

Towards Understanding Aqīdah: Introduction.

a. What is ‘Aqīdah?’

‘Aqīdah derives from the root word ‘Aqada in Arabic, which means to tie and bind something.

¹ When a person forms a contract or agreement with someone, then the Arabs call this an ‘Aqd. This is because by agreeing to something, they are ‘binding’ their ties.

In Islamic terms, ‘Aqīdah refers to the doctrines that each and every Muslim is tied too. It refers to the beliefs that he/she agrees to adhere to as a believer.

b. What areas does Aqīdah cover?

In short, it is possible to identify three broad areas that this discipline covers;

i. al-Ilāhīyyāt; namely everything that is related to our beliefs in God.

ii. al-Nabūwwāt; this refers to all matters related to the prophets and messengers.

iii. al-Sam’īyyāt; this refers to those matters relating to our Aqīdah that we could never understand and comprehend except from a heard source, namely Allāh and His Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). For instance, our Aqīdah requires that we believe in punishment and reward in the grave. The only way we know this is because we heard it from the Qur’ān and Sunna. Likewise, our belief in the questioning (in the grave and on the Day of Judgement), in Paradise and in Hell are all considered al-Sam’īyyāt.

c. Why is Aqīdah important?

In short, the acceptance of our actions is dependant on our faith, or Aqīdah. All our good work and worship is only accepted when it is coupled with the correct belief.

Otherwise people are described in the Qur’ān who perform Salāh but are still subject to Allāh’s dismay (107: 4-7) and who build mosques but still lack piety (9: 107-8). Repeatedly in the Qur’ān, Allāh gives glad-tiding to those ‘who believe *and* perform good actions.’ In other words, the right doctrine is the basis for the acceptance of our actions.²

d. The Aqīdah of the Ahl Sunna; its source.

Our Aqīdah is derived directly from the Qur’ān and Sunna of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). The task to formulate and explain it has been left to the scholars, like the four great Imams³, Imam al-Tahāwī (d. 321/933), Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī (d. 324/936) and Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944).

¹ See *Lisan al-Arab* (vol. IX, p. 309) by Ibn Manzur (d.711); Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi Publications, Beirut, 1988.

² We find that in one famous report, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said ‘Islam is built upon five [pillars]; the testimony that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish prayer, to give Zakah, Hajj and to fast in Ramadhan (*Sahih al-Bukhari*; Book of Faith, Hadith no.7). Some reports exist in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) mentioned ‘fasting in Ramadhan’ before ‘Hajj’ (*Sahih Muslim*, Book of Faith, Hadith no. 19). But all the variations of this Hadith commence with the testimony that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. This too implicitly implies that faith (the testimony) always precedes actions (Hajj, Salah, Zakah and Sawm).

³ Namely Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi’i, Imam Malik and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

e. The format of this course.

In essence, the Aqīdah of the Ahl Sunna in this course will be based on *Īmān Mufassal* which all Muslims learn from a young age:

امنت بالله و ملائكته و كتبه و رسله و اليوم الاخر و القدر خيره و شره من الله تعالى و
البعث بعد الموت

'I believe in Allāh, and His angels, and His scriptures, and His Messengers, and the Last Day, and in destiny; the good and bad of it is from Allāh and [I believe] in resurrection after death.'

This itself is derived directly from the famous *Hadīth of Jibrīl*, in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) defined Faith (Īmān) as:

*'[Īmān is that] you believe in Allāh, His angels, His scriptures, His Messengers, the Last Day, and that you believe in Qadr, the good and bad of it.'*⁴

⁴ *Sahih Muslim*, Book of Faith.

1.0 Programme One; ‘I believe in Allāh...’

1.1 Īmān and Islām.

• Īmān.

هو تصديق بالقلب

Īmān means to believe and verify with the heart. In other words, to accept whatever the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) brought.⁵

• Islām.

هو الاقرار باللسان بالشهادتين مع التصديق بالقلب

Islām means the verbal affirmation of the two testimonies (that there is no worthy of worship except Allāh and that Muhammad is the Last Messenger), along with believing this with the heart.⁶

Islām consists of five pillars (i) to testify that there is no worthy of worship except Allāh and that Muhammad is the Last Messenger (ii) to establish Prayer (iii) to give Zakāh (iv) to fast in Ramadhān (v) to perform Hajj.

