

A Comparative Study Of The Emergence And Development Of Sects In Five Major World Religions: A Historical Overview

Dr. Farmanullah¹, Dr. Shahbaz Khan², Dr. Babar Shah³, Safia Ali⁴, Naila Alam⁵

¹Assistant Professor, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.,
Email: farman.ullah@uop.edu.pk

²Associate Professor, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
Email: shahbazkhanpsc@yahoo.com

³Professor & Director Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: dryosafzai@gmail.com

⁴Visiting Lecturer, Women University Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
Email: safiaali1793@gmail.com

⁵Ph.D Scholar, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
Email: nailaalam86@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The article explores the history of various sects in Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, highlighting their distinctive features and beliefs. It explains that sectarianism arises when narrow interpretations of religious beliefs are combined with intolerant behavior, resulting in militant ideologies that threaten societal peace and harmony. The article explores different sects within each religion, such as Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada in Buddhism, Shiva, Vaishnavism, and Shakteya in Hinduism, and Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Hasidic, and Kabbalah in Judaism. It also explains the political nature of the emergence of sectarianism in Islam and discusses the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Overall, the article emphasizes the need to promote tolerance and respect for diversity to combat the harmful effects of religious sectarianism.

KEYWORDS: Sect, Sectarianism, Religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

INTRODUCTION

The word "sect" has its roots in the Latin word "sequor," which means "to adhere." It refers to a faction that is separated from

the main body of a religion. 1 In religion, it refers to a school of religious dogmas within a main faith or religion. Keeping in view the definition of sect, sectarianism refers to the religious ideology within a

¹ "What is Sectarianism?",
www.nilbymouth.org

main faith.² For example, the Catholic or Protestant faith in Christianity; the Sunni and Shia sects in Islam; Orthodox and Reformed sects in Judaism. Almost all sects in all religions have the same fundamental principles; however, they have different ways of interpreting them. The term sectarianism can also be used in the sphere of culture, history, and politics.

³

It is also defined as, "Sectarianism is a cultural and historical phenomenon formed due to religious and political disparities in a given society."⁴

According to Bryan R. Wilson, "The adherents of a religion separated from the main religion due to different interpretations of religious dogmas and social ethos."⁵

According to Andrew Feenberg, "Sectarianism refers to a mindset where an individual strongly attaches themselves to a sect by considering its teachings as right and develops a sense of intolerance towards other sects in the same religion."⁶

RELIGIOUS SECTARIANISM

Sectarianism is primarily associated with religion, where it denotes a belief, action,

² Farmanullah, "Sectarianism in NWFP; A Case Study of Hangu" M.A Thesis Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, (2002-2004), 8.

³ www.nilbymouth.org

⁴ Neil Jarman, "Define Sectarianism and Sectarian Hate Crime" *Challenge hate Crime Deal with It*, (Report No. 2 August 2012), 5.

⁵ Bryn R. Wilson, *The Social Dimension of Sectarianism: Sects and New Religious Movements in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 1.

⁶ Andrew Feenberg, "Paths to Failure: The Dialectics of Organization and Ideology in the New Left" *Humanities in Society*, (1983), 8.

or way of thinking that is specific to a particular sect.⁷ The narrow interpretation of religious doctrines by religious leaders and their intolerant behavior are the fundamental causes of sectarianism. Unfortunately, this sectarian behavior has now taken on a militant nature. Sectarian ideology is not only preached but also overvalued, leading to religious extremism and militancy that poses a threat to the peace and tranquility of society. The followers of one sect may target the places of worship of other sects, believing that they are fulfilling a sectarian obligation. This creates polarization in society on the basis of sectarian identity.⁸

Religious sectarianism has emerged as a response to prevailing ideas and perceptions within Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism. It functions as a protest against the existing religious, social, and political orders. A religious sect takes the shape of a social community that thinks and acts collectively against opposing forces.⁹

SECTARIANISM IN BUDDHISM

Buddhism is the world's fourth-largest religion with around 7% of the world's population following it. Its origins can be traced back to 2500 years ago in India, when an Indian holy man named

⁷ Joseph Liechty & Cecilia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 2001), 38.

⁸ Saima Afzal, Hamid Iqbal & Mavara Inyat, "Sectarianism and its Implications for Pakistan Security: Policy Recommendations Using Exploratory Study", *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 4, Issue No.4, (Nov-Dec 2012), 23.

