

ESSAY TITLE:

Examine belief and practices distinctive of Shi'a Islam.

Bulleted summary

Beliefs

- Shi'a believe that Ali should have been first Caliph of Islam
- The saying of Ali's name along with the shahadah is upheld by Shi'a and contested by Sunni
- Shi'a place an emphasis on collections of hadith usually traced through narrators from Ali and his family
- The notion of suffering that emerges from Husayn ibn Ali's death and martyrdom e.g. Ashura – this makes Shi'a totally distinctive
- Shi'a focus on oppression of a religious minority that are disinherited from their status of the rightful heirs to true Islamic government
- They accept the divinely appointed succession of Imams
- Imam's ability to interpret and add esoteric interpretation to the Qur'an through esoteric knowledge
- Tradition of succession of Imams each chosen by the previous one, who have religious and political authority
- The belief in the Mahdi, the final hidden leader
- There are slightly different beliefs held by each of the Fivers, Severners and Twelvers

Practices

- The festival of Ashura at Karbala to mark the martyrdom of Husayn
- Symbolic and actual expressions of suffering and oppression, such as self-flagellation, may be used during Ashura
- Extra pilgrimages to shrines of Imams and significant historical figures
- Compulsory nature of khums (taxes) to fund religious hierarchy
- The regular combination of five daily prayer times into three occasions
- Additional festivals e.g. birth of Ali
- The permission to perform 'taqiyya' under persecution (concealing one's faith)
- Temporary marriage – 'muta'
- 'Rawdahs', gatherings 40 days after someone's death
- Shi'a put emphasis on jihad as upholding righteous causes even in the face of oppression

QUOTATIONS

'Just as Muhammad is known as the last Prophet and was a perfect example, the Shi'a believe that Ali was the perfect man. Shi'a Imams do not have any supernatural power, but are thought to be infallible due to their absolute, unquestioning faith in God and their high moral conduct.' (Morar)

'The concept of martyrdom is deeply rooted in the theology of the Shi'a sect. 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)

'People will flee from the Mahdi, as sheep flee from the shepherd. Later, people will begin to look for a purifier. But since they can find none to help them but him, they will begin to run to him.' (Hadith of Prophet Muhammad)

'While Sunni jurists tended to emphasize and exhibit deference to the four Caliphs ... Shi'i jurists heavily relied on the teachings of the infallible imams, all of whom were the descendants of Ali, the fourth Caliph and the Prophet's cousin, and his wife, Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter.' (El Fadl)

'Peace be on Hussein, who gave his life a martyr in the way of Allah. He underwent unknown hardships. He was surrounded by a circle of sorrow and grief and killed a hostage by savage murderers.' (Imam Jafar al-Sadiq)

'For much of history Shi'a Muslims suffered persecution at the hands of Sunnis, sometimes a matter of life and death. At such times they were advised by their Imams to hide their faith to save themselves.' (Morar)

'Setting the Shia apart from the Sunni most emphatically, however, is the great feast of mourning, remembrance, and atonement that is Ashura.' (Vali Nasr)

'The event of Karbala, that unhappy episode in Islam's long and sometimes bloody history, is thus elevated into an archetype of human suffering, a suffering made tolerable by its incorporation into a wider, and ultimately beneficial, cosmic order.' (Ruthven)

'Remembrance and ritual reenactment of the tragedy at Karbala is a cornerstone of faith, personal and community identity, and piety.' (Esposito)

'It is evident that al-Husayn's death was perceived by these early transmitters as a tragedy for the community as a whole.' (Waines)

'During the public street processions, participants beat their breasts and heads with their hands, with swords and even chains. Self-flagellation, often disapproved of by the authorities, is nevertheless a popular expression of mourning for al-Husayn.' (Waines)

'... a major form of devotion is the visitation of the tomb-shrines of the Holy Family and Imams at Karbala, Kazimiyya, Najaf, Kufa, Qum and Mashad. These holy sites draw hundreds of thousands of pilgrims throughout the year. Historically, for financial reasons and ease of access, these pilgrimages have been more popular and common than the hajj.' (Esposito)