The Major Divisions among Muslims – Sunni, Shia and other groups

We will look at:

- Sunni Islam
- Shia Islam
- The Ibadi Muslims and the Kharijis

There are other minor groups such as the Ahmadiya. They are very rarely found in Arab countries. They are based in Pakistan.

- **Sunni Islam**

The majority of Muslims in the world today are Sunni. They take their name from the 'Sunnah'– a collection of six "authentic" (*sahih*) books of the Hadith attributed to Muhammad and his earliest companions. Nearly 80% of all Muslims are Sunni. Every Arab country has a clear majority except Iraq, Yemen and some Gulf states such as Bahrain and Oman where the Sunnis are a minority.

Sunni theology and law are based in the Quran, the Sunnah and to some extent on *ijna* – the consensus of the community of believers.

There are four main divisions of Sunni based on four schools of law. Sunni law evolved during the early Abbasid Khalifate (after 750 A.D.). It was an attempt to unite all Muslims into one state after the damaging civil war over the principles of succession to Muhammad. To do this Arab traditional Bedouin Law that demanded a legal regime based exclusively on the Quran and the concept of predestination by Allah had to make room for the wishes of the "nationalists" who needed a more sophisticated legal system more suited to governing an empire based on the principle of free will.

According to Sunni teaching, a Muslim ruler need not prove descent from Muhammad as long as he gains the consent of the Muslims (the Umma). Once a ruler has proved his effectiveness – military success and upholding the Sunni version of the Sharia – then Sunnis were obliged to follow him unquestioningly as the "Khalif of prophecy", regardless of whether he was just or oppressive – moral or immoral.

The Abbasid Khalifate was succeeded by the Ottoman Turks and they promoted the Hanafi Law School. However, the Maliki Law School was established in Morocco. The Hanafi School is the least "fundamentalist" of the four Sunni schools. The exception to this is Saudi Arabia who follow the Hanbali Law School which is the most fundamentalist of the four law schools.

- **Shia Islam**

The Shia divide into various sub-sects. They make up just over 20% of all Muslims. Their main concentration is in Iran, the Near East and the Arabian Peninsula. They were formed by a group of Muslims in Medina who believed that the Khalifate should remain exclusively in the hands of the descendants of Muhammad's family. The assumption was that the fount of divine inspiration dried up at the death of Muhammad and God would not allow a Khalif to be chosen by means of fallible human beings through the process of election.

They formed the "partisans" of Ali Ibn Talib, the fourth 'rightly guided' Khalif to follow Muhammad. In 661 A.D. Ali was murdered and the Khalifate passed to the Umayyads. The Shia have now fought intermittently for 1,353 years to overthrow the Sunni rulers. The leader of the Muslims should not be called Khalif but an Imam.

So Shia Islam is older than Sunni Islam and is modelled more closely on the political practices of Muhammad and the four 'rightly guided' Khalifs. It also incorporates a creed of revolution and martyrdom – perhaps the result of centuries of uprisings and civil wars. The Shia don't accept the first 3 Khalifs (Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman) and they have 5 different books of traditions (Hadith).

Shia Islam can be divided into several groups and subsections:

- ✓ **The Twelvers**: these are the largest group of Shia and are the "orthodox" version of Shia Islam. They form the majority of the population of Iran and about 60% of the people of Iraq – mainly in the south and east. They also form the majority in Azerbaijan. In eastern Saudi Arabia and especially in Bahrain they form the indigenous majority.

  Twelvers believe that the descendants of Ali are the rightful rulers of the Muslim World and that the line of Ali's descendants is held to have been divinely guided. They believe Ali's offspring are divinely guided and immune from sin and error so they are accorded the same authority as Muhammad himself. Disobedience to the word of a Shia Imam is heresy.

  According to the Twelvers, Muhammad Ibn al-Askari was the twelfth Imam after Ali and became Imam at the age of four but within days he mysteriously disappeared in the cellar of his house in Samara, Iraq and was never found. As he had no brothers, the line became extinct. But Twelvers refuse to believe that he died. They say that since then he has been "concealed" by God in an invisible way to all sinners (which is all of us) one day he will become visible as the *Mahdi* ('The Chosen One') who will appear shortly before the end of the world.

  Later the leadership of the Twelvers passed to a council of twelve Shia elders – the Ulama. They chose to be guided by the "concealed" twelfth Imam.

  The Ulama became the central political and legal institution. The Ulama and the senior judges they appointed became known as Ayatollahs and they are held to be 'divinely guided' and are allowed to apply their own judgement without any reference to the Quran. The Twelvers' Imam is held to be the wisest and least sinful man on earth – immune from error – and the only man who understands both the religious and the legal meaning of the Quran.

- ✓ **The Seveners (The Isma'iliyah)**

  In the Arab World, Seveners are found in Egypt and Syria. They take their name from Isma'il, the eldest son of the 6th Shia Imam – Ja'far as Sadiq. But Isma'il died before his father. This caused a crisis among the Shia. The Twelvers supported Isma'il's younger brother – Musa 'l-Kazim. The Seveners refused to recognise him and said the original line of Imams was over and Isma'il's descendants should start a new line of Imams.

  The number "7" had particular religious significance for Zoroastrians. Many former Zoroastrian Muslims brought this belief into their new faith. So the Isma'ilis said that Allah ruled in cycles of seven. At that time they named their dynasty "Fatimid" after Ali's wife – the daughter of Muhammad.

  There is a great deal of metaphysical, esoteric teaching among the Seveners – much like the Gnostics in early Christianity. They suffered a lot of persecution from both the Sunnis and the Twelvers and as a result they often went underground into a network of guerrilla fighters.

  In 969 A.D. a Fatimid Isma'ili Imam was established in Cairo and Egypt became independent of the Abbasid Empire. Cairo was a small town at the time. It was the Fatimids that began its growth into one of the most significant cities in the Muslim World.

  The Fatimids were much less hostile to the Coptic Church than the Abbasids had been. At its height, in the late 11th century, the state stretched from Tunis in the west to Palestine in the east. The Fatimid state was destroyed as an indirect result of the Crusades. It was the Abbasid commander Sal'had-din who conquered Cairo in 1171 A.D. and that was the end of the Fatimids.

- ✓ **The Assassins**

  The Isma'ilis resumed their guerrilla existence and became known as the 'assassins'. There are two branches of this group of people:

  - The **Tayyibiyah** who turned to pure metaphysics
  - The **Nizirujah** who started a dynastic line of rulers whom they could follow. They became the dominant group of Isma'ilis. This group was sort of anti-Sharia as they could drink wine,

smoke hashish and could kill Sunni Muslims in Jihad. The Nizirujah moved from Egypt to Syria where they became known as the Assassins – the Arabic plural of hashish smokers. Their aim was to overthrow the Sunni rulers.

For over 200 years the Assassins were the terror of the Sunni world. Their major base/HQ was in the Alamut valley in northern Persia. They also had smaller fortresses in Syria and Palestine. The Alamut Fortress was overrun by Mongols in 1256 A.D. But their last strongholds were not destroyed until the 16th century A.D. The dynasty of the Nizari Isma'ili Imams has continued until today in the person of the Aga Khan – the 49th Imam Prince Shah Karim Al-Husseini (b. 1936) who lives in his chateau north of Paris today.

✓ **The Alawi**

These are an Isma'ili Assassin sub-group that mainly exist in north-west Syria and in parts of Lebanon. The Alawi form ~ 10% of Syria's population but they form the current government. They are much closer to the Twelvers – the Shia of Iran.

One aspect of the Alawi is their open identification with aspects of Christian theology, especially the doctrine of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. For this reason, the Alawi celebrate the Christian festival of Easter. The Alawi still retain their militant traditions learned from the Assassins.

✓ **The Druze**

The Druze are a still more heterodox Assassin-derived group that is now completely separate from Islam. The religion was first formed in 1021 A.D. in Cairo, but they were soon driven to Syria. The original Druze leader was al-Dazari (the cobbler) who was apparently a Turk. At the beginning they declared themselves "closed" to anyone other than direct descendants of the original Druze faithful. So they are both a tribe and a religious group. They live in the mountains of Lebanon and southern Syria and a few live in northern Israel.

The theology of the Druze religion is declared a secret and not much is known about them except that they call themselves "Unitarian". They believe that the ultimate truth is contained in revelations given to their leaders – particularly Baha al-Din – which are contained in their Scriptures (Al-Hikmah-al-Sharifa).

There are probably not more than 1-1½ million Druze in the world today. They are a friendly, industrious and intelligent people whom it is always a pleasure to meet on a personal level. In history, they have carried out three massacres of Maronite Christians – the last on a large scale in 1860 A.D.

✓ **The Zaydi Shia** (sometimes called the Fivers)

They are mainly found in Yemen. There are also a few in Iran and in parts of Africa. Of all the Shia, they are closest to the Sunni as they apply the Sharia to themselves. They are mainly from Bedouin background. They recognise the continuing series of imams but do not believe they have any supernatural qualities.

The Zaydi Imam is selected entirely on the basis of military skill. They don't believe their Imams are divinely guided or free from sin. The Zaydis fiercely reject any attempt to establish a dynasty of rulers such as those in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states.

The rule of the Zaydi Imam becomes operative by declaring one's allegiance on the eve of war. Then no man can oppose the Imam on pain of death.

✓ **Other Shia sects**

There are estimated to be another 70 identifiable groups – some with only a few hundred followers.

- **The Ibadi Muslims and the Khariji Muslims**

The Ibadi Muslims are a moderate subset of Khariji Islam. The Ibadis are mainly in Oman but some are also found in North Africa and Zanzibar (once an Omani colony).

The name 'Ibadi' is derived from 'Ibadah' meaning being in a state of submission. The Imam is elected and then holds absolute authority over the community while he lives as long as he abides by Ibadi principles. The Ulama are held in high esteem and they guide the process of electing a new Imam. Ibadis accept co-existence with other Islamic sects. When suppressed by enemies, the community exists in a state of secrecy.

The Khariji (successionists)

They are perhaps the earliest sect within Islam. They are neither Sunni nor Shia. They originally supported Ali's leadership on the basis of his wisdom and piety. But they turned away from him when he agreed to submit his quarrel with Muawiya to arbitration. The Khariji accused him of rejecting the Quran. Ali was forced to fight against them in 658 A.D. and, in revenge, Ali was murdered at the mosque in Kufa in 661 A.D.

The early Khariji suspected that many tribes both in Arabia and elsewhere had become Muslims because they were motivated by plunder – i.e. they were opportunistic fortune seekers. Abu Bakr and Umar allowed conquered people to become Muslims and escape the jizya tax just by saying the Shahada. The Khariji insisted that all the Five Pillars had to be regularly performed by all new Muslims otherwise they would be declared "*kafir*" (unbelievers).

Khalif Uthman, who needed manpower to expand, introduced a new category of Muslims – the Murji'a (those who postpone judgement) – a doctrine that a Muslim's piety should be left to God and not to the Khariji.

The Murji'a refused to take life too seriously. In Abbasid times they developed an easy-going tolerance in theological issues. For them, there was only one intolerable sin – polytheism. So provided you accept the two assertions of the unity of God and the apostleship of Muhammad, all sin is guaranteed to be forgiven on Judgement Day by Muhammad's intercession before God.

In 656 A.D. Uthman was killed in Mecca by a mob of Khariji. They welcomed Ali when he became Khalif because he was a Hashemite and because he had married Muhammad's daughter Fatima.

Muawiya promised to avenge the death of Uthman and destroy the Khariji and Ali. In the battle of Siffin between the Umayyads and Ali many Muslims died and Ali proposed arbitration with Muawiya. The Khariji were outraged, accusing Ali of breaking the Sharia and he was assassinated. They said that arbitration was treason for the only arbitrator is God. The only test for a Khalif was a pure and holy life demonstrated by faithfulness to the Five Pillars. They also said that evil speaking, lying and slander destroyed purity. The Khariji believe that God has left men free to believe or not to believe and that He does not create their actions. He never wills them to do anything bad. They totally refuse dissimulation (*taqiya*) in word or deed. The Wahabis of Saudi Arabia have clearly been influenced in some respects by the Khariji.

These are the major sects of Islam in the Arab World. Why do they hate each other?

The conflicts between the Sunni and the Shia in the last 50 years

Sunni-Shia relations have been worsening over the last 50 years. Sadly the bloodlust is no longer limited to extremists, but has gone "mainstream" on both sides. This is true in Iraq where hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have lost loved ones, jobs, homes and in some cases entire neighbourhoods have been destroyed. The same hatred is now spreading to Shia militias and Sunni jihadis in Syria and Lebanon. It could spread elsewhere.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah supporters toppled the previous government in Beirut. At political rallies they sometimes chant the name of Muqtada al-Sad whose militia is blamed for thousands of Sunni deaths.

Meanwhile Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, together with Egypt, clearly fear a Shia tide rising in the Near East and the Gulf. This is why the conflict in Syria is so terrible. There are several explanations for this, each is linked to a particular understanding of what happened after the fall of Saddam Hussein including – very poor American post-war policies, provocation from foreign Sunni Jihadis like Al Qaeda, Iranian interference and centuries of economic inequalities reinforced by bloodshed.

The hatred is not really about the Islamic religion, for their differences are small. There is no evidence that they are trying to convert each other. The perception of the Shia is that they have been oppressed for hundreds of years and that the Sunnis are the oppressors. What they are fighting for is political domination.

Khomeini's 1979 revolution in Iran created the fear that the 60% Shia population of Iraq would rebel against the minority Sunni government. The Iraq-Iran war lasted from 1980-88. Hundreds of thousands died on both sides. After the Gulf War, the Shia thought they may be able to gain some power, but Saddam crushed the revolt and 300,000 Shia died in indiscriminate killing.

In the January elections of 2005 in Iraq, the Shia coalition swept to power. They began to unofficially avenge old grudges against the Sunni. The Shia shrine at Samara was blown up by some Sunni extremists and the hatred went mainstream. The Samara operation by al'Zarqawi (a Jordanian) was a terrible atrocity to the Shia. So Sunnis were slaughtered, Sunni mosques were blown up and there were kidnappings and executions. Sunni Jihadi groups responded in kind.

In the wider Arab World the war between the Sunni and Shia in Iraq is seen as part of a wider picture of Iran trying to build a Shia empire. There are large numbers of Shia in central Afghanistan, in Azerbaijan and in Iraq as well as pockets of Shia in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia. Iran's backing of the Shia Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as Hamas is seen as proof that Iran is trying to reshape the Middle East.

The tensions have spread to Pakistan where there is also a great deal of violence between Sunni and Shia with thousands killed. At the moment it appears there can be very little rapprochement between the Sunni and Shia in the Near East.

Where is Islam going?

For over 150 years there has been a growing crisis in the Muslim World. In the history of Islam, Muslims were always dominant. But in the 18th century, Muslim empires were conquered by the "infidel" Europeans – mainly the Spanish and the Portuguese, then the French and especially the British. The colonies were ruled by non-Muslims. This was considered absolutely terrible. For Muslims, the early days of Islam were the ideal of theocratic government with no separation between the secular and the spiritual in law, in education, in holidays etc. Then there is the divine Quran and the model of an absolutely ideal man, Muhammad, to follow.

A fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity is that the Lord Jesus taught us we should, ***"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that belong to God"*** (Mt. 22:21). At times there have been attempts to form a Christian state (e.g. Calvin's Geneva). But in Islam, an earthly "kingdom" is where the state enforces the law of God. But in the time of the Holy Roman Empire in Europe, it was common after a peace treaty that the opposition to the Empire (all the non-Christian barbarians) had to be baptised and 'Christianised'.

The Shah in Iran wanted to westernise Iran. He changed the calendar from A.H. to the time of Cyrus the Great. By implication he was saying that being Persian is greater than being Muslim. The outrage in Iran was so great that he had to change it back long before he was ousted. The sin of the West was that it gave the Shah the power to do whatever he wanted in secularising the state and as a result provided the means for corruption – western music, girls' education, getting good jobs etc.

So what went wrong and how can it be corrected? To most Muslims secularism (there is no God) linked with materialism is not the answer. Islam is monolithic and so was Communism. There are probably more similarities than differences between the two – the main difficulty being atheism.

In the mid-50s various Arab governments tried to borrow elements of socialism (Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt), South Yemen, Syria and Iraq (the Ba'ath Party).

But at the same time there was a very strong reaction to any form of socialism or western ideas:

- **The Wahabis** were founded by Muhammad ibn al-Wahab in the Nejd areas of what is now Saudi Arabia. Wahabis began to say that the moral decline and political weakness of Muslim communities was because Muslims were adopting non-Muslim ideas. They advocated returning to the idealised Muslim past – monotheism and reliance on the Quran and Hadith. They were violently against Folk Islam (shrine and tomb visitation). With the financial backing from oil they are strongly promoting their views.

- **The Sanusi:** This movement was founded in North Africa in 1841 by Muhammad Ali Sanusi. They strongly resisted Italian and French colonialism. They disapproved of excesses in ritual. [It's a poor word to use, but they are somewhat similar to the Puritans.] They had a strong work ethic.

Their numbers were large in Libya and in central Sahara. They started a Jihad especially against Italian forces. At independence from Italy, Muhammad Idris, the head of the order, became King of Libya until he was overthrown in 1969 by Muammer Qaddafi.

- **The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt**

This movement was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928. It is the parent of many other organisations in different Arab countries. It was founded to counter the "westernisation" of Egypt then under the British. The Brotherhood promoted benevolence, charity, development, nationalism, complete independence and social and governmental reform according to the letter and spirit of Islam.

