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## WHO ARE THE SHIA?

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### SYNOPSIS

Who are the Shia (or Shiite) Muslims we see headlining our daily news? Shiites make up only ten percent of the Muslim world but comprise almost half of the Muslims in the Middle East. They live on top of, and work in the production of, most of the oil and gas fields in the Middle East. The story of Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Jews is intertwined throughout their history. There are more Christians of three major strands in the Middle East than there are Jews in the entire world. Shiism began with the death of Muhammad and the decision of who should succeed Muhammad as leader. Shiites, believing it should be a blood relative, followed Ali, who in turn was followed by a series of Imams. Some distinctions from Sunnis include: exaltation of the family of Muhammad, praying only three times a day, a passion motif with a desire for martyrdom, belief in the return of their last Imam, and the practice of muta (temporary marriages) and taqiyya (dissimulation or lying).

The politics and religions of the Middle East are historically interwoven. Today it pits Iran and Shiites of Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia against the Sunnis of the Middle East. The disgust of Iranian leaders with the Little Satan (Israel) is only exceeded by their disgust for the Great Satan (America). Points of contact for Christians sharing Christ's love with Shiites include: the passion motif and the death of Christ, the return of the Mahdi and the return of Christ, and their desire for a mediator and Christ's mediation. As a result of Khomeini's revolution beginning in 1979, more Iranians (many say at least 160,000) have come to Christ than ever before in history.

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Whether the message is inescapable in the fear-mongering rhetoric of a YouTube video or downplayed without fanfare by the anchorperson on the evening news, Americans are no longer in the dark regarding the harsh reality that many Muslims outside our borders have a negative impression of America.

In fact, in the eyes of many within the anti-American Muslim world, there is but

one criminal more worthy of being brought to justice than “the Little Satan” known as Israel; that is America, “the Great Satan.” Among other causes, anti-American sentiment continues to escalate because of what Hollywood communicates about America (alcohol consumption and a sexual ethic characterized by immodesty, adultery, fornication, and homosexuality), because America has military bases in Saudi Arabia and thus defends Islam’s two most holy cities, and because America has female soldiers helping to defend these two cities of Mecca and Medina, doing what Muslims believe Muslim men should be doing.

### **CHRISTIANS IN THE SHIITE WORLD**

Yet the story left untold by the mainstream media is the great work of the gospel in the Middle East and in other Muslim countries and the growth of Christianity there. Middle Eastern churches come in three forms: the historic churches with Coptic, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Assyrian, and Armenian roots; a variety of Protestant denominations as found in the West; and individuals and congregations of Muslim-background believers in Christ.

There appear to be more Christians in the Middle East (fifteen million) than there are Jews in the entire world (thirteen million). That number of Christians is shrinking as they face persecution and flee to the West. Saddam Hussein’s Foreign Minister, Tareq Aziz, was a Christian and the former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, is an Egyptian Coptic Christian married to a Jew. In Iraq, despite the war, many Christians have resumed church attendance and a seminary was formed, while many other Christians have fled due to persecution, usually from Sunnis who believe that Christians side with the Shias.

Behind the rush of mainstream media there are stories of clashes between the crescent and the cross, Islam and modernity, and Shiites and Sunnis. Our lives in the West are affected by the story of a historic rift between the two major Islamic divisions and the emergence of the Shia (or Shiite) Muslim minority as a significant force in social, political, and religious world affairs. It is a story as old as the traditions that both groups painstakingly preserve and as fresh as the blood of the Shiite women and children that covered the ground where—at the time of this writing—Sunni women strapped with explosives allowed themselves to be blown up.

### **HISTORICAL ROOTS**

In the sixth century, Islam’s spiritual messenger, the prophet Muhammad, whom Muslims believe was illiterate, made it known that he had received revelations from an angel of God. He shared these revelations with his people in such arresting and beautiful language that a group began to accept Muhammad as their prophet. These revelations were eventually compiled into Islam’s sacred scripture, the Qur’an, which means “recite.”<sup>1</sup>

In his preaching, Muhammad spoke of the necessity of submission to the will of Allah. Today, the word “Islam,” which also means “peace,” is defined by the derivative word “submission,” and twenty-one percent of the world’s population (1,449,000,000)—

making Islam the second largest religion in the world behind Christianity — attempts to practice a life of such submission, primarily in North Africa, the Middle East, South-Central Asia, and Indonesia. Closer to home, roughly one-fifth of the more than 530,000 international students in the United States come from forty Islamic countries.

