

# I. FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

## What Are the Five Pillars of Islam?

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While Islam is a religion with incredible diversity, certain core beliefs and practices unite all Muslims. According to one of the Prophetic traditions, the Prophet Muhammad stated, "Islam is built upon five [fundamentals]." These fundamentals are referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam.

1. **The Declaration of Faith (*Shahada*):** The basic profession of faith in Islam states: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The declaration affirms both God's oneness and the privileged role of the Prophet Muhammad as the one through whom the final and decisive revelation was given to humanity.

Elements of the declaration are found throughout the Qur'an, and it is found in its full form in several of the *hadith*. The declaration can also be heard in the call to prayer.

To convert to Islam, all one needs to do is recite the declaration in the presence of other Muslims. Islam does not require other rituals in order to gain membership in the community.

2. **Prayer (*Salat*):** Muslims pray five times per day: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. In Muslim-majority countries, the call to prayer (*adhan*) is issued from minarets, reminding all Muslims in the vicinity it is time to pray. Muslims can pray at the mosque, in their workplaces, or at home. Traditionally, for the noon Friday prayer, or the

*juma* prayer, Muslim men are required to attend the mosque, women are encouraged.

Prayers in Islam consist of reciting verses from the Qur'an in Arabic accompanied by a series of movements: standing, bowing, kneeling on the ground, touching the ground with one's forehead, and sitting. The movements that accompany prayers are intended to convey one's submission and humility before God. When Muslims pray, they face Mecca, Islam's holiest city. Most mosques contain a niche in the wall, or *mihrab*, which indicates the direction of Mecca.

3. **Almsgiving (*Zakat*):** All Muslims with the financial and material means must set aside 2.5% of their net worth (and not just their net income) for almsgiving. This pillar reflects the Muslim conviction that all wealth and material possessions are entrusted to humanity by God. Muslims are called upon to be faithful stewards of what God has given them and to make sure the basic needs of all are met. According to the Qur'an, the intended recipients of almsgiving include the poor, orphans, widows, travelers, and debtors. In Muslim-majority societies, almsgiving traditionally functioned as a type of social security system, with government officials collecting a zakat tax. Today, only a few Muslim-majority countries have some sort of obligatory zakat tax. In most places, zakat is an individual responsibility.
  
4. **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Fasting in Islam occurs during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, or the month of Ramadan. This is the month in which God first revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. During Ramadan, many Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, and engaging in sexual activity from dawn to dusk. The purpose of fasting in Islam is to generate an awareness of human fragility and dependence on God as well as to be mindful of those who are poor.

At sunset, Muslims break the fast with an evening meal known as *iftar*. One of the most important religious occasions of the year is the meal

that takes place at the end of Ramadan known as the *Eid al-Fitr*. This is basically a series of feasts lasting for several days and involves not only food but exchanging gifts and communal prayer.

5. **Pilgrimage (*Hajj*):** The pilgrimage involves a journey to Mecca. All Muslims who are physically and financially able to take this pilgrimage do so at least once in their lifetime. The pilgrimage takes place after the end of Ramadan, during the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. Those who take the pilgrimage dress alike in white garments, a symbol of purification and unity. The pilgrimage involves a series of rituals that take place over a week's time. One of these rituals involves circling the *Kaaba*, considered the first house of worship of the one God, while casting pebbles at stone pillars that represent Satan. Another ritual involves walking back and forth along a corridor seven times in commemoration of Hagar's search for water in the desert for her son, Ishmael.

These five pillars reflect a religion that does not elevate belief (or doctrine) above practice but views practice as central to what it means to be a Muslim (literally "one who submits"). The only pillar that emphasizes belief is the first one, the *shahada*, though many Muslims view the declaration of faith as an encouragement to submit to God by following the model of the Prophet Muhammad. These pillars lead some scholars to refer to Islam as a religion of orthopraxy ("right practice") as opposed to orthodoxy ("right belief"). Such a distinction can be pushed too far, but the important point here is that in Islam, the emphasis is on how one's faith or belief is translated into actions and deeds.

## **Response to: “What Are the Five Pillars of Islam?”**

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Ask any Christian what are the foundational pillars of Christianity and you will receive as many answers as there are denominations. There are not one or two or seven or any number of foundations people would agree upon. For some, it would clearly be the Scripture as the book; for others, it would be Scripture as it comes to life in worship, in preaching and sacraments; for others, it might be the Ten Commandments or tangible signs of the Holy Spirit.

A danger Christians have often sought to mitigate is the idolization of any particular practice, turning practice into a form of “works righteousness,” that is, something required for a good relationship with God. Christian faith is not to be reduced to any one or two practices, whether they be spiritual practices or institutional practices (such as particular forms of church structure). At the heart of the encounter with Jesus Christ is faith and faith alone.

But what does faith “alone” mean? Justification by faith alone has been called a “doctrine,” but it is far more – it shapes a spirituality, it is a way of life. It cannot be reduced to orthodoxy but is itself an orthopraxis. Justification by faith alone overflows the cup that is one person’s heart and manifests itself in good works. Or, as Martin Luther put it, a good tree will always produce good fruit.

The “good fruit” by which faith is known and through which faith is witnessed in the world are found, first of all, in a few basic practices. Prayer is at the heart of these practices. The First Commandment – you shall have no other God – invites the Christian into a relationship of

dependence expressed through prayer, both individual and communal. The psalms call us to the regularity of prayer in the morning, at midday and in the evening.

Other practices will include generosity towards the neighbor – both the neighbor we know and the neighbor who seems very foreign to us. Another practice of faith seeks the best possible interpretation of the neighbor's action, helping them towards a good life in this society. In all of these practices of faith, a Christian believer does not neglect his or her own life either. A Christian will engage practices that care for the body and creation through restraint and self-control, sharing the goods of the earth, both material and spiritual.

As with our Muslim sisters and brothers, faith in God has deep consequences for the way life is lived. Life itself is patterned as worship. Without the same specific regulations or detailed framework, a Christian life is a continual worship shaped by the Gospel preached and the Word, Jesus Christ, shared together in ritual acts, for example, at a meal. The freedom of a Christian with regard to particular practices simply means that we engage those practices all the more robustly in love for the neighbor and for creation. Our freedom is always for the benefit of the neighbor.

## I. Discussion Questions

1. What characteristics of your faith practice, either as an individual or in your faith community, encourage you toward your neighbor?
2. How are the Ten Commandments not simply “shall nots” but an invitation toward prayer, care of neighbor, self and world?
3. What spiritual practices could your faith community explore and engage that would open the doors of the community to diversity?
4. Consider what it means to live “justification by faith alone” as a spiritual discipline rather than as a doctrine or right belief.
5. What can we admire and learn from Islam’s insistence on the practice of faith and on the regularity of that practice?