



Lucy's school, Tamale Studies in Islam. Work sheet 3

Groups within Islam

The problem

Muhammad left no male heir, so there was a problem of succession. But a successor, (Caliph or Khalifa) was needed to guide Muslims in the teachings of the Quran. But who would it be?

This caused the division between the Sunnis, and the Shi'ites.

Sunni

The Sunni branch, (90% of all Muslims) said that the Caliph should be from Muhammad's tribe, be chosen by consensus (ijma) and he should guard, not continue the prophet's work.

This is the key thought:

The Caliph should guard the prophet's ministry.

Thirty years after Muhammad's death, four Caliphs were appointed in succession: Abu Bakr (632-634), 'Umar (634-644), 'Uthman (644-656), and 'Ali (656-661). Sunnis regard these first Islamic leaders as "the four rightly guided Caliphs," since

they lived so close to Muhammad. Sunnis believe that the sunna (behaviour or practice) of these four Caliphs, together with the Prophet's teaching, is the rule for all Muslims.

Generally, the Sunni are regarded as the more orthodox part of Islam.



Shi'ites

The other major branch of Islam, (10% of all Muslims and exists primarily in Iraq and Iran), is the more militant Shi'a. The Shi'ites, broke away from the Sunnis over the question of the Caliphate.

Sunnis believe that the Caliph should be a descendent of Muhammad's tribe. Shi'ites say that the Caliph should descend specifically from 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. In fact, the word Shi'ite means "partisan" and indicates that Shi'ites are "partisans of 'Ali"

The Shi'ites differ with the Sunnis over the authority of the Caliph. Shi'ite Muslims believe that the Islamic leader, whom they call the "imam", is more than a guardian of Muhammad's prophetic legacy, but also an interpreter.

This is the key thought:

The Imam is a guardian of Muhammad's teachings, and an interpreter of them.

They believe that Muhammad left 'Ali with his wilaya, which means his "spiritual abilities", so he could interpret the Qur'an and to lead the Islamic community infallibly. Shi'ites generally believe that the wilaya has been passed down through the subsequent generations of 'Ali's descendants. They believe that this "cycle of the wilaya" will continue until the last day, when humanity will be resurrected and judged.

*"I am the vine,
you are the branches."*

The twelfth Imam

The majority group within the Shi'a branch, known as the "Imamis", (most of whom live in Iran), believes that the wilaya cycle will end with the messianic return of the twelfth imam. This group believe that the twelfth imam has been in "occultation" (the state of hiding) since the third century of Islam.

Ayatollah

They believe, however, that the ayatollahs (senior experts in Islamic law) have access to the hidden imam, and so have the right to interpret Islamic law and make religious rulings. The late Ayatollah Khomeini, perhaps the most widely remembered Shi'ite leader among contemporary Westerners, was considered to be the spokesman for the hidden imam.

For more details in Shi'ite practice, use these key words on a web search:- Imam Husein: Ali: The Twelvers: The Mhadi. Further study of the Iranian revolution, and Ayatollah Khomeini will help understand the thrust of Shi'ite thinking.

Sufism

Islam is strict and intellectual, but people are emotional, and have personal feelings and desires. So many people have turned to the more emotional and personal ways of knowing God practiced by mystical Islam, or Sufism.

Found in many parts of the Muslim world, Sufism wants to produce a personal experience of God through simple lifestyle and mystical experience. While Sufi followers understand Islam in a mystic way, they do not differ from Islam in the theological point of view.



Sufi followers believe that the person who has chosen this path can reach an individual contact with God. Sufi followers have a teacher who acts as an intermediary between God and the person. The teacher gives the principles by which people should behave.

This is the key thought:

Personal and emotional relationship with God

Dervishes

Many of the Sufis chose a simple and disciplined lifestyle, gathered disciples around themselves and developed into religious orders, known as dervishes. Others became almost beggars, travelling around the country side, living off the charity of others. Not all Sufis were accepted by the more conservative elements of Islam because of their unorthodox habits and beliefs. Sufi influence has grown over the centuries and today there are literally hundreds of mystic orders with millions of adherents. They are most prevalent in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Arabia.

Islam wants to give the impression that it is one united brotherhood. As we can see, this is not the case. And this is not all - within these groupings are other smaller groupings, which I will look at on worksheet 4.

Muslims do like to point to the divisions within the Christian family. But they appear to be just as divided.

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