

## 1.3 The nature of God

### ■ 'God is the greatest'

Every day Muslims hear and say the words 'Allahu Akbar', meaning 'God is the greatest'. Muslims believe that God is so great he is beyond human understanding, and greater than anything humans can imagine. Yet Muslims have firm beliefs about what God is like. Where do these ideas come from?

### ■ The names of God

Muslims believe God has revealed himself to people through Muhammad and the holy books. There are 99 names of God in the Qur'an and Hadith (Muhammad's sayings), which can help Muslims to understand something of God's nature. Each name describes a quality that God has revealed about himself.



▲ Muslims use prayer beads to help them recite the names of God

Many Muslims memorise the names of God and recite them when they are praying privately. Each name helps them to feel God's presence. Some names show God's power, might and authority; others show God's love and care for human beings.

“ The Most Excellent Names belong to God: use them to call on Him. ”

Qur'an 7:180

### ■ Qualities of God

A young child might ask 'Where is God?'. It is not an easy question to answer. Muslims believe that God is **immanent**, within all things and close to his people. But God is also **transcendent**, beyond all things.

#### Objective

- Understand Muslim beliefs about the nature of God.

#### Key terms

- **immanent**: the idea that God is present in and involved with life on earth and in the universe; a quality of God
- **transcendent**: the idea that God is beyond and outside life on earth and the universe; a quality of God
- **omnipotent**: almighty, having unlimited power; a quality of God
- **beneficent**: benevolent, all-loving, all-good; a quality of God
- **merciful**: the quality of God that shows compassion or forgiveness to humans, even though he has the power to punish them
- **fairness**: the idea that God treats people fairly and impartially without favour or discrimination
- **justice (Adalat in Shi'a Islam)**: the idea that God is just and fair and judges human actions, rewarding the good and punishing the bad



Our limited human thinking makes us wonder, 'How can God be both?' For Muslims, God can be both because God is creator of the universe, therefore outside and not limited by the physical world, yet he is also within all things and compassionate towards people.

Muslims also believe God is **omnipotent** (all-powerful), as God is the creator, sustainer and owner of all things. He is also all-knowing, aware of everything including human actions and thoughts.

“ This is God, your Lord, **there is no God but Him, the Creator of all things**, so worship Him; **He is in charge of everything**. No vision can take Him in, but He takes in all vision. He is the All Subtle, the All Aware. ”

*Qur'an 6:102–103*

“ He is with you wherever you are. ”

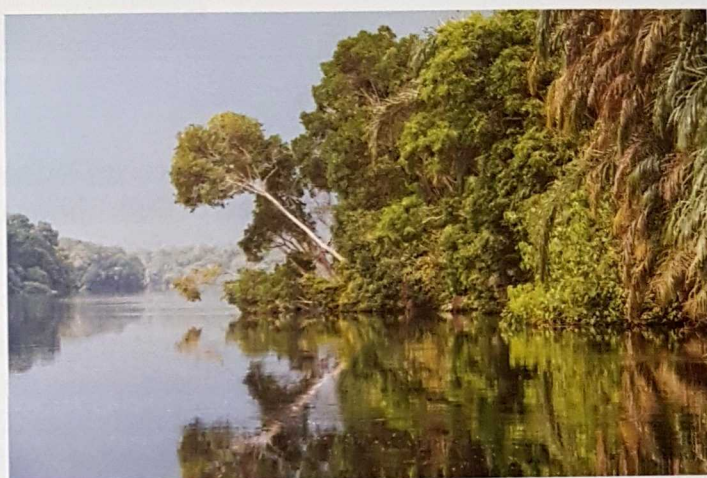
*Qur'an 57:4*

God is **beneficent**, the source of all goodness. His generosity is seen in his gift to humans of life on earth.

God's beneficence is linked to his mercy and compassion. In their daily prayers, Muslims begin by saying 'In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy'. This phrase is called the 'Bismillah' and Muslims say it to dedicate everything they do to God. They believe that God is **merciful**: he understands their suffering, cares for them and forgives them if they are truly sorry for any wrong they have done.

God acts with **fairness** and **justice**. He treats people equally and justly, and requires that they do the same to their fellow human beings. God will judge people in fairness on the Day of Judgement.

One of the five roots of 'Usul ad-Din in Shi'a Islam is the justice of God (Adalat). Since God is perfect, he is just and therefore never acts unjustly to his creations. Also, God is not happy when people do wrong and will hold them to account. Humans have full responsibility for their own actions and God will judge them accordingly.



▲ God's beneficence is seen in his gift to humans of life on earth

## Activities

- 1 Make a list of the seven qualities of God and explain them in your own words. Try to learn the seven qualities off by heart.
- 2 How might the belief of Shi'a Islam in the justice of God (Adalat) affect people's attitudes towards suffering in life?
- 3 'God cannot be both immanent and transcendent.' Evaluate this statement. Be sure to include more than one point of view, and refer to Muslim beliefs and teachings in your answer.

## Summary

You should now be able to explain Muslim beliefs about the nature of God.

## Extension activity



Look up the 99 names of God online. What do the names show Muslims believe about the nature of God?

## ★ Study tip

It is important to remember that although Muslims believe God is beyond human understanding, he does make himself known in ways people can partly understand.