



Footnotes

The Newsletter of FPRI's [Wachman Center](#)

Sunni Islam: What Students Need to Know

By John Calvert

April 2010

Vol. 15, No. 1

John Calvert is the Fr. Henry W. Casper, S.J. Associate Professor of History at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. This essay is excerpted from his book "Divisions within Islam," part of a 10-volume series for middle and high school students on the World of Islam, put out by Mason Crest Publishers in cooperation with FPRI. For information about the series, or to order, visit

http://www.masoncrest.com/series_view.php?seriesID=90. Also of interest by John Calvin will be [Shiism: What Students Need to Know](#).

It is the mark of a great world religion to accommodate different outlooks and sensibilities. Quite often, these differences are manifested in terms of formal divisions within the faith. Thus, in Christianity, a distinction exists between the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant denominations. Judaism divides into the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements. The major division in Buddhism is between the Theravada and Mahayana forms of the faith.

Islam is no exception to this rule. In Islam, the major split is between Sunni and the various forms of Shiism, though other divisions also exist. This book will describe and explain these divisions, focusing on Shiism but also taking into consideration other important interpretations of Islam. In contrast to Christianity, the divisions of Islam tend to have their origins in politics rather than dogma. Although theological questions do form part of these divisions, the issues over which they first crystallized were primarily concerned with the leadership of the Islamic community (*umma*).

It will be useful to begin with a few words about Sunni Islam, the position held by approximately 90 percent of the world's Muslims, from which the sectarian forms of Islam, with which we are concerned, are distinguished.

According to the majority Sunni view, the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 C.E. without naming a successor. If Muhammad had had a son, the Muslims at Medina might easily have settled the issue of the succession, but the one son born to the Prophet died in infancy. Thus, it was left to the community of Muslims at Medina to decide the matter. Some of the elders of the community gathered to decide how to hold the people together and ensure some form of continuity. After deliberating, the elders determined that one of Muhammad's closest companions, the venerable tribal *shaykh* ("elder") Abu Bakr, should be the *caliph*, or "successor" to the Prophet. In many ways, Abu Bakr was the logical choice. He was an

early convert to Islam, he was an older man who knew the tribes and their genealogies, and his daughter Aisha had been one of Muhammad's wives.

Although it was clear to the Muslims that Muhammad was the last of the prophets, no one in the Muslim community was quite sure what the role of Abu Bakr should be. However, within a short time, a consensus emerged among the Muslims that the caliph's chief duties should be to enforce Qur'anic laws, defend Islam from its enemies, and expand the faith beyond the Arabian Peninsula, where Islam had originated. According to the Sunnis, the caliphs were mortals who did not have divine powers or even special insight. Their authority was limited to worldly affairs. Sunnis left matters of religious guidance in the hands of the ulama, religious scholars who specialized in the interpretation of the Qur'an and the specifics of its application in society. Early on, the Muslims at Medina decided that the caliphs should be elected or chosen from the tribe of Quraysh, Muhammad's tribe.

Abu Bakr ruled as caliph only two years. Before he died in 634, he appointed another early convert to Islam, Umar, to become the next caliph. A resentful servant attacked Umar in 644. Before he died, he appointed a committee, called a shura, to select the next caliph. The committee chose Uthman. In many ways, Uthman was an unlikely candidate. He hailed from a clan—the Umayyads—that had earlier resisted Muhammad and the Muslims. However, Uthman's piety distinguished him from his Umayyad kinsmen. It was he who had the Qur'an collected and put into an authorized version. Mutinous Muslim soldiers who had settled in Egypt murdered Uthman in 656. The community next chose as caliph Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law (he was married to one of the Prophet's daughters, Fatima).

Collectively, Sunni Muslims refer to Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali as the Rashidun ("rightly guided") caliphs, so called because each knew the Prophet Muhammad personally and dedicated himself to maintaining his ways. In the Sunni Muslim perspective, the short-lived era of the Rashidun represents the high point of Islam in history. Even today, Muslims regard the period as exemplary. Of course, modern Muslims have no interest in replicating the primitive material culture of the Rashidun era. Yet many recognize that these early caliphs implemented Qur'anic principles in society to a degree that subsequent Muslim rulers did not match. Although the dynasties of caliphs that followed the Rashidun—the Umayyads (ruled 661-750) and the Abbasids (ruled 750-1258)—built up Islam's power and prestige in the world, they do not have quite the same reputation in Sunni Muslim eyes. Sunni Muslims accuse a number of these caliphs of indiscretions and bad behavior.

Nevertheless, Sunni Muslims recognize the legitimacy not only of the Rashidun but also of all the caliphs, including those of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The strength of the Sunni position rests in the belief that it is preferable to accept a ruler who is less than ideal than to risk strife and factionalism. In fact, at most times in history the Sunni establishment has adopted a very comprehensive attitude and tried to include as many Muslims as it could under the Sunni umbrella—even when this meant that the notion of acceptable Sunni belief had to adapt and expand. In the traditional Sunni view, one can disagree with the way rulers govern Muslim countries, yet it is always better to preserve the integrity of the Muslim community than risk civil war.

The very term Sunni, the name Sunnis use to refer to themselves, reflects the ideal of community solidarity: "the people of tradition (*sunna*) and the community." Historically, Sunni Muslims have looked to the consensus of the community, known as *ijma*, to determine points of doctrine and behavior. According to a well-known hadith, the Prophet Muhammad declared, "My people will never agree together on an error." Consensus therefore became a powerful force for conformity within Sunni Islam. By the early Middle Ages, various schools of law had developed among Sunni Muslims. These were the Hanafi, Shafii, Maliki, and Hanbali schools of jurisprudence. Although these schools differed slightly in terms of the methodology they employed to discover God's will, all agreed on the Qur'an and the

example of the Prophet Muhammad as the ultimate source of truth.

You may forward this email as you like provided that you send it in its entirety, attribute it to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and include our web address (www.fpri.org). If you post it on a mailing list, please contact FPRI with the name, location, purpose, and number of recipients of the mailing list.

If you receive this as a forward and would like to be placed directly on our mailing lists, send email to FPRI@fpri.org. Include your name, address, and affiliation. For further information, contact Alan Luxenberg at (215) 732-3774 x105.

- [Become an FPRI member](#)

Copyright © 2001–2010 Foreign Policy Research Institute, All Rights Reserved.

Site developed by [Argo Potomac](#)