Islam is Built on Five

A well-known hadith, the essence of which is familiar to most Muslims states, “Islam is built on five (things): testifying that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, establishing the salah (prayer), paying the zakah (obligatory charity), making the hajj (pilgrimage) to the House, and fasting in Ramadan.”

Despite this hadith being so famous, it is often misunderstood, and is thought to be just defining what Islam is. While it is correct to say that the five things mentioned in this hadith are integral to the Islamic faith as known from Hadith Jibril, which has been discussed in detail in the previous khutbas, yet this hadith talks more about the structure of Islam. The word بُنِىَ (buniya) in the hadith is made up of the three letters root ب ن ي which means ‘built on.’ From the same root letters, we also have the word بنایة (binayah), which means a building, structure, or edifice. This hadith is at times mistranslated as ‘Islam is based on five (pillars),’ whereas there is no word in the hadith that means pillars. This hadith has also come to be known as ‘Arkan ul Islam’ (the Pillars of Islam).

If we were to visualize Islam as it is presented in this hadith, it would be appropriate to conceive it as a structure with a foundation and pillars to support it. Islam is not just the pillars, but the floors, walls, roofing, and other bits and pieces that go to construct it into a proper building—one that would shelter us and keep us safe and secure from the storms of shirk, kufr, and other evils. Islam in its generic meaning includes the concepts of peace and submission, and from a spiritual perspective may be defined as attaining peace through submission to God alone. This concept of peace embraces peace within and peace without—peace with the Creator, peace with His creation, peace with oneself, and peace with one’s surroundings.

Unfortunately, Islam has been reduced to connote only its ‘five pillars.’ It took Prophet Muhammad (SAW) 13 years at Mecca to lay the foundation of Islam, and 10 years at Madina to construct its pillars and other levels. It was only after 23 years that the edifice of Islam was constructed to its perfection with Allah’s approval; an approval that resonates with the voice of assurance: “Today I have perfected your deen for you and completed My blessing upon you and I am pleased with Islam as a deen for you” (al-Ma’idah, 5:3). This Islam is the only way of life (deen) that is acceptable to Allah (SWT). “Truly, the deen in the sight of Allah is Islam” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:19).

Regrettably, this great structure of the Deen of Islam, so assiduously constructed by Muhammad (SAW) and his companions has been, over the past several hundred years and more notably after the demise of the Ottoman Caliphate decreased from a deen to just a religion. The essential components of human life—the political, economic, and social affairs, or the public and civic affairs, were taken out of the domain of Islam, reducing Islam to just a religion. In essence, Islam was reduced to merely a set of beliefs—the belief in One God, Angels,
Books, Prophets, Resurrection, Judgment Day, and Heaven and Hell; a set of rituals such as *salah*, *zakah*, *sawm*, and *hajj*; a set of social customs detailing celebration and mourning of major life events such as birth, marriage, and death, and one’s personal and private affairs. Divine Guidance has no place in the collective affairs of people in the contemporary secular world.

As opposed to this, Islam demands that Allah (SWT) be at the center of all human affairs, the private and the public; the individual and the collective. Islam is a complete structure with a politico-socio-economic order based on the ideology of *tawheed*. Traditionally and simply expressed, *tawheed* is the conviction and witnessing that “there is no god but God” (*la ilaha illallah*), and this brief statement, preached, practiced, and manifested in the life and teachings of the Messenger of Allah—Muhammad (SAW) is the foundation of the structure of Islam. Along with this foundation (the *shahadatan*), the other four constituents—*salah*, *zakah*, *sawm*, and *hajj* are integral to Islam and go together to support the super structure or the entire edifice of Islam.

Essentially, the structure of Islam consists of three levels: the sub-level foundation, the plinth, and the structure above it. Faith (*iman*) as we know has to do with attestation by the tongue (the visible part of the foundation, plinth), and conviction in the heart (the invisible part of the foundation). The three levels on which Islam is to be built are basically our duties toward the *deen* of Allah (SWT). The last two *ayah* of Surat al-Hajj go hand in hand with the *hadith* under discussion. Thus, “O you who believe, bow and prostrate and worship (make *ibadah to) your Lord, and do good, so you may be successful. And strive hard for (the cause of) Allah as is His due” (al-Hajj, 22:77-78). One has to be a believer in God (a Muslim) to begin with, and has to bow and prostrate to Allah (SWT). These gestures of bowing and prostrating according to the exegetes of the Qur’an (*mufassirun*) are indicative of fulfillment of the modes of worship of *salah*, *zakah*, *sawm*, and *hajj*. This covers the foundation of the building as well as its pillars.

The second command, “*and worship (make ‘ibadah to) your Lord*” may be perceived as the first level of the structure of Islam. At this level, one should become mindful of God, accept Him as one’s true Master, surrender oneself completely to His will, and become His true slave (*‘abd*).

