

The Five Pillars

Summary: *The Five Pillars of Islam are the shahadah (statements of faith), salat (prayer five times a day), zakat (giving a portion of one's possession, usually 2.5% of annual wealth, through local mosques or associations), sawm (fasting from sunrise to sunset in the month of Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca during the month of Dhu'l-Hijjah).*

"Righteousness does not consist in turning your face towards East or West. The truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets; who give away some of their wealth, however much they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage; those who keep up the prayer (*salat*) and pay the prescribed alms (*zakat*); who keep pledges whenever they make them; who are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. These are the ones who are true, and it is they who are aware of God." (Qur'an 2:177).

Muslims are called to perform certain regular acts of worship which increase their sense of God-consciousness and discipline their attitudes toward others as well as the use of their time and property. These acts of worship, often called the "Five Pillars of Islam," are based in the Qur'an and *Sunnah* and interpreted by the *'ulama* in the first three centuries of Islam. The Five Pillars are: the *shahadah*, *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and *Hajj*. These grounding commitments shape the lives and practices of Muslims throughout the world, including in America.

**Shahadah*: The *shahadah*, "witness" or profession of faith, is repeated with every prayer: "I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is God's Messenger." The belief in God's oneness, or *tauhid*, and the prophethood of Muhammad is the first step of a lifelong journey as a Muslim.

**Salat*: Muslims perform the ritual prayers—*salat*—five times a day, just as Muhammad did. Standing, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating the body before God and reciting Qur'anic passages teach humility and dependence on God. Prayers are performed at dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. While it is preferable to pray in a mosque with fellow believers, it is also permissible to pray alone in a clean place. Many families pray together in their homes, at least in the morning and evening. Before the

prayers, Muslims remove their shoes, perform ritual ablutions, and state their intention to worship. In the mosque, prayers are often led by an *imam*, a learned community member. Prayers are performed in cycles of bowing and prostration called *rak'at*. Muslims, wherever they are, pray in the direction of the Ka'bah in Mecca (*qiblah*), usually marked by a niche in a mosque wall (*mihrab*). Around the world, millions of Muslims pray five times daily, orienting their lives—individually and collectively—toward God.

**Zakat*: *Zakat* literally means “purification”—a payment of a portion of one’s wealth to purify the rest and to ensure justice in society. Used to help the needy members of a community or those working for just causes, the *zakat* is part of the larger Islamic vision of social justice. While Muslims are encouraged to pursue economic and social gain, they are also reminded to use their wealth unselfishly and to care for others less fortunate. The rate of *zakat* is generally 2.5 percent of annual accumulated wealth, including savings and nonessential property; in some countries it is collected and distributed by the government. American Muslims often distribute their *zakat* through local mosques and Muslim associations. Muslim relief agencies are at work throughout the world today, and American Muslims run special programs through *zakat* contributions—from soup kitchens to Bosnian refugee relief.

**Sawm*: The first revelation of the Qur’an came to Muhammad during the lunar month of Ramadan. Every year during this month, Muslims perform a daily fast (*sawm*). They are obliged to abstain from food, water, sexual activity and evil thoughts during the daylight fasting hours. Ramadan is a time of discipline for the spirit as well as the body, a time to cultivate patience and commitment. The fast also reminds the faithful of those who are hungry every day, underscoring the need for social justice. Many Muslims perform special prayers and attend Qur’anic recitation sessions every night. Ramadan is also a time of community solidarity, as meals and festivities are shared with family and friends after dark.

**Hajj*: The final pillar of Islam is the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca, performed during Dhu'l-Hijjah, the last lunar month of the Muslim year. The *Hajj* recalls the faithfulness of Prophet Abraham who was ready to sacrifice his son Ishmael at God’s command; but it was not God’s will. It is both joy and faithfulness that bring millions of Muslims from all over the world to Mecca for this pilgrimage. The *Hajj* is required at least once of every Muslim in good health and with the financial means. It brings together the world-wide *ummah*, making clear that Muslims of all races, ethnic groups,

and cultures are equal in God's presence, all wearing the same simple white garment, walking and praying and eating together in the most holy places.