

QURANIC TEACHINGS: MAJOR PRACTICES

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, the Quranic teaching on the practice of the faith and the organization of the community came to be elaborated and certain basic ritual practices emerged. These are often termed *pillars*, and have come to be regarded as religious practices that anchor human relationships with God and with others within the *Ummah*.

Shahadah, the Profession of Faith

“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger” (“*La ilaha illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah*”) is the statement of Muslim acceptance of the basis of Islam. This profession is whispered at birth, at death, during daily prayers, and at virtually all other events of significance in individual and community life. For a new convert to Islam, it represents the initial act of commitment that henceforth leads to an acceptance of all other aspects of Islam. The profession is also a statement of faith, inasmuch as it comprises essential elements of belief. The first statement (“*La ilaha illa Allah*”) affirms acceptance of the absolute unity of God and the second statement (“*wa Muhammad rasul Allah*”) relates this unity to the medium through which the Absolute becomes manifested. This manifestation thus makes it possible for human beings to respond to God in this world. The *shahadah* thus links God, the Prophet, and the believers.

Salat, Dhikr, and Du'a: Acts of Worship

Three practices articulate the Quranic concept of worship. *Salat* is the formal ritual prayer for which both patterns and times are indicated, and further elaborated, based on Prophetic practice and tradition.

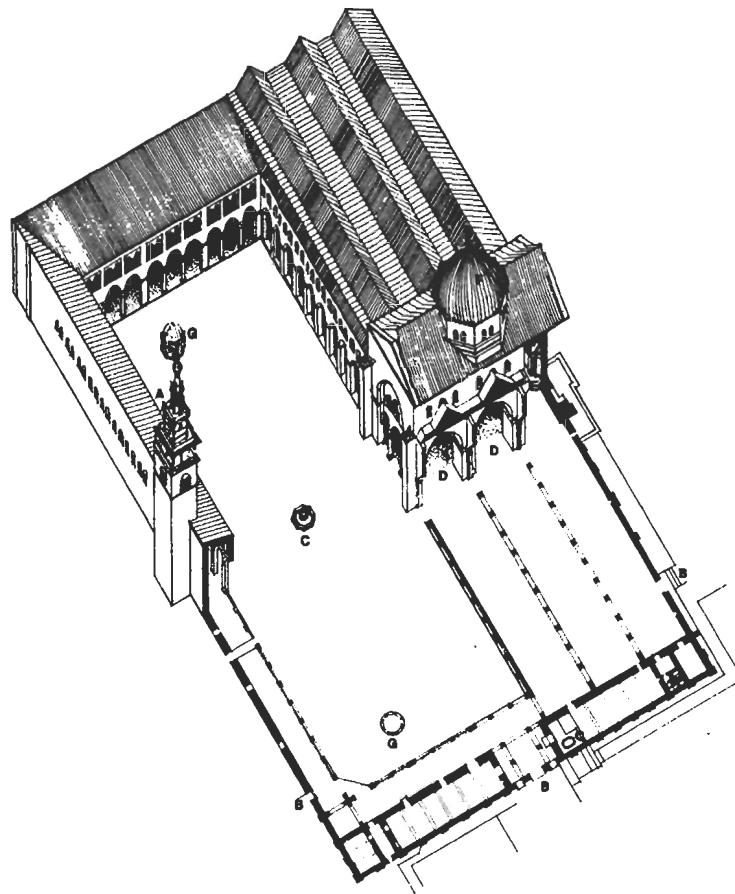
Dhikr and *Du'a* represent individual attempts to draw near to God in a more personal relationship. These aspects of worship are referred to in the Quran as follows:

Establish prayer [*salat*] at the two ends of the day and in the later part of night. Surely good deeds erase evil ones. This is a reminder [*dhikra*] for those who are mindful. (11:114)

Muslims may pray at any time, although the traditional times for ritual prayer are dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and late evening, some of which may be combined. When possible, Muslims are urged to join with others, particularly for the Friday congregational ritual prayer at noon. *Salat* is preceded by an act of ablution in which Muslims purify themselves. The cleaning involves the hands and the arms, the mouth and the nostrils, and finally the feet and the ankles. All mosques provide facilities for this act of cleansing. Running water is used if available. Where water is unavailable, sand or a stone is used for a symbolic cleansing of the same parts of the body. This act of ablution links water as the symbol of purity to the idea of prayer as the means of purification of the soul. The ritual of cleansing is therefore inseparable from the ritual of prayer itself, reflecting a commitment to the total state of outer and inner purity.

