

Taqiya – The Dictate of Secrecy in Emergency

Christine Schirrmacher

Rivalry and animosity characterized the relationship between Sunni and Shiite Muslims from the very start, the key issue being the legitimacy of rule, but there were also disputes about the “correct” text of the Koran and the “correct” tradition, as well as numerous legal questions, with each side accusing the other of “unbelief” and “heresy” till today.

Shiites have at times suffered persecution from Sunni rulers and dynasties such as the Umayyads and Abbasids, and their places of pilgrimage have again and again been destroyed by Sunnis. In modern Saudi-Arabia, which recognizes only Sunni-Wahhabite Islam as the true faith, Shiites do not enjoy genuine freedom of religion and are often regarded with suspicion if not animosity. As a result many conceal their affiliation with the Shiite community. The same is often true in the Gulf States. The Shiite minority is all too often suspected of lack of identification with or loyalty to the Sunni regime, and of entertaining relations with Shiite circles in Iran with a view to overthrowing the government and introducing the Iranian revolution. Fear of subversion has often led the Gulf States and Saudi-Arabia to deport Shiite groups regardless of whether they were in fact politically active or not.

The centuries-old and sometimes severe persecution of their minority community led Shiites to take the view that in such an emergency they should either emigrate or compulsorily conceal their faith to avoid unnecessary martyrdom

and protect themselves and their community. This practice of taqiya, meaning “prudence” or “concealment” seems to have arisen under the strict Sunni rule of the Abbasids in the 8th century AD.¹ Justification was found in Surah 16.106, which exonerates from divine wrath on voluntary unbelievers those who “are externally driven to unbelief although their heart has found eternal rest in faith”. The Koran extends these dispensations to other emergencies such as threat of starvation or fear of non-Muslim enemies, in which case one is allowed to eat meat which has not been ritually slaughtered (6.119) and to entertaining friendships with “unbelievers” (3.28). The term taqiya later came to be synonymous with “hide”, “conceal” or even “lie”, and “practising taqiya” meant dissimulation to deceive others. The term taqiya today is also applied to Da’wah (the call or invitation to Islam), meaning to proceed in a tactical way in order to proselytize.

Even Sunni theologians accept the principle of taqiya. One of the most famous, al-Tabari (died 855) gave the following interpretation of Surah 16.106: “If any one is compelled and professes unbelief with his tongue, while his heart contradicts him, in order to escape his enemies, no blame falls on him, because God takes his servants as their hearts be-

¹ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism*, New Haven/London, 1985, p. 39.

lieve.”² Others held the view that *taqiya* was to be recommended for women, children and handicapped but not binding on single persons, who could bear persecution as long as it was limited to prison or non-fatal beating.³

The opinion of the vast majority of Shiites is that the persecuted believer should practise “prudence” or “dissimulation” and pretend to be Sunni to avoid persecution.⁴ Some Shiite scholars even went so far as teach publically as Sunni theologians while secretly presiding over their Shiite communities.⁵ Genuine equality and mutual recognition between Sunnis and Shiites has never been attained in Muslim history and theology.

² al-Tabari. *Tafsir*, Bulak 1323, XXIV,122, quoted from R. Strothmann-[Mokhtar-Djebli]. *Taqiyya*. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, Leiden 2000, pp.134-136, see p. 134

³ *Ibid.* p. 134.

⁴ Only the Shii group of the Zaidites is against *taqiya*.

⁵ Momen. *Introduction*, pp. 319-320 mentions some examples.