

Background article: Sources, Sunni and Shi'a: Succession and Imams

The three meanings of the term Imam

The term *imam* is used in three senses within Islam. First, there is the *imam* who leads the community at prayer.

Second, the term is used of outstanding scholars, whose teaching is esteemed throughout generations, such as Imam al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Imam al-Ash'ari (873-935). It is also used of the founding figures in the four Sunni Schools of Law: Imam Malik ibn Anas (716-795), Imam Abu Hanifa (699-767), Imam al-Shafi'i (767-820) and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855). In a similar way, the Shi'a use the term of outstanding scholars, such as Imam al-Khoei (1899-1992) and Imam Khomeini (1902-1989).

The third usage is specific to the Shi'a; these are the divinely-appointed Imams who are the sinless, infallible guides of the community after Muhammad.