

The Abrahamic Religions:

An Introduction to World Religions

Islam: Practices and Sects

Session Week 11

Abba Hailegebriel Girma

*The Ethiopian Orthodox Theological
College Houston, Texas, USA*

Aim and Learning Outcomes – Week 11 Session

Aims

- This session aims to explore Islam: Practices and Sects

Learning Outcomes

- Students identify the main aspects
 - Islam: Practices and Sects

Islam: Practices and Sects Within the 'Umma'

- When Muslims speak of the Umma they are referring to the global community of believers who follow the Islamic faith.
- Some Muslims are inclined to suggest that other Muslims are not “true” believers because they are lax about, for example, meeting all the obligations associated with the five Pillars.
- Nonetheless, a majority of Muslims would say that all Sunnis, Shias and Sufis belong to the Umma.
- Most would also concede that a numerically small sect such as the Ismaelitis, led today by the Agha Khan, were also part of the Umma, but the Druze of the Lebanon and Syria were not because of their rejection of many aspects of Shariah, or religious law, and belief in transmigration of souls.
- On this basis, at least 800 million people belong to the Umma.
- It is probably the case that 70% of Muslims are Sunni, 17% are Shia, 10% are Sufi and 3% belong to one or other of minor sects such as the Ismaelitis.

Continued.... (1)

- In theory at least, it does not matter whether someone is Sunni, Shia or Sufi, he/she is still part of the Umma and an equal member within it.
- Nor does it matter which ethnic group they belong to. Islam may have begun as a religion of the Arab people, but, today, people all over the globe are Muslims and, as Muslims, everyone is an equal within the global community of believers.
- Two of the faith's holiest sites may lie in Arab Saudi Arabia, but the Saudis are defined simply as the guardians, or custodians, of the holy shrines.
- The Umma can be thought of as an enormous extended family, a worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood of believers which transcends ethnically, nationally and language.

Islam: Practices and Sects - Sunni and Shia

- It is essential to address the difference between Sunni and Shia first. Basically, the difference boils down to an argument about who were the legitimate leaders of the global Umma.
- Sunnis regard Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali as the four caliphs, or successors, who followed immediately after Muhammad's death.
- They also regard the Ummayyads and the Abbasids as the legitimate “dynastic” caliphs who came after them.
- When the Ottomans achieved domination over a large part of the Islamic world, Sunnis also accepted them as legitimate caliphs.
- Today, the caliphate no longer exists. It was abolished in the 1920s by the parliament of the Turkish Republic.
- Sunnis have not attempted to revive it elsewhere.

Continued... (1)

- Shias belong to the Party of Ali. Most of them do not regard Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman as legitimate leaders of the Umma.
- They are of the opinion that these caliphs pushed Ali aside even though Ali had been promised leadership by Muhammad.
- As a result, most Shias define Ali as the first Imam, or divinely chosen leader, and believe that, on his death, authority transferred to his eldest son, Hassan, who became the second Imam. However, Hassan was persuaded by Ummayyad family to renounce all claims to the caliphate. Hassan retired to Medina where he lived out his days quietly.
- After Hassan's death, his young brother, Hussain, became head of the house of Ali and, according to the Shias, the third Imam.
- Hussain decided to challenge the authority of the Ummayyad family by engaging them in battle at Kerbala in modern Iraq.
- The Ummayyads defeated Hussain's army and tortured Hussain before his execution. His body was buried at Kerbala which became an important pilgrimage site for Shias. Every year, Shias mark the day on which the battle took place with a massive outpouring of emotion.

