

# Analysing sunnis and shiites split religion essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The difference between Sunni and Shia sects of Islam are not to the gigantic proportions as most Western literature assume. It is true that there are minor variations in the way they take their respective religious heads and attribute meaning to the history of the family of Muhammad's, however, cultural and political differences hold the most divisive power over the religious forces. It is therefore significant to note that both sects believe and put emphasis in the Five Pillars of Islam, believe in and read same Holy Quran, and furthermore consider each other Muslims. The five pillars that form the core of their spiritual sanctity are Testimony of faith (Kalima), Prayer (Salat), Almsgiving (Zakat), Fasting (Sawm), Pilgrimage (Hajj) (Huda, 2010).

The split between the Sunnis and Shia can be traced back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and the dilemma of the successor of Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim nation. Prophet Muhammad died in the evening of June 8, 632 A. D. (the twelfth of Rabi' al-Away) at the age of sixty-three. There after, the Sunni Muslims were in agreement with the stand taken by most of the Prophet's companions that the new head should be chosen from among those deemed competent of the job. This is the position that was adopted and implemented. The Prophet Muhammad's close acquaintance and counselor, Abu Bark, consequently became the first Caliph of the Islamic nation. It is worth noting that the word " Sunni" is an Arabic word meaning " one who follows the traditions of the Prophet."

Contrary to the Sunni belief over the succession, some Muslims hold the idea that leadership should have been from the Prophet's own family, handed over to those specifically appointed by him, or amid Imams chosen by God

Himself. These were the Shia Muslims. They believed that after the death of Prophet Muhammad, leadership ought to have been passed on directly to his cousin/son-in-law, Ali. Since those historical years, Shia Muslims have not acknowledged the power and authority of elected leaders. The Shia Muslims instead opted to recognize and obey the Imams they believed were chosen by the Prophet Muhammad or by God Himself. The word " Shia" is an Arabic word for " a group or supportive party of people." It is short form of " Shia-t-Ali," or " the Party of Ali." Shias are also referred to as followers of " Ahl-al-Bayt" or " People of the Household" (of the Prophet) (Huda).

Majority of the Muslims are the Sunni Muslims at 85% of all the Muslims all over the world. A tangible number of Shia Muslims are found in Iraq and Iran, with some large minority communities in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain etc.

Having looked at the brief history of the split of the two sects and the reasons behind the split, it is fundamental therefore, to look at the differences in religious beliefs, leadership, texts, and any other that may be. From the historical differences in political leadership, some spiritual life aspects were consequently changed and since diverge between the two groups. However, as noted hitherto, the Shia and Sunni Muslims hold in common the fundamental articles of Islamic belief and are brethren in the Islam faith. As a matter of fact, rarely or never at all will a Muslim identify themselves as Shia or Sunni Muslim but rather as Muslim (Austine Cline).

Shia Muslims believe that the Imam is naturally sinless since his authority comes directly from God. From this, the Shia Muslims revere and adore the

Imams as saints and strive to perform pilgrimages for divine intervention to their shrines and tombs. Countering this is the Sunni Muslim belief that there is no foundation in Islam for a hereditary advantaged category or rank of religious leaders. They therefore have no place for the pilgrimage to the saint's shrines. Sunni Muslims argue that control of the community is not hereditary or a birthright, but a trust that must be earned and therefore can be given or taken away by the people themselves.

Another difference comes in the sanctity of religious texts. Shia Muslims have some resentment to some of the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. This sprouts from their stands and deeds in the historical years of discord about leadership among the Muslim nations. It is said that Abu Bakr, Umar, Aisha, etc (Sunnis) narrated much about the Prophet Muhammad's life and spiritual encounters, practice and journey. The Shia Muslims reject these Hadith do not take them as a basis for their religious practices. This accordingly informs divergence in religious practice between the Sunnis and Shias. The differences concern aspects of religious life: prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and so on and so forth. For instance Shi'ites can condense the five daily prayers into 3 or 4 yet Sunnis don't, Shiites might pay their alms (Zakat) directly to the poor, yet Sunnis pay to the state. Shiites also promotes a provisional marriage (muttah) for men travelling far from home while Sunnis don't ascribe to this (Sunnis vs. Shiites).

The Shias place their forehead onto a piece of natural material while praying (clay tablet, soil or sand from Karbala (where Imam Hussain was martyred), rather than onto a prayer mat. The Sunnis however recommend that one should not prostrate on a natural surface.

Shias hold their hands at their sides while praying while Sunnis on the other side their arms-right over left- and clasp their hands, though either is acceptable.

Religious Shia women black like the male religious leaders. Conventional Sunni women cover around the perimeter of the face with the hijab but only to below their chin such that the chin can show in part while the Shia women will cover the perimeter of the face and the chin completely.

Shias more often than not derive their name from the name or titles of saints. They often draw their lineage from to Ali and Fatimah.

### **The three Sects of Shiites**

Although, through history there were several branches of Shia Muslims, currently only three are predominant. The Ashariyyah, profoundly called the Twelvers, the Ismaili and the Zaidi.

Ashariyyah or Twelvers as the adherents are called believe in the twelve divinely ordained leaders, known as the Twelve Imams. These were the successors of Prophet Muhammad and were spiritual and political leaders. On average 85% of Shi'a are Twelvers.

Ismaili is the second largest sect of the Shia Islam after the Twelvers. They derive their name from their acceptance of Ismail ibn Jafar as the divinely-appointed spiritual successor to Jafar as-sadiq, they differ from the Twelvers, who accept Musa al-Kizim, the younger brother of Ismail, as the proper Imam.

**Zaidi are followers of the Zaidi fiqh and they identify with the first four of the Twelve Imams but they accept Zayd ibn Ali as their Fifth Imam, in place of his brother Muhammad al-Baqir. After Zayd ibn Ali, the Zaidi recognize other descendants of Hasan ibn Ali or Husayn ibn Ali to be Imams. Among the well known Zaidi Imams are Yahya ibn Zayd, Muhammad al Nafs az-Zakiyah and Ibrahim ibn Abdullah.**