Hajj

The Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca, which every adult and able-bodied Muslim who can afford to is instructed to do at least once in their lifetime. Hajj occurs in the month of Dhul Hijja, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar.

The tradition of Hajj is said to date back to the time of Abraham, when Abraham’s son Ismael and his wife Hagar were without water in the desert. In the Arabian desert, they found a spring of water, which was later named Zamzam. Abraham built a mosque at the spring, which is still a place of pilgrimage for Muslims.

Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam. It promotes equality and fellowship amongst Muslims and shows worshippers that all believers are equal in the eyes of God.

A pilgrim on Hajj has to wear special white clothes called Ihram. They are forbidden to shave, use makeup or perfume, have sex, kill or hunt animals, fight or argue while on Hajj. Men are not allowed to wear clothing that is too revealing and women are required to cover their hair.

On arrival in Mecca, pilgrims head to Mina, where they spend the day praying in tents. The next day, they go to Mount Arafat, and spend the day praying that they have committed in the past. They spend the night in Muzdalifa, where they pray and gather pebbles to be used on the next day in the pilgrimage.

The day is called Zamzam, and it involves throwing pebbles collected in Muzdalifa at three different pillars (small, medium and large). It is a symbolic act of stoning the devil, which goes back to the story of the devil’s attempts to tempt the prophet Abraham away from obeying God. Pilgrims then return to Mecca, where they pray and gather pebbles to be used on the next day in the pilgrimage.

Festivals and Commemorations

Fid al-Adha, also known as the Greater Eid, is the Festival of Sacrifice. It is a celebration and commemoration of the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his own son when God commanded him to. The devil tried to tempt Abraham into disobeying God, but Abraham was faithful and just before he was going to slaughter his son, God intervened and gave him a lamb to kill as a sacrifice instead.

The celebrations for Eid-ul-Adha involve sacrificing a sheep (in the UK, this must be done at a slaughterhouse). The meat is divided among family and friends, as well as given to the poor. People wear new clothes, and Muslims offer other prayers. In Muslim countries, Eid-ul-Adha is a national holiday and people celebrate with family and friends. Money has to be given to the poor on Eid as part of the celebrations.

In Fitr, it is the Festival of Breaking the Fast, and it occurs at the end of Ramadan. In this festival, Muslims are celebrating the end of the fast but also giving thanks to God for the strength and control that he has given them during the month. The festival is marked by a day of prayer and charity, and families often gather together to celebrate.

As a day commemorated by Muslims, but it has a different significance to the Sunni Muslims. For Shia Muslims, Ashura marks the killing of Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala. For many Muslims, Ashura is a day of mourning and remembering the sacrifice of Imam Hussain and his family.

DUTIES + FESTIVALS

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Zakat

Zakat is the act of paying 2.5% of income and savings to poor people or needy causes. Zakat is collected by the state in some countries such as Pakistan, Libya and Saudi Arabia, but in many other countries, it is due to the individual who is in need. Shari’ah Muslims give a higher amount of zakat, called Khums, to Imams, who then distribute the money to those in need.

Zakat literally means ‘that which purifies’, and it is taught that giving zakat purifies the giver and the receiver. It purifies the receiver because it stops them from being jealous of the rich and it is an acceptance of God’s will. It purifies the giver because it is allowing them to gain true riches from God.

There is guidance in the Qur’an about who should receive zakat. The Qur’an 9:60 states: “Allams are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to Truth); for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer: (thus is) ordained by Allah, and Allah is Full of knowledge and wisdom.”

Zakat therefore acts as a kind of social security, ensuring that the poor are looked after and that relations between rich and poor Muslims are harmonious.

Jihad

As mentioned above, there are numerous interpretations of the word jihad. Jihad can refer to the internal struggle to live a Godly life as a good Muslim, the struggle to create a true Muslim society, or the struggle to defend Islam by military force if necessary.

The Prophet Muhammad referred to the internal struggle as ‘the greater jihad’, this means that the battle within oneself to live a Godly and righteously is the hardest struggle. However, there is some justification for ‘lesser jihad’, or holy war.

There are very strict rules for when this kind of jihad is permitted. For example, it must be always in self-defense; it must be started by a religious leader; its cause must be noble and something that God would approve of; wounded enemies must be treated in the same way as one’s own soldiers; women, children and old people should not be harmed. The Qur’an also says that the war must stop as soon as the enemy asks for peace (Qur’an 8:61).

Sawn

Sawn is the fourth pillar of Islam. It involves fasting during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. As well as food and drink, adults must also give up smoking and sexual intercourse in daylight hours. There are a number of people who are excused from taking part in sawm, including: the elderly; people with diabetes or other health conditions which would make fasting dangerous; children under 12; people who are pregnant, breastfeeding or menstruating; people who are travelling. If an adult has been excused from sawm for any of these reasons, they should aim to fast at another point or make a donation to charity instead.

During Ramadan, Muslims who are fasting will eat a large meal just before dawn, in order to set them up for a day without food and water. At the setting of the sun, they will break their fast with dates or water, before having a larger meal later. These evening meals during Ramadan are often events where family and communities get together.

The Ninth of Muharram, or Lailat al-Qadr, falls in the month of Ramadan. This marks the night when the Qur’an was first revealed to the angel Jibril to the prophet Muhammad. It is regarded as a very special and holy night.

the Qur’an 97:3 says it is “better than a thousand months”, and it is an especially good time for Muslims to pray and recite the Qur’an.

Ramadan ends with Eid al-Fitr, which involves celebrating with prayers at the mosque and meals with family and friends.

Fasting during Ramadan promotes lots of things that are beneficial to the individual, such as:

- increased interaction and submission to God
- self-discipline
- a renewed appreciation of God’s gifts
- empathy for the suffering of the poor
- a new understanding of the values of charity and generosity
- a way of giving thanks for the Qur’an which was revealed to Muhammad in the month of Ramadan
- a way of connecting to other Muslims

Five Pillars of Islam

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