

DIFFERENCES WITHIN ISLAM

(N.B. Some of the Arabic and other foreign words used below are spelt in various ways in English. For convenience most of these are italicised.)

Introduction

An earlier leaflet in this series, "What is Islam?", referred to the differences of belief, devotional practice and emphasis which exist within this great world religion. The world of Islam is not a monolithic structure with no room for divergences of opinion, interpretation or, in some cases, sharp dissent. In this respect the Islamic world has much in common with the Christian world. The subject is vast and complex but this leaflet attempts to give a very basic guide to the main differences, with some mention of certain traditions which are widespread among Muslims of this country.

The fundamental principles of Islam are accepted by all Muslims except those eg. the *Ahmadiyya* (see below) whose beliefs are regarded as too divergent to be regarded as authentic by the main traditions. Among the commonly held principles of all mainstream Muslims are the worship of *Allah*, the one true God, and recognition of a large number of prophets, including several Old Testament prophets and Jesus (whose divinity, however, they deny). But for all Muslims, *Muhammad* is the Seal of the Prophets, that is the most important and the last of the Prophets sent by God, as Muslims believe. They also believe that God revealed to *Muhammad* His definitive revelation, the Qur'an, through the angel Gabriel. Five main religious duties are also held in common, namely, bearing witness to the unity and oneness of *Allah* and the special status of *Muhammad*, daily public prayer, almsgiving, keeping of the fast during the Muslim month of *Ramadan* and the performance of the Mecca pilgrimage once in a lifetime.

The two main groups in Islam are the *Sunni* and the *Shi`a*. There are also tendencies which apply to some members of both groups eg. *Sufism* (see below).

SUNNI

This term indicates acceptance of the *Sunna* ie. the recorded utterances and actions of *Muhammad*. The vast majority of Muslims are *Sunni*. They acknowledge the first four Caliphs (in Arabic *Khalifa* means successor) the "rightly guided" Caliphs, as the leaders of the Muslim community after *Muhammad*. They also, for the most part, accept the subsequent

dynasties of Caliphs, eg, the *Umayyads* and *Abbasids*. The Caliphs, although protectors of *Sunni* Islam, were, in practice, political rather than spiritual leaders. In the last century or so of their imperial rule the Ottoman Sultans assumed the title of Caliph. Since the fall of the Ottoman dynasty, there has been no effective attempt to revive the office.

For the *Sunni* the sources of the *Shari`a* (Islamic law) are the *Qur'an*, the *Hadith* (those utterances and actions of *Muhammad* which are recorded by tradition) as well as the principles of *Ijma* (consensus) and, particularly among the *Shafi`i*, *Qiyas* (analogy). But there are differences of interpretation between four main legal schools, the *Hanafis*, *Hanbalis*, *Malikis* and *Shafi`is*.

There are also differences of devotional practice. Such differences may be noted in Muslim communities world wide but as the majority of Muslims in Britain are of South Asian origin, it seems appropriate to list below some of the different tendencies to be found in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Barelwis

This group is named after *Bareilly*, the home town in India of *Maulana Ahmad Raza Khan* (1856-1921) whose teachings were inspired by *Qadiri Sufi* (see below) mysticism and *Hanafi* legal precepts. The *Barelwis* have a particular devotion to *Muhammad* believing that the eternal divine light can be discerned in him. Consequently the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid al-Nabi*) on the 12th day of the Muslim month of *Rabi`al-Awwal* is a major celebration for them. They have a deep respect for *Sayyids* (descendants of Muhammad) and for *Pirs* (spiritual masters).

Deobandis

Deoband is an Indian town where a training college for Muslim religious students was founded in 1857. There is great emphasis on the *Qur'an*, the *Hadith* and *Hanafi* legal traditions. Like the followers of other 'purist' Islamic movements, the *Deobandis* seek to eliminate any tradition or practice which they do not regard as authentic. This can lead to tension with the *Barelwis* and the two groups often patronise different mosques. Like many Muslims of South Asian origins the *Deobandis* are inspired by *Sufism* but they do not recognise the intercession of *Pirs*.

The *Tablighi Jamaat* movement is in the *Deobandi* tradition but has a notably popular and missionary character.

Jamaat—Islami

This movement, founded in 1941 in India by *Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi*, has a political role in Pakistan. It is an Islamist (see below) movement, advocating adherence to what it sees as original Muslim teaching, rejection of secular influences and, in Pakistan, the establishment of an Islamic state. Their followers in Britain do not actively promote the creation of such a state here.

Ahl-l-Hadith

This group, the *name* of which means in Arabic 'people of the *Hadith* ' recognises only the *Qur'an* and the oldest *Hadith* (see above) traditions.

SHI'A

Some ten percent of Muslims are *Shi`a* (followers of *Ali*). They do not recognise the *Sunni* line of Caliphs and follow a line of *Imams* originating with *Ali*, *Muhammad's* cousin and son-in-law, whom the *Sunni* however, also recognise as their fourth Caliph. (The role of *Imam* has a crucial spiritual significance for the *Shi`a*, whereas for the *Sunni*, an *Imam* is simply a Mosque prayer leader.) The *Shi`a* are divided into different communities depending on how many and which *Imams* are accepted as members of the original line, all of whom, unlike some of the *Sunni* Caliphs, are considered to be related through *Ali* to *Muhammad*. Unlike the *Sunni* Caliphs, the *Shi`a Imams*, at any rate those who succeeded *Ali* and his sons, *Hasan* and *Husayn*, are not remembered particularly as political leaders but are all revered as spiritual leaders selected by *Allah* to interpret the *Qur'an* and to provide guidance.

