

# ‘Ibādah

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## Source:

*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*

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*‘Ibādah* (pl. *‘ibādāt*) refers to service, servitude, and by extension the very notion of religious worship in Islam. The concept of *‘ibādah* lies at the very heart of the expression of the relationship between humanity and God in the Qur‘ān and its subsequent elaborations in Islamic law and religious practice. The Qur‘ān uses the verbal form *ya‘budūn* to describe the creation of human beings as linked to the notion of a primacy placed on the worship of God: “I did not create the jinn and human beings but to worship me (*illā li-ya‘budūnī*)” (51:56). This concept of servitude is extended to all creation in a number of Qur‘ānic passages including: “None is in the heavens and the earth but comes before the All-Merciful as a servant” (19:93). Thus, the demonstration of service or worship by the servants of God (*‘ibād Allāh*) is ultimately the prescribed goal of all in existence.

The performance of ritual acts of worship has been the subject of considerable Qur‘ānic and legal discourse. Works of *fiqh* commonly treat acts of religious worship (*‘ibādāt*) in contrast to religious transactions (*mu‘āmalāt*). The distinction between religious worship and transactions is a theoretical distinction rather than one that corresponds to the multivalent expressions of religious worship in social practice. While both Shī‘ī and Sunnī works on law tend to treat *‘ibādāt*, preceded by issues of ritual purity (*ṭahārah*), in a manner based on the exposition of the ritual acts of worship among the “five pillars of Islam” (prayer, *zakāt*, fasting, and pilgrimage), the relationship between *‘ibādāt* and *mu‘āmalāt* is not unambiguous. For instance, the connection between the performance of ritual acts of worship and *mu‘āmalāt* can be seen in the prescriptions related to a range of religious obligations that extend beyond the five pillars of Islam such as the provisions relating to marriage, the hunting and slaughter of animals, the taking of oaths, the expiation of sin, circumambulation of the Ka‘bah during pilgrimage, and even the degree to which transactional matters are to include praise, glorification, and remembrance of God.

*‘Ibādah* in Islamic discourses cannot be seen as solely resulting from the accumulated weight of textual stipulations but as the product of cumulative interpretive enterprises forged by Muslim communities over time. Thus, the range of acts of worship considered a reflection of *‘ibādah* have been historically determined with reference to the Qur‘ān, *sunnah*, and social practice. The Qur‘ān rarely addresses the details of the specific forms of religious worship. The text alludes to a number of dimensions of religious worship and

practices that are assumed to be known elements of religious life with the practical manifestations of these forms taken to be implicit. Even with regard to the specific acts of religious worship implied by the five pillars of Islam, the relationship between the Qur‘ān, *sunnah*, and the social practice of Muslim communities is necessary to define the particular modes of expression. For example, though the Qur‘ān clearly emphasizes prayer as an essential dimension of *‘ibādah*, the Qur‘ānic text does not unambiguously define five times for daily prayer, nor the precise sequence of bodily postures or number of “cycles” necessary for its successful completion (17:78–79 and 2:238). The number and times of the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) is primarily indicated by *ḥadīth* literature and other extra-Qur‘ānic materials. Hence, the specific timings and manner of prayer have been the subject of considerable discourse by both Shī‘ī and Sunnī legal scholars. Consequently, in prayer, as is the case in other stipulated ritual forms of worship such as *ḥājj*, fasting, *zakāt*, and other devotional practices including recitation of the Qur‘ān (*tilāwah*) and remembrance (*dhikr*), the textual traditions and social practice can be seen as conterminously shaping Muslim conceptions of *‘ibādah*.

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