

The Third Pillar of Islam
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There are many stories about Mulla Nasruddin, the Sufi character we heard about earlier. He's a Trickster figure in Sufi lore, sometimes a wise and respected teacher, sometimes a village fool; almost always low on money and big on attitude. Sometimes he's the one who plays tricks and sometimes the joke's on him, but Nasruddin always makes us think twice about conventional wisdom.

In another story, Nasruddin lives as a poor man in a humble home, short on money and living on a meager diet of chickpeas, lentils, and a little bread. He's a blunt truth-teller who is out of favor with the local king, so his life is hard. Nasruddin's neighbor, on the other hand, lives very well. He's often seen dining at the king's table, telling his royal host just what he wants to hear, and bringing home the rich leftovers to enjoy later. One day he's looking out his window, munching on a delicious bit of stew, when he sees Nasruddin hunched over his poor bowl of beans.

"Oh, Nasruddin," he says. "How I pity you. If only you'd learn to get along with the king a little better, you wouldn't have to get by on lentils and chickpeas!" Nasruddin doesn't even look up. "Huh," he says. "If you'd learn how to enjoy lentils and chickpeas, you wouldn't have to suck up to the king all the time."

Who is the truly wealthy person?

Most of us, at some time in our lives, work very hard to earn as much money as we can. We want to have some measure of comfort and freedom from financial worry for ourselves; if we have a family we want them to be safe, comfortable, free to make choices about their time and their life. