

## Sunnism

others, no one person or body was empowered to sit in final judgment of what was or was not Islamic law and doctrine. Determining and interpreting the will of God was a cumulative endeavor fraught with uncertainty, and the only final arbiter was consensus (*ijmāʿ*), an entirely informal and retrospective mechanism consisting in the observation that the community had in practice acted in accordance with a particular rule for so long that the rule in question must count as vindicated. The Prophet is on record as having said that “my community will not agree on an error,” and the ultimate arbiter of what did or did not count as Islamic was in fact the community. There could be no equivalent of papal authority in Sunni Islam and also no “Caesaropapism.” This is still the case. Accordingly, Sunni Islam cannot quickly be made to turn around or change direction, nor does it have the vulnerability of communities dependent on a leadership defined by special descent, status, or office.

It is above all in its concept of religious authority that Sunni Islam differs from Shiʿism. Like all Muslims, Shiʿis accept the Sunna of the Prophet as authoritative, but they see their imams as continuing it as authorities in their own right, not just as mere transmitters of the Hadith documenting the Sunna. To Shiʿis, the divine guidance mediated through a human being (prophet or imam) could never be cut off. The Imamis eventually ruled that the twelfth imam had gone into occultation in 874, so religious authority came to rest on fallible scholarly learning, but by then they had developed a different corpus of the Hadith and a different law. Both the Zaydis and the Ismaʿilis continued to concentrate religious authority in imams in the here and now, with the proviso that there might be periods without such imams (or without such imams in the open) in between.

Even within Sunnism the classical concept of Sunna was never unchallenged. Sufis claimed religious authority as saints endowed with supernatural powers rather than book learning, the value of which they sometimes rejected altogether. Scholars, too, might claim to be saints or, more drastically, to be the messiah (*mahdī*), thereby endowing themselves with supreme authority that was not normally available. In modern times the very concept of the Prophet’s Sunna has become an object of debate, with much discussion of the authenticity of the Hadith and even outright rejection of it in favor of exclusive reliance on the Qurʾan. Some of the most influential thinkers in modern times have been laymen without scholarly training. But the classical distribution of religious authority still prevails.

## See also

### Further Reading

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### PATRICIA CRONE

## Sunnism

Sunnism is the form of Islam to which the majority of contemporary Muslims (close to 90 percent) adhere. In formal terms Sunnism is defined by acceptance of the authoritative nature of the Prophet’s Sunna (paradigmatic behavior and beliefs) as transmitted through his Companions and by recognition of the first four caliphs (Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali), drawn from the Companions, as legitimate caliphs and moral exemplars. By contrast, the Kharijis do not recognize the third and the fourth caliphs, and most forms of Shiʿism do not recognize the first three. The Khariji and Shiʿi positions rendered all later caliphs illegitimate, a view once seen as tantamount to the entire community living in sin: a legitimate caliph was required for the performance of public religious duties such as the Friday prayer, the conduct of jihad, and the execution of certain punishments known as *ḥudūd*. The Sunnis preferred to differentiate between practical requirements and moral perfection and so adopted less utopian standards for legitimizing a claimant to the office of the caliph, but even these standards were difficult to enforce. The Sunnis thus chose to recognize anyone who seized power as the caliph as long as he was a Qurashi (a member of the tribe of the Prophet), partly to minimize bloodshed and partly to ensure that they would retain some moral hold on the state. Sunnis do not consider caliphs after the first four as moral exemplars, nor were their actions, executive proclamations, or decisions on points of law regarded as having any

value as precedents, so their often reproachable behavior did not endanger Islamic norms.

The Sunnis tended to hold that all de facto holders of public power (initially caliphs, thereafter sultans and amirs) were to be obeyed, whether formally legitimate or not and regardless of their mode of government, however unjust, unless they violated God's commands. Resistance, according to the Sunni view, should be passive rather than armed; the martyrdom of individuals was preferable to the large-scale bloodshed and general instability that accompanied revolt. All Muslims eventually came to live under rulers who were technically illegitimate in terms of the stipulations laid down for the caliphate (or, as it is usually called in this context, the imamate). But the Sunnis went further than others in accommodating these rulers, and in so doing they made most of Islamic history their own.

Like other Muslims, however, they lived under unstable regimes, many of them established by the pastoralist tribes that formed a warlike base outside the cities or beyond the borders of the Muslim world. These tribesmen often seized power by invasion (e.g., the Almohads or Almoravids in Andalus, and the Seljuqs, Mongols, and Safavids in the east), or they supplied the bulk of soldiers for existing armies, as free men or slaves, usually monopolizing political and military offices as well, leaving only the bureaucracy and religious affairs in the control of the existing urban elites. Determined though the Sunnis were to domesticate all regimes (as long as they were Muslim) and make them serve the cause of Islam as best they could, their relationship with them was balanced by both cultural and political alienation from them.

Historically the bearers of Sunnism are religious scholars who are in principle learned laymen rather than religious specialists marked off from the laity by special gifts or institutional affiliation, making for a dispersed pattern of religious authority. But keeping the community together is a fundamental Sunni value, and internal disagreement never reached the point of producing enduring schisms.

Religious scholars ('ulama') are authoritative only to the extent that they master the Qur'an and Hadith (the mass of short reports recording aspects of the Sunna) as studied and interpreted through the sciences devoted to them, most prominent among these being the study of the Sharia. It is their learning, and that alone, which sets the scholars apart from everyone else. In terms of legal doctrine, this means that the ultimate legal authority is

vested in the Qur'an and the Hadith (both treated as revelation) rather than in an office or a person endowed with special sanctity, whether by descent or special grace, such as the Shi'i imam or holy men.

It was around 800 that the Qur'an and authenticated hadith reports came to be seen as the sole legitimate source of Islamic legal norms reflective of God's will. The theory is best exemplified in the thought of Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 820). Although he was motivated primarily by the desire to overcome regionalism, his jurisprudential system denied the political ruler the ability to create Islamic law. Sunni scholars held that the ruler could issue administrative rules and other regulations, but he could not create legal institutions or norms that reflected the divine will. Authorized by his own ability to engage in competent interpretation (ijtihad), the ruler could, however, decide which legal rule the courts were to apply when juristic interpretation yielded several legitimate interpretations, as they usually did. In the past, many dynasties used this ability to favor a particularly legal school (often the Hanafi).

#### The *Siyasa Shar'iyya* Tradition

While Sunni religious scholars were more accommodating of de facto rulers than their Shi'i counterparts, the public law they taught was often impracticable and highly idealized. They made up for this by granting rulers wide authority to make discretionary rules for the sake of public order. The administrative and criminal law generated in this way was deemed to be merely instrumental, devoid of the moral authority of Islamic law. The 14th-century jurists Taqi al-din Ahmad b. Taymiyya and his student Ibn al-Qayyim, however, sought to place this law, and public policy in general, on a firmer moral footing and bring it into the purview of the Sharia by modifying some of the inflexible and impractical rules. The outcome was labeled *Siyasa Shar'iyya*, or Sharia-oriented governance. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim hoped to engender greater cooperation between lay Muslims, religious scholars, and rulers by orienting all of them toward establishing a just society in conformity with a broader vision of the Sharia. *Siyasa Shar'iyya* thus does not represent a reluctant move to accommodate alien rulers but rather an attempt at further integration of society and political elites.

#### The Rise of the Activists

In the early 20th century, Sunnism saw an unprecedented form of politics: the mass political movement.

### Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed (1909–85)

This is perhaps best exemplified by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, founded in the late 1920s, to national prominence during the events preceding and following the Egyptian Revolution of 1952. Abandoning the quietist attitude that had prevailed in much of the scholarly establishment even in the colonial period, and taking advantage of Sunnism's relative lack of formal authority, the Muslim Brotherhood refused to trade legitimacy for patronage by normalizing or accommodating the foreign, non-Muslim occupation of Egypt. Backed by laymen and led by one, Hasan al-Banna, they demanded an immediate end to British presence on Egyptian soil and at the very least a more public display of Islamic symbols and application of Islamic norms, if not the application of the Sharia as the law of the land.

In the aftermath of the end of formal colonial occupation in the late 1940s and 1950s, two Sunni thinkers emerged who were to exert an enormous influence on Islamic political thought: Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi of Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt. Both thinkers gave a more concrete form to the amorphous demands of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Neither was a religious scholar by profession. Mawdudi, though trained in the Islamic sciences at an early age, was a journalist, while Qutb, who worked as a literary critic in his early life, had no formal religious training at all. Unlike medieval Sunni scholars, who tended to have a realistic conception of political possibilities, both thinkers had a utopian streak. Both sought to mobilize all Muslims for the transformation of Muslim society from its present state of Western-inspired decadence and corruption to a state of perfect individual and collective obedience to God's will. In their view, Muslim rulers must actively seek to uphold and implement the Sharia to count as legitimate: mere confessional membership in the Muslim community did not suffice. Mawdudi provided a more detailed account of a government that could count as Islamic than Qutb, who was content to assert that it was only through subservience to God and obedience to Him that human beings could break their servitude to one another. Both, however, stressed that sovereignty belonged to God alone and inferred that rulers whose government failed to accord with His will had to be actively resisted. Qutb advocated open rebellion; Mawdudi did not. Mawdudi further proposed that only God could legislate and that Islam required all Muslims to work actively for the establishment of an Islamic state. Such a state would have a representative institution charged with the function not of legislating but rather of discovering God's law and

offering advice to the executive on the best way to implement it. The political programs of many Islamist movements of the 1960s through the 1990s were rooted in Mawdudi's and Qutb's ideas, but the most radical movements of the early 21st century have gone well beyond them by extending the legitimacy of revolt to attacks on the foreign powers that sustain the corrupt regimes of the postcolonial Muslim world. On the other hand, the vast majority of Sunni Islamist thinkers and political movements have categorically rejected Qutb's call for rebellion against illegitimate regimes. These movements tend either to adopt participation in the electoral process to acquire political power or else to channel their energies into the provision of social services for the poor. Recent Sunni Islamist thinkers have also moved away from the idea that belief in God's exclusive sovereignty excludes the possibility of democratic government. The popular religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in fact, insisted that voting is a perfectly acceptable method for the Muslim community to decide issues relevant to their common good, specifically where there are historical differences of opinion in Islamic law.

**See also**

#### Further Reading

Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, 2007; Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*, 2001; L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State*, 2000; Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 2004; Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, 2001; Roxanne Leslie Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, 2009; Roy Jackson, *Mawlana Mawdudi and Political Islam: Authority and the Islamic State*, 2011.

MAIRAJ SYED

### Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed (1909–85)

While Mahmoud Mohamed Taha founded and led a political party that worked toward the independence of Sudan, he devoted his life to leading his followers to a new understanding of Islam that had emerged from his own Sufi training. Taha essentially eschewed politics as