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Approaches to Muslim Sects and Schools

Why Read a Book on Muslim Sects and Schools?

This is a book about intra-religious divisions among Muslims – what medieval Muslims might have called *fīraq* (sing. *fīraqa*), or *nihāl* (sing. *nihla*), and contemporary Muslims might call *ṭawāʿif* (sing. *ṭāʿifa*) or *madhāhib* (sing. *madhhab*). That is to say, it is a book about how Muslims have, over the course of their long history and in the many geographical areas where they found themselves, forged and often reformed divergent notions of what it means to be a Muslim. This process might be called “sectarianism,” or even “Islamic sectarianism,” though the moniker is fraught with problems, not the least of which being that several of the recognized divisions (*fīraq*) among Muslims (e.g. Muʿtazilites and Murjiʿites) would not technically qualify as being “sects” according to the myriad scholarly definitions of that term. To account for this particular issue, this work focuses on Muslim sects and “schools,” meaning here schools of thought, as a means of approaching what Muslim authors might have implied when they described these groups as *fīraq*, *nihāl*, *madhāhib*, or *ṭawāʿif*.

At the outset, it is worth asking after the purpose of such a book. Why read it? On the face of it, it would seem that current world conditions make the answers to these questions obvious: communal unrest or outright violence in Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen, and Pakistan (to name a few) often gets articulated in sectarian terms, not only by the actors and the victims of such violence but also by the various journalists, anchors, and writers whose task it is to report and explain these events to the rest of the world. For many popular media outlets, affiliations, such as Sunni or Shiʿa, offer convenient identity markers by bounding groups by their communal affiliation. 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. Indeed, many

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Sunnis and Shi‘a, among others, employ sectarian categories as a means to identify themselves, or as the basis for polemics (as a simple search of the Internet will show), or as a reason to engage in violence. Journalists, then, can accurately claim that their reporting reflects “local” perceptions of the situation on the ground.

Explanations that aim to be taken as more sophisticated often come seasoned with historical accounts of the first disputes among Muslims over the succession to the Prophet Muḥammad, and of the subsequent sectarian divisions that developed therefrom. In this way, contemporary conflicts between different kinds of Muslims receive a history, and sectarian conflict is presented as part and parcel of the meta-historical narrative of Muslims. Thus, the seemingly inherent nature of sectarian conflict, or – in its more sophisticated form – the *longue durée* approach to Islamic sectarianism, would be assumed to do the work of “explaining” contemporary instances of communal tension, intra-religious polemic, or violence. The simple invocation of “Sunni” or “Shi‘a” or other identifiers such as “Wahhābī,” “Salafī,” and “Aḥmadī” are assumed to be sufficient in and of themselves as explanatory devices. Or these conflicts are presented with reference to the origins and presumed longevity of sectarian monikers over the long course of Islamic history.

These lines of thinking remain flawed in several fundamental ways. First, the simplistic invocation of “Sunni” and “Shi‘a” (or other identifiers) as explanatory devices for contemporary polemic or conflict in the Islamic world falls apart when we encounter the equally numerous examples of Sunnis and Shi‘a, to which we could add the Ibāḍiyya, living together in relative harmony. In other words, simply being Sunni, Shi‘a, or Ibāḍī is not enough to automatically create conflict with other Muslims of a different communal affiliation. More to the point, this all-too-common move to essentialize Muslim sectarian identities obscures the very interesting questions of how Muslims acquire, maintain, and manipulate their communal affiliations, as well as the extent to which such affiliations might overlap or break down altogether. After all, Muslims are not born Sunni, Shi‘a, or Ibāḍī (nor were they born Khārijites, Murji‘ites, or Mu‘tazilites in the medieval periods), but must first imbibe the meanings of such associations before they themselves go on to determine the extent to which such affiliations matter. Accordingly, the existence of historical figures who defy easy categorization as Sunni, Shi‘a, or other (such as Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī, Hajī Bektāsh Veli, or Timurlane, to name a few) tends to erode confidence in the utility of sectarian markers as fixed taxonomies of identification.

