

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

*O God, shower Your blessings upon
Prophet Muhammad & his family.*

“A faith in the beginning is simple & uncomplicated. As time goes on, people start elaborating those simple beliefs and that is when disputes arise & different sects are established.

It has happened in all previous religions and Islam was not an exception.”

SSA Rizvi

If you travel across the Middle East and Asia, you will soon realize that besides the similarity and uniformity found among the Muslims on basic issues, there is also a great diversity in the world of Islam. Not only in the composition of its membership but also in thought and practice: there are different theological sects and a variety of spiritual brotherhoods.

However, the most the important division in Islamic theology has placed the Muslims into two main schools of thought: the Sunni and the Shi‘a.

A. WHO IS A MUSLIM?

The Sunnis and the Shi‘as both are Muslims, so let us first define a “Muslim”. A Muslim is one who believes in the following three principles of Islam:

1. **Monotheism (*Tawhīd*)**. This is the belief that there is only One God who is the origin and creator of the universe. This is the foundation stone

of Islam and is reflected in the famous sentence that says:

“I bear witness that there is no god but Allāh”.

2. **Prophet-hood (*Nubuwwa*)**. This is the belief that God sent thousands of prophets and messengers to guide the human society.

Some of the most important prophets of God in whom a Muslim must believe are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them all).

A Muslim must also believe that Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet and final messenger of God. No prophet or messenger is to come after him. This is reflected in the famous saying:

“I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God”.

3. **Resurrection and Life Hereafter (*Qiyāmat*)**. This is a belief that at the end of time, all human beings will be resurrected by God and will be held accountable for their deeds done in this world. The life in hereafter will be an eternal life. However, whether it will be blissful or full of sorrow depends on how we spend our present life.

All Muslims agree that the above three principles are the minimum requirement for joining into the fold of Islam. Anyone who does not believe in all three of the above principles cannot be called a Muslim.

All the Muslims—the Sunnis as well as the Shi‘as— also agree on the following important issues:

- The **Qur’ān** is the Word of God revealed upon Prophet Muhammad, and that it is unaltered, and the main source of Islamic views and laws.
- The **Sunna** (sayings and deeds) of the Prophet of Islam is, after the Qur’ān, the main source of guidance for the Muslims.
- The **Ka’ba** in Mecca is the symbolic House of God, and that Muslims face its direction whenever they stand for their daily prayers.
- The famous tenets of Islam are:
 - **five daily ritual prayers** (salāt): dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset and night prayer;
 - the **fasting** from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadhān (sawm);
 - paying of religious **charity** (in form zakāt);
 - the performing of **pilgrimage** to Mecca (hajj) once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially capable of travelling to Mecca.

Both sects agree in the basics of these tenets even though they differ in their details. The difference, however, does not prevent them from worshipping together in one another’s masjid, mosque. (In reality, a masjid cannot be categorized as “Sunni” or “Shi‘a,” it is a mosque, a place of worshipping Allah open for all Muslims.)

B. WHO IS A SHI‘A MUSLIM?

A Shi‘a Muslim believes in all the issues mentioned above. What makes a Shi‘a different from a Sunni are two main concepts: leadership and justice.

1. Leadership (*imāmat*):

Shi‘a school of thought believes that Islam is a complete way of life, and therefore it is inconceivable that the Prophet Muhammad would have ignored the issue of leadership and succession.

Shi‘ism believes that the Prophet not only gave importance to the issue of leadership and succession but also clearly appointed ‘Ali bin Abi Tālib as his successor and caliph, and also mentioned that the leadership of Islam will continue among the descendants of ‘Ali. This was in accordance with the will of God.

The Sunni Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad set no guidelines for the institution of leadership after his death, and that it is upon the Muslims themselves to come up with a system of leadership.

Shi‘ism bases its arguments on the Qur’ānic verses and the divine precedence in which God never left the issue of leadership in the hands of the people; He appointed the prophets and their successors. When it came to the issue of succession, we see that even great prophets like Abraham and Moses prayed to God: the former prayed for his descendants and the latter prayed for his brother—they prayed and didn’t feel that they could appoint whomsoever they wanted without God’s approval.

The Prophet of Islam, from the very first day of his mission started introducing ‘Ali bin Abi Tâlib as his successor. He clarified that this was done by the will of God.

Names of the Shi‘a Imams (successors of the Prophet) and their era of leadership:

1. ‘Ali bin Abi Talib 632-661
2. Hasan bin ‘Ali 661-669
3. Husayn bin ‘Ali 669-680
4. ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin 680-712
5. Muhammad al-Bâqir 712-735
6. Ja‘far as-Sâdiq 735-765
7. Musa al-Kâzim 765-799
8. ‘Ali ar-Riza 799-818
9. Muhammad bin ‘Ali 818-835
10. ‘Ali an-Naqi 835-868
11. Hasan al-‘Askari 868-873
12. Muhammad al-Mahdi 873-

The Twelfth Shi‘a Imam (or successor of the Prophet) is believed to have gone into Occultation (that is, he is alive but is not known to anyone). This Occultation will last till the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam as the Saviour who will establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The Shi‘as believe that the Mahdi will be assisted in his mission by Jesus.

2. Justice (*‘adl*):

The Shi‘a school of Islamic thought values justice so highly that the belief in justice has become its hallmark in theological books. They are known as “*al-‘adliyya*.”

The Shi‘as believe that justice must prevail and exist at all stages of existence.

They believe that God is just in His dealing with mankind; that God does not compel anyone to believe or to disbelieve in Him; that God does not compel human beings to do good or evil — it is entirely left upon them to make the right choice in light of the guidance provided by the prophets and messengers.

This belief in importance of justice permeates down to human level: the Shi‘as believe that the Prophet and the Imams who succeeded him must also upheld highest standard of justice; that even the religious teachers and prayer-leaders must be upright in their character.

Based on this emphasis of the concept of justice, Shi‘a Muslims are not permitted to co-operate or work with an unjust and tyrant ruler, and they are also expected to strive for a just social order in human society.

C. A SUMMARY OF THE SHI‘A BELIEFS

In conclusion, a Muslim is one who believes in the following three principles

- Monotheism — *Tawhîd*.
- Prophethood — *Nubuwwa*.
- Life Hereafter — *Qiyâmat*.

A Shi‘a Muslim is the one who believes in the following five principles

- Monotheism — *Tawhîd*.
- Justice — *‘Adl*.
- Prophethood — *Nubuwwa*.
- Leadership — *Imâmat*.
- Life Hereafter — *Qiyâmat*.

For more information, refer to the following books:

- *Shi‘a Islam*
by S. Muhammad Husayn Tabataba‘i.
- *Shi‘ism: Imamate & Wilayat*
by Sayyid M. Rizvi.
- *Then I Was Guided*
by Dr. Samawi Tijani.
- *The Right Path*
by S. Sharafuddin Musawi.

Many Shi‘a books and articles can also be read online at www.al-islam.org

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An Introduction to SHI‘A ISLAM

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