

Book Proposal:

“A Minority Within a Minority: The American Shi‘i Community”

Liyakat Takim
The Department of Religious Studies
The University of Denver
Denver, CO 80208

Email: ltakim@du.edu
Phone: (303) 871-3503 (W)
(303) 690-8511 (H)

Introduction and Argument

The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of Muslims to the American shores. The increased presence and visibility of Muslims in America means that Islam can no longer be characterized as a Middle Eastern or South Asian phenomenon. Given the fact that it is the fastest growing religion in America, Islam is now a very American phenomenon.

Discussions about Islam in America have focused primarily on Sunni Muslims. This generalized analysis of Muslims in America tends to ignore the nuances that characterize and differentiate the diverse Muslim segments in America. It further obscures the understanding of the religious experience of a significant religious minority in America.

I propose to study a community that has so far received very little attention by modern western scholarship, the American Shi'i community. This study will examine the early history and contemporary religious, social, and political experience of the Shi'i Muslims in America. It will also explore the Shi'i centers, their membership, and activities. My discussion of the American Shi'is will also explore the reformulation of Shi'i law in contemporary America and the community's attempts at reaching out to the American community and the experience of the African American Shi'is.

Present Scholarship on the subject:

So far, no comprehensive study of the American Shi'i community has been undertaken. Jane Smith has devoted a few pages to the American Shi'is in her study *Islam in America*. Larry Poston has briefly tackled the issue of Shi'i proselytization

activities in his book *Islamic Da'wah in the West*. Lynda Walbridge has examined the American Shi'i community in Dearborn in her ethnographic study, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*.

Some scholars have written on aspects of Shi'ism in America in various articles. Abdulaziz Sachedina examines how the Shi'is have adapted to the challenges of living in the American milieu in "A Minority Within a Minority: The Case of the Shi'a in North America" Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (eds.) *Muslim Communities in North America*, (Albany: SUNY, 1994). Vernon Schubel has discussed the ritual activities of the Khoja Shi'i community in his "Karbala as Sacred Space Among North American Shi'a," in Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). Schubel has also examined the significance of Muharram rituals in North America in his "The Muharram Majlis: The Role of a Ritual in the Preservation of Shi'a Identity" in E. Waugh, S. M. Abu-Laban, R Qureshi , eds., *Muslim Families in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991). I have explored the challenges confronting the American Shi'i community in two articles; Liyakatali Takim, "Foreign Influences on American Shi'ism" in *The Muslim World*, 90, (Fall, 2000); and "Multiple Identities in a Pluralistic World: Shi'ism in America" in Yvonne Haddad (ed.), *From Sojourners to Citizens: Muslim Diaspora in the West* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2002). However, none of these works have studied the American Shi'i community in much detail. It is hoped that the present study will fill the gap that currently exists in our understanding of this important yet neglected Muslim community.

Description of the Study

My study of the American Shi'i community will be divided into four chapters along the following lines:

Chapter One: The Origins of the America Shi'i Community

The study will initially trace the origins of Shi'ism in America and the religious and cultural experience of the early Shi'i community. The predominance of mainly Lebanese Shi'is in the early part of the twentieth century will be contrasted with the present American Shi'i community, which is composed of highly diverse ethnic and cultural groups. In discussing the matrix of forms through which the culture of the different Shi'i groups is expressed, I intend to show that far from being a monolithic group, the Shi'i community comprises a mosaic of diverse ethnic and cultural groups that have settled in America. As a matter of fact, it is possible to speak of a 'rainbow' nature of Shi'i Islam in America.

It is important to note that the discussion of the origins of Shi'ism in America has to be contextualized within the broader framework of the experience of the early Sunni Muslims in America. This is because, in many cases, Shi'is and Sunnis arrived at the same time, worshipped together, shared similar experiences, and encountered the same challenges. As a matter of fact, in the early years of the twentieth century, it was the Islamic, rather than sectarian identity, of Muslims that was stressed. Hence, despite their sectarian differences, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims often worked together to combat the challenges they encountered. Thus, the discussion of origins of the Shi'is in America will be prefaced with a discussion of Sunni Muslims in America.

