

The Charismatic Community: Shi`ite Identity in Early Islam

Maria Massi Dakake

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 300 pages.

A revised and expanded version of a dissertation completed at Princeton University in 2000, this book describes the emergence of a distinct Shi`ite communal identity within the larger Islamic community in the period between the First Civil War (656-61) and the end of the second/eighth century. It draws on the Shi`ite hadith of the Imami (Twelver) tradition in order to construct a rich picture of the developing Shi`ite community, stressing the Shi`ites' ideas about their relationship to the Imam, to each other, and to non-Shi`ites, particularly the Islamic *ummah* at large.

The work is divided into an introduction and three sections of four chapters each, presenting three major theses. The first four chapters concentrate on the concept of *walāyā*, usually translated as loyalty or allegiance but, as the author suggests, containing a denotation akin to charisma. She argues that from the beginning, Shi`ism's crucial characteristic was allegiance to Ali ibn Abi Talib during the First Civil War. Even after his assassination and the end of the war, allegiance to his cause remained fundamental and he remained the primary focus for the Shi`ites' location of charismatic authority.

Here she makes a strong argument against Shi`ite doctrine and several western scholars. She locates the beginning of Shi`ism as a movement in the First Civil War and not earlier, as Wilferd Madelung does in *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge University Press: 1998), or in the Prophet's lifetime or even in pre-eternity according to Shi`ite doctrine. Other scholars consider Husayn's revolt and the battle of Karbala, the Tawwabun's (Penitents) revolt four years later, or even the activities of Ja`far al-Sadiq in the next century as the true beginning of Shi`ism as a religious movement. This is incorrect, Dakake argues, for it assumes that Ali's cause was merely political and not religious, an idea that must be rejected.

The second major thesis, presented in chapters 5-8, is that *walayah* refers not simply to allegiance to the Imam, but also to the spiritual brotherhood of Shi`ites and the solidarity of their community. Thus, one may speak of Shi`ites as forming a charismatic community and not simply a religious community led by a charismatic authority. *Walāyā* is one of the pillars of faith, we learn from reports of Muhammad al-Baqir and his disciples. It is the basis of membership in the community, the glue that holds the community together, and the basis for the Shi`ites' enhanced spiritual status.

The third major thesis, presented in chapters 9-12, has to do with the Shi`ites' position in the Islamic community as a whole. Dakake argues that the Shi`ites' sense of their own charisma and their status as a spiritual elite shaped how they envisioned and regulated their interactions with non-Shi`ites, and especially with other Muslims. While Shi`ite doctrine often unabashedly condemns Sunnis as unbelievers, it is remarkable that the Shi`ites have historically viewed themselves as members of the larger Islamic *ummah* and have not sought to disassociate themselves from it altogether. Shi`ite hadiths define *Imān* (faith) as a more restricted term than Islam; Shi`ites constitute the "true" believers in the larger community of Muslims on the grounds that they pay allegiance to the correct authorities and thus form a spiritual elite within the Islamic *ummah*. Other reports portray a hierarchical organization within the community, distinguishing a scholarly elite from lay Shi`ites, or posit the existence of degrees of faith among them, the highest of which are attained by only a few.

Chapter 11, "Rarer than Red Sulfur": Women's Identity in Early Shi`ism," discusses the ambiguous portrayal of women in hadith reports. While A'ishah is held up as the worst of the Shi`ites' enemies, and women in general are considered less likely to excel in virtue and piety, it is recognized that women feel strong sympathy for the Shi`ite cause and the Ahl al-Bayt's tragic history and have served the cause on many occasions in the past.

Finally, chapter 12 argues that two codes of conduct are established for Shi`ites, one regulating interactions with non-Shi`ites, and one regulating interactions with other Shi`ites. Ja`far al-Sadiq is portrayed as enjoining them not to shun their Muslim contemporaries, but to be exemplary members of the Islamic community, praying with the majority, visiting their sick, and attending their funerals. The boundary between the groups exists but is "perforated," as the author puts it; the erection of a sectarian wall is not condoned. Nevertheless, there are limits to interaction. One is forbidden to associate with those who disparage the Imams or Shi`ism, and intermarriage with Sunnis, Jews, and Christians is discouraged far more than in the Sunni tradition. While good behavior toward other Muslims is promoted, a higher level of concern, especially regarding charity and financial solidarity, should be shown to fellow Shi`ites in order to create a tightly knit community and to provide support for each other in a potentially hostile environment.

The Charismatic Community is very well written, with clear, cogent arguments, no errors of Arabic transliteration to speak of, and only a few instances where one might quibble about translation. It constitutes a substantial contribution to our understanding of Shi`ism's early history and thought and stands out for the imaginative and intelligent use it makes of hadith as a

window into social religious concepts current in early Islamic history. The book lacks a general conclusion, presumably the result of an effort to save space. Missing as well is a substantial historiographical discussion with reference to secondary literature on the dating of hadith reports. It is clear from the text that many of the hadiths in the canonical Shi`ite collections, such as al-Kulayni's *Al-Kaḥf*, predate the tenth and eleventh centuries when they were compiled, but exactly how far back can they be traced reliably, and how reliably do they reflect the thought of Muhammad al-Baqir, Ja`far al-Sadiq, or their contemporaries?

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