

# 7 Who Is God?

## Overview of Islamic Theology

Belief in God is the first article of faith in Islam. But before I examine the Islamic concept of God, I will briefly introduce Islamic theology as a whole. *Iman* (“faith” or “belief”) is among the most important domains of Islamic theology. The word *iman* originates from the Arabic root *amana*, which connotes freedom from fear, calmness, conviction, confidence in truth, and trust. In Islam, *iman* means “to believe in the message from God that was revealed through the Prophet Muhammad.” A person who accepts the Prophet Muhammad’s message becomes a believer (*mu’min*) or Muslim (a person who submits to the message). The opposite of faith is *kufur*, which literally means “covering the truth.” *Kufur* is also described as being contrary to *shukr*, which is often translated as “thankfulness” or “gratitude.” The person who carries the trait of *kufur* is an unbeliever (*kafir*).

The Qur’an frequently engages with theological issues concerning faith and characterizes believers as those who have faith in God, angels, scriptures, messengers, and the hereafter.<sup>1</sup> It also addresses the idea of predestination and of what is evil and what is good.<sup>2</sup>

The hadith collections also discuss theological issues related to faith. A number of hadiths attributed to Muhammad discuss the fundamentals of faith in Islam. In one of these reports, a man in white garb visited the Prophet while he was sitting with his companions. To his companions’ surprise, the man sat knee to knee with the Prophet and began asking him questions. When the man queried the Prophet on the meaning of *iman*, the Prophet answered, “Faith means to believe in God, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, the resurrection and the hereafter, and predestination, both its good and its evil.”

“You have spoken the truth,” the man responded. He then asked the Prophet, “What is Islam?”

1. Qur’an 2:185; 2:177; 4:136.

2. Qur’an 57:22–23; 64:11; 15:21; 36:12.

The Prophet replied, “Islam means to bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger, to perform the five daily prayers, to pay the *zakat* or alms tax, to fast during the month of Ramadan, and to make the *hajj* or pilgrimage to the Kaaba.”

Affirming the Prophet’s answer, the man then asked, “What is *ihsan*?”

The Prophet replied, “*Ihsan* means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.” The conversation continued with a few other questions. The companions of the Prophet were astonished to see a man they did not know questioning the Prophet and affirming his answers. Once the man left, the Prophet told his companions that the visitor was the archangel Gabriel, who had come to teach them about religion.<sup>3</sup>

On another occasion, the Prophet said that Muslims who embody the following qualities would enjoy the sweetness of faith: holding God and his messenger dearer than anything else, loving a person for God’s sake alone, and after finding faith, avoiding unbelief so they would escape being cast into the fire.<sup>4</sup> He also said that faith has over seventy branches. The highest branch of faith is to say, “There is no god but God.” Its lowest branch is to remove injuries from the paths of people. Modesty is another branch of faith.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the hadiths, Muslim scholars listed reciting the Qur’an, maintaining cleanliness, believing in the six articles of faith, practicing the five pillars of Islam, being thankful to God, avoiding waste, being truthful, avoiding hatred toward people, being just and pious, helping those in need, being humble, managing anger, taking care of one’s family, responding to the greeting of a person, visiting the sick, attending funeral prayers, being generous, being respectful to the elderly, not gossiping, not killing, and not eating impermissible food, among other activities, as being among the branches of faith.<sup>6</sup>

In one of the hadiths, the Prophet said, “Faith is knowledge in the heart, words on the tongue, and action with the physical faculties (limbs of the body).”<sup>7</sup> Based on this statement, Muslim scholars emphasize faith’s three dimensions.

3. This report is narrated in major hadith collections, including *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, and *Sunan Abu Dawud*.
4. Al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, book 1, hadith 67.
5. Al-Naysaburi, book 1, hadith 60.
6. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, *Hadislerle İslam*, 1:512.
7. Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, book 1, hadith 68.

According to the first dimension, faith begins in the heart. The Prophet said that God would save whomever sincerely believed in their heart that there was no god but God and that Muhammad was his messenger.<sup>8</sup> This hadith also echoes a verse in the Qur'an that says that those who say they have faith in fact do not have faith, as "faith has not yet entered their hearts."<sup>9</sup> On one occasion, the Prophet's companions were at war with a hostile tribe. One of his companions, Usama bin Zayd, captured a fighter from that tribe. When Zayd was upon his enemy, all of a sudden, the man said, "There is no god but God." Zayd killed him despite his having said that. When the Prophet heard about the incident, he asked Zayd why he had killed the person when he had declared his faith in God. Zayd answered that the enemy had invoked the statement of faith in order to save his life. The Prophet then rebuked Zayd by saying, "Did you check his heart?"<sup>10</sup>

The second dimension of faith involves utterances of the tongue. The Prophet repeatedly encouraged his followers to voice their faith in God by saying, "There is no god but God." Muhammad himself repeated words of repentance (*tawba*) and sought refuge in God (*istighfar*) seventy times every day. The third dimension of faith is acting with one's body. Faith in God can only become rooted and meaningful once it is put into action. For the salvation of Muslims, the Prophet often invoked practices as well as faith. That is why Muslim theologians listed works (*'amal*), including especially the five pillars of Islam, as being part of faith. In this sense, faith requires practice.

