

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

of

Shia Islam and Christianity

Developed by the ad hoc group
Baptists Exploring Shia Theology

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CHRISTIANITY AND SHIA ISLAM: A WHITE PAPER

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We, as an ad hoc group identifying as Baptists Exploring Shia Theology (BEST), believe that a theological view should be set forth regarding the current crisis in the Middle East. Alongside military and political analyses, we believe that the global media also should carry a theological discussion of Shia Islam and Christianity. We believe that Christian faith can offer a soul-satisfying alternative to the cataclysmic mindset inherent to Shia Islam.

Four sections comprise this white paper:

- 1) A message to the people of Iran
- 2) A brief history of Shia Islam
- 3) An appeal to followers of Shia Islam
- 4) Guidance for Christians

SECTION 1: A MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF IRAN

We live in a world where many people seem to use religion for their own purposes. The focus is less on God and more on how they can build their own empires of power and wealth. Evidence of this is everywhere and especially for those of you living in Iran.

Instead of having the freedom to choose what

you believe and how you will practice that belief, you have been forced into a belief and practice without having any say in the matter.

But if God is real, then He is not threatened by humans who have to force others to believe and obey. Moreover, God desires those who choose to follow Him with all their hearts and minds — people who don't pretend to be religious but believe and act out of a true relationship with God.

God created humans with the freedom to choose and live with the consequences of those choices. We should not force religion even on our own children but rather help them make their own choice, so that it is real in their soul.

A true follower of Jesus would support the idea that you have the freedom to choose your religion. A true follower of Jesus would want to tell you all about Jesus and what He has done in their life, but in a way that allows you to decide for yourself. They would want to invite you to experience all the hope, peace and love that Jesus brings, but never in a way that forces it on you.

Using the freedom to believe for yourself, would you be willing to see if Jesus is the answer to your life?

SECTION 2: A BRIEF LOOK AT SHIA ISLAM

Shia Islam is one of the two major branches of Islam and the division is as old as Islam itself. When Muhammad died in 632 A.D., he did not leave specific instructions about a successor, and so two ideas emerged. Some believed that the new leader should come from the bloodline of Muhammad and others believed that piety should be the deciding factor — regardless of bloodline.

The latter group prevailed and they laid the foundation for what is called Sunni Islam. The former group is called Shia Islam. The names themselves indicate the differences.

Sunni comes from the word that means “tradition” — following the traditions is more important than the personality.

Shia comes from the word that means “followers,” so following a person is more important — in this case, a true descendent of Muhammad. The key figure in this branch is Ali who was the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. He would eventually become the leader of Islam — which fits the ideology of the Shias — but his son, Hussein, was killed in a battle with Sunnis who did not want the leadership of Islam to continue through Muhammad’s family, solidifying a future of bitterness between these two Islamic groups.

You cannot overstate the importance of Ali in the heart of a Shi’ite. In many cases, Ali commands as much a devotion as even Muhammad. He even occupies a mediation role. When Shi’ites come to the mosque to pray for Allah’s help, many will repeat the name of Ali over and over to gain Allah’s favor. Shia Muslims also look to a coming leader called the Mahdi who will have an apocalyptic role in ushering in the end times.

An Iranian believer “Sam” explains that the difference between Shia and Sunni has significant implications for sharing the Gospel to a Muslim. Sam was born into a Shia family in Iran and began following Jesus when he was 18 years old. Over the years, he has seen a dramatic shift in the spiritual landscape away from Shia Islam and an openness to entertain something different.

“People in Iran saw firsthand various kinds of abuses within the walls of the local mosques. Over a generation, people developed a great animosity toward Islam and that has opened the doors for spiritual conversations. In some respects, Shias and Sunnis possess the same confusions about Jesus, but for Shia Muslims, it is easier to talk about Jesus as a mediator because of the influence of Ali. The need for a mediator is something that they understand and so that is my focus.”

A 2020 survey by a research group from the Netherlands confirms Sam’s observations and points to the reality that religion in Iran is not monolithic in which everyone is simply labeled as a follower of Shia Islam (<https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GAMAAN-Iran-Religion-Survey-2020-English.pdf>).

The current crisis in Iran is opening the way to look beyond politics and see the opportunities in the Muslim world for sharing the good news of Jesus.

SECTION 3: AN APPEAL TO THE FOLLOWERS OF SHIA ISLAM

In the uncertainty and conflict all around the world today, what can bring hope and peace? Is the high and holy God who created all things able to connect to our lives in a personal way?

We understand that for Shia Muslims there is a belief that God has appointed special Imams to provide spiritual guidance and leadership. God himself does not live among us in human form but has sent these Imams to do so. Within these Imams is the Mahdi who will return as a messiah-type person and bring peace and justice.

You are waiting eagerly for this Mahdi and even believe that at times he visits in disguise at the revered mosque at Jamkaran. You also believe that some of the Imams and in particular Hussein have suffered and even died for the sake of their followers. Ashura is a special time of commemoration when you remember the martyrdom of Hussein.