On June 8, AD 632, Muhammad died, and immediately following his death, two major traditions emerged, divided over who should succeed the great prophet who had united all the once war-ringing tribes of the broad plains of Arabia, around the city of Mecca, near the banks of the Red Sea in what today is known as the Arabian Peninsula. Four “Rightly Guided” Caliphs, or successors, followed: Abu Bakr, from AD 632 to 634; Umar, from 634 to 644; Uthman, from 644 to 656; and Ali, from 656 to 661.

Ali, the fourth “Rightly Guided” Caliph, inherited a power struggle between a powerful Syrian Muslim government and his own people and in AD 661 was assassinated by a Kharijite soldier while on his way to prayer at a mosque.

After the murder of the Caliph Ali, his followers, eventually called Shiites, claimed that it was the divine right of the family of Muhammad to rule. When leadership is decided by other factors, they argued, disaster is imminent. Through being a cousin of Muhammad and by his marriage to Fatima, daughter of Muhammad and Khadija, Ali was a kinsman of the Prophet and therefore the legitimate leader of Muslims. Shia Muslims claim that authority is granted in this way. Such authority is invested with even more power within the community through the passion associated with the assassinations of Ali and, later, his son Husayn.

Ali was assassinated because some perceived him too weak to lead and his son, Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad himself, claimed leadership. The people of what is now Iraq called Husayn to lead, and Husayn accepted. At Karbala (AD 680) on his journey from Medina, however, he and his family were killed by forces of Yazid, his opponent in the struggle for power. The deaths of Husayn and his family are the source of the passion motif that drives Shiites and that they believe paves the way to paradise. Husayn’s family died before his eyes, and Husayn’s head was delivered as a trophy to Yazid. Thus, the loyalty to this line of succession and the emotional power of the martyrdom of Ali and his son Husayn distinguish the Shiite strand within Islam. Sunni Muslims, in contrast, focus leadership more on the consensus of the community and on reasoned argument concerning matters of faith. (The second sidebar describes differences in matters of faith between the Sunnis and the Shiites.)

In its long and extremely complicated history, the Shiite version of Islam has developed some distinctive theologies and a variety of religious subgroups. Probably out of its reverence for Ali, Shia Islam came to regard the community leader, the Imam (the Muslim equivalent of the Catholic Pope), as an infallible being who was the only one who knew the hidden and true meaning of the Qur’an. One group of Shiites, the Twelvers, recognizes twelve Imams in their history, the last of whom disappeared in 873. It is believed that this twelfth Imam has continued to live until this day in a state of hiddenness or occultation. One day he will return as the Mahdi (the guided one) and inaugurate a period of righteousness prior to the last judgment. During this long period of hiddenness preceding the Twelfth (or Hidden) Imam’s return, the fuqaha

(religious scholars) provide guidance to the people in regard to law and doctrine. The Twelvers constitute the majority of Shia Muslims.

A smaller subgroup within Shia Islam is the Ismailis. The distinguishing feature of this group originates in the identity of the seventh in the series of Imams. The main body of Shiites accepts Musa as the seventh Imam, but the Ismailis instead recognize his brother, Ismail. Since Ismail's disappearance, they have awaited his return and hence are usually called Seveners instead of Twelvers. The seven Imams recognized by the Ismailis are, in a sense, higher in excellence than the Prophet, because they receive their teachings directly from God Himself. Although many other divisions exist within Shia Islam, the distinction between the Seveners and the Twelvers is the most dramatic.

A third group of Shiites, the Zaydiyya, are closest to the Sunni Muslims in doctrine. The Zaydiyya have historically ruled Yemen and exist in some other areas. Other sects branched off of Shia Islam, including the Druze from Ismaili Shiism and the Alawiyya, or the Babis, from Twelver Shiism.

The Shiites believe, in contrast to the Sunnis, that divine knowledge is mediated through the infallible teachings of an Imam. Consequently, all knowledge derived from fallible, human sources is worthless. It is not what the community thinks, but rather what the Imam proclaims, that is authoritative. This position effectively narrows the scope for toleration of divergent views. Another major difference from Sunni Islam was the emergence of a "passion history" among the Shiites. The violent death of Ali's son, Husayn, in AD 680 is celebrated annually with plays, orations, and processions. The influence of this emphasis on passion history is also felt in the veneration in which Shia Muslims hold Ali and his family and in the respect that they show for his descendents.

The total Shiite movement makes up approximately ten per-cent of the Islamic world. The greatest concentration is in Iran, where more than eighty percent of the population is Shiite while Iraq is about fifty-five percent Shiite. It is within Iran and between Iran and other Muslim nations that the conflict between the Shiites and the Sunnis became explosive at the end of the twentieth century. Thus, the early period in Islam's history provides perhaps the major theological distinction in the religion even today—that between Shiite and Sunni. The history of Islamic expansion continued primarily, however, with the Sunnis during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties.

## **THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE**

Shiites agree with Sunnis in most areas of Islamic theology, including Muhammad as the final prophet, the Qur'an as God's final book replacing what came before it, and Islam as God's final and perfect religion. There is also basic agreement on the five pillars of Islam: to recite the Shahadah<sup>2</sup> and bear witness to Allah and Muhammad, Allah's messenger; to pray five times a day; to fast; to give alms; and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Shiites, however, combine two of the prayers two times a day so they only need to pray three times. In a Shiite mosque one sees pictures of their holy places where their Imams are buried and sometimes pictures of Ali, Husayn, or Muhammad, while in Sunni mosques pictures are considered idolatrous.

All Muslims hold to the Qur'an and Hadith (tradition) as authority. However, Sunnis follow the Qur'an more, and Shiites follow their tradition more. Shiites push Ali almost to the role of deity and call him "Valayat Allah" (in the place of God). Many unknowingly quote the Bible and credit Ali.

Sunni Islam has four schools of law and Shiism has one, the Jafari School. Shiism is not a Mutazilite division of Islam (ratio-nalists) but it has been strongly influenced by the Mutazilites, emphasizing human responsibility and believing that human rea-son is foundational along with the Qur'an. "Mutazilite denial of predestination and acceptance of free will, essential prerequisites for God's justice on the Last Day, were thus accepted and main-tained by the Shia, in contrast to the Sunna."<sup>3</sup> Shiites hold that the Qur'an is created and Sunnis believe it is eternal and uncreat-ed, which is a major issue in Muslim theology.

One is struck by the exalted place given to the prophet's fam-ily at the expense of the prophet.<sup>4</sup> Twelver Shiites will speak more of Hussein, Ali, and then Muhammad, in that order. Preachers might quote Jafar al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam, the most because he codified Shiite law, theology, and ethics. (Within Sunni theology clearly Muhammad would be referred to most frequently.) Shiites say that "Ali is not God but he is not separate from God."<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad stated, "I have two great and precious things among you: the book of Allah and my household."<sup>6</sup> By this Shiites communicate that Shiism is God's path because the family of Muhammad (ahl al-bayt) is the foundation of Islam. Ahl al-bayt is one of the names for Shiism.

Al-Muzaffar, a leading twentieth-century Shiite scholar from Najaf, Iran, and founder of the College of Islamic Studies, clari-fies that Allah ordered that people obey and submit to the author-ity of the Imams. Obeying their commands is the same as obey-ing God's commands. Friendship or hatred of them is the same as friendship or hatred of God. "It is a sin to deny them, for every-one who denies them in fact denies the Messenger, and that is the same as denying Allah."<sup>7</sup>

The Imams are considered to be sinless and infallible. "The Imam is able to understand information about anything, any-where, and at anytime, and he understands by the means of Divinely-given power at once."<sup>8</sup> Shiites believe that at all times subsequent to Muhammad there has to be an Imam present. The twelfth Imam is present today and hidden just as Muhammad was hidden in the cave.<sup>9</sup> A cardinal doctrine of Twelvers is the return of the Mahdi, the hidden twelfth Imam, who will bring an end to war.

### **The Doctrine of Mut'a**

Two of the unique doctrines of Shiism that are difficult for Westerners to understand are mut'a and taqiyyah. Mut'a (enjoyment) or segah is temporary marriage, where a contract between a man and woman is agreed on and the woman is married to the man for one hour or for a longer period.

