

Transcript: Beliefs, The nature of God

Over the centuries the main beliefs of Islam, contained in the Qur'an and the Sunna [Q. 2:177, 2:285],¹ have been written down in many different statements. One of the simplest expressions is contained in the *Iman al-Mufassal*, which runs as follows:

I believe in God, in his Angels, in his Revealed Books, in all his Prophets, in the Day of Judgement, in that everything, both good and evil, comes from him, and in the Life Hereafter.

The nature of God

The principle of the absolute oneness and indivisibility of God or *tawhid* is the most fundamental belief of Islam. God is one and cannot be divided or share divinity with any being or thing. The one sin that will not be forgiven is to attribute partners to God or to give something as much importance as God [Q. 4:48].² But it's not enough just to believe this.

A Muslim has to demonstrate his or her belief through action [Q. 103:1-3];³ to devote their whole existence to the worship of God. That is what human life is all about – to serve, obey, love, and worship God [Q. 51:56].⁴

God is beyond our comprehension and human language lacks the capacity to describe God fully. Whenever we speak about God, we have to use the language of analogy.

¹ Q. 2:177 It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards east or west; but the really righteous is whoever believes in God, and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Prophets; and who spends of his wealth, out of love for Him, for relations, for orphans, for the poor, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; and who is steadfast in prayer, and practises regular charity; those who fulfil the contracts which they have made; and are patient in pain and adversity, and in time of war. Those are the ones who are truthful and those are the God-fearing.

Q. 2:285 The Messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, as do the believers. Each one [of them] believes in God, his Angels, his Books, and his Messengers. [They say] "We make no distinction between one and another of his Messengers." And they say, "We hear, and we obey, [we seek] your forgiveness, our Lord, and towards you is the journey."

² Q. 4:48 Indeed God does not forgive that any partner should be given to him, but he forgives anything besides that to whomever he wishes. And whoever gives partners to God has indeed forged the most terribly sinful [lie].

³ Q. 103:1-3 By Time! Indeed the human being is in loss, except those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and recommend to each other truth and recommend to each other patience.

⁴ Q. 51:56 I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me.

There is always a resistance to use human terms to speak about God, but they are all we have. Besides, God uses such terms to speak of himself in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an itself contains many descriptions of God and the ways that God acts. We are told that God sits on a throne [Q. 2:255].⁵ There are references to God's hands [Q. 3:73],⁶ eyes [Q. 11:37]⁷ and face [Q. 2:115].⁸ The Qur'an speaks of God seeing, speaking and hearing. Some scholars have taken these to be metaphorical and others have said that, they are real but they do not mean that God has human features [Q. 42:11b].⁹ God is beyond such allusions [Q. 112:4].¹⁰

The Qur'an also speaks about God in more abstract terms.

God is all-perfect

God is all-knowing, all-powerful [Q. 6:59, 34:22].¹¹

God is transcendent or totally other.

God is beyond all time and space [Q. 7:7].¹²

⁵ Q. 2:255 God! There is no god but he; the Living, the Self-subsisting. No slumber or sleep overcomes him. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there to intercede in his presence except by his permission? He knows that which is before them and behind them. Nor do they comprehend anything of his knowledge except as he wills. His seat extends over the heavens and the earth and preserving them does not fatigue him. He is the Most High, the Supreme.

⁶ Q. 3:73 [The Jews said] "And believe no-one unless he follows your religion." Say [Muhammad], "The guidance is indeed the guidance of God. [And do not believe] that anyone may be given the like of what you were given or that they may argue with you before your Lord." Say: "All favour is in the hand of God. He grants it to whom he pleases. And God is All-pervading, All-knowing."

⁷ Q. 11:37 Build the ark before Our eyes and by Our revelation, and do not plead with Me for those who are wrongdoers: they shall indeed be drowned.

⁸ Q. 2:115 To God belong the East and the West. Wherever you turn, there is the face of God. For God is All-pervading, All-knowing.

⁹ Q. 42:11b Nothing is like Him, and He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing.

¹⁰ Q. 112:4 Nor has He any equal.

¹¹ Q. 6:59 With God are the keys of the unseen; no-one knows them except him. He knows whatever there is in land and sea. No leaf falls without his knowing it, nor is there a grain in the darkness of the earth, nor anything fresh or withered but it is in a manifest book.

Q. 34:22 Say, "Invoke them whom you claim [to be gods] besides God! They do not control [even] an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in [either of] them, nor is any of them His supporter."

¹² Q. 7:7 Then We [God] will surely recount to them with knowledge, for we had not been absent.

However, none of this means that God is distant or unapproachable [Q. **2:186**].¹³ The Qur'an says that God is nearer to us than our jugular vein [Q. **50:16**].¹⁴

The scholars of Islam have searched the Qur'an and Hadith to find the names by which God has called himself or is called by the Prophet [Q. **7:180, 59:23-24**].¹⁵ These give a list of characteristics or qualities of God. They give us some insight into the way that God acts. The names of God are beyond number but there are ninety-nine that are most commonly used.

Among them are:

the Most Great, the Just, the Almighty, the Source of Goodness, the Majestic, the All-seeing, the All-forgiving, the Acceptor of Repentance, the Guide, the Wise, the Abaser, the Truth, the Patient, the Creator, the Protector, the Light, the Compassionate, the Source of Peace, the Compeller, the Loving, the Unique, the Friend, the Provider, the Giver of Death, the Judge, the All-knowing.

Reciting the names proclaims the praises of God and acts as an aid to meditation. These Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God are recited and used in meditation. One often sees Muslims with a *tasbih*, a string of ninety-nine beads to use in recitation.

In sufi practice, students are sometimes given one particular name to repeat many times each day, to allow that quality of God to enter their heart and to shape their lives. Their sufi teacher, or *shaykh/shaykhah*, might choose a name which refers to a quality in which the student is deficient. So someone lacking in generosity might be told to repeat the name *al-Karim* "the Most Generous" a thousand times a day. The *tasbih* is used in other pious exercises, for example, to repeat thirty-three times each: all glory be to God – *Subhan Allah*, all praise be to God – *al-Hamdu lillah*, and God is the greatest – *Allahu Akbar*. This is often done at the end of each prayer session but it is also recommended frequently during the day.

¹³ Q. **2:186** When My servants ask you about me, I am indeed close by. I answer the prayer of every person who calls on me, when he calls on me, so let them respond to me, and believe in me: that they may go in the right direction.

¹⁴ Q. **50:16** Certainly We have created man and we know to what his soul tempts him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.

¹⁵ Q. **7:180** To God belong the most Beautiful Names, so invoke him by them, and abandon those who profane his names. Soon they shall be punished for what they used to do.

Q. **59:23-24** He is God - there is no god except him - the Sovereign, the All-holy, the Source of Peace, the Securer, the All-conserver, the All-mighty, the All-compeller, the All-magnanimous. Glorified is God above what they may ascribe [to him] as partners! He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Former. To him belong the Most Beautiful Names. Whatever there is in the heavens and on the earth glorifies him, and he is the All-mighty, the All-wise.

The importance of these Names is reflected in the names of Muslim men and women. Men are often named by adding the prefix Abd, or Loving Servant, to one of the Beautiful Names; so Abd ar-Rahman means Loving Servant of the Most Merciful. Women are also called after a Beautiful Name, so Nurallah, the Light of God.

Maulana Raza recites the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God.