

Sunnis and Shiites – Why Do They Fight?

Paul R. Hollrah — April 11, 2007
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Several readers have asked if I would educate them on the reasons why Sunnis and Shiites hate each other as they do... as if I were an authority on Islam.

Conservatives and Republicans don't hate liberals and Democrats, but liberals and Democrats hate conservatives and Republicans. I understand all that and the reasons for it, but Sunnis and Shiites? That's another matter entirely.

I have always assumed that Sunnis and Shiites fought and killed each other for approximately the same reason that Irish Protestants and Catholics fought and killed each other... the same reason that there are ten or more different varieties of Baptists—enough, at times, to have three or four Baptist churches at a single highway intersection.

However, since I have always wondered myself about Sunnis and Shiites, and especially since we have troops in harm's way and Islamic fundamentalists have threatened to kill all of us, I thought I'd take a look to see if I could find some answers that might make sense.

Sunnis constitute the large majority (90 percent) of the 1.4 billion Muslims in the world. They reside primarily in Asia, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, North and East Africa, and more recently, in Western Europe and North America.

The word "Sunni" is derived from the Arabic word "Sunnah," which means, roughly, "customary practices," and refers to the oral history and traditions of what the [Prophet Muhammad](#) said or did during his lifetime. Sunnis regard themselves, as opposed to Shiites, as the "keepers of the true faith."

Shiites, a distinct minority in the Muslim world, comprise some 89% of Iran's population and 60% of the Iraqi population. They are also a majority in Yemen, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, and there are sizeable Shiite communities along the east coast of Saudi Arabia and in Lebanon. The Lebanese guerilla organization, Hezbollah, is Shiite.

Shiites are descended from Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, and his son-in-law, Ali. In the years that followed Ali's assassination in 661 A.D., leadership of Islam was claimed by the Ummayyad dynasty, a Sunni sect. Nevertheless, Ali's followers continued to claim his son, Hussein, the Third Imam, as the rightful heir. After years of bitter dispute, Hussein and his Shia followers migrated north from the Arabian Peninsula into Iraq.

In 680 A.D. Hussein found himself surrounded by Ummayyad forces at Karbala, in present day Iraq.

With only a handful of supporters to defend him, Hussein and 72 of his men were captured and beheaded, and their women taken captive. The battle was a defining moment in the split between Sunnis and Shiites.

Ashoura, the holiest day of the Muslim calendar, marks the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala. To this day, Shiites celebrate Ashoura by flagellating themselves with chains and slashing their bodies with swords in grief over Hussein's death. And they've never forgotten who it was that beheaded him.

Sunnis and Shiites lived in relative harmony for nearly a millennium and few challenged the Sunni assumption of superiority. However, with the coming of modern communications and transportation, the drawing of national boundaries, and the establishment of major cities, Sunnis and Shiites were suddenly thrown together in close proximity and memories of old unsettled scores resurfaced.

Many of today's most militant Islamic terror cells, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda, are members of a fundamentalist Sunni sect called Wahhabi. Since the earliest days, Wahhabis have been particularly hostile toward the Shiites. During the early 19th century, Wahhabis attacked and destroyed Shiite shrines at Mecca, Medina, and Karbala, accusing the Shiites of worshipping idols.

In 2004, a Kuwaiti sheikh, Hamed al-Ali, condemned Shia as "the world's biggest display of heathens and idolatry," while the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, once said that "the Shiites are a more pernicious enemy than the Americans, and the best strategy for... Sunnis is to 'strike their religious, military, and other cadres.'" The Saudis still maintain official discrimination against Shiites and vilify them in children's textbooks.

Then, just as I thought I was beginning to gain a little understanding of Islam I stumbled onto a discussion of "The Twelve Imams" and I noted that, between 600 and 900 A.D., ten of Shia's first twelve Imam's died of food poisoning. Then I heard of a Wisconsin Muslim who gouged out both of his wife's eyes because she refused to obey him. Under Sharia law, that is his right. And then we hear of insurgents in Iraq carrying children in the back seat of explosives-packed automobiles so that they can pass through American and Iraqi checkpoints before blowing them up... children and all

So what's the point of studying any further? How could 21st century Christians and Jews ever make any sense of that?

The original article can be found at <http://www.familysecuritymatters.org/>

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