One Mullah explained that the only difference between mut'a and prostitution is that in prostitution you agree on a price in advance and in mut'a you do not. So in

addition to four wives, a Shiite man may have countless mut'a relationships, or legalized concubines. Frequently, these temporary wives are obtained when Shiites make their pilgrimages to Karbala, Najaf, Qom, and Mashhad or to one of the countless Imam Zadehs (tombs of the Imams and their descendants). Some call these places of pilgrim-age religiously legalized prostitution centers. All one needs is a contract that a simple village Mullah can write for a small fee. This piece of paper gives permission and removes it from the state of sin. Recently, Mustafa Pour Mohammedi, the Interior Minister and head of the secret police of Iran, publicly encouraged more segah or mut'a in order to help keep society pure by preventing homosexuality and fornication.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Doctrine of Taqiyyah**

Taqiyyah (dissimulation) is also unique to Shiism. When a Shiite is asked by a Sunni if he is a Shiite, and if his life, property, or family is threatened, he can legally say that he is a Sunni. In Iraq, where there have always been Shiite/Sunni conflicts, this has been a valuable resource for Shiites. A Persian has said that this doctrine and practice has fully permeated the culture of Iran. Even Khomeini practiced it, blaming the Great Satan (America) or the Little Satan (Israel) for problems or weakness within Iran.

Taqiyyah is not in the Qur'an, but it may have its roots there. Five times the Qur'an says that God is a deceiver; two of those times it says that He is the greatest deceiver (3:54; 8:30; 10:21). The Arabic word is makara, which Hans Wehr's standard Arabic-English dictionary, translates as "deceive, delude, cheat, dupe, gull, double-cross."<sup>11</sup> Muslim translators of the Qur'an, however, working to put on a positive spin, translate it with "plot, plan, and plan-ner." Nonetheless, Shiites reason that if God can deceive, they can tell a lie for a good cause.

Obviously, this clearly encourages lying, which in turn builds distrust in a society. It is difficult to build relationships with a lack of trust and with the assumption of ulterior motives. To some degree deception affects the Muslim world as a whole, for many stores are small and not self-service. They do not trust employees, customers, or even spouses. When Muslims come to faith in Christ, this distrust carried over from their past can become an issue within the fellowship.

### **The Pilgrimage**

Imam zadehs, the tombs of Shia Imams and their descendants and of other holy people, are significant places of pilgrimage or ziyarah. Second only to Mecca, Mashhad (the tomb of Rida the eighth Imam) in northeast Iran is the greatest place of pilgrimage for Iranians. Imam Rida said, "Whoever undertakes a pilgrimage of his own free will, believing in it, for him the Imams will intercede on the day of resurrection."<sup>12</sup> For those who are too poor to go to Mecca or to Mashhad, it is likely that one of the roughly two thousand imam zadehs serving as acceptable pilgrimage sites is reasonably close to their home. In Shia Islam, mediation between man and God is not necessary, but is helpful.

## **CONTEMPORARY EVENTS**

One of the basic mistakes of the West is to assume that other cultures are like our own, that most people share our values, really want democracy, and should have a separation of church and state. In Islam, however, there is no separation of mosque and state, of religion and government. Islam at heart is not democratic; purely Islamic countries ultimately are ruled by religious leaders under sharia (divine) Islamic law. Many Muslims only want a democracy when they are in the majority, such as Shiites in Iraq.

The Sunni/Shiite conflict, moreover, is not a Persian/Arab conflict, for most of the Shiites of Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain are Arab. The founding Shiites and all twelve of its Imams were Arabs. The Shiites of Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India are neither Persians nor Arabs. A broader view of certain contemporary events and the connection these events have between Shiite and Sunni relations today will be helpful in placing the ongoing conflict in its context.

### **The Sunnis' Attack**

One of the major turning points of the Iraq war took place on February 22, 2006, when Sunnis bombed the golden dome of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra. The Golden Mosque contains the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Imams and it is the location where the twelfth Imam went into his state of occultation. The Sunnis knew how to provoke Shiites. The bombing ignited significant rioting and raised civilian fatalities from five hundred a month to almost nine hundred.

Ayatollah Khomeini's Revolution "By far the most rhetorically successful revolutionary Shi'i was Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) who ultimately engineered the downfall of the Persian monarchy."<sup>13</sup> Khomeini's Iranian revolution of 1979 overthrowing the Shah, Western interference, and secularism, influenced the whole Muslim world, inspiring them to reject subservience to the West. Some consider 1979 the official end of colonialism.