If a person denies the legitimacy of one of these five pillars, then he becomes a non-believer, Islamic Sharīah is no longer applicable to him and he will not be buried in a Muslim cemetery.

1.2 What is Tawhīd?

It is a knowledge from which we are able to understand the oneness of Allāh- in essence, attributes and actions.

In short, this field of knowledge refers to Allāh Almighty and helps us to identify:

1. What is necessary for Him.
2. What is permissible for Him.
3. What is impossible for Him.

1.3 The Attributes of Allāh.

The scholars have divided the attributes of Allāh into many different types.⁷ For the sake of clarity, the main attributes of Allāh are listed below with a brief description.

i. al-Qīdm (pre-existent). In other words, His existence cannot be ascribed to a particular time and does not have a beginning. When we say that Allāh is *Qadīm*, it means He has no beginning. Allāh existed before anything else did and He has always existed. In the Qur’ān, Allāh is described as:

‘He is the First (nothing is before Him) and the Last (nothing is after Him)’ (57:3).’

⁵ p. 28. *Sharh al-Risala al-Nafi’a wa al-Hujaj al-Qaat’ia*. Sheikh Muhammad Abd al-Latif Salih al-Farfur (d. 1407 A.H.). Dar al-Nu’mān li al-Ulum Publications, Damascus.

⁶ p. 28. *Sharh al-Risala al-Nafi’a wa al-Hujaj al-Qaat’ia*. Sheikh Muhammad Abd al-Latif Salih al-Farfur (d. 1407 A.H.). Dar al-Nu’mān li al-Ulum Publications, Damascus.

⁷ Sifa Nafsiyya, Sifa Salbiyya, Sifa Ma’ani and Sifa Ma’awiyya.

Hence, there is a difference between our existence (and everything in the universe) and Allāh's existence. The *Wujud* (existence) of Allāh is pre-eternal and ever-lasting and He did not require someone to bring Him into existence. Allāh existed when nothing else did. As for our existence, it is *Hādīth*, meaning it is dependant on a creator and on time and place. Our existence – unlike Allāh's – does have a beginning and end.

ii. *al-Baqā* (ever-living). In other words, He is not subject to death or decay. When we say that Allāh is *Bāqī*, it means He will never be subject to an end. The Qur'ān states:

'Whoever is on it (the earth) will perish. And the Face of your Lord full of majesty and honour will abide forever' (55: 26-27).

iii. *al-Mukhālafa lil Hawādīth* (contrary to created things). He does not resemble anyone or anything from His creations, not in essence, attributes or actions. The Qur'ān affirms that 'there is nothing like Him' (42: 11).

A pious man from our ancestors saw the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) in his dream. He asked him, 'what is the essence of *Tawhīd*?' The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) replied, 'Whatever you think Allāh is like, He is different to that.'⁸

iv. *al-Wahdāniyya* (oneness). In other words, He is not subject to division and numbers, as clarified perfectly in Sūrah Ikhlās.

v. *al-Qiyām bi al-Nafs* (self-supportive). This means that Allāh is not dependant upon anyone or anything for His continued existence. He is free from all types of support. Rather, the entire universe is dependant on Him.

vi. *Wājib al-Wujūd* (necessary existence). Everything in this world that we see did not exist at one point in time. For example, the sun at one point in time did not exist. There must have been a force or creator which brought the sun into existence. This creator itself must have always existed and must not have depended on anything else for its own existence. This is Allāh and He is what we term *Wājib al-Wujūd*; that His ever-existence is compulsory.

Additionally, the scholars outline that Allāh Almighty is:

vii. All-Able.

viii. Does what He intends.

ix. All-Knowing.

x. All-Listening.⁹

xi. All-Seeing.

xii. Capable of dialogue.

xiii. is Alive.

⁸ p. 39. *Sharh al-Risala al-Nafi'a wa al-Hujaj al-Qaat'ia*. Sheikh Muhammad Abd al-Latif Salih al-Farfur (d. 1407 A.H.). Dar al-Nu'man li al-Ulum Publications, Damascus.

