

What is Islam? (part 4 of 4): Islamic Worship

Description: A look at some of the essential practices of Islam, with a brief explanation of who are Muslims.

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There are five simple but essential observances that all practicing Muslims accept and follow. These "Pillars of Islam" represent the core that unites all Muslims.

1) The 'Declaration of Faith'

A Muslim is one who testifies that "none deserves worship but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." This declaration is known as the "*shahada*" (witness, testimony). Allah is the Arabic name for God, just as Yahweh is the Hebrew name for God. By making this simple proclamation one becomes a Muslim. The proclamation affirms Islam's absolute belief in the oneness of God, His exclusive right to be worshipped, as well as the doctrine that associating anything else with God is the one unforgivable sin as we read in the Koran:

"God does not forgive anyone for associating something with Him, while He does forgive whomever He wishes to for anything else. Anyone who gives God partners has invented an awful sin." (Quran 4:48)

The second part of the testimony of faith states that Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, is a prophet of God like Abraham, Moses and Jesus before him. Muhammad brought the last and final revelation. In accepting Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets," Muslims believe that his prophecy confirms and fulfills all of the revealed messages, beginning with Adam's. In addition, Muhammad serves as the role model through his exemplary life. A believer's effort to follow Muhammad's example reflects the emphasis of Islam on practice and action.

2) The Prayer (*Salah*)

Muslims worship five times a day: at daybreak, noon, mid afternoon, sunset, and evening. It helps keep believers mindful of God in the stress of work and family. It resets the spiritual focus, reaffirms total dependence on God, and puts worldly concerns within the perspective of the last judgment and the afterlife. The prayers consist of standing, bowing, kneeling, putting the forehead on the ground, and sitting. The Prayer is a means in which a relationship between God and His creation is maintained. It includes recitations from the Quran, praises of God, prayers for forgiveness and other various supplications. The prayer is an expression of submission, humility, and adoration of God. Prayers can be offered in any clean place, alone or together, in a mosque or at home, at

work or on the road, indoors or out. It is preferable to pray with others as one body united in the worship of God, demonstrating discipline, brotherhood, equality, and solidarity. As they pray, Muslims face Mecca, the holy city centered around the Kaaba - the house of God built by Abraham and his son Ishmael.

3) The Compulsory Charity (*Zakah*)

In Islam, the true owner of everything is God, not man. People are given wealth as a trust from God. *Zakah* is worship and thanksgiving to God by supporting the poor, and through it one's wealth is purified. It requires an annual contribution of 2.5 percent of an individual's wealth and assets. Therefore, *Zakah* is not mere "charity", it is an obligation on those who have received their wealth from God to meet the needs of less fortunate members of the community. *Zakah* is used to support the poor and the needy, help those in debt, and, in olden times, to free slaves.

4) The Fast of Ramadan (*Sawm*)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar which is spent in fasting. Healthy Muslims abstain from dawn to sunset from food, drink, and sexual activity. Fasting develops spirituality, dependence upon God, and brings identification with the less fortunate. A special evening prayer is also held in mosques in which recitations of the Quran are heard. Families rise before dawn to take their first meal of the day to sustain them till sunset. The month of Ramadan ends with one of the two major Islamic celebrations, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast, called Eid al-Fitr, which is marked by joyfulness, family visits, and exchanging of gifts.

5) The fifth Pillar is the Pilgrimage or Hajj to Mecca

At least once in a lifetime, every adult Muslim who is physically and financially able is required to sacrifice time, wealth, status, and ordinary comforts of life to make the Hajj pilgrimage, putting himself totally at God's service. Every year over two million believers from a diversity of cultures and languages travel from all over the world to the sacred city of Mecca^[1] to respond to God's call.

Who are Muslims?

The Arabic word "Muslim" literally means "someone who is in a state of Islam (submission to the will and law of God)". The message of Islam is meant for the entire world, and anyone who accepts this message becomes a Muslim. There are over a billion Muslims worldwide. Muslims represent the majority population in fifty-six countries. Many people are surprised to know that the majority of Muslims are not Arab. Even though most Arabs are Muslims, there are Arabs who are Christians, Jews and atheists.

Only 20 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims come from Arab countries. There are significant Muslim populations in India, China, Central Asian Republics, Russia, Europe, and America. If one just takes a look at the various peoples who live in the Muslim World - from Nigeria to Bosnia and from Morocco to Indonesia - it is easy enough to see that Muslims come from all different races, ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities. Islam

has always been a universal message for all people. Islam is the second largest religion in the world and will soon be the second largest religion in America. Yet, few people know what Islam is.

Endnotes:

[1] Mecca city is located in Saudi Arabia.

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