

The Caliph and the Imam, The Making of Sunnism and Shiism¹

Written by Toby Matthiesen

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Toby Matthiesen's *The Caliph and the Imam* is an important contribution to the field of Twelver Shī'ī studies. It is a voluminous work of over 700 pages with extensively long footnotes which covers the Sunnī-Shī'ī divide in the Islamic world from the death of Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632) until the present day. He argues that the 1400 year conflict has been politically motivated by policies that Muslim leaders set throughout the centuries. It examines how intra-faith and interfaith debates were motivated by dialogues between various tribes, nations, empires, and modern states. One of the great strengths of this book is the fact that it attempts to be interdisciplinary by nature. In other words, Matthiesen examines the conflict from a historical, anthropological, sociological, and religious studies approach. The book is divided into four parts. Due to the size of the work, it is impossible to provide a complete summary.

The first part examines the beginning of the division of the Muslim community from after the death of Prophet Muḥammad and the early caliphate (11/632-41/661). It examines the Shī'ī position regarding the caliphate which claims that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 41/661) and the family of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt) were ignored or repressed during the selection of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), 'Umar (d. 24/644), and 'Uthmān (d. 36/656). However, all of these narratives primarily come out of Shī'ī narratives and do not include the Sunnī position regarding these issues.

The first sentence of this section begins with the phrase, "According to Muslim tradition ..." as if all Muslim scholars are in agreement with

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the nature of the birth, life, and death of Prophet Muḥammad, and the events which came after that.

With this said, Matthiesen constantly claims to be presenting both the Shīʿī and Sunnī positions of what happened. However, the narrative reads as if he is presenting the Sunnī narrative (when he brings it in) as a response to the Shīʿī narrative.

Furthermore, from the beginning, Matthiesen never critically examines the historical sources which he narrates from. For example, he cites from al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), but does not mention whether al-Ṭabarī was a Sunnī or Shīʿī historian. Although most sources claim that he was a Jarīrī, some claim that he may have been a Shīʿī Muslim. Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī very rarely leaves a moment of history without critical examination. This would have made him as much a historiographer as a historian.

It is surprising that this book does not mention this important fact.

Throughout this section, there are important religious narratives that were not mentioned. For example, Matthiesen writes that the famous sword of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, known as Dhū al-Faḳār, “belonged to a Meccan who was killed in a fight against the Muslims at the Battle of Badr in 3/624. Thereafter, it is believed to have been one of the swords of the Prophet, who gave it to ʿAlī during the battle of Uḥud of the same year.” This is a very contested report amongst both the Sunnī and Shīʿa. Many Muslims actually argue that this sword was a gift from the Prophet which he received from heaven. Regardless of the historical reality, it would have been important for Matthiesen to mention that all of these religious artifacts have disputed origins and inform different narratives throughout the centuries.

One of the most problematic parts of this section is the fact that the Ṣūfīs are almost never mentioned when it comes to the 2nd/8th eighth centuries, respectively. In the first section, Matthiesen addresses the important figures who founded the four schools of Sunnī law and early Shīʿī figures. But he never mentions Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), and other early figures. Being

prominent Sunnī mystics, these are all figures who either influenced Sunnī positions on the family of the Prophet, or were in direct contact with the family and therefore had their own positions, which may have also influenced Shīʿī portrayals of the family of the Prophet. Despite this, Matthiesen still adequately covers major aspects of how the first centuries of Islam created the leavens of the dispute between the two largest groups of Muslims.

The second section examines how various Muslim empires dealt with the dispute within their polities. One of the greatest sections of this part is the fact that it was much more inclusive of the various groups of Islam, which informed the Sunnī-Shīʿī narratives and disputes. For example, this section begins with an examination of how the Safavid dynasty's Ṣūfī origins influenced how they dealt with different forms of Ṣūfī orders. For examples, they were antagonistic towards Sunnī Ṣūfīs, but were sympathetic to what he calls Shīʿī Ṣūfī orders.

However, certain glaring mistakes cause one to wonder whether proper research was done with respect to the shrine culture in Iran. For example, Matthiesen writes that there was a shrine built in honour of the murderer of ʿUmar. However, unlike other shrines which he examines, he fails to mention that this shrine was a major site of pilgrimage for Persian Shīʿī Muslims until very recently. In his discussion of the Friday prayer, Matthiesen never mentions the fact that the famous Shīʿī philosopher and jurist, Mīr Dāmād (d. 1031/1631), was essential in re-mandating this prayer for all Shīʿī Muslims. Nonetheless, his discussions on the relations between the gunpowder empires and other empires, and the role of these relationships with respect to Shīʿī-Sunnī polemics, remains groundbreaking.

The last two sections continue to address how the age of colonialism and post-colonisation informs the ongoing Sunnī-Shīʿī crises. Matthiesen's discussion of how regional powers in the Middle East informed the crises between the Sunnī and Shīʿa is essential to any course on modern Islamic political thought. Furthermore, he demonstrates how many of these powers have been able to invoke

historical imagery to bolster their own religious narratives and policies. Matthiesen accurately analyses how Shī'ī and Sunnī religious leaders have been able to inform religious feelings and thought in South Asia in a manner which is rarely found.

The Caliph and the Imam is a welcome addition to the study of Islam. Many sections of this book are useful for courses such as an "Introduction to Islamic Political Thought" or even "Introduction to Islam". However, the work could have been improved by including narratives from early Ṣūfī and philosophical figures.

Also, although Matthiesen writes that he approaches this work from a religious studies perspective, he never introduces any modern or critical theorists to his approach to Sunnī or Shī'ī narratives. Surely, concepts such as Michel Foucault's archive could have been used in how he understood hadith narratives of both groups.

Furthermore, although this is not due to any fault of the author, this work required proper copy-editing. For example, the entire work lacks proper spaces between periods (.) and subsequent sentences. Also, there is inconsistency with respect to the use of Islamic calendar dates throughout the work. Nonetheless, this work is an important contribution to the study of Shiism and Sunnism.