

Key concepts

- The beliefs and practices distinctive of Shi'a Islam are the focus of this section, from its origins in the historical dispute to the particular practices today, including Shi'a pilgrimages, the marking of the deaths of Hasan and Hussein at Ashura, Muta (temporary marriage) and Taqiyya (concealing belief).
- Unity is important in Islam, visually symbolised in coming together at Hajj or in lines at prayer, showing the Ummah together. It may be debated how far differences of background, sect or interpretation matter and how significant perceived differences of belief really are.

- Shi'a Islam is a sect, comprising many sub-sects, such as the Twelvers and Ismailis. Its roots may be traced from the historical dispute over the succession to the leadership of the Muslims.
- The Shi'a interpret Muhammad as having appointed Ali as his successor and his family; Hussein was martyred at Karbala upholding this claim. Shi'a Muslims mark this time at Ashura by acting out events in passion plays and making displays of sorrow and suffering. This can take the form of self-flagellation. This is in contrast to Sunni Muslims who mark Ashura for different reasons.
- Other distinctive practices of Shi'a Muslims include pilgrimage to Imam Ali's tomb in Najaf and other sites of pilgrimage. They pay an additional poor sue in the form of Khums. Shi'a Imams are descendants of the family of the Prophet and are respected for their power to interpret the Qur'an without error for the people today.
- It is permitted to practice Muta (temporary marriage) and, if facing persecution, to conceal belief (Taqiyya) – these are distinct to Shi'a Islam.

- There are many sects in Islam, not just Shi'a, and other interpretations such as Salafi, reformists and Qur'anist. All would agree on the oneness of Allah and the importance of the Qur'an as God's revelation. There are differences of tradition and authority.
- Muhammad taught in his final sermon that there was to be no rich or poor, Arab or non-Arab; simply Muslims. Muslims are encouraged to make peace and not hold a grudge and settle disputes before Hajj and Id.

Key quotes

'There is a long-standing belief that giving one's life for a just cause is a noble act that is rewarded in heaven.' (Haleh Afshar)

'The religion is imbalanced in favour of the divisive possibilities of its outward forms, because the heart unifies and the law creates, not disunity, diversity.' (Abdul Hakim Murad)

'Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was relentlessly hostile to all forms of intellectualism, mysticism, such as Sufism, and any sectarianism, such as Shi'ism, within Islam, considering all of these to be corrupt innovations that had crept into the religion due to un-Islamic influences.' (Khaled Abou El Fadl)

'Setting the Shia apart from the Sunni most emphatically, however, is the great feast of mourning, remembrance, and atonement that is Ashura. From its earliest days, Shiism has been defined by the witness that it bears to the moral principles of Islam—a witness whose greatest public expression takes place in and through the rituals that remind the community of the special status of the imams. (Vali Nasr)

Key words

Mahdi	Ahl al-Bayt	Shahid	Metaphysical
Salah	Sajdah	Fajr	Zuhr
Asr	Maghrib	Isha	Akhirah
Walayah	Sawm	Khums	Imamah
Risalah	Nubuwwah	Mi'ad Adl	Furu al-din
Usul al-din	Twelvers	Amr-bil-Marroof	Nahi Anil Munkar

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

1. Islam as a divided or united religion.
Whether Islam is united in theory or in practice are two different angles to this discussion: are the main beliefs held by reformists and Salafis similar? Do Muslims join in prayer and giving charity? What are the attitudes towards difference?
2. The extent to which Shi'a is a unique form of Islam.
Discussion should focus on 'unique' – are the practices and beliefs different, to that extent? Comparison could be made with Sufi leadership (murshid/shaykh) and with different Sunni interpretations. How far overall, taking a broad view, do the differences add up to a unique form of Islam?