Continued... (2)

- While for Sunnis Kerbala confirmed the right of the Ummayyads to be the caliphs, Shias took the view that each new leader of the Umma should be chosen by the previous Imam by divine inspiration.
- Moreover, the chosen leader had to prove he was a descendant of Muhammad and Ali, Ali being Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.
- Most Shias believe that nine additional Imams followed Hussain giving an unbroken line of 12 Imams up to the year 874CE.
- It is for this reason that most Shias have the nickname "The Twelvers". The last Imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi, is believed to be alive.
- Shias think of him as hidden. They expect the Mahdi, or divinely guided one, to reappear before the Day of Judgement inaugurating a reign of universal peace and justice. Parallels can be drawn with some Jewish and Christian visions of the Messianic Age.

Continued... (3)

- Sunnis do not, for obvious reasons, commemorate the Battle of Kerbala on 10th Muharam, the 10th day of the first month in the Muslim year. Known as Ashura, this festival is an occasion for universal grieving and mourning in the Shia commitment to martyrdom. Promises are made to right injustices, even if the righting of wrongs results in the loss of life.
- The celebration of Ashura is not the only way in which Sunnis and Shias differ. For Sunnis the caliphs held political as well religious power, but for Shias the religious authority of the Imams far outweighed their political authority.
- Sunnis believe that the Qur'an and the Hadith are the only guides humankind requires to live the good, or the morally sound, life.
- Because Shias cannot imagine that Allah would leave humankind figures have the right to reach decisions for them about issues not addressed in the Qur'an and the Hadith.

Continued... (4)

- Sunnis interpret the Qur'an literally, but Shias claim that its hidden meaning was given to Ali by Muhammad. While Sunnis accept the Accurate Six Books of Hadith, Shias have their own collections of Hadith which have been passed down by the Imams.
- Shias are rather relaxed about complying with the requirements of the Five Pillars (e.g. the five daily prayers are usually compressed into three); they have many saints, both male and female, all with elaborate shrines which are pilgrimage sites; relics of Imams and saints are accorded to it in the Sunni world.
- Until the Mahdi reappears, Twelver Shias rely on his representatives to lead them, and the representatives with the greatest authority are the Ayatollahs, a word meaning signs of Allah.

Islam: Practices and Sects - Sufi

- Although Sufi sects are found all over the world, it won't come as a surprise that most emerged in Shia-dominated regions.
- The Sufis are the mystics of Islam, but, as we have already seen, with the occultation of the 12th Imam and talk about hidden meanings in the Qur'an, a mystical strand exists in mainstream Shia Islam.
- Sufism, then, is the mystical outpouring of Islam. As such it upsets the ulema, or religious authorities, in both Sunni and Shia Islam. Groups, hierarchical or otherwise, tend to protect themselves from innovation and spontaneity because innovation and authority.
- Sufism, which claims to establish what might be called a direct and intimate loving relationship between the individual and Allah, infringes several of Islam's doctrinal norms.
- The obligations of Salat, Saum, Haj and Zakat are not abolished, but because secondary to a different kind of worship, one that is warmer and freer but reserved for the initiated. Commitment to monotheism persists, but Sufis care little for cold doctrinal definitions.

Continued... (1)

- Most Sufi groups venerate Imam Ali. In fact, it often appears as if Ali is regarded with greater affection than Muhammad.
- Another similarity between Sufis and Shias is the emphasis placed on human guidance in the here and now.
- Generally speaking, a Sufi sect is organised around a **shayk**, or supreme leader, who possesses with Allah.
- The **shayk** is the leader of an hierarchical structure in which followers are at different stages of initiation.
- **Tekkes**, or meeting places, are set up where communities of believers gather, often secretly, to enact sometimes complex rituals designed to create a state of mind capable of communicating directly with Allah.
- Music, dance and alcohol may be used to create an appropriate state of mind. In some Sufi sects, women play an equal in ritual practices.
- Others Sufis go to remote locations in the countryside, venerate trees, rocks and streams, and find themselves accused of animist or pantheistic tendencies.

