

10. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

The Pillars of Islam sum up these central practices of Islam; they are the five most important elements of the Islamic faith. They are: the Confession of Faith (*Shahada*); Prayer (*Salat*); Fasting (*Saum*); Pilgrimage (*Hajj*); and Almsgiving (*Zakat*).

In contrast to Christianity, Islam is characterized more by practices than by beliefs. In this regard, Islam more closely resembles Judaism than it does Christianity. Christians have historically placed great emphasis on *orthodoxy*, or right be-

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lief, whereas Muslims are generally more concerned with *orthopraxis*, the unity of religious practice.

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11. What does the first pillar, the Confession of Faith, entail?

The first pillar, as we have seen, is the confession of faith in the unity of Allah and the prophetic status of Muhammad. It is a statement of belief that is also a practice: one becomes a Muslim by making this confession in a public assembly of Muslims. In Arabic this confession is known as the *Shahada*. Every Muslim must confess verbally and believe that "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet."

To confess this is to become a Muslim, just as baptism makes one a Christian. In form, however, it involves only words, not actions, and it therefore resembles baptism less than it does the confession of Jesus Christ as personal Savior that makes one a Christian according to many in the evangelical Protestant tradition.

According to Islamic theology, the first part of this testimony, "There is no god but Allah," consists of three elements:

1. *The oneness of Allah*: although He refers to Himself in the Koran using the first-person plural reserved to kings ("We"), He is an absolute unity.
2. *The confession that Allah is the only One that human beings should worship*. This was formulated as a rejection of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.
3. *The confession of His Holy Names (of which there are 99) and Essence*, here subsumed under the name Allah.

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The second part of the *Shahada* contains the assertion that Muhammad is Allah's prophet. Implied is the assertion that all humans are obligated to follow Him as the final prophet of Allah and the perfect example for all humanity to imitate.

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## 12. Muslims seem to be very dedicated to prayer.

Yes, they are. The second pillar of Islam is prayer (*Salat*). Prayers are mandatory five times a day for all Muslims. Muslims generally regard this as the greatest pillar of the faith, the unbendable pillar. Muslims may be excused from observing the other pillars—fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage to Mecca—when their health, age, finances, or some other impediment do not permit them to perform these duties. But never is anyone formally excused from praying five times a day.

Part of the Muslim's prayer obligation is attendance at community prayers in the local mosque on Fridays. Most Muslims regard attending these community prayers as essential to their practice of the faith, because there is strength in unity and praying together.

The daily call to prayer is called *Athan*. In Muslim countries nowadays it is announced through loudspeakers. The person who calls the faithful to prayer by chanting the Athan is called a *Mu'athin* (or *Muezzin*). A Mu'athin calls the Athan five times a day, just before the times when Muslims are required to perform their daily prayers. The Athan is composed of specific words and phrases that the Mu'athin must recite loudly, beginning with *Allahu Akbar* ("Allah is great").

Before a Muslim can pray, he ordinarily must perform a series of ritual ablutions (*Wudu*). He must wash each fist, his hands to the elbow, his face, ears, nose, and feet three times, as well as his sexual organs. There are also a number of bowings and prostrations (*Ruk'at*) that are part of each

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prayer. They consist of many movements, each of which is accompanied by a recitation of certain prayers.

The daily prayers are said in the early morning, at noon, at mid-afternoon, at sunset, and at night.<sup>7</sup> Muslims often criticize Christians for failing to pray as faithfully as Muslims do. Indeed, with some notable exceptions (particularly the *hesychasts* of Eastern Christianity), Muslims could well be correct in this criticism. Too few Christians have embodied St. Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17).<sup>8</sup>

The Koran mentions three times daily when prayers should be said (see Sura 11:114). According to Muhammad's Tradition, the Prophet received the command to pray five times a day from Allah himself, during the Prophet's mystical Night Journey to Heaven. Muhammad says that he was originally told by Allah to command his followers to pray fifty times daily, but Allah later revealed this to be too much of a burden.<sup>9</sup>

## 13. Why do Muslims worship on Friday? Isn't Sunday the Lord's Day?

Christians gather to observe the Sabbath on Sunday because that is the day the Lord Jesus rose from the dead. Muslims, however, deny the resurrection of Christ. They gather on Friday according to the command of the Koran, which seems to have been laid down in order to distinguish Muslims from Jews (who gather on Saturdays) and Christians: "O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew!" (Sura 62:9)



Pillar #3

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15. What are Islam's rules regarding fasting?

