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*The Top Story of 2006?*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

Dec. 22, 2006 -- I was walking into a coffee shop just before Christmas when a reporter put a microphone in front of me and asked, "What was the top news story of 2006?" I said the first thing that came to mind.

"The top story of 2006 was the discovery that so many of the leaders in charge of United States-Iraq activities do not know the difference between Sunnis and Shiites. That's like trying to administer Northern Ireland and not understanding the difference between Catholics and Protestants."

Certainly, it is correct to observe that many American politicians, military leaders and diplomats have recently revealed that although they have been in charge of forming or implementing policy on Iraq for years, they fail to understand the primary distinction between the two groups. Perhaps more tragically, in all of that time, they have not been curious enough to find out. No wonder the American involvement in Iraq has been such a mess.

In hindsight, perhaps this lack of curiosity about the underlying cause of the conflict in Iraq is not the most important story of 2006, given all the other possibilities, but it deserves further consideration as we enter a new year and the president reassesses the United States posture there.

Why is it important to understand people's religion in Iraq, or in general?

Recently I was reading an introduction to religion book that said religions appeal to the head or to the heart. By this, the author meant that religions provide an explanation for the order of the world and the individual's place in it or they provide a moral and spiritual guide and outlet for one's emotions and feelings, both positive and negative.

These observations provide only a general response to the question. The question was better answered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He observed that religion, in part, is "a system -- which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting -- motivations." In other words, religions motivate people; they cause people to behave in certain ways, both as individuals and in groups.

The centuries-long disenfranchisement and oppression of the Shiites by the Sunnis in Iraq, under the Ottoman Empire and later under Saddam Hussein, followed by the sudden opportunity for political power provides an opportunity for the fulfillment of Shiite beliefs and prophecies. These powerful and pervasive beliefs motivate many Shiite attitudes towards and activities in the new Iraqi government. The United States and its allies would do well to understand them.

The Shiite story begins with Muhammad, Islam's founder. He was both a prophet who brought God's message to humanity and a political leader of the Muslim community. Upon his death, the community disagreed about his successor. The largest group held that since there could be no prophetic successor to Muhammad his successors should be political leaders. This group evolved into Sunni Islam, encompassing about 80 percent of Muslims.

The other group followed Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, and believed the succession should be primarily religious, although not prophetic, as well as political. These leaders acquired the title of Imam, and emphasized the righteous perfection of the Muslim community.

This disagreement over Muslim leadership led to violence and betrayal. Ali was murdered in 660 and buried in Najaf. His grandson Husayn, the third Imam, was betrayed and murdered with his family in 680 by Umayyad Sunni troops near Karbala. This event has become an annual Shiite commemoration emphasizing the suffering of the righteous. It has led to a Shiite emphasis on bearing up under suffering, oppression and persecution, and on the moral importance of addressing social injustice.

After Ali, the Shiites never regained leadership of the Muslim community and for the next several centuries, the group lacked even political control of its own community. The Imams thus became religious leaders, infallible guides for the religious purification of Shiism, but did not have political power. In addition, they were all descendants of Muhammad through Ali and Muhammad's daughter Fatima.

Shiism combines this emphasis on the religious value of suffering with a strong messianic streak. The Twelfth Imam was known as the Mahdi. He did not die but passed into spiritual hiding until he returns at the end of time to establish peace and justice for the oppressed (i.e., the Shiites). Until he comes, the Shiites will be led by trained religious judges, known as mujtahids and ayatollahs.

When we put this religious vision together with the present Iraqi political situation, it becomes clear that the Shiites do not share the United States' vision of liberation from Saddam as the establishment of democracy for all. Instead, the Shiites see these events as the removal of Sunni oppression of the Shiites and the beginning of a Shiite theocracy, ultimately led by an ayatollah, like neighboring Iran. (Who would be that ayatollah? Certainly Muqtada al-Sadr thinks he should be. His father and uncle, murdered by Saddam, were Grand Ayatollahs.) The removal of oppression and the apocalyptic events brought on by the U.S. occupation may also be understood as a sign of the immanent return of the messianic Mahdi. Certainly there is no religious fervor like that of people who are convinced the end is near.