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The 5 Pillars of Islam

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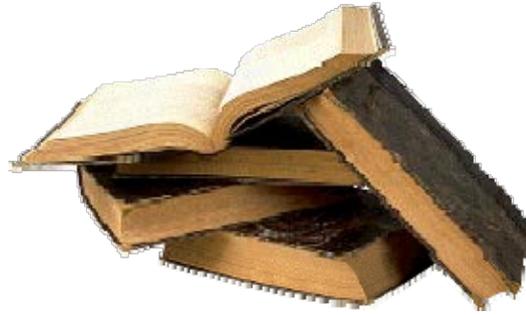
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The 5 Pillars of Islam

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The basic rites of Islam that were revealed to the Prophet are the "pillars" of Islam. These are considered to be the entire ritual structure of the Islamic religion because they are the five essential and obligatory practices that all Muslims follow. These pillars also "have certain disciplinary effects in curbing the excess desires of the believers, in teaching them to do things together for the welfare of the group and for the purification of their souls" (Farah, 135). The five rituals consist of: 1.) Shahada, the profession of faith, 2.) Salah, prayer, 3.) Zakah, almsgiving, 4.) Siyam, fasting, and 5.) Hajj, the pilgrimage."



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The 5 Pillars of Islam

The basic rites of Islam that were revealed to the Prophet are the “pillars” of Islam. These are considered to be the entire ritual structure of the Islamic religion because they are the five essential and obligatory practices that all Muslims follow. These pillars also “have certain disciplinary effects in curbing the excess desires of the believers, in teaching them to do things together for the welfare of the group and for the purification of their souls” (Farah, 135). The five rituals consist of: 1.) Shahada, the profession of faith, 2.) Salah, prayer, 3.) Zakah, almsgiving, 4.) Siyam, fasting, and 5.) Hajj, the pilgrimage.

Shahada, the first of the Five Pillars is what is known as the “profession of faith” or “bearing witness.” It is a two part statement, the first part, in Arabic reads: “ashhadu anna la ilaha illa ‘l-Lah.” Which means “I bear witness that there is no god but God.” The second half of the profession in Arabic is: “wa anna Muhammadan rasulu ‘l-Lah.” Which means “and that Muhammad is the messenger of God.” By saying the full statement, “I bear witness that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God” a person becomes a Muslim.

The first half of the Shahada is important because “it affirms Islam’s absolute monotheism, an unshakable and uncompromising faith in the oneness or unity of God” (Esposito, 90). It is also the confirmation of their reliance on God for all things. The second half of the Shahada is “the affirmation of Muhammad as the messenger of God, the last and final prophet, who serves as a model for the Muslim community” (Esposito, 90).

These words are so important that they are the first that are said to a newborn baby and the last said by a person who is dying. “No words are more often uttered than these; they are repeated by the average believer no less than twenty times daily. They constitute the basic part of the call to prayer” (Farah, 135).

The second of the Five Pillars is Salah, which is prayer. This is not just whimsical prayer, but the ritual and obligatory prayer that is carried out during five specified times during the day. The times of prayer are fixed to these times: “1.) fajr – when the sky is filled with light but before actual sunrise, 2.) Zuhr – immediately after midday 3.) ‘asr – sometime between three and five o’clock in the afternoon, 4.) maghrib – after sunset but before the onslaught of darkness, and 5.) ‘isha’ – any hour of darkness” (Farah, 137). This prayer may be performed wherever the person finds themselves at any of those times, or it can be performed in a mosque with others.

At each of these five times during the day, all around the world the muezzin announces the call to prayer by saying: “God is great (four times). I bear witness that there is no god but God (twice). I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God (twice). There is no god but God” (Farah, 136). Before prayer the worshippers must perform ghusl or wudu, which is the ritual cleansing of the body. This is to make sure that each person is ritually pure, which is a necessity for divine worship. Ghusl is what is done after acts of great defilement, for example sexual intercourse. Wudu is done after acts of small defilement, for example sleep, satisfying the calls of nature and common contact with the opposite sex.