Fasting is the third pillar of Islam. Every Muslim is obligated to fast during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Ramadan, which literally means " parched thirst." According to the prophet Muhammad, "Verily, the smell of the mouth of a fasting person is better to Allah than the smell of musk."<sup>10</sup>

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Because Islam follows a lunar calendar, the month of Ramadan slowly travels through the year; in some years it falls in the hottest part of summer, and in other years in the most frigid times of winter. During Ramadan, Muslims must abstain from all eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual relations from just before sunrise until sunset.

Muslims consider the month of Ramadan holy because they believe it was during this month Muhammad received the initial revelation of the Koran. Also in this same month, Muhammad is believed to have ascended to the Seven Heavens upon his death. At first, the fast lasted only three days, but over time it became extended to an entire month.

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### 16. Why are Muslims required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca?

At least once during their lifetimes, Muslims are obligated to make a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the holiest site in Islam: the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, where Muhammad was born and where he lived for a great part of his tumultuous life.<sup>11</sup> The *hajj* is the fourth pillar of Islam. If the Muslim is physically and financially able to undertake this pilgrimage, he must do so. If not, he is exempted from this obligation.

Muslims cannot make this pilgrimage any time they choose: the *hajj* takes place only during the twelfth month in the lunar calendar, Dhu al-Hijjah.

The Muslim pilgrim (*Hajji*) must fulfill two conditions; otherwise, his *hajj* is unacceptable. First, he must have a right intention to worship Allah alone, along with a desire for the Hereafter. Also, he must follow the example of Muhammad in words and deeds, performing the specific rituals as Muhammad did in his life. If the pilgrim performs these rituals improperly, or makes the journey because of a

desire to be seen by men, or for any other worldly reason, his pilgrimage is worthless.

The pilgrimage involves a number of ritual actions. The pilgrims visit several important sites, including the well of Zamzam, where the angel Gabriel is said to have slaked the thirst of Hagar and Ishmael. At a certain point the pilgrims throw rocks at Satan, just as Abraham is supposed to have done at the same site when the Evil One tempted him. At another place the pilgrims sacrifice an animal.

The focal point of the pilgrimage, however, is the small stone building known as the *Ka'aba* (cube). Many Muslims consider it to be the very house of Allah on earth. It is a bare room with stone walls, and can accommodate about fifty people. It contains the black stone, which Allah is said to have thrown down from Heaven. Hajjis kiss it reverently. The *Ka'aba* was a pagan shrine before the advent of Islam, although Islamic tradition holds that the angel Gabriel gave Abraham the black stone and that he constructed a shrine there. In pre-Islamic times, the room that contains the black stone was the place where the local pagans kept statues of their gods. According to some Muslim traditions, there were even images of Mary and Jesus there.

Although many Muslims believe that Abraham built the *Ka'aba*, the Koran states that it was built before Abraham. In Sura 2:127 Abraham seems to be the builder of the House—that is, the *Ka'aba*. Sura 14:37, however, speaks of Abraham placing Ishmael and Hagar by the sacred house, which means that it already existed. Adam himself is said to have built the first shrine on the spot. Ishmael and Muhammad are supposed to have built and rebuilt there, too.

It seems more likely that Muhammad was able to win over some converts to his new faith, and to avoid alienating others, by incorporating certain rituals from the pagan *Ka'aba* into Islam.



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17. What does Islam teach about almsgiving?

Muslims believe that almsgiving (*zakar*) purifies the property of the giver and purifies his heart from selfishness and greed. The Muslim view here closely coincides with the Christian idea of charity: almsgiving provides the poor with sustenance and minimizes jealousy and envy. It restores the right balance between the giver and the receiver. Thus, almsgiving is Islam's fifth and final pillar.

In many Muslim countries the zakat is collected much as a tax would be. Muslim jurists differ on how much a Muslim should pay, but most agree that the zakat should not be less than 2.5 percent of a Muslim's net property, after he has paid all expenses required by the law and the faith. In some Islamic countries, the mosques have the responsibility to distribute the money to the poor and needy.

The Five Pillars are generally all that non-Muslims know about Islamic beliefs and practices, but Muslims also hold Six Articles of faith.