⁹ When we see and hear, then this is dependant on other factors and instruments. If our eyes are covered then this affects our ability to see. If the sound is too low, then we cannot hear. However, Allah's seeing and listening is free from such factors. He does not require eyes and ears to see and hear and more importantly, nothing can escape His senses (p. 51, *al-Aqida al-Hasana (al-Mar'uf bi) Aqa'id al-Islam*. Hazrat Shah Wali Allah Muhaddith Delhvi. Edited by Moulana Mufti Muhammad Khalil Khan, Farid Book Stall, Lahore, 1400 A.H.)

1.4 What attributes cannot be associated with Allāh Almighty?

The opposite of the aforementioned attributes are impossible for Allāh Almighty. For example, Allāh is *Bāqī* and so it is impossible for Him to be *Fānī* (subject to perish).

It is astonishing to hear the Fatwa of Sheikh Rashīd Ahmad Gangūhī in *Fatāwa Rashidiyya*, in which he suggests that it is possible for Allāh to lie. He writes:

‘The meaning of the possibility of Allāh lying is that it is within the power of Allāh to lie, meaning that whatever punishment has been promised (for the sinners) by Allāh, He has the power to do the opposite of that even if He does not do it....so the belief of all the scholars, Sufis and Ulama of Islām is that lies are within the power of Allāh.’¹⁰

This clearly contravenes the Qur’ān which asserts that:

- ‘Surely Allāh never fails in His promise’ (3:9).
- ‘Who is more true in statement than Allah?’ (4: 87)

Moreover, one of Allāh’s beautiful names is *Haqq* (the Truth).

The mainstream Sunni scholars do hold the belief that Allāh can do what He wishes, but Sheikh Rashīd Ahmad has confused Muslims by scandalously terming this as ‘Imkān al-Kazib’, or possibility of lying. Sheikh Jibrīl Haddad writes:

‘It is astonishing that the Deobandī Sheikhs showed such eloquence and righteous care in refusing to attribute the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) the attribute Ālim al-Ghaib, lest it suggest Shirk...yet when it comes to the Divine Attributes, the Deobandī Shuyūkh come up with a new term [Imkān al-Kazib] which not only has no verbatim textual stipulation either - ‘Imkān al-Kazib’ – but also contradicts the Divine Attribute of *Sidq* (Truth) in the Qur’an!’¹¹

In short, we believe that Allāh possesses all attributes of perfection and beauty and therefore all traits of imperfection are impossible for Him, such as lying, deceit and oppression.¹² Knowing that Allāh is able to do all things is a totally separate issue from the debate as to whether He can lie, as the Deobandis suggest. Such a comment is blasphemous to the utmost degree and a blatant ascription of a defect to Allāh. Debating whether an ordinary person can lie is a matter of disrespect, so how can someone see it befitting to debate whether Allāh can lie as respectful and fruitful?

¹⁰ *Fatāwa Rashidiyya*. Sheikh Rashid Ahmad Gangūhi. Vol. I, p. 20, Lines 11-15. Kutub Khana Raheemiya, Delhi, India.

¹¹ Sheikh Jibril Haddad adds:

‘In addition, Ashraf Ali Thanvi is also accused of attributing Allah Most High the "power to lie" in translating the meaning of the verse {*wa makaru wa makara Allahu wAllahu khayru al-makirin*, 3:54} - "They schemed and Allah schemed, and Allah is the best of schemers" to read "They 'makkarbaaz' [which in Urdu connotes cunning and other despicable attributes unbecoming to Allah], He 'makkarbaaz', and He is the best of those who makkarbaaz." But the latter accusation is groundless, as Allah Himself attributes to Himself the Arabic verb *makara* in His Book, and to deny such attribution or decry it is impermissible. However, it is equally impermissible to understand or explain it in terms of the *makr* of creatures. The authorities said that verses such as {They schemed, and Allah schemed, and Allah is the best of schemer} are based on *mushakala*, i.e. a figure of speech whereby Allah attributes to Himself the same word as He applies to the wrongdoers' act but in a different sense, which they explained to mean: "He throws back upon them [the fruits of] their own scheming."’

¹² p. 50. *al-Aqida al-Hasana (al-Mar'uf bi) Aqa'id al-Islam*. Hazrat Shah Wali Allah Muhaddith Delhvi. Edited by Moulana Mufti Muhammad Khalil Khan, Farid Book Stall, Lahore, 1400 A.H.