While praying, all Muslims face the direction of Mecca. “The prayers themselves consist of two to four prostrations, depending on the time of the day. Each prostration

begins with the declaration, 'God is most great,' and consists of bows, prostrations, and the recitation of fixed prayers that include the opening verse of the Quran and other passages from the Quran" (Esposito, 91). At the end the shahada is said again and the peace greeting "Peace be upon all of you and the mercy and blessings of God" is said twice (Esposito, 91).

"In addition to the salah, there are the Friday congregational prayers, which are almost always performed in mosques or in their absence in open spaces in towns, in the fields or in the desert. They bring the members of the community together and have important social, economic and even political dimensions as well as a purely religious one" (Nasr, 93). The main difference between the Friday congregational prayers and the salah is that during the Friday prayers there is the delivery of a sermon by the imam, leader of prayers.

Du'a are the individual, non-obligatory prayers that are said after the salah, or at any other time during the day or night. These are personal prayers that are most often said in the person's own language. Salah on the other hand must be performed in Arabic "for it is a rite whose form is sacred and beyond individual, a Divine norm in which men and women take refuge from the withering effects of the storm of like and the transient conditions of temporal existence" (Nasr, 93).

Zakah, the third of the Five Pillars is almsgiving or poor due. "All adult Muslims who are able to do so are obliged to pay a wealth tax annually" (Esposito, 92). Zakah literally means "giving back to Allah a portion of His bounty as means of avoiding the sufferings of the next life" (Farah, 142). There is no exact amount that must be given, but is usually between 2 and 3 percent of their accumulated wealth and assets. The money

collected for zakah “is to be kept in the ‘public treasury’ and spent for public and religious services and works” (Nasr, 96). These services and works make up “eight categories of people named in Qur’am 9:61: ‘Zakah is for the poor and needy, and those who collect zakah, and those whose hearts are to be reconciled, and to free captives and debtors, and for the cause of Allah, and for the wayfarers; a duty imposed by Allah. Allah is Knower, Wise’” (Brown, 129-130). To put it simply “alms are to be used to support the poor, orphans, and widows, to free slaves and debtors, and to assist in the spread of Islam” (Esposito, 92).

There is also a non-obligatory or voluntary alms. This is called sadaqah and it is a supplement to the alms collected through zakah. “The faithful volunteered them as his proclivity for doing good or acquiring merits when Allah moved him” (Farah, 143). Today sadaqah is generally paid when the month of fast ends.

Which leads to the fourth of the Five Pillars, siyam. Siyam is “fasting, including obligatory and bonus fasts. The major obligatory fast involves abstention from food, drink, and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan” (Brown, 130). Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (which follows the lunar year) and therefore moves from month to month in the solar year. During this month, all adult Muslims whose health permits must participate in this fast. “The sick and those on a journey are not required to fast, but they must try to make up the days lost when possible. Also women do not fast during their menstrual period; breast feeding mothers also do not fast” (Nasr, 94).

The fast is broken directly after sunset with a “futar” or light meal. The people that are fasting may eat until dawn and this culminates with a “suhur” or dawn meal.

This early morning meal must sustain the faster until sunset. Based on the cycle of the moon, the period of Ramadan could last between 28 and 30 days.

“As the end of Ramadan nears (on the twenty-seventh day), Muslims commemorate the ‘Night of Power’ when Muhammad first received God’s revelation” (Esposito, 93). The celebration of the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast, Id al-Fitr marks the end of the month of Ramadan. This celebration lasts for three full days, and during this is when zakat (the obligatory alms) are given out. It is also a time when families get together and exchange gifts, “the spirit and joyousness remind one of the celebration of Christmas” (Esposito, 93).

If a Muslim does not fast, but is physically able to then he must feed a poor man to make up for it and must give expiatory alms, which are called fidya. “If the sexual prohibition is violated, then he must free a slave or fast two months or feed sixty persons” (Farah, 145).

