

Preserving or Extending Boundaries: The Blacks Shi'is of America

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Abstract

While much has been written regarding the rise and experience of the African American Muslim community in America, Western scholarship has paid little attention to the Black Shi'is in the country. This paper will attempt to redress this imbalance. First, the paper will discuss Shi'i institutions and their proselytization activities in America. It will be argued that, being a minority within the Muslim community in America, the Shi'i community is highly introverted and more concerned with preserving rather than extending its boundaries. In addition, the ethnic divisions within the Shi'i community and the fact that Shi'ism is highly reliant on the foreign based ayatollahs means that the Shi'i community has not been concerned with reaching out to potential converts. Drawing upon the results of a survey conducted for this study, it will be argued that the Wahhabis by their vehement attacks on the Shi'is, have aroused the curiosity of many converts who had not previously heard of Shi'ism. Paradoxically, this has led to their conversion to Shi'ism. The paper will also review the situation of Shi'ism in the Correctional Facilities and analyze the works of a major Shi'i proselyte whose enormous impact on inmates of American correctional facilities has yet to be acknowledged.

Introduction

Scholars on Islam in America have amply documented the provenance and experience of the African American Muslim community. Most of those who have discussed the Black Muslims in America have done so from a Sunni perspective or have analyzed them within the context of indigenous Muslim African American movements such as the Moorish Science Temple, Ansar Allah, and the Nation of Islam. However, scholars have paid little attention to the Black Shi'is of America. For example, in his *American Jihad*, Steve Barboza profiles several Black Muslims. They range from members of the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, to members of the Sunni community. Yet, not a single Black Shi'i is profiled, nor is the existence of Black Shi'ism in America even acknowledged.

This paper will examine the origins, growth, and subsequent challenges encountered by the African American Shi'is, or as I will call them, the Black Shi'is of America. The paper will also discuss the interaction between immigrant and Black Shi'is and will argue that since they have been established recently, few Shi'i institutes have reached out to the Black community. It will also argue that due to its dependency on the immigrant community, Black Shi'ism has yet to forge an identity within and integrate

into Shi'ism without compromising its distinctive black consciousness. This has undermined the ability of Black Shi'ism to proliferate in America.

The Early Shi'is in America

The Shi'i presence in America can be dated to the late nineteenth century. Among the early migrants to America in the 1880s were Twelver Shi'is from what was then Greater Syria. As I have discussed elsewhere, between 1900 and 1914 several hundred Shi'i settlers settled in different parts of America. Many settled in Detroit to work in the Ford Motor Company. There was also a big Shi'i settlement in Michigan City. There is strong evidence to suggest that the early Lebanese Shi'is settled in other cities like New York, Quincy, Chicago, Cedar Rapids, Toledo, Sioux Falls, and Ross, North Dakota. By the late 1920s, a large community of Shi'is had started to crystallize in different parts of America.¹

In contrast to the early twentieth century when there was a predominance of Lebanese Shi'is, the present American Shi'i community is composed of highly diverse ethnic and cultural groups most of whom have relocated in numbers since the 1970s. They originate from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Indian sub-continent, the Gulf States, East Africa, and parts of North Africa. A growing number of African-Americans are now converting to Shi'ism after having initially converted to Sunnism or to the Nation of Islam. Some Sufi groups with Shi'i proclivities have also been established in America. There are at least three Sufi Shi'i organizations within the Iranian community in California.²

The growth in and diverse composition of the Shi'i population in America is a relatively recent phenomenon. In part, this has been a response to changes in American immigration laws in 1965. Other factors have also precipitated increased migration of different Shi'i communities to America. The Islamic revolution in Iran, the inimical socio-political conditions in Iraq, civil strife in Pakistan, the break up of Pakistan into East Bangladesh, the civil war in Lebanon, adverse socio-economic conditions in East Africa, and the establishment of the anti-Shi'i Taliban regime in Afghanistan have all contributed to the increased Shi'i presence here. Thus, like the Sunnis, the Shi'i community in America now comprises a variety of people from many nations who represent diverse linguistic, national, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

Shi'i Outreach Activities in America

At the outset, it should be noted that the Shi'i self-definition in America is governed by a concern to maintain faith in the face of a double minority status. Since it is a minority within both the American and Muslim communities, the Shi'i community is introverted and more concerned with maintaining and preserving a distinct communal and sectarian identity than with extending its religious boundaries. Thus, rather than reaching out to potential converts, American Shi'is are more concerned to ensure that the younger generation within the community is not assimilated to the West and that it is not influenced by Wahhabi and Salafi rhetoric against the Shi'is.

Most Shi'i centers of worship have been established since the 1980s. Shi'is have used their limited financial resources to establish and consolidate their religious

institutions and engage in communal activities rather than to proselytize or help improve the image of Islam outside the community.

