

Comparative Study of Esoteric Interpretation Between Ahlussunnah and Shi'a

Studi Komparatif atas Tafsir Esoterik antara Ahlussunnah dan Syiah

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Abstract

The comparative study of esoteric interpretation (tafsir isyari) between Ahlussunnah and Shi'a reveals significant differences, both in substance and methodology. Despite these contrasts, a common ground between the two is the shared belief that esoteric interpretation is possible. However, this method can only be undertaken by those who are truly purified from sin and capable of profound contemplation, allowing them to perceive nothing but God in all aspects of life. Furthermore, any interpretation derived through this approach must ultimately be aligned with the textual sources of the Qur'an and Hadith. This study employs thematic, historical-critical, and comparative methods, while adopting a qualitative approach to analyze and compare the perspectives of Ahlussunnah and Shi'a on esoteric interpretation.

Key Words: *Esoteric Interpretation, Ahlussunnah, Shi'a.*

Abstrak

Kajian perbandingan terhadap penafsiran esoterik (tafsir isyari) antara Ahlussunnah dan Syiah mengungkap perbedaan yang signifikan, baik dari segi substansi maupun metodologi. Meskipun terdapat perbedaan mendasar, keduanya memiliki titik temu dalam keyakinan bahwa penafsiran esoterik merupakan sesuatu yang dimungkinkan. Namun, metode ini hanya dapat dilakukan oleh individu yang benar-benar tersucikan dari dosa dan memiliki kemampuan kontemplasi mendalam, sehingga mampu melihat segala sesuatu sebagai manifestasi dari kehadiran Tuhan. Selain itu, setiap penafsiran yang dihasilkan melalui pendekatan ini harus tetap selaras dengan

sumber tekstual utama, yaitu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode tematik, historis-kritis, dan komparatif untuk menganalisis serta membandingkan pandangan Ahlussunnah dan Syiah terhadap penafsiran esoteric

Kata Kunci: Tafsir *Isyari*, *Ahlussunnah*, *Syiah*.

Introduction

The Qur'an was revealed by Allah (SWT) as guidance for humanity until the end of time. Its existence will always be a miracle in every era that mankind experiences. Thus, the Qur'an will continue to serve as a timeless miracle, remaining relevant across all times and places.¹

For the Qur'an to fulfill its function as divine guidance, we must seek to understand the meanings of Allah's revelations when interpreting it—just as the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) once did, adapting their understanding to their time and circumstances.²

Over the course of history, various schools of Qur'anic interpretation have emerged. Among them is the Shi'a school of thought, which interprets certain verses through its distinct ideological lens. For instance, Shi'a exegetes have interpreted the Qur'anic narrative about the cow in the story of Moses (AS) as a reference to 'Aishah (RA). Their interpretations often reflect their strong allegiance to Ali (RA) while displaying hostility toward certain companions whom they perceive as his opponents.³

Additionally, another school of interpretation focuses on esoteric or symbolic meanings (*tafsir bi al-isyârah*), emphasizing mystical and

¹ Mutawalli Sya'rawi, *Gerbang Memahami al-Qur'an* diterjemahkan oleh Abdul Syakur Abdul Razzaq dan Hafiz, M. Amin dari judul asli *Tafsir al-Sya'râwi*, Ciputat: Penerbit Hikam, 2010, h. 21.

² Abd Rahman Dahlan, *Kaidah-kaidah Penafsiran al-Qur'an*, Bandung: Mizan, 1998, h. 20.

³ Teungku Muhammad Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy, *Sejarah dan Pengantar Ilmu alQur'an dan Tafsir*, Semarang: PT. Pustaka Rizki Putra, 2000, h. 227.

spiritual insights derived from the Qur'an. This approach is seen in the works of al-Tustari (d. 383 H), Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 683 H), al-Naisaburi, and al-Alusi (d. 1270 H). Their interpretations intertwine Qur'anic meanings with Sufism and spiritual purification (suluk), reflecting a deeply introspective engagement with the text.⁴

In Qur'anic studies, textual interpretation is often associated with the Arabic term *nass*, whereas contextual interpretation corresponds to *siyâq*. The contrast between these two interpretative approaches has significantly contributed to the diversity of *tafsir*. In some cases, this diversity has even led to sectarian conflicts, such as the theological disputes between Sunnis and Shi'a. However, the plurality of Qur'anic interpretations can also be seen as a blessing, offering Muslims a broader intellectual spectrum through which they can engage with divine revelation.

Another issue arises when certain interpretations prioritize fanaticism, blind adherence (*taqlid buta*), and the pursuit of personal desires rather than objective exegesis. For example, Allah (SWT) states in Surah Qaf (50:1): "Ha Mim. 'Ain, Sin, Qaf." Classical exegetes generally interpret these disjointed letters (*huruf muqatta'at*) as divine secrets known only to Allah (SWT). However, the Bâtiniyyah sect offers a vastly different and controversial interpretation, which is unorthodox and lacks credibility. According to their view:

"Hâ" represents the war between Ali (RA) and Mu'awiyah.

"Mîm" stands for the rule of the Banu Marwan dynasty.

"'Ain" signifies the Abbasid dynasty.

"Sîn" refers to the Sufyanid dynasty.

"Qâf" symbolizes the coming of Imam Mahdi.

This allegorical and speculative interpretation is considered a deviation from authentic Islamic exegesis, as it lacks any foundation in the hadith literature or the established methodologies of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah. Therefore, such interpretations are rejected as they are

⁴ Teungku Muhammad Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy, *Sejarah dan Pengantar Ilmu alQur'an dan Tafsir...*, h. 241.

based on personal conjecture rather than sound hermeneutical principles.⁵

Discussion

The Shi'a school of thought frequently employs contextual interpretation (tafsir kontekstual) when analyzing Qur'anic verses and hadiths that discuss noble individuals. They interpret these texts as evidence supporting the legitimacy of Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) and his descendants as rightful leaders of the Muslim community. Their approach to contextual interpretation is deeply influenced by their ideological beliefs, which also shape their textual interpretations.

However, this practice is not exclusive to the Shi'a tradition. Sunnis and other Islamic sects also engage in both textual (tafsir nashiy) and contextual (tafsir siyāqiy) exegesis. This highlights an essential reality in Qur'anic hermeneutics: interpreters inevitably choose between textual and contextual approaches, often guided by their theological perspectives and historical contexts.⁶

Imam al-Shafi'i stated: "I have not found any scholar who disagrees that the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) are categorized into three types. Scholars agree on two of these categories, though there are both similarities and differences in their perspectives."

The first category includes what Allah (SWT) has revealed explicitly in the Qur'an. In these cases, the Prophet (SAW) explained the verses in accordance with their literal meaning (nash).

The second category pertains to verses that are revealed in a general sense, where the Prophet (SAW) provided further clarification according to Allah's will. Scholars unanimously agree on this approach.

⁵ Thameem Ushama, *Metodologi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, diterjemahkan oleh Hasan Basri dan Amroeni dari judul *Methodologies of the Qur'anic Exegesis*, Jakarta: Riora Cipta, 2000, h. 41-45.

⁶ Andi Rahman, "Hadis dan Politik Sektarian: Analisis Basis Argumentasi tentang Konsep Imamah menurut Syi'ah," dalam *Jurnal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 1 Tahun 2013, h. 119.

The third category consists of commands given by the Prophet (SAW) that are not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. This category has led to scholarly debate:

Some scholars argue that Allah (SWT) has granted the Prophet (SAW) the authority to legislate, and that through divine guidance (tawfiq) and Allah's approval (rida), he was able to establish rulings beyond explicit Qur'anic texts.

Others assert that every ruling the Prophet (SAW) enacted must have a foundational basis in the Qur'an, meaning that no independent legislation exists outside of its framework.

This classification highlights the varying degrees of prophetic authority in Islamic jurisprudence and reflects the dynamic nature of interpretation among scholars.⁷

Al-Suyūṭī cited a narration from Ibn Jarīr through multiple sources, including Ibn 'Abbās, stating that there are four types of tafsir (Qur'anic interpretation):

1. Tafsir known only to the Arabs – This refers to linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the Qur'an that are understood by those proficient in classical Arabic.
2. Tafsir that is unknown to anyone – These are hidden or undisclosed meanings that remain beyond human comprehension.
3. Tafsir that can only be understood by scholars – This category encompasses interpretations derived through deep knowledge, scholarly analysis, and ijtihad (independent reasoning).
4. Tafsir known only to Allah (SWT) – These are divine secrets and ultimate meanings that are beyond human grasp, such as the exact nature of the disjointed letters (huruf muqatta'at) in the Qur'an.

⁷ Ali Ahmad as-Salus, *Ensiklopedia Sunnah dan Syiah*, diterjemahkan oleh Bisri Abdussomad, Asmuni Solihan Zamakhsyari dan Samson Rahman dari judul *Ma'a al-Syiah itsnâ 'Asyariah fî al-Ushûl wa al-Furû'* (*Mausû'ah Syâmilah*) *Dirâsah Muqârinah fî al-'Aqâid wa al-Tafsîr*, Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 2015, h. 419-420.

This classification highlights the varying degrees of accessibility to Qur'anic knowledge, distinguishing between linguistic, scholarly, and divine levels of interpretation.⁸

Comparison of Esoteric Tafsir (Tafsir Isyari) Between Sunni and Shia

The first thing the Shia seek to establish as their distinguishing feature from other Islamic sects is their claim to possess exclusive knowledge that has not been granted to the general Muslim community. At times, they attribute this knowledge to Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA), asserting that he possessed religious secrets and was the designated successor of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), entrusted with esoteric knowledge unknown to the broader Muslim ummah. Additionally, they claim to have inherited special knowledge from the Imams, who are descendants of Ali through Fatimah (RA).

In his book "Al-Dīn bayna al-Sā'il wa al-Mujīb," Mirza al-Hairy al-Ahqafy states that the Imams possess complete knowledge of the unseen (ghaib), are infallible, and never err or forget. According to this view, no one can truly comprehend Islam except through the Imams. Furthermore, the secrets of the Qur'an and the essence of the faith are said to be exclusively known by them.

Some Shia groups also claim to possess a special Qur'an, which they refer to as "The Qur'an of Fatimah" (Muṣḥaf Fāṭimah). They assert that this Qur'an is distinct from the one currently in the hands of the Muslim ummah, and that it does not contain the same letters or verses as the standard Qur'an.⁹

In the book "Al-Fīraq al-Shi'ah," it is mentioned that the Shia claim to possess the true interpretation of the Qur'anic verses. They even

⁸ Thameem Ushama, *Metodologi Tafsir al-Qur'an* diterjemahkan oleh Hasan Basri dan Amroeni dari judul *Methodologies of the Qur'anic Exegesis*, Jakarta: Riora Cipta, 2000, h. 21.

⁹ Abdur Rahman Abdul Khaliq, *Penyimpangan-penyimpangan Tasawuf*, yang diterjemahkan oleh Ahmad Misbach dari judul asli *al-Fikru al-Shūfi*, Jakarta: Robbani Press, 2001, h. 89.

believe that Allah (SWT) sent Muhammad (SAW) with *tanzīl* (the literal text of the Qur'an) and sent Ali (RA) with *ta'wīl* (its interpretation).¹⁰

The Shia hold that the Qur'an has a hidden (*bāṭin*) meaning that differs from its apparent (*ẓāhir*) meaning. They believe that ordinary people can only understand the outward meaning of the Qur'an, while its inner meanings are known exclusively to the Imams and those who have inherited knowledge from them.¹¹

The Sunnis regard esoteric interpretation (*bāṭinī ta'wīl*) of the Qur'an and Hadith as a source of their special knowledge. At times, they claim to receive this interpretation directly from Allah (SWT), from angels, or through divine inspiration (*ilhām*). Additionally, they associate their esoteric knowledge with the hidden meanings of the disjointed letters (*ḥurūf muqaṭṭa'āt*) in the Qur'an, and some even claim to have received it from the Preserved Tablet (*Lauh Mahfūz*) in the heavens.

This assertion closely parallels the Shia belief in their Imams. The Shia claim that their Imams possess knowledge of the unseen (*ghaib*), knowing everything that occurs in the eternal past (*azali*) and the infinite future. They assert that not a single leaf falls without the Imam's knowledge and that no event happens in the universe except that they are aware of it.

Such claims are identical to those made by certain Sufi groups, who ascribe similar attributes to their spiritual leaders (mystics and saints) and elevate their status to one of divine knowledge and infallibility.¹²

If analyzed in depth, the differences between these two groups can be summarized as follows:

a. Theological Perspective of Ahlus Sunnah vs. Shia

¹⁰ Abdur Rahman Abdul Khaliq, *Penyimpangan-penyimpangan Tasawuf...*, hal. 38.

¹¹ Mahmud Farhan al-Buhairi, *Gen Syiah, sebuah tinjauan Sejarah, penyimpangan Akidah dan konspirasi Yahudi*, Jakarta: Darul Falah, 2001, h. 184.

¹² Abdur Rahman Abdul Khaliq, *Penyimpangan-penyimpangan Tasawuf...*, h. 354.

Ahlu Sunnah believes that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was sent as a messenger to all of humanity, and that his followers transmitted his Sunnah and teachings to the generations that came after him. The transmission of knowledge is open to the entire Muslim community, ensuring that Islamic teachings are preserved through a broad and diverse chain of narrators. Shia theology, on the other hand, asserts that the Prophet (SAW) was specifically sent to Ali (RA) and that Allah (SWT) explicitly designated him as the rightful successor. According to this belief, the Prophet's mission included the divine appointment (*wasiyyah*) of Ali (RA), and only Ali (RA) and his descendants are legitimate sources of religious knowledge. Consequently, within the Shia framework, religious teachings that are transmitted from anyone other than Ali (RA) and his descendants are considered invalid. This means that, according to their belief, the only true knowledge of Islam must come exclusively from the lineage of Ali (RA), rejecting any religious transmission from other Companions of the Prophet (SAW).¹³

b. Theological Perspective on Religious Authority in Ahlu Sunnah vs. Shia

Ahlu Sunnah believes that religious knowledge is accessible to everyone, meaning that any Muslim has the potential to become a scholar (*'ālim*) and take on the responsibility of teaching and guiding others. In this perspective, Islamic scholarship is not restricted to a specific lineage or group, but rather is open to anyone who seeks knowledge through proper learning and adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Shia theology, however, requires that religious authority be vested in an infallible (*ma'sūm*) leader who serves as the ultimate reference for Islamic teachings. This belief necessitates the existence of a divinely guided individual in every era, ensuring that Islamic rulings and guidance remain in accordance with divine will. This requirement for an infallible authority raises a practical concern: If every region

¹³ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu,...*, h. 24-28.

across the world requires an infallible leader to ensure correct religious practice, then how can individuals in distant parts of the world (such as the East or West) correctly follow Islam without direct access to such a leader? This presents a logistical and theological challenge within the Shia framework, as it implies that religious knowledge is dependent on the presence of a specific, divinely appointed figure rather than being universally accessible.¹⁴

c. The Perspective on the Companions (Sahabah) in Ahlus Sunnah vs. Shia

Ahlu Sunnah greatly honors and respects the Companions (Sahabah), recognizing them as the bearers of Islam and the mujahideen who spread the religion across vast regions, from the East to the West. They are regarded as the preservers of the Qur'an and Sunnah, ensuring that the message of Islam reached the entire world. Shia theology, on the other hand, often takes a critical stance toward many of the Companions, accusing them of wrongdoing and betrayal, particularly in relation to their treatment of Ali (RA) and his family. The virtues and contributions of the Companions are frequently downplayed or dismissed, and instead, Shia scholars focus on finding faults and shortcomings in them. Additionally, Shia interpretations of the Qur'an tend to apply specific and restricted meanings to general verses, shaping their understanding based on deeply held theological convictions. This leads to exclusive interpretations that align with their doctrinal beliefs, rather than adopting a broader, more inclusive understanding of Islamic teachings.

d. The Perspective on the Triumph of Islam in Ahlus Sunnah vs. Shia

From the Ahlu Sunnah perspective, Islam has already achieved victory, as it has been practiced by the Muslim community and has spread across various nations. The religion has been established, upheld, and implemented throughout history. In contrast, the Shia

¹⁴ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu,...*, h. 24-28.

viewpoint suggests that Islam has not yet fully triumphed and is not yet practiced in its true form. According to this belief, the complete establishment of Islam remains incomplete and awaits the emergence of the rightful leader to bring about its ultimate realization.

e. The Perspective on Ali (RA) in Ahlus Sunnah vs. Shia

From the Ahlus Sunnah perspective, Ali (RA) is deeply respected as a courageous warrior who defended Islam and upheld the truth. They believe that if he had truly been designated as the exclusive successor (wasi) by the Prophet (SAW), he would not have remained silent for nearly 25 years after the Prophet's passing. His actions demonstrate that he fully accepted and cooperated with the leadership of Abu Bakr (RA), Umar (RA), and Uthman (RA), which contradicts the idea that he was unjustly sidelined.¹⁵

On the other hand, the Shia claim to revere Ali (RA) and assert that he was the rightful successor, chosen by the Prophet (SAW). However, they argue that he chose to remain silent and did not openly assert his leadership due to fear for his safety. This portrayal raises significant questions about his bravery and role in history. Moreover, Shia scholars cite numerous hadiths to support this claim, many of which have been critically analyzed and deemed unauthentic by renowned scholars (Muhaddiqin) specializing in hadith verification.

f. The Perspective on Imamate in Ahlus Sunnah vs. Shia

Ahlu Sunnah believes that leadership (Imamate) is a matter of terminology based on consultation (shura). The Muslim community has the right to choose a capable leader who will govern them according to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Differences in understanding or opinion regarding leadership are natural and do not pose a fundamental problem as long as the principles of Islam are upheld.

In contrast, Shia doctrine holds that Allah (SWT) has decreed the appointment of an Imam as an absolute necessity. They believe that Ali (RA) was divinely chosen as the rightful leader, and leadership is not a

¹⁵ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu,...*, h. 24-28.

matter of human consultation but divine will. However, nowhere in the Qur'an or authentic Sunnah is there an explicit mention of Imamate or divine appointment (wasiya) of Ali (RA). The verses they cite are general in nature and can be interpreted in multiple ways, rather than being definitive proof of their claim.¹⁶

g. The Shia Approach After the Lineage Ceased vs. Ahlus Sunnah After the Prophet's Passing

After the passing of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Ahlus Sunnah established leadership through consultation (shura), ensuring the continuity of governance based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. They upheld the responsibility of leadership among the most qualified companions without claiming divine appointment.

In contrast, Shia faced a dilemma when their belief in an unbroken line of Imams was disrupted. Instead of openly addressing this, they remained silent for a long period, refraining from public gatherings or declarations. Eventually, they introduced the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), a concept that was not originally part of classical Shia theology but was later formulated to maintain religious and political authority. This shift, however, reflects an adaptation rather than a continuation of their original claim of divine Imamate.

h. The Perspective on the Reliability of Hadith Narrators

Ahlu Sunnah acknowledges that fabrications in the name of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) emerged after the generation of the Sahabah (Companions). However, they firmly uphold the justice ('adalah) of all the Sahabah, believing that they never deliberately lied about the Prophet. Disputing their integrity would mean undermining the foundation of Islam itself, as they were the direct transmitters of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

In contrast, Shia theology holds a different stance, viewing the majority of the Sahabah as untrustworthy, believing that many of them

¹⁶ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu*,..., h. 24-28.

concealed the truth or even fabricated reports. This perspective creates fundamental doubts about the authenticity of religious sources, as it implies that much of the transmitted Islamic teachings come from individuals considered unreliable or even disbelievers. Consequently, this raises a theological paradox: how can a religion be followed when its foundational narrators are viewed as deceitful?¹⁷

i. The Perspective on Hadith Fabrication

Ahlu Sunnah acknowledges that numerous fabricated hadiths and weak reports (*atsar*) have infiltrated Islamic teachings, introduced by individuals either aiming to undermine the religion or out of ignorance in their attempts to defend it. However, the scholars of Ahlu Sunnah have rigorously examined and exposed these fabrications. If the collections of Ahlu Sunnah contain around one thousand fabricated hadiths, for instance, then Shia sources are believed to contain approximately twelve thousand fabricated hadiths.

This discrepancy arises because, in Shia theology, hadith fabrications frequently occur under the authority of their concept of "Ma'sum" (infallibility)—a belief that their twelve Imams are infallible figures whose words hold the same weight as the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah. Meanwhile, Ahlu Sunnah firmly maintains that only the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is *ma'sum* (infallible), and no other human possesses this status.¹⁸

j. The Concept of Infallibility

Ahlu Sunnah does not recognize any individual as *ma'shûm* (infallible) after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Even figures of great stature, such as Abu Bakr and Umar, are not considered infallible. However, their *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) is deemed acceptable as long as it does not contradict the clear texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

¹⁷ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu,...*, h. 24-28.

¹⁸ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu,...*, h. 24-28.

In contrast, Shia theology upholds the doctrine of infallibility for their Imams, believing that they are divinely protected from error in all aspects, including religious rulings and daily affairs. If an Imam's statement or action appears to contradict their established doctrines, they justify it by claiming it was done out of *taqiyyah* (a practice of dissimulation or concealment for self-preservation).

k. The Methodology of Accepting Narrations

Ahlu Sunnah follows a rigorous and systematic methodology in accepting narrations. They codified the biographies of all narrators and evaluated them based on their narrative credibility. Each narrator is assessed through the principles of *al-Jarh wa al-Ta'dîl* (criticism and validation of narrators). Any narration that meets these strict criteria is accepted, while those that contradict them are rejected. This principle serves as the foundation of hadith authentication, and anyone who opposes it is refuted accordingly. On the other hand, Shia scholarship lacks a similarly structured methodology in hadith authentication.¹⁹

Example of Isyari Interpretation Between Sunni and Shia

For example, when Prophet Ibrahim (AS) was commanded to enter the fire but was not burned, Sunni scholars generally interpret this as a literal miracle—that Allah protected him from the flames. This aligns with the traditional understanding of miracles (*mu'jizat*), where divine intervention defies natural laws.

However, in some esoteric (Batiniah) and Shia interpretations, the fire is not literal but rather a symbol of the oppression and tyranny of King Nimrod's rule. They view the verse metaphorically, suggesting that Prophet Ibrahim's survival represents his resilience against oppression, rather than an actual physical miracle.

Because of such interpretations, some Shia scholars do not emphasize miracles in the same way as Sunni scholars. Instead, they believe every Qur'anic verse has a hidden meaning, which goes beyond its apparent wording.

¹⁹ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu,...*, h. 24-28.

Shia interpret Quranic verses with esoteric meanings without any clear evidence from Allah. They associate verses on monotheism, Islam, halal, and haram with their twelve Imams, while attributing polytheism, disbelief, immorality, and rebellion to the Prophet's companions. These interpretations are falsely ascribed to the twelve Imams, who had no knowledge of them.

For example, in Surah Al-Anfal (8:55): "Indeed, the worst of living creatures in the sight of Allah are those who disbelieve, for they will not believe." Shia scholars interpret "those who disbelieve" as referring to Banu Umayyah.

In Surah Yasin (36:12): "And We have enumerated everything in a clear Record." Shia interpretation claims that the "clear Record" refers to Ali. In Surah Al-Isra (17:60): "And [We warned you of] the accursed tree in the Quran." They interpret the "accursed tree" as referring to Banu Umayyah.

This is a grave distortion of the sacred Qur'an due to their ignorance and falsehood against Allah (SWT). They turn the Qur'an into a book of riddles and games, interpreting its words without any clear measure or rule, solely based on their own interests. They manipulate the meanings of the Qur'an, diverting them from their true context.

Allah (SWT) describes such people in Surah Ali 'Imran (3:7):

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ
مُتَشَبِهَاتٌ ۚ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ
تَأْوِيلِهِ ۚ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّسُخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ۖ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ
رَبِّنَا ۚ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

"It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book. In it are verses [that are] precise—they are the foundation of the Book—and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they will follow that of it

which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. But no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah..."

Sunni believe that Allah (SWT) has revealed a complete and perfect book as a guide for humanity. This book is more than sufficient for the ummah to understand their religion, making any additional scripture unnecessary. Allah (SWT) affirms this in multiple verses of the Qur'an, emphasizing its sufficiency as the ultimate source of guidance.²⁰

Allah (SWT) has promised to preserve the Qur'an, ensuring that it is neither added to nor diminished. Furthermore, Allah (SWT) has chosen noble and righteous individuals to accompany the Prophet (SAW)—those who believed in him, supported him, and carried the banner of Islam after his passing through jihad, preaching, and teaching. This is the religion that has spread across nearly a quarter of the world, remaining pure and ever-relevant as a guide for those who seek the truth. This is the belief of Ahlus Sunnah.

Meanwhile, the Shia claim that the Qur'an is insufficient, necessitating an Imam to explain it to humanity. They believe that this Imam lacks authority on earth or functions without executive power. Many among them hold that the Qur'an is incomplete, leading to a diminished trust in it. If omissions are possible, then additions are equally plausible. Consequently, they have essentially declared the failure of this religion from the outset—both in the Qur'an's ability to guide and in the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) role as an educator.²¹

It is no surprise, then, that within this ummah, there exist groups that go to extremes in their love for certain figures, exceeding the bounds of Sharia. One such group professes love for the noble companion, Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA), in a manner that ultimately distorts

²⁰ Lihat Qs. al-Isrâ'/17: 9, Qs. Muḥammad/47: 24, Qs. Qâf/50: 45, dan al-Nisâ/4: 59.

²¹ Ahmad bin Sa'ad al-Ghamidi, *Siapa Bilang Sunni Syi'ah Tidak Bisa Bersatu*, yang diterjemahkan oleh Tim Pustaka Darul Haq dari judul asli *Hiwâr Hâdi ma'a al-Duktûr al-Qazwini Asy-Syi'i al-Istnâ Asyari*, Jakarta: Daarul Haq, 2009, h. 2-3.

everything. In their excessive devotion, they boldly attribute false claims and fabricated reports to Ali (RA). At the same time, they attempt to undermine the honor of other companions, accusing them of usurping Ali's rights and oppressing the Prophet's (SAW) cousin—when in reality, they are only wronging themselves.²²

The hadith of the Prophet (SAW) stating, "Ali is from me, and I am from Ali. And none shall represent me except myself or Ali," is often cited as evidence that Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) was the rightful leader after the Prophet (SAW). However, scholars differ in interpreting this narration.

Sunni scholars generally understand it as a testament to Ali's closeness to the Prophet (SAW) in lineage, character, and mission, particularly in specific tasks assigned to him, such as conveying certain messages on behalf of the Prophet. They argue that this statement does not explicitly designate Ali (RA) as the sole successor. On the other hand, Shi'a scholars view it as clear proof of Ali's (RA) divine appointment as the Prophet's (SAW) immediate successor in leadership. Thus, the interpretation of this hadith depends on theological perspectives and broader contextual analysis within Islamic traditions.²³

The Prophet's (SAW) statement, "All (leaders) are from Quraysh," indicates that leadership within the Muslim community was designated for the Quraysh tribe as a whole, not exclusively for Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) and his descendants. This hadith highlights a broader principle rather than specifying a single lineage within Quraysh.

If the Prophet (SAW) had instead said, "All (leaders) are from the descendants of Isma'il," then the Shi'a might have similarly claimed that their Imams were the intended heirs, as they also descend from Isma'il

²² Utsman bin Muhammad al-Khamis, *Inilah Faktanya, meluruskan sejarah umat Islam sejak wafat Nabi hingga terbunuhnya al-Husain*, yang diterjemahkan oleh Syafaruddin dari judul asli *Hiqbah Min al-Tarîkh*, Jakarta: Pustaka Imam Asy-Syafi'i, 2012, h. 4.

²³ Utsman bin Muhammad al-Khamis, *Inilah Faktanya...*, h. 393.

(AS). This demonstrates how textual interpretations can be shaped by theological perspectives, emphasizing the importance of context in understanding prophetic traditions.

The Shi'a believe that Islam has never truly experienced its golden age, including during the leadership of the early caliphs. They argue that their Imams lived in hiding and constant fear, interacting with the broader Muslim society under the principle of *taqiyyah*—concealing their true beliefs while outwardly conforming. In their view, the governance of the Prophet's (SAW) companions was deeply flawed and corrupt.

Why does the Qur'an mention the prophets and their messages, but never explicitly mention the imams? Even though, according to the Shia belief, imams are considered superior to prophets.²⁴

On the other hand, this development emerged somewhat later, as the Shia sought to strengthen the legitimacy of their beliefs by referring to Qur'anic verses. For instance, they cite a narration from Abu Bakr attributed to Muhammad al-Baqir, claiming that the term "Shia" is derived from the Qur'anic expression found in Surah al-Saffat (37:83). While this approach is legitimate, it is also well understood that referencing the Qur'an should not be done selectively, just as belief in it must be comprehensive.²⁵

And through the thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhû'i*) method, it becomes clear that besides Surah al-Saffat, Surah al-Qasas (28:15) also mentions the term "Shia," which does not always carry a positive connotation. In fact, verse 69 of Surah Maryam refers to "Shia" in an entirely negative sense, describing them as those who rebel against Allah (SWT).²⁶

Common Ground in Sunni and Shia Esoteric Interpretation (Tafsir Isyari)

²⁴ Utsman bin Muhammad al-Khamis, *Inilah Faktanya...*, h. 396.

²⁵ Hidayat Nur Wahid, *Kata Pengantar, Mendudukan Kembali Sunnah Syiah dalam buku Ensiklopedia Sunnah dan Syiah*, Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 2015, h. Viii.

²⁶ Hidayat Nur Wahid, *Kata Pengantar Ensiklopedia Sunnah Dan Syiah...*, h. Ix.

Sayyed Hossein Nasr argues that Sunni and Shia Islam represent two dimensions of Islamic orthodoxy, divinely ordained to integrate groups with differing psychological and spiritual temperaments into the Muslim community. Furthermore, he states that, from an external perspective, the primary difference between Sunni and Shia Islam lies in the issue of succession—who should lead the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) passing.

The Sunni perspective holds that the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) successor serves merely as a caliph, acting as the ruler of the newly established Muslim community. In contrast, the Shia view asserts that the successor must also be entrusted with esoteric knowledge and the interpretation of religious sciences. Therefore, while the initial differences between Sunni and Shia teachings may appear to be political, they are, in fact, deeply theological as well.²⁷

Apart from false claims such as the existence of a distinct Shia Qur'an, there are typically at least three fundamental weaknesses in many arguments put forth by critics of Shia Islam.

First, generalization. Many arguments made by critics of Shia Islam rely on selectively choosing specific materials or the views of particular Shia scholars and then generalizing them as representative of the entire Shia community. A clear example is the repeated accusation that Shia Muslims have a different Qur'an from Sunni Muslims. While it is undeniable that some Shia scholars throughout history have held and argued for this belief, it is easy to demonstrate that this view is not widely accepted among Shia Muslims. The consensus (ijma') of the majority of Shia scholars—excluding rare and isolated opinions (shādh)—is that the Uthmanic Mushaf in existence today is complete and perfect, containing exactly the same content as what is read by all Muslims.

Second, the lack of balanced perspectives. Continuing with the example of the Qur'an, it is important to note that Sunni tradition is not

²⁷ M. Subhi Ibrahim, "Politik Syiah: antara Quietisme dan Mahdiisme," dalam *Jurnal Mumtaz* Vol. 2 No. 1 Tahun 2011, h. 87-89.

entirely free from claims suggesting that the Qur'an we read today might be incomplete. For instance, Al-Itqān mentions that the total number of surahs in the Qur'an was originally 116, rather than the 114 surahs we have today, due to the alleged loss of two surahs known as *Al-Hafd* and *Al-Khal*.

Third, insufficient attention to the evolution of views within the Shia school of thought. For example, while it is true that certain Shia circles have historically criticized the Prophet's companions and wives, many Shia scholars, particularly from the Imami or Twelver sect, have since revised their perspectives on this matter. The 1995 Majma' Ahl Bayt conference in London, for instance, explicitly affirmed the legitimacy of the three caliphs preceding Caliph Ali (RA).

In fact, regarding the controversy surrounding the cursing of the Prophet's prominent companions and some of his wives by a Shia figure residing in the UK, Yasir al-Habib, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei himself issued a fatwa explicitly prohibiting any insults toward figures respected by Sunni Muslims. Among its contents, the fatwa states: *"It is forbidden to insult religious figures or leaders revered by our Sunni brothers, including making accusations against the Prophet's wives that would undermine their honor."*

Ultimately, the leaders of various Muslim groups should emulate the wisdom of scholars and figures who advocate for a balanced perspective on inter-sectarian conflicts within Islam. On one hand, criticism of a particular sect should not lead to the generalization of the entire group or all its followers. If deviations must be pointed out, they should be limited to specific aspects that are proven to be erroneous, while maintaining objectivity, broad and contextual understanding, and keeping up with the latest developments in the sect being examined.

For those whose views hold influence among Shia followers in this country, they should encourage their communities to conduct

themselves with dignity, prioritize brotherhood, and foster tolerance toward their fellow Muslims, who form the majority in this nation.²⁸

Considering the map of debates outlined above, the author hopes that this study can serve as a source of enlightenment for both Ahlus Sunnah and Shia. The goal is no longer to assert claims of absolute truth against one another, but rather, through a comparative and argumentative approach, to cultivate greater wisdom and understanding in accepting the inevitable differences between these two schools of thought.

Conclusion

The fundamental difference between these two sects lies in their approach to interpreting the Qur'an. In general, there are numerous distinctions between them. One key difference is that the Shia heavily rely on interpretations provided by individuals they consider to be Imams, who are believed to be *ma'shum* (infallible) and possess both outward and inward knowledge of Quranic exegesis. This contrasts with the Sunni approach, which entrusts Quranic interpretation to scholars (*mufasssir*) who meet the necessary qualifications, basing their interpretations solely on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), without attributing exclusive interpretative authority to a specific individual as the Shia do.

In the context of Quranic interpretation through the esoteric (*isyârî*) approach, there are striking differences between Shia and Sunni perspectives. One of the key distinctions is that, according to Sunni beliefs, the Quran's outward meaning is accessible to the general public (Ahlus Sunnah), whereas in Shia thought, its deeper, hidden meanings (*bâthiniyah*) are known only to their Imams.

Despite the conflicts and differences mentioned above, a common ground between Sunni and Shia beliefs is that both acknowledge the possibility of esoteric (*isyârî*) interpretation. However, this method is

²⁸ Haidar Bagir, *Islam Tuhan Islam Manusia, Agama dan Spiritualitas di Zaman Kacau*, Bandung: Mizan, 2017, h. 145-151.

considered attainable only by those who are truly purified from sin, capable of deep contemplation, and whose every action and perception are solely directed toward God.

From an objective analysis, both groups are part of the broader Islamic tradition. However, their primary distinction lies in their approach to interpreting the Quran, particularly in their esoteric interpretations.

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