most valuable divine trusts (The Thaqalain) by the enemies of God and the treacherous followers of the tyrants = (Taghootian) as these are too many for me to enumerate, given my limited knowledge and time.

I thought that I might make a passing remark about what has happened to these two most valuable treasures. Perhaps the phrase, "... which will never part with each other until they join me by the pond (Howz) ...(9) ...implies that after the death of the Prophet (SAW), the Book of God and the household of the Prophet (SAW) shall receive similar treatment. Whatever is made of one, the other suffers the same until both descend on the Prophet (SAW) and unite with him by the Pond. Does this union, this pond, indicate the merging of plurality with unity ...(10) as the disappearance of drops in the sea? Or, does it mean something beyond the gamut of human intellect and cognition? Moreover the cruelty to which these two divine trusts, nay the entire humanity including the Islamic ummah (nation), were subjected by the followers of the tyrants and their stooges defy description by pen.

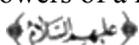
It should be mentioned that the Thaqalain Hadith ...(11) which is a mutawatir (an unbroken chain of recorded traditions) Tradition has been quoted, cited and adduced successively by Muslim ulema (foqaha, learned religious authorities or jurists), in both Shia and Sunni ...(12) denominations as proof positive for all mankind, especially for Muslims in all sects and branches. References to this Prophetic tradition are frequently made in such highly reliable Sunni sources like the famous 'Six Authentic Texts' (The Sahah-e-Sitta) ...(13) as well as in countless Shiite cogent texts. This hujjat or proof is binding on all Muslims who are accountable for it especially the foqaha (Muslim religious jurists) as they cannot claim ignorance of it. Let us now see what befell this book of God, this Divine Trust and the bequest of the prophet of Islam. The sad events for which tears may well be shed, began to take place following the martyrdom of Hazrat Ali  ...(14). Selfish people, followers of taghoots (despotic, pagan rulers) abused the Holy Quran as a mean by which to establish anti-Quranic rules.

To achieve this they forced off the scenes the true interpreters of the Quran and others who had received all of the Holy Book directly from the Prophet (SAW) and whose ears still echoed with the voice of His Holiness Muhammad (SAW) as he had said, "... I am leaving with you the two most valuable objects..." Thus, the Quran, which was to be man's guide to moral and material life to the Last Day, was shelved and the rule of divine justice that was, and still is, one of the ideals of the holy Book, was all forgotten.

Perversion of the Book, of Divine Traditions and of God's religion reached a shameful stage, it became the rule. The more this warped and distorted condition advanced, the more the Holy Quran that had been sent down for the betterment of man, was forced into oblivion. The Quran was sent down by the Omniscient God to Hazrat Muhammad (SAW) to complete and seal such divine revelations (Kashf -e Tomm-e Muhammadi) ...(15), to unite humanity and advance him to his rightful station; to rescue this issue of the divine attributes (Validah-e Eimul-Asmae) ...(16) from tyranny and evil; to institute the rule of justice and equity and to confer sovereignty to the Infallible and divine authorities (The Masoomeen) ...(17) that they in turn hand over such divine sovereignty to qualified worthy persons, was removed from all areas as though it had had no mission to guide mankind. In the hands of oppressive rulers and wicked akhunds (muslim clergymen, sometimes used in a derogatory manner), who were more decadent than the taghooti (despotic) rulers the Holy Quran was abused as an instrument of oppression, cruelty and corruption and was distorted to justify acts of tyranny by the enemies of God.

Unfortunately, in the hands of conniving enemies and ignorant friends, the Holy Quran, this divine book that is empowered to decide man's destiny, has found no place anywhere except in graveyards and at the gatherings for the dead. The instrument, that was to unite Muslims and all mankind and serve as scripture for their lives and salvation, was turned into an instrument of division and dispute among men or left the arena entirely. We all witnessed that whoever spoke of Islamic rule or of politics, which is the major role of Islam and its Prophet (SAW), or of the Quran and Islamic traditions, was regarded as one who had committed grave sins. The term akhund-a-siasi, which means a political clergyman, came to denote a profane canonist. These circumstances are still extant.

In recent years major satanic powers have, through their puppet regimes who sham Islam, undertaken to reprint and publish the Holy Quran, distorting sacred verses to serve their devilish ends. Such Qurans are published with attractive calligraphy and binding and are distributed everywhere with the aim of eventually removing the Holy Book from all scenes. We all saw the Quran that Muhammad Reza Khan Pahlavi ...(18) had printed. He succeeded in deceiving some people including a few Muslim akhunds or preachers who, unaware of the aims of Islam, praised him for it. We note that each year King Fahd ...(19) of Saudi Arabia spends a good deal of the wealth of the people in printing the Holy Quran and considerable publicity and propaganda material in support of anti-Quranic ideas propagating the baseless and superstitious cult of Wahhabism ...(20). Fahd abuses the Quran, urges negligent people and nations to side with the superpowers. He uses the noble Islam and the Holy Book to destroy both.