While he was alive, the Prophet could clarify ambiguous matters of faith on which his followers sought clarification. As the messenger of God, Muhammad's explanations satisfied those seeking his guidance. However, after he died, Muslims became preoccupied with theological inquiries for two prominent reasons. First, the Prophet's death created a void in authority that led to disagreements among Muslims concerning various aspects of faith. Second, as Muslim territories expanded, followers of Islam increasingly engaged with people of other faiths, including Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and those who were learned in Greek philosophy. These dynamics led to the rise of Islamic theology known as *kalam* ("speech" or "discourse"), a science that aimed "to give precise formulation to the

8. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 3, hadith 70.

9. Qur'an 49:14.

10. Al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, book 1, hadith 183.

articles of faith.”<sup>11</sup> According to one scholar of Islam, *kalam* “represents one of the most original and distinctive of the Islamic sciences of religion, as comprehensive as it is intricate.”<sup>12</sup>

While *kalam* has remained an important discipline in Islam, it has not played the leading role that theology has played in the Christian tradition. Instead, sharia has enjoyed that place of prominence: “The vast majority of practicing Muslims have known nothing about *Kalam*, although they all have had some degree of familiarity with the Shariah. One can be a good Muslim without *Kalam*, but it is impossible to be any sort of Muslim without the Shariah. Many of the great Muslim authorities, such as al-Ghazali, warned people against studying *Kalam*, since it focuses on intellectual issues that are of no practical use for most people.”<sup>13</sup>

Another important characteristic of Islamic theology is that it is open to diversity. Because of the lack of sacraments and a true hierarchy, “Islam possessed no mechanisms for imposing dogmatic conformity.”<sup>14</sup> History documents two major exceptions, however. First, from 833 to 848 CE, Mutazilite theology was backed by the Abbasid Caliphate and enforced on the people. Second, Shiite doctrine was imposed on Iranian Sunnis under the Safavids in the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Apart from these examples, one generally finds great diversity in theological opinion because “in Islam, there exists no special category of individuals, no special profession, whose task it is to dispense salvation; all Muslims are laypersons.”<sup>16</sup> This made space not only for the emergence of diverse theological schools—such as Mutazilism, Asharism, Maturidism, and Hanbalism—but also for major differences of opinion about law and mysticism.<sup>17</sup> When there were disagreements about theological issues, Muslim theologians often turned to the Prophet’s famous hadith: “In my community, disagreement is a sign of divine mercy.”<sup>18</sup>

Among the questions that Muslim theologians have addressed are the following:

11. Eric Ormsby, “Islamic Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, ed. William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 432–46, <https://tinyurl.com/2h7jzxhr>.
12. Ormsby, 433.
13. Murata Sachiko and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (Saint Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1994), 239.
14. Tim Winter, ed., *Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7.
15. Winter, 7.
16. Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 13.
17. Winter, *Classical Islamic Theology*, 7.
18. Van Ess, *Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 18.

- *What is God's nature in relation to his attributes?*
- *Do humans have free will or are they predestined to act in a certain way?*
- *If God is all knowing and all powerful, why is there still accountability in the hereafter, given that he already knows what humans will do?*
- *What is the status of a mortal sinner?*
- *Who is eligible to lead the Muslim community and what is legitimate governance?*
- *Do mortal sinners remain as believers or do they become unbelievers?*
- *Is there a middle way for a mortal sinner?*
- *Is the capacity for reason sufficient to guide humans?*
- *Is the Qur'an eternal or created?*
- *What is the relationship between faith and works?*

Mainstream Muslim theologians eventually came to a consensus that the fundamentals of faith concern belief in the following:

- *God*
- *angels*
- *the prophets*
- *scriptures*
- *the resurrection*
- *the hereafter*
- *predestination*

This section treats each of these fundamentals, beginning with the Islamic belief in God.

## The One God

A professor at a private evangelical Christian college in a Chicago suburb was at the center of a major controversy in late 2015. Concerned about negative political rhetoric involving Muslims at the time, she donned a hijab in solidarity and made the following statement on social media: "I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated

last week, we worship the same God.”<sup>19</sup> College administrators initially placed the professor on administrative leave and issued a statement indicating that their decision was not about the hijab but rather about her statement that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. The college and the professor eventually parted ways. On this issue, camps continue to be divided: many non-Muslims argue that Muslims believe in a different divinity, while others claim that they all believe in the same God even though conceptions about this common God might differ. So who is the God of Muslims? How do Muslims relate to their divinity?

While Muslims refer to God by many different names, the most common name used to invoke or address and praise God is Allah. Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians also use this word, which derives from the combination of the Arabic article *al* and the word *ilah*. In this regard, *Allah* literally means “the God.” Grammatically speaking, the word *Allah* has no plural form or associated gender.

Islamic tradition relates that in Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, people already had a notion of Allah but associated other gods with him. While the Meccans considered Allah to be their supreme creator, they also believed that other deities existed that interceded between them and Allah. Islamic tradition dates the history of Mecca to Abraham, his concubine Hagar, and his son Ishmael, who brought monotheism to Mecca. But it is believed that at some point, through interactions with neighboring cities, Mecca was introduced to polytheism. By the dawn of Islam, the Kaaba—built by Abraham and his family as the house of the one God—was full of deities. With the coming of Islam, Arab society was reintroduced to its monotheistic roots and the belief in one God, or Allah. But who is this God whom Muslims worship?

To understand and know the ways of God, Muslims turn to three sources: the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, and the created universe itself. When trying to comprehend God, Muslims believe that one should first turn to creation. The Qur’an relates the following verse: “I [God] created jinn and humankind only that they might worship me.”<sup>20</sup> The purpose of creation is to know, worship, and remember God. This form of worship and remembrance is by choice, not force. Some of the

19. Manya Brachear Pashman and Marwa Eltagouri, “Wheaton College Says View of Islam, Not Hijab, Got Christian Teacher Suspended,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/zwyc9ja9>.

20. Qur’an 51:56.

Qur'an commentaries interpret the phrase "only to worship Me" as "only to know me."<sup>21</sup> In line with this interpretation, a widely circulated sacred narration (*hadith al-qudsi*) reports that God said, "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known; so I created creation in order to be known."<sup>22</sup> In the center of the story of the creation stands God's desire to reveal and introduce himself.

A few analogies might help us understand the Islamic theology of creation. Perhaps one of the most enjoyable things for artists is to exhibit their work. Through their exhibits, artists not only delight in seeing their pieces displayed but also enjoy visitors' appreciation and admiration. For teachers, one of the most pleasing things is to show their knowledge and share it with an audience. In the same way, people who are beautiful or perfect in some way or possess specific knowledge and skills naturally aim to reveal, display, and manifest these qualities and abilities. They would especially like to express their skills to those capable of both understanding and offering a proper response.<sup>23</sup> From an Islamic point of view, knowledge, love, and worship of the creator is that appropriate response. God exhibits his large treasure of skills and blessings in this universe and invites his creation, particularly humans, to freely and consciously acknowledge him as their only creator. That, in short, is the main purpose of creation in Islam.

## God's Names: *Asma al-Husna*

The most important way of knowing God is through his most beautiful names (*asma al-husna*). God reveals himself through these names, which the Qur'an refers to as follows: "The most beautiful names belong to God, so call on Him by them."<sup>24</sup> In another verse, the Qur'an instructs followers to "call upon God, or the Compassionate—whatever names you call Him, the most beautiful names belong to Him."<sup>25</sup> The Qur'an repeatedly mentions God by different names and attributes. In chapter 59, for example, many of God's names are listed together:

21. Joseph E. B. Lumbard, Commentary on *Surat al-Dharyyat*, in Nasr et al., 1280.

22. Nasr et al., 1280. A *hadith al-qudsi* is a report that is attributed to God from the perspective of its meaning, but it is articulated with the words of the Prophet Muhammad.

