

1. Faith

There is no god worthy of worship except God and Muhammad is His messenger. This declaration of faith is called the Shahada, a simple formula which all the faithful pronounce. In Arabic, the first part is la ilaha illa Llah - 'there is no god except God'; ilaha (god) can refer to anything which we may be tempted to put in place of God - wealth, power, and the like. Then comes illa Llah: 'except God', the source of all Creation. The second part of the Shahada is Muhammadun rasulu'Llah: 'Muhammad is the messenger of God.' A message of guidance has come through a man like ourselves.



Shahada inscribed at Ottoman Topkapi Palace, Istanbul.

2. Prayer

Salat is the name for the obligatory prayers which are performed five times a day, and are a direct link between the worshipper and God. There is no hierarchical authority in Islam, and no priests, so the prayers are led by a learned person who knows the Quran, chosen by the congregation. These five prayers contain verses from the Quran, and are said in Arabic, the language of the Revelation, but personal supplication can be offered in one's own language. Prayers are said at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall, and thus determine the rhythm of the entire day. Although it is preferable to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere, such as in fields, offices, factories and universities. Visitors to the Muslim world are struck by the centrality of prayers in daily life.



New Mexico, U.S.A.
Prayer Call from Abiquiu Mosque.

A translation of the Call to Prayer is:

God is most great. God is most great.
God is most great. God is most great.

I testify that there is no god except God.
I testify that there is no god except God.
I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.
I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.
Come to prayer! Come to prayer!
Come to success (in this life and the Hereafter)!
Come to success!
God is most great. God is most great.
There is no god except God.

3. The 'Zakat'

One of the most important principles of Islam is that all things belong to God, and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. The word zakat means both 'purification' and 'growth'. Our possessions are purified by setting aside a proportion for those in need, and, like the pruning of plants, this cutting back balances and encourages new growth. Each Muslim calculates his or her own zakat individually. For most purposes this involves the payment each year of two and a half percent of one's capital.



Zakat keeps the money flowing within a society, Cairo.

A pious person may also give as much as he or she pleases as sadaqa, and does so preferably in secret. Although this word can be translated as 'voluntary charity' it has a wider meaning. The Prophet said 'even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is charity.'

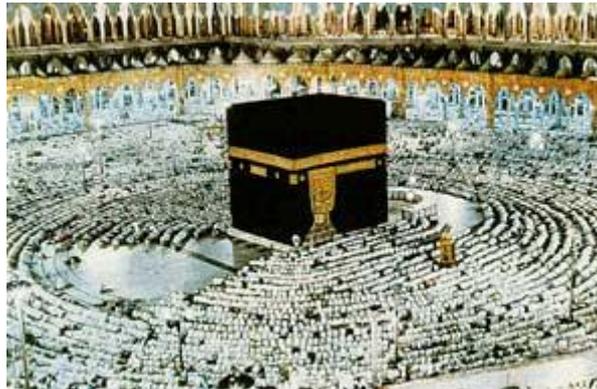
The Prophet said: 'Charity is a necessity for every Muslim.' He was asked: 'What if a person has nothing?' The Prophet replied: 'He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity.' The Companions asked: 'What if he is not able to work?' The Prophet said: 'He should help poor and needy persons.' The Companions further asked 'What if he cannot do even that?' The Prophet said 'He should urge others to do good.' The Companions said 'What if he lacks that also?' The Prophet said 'He should check himself from doing evil. That is also charity.'

4. The Fast

Every year in the month of Ramadan, all Muslims fast from first light until sundown, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations. Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are pregnant or nursing are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year. If they are physically unable to do this, they must feed a needy person for every day missed. Children begin to fast (and to observe the prayer) from puberty, although many start earlier. Although the fast is most beneficial to the health, it is regarded principally as a method of self purification. By cutting oneself off from worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person gains true sympathy with those who go hungry as well as growth in one's spiritual life.

5. Pilgrimage (Hajj)

The annual pilgrimage to Makkah - the Hajj - is an obligation only for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. Nevertheless, about two million people go to Makkah each year from every corner of the globe providing a unique opportunity for those of different nations to meet one another. Although Makkah is always filled with visitors, the annual Hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year (which is lunar, not solar, so that Hajj and Ramadan fall sometimes in summer, sometimes in winter). Pilgrims wear special clothes: simple garments which strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before God.



Pilgrims praying at the mosque in Makkah.

The rites of the Hajj, which are of Abrahamic origin, include circling the Ka'ba seven times, and going seven times between the mountains of Safa and Marwa as did Hagar during her search for water. Then the pilgrims stand together on the wide plain of Arafat and join in prayers for God's forgiveness, in what is often thought of as a preview of the Last Judgment.

In previous centuries the Hajj was an arduous undertaking. Today, however, Saudi Arabia provides millions of people with water, modern transport, and the most up-to-date health facilities.



Pilgrim tents during Hajj.

The close of the Hajj is marked by a festival, the Eid al-Adha, which is celebrated with prayers and the exchange of gifts in Muslim communities everywhere. This, and the Eid al-Fitr, a feast-day commemorating the end of Ramadan, are the main festivals of the Muslim calendar.