Chapter Two: The American Shi'i Community and Institutions

The influx of Shi'i migrants to America necessitated the establishment of centers and places of worship to furnish the needs of the community. Sensing the needs of the Shi'i community in America, the most prominent Shi'i spiritual leader of the time, Ayatullah al-Khu'i (d. 1992) resolved to establish the Khu'i Foundation in America in 1976. This marked the beginning of an epoch in which the Shi'i religious leadership would be actively engaged in furnishing religious guidance to its followers in the West. Gradually, the Shi'i community became engaged in providing religious centers and facilitating infrastructures that would protect and perpetuate the identity of its members. There are currently about two hundred Shi'i centers in America.

The second chapter will examine the establishment of the early Shi'i centers and how these have catered to the growing needs of the Shi'i community. Increased immigration from various parts of the world has resulted in the American Shi'i community becoming more fragmented as bonds of common faith are replaced by ties to common origins, ethnicity, and culture. The process of ethnicization involves the formation of associations that are bound by distinctive cultural and ethnic characteristics. These include shared language, cultural norms, and the affirmation of a common history of a people. The chapter will examine how members of the Shi'i community have engaged the challenges of cultural negotiations, re-definitions, and re-appropriation of a different culture, and how they have pursued different ways to adapt to the American milieu. The chapter will also argue that the ethnic characterization of Shi'i Islam reflects

the pluralistic American ambience and the part played by ethnic minorities in shaping American social and religious pluralism.

My observations on Shi'ism in North America will be based on surveys of various Shi'i centers conducted in 1997 and in 2000. I will also use a survey of Muslim youths that was conducted in 1995. Based on the various surveys, the chapter will examine the composition of the Shi'i community in America, some of the key challenges confronting it, and some of its visions and aspirations for the future.

The chapter will also compare the diverse Shi'i communities from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and the Khoja Shi'is in America. It will also contrast the experiences of two main groups within the Shi'i community, immigrant and indigenous Shi'is. What are the main challenges confronting these groups? How do the Iraqis, for example, differ from the Lebanese? How does the experience of the African community differ from that of the Pakistani community? How do these groups react to the challenges of acculturation and assimilation?

Chapter Three: Sunni - Shi'i Interaction in America

An important dimension of the Shi'i existence in America is the community's relationship with fellow Muslims. Relations between Shi'is and Sunnis in North America have been contingent on political circumstances in the Middle East. The chapter will examine how the spread of fundamentalist ideology in the Muslim world has impinged on sectarian relations in America.

The third chapter will also discuss how Saudi-Iranian political battles in the Middle East have impacted American Muslims in different spheres, creating animosity

between Shi'is and Sunnis here. The chapter will argue that polarization within the Muslim community has been further exacerbated by the influx of conservative immigrants. Immigration has resulted in the spread of a conservative spirit in many institutions, accentuating sectarian divisions and disputes between the two schools of thought. Hence, there is a tendency to replicate what prevailed abroad, making America a battleground for sectarian differences.

Chapter Four: Reformation of Islamic Law in America

The Shi'i experience in America is different from the Sunni one due to the influence exerted by Shi'i scholars who are responsible for re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic norms to the modern era. Increasingly, Shi'i jurists living in the Middle East have recognized the need to foster closer ties with their followers living in America. Besides establishing centers, they have sought to meet contemporary challenges by being more accessible to their followers and by sending emissaries to visit them.

Chapter four will examine the influence of the Shi'i scholars in the establishment of the centers and the impact that they have had in America. In recent times, a distinct genre of juridical texts called the *mustahdathat* literature has emerged from the Shi'i theological centers of Qum (Iran) and Najaf (Iraq). These include works titled, *Jurisprudence for those [Muslims] living in the West*. What is novel about these texts is that they evince increasing attempts by the Shi'i spiritual guides to respond to issues affecting the lives of Shi'is in the West. The literature is a collection of the Ayatullahs' responsa to questions posed by their followers in the West.

This chapter will also explore how living in the West has forced Shi'i jurists to rethink and reinterpret Islamic law (*shari'a*) in order to respond to the challenges of modernity. The *shari'a*, as articulated by classical jurists, became a structured normative praxis and a comprehensive system that governed personal and public demeanor. The determination of these jurists was seen as the final and only possible interpretation of the law as they posited a normative and well-defined position on them.

With this background of the development of Islamic law in the classical period, the chapter will go on to examine how living in America has forced contemporary Shi'i jurists to resort to various hermeneutical and exegetical strategies so as to respond to the challenges of contemporary times. Some jurists have argued that the juridical decisions in the past were interwoven to the political, cultural, or historical circumstances in the eighth century. Thus, they have reinterpreted and restated Islamic law, invoking various hermeneutical principles like *maslaha* (derivation and application of a juridical ruling that is in the public interest), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), *istihsan* (preference of a ruling which a jurist deems most appropriate under the circumstances) and other innovative and interpretive principles to respond to the needs of the times and to go beyond the rulings stated in the revealed texts. Will the net product of such hermeneutical legislative enterprises be to create a diversified rather than a uniform legal system?

My discussions with the scholars and regional community leaders will be conducted in the main cities where there are large Shi'i communities. There is no way of comprehending the development and interpretation of sacred texts and their implication for Muslims in America without interviewing and engaging the jurists who have played a

significant role in the exposition as well as legitimation of religious texts and the authority that is accorded to such texts.

Chapter Five: Shi'ism and American Pluralism

Besides the immigrants and American-born Shi'is, the Shi'i community in America is also composed of an increasing number of African-Americans converts and some Shi'i Sufi orders. This chapter will examine some of the outreach and proselytization (*da'wa*) activities of the Shi'i community in America. Initially, it will examine the reasons why Islam is the fastest growing religion in North America and the implications this has for the Shi'i community. To gain a comparative perspective, the chapter will also consider *da'wa* activities by the Sunni community. This will provide us a framework to examine the outreach activities of the Shi'i community. In my discussion on conversion to Shi'ism, I will also draw on the results of a survey conducted in with Shi'i inmates in various correctional facilities.

Since the events of September 11, Muslims have recognized that they cannot afford to live in impregnable fortresses and that living in a pluralistic milieu requires an active engagement with others. The events of September 11 also proved to the North American Muslim community that pluralism in North America is a social reality that it cannot escape from. In fact, many Muslims have become more visible, vocal, and extrovert while others have stressed their North American rather than homeland identity.

Both Muslims and Christians in America have realized that it is better to speak with, rather than about, the other. The increased dialogue and interaction between Muslims and Christians represent a significant paradigm shift, from attempts at

conversion of to those of conversation with the other. The chapter will examine the impact the events of September 11, 2001 had on the Shi'i community. It will also examine how the community has responded by engaging in inter-faith dialogue. It has to be remembered that for most members of the Muslim community, dialogue between people of different faiths, in an environment of mutual respect and acceptance, is a relatively new phenomenon. In their own countries, Muslims did not, generally speaking, feel the need to dialogue or converse with the other. Hence, engaging in dialogue with non-Muslims is a relatively new experience for most Muslims.

Methodology and Approach

The study will attempt to understand individual mosques/centers in terms of their internal environment - the ethnic backgrounds of their members, attitudes, and responses of leadership and constituents - and in terms of their relationship to the surrounding culture and its ethnic, social, and political institutions. My investigation into the contemporary reformulation of Islamic law will entail a meticulous examination and reconstruction of discrete components that are interspersed in different genres of classical literature. I will examine how the jurists have reinterpreted the classical formulation of Islamic law to meet the challenges of Islam in America. My investigation will also require extensive interviews with leading scholars who are engaged in the debate on Islamic hermeneutics and have challenged the classical formulations.

Expected Scholarly Outcome

This study will interest a wide range of scholars of religion, culture, international studies, and sociology who wish to comprehend the struggle by a minority religious community to acculturate and adjust in an alien cultural and political milieu. As mentioned, very little attention has been paid to the subject in modern western scholarship. Hence this study will be breaking new ground.

This study will enable scholars to understand the significance of minorities in the US, the dynamics of internal as well as external pluralism, and the role that Islam plays in America civic life. The study will further highlight exterior influences on Shi‘i American Muslims and assess the impact of the imported Shi‘i heritage on the definition of Shi‘ism in the American context. Finally, the study will also examine how the Shi‘is have drawn on their spiritual leaders to form a cohesive milieu in America and the reformation in Islamic law in America. This last portion of this book will fill an important lacuna of inquiry on the struggle between those who treat normative textual sources as timeless and sacred and those who argue that texts are anchored to a specific historical context that can be reformulated at different times in human history.