We are proud, and our dedicated nation is proud, that we adhere to a faith in which the Holy Quran speaks of the unity of all Muslims and the oneness of mankind. We are proud that our faith has retrieved the Quran from the cemeteries and has saved this Holy Book as man's prescription for freedom from all physical, mental and intellectual bonds that push him deeper into slavery and nothingness. We are proud to be followers of a religion whose founder has been designated by divine commandment and in which Ali ibn Abi Taleb , this

servant of God, free of all bonds and shackles of servitude and serfdom, has been appointed to deliver mankind from all the chains of slavery and thralldom. We are honoured that the book Nahjul-Balagha ...(21), which is next to the Quran, is man's great manuscript for salvation, moral and material existence and the greatest instrument for just rule and government, has our Infallible Imam, Ali عليه السلام as its author.

We are proud to have had as our leaders the Infallible Imams ...(22), from Ali عليه السلام down to Hazrat Mahdi عليه السلام ...(23) who, by the grace of God, lives in occultation, and watches our doings.

We are honoured to have our Infallible Imams as authors of such exalted, superb and life-giving prayers of supplication (referred to as The Ascending Quran (Quran-e-Sa-ed)) ...(24), as the Shabaniah prayer ...(25), the Arafat Prayer ...(26) of Imam Hussein عليه السلام ...(27), the Sahifah Sajjadiyah ...(28), these psalms of the Household of Muhammad (SAW) ...(29), and the Sahifah Fatimiah ...(30) revealed by the Lord to Her Holiness Fatima Zahra عليها السلام ...(31). We are honoured to have had as our fifth Infallible Imam, Baqer-ul-uloom عليه السلام ...(32) (profound knowledge, a title given to the fifth Imam), this superlative world personality whose true station can be appreciated by none save Allah, His Prophet صلى الله عليه وآله and the Infallible Imams (pbut).

We are proud to be followers of the Jaaferi Faith ...(33) (Religion) whose fiqh ...(34) (religious legislation and jurisprudence) is a boundless ocean. We are proud of all our Infallible Imams (the 12 innocent ones) and we are committed to follow them. We are honoured that our Infallible Imams عليهم السلام suffered imprisonment, banishment and finally attained martyrdom in their efforts to advance Islam; to implement the teachings and commandments of the Holy Quran-of which the establishment of the sovereignty of justice is but one dimension - and; to overthrow the rule of the oppressors and of the arrogant. Today, we feel proud that we seek to re-institute the objectives of the Holy Quran and Tradition and that the various layers of our nation sacrifice their lives, properties and loved ones for this holy cause.

We are proud that our women, young and old, regardless of their status, are present and active, side by side with the men, often more active than men, in all scenes including cultural, economic and military areas. They strive, sometimes more effectively than the men, for the propagation of Islamic teachings. Women who are capable of fighting take military training, which is a major prerequisite for the defence of Islam and the Islamic state. Our women have extricated themselves from the deprivations imposed on them by the enemies of Islam and by the inadequate knowledge of friends of Islamic tenets. They have bravely discarded the superstitions created by enemies through some ignorant preachers. Those women who are unable to fight in the war fronts serve behind the front-lines with such ardour and courage that makes the hearts of their men tremble with delight and it throws fear in the heart of enemies and makes ignorant individuals who are worse than foes shake with anger and fear. Often we hear our women, in a manner like that of Hazrat Zainab ...(35), cry out loud saying that they have given children in the path of God and Islam and are proud of it. They realise that what they get in return is far above the blessings of Heaven, let alone the material things of this world.

Our nation, indeed all Islamic nations as well as the meek and oppressed are pleased to see that their enemies, who are the enemies of Almighty God, of Islam and of the Holy Quran, are indeed savages who do not desist from committing any criminal acts to promote their mean purposes and who are unable to tell a friend from a foe in achieving treacherous goals. The USA is the foremost enemy of Islam. It is a terrorist state by nature that has set fire to everything everywhere and its ally, the international Zionism does not stop short of any crime to achieve its base and greedy desires, crimes that the tongue and pen are ashamed to utter or write. The stupid idea of a Greater Israel ...(36) urges them to commit any shameful crime. The Islamic nations and the mustazafeen (the meek, the oppressed) peoples of the world are pleased to have Hussein of Jordan (37) a professional, itinerant criminal, Hasan of Morocco ...(38) and Hosni Mubarak ...(39) of Egypt, fellow-mangers of Israel, as enemies. These are fellow-criminals with Israel and commit any act of treason against their own nations to serve the USA. We cheer to have Saddam, the Aflaqi ...(40) as an enemy whom friend and foe know to be a criminal, a violator of human rights and international laws and whose betrayal of the peoples of Iraq and of the Persian Gulf Emirates, has been no less than his betrayal of our country and people. We and the oppressed peoples of the world are delighted to be objects of criminal accusations by the superpowers through the international mass media under their control.