Continued... (2)

- Traditionally, Sufi sects have steered clear of political power and influence; they have tended to devote their time and energy toward their relationship with Allah. Nonetheless, the Bektashi order of Sufis achieved great power and influence when they acquired a following among the Janisseries, the elite troops of the Ottoman Empire.
- The Janisseries were so powerful that, in the early 19th century, they were disbanded because they were thought to be a threat to the sultan's authority. To this day the Bektashis remain an important minority in Turkey. Some scholars believe there may be as many as 2 million. Every August they gather in their thousands in the town of Hacibektas where their founder is buried. Their ritual use of alcohol is more likely to be encountered when Bektashis gather for worship in remote parts of the countryside.
- The Bektashis established a strong presence in parts of the Balkans such as Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. The Mevlevis, or Whirling Dervishes, founded in 13th century by the great Persian poet and mystic Mevlana Celaluddin Rumi, are another Sufi sect that originated in Turkey. In a sacred dance each dervish spins round on the spot with one hand raised to Paradise and the other pointing to the ground trying to become a channel of communication between the two. Music accompanies the dance, the ney, an end-blown ductless flute, being the most well-known Mevevi instrument.

Islam: Practices and Sects – Others

- Now a brief mention of the two Wahabbis, the Sunni sect who hate the Shias and dominate power in Saudi Arabia.
- The Wahabbis are extremely puritanical in outlook. Until recently they had no minarets on their mosques and did not raise a tomb or a mausoleum for their dead. Kings and beggars alike were buried in the bare earth.
- They tend to interpret Shariah very rigidly. It is for this reason that very few Muslim women are in paid employment in Saudi Arabia, women are almost absent from public domain, and thieves have their hands chopped off and adulterers have been executed. In their eyes the cult of the Imams in Shia Islam is a form of polytheism and the devotions at the saints' tombs are sheer paganism.
- As we can imagine, Shias in Saudi Arabia suffer extreme oppression. There is some evidence that Wahabbi influence lies behind on its own distinctive interpretation of Shariah. Needless to say, most Muslims outside Afghanistan, and many within, look on I horror at what Taliban is doing in the name of Islam.

Islam: Practices and Sects – Others

- Increasingly Muslims not only define themselves as Sunnis, Shias or Sufis, but also as traditionalists, fundamentalists, liberals or modernists.
- One may even across so-called secular Muslims, Muslims who regard themselves as Muslim by culture but who make hardly any effort to comply with the requirements of the Five Pillars. Saudi Arabia is sometimes singled out as a traditionalist Muslim society and Turkey might be singled out as a Modernist society in that the legal system is founded on secular principles, not religious.
- Nonetheless, there is an understanding that Islam is religion of the Turkish nation if not of the state itself. Liberal Muslims, who might be encountered in any Islamic society, tend to emphasise that religion is a private and personal affair and should not influence the way in which a society is structured or organised.
- Generally speaking, liberal Muslims support the idea of ethnically and religiously plural societies, encourage integration, and frequently play a key role in interfaith dialogue.

Continued

- All mosques have rooms or facilities for worshippers to complete the 'wudu'. At midday on Friday the Imam, or the religious leader, delivers a sermon from the minbar, or pulpit.
- During the prayer cycles, each one of which is called a 'rakah' – two, three or four rakahs are completed depending on the time of day – Muslims stand, bow, kneel and prostrate themselves on the ground.
- When they touch the ground with their foreheads they are giving physical expression to a key idea associated with Islam, submission to the will of Allah.
- In its strictest sense the word 'Islam' means submission. However, some scholars suggest that Islam may also be a corruption of 'salaam', Arabic for peace.
- It is for these reasons that many Muslims characterise their religion as being one which requires submission to the will of Allah and commitment to peace.

Reference

- Guillaume, Alfred (2011) Islam (Literary Licensing)
- Kenney, Jeffrey and Moosa, Ebrahim. Eds. (2012) Islam in the Modern World (Routledge)

Next Session

- We continue to discuss about *Abrahamic Religious Lives in Ethiopia*