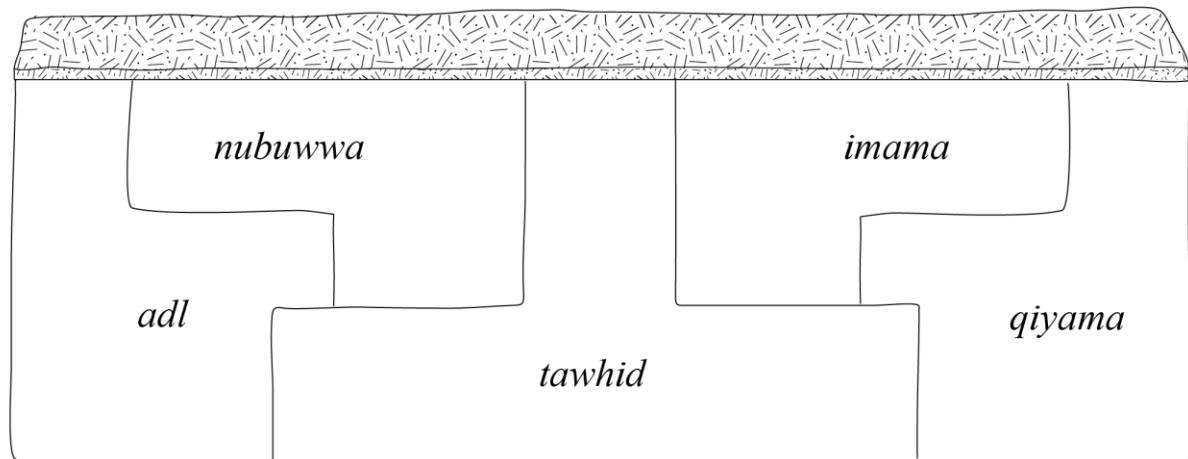


Background article: Beliefs, Shi'a foundations of faith

The five foundational beliefs of Shi'a Islam



There are five foundational beliefs that underlie the practice of Islam in Shi'a understanding. These are: *tawhid*, the oneness of God; *adl*, the justice of God; *nubuwwa*, prophethood; *imama*, divinely inspired leadership; and *qiyama*, resurrection, judgement and life after death. The model that is given is of five foundation stones on which the practice of Islam can be built. The central foundation is *tawhid* and all the others rest on this. The five fit together or tessellate so that none can stand without the other four. All five contribute to form the foundation layer on which the pillars, practices or obligatory acts of Islam in Shi'a understanding stand (see the diagramme of the Practice of Islam in the Section on Practices).

Every human being possesses the gift of reason and great stress is laid on this within the Shi'a tradition. Each individual believer is responsible for coming to their own conviction of belief in these five foundations based on the use of their reason. Through the use of reason, human beings can come to an understanding of the will of God; it is sometimes spoken of as "the internal prophet." Not everyone has the same capacity for rational thought but the Qur'an commands people to reason on the basis of evidence [Q. 21:24; 27:64], to ponder [Q. 7:185; 16:48], to think [Q. 34:9] and to reflect [Q. 30:20-28]. There is a Hadith Qudsi in which Muhammad is given the following statement from God to convey: "God rewards and punishes according to their reason," which indicates the principle that those who have a higher rational capacity will be expected to demonstrate a higher level of knowledge, piety and obedience.

Tawhid

God is the starting point: God, the supreme being, who alone eternally existed, unmoved and uninvolved with any other being, for only God existed, before the creation of anything, before time and before space. Muslim philosophers have used the classical schools of philosophy to speak of God. God is the being who causes everything to exist but is uncaused by anything else; the one who sets all things in motion, whilst being unmoved by anything else; the one who knows everything, whilst being unknown by anything else. God existed and there was nothing else. The existence of God can be demonstrated by philosophical argument and presented to the human being as a rational proposition for belief.

