

The Five Pillars of Islam

(“The Supports of Religion” *arkān ad-dīn* أركان الدين)

“The Messenger of Allāh (may the blessings and peace of Allāh be upon him) said, ‘Islam is that you should testify that there is no god but Allāh and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allāh, that you should perform the prayers, pay the *zakāt*¹, fast during Ramaḍān, and make pilgrimage to the House² if you are able to do so.’”

1. Confession of Faith (*shahāda* شهادة): **أشهد أن لا إله إلا الله محمدًا رسول الله**.

The first time a person says, with the intention of being a Muslim, *Lā ilāha illa ‘Llāh. Muḥammadun rasūlu ‘Llāh*, “There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God,” he or she is considered a Muslim.

2. Prayer (*ṣalāt* صلاة).

This is formal, ritual prayer, which follows a set “order of service.” These obligatory prayers are performed five times a day and may be led by any learned person who is chosen by the congregation to do so. These five prayers contain verses from the Qur’ān and are said in Arabic, but personal prayers may be offered in one’s own language at any time. *Ṣalāt* is said at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall, and thus determines the rhythm of the entire day. Although it is preferable to perform the *ṣalāt* with others in a mosque, a Muslim may perform the prayers almost anywhere that is clean (so *not* in a bathroom).

3. Almsgiving (*zakāt* زكاة).

One of the most important principles of Islam is that all things belong to God, and that wealth is held by human beings in trust. Therefore paying *zakāt* is a legal, obligatory act, part of one’s service to God.

Each Muslim calculates his or her own *zakāt* individually. Before *zakāt* is owed, a minimum amount of each type of wealth must be owned, called *niṣāb*. Generally speaking, *zakāt* is calculated at the rate of 2.5 percent of the amount over the *niṣāb*. Pious people may also give as much as they please as *sadaqa*, and do so preferably in secret. Although this word can be translated as “voluntary charity” it has a wider meaning. The Prophet said, “Even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is charity.” The Prophet said, “Charity is a necessity for every Muslim.” He was asked, “What if a person has nothing?” The Prophet replied, “He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity.” The Companions asked, “What if he is not able to work?” The Prophet said, “He should help poor and needy persons.” The Companions further asked, “What if he cannot do even that?” The Prophet said, “He should urge others to do good.” The Companions said, “What if he lacks that also?” The Prophet said, “He should check himself from doing evil. That is also charity.”

4. Fasting (*ṣawm* صوم).

Every year in the month of Ramaḍān, all Muslims fast from first light until sundown, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations.

Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are pregnant or nursing are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year. If they are physically unable to do this, they must feed a needy person for every day missed. Children begin to fast (and to observe the prayer) from puberty, although many start earlier.

5. Pilgrimage (*ḥajj* حج).

The annual pilgrimage to Mecca — the *Hajj* — is obligatory only for those who are physically and financially able to perform it.

The annual *Hajj* begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year (which is lunar and not corrected to fit the solar year and the seasons, so that *Hajj* and the month of Ramaḍān “migrate” through the seasons). Pilgrims wear special clothes, simple garments which strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before God. The rites of the *Hajj* include circling the Ka’ba seven times, and going seven times between the mountains of Safa and Marwa as did Hagar during her search for water. Then the pilgrims stand together on the wide plain of Arafat and join in prayers for God’s forgiveness, in what is often thought of as a preview of the Last Judgment. The close of the *Hajj* is marked by a festival, the *Īd al-Adha*, which is celebrated with prayers and the exchange of gifts in Muslim communities everywhere. This, and the *Īd al-Fitr*, a feast-day commemorating the end of Ramaḍān, are the main festivals of the Muslim calendar.

¹ Often rendered as “alms-tax” or “poor-due,” it is a tax on a person’s wealth and distributed among the poor.

² The Ka’ba and Holy Mosque in Mecca.