It was in the late 1980s that Shi'is became aware that Sunni organizations had influenced how Islam in America was presented and perceived. Due to the enhanced Sunni – Shi'i sectarian tensions in the 1980s, the Shi'is quickly realized that they could not depend on Sunni institutions to represent them or speak on their behalf. As more Shi'i immigrants settled here, they came to view America as a fertile place for promoting a better image of Islam and for seeking converts. Hence, the 1980s saw the establishment of a few Shi'i institutions that reached out to the non-Muslim community.

Private sources like Ansariyan Publications based in Tehran sent Shi'i literature to American prisons. The Bilal Muslim Mission in East Africa also sent some literature to individuals who were interested in Shi'i Islam. Several Shi'i institutes were established by private individuals to reach out to non-Muslims. An early Shi'i institute was the Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an (TTQ). Established in New York in 1978 by Aunali Khalfan, TTQ has the specific aim of publishing copies of the Qur'an which are distributed to different parts of the world, including in American prisons. Another Shi'i institute, the Qur'an Account Inc (QAI) was established in 1987. It was founded by a retired paediatrician from Iraq, Dr. Hashim in Washington D.C.. Its primary focus has been to educate inmates in correctional facilities. Since the institute's inception, Dr. Hashim has converted over 6,300 people to Islam. The institute sends copies of the Qur'an, books, and has published a quarterly bulletin (called Bulletin of Affiliation) for twenty three years.³

Established in the mid-1990's in New York, the Bilal Muslim Mission of Americas (BMMA) now operates from Orlando, Florida. Initially, most of its outreach activities focused on Trinidad. The focus of BMMA's activities is now America. BMMA responds to letters from inmates in various correctional facilities and sends books on Islam. Some Canadian-based Shi'i institutions also proselytize in America. The Islamic Humanitarian Services (IHS) operates from Kitchener, Waterloo, in Canada. It has published various books, and engages in outreach work in correctional facilities in America. IHS has also translated some important Shi'i works to English. In addition, it has been engaged in various humanitarian projects. Al-Khoei Foundation in New York has also maintained regular contact with Shi'i inmates and has worked with the Department of Correctional Facilities (DOCS) to cater for the needs of Shi'i inmates.

Most of these institutes lack the financial support that is afforded, for example, to the Saudi-backed Muslim World League (MWL). Lack of diplomatic relations between America and Iran, the only Shi'i country, has meant the latter has not been able to provide the institutional infrastructure or financial support necessary to furnish Shi'i outreach work in America. Shi'i proselytization activities have been limited to a few poorly funded organizations that are not properly structured for extensive *da'wa* (proselytization). It is correct to state that Shi'i centers of worship are introverted rather than outward directed. The activities of most centers are directed at providing basic religious services like facilitating prayers, conducting marriages and funerals, and counseling members of the community.

Other factors also challenge the Shi'i community's capacity to actively engage in outreach activities. The arrival of newer migrants has impinged on the American Shi'i community as it experiences Islam mainly through the phenomenon of "imported Islam."

Newer immigrants tend to revive traditional norms and impose a conservative and extraneous expression of Islam. The immigrants' major concern is to preserve the traditional understanding of Islam than to reach out to potential converts or engage in dialogue with non-Muslims. Recently arrived immigrants tend to coalesce around their own ethnic enclaves and feel threatened by "the other" especially if they have not proselytized or reached out to non-Muslims in their countries of origins.

The Black Shi'is of America

In its early history, Black Islam in America was characterized by the presence of charismatic leaders like Timothy Drew (d. 1929) and Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975) who led ideological and resistant movements against White, Christian America. The presence of such charismatic figures and the appropriation of Islamic symbols made Islam an attractive proposition for many African Americans.

Upto the 1960s, Islam in America was defined and understood through the prism of indigenous Muslims, primarily the Nation of Islam and, before that, the Moorish Science Temple. Shi'ism, whether in the form of immigrants or Black Americans, had no voice in American Islam. It was in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979 that the African American community started looking at Shi'ism as a possible expression of normative Islam. Before that time, there were very few Black Shi'is. It is estimated that by 1982, due to the influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran, one thousand blacks had converted to Shi'ism in the Philadelphia area alone.⁴

'Isa Muhammad, the head of the Ansar Allah, was the only known black leader to appropriate elements of Shi'i Islam in his teachings. From around 1982 he preached, for example, that 'Ali b. Abu Talib, (d. 661) the first Shi'i Imam, was black. He also affirmed his genealogy from the Prophet Muhammad through Fatima (d. 632) and 'Ali. The title that he used for himself, the Mahdi, fits well with Shi'i messianic teachings.⁵ However, 'Isa Muhammad never accepted or preached Shi'ism. He merely synthesized elements of Shi'ism that gave credence to his messianic preaching.

When Black Shi'ism did emerge, it lacked charismatic figures to provide an ideological basis for a dynamic movement. As a matter of fact, Black Shi'is had no movement to speak of. They could not afford to provide protection, social services, or employment opportunities to those who joined their ranks. Due to their rather tenuous position, the ideological basis of Black Shi'ism was tied to the interpretation provided by the immigrant Shi'i community.

While all Black Muslims have had to endure the stigmas of color and religion, Black Shi'is have had to endure the additional stigma of being a minority within Islam. This is because transition to Shi'i Islam was deemed as an aberration by many in the Black community. By the 1980s, when Black Shi'ism made its appearance on the American religious landscape, the Wahhabis were actively promoting their ideology in American mosques, campuses, and prisons. Basing their views on a very parochial and literalist understanding of Islam, the Wahhabis had pronounced Shi'ism to be a heretical sect. By converting to Shi'ism, Black Shi'is became alienated not only from their family and friends but also from the Black American Muslim community which felt betrayed by the Black Shi'is.

For many Black Sunnis, Black Shi'ism represented religious heresy. This perceived act of religious treason probably explains instances of discrimination and violence reported by Black Shi'is in correctional facilities and other areas. As they were deemed to be heretics, they were marginalized and often isolated. Consequently, Black Shi'is lacked the collective empowerment and economic self-help that Black Sunnis could call upon when they converted.

The Appeal of Shi'ism to the Black Community

Why do some African Americans find Shi'ism appealing? Islam gave Black Americans a new identity as it was considered to be "the other." Shi'ism, however, was the other within the other. It had a special appeal for many in the Black community. Since it has been a minority in much of the Islamic world, Shi'ism bears a sense of what Charles Long has called "lithic consciousness" – a state of mind and being that in confronting reality invokes a *will in opposition*, a veritable cosmic no.⁶ Black religion is, at its core, an instrument of protest against any form of oppression. Concepts like a "reactionary no" and a "protest sentiment" are deeply ingrained within Shi'ism.

The Shi'i view that the rights of 'Ali and the family of the Prophet (also called the *ahl al-bayt*) were usurped by the companions meant that, from the very beginning, Shi'ism rose as a dissenting group in opposition to the Muslim majority. This dissent manifested itself in different forms during the course of Shi'i history. Initially, Shi'i protest expressed itself by contesting Abu Bakr's succession to the Prophet advocating instead, the succession of 'Ali based on the principle of divine designation.⁷ Later conflicts between 'Ali b. Abu Talib and Mu'awiya (d. 679), Husayn (d. 680) and Yazid (d. 684), and the various Shi'i revolts against both the Umayyad and 'Abbasid dynasties were further manifestations of these differences.⁸ Subsequently, political opposition and rebellion against a central, Sunni-dominated government formed the basis of the development of a distinct sectarian movement that postulated its own concept of religious authority and leadership.

The spirits of resistance and opposition to injustice could be perpetuated to its fullest extent in Shi'i rather than Sunni Islam. The latter had, on many occasions, accommodated itself to tyrannical rulers as it did not want to create *fitna* (sedition). Many traditions were circulated to quell opposition to the ruling elite. An evil ruler, it was declared, was better than anarchy in the community. Obedience to the rulers was tantamount to obedience to God.⁹

The Shi'i paradigm of opposition to tyranny and injustice was given further impetus after the Iranian revolution. Ayatullah Khomeini's (d. 1989) defiance against America and his characterization of it as the "great Satan" was a view that Black Shi'is in America could readily identify with. As a matter of fact, many Black Americans converted to Shi'ism after visiting or reading about Iran. Black Shi'is were impressed by the revolutionary fervor generated by the Iranian revolution. More than any other factor, it was the revolution and its defiance of American hegemony in the Middle East that attracted many American Blacks to Shi'ism. The revolutionary spirit embedded in Shi'ism was acknowledged by Yvonne Haddad. According to her, a growing number of Blacks were attracted to Shi'i Islam due to its revolutionary spirit.¹⁰

The Iranian influence on Black Shi'is can be discerned from the fact that in the 1980s and 1990s, many Blacks were invited to visit the country. Some of them decided to study in the religious seminary in Qum. Along with several other Black Shi'is, Hashim 'Ali 'Ala al-Din, for example, studied with the scholars of Qum. While studying in Iran in the 1990s, he saw the need to help others understand Shi'ism. Hashim 'Ala al-Din helped establish the Islamic Foundation Cooperation (IFC), an institution that helps Black Shi'is visit the tomb of the eighth Shi'i Imam, 'Ali al-Rida (d. 818), in Mashad and encourages them to take short-term courses in Iran.¹¹

Besides the Iranian factor, Shi'ism posited role models who Black Shi'is could derive inspiration from in their quest for socio-economic justice. Shi'i Imams, especially 'Ali and Husayn, have become role models as they opposed and fought against rebels and tyrannical regimes. Such notions resonate strongly with Black Americans who have suffered from racism, unemployment, and discrimination in White America. Shi'ism offered Blacks not only the spirit but also the role models of protest and resistance to tyranny. Iran and Hizbollah provided the contemporary paradigm of release from bondage and subjugation to America.

Another possible reason for the appeal of Shi'ism to the Blacks is that when Black Shi'ism appeared on the scene, Black Sunnism had lost the spirit of resistance to and defiance of White America that it possessed during the times of Elijah Mohammed and Malcolm X (d. 1965). By the 1980s, when Black Shi'ism first made its appearance in America, Warith al-Din Muhammad (d. 2008) had reconciled his movement with White America. Under the influence of Khumayni's Iran, Shi'ism was just beginning its opposition to American hegemony around the world.

Black and Immigrant Shi'i Interaction

To understand the contemporary challenges and manifestations of Black Shi'ism, it is important to comprehend its relationship with immigrant Shi'ism. Shi'ism came to the Black community through the immigrant community rather than through pseudo-Islamic movements. This means that the views, outlook, and perceptions of Black Shi'is were informed by the lens which immigrant Shi'is brought to America. It was through interaction with immigrant Shi'is or literature imported by them that Shi'ism came to the Black community. This made Black Shi'ism largely dependent on and vulnerable to the interpretations of immigrant Shi'ism.

Dependency on the immigrant community was accentuated by the fact that the Black Shi'is did not possess the resources to build their own institutions or centers. To date, there are only a handful of Black Shi'i mosques in America. The fact that they emerged only after the Iranian revolution when many Shi'is had migrated here meant that Black Shi'is largely capitulated to rather than challenged the immigrant expression of Shi'i Islam.

There was an additional reason why the Black Shi'i community became dependent on immigrant Shi'is. Black Shi'ism is a relatively new phenomenon; indeed, the number of Black Shi'is does not exceed a few thousand. Lack of financial resources has made the Black Shi'is dependent on immigrant Shi'is who have largely defined and imposed their own cultural understanding of Shi'ism in America. Furthermore, a paucity

of charismatic leaders who could articulate a vision for or initiate a movement within the Black community has made Black Shi'ism more dependent on the immigrant community.

The immigrants can boast not only a long association with Shi'i Islam but also the support of preachers who articulate a Shi'ism that is often shaped by cultural forces imported from "back home." Even the Shi'i religious leaders, the *maraji'*,¹² have yet to acknowledge or address the particular needs of the Black community in America. Many of these leaders have not explored the possibilities of reaching out to the Black community in America. The *maraji'*, who live primarily in Iran and Iraq, are more concerned with providing guidance and religious instruction to their followers in their own countries than with reaching out to new converts in America.

Even though they have tremendous financial resources generated by religious taxes (the *khumus*), the *maraji'* have yet to establish institutions that can reach out to and cater for the needs of Black Shi'is in America.¹³ For example, the Los Angeles-based Imam Mahdi Association of Marjaeya (IMAM), a liaison office of one of the most prominent Shi'i religious leaders, Ayatullah 'Ali Hussein al-Seestani, has yet to create an effective mechanism or chart out a program to reach out to the Black Shi'is.

It is the Shi'i immigrants who have always defined American Shi'ism, a fact which has denied Black Shi'is space and an interpretive voice in the community. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to state that their Islamicity was tied to conformity to immigrant Shi'ism. Depending on where they lived, Black Shi'is were attached either to Arab, South Asian, Khoja or the Iranian expression of Shi'ism. Whether in matters related to Shi'i law, the manifestation of rituals, or the expression of a particular culture, Black Shi'is followed the interpretation of and articulation by immigrant Shi'is. Consequently, American Shi'ism came to be identified with the immigrant as opposed to the Black Shi'i community. To date, there is no independent Black Shi'i institution that can challenge the monopoly that immigrant Shi'is enjoy.

Immigrants tend to see themselves not only as the carriers of an "authentic Islam" but also as obligated to impose their understanding of Islam in the American milieu. This has the effect of marginalizing both converts to Islam and the burgeoning youth community that often accuses the parents of imposing a "culturally-conditioned Islam." This is certainly the case with American Shi'ism where immigrants enjoy not only economic strength but also greater power. Immigrants have the financial and numerical superiority to establish centers and a self-proclaimed right to dictate how the centers will be run. In many American cities, Shi'i centers have become the exclusive property of ethnic immigrants. Immigrants determine who will speak at the centers and what issues will be addressed.

Immigrants see Shi'i Islam through a cultural prism, a lens that they have been accustomed to. Hence, to practice Shi'ism in any other way is often seen as an aberration or construed as cultural heresy. Their experience of Shi'ism, even in America, is informed by their "back home" experience. Black Shi'is, on the other hand, see Islam through an entirely different lens. They carry stigmas of slavery, color, and economic hardships and expect conversion will help them address and overcome their struggles. They hope that issues which concern them like education, social justice, affirmative action, racism, joblessness, housing, the relationship between Black Shi'is and immigrants, economic empowerment, and finding suitable marriage partners will be addressed by Shi'i leaders and preachers in the centers.

Instead, Black Shi'is find that immigrants are more concerned with addressing historical and theological topics that have differentiated Shi'i from Sunni Muslims. Preachers in the immigrant centers also address issues pertaining to American foreign policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Immigrants also focus on issues like the moral upbringing of their youth, and, since the events of September 11, 2001, countering the government's policies such as arbitrary arrests, detention, and the effects of the USA PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) act of October 24, 2001. Rarely are issues that directly impact Black Shi'is discussed.

The discussion on the interaction between immigrant and Black Shi'is and the latter's lack of involvement in Shi'i centers should not conceal the fact that there are a considerable number Black Shi'is in the correctional facilities. Their education and spiritual nourishment is contingent, to a large degree, on the activities of the various Shi'i institutes.

Shi'ism in the Correctional Facilities

Immigration of Shi'is to America, the Iranian revolution, the advent of Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Internet, the American invasion of Iraq, and greater access to Shi'i literature have made Shi'ism an American rather than a purely foreign phenomenon. These factors, plus the Wahhabi denunciation of Shi'ism have encouraged many Blacks, including those in correctional facilities, to look at Shi'ism as an alternative articulation of normative Islam.

My correspondence with various Shi'i inmates indicates that most converts from the African American community accept Shi'ism as a result of their own efforts and initiatives rather than due to extensive proselytization from the Shi'i community. As previously mentioned, this is probably because Shi'i institutions lack the financial resources to engage in extensive *da'wah* activities. Some inmates indicated that derogatory remarks regarding Shi'ism made by prison imams in Friday sermons made the inmates more curious and led them to investigate Shi'i beliefs and practices. Ironically, by their pernicious attacks against and denigration of Shi'ism, the Wahhabis have aroused the curiosity of many converts who had not previously heard of this branch of Islam. After further exploration into Shi'ism, some of these converts embraced it.

For the Shi'i inmates, the adoption of Shi'ism meant embracing new sets of obligations and role models. Instead of the companions of the Prophet, the role models became the Prophet and the Shi'i Imams. The *fiqh* (jurisprudence) of Abu Hanifa (d. 767) or Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 820) was replaced by that of Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), the sixth Shi'i imam. Sunni *hadith* texts and manuals of jurisprudence had to be replaced by Shi'i ones. After conversion, Shi'i inmates have to base their religious practices on the juridical treatises (*risala 'amaliyya*) of Shi'i *maraji'* like Ayatullahs Seestani, Fadlallah, or Khamenei. As we shall see, such shifts have often resulted in altercations and sectarian tensions within the correctional facilities.

After conversion to Shi'ism, inmates seek a team or institution that could educate and guide them. Many inmates complain that Shi'i centers or mosques do not respond to their letters or send them the books they request. They also state that despite numerous attempts to communicate with Shi'i organizations, they have had little success and feel

largely neglected. Inmates also seek access to Shi'i imams and to be able to communicate with the *maraji'* or their offices.

The sense of isolation that Shi'i inmates experience is compounded by the fact that conversion to Shi'ism also means, for them, a change of social network and friendship. The much wider network of Sunni brethren who provided support, protection, and religious guidance is replaced by a much smaller group of Shi'i inmates, most of whom have endured some form of sectarian discrimination. Thus, the challenges for Shi'i converts arise not only from dealing with non-Muslim inmates but also from interaction with Muslim ones.

Shi'i inmates are concerned that the religious education offered in the prison system teaches only Sunni Islam. They complain that when Shi'ism is discussed, it is often projected as a heretical movement started by a Jew, 'Abd Allah b. Saba'. Shi'i inmates also report that they do not have access to Shi'i books or facilities to educate them about Shi'i history, theology, or jurisprudence. Most of their understanding of Shi'ism is derived from their fellow Shi'i inmates who are better versed but not experts in Shi'i Islam.

Sectarian Tensions in Correctional Facilities

A major challenge reported in my correspondence with Shi'i inmates is that they encounter widespread discrimination and pressure to renounce their faith. Inmates complain that Shi'i books that are kept in the prison libraries have been removed by Sunni inmates. The acrimony between the two groups has often led to physical confrontation within the correctional facilities and to some inmates being placed in "isolation boxes."

Tensions arise when Shi'i inmates demand separate classes, literature, access to Shi'i Imams, and recognition of their distinct needs based on their school of law. It is important to bear in mind that such demands by Shi'i inmates is rooted in the fact that, on some points, Shi'i law differs fundamentally from the four Sunni *madhahib* (schools of law). In many instances, Shi'i law is more strict. In the case of dietary laws, for example, Shi'i law demands that the animal be slaughtered in accordance with strictly prescribed rules, i.e., the animal be made to face Mecca, the *bismillah*¹⁴ be recited and certain veins be slit. Some Sunni schools, on the other hand, state that if the *bismillah* is recited before eating, the meat can be consumed regardless of how the animal was slaughtered. Shi'i law also differs from Sunni law regarding the timings for breaking the fast, the times of morning and evening prayers, and whether the afternoon and evening prayers can be combined or not.¹⁵

Differences between Sunni and Shi'i inmates cover many aspects of Islamic law. Shi'i inmates, for example, will not celebrate the end of Ramadhan based on statements from Sunni Imams, ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) or the Sunni-based *Fiqh* Council of America. Rather, they will wait to hear the pronouncements from the offices of the *maraji'* confirming that the new moon has been sighted. In 2005, the Council of Shi'a 'Ulama' of North America formed a *hilal* committee that will decide when the new Islamic month begins. Due to such differences, Shi'i inmates do not celebrate Islamic holidays like the end of Ramadhan (*eid*) feast with their Muslim brethren.

Furthermore, Shi'is have their own distinctive religious holidays which Sunnis do

not commemorate. Shi'is mark the day of 'Ashura' when Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was slain in the plains of Kerbala, Iraq. Similarly, Shi'is mark the day of Ghadir (in the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar) when, Shi'is believe, the Prophet Muhammad explicitly appointed 'Ali to succeed him.

Sectarian tensions arise also because, according to Shi'i inmates, Wahhabi-influenced chaplains denigrate Shi'ism in their sermons. Some of these inmates reportedly encourage the persecution of Black Shi'is.¹⁶ Frankie Cancel, who was an inmate at Fishkill correctional facility in New York state, complained that the Sunni chaplain in the facility did not permit the study of or recognize differences between the different sects of Islam and routinely labeled Shi'is as infidels, hypocrites, satanic worshipers, and rejecters (*Rafidis*) to shame them into converting to Sunnism.¹⁷ Due to their conversion, Shi'i inmates lose the brotherhood and fraternity that other Muslim inmates enjoy, especially as they do not and sometimes cannot partake in the religious services offered by the Muslim chaplains.

Shi'i inmates also complain that anti-Shi'i material is widely disseminated in the correctional facilities. Anti-Shi'i literature such as *Khutut al-Areedha* and *Up from Shiism* has been distributed in America.¹⁸ Another Shi'i inmate, Anthony Cook, complained that in 1999 at the Great Meadow Prison, the chaplain distributed literature that condemned Shi'is as charlatans, reeking with the stench of chicken-heartedness, insincerity, greed, cowardice and equivocation. Cook was later placed in protective custody after warnings that his life was in danger from other Muslims.¹⁹

Having converted to Shi'ism most inmates report that they have experienced some kind of discrimination. The following are excerpts of letters received from some of the inmates. They are indicative of sectarian tensions behind the prison walls.

Interview # 1 - Wende

Spring 2002

"Shi'ite Muslims are being oppressed physically and spiritually. I believe that Shi'ite Muslims must separate themselves from the Sunni Muslims... We cannot even worship in the facility masjid without being attacked."

Interview # 2 - Dannemora, NY

Spring- 2004

"Since I last was in touch with you we've been assaulted by a vicious-virus (i.e. a large campaign by Wahabi-backed missionaries that spreads anti-Shi'a literature through out the prisons in the states) we have also been blessed to win a big court case against NYSDOCS and NY State was ordered to hire their first Shi'a Chaplain recently."

"This group who call themselves Salaafias are the biggest problem to us and in their literature demeans our creed, it is splitting up jamaats across the state."

Interview # 3- Green Haven

July 28, 1998

"There is a lot of hostility here for the Shia's from the brothers who follow without question, the Sunni way, but we endure regardless of the adversity that we are faced with daily; as they out number us 10 to 1."

“There is also a chance for us to view and listen to tapes when they are available, but not within the confines of the Mosque. We have tried and have been halted after they see our numbers, and that has always been the case with the Sunni brothers, at least here at this facility.”

Interview # 4 - Fishkill

Sept. 20, 2000

“I have received a great deal of mail from other incarcerated Shia from through out North America. From the Utah State Prison to among other places the Estelle Jr. Prison Plantation of Texas. Sadly, they all recount similar treatment against them at the hands of our fellow Sunni brethren.”

I have included only a small number of complaints that I received from a number of Shi‘i inmates. Most of them state that their lives are threatened more by Sunni than by non-Muslim inmates. Paradoxically, when Black Sunnis have demonstrated that they have not received the same treatment as other religious groups in prison, the courts have, generally speaking, upheld and protected their constitutional claims to religious freedom.²⁰ However, these inmates have denied Black Shi‘is the same rights that they claimed for themselves, i.e., to practice Islam according to their tenets.

In many instances, Shi‘i inmates have been discriminated against in the same facilities where Sunnis demanded their rights. At Greenhaven Correctional Facility, for example, inmate Brown charged that prison officials discriminated against him and his coreligionists by prohibiting religious services, spiritual advice, and administration from recognized clergy of the Islamic faith.²¹ Shi‘i inmates at the same facility complain that Shi‘i literature has been removed from the library and that they have endured other kinds of discrimination.

The Case of Frankie Cancel

Sectarian tensions and the denial of rights for Shi‘i inmates have led some of them to file grievances against the correctional facilities. Such acts have led to the Department of Correctional Facility to reexamine their treatment of Shi‘i inmates. In 1999, a Hispanic convert to Shi‘ism called Frankie Cancel, an inmate at the Fishkill Correctional Facility of the Department of Correctional Facilities, filed a grievance with prison officials alleging that the only Islamic services provided within the facility were those that were affiliated to Sunnism.²²

Cancel filed an Article 78 proceeding challenging the denial of his grievance. He claimed that there were significant differences between Shi‘i Muslims and the sect that DOCS chaplains are associated with, Sunni Muslims. Cancel alleged that Shi‘is were not allowed to have religious study groups or classes in which their beliefs and methods of prayer are taught, nor were they able to observe religious holidays because their holidays were not recognized by Muslim chaplains.

Cancel argued that DOCS’ refusal to accommodate the Shi‘is violated its own Directive 4202. This directive provides, in part, that

“It is the intent of the Department to extend to inmates as much spiritual assistance as possible as well as to provide as many opportunities as

feasible for the practice of their chosen faiths consistent with the safe and secure operations of the Department's correctional facilities. If a chaplain or an outside religious volunteer is not available to serve the spiritual needs of a group of inmates of a known religious faith, the facility Superintendent, in consultation with the Director of Ministerial and Family Services, may authorize the inmates to participate in a religious education class or study group"²³

Cancel further alleged that Sunni faith and practices were inconsistent with his own, and that the Sunni Imam at his facility did not permit the recognition of different Islamic sects and often referred to Shi'is as "infidels" and "satanic worshipers." Cancel requested that a Shi'i clergy or registered volunteers be allowed to enter the prison and lead separate Shi'i services and discussion groups.

After DOCS denied the grievance on the basis that it was "advised by the Department's Imam (himself a Sunni) that all Muslim religious groups fall under Islam," Cancel filed a petition, requesting the relief contained in his grievance. The Supreme Court granted the petition, and DOCS appealed to the Second Department. In affirming the decision of the Supreme Court, the Second Department made specific reference to Correction Law 610, that all prisoners in New York State "have the right to the free exercise of religion without discrimination or preference" and that regulations "shall recognize the right of the inmates to the free exercise of their religious belief, and to worship God according to the dictates of their consciences."

Reviewing the proof submitted by the parties, the Court concluded that the differences between Shi'i and Sunni practices warranted the relief requested. It opined that "the differences between the historical and doctrinal beliefs, as well as the religious practices, of the two groups are significant. The Court also took note that Cancel's petition was denied based on the opinion of the Imam, the very individual who is alleged to be guilty of religious discrimination. This did not provide a rational basis for the denial of the grievance."²⁴

In essence, DOCS was ordered to make accommodation for the freedom of religious practice for Shi'i inmates in Fishkill. As a result of the Cancel case, DOCS increased its program with a statewide Protocol in August 2001. The goal was to increase Shi'i inmate access to DOCS' sanctioned religious services and classes and not to be harassed or discriminated against based on their religious beliefs.

DOCS issued specific guidelines to accommodate the needs of Shi'i inmates in a Protocol for Shi'ite Muslims Programs and Practices dated Oct 26, 2001. Article II of the document states,

"The Department will endeavor to consult with ecclesiastical authorities on Shi'ite Islam in the community at large (including but not limited to, individual Shi'ite Muslim scholars and clergy and Shi'ite Muslim organizations) for purposes of obtaining advice and guidance in the Department's efforts to reasonably accommodate the religious needs of its Shi'ite Muslim inmates."