What can we say of God in God's very self, of the essence of God? Nothing. Human beings, like the rest of creation, belong to a totally different order to the supreme being. We are creatures; God is the creator of all that exists. We are finite, we have limits to our life and knowledge; God is infinite, eternal and all-knowing. No matter how sophisticated our poetry, philosophy or imagination, God is greater still, transcendent, beyond our ability to comprehend. Of the essence of God, we can say nothing.

Whenever we speak of God, the philosophers remind us that we are using a created human language and human philosophical categories to speak about a supreme being who lies beyond all such things. This means that every positive statement that we make about God can only go as far as our creaturely knowledge will extend. Every time we say something, we are saying "it is as though..." "to the best of our ability, we can say..." "in our categories of knowledge, the best that we can say is..." When giving praise to God, Muslims will always add *subhanallah* to show that "God is holier" than anything that human beings can say or imagine. Given these limitations, what can we say about God?

There are certain things that we can say about God that do not depend on God doing anything, like being a creator. We can say that God exists; therefore God possesses life. God alone existed and created everything else in creation; therefore God possesses power. God knows how to fashion a creation without the need of any teacher; therefore God possesses knowledge. These three qualities belong to the very nature of God and, even though we cannot understand what they mean from God's perspective, they are things that we can say about the essence of God that are not dependent on the creation. They are called, technically, attributes of essence. It belongs to the essence of God to possess life, power and knowledge.

Once God creates something, then there is a fundamental change. Something now exists outside of God. Now God knows the creation and the creation can know something about God; God is the being who created the creation. Now we can speak about interaction; God interacts with the creation. God guides, sustains and

communicates with the creation. We can speak of God being merciful to the creatures and God acting with justice. These are a different kind of attribute; once they did not exist because the creation did not exist. After God created something these attributes came into being, therefore they are creatures too. These are called attributes of act; they show us some aspect of God's interaction with the creation. Many of the names by which God is known tell us something about these attributes. God is called, for example: the All-forgiving, the Guide, the Judge, the Most Generous, the Giver of Life, the Giver of Death, the All-hearing, the Most Merciful, and the Source of Peace.

The most fundamental statement that Islam wants to make about God, other than God's existence, is that God is one. This is the foundational belief in *tawhid*, the oneness of God. It is asserted numerous times in the Qur'an [Q. 17:42-44; 21:21-24; 27:60-64; 112:1-4]. God is one in two senses: God is the one and only God, and God cannot be divided into parts or share divinity with any other being, whether created or uncreated. It is a characteristic of creation that everything was created in pairs [Q. 51:49], not just human beings, but also plants, animals, day and night, mercy and justice, attraction and repulsion, positive and negative, and so on. God alone is not paired [Q. 42:11; 112:4]. A pair of like kind is required to produce offspring; this rules out any notion of God having a partner or consort with whom to have progeny or issue of any kind. "Far exalted is God above having a son" [Q. 4:171].

Some religious systems have a belief in a tribal or ethnic god; they might say "this god is our god". In Islamic understanding, God does not belong to any tribe, people, ethnic group or religion; God is the one and only God. Some religious systems speak about many gods, this is polytheism: Islam rejects this notion and speaks of absolute monotheism; there is only one God. Some religious systems speak about a hierarchy or pyramid of gods: family gods, clan gods, tribal gods, local gods, regional gods, and so on, with the "supreme god" at the top, sitting, as it were, "on the top of the pyramid". This is called henotheism and is likewise rejected by Islam. God alone is worthy of worship and nothing else.

God is one in the sense of being indivisible. God cannot be divided into parts; this rules out any notion of plurality within God. God cannot share divinity with any thing or any person; this rules out any idea of semi-divine, partially-divine or wholly-divine beings other than God. Muslims never worship Muhammad, or any other person, or creature. Muslims will never allow the worship of any "lesser gods" (the ancient gods of our people, or ancestor worship), or "saintly people" (God is too far distant, or mighty, for me to worship, so I worship this local saint too), or any concept or ideology (this rules out the worship of money, power, racial superiority, military might, political system, beauty, nature and so on).

