

## Sunni and Shi'a

### Introduction



Mosaic tiled columns in a mosque ©

The words *Sunni* and *Shi'a* appear regularly in stories about the Muslim world but few people know what they really mean. Religion permeates every aspect of life in Muslim countries and understanding Sunni and Shi'a beliefs is important in understanding the modern Muslim world.

### Introduction

The division between Sunnis and Shi'as is the largest and oldest in the history of Islam.

They both agree on the fundamentals of Islam and share the same Holy Book (The Qur'an), but there are differences mostly derived from their different historical experiences, political and social developments, as well as ethnic composition.

These differences originate from the question of who would succeed the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the emerging Muslim community after his death. To understand them, we need to know a bit about the Prophet's life and political and spiritual legacy.

### The Prophet Muhammad

When the Prophet died in the early 7th century he left not only the religion of Islam but also a community of about one hundred thousand Muslims organised as an Islamic state on the Arabian Peninsula. It was the question of who should succeed the Prophet and lead the fledgling Islamic state that created the divide.

The larger group of Muslims chose Abu Bakr, a close Companion of the Prophet, as the Caliph (politico-social leader) and he was accepted as such by much of the community which saw the succession in political and not spiritual terms. However another smaller group, which also included some of the senior Companions, believed

that the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali, should be Caliph. They understood that the Prophet had appointed him as the sole interpreter of his legacy, in both political and spiritual terms. In the end Abu Bakr was appointed First Caliph.

### **Leadership claims**

Both Shi'as and Sunnis have good evidence to support their understanding of the succession. Sunnis argue that the Prophet chose Abu Bakr to lead the congregational prayers as he lay on his deathbed, thus suggesting that the Prophet was naming Abu Bakr as the next leader. The Shi'as' evidence is that Muhammad stood up in front of his Companions on the way back from his last Hajj, and proclaimed Ali the spiritual guide and master of all believers. Shi'a reports say he took Ali's hand and said that anyone who followed Muhammad should follow Ali.

Muslims who believe that Abu Bakr should have been the Prophet's successor have come to be known as Sunni Muslims. Those who believe Ali should have been the Prophet's successor are now known as Shi'a Muslims. It was only later that these terms came into use. Sunni means 'one who follows the Sunnah' (what the Prophet said, did, agreed to or condemned). Shi'a is a contraction of the phrase 'Shiat Ali', meaning 'partisans of Ali'.

The use of the word "successor" should not be confused to mean that those leaders that came after the Prophet Muhammad were also prophets - both Shi'a and Sunni agree that Muhammad was the final prophet.