

The Five Pillars of Religion

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When speaking of religion, we often think of different belief systems with different goals. Each religion has a holy book which, being revealed by God, becomes the source of the practices and beliefs of that religion and is often considered a sufficient source of truth for the religion's followers. In many cases, the followers of one religion reject the authenticity of other holy books and religions.

A different perspective is to accept the divine Origin of all religions and scriptures, using all of them to know God and His will more intimately. According to Divine Principle,

"...the purpose of every religion is identical. However, religions have appeared in different forms according to their various missions, the cultures in which they took root, and their particular historical period. Their scriptures have taken different forms for similar reasons. All scriptures have the same purpose: to illuminate their surroundings with the light of truth." ([Introduction](#))



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One of the major world religions, Islam, was founded by the prophet Muhammed, who revealed the Koran. He confessed he was sent by God to the Arab people, teaching that he came with the same authority as the other prophets and that all of the scriptures are from God. He called Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets Muslims, simply because they submitted to God's will and worship no other.

According to Muhammed, the message of all the prophets is simple: there is one God and we are to worship Him. The word "Islam" means submission to God's will and this is the essence of the religion. Aside from this, there is also the established religion of Islam which developed along certain lines and is often considered to be one religion as opposed to others. This is natural with all human institutions. If we can, however, think of an "institution of God," not man-made but natural and universal, we can understand the essence of Islam, transcending all historical circumstances and remaining the same over time.

I believe that Islam - in this sense - is true, and have come to call myself a Muslim. I also seek to follow Jesus' teaching and example in all things and that of Reverend Moon. I believe in the word of God as expressed in the Koran and the world's scriptures, and in the prophet Muhammed and all teachers of God's word. I find that the Holy Koran and the Holy Bible don't contradict each other but lead in the same direction toward God. I also accept and practice the five pillars of Islam and follow the religion's guidelines inasmuch as they are an authentic expression of faith.

The Five Universal Pillars of Islam

Among the teachings of Islam are the five pillars. Ordinarily, we think of Islam as a religion separate from others. I suggest that we can also think of an Islam that transcends human institutions and remains the same over time.

I believe the five pillars of Islam can be accepted from the standpoint of any other religion and that Islam - in the sense that Islam is "submission to the will of God" and in the sense that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were Muslims - can be regarded as universal and an institution of God. The Koran as God's message to humankind can be read by seekers along with all scriptures.

In this article, I focus on the five pillars of Islam and seek to explicate their universal significance.

1. **Declaration of Faith** - There is no god but the One True God. He is to be worshipped and all of His apostles are to be honored.
2. **Prayer** - Establish regular prayer and strive to maintain conscious contact with God.
3. **Charity** - God is Most Gracious and Most Merciful. We should imitate God, becoming gracious and merciful ourselves, giving to those who ask or are in need.
4. **Fasting** - We should undergo certain disciplines that lead us from earthly things to heavenly things and should develop a spiritual appetite and hunger for righteousness.
5. **Pilgrimage** - We are pilgrims on this earth and our true home is the "City of God."

First Pillar: Shahada

The first pillar of Islam - Shahada, or declaration of faith - is an expression of one's belief in Islam and one's commitment to follow the religious precepts. Shahada is undertaken by declaring aloud, with conviction, in the presence of one more spiritually enlightened, that "there is no god but God and Muhammed is His messenger."

"No god but God" is important because it's both a negation and an affirmation. First, we are not to worship any other than God - any created being, angel or messenger of God - and, second, the Lord of heaven and earth, Allah, is alone worthy of worship. We can call Him one of many names - God, Allah, Merciful, Source, etc. - but the point is that He is the uncreated Creator, or the unmoved Mover, as Aristotle called Him. All of God's messengers are His creatures and servants, and we shouldn't follow any false doctrines that replace God.

We should accept Muhammed as the messenger of God because he was sent by the God to Whom we declared our faith. Islam believes in all of the prophets as messengers of God. Muhammed is one of God's messengers and Muslims shouldn't reject the divine Source of other holy books. The declaration of faith was expressed by Jesus in the following way: "Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" and "Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me" (Mark 12:29 and John 13:20). So, any believer in God can declare that "there is no god but God and Muhammed, or Jesus, or Moses, or Buddha is His messenger."



Earth from space (image courtesy of NASA).

Second Pillar: Prayer

The second pillar of Islam is to establish regular prayer. Muslims are instructed to pray five times a day. The purpose of establishing regular prayer is to always keep God in remembrance. The goal is a constant connection to God.

In my view, it is good to follow the ritual practices of a tradition inasmuch as they are in line with our inner feeling. To focus too heavily on external rituals to the neglect of our inner attitude, however, is improper worship.

While the external practice of five prayers a day is in itself important, the practice serves also as a means to an end, the end being a personal relationship with God. One shouldn't take the external practice as the most important thing.

If, for instance, one were to pray dutifully five times a day, only so that others see that one is praying, then the external act would serve nothing, other than being seen by others. Ironically, this prayer would be entirely non-religious.

If, conversely, one were to pray silently and alone three times daily, seeking God's presence, and attain a state of constant remembrance of God, then even if it's not the traditional Muslim prayer, it would still accomplish the purpose of the second pillar of Islam. As Jesus might say, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matt. 6:6).

Prayer is an act which we perform by turning from the outside world to the world within our consciousness. It is also equally an attitude with which we can perform any act, such as washing the dishes or listening to music. The practice of regular prayer can lead to a life which itself becomes a constant prayer and conversation with God.

Third Pillar: Charity

The third pillar of Islam is charity (zakat). It involves giving a certain portion of one's income to the poor. Through charity, we're sharing freely with others what God has shared freely with us. This is also a way of expressing thanksgiving. It's important that the charity we give is voluntary and free, not mandatory. The reason for zakat is to cultivate generosity (paralleling Confucian jen, or benevolence), and a generous person gives gladly.

Concerning this pillar, I am most critical of the institution of Islam as traditionally practiced in most Islamic countries today. It used to be an individual responsibility but now it's a state-imposed tax. A compulsive and obligatory zakat seems, to me, like a secular, not a religious, practice. It wasn't thus taught by Muhammed because it doesn't necessarily cultivate good-heartedness. If a person is compelled to be charitable, then it's unclear whether his motivation is to be lovingly generous or to be free from the guilt that ungenerosity brings - especially when others notice it. But if a person is not obligated to do anything, and chooses to give - especially in secret - then it's more likely that there's a sincere motive.

While the external practice is important, it's also intended that we see the point of the practice: to cultivate goodness and convert the heart. By following this practice we learn by experience the truth of the saying "Give and you shall receive" (Luke 6:38). The practice of charity is vital for a religious person because it causes our character to resemble God. As we grow in charity, we grow in godliness.

For this reason, giving of ourselves is of utmost importance. If one is obligated to provide certain alms, then it is still necessary for one to perform an individual charity in their search for God. As it pleases God to be gracious to us, it pleases our original nature to be gracious to our brother-man.

Fourth Pillar: Fasting

The fourth pillar of Islam is to fast during the month of Ramadan. Fasting is practiced in every major religion in the world and is an essential part of religious life. By experiencing hunger during Ramadan we learn to feel the pain of those that are hungry not by choice but by circumstance. We also learn to hunger after spiritual things and grow in our character and cultivate virtue. While not all religions require a mandatory fast as does Islam, a voluntary fast is expected of every religious seeker.

It pleases God that we earnestly desire after spiritual things, for "blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matt. 5:6). Every person who fasts with the right motive is thus nurturing an appetite for righteousness, seeking God and becoming more aligned with His will. Aside from improving our character, God also gives us an exceedingly generous reward for fasting.

The success of the holy month in Islam is astounding. For a not-so-easy practice such as Ramadan fasting to become so widely practiced is nothing short of a miracle, for not all religions make such a strict requirement. The purpose of this pillar, however, transcends the established practice of Ramadan, but applies to all fasting undertaken in devotion to God.

The practice of fasting is connected with the giving of charity. By knowing what it's like to be hungry, those who serve God will be better able to relate to hungry people in their need. Also, the ability to forgo

our individual needs or wants makes us more able to provide for the needs and desires of others. When we're sympathetic to another's need for food, it's natural to be sympathetic to their needs in general, so fasting during Ramadan teaches one not only to follow the guidelines of his religion but to be a generous or gracious person.

Fifth Pillar: Pilgrimage

Muslims are instructed - at some point in their life, if they are physically able - to visit the holy city of Mecca and circle around the Kaaba which is God's house or temple. From one point of view, it seems like a plainly external action. This may be the most difficult pillar to universalize and apply to religion in general, but the Hajj, in my interpretation, is symbolic.

Not a few times in scripture, we hear of the house of God spoken of in ways that cannot possibly mean merely a physical structure:

"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'" (Gen. 28:16-17).

"Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet..." (Acts 7:48)

We seekers of salvation are told by every prophet that answers are found by turning our attention from the cares of the world to the world within. When we are told that we must face in the direction of the Kaaba when offering our prayer, we are really being told to turn away from the outer world to the Kaaba which is our heart of hearts.

The goal of the fifth pillar of Islam is to reach this center of ourselves during earthly life if we are able to.

Islam is Submission to God's Will

The Islam that I seek is not the one in the world but the one I find within. I believe Abraham and Jesus, as well as Lao Tzu, Confucius and Buddha, were Muslims - again in the sense of submitting to God's will. Muhammed came to establish the same faith as the other prophets.

Allah is the God of the living. If the spiritual world exists, transcending time and space, then all of the prophets and souls of the past live right now in the present moment. They are continuing this day as servants of God to accomplish His will.

Let us ask: Do they work in harmony toward the absolute, unique, unchanging and eternal purpose? Or, are they as narrow-minded as many of their followers? Do we not think that they are still working to further the cause of the true religion and bring the people of different religions into one fold?

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