

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, most Kind, most Merciful



Surat al-Hujurat, 49:13

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَى
وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا
إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes so that you may know each other. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the one with most *taqwa* among you.

Learning Objectives

- To define the term 'theology'
- To explain that there are different schools of theology amongst Muslims
- To compare and contrast the major beliefs of the Ash'ari school with Shi'a beliefs

Key Words

عِلْمُ الْكَلَامِ

Ilm al-kalam
theology

إِجْتِهَاد

Ijtihad
independant reasoning



In the *ayah* quoted at the start of this lesson, Allah reminds us that we are all different, and urges us to learn about those differences. We come from different tribes and nations; we speak different languages; we follow different religions; we even have different beliefs within those religions. By understanding these differences we can learn about others and ourselves.

Allah also reminds us that the best amongst us are those who have *taqwa*. Having *taqwa* determines our values. Having *taqwa* humbles us and allows us to be tolerant of those who differ with us, especially in matters of faith.

Theology is the study of God and religious belief. In Islam it is known as *ilm al-kalam* or just *kalam*, which is the science of discussing and debating all matters of belief, particularly the differences of opinion between the different sects of Islam.

Jurisprudence, on the other hand, is the science of law. It involves deducing and implementing laws via *ijtihad*. In Islam, *fiqh* is the term used to denote Islamic law. *Fiqh* is based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the *sunnah*.

Theology allows us to develop an understanding of our religious beliefs and acts through logical reasoning. It encourages us to use our *aql* to analyse and understand our core beliefs and to debate using rational proofs. *Ilm al-kalam* primarily includes discussions on the topics of *tawhid* and *adalah*, *nubuwwah*, *imamah*, and *ma'ad*. Whereas *fiqh* involves discussions on the details of the *furu ad-din*, i.e. our acts of *salah*, *sawm*, *khums*, etc.



Surat al-Ma'ida, 5:48



لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً
وَمِنْهَا جَا وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ
لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَ
لَكِنْ لَيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ
فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ

We have given each of you a code of law plus a program for action. If God had wished, He might have made you into one community, but compete rather in doing good deeds so He may test you by means of what He has given you.

Sects in Islam

All Muslims believe that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad (s) is His Messenger. We all pray five times a day towards the *Ka'bah* and we all believe in the Qur'an as the final revelation from Allah. Despite these commonalities, there are some important differences between the different groups or sects of Muslims.

After the passing away of Rasulullah (s), different groups of Muslims began to arise with different opinions. Each group promoted their own opinions and beliefs leading to the formation of different sects of Islam.

The beginning of the differences was on the question of who succeeded Rasulullah (s). The majority of Muslims followed what became known as the *khilafah*: leaders who were initially chosen by the people, or by the previous caliph, then by committee, and then through lineage.

The Shi'as believe that Rasulullah (s) appointed Imam Ali (a) as his successor on multiple occasions before his death and that this was a divine appointment.

They maintain that they are not a sect that split away from Islam, but are in fact loyal to the Ahlul Bayt (a) as per the instructions of Rasulullah (s), and to true Islam as Allah had intended it to be.

Initially, only very small differences were visible between Muslims regardless of whom they believed should have succeeded Rasulullah (s). Gradually, however, different ideologies emerged and were promoted due to political power or due distance from the teachings of Ahl al-Bayt who were the true guardians of the Quran and the Sunna. The division deepened during the rule of Mu'awiyah and Yazid, when people classified themselves as being in the group of Imam Ali (a) or the group of Mu'awiyah. It was many years later during the reign of the Bani Abbas that the term *ahl as-sunnah* developed. This was an outcome of the government promoting certain schools of law.

Islamic schools of theology

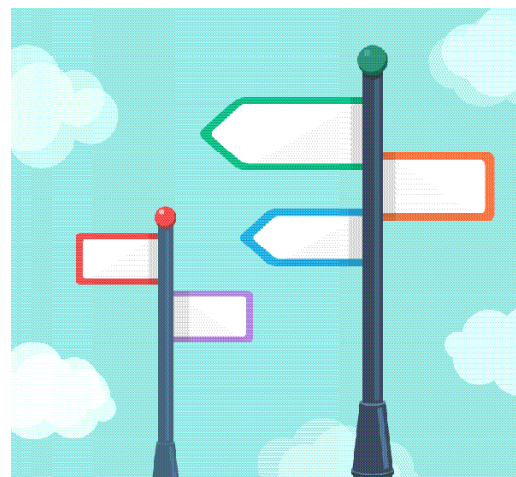
As time passed, scholars started to interpret the teachings of Rasulullah (s) differently, and this led to varying schools of thought. The three major schools of theology are:

- Mu'tazili
- Ash'ari
- Shi'a Ithna Ashari

The Mu'tazili school

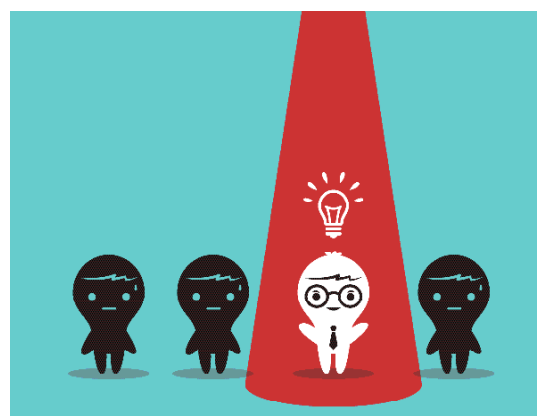
The Mu'tazili school was the first systematic school of Islamic theology. It grew from a circle of traditional scholars of Qur'an and *hadith* and was founded by Wasil ibn Ata in the second-century after *hijrah* (around the time of our 5th and 6th Imams). A student of the renowned Sufi teacher Hasan al-Basri, Wasil separated from his teacher and established his own school in Basra, Iraq.

The Mu'tazili theology emphasised the use of reason and importance of free will, to the extent that some of their scholars denied the existence of miracles or the control of God over human acts.



DID YOU KNOW?

Early Muslims engaged in *kalam* to protect and defend Islam. They faced challenges from the ideas of other religions such as Christianity. The rapid spread of Islam brought diverse groups into the Islamic community. Theologians had to study the Qur'an and *hadith* in great depth so they could respond to questions on the understanding of Allah and core Islamic beliefs.



DID YOU KNOW?

The establishment of the science of theology is attributed to Imam Ali (a). His sermons in *Nahj al-Balaghah* contain the first proofs of the unity of Allah outside the proofs found in the Qur'an.

DID YOU KNOW?

The famous Sunni scholar Ibn Abi al-Hadid (d. 650/1253), renowned for his commentary on *Nahj al-Balagha* entitled *Sharh Nahj al-Balagha*, was a Mu'tazili.

Core Mu'tazili beliefs:

- They opposed anthropomorphism (that Allah has a form or physical body and other human attributes)
- They believed that man could never fully know Allah and that the speech of Allah (the Qur'an) is a creation
- They emphasised that Allah's *adalah* requires that in the same way that He should fulfil His promises, He has to fulfil His threats to the extent that He cannot forgive the sinners.
- Man is completely free and Allah does not interfere in creation; everything happens through cause and effect

The Mu'tazili theology began to decline by the early tenth-century (CE) and they were replaced by the Ash'arite school of kalam, strongly supported by al-Mutawakkil (the Abbasid ruler during the time of our 10th Imam). However, the Mu'tazilites continued to flourish in Baghdad for some time after that and have survived in small groups over the years with a revival of their ideologies in recent times. Mu'tazilah continued their existence until 7th century. Ibn Abi al-Hadid (d. 650/1253) was a Mu'tazili scholar. As the first group to apply rational arguments to a variety of religious questions, the Mu'tazilites developed rational theology, which has directly influenced all Sunni Ash'ari and also Shi'a Ithna Ashari discussions.

The Ash'ari school

In the early third-century after hijrah, traditional scholars including jurists started to oppose the view of the rationalists. Some even considered them heretics, especially after they began to apply the Greek philosophical ideas made available to them by the early Abbasid Caliphs, particularly by al-Mansur and al-Mamun, to the interpretation of the basic principles of Islam, making reason and logic the sole basis for truth and reality. One such scholar, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, himself a former Mu'tazali, strongly came out and renounced the Mu'tazalis and his former beliefs. Instead, he called for a return to what he saw as the authentic teachings of the Qur'an and a more literal interpretation of the texts. He used the tools of logic that he had acquired as a Mu'tazali to cite evidence from the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* to support and defend his beliefs, purging them of all the non-Islamic elements that had crept into it. Thus, Ash'ari and other such scholars founded the

orthodox theology of Islam, which is considered the basis of Sunni Islam today by using *kalam* in defence of their beliefs.

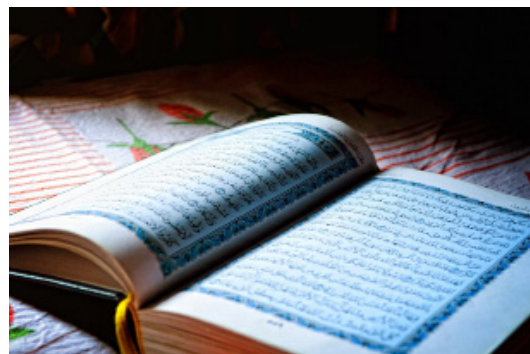
Ma'mun and his successor Wathiq supported the Mu'tazilah. Wathiq's successor, al-Mutawakkil stopped supporting them but it did not mean that they ceased to exist. They flourished in Baghdad for long time after that.

