

## Branches of Islam: Sunni & Shiite; Differences between the Two & America's Ignorance of Them: the Line of Muhammad; Shari'ah Law Defined; Dome of the Rock's Inscriptions Reveal Cosmic 1 Arrogance & Cosmic 2 Hatred

There are several branches or "denominations" in Islam. We will briefly note the two major ones.

- 1) Sunni. This is considered to be orthodox Islam. It means the "well trodden path." This branch believes that the heirs of any of the first four caliphs following Muhammad are the legitimate rulers of Islam.
- 2) Shiite. "The Party of Ali." This branch of Islam demands the return of the Muhammad family. The political leader is known as the imam and is transformed into a manifestation of God. This means that he is in touch with the Primordial Light which provides him the only true knowledge. Only the imam can understand the true meaning of the Qur'an for he alone is infallible.

Who the true caliph/imam actually is becomes the major issue in the Middle East today. When Muhammad died, a great power struggle followed as to who would take over Islamic power. Today the Sunni are those who believe that the caliph should be from the lineage of Muhammad. Shiites hold to Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali as being the correct lineage of the imam.

Much of twenty-first-century history will be determined by the conflict that exists between these two branches of Islam and between Islam in general and the Western world. Your understanding of this conflict is essential to your function as the restraining pivot.

This article from the George Mason University Web site, History News Network, gives basic information about the two major branches of Islam:

### What Is the Difference Between Sunni and Shiite Muslims—and Why Does It Matter?

The Islam religion was founded by Mohammed in the seventh century. In 622, he founded the first Islamic state, a theocracy in Medina, a city in western Saudi Arabia located north of Mecca. There are two branches of the religion he founded.

The **Sunni** branch believes that the first four caliphs--Mohammed's successors--rightfully took his place as the leaders of Muslims. They recognize the heirs of the four caliphs as legitimate religious leaders. These heirs ruled continuously in the Arab world until the break-up of the Ottoman Empire following the end of the First World War.

**Shiites**, in contrast, believe that only the heirs of the fourth caliph, Ali, are the legitimate successors of Mohammed. In 931 the Twelfth Imam disappeared. This was a seminal event in the history of Shiite Muslims. According to R. Scott Appleby, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, "Shiite Muslims, who are concentrated in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, [believe they] had suffered the loss of divinely guided political leadership" at the time of the Imam's disappearance. Not "until the ascendancy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini \kō-mā'-nē\ in 1978" did they believe that they had once again begun to live under the authority of a legitimate religious figure.

Another difference between **Sunnis** and **Shiites** has to do with the Mahdi, "the rightly-guided one" whose role is to bring a just global caliphate into being. As historian Timothy Furnish has written, "The major difference is that for **Shi'ites** he has already been here, and will return from hiding; for **Sunnis** he has yet to emerge into history: a comeback versus a coming out, if you will."

In a special 9-11 edition of the *Journal of American History*, Appleby explained that the **Shiite** outlook is far different from the **Sunni's**, a difference that is highly significant:

... for **Sunni** Muslims, approximately 90 percent of the Muslim world, the loss of the caliphate after World War I was devastating in light of the hitherto continuous historic presence of the caliph, the guardian of Islamic law and the Islamic state. Sunni fundamentalist leaders thereafter emerged in nations such as Egypt and India, where contact with Western political structures provided them with a model awkwardly to imitate ... as they struggled after 1924 to provide a viable alternative to the caliphate.

In 1928, four years after the abolishment of the caliphate, the Egyptian schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna founded the first Islamic fundamentalist movement in the **Sunni** world, the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun). Al-Banna was appalled by "the wave of atheism and lewdness [that] engulfed Egypt" following World War I. Most distressing to al-Banna and his followers was what they saw as the rapid moral decline of the religious establishment, including the leading sheikhs, or religious scholars, at Al-Azhar, the grand mosque and center of Islamic learning in Cairo. The clerical leaders had become compromised and corrupted by their alliance with the indigenous ruling elites who had succeeded the European colonial masters.

Osama bin Laden is a **Sunni** Muslim. To him the end of the reign of the caliphs in the 1920s was catastrophic, as he made clear in a videotape made after 9-11. On the tape, broadcast by Al-Jazeera on October 7, 2001, he proclaimed: "What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. ... Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more [than] eighty years, of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated."

In December 2006 the New York Times reported that it is not just ordinary Americans who find it difficult to remember the difference between **Sunnis** and **Shiites**:

Surprise quiz: Is Al Qaeda **Sunni** or **Shiite**? Which sect dominates Hezbollah?

Silvestre Reyes (D-TX), the Democratic nominee to head the House Intelligence Committee,<sup>1</sup> failed to answer both questions correctly last week when put to the test by *Congressional Quarterly*. He mislabeled Al Qaeda as predominantly **Shiite**, and on Hezbollah,<sup>2</sup> which is mostly **Shiite**, he drew a blank.

“Speaking only for myself,” he told reporters, “it’s hard to keep things in perspective and in the categories.”

