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Sectarianism in Islam. The Umma Divided

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الكلمات المفتاحية: التنوع العقدي، كتب الفرق، الذكريات الجماعية، الفتنة والانفصال، الخلافة، الإمامة

Adam Gaiser is Professor of Religion at Florida State University (Tallahassee, Florida). *Sectarianism in Islam* is his third book. Gaiser's previous writings encompass the history of early Ibādism and the memory of Khārijism. His new book offers refreshing perspectives on the intricate issue of sectarianism in Islam and the genesis of doctrinal diversity in the Islamicate world.

The book is introduced by a comprehensive discussion of the methodological challenges associated with the study of sectarianism (p. 1-26). The introduction is followed by six thematic chapters. The second chapter synthesizes the history of Islamic sects and schools (p. 26-57). Chapters 3 and 4 provide a thorough examination of the first opposition movements, namely the Khārijites (p. 57-86) and the Shī'ā (p. 86-126). Gaiser then proceeds to what he calls the "schools of thought," that is, the Murji'a and the Mu'tazila (p. 126-147). Sunnism is ultimately examined as the latest Islamic trend to emerge (p. 147-66). The final chapter revisits the initial challenges discussed in the introduction and offers comprehensive insights into Islamic sectarianism as a historical and contextualized phenomenon (p. 166-185). The conclusion emphasizes the primary takeaways and the unanswered questions that necessitate further research in the future (p. 185-192).

The book's introduction poses a straightforward question: what is the rationale for reading a book on Muslim sects and schools? A. Gaiser recalls that this topic resonates profoundly with contemporary conflicts besetting the Muslim world. The ongoing wars in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have strengthened the prevailing sectarian interpretive framework, prompting scholars, journalists and politicians to seek the

origins of the division in the medieval period. The first civil war (*fitna*) has long been interpreted as the pivotal moment when Islamic trends such as Shī'ism, Khārijism and Sunnism acquired their distinctive doctrinal identities.

While this assertion is not altogether erroneous, considering these doctrinal identities as being immutable since the middle of the 1st/7th century is misleading. Gaiser accurately points out that "these sectarian classifications are meant to 'make sense' of conflict in the Islamic world by providing their readers a means to navigate that world, and they gain legitimacy as explanatory devices insofar as they reflect the ways that some Muslims articulate the underlying causes of their conflicts" (p. 1). Consequently, the *longue durée* must be regarded with a degree of skepticism. The author posits that this phenomenon impedes the understanding of the intricate and frequently interwoven history of sectarian identification.

In contrast, A. Gaiser eschews identity as a rigid interpretive framework. He persuasively contends that religious identity is a pragmatic and malleable apparatus through which stakeholders position themselves within a fragmented and contested religious field. Such positions have undergone constant evolution throughout history. From this perspective, the sectarian identity of a religious group can no longer be encapsulated in a single original event. The phenomenon is better explained by reference to a particular socio-political context.

The following pages are devoted to a critical examination of the contentious issues raised by the terms "sectarian" and "sectarianism." These terms have their origins in Christian theology, as expressed in Latin and Western thought, where they are characterized by a marked negative connotation. From Weber and Troeltsch to Cook and Sedgwick, A. Gaiser synthesizes the seminal works that have touched upon this methodological issue. He highlights the diversity of Arabic terminology (*firqa*, *nihla*, *madhhab*) employed by the Islamic sources, and the challenges associated with their translation. He posits that there is not adequate English term that could accurately substitute for "sect." Accordingly, sectarianism is defined as an affiliation, and sect is understood to refer to "groups that *differed with each other* rather than with some 'parent group' or normative society" (p. 13).⁽¹⁾

(1) Gaiser's italics.

How then can we identify a sectarian group? The question was raised long ago by Hodgson for Shi'ism.⁽²⁾ Is there any criterion that allows one to differentiate a sectarian group from one that is not? In other words, what is Gaiser's justification for including the "schools of thought" – that is the Murji'a and the Mu'tazila – within the scope of his book, while excluding Sufism and the schools of law?

The primary focus of Gaiser's approach is the compelling "narrative-identification" methodology (p. 14-24) which is further developed from Somers' works as well as Brubaker and Cooper's. Accordingly, the inherent instability of the sectarian affiliations can be addressed by investigating how individuals continually reshape the group's narratives and therefore redefine its boundaries. Such a narrative delineates a specific path to salvation that enables the group's members to differentiate themselves from those who have strayed and will face retribution. Contrary to the notion of immutable groups whose identities could be reduced to a set of essentialized sectarian doctrines, the movements studied by A. Gaiser are caught in a state of constant evolution. The substantial extent awarded by Gaiser to the soteriological criterion is convincing and provides a persuasive explanation for the exclusion of particular groups. Although the Murji'a and the Mu'tazila differentiated themselves from the Shi'ites, the Khārijites, and the Sunnis by their philosophical-theological oriented approaches, they nevertheless developed sectarian narratives.