The two main *Shi`a* groups are the Twelvers who recognise twelve *Imams* and the *Ismailis* or *Seveners* who recognise only seven.

Twelvers.

Since the sixteenth century the Twelver *Shi`a* have been in a majority in Iran where their faith is the official religion. They claim to be the largest religious group in Iraq where some of their major pilgrimage shrines are situated. They also have important communities in the Lebanon and in the sub-continent.

The commemoration of *Imam Husayn's* martyrdom at the battle of *Karbala* on the tenth day (*Ashura*) of the Muslim month of *Muharram* is a major day of mourning. All of the first eleven *Imams* met with a violent death and are celebrated as martyrs. Although the Twelvers, like other *Shi`a*, share with the *Sunni* the essential tenets of Islam, the climate of *Sh`ia* devotion is distinctive. On some legal questions, such as marriage, the Twelvers differ from the *Sunni*

The twelfth *Imam*, *Muhammad al-Qa`im* disappeared in 873 and is regarded as being still alive but in occultation or hiding. His reappearance, at *Allah's* command, is awaited. In the meantime the religious leadership of the Twelver *Shi`as* has greater leeway than the *Sunni* authorities in interpreting religious law. In Iran, where a religious republic was established in 1979, the Twelver jurists (the *Ayatullahs*) have a major role in government.

The Ismailis or Seveners.

The *Ismailis* share with the Twelvers the identity of the first six *Imams* descending from *Ali* but differ as to the succession between two of the sons of the sixth *Imam*.

Ismaili theology was influenced by certain Greek philosophical theories and by an interpretation of history based on the number seven. They hold that the *Qur'an* has both an inner and

an outer interpretation, Some *Ismailis* believe that their contemporary leaders are living Imams in the *Shi`a* terminology, There are a number of Ismaili groups perhaps the best known of which are the *Nizaris* whose spiritual leader is the *Aga Khan*.

CATEGORIES WHICH MAY APPLY TO EITHER *SUNNI* OR *SHI`A* MUSLIMS

Sufism

Sufism is Islamic mysticism and although certain *Sufi* manifestations may be attractive to Christians, the term cannot be applied to the mystical traditions of Christianity or of any other religion. *Sufism* is based on both the outer legal and regulatory aspects of Islam (eg. the *Shari`a*) and on inner spiritual elements. There are many worldwide and local *Sunni Sufi* orders eg. the *Naqshabandi* and the *Qadiri*. *Shi`a Sufi* orders also exist but are less prominent than those of the *Sunni*.

In large areas of the world, *Sufi* missionaries have been the determined and effective agents of the spread of Islam. Establishment Muslim leaders have sometimes been suspicious of *Sufis*, though in other situations the two have cooperated closely.

The *Sufi* orders trace their origins back through successions of spiritual guides.

Islamism.

This is a modern academic term for what is popularly known as Islamic fundamentalism the latter word being a term deriving from certain forms of Protestant Christianity. There are various layers of meaning.

Islamism is sometimes used to describe all Islamic movements, whether politically active or not, which lay great stress on returning to what they identify as the original sources of Islam and the removal of elements seen as based on superstition or secular influences.

But it is perhaps more usefully employed to apply to groups whether *Sunni* or *Shi`a*, which aspire to found a political system based on Islamic religious law, however interpreted. Examples of states which already apply such systems are Saudi Arabia (*Sunni*) and Iran (*Shi`a*). Movements working for the establishment of Islamic states include the *Jamaat-i-Islamia* in Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Most Islamists do not employ violent methods but as we know from the Media, there are many organisations or elements of organisations which do have recourse to violent means; happily they are, in most instances, supported by only a small minority of Muslims, the majority of whom believe that Islam is essentially a religion of peace.

Cultural and national differences

Islam, like Christianity, can accommodate many varieties of tradition and rituals which have more to do with the different cultures of particular Muslim communities than with religious essentials. Among the most important cultural differences is of course language, and although

the *Qur'an* is always read in Arabic, other elements of worship are conducted in the language most readily understood by the congregation. Hence, in Britain, separate mosques and religious organisations may be found in the same localities catering for particular Pakistani and Bangladeshi linguistic cultural requirements, even where members of these communities share identical religious beliefs.

GROUPS OUTSIDE ORTHODOX SUNNI AND SHI'A CATEGORIES.

There are some communities which have historical connections with Islam or which indeed claim to be authentically Muslim but which main stream Muslims do not recognise as such. In Britain the most prominent of these are the *Ahmadyya*. Their founder, *Gulam Ahmad*, claimed to be the *Mahdi* (meaning the one who is rightly guided) and who is expected to appear at the end of time. The *Ahmadyya* have often been persecuted by other Muslims. Other divergent groups include the *Druze* and the *Alawis*, found mainly in the Lebanon and Syria.

CONCLUSION

Since the Second Vatican Council Catholics have engaged in dialogue with other Christians to work for Christian Unity, They have also sought to enter into dialogue with other faiths in a spirit of friendship and mutual respect. They hope that these efforts may find a positive resonance among members of other faiths; indeed Catholics and other Christians gladly acknowledge the efforts which are already being made by other faiths to join in dialogue.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Those who wish to know more about these and other matters relating to Islam may wish to consult "A Popular Dictionary of Islam" by Professor Ian Netton, published by Curzon Press (ISBN 0-7007-0233-4).

This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples. The Committee is grateful to its member Sir James Adams KCMG for his contribution.

+Kevin Mc Donald, Chairman.

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