

whom to direct one's prayers? **Are God's goodness & power somehow insufficient, that we should invent for Him partners?** For Muslims, the answer to these questions is obvious: there is no ilah (deity) but God, and hence, worship is due to God alone.

For all humankind, there seems to be a great need that we have faith in someone or something. A life without meaning or direction is wretched. As Muslims see it, life is a continuous choice between masters, between those you create for yourself & the One who created you. When you make your own gods, you create your own oppression & debasement, but **when you surrender yourself to the one God, you are shielded from the types of fears & insecurities that lead persons to idol worship.**

In fact, from the point of view of Islam, all creatures, whether or not they are aware of it, are already slaves of God in the sense that they all serve His ultimate purposes and can accomplish only what He allows them to accomplish. God not only wants us to realize this truth, but to benefit as much as we can from it, by using the gifts and guidance He gives to us so that we may grow ever closer to Him. When we become true servants of God, we become servants of the divine attributes as well as of His Mercy, Love, Justice, and Truth. To worship a creation is, to the Muslim, utterly irrational and self-abasing, but to be the slave of God is a Muslim's highest honour and lifelong goal.

The first testimony of the shahadah, that there is no god but God, is an independent statement of fact. It bears witness to a universal truth that applies to all of us, regardless of whether or not we acknowledge it. Before humanity came into being, before the creation of Earth, **before the birth of the universe we live in, there was but one God & there will never be another.**

The second testimony of the shahadah, that Muhammad (p) is the messenger of God, depends on the first. It too is a statement of a truth, but it is also a statement of commitment to the first & to the community of disciples of Muhammad. The first half of the shahadah declares the oneness of God; the second half informs us of God's great concern for man. The first proclaims God's incomparable being; the second tells us how to come to know Him. The first states the goal; the second shows the way. God willed to be known and, by His mercy, commissioned Muhammad (p) to help guide us to Him.

From the moment someone joins the Muslim community, whether by birth or conversion, the shahadah will be an ever-present feature of that person's life. It will be chanted aloud during the call to prayer, invoked at the beginning of all major events, recited at least nine times a day during the five ritual prayers, exclaimed spontaneously by believers during moments of excitement or wonder, and sighed quietly by Muslims when they reflect on the greatness and glory of God. Moreover, it will become a statement of a lifestyle based on the Quran & the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (p).

For Muslims, the Quran is God's word revealed, and the Prophets Sunnah (literally, "way") is God's word most perfectly applied. When Aishah, Muhammad's wife, was asked about the Prophet's conduct during his life, she simply responded, "It was the Quran." Her answer best expresses how Muslims view the relationship between their scripture & the Messenger of God.

The shahadah is where Muslim life begins, both literally and figuratively. It is the cornerstone upon which the community of believers rests and is their source of unity and strength. It is the boundary that protects them & the line of demarcation that must be crossed if one is to join them.

"Hasten to prayer. Hasten to success!" the adhan urges. If our main purpose in life is to grow ever nearer to God, then toward this end prayer is indeed essential. For Muslims, prayer is one of the most important ways to pursue & experience this goal. It is a Muslim's spiritual compass by which they repeatedly check their progress & direction in life, and it is their lifeline to paradise in the hereafter.

To perform the Islamic ritual prayer five times every day at the appointed times requires a considerable commitment to the religion. All of Islam's rituals test & challenge a Muslim's will-power & self-control in various ways and, in so doing, help to build these qualities in them. The shahadah tests a person's allegiances; the fast of Ramadan tests their control of their physical needs; the zakah tests their ability to discipline their material desires; and the pilgrimage to Makkah in some ways tests all three.

There are many sayings of the Prophet (p) in the same vein. On one occasion, he is reported to have startled his Companions by telling them that believers were obliged to perform as many acts of charity each day as there were bones in their bodies. When the

poorer ones mentioned that they did not have the financial means to meet this obligation, he insisted on it nonetheless. and informed them that a smile, an act of kindness, and a helping hand are all acts of charity.

Unlike other religions, there is no monasticism in Islam. A Muslim's submission to God carries with it obligations towards humanity. The office of God's khalifah (vicegerent) on Earth, which Islam assigns the believer, requires community involvement. **"You are the best of peoples evolved for mankind, for you enjoin what is right & oppose what is wrong,"** Quran 3:10 informs Muslims. From the standpoint of Islam, faith is never solely a personal and spiritual matter; it must be applied and tested in society. The Quran & the Prophet's teachings supply Muslims with guidance, the five pillars provide spiritual support, and society furnishes testing, learning, and growing environments.