Gaiser's rationale expands upon the narrative-identification approach, emphasizing the multi-layered and overlapping nature of these narratives. He suggests defining a *firqa* or a sect/school "as participatory narrative of intra-religious difference that accretes institutionalized forms through the collective weight of the Muslims who choose to emplot themselves within it. In other words, Muslim sects and schools are here treated as accumulating stories, or grand or master narratives, in which Muslims partake, especially insofar as these narratives stake out particularized claims to religious distinctiveness" (p. 20).

Insofar as the socio-political and geographical context is pivotal for understanding religious sectarianism, Gaiser dedicates his second chapter to a chronological outline of Islamic history from Muḥammad to the gunpowder empires (p. 26-57). In the aftermath of Muḥammad's death, the *umma*

witnessed a schism surrounding the complex issue of the succession. The conquests and the formation of a worldwide caliphate led to profound socio-political transformations and generated tensions that culminated with the assassination of the third caliph, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān. Gaiser postulates that "it is with the first *fitna* that the seeds of Muslim sectarianism, planted at the death of the Prophet and rooted in the soil of late antiquity, first sprouted" (p. 39).

The Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd periods are characterized by significant political and doctrinal development, including the emergence of *fiqh* – "a comprehensive roadmap for pious living" (p. 44-45) – and a quest for a broader consensus among the proto-Sunnīs. Gaiser postulates that the 'Abbāsīd period witnessed an increasing inclusion of believers within an extended, albeit loosely delineated, category henceforth called Sunnism. The aforementioned factors prompted the marginalization of non-Sunnī Islamic trends, such as Shi'ism and Ibādism, which consequently led to a cooling down of the political and religious tensions. The chapter culminates with the transition from horsepower to gunpowder, which coincided with the establishment of the Mamluk and Ottoman empires. At this juncture, the geographical distribution of non-Sunnī communities is scrutinized. Indeed, the accelerating centralization of power resulted in a heightened need to integrate marginal movements, which had become established in peripheral regions, into the political apparatus.

From chapter 3 to chapter 7, A. Gaiser methodically examines the historical development and doctrinal tenets of various sectarian movements. Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to the first opposition movements that flourished throughout the 1st/7th century. The Khārijites and the Shi'a underwent marked development as cohesive groups in the aftermath of the first *fitna*. A. Gaiser provides a valuable introduction to the history of these movements, emphasizing their internal diversity. The Khārijites and their sense of martyrdom (*shirā'*) are situated in their Late Antique context. Gaiser's analysis unveils the doctrinal and political schisms that divided the movement between a radical branch (Azāriqa and Najdiyya) and a moderate one (Ibāḍiyya and Ṣūfriyya). The chapter interrogates the formation of an Ibāḍī community in Baṣra (Iraq) and outlines the political achievements of Ibāḍīs in North Africa and Oman. With regard to the Shi'a, Gaiser recalls the historical origins of the movement which are traced from the narrative of Ghadir Khumm to the Battle of Karbalā', through Ṣiffīn and 'Alī's murder. He then transitions to the Ghulāt – and their Nuṣayrī offshoots – as well as the Zaydiyya (p. 92-101). These

(2) Marsham G.S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 75/1, 1955, p. 1-13.

groups advocated armed violence and revolted during the 7th and the 8th centuries. The ensuing sections are devoted to an examination of moderate Imāmī Shī'is and to Ismā'ilism.

The chapter on Muslim schools of thought and the Sunnī consensus emphasizes the evolution of political sectarian trends into theological movements. Gaiser recalls that early Murji'ism was not initially quietist, as indicated by al-Ḥārith b. Surayj's revolt (p. 127-131). The assertion is equally applicable to the Qadariyya (p. 136-138) and the Mu'tazila (p. 138-146). The formation and development of Islamic theology is closely related to the cooling-down atmosphere of the 'Abbāsīd period that Gaiser posits in the introduction. The caliphate had by then become the dominant institution. The initial conflicts surrounding the political legitimacy of the caliphs had dissipated, thereby facilitating the emergence of extensive debates on the relationship between God and man.

Meanwhile, the endeavor to reach a consensus among the majority – known as proto-Sunnism – resulted in the widespread acceptance of the principle of *luzūm al-jamā'a*, “cleaving to the community.” Adherence to the model of the Prophet, the *sunna*, which, in turn, prompted the collection of ḥadīth, was paramount. The figure of Muḥammad offered a unifying and universal example that could lay the grounds for the reunification of diverse proto-Sunnī trends. In the field of theology, Sunnism is characterized as “a complex tapestry of theological positions that coalesced slowly” (p. 156-157). A. Gaiser underscores the nebulous and interwoven nature of Sunnism, which “would become a blending of many solutions, but what fused and then held them all together was the vision, itself a carefully constructed memory, of a unified Muslim community and the promise of the *jamā'a*” (p. 150).

The purpose of chapter seven is to offer overarching remarks on Islamic sectarianism that echo the introductory rationale on sectarianism (p. 166-185). A. Gaiser emphasizes the flexible nature of sectarian identification. Affiliation with a movement entails the adoption of its narrative, yet it also manifests as a pragmatic strategy for self-positioning within a specific context. Consequently, sectarian identities do not offer an immutable and atemporal framework for the interpretation of medieval Islamic societies. Furthermore, the author accurately contends that a thematic study of sectarian movements has the potential to hinder scholars and students from perceiving moments when coexistence prevails over religious conflicts. The application of sectarian taxonomies resulted in the prominence of contentious

subjects, while an alternative approach, whether social or economic, would have given rise to a more interconnected and overlapping history. The author posits a critical question: “is it better to unthink the strong boundaries separating what we now imagine as reified *fīraq* in the early Islamic period, imagining instead permeable identities that allow for multiple and less defined allegiances?” (p. 167). Insofar as “language and the organization of knowledge are human endeavors, tied to the times and places where they are employed, and bounded by the agendas of those who employ them” (p. 184), one must therefore be careful not to overemphasize the sectarian affiliation.

Gaiser's new book is well-written. It is a must-read for any student interested in Islamic religious and political history. *Sectarianism in Islam* offers a valuable and easily readable synthesis on doctrinal pluralism that has prevailed in the Islamic empire since the first *fitna*. The historical outline is closely related to an overarching and always rigorous exposition of the doctrinal stances that characterized these sectarian movements.

The author does not overlook challenges posed by source material and historiographical debates. It is particularly true in the chapters dedicated to Khārijism and to the Shī'ī Ghulāt. A. Gaiser highlights the extent to which the narratives concerning these radical movements were produced by external scholars whose objective was to vilify what they perceived to be a threat to public order and political stability.

The book contains a map of the Islamic world and a genealogical tree of the Shī'ī imams. The chapters addressing Khārijism and Shī'ism are enriched by historical materials, including a coin minted by a Khārijite leader, a stamp bearing the effigy of an Ibādī imam, and an Iranian stamp commemorating the day of Ghadīr Khumm. The glossary, which is located at the end of the book, is commendable for its comprehensiveness and utility in elucidating the fundamental concepts. The bibliography is extensive, despite the lack of French references that would have been beneficial. Terrier's methodological paper on the application of concepts such as “sect” and “heresy” in Islamic studies could have enhanced the introduction.⁽³⁾ X. De Planhol's theory regarding the religious geography of minority groups, which was recently discussed by J.-P. Van Staëvel, also appears to

(3) Mathieu Terrier, « L'hérésie: un concept transposable ? », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 184, 2018, p. 143-156.

be lacking.⁽⁴⁾ Ultimately, chapter seven revisits issues previously addressed in the introduction, which may result in the perception of redundancy at some point. Its articulation with the subsequent conclusion prompts the question whether it would have been more appropriate to merge chapter seven with the last conclusive pages.

At the end of the day, Islamic sectarianism must be regarded as a dynamic historical phenomenon. The interpretation of these phenomena is contingent upon a meticulous and rigorous investigation of the context within which these affiliations were produced and mustered. In contrast to the chapters on Sunnism and schools of thought, the chapter on Shī'ism distinctly demonstrates the extent to which sectarianism coalesces into narratives and primarily materializes in daily life rather than in theological debates. Rituals, mosque attendance, and pilgrimage all serve to express sectarian belonging that in turn contributes to the strengthening of boundaries between groups (see especially p. 103-104). A thorough investigation into these markers, encompassing their genesis within legal discourses and their significance across public spaces, along with their historical evolution, is poised to foster renewed research on Islamic pluralism and doctrinal diversity.

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(4) Xavier de Planhol, *Le monde islamique. Essai de géographie religieuse*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1957 ; id., *Minorités en Islam. Géographie politique et sociale*, Paris, Flammarion, 1997. See also Jean-Pierre Van Staëvel, « Sociétés de montagne et réforme religieuse en terre d'islam. Un autre versant du processus d'islamisation », *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 135, 2014, p. 13-32.