Christians who truly follow Jesus the messiah also look for hope and peace in the middle of all the world’s problems. We believe that God did not simply create us and then withdraw and leave us on our own in the middle of all our troubles. He knew we would need his help and presence every moment of our lives.

In his ultimate wisdom and power, He decided to live among us in two ways so that he could personally bring us the hope and peace that we need. The first way he lived with us was through Jesus the Son of God who came to earth as a real human. He

lived just as we do and experienced life with all its challenges.

There were those who opposed him just like with Hussein, and this ended in him dying on a cross. But being fully God, He rose from the dead and lives forever in heaven. What is very important for making sure that we have hope and peace is that his death and resurrection were not just a historical event, but they paid the price for our sins so that we could be forgiven and have a relationship with God. Our response is to believe in what he did and live our lives according to his teachings.

But now in a second way, God did not leave us alone when Jesus went to heaven. He lives with us through the Holy Spirit so that we have God with us every moment of every day. In the days to come, Jesus will return and bring peace and justice to the whole world.

SECTION 4: GUIDANCE FOR CHRISTIANS

Grant watched the rain come down in sheets and, rather than risk returning to work soaked and disheveled, he pulled up a chair in a local café and decided to wait for the storm to pass. Three men of Middle Eastern descent had the same thought and sat at a table next to him.

Rather than ignore them, Grant decided to engage in friendly conversation. The men were friends from a local Iranian cultural club around the corner. They met there once or twice a week to enjoy Iranian-style tea, play backgammon and spend a few moments chatting in their own language.

Grant asked them questions about their story — How did they make it to the U.S.? What do they miss about their homeland? What are the adjustments they find challenging in this culture? Grant was surprised at how quickly and easily their discussions moved into the topic of faith and how diverse their views were on the matter of Islam.

The oldest of the group explained he was a practicing Muslim, going to the mosque on Fridays, fasting during Ramadan, praying during the day,

avoiding foods and drinks that are forbidden and reading the Quran. He even attended the assemblies for the day of Ashura. While Sunnis connect Ashura to Noah's safe exit from the ark and Moses' rescue of the people from their slavery in Egypt, Shi'ites commemorate this as a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein.

The youngest of the group reacted with veiled contempt at these remarks. Contempt because he believed Islam was at the heart of the troubles inside Iran; veiled because this was an older man from an eastern culture that demands the young man regard him respectfully.

"Islam, like all religions, is a tool used by the powerful to control people," the young man said. Like so many young people in Iran, he had given up Islam and embraced a secular worldview.

The third Iranian considered the views of both his companions as extreme. The older man took his faith too seriously while the younger Iranian too easily dismissed spirituality. He considered himself Muslim and the stories of Ali and Hussein brought him comfort in times of difficulty, but he would not describe himself as religious. Like a Persian carpet, Shia Islam was woven into the fabric of their culture, but a serious devotion was not necessary. If you did good in this world, God — whatever god you served — would reward you.

Three Iranians from the same country with three different spiritual orientations: one faithfully embraces Shia Islam; one rejects it outright; and the other retains a cultural but not a convictional commitment. Grant knows there is a Gospel opportunity here — how does he proceed? There are three considerations in these kinds of encounters.

1) Affirm their culture. Grant did a great job of starting the conversation as a cultural learner. Rather than making assumptions about the three men based on their Middle Eastern appearance or how their country is framed in the media, he asked good questions and showed heartfelt interest.

Most Muslims believe that one's national identity and one's religious identity are inseparable; to be Iranian or Afghan or Turk is to be Muslim. But the Bible teaches that God is drawing people

from every nation and tribe in forming His church. You can retain your cultural identity — what foods you enjoy, what clothes you wear, patriotic pride, music, dance, literature and so on and still follow Jesus.

2) Affirm the spiritual touchpoints with the Bible. Grant may not know much about Shia Islam, so he should ask questions that allow for contrast and comparison. Grant could say something like, “Tell me more about Ali,” and then pick one or two features to act as a comparison.

Ali has a birth narrative and is believed to have performed miracles. Some say he played a role in rescuing Jesus from His crucifixion. Grant should listen intently and then ask them if he can share what Christians believe. He might start like this: “Those are fascinating stories about Ali! Thank

you for sharing that with me. May I share with you what the Bible teaches about Jesus?”

Grant should share the essentials of the Gospel in respect to Jesus. Focusing on Jesus as the mediator who forgives through His sacrifice will resonate with Shia Muslims since these are echoed in their narratives with Ali and with his son, Hussein.

3) Get them to read the Bible. It is unlikely that Grant will have the time to address every issue in a café, so he should have some resources ready to share on his phone that directs them to the stories of Jesus in the Gospels and to share his contact information so there can be follow-up discussions.

All of us can be like Grant — if we take the time to prepare and to observe who Father God puts in our path.

