

■ Sunni and Shi'a Islam

Sunni Islam

When Muhammad died, the majority of Muslims thought that only the **Qur'an** (the Muslim holy book) and the **Sunnah** (Muhammad's teaching and actions) had the authority to guide the beliefs and behaviour of Muslims. They elected Abu Bakr to be their leader (Caliph), to act on behalf of God and Muhammad to make sure people followed God's laws.

The Caliphs did not make the laws; they enforced them once the community had considered the views of scholars who studied the Qur'an and the Sunnah. This group of Muslims came to be called '**Sunni**', meaning followers of the Sunnah.

Shi'a Islam

Another group of Muslims believed that Muhammad had named his cousin Ali as his successor. Ali was one of the earliest converts to Islam and was married to Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. Ali and his supporters thought that the true leader (called the Imam) had to be a descendent of Muhammad and chosen by God. Each Imam would identify the next one before he died.

Ali's claims to be leader were ignored by many Muslims. Over time a split developed between the followers of Ali's party, known as the **Shi'a**, and the Sunni Muslims. Today, the Shi'a have their own interpretation of Islamic laws and only accept sayings of Muhammad that have been passed down through Ali or his followers.

Shi'a and Sunni Islam hold many elements in common such as belief in God, the prophethood of Muhammad, the guidance of the Qur'an, and following the Sunnah. They only differ in interpretations of certain aspects of belief and law, and in the emphasis they put on expressing key beliefs, as you will see below.

■ The key beliefs of Sunni and Shi'a Islam

The six articles of faith in Sunni Islam

Sunni Muslims hold these six main beliefs:

1. There is only one God. 'Allah' combines the two Arabic words 'al' (the) and 'ilāh' (God).
2. Angels communicate the message of God to humans.
3. The Qur'an (meaning 'recitation') is the most important writing and the highest authority in Islam.
4. Muhammad, whose name means 'highly praised', is the most important prophet of God.
5. The Day of Judgement is when all humanity will be judged by God and sent to paradise or hell.

Objectives

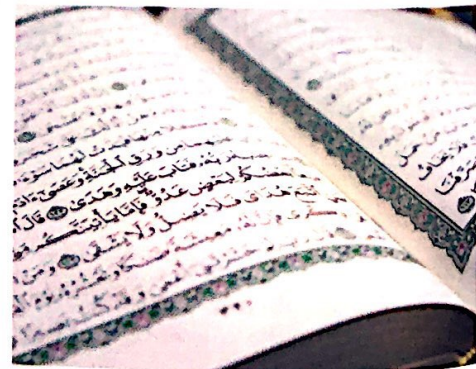
- Know the origins of Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam.
- Know the key beliefs of Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam.

Key terms

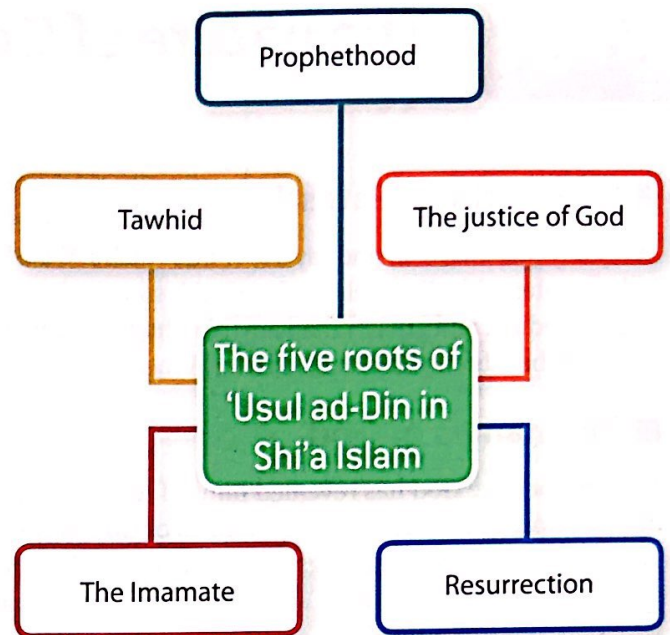
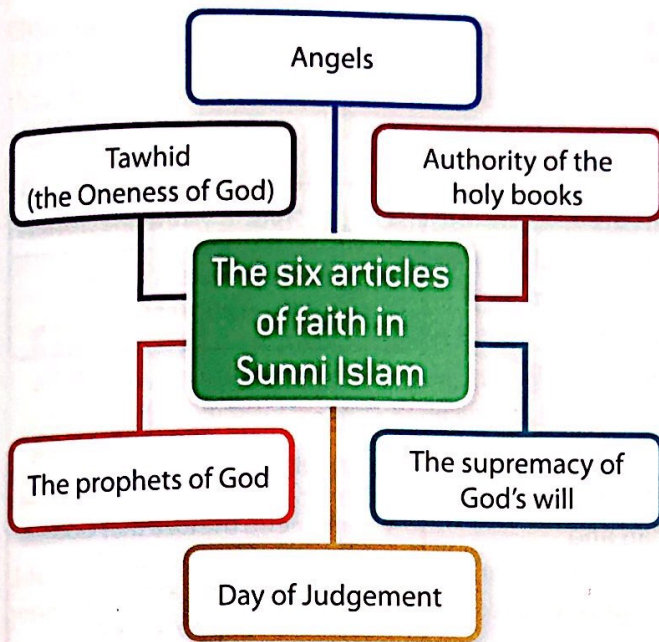
- **Qur'an:** the holy book revealed to Muhammad by the angel Jibril; God's final revelation to humankind
- **Sunnah:** the teachings and deeds of Muhammad
- **Sunni:** Muslims who believe in the successorship to Muhammad of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali
- **Shi'a (Shi'i):** Muslim who believe in the Imamate, the successorship of Ali

Links

To read more about Muhammad see pages 184–185.



▲ Sunni Muslims follow the Qur'an and the Sunnah

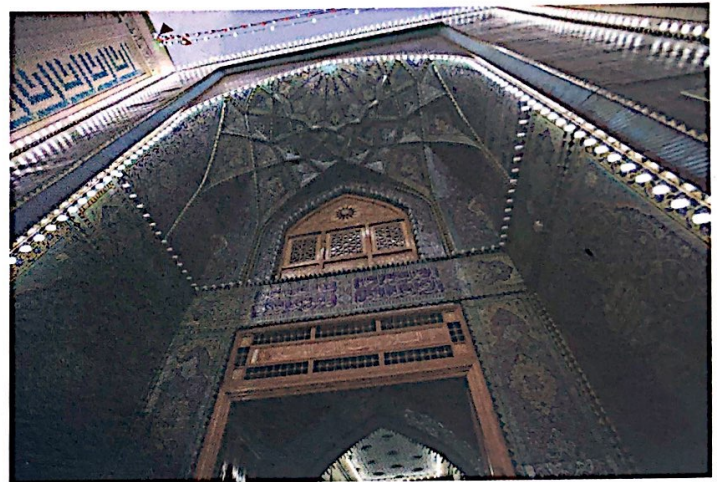


6. The supremacy of God's will means that God already knows but also makes happen everything that occurs in the world and in human lives.

The five roots of 'Usul ad-Din in Shi'a Islam

'Usul ad-Din means the 'principles (or roots) of religion'. The roots of a tree keep it alive and firmly attached to the source of its life. For Shi'a Muslims, these five principles keep them firmly rooted in God, the source of life.

1. Tawhid means that God is One; God is not made up of different persons.
2. Prophethood means accepting that Muhammad is God's last prophet, and that God's revelations through him are true.
3. God is just and wise, cannot do wrong, and holds humans accountable for their actions.
4. The Imamate means accepting that the twelve Imams are the leaders of Islam and guard the truth of the religion without error.
5. Shi'a Muslims believe that after death they will be resurrected to be judged by God.



▲ Millions of Shi'a Muslims visit the burial place of Imam Ali, whom they believe was Muhammad's true successor

★ Study tip

It is important to understand the beliefs that Shi'a and Sunni Muslims hold in common as well as why they have differences.

Activities

- 1 Explain the meaning of the word 'Islam'.
- 2 Give two beliefs that Sunni and Shi'a Muslims share.
- 3 Explain two differences between the beliefs of Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims.

Summary

You should now be able to identify the six articles of faith in Sunni Islam and the five roots of 'Usul ad-Din in Shi'a Islam. You should also be able to explain the origins of Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam.