

Islamic Practices

Summary: Among Sunni Muslims, the key practices of Islam are referred to as “The Five Pillars” and include: *shahadah* (statement of faith), *salat* (prayer five times a day), *zakat* (giving a portion of one’s possession, usually 2.5% of annual wealth, through local mosques or organizations), *sawm* (fasting from sunrise to sunset in the month of Ramadan), and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to the Ka’bah in Mecca during the month of Dhu’l-Hijjah). Though these five key practices are observed by other Muslim denominations, Shi’a Muslims add others like *khums* (yearly tax given to the Imams) and *walayah* (acceptance and adoration of the Imams). Islamic practices are also constantly in dialogue with societal changes and advancements.

“Righteousness does not consist in turning your face towards the East or West. The truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets; who give away some of their wealth, however much they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage; those who keep up the prayer (*salat*) and pay the prescribed alms (*zakat*); who keep pledges whenever they make them; who are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. These are the ones who are true, and it is they who are aware of God.” (*Qur’an 2:177, trans. Abdel Haleem*).

Muslims are called to perform certain regular acts of worship which increase their sense of God-consciousness (*taqwa*), and discipline their attitudes toward others as well as the use of their time and property. These acts of worship according to Sunni Muslims are called the “Five Pillars of Islam”. They are based on the Qur’an and *Sunnah* as interpreted by scholars of Islamic law (*‘ulama*). The Five Pillars are: the *shahadah*, *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and *Hajj*. These grounding commitments shape the lives and practices of Muslims throughout the world, including in America.

Shahadah: The *shahadah*, “witness” or profession of faith, is repeated with every prayer: “I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s Messenger.” The belief in God’s oneness, or *tauhid*, and the prophethood of Muhammad is the first step of one’s lifelong journey as a Muslim.

Salat: Muslims perform the ritual prayers—*salat*—five times a day, just as Muhammad did. Standing, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating the body before God and reciting Qur’anic passages teach humility and trust in God. Prayers are performed five times a day: at dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. While it is preferable to pray in a mosque with fellow believers, it is also permissible to pray

alone in a clean place. Many families pray together in their homes, at least in the morning and evening. Before the prayers, Muslims remove their shoes, perform ritual ablutions, and state their intention to worship. In the mosque, prayers are often led by an imam, or the religious leader. Prayers are performed in cycles of bowing and prostration called *rak'at*. Muslims, wherever they are, pray in the direction of the *Ka'bah* in Mecca (*qiblah*), usually marked by a niche in a mosque wall (*mihrab*). The Friday communal prayer, known as *salat al-jumu'ah*, occurs every week and includes a sermon followed by a special prayer, which replaces the midday *salat*. Around the world, millions of Muslims pray five times daily, orienting their lives—individually and collectively—toward God.

Zakat: *Zakat* literally means “purification”—a payment of a portion of one’s wealth to purify the rest and to ensure justice in society. Used to help the needy members of a community or those working for just causes, the *zakat* is part of the larger Islamic vision of social justice. While Muslims are encouraged to pursue economic and social gain, they are also reminded to use their wealth unselfishly and to care for others less fortunate. The rate of *zakat* is generally 2.5 percent of annual accumulated wealth, including savings and nonessential property; in some countries it is collected and distributed by the government. American Muslims often distribute their *zakat* through local mosques and Muslim organizations. Muslim relief agencies are at work throughout the world today, and American Muslims run special programs through *zakat* contributions—from soup kitchens to refugee relief.

Sawm: The first revelation of the Qur’an came to Muhammad during the lunar month of Ramadan. Every year during this month, Muslims perform a daily fast (*sawm*). They are obliged to abstain from food, water, sexual activity and evil thoughts during the daylight fasting hours. Ramadan is a time of discipline for the spirit as well as the body, a time to cultivate patience and commitment. The fast also reminds the faithful of those who are hungry every day, underscoring the need for social justice. Many Muslims perform special nightly prayers during this time, known as *salat al-tarawih*, in which the entirety of the Qur’an is recited throughout the month. Ramadan is also a time of community solidarity, as meals and festivities are shared with family and friends after sunset.

Hajj: The final pillar of Islam is the Hajj, or pilgrimage to the *Ka'bah* in Mecca, performed during Dhu'l-Hijjah, the last lunar month of the Muslim calendar. The Hajj recalls the faithfulness of Prophet Abraham who was ready to sacrifice his son Ishmael at God’s command, though it was only a trial from God. It is both joy and faithfulness that brings millions of Muslims from all over the world to Mecca for

this pilgrimage. The Hajj is required at least once of every Muslim in good health and with the financial means. It brings together the world-wide Muslim community (*ummah*), making clear that Muslims of all races, ethnic groups, and cultures are equal in God's presence, all wearing the same simple white garment, walking and praying and eating together in the most holy places.

Though non-Sunni denominations practice these same five pillars, they may add to or interpret them slightly differently. For instance, Twelver Shi'as recognize *khums*, a yearly tax of 1/5th of one's surplus annual income (after expenses) paid to the Imams, the twelve patrilineal descendants of Muhammad, as a primary practice. Since the twelfth Imam's disappearance in the 9th century CE, *khums* is paid instead to *marjas* (also referred to as the Grand Ayatollahs) who act as representatives of the Imams. They distribute it to the needy and orphans, and spend it for the upkeep of the community. Isma'ili Shi'as pay a *khums* amount of 1/10th directly to the presently living Imam. While *zakat* is also paid by Shi'a Muslims, *khums* is restricted to the needy and orphans who are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's family. Another primary difference is *walaya*. This refers to accepting the religious and spiritual authority of the Imams, in addition to expressing love and adoration of them. Due to the importance of this pillar, a third profession of faith is often added to the *shahadah* for Shi'a Muslims: "I bear witness that Ali is the vicegerent (*wali*) of God."

Though the form of these practices has remained constant since the earliest period, their implementation and finer details are in constant dialogue with societal, technological, and scientific changes. For instance, Muslims and scholars of Islamic law today discuss whether stocks should be counted under *zakat*, if medical injections break the fast or not, and how Hajj should be adapted to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims.