

# Islam: The Sects

★ One of the aims of Muhammad was to unify a society that was broken by countless religious beliefs and philosophies. That objective was successful and can still be seen in Islam today. Yet even within a religion as unified as Islam some division has occurred, although there are still far fewer sects or divisions among Islam than within Christianity. The two major sects trace their division more to historic differences than doctrine.

Muhammad never established a line of predecessors. Consequently following his death it was necessary to quickly designate one who would lead the people spiritually, militarily, and administratively. The Muslims agreed that there should be a designated leader, a *caliph*, someone who would lead as Muhammad did, yet would not be equal to Muhammad. The selection of this caliph led to the greatest divide among Muslims. (The role of caliph continued to be filled by specially chosen Muslims up to the end of WWI when the caliphate was abolished by the Turks.)

## THE SUNNI MUSLIMS

A large faction of Muhammad's followers agreed that the successor to Muhammad should be elected from among the people of the Quarish tribe. They came to be known as the *Sunni Muslims*, Muslims who follow the sunnah or path as mentioned in the Hadith. The first of the caliphs chosen in AD 632 was Abu Bakr, a companion of Muhammad's since the early years of Islam. He was entrusted with governing the people by the teachings of the Quran and the traditions set down by the prophet Muhammad. The Sunnis further religiously follow the pillars of faith. Muslims especially hold in high regard the first four caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

Today the Sunni tribe makes up nearly 90% of Islam, boasting a majority in all Islamic countries with the exception of Iran. (Note: Saddam Hussein was a Sunni Muslim).

## THE SHIITE MUSLIMS

There arose a second faction in opposition to the Sunnis that felt the new leader should be chosen from

the line of Muhammad. They felt that Muhammad supposedly bestowed that rite on his cousin Ali, the husband of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. These people were named the "faction of Ali" or *Shia (Shiite) Muslims*. Their plan was to negate the Sunni caliph and appoint an *imam* or spiritual leader. The Shiites believe that the twelfth imam did not die, but was either taken by Allah to heaven, or is hiding on the earth. One day he will return to become the *Mahdi*, or messianic figure.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Ali was chosen by the Sunnis to be the fourth caliph although the Shiites would instead consider him to be the first imam. His rule was one of distrust as he filled his administrative posts with close relatives. After only five years, he was murdered and buried in Najaf, Iraq, where people still visit his shrine.

Ali was followed by his son, Hasan. However his reign was also short-lived and he and his sixty wives were driven into exile in Medina where he was later poisoned. In AD 680, Ali's second son Hussain attempted to regain the position of leader. He and his

family were brutally slaughtered by the Sunnis. His head was taken to Damascus and his body was trampled under horses. To this day the tenth day of Muharram is viewed as a day of infamy to those Shiites in Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan and parts of Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> In remembrance, Shiites prepare sermons, passion plays and

parades that reenact the horrid details of the deaths of Hussain and his family. The men are said to clothe themselves in white, beat their heads and chests with chains, and draw blood to stain their white garments.<sup>1</sup>

Shiites are awaiting the return of the twelfth imam. Until he returns, an Ayatollah may rule in his stead.

## THE SUFI MUSLIMS

About 150 years after the death of Muhammad, a mystical order of Muslim began. Its followers cut across the lines of Sunni and Shiite Muslims. They are named Sufi because the original sect wore wool (*suf*) as a sign of their purity before Allah. As mystics their faith is based on a deep sense of oneness with their god. They preach against the evils of the world and strive for a union with God following an inward path of love. Their path is illuminated by the directions given

*All Muslims must believe in Jesus—as a prophet but not as a Savior and Lord.<sup>4</sup>*  
Ernest Hahn

them through Muhammad. They believe that Muhammad was the perfect human, guided by God. Through the years there have been several prominent Sufis who have established schools. Among them was Al-Din Rumi, founder of the Sufi order known as the “*whirling dervishes*” (a dervish is a wandering Sufi) because they repeated the name of God as they danced in circles. Today the Sufis are among the most aggressive Muslim missionaries.