Also concealed by the essentializing of sectarian identifications is the question of when, and under what conditions, sectarian differences can be mustered in the service of polemic or violence. It conceals what “activates” sectarian affiliations and makes them “gain the salience needed to elicit a shift in levels of self-definition” to the point that such groups become willing to engage in confrontation.¹ It must be noted that sectarian difference, here to be treated as a form of intra-religious identification, often stands alongside of (and sometimes in competition with) other modes of identification. For example, a person’s primary outlook might also be global-humanist, interreligious, ethnic, linguistic, familial, tribal, national, or even ritual/performative (among others). In order to become a dominant mode of self-identification, sect/school identities must be imbued with significant meaning, so much so that sectarian differences begin to stand in front of other types of identification, including Qur’an-grounded exhortations toward unity among Muslims that are embedded in the concept of the *umma* (the Islamic community writ large). Moreover, in order to effect violence sect identifications must overcome the barriers to action that seem to characterize studies of human behavior. Confrontation requires significant time and energy (as any who have engaged in formal debates know), and thus a good many, if not most, people seek to evade it by tolerating or simply ignoring other people. Moments of sectarian “activation,” then, remain necessarily grounded in specifically charged, and often local, circumstances and may involve a whole host of social, political, economic, and religious issues. Simply pointing toward sectarian affiliation, therefore, obscures the ways that a given group of Muslims in a given time and place “activate” such identifications with the purpose of resisting, confronting, or possibly fighting other types of Muslims.

Equally limiting is the assumption that the *longue durée* history of sectarian difference can be marshaled to explain modern instances of violence in which sect identification is a factor. This is not to say that the long history of Islamic sects and schools is unimportant, but rather to stress that the origin and development of various Muslim groups goes only so far as a means of elucidating contemporary conflicts between, for example, Sunnis and Shi’ites.² History and its role in bolstering

¹ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 10.

² Many journalistic accounts of contemporary sectarian conflicts in the Islamic world do not end up providing much in the way of actual historical analysis, and thus do not really qualify as *longue durée* explanations. Many tend to provide accounts of the early succession debates, or perhaps the Battle of Siffin, but then jump to the present. Implicit in such a move is the idea that Islamic sectarianism is a phenomenon with a long history (despite the fact that authors often do not provide much of that history), and that this longevity “explains” recent iterations of sectarian conflict among Muslims. In essence, such

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sectarianism remains only part of this story. Historical narratives of sect identification illuminate the trajectory of ideas through time, and explain some of their inertia. However, references to events of the seventh century CE cannot explain the activities of twentieth-century actors. Thus, the recent violence between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'a (and the many non-Iraqis that joined in that conflict) must be elucidated, in large part, with reference to the recent history of Iraq: that is, the Iranian Revolution of 1978 that pitted a revolutionary vision of a Shi'ite-inspired Islamic government against Saddam Hussein's secular-socialist totalitarianism; the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq in which Saddam Hussein treated Shi'ites as a fifth column; the First Gulf War with its doomed Shi'ite uprising in southern Iraq; the Second Gulf War and the rise of various Sunni and Shi'ite militias; and so on (to mention but a limited number of these factors, and briefly at that).³ So too, sectarian conflicts in Bahrain, Pakistan, Lebanon, and the Yemen must be approached by weighting the recent histories of those countries. A *longue durée* history of sectarian difference will certainly contribute to this project, but it will not ultimately explain the core issues driving these local struggles.

A third and rather insidious assumption underlying the move to explain contemporary violence and confrontation in Islamdom is the supposition that such violence is inherently religious in nature, and thus must be explained with reference to religious categories of identification. Setting aside the problems of defining "religious" violence, it is worth noting how this assumption tacitly favors a "secular" view of conflicts where religion or religious affiliations play a role. According to such a view, removing religion from the equation (presumably by introducing a "secular" element) should remove the main driver of violence. However, not only do religious identifications seem to play a contingent role in such conflicts (recalling that sectarian affiliation must be "activated" in some fashion, usually involving social, political, economic, or other motivators), but such an assumption relies on views toward religion that mark it as irrational due to its emotional appeal, instable in the public sphere, and given to provoking extreme ("fanatical," "zealous") responses in human beings. Such a simplistic view of religion is to be avoided on principle, to say nothing of how it obscures the complex of factors (including whatever we might designate as the "religious") that contribute to specific instances of tension or violence in the world.

treatments use the cover of history to essentialize Islamic sectarianism as a driver of contemporary violence between Muslims.

³ See Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 32ff.

For all of these reasons, a book on Islamic sects and schools that provides descriptions and history of the main Muslim *firaq* will be of limited use to those who seek an understanding of the conflicts plaguing the Muslim world today. Consequently, this work is emphatically not a book that deals with today's sectarian conflicts: it ends its analysis before the twelfth/eighteenth century, and does not highlight the topic of religious violence as such. It is, on the other hand, a book about Muslims and their differences: specifically, the kind of intra-Islamic differences that are tied to religious rituals, histories, beliefs, and other kinds of things. It is a book that navigates the long development of these religious differences among Muslims, and charts the subsequent ways by which such differences were periodically made to stand between them as a marker of their specific intra-religious affiliations. And herein lies the value of an exploration of Muslim sects and schools. Religious identification turns out to be a complex process, shaped by innumerable factors, and insofar as these divergent means of articulating "Islam" allow for an appreciation of the development of different Islamic perspectives, it also illuminates the ways that human beings create identities for themselves and others. The questions raised in the preceding paragraphs about how Muslims acquire, maintain, and manipulate communal affiliations, the extent to which such affiliations might overlap or break down altogether, as well as the question of how local circumstances affect the "activation" of sect identification provide the guiding principles behind this exploration. A welcome side benefit to this approach is that it explodes the idea of a monolithic Islam, and of fixed sectarian or school identifications that can be adopted "as is" for any occasion. The rich texture of Islamic thought, herein examined through the lens of sects and schools, reflects the diversity of human thought. And if this work does nothing more than allow a glimpse into the complex, sometimes sublime, too-often tragic workings of the fellow human beings that call themselves Muslim, then it will have succeeded.

Narratives of Muslim Sects and Schools

What is a sect, and what is a "school of thought"? And why use two different English terms as the equivalent of what in Islamic literature is usually rendered by a singular term? To answer these questions, we must approach the ways that the metanarratives, what Somers also calls the "master narratives" and I have often called the "grand narratives," of sect/school division were and are articulated.⁴ Medieval Muslim historians and theologians developed several concepts and taxonomies to help them

⁴ Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity," 619ff.

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explain the existence of, and navigate their place among, the *firaq*. As we are largely dependent on the sources that they created for our own understanding of Muslim sects and schools, it behooves us to examine the ways that they conceptualized their subject. And for the same reason, we must first scrutinize the ways that we, as students and researchers in English-speaking (part of the so-called Western) academies, have inherited a discourse about sects and philosophical/theological schools of thought that guide the way that we speak and think about religious difference.

The English word “sect” derives from the Latin *secta*, meaning “manner, mode, following, school of thought,” or, literally, “way” or “road.” However, a common mistake, dating back even to the medieval period, was to derive the word from the Latin verb *secare* (“to cut”), thus giving the idea of a sect as something that breaks off or branches off from a main group.⁵ Medieval Christians often applied the term “sect” to denote schismatics, and therefore heretics. In other words, they used it to describe those who were perceived to have deviated from true Christianity in the eyes of whatever body was making the accusation of schism. As a modern term, the popular notion of sectarianism has retained something of this polemical and pejorative sense, though academic definitions of sectarianism attempt, with varying degrees of success, to define sectarianism in a more neutral fashion. Also noteworthy is how both of the connotations of sect (as a subgroup of a religious or philosophical system, and usually as an offshoot of a larger group) inform the ways that term is understood. In fact, many academic definitions of “sect” and “sectarianism” have not deviated far from these core usages, though they have offered some important insights along the way.

Contemporary academic discussions about sectarianism begin with one of the founders of modern sociology, the German intellectual Karl Emil Maximilian (“Max”) Weber (d. 1920). Weber interested himself in the study of human social behavior, its origins and development, organizations and institutions. As an aspect of these concerns, he offered the first sociological characterization of a sect, which he contrasted with the institution of the church. Weber was interested in these institutions insofar as they provided ideal types, highlighting certain contrasting features of human social organization for the purposes of comparison.⁶ Specifically, Weber was interested in refuting Marx’s contention that social institutions were rooted in the economic substructure of society, aiming to show that religion could operate as an independent variable in

⁵ www.etymonline.com/word/sect#etymonline_v_23088.

⁶ Swatos, “Weber or Troeltsch?” 131.

history.⁷ For Weber, churches had certain features such as professional priesthoods, dogmas and rites, claims to universal domination; and they were compulsory organizations, meaning that the church's claims to truth went beyond individuals, compelling the church to discipline those who deviated from it.⁸ This last point on the mode of membership provided for one of the main differences between churches and sects: people were born into churches, but they chose to be part of sects. This mode of membership, thereby, affected how a person acted in relation to the institution, as the church remained a "compulsory association for the administration of grace," while the sect offered a "voluntary association for religiously qualified persons."⁹ Sects thus rejected the institutionalized grace of the church for the personal salvation offered by the sect. This meant that membership in the sect required specific actions, and unqualified members were removed from the group.¹⁰ Weber also claimed that sects resisted hierarchies while churches maintained hierarchies of persons who dispensed grace, and that sects were generally apolitical, desiring to be left alone, in contrast to churches that remained tied to the world.¹¹

Weber's ideas were taken up and elaborated upon by one of his colleagues, another German intellectual, Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923). As a theologian, Troeltsch hoped to relate different kinds of religious experience to various kinds of social teachings, and to thereby discover a solution to the problems facing Christians in the modern era. He thus emphasized the social behavior of churches and sects over the particular forms of social organization that they maintained.¹² Churches, he argued, tended to accommodate the state, becoming in the process associated with the ruling classes, and thus part of the social order.¹³ This willingness to compromise with the world was predicated on the church's presumed ability to remain sanctified despite individual inadequacies. Thus, the sanctity of the church superseded the individual pieties of the persons that comprised it. Sects, on the other hand, aspired toward inward perfection and personal fellowship, treating the wider society sometimes with indifference and tolerance, but often with protest or open hostility. Indeed, for Troeltsch the very values of the sect existed as a remonstrance of those of the wider society. For this reason, they tended to break from the church, and to exist among the lower classes of society and those who did not get on well with the state. For sect members, attainment of salvation existed

⁷ Coleman, "Church-Sect Typology and Organizational Precariousness," 55.

⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1164. ⁹ Weber, *From Max Weber*, 314.

¹⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1204–5. ¹¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1208.

¹² Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 133.

¹³ Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 331ff.

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in tension with secular interests and institutions. Thus, for Troeltsch, the church represented an institution of grace that was enmeshed in the wider world of politics and society, while the sect presented a smaller, voluntary group that stressed individual, demonstrated ethical behavior apart from the world.

Weber and Troeltsch's typologies were heavily invested in the language and history of Christianity. They posited sects as voluntary, apolitical groups that existed in tension with their universalist parent groups, the church. Not only did their typologies draw explicitly from the history of the Catholic/Protestant splits in Europe, but both offered less a definition of church and sect, and more an attempt to establish these ideals as heuristic tools that would illuminate certain features of human social organization through comparison. Weber's aim in developing the typology was precisely to understand why capitalism and the idea of secular democracy seemed to develop only among Protestant Christians. For his part, Troeltsch hoped to find an answer to the problem of the Christian's relation to the modern world, concluding that because of its relation to society at large, the church offered the better solution.

Weber and Troeltsch's church-sect typology was itself then picked up by an American theologian, Helmut Richard Niebuhr (d. 1962), who treated churches and sects as poles on a continuum, rather than as distinct categories. Niebuhr's insight was to show how sects tended to become more church-like with time. As new generations populated the sects, and as their ways became fixed, "the original impetus to reject the norms and activities of the dominant society" gave way to acceptance.¹⁴ Following Niebuhr, several contemporary sociologists and scholars of religion have offered elaborations of the church-sect typology, many of which developed it into full-fledged definitions of various church or sect-types, creating what has been called "quasi-evaluative" devices.¹⁵ Thus, for example, Becker expanded the church-sect model to include denominations and ecclesia.¹⁶ Yinger enlarged Becker's model even further, positing six types (cult, sect, established sect, class church/denomination, ecclesia, and universal church) and sub-typing sects by their accepting, avoiding, or aggressive relationship to the wider society.¹⁷ Similarly, Johnson classified religious groups according to their state of tension with their social

¹⁴ Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 134; Dawson, "Creating 'Cult' Typologies," 367; see also Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

¹⁵ Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 134–35.

¹⁶ Becker, *Systematic Sociology*, 114–18; Becker, "Sacred and Secular Societies," 362–76; Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 135.

¹⁷ Yinger, *Religion and the Struggle for Power*, 18–23; Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual*, 142–45.

environment.¹⁸ Stark and Bainbridge defined churches as conventional religious organizations, sects as deviant religious organization with traditional beliefs and practices, and cults as deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices.¹⁹ Opting for visual models, Robertson and Gustafson provided two-by-two tables, the cells of which offered elaborations on the church and sect-types using modified Troeltschian criteria,²⁰ while Swatos afforded a more elaborate table with five types.²¹ Wilson, arguing along classic Weberian lines that religious groups should be understood according to their soteriological function, classed several types of sects according to their “deviant” responses to the world.²² Importantly, Wilson rejected the idea that sects must be set against a church. Rather, they may be arrayed against “secular society” as a kind of protest movement.²³ Baumgarten similarly viewed sects primarily as protest groups, emphasizing the process of boundary creating by defining a sect as “a voluntary association of protest, which utilizes boundary marking mechanisms – the social means of differentiating between insiders and outsiders – to distinguish between its own members and those otherwise normally regarded as belonging to the same national or religious entity.”²⁴ As becomes clear from a brief survey of the various sociologists and religious studies scholars who developed the Weber/Troeltsch/Niebuhr church-sect and later, cult typology, the notions of “sect” and “sectarianism” admit varying degrees of subtlety, and may be differentiated from other kinds of groups according to an array of diverse criteria. Broadly speaking, however, there is consensus among them that a sect is “a group that has separated to some degree from a parent body, and has boundary markers to indicate its separate identity.”²⁵

Given this broad consensus among certain “Western” academics, it is worth asking how applicable their conceptualizations of “sect” and “sectarianism” might be for the study of Muslim *fiqh*. Cook has argued that Weber’s notion of church-sect is, in fact, not very useful when carried over into an Islamic context. For one, Islamic sectarianism proper was first and foremost a response to religio-political developments after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, while Weber and Troeltsch (among others) characterized sects as apolitical.²⁶ Secondly, membership in what might

¹⁸ Johnson, “On Church and Sect,” 542; Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 23.

¹⁹ Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 124.

²⁰ Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, 122–28; Gustafson, “UO-US-PS-PO,” 64–68; Gustafson, “Exegesis on the Gospel according to St. Max,” 12–25.

²¹ Swatos, “Monopolism, Pluralism, Acceptance, and Rejection,” 174–85 (esp. figure 1 on 177); see also Wallis, “Scientology,” 98.

²² Wilson, *Religious Sects*, 36–40. ²³ Wilson, *Religious Sects*, 26–27.

²⁴ Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era*, 7.

²⁵ Collins, *Scriptures and Sectarianism*, 177. ²⁶ Cook, “Weber and Islamic Sects,” 276.

be considered a Muslim sect, notably the Shi'ites, but also the Ibāḍiyya, is not any less voluntary than that of other Muslim groups. And lastly, Shi'ites possess far more hierarchical characteristics than their Sunni counterparts, making them more properly the candidates for the Weberian status of "church" than the Sunnis, upon whom Weber actually bestowed the designation.²⁷ Given these problems, Cook concludes that "Weber is neither so obviously right, nor so interestingly wrong, as to provide a useful starting-point for our own attempts to understand the peculiar groups we know as Islamic sects."²⁸

Similarly, many of the definitions of sects and sectarianism that follow Weber turn out to be fundamentally problematic when applied to the Islamic context. One of the main issues with them revolves around their notions of church, denomination, or ecclesia as somehow set against sects and cults. While a case could be made for treating Shi'ites and, perhaps more appropriately, Khārijites as sects in the Weberian-Troeltschian vein, there is no good candidate for what in the early Islamic period might qualify as the church, denomination, or ecclesia from which they separated. Something called the "Sunni" branch of Islam cannot be said to have existed before the third/ninth century (at the earliest), and the pro-ʿUthmān groups of the initial period (mainly the Umayyads) constituted no majority, nor were they as firmly established in their rule as they might have liked to have been. Certainly, the Umayyads attempted to make themselves into the undisputed, popular, religious authorities of early Islamdom, but such attempts failed, as did the later ʿAbbāsīd efforts to do the same. At best, these early groups might simply qualify as other Muslim sects. None of them actually meet the requirements for "churches" or parent groups.

Even Wilson's definition of sect, which helpfully leaves aside overt notions of "church," nonetheless posits sects as protest movements (and "deviant" ones at that) to be measured against the societies in which they are located. In effect, Wilson simply substitutes "society" for "church" as the normative baseline against which sects may be classed. This is not to say that what early Muslims later dubbed *firaq* were not protest movements within the midst of their societies. Indeed, many of the *firaq* could be described as protest or revolutionary movements. Nevertheless, the yardstick for measuring protest need not be a real or imagined universal such as church/denomination/ecclesia or "society." Defining sects as "deviant" in relation to some universal, in fact, subtly replicates the historical situation of the early Christian church, revealing it to be hiding under such definitions all along.

²⁷ Cook, "Weber and Islamic Sects," 277. ²⁸ Cook, "Weber and Islamic Sects," 278.