Any clean place may be chosen for prayer, although when possible Muslims are encouraged to pray with others at a mosque or other congregational spaces. Prayers are customarily performed on prayer carpets where these are available. These carpets are intricately decorated, the patterns incorporating a niche with a lamp in it. The niche is the symbol of orientation to Mecca and the lamp signifies illumination, the light of understanding and faith that comes through prayer.

The *salat* begins with a call to prayer often recited from the *minarets* that adorn a mosque, inviting the believers to hasten to the virtuous act of prayer. An individual competent in performing the prayer acts as a leader called *Imam*, with the congregation gathered behind him in straight rows. All face in the direction of Mecca, which serves as a point of orientation referred to as the *qiblah*. The prayer consists of two to four units,



The Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. Profile of the Great Mosque of Damascus, shown in a cutaway diagram. The letters indicate the locations of (A) the minaret from which the call to prayer is made; (B) gateways through which worshipers enter the large courtyard; (C) the fountain and places for ablution where worshipers purify themselves ritually before proceeding to (D) the prayer halls where they stand facing the qiblah, the direction to Mecca designated by (E) the mihrab. The outside of a mosque is often characterized by (F) a dome; and some mosques have (G) a treasury for charitable contributions and other donations for activities related to the mosque. (Courtesy of George Baumiller)

depending on the time, and involves the recitation of the first Quranic chapter—*al Fatihah*:

In the name of Allah, most Gracious, most Merciful
 All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds
 The most Gracious, the most Merciful.
 Lord of the Day of Judgment.
 You alone we worship
 and from You alone we seek help
 Guide us on the right path,

the path of those on whom you have bestowed grace,

not of those with whom you have been displeased,
 nor those who have gone astray. (1:1-7)

In addition, other verses from the Quran are recited. The recitation is accompanied by bowing and prostration in a rhythmic cycle. Each complete ritual movement, known as *rak'ah*, follows a set pattern based on the example of Muhammad.

The pattern of *salat* may be divided into seven steps:

1. The first step consists of facing the *qiblah* (Mecca), raising one's hands to the ears, and pronouncing the *takbir*, or recitation of praise: "God is Great" ("Allahu Akbar"). The worshiper remains silent, readying his attention for the performance of the prayer.
2. During the second step, known as the "standing," the chapter *al-Fatiha* is recited together with additional verses from the Quran.
3. With the recitation of another *takbir*, the worshiper bows, with his hands on his knees, and in this bent position, praises God.
4. After resuming the standing position, the worshiper prostrates with the forehead touching the ground, as a sign of humility and submission.
5. The fifth step involves raising oneself from prostration while reciting another *takbir* and remaining in a sitting position, praying.
6. There follows another act of prostration, when the praises of God are repeated.
7. The final step involves the sitting position and silent recitation of a personal prayer, after which the individual worshipers turn their faces to the right and the left to greet their neighbors. This greeting, or *salam*, concludes the prayer proper. However, it must be noted that where additional *rak'ahs* are to be said, the first six steps are always repeated.

In the prayer the words of supplication and praise, the postures of submission, and the acts of cleansing all come together to symbolize the meaning of true worship, integrating the Muslim into a rhythm of universal adoration. The parts of the prayer also remind them of their created state, the sense of direction in life symbolized by the *qiblah*, the goal of purification necessary for spiritual life, and the fellowship of the *Ummah*, through which they participate in the worship of God.

On Friday, Muslims are enjoined to take part in a congregational prayer at noon. The prayer has a special social significance in most Muslim countries, where Friday is often a public holiday, although

Islam does not recognize the notion of a "sabbath," or a day set aside for specifically spiritual activities. The times of prayer are meant to conform to the rhythm of the daily cycle of life so that the prayers complement other activities, rather than being an escape from the ordinary pattern of life.