What was behind the assassination of President Sadat? The Brotherhood wanted to establish a Muslim government modelled on the original in Medina, while 'The Free Officers' were much more interested in a secular, socialist republic on western lines – Muslim in name only. Those who killed Sadat were an offshoot group, but they got their inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood.

The tactics have varied over the decades, sometimes military and anti-regime assassinations and violence, but also including a huge amount of philanthropy for the poor and developing economic institutions. Initially the Muslim Brotherhood was linked with "The Free Officers" who overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952, but it was persecuted by Gamal Abdel Nasser.

- **The Salafi Movement**

The name is derived from "*salaf*" (pious ancestors). It was founded by Mohammad Abduh around 1900. It emphasises the restoration of Muslim countries to the original form of Islam of the 'rightly guided' Khalifs, the adherence to the Quran and the Sunnah, rejection of all later interpretations and the unity of the Umma into one state – i.e. the renewed Khalifate. The Wahhabis want to return to the values of the '*salaf*', but the Salafis also want the full implementation of the '*salaf*' practices.

The Salafi Movement has adopted a new name – the **Ansar al Sharia**. The **Ansar al Sharia** see that there are many forces within the Arab World preventing Muslims from implementing full Sharia Law and they must reject all other bases for law – in particular UN resolutions and any national laws: **"The revolution must continue until they have uprooted the remains of all present corrupt regimes and purified our lands of external humiliation and internal corruption."**

These Muslims based their position on Quranic verses like sura 2:216, *"Fighting is prescribed for you"* and sura 2:190-192 *"Fight in the cause of God those who fight you and kill them, for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter …. Fight them until there is no more persecution and oppression and there prevails justice and faith in God."*

See also sura 9:5, *"Fight and kill the infidels"* and sura 49:15, *"The true believers are those that strive with their lives for the cause of God."*

This is in contrast to the Muslim brotherhood who had strongly advocated a more gradual approach to implementing Sharia.

The Islamic revolution in Iran

Sunnis are interested in this model of Shia radicalism, but do not want it to succeed, especially if the Shia gain a nuclear bomb. The revolution in Iran was primarily against the Shah who had become very dictatorial.

So there are constant attempts throughout the Muslim World to establish a truly Muslim government modelled on the Medina of Muhammad and the 'rightly guided' Khalifs.

As followers of the Lord Jesus, let us make sure that our reactions to all this are those of the Lord Jesus as we express His self-giving love.

Reflections on the anger driving war and terrorism

The anger of terrorists and Salafists in general is a response to the build-up of grievances both real and imagined. So we can't drive out the terrorism without dealing with the grievances that led to it. Here are some of them:

- **The Israel-Palestinian conflict**

So often we see rock-throwing Palestinian youths and suicide bombers against greatly superior Israeli firepower with many more Palestinians killed than Israelis. At the root of this are the broken promises that the British government made to the Arabs during the First World War as a response to their support against their Ottoman Turk masters. In World War II, President Roosevelt promised the Saudi King not to do anything about Palestine without consulting the Arabs. Today the Arabs know of the $3 billion the USA gives to Israel each year.

- **Recent wars against Muslims**

Wars in Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya and Afghanistan have again fanned the flames of anger and hatred of the West.

- **Westerners have humiliated Muslims**

The West is using the Jews in Palestine, Christian Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo and the Russians in Chechnya to humiliate Muslims.

After the bomb blast that killed 24 Americans in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, Bin Laden said, **"They have raised the nation's head high and washed away a great part of the shame that has enveloped us".**

- **Western moral practices have invaded the Arab World**
  - ✓ These include the flow of alcoholism, drugs, materialism, sexual immorality and arrogance through films, Satellite TV and Arab tourists going to the west or Thailand etc.
  - ✓ Some Arab states have adopted western law codes rather than divinely ordained Islamic laws.
  - ✓ Globally, the economy is dominated by western economic ideas such as the charging of interest which is not allowed in Islam.
  - ✓ Finally the West espouses democracy, but has used its military power to help some Muslim governments crush their people's aspirations of their own political system – i.e. Iran under the Shah, Kuwait, Algeria and Saudi Arabia.

So we tend to label these people "terrorists". They see themselves as "freedom fighters". We need to remember Romans 8:28, ***"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose***".

Remember the attempt in the Cultural Revolution in China to rid China of all Christian influences. This led to considerable church growth so that the church in China is now the largest evangelical church in the world!

In the Muslim World all the evidence is that wherever Muslims have tried to enforce Sharia it has led to greater openness and a greater receptivity to the Christian faith.