Most of us are capable of great moments of virtue or religiosity & can rise to the occasion on rare occasions. However, too many of us are incapable of being even moderately virtuous or religious consistently. In terms of our spiritual & moral growth, we are too often like the person who suddenly decides he will get in shape one weekend by going out and running a marathon. But to really become physically fit, one needs to begin & follow a regular program of exercise. The Quran repeatedly exhorts the believer to develop sabr, the Arabic word that connotes patience, perseverance, and fortitude, qualities that are essential to spiritual development.

There are moments during salah when a Muslim perceives the omnipresence of God's most merciful & compassionate light. These moments almost always come unexpectedly. But when they do, the believer feels the caress of the most tender & overpowering kindness. It is a humbling experience, and these moments of divine intimacy create an overpowering longing to be near to God, and to make the hereafter the focus of their living & striving.

This helps us to understand why devout Muslims are so zealous about their prayers. They can be seen at airports or on sidewalks, in city parks or public buildings, alone or in congregation, standing, bowing, sitting & prostrating, paying no attention to the activity around them, seemingly in their own world. This is because their prayers have become their main source of spiritual sustenance & their most personal & powerful means of relating to, and communing with God.

It's easy, just say: **There's no god but God...**

# The Pillars

**Gives Support: A life without God's Support is WRETCHED**

Many in life move from **pillar to post:** aimlessly. Muslims move from **pillar to pillar.** The religion of Islam is built on five pillars: the shahadah (the witnessing of faith), salah (prayer), sawm (fasting) during the Arabic lunar month of Ramadan, zakah (the annual charity tax), and hajj (the annual pilgrimage). It is through these five pillars of Islam that the believer begins to build their faith. They present the first test of commitment & they are at the center of Islam's system of moral & spiritual growth. Together, these five pillars touch many areas of a believer's earthly existence: their spirituality, ethics, personal hygiene, social relations, sexual relations, politics, finances, time management, eating habits, dress, travel plans & many others. In this way they remind & help the believer to direct all of their efforts towards God & to make the whole of their life on earth an act of worship. They also strengthen their character since they require considerable determination & self restraint, and since the Muslim must repeatedly & periodically interrupt their worldly pursuits to perform them. Time plays a key role in Islam's rituals. Voluntary acts of worship are strongly encouraged & may be offered for the most part whenever one wishes, but the five pillars are obligatory & must be performed at specified times. Those who practice the pillars steadfastly & correctly soon discover that they come to regulate their lives. They become an inner clock by which the believer sets & organizes their life. Like the different hands on a stop watch, each ritual is associated with a different measure of earthly duration.

## Through the five pillars, Muslims have been able to know profoundly & intimately God's infinitely merciful power

**T**he shahadah, which takes only seconds to pronounce, is in one sense Islam's briefest ritual. For those who wish to convert to Islam, its recital, witnessed by two Muslims, is required in order to join the Muslim community officially. Muslims must also recite the shahadah quietly while in the sitting posture during ritual prayer. While these may be the only times the statement of the shahadah is compulsory, the shahadah is really a permanent requirement, for the instant someone genuinely rejects it, that person is outside the pale of Islam. In this sense, then, the shahadah is a continuous ritual, a moment-by-moment commitment to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad.

The salah (prayer) is mandatory for Muslims five times daily: before sunrise (fajr), around noon (zuhr), in the afternoon (asr), at sunset (maghrib), and before sleeping (isha). The time needed to perform the ritual prayer is rather short – as little as a few minutes – so that the compulsory Islamic prayers are just long enough and frequent enough to keep the believer focused throughout the day on the real purpose of life, without imposing too great an interruption of his necessary daily pursuits.

The fast of Ramadan takes place during the ninth lunar month of the Islamic calendar. For this entire month, Muslims deny themselves food, drink, and sex between sunrise & sunset and also make special efforts to engage themselves in extra acts of worship. While it would be much too difficult to fast the whole year through, the fast of Ramadan signifies to Muslims that they should dedicate each month of their earthly lives to serving God.

Zakah is an annual charity-tax that follows specific rates that are applied to one's accumulated wealth. By paying zakah, believers aspire to purify

the previous year's worldly gains. The hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Makkah which Muslims are required to make once in a lifetime if they have the means to do so. For the faithful, to make the pilgrimage is one of their greatest goals in life. It is a chance to journey to the sanctuary toward which they have always prayed, and to glorify God with their Muslim brothers and sisters from every corner of the earth.

Through these five pillars, Muslims consecrate their time on earth: with the shahadah they commit to God their **every moment**; with salah, their **days**; with the fast of Ramadan, their **months**; with the payment of zakah, their **years**; and with the pilgrimage to Makkah, their **lifetime**.