Doing good unto others as commanded in this *ayah* goes toward completing the second level of the structure of Islam. The command to do good unto others as understood within the context of this *ayah* is not restricted to helping the poor and the needy only, but extends to calling humanity at large to the message of Islam and to trying to save people from the eternal doom in the hereafter. This involves calling people to the worship and obedience of One God rather than other deities, be they one’s lusts, one’s wealth, or the numerous man-made ‘isms’ such as secularism, socialism, communism, humanism, materialism, to mention only a few.

The third and final level has to do with striving in the path of Allah. “*Strive hard for (the cause of) Allah as is His due*” (al-Hajj, 22:78). This is to ensure that the entire way of life (*deen*) becomes wholly and totally as ordained by Allah. “*And the deen is Allah’s alone*” (al-Anfal, 8:39). This is also the manifestation of the prayer ‘*Thy Kingdom come. Thy shall be done on earth as it is in Heaven,*’ so ardently chanted in the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ by Christians of all denominations. God’s Kingdom refers to God’s Rule, the consequence of which is justice, here, on earth. Who is to bring about this justice on earth; only those who profess to believe in Allah. This calls for making the word of Allah reign supreme. “*And the word of Allah is supreme. Allah is Almighty, All-Wise*” (al-Taubah, 9:40).

Sadly, the structure of Islam alluded to in the *hadith* is not comprehended by the majority of Muslims. Generally, they are self-satisfied with the mere performance of rituals and other mundane activities geared towards promoting their name, fame, status, and wealth. It is little wonder that there is no real Islam anywhere in the world. Islam in reality is following the Messenger of Allah (SAW) in all matters related to belief (*aqidah*) and implementing Allah’s laws (the *shariah*). The very purpose of our creation is to do *ibadah* (worship and obedience) of Allah. “*I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me*” (al-Dhariyat, 51:56).

Islam has been the core of all Prophetic teachings throughout human history. Every Prophet and his fol-
lowers who lived by the shariah revealed by Allah were Muslims. “For each among you We made a divine law and a way” (al-Ma’idah, 5:48). Ibrahim (AS) was an upright Muslim. “Ibrahim was neither a Jew, nor a Christian, but he was an upright Muslim” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:67). So were all prophets and their true followers. The Islam that we see as a deen which came 14 centuries ago was the final dispensation of Islam. The revelation bestowed upon Muhammad (SAW), the last and final Messenger of Allah contained the last and final shariah that supplants all other previous shariahs revealed through earlier divine scriptures. Therefore, it is now the eternal and universal shariah.

To utter the testimony of faith (shahadatan) is to declare and live by tawheed and to believe in the final messengership of Muhammad (SAW) who was sent by Allah as a mercy to all the worlds. “We have only sent you as a mercy to all the worlds” (al-Anbiya’, 2:107). His mercy manifested itself in the just social order of ‘al-Islam’ that he established during his life time. Islam took people out from darkness into light; from misery into prosperity. Muhammad (SAW) was sent to the entire humanity. “Say, ‘O people, I am Allah’s Messenger to you all” (al-A’raf, 7:158). It was he who constructed Islam brick by brick. Even though many of us may be familiar with the blessed sirah of Muhammad (SAW), especially with things that deal with his habits, attire, and his conduct, not many of us are aware about the efforts he made at a human level to build the edifice of Islam.

As for the four constituents mentioned in the hadith, the salah is a medium to connect spiritually with Allah (SWT); to implore Him, to seek His forgiveness and His help. It pacifies the soul and helps one to exercise self-restraint when one finds oneself overwhelmed by base desires. Salah is an obligatory duty to be performed at all times, during times of war or peace, health or sickness. Salah cannot be done without unless one is insane, or has become absolutely senile, or is in the throes of death.

Zakah purifies one from the niggardliness of one’s soul. Allah asks the Prophet (SAW) to take zakah from people’s wealth. Zakah is spent in charitable causes and in Allah’s path. “Take alms (zakah) from their wealth to purify and cleanse them and pray for them” (al-Taubah, 9:103). There is a stern warning for those who are tight-fisted. “Those who are tight-fisted with the bounty Allah has given them should not suppose that that is better for them. No indeed, it is worse for them! What they were tight-fisted with will be hung around their necks on the Day of Rising. Allah is the inheritor of the heavens and the earth and Allah is aware of what you do” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:180).

Sawm or fasting during the month of Ramadan is like taking a break for one month from the construction of Islam in order to get rejuvenated and in order to rededicate oneself to the ongoing task of construction. There is a hadith which says, “Whoever fasts Ramadan out of faith and in the hope of reward, his previous sins will be forgiven.” Besides the ordained compulsory fasting, the Prophet (SAW) used to fast on other days as well, such as Mondays and Thursdays, first ten days of Zul-Hijjah, during the month of Shaban, and other days.

Hajj too is an obligation to be done once during one’s life time provided one has the bodily and financial capacity to do so. The Prophet (SAW) said, “Whoever performs hajj to this Ka’ba and does not approach his wife for sexual relations nor commit sins (while performing hajj), will come out as sinless as a new-born child, (just delivered by his mother).”

Thus, all the five things (shahadatan, salah, zakah, sawm, and hajj) are vital in the process of constructing the edifice of Islam. Hence the wording of the hadith, “Islam is built on five (things)…”

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