Sunnism, Shī‘ism, Sufism, and Education: A Brief Overview

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Abstract

This chapter examines very briefly three trends within Islam: Sunnism, Shī‘ism, and Sufism. The main differences and similarities between the two dominant interpretations of Islam – Sunnism and Shī‘ism – are outlined through discussion of their historical origins, their diverging conceptions of religious and political authority, and their key theological trends. A discussion of Sufism follows, which casts a different light altogether on the possible interpretation of Islamic belief and practice. The development of education and educational institutions in Islam is also outlined, to demonstrate the varied connections between these trends of Islam and the broader area of Islamic education.

Keywords

Islamic education • Sunnism • Shī‘ism • Sufism • ṭarīqah • madrasah

Contents

Historical Origins of Sunnism and Shī‘ism ................................................. 2
Sunnism .................................................................................................. 4
Sunni Theology ..................................................................................... 5
Sunnism and Politics .............................................................................. 6
Shī‘ism .................................................................................................. 8
Shī‘ah Legal School .............................................................................. 8
Shī‘ism and Politics .............................................................................. 9
The Imamate ............................................................................................ 9
Twelver or Imāmī Shī‘ī Theology .......................................................... 10
Sufism .................................................................................................. 11
Historical Origins of Sunnism and Shi’ism

Historians often focus on the turbulent nature of early Islamic history, in particular on the period immediately after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad and during the first century of Islam. The Prophet died in 632 CE, after a remarkably successful career that brought together the divergent and warring tribes of Arabia. These tribes became allied to Medina, the seat of power at the time of the Prophet. Conversions to Islam included individuals and clans, and, sometimes, whole tribes. At the time of the Prophet’s death, the Medinan community was comprised largely of Meccan migrants (muhājirūn) and the Medinan Muslims (ansār): each of which retained their tribal identities in addition to being Muslim.

The Prophet’s death meant the community of Muslims – primarily situated in Medina, but also surrounding regions – were left without a leader. Even before the Prophet was buried, leading figures within the Medinan Muslim community met at the meeting place of Saqīfah in Medina to debate and discuss the issue of leadership, and to appoint a new leader. Key figures from the Meccan Muslims in Medina also joined the leadership debate. In this debate, the tribal identities of both groups (the Medinan Muslims as well as the Meccan Muslims from the Quraysh tribe) were on full display.

The Medinan Muslims had provided the support that was necessary for the 10 years (622–632 CE) of success that the Prophet achieved during his residence in Medina. They felt, therefore, that they should have a stronger say in the legacy of the Prophet and the political domain that he created. Conversely, the Meccan Muslims insisted that pre-Islamic tribal identities were still politically relevant in the eyes of the Arabs. In addition, the Meccan Muslims argued that the Prophet himself was from Mecca, and therefore a leader emerging from the Medinan tribes would not be politically expedient; the surrounding tribes, they argued, would only recognize a Meccan leader. The debates were heated and the Meccan participants, headed by senior figures such as ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Abū Bakr, prevailed. In the meeting, ‘Umar nominated Abū Bakr to be the leader (caliph) of the community. Abū Bakr had been a close adviser to the Prophet and was close to him throughout his prophetic career. ‘Umar’s nomination of Abū Bakr led to the acceptance of Abū Bakr by a significant number of participants but also rejection by some leaders of Medina. Despite all the difficulties in the meeting, Abū Bakr became the leader of the community, the Prophet’s first successor, who came to be known as the “First Rightly Guided Caliph.”
Despite the conflict, the appointment of a leader in Medina was supported by the majority of the community at the time, and this political leadership remained within the Meccan Muslim community. Before Abū Bakr died (in 634 CE) he nominated another Meccan Muslim, ‘Umar, to be the leader of the community. In turn, just before his death, ‘Umar nominated six people (all of whom were Meccans), one of whom was potentially to succeed him. One of these was ‘Uthmān, who subsequently became the leader after ‘Umar’s death. ‘Alī became the fourth caliph after a turbulent ending to ‘Uthmān’s caliphate, which resulted in ‘Uthmān’s assassination. Following the assassination, divisions within the Muslim community increased significantly: namely, a split between those who were pro-‘Uthmān and those who opposed him. Although ‘Alī remained the leader for 4–5 years, his rule was marred by conflicts and wars between various camps in the Muslim community. ‘Alī himself eventually faced a violent death at the hands of his opponents.

The first century of Islam can be described as fluid in nature, and following these events as well as heated debates on the nature of religious and political authority in early Islam, it took roughly 200 years for the basic ideas of Sunnism and Shi‘ism to develop into what they are today. In relation to early theological questions, one of the earliest to arise was how to define a Muslim believer, as opposed to a hypocrite (munāfiq). Questions were asked about the limits of tolerance as far as the definition of a Muslim and a person’s key beliefs were concerned. The distinction between a Muslim and non-Muslim and a believer and unbeliever was also debated, and ideas in relation to these issues were refined. Whereas debates such as these unfolded in the first century, the second and third centuries of Islam were characterized by the emergence of distinct Sunnī and Shi‘ah identities.