Moreover, if this debate is allowed to flourish, it can lead to an avalanche of discussions which will subsequently undermine our position as Muslims. If Allāh can lie, does that mean He lied (God forbid) when He said there is a Paradise? Does this mean there is no Day of Judgement? ¹³

1.5 Does Allāh have hands?

As mentioned earlier, one of the fundamental beliefs we hold about Allāh is that He does not resemble His creations - in essence, attributes or actions. However, there are several verses in the Qur'ān which seemingly suggest that He does share some similar attributes with His creation. For example, we are informed that;

- Allāh has a hand.
'The hand of Allāh is above their hands' (48: 10)
- Allāh can grasp with His hand.
'And on the Day of Judgement the whole of the earth will be grasped by His hand and the heavens will be folded in His right hand...' (39:67).
- Allāh has a face.
'Whoever is on it (the earth) will perish. And the face of your Lord full of majesty and honour will remain (forever)' (55: 26-27).
- Allāh can sit in some form on His Throne.
'Allāh is He who raised the skies without any pillars that you can see, then he became one with the Throne (*Istiwā*)' (13:2).

Such verses and others (where the interpretation becomes difficult) are called the *Mutashābis*. The reaction of the scholars and the pious ancestors to these verses has been mixed;

Position One.

- Some scholars believe that those who have *sufficient knowledge* on the matter are permitted to interpret such verses, and explain them in a manner befitting to Allāh's status. So for example, 'Allāh's hand' can be metaphorically interpreted as His power or care. The *Istiwā* on the Throne (*Arsh*) is interpreted as Allāh taking ownership of it. ¹⁴

¹³ p. 51. *al-Aqida al-Hasana (al-Mar'uf bi) Aqa'id al-Islam*. Hazrat Shah Wali Allah Muhaddith Delhvi. Edited by Moulana Mufti Muhammad Khalil Khan, Farid Book Stall, Lahore, 1400 A.H.

¹⁴ In the Qur'an (3:007) Allah states that 'He it is Who has revealed the Book to you; some of its verses are decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are allegorical; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity they follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation. but none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding.' Those adhering to this position believe that the verse means Allah *and* those 'firmly rooted' have knowledge in the allegorical verses. The majority opinion (as expressed in position two) is that there is a necessary pause after 'except Allah' and that those 'firmly rooted' simply remark 'we believe in it' (Zia al-Qur'an, p. 209-210. vol. I. Zia al-Qur'an Publications, Lahore, 1995)

Position Two; The correct and majority opinion.

• According to the majority of the Companions and their pious successors, such verses can only be truly interpreted by Allāh Almighty, and our task is simply to believe in the verses. So we say that Allāh does have a hand, but the exact form of it is beyond our comprehension. Imam Mālik (may Allāh be pleased with him) was asked about the verse which seemingly suggests that Allāh sat on the Throne. Imam Mālik replied:

الاستواء غير مجهول و الكيف غير معقول و الايمان به واجب و السؤال عنه بدعة

‘The sitting (*Istiwā*) is not known [by us]. Its exact form is not understandable. Faith in it is compulsory. And asking about it is Bid’a.’¹⁵

Imam Mālik then had the questioner thrown out of his gathering. This shows that it is not the way of the pious to indulge into what exactly these verses mean and entail. Our task is simply to believe in these verses.

Position Three; Sheikh Ibn Taymīyya and his followers.

• However, some Muslims have deviated from the overwhelming consensus by trying to ascribe human attributes to Allāh. Sheikh Ibn Taymīyya (d. 728/1328) gained notoriety amongst the scholars for alleged anthropomorphism¹⁶ and spent time in prison in Cairo because of such charges. He suggested that the Divine Names and Attributes of Allāh are to be taken at face value.¹⁷ Because we raise our hands to the skies, he sought to suggest Allāh’s presence there. He writes:

‘Inclusive in what we have mentioned regarding the faith in Allāh is to believe in what He has informed us of regarding Himself in His book. And it is proven from the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and the Ummah have agreed on the fact that Allāh is above the skies on His Throne (*Arsh*), exalted over His creation.’¹⁸

Like our pious ancestors have purported, we raise our hands to the skies because this is the direction from which mercy and blessings descend, not because Allāh is present there (to the exclusion of other places).¹⁹

In short, there is no reason for Muslims to openly indulge in the exact form of Allāh’s hand. Ibn Atā Allāh (d. 709/1309) offered priceless advice when he said:

‘Allāh will not ask you about the details of His nature and His attributes; rather, He will ask you about what you did while you tarried on the earth.’²⁰

¹⁵ *Bid’a* means something that has been newly innovated in religion. Here, Imam Malik used the term to mean that asking such a question contravenes the practice of the pious ancestors.