Core Ash'ari beliefs:

- The Qur'an is, in its essence, as eternal as Allah
- People will be able to see Allah on the Day of Judgement
- Allah is responsible for all the actions of man and nothing has an independent nature to cause anything. Allah is the only cause. This means fire burns because Allah wills it to burn

DID YOU KNOW?

Salafism is a movement within Sunni Islam, not a school of theology. It developed in Arabia in the first half of the eighteenth-century (CE) during a time of European colonialism. Followers of the Salafi movement believe that the clear and literal meaning of the Qur'an and *hadith* have sole authority in matters of belief and therefore they believe it is *haram* to engage in rational discussions of theology. Wahhabism is a version of Salafi Islam which took on a political manifestation in the Arabian Peninsula. We will learn more about these two movements in a later lesson *inshallah*.



The Shi'a Ithna Ashari

Shi'a theology comes from teachings of the Ahlul Bayt, who encouraged the use of rationality and intellect to understand *Tawhid* and its branches beyond just the literal translation of the Qur'anic verses and *hadith*. The Ithna Ashari Shi'a's follow the twelve *a'immah* and believe the final Imam, Imam al-Mahdi (a), is alive and in *ghaybah*. They are the majority of Shi'as.

DID YOU KNOW?

It is estimated that approximately 85% of the Shi'a are the Shi'a Ithna Ashari. The remaining Shi'a comprise of the:

● Zaydi Shi'as:

- These are Muslims who follow the *a'immah* up to Imam Zayn al-Abidin (a), and then follow his son Zayd. Zaydis believe Muslims should only be ruled by the descendants of Rasulullah (s). The Zaydi sect emerged in respect of Zayd's failed uprising against the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik. Zaydis believe Muslims have a responsibility to rise up and dismiss unjust leaders. Presently, Zaydi Shi'as are predominant in Yemen.

● Ismaili Shi'as:

- These are Muslims who follow the *a'immah* up to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a) and then follow his son, Isma'il. Ismailis are further divided into Dawoodi Bohras (also known as Musta'lis) and Nizari Ismailis (also known as Aga Khanis). Ismailis believe in the Ahlul Bayt as infallible divinely chosen guides. After the death of Muhammad ibn Isma'il, Ismailism developed further focusing on the deeper mystical meaning of Islam and the use of reason to practically apply their beliefs depending on the time



HIGHER LEVEL

In your groups select one of the following schools of Islamic theology:

- Mu'tazili
- Ash'ari
- Shi'a

Research into your chosen school using the resources provided. Present your findings to the class in the form of a short video, poster, oral presentation, or a play. Ensure your presentation covers the following points:

- Origins of the school of theology
- Main beliefs
- Geographic location of current and past followers



Major beliefs of Ash'ari and Shi'a schools of theology

The Ash'ari school of thought is considered one of the main orthodox schools of theology in Sunni Islam today. Though unity of Muslims is essential, as Shi'as, we should however be aware of the differences between the beliefs of the school of the Ahlul Bayt and others. In lesson 1F06 (All Muslims believe in *tawhid*), we examined some of these differences in belief in respect of *tawhid*. Below, we look at some other differences in respect to other aspects of theology:



Faith in Action

Read the following extract from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 127. Reflect over the words of Imam Ali (a). Imam reminds us that going towards extremes is not good and invites us towards living a balanced life. Think about those people who you think exaggerate their love for Imam Ali (a). Are their acts representative of the teachings of the faith of Islam?

Imam Ali (a) also places great emphasis on unity and highlights the dangers of isolation from the Muslim community. What do you think these dangers may be? Briefly describe in 8-10 lines your ideal of a united Muslim community. Remember this is about practice, not beliefs.

'With regards to me, two categories of people will be ruined, namely he who exaggerates in my love and the love takes him away from rightfulness, and he who exaggerates in hating me and the hatred takes him away from rightfulness.. The best man with regard to me is he who is on the middle course. So be with him and be with the great majority [of Muslims] because Allah's hand [of protection] is on keeping unity. You should beware of division because the one isolated from the group [is prey] to Shaytan just as the one isolated from the flock of sheep [is prey] to the wolf.'

Being with the majority does not mean we have to follow in the beliefs of the majority. It means that we should work towards creating a community that is united, that is compassionate towards one another, and tolerant of the beliefs of different sects. Islam teaches us to love one another, to learn about one another, and to share our beliefs with others. It discourages us from enforcing our opinions and beliefs on the other.

