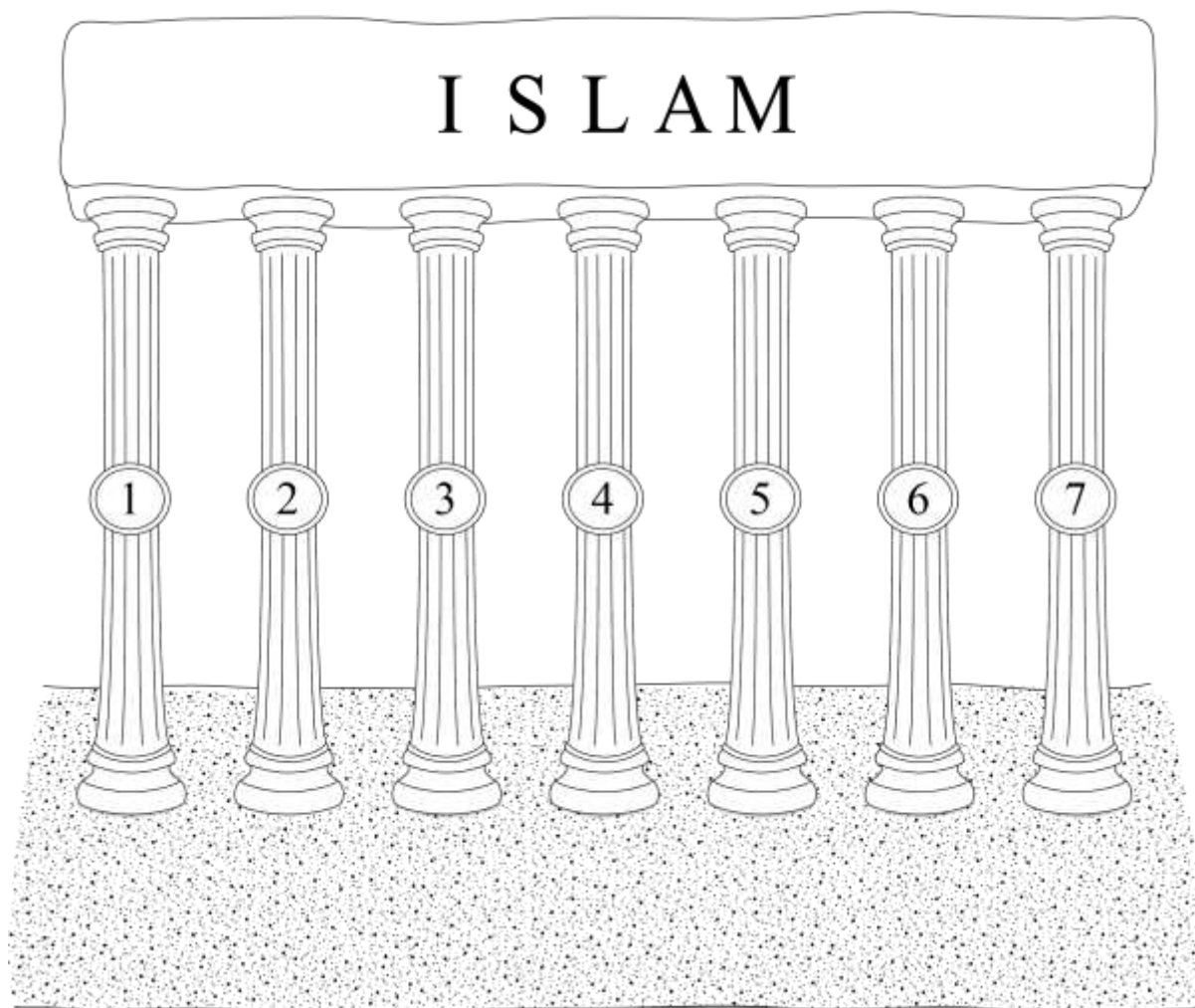


Background article: Practices, The practice of Islam

The seven pillars of Ismaili Islam



The Ismailis have a system of seven pillars, or obligatory practices, of Islam. They are:

- *Walayah*, following the teaching and example of the divinely-appointed Imams.
- *Tahara*, ritual and practical purity and cleanliness.
- *Salat*, the regular rhythm of five times per day formal prayer.
- *Sawm*, fasting during the month of Ramadan.
- *Zakat*, the circulation of a proportion of one's surplus wealth to those in need.
- *Hajj*, the annual pilgrimage to Makka, which is obligatory on every adult Muslim once in their lifetime if they have sufficient wealth and health to perform it.
- *Jihad*, striving in the way of God.

Salat, sawm, zakat and hajj are common to both Sunni and general Shi'a practice, plus *jihad*, which comprises also an obligatory practice for all Shi'a Muslims.

Walayah is the first pillar in the Ismaili system. It is the central concept from which all the other pillars take their origin, meaning and contemporary application. It is not only to acknowledge the line of divinely-appointed Imams, which the Ismailis share with the majority of the Shi'a for the first six Imams (although the Ismailis refer to Ali as the Wasi or executor of Muhammad's will and begin to count the Imams from Hasan onwards), until they diverge due to a dispute about the rightful Imam after Ja'far al-Sadiq {see details in "The Shi'a perspective on Islam"}, but also to follow their ongoing guidance. They are seen as infallible guides and exemplars of the Islamic way of life.

The Ismailis have a longer line of divinely-appointed Imams. One branch, the Musta'lian, today represented by the Sulaymani, Alavi and Daudi Bohras, hold that the twenty-first Imam went into occultation, or hidden existence, in 1132. During this time of occultation, it is the duty of the community to follow the way of life laid out by the Imams, led by the Da'i Mutlaqs, who act as the caretakers or guardians of that way, until the eventual reappearance of the descendent of the Imam who went into hiding.

The other principal branch, the Nizari, today represented by the followers of the Aga Khan, hold that the earth will never be left without a Living Imam, who is accessible to his followers. The Nizari Ismailis uniquely hold that the Aga Khan, as Living Imam, has the responsibility to lead his followers into a way of following Islam that is adapted to the times and circumstances in which they live. As the living, divinely-appointed Imam, he is inspired infallibly to interpret the inner meaning of the Qur'an and the Islamic way of life. It is the duty of each successive Living Imam infallibly to designate his successor.

The second pillar, *tahara*, stresses the need for ritual purity, through the minor ablution, *wudu*, required before prayer and other ritual activities, and through the major ablution of a complete bath or shower, *ghusl*, before major festivals and after coming into contact, for example, with a dead body. This emphasis on cleanliness spreads out into all aspects of life for an Ismaili Muslim and can be seen in the cleanliness of their meeting places, *jamat khana*, and homes, as well as clothing.

The Ismaili tradition holds that there are three dimensions to every practice of Islam. These are the outer, visible bodily practices (*zahiri*), the inner dimension of the disposition of the whole person (*batini*), which affects the intention and rational self, and the ultimate inner reality of the practice before God (*haqiqi*). The precise details of these *batini* and *haqiqi* dimensions are known only to the members of these communities.