23. Nursi, *Sözler*, 178.

24. Qur'an 7:180.

25. Qur'an 17:110.

He is God, there is no god other than Him; who knows all things both secret and open. He is the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. He is God, there is no god other than Him, the Controller, the Holy One, the Source of Peace, the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme. Glory be to God, He is above all that they associate as partners with Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Fashioner, to Him belong the most beautiful names. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him. He is the Mighty, the Wise.<sup>26</sup>

While Islamic literature often references the ninety-nine names of God, the Qur'an mentions more than a hundred. Therefore, the number ninety-nine should not be taken literally, since scripture contains more than that. All chapters of the Qur'an except one begin with these names of God. God is al-Rahman and al-Rahim, the most compassionate and the most merciful. God is al-Khaliq, the one who brings everything from nonexistence to existence. God is al-'Adl, the embodiment of justice. God is al-'Alim, the all-knowing one; there is nothing beyond his knowledge. God is al-Razzaq, the provider. God is al-Latif, the most gracious one. God is al-Ghafur, the all-forgiving one. God is al-Wadud, the all-loving one. God is al-Mumit, the one who inflicts death. God is also al-Muhyi, the one who gives life. God is al-Quddus, the most holy one—the one who is pure and without imperfection. The self-cleansing of the universe through alteration, transformation, death, and re-creation is regarded as the manifestation of this name. God is also al-Qayyum, the self-sufficient one, who depends on nothing but on whom everything depends.

The Qur'an refers to this attribute of God with the following verse: "God: there is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. His are all things in the heavens and on the earth. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth, and their preservation does not tire Him. He is the Exalted, the Magnificent."<sup>27</sup> Muslims often know this verse by heart and usually recite it in their daily supplications.

26. Qur'an 59:22-24.

27. Qur'an 2:255.



## God's Essence, Attributes, and Acts

Muslim theologians have classified God's names in numerous ways. One way is to think of God's names as being related to his essence (*dhat*), attributes (*sifat*), and acts (*af'al*). The names concerning God's essence belong only to him—there is nothing created that can share the qualities enumerated by these names. In this regard, the Qur'an affirms, "There is nothing like Him."<sup>28</sup> Among the attributes of his essence is existence (*wujud*). Thus God's existence stems from himself. He is not created, and his existence depends on nothing. Everything will perish except God. God has neither beginning nor end.

Another way to categorize God's names is by his attributes (*sifat*), such as power (*qudra*), knowledge (*'ilm*), will (*irada*), life (*hayat*), speech (*kalam*), hearing (*sam'*), and sight (*basar*). While these attributes are unlimited in God, humans can only partially embody these names. For example, whereas God is all knowing, humans have limited knowledge. Whereas God has life without imperfection, humans and other creatures have life only because of God. Their life depends on God and is subject to imperfections, including illness and death. God also has the attribute of will (*irada*). Human beings share this attribute, but while God's will is unlimited, humans' free will is highly limited.

Other names relate to God's active role (*af'al*) in the creation (*khalq*) of the universe. Everything is created by God. God creates the universe from nothing (*insha*). He gives life (*ihya*) as well as death (*imata*). As part of his active role, God is also the one who provides (al-Razzaq) for his creation. In order for his creatures to continue living, God meets all their needs.

## God's Nearness and Distance

To understand God's essence and attributes, Muslim theologians point to his nearness and distance. The Qur'an states that everything is near to God and in his control: "To God belong the East and the West. Wherever you turn, there is the presence of God. No leaf falls without His knowledge."<sup>29</sup> In another verse, God's nearness to humankind is stated: "We are nearer to him than his jugular

28. Qur'an 42:11.

29. Qur'an 2:115; 6:59.

vein.”<sup>30</sup> But Islamic theology also emphasizes God’s distance from creation. God is everywhere, so no particular thing or place is associated with God. In emphasizing God’s distance, the Qur’an states that angels ascend to God “on a day whose measure is fifty thousand years.”<sup>31</sup> One hadith reports that God is behind seven thousand veils.<sup>32</sup> God is close to creation through the manifestations of his names and attributes, while creation itself is distant from God’s essence.<sup>33</sup>

## God’s *Jamali* and *Jalali* Names

Islamic theology speaks of the two modes of God, or his dual nature. God’s names are also divided into beauty and mercy (*jamali*) and glory and majesty (*jalali*) aspects. *Jamali* names are manifested in the universe as beauty, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, love, and kindness. The beauty of creation, with its distinctive forms, fashions, and colors; generosity; and blessings are also among these names. Others are the Most Beautiful (al-Jamil), the Most Generous (al-Karim), and the Giver of Life (al-Muhyi).

The *jalali* names are revealed in the forms of majesty, awe, and fear. Life, light, and existence are manifestations of the *jalali* names, as are death, separation, fear, punishment, wrath, and major natural disasters. These names include the Majestic/Exalted (al-Jalil), the Subduer (al-Qahhar), the Almighty (al-Aziz), the Bringer of Death (al-Mumit), the Avenger (al-Muntaqim), and the Compeller (al-Jabbar).