Use of rationality

The Ahlul Bayt encouraged a deep intellectual study of the Qur'an and *hadith*. They also emphasised the importance of understanding *tawhid* and its branches beyond the literal translation of the Qur'an and *hadith*.

Rasulullah (s) himself engaged in theological debates, such as with the Christian delegation from Najran regarding Nabi Isa, after which ayah 3:61 was revealed. These debates are recorded in many *tafsir* works and clearly show Rasulullah (s) arguing with logic and reasoning as to why God cannot have a son and why Nabi Isa was a human and not a divine being.

Ash'arites on the other hand, advocate for a more literal interpretation of the Qur'an and *ahadith*, only allowing the use of rationality in theological discussions within defined limits in order to support and defend their beliefs. They believe that revelation is more fundamental as the source of ultimate truth and reality, and reason should merely confirm what is given by revelation.

Causality

One of the most famous doctrines of the Ash'arites was the rejection of causality. What this means is that, for the Ash'arites, nothing has an independent nature to cause anything. Only God is the cause of everything. For example, fire does not burn because it is in its nature to do so but because God has willed it. Tomorrow, He could will otherwise and as a result fire would cease to burn. To prove this theory, the Ash'arites backed it with verses from the Qur'an and said, 'do you not see how when Nabi Ibrahim (a) was thrown in fire, it did not burn him because God did not will it?'

The Shi'a response to the Ash'arites is that this very same incident in the Qur'an proves that Allah has given everything its own nature and ability to cause things. Their ability to cause is of course by Allah's Will that He can retract at any time, but it doesn't prove they don't have any ability to affect another thing.

Look at the verse where Allah commands the fire not to burn Nabi Ibrahim:

Surat al-Anbiya, 21:69

قُلْنَا يَا نَارُ كُونِي بَرْدًا وَسَلَامًا عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ

We said, 'O fire! Be cool and safe for Ibrahim!'

Notice that Allah commands, 'O Fire! Be cool...' If the cause of fire burning was Allah alone, then why would He order the fire not to burn Nabi Ibrahim?



Adalah

The prevailing Ash'ari view on *adalah* is that Allah, being all-powerful and absolutely free in His will, can punish His creatures even if they have not committed any sins or reward them even if they have not done any good. There is nothing binding on God because otherwise there would be a limit on God's power and His actions would be determined by something external to and other than Himself. It is only because of Allah's own nature in that He has promised through revelation to reward the obedient and punish the disobedient that He fulfils His promises and does not do otherwise. And it is in His infinite mercy that He may forgive any wrongdoer, in spite of the threats of punishment for his wrong doings.

As Shi'as, we believe that for Allah to be unjust would be an imperfection in Him, and therefore it is not a matter of a lack of power, but rather His nature as a perfect being that necessitates Him to be just.



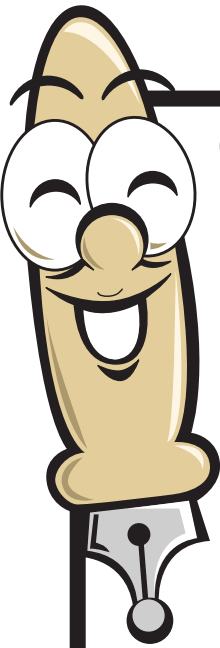
Imamah

The other major difference between the Shi'a and Ash'ari theology is on concepts surrounding *imamah*. Shi'as believe in and uphold the concepts of infallibility, intercession, the possibility of Rasulullah (s) and *a'imma* having awareness of the unseen (*ilm al-ghayb*) taught to them by Allah . The Ash'arites, however, are not unanimous in their belief of these concepts.

Free will

Another difference between the Shi'a and the Ash'ari school of thought is on the concept of whether humans have free will. We will look at this in more detail in the next lesson *inshallah*.

Shi'a scholars discussed theology within the subjects of philosophy and *hadith*. Some of the greatest Shi'a theologians were also philosophers and experts in other sciences.



KEY POINTS

- 1 Theology is the study of the nature of God and religious belief.
- 2 Islamic theology or *ilm al-kalam* is the science of discussing and debating matters of belief, particularly the differences of opinion between the different sects of Islam.
- 3 There are three major schools of theology in Islam: Mu'tazili, Ash'ari, Shi'a Ithna Ashari.
- 4 Shi'a theology comes from teachings of Ahlul Bayt, who encouraged the use of rationality and intellect in theology. They emphasise the importance of understanding core Islamic principles beyond the literal translation of the Qur'an and *hadith*.



- 1 Define the term 'theology'.

- 2 Briefly describe the difference between theology (*kalam*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

- 3 Name the three major schools of Islamic theology.

- 4 What is the Ash'ari view on *adalah*? How does this differ from that of the Ithna Ashari?