¹⁶ Attributing human characteristics to Allāh.

¹⁷ p. 35. *Sharh al-Aqīdah al-Waasita li Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya*. Commentary by Muhammad ibn Salih al-Athimain. Maktaba al-Hikam al-Deeniyya, 2007.

¹⁸ p. 296. *Sharh al-Aqīdah al-Waasita li Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya*. Commentary by Muhammad ibn Salih al-Athimain. Maktaba al-Hikam al-Deeniyya, 2007.

¹⁹ p. 116. *al-Sharh al-Qawim fi Hill Alfaz al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*. ‘Abd Allāh al-Harawi. Dar al-Masami’; Beirut, Lebanon, 2004.

²⁰ Cited in *The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi. Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Hamza Yusuf*. p. 10. Zaytuna Institute, 2007, USA.

Imam Tahāwī warned:

‘Whoever does not guard against denying [God’s attributes] and against *Tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) has erred and failed to acquire understanding of divine transcendence (*Tanzīh*). For undoubtedly our Lord, the Sublime and Exalted, is described with the attributes of unity and uniqueness. No one in creation is in any way like Him.’²¹

Moreover, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) never asked and demanded Muslims to think about Allāh’s existence and exact nature in great detail, and in fact pointed out that this could lead to misguidance and confusion. Imam Muslim reports in his *Sahīh*:

Abū Huraira (may Allāh be pleased with him) narrates that the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:
‘The devil will come to one of you and ask ‘who created this and that?’ until he will eventually ask ‘then who created Allāh?’ When it reaches this stage he should seek refuge with Allāh and refrain.’²²

Allāh has only entrusted us with things we can fathom and comprehend. If something is behind our limited intellect and understanding (like for example, the *Rūh*), then it is not an essential element of our faith. Perhaps this is why the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) informed people to ‘contemplate on Allāh’s creation and do not contemplate on Allāh.’

1.6 Is our intellect sufficient to acknowledge that Allāh exists?

This question refers to a famous, hypothetical debate that existed amongst the classical scholars. Allāh has sent a prophet or messenger to every single community that has existed to preach the message of Islām. But if there existed a community that never heard the message of Islām, would they still be expected to deduce the existence of Allāh through their own senses?

- The majority of the Hanafī Sheikhs are of the opinion that if Allāh had not sent a messenger to us, we would still be expected to have faith in Allāh.²³ Imam Abū Hanīfa stated that our intellect should guide us to realise that this world must have a creator, and that this creator himself must not have been subject to creation.
- Many Shāfi’īs scholars believe that in the absence of messengers, it does not become incumbent upon people to accept faith. Imam al-Suyūṭī wrote a separate essay on the faith of the Prophet’s parents. In this work, he wrote that whosoever dies in the state that the message of Islam did not reach him, then he will be saved from the fire of Hell. This is because Allāh states in the Qur’ān:

‘And We never punish until We have sent a messenger’ (17:15).²⁴

²¹ p.58. *The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi. Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Hamza Yusuf.* p. 10. Zaytuna Institute, 2007, USA.

²² *Sahih Muslim.* Book of Faith. Hadīth no. 191. In a similar Hadīth, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘People will continue to ask one another until it is said, ‘this [world], Allāh has created the universe, so who created Allāh?’ So whosoever finds such [a sentiment] should say ‘I believe in Allāh’ (*Sahih Muslim.* Book of Faith. Hadīth no. 190).

²³ p. 31. *Sharh al-Risala al-Nafi’a wa al-Hujaj al-Qaat’ia.* Sheikh Muhammad Abd al-Latif Salih al-Farfur (d. 1407 A.H.). Dar al-Nu’man li al-Ulum Publications, Damascus.

²⁴ p. 32. *Sharh al-Risala al-Nafi’a wa al-Hujaj al-Qaat’ia.*