The foundational belief of *tawhid* is absolute. It is expressed in every formal prayer, in which Muslims recite the first chapter of the Qur'an, which includes the line "you [God] only do we worship" [Q. 1:5]. God alone existed eternally. All else is created. All created things (the universe, our planet) will have an end. At the end of the

creation, God alone will exist (and, in some way that we cannot really explain, those who have entered into “the eternal life hereafter” with God).

{For more discussion on God, see the Section on Beliefs and Teachings: The nature of God.}

Adl

Once God created the creation, the attributes of act come into existence. They describe the ways in which God interacts with the creation. One such fundamental attribute is justice, *adl*. God is just and God acts with justice [Q. 4:40]. God does not act in an arbitrary or capricious way; it is of the nature of God to be just. God is by definition perfect: justice is a reflection of perfection, whereas injustice is a reflection of imperfection. God is just and never oppressive or tyrannical [Q. 3:182; 41:46; 21:47]. This justice is open to human reason. We can understand the beauty, or rightness, of repaying good with good and the ugliness, or wrongness, of repaying good with evil. Through the use of reason, human beings can come to an understanding of the will of God.

If God acted on a whim and judged people without any concept of justice, then human beings would never know how to live according to God’s guidance and do what is right. This would be tyranny! One would never know if one is on the path to Paradise or not. Right and wrong, good and bad are objective realities and open to be accessed by our reason. God has taught human beings the standards of justice, both through the revelations that God has sent to the earth and through our capacity to reason things out. God acts according to those standards. Human beings have the freedom to act according to those standards of justice, or to rebel and act unjustly. At the judgement, God does not make arbitrary decisions, but rather such judgements are based on the justice of God. In this sense then, in justice, we bring our judgement upon ourselves [Q. 10:44]. Fortunately, God’s judgement is also tempered by mercy, as we will see in the section on the foundational belief in *qiyama*.

Nubuwwa

If we consider the two concepts of reason and justice, it will be clear that not all human beings have the same level of intellectual capacity, and that all of us stand, to some degree, in need of guidance from God on right, wrong and how to live a life in accordance with God’s ethical will. If God were not to supply this guidance, then God would be acting unjustly. The guidance needs to come through a pure channel of communication, so that there is no possibility of corruption. Guidance in the form of a scripture, or book, would be insufficient as individuals would never know how to interpret it correctly, or even if it is possible to live a sinless life in total obedience to God. This is the basis for the argument for the existence of prophets, or the foundational belief in prophecy, *nubuwwa*.

From the beginning of time, God has sent prophets to all the peoples of the earth because all stood in need of the guidance that they brought. Muhammad is thus the last and the seal [Q. 33:40] of this line of prophets that began with Adam and, according to a Hadith, numbered some 124,000 in total. Muhammad is the universal prophet and for “all the worlds” [Q. 21:107; 34:28]. Prophets have the function to receive the guidance from God; some prophets (*rasul*) receive this guidance in the form of a scripture, others (*nabi*) call people back to a purer following of the scripture sent to an earlier prophet. They are people of the highest spiritual excellence and thus preserved from sin, so they are pure channels through which the revelation can pass. They share in our humanity in every way and thus can be perfect exemplars or role models for others on how to put the guidance into practice. They are free from sin, error or doubt and thus their exemplary lives can be relied upon. It is the duty of prophets sent with a scripture to establish a way of life on earth (*shari'a*) that is just and that will lead their communities to live in obedience to the divine will and thus attain Paradise.

{For more discussion on prophets, see the Section on Beliefs and Teachings: What is a Prophet?}

Imama

Even though the number of prophets seems huge at 124,000, that number is actually few when one considers all the peoples of the earth throughout all ages. Necessarily, there were long gaps between the prophets and there are to be no more prophets, throughout the earth, after Muhammad. This leaves many potential gaps in guidance during which human communities could stray into error. It would be a lack of justice on the part of God to punish people who went thus into error if they lacked the presence of a divinely-appointed and inspired guide to keep them on the straight path until the next prophet was sent (or until the end of the world in the case of the time after Muhammad). These divinely-appointed and inspired guides are the Imams, hence the foundational belief in the Imamate, *imama*.

The Imams are not prophets, they do not receive revelation (*wahy*), but they are next in rank to the prophets and receive inspiration (*ilham*). They are sinless, free from error, and able to interpret the scripture of the prophet that they follow based on the God-given gift of knowledge, which is open to them alone. Imams have existed throughout the human centuries but their identities, like the vast bulk of the prophets, are unknown. What is known is the identity of the Imams after Muhammad; they are the twelve Imams of the mainstream of Shi'a Muslims, or the larger numbers for the various Ismaili groups.

A fundamental principle is that the world will never be left without the presence of an Imam, or else humankind will go irredeemably astray. For the small Shi'a group of Nizari Ismailis, the situation is clear, with their doctrine of there being a Living Imam within the community at all times. Other groups of the Shi'a have their Imam in occultation, or living a hidden existence. It is crucially important that the Imamate has

not died out but goes on “like the sun hidden behind the clouds”. No-one can see or make contact with the Imam during occultation but he is still present on the earth and, in a sense, still an active presence: if the sun were to cease to exist, even though we cannot see it, then all life on earth would end.

{For more discussion on the Imams see the Section on Setting the Scene: A Shi'a perspective on Islam, and the Section on Sources of wisdom and authority: The Shi'a Imams as spiritual guides.}

Qiyama

The rational conclusion of the first four foundational beliefs is that there must be human accountability. Human beings are given a high dignity by God and God has sent guidance to all humankind on how human life should be lived. It is therefore reasonable that God should hold each individual human being to account for how they have implemented that guidance in their lives and acted upon it. It is also clear upon reflection, that this accountability cannot be fully realised in this earthly life: the unjust appear to prosper in the world. This indicates the logical necessity of a life beyond our earthly life, which is often referred to as ‘the life hereafter’. Given that our life ends in death, such a life hereafter requires a concept of resurrection from the dead to a new form of life [Q. 22:5-6; 32:10-11]. The resurrection to a new life is indeed the consequence of our creation; as the Qur'an puts it: “From God we came and to God we will return” [Q. 2:156]. If this were not so, then our life would have no purpose [Q. 23:115].

This return to God brings with it the notion of accountability. God's justice demands that the upright and the wicked are not treated in the same way [Q. 10:4; 38:28]. In Shi'a understanding, there is an important difference between the rewards *promised* by God and the punishments *threatened* by God. God is just and justice demands that God will be faithful in granting the rewards that have been promised. God is however at liberty to exercise mercy and forego the punishments that have been threatened. As far as our human understanding can take us, we human beings need bodies to experience joy or anguish. This means that our spirits, which are separated from our earthly bodies at death, are united to a new ‘eternal body’ at the resurrection. This new life, the life hereafter, is the true final destiny of human beings, our ultimate abode, for which we were created. God created all human beings with the desire that all should come to the true abode of Paradise; it is only human sin and rebellion that may lead some to forfeit that goal and to suffer the anguish of separation from God in hell.

The reasonable belief in resurrection, the return to God, judgement and the life hereafter is the foundational belief in *qiyama*. {For more discussion of *qiyama* see the Section on Beliefs and Teachings: Life after death.}

Once these five foundations have been grasped as reasonable beliefs, human beings are then in a position to make the personal act of faith, “I believe”, and thus to

transform their lives accordingly by performing the ten acts held to be obligatory in Shi'a understanding.