

To be a Shia or a Sunni?

A Thirteen Centuries Old Question

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<http://www.guidedones.com/metapage/frq/shsunnii0.htm>

The Sunni-Shia schism in Islam can be traced back to the issues that arose over the leadership of the Muslim community shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in AD 632. Since Mohammed's only daughter, Fatima, could not step into her father's shoes, three caliphs (deputies) assumed control for the brief period AD 632-656. Some, however, refused to recognize them. Known as the Shias, they were followers of Mohammed's charismatic son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib (AD 600-661).

Arguing that only the blood line could be the recipient of Mohammed's divine guidance, Shia believed the Prophet had designated Ali as his political successor and had imparted to him the power of interpreting religious knowledge. Ali and his descendants were therefore the only rightful successors of the Prophet. Their opponents, the Sunnis, supported the view that the Prophet's legitimate successor could be chosen by man and should be an elected member of the Prophet's own tribe.

There are a number of differences in the Shia and the Sunni opinions. But these differences cannot be termed as the "basic differences" in these two major sects of Islam. The basic difference in the two sects is that of the Shiite faith of the system of "Imamat." The Shiite faith of Imamat implies that after the Prophet, there shall be no other prophet, but the only true leader of the Muslims, at a given time, is an Imam who, like the prophets of Allah, is directly appointed by Allah. The appointment of the first Imam was made by Allah through the last prophet and every subsequent Imam is appointed by Allah through the Imam who precedes him. Another qualification of the Imam, according to the Shiite belief is that he shall belong to the family of the last prophet. In this category, the first, second and third caliphs of Islam are held null and void and done out of treachery to the Ummah. The Shiite belief holds that the Imams, like the prophets of Allah, are "masoom" (sinless, innocent) and therefore should be obeyed in all matters and under all circumstances. The Imams, according to the Shiite faith, are thus not just the political leaders of the Muslims but also their religious leaders and clergy.

The Sunni school, on the other hand, does not hold any such belief. The Sunni school, because of its lack of belief in the institution of Imamat, which holds the last prophet of Allah and the book revealed on him are the two primary sources of Islam, while the Shiite school, because of the importance and position it gives to the Imams holds them to be a source of their religion. Anything that an Imam says, any thing that he does and anything that he narrates is religion for the Shiite school. Differing with an Imam in any matter is of about the same consequence as differing with a prophet. Not submitting to the directions of an Imam is as grave a sin as refusing to submit to the directions of a prophet of Allah.

It should be interesting to note here that although these two sects have co-existed for centuries now, the extent and gravity of sectarian violence has never been felt more than in the present times, especially in Muslim countries of Pakistan and Iraq. The basic reason for this change in the situation is that a number of prominent scholars and knowledgeable personalities of both these sects have changed the roles that they played in the past. In the past, the differences of both the sects were a matter of intellectual debate between the scholars of these sects. The gravity of these differences was also fully known, but the scholars never promoted violence against each other. But now the situation is completely different.

The scholars of these sects now sit on their respective pulpits and use these differences as fire to burn the emotions and feelings of their addressees against the people of the other sects. They promote the killings of the followers of other sects by labeling these followers with various derogatory terms. They call such killings a part of Jihad and they promise their followers the everlasting bliss of paradise if they take part in such killings. A Muslim killing another innocent human being, be it a Hindu, Muslim, Christian or a Jew, will have to answer for the blood of the innocent or the murder he committed. How can any group of Muslim, claim to enter paradise by spilling the blood of another Muslim who believes in the Unity of Allah and Prophet-hood of Muhammad?