What can be a better source of pride than the fact that the USA with all its military might, its boastfulness, its claims, its mass media and its allies among puppet regimes, has been so dumbfounded and disgraced in its dealings with the dauntless Iranian nation and the land of His Holiness Baqiyatullah (a title of the 12th infallible imam, Hazrat Mahdi  who is now in occultation) that it does not know which way to turn and who to turn to?! This is not the work of anyone or anything except divine assistance that has awakened nations, particularly the Iranian Muslim nation and has guided it from darkness into light: The Light of Islam.

I now take this opportunity to advise the oppressed and noble nations, including our own, to stay firmly on this divine straight path that leads neither to the atheistic (Mulhid) East nor to the oppressive, pagan West, but to the path which the Almighty God has decreed for us. I further advise not to be negligent even for a single moment in being grateful for this blessing. Let no polluted hand of a superpower, or its agents, whether domestic or foreign, affect your determination and will. Know that the rowdier the Eastern or Western satanic power gets, the more proof it is for your divine support and God shall reward and punish the deserving ones in the best fashion in this and in the other worlds. "Truly, He is the Lord of all blessing and in His hand lies the dominion over all things".(The Quran, Sura 23, Al-Muminun, the Believers, verse 88).

I earnestly ask all Muslim nations to follow the practices and traditions of the Infallible Imams  in respect of political, social, economic and military affairs and to sacrifice for their sake whatever may be required. Also, I would like to enjoin on all of you to safeguard and observe the Fiqh sunnati (Traditional fiqh) ...(41) or religious canons for these set forth the schools of prophetic mission and Imamate and guarantee the growth and development of the nations through their primary and secondary decrees ...(42)' both of which are schools of Islamic jurisprudence. My advice is that you do not deviate an iota from the teachings of both schools of Islamic fiqh and not listen to the whisperings of the slinking (Satan) who are the enemies of religion and truth. Be sure that even a minor step toward deviation may be a prelude to the fall of the religion, of the tenets of Islam and of the divine rule of justice. Do not ever miss the Friday mass prayers ...(43) and the daily congregational ...(44) prayers (Salaat-al-Jumah and Salaat-al-Jamaat.). The Friday Congregational Prayer is one of the greatest divine blessings for the Islamic Republic of Iran, it reflects the political dimension of prayers. Also, never neglect the mourning ceremonies ...(45) commemorating the martyrdom of the Innocent Imams particularly that of the Master of All Martyrs his Holiness Abi Abdullah Hussein , may God, His Angels, the prophets and saints bless his great, valiant soul!

Let all know that the decrees of the Imams  regarding the observance of this great epic event of Islam and all the curses levied against the enemies of Ahl-e Bayt (the Household of the Prophet ...(46) are, in fact, the heroic cries of nations against agents of tyranny throughout history. You should know that the damnation and curses against the then injustices of the Bani Omayyads ...(47), who were annihilated and cast into the Hell, reflect the cries of protest by the people against the oppressors of the world and it is the perpetuation of such cries of protest that shatters oppression. It is necessary that the crimes of the tyrants in each age and era be regularly condemned in the cries of lamentation and in the recitals of elegies held for the Infallible Imams.

In this age of oppression of Muslim nations is the work of the USA and the U.S.S.R and their local lackeys such as the Alay Saud (Family of Saud and rulers of Hijaz), these traitors to the House of God, the Great Divine Sanctuary, who deserve the most potent damnation by Allah, His Angels (Mala-eka) and

Prophets (SAW). We must all know that it is these political ceremonies (Friday Mass, the Hajj Pilgrimage, the Salaat ul Jama'at, etc) that give Muslims, particularly the 'ithnai Ashar (the Shiite ...(48) Muslims who accept and follow the 12 Infallible Imams , the unity they should enjoy; these also preserve the nationality of all Muslims.

Let me say at this point that this politico-religious testament of mine is not made to the noble people of Iran only. Rather, it is recommended for all Islamic nations and the oppressed peoples of the world regardless of religion or nationality. I humbly pray that Almighty God does not leave us and our nations to ourselves even for a moment. May He not withhold His blessings from the children of Islam and the cherished Muslim combatants.

Ruhollah Al-Musavi Al-Kbomeini