

The Shi'ah and Sunni Sects of Islam

Now it was Mu'awiyah's turn to assume leadership. He moved the capital of the Islamic empire to Damascus and began the Umayyad Dynasty. Although they still faced opposition from the Kharijite, more threatening opposition came from the follow of Ali, or the Shi'at Ali. This group came to be known as the Shi'ah (or Shiite) and believed that only the descendants of Ali should lead the nation of Islam. For years, the Shi'ah led revolts against the Umayyads in an attempt to restore their leadership to the caliphate. Though they failed, their presence in the Islamic world was, and continues to be, influential.

For the Shi'ah, the lineage of Ali continued in the Successions of Imams, or leaders of the Shi'ah community. Interestingly, for political reasons, the identity of the Twelfth Imam was never revealed. He came to be known as the Hidden Imam, or al-Mahdi, "the one guided by God." Scholars of the Imams believe that the Hidden Imam will appear at the end of time to judge the faithful and unfaithful.

The largest groups of Muslims, however, are the Sunnis, the orthodox Muslims. They follow the traditional path shown by Muhammad directly from Allah. They differ in many fundamental ways from the Shi'ah. First, they do not believe that the Islamic leader must be a direct heir of Muhammad. Although they respect the Imams, they do not believe that the lineage holds special religious inspiration. Instead, the Sunnis elect caliphs based upon the merit of the character and ability to lead the world's Islamic community.

The other basic argument between the two sects concerns salvation. While the Sunnis believe that the total Muslim community will be judged on the Day of Judgment, the Shi'ah focus their fate on the Imams – and believe that only the Imams can guide Muslims to salvation.

Questions:

1. To the Shi'ah, what is an Imam? What is special about the Twelfth Imam?

2. Over what two issues are the Sunni and Shi'ah most in disagreement?