Adherents to Sunnism asserted the importance of broad consensus in the community and placed their faith in the community’s guidance in relation to political questions. Put simply, they emphasized that authority should be vested in the community. For Sunnis, part of Muslim identity was the degree to which they followed the example of the Prophet: that is, his sunnah. As long as a Muslim followed the sunnah of the Prophet and the book of God (the Qur’ān), then he or she was considered to be authentically connected to Sunnī Islam, at least in its key aspects. A Sunnī Muslim, therefore, accepts that political authority is vested in the community, and that the consensus of the community is the guiding principle for understanding and following the sunnah and the Qur’ān.

The Shi‘ah, however, adopted a different view: the Prophet’s spiritual (alongside his political) authority needed to be maintained in the postprophetic context. The Shi‘ah came to believe that this spiritual authority could solely be passed down through the Prophet’s descendants. The hereditary line, according to the Shi‘ah, continued from the Prophet to his son-in-law, ‘Alī, and then to ‘Alī’s children. Crucially, for the Shi‘ah, postprophetic leadership was outlined by the Prophet himself, and, accordingly, ‘Alī was expected to be the Prophet’s rightful successor.

A number of statements are drawn on by the Shi‘ah to support this position. In one hadīth, for example, the Shi‘ah report that the Prophet said, “‘Alī is from me and I am from ‘Alī” (Momen 1985, p. 17). They also identified a range of other sayings that have been attributed to the Prophet on this question. The Shi‘ah also refer to an event that, according to them, occurred in Ghadir Khumm (located between Mecca and
Medina) in 632 CE, just before the Prophet died. According to the report, the Prophet declared he was leaving two very important things that together would prevent the Muslim community from going astray: the Qurʾān—the Book of God—and ‘itrah—the Prophet’s family (understood as represented by ‘Ali). (See http://www.al-islam.org/ghadir/incident.htm for a range of views on this issue from a Shi‘ah point of view.)

Sunnism

The term “Sunni” comes from the Arabic term sunnah. “Sunnah” refers to “the normative practice of the Prophet, as in the phrase ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā’ah, the people of the sunnah and the community [or collectivity]” (Berkey 2003, pp. 142–143). Sunnī Islam is the dominant expression of Islam, and it is currently followed by approximately 80–85% of Muslims around the world (Mathewson Denny 2009). In the early centuries, Sunnī Islam developed its own legal and theological schools and a specific political theory (ibid.). As such, its difference from Shi‘ism is twofold: the distinction between Sunnī and Shi‘ī Islam “rests in the first place upon different memories of what occurred in the earliest years of Islam, and second on radically different views of the nature and locus of religious authority” (Berkey 2003, p. 142).

For Sunnīs, the central idea is “that the community as a whole had got things right, that at least in broad outlines it was following the will of God” (ibid.). This is epitomized in the famous statement attributed to the Prophet: “My community will never agree upon an error” (ibid.). The emphasis on community and communal consensus lent itself to the development of jurisprudence as a way of managing this approach. That is to say, alongside the development of Sunnism emerged the legal system of sharī‘ah: “the privileging of the consensus of the community brings us to the central question of the law, and of the formation of a science of jurisprudence” (ibid., p. 143). In relation to this, Berkey (ibid., p. 146) argues:

The formation of Islamic law constituted a critical step in the consolidation of a unifying if not entirely uniform Muslim identity, a means for delineating what it meant to be a Muslim while at the same time accommodating the growing diversity of outlook and practice within the Muslim community.

Overall, there are four sources or principles (uṣūl) of Islamic law according to Sunnism. The first is the Qurʾān, Islam’s primary text. The second is the sunnah, the normative behavior of the Prophet, which culminated in six canonized hadith collections. The third source is qiyās (analogical reasoning), a method of legal interpretation to be used “where no clear, explicit, revealed text or general consensus existed” (Esposito 2011, p. 83). The fourth source is ijmā‘ (the consensus of the community). While the idea of community was, in the first instance, tied to the whole Sunnī community, over time it was redefined “in a more restricted sense as the community of legal scholars or religious authorities who act on behalf of and guide the entire Muslim community” (ibid., p. 83).
There are four schools of law (madhāhib; singular madhhab) that developed as extensions of Sunnī legal thought. Each is named after a leading figure of the school, but they are ultimately the culmination of many legal scholars’ work. The schools consolidated by the tenth century CE.

The independent development of jurisprudence first took shape under the Umayyad dynasty. Under the ‘Abbāṣīds, legal science was developed in a more systematic way. In particular, this involved the development of hermeneutical concepts such as maslaḥah, the derivation and application of a juridical ruling that is in the public interest; qiyās, the use of analogy; ijtihād, independent reasoning; and istiḥsān, the preference for a ruling that a jurist deems most appropriate under the circumstances. As the work of the jurists (fuqahā) became increasingly systematic, different schools of thought began to unfold (Takim 2003). In the early years, development of the various legal schools was tied to geographic place, and, as such, they were influenced by local particularities (ibid.).

