

Shi'ism

Today and Yesterday

by:

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(May Allah have Mercy on him)

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Transliteration key

أ- 'ā	ض - ḍ
آ - ā	ط - ṭ
ب - b	ظ - ṣ
ت - t	ع - 'a
ث - th	غ - gh
ج - j	ف - f
ح - ḥ	ق - q
خ - kh	ك - k
د - d	ل - l
ذ - dh	م - m
ر - r	ن - n
ز - z	و - w, ū
س - s	ه - h
ش - sh	ي - y, ī
ص - ṣ	

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Question

Sunnis who write critically about Shi'ism always tend to quote the classical literature of the Shī'ah for substantiation of their criticism. They fail to realise that Shi'ism has changed substantially and that the Shi'ism on the basis of which they criticise is different from the Shi'ism which they criticise. Such critiques of Shi'ism are therefore valueless and must be rejected as inherently flawed.

Answer

This is a very common misconception through which many people are either misled by Shī'ī missionaries or seek to deceive themselves. Before we deal with this objection we need to know where it comes from. Did the objector hear this from an 'Alim of the Shī'ah, or is it merely what he himself surmises? If the latter is the case, we can well discount the objection on grounds of the objector's obvious ignorance of Shi'ism. After all, what standards could an average lay person have to judge Shi'ism by? Is his knowledge of contemporary as well as classical Shi'ite literature wide enough to enable him to make the judgement that "Shi'ism has changed"? Does the reading of a selected bibliography (propagandist by nature thereupon) empower one to detect a change of this nature?

The lay public has only one "standard" whereby to judge Shi'ism, and that is the high profile image of the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic republic. It has to be admitted that on this point specifically there was a substantial shift from the classical Shī'ī political theory of state. Traditionally Shi'ism has consistently been apolitical, "world-rejecting" rather than "world-embracing", to use Arjomand's terminology; a position no doubt inspired by chiliastic hopes for the advent of the Mahdi. Khomeini's political ideas represent a major break with the political quietism that persisted right up to the sixties, as can be seen so clearly in the life of Ayatollah Burūjirdī, the last sole Marja'-e taqlīd who died in 1961. Most of the other jurisconsults of the Shī'ah did not agree with Khomeini's political ideas, notably Ayatollahs Khū'ī in Iraq and Sharī'atmadārī in Iran, and Maghniyah in Lebanon. The Revolutionary philosophy of Khomeini can therefore rightfully be considered an innovation in Shi'ism.

But does the introduction of an innovative political theory mean a complete about turn in all other aspects of Shi'ism? This is a totally unwarranted generalisation, one that only a person who very much wants to believe that Shi'ism has "changed" will be credulous enough to believe.

If it was from a Shī'ī 'Alim that the objector heard this statement, we would like to comment upon it firstly by saying that this 'Alim has been honest enough to do what so many of his colleagues refuse to do: to admit that classical Shi'ism includes elements that are unacceptable and inassimilable with Islam. Otherwise why would there be a need to change?

But on a more realistic note: did Shi'ism actually change? Before that question can be answered we would first need to define what constitutes change. If it is said that the Shī'ah once believed that the vast majority of the Ṣaḥābah became murtad after the death of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, but today

they no longer believe in that, or that they once believed that the Qur'ān was subjected to interpolation, but today they do not believe in it, would that be considered change?

We say it cannot be considered as such, since true change lies not in secondary matters like these, but in the foundations upon which they rest. When the Shī'ah “once upon a time” believed that the Ṣaḥābah رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ became murtad, it was not merely because they didn't like the Ṣaḥābah, but because of aḥādīth they claim to narrate from their Imāms that say that the Ṣaḥābah reverted to kufr after the death of the Messenger of Allah صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ. If they were “once upon a time” bold enough to state unequivocally their belief in the interpolation of the Qur'ān, it was in what they claimed to be the teachings of their Imāms that they found support for their belief. Therefore, when they recant today and claim to have “changed”, we ask them: why is that change limited to secondary matters? Why does it not extend all the way back to the legacy that is the foundation of these beliefs? If change is to be sincere, meaningful and effective, it must encompass not only secondary matters arising from the foundations, but the foundations themselves.

This is exactly why we maintain that any appearance of change on the side of the Shī'ah is done for the sake of expedience rather than out of sincerity. True change, which encompasses, as we have said, the foundations of the heterodox elements of Shi'ite belief, cannot be expected of the Shī'ah, since for them that would mean the rejection of a legacy which is in itself the essence of Shi'ism. (See the topic “[Nādir Shāh and the Najaf Conference](#)” in the article on *Taqrīb*)

A man like Khomeini, for example, who would be the obvious choice as a proponent of the “changed” Shi'ism, is as bound to this legacy as any other Shī'ī mujtahid in history. All of his works bear testimony to this, and his last testament reflects it very clearly.

Similarly, the fiqh of the Shī'ah according to which they perform their 'ibādah and regulate their private and public lives is firmly rooted in this legacy. Do we not find it strange that a Shī'ī who dutifully accepts the teachings of this legacy in the way he performs his Ṣalāh, professes to reject the teachings of the very same legacy when it comes to issues the Ahl al-Sunnah find objectionable? In this selective approach of the Shī'ah to their legacy, we again see proof of the fact that it is expedience, and nothing else, that leads them to create the impression with the Ahl al-Sunnah that they have “changed”.

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