## WAHHABISM

Sometimes referred to as radical Sunnism, the Wahhabi movement is one of the most conservative movements among Muslims. The founder, Al Wahhab (AD 1703-1787) believed in an ultra literal interpretation of the Quran. The Wahhabis say their daily prayers using only text from the Quran, and they condemn idol worship or sainthood. They believe in the teaching of jihad, frequently threatening those who stray from the Quran. Today Saudi Arabia is strongly connected with the Wahhabi sect.

## NATION OF ISLAM

One of the most controversial sects of Islam is found here in the West, the Nation of Islam. This group was founded in the 1930s by Wallace Dodd Fard (Wali Farad Muhammad) in Detroit, Michigan. He wished to continue the teachings of Timothy Ali who founded the Moorish Holy Temple of Science Organization. He taught that Islam, not Christianity, was the historical and proper religion of black people and that the white people were the devils. Fard continued to teach that the black man was originally Muslim, thereby calling on a separate nation. In 1934, Fard was succeeded by Elijah Pool Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam. Central to his belief was that blacks were the first people created and that they were to be restored to their rightful leadership. They further said that Christianity was the white man’s religion, Allah was truly God, the Quran was the holy book, and he was a specially chosen prophet.

The movement grew between the 1930s and 1970. In Elijah Muhammad’s later years the movement was divided as a faction began to veer more toward the orthodox teachings of Islam. This group was headed by Malcolm X, who attacked Elijah’s marital infidelity and extreme teachings. In 1965 Malcolm X was murdered by dissident Muslims in Harlem.

Elijah’s son, Wallace Muhammad spoke out against his father’s radical viewpoints. He also moved closer toward orthodox Islam. This second offshoot of Elijah Muhammad changed the name of the Nation of Islam to the American Muslim Mission.

Yet not everyone was satisfied with these changes.

Another black leader, Louis Farrakhan, wished to remain faithful to the fanatic teachings of Elijah Muhammad. He resurrected the Nation of Islam and continued the major teachings of Elijah Muhammad, namely:

- *There is one God Allah.*
- *The Quran and the Bible are to be followed, although the Bible has become corrupted.*
- *Allah’s prophets must be accepted.*
- *The judgment of Allah will take place first in America.*
- *Black and white Americans should be separated.*
- *Integration is hypocritical and deceptive.*<sup>1</sup>

In recent years the Muslim community within the United States has grown and become better organized. More and more mosques are being built for their places of worship, and some Muslims have begun parochial schools for their children. Muslims spread their faith in a number of ways including books, shops, and even television and radio programs. Many college campuses are targeted as prime areas for Muslim evangelizing. Christians have their mission to “go and teach all people”, and Muslims have their marching orders to “bring the non-Muslim world under the rule of Allah.”.

Author George Braswell ( “*What You Need to Know about Islam and Muslims*”<sup>1</sup>) lists several areas for the Christian to respond to the Muslim religion.

1. *Christians should let the past be the past.*
2. *Christians should understand the basics of Islam.*
3. *Christians should distinguish between different types of Muslims.*
4. *Christians should prepare themselves for Muslim misunderstandings about Christianity.*
5. *Christians should prepare themselves to witness to Muslims.*
6. *Christians should reach out to Muslims.*
7. *Christians should plant churches among Muslim people.*

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## DISCUSSION:

1. ***Why is there so much hatred between the Sunnis and the Shiites?***
2. ***How can it be that a religion with sects that hate one another could stand side by side against the world?***
3. ***The radical Wahhabis have been tied to the 9/11 suicide bombings. How can any religion claim such violence as a doctrine?***
4. ***Many in our country today, including those within our educational systems and political arenas, lovingly embrace the Islamic religion. Why is it important to educate ourselves with Islam’s teaching and background?***