

Why are the Five Pillars important for Muslims?

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Ben Hurst. I'm a broadcaster and journalist, and host for this series where we're exploring the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE on Islam.

And in this episode, we're exploring how faith is lived out through the Five Pillars of Islam. We'll look at different ways they're practised, and how it expresses submission to Allah and shapes daily life. And I'm here with TV and radio presenter Mehreen Baig. Hi Mehreen!

Mehreen: Hi Ben! Thanks for having me. I'm also a former GCSE teacher, and a practising Muslim, so I'm very happy to be part of this and break down some learning about Islam.

Ben: Great to have you here! Before we start, don't forget to grab a pen and paper or use the notes app on your phone for writing down key points as you're listening.

Mehreen: And we'll finish off with a quick quiz.

Ben: Remember - download the Sounds app for things to entertain you, as well as many more GCSE revision podcasts. Search 'Bitesize GCSE'.

Mehreen: Let's get started!

Ben: Before we talk about the Five Pillars of Islam, it's important to remember there are different branches within Islam, including Sunni and Shi'a, which are the two largest branches. They have a lot in common, but there are some differences.

Mehreen: That's right. In Sunni Islam, the key religious duties are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. In Shi'a Islam, religious duties are structured around the Ten

Obligatory Acts. These include the main duties found in the Five Pillars, along with additional duties.

Ben: So, two different sets of duties, but they both aim to set up the guidelines for Muslims to follow to lead a good life?

Mehreen: Correct.

Ben: Mehreen, can you give us a quick overview for both before we go into detail?

Mehreen: Absolutely. For Sunni Muslims, the Five Pillars are:

- Shahadah, which is the declaration of faith
- Salah, is regular prayer
- Zakah, is giving to charity
- Sawm, is fasting and Hajj is the pilgrimage to Makkah.

For Shi'a Muslims, the Ten Obligatory Acts include many of these same duties:

- prayer
- fasting
- giving to charity
- and pilgrimage.

But they also include additional differences:

- Jihad - striving in the way of Allah
- and Khums - an additional charitable tax.

They also cover:

- encouraging what is good
- forbidding what is wrong
- showing loyalty to those who do good
- distancing oneself from those who oppose justice and righteousness.

Ben: Let's break down the Five Pillars that Sunni Muslims follow and we'll go on to explore them each in turn. We'll also point out where Shi'a Muslims follow the same practice, as we go through them.

Ben: Let's start with the First Pillar.

Mehreen: This is Shahadah, the Muslim declaration of faith - basically saying I believe in one God and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him). Shahadah involves reciting the words, 'I bear witness that there is no deity but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger'.

Ben: And Shahadah is the foundation of the Five Pillars of Islam?

Mehreen: Yes. In Shi'a Islam, Shahadah sits outside of the Ten Obligatory Acts as an additional duty and they sometimes add the sentence: 'I bear witness that Ali is the friend of Allah.' However, they do not believe this is a requirement to be a Muslim.

Ben: How is Shahadah practised in Muslim communities?

Mehreen: Shahadah runs all the way through a Muslim's life. It's said when someone chooses to become Muslim, often in front of witnesses. It's whispered to a newborn baby, so the first thing they hear is the core belief of the faith.

Ben: Is it just said at the beginning of a Muslim's life?

Mehreen: No, it's repeated every day in prayer, and if possible, it becomes the last thing a Muslim says before they die.

Ben: Shahadah is a daily reminder of Tawhid, which is the oneness of Allah?

Mehreen: Yes, that's right.

Mehreen: Salah is the Second Pillar of Islam, which most Sunni Muslims follow - it's the duty of prayer.

Ben: And it's also the first of the Ten Obligatory Acts in Shi'a Islam isn't it?

Mehreen: It is. Salah offers many Muslims a steady pattern of worship throughout the day and is one of the most important ways they feel close to Allah. It's expected of Muslims who have reached puberty and are physically and mentally able to pray.

Ben: What does Salah involve?

Mehreen: Salah involves praying five times a day, at fixed points between early morning and nighttime. They stop, face the Ka'aba in Makkah, the holiest city in Islam, and pray. They also recite verses from the Qur'an.

Ben: And is that where the call to prayer comes in?

Mehreen: Yes. In some countries, Muslims hear the Adhan, which is the name for the call to prayer.

Ben: What does the act of prayer involve?

Mehreen: In prayer, Muslims go through a sequence of actions, known as rak'ah, including standing, bowing and prostrating. These movements express submission to Allah and remind Muslims that Allah comes before everything else.

Ben: And the duty of prayer, or Salah, is an important part of Muslim life, isn't it? And as Salah is the second Pillar of Islam, we know it's very important.

Mehreen: Absolutely. As a Muslim, Salah keeps me connected to Allah, encourages self-discipline, and reminds me of my purpose on this earth and to be grateful.

Ben: Are there any differences between Sunni and Shi'a prayer?

Mehreen: There are some differences. Shi'a Muslims may combine certain prayers, meaning they still perform the five daily prayers but sometimes pray them at three set times instead of five separate times. They also prostrate on something natural, for example, a piece of earth in the form of a clay tablet that many Shi'a Muslims carry.

