

Introduction to Sects (part 1 of 2)

Description: An introduction to sects attributed to Islam. Part 1 deals with Islam's view on sects and how can a Muslim avoid confusion.

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Lesson Objectives:

- To understand that Islam commands unity and shuns division.
- To understand that all sects are not equal: there are sects with "small" mistakes, but are still Muslims and then there are cults which call themselves Muslims, but are universally acknowledged to be non-Muslims.
- To learn the Islamic guidance on how to avoid confusion.
- To understand the importance of the "*Sahabah*".

Arabic Terms

- *Sahabah* - the plural form of "Sahabi," which translates to Companions. A *sahabi*, as the word is commonly used today, is someone who saw Prophet Muhammad, believed in him and died as a Muslim.
- *Sunnah* - The word Sunnah has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.

While the majority of Muslims share the same fundamental beliefs, with 1.62 billion adherents –close to a quarter of planet Earth's population^[1] – distributed over the far stretches of the continents and among 49 countries where Muslims are a majority and a history of more than a thousand years, all people who call themselves Muslims are not exactly the same. There are sometimes significant religious differences between them. In the following two lessons, we will cover the following points in more detail:



Do the existence of sects mean that Islamic teachings (contained in Quran and *Sunnah*) mandate them? The answer is no. What is important is to realize that unlike other religions, Allah has taken upon Himself to protect Islam - the last revelation and the most complete religion of God to humanity. You will not find any promise from God in the Bible or almost any other religious text that He will protect it. On the other hand, you do find two important promises from God in the Quran:

“God has completed His religion of Islam” (Quran 5:3)

God will protect and safeguard His religion from change (Quran 15:9)

The existence of sects is due to reasons whose discussion is beyond this lesson.

All Sects are Not Equal: An Analogy of Circles

An analogy can better explain the issue of sects. The Quran and *Sunnah* sit at the center around which there are many circles. Some Muslims will lie within a circle, but others will lie outside of it. In other words, some Muslims will be closer to the center, others may be distant. Then, think of a red circle which is so far from the center that anyone who lies outside of that red circle is not even considered a Muslim. The radius of the circle is a measure of how “deviant” the sect is.

In other words, the most “deviant” sects, one can call them cults, will be outside of the red circle. They will be the ones that have the most serious conflict with the established Islamic beliefs and practices. Examples would be Ahmadis, Bahais, and the Druze.

Sects Are Confusing, Who Do I Follow?

What becomes confusing is that with the existence of different sects, who does a new Muslim follow, especially when most sects claim to follow the Quran and *Sunnah*. What is a new Muslim to do? How does he or she determine who is right and who is wrong? In simple words, how does a new Muslim avoid confusion? Let us break down the answer to this question in a few points:

First, if we go back to the Quran and *Sunnah*, we will find the answer to this question. You see, the Quran and *Sunnah* are texts; some will try to take the Quran alone, separating it from the *Sunnah* (Prophetic traditions). They would then interpret the Quran they way they like. The only way to properly understand the Quran is by going back to the Prophetic traditions and to understand both in light of the understanding of the people who were present at the time of revelation. These texts were revealed in their time, many of the texts were addressed to them^[2], and they had the best teacher (the Prophet of Allah) to explain to them anything that needed explanation. Let us see what the Prophet said regarding this matter,

“The best of people is my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

The Prophet distinguished the first three generation of Muslims to be the “best.” If they are the “best” according to the Prophet of Islam, then it makes sense that we understand and practice Islam the way the “best” people understood and practiced Islam.

Second, it is important to know that the first generation of Islam is known as the generation of the “*Sahabah*.” The word “*sahabah*” means “companions” in Arabic. Its singular is “*sahabi*,” which means a “companion.” The second and third generation also have names, but “*sahabah*” is the most important term to know for now.

Third, it is important that one not judge for himself who is Muslim and who is not. When one lacks the proper knowledge, issues such as this should be left to the scholars. There are some sects that do have good and bad incorporated into their beliefs. Take Sufis [3] as an example. All their beliefs and practices are not wrong, but some are. One should be cautious due to one’s lack of knowledge so as to not get confused.

Endnotes:

[1] (<http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>)

[2] At times a text may have a specific reason for its revelation, but its general nature is taken into consideration.

[3] <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/1388/>

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