The Mālikī school, for example, is attributed to Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), and was based in Medina. This school of law put a strong emphasis on the practices of the people of Medina. This is based on the idea that these practices were largely based on those of the Prophet himself as he spent the last ten years of his life there. Today, this school is dominant in North, Central, and West Africa.

The Ḥanafī school is attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767), and was based in Kūfah. Rather than just developing legal points or rulings according to the traditions of the Prophet, the Ḥanafī school emphasized reason to some extent in the development of jurisprudence (Takim 2003). Today, this school is dominant in the Arab Middle East and South Asia.

The Shāfi‘ī school is attributed to Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 205/820). For Shāfi‘ī, jurisprudence must be based on the Book of God and the sunnah of the Prophet. It is through the ḥadīth we must get a sense of what the sunnah of the Prophet was, he argued. Shāfi‘ī’s approach fundamentally impacted the subsequent development of Sunnī jurisprudence. Today, this school is dominant in East Africa, southern Arabia, and Southeast Asia.

The Ḥanbalī school is attributed to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). According to this school, the traditions of the prophet are fundamentally superior to any form of human reasoning in relation to how law is derived. Today, this school is dominant in Saudi Arabia (Esposito 2011, p. 85).

**Sunnī Theology**

Among Muslims, a range of theological debates began in the very first century of Islam. These intensified over the course of the second and third centuries.

For Sunnī Muslims, the most important theological school is that of Ashʿarīs, associated with the theologian Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Ismā‘īl al-Ashʿarī (d. 331/942). Al-Ashʿarī was initially associated with the most influential theological school of the third century of Islam — the Muʿtazilah — which adopted a strong rationalist position on theological matters. However, he came to reject and criticize many of the positions of the Muʿtazilah. Although al-Ashʿarī did not completely disregard the
use of reason in theological matters, he adopted some of the positions held by the Mu'tazilah’s opponents, who were strongly literalist. In that sense, al-Ash'arī can be seen as following a middle position between the strong rationalist and literalist trends in theological thinking at the time. Gradually, the theological ideas adopted by this middle position came to be accepted as part of the most influential Sunnī theological thought. (Saeed 2006, pp. 67–69).

Some of the important theological ideas of the Ash’arīs include:

- The first duty of a human being is to know God. Although it is possible to know God through reason, the obligation to know comes through revelation, which is therefore superior to reason.
- There is nothing like God in creation. In describing God, we should primarily use those attributes of God that are mentioned in the Qur’an. The attributes of power, knowledge, life, will, hearing, speech, and sight subsist in God eternally and are inherent in God’s Essence.
- The Qur’an is the immutable, eternal, and uncreated word of God.
- Sinful acts do not have a bearing on the faith of a Muslim. This is essentially a rejection of the Mu'tazilī position that committing a grave sin may lead to a Muslim’s loss of faith.
- It is possible to see God in the next life in a manner that is appropriate, which may not be the way we see in this world.
- Human beings do not possess the power to originate or complete an act; that power belongs to God alone. However, they have the ability to freely choose between right and wrong. This means they are responsible for their choices (Saeed 2006, pp. 67–69).

The second most important school of theology for Sunnīs is the Maturīdīs. While there are differences between them and the Ash’arīs, the similarities far outweigh their differences. These two schools of theology remain dominant to this day in Sunnī Islam.

**Sunnism and Politics**

Sunnism forms around the notion of communal access to God. This is exemplified in Abū Bakr’s famous statement: “Muslims! If any of you have worshipped Muḥammad, let me tell you that Muḥammad is dead. But if you worship God, then know that God is living and will never die!” (Statement attributed to Abū Bakr.) (Esposito 2011, p. 35). In this context, the caliphate can be seen, at least retrospectively, as a Sunnī form of governance that “established the pattern for the organisation and administration for the Islamic state” (ibid., p. 36). Ultimately, for the Sunnīs, the caliphate is the defining political institution of the Islamic community (Nasr 1966, p. 152). As Nasr (ibid., pp. 152–153) explains, the role of the caliphate is not to interpret “the Divine Law and religious matters in general, but to administer the Law and act as judged in accordance with this Law”. Nasr (ibid., p. 152) states:
As there is only one community (ummah) and one Divine Law or sharīʿah, so is there ideally one caliph who rules over the community and whose duty it is to protect the community and administer the sharīʿah in conformity with the view of the ‘ulama’.

Sunnīs consider the early Islamic period of the Rāshidūn caliphs (the first four caliphs, 632–661 CE) to be the proper manifestation of political authority. For Sunnīs, the Prophet did not provide clear instruction as to how his successors should be appointed after his death. Following the conventions of the time and after heated discussion, the elders of the Muslim community in Medina decided to choose Abū Bakr (d. 634), one of the closest advisors and followers of the Prophet, as their leader after the death of the Prophet. Abu Bakr did not enter into dialogue with the community when he nominated ‘Umar (d. 644) as his successor. However, ‘Umar adopted a very different method. He nominated six key figures of the Muslim community, all from Mecca, and asked them to make a decision among themselves about who should be the leader of the community after his death. Uthmān, the third caliph, who was chosen as a result of these discussions, was assassinated in 656 and therefore did not have any say in who should be his successor. At the time of his death, the community was divided between those who supported Uthmān and those who did not. Relying largely on those who did not support the caliph Uthmān, Ali (d. 661) became the fourth political leader of the Muslim community. Thus, there was no common pattern for appointing the leader of the community among the Rāshidūn caliphs.

After this time, the Umayyads in Damascus consolidated their power and a period of dynastic rule began. Almost a century later, the ‘Abbāṣīds were successful in a revolution that led to the consolidation of their power in Baghdad for several centuries.

Sunnī political theorists examined how power was transferred from one ruler to another in these early centuries of Islam and concluded that the ruler of the Muslims should come from the tribe of Quraysh. This is often supported by a tradition attributed to the Prophet. However, it is more likely that these theorists were, in fact, looking at what had occurred. The Rāshidūn caliphs, as well as the Umayyads and the ‘Abbāṣīds, were all from Mecca and from the tribe of Quraysh. So it made sense to argue that legitimate rulers should come from this tribe.

Sunnī political theory also adopted ideas about the central place of the sharīʿah in matters of governance. Based on this theory, (a) as long as the ruler implemented the sharīʿah, the legitimacy of the ruler could not be questioned, and (b) even if the ruler committed major sins, he was still a Muslim, and Muslims should not rebel against their ruler unless he becomes an apostate. Sunnī political theory also accepted the idea that at certain times and contexts the caliphs might not have effective power. Instead, those such as military figures who were powerful enough to take over the actual functioning of the state could become de facto rulers. Thus, there could be a caliph who held symbolic power and a sultan with effective power, ruling at the same time. This dynamic became very obvious in the later part of the ‘Abbāṣīd period, and Sunnī political theory adapted to this situation.
In sum, Sunnī theorists looked at the political reality in the early centuries of Islam, and tried to accommodate that in their theories of political leadership. In a sense, then, it could be argued that Sunnī political theory is reasonably flexible and different kinds of arrangements may be considered legitimate as the community adopts new ideas and systems in the area of governance.

**Shī‘ism**

There are many differences between the Shī‘ah and Sunnī approaches to Islam. As noted above, the original schismatic event occurred with the death of the Prophet:

The Shī‘ah are those who believe that the right of succession to the Prophet belongs solely to his family and who follow the family of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt), as their source of inspiration and guidance for the understanding of the Qur’ānic revelation brought by the prophet. (Nasr 1966, p. 153)

There are three different trends within Shī‘ism: Twelver Shī‘ism (also known as Imāmī or Ithnā’ Asharī), Sevenner Shī‘ism (also known as Ismā‘īlīs), and Fiver Shī‘ism (also known as Zaydīs). The majority of the Shī‘ah follow Twelver Shī‘ism. Twelver Shī‘ism is based on the belief that:

The spiritual-political leadership of the community (the Imamate) was passed down through the male descendants until the twelfth Imam, born in 868, who is believed to be the Mahdī alive but in hiding until Allah determines the appropriate time for his return to bring peace and justice to the world. (Newman 2009)

Today, Twelver Shī‘ism is most prominent in Iran (where they comprise roughly 90% of Iran’s population), followed by Iraq, Lebanon, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Ismā‘īlīs are the second largest of the present-day Shī‘i groups. They believe that “Ismā‘īl, the eldest son of the sixth Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765 CE), did not die—as many Twelvers believe—but went into hiding and had a son, Muḥammad, who also went into hiding or died” (ibid.). The Zaydī Shī‘ah gave allegiance to Zayd, son of the fifth Imām, and followed a living Imām until recently (Newman 2009). Zaydīs comprise a significant portion of the Muslims in Yemen, and there are also Zaydīs in Saudi Arabia (ibid.).

**Shī‘ah Legal School**

The Shī‘ah school of law – in particular that of Twelver Imām Shī‘ism – is the Ja‘farī school. Like the Sunnīs, the Shī‘ah accept the Qur‘ān and sunnah of the Prophet as the fundamental textual sources (Esposito 2011, p. 85). However, the Shī‘ah have their own collections of traditions that “include not only the Sunnah of the Prophet but also that of ‘Alī and the Imāms” (ibid.). The Shī‘ah “reject analogy and consensus as legal sources, since they regard the Imām as the supreme legal interpreter and
authority” (ibid.). In the absence of an Imām, mujtahids (legal scholars) have the right to guide the community until the return of the Mahdī. The Shi‘ah have historically maintained a strong emphasis on ijtihād, compared to the de-emphasis of this concept among Sunnīs in the later centuries of Islam (ibid.).