⁹ "Religious Sectarianism", www.encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com

Siddhartha Gautama discovered ways to find happiness in society. He discussed his thoughts with other holy men in Banaras, and soon many people became his disciples, marking the beginning of the era of Buddhism. According to Buddhism, a person has two natures: one is ordinary, which includes negative feelings such as jealousy, fear, and anger, and the other is the true nature, which is positive and includes purity, wisdom, and perfection. 10 Buddhism is mainly divided into three sects: Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada.¹¹

Theravada

Theravada, meaning ‘The School of the Elders’, is the oldest sect of Buddhism and adheres to the original dogmas of the faith. This sect is predominantly followed in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. It contains the Pali scriptures of the Buddha's teachings, and its followers believe that they have attained enlightenment and understood the reality of the world. They strongly uphold the advice of wise men.¹²

The basis doctrines of Theravada include the concepts of self and soul. They believe that the self in our body is an illusion, a tenet supported by all sects in Buddhism. There is also a distinction between a monastic and a lay person. The monks study and teach religious dogmas while the lay person does not engage in these activities but only practices the teachings

and supports the monks through alms and donations.¹³

The main scripture of the Theravada sect is the practice of Vipassana (insight). There are different orders of Theravada sects in Asia, and this faith has many beliefs taken from folk cultures that are found in one part of Southeast Asia but not in others. Theravada is comparatively more homogenous compared to other sects of Buddhism.¹⁴ The ultimate goal of the Theravada sect revolves around two things: Samsara (the cycle of life and death) and Nirvana (liberation from suffering). Lay people always try to support the monks so that they can attain Samsara and Nirvana.¹⁵

Mahayana

The Mahayana sect originated around 500 years after the death of the Buddha, during the reign of King Ashoka. Its followers disputed with Brahmins and actively opposed them in India, and were spread across many regions of India to reform the religion and combat factionalism in society.¹⁶

The Mahayana sect is considered one of the most authentic sects, as it emerged due to differences in monastic rules and Buddha's teachings among the monks. Apart from their own teachings, they also believe in Hindu gods. Mahayana accepts the fundamental scriptures of Theravada,

¹³ Barbara O’Brein, *Brief Guide to Major School of Buddhism*,

www.buddhism.about.com

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Main Sects of Buddhism”,

www.thebuddhism.net

¹⁶ Bibhuti Baruah, *Buddhist Sects and Sectarianism* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2000), 75.

¹⁰ *Buddhism: A Brief Introduction* (California: Buddhist Translation Society, 1996), 56.

¹¹ “Buddhism: Researching the Religion of the Buddha”, www.findingdulcinea.com

¹² Ibid.

and also has its own philosophical and devotional scriptures.¹⁷

The important feature of Mahayana teachings is to assist people who are still in Samsara (suffering). It aims to assess the mental level of individuals and guide them according to their mental approach. Mahayana believes that enlightened beings continue to exist after death and live in other realms, and the monks continue to uncover the truth. Its followers, even after death, continue to assist others in achieving Nirvana.¹⁸

The followers of the Mahayana sect can be found in various countries, including China, Russia, Nepal, Japan, Taiwan, Mongolia, Korea, Vietnam, and Tibet. The cultural aspect of the scriptures differs in each of these countries. The sub-sects of Mahayana include Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Shingon, Shinnyoen, Tiantai, and Nichiren Buddhism.¹⁹

Vajrayana

Vajrayana, which means 'Diamond Vehicle' in Sanskrit, is a sect whose followers can be found in Japan, China, and Tibet. The practice of rituals and meditation is a fundamental belief of this sect. It emerged as a reaction to Indian Buddhism and aimed to return to the original teachings of Buddhism. Vajrayana believes in developing the mind by practicing various rituals, including esoteric verbal formulas, diagrams, and paintings. The religious leaders (gurus) are held in great esteem because they are

considered experts in philosophical and ritual traditions.²⁰ The followers visit their gurus to seek guidance on domestic and collective issues.

2) DENOMINATION IN HINDUISM

Hinduism is the most ancient and dominant religion of the Indian subcontinent. It is divided and subdivided into many sects and sub-sects depending on the worship of various gods, which are marked on the foreheads, arms, and chests of its followers. The forehead marks, in particular, are prominent and are still practiced by orthodox Hindus. Some of them practice these marks on the eve of religious festivals, such as Holi. Hinduism has three main sects, including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism.

Shiva

This is the oldest sect of Hinduism, named after the god Shiva. The followers of this sect are also referred to as Ishwara. There are many sub-sects within this sect that have emerged based on different forms and features of Shiva. Some of its sub-sects include Shiva Advaita, Pashupata Shivism, Lingayata, Siddha Siddhanta, Kashmir Shivism, and Shiva Siddhanta.²¹

Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism is another sect of Hinduism which is very popular. The followers of this sect worship Lord Krishna, Narayana, and Vishnu. They have a 'U'-shaped mark on their foreheads. They are further

¹⁷ "Main Sects of Buddhism", www.thebuddhism.net

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Barbar O' Brien, 1-4.

