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Reviving the Intellectual Heritage in Contemporary Islam: The Shi'ite Perspective

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THE present intellectual crisis in Islam does not help in countering extremist interpretations. A closer look at Islam's rich intellectual traditions from the past, however, might offer chances for fostering a climate of dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding. In this regard, the potential contribution of Shi'ism has often been overlooked.

There is no denying that the intellectual contributions of Sunni Islam had been manifold. Yet, it is Twelver Shi'ism – the majority denomination in Iran and Iraq revolving around the Twelve Imams – that is usually associated with a certain pioneering spirit in terms of philosophy and thought. Shi'ism is commonly – though somewhat rashly – associated with political assertiveness of a militant character. However, what is lesser known is that this rather recent, post-1979 phenomenon is mainly related to the events in Iran. Thus, a more sober, fact-oriented, and less sensational attitude might be helpful in understanding contemporary Shi'ite Islam.

Understanding political non-assertiveness of Shi'ite Islam

Shi'ism's theological divergences with Sunnism, as well as its experiences as a persecuted minority, contributed to its character as a rather politically non-assertive (although not necessarily pacifist) movement. In order to understand this rather surprising feature it is vital to know that Shi'ites still await the return of the *Mahdi*, or "Rightly Guided One". Similar to the messianic "Second Coming" of Christ, the *Mahdi*, too, is expected to herald an "age of justice and peace". Thus, *any* kind of political (and religious) authority during his "absence" could well be considered "illegitimate" - although somehow "necessary" for "keeping things going". Based on this reading of history, Iran's current political system of the "Guardianship of the Jurisprudent" (Persian: *velayat-e faqih*), too, has no legitimate claim of being the *only* acceptable form of government. Already Iran's unsuccessful Constitutional Revolution of 1906 – a unique contribution to modern political discourse and practice that tried to combine parliamentarism with Islamic notions of government - has demonstrated that several alternative options for an appropriate Islamic form of government – based on the requirements of the time – do exist.

Twelver Shi'ism, scholarship, and *ijtihad*

In early Shi'ism, the Prophet and the Twelve Imams were seen as the *sole* authentic source for interpreting Scripture and the therefrom derived sacred law, the *shari'ah*. The "absence"

of the Twelfth Imam created a “problem” in this regard: since direct access to him was henceforth not possible, other tools of interpretation had to be developed. For the Shi’ites, no Islamic state that catered for their religious needs existed, as Sunni held the reins of power. Sunni ulama decided what was “orthodox” and what not. Shi’ites had to figure out their own methodology of ascertaining and verifying the religious and legal requirements of the day. Their approach towards *ijtihad*, “independent legal reasoning”, was thus (and still is) somewhat more flexible.

Sunni jurisprudence, in turn, considers the “gate of *ijtihad*” closed after its four “legal schools” (*madhahib*) were fully established at some point of time in the Middle Ages. Although the fact of this “closure” has been questioned by some scholars, a certain lack of suppleness in Sunni jurisprudence has also been lamented by Sunnis themselves. In Shi’ite Islam, in turn, this gate was never closed as their leading ulama always enjoyed a degree of independence from the state that was unheard of elsewhere. This is mostly so due to a special “income tax” (*khums*) that is paid to them directly by the faithful, making senior clerics, such as Iraq’s “grand ayatollah” Sistani, largely independent from state influence. Independent religious and intellectual scholarship profited from that. Most Sunni ulama, in turn, receive their incomes from the state, a feature that might affect negatively their independence as scholars.

Inspirations from the past

Shi’ite Islam also enjoys an unbroken tradition of intellectual life and scholarship.

The era of the Shi’ite Buyid dynasty (10-11th century) was a period of a certain *rapprochement* between Sunnis and Shi’ites and is often called the “Renaissance of Islam”. Islamic intellectual life flourished and eminent men of letters, scientists and philosophers, among them Ibn Sina (d. 1037), known to the Latin West as Avicenna, contributed in various fields of religious as well as scientific knowledge. Moreover, there was an event with far-reaching consequences, which I refer to as the “birth hour of the Twelver Shi’ite educational system and hierarchical structure of its scholars”. This event was the foundation of the Shi’ite seminaries at Najaf in Iraq by the jurist Abu Ja‘far al-Tūsī (d. 1068). The replacement of the Buyids by the Seljuk Turks towards the middle of the 11th century ended this period of tolerance.

During the Mongol period (13-14th century), the Twelver Shi’ite seminaries in Iraq continued to flourish and contributed to the blending of philosophy and traditional religious scholarship into a coherent intellectual system. Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī (d. 1274), the famous philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, theologian, and physician, was perhaps the most eminent scholar of that period.

The Safavid era (1501-1722) saw Twelver Shi’ism established as the “religion of state” in Iran. It heralded also a revival of Islamic philosophical thought – known as “The School of Isfahan” or the “Ishrāqī (or Illuminationist) School”. The “Illuminationists” believed that true wisdom was the product of both reason and intuition. Using the philosophy of Aristotle and Avicenna, one could arrive at “partial truth”. This should then be complemented by mystical vision, “illumination”, to arrive at “full truth”. Shi’ite philosophy continued also in the subsequent periods in the 19th century. It is no coincidence that leading 20th-century Shi’ite intellectuals were different from each other in their political outlook. For example, Ayatollah Mutahharī (1920-1979) and Dr ‘Alī Sharī‘atī (1933-1977) had been thoroughly trained in

philosophy – Islamic and Classical Greek, Christian and Modern Western. Former Iranian President Khatami, too, was thoroughly trained in various philosophical traditions and had been involved in dialogue with civilizations other than Islam.

Perspectives

In Shi'ism, the works of Avicenna, as well as translations of Aristotle, Plato and other Greek philosophers remained always part of the curricula of learned institutions, whether those in Iraq or Iran. At least since the 20th century, Western philosophies, and even Christian theology, are taught in Shi'ite seminaries, whereas Egypt's Sunni Al-Azhar university has been reluctant in this regard. In the 1990s, several of Iran's leading seminaries – even some of those in Ghom (or Qom) – have further revised their curricula, which include now also the study of Western languages. In neighbouring Iraq, the restoration of peace, internal security, and stability – once achieved - could well result in a revival of the seminaries in Najaf and elsewhere. This revival should be open to the challenges and opportunities offered by modernity. As Iraq is a predominantly Arab country, a general revival of Islamic intellectual thought there could also have positive results in the Sunni Arab world at large.

Progressive Islamic thought and learning, based on the classical heritage, could thus also function as a stimulus for moderation. Such a stimulus might be of more relevance to the wider Muslim public than the uncritical introduction of ideas that are perceived as alien. The revival of the classical intellectual tradition in contemporary Islam is thus also of vital interest to Southeast Asia.

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