The last of the Five Pillars is hajj. The Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims take at least once in a lifetime if they can afford to and are physically able. “Muslims believe that God forgives a person’s sins if he or she performs the hajj with devotion and sincerity” (Nasr, 95).

The hajj takes place during the first ten days of the twelfth month of the Muslim lunar calendar which is Dhu’l-hijjah. The pilgrimage starts on the borders of the haram, or holy area where there are certain areas on the road approaching the haram that the pilgrim performs certain rites that prepare him for the following days. “He sheds his daily clothing and dons two seamless wrappers, one around the loins reaching to just above the knees and the other about the shoulders. After these necessary preliminary

preparations, he enters the haram and does not thereafter shave, trim his nails, or anoint his head during the entire ceremonial period” (Farah, 148).

The pilgrimage consists of a series of visits and events to different areas of Mecca. These are “a visit to the Masjid al-Haram (the sacred mosque), kissing the Black Stone, circumambulating the Ka’bah seven times (tawaf) three times at a run and four at a quick pace, a visit to Maqam Ibrahim, where there is a sacred stone upon which Abraham allegedly climbed while laying the upper courses of the Ka’bah. There is also the ascent to Mount Safa whence the pilgrim runs to Mount Marwa seven times, then to Mount ‘Arafat, on the ninth day of the pilgrimage” (Farah, 148).

When at ‘Arafat the wuquf takes place, this is the culminating point of the pilgrimage, the entire ceremony would be null and void without this. After this, at sunset of the ninth day the pilgrims move to the valley between ‘Arafat and Mina, Muzdalifah which is where they spend the night and then move to Mina at sunrise. At Mina they “cast seven little pebbles picked up at Muzdalifah while reciting Bism ‘l-Lahi, Allahu akbar (in the name of God, God is great. The casting of the seven pebbles is in commemoration of Abraham’s escape from Satan, when tempted by him at this spot to sacrifice his son, by his throwing seven stones at him” (Farah, 149).

The ceremony ends at Mina with the sacrifice of a sheep or a goat that the pilgrim had consecrated during the hajj. The meat is then eaten by the owners and shared with the poor of Mecca. This day is known as the Id al-Adha or the feast of the offerings. It is celebrated throughout the world by Muslims sacrificing an animal just like the animals that are sacrificed in Mina.

“At the end of the sacrifice ritual the pilgrim has his head shaven and nails cut. The waste is carefully buried at Mina” (Farah, 150). After this is done he is “in a state of partial desanctification (tahallu; al-saghir). Full desanctification occurs only after the pilgrim scurries back to Mecca and performs at the Ka’bah the tawf al-ifadah” (Farah, 150). He is now able to be called “Hajj.”

Women are also able to undertake the hajj as long as it is permitted by the husband. She must be accompanied either by her husband or another person that is her protector. The garb for women during their pilgrimage is often a “long white dress and head covering” but they may also wear a “simple, national dress” (Esposito, 94). During the hajj perfume and jewelry are not permitted and neither is sexual activity or hunting.

“Should a believer die without having performed the pilgrimage when he could have and should have, arrangements may be then made for it to be done postmortem on his behalf by his heirs, who would thereby be performing a pious act subject to rewards on the Day of Judgment. In some cases bodies are sent to Mecca for burial” (Farah, 148).

In addition to, but in no way is it a replacement of the hajj, Muslims who are able to do so make a lesser hajj to Mecca at any time during the year, this is called hajj al-‘umrah. They visit the same sites that would be visited during the hajj, but because it is not during the first ten days of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar it is not the hajj.

The Five Pillars are the core of a Muslim’s duty to worship God. These five obligations of every Muslim are the backbone to the Islamic faith. They guide every follower into a life of devotion and servitude of God. Each of them has been carried out since Muhammad brought them back to his followers so many years ago. And “despite the rich diversity in Islamic practice, the Five Pillars of Islam remain the core and

common denominator, the five essential and obligatory practices all Muslims accept and follow” (Esposito, 90).

By: Jennifer Hitchcock