²⁰ "Vajrayana Buddhism", www.patheos.com

²¹ "Hinduism Sects", www.aumamen.com

divided into various sub-sects such as Pancaratra, Vaikhanasa, and others.²²

Shaktism

The followers of this sect worship the mother goddess, Shakti, whom they consider as supreme in the entire world. According to them, it is the Shakti god who controls and runs the entire universe, and causes changes in the world. They worship various aspects of this god, and there are several temples where people visit to pay their respects. These temples are called Devi temples. The worshipers of the Shakti god are more common in eastern India.²³

3) SECTARIANISM IN JUDAISM

The history of Judaism is about four thousand years old, based on the teachings of the Torah - the holy book revealed to Moses (AS).²⁴ The historical sects of Judaism emerged as a result of societal movements that occurred from time to time. The Jewish historical movements introduced some historical sects in Judaism such as Essenes, Sadducees and Pharisees. These sects emerged in response to the Roman reign of Israel. The modern sects in Judaism are Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative. These sects emerged in response to the secular culture in America and Europe. The sects based on mysticism are Kabbalah and Hasidism.²⁵

²² Jayaram V., "Main Sects and School of Hinduism", www.hinduwebsite.com

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "The Origins of Judaism", www.jmcenterfer.tripod.com

²⁵ "Jewish Denominations and Sects", www.religiousfacts.com

Orthodox Judaism

This is an orthodox or traditional sect which believes that the teachings of Torah are binding on all in their entirety, including the written scriptures and oral instructions given to Prophet Moses by Allah. All these teachings provide guidance on how to lead a life in the modern world.²⁶

Reform Judaism

This sect is liberal or progressive in its outlook. This sect believes in the reformation of Jewish teachings. It believes that the Jewish faith has two parts. One part is divine, which is compulsory and must be followed, while the other part is customary and changes according to the needs of the times. Society undergoes changes from time to time, and all these changes should be explained by religion.²⁷

Conservative Judaism

This sect is moderate as far as Jewish teachings are concerned. It believes that traditional elements should be retained with necessary modernization. It discourages following orthodox teachings, but at the same time, it discourages drastic reforms in the traditional scripture of Judaism. It adopts a balanced approach between orthodox and reform Judaism.²⁸

Hasidic Judaism

This sect was founded by Israel ben Eliezer in Poland in the eighteenth century. It emerged due to a mystical

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Denominations of Judaism", www.artsci.uc.edu

²⁸ Ibid.

movement in Germany in the twelfth century. Its teachings revolve around the elements of love and humanity.²⁹

Kabalah

Kabalah is also a mystical sect in Jewish faith. Its origin can be traced back to the period of the Second Temple. It became systematic and scattered in the Middle Ages. The foundation of this sect was laid in 1660 AD by Reuben Hoeshke. This sect believes in God in terms of its attributes.³⁰

4) SECTARIANISM IN CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has many sects, each with distinctive features and dogmas. However, all sects share some common beliefs of the mainstream faith, such as belief in the Bible and the divinity of Jesus Christ. The three main sects of Christianity are Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.

Roman Catholic

This sect is strongly influenced by the Church and developed in Western Europe. It is under the patronage of the Pope and its doctrines include Purgatory³¹ and Transubstantiation.³² This sect owes its

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ It is a place or state in which the souls of dead people suffer for the bad things they did when they were living, so that they can become pure enough to go to heaven

³² The belief that the bread and wine of the Communion service become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ after they have been blessed, even though they still look like bread and wine

devotion to mystics and Mary and also practices the use of the rosary.³³

Eastern Orthodoxy

The origination of this sect can be traced back to 1054 A.D. It includes the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe such as Russia and Greece, and does not owe its allegiance to the Pope. It uses icons in worship and celebrates Easter. Additionally, there are many religious, cultural, and political differences that exist between Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

Protestantism

Protestantism emerged as a result of reformative movements that took place in Britain, Germany, and Switzerland in the sixteenth century. It rejects allegiance to the Pope and the beliefs of Catholicism. It believes in the reformation of faith and reinterpretation of faith due to modern challenges. It has many sub-sects such as Evangelicals, Episcopalians or Anglicanism, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, and Lutherans.³⁴

5) SECTARIANISM IN ISLAM

The primary cause for the emergence of sectarianism in Islam is attributed more to political rather than religious factors. Following the passing of the Holy Prophet (SAW) on 8th June 632, the Muslim community became divided over the matter of leadership in the Islamic state. Different groups asserted their right to lead the Islamic state, with a minority