Ben: Let's move on to the next Pillar of Islam.

Mehreen: Listen to this reading from the Qur'an, chapter 2 verse 110:

"Establish prayer and give Zakah."

Ben: That reading emphasises the importance of prayer and Zakah. Let's explore Zakah a bit more.

Mehreen: Zakah is the third of the Five Pillars in Islam. Muslims see wealth as a blessing given by Allah and believe it should be used responsibly. Those who can afford to are therefore expected to give a fixed proportion of their wealth to specific categories of eligible recipients set out in the Qur'an.

Ben: Zakah is also the third Obligatory Act for many Shi'a Muslims, meaning it applies to all Muslims that have enough money to do this.

Mehreen: That's right. The word Zakah is linked to the idea of purification. It's about cleaning the heart of selfishness and greed. By giving in this way, Muslims both help people who are struggling and show obedience to Allah.

Ben: The Fourth Pillar of Islam (and the second Obligatory Act for Shi'a Muslims) is Sawm. What does that mean?

Mehreen: Sawm is the duty to fast from just before dawn until sunset. Muslims carry out this fast in the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, in the holy month of Ramadan.

Mehreen: That drumming you hear is a Ramadan drummer, a traditional fixture of Ramadan in Turkey.

Ben: Tell us more about Ramadan, Mehreen.

Mehreen: Ramadan is the month when most Muslims believe the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) on Laylat al-Qadr, the Night of Power. The Qur'an teaches Muslims to fast in this month, so fasting becomes a powerful act of worship and obedience.

Let me read this to you from the Qur'an, chapter 2 verse 183:

“Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of Allah.”

Mehreen: This quote is a reminder to Muslims of why fasting is obligatory. During Ramadan, Muslims who are physically able and not exempt are required to fast from dawn to sunset.

Ben: How do you experience Ramadan?

Mehreen: When I was younger, Ramadan felt like a midnight feast or a party. But as I've gotten older, I've learnt that Ramadan is really not about starving yourself and behaving the same in every other aspect of your life. It's a time of reflection and to be the best version of yourself.

Ben: What else does Ramadan involve?

Mehreen: Many Muslims cut down on distractions and spend more time praying, reading the Qur'an, going to the mosque and supporting others.

Ben: Let's look at Hajj - the final and Fifth Pillar of Islam and the fourth Obligatory Act for most Shi'a Muslims.

Mehreen: Hajj is a pilgrimage, a special journey with religious meaning. Adult Muslims who are healthy and can afford it are expected to make this journey at least once in their lives. Taking part in Hajj can deepen a Muslim's faith and give a sense of belonging to the worldwide Muslim community.

Ben: Make sure you listen to our episode where we talk about why Hajj is significant to Muslims. Mehreen also talks about her experience of taking her family!

Mehreen: That's right!

Ben: We covered how the Five Pillars influence Sunni Muslims to submit to Allah and make sacrifices which allow faith to be lived out in daily life. Let's look at the Ten Obligatory Acts we've not covered yet.

Mehreen: Yes, duties like prayer, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage overlap. But the Ten Obligatory Acts also include some extra duties that are important in Shi'a Islam.

Ben: Let's talk about these in more detail.

Mehreen: One important duty in Shi'a Islam is Jihad. Jihad means 'struggle', and it applies to all Muslims. The most important type is the Greater Jihad — the personal struggle to live a good and faithful life every day.

Ben: Then we have Khums.

Mehreen: Khums is an additional financial obligation. Shi'a Muslims give a set proportion of their surplus income, which is then distributed to support religious authorities, the wider community, and those in need.

Ben: And the final four Obligatory Acts for Shi'a Muslims come in pairs, don't they?

Mehthree: That's right. Amr bil Ma'ruf is about encouraging what is good. Nahi Anil Munkar is about speaking out against what is wrong.

Ben: And the last two of the Ten Obligatory Acts?

Mehreen: Tawallah is about showing love and loyalty to good and righteous people. Tabarra means rejecting injustice and distancing yourself from wrongdoing.

Ben: So why are the Ten Obligatory acts significant for Muslims, Mehreen?

Mehreen: Together they bring worship, generosity and ethical behaviour under one umbrella.

Ben: That's a great summary.

Mehreen: And don't forget - the Five Pillars and Ten Obligatory Acts focus on how many Muslims practise their faith.

Ben: It's time for a quick quiz. Mehreen come on. Test me!

Mehreen: Alright Ben, this is a quick-fire recap. You ready?

Ben: Let's do it.

Mehreen: Name any two of the Five Pillars of Islam followed by Sunni Muslims.

Ben: Shahadah and Salah.

Mehreen: Yes Ben! Ok. Name any two of the Ten Obligatory Acts followed by Shi'a Muslims.

Ben: Tawallah and Tabarra.

Mehreen: Yes! In what month do many Muslims practice Sawm?

Ben: Ramadan.

Mehreen: Nice work!

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Mehreen: In the next episode we will be exploring all about Hajj.

Ben: Remember there are loads of podcasts to help you with your GCSEs, just search for Bitesize GCSE on BBC Sounds. See you next time!