

Core Curriculum

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2 Foundations of Islam - Theology

2.1

Entering Islam: The Shahada

The door through which one enters Islam is called the shahāda. Shahāda literally means to testify or bear witness similar to how one would testify in court. The shahāda in the Muslim religion is to testify that 1) there is no deity but Allah alone and that 2) Muhammad (s) is the Messenger of Allah. The first part of the shahāda means that we should reject polytheism and affirm monotheism* only.

It also means that we should worship God only and make Him a priority in our lives. If one makes the world and its contents (like money, power or fame) the sole object of one's love, then one is, in reality, worshipping a "god" other than Allah. We cannot emphasize this point enough. Worshipping in Islam simply means to surrender one's heart, soul and mind to something.

The second part of the shahāda is affirming that Muhammad is a Prophet and Messenger sent by Allah to guide humankind for people's salvation. It also means that as the last and final Prophet and Messenger from Allah, we are to take his teachings as the blueprint of how to lead the proper religious life.

This not only includes various ritual practices, but also proper mannerisms and behavior. If a Muslim wants to perfect his or her Islam, he or she must also pay heed to the Prophet Muhammad's command of following his Ahl al-Bayt (as). The Ahl al-Bayt were the divinely guided successors after his death.

Simply believing and performing ritual practices, however, is not enough. A Muslim needs to go further by always struggling to better himself or herself and always being mindful that Allah is watching. The only way that bettering oneself, that is, transforming one's inner self, can come about is through inner humility. For it is only in humility and not in arrogance that the human heart truly surrenders itself to God.

2.2

The Usūl al-Dīn: The Fundamental Beliefs of Islam

The uṣūl al-dīn are the foundations of the Muslim belief system. After the shahāda, they are the basic theological foundations of Islam which a Muslim must believe in. They are five:

The first is Tawhīd or the Absolute Oneness and Unity of God, meaning that Allah is the Only Creator and Sustainer of all of existence and that He has no partners in anything He does. It also means that He is the only One worthy of worship to the exclusion of all other things. All other beliefs in Islam are predicated on the notion of tawhīd.

The second principal is that of 'adālah, or Divine Justice. This means that God is absolutely good and just and He does not command or act unjustly towards His creation.

The third principal is Nubuwwa or Prophethood. As a Just God, Allah sent Prophets to humankind in order to guide them to salvation. The most important and final Prophet is the Prophet Muhammad (s).

The fourth principal is Imāmah or Divine Leadership. As the Prophet Muhammad (s) is the final Prophet, and Islam is the final religion, we need divinely guided leaders to protect the message and interpretation of Islam. These divine leaders or Imāms are 12 in number and are from the Holy Household of the Prophet (s).

The fifth principal is Ma'ād or resurrection on the Day of Judgment. As the God wants the best for humankind, He sends Prophets to warn them about a Day of Judgment in which they will be accountable for their deeds.

2.3

Tawhīd: The Unity and Oneness of God in Islam

Tawhīd is the Absolute Oneness and Unity of God. It is the most important and most fundamental aspect of Islam. Without Tawhīd, none of the uṣūl al-dīn, or Islam, would make sense. Tawhīd denies the existence of any other god or deity except for the One God who created the world.

It also holds that God has no partners in anything He does. Although He may have servants that perform tasks in the world by His will, this does not mean that they are His partners in any way as He is in no need of them. He is perfectly capable of managing the world without them.

Tawhīd is not just an abstract theological understanding of the nature of God, it has a direct bearing on how we lead our lives and how we are supposed to see the world around us. Tawhīd not only implies that we must serve and submit our hearts to Him only (that is, not money, our desires etc.) but it also means that only Allah controls and sustains the universe. Anything else is but a mere illusion. To give independent power to anything else in this regard is called shirk in Islam, that is, polytheism or idolatry.

As a result, we shouldn't be upset when things do not go our way. For in the end, little is under our control. Everything belongs to Him, and He controls the results of all events that take place in our world.

2.4

Adala: Divine Justice in Islam

‘Adāla means “Divine Justice” and it is the second principle of the uṣūl al-dīn, that is, the fundamental beliefs of Islam. In Arabic, the word literally means to keep a form of balance in weight. In His treatment of humankind, Allah makes ‘adāla or

justice obligatory upon himself and therefore always acts with goodness and justice.

This means that He never wrongs His creation. For example, on the Day of Judgment, Allah will not punish people with more than what they deserve. Furthermore, God, according to Islam, does not test people with more than what they can bear. Indeed, they may fail the test, but the test is never beyond the possibility of success.

Parallel to this, just as God makes justice obligatory upon Himself, He also makes it obligatory upon humankind. Human beings have the responsibility of maintaining the “balance” of justice in the world. Transgressing this balance leads to corruption and evil.

We say it is evil as the rules and boundaries God sets for humans is intended to lead them to the divine Good and Truth. Transgressing these boundaries leads one to the opposite, that is, the opposite of Good and Truth which is evil, corruption and falsehood.

Only with God do we find real justice for His justice is not arbitrary, but an expression of the goodness of his own nature.

2.5

Nubuwwa: The Purpose of Prophethood in Islam

Allah wants to guide people and help them attain salvation. As a just God, the God of Islam must therefore send Prophets to guide mankind to the proper path.

The word prophet in the English language is not always synonymous with the Islamic term nabī. Nabī is someone who receives wahī which is a special kind of direct revelation that a person receives through the medium of the Archangel Gabriel.

A rasūl is a higher ranking nabī who receives a whole new system of laws. A basic nabī may receive a specific law, but he does not receive a system of laws.

According to Islam, the purpose of Prophethood is to guide mankind towards salvation in this world and in the Hereafter. Prophets bring the blueprint on how to live the proper spiritual, moral and material life. They not only teach the blueprint, but they also act as role models for us to follow.

The Prophet Muhammad was both a nabī and a rasūl. As the final Prophet of God, he was the universal messenger for all of mankind. Among all Prophets, he was the most perfect in knowledge and in character. As the final and universal Prophet, his message is meant for all of mankind in all places and all times.

As a role model, the Prophet's actions are known through his Sunnah (tradition). His sunnah is recorded in a oral tradition called the hadith, which are sayings of, or about the Prophet (i.e what he did). The Prophet's main miracle was his own message in the form of the Qur'an, the Divine Scripture of Islam even though he had other miracles as well.

The correct interpretation of the Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings had to be protected after the Messenger of Allah's death. For this reason, God chose Imāms from the Ahl al-Bayt, or the Holy Household of the Prophet (s), to guard their correct interpretation.

2.6

Imāmah or divinely guided leadership in Islam after the Prophet Muhammad.

Although the Prophet Muhammad (s) was the last of all prophets, it would have been unjust if Allah completely cut off humankind from divine contact. Like Prophets, Imams act as mediums between God and humankind. After the Prophet's (s) death, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) took on the role of guiding people and protecting the authentic interpretation of Islam.

The first two and a half centuries of Islam were the formative periods of Islam. Most of Islam's theological and legal schools were established during this era. Most Muslims were beset by disagreements and differences of opinion during that time. The Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) however, were present during this time and made sure to establish a school that was in accordance with the pure teachings of Muhammadan Islam.

Imamah is the greatest distinguishing factor between the two major expressions of Islam, Shia and Sunni. The Sunni belief in imamah is a belief in fallible and completely human centered leadership.

Imams for Sunni Islam can be Friday Prayer leaders, or leaders of law (like the four Imams of Sunni law). According to Shi'ism, Imamah is divine leadership, that is, a guided leadership by God to protect Islam and lead people to salvation.

2.7

Ma'ād: The Day of Judgment in Islam

The Day of Judgment in Islam is the day when all humans will be resurrected after their death. Life in this world is the first phase of human life. In this life, there is choice. The life in the next world is the second, eternal stage where we will reap the consequences of the choices we made in the first stage of our lives.

The religion of Islam holds that at the peak of the world's darkness, God will send a savior, namely the 12th Imām of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), known as al-Mahdī, to rectify the world's corruption and bring justice and faith to all of humanity.

This final event of Imām al-Mahdī's (aj) reappearance will set the stage for the total end of the world. The Mahdī is the promised messiah and savior of the world. His death will mark the end of the world, and the beginning of the Day of Judgment.

According to Islamic tradition, when Allah wills to bring the Day of Judgment into effect, He will send down the Archangel Isrāfīl who will blow his trumpet and destroy the world with all life in it. Isrāfīl will then blow his trumpet again and the world will come back and all humans that ever lived will be resurrected to life.

As resurrected people, every single human on earth will stand before God and account for all of his or her deeds and the state of their souls.