³³ "Christian Denominations",

www.religionfacts.com

³⁴ Ibid.

group insisting that the leadership must be vested in the family of the Holy Prophet (SAW). This faction eventually rallied behind Hazrat Ali, forming the Shi‘ān-e-‘Alī, meaning the party of Ali. Meanwhile, a substantial number of Muslims supported Abu Bakr for the leadership of the Islamic State. It was argued that the Holy Prophet (SAW) had not provided clear instructions on the issue of leadership, thus the decision should be made based on the collective will of the Muslim community. This latter group of Muslims came to be known as ahl al-sunnah wa’l-jama‘ah.³⁵

Abū Bakr as a Caliph:

Subsequent to the demise of the Holy Prophet (SAW), a group of Ansar, meaning helpers, congregated in Saqifa hall with the intention of selecting one of their own as the successor of the last Prophet (SAW). Word of this gathering was relayed to Umar, who then informed Abu Bakr. Both men proceeded to the meeting, encountering Abu Ubaida al Jarah en route. Upon arriving at the hall, they found Saad bin Ubaidah, who was unwell, lying under a blanket. The Ansar group informed Abu Bakr of their decision to appoint Ubaidah as the caliph of the last Prophet (SAW), citing their past services to Islam and Muslims during the migration from Makkah to Madina as justification for their demand for Khilafat. Abu Bakr, a close friend of the last Prophet (SAW), acknowledged the Ansars' contributions to

Islam, but argued that leadership of both the Madinah and Islamic states was an affair for the Quraish, the most respected tribe in Arabia. He further suggested that the Ansars should follow past practices and leave the affairs of leading the Islamic state to the Quraish.³⁶ In contrast, the leader of the Ansars, Hubab bin Manzar, proposed that there should be two chiefs, one for the Muhajirin and the other for the Ansar. Umar rejected this idea, arguing that a single state cannot be governed by two sovereign rulers simultaneously. Ultimately, Abu Bakr recommended that either Umar or Ubaidah, both companions of the Holy Prophet (SAW), be chosen as the chief of the Islamic state. However, both men declined and instead raised Abu Bakr as Khalifa, pledging their allegiance to him. As a result, Abu Bakr was chosen as the successor of the Holy Prophet (SAW) to lead the Islamic State.³⁷

Views about Hazrat Ali’s Allegiance:

Tarikh-e-Ibni Kathir presents three distinct perspectives on Ali's acceptance of Abu Bakr as the Khalifa. The first viewpoint suggests that Ali accepted Abu Bakr's khilafat on the very day when it was conferred to him. The second viewpoint claims that Ali did not take an oath of obedience at all. The third viewpoint asserts that Ali accepted Abu Bakr's Khilfat after the death of his wife, Fatima,

³⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), pp. 147-149.

³⁶ Allama Abi Ja’far Muhammad bin Jarīr-ul-Tebrī, *Tarīkh-e- Tebrī*, vol. I & II (Karachi: Nafees Academy, 1987), pp. 526-535.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 535-537.

who passed away six months after the demise of the Holy Prophet (SAW).³⁸

Shi'ahs' and Sunnis' Claim for Caliphate:

The Shi'ah maintain that Hazrat 'Alī is the rightful leader of the Islamic State due to his familial relationship as the first cousin and son-in-law of the Holy Prophet (SAW). They also assert that the Holy Prophet (SAW) himself designated Hazrat 'Alī as Khalifa for the Islamic State, citing a declaration made by the Holy Prophet (SAW) in 632 AD at Ghadīr al-Khumm on his return from Makkah.³⁹

Furthermore, they reject the idea of using free will to determine leadership as they believe it could result in an unsuitable leader being selected. Instead, they advocate for selecting a leader who possesses sufficient Islamic knowledge, and those who were closest to the Holy Prophet (SAW) would have the required knowledge. Given Hazrat 'Alī's proximity to the Holy Prophet (SAW) as a family member, they argue that he is the most qualified person to lead the Islamic State.⁴⁰

On the other hand, Sunni Muslims provide their own rationale for supporting Abu Bakr as the successor of the Holy Prophet (SAW). Firstly, he had been a close companion of the Holy Prophet (SAW) and was senior in age compared to other

companions. He had accompanied the Holy Prophet (SAW) during the migration from Makkah to Madina, an event of great significance mentioned in the Holy Quran (9:40). He had also acted as the Holy Prophet's main advisor on many occasions and given his daughter Aisha in marriage to him. Secondly, when the Holy Prophet (SAW) became ill, Abu Bakr led the congregational prayer. Thirdly, Sunni Muslims question the validity of the tradition claiming that the Holy Prophet (SAW) appointed 'Alī as his successor, considering it to be too vague to draw any conclusive meaning.

Furthermore, Sunni Muslims maintain that the headship of the Islamic State is elective and not hereditary. They argue that the principle of free-will of the people should be the basis for choosing the leader. This principle has been practiced by Arabs in choosing their chieftains, making it a familiar concept. With no will or written document to guide Muslims in selecting a successor, the principle of free-will of the people was a legitimate response to the situation. A well-known tradition of the Holy Prophet (SAW) also supports the principle of free-will of the people in this matter.⁴¹

ان امتی لا تجتمع علی ضلالة (ابن ماجه)

'My community cannot agree on error.' (Ibn-i-Mājah)⁴²

Some Important Aspects of Shi'aism and Sunnism:

Both Shi'aism and Sunnism provide different interpretations regarding the

³⁸ Allama Hāfīz Abū al-Fidā Imad-ud-Dīn Ibn-i-Kathīr Damashqī, *Tarīkh-e-Ibn-i-Kathīr*, vol.V & VI

(Karachi: Nafees Academy, 1989), pp. 434-435.

³⁹ Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1986), pp. 4-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ Atta Mohy-ud-Din, *Abū Bakr* (Karachi: Ferozsons, n.d.), pp.11-14.

⁴² *Urdu Dā-e-rah Ma'arif-e-Islamiyya*, vol.15 (Punjab: University of Punjab, 1975), "Firqah," p. 307.

qualifications and duties of the leadership of the Islamic State. Sunnism asserts that the leader of the Islamic State should be referred to as Khalīfah, whereas Shi'ism refers to such a person as Imām.⁴³ Furthermore, Shi'ism maintains that the character of the Imām is infallible, embodying purity and truthfulness. Conversely, Sunnis assert that the leader of the Islamic State should possess the traits of adulthood, freedom, sound mind, and the capability to govern the state.⁴⁴

Both Shi'ism and Sunnism are comprised of various subsects. The Shi'a subsects include Isnā 'Ashariyyah, Ismā'ilism, and Zaidism, with the majority belonging to Isnā 'Ashariyyah. The Sunni subsects consist of Hanfī, Shāfī, Hambalī, and Mālikī.⁴⁵

Sunnis recognize the first four Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali) of the Holy Prophet (SAW) as the legitimate Khalifas, known as the Al-Khulafa Al-Rashidūn (rightly-guided Caliphs). However, Sunni jurists do not consider the Caliphs of the Umayyad and Abbasid periods to be righteous, as the Islamic State during these times did not represent the whole Ummah and was limited to an Arab Kingdom.⁴⁶ Sunnis even recognize the authority of oppressive rulers. In contrast, Shi'ism does not accept the authority of oppressive rulers and has

historically challenged the legitimacy of Muslim rulers' authority.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The phenomenon of sectarian division is observable across all five major world religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within Buddhism, three major sects emerged, namely Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, while a fourth sect, Zen Buddhism, originated from Mahayana. Similarly, within Hinduism, the religion split into Shaiva, Vaishnavism, and Shakteya, with Shaiva further subdivided into sub-sects such as Pashupata Shaivism, Shaiva Siddhanta, Kashmir Shaivism, Siddha Siddhanta, Lingayata, and Shiva Advaita, and Vaishnavism into sub-sects like Vaikhasana and Pancarata. In the context of Judaism, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes were historically significant sects, while modern sects include Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative. Hasidism and Kabbalah are two additional classifications of sects based on mystical approaches within the Jewish faith. Christianity is divided into three main sects, namely Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestant. Lastly, Islam, following the passing of the Holy Prophet (SAW), split into two significant sub-sects, Sunni and Shia.

Sectarianism is a phenomenon that exists in various religions, and it often stems from narrow interpretations of religious dogmas and intolerant behavior. This sectarianism has now taken on a militant nature, which threatens the peace and tranquility of society. The followers of

⁴³ Nasr, p. 150.

⁴⁴ Mukhtar Ahmad Ali, *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: A Case Study of Jhang* (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 2000), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁵ *Urdu*, pp. 298,307.

⁴⁶ Nasr, p. 152.

⁴⁷ Mukhtar, p. 11.

one sect target the worship places of the other sect, causing polarization in society based on sectarian identity. While the causes of sectarianism may differ, it is important to promote tolerance and respect for different religious beliefs to prevent the harmful effects of sectarianism on society.