In the universe, one can also observe that the *jamali* names are revealed within the *jalali* names. For example, within God’s unity (*wahdaniyya*) is the manifestation of divine oneness (*ahadiyya*). As the light of the sun encompasses the entire earth, so does God’s glory and unity. As the sun’s light, heat, colors, and shadows are found in transparent objects and drops of water, so is God’s *jalal* and oneness. God is present in the universe and is the provider for all of creation. But God is also particular in providing according to the distinctive needs of every being. All the flowers on earth together, for example, manifest God’s glory and unity. However, every single flower, with its distinctive beauty and color, manifests God’s *jamal* and oneness.

30. Qur’an 50:16.

31. Qur’an 70:4.

32. Nursi, *Sözler*, 277.

33. Nursi, *Words*, 215.

Muslims believe that the *jalali* names will be fully revealed in hell, while the *jamali* names will have their full manifestation in heaven. But in Islam, God's mercy is emphasized over his wrath. In one of the *hadith al-qudsi*, God says, "My mercy overcomes my wrath."<sup>34</sup> The Qur'an also emphasizes God's mercy: "Your Lord has prescribed mercy upon Himself, if any of you did evil in ignorance, and thereafter repented, and amend his conduct, indeed He is Forgiving and Merciful."<sup>35</sup> Referring to the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an notes that he was sent as a mercy to all creatures.<sup>36</sup>

## Humankind in Relation to God and His Names

At the center of the theology of God's names is humankind. Unlike in the Christian tradition, the notion of original sin is absent in Islamic theology. Muslims believe that God created Adam and Eve and that they slipped "individually," as the Qur'an puts it. Both repented, and God eventually forgave them. The Qur'an points out that Adam and Eve were abiding in heaven. God gave them permission for everything except for approaching a particular tree. Satan tempted them with the idea of becoming eternal if they ate fruit from the forbidden tree.<sup>37</sup>

Muslims believe that humans are the mirror of God's names in the most comprehensive way. That is why they are—along with the Qur'an and universe—also considered a book to be read in relation to God. According to a hadith that often appears in Sufi literature, "God created humankind in his image."<sup>38</sup> Humankind was not only created in the image of God, but humans are the ones who read and contemplate God's names better than any being in the universe.

In the story of the creation in Islam, one learns that "Adam was taught the names" by which humans are made superior even to the angels. The ability to recognize the manifestation of God's names in creation is one of the most important ways to know God. To believe that there is one God is different from knowing God. Once humans know God and have knowledge of him, they will be led to have admiration as well as love for him. Love for God is followed by strong faith and worship. In this regard, contemplating the universe in relation to God (*tafakkur*) is an act of worship.

34. Al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, book 50, hadith 18.

35. Qur'an 6:54.

36. Qur'an 21:107.

37. Qur'an 7:19–25.

38. Al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, book 45, hadith 1.

## Being the Mirror of God's Names

Humans not only reflect on the names of God and have the ability to contemplate their manifestations in the universe; they also have the responsibility to embody God's names in their acts. In line with the qur'anic principle "Do good to others as God has done good to you," believers are asked to exemplify God's names in their lives. God is the most compassionate one, and humans are encouraged to have compassion for each other and for God's creation. God is the most generous one, and humans are encouraged to be generous. God is just, and humans are encouraged to stand for justice. God creates with wisdom and does not waste, and likewise, humans are encouraged to do the same in their affairs.

In embodying God's name, the Most Merciful One (al-Rahim), al-Ghazali (d. 1111) wrote that believers should show mercy for the poor and provide them with whatever they need. In order to embody God's name the Peace and Source of Peace (al-Salaam), believers should not be prisoners of their anger and greed. Al-Salaam is the one whose essence is free from imperfection. To be the mirror of this name of God, believers should overcome such deficiencies. A Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand believers are safe.<sup>39</sup>

Humankind remains at the center of Islamic theology because humans embody God's names (*asma al-husna*) in the most comprehensive way. They are also the ones who can read and contemplate the manifestation of these names in the universe better than any other creature. Humankind, therefore, carries a unique responsibility, which is to believe in God, to know and contemplate him, and to worship him. Departing from this responsibility is regarded as veiling God's signs (*kufur*); in other words, not reading the creation as it relates to God. A further step in *kufur* is *shirk*, which means to put other deities or humans on an equivalent footing with God.

Islamic ontology is not limited to human beings; it includes supernatural beings such as angels, which are the subject of the next chapter.

39. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ninety-Nine Names of God in Islam*, trans. Robert Charles Stade (Ibadan: Daystar, 1970), 14, 23.