So the kinds of things that will matter on that day are the following: when they lived, how much of a role did God have in their lives? How did they treat people, animals and nature? Did they waste their lives pursuing trivial matters? What was their relationship to God's Prophets? Did they reject them out of hand even after coming to know the truth?

2.8

The Sharī'a: Purpose and Practice

Sharī'a is the entirety of God's will upon humankind. The purpose of the Sharī'a is to discipline and test humankind in their obedience to God. Only through obedience to Allah can we reach salvation and nearness to Him.

The Sharī'a contains the dos and don'ts of Islam. Allah gains nothing out of our obedience and spiritual discipline, it is us who gain and benefit.

Allah commands us to the good, such as praying five times a day, or fasting during the month of Ramadan, but He also forbids evil, such as fornication, adultery, theft, alcohol and so on and so forth. All of these are there to aid our salvation.

The Sharī'a is therefore universal and can be practiced anywhere, up to a limit of course. In non-Muslim countries, most features of the Sharī'a can be practiced, such as feeding the poor or obeying and respecting one's parents.

Rules that are governmental and political in nature do not need to be implemented in non-Muslim countries.

If anything, we have to obey most secular rules when we live in non-Muslim countries, such as obeying traffic laws, or not cheating our taxes.

2.9

The Islamic Concept of the Nafs: Battling the Human Ego

In this lesson, we discuss the part of the nafs that commands to evil which is otherwise known as nafs al-ammārah in Arabic. According to Islam, the inner dimension of person is divided into two camps, the first is the spiritual self - commonly known as the fitrah - and the lower or base self which commands us to evil, commonly known as the nafs. The nafs that commands to evil is the realm that produces delusion and attachment to mental illusions. It is the center of our unruly desires, base thoughts and heedlessness.

The nafs is the prime target of Shaytān who whispers in the human self and tries to compel it to do evil. The way one protects himself of herself from Shaytān is

developing self-control, that is, controlling the nafs.

So there is a battle between the fitrah and the nafs. Whichever side wins the battle depends on which one we feed the most. If we read Qur'an, abstain from sins, associate with good people, our fitrah will become stronger. If we continually submit to our wrong desires, associate with bad people, sin etc. then we are making the evil nafs stronger. In short, whichever side wins depends on our habits.

2.10

Satan, Jinns and Angels: Their Influence in the World

There is an internal battle inside everyone. It is a battle between good and evil, godliness and ungodliness. Our own whims and desires, and our regular habits in life play a central role in shaping the quality of our souls.

The battle, however, is not just personal. Other entities, that is, spiritual entities, try to influence our decisions by either whispering good thoughts or evil thoughts inside us. Among these entities are angels, who are good and do not commit sins. Angels suggest good thoughts in our minds.

Angels are made out of light and are wholly good. On the other hand, there are Jinns, many of whom are evil, and they try to entice us to evil by whispering evil thoughts in our minds. The worst among these Jinns is Satan. Satan in Islam, unlike Christianity, is a Jinn who fell out of God's favor when he disobeyed him when Allah asked him to prostrate to Adam (as).

Satan has made it his own "one-Jinn" mission to deviate humankind and drag them to hell.

The Qur'an says:

Truly, Shaytān is an open enemy to humankind (Chapter 12, verse 5 of the Holy Qur'an)

Shaytān and his legions want the destruction of humankind. He encourages immorality, sinful pleasure, and pointless fun. Worst of all, he tries to instill the sense of despair among human beings.

However, the final choice belongs to individuals themselves. They have the choice to choose the good, or succumb to Satan's suggestions. Satan in Islam cannot force anyone to do anything.

2.11

The Problem of Evil, Suffering and Pain

In this lesson, we look at two aspects of the problem of evil in the world. The first is the intellectual problem of evil and suffering. The second is the emotional problem of evil and suffering.

The intellectual problem of evil sees God and evil as mutually incompatible. If God is all-good and all-loving, then He would naturally want to alleviate suffering from us. Since there is great suffering and evil in the world, then God is either

1. powerless to do anything about suffering and evil
2. or careless and callous about His creation
3. or He does not exist

The emotional problem of evil is about people's dislike or even hatred of God who is seen as permitting suffering in the world. People lose their loved ones, their health, their jobs or see their societies around them fall apart as a result of evil like wars and crime. They are angry that God doesn't do anything about all the injustices they see.

In order to learn how Islam responds to these two problems, please tune into the full version of this lesson.