Although time has such an important place in these rituals, the five pillars, in several ways, also reach beyond time. For one thing, they persistently remind Muslims that they are moving, moment by moment, closer to their last days on earth and then to the next life, to a very different order of creation, where earthly time will seem to them strange & illusory. The rituals, both in form and content, help to keep the worshiper alert to this. Indeed, many Quranic verses and the traditional invocations that Muslims recite during the rituals recall the themes of the afterlife & our return to God. In addition, many of the postures Muslims assume, hardships they endure, and ceremonies they perform in the rituals also parallel descriptions from the Quran & the sayings of Muhammad (p) of the Day of Judgment. In this way, the rituals become for Muslims both a preparation & a kind of rehearsal for that Day, a vehicle by which the worshiper is allowed to almost experience in advance that decisive meeting with his Lord.

It is important that Muslims realize that the rituals they practice were not introduced by Muhammad (p) but, rather, date back to the very beginnings of humanity's worship of God. The Quran tells us that all the Prophets insisted on the oneness of God and that the divine guidance revealed through them must be heeded. They often established ritual prayer & enjoined upon their followers charity & fasting. Moreover, the Quran states that the Prophet Abraham (p) first called for the hajj and that, together with his son Ishmael (p), rebuilt

the Kabah, the first house established on Earth for the worship of the one God. Therefore, when Muslims perform their rituals, they understand that they are not only practicing the religion taught by the Prophet (p), but that they are returning to & restoring the pure & timeless religion revealed by God to all of his prophets: the religion of self-surrender to God – Islam.

**Self-surrender to God is what Islam is all about**, and it is through these rituals that Muslims come to experience it most personally and directly. **The five pillars of Islam are at the core of Muslim piety**, as each worshiper brings into them all of his or her pains, efforts, and longings. The rituals create a nexus between a believer's relationships with his fellow man and his relationship with God, because his good deeds and his love of God are joined through them. Through the five pillars, Muslims have been able to know profoundly and intimately God's infinitely merciful power. This also helps to explain why Muslims are so strict about preserving the original forms of their rituals: they are convinced that the slightest modification inevitably would diminish their experience of the divine.

The Islamic call to prayer, the adhan, are among the first words spoken to every child born into a Muslim family. After reciting the adhan in the right ear of the newborn, the parent or relative will then recite the iqamah, the second call to prayer, in the child's left ear. The iqama reads: *Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah. Hayya 'alas salaah. Hayya 'alal falaah. Qad qamat as salah. Qad qamat as salah, Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar. La ilaha illa Allah.*

When a parent makes this summons to their infant, they do so with their fervent prayers that he or she will grow to be a righteous, God-conscious believer. It signifies a recalling of the child to his or her true nature, to the spirit which God breathed into him or her, and to that primordial bond to which every soul bore witness: "Am I not your Lord?" (7:172). While Muslim parents know that their son or daughter may make mistakes in life, that he or she may even come to neglect the requirements of faith at times, the adhan also signifies

the parents' deepest hope that if this should happen, then their child will always come back to this first calling.

The adhan is typical of Islam in the way it uses the call to prayer to remind believers of Islam's broader objectives. While the ring of a bell could signal the times for the obligatory prayers, Islam chooses a method that offers the greatest possible meaning, for the adhan succinctly summarizes & interconnects Islam's attitudes toward God, the Prophet (p), worship & life. For this reason, the adhan & its meaning, is a perfect way of explaining the first two pillars of Islam.

**Allahu Akbar!** (God is Greater!) It is the supreme affirmation of Islam, the great axiom upon which all else depends. It qualifies all other statements about God and His creation and is the key Muslim perception of God. It is the reason for his or her worship, total trust in, and self-surrender to Him as well as the foundation of Muslim piety and spirituality.

God is greater than what or whom? The statement seems to beg the question. Its open-endedness is at first perplexing. **Why is it left incomplete?** Allahu Akbar! This seemingly unfinished comparative is all-inclusive, for it allows for all our praises and glorification. Its open-endedness invites us to imagine, but at the same time proclaims our inability to truly conceive of God's greatness. All other beings from the perspective of Allahu Akbar stand on the same level ground as infinitely inferior to God. Therefore, the second declaration of the adhan, which is also the first of the two testimonies of the shahadah, follows as a natural consequence of Allahu Akbar. "*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah! Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah!*" (I bear witness that there is no god but God!)

How could it be otherwise? If God is infinitely greater, infinitely more merciful, infinitely more compassionate, infinitely more powerful, infinitely kinder, infinitely more just, infinitely nearer to us, infinitely more loving, infinitely wiser, infinitely more knowing, how could there be and why should one seek another god, another ultimate protector, another ultimate goal? Why should one seek other deities between oneself & God, or other persons, alive or dead, to

The Primordial Bond: Every soul bore witness to this: **every soul**

## Am I not your Lord?

Why then your earthly rebellion against this Heavenly Bond?

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