Shi‘ism and Politics

The concept of the Imām in Shi‘ism has a very specific meaning: the “person who is the real ruler of the community and especially the inheritor of the esoteric teachings of the prophet” (Nasr 1966, p. 162). The Imām is said to be infallible, and to possess “the quality of inerrancy (‘ismah), in spiritual and religious matters” (ibid.). Historically, the Twelve Imāms of Shi‘ism are as follows: 1. ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib; 2. ‘Alī’s elder son, Imām Ḥasan; 3. ‘Alī’s younger son, Imām Ḥusayn; 4. Imām Ḥusayn’s son, Zayn al-‘Abidīn; 5. Son of Zayn al-‘Abidīn, Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir; 6. Son of al-Bāqir, Imām Ja’far al-Ṣādiq; 7. Son of al-Ṣādiq, Imām Musā al-Kāẓim; 8. Son of al-Kāẓim, Imām ‘Alī al-Riḍā; 9. Son of al-Riḍā, Imām Muḥammad al-Taqī; 10. Son of al-Taqī, Imām ‘Alī al-Naqī; 11. Son of al-Naqī, Imām Ḥasan al-‘Askarī; 12. Son of al-‘Askarī, Imām Muḥammad al-Mahdī. The Imām is “one who carries the ‘Muhammadan Light’ (al-nūr al-muḥammadī)” (ibid.), although the idea of prophetic light is found in both Shi‘ism and Sufism.

According to the Twelver Shi‘ah, the Twelfth Imām is in Occultation, and while he cannot be seen, he remains the primary authority that structures their faith. Al-Mahdī (otherwise known as “The Hidden Imām”) is present yet unseen, but crucially his return is expected: “before the end of time he will appear again on earth to bring equity and justice and to fill it with peace after it has been torn by war and injustice” (ibid., p. 166).

The Imamate

Minority Shi‘i groups (namely the Zaydīs and the Ismā‘īlīs) have differing theories about the Imamate. However, this section focuses on the majority Twelver Shi‘ah position.

The Twelver Shi‘i conception of the Imamate is based on several ideas. Firstly, the Imām has the divine right to be the leader of the community, because, as mentioned, he embodies both spiritual and political authority. This is unlike the Sunnī approach, which often makes a clear distinction between the two.

Secondly, the Imāms are protected by God from error and sin: a protection they share with the Prophet. This is based on the concept that humanity is in perpetual need of a divinely guided leader and interpreter of the faith. The difference between the role of the prophet and the role of the Imām, then, is that the former brings forth divine books of scripture, whereas the latter interpret such revelation and lead the community accordingly. Thus, a person can be both prophet and Imām, while an Imām may not necessarily be a prophet (Tabataba’i 1989, pp. 185–186).
Thirdly, the question of how the Shi‘ah should relate to the existing political authority while the Twelfth Imām is in Occultation is one of critical importance. While, Shi‘i jurists represent the Twelfth Imām in interpreting the law, they do not represent him in the political arena (Amini 2004). Rather, during the Occultation, the Shi‘ah have had to relate to existing political authorities that do not represent their beliefs. The question has therefore arisen: should Shi‘ah cooperate with existing authorities or reject them as interlopers? Different views have been expressed, with some scholars arguing that some form of cooperation is necessary, while others deny the importance of such cooperation (Lambton 1981, p. 252).

The authority of a jurist is in close connection with the authority of the Imām; however, it is not without limits. The limitations in theory include implementation of the Qur’anic hudūd punishments, making Friday prayers obligatory, interpretation of legal texts and the commandment of jihād (Halm et al. 2004, p. 57). While in theory these can only be enacted by the Imām, Shi‘i scholars have over several centuries removed some of these limitations.

**Twelver or Imāmi Shi‘i Theology**

The three main groups within Shi‘ism differ in their theological positions. The Twelvers and Zaydīs are heavily influenced by Mu‘tazilī theology. Their respective theological positions may thus be considered extensions of the Mu‘tazilah. The Ismā‘īlīs differ considerably, predominantly emphasizing esoteric interpretation (Saeed 2006, p. 71).

The systematic elaboration of Imāmi beliefs is attributed to the work of a number of scholars, such as Ibn-Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991), al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), al-Sharīf al-Murtadhā (d. 355/1044), and al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067). Twelver doctrinal belief was first fully elaborated in the Risalah (Epistle), composed by Ibn-Bābawayh (Watt 1998, pp. 122–124). Key Twelver theological positions include:

- Insistence on God’s unity and acceptance of a distinction between the essential and active attributes of God (ṣifāt al-dhāt, and ṣifāt al-fi‘l). The active attributes originate in time: for example, God cannot be Provider (rizq) until there is a creature for which he makes provision (rizq) (Saeed 2006, p. 71).
- Interpretation of anthropomorphic terms, such as “face” and “hand,” is applied metaphorically, rather than literally, to God (ibid.).
- Acceptance of common eschatological beliefs, although some are interpreted metaphorically (ibid.).
- Acceptance of the idea of the createdness of the Qur‘ān.

The Twelvers come very close to Mu‘tazilī positions in theology. However, much like Sunnīs, there have been two contrary tendencies in Twelver Shi‘ism: one that uses reason and engages in kalām (Speculative theology), and the other that mostly restricts itself to the Qur‘ān and traditions and criticizes the use of reason (Watt 1985).
Sufism

Sufism (known as Islamic mysticism) is one way of understanding and approaching God in Islam. It makes use of “dormant” intuitive and emotional spiritual faculties through guided training. One definition of Sufism, therefore, is “embracing those tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man” (Trimingham 1988, p. 1). Training in Sufism is known as “traveling the path.” Sufism reacts against the rationalization of Islam in law and theology, focusing instead on spiritual freedom that allows a person’s intrinsic intuitive spiritual senses their full scope (ibid., p. 2).

Islamic asceticism began to develop during the first century of Islam and continued into the second century. Gradually this movement that began with an emphasis on renunciation developed into what we may call Sufism (Smith 1995, p. 158).

Key ideas and practices of early Sufism include rejection of the world in the form of an abandonment of the transient pleasures of this life, and the desire for eternal bliss; the sacrifice of all material goods, exercise of patience and resignation to the will of God, and the glad endurance of affliction in this life, for the sake of attaining God in the hereafter (ibid., p. 166); wearing of patched robe; excessive fasting; spending extensive time in prayer, recitation of the Qur’an and remembrance of God (ibid., pp.161–2)

The Ṣūfī Path: The ultimate goal of a Ṣūfī is ‘union with God’ through a variety of spiritual exercises. To arrive at this goal a Ṣūfī must follow the ‘path’, which is referred to as Ṭarīqah. The path has various stages of spiritual attainment, and to move through these stages, a Ṣūfī must start under the guidance of an experienced Ṣūfī master. While the descriptions of or terms used for these stages may differ among Ṣūfīs, they include repentance, watchfulness, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust, and acceptance (Saeed 2006, p. 76).

Development of Ṣūfī Orders: Sufism developed ways of purification by establishing religious orders, based on the idea of a master–disciple relationship (Trimingham 1988, p. 3). A disciple accepted the authority and guidance of a master who had traveled through all the stages of the Ṣūfī path. Initially, the ṭarīqah referred to a gradual and practical method of contemplative and soul-releasing mysticism, which took a disciple through a succession of maqāmāt (stages) in order to experience Divine Reality. Later, ṭarīqah also came to refer to particular Ṣūfī groups with distinct initiation rites and ritual practices. (ibid., p. 10).

Although initially poorly received by the ‘ulamā’, Sufism came to be recognized as legitimate by the fifth/eleventh century, mostly due to the activities of well-respected Muslim scholars who were also Ṣūfīs, most notably Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), a respected theologian who was appointed as head professor at the Niẓāmiyyah college in Baghdad (ibid.).

By the seventh/thirteenth century, ṭarīqah (as Ṣūfī orders) became associated with a single master, whose teachings, mystical exercises, and rules of life were handed down through a silsilah (chain) of spiritual guides (ibid., p. 10; Nasr 1991, p. 3). These orders include the Qādiriyah order, named after Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (d.561/1166) from northern Iran; the Shādhiliyyah order, named after
Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhīfī (d.656/1258); and the Naqshbandiyyah order, named after Khwājah Bahā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad Naqshband (d.791/1389). Apart from these, there are also many other ṣūfī orders. Each order has its own ceremonies, activities, practices and beliefs. Many orders emphasise the need to move along the spiritual path by adhering to religious law, while some do not.

Sufism is still an important part of the Islamic experience in modern times, and has even spread to the West. In the Muslim world, Sufism has been ferociously denounced by puritanical groups such as the Salafīs, who view it as an unacceptable innovation. However, Sufism has also spurred revivalist movements in the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and Africa (Hunwick 1996).

Education

Sunnī Education

From the emergence of distinct schools of thought came the disciplines of Qur’ān and hadīth studies, law, theology, philosophy, science, and Arabic linguistics and literature. Eventually educational institutions were developed to disseminate teaching in each discipline. (For further details, see Saeed 2006, pp. 10–12) and the references cited below are those that are listed there.)

By the fifth/eleventh century, the madrasah emerged as the key institution of Islamic learning, first established “in the eastern part of the Islamic world” (Leiser 1986). Through the establishment of the madrasah, the ‘ulamā’ became the transmitters of formal Islamic knowledge, and formed an intellectual elite that came to penetrate all parts of the Muslim world (Robinson 1996, p. 219).