Gen. William Odom, who directed the National Security Agency under President Ronald Reagan, said that Mr. Reyes mainly needs to know “how the intelligence community works.”

The Review asked nearly a dozen experts, from William R. Polk, author of “Understanding Iraq,” to Paul R. Pillar, the C.I.A. official who coordinated intelligence on the Middle East until he retired last year, to explain the region. Here, a quick distillation.

What caused the original divide?

The groups first diverged after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, and his followers could not agree on whether to choose bloodline successors or leaders most likely to follow the tenets of the faith.

The group now known as **Sunnis** chose Abu Bakr 'ah-bü-bak'-ar\, the prophet’s adviser, to become the first successor, or caliph, to lead the Muslim state. **Shiites** favored Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Ali and his successors are called imams, who not only lead the **Shiites** but are considered to be descendants of Muhammad. After the 11th imam died in 874, and his young son was said to have disappeared from the funeral, **Shiites** in particular came to see the child as a Messiah who had been hidden from the public by God.

How did the violence start?

In 656, Ali’s supporters killed the third caliph. Soon after, the **Sunnis** killed Ali’s son Husain.

Fighting continued but **Sunnis** emerged victorious over the **Shiites** and came to revere the caliphate for its strength and piety.

**Shiites** focused on developing their religious beliefs, through their imams.<sup>3</sup>

From this overview of Islam it is important to note a legal definition of Shari’ah law:

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<sup>1</sup> Nominated by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and confirmed following hearings in 2006 as chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

<sup>2</sup> “The history of Hezbollah begins with the 1982 occupation of Beirut and southern Lebanon by Israel. Israel had re-invaded the country in an effort to control members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) who had settled there and were carrying out attacks on Israel. In response Shi’ite Muslims with the assistance of Iranian Revolutionary Guards formed Hezbollah to combat the Israeli presence, and ultimately to assist the Palestinians in their fight for statehood” (“The Hezbollah’s History,” <http://www.military.com/Resources/ResourceFileView?file=Hezbollah-History.htm> [accessed September 5, 2009]).

<sup>3</sup> History News Network Staff, “What Is the Difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims—and Why Does It Matter?” *History News Network*, December 18, 2006, <http://hnn.us/articles/934.html> (accessed September 5, 2009).

Shariah law: Muslim or Islamic law, both civil and criminal justice as well as regulating individual conduct both personal and moral. The custom-based body of law based on the Koran and the religion of Islam. Because, by definition, Muslim states are theocracies, religious texts are law, the latter distinguished by Islam and Muslims in their application, as Shariah or Shariah law. So thorough is the integration of the justice system and Church under Shariah law that Shariah courts are essentially religious courts; judges are usually church (Mosque) officials.<sup>4</sup>

This Islamic-Statist worldview plus the belief that the Qur'an trumps the divine revelations of Judaism and Christianity, motivates Muslim aspirations for Shari'ah law worldwide.

Bernard Lewis is the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies Emeritus at Princeton University. He writes the following in his book, *The Crisis of Islam*:

The oldest surviving Muslim religious building outside Arabia, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, was completed in 691 or 692 C.E. The erection of this monument, on the site of the ancient Jewish temple, and in the style and the vicinity of Christian monuments such as the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Ascension, sent a clear message to the Jews and, more important, the Christians. Their revelations, though once authentic, had been corrupted by their unworthy custodians and were therefore superseded by the final and perfect revelation embodied in Islam. Just as the Jews had been overcome and superseded by the Christians, so the Christian world order was now to be replaced by the Muslim faith and the Islamic caliphate. To emphasize the point, the Qur'anic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock denounce what Muslims regard as the principle Christian errors: "Praise be to God, who begets no son, and has no partner" and "He is God, one, eternal. He does not beget, He is not begotten, and He has no peer" (Qur'an CXII). This was clearly a challenge to Christendom in its birthplace. A millennium later the stationing of American troops in Arabia was seen by many Muslims and notably Usama bin Ladin as a similar challenge, this time from Christendom to Islam.

To emphasize this early challenge to Christendom, the caliph, for the first time, struck gold coins, hitherto an imperial Roman prerogative. It is significant that the name of the first Islamic gold coin, the *dinar* \di-när\, is borrowed from the Roman denarius.<sup>5</sup> Some of these coins bore the caliph's name, his title Commander of the Faithful, and the same polemical verses. The message was clear. In the Muslim perception, the Jews and later the Christians had gone astray and had followed false doctrines. Both religions were therefore superseded, and replaced by Islam, the final and perfect revelation in God's sequence. The Qur'anic verses quoted in the Dome and on the gold coins condemn what, for Muslims, is the worst of these corruptions of the true faith. There is of course an additional message, from the caliph to the emperor: "Your faith is corrupted, your time has passed. I am now the ruler of God's empire on earth."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Duhaime, "Sharia Law," <http://www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/S/ShariaLaw.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> See visual, "Octavian Aureus," Joe Griffin Media Ministries: Visuals and Diagrams, [www.joegriffin.org](http://www.joegriffin.org).

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 43-44.

