

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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What Is the Difference between Sunni and Shia Islam?

In today's Middle East, there are two major Islamic powers striving for power and influence—Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. This rivalry is tense and fueled by centuries of bitter hatred and competition. This rivalry is evident in Yemen, Iraq and the bitter civil war in Syria. What is the difference between these two branches of Islam? Why does it matter and how important is this difference in understanding today's complex world?

More than 85% of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims are Sunni. They dominate the Arab world and are central in countries like Turkey, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. The nations of Iran, major parts of Iraq and Bahrain are predominately Shiite Muslims. It is Saudi Arabia and its royal family that control the holiest shrines of Islam in Mecca and Medina. The cities of Karbala, Kufa and Najaf contain the revered shrines of Shiite Islam.

The historic origins of the Islamic split: The founding and early history of Islam revolves around the prophet Muhammad (A.D. 570-632). Muhammad was born about 570. Because he lost his father near the time of his birth and because his mother died when he was six, Muhammad was cared for briefly by his grandfather and later by his uncle, Abu Talib. His uncle, Abu Talib, was a merchant, so Muhammad traveled extensively with him in the thriving caravan network that traversed Arabia, Syria and into India and northern Africa. No doubt it was these journeys that first exposed Muhammad to Christianity and Judaism. Although none of these contacts were with orthodox representatives of either faith, a deepening conviction about the truth of monotheism resulted. At the age of 25, Muhammad led a trading expedition to Syria for a wealthy widow named Khadijah. So impressed was she with Muhammad, that she sought his hand in marriage. Though she was 15 years his senior, he accepted and they began a life of devotion to one another; a marriage that produced six children. Although he married several women after she died, he maintained a monogamous relationship with her throughout their life together.

According to Muslim tradition, the year 610 changed Muhammad and thereby the world. On the 17th night of the month of Ramadan, Muhammad was in solitary meditation in a cave at the foot of Mount Hira, near the city of Mecca, when he suddenly saw a vision. The angel Gabriel commanded him to "recite." Not understanding what he was to recite, Muhammad heard Gabriel exclaim that he was the prophet of God (Allah). His newfound monotheism was controversial among the polytheistic tribes of Mecca. Resistance from Mecca intensified and his life was in danger. Also according to Muslim tradition, Allah confirmed Muhammad's prophethood in 620, miraculously bringing him at night to Jerusalem. There he conversed with Jesus, Moses and Abraham, and where he and Gabriel were taken by a ladder to the seventh

heaven. (Muslims believe that the Dome of the Rock is built on the site of this ascension.) But this confirmation did not facilitate acceptance of his monotheistic message by others. Muhammad continued to condemn the paganism of the polytheistic Arabian tribes. In Mecca there was a massive stone shrine called the Ka'ba, which attracted pilgrims from all over Arabia. Fifty feet high and nearly 40 feet square, it housed one idol for each day of the year. Some said it had been built by Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden. Others claimed that Abraham and Ishmael had built it. Arabian pilgrims came to kiss or touch the smooth black stone that glistened in the southeastern corner. So severe was Muhammad's persecution that he took his wife and small group of followers and fled to Medina, about 250 miles north of Mecca. For the Muslim this momentous event, called the "Hijra," is year 1 in the Muslim calendar. While in Medina, he found acceptance and began to build his army of Islam. Muhammad had become a military leader! Eight years after the Hijra, Muhammad and his army of 10,000 reentered Mecca in triumph. Thronged by his followers, the 62-year old Muhammad led a glorious pilgrimage to the Ka'bah, now the focal point of Islamic worship. There in 632, he announced the perfection of a new religion--the religion that worshiped Allah. Before he died, Muhammad established complete domination over the Arabian Peninsula.

What was Muhammad's relationship with the early Christians and the Jews? Muhammad was not really familiar with Christianity, or the Bible. The Qur'an, the 114 chapters of Archangel Gabriel's revelations to Muhammad, refutes Christian claims that Jesus died on the cross, that He was God's Son, and that God is Trinity. Likewise, the Qur'an alludes to other beliefs that are of course demonstrably false--that Mary was a sister of Aaron and Moses and that Mary was part of the Trinity. Therefore, Muhammad denied Jesus's deity, His atoning death on the cross and the Trinitarian nature of God. Despite such horrific error and misunderstanding about the truth of Christianity, Muhammad vigorously taught that he and his teachings were heirs to both Judaism and Christianity--those he called "peoples of the book". For that reason, he decreed that Christians and Jews were to receive protection under Muslim rule. He extended personal hospitality to Christians, less to Jews. During his early years in Mecca, Muhammad confirmed his basic allegiance with Jews and Christians. However, after the flight to Medina, his attitude towards Jews and Christians changed. He turned radically against them and developed his teachings about jihad.

After Muhammad's death, Islam spread quickly. In fact, in only 100 years (632-732) it swept across the rest of Arabia, Palestine, all of northern Africa and into Spain, only to be stopped in France. Why did it spread so quickly? The military vacuum left by the collapse of western Rome and the jihad, or holy war, proclaimed by the Qur'an help to explain the swift conquest by Islam. Huge territories, once dominated by Christianity, were lost, many of which have never been recovered.

When Muhammad died suddenly, he had designated no successor. His followers had to decide how the succession issue was solved--was it to be based on heredity or chosen based on loyalty to Muhammad? The successors to Muhammad fell into disagreement, which caused a fatal division in Islam that has never healed. According to the Sunni sect, Medinans elected an aging member from Muhammad's tribe, Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law. But, according to the

Shiah sect (partisans of Ali), the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law was the designated successor—Ali ibn Abi Talib. Ali did eventually become caliph after Abu Bakr's two successors were assassinated. After Ali was also assassinated, with a poison-laced sword at the mosque in Kufa (in Iraq), his sons Hasan and then Hussein claimed the title of caliph. At Karbala, Hussein and his relatives were massacred in 680. The martyrdom of Hussein is now the central tenet of those who believe that Ali should have been the Prophet's successor. This is the origin of the Shiites, a contraction of the phrase *Shiat Ali*, or followers of Ali.

The Theology of Sunni and Shiite Islam: Perhaps the single biggest misunderstanding about Islam among Christians is that Islam is a monolithic religion. Islam has deep conflicts and tensions among the various Muslim communities—Sunni, Shiite, Sufi and others.

All agree on the basic teachings about Allah: The Muslim concept of God is summed up in the name "Allah." A critical point for Islamic doctrine is the stress on Allah's unity of being. This dominates the Muslim's thinking about God, and is expressed in the phrase, "There is no God but Allah." He is absolutely unique and inconceivable. An Islamic proverb says, "Whatever your mind may think of, God is not that!" A constant phrase repeated in Muslim prayers is "Allah Akbar" (God is great). God is far greater than any thought humans can have of him. Allah is so great that he can do what he likes, even break his own laws. In Islam, Allah has decreed all that will occur. He is the creator of all that is in heaven and on earth. His knowledge is perfect; his will is beyond challenge; and his power is irresistible. All these attributes--omniscience, sovereignty and omnipotence--are evident in his creation. Many pious Muslims carry a rosary that has 99 beads, each one representing one of Allah's names. The one-hundredth is unknown to humans, known, legend has it, only to the camel. Allah's might and majesty are tempered with justice. He rewards and punishes, yet he is merciful; a guardian of his servants; a defender of the orphan; a guide of the wrong-doer; a liberator from pain; a friend of the poor; and a ready-to-forgive master (Qur'an, 11:52). Allah resides in the seventh heaven, far removed from his creation. He is unknowable but he has chosen to make himself known through the holy books and through his prophets. These books including the Old and New Testaments, and the prophets include the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus.

But consider this summary of the major differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam:

1. Both Sunnis and Shiites believe that each has respectively distorted the meaning of the Qur'an, the holy text of 114 chapters of Muhammad's revelations.
2. Shiites believe that additional revelation comes through the Imams (their teachers). In Iran, the Ayatollahs are examples of this (e.g., Ayatollah Khomeini and the present Ayatollah Khamenei).
3. Shiites believe in a line of 12 Imams, the last of whom, a boy, is believed to have vanished in the 9th century in Iraq after his father was murdered. Shiites, known as "The Twelvers," anticipate his return as the Mahdi, the Messiah. His return is associated with cataclysmic events, which will ultimately bring the prophet Jesus back, who will convert

whole world to Islam.

4. Where Sunnis emphasize Allah's power in the material world, Shiites value martyrdom and sacrifice.

A Word about Jihad. The term "jihad" literally means "struggle" or "exertion." In the religious context it always involves a struggle against evil. That struggle can involve one of the hearts, where the Muslim fights the evil of his nature, but it can also be a "jihad of the mouth," where the Muslim struggles against those who oppose Islam. But the most controversial form of jihad is the "jihad of the sword." Throughout the Qur'an there are calls to physical combat on behalf of Islam. In fact, this doctrine developed over time in Muhammad's teaching. In the Qur'an, chapters that focus on his time in Mecca and even early Medina, the militancy of jihad is absent. However, as the opposition to Islam mounted so did Muhammad's teaching that jihad is military force in the name of Allah. As the doctrine developed, Muhammad taught that those who sacrificed their lives for the battle for Allah were guaranteed admission to the highest level of heaven. Jihad had become a violent, military means of spreading the faith and Allah was glorified through this. Historically, jihad became the heart of Islam's expansion. Today, Islamic terrorists are trying to resurrect that militant, aggressive form of jihad. Shiite Islam more readily embraces the "jihad of the sword."

Today, one must understand the basic divisions within Islam and also how these differences impact policy—both domestic and foreign—in the Middle East. And to grasp the growing hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, one has to understand the difference between Sunni and Shiite Islam.

See James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 75-84; John Harney, "Q and A" in the *New York Times* (3 January 2016).