Islam, a religion started in the seventh century, once encompassed all those that practiced the religion and all followers were known as Muslims. Today, there are many versions of the Islam religion; Sunni, Shi’ism, and Sufi. Sunni is the most common form of Islam with a traditional, orthodox set of beliefs. Shi’ism is another branch of Islam practiced mainly in the countries of Iran and Iraq and incorporates self-sacrifice into their faith. Lastly, only a small proportion of Muslims consider themselves to be Sufis, those who practice a mystical branch of Islam. To understand Reza Aslan’s thesis in *No god but God* one must first understand why Muslims were fractured into separate groups and how their beliefs differ.

The division of Islam began in 632 when Muhammad, the Messenger of God, died (Aslan 35). Muhammad’s death caused devastation in the Ummah because Muhammad’s choice of successor was not clear. The next leader of Islam would become the Caliph and be responsible for the entire community of Muslims. A large group of Muslims did not want the Caliph to come from Muhammad’s family clan; while others believed Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, should be the Caliph. Those against Ali becoming Caliph, later known as Sunnis, did not want the power of the Ummah in the grasp of one clan and subsequently Muhammad’s family. The Sunnis were successful in their attempts to keep Ali from becoming the first Caliph. As history shows, Abu Bakr became the first Caliph. Not only was Ali not the first Caliph, he was neither the second nor third. This infuriated the group of people who believed Ali should be Caliph. As they were later known, the Shi’ites knew Ali was the rightful successor of Muhammad.

An event of significant importance to the creation of Shi’ism as an instrumental group in Islam and their theology, is the death of Ali’s son Husayn at Karbala. This stemmed from Husayn trying to gain power over a tyrannical Caliph, who he believed was not behaving as the Prophet would have wanted (176-177). The small army gathered by Husayn, were soon caught in a battle that could not be won. Even though greatly outnumbered, it is said that Husayn, “deliberately chose to continue to Kufa in order to sacrifice himself for his principles and for all generations to come” (179). The death and self-sacrifice of Husayn was seen by the Shi’ites as “having completed the religion that Abraham initiated and Muhammad revealed to the Arabs”, which led them to believe that self-sacrifice was the key to Islam.

Another important sector of Islam is Sufism. The original Sufis were “highly mobile individuals who traveled throughout the Muslim Empire seeking intimate knowledge of God” (199). Reza Aslan believed that Sufism was a result of the extreme Traditionalists (Sunni’s) beliefs and strict interpretation of the Quran (200). While the pressure from the Traditionalist might have formed the Sufi customs, there is no way to be sure. However, Sufis are sometimes seen as a branch of Shi’ism because they do not believe in the strict traditional interpretation of the Quran. Sufis, unlike Sunnis and Shi’ites, were not interested in political power. They believe that it is better to live a simple life to get closer to God; they are not interested in a materialistic lifestyle. Even though Sufis are Muslims, they do not agree that “orthodoxy, all traditional teachings, the law, theology, and the Five Pillars” (201) are the steps to reach God. The ultimate goal of a Sufi is to lose the sense of self and be encompassed by God.

Many differences in theology have developed because of the division of Islam into Sunni, Shi’ism, and Sufism. As stated above, the main difference between Sunnis and Shi’ites is Shi’ites believe Ali should have been the first Caliph. This led to a distinct separation of ideologies in leadership of the community, otherwise known as the Ummah. After the death of Muhammad, it was decided that religious scholars called the Ulama “would take upon themselves the responsibility of guiding the Ummah on a straight path” (113) by decoding the remaining messages in the Quran that were not answered by Muhammad. The Ulama had two processes of thought, the traditional and rational. The Traditionalist, or Sunni, believe that the Quran is uncreated and is the actual word of God. While Shi’ites, Rationalists, believe that the Quran shows “God’s speech reflects God but is not itself God” (158). Sufism argues that nothing written can compare to God and to focus on the words of God is incomparable to being in the presence of God (201). As the religious authority, the Ulama wrote codes of conduct known as the Shariah, which became a point of dissention between Muslim people. The Traditionalist thought that all rules and conduct should be based on the theology of the Quran. Rationalists believed that laws and rules of conduct should be based heavily on human reasoning, or ijtihad; even excerpts of the Quran should be looked at through the scope of historical context. This debate was of extreme contention but was finally settled in the tenth century when ijtihad was outlawed by a Sunni Caliph. Since then, the Shariah of the tenth century has continued to be used. Shi’ites thought that the laws should be ever changing to adapt to the community. Reza Aslan believes the “traditionalist position continues to have devastating consequences for the development and progress of law and society in the modern Middle East” (169) because the use of a tenth century law is being applied in the twenty-first century. Shi’ites continued to use human reasoning in their understanding of the Quran but their numbers were so few, their impact on the Ummah was insignificant. While the Sufis did believe in an ever-evolving journey to meet God, they did not believe in the Shariah.

An important distinction between Shi’ites and Sunni is that after the death of Ali, Shi’ites no longer believed the Ulama were the religious authority. Shi’ites believed that religious authority belonged to the Imam, who were “the Prophets legitimate successors, bear the responsibility of guarding and preserving Muhammad’s divine message” (181). There is believed to be only a certain number of Imam including Muhammad, Ali, and Ali’s sons Hasan and Husayn. Also, some Shi’ites accept the belief in Mahdi, where an Imam will come back to earth and take revenge for the massacre at Karbala. Sunni followers “openly criticized belief in the Mahdi in an attempt to discourage what was fast becoming a politically disruptive theology” (186). Sufis, on the other hand, followed the religious authority of a Pir or Sufi master. The Pir guides people on their journey through the Way, the process in which a Sufi can rid themselves of their ego to accept God.

Islam began as one community worshipping Muhammad as their Prophet. The death of Muhammad led to many divisions within the Ummah. Muslims disagreed with who should become the next leader, which caused turmoil in the community. With the separation of Sunnis and Shia’s new theologies were created along with the mystical based religion of Sufism. Sunni have remained Traditionalists since the tenth century while Shia’s readapt their teachings of the Quran through human reasoning. Sufis embrace their original concept of Islam by limiting worldly desires to truly connect to God. Although there are many differences between each sect of Islam, it is the fastest growing religion in the world. Understanding the origin of the religion of Islam and how it has developed throughout history, allows the reader to understand Reza Aslan’s thesis in *No god but God.*