During this time madrasahs were established in Iraq and Syria. By the end of the sixth/twelfth century, at least 30 madrasahs existed in Damascus and Cairo (Robinson 1996, p. 221). Over time, a network of these institutions had spread throughout the Muslim world (Rahman 1979, p. 148). Al-Azhar, the famous mosque-school, was founded in Cairo in 361/972 by the Fatimids (297–567/909–1171), a North African Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ah dynasty. It later became a Sunnī institution, and the single greatest traditional Islamic seminary in the Sunnī world.

In madrasahs, as well as in other study circles, learned shaykhs taught legal and theological subjects, in addition to medicine, poetry, mathematics, natural sciences, belles-lettres, and Hellenistic “rational” sciences (Chamberlain 1994, pp. 83–85). Depending on the particular school, some controversial fields like logic and philosophy were avoided, although they were accepted in some. The growth and development of the madrasah system continued and came to achieve its greatest heights during the Ottoman Empire:

From the organizational point of view, the madrasa system reached its highest point in the Ottoman Empire where madrasas were systematically instituted, endowed and maintained . . . with remarkable administrative skill and efficiency. The ‘ulamā’ were organized in a hierarchy and became almost a caste in the Ottoman society. These traditional seats of
learning are still functioning all over the Muslim world outside Turkey. (Rahman 1979, p. 184)

In madrasahs, common texts were often used across regions. For example, the ‘ulamā’ in Timbuktu used the same books as their counterparts in Morocco and Egypt. The openness to rational sciences on the part of some Sunnī and Shi‘ī Muslims also led to common texts between their ‘ulamā’ (Robinson 1996, p. 12). A system of certification (ijāzah) was used by such scholars to enable their students to pass on their bodies of knowledge (Chamberlain 1994, p. 880). There were several different types of these, and they were often verbal rather than written: “what was granted was as much an emblem of a bond to a shaykh as a certificate with a fixed value in social relations” (ibid., p. 890) (For more detailed discussion on ijāzah see chapter 7.).

Shi‘ah Education

The religious elite of the Shi‘ah “gain their authority primarily through their learning. Religious knowledge is the quality that distinguishes” religious leaders from the rest of the Shi‘ah community and gives them a special status (Gleave 2012, p. 5).

Knowledge is obtained by studying at one of the Shi‘ah seminaries, collectively referred to as the hawzah. The term hawzah comes from the Arabic root ḥ-w-z, which means to obtain, achieve, or receive, or as a noun, the district or precinct of knowledge (hawzah ‘ilmiyah). (Arabic: hawzah and hauzah, while from Persian it is usually transliterated as howzeh or howze. See Rasiah (2007, pp. 1–2).) Today, the main centers of hawzah are located in Iraq and Iran, both majority Shi‘ah countries. Their influence is widespread, and they educate Shi‘ah religious leaders from places as diverse as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, India, and Lebanon (ibid.).

The hawzah system has many unique features. It is extremely informal and flexible. Traditionally, there was no set curriculum, tuition fees, examinations, or particular qualifications obtained by students upon graduation. Students were allocated to a particular school or college (individually known as a hawzah or madrasah) overseen by an individual or group of religious leaders. Once a student reached the limit of their intellectual ability, they left the college to take on the role of a religious leader within the community. Only a few students would stay on to reach the apex of the institution and teach at the higher levels of the college (Gleave 2012).

Within this structure, students had considerable autonomy to pursue their own interests. There were some compulsory subjects, such as Arabic grammar and jurisprudence, but students could choose from many electives. Thus, the process of learning was not seen simply as gaining a qualification but as undertaking a process of spiritual discovery and growth. Students had “freedom to experiment with subjects and themes and to develop” their own area of specialization (ibid., pp. 5–6).

Today the hawzah curriculum is somewhat more structured. While the hawzah attempts to train students in each of the Islamic disciplines, its focus has been on
training in the sciences and principles of jurisprudence. Islamic sciences are classified into two divisions: the Qur’ān, ḥadīth and jurisprudence on the one hand, and logic (manṭiq), principles of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh), philosophy (falsafah), and speculative theology (kalām) on the other. Since the 1920s mystical tendencies within Shī‘ī thought have grown in the hawzah, but they still remain largely an extra-curricular endeavor (Rasiah 2007).

The formal curriculum involves mastery of particular religious texts, where students progress through three stages of study: introductory, intermediate, and advanced (Rasiah 2007, p. 161).

A number of different teaching methods are employed in the hawzah, including solitary or individual reading, group discussion, linguistic analysis of texts, and understanding textual structure and argument. Learning is often teacher-led, but peer learning also plays an important role well into the advanced levels of learning. Students are encouraged to voice questions or objections (ishkāl) in the classroom (ibid., pp. 177–179).

Şūfi Education

While the Sunnī ‘ulamā‘ often “flourished in cities and areas of state power, şūfīs reached all parts of the Muslim world, particularly remote areas where kinship and tribal organization were paramount” (Saeed 2006, p.12).

The early şūfi movement was concerned with experiential knowledge of God through the soul, cultivating an inner spiritual life, attaining inner knowledge (‘ilm al-bāṭin) (Karamustafa 2007, pp. 1–19), and disciplining and domesticating the self (ibid.). This journey was marked by various stations and corresponding spiritual states, but at this stage there was no consensus or systemization of this understanding (ibid.). Although most şūfī shaykhs were educated, Sufism led some of them to shun scholarly pursuits like fiqh, theological understanding, philosophy, and the use of human reason. Knowledge of the sharī‘ah was valued; however, it was seen as only the beginning of one’s spiritual journey. During this early period teaching was generally informal and took place in private venues of among small groups (ibid.).

From the third/ninth century, the “disciples of şūfī shaykhs were central to the transmission of mystical knowledge and became part of the shaykh’s chain of spiritual transmission (silsilah)”. After their initiation, “disciples swore an oath of allegiance, received a special cloak” (Saeed 2007, p.12), and were told a special protective prayer. Şūfī masters became spiritual guides for their students (şāhib or murīd), intimately involved in every aspect of their lives and developing intensely personal bonds. A characteristic of the relationship was the practice of taqlīd: imitation of the behavior of the master in both spiritual and mundane matters (Malamud 1994, p. 434). Training under the guidance or a şūfī master also meant that a şūfī novice became part of a spiritual chain that stretched back to the lifetime of the Prophet (ibid., p. 437).

By the fourth/tenth century specialized şūfī literature had begun to emerge with the aim of establishing Sufism as a legitimate “science” and highlighting its
superiority to other modes of piety. These texts detailed the history of the movement and the influence of key figures, and systemized some of Sufism’s key concepts. Sūfīs such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) compiled texts that quickly became authoritative expressions of Sūfī doctrine and practice (ibid., p. 429). The spread of specialized Sūfī literature also brought with it an interest in questions of pedagogy and training in the field, now recognized as a legitimate “science.”

Eventually the practice of master-disciple groups grew into communities that resided in particular places and carried out their teaching, training, and spiritual activities (Karamustafa 2007, pp. 430–436). By the fifth/eleventh century, Sūfīs began living together in what came to be known as khānqahs (communal residences established by private benefactors or donors) (Malamud 1994, p. 436).

From around the seventh/thirteenth century Sūfī orders were pivotal in transmitting mystical knowledge throughout the Muslim world (Humphreys et al.).

**Conclusion**

The main disagreements between Sunnism and Shi‘ism are not so much on the most basic and fundamentals of the religion but a number of other important areas, particularly in theology and politics. This has left its trace – among other areas – on the organization and administration of Islamic education.

In the Sunni areas, educational institutions developed to disseminate teaching and research in each discipline. The madrasah emerged as the key institution of Islamic learning. Through the establishment of the madrasah, the ‘ulamā’ became the transmitters of formal Islamic knowledge, and formed an intellectual elite that came to penetrate all parts of the Muslim world. Over time, a network of these institutions had spread throughout the Muslim world.

While Sunnism relies on the notion of caliphate as the legitimate institution for the governance of the Muslim society, Shi‘ism is intrinsically tied to the conception of the infallible Imām, who is conceived of as the spiritual guide and the only legitimate political leader. The Shi‘ah view the Prophet’s spiritual (alongside his political) authority was needed to be maintained in the postprophetic context. For them, spiritual authority could solely be passed down through the Prophet’s descendants.

The concept of the Imām in Shi‘ism means the person who is the ruler of the community and especially the inheritor of the esoteric teachings of the prophet. The religious elite of the Shi‘ah gain their authority primarily through their learning. Religious knowledge is the quality that distinguishes religious leaders from the laymen.

Knowledge is obtained by studying at one of the Shi‘ah seminaries (ḥawzah). Today, the main centers of learning are located in Iraq and Iran, both majority Shi‘ah countries. Within this structure, students had considerable autonomy to pursue their own interests, although there were some compulsory subjects. Today the hawzah curriculum is somewhat more structured. Learning is often teacher-led, but peer learning also plays an important role well into the advanced levels of learning.
The ascetic movement of the first two centuries of Islam was gradually combined with tendencies towards mysticism. The early ṣūfī movement was concerned with experiential knowledge of God through purification of the soul, cultivating an inner spiritual life, and attaining inner knowledge (‘ilm al-bāṭin). Knowledge of the shari‘ah was also valued, but seen as only the beginning of one’s spiritual journey.

Ṣufism developed ways of purification by establishing religious orders, based on the idea of a master-disciple relationship. This eventually grew into communities that resided in particular places and carried out their teaching. In due course, Sufism came to reach all parts of the Muslim world. Although during Sufism’s early period, teaching was generally informal and took place in private venues or among small groups, in later periods, instruction and guidance became highly structured in ṣūfī orders.

References