Khomeini wanted to obtain Saudi Arabia's support for his revolution so he spoke of it as an Islamic revolution and a Middle East revolution, not a Shiite or Iranian revolution. He desired to unite the Middle East and the Muslim world and to take over Mecca and Medina under his leadership. He wanted to dominate as much of the world as he could. He failed, so he had to start working on his neighbors (Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) one at a time.<sup>14</sup>

Khomeini believed that one must go through Iraq to win Jerusalem. Some Shiites believe either America will pull out and thus give southern Iraq to Iran or they will divide Iraq by race and religion—Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiite Arabs. The second language taught in southern Shiite Iraq is Farsi or Persian (the principal language of Iran), and the majority of the residents of Karbala and Najaf speak Farsi as a second language.

### **Saddam Hussein's Barrier**

When the allies invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, they appeared ignorant of the Shiite majority of fifty-five percent, as if they did not exist. Saddam Hussein oppressed

them because as a majority they were a threat to his minority regime. Now that the allies have rid Iraq of Hussein, however, Shiite influence is again alive and well. Mahmood, an optimistic Sunni, holds an interesting view: "A democratic government in Iraq with the Shiite representatives who are moderate will have its impact on the Iranian politics, as it will encourage the moderate Iranians to continue their struggle against the hardliner Iranian clergy and in the end there may be much more peace in the region than what we have seen so far."<sup>15</sup>

Hussein was the biggest barrier to an Iranian invasion of Iraq. There is widespread speculation that the reason Hussein would not let inspectors see all of his potential sites of weapons of mass destruction (WMD's) was because he did not want Iran to know that he did not have WMD's in order to prevent Iran's aggression against Iraq. Middle Eastern politics is replete with taqiyyah. Indeed, Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, masterfully exploits the world's worries over Iran's possible nuclear capabilities in conjunction with his claims that Iran is neither constructing a nuclear weapon nor plans to do so. As with Iraq, a perceived threat can deter neighbors and build self-esteem.

### **An Unholy Alliance**

Why is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad so hateful of Israel, threatening to wipe it off the map and denying the Holocaust? One likely reason is the teachings of the Qur'an itself. The Medinan suras (chapters in the Qur'an), in contrast to the suras given in Mecca, are strongly anti-Jewish. Sura 5:82 translated by Pickthall states: "Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters." In Mecca, Muhammad thought he was bringing the same message as the Jews and Christians, only in the Arabic language. But in Medina, the Jews rejected Muhammad as God's prophet and as bringing the same message as the Taurat (Torah— the five books of Moses).

A second reason for Ahmadinejad's hostility is that for Muslims, Israel is a type of colonialism, with America having a fifty-first state that does not pay taxes to it, but which the US is obligated to defend and finance by more than three billion dollars per year. It is an insult to Muslims that the Jews could come in and steal their land, which Muslims won during the Crusades a mil-lennium ago. Mullahs preach that Israel drinks the blood of Muslims and we should make them thirsty. In other words, they intend to provoke war.

Maybe even a larger reason is that Ahmadinejad is "out-Arabizing" the Arabs in their hatred for Israel. Israel took, or retook, Arab lands, not Iranian lands. The average Arab in the street believes Ahmadinejad is bravely doing what Arabian lead-ers are afraid to do. So Ahmadinejad is working to unite the Muslim world on his side, and helping Sunni Arabs to accept Shiites and Iran.

A significant reason that Ahmadinejad appears not to be afraid of war is that martyrdom is part and parcel of Shiism, since the mar-tyrdom of Muhammad's grandson Husayn is the foundation stone of Shiism. Igniting a major war, especially one involving "the Great Satan," Ahmadinejad believes, would help bring back the Mahdi.



On November 16, 2005, in a Tehran speech he declared: "Our revolution's main mission is to pave the way for the glorious reappearance of Imam Mahdi; may Allah hasten his reappearance."<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, within Iranian politics, if another group or politician such as Ali Akhbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani is critical of government policies, Ahmadinejad accuses them of being anti-Islam. Today, many Iranians, especially the younger generation, are not proud to be Muslims but are proud to be Iranians and are weary of their government's politics and restrictions.

Saudi Arabia and Syria Saudi Arabia vehemently protests Shiites and Iran gaining control in Iraq, for it could embolden their own Shiites who live on top of, and work in, their oil and gas fields. They also realize that Iran and its Shiite friends would like to control Mecca and Medina.

Syria, however, benefits in an alliance with predominantly Shia Iran. The Assad regime in Syria is Alawi in faith, a sect rooted in Shiism. Although Alawis comprise only eleven percent of the Syrian population, many of their highest military officers are Alawis. Despite the fact that many Muslims do not consider Alawis to be truly Muslim, the Assads persuaded Khomeini and Lebanese Shia leader Musa al-Sadr (the founder of the Amal militia, who disappeared in 1978) to issue fatwas (Muslim religious decrees) stating that Alawis are Shias and, therefore, Muslims. The Assads, furthermore, have made Syria a secular country to legitimize their rule.

Syria is also an enemy of both Iraq and Israel, which further encourages Syria to be a friend of Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah party (Party of God) that Iran controls. Syria's population only totals sixteen million, while Iran boasts a population of seventy-two million. Iran plans to build an oil pipeline across Iran to Syria and the Mediterranean. There is no majority in Lebanon, but the Shiites are the largest minority and Syria is a supporter of them.

### **Militias' Malicious Intent**

The Amal ("hope") and Hezbollah are both Shiite militias in Lebanon, now political parties, with Amal being pro-Syrian and anti-Iranian and Hezbollah, the more radical, being Iran's party. But Hezbollah also has Sunnis in it, as it is more political than religious. Hezbollah's militia, having learned the cult of martyrdom taught by Khomeini (who in turn learned it from the Shiite passion motif of Husayn), sent a suicide truck bomber into the US Marine barracks in Lebanon on October 23, 1983, killing 241 Marines and servicemen. Later that day they killed fifty-eight French troops with a truck bomb. As a result, President Ronald Reagan pulled out the remaining US forces. This taught the Shiites that martyrdom and force get results and America can be compelled to back down. The Sunnis later learned this lesson as well.

So an anti-American, anti-Israeli alliance between Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran continues to grow. Hezbollah (founded, financed, and trained by Iran) is the only instance where Khomeini's revolution was successfully transplanted outside of Iran's borders. "If the Lebanon war popularized Iran as a bulwark against Israel and champion of the Palestinian cause, Iraq's sectarian woes evoke a very different

response: fear of Shia domination over a divided Middle East.”<sup>17</sup> “Sunnis feel threatened by the violence of Shia militias in Iraq and Hezbollah adventurism in Lebanon.”<sup>18</sup> “The older default strategy left over from the Cold War, when the Middle East was a sideshow that local authoritarian rulers could be counted on to keep under control, will simply no longer suffice. For the United States, the challenge remains how to respond to the radicalism in the Sunni world and also prevent it from spreading to Shias.”<sup>19</sup>

## PRINCIPLES FOR EVANGELISM

There are principles or strategies for evangelism that have proven useful on the mission field and that are also helpful when encountering Muslims at home. For example, there are doctrines and practices unique to Shiites that provide contact points or bridges between Islam and Christianity, including the passion motif, the need for a mediator, and the second coming of the Mahdi.

Muslim theology teaches that Christ did not die on a cross, but some Shiites do not know this or it is not an issue with them. Husayn was a Muslim martyr but Christ was more than a martyr; He died for our sins to be forgiven. As Christians regularly remember the death of Christ in communion, Muslims remember the death of Husayn annually for ten days with plays depicting the martyrdom and with the Ashura parade and beatings.

Christians teach Christ’s deity sometimes without emphasizing His humanity. It can be helpful to begin with His humanity and His suffering as Mark and Acts do, and then lead to “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16 KJV). Sunnis believe there is no mediator between God and man. Shiites believe you do not have to have a mediator, but that it can help. So the Shia Imams have special power with God to help get one’s prayers answered, which is done at their tombs or the tombs of their holy descendants. Christians believe in one intercessor, the man Christ Jesus. Passages that address the wonderful provision of an intercessor and mediator in Jesus Christ include John 17:3, Romans 5:10, Hebrews 7:25, and 1 John 2:1.

All Muslim theology holds to a return of Christ and of Muhammad, when Christ will return, marry, have children, destroy all crosses and pigs, deny His crucifixion, His deity, and the Trinity, and then will die. Iranian Shiites, however, believe that the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, was removed by God at the age of four or five in AD 873 and is in a miraculous state of hiddenness. Occasionally he appears and speaks with special people. Following much conflict and war he will reappear with Christ. The return of Christ and the return of the Mahdi are very close in concept. As noted above, many believe that Ahmadinejad wants to stir this conflict and bring the Mahdi back sooner.

In crossing these evangelistic bridges, it is easy to begin by asking the Muslim what he or she believes about one of these doctrines and let the Muslim explain. Then say, “This has some similarity to what the Bible teaches” and have them read the biblical account and explain it. From here the discussion can readily go into our need for forgiveness and who Christ is.<sup>20</sup>

Another principle of evangelism is to look for people groups and ethnicities

within Islam that may be more responsive to Christ. Shiites have historically been marginalized and looked down on by the majority Sunnis. Many Muslims in the West, especially after 9/11, consider themselves second-class citizens looked down on by Westerners, but Shiites are more defensive with even fewer friends in the West. They are a minority within a minority.

Within the Shiite world it can be helpful to study the Shiite minorities or cults that have broken off from it. The Alevis in Turkey make up about twenty percent of the population but about fifty percent of Muslim-background believers in Christ. Could there be other minorities within a minority who might be open to the Holy Spirit's leading? For instance, six Ismaili people groups live remotely in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan with no known Pamiri believers and no known witness. Many times the unreached ethnicities and minorities may be more responsive first to friend-ship and then to the gospel.

God has worked in an amazing way among Iranians following the Iranian revolution. This is in spite of, or maybe because of, Iran having the third worst record of persecution of Christians in the entire world. When Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, there were at the most three hundred Persian Muslim-background believers in Christ and two small fellowships. Today in Iran and around the world there are at least 160,000 Farsi-speaking, Muslim-background believers in Christ and at least 150 fellowships.

Most major cities in North America have one or more Farsi-speaking fellowships. Khomeini came saying he was bringing pure Islam, and many Iranians have concluded that if this is pure Islam, they do not want anything to do with it. Khomeini created a Christ-shaped vacuum. Shiites, like Muslims around the world, have experienced dreams where Christ came to them and later they searched for the gospel and believed.<sup>21</sup>

It is easy to meet Shiite Muslims in the West. Different kinds of Shiite mosques function in many of our large cities, though frequently they are not called mosques. Imam Ali centers or Shia Ithna-Asheri Jamaat or Ahlu Bayt centers are usually English-speaking mosques with participants from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Mosques in the West are normally very friendly to outsiders.<sup>22</sup>

As the turmoil caused by Khomeini helped bring many to Christ, let us pray for God to use the conflict of Sunnis and Shiites killing each other to wake up Muslims that this political/religious practice is not from God. May we take steps of faith to befriend, help, and share Christ with Shiites and Muslims who live in our midst.

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## NOTES

- 1 For a more detailed account of Islamic history before and after the emergence of Shiism, see C. Wayne Mayhall, et. al., *Patterns of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2005), 407–47.
- 2 An English translation of the Shahadah or Islamic creed is, “There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the apostle of Allah.”
- 3 Halm, 50.
- 4 J. Davidson Frame, “The Religious Life of the Persians,” *The Moslem World* 7 (1917): 171.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 170.
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- 13 Hamid Dabashi, “Modern Shi’i Thought,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, vol.4, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.
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- 16 “Iran President Paves the Way for Arabs’ Imam Return,” *Persian Journal*, November 17, 2005, [http://www.iranian.ws/cgi-bin/iran\\_news/exec/view.cgi/13/10945](http://www.iranian.ws/cgi-bin/iran_news/exec/view.cgi/13/10945).
- 17 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 270.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 271.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 272.
- 20 For help in witnessing to Muslims see: Patrick O. Cate, “Islamic Values and the Gospel,” in *Vital Mission Issues: Examining Challenges and Changes in World Evangelism*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1998), 201–17; and Patrick O. Cate, “Gospel Communication from Within,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 11, 2 (April 1994): 93–97.
- 21 To read or view over one hundred testimonies of Muslim-background believers in Christ, many who were brought to Christ partially through a dream, see [www.Answering-Islam.org](http://www.Answering-Islam.org). This is probably the best first site for Christians interested in understanding Islam and reaching Muslims.
- 22 To locate some of the ninety plus Shiite mosques in North America plus Shiite mosques in twenty-one other countries see [www.Shia.org/organizations](http://www.Shia.org/organizations).