The Cancel case was to have major ramifications in the prison system. DOCS was forced to revise its policies toward Shi'i inmates which, in the Court's view, were

discriminatory. Encouraged by the outcome of his petition, other Shi'i inmates have sought to have Shi'ism recognized as an independent school of thought and to allow Shi'i services and texts at their facilities. Following Cancel's litigation, a Shi'i inmate at Upstate Correctional Facility, Shaheed 'Abd al-Rahman, filed a civil rights complaint under the 1st and 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution arguing that the Department of Correctional Facilities had established Sunni Islam as the official doctrine of Islam and denied Shi'i Muslims a chance to practice their faith.²⁵ His case is under consideration.

Conclusion

I have chosen to focus on the Black Shi'is, but my choice should not override the fact that there are many Whites who also accept Shi'ism. The Shi'i community has yet to realize the importance and scope of *da'wa* work in America. The few Shi'i *da'wah* institutions in existence suffer from a lack of proper direction, leadership, and funding. There is also a need for a central body that could direct the outreach activities of all the institutions.

Black Shi'ism has yet to evolve into a fully fledged movement. So far, it has been occupied with defending itself from attacks by the Wahhabis and Black Sunnis. Black Shi'is need to forge a distinct identity within and integrate into Shi'ism without compromising their distinctive black consciousness. They also need to foster an ideology that will distinguish them from other Black American movements. In addition, Black Shi'is need to nurture charismatic leadership and establish institutions in their fight against racism and socio-economic injustice within the framework of American Shi'i Islam.

NOTES

¹ Liyakat Takim, *The Shi'i experience in America* (New York: New York Press, 2009), chapter one.

² Ron Kelley, "Muslim in Los Angeles," in Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith eds., *Muslim Communities in North America*, Albany: SUNY, 1994, 160-61.

³ I am grateful to Dr. Ahmad Hashim, a Shi'i proselyte in Maryland, for sharing this information with me.

⁴ Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993, 133.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ As quoted by Sherman Jackson, "Preliminary Reflections on Islam and Black Religion," in *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square*, Zahid H. Bukhari, Sulayman S. Nyang, Mumtaz Ahmad, and John L. Esposito, eds., Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004, 206.

⁷ See Liyakat Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam*, Albany: SUNY, 2006, chapter one.

⁸ Examples are the revolts of Muhammad bin. 'Abd Allah (Nafs al-Zakiyya) (d. 762), Husayn bin 'Ali (d. 786) and Abu Saraya (d. 815). For a discussion on various 'Alid revolts against the 'Abbasids, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Early 'Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History*, London: Croom Helm, 1981; C. Huart, "'Alids," *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, eds. H. A. Gibb and J.H. Kramer, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974, 32-33.

⁹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2 volumes, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971, 2/94-5. See also Bryan Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 92.

¹⁰ Yvonne Haddad, "The Dynamics of Islamic Identity in North America," in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito, eds., *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998, p. 45.

¹¹ See <http://www.islamifc.org/test/index.php>.

¹² A *marji'* singular of *maraji'* is the most learned juridical authority in the Shi'i community whose rulings on the *shari'a* (Islamic moral-legal law) are followed by his adherents. In the absence of the twelfth Shi'i Imam, the *marji'* assumes the responsibility of re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic norms to the modern era. He is thus able to impinge on the religious and social lives of his followers.

¹³ Among the various dues that the *maraji'* receive is the *khumus*, a religious tax of twenty percent that is levied on net savings. According to Shi'i jurists, *khumus* is to be paid on income and other forms of wealth. Half of the *khumus* is to be distributed to the needy from the descendants of the Prophet, whereas the other half is to be spent for the welfare of the community.

¹⁴ This refers to the invocation, "In the name of God, the Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate."

¹⁵ On this see Sharaf al-Din al-Musawi, *Questions of Jurisprudence: A Comparative Study of Muslim Ritual Practices*, translated Liyakat Takim, Toronto: Hydery Press, 1996, chapter one.

¹⁶ This observation is based on comments made in my correspondence with a number of Shi'i inmates.

¹⁷ According to a letter written in 2000.

¹⁸ Steve Johnson, "Political Activity of Muslims in America," in Yvonne Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 119.

¹⁹ *The Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2003.

²⁰ See the examples cited by Kathleen Moore, "Muslims in Prison: Claims to Constitutional Protection of Religious Liberty," in Yvonne Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America, op. cit.*, p.141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²² According to a letter written in 2000.

²³ <http://www.scoc.state.ny.us/pdfdocs/clr01-1.pdf>; see also <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data2/circs/2nd/020030pv2.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.scoc.state.ny.us/pdfdocs/clr01-1.pdf>; see also <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data2/circs/2nd/020030pv2.pdf>.

²⁵ See *Islamic Insights*, September 2007.