Diversity in Islam

- The main division in Islam is between Sunni and Shi’a.
- The break between Shi’a and Sunni took place when Ali, the fourth caliph, died in A.D. 661.
- The division between Shi’a and Sunni is primarily a political one, not necessarily a doctrinal one. Muslims are united by the five pillars as well as by their basic fundamental doctrines. The split came about because Shi’ites believe that the leader of the Muslim community should be descended from Muhammad.
- Shi’ites and Sunnis have their own distinct commentaries on the Koran as well as collections of *hadith*.
- There are other divisions within these branches and there is a lot of diversity in belief and practice amongst Muslims just as there is within Christianity. To illustrate, the main divisions in Christianity are Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. But there is also a lot of diversity within those divisions as well as Christians who don’t really fit neatly into a category. This is also true in Islam.

Sunni

- Around 90% of Muslims are Sunni
- Most Muslim majority countries are Sunni and most Muslims you meet in Muslim minority nations are Sunni. Sunni majority states include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, other Gulf States, Indonesia, Pakistan, etc.
- Sunni’s tend to look to the larger community do develop consensus on what it means to be a Muslim
- There are various forms that Sunni Islam takes as well as divisions between fundamentalists and modernists.

Shi’a

- Around 10% of Muslims are Shiites
- Shi’ite means “Party.”
- Shi’a majority nations include Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen
- Shi’ites were led by a succession of twelve imans. The twelfth went into “Occultation” and will return. Shi’ite eschatology has some points of contact with Christian eschatology.
- Shi’ites view themselves as an oppressed minority.
- Shi’ites are further divided according to how many Imams they recognize.
Sufism

- Can be either Shiite or Sunni. Can also be represented by Folk Islam
- Emphasizes personal connection to God through a variety of practices.
- Sufi Muslims would generally follow these practices in addition to following the fundamental practices and beliefs of Islam.
- Sufism is very attractive to converts.
- Having a spiritual guide is important for Sufis.
- Some Sufis look to Jesus as a model for life, even more than they do Mohammed.
- Common practices include reciting the names of Allah and reflecting upon them, meeting together with other Sufis, and using music and dance to connect to God.

Folk Islam

- Representatives in both Shiite and Sunni
- Does not always adhere to orthodox teaching
- Like other folk religions folk Islam is syncretistic and superstitious.
- Very concerned with evil spirits and Satan (Iblis)
- Common practices include the use of charms to ward off evil spirits, displaying eyes to ward off the evil eye, veneration of Muhammad, using the Qur’an as a talisman, etc.