

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

1. *Shahada or Profession of Faith*

One who decides to become a Muslim professes the unity of God and the mission of Muhammad, by saying: "There is no God but God (Allah) and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." This is called *shahada* in Arabic. This forms part of every prayer and is the essence of Muslim identity.

2. *Salat or Prayer*

A believer prays five times a day: at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset and dusk. It must be performed in a state of purity and every word must be in Arabic. The worshipper has the choice of praying privately, in the open air or in a house; or with a group, outdoors, or in a mosque. Islam opposes the practice of withdrawing into ascetic life. For this reason, there is no priesthood, as is known in other religions. Islam has its own *Ulema*, learned men, who are well-versed in the interpretation of the Quran, Prophet's sayings and Islamic law and social conditions. Throughout the Muslim world, special prayers are held at noon on Fridays in mosques. Muhammad did not explicitly designate Friday as a day of rest, only a part of which is devoted to a special prayer. People are free to do their business as usual before and after the prayer.

3. *Zakat or Almsgiving*

The third pillar of Islam embodies the principle of social responsibility. This precept teaches that what belongs to the individual also belongs to the community in the ultimate sense, and that only by donating a proportion of his wealth for public use does a person legitimize what he or she retains. The *zakat*, in addition to the other tenets of Islam, is a religious obligation and Muslims are expected to treat it seriously.

4. *Sawm or Fasting*

The ancient religious institution of Fasting is the fourth Pillar of Islam, known as *sawm*. A Muslim is required to fast in the month of Ramadan, the seventh month of the lunar calendar of Muslims. To a Muslim, it means observing Ramadan, the month during which God sent the Quran to Muhammad through Gabriel. Fasting demands complete abstinence from food and drink from dawn to sunset every day during Ramadan.

5. Hajj or the Pilgrimage to Makkah

The last cherished Pillar of Islam is the Pilgrimage to Makkah, where God's revelation was first revealed to Muhammad. The pilgrimage is in commemoration of Prophets Abraham and his son Ishmael who built the Kaaba to serve God. Muslims worship publicly at the Grand Mosque, expressing the full equality among Muslims with a common objective; all performing the same actions, all seeking to gain the favor of God. All pilgrims, from various cultures and classes, wear identical white robes as they assemble around a single center, the Kaaba, which inspires them with a strong sense of unity. Every Muslim, who can afford, is expected to make the pilgrimage at least once during his or her lifetime.

While the Islamic community throughout the world is united by its essential beliefs in:

(a) the Oneness of God, and

(b) the divine mission of His Prophet, there are several sects and groups. One such group, is Shia. It is important to remember, however, that on fundamental issues, the Shia sect is in basic agreement with other Muslims since they all draw on the Quran and the *Sunna*, the words and actions of the Prophet.