The term *masjid*, "mosque," which has come to refer to the place of formal prayer in Islam, literally means "a place of prostration." It can thus be any place where the believer responds to God either individually or in congregation by paying Him homage in a state of purity. Most mosques share certain common features. Within, the *qiblah*, or direction to Mecca, is signified by a niche, called *mihrab*, often adorned with Quranic writings and other designs. Next to it, there is a rostrum called the *minbar*, from which a preacher addresses the congregation. Such an address is an integral part of the congregational Friday prayer and is called a *khutba*. Outside the mosque, the features most easily noticeable are the *minaret* and the open courtyard. The *minaret* is the focus of the call to prayer. From here the caller, the *muezzin*, chants the words calling the faithful to worship. Within the courtyard, there is invariably a fountain and places where the worshipers may perform the acts of cleansing. Many mosques also have domes. These features have however been adapted or incorporated in many parts of the Muslim world to vernacular architecture and by using local materials. The wide range of mosque designs, structures, and scale, indicate the key role of the mosque, in symbolizing the aspect of unity in Islam perhaps more than any other physical structure in the Muslim world.

Dhikr, remembrance of God, and *du'a*, a voluntary or private prayer, are the other forms of worship that complement the ritual prayer in Islam. They provide an opportunity for meditation and contemplation within the heart and a way of drawing closer to God. The ritual act of prayer, with its formal aspects and physical orientation to Mecca, is complemented by remembrance, which draws the individual inward, creating an inner sense of harmony and peace. The Quran emphasizes this aspect in the verse that states, "Surely in the



Inside a Mosque. The mihrab (niche) and the mihrab (pulpit) inside the famous Sultan Hasan Mosque in Cairo. (Courtesy of Fred Denny)

remembrance of Allah, do hearts find peace" (13:28).

The essence of such prayers is devotion and adoration. Muslims consider Muhammad's vigils on Mount Hira and his profoundly moving experiences of revelation and closeness to God as examples of such worship. Such devotion is also reflected in prayers preserved from the sayings of well-known devotees, such as a Muslim woman called Rabia, who lived in the eighth century:

My Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.¹

The goal of these forms of worship, representing the devotional spirit in Islam, is to bring believers into daily communication with the Creator through public as well as personal and private actions.

Zakat, Purification Through Sharing

Many of the verses of the Quran that enjoin worship also make it obligatory for Muslims to pay a

share of their wealth to the community. The word *zakat* means "purification," thus indicating that the act of sharing is a necessary prelude to making one's wealth and property pure. The amount varies according to the category of wealth or property, being calculated differently on agricultural products, cash, precious metals, and livestock.

The Quran also specifies the purposes for which dues from the *zakat* are to be used, including aid for the poor, the needy, and those heavily in debt who require assistance, as well as for education, health services, and facilities for travelers. The duty of *zakat* is coupled with that of charity, which may range from almsgiving to a kind act:

Those who share their wealth in Allah's way may be compared to a grain which grows seven ears, each with a hundred grains. Allah grants an increase to whom He will. (2:261)

A kind word of forgiveness is better than an act of charity followed by harm. (2:263)

Quranic injunctions, though they condemn the hoarding of wealth and economic injustice, also urged individuals and the community at large to act as trustees, through whose acts of sharing the

moral and spiritual vision of a just society could be fulfilled. An equitable sharing of justly earned wealth, through *zakat*, was thus a key element in redressing imbalance and poverty.

Ramadan, the Month of Fasting

The Quran prescribes fasting for all able, adult Muslims for the period of the month of *Ramadan* (the ninth month of the Muslim calendar). Fasting begins at daybreak and ends after the setting of the sun. The spiritual, moral, and physical discipline observed during these hours included a more intensive commitment to the values and practices of Islam as well as refraining from food, drink, and sexual activity. The month of *Ramadan* is singled out because the Quran was first revealed during that month, the night of the first revelation being described as the "night of power." On this night Muslims stay up, praying, remembering God, and reading the Quran until daybreak.

The rhythm of abstinence and quietude during the daylight hours of *Ramadan* alternates with times of feasting and socializing throughout the evenings. When the time of sunset arrives, the fast is broken in the traditional manner of eating a few dates and having a refreshing drink. Prayers follow, and then part of the night is spent sharing a meal with family and friends. The evenings reflect an air of gaiety, with most of the cities and towns alive with people, mingled with a stronger sense of piety reflected in prayers and intense reading of the Quran. The spirit of joy and festivity reaches its climax after the last day of fasting. The following day is called *'Id al Fit̄r*, a time of celebration, feasting, and sharing; this day is one of the major festivals in the Muslim year.

Fasting has significance in Islam at several levels: It commemorates the experience of revelation that was granted to Muhammad; it singles out a month in the changing lunar calendar during which all adult Muslims practice a common act of discipline, self-denial, and self-examination; it enlarges their sympathy and compassion for persons deprived of the daily means of survival; and finally it establishes a continuity of practice with religions

such as Judaism and Christianity, in which fasting is recognized as an important practice.

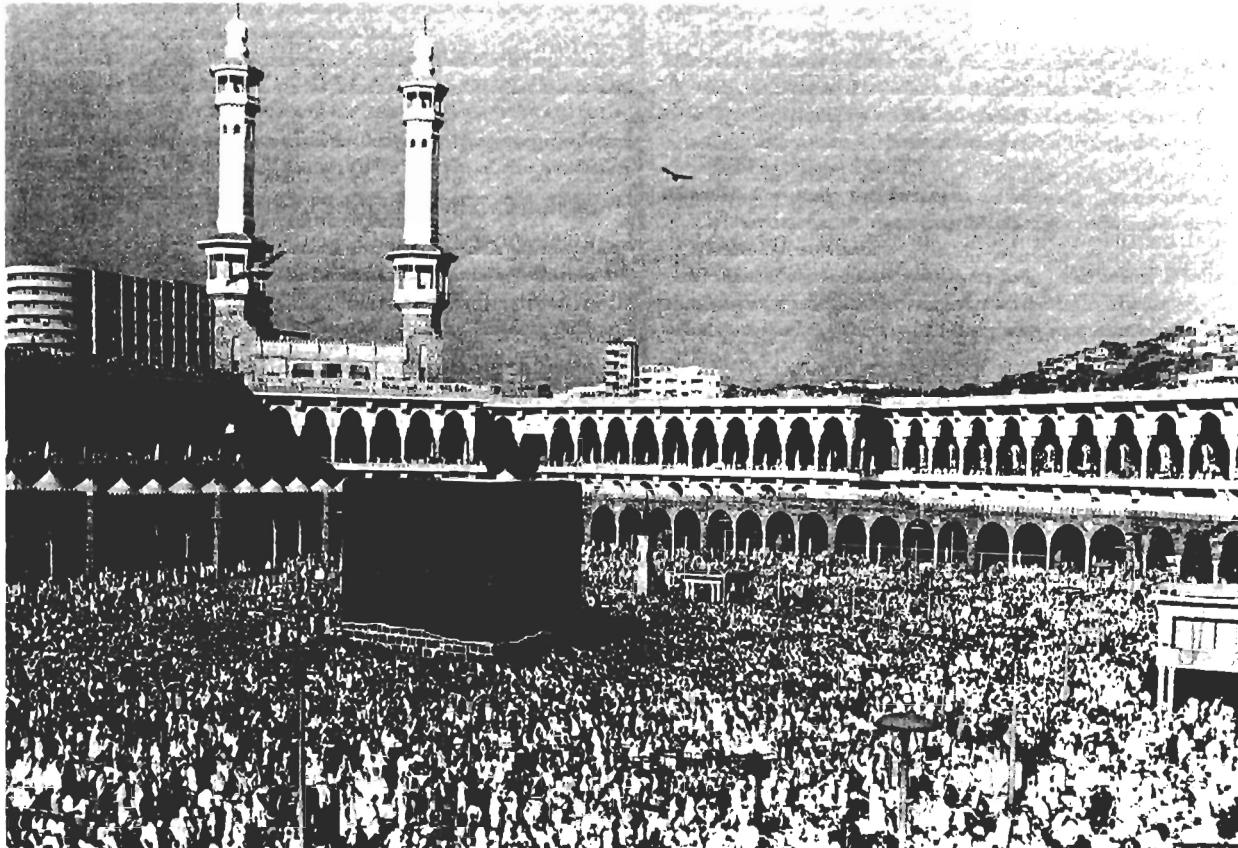
Hajj, the Pilgrimage

The ritual event that represents one of the peak experiences in the life of a Muslim is the *Hajj* or Pilgrimage to the sacred places of Islam in and around Mecca. This duty is prescribed for Muslims unless it becomes financially too burdensome or renders the individual and the family destitute. The *Hajj* takes place in "The Month of *Hajj*" (*Dhu-l-Hijjah*), the last month of the Muslim year.

The event can best be understood by tracing the steps through which pilgrims pass and noting the significance of the places and objects they encounter during the *Hajj*. The occasion begins even before departure from home for Arabia, for the period before departure is spent readying oneself emotionally and spiritually.

When the pilgrims arrive in the vicinity of Mecca, they enter into a state called *ihram* or sacredness. Men do this by putting on two seamless garments; women don a simple, modest gown and a headcovering. In this state, the pilgrims refrain from shaving hair, cutting nails, and wearing jewelry or other adornments; they also abstain from any acts of violence, hunting, and sexual relations. It is in this purified state that the pilgrims make a commitment to fulfill the duties that are to follow.

The sequence of rituals that follow lead most pilgrims first to the sanctuary of the *Ka'ba*. Before the rise of Islam, this sanctuary was used by the Arabs for their own religious festivals and to house the images of their divinities. When the Prophet conquered Mecca, he cleansed it of all its idols. In the Quran the *Ka'ba* is referred to as the "Sacred House" (5:97) and the "sanctuary established for humanity" (2:125). In Islam, therefore, the significance of the *Ka'ba* lies in its being the symbol of the initial human attempt to express a relationship with God. The Quran also refers to it as the "place of Abraham" (2:125), which he and Ishmael, his son, sanctified for the worship of the One true God. It is thus also the link between Islam and the tradition of Abraham.



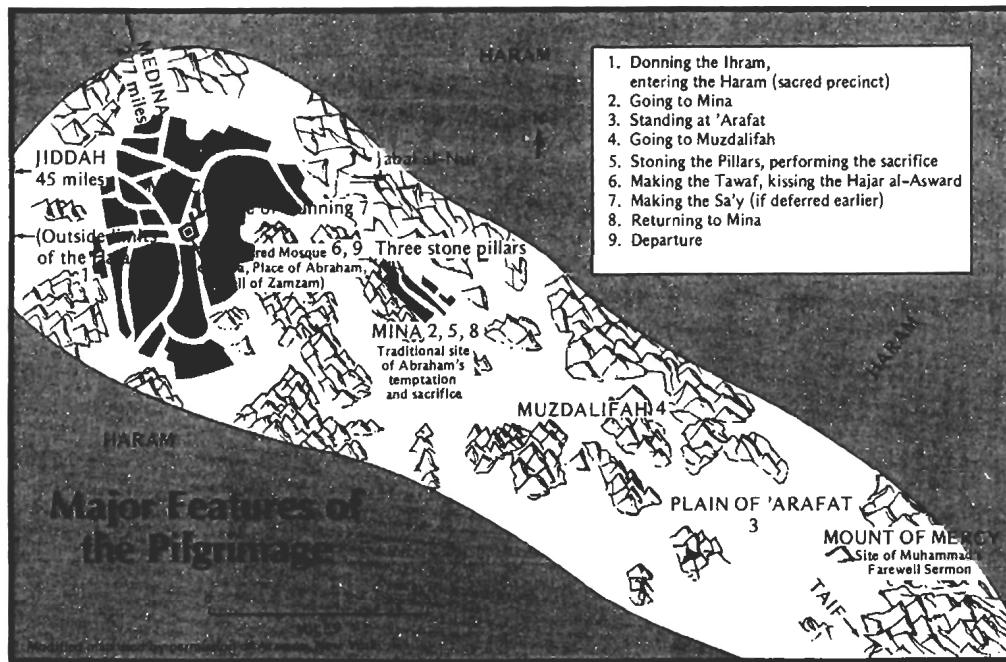
The Ka'ba. The Ka'ba during the Pilgrimage. (Courtesy of the Ministry of Information: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

The *Ka'ba* is not merely a structure signifying the physical axis of the Muslim world, the direction to which all Muslims turn in prayer. It also has a cosmic significance in Islam, for it is the symbol of the human encounter with the Divine for all times. As the symbolic center, it is the point toward which all Muslims converge daily for prayer and once during their lives, if possible, for pilgrimage.

The stone structure is located in the middle of the courtyard of Mecca's great mosque. It is about fifty feet high, cubical in shape, with its four corners aligned with the cardinal points of the compass. It is covered with a cloth, generally black in recent times, and embroidered in gold thread with verses from the Quran. In one corner of the *Ka'ba*, set within the wall, is the Black Stone, which Muslims, following the tradition of the Prophet while

he was on Pilgrimage, kiss or touch. The stone is believed to be a relic that has survived from the time of Abraham.

Upon first entering Mecca, all pilgrims pay their respect to this central symbol of Islam. They perform the "circling" of the *Ka'ba*, going around it seven times in a counterclockwise direction. Having done this, the pilgrims embark on the *Hajj* proper. Moving away from the center, the pilgrims run between two spots called *Safa* and *Marwa*. This ritual (called *sa'y*) signifies the running of *Hagar*, Abraham's second wife, as she sought water for their son *Ishmael*. Islamic tradition states that when Abraham left *Hagar* and *Ishmael* there on his mission for God, he promised that God would not abandon them. When the small supply of dates and water ran out, *Hagar* ran between the two



spots, searching desperately for water for her thirsty son. The spot during her quest when water miraculously sprang forth is called the Well of *Zam-Zam*. It is now enclosed in a marble chamber, and pilgrims draw water from it to drink and take home to share with others as a symbol of God's mercy and care.

The next ritual takes the pilgrims from Mecca to Mina, a few miles away. After spending the night there, they proceed to the plains of Arafat. There the whole day is spent in remembrance, meditation, and prayer, and the pilgrims remain standing for as long as they can. In fact, the ritual is called "the Standing," and the pilgrimage cannot be considered complete without its performance. Just before sunset, everyone proceeds to Muzdalifah, a place between Arafat and Mina, where they spend the night.

Before daybreak the next day, the pilgrims leave to return to Mina. There they participate in a ceremony of stoning three pillars. The pillars symbolize evil, and the stoning, an act of repudiation. Tradition also recounts that the stoning has its

roots in Abraham's rejection of Satan, who tried to persuade him to disobey God's command to sacrifice his son.

After this event, the pilgrims prepare for the festival of *'Id al Adha*, the Festival of Sacrifice. In commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, the pilgrims ritually slaughter a sheep, goat, or camel and give away a portion of the meat to the poor. Muslims all over the world celebrate the same event by performing an identical sacrifice, thus uniting in spirit to honor the end of the Pilgrimage. The pilgrims now gradually begin to resume their normal lives, but must await the final act of circling the *Ka'ba* seven times before they can no longer be considered in a state of *ihram*. After the circling, the pilgrims worship at a location called "the Place of Abraham" that is also within the courtyard of the mosque. The Pilgrimage is now completed and each pilgrim can be honored by the title of *hajji* for men and *hajjiyah* for women, a designation that brings much respect in the various communities to which the pilgrims now return.

The Pilgrimage is a dramatic reenactment of the founding of Islam. Historically, these rituals were performed by the Prophet Muhammad. But the rituals also remind pilgrims of an earlier time, the founding of the *Ka'ba* by Abraham as a sanctuary in which to worship God. Thus, the pilgrims are taken farther back into history, where the roots of Islam are traced in God's communication with Abraham. At the same time the state of *ihram* puts each pilgrim in a state of equality with all other pilgrims, affirming a sense of oneness and fellowship. Within the precincts of the *Ka'ba*, the pilgrims affirm the Quranic concepts of a God who has communicated with humans from time immemorial and of a community that is drawn from all over the world, of which each pilgrim is an integral part. The days of the *Hajj* mark a separation of the individuals from their daily lives to which they can now return with a renewed sense of commitment to God and to the *Ummah*, whose founding experiences they have witnessed and shared during the pilgrimage.

Other Significant Practices and Places

In addition to the practices of Islam mentioned above, Muslims observe and honor several important days and places because they are referred to in the Quran and are linked to the Prophet's life.

Besides the *Ka'ba* and the sacred places around Mecca, importance is given to the cities of Medina and Jerusalem, called *al-Quds*, "the Holy," in Arabic. Muslims revere Medina as the place that offered Muhammad safety and a home, as the city in which the *Ummah* was established, and as the site of the Prophet's mosque and tomb. Jerusalem is significant because it was the first point of orientation of prayer for the early Muslims. During Muhammad's early preaching in Mecca, the Quran enjoined Muslims to face in the direction of Jerusalem when praying. Later, the direction was changed to the *Ka'ba* in Mecca. The city is also associated with the "Farthest Mosque" referred to in connection with an event described in the Quran as the *miraj*, a journey into heaven by Muhammad (17:1). This night is commemorated by Muslims at

special gatherings. Jerusalem is also the location of one of the earliest and best-known sites in Islam, the Dome of the Rock. This site is sacred to Muslims because it recalls Abraham, David, Solomon, and Jesus, as well as being the place associated with Muhammad's *miraj*, thus establishing a point of continuity among the great prophets sent by God and relating Muslims to the "People of the Book."

Two major festivals have already been referred to in connection with the month of fasting and the pilgrimage. Muslims also celebrate the birthday of the Prophet with great rejoicing and prayers. See Table 9-1 for a more complete description of the Islamic calendar.