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Date _____

Religion & Ethics - *Islam*



The Differences Between Sunni and Shia Muslims

The words Sunni and Shia appear regularly in stories about the Muslim world but few people know what they really mean. Religion is important in Muslim countries and understanding Sunni and Shia beliefs is important in understanding the modern Muslim world.

The beginnings

The division between the Sunnis and the Shia is the largest and oldest in the history of Islam. To understand it, it is good to know a little bit about the political legacy of the Prophet Muhammad.

When the Prophet died in the early 7th Century he not only left the religion of Islam but also an Islamic State in the Arabian Peninsula with around one hundred thousand Muslim inhabitants. It was the question of who should succeed the Prophet and lead the new Islamic state that created the divide.

One group of Muslims (the larger group) elected Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet as the next caliph (leader) of the Muslims and he was then appointed. However, a smaller group believed that the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali, should become the caliph.

Muslims who believe that Abu Bakr should be the next leader have come to be known as Sunni. Muslims who believe Ali should have been the next leader are now known as Shia. The use of the word successor should not be confused to mean that those that followed the Prophet Muhammad were also prophets - both Shia and Sunni agree that Muhammad was the final prophet.

How do Sunni and Shia differ on beliefs?

Initially, the difference between Sunni and Shia was merely a difference concerning who should lead the Muslim community. The Shia, however, not only preferred the family of the Prophet in their choice of leadership but also with regard to the Hadith literature. The interpretation of Hadith (sayings and conduct of the Prophet) is an very important for Shia and Sunnis. The Shia give preference to the Hadith as narrated by Ali and Fatima and their close associates. The Sunnis consider the Hadith narrated by any of twelve thousand companions equally. This ultimately led to a different understanding of Islam.

Sunni Muslims tend to follow the opinion of the 7th and 8th century scholars Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki and Shaafii. The Shia believe only a living scholar must be followed.

Practical differences

Sunni Muslims pray five times a day, whereas Shia Muslims can combine prayers to pray three times a day. Shia prayers can often be identified by a small tablet of clay, from a holy place (often Karbala), on which they place their forehead while bowing in prayer. The practice of Muttah marriage, a temporary marriage, is also permitted in Shia Islam but Sunnis considered it forbidden as they believe the Prophet abolished it.

How do Sunni and Shia view each other?

The majority of Sunni and Shia do not let their differences allow them to cast each other out of Islam. Most Muslims think of both Sunni and Shia approaches to Islam as equally valid.

—Adapted from *BBC Religion & Ethics*
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/>

Directions: Fill in the T-chart with differences between Sunni and Shia Islam from the reading.

Sunni

Shia