

The Five Pillars of Islam
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Another way to capture the basics of Islam is to give some attention to its five pillars. This refers to five religious practices that constitute the very heart of Islamic spirituality. While Muslims around the world practice many diverse rituals (depending on their ethnic and religious background), these five pillars are common to Muslims virtually everywhere.

1. Muslims place great emphasis on quoting the *shahadah*, a one sentence statement that is the equivalent of John 3:16 for Christians. The Muslim recites this confession often: "There is no god but Allah and, and Muhammad is His messenger." All that is necessary to become a Muslim is to say this with sincerity.

The *shahadah* affirms both the identity of God (Allah) and opposition to polytheism. *Implicit in the Muslim confession is disagreement with the concept of the Trinity.* The statement also affirms the centrality of Muhammad in Islam. He is not the only messenger of Allah, but he is the greatest and final prophet.

2. The Muslim is also to be a person of prayer. This is known as *salat*. The guidelines for prayer involve a command to pray towards Mecca five times daily. Also, Muslims are required to attend the prayer services every Friday at the mosque. In communal worship Muslims must wash themselves following very specific instructions before they recite the prayers in Arabic. Even those who do not speak Arabic are expected to learn enough to be able to recite the prayers in the original.
3. Muslims are also expected to be generous financially. This is mandated in Islam through *zakat* or alms-giving. This involves giving 2.5% of one's income to others, and this is mandatory in some Muslim countries. The prophet Muhammad was quite generous with his wealth, and *the Quran has charity as one of its central motifs.* The practice of *zakat* is not to be confused with income tax.
4. Muslims are also told to engage in fasting. This is known in Arabic as *sawm* and involved the duty to fast during daylight hours for the month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. Muslims are allowed to eat and drink between sunset and sunrise. This is a special time for Muslims since they believe Ramadan was the month when Muhammad received the first revelations from Allah. The fasting ritual includes rules regarding sexual abstinence and what to do if one misses even a day of fasting during the special month.
5. Muslims are also required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they can afford it. Only Muslims are allowed in their chief holy city. The pilgrimage is known as the *hajj*. The visit to Mecca usually lasts seven days and involves participation in rituals (about dress, prayer, ablution, and animal sacrifice) that date back centuries, some to the time of Muhammad. Mecca's attraction is twofold. Not only is its

Muhammad's birthplace and the city to which he returned in triumph after exile in Medina, but Muslims also believe that Abraham built a temple in Mecca (called the Ka'ba) after Allah provided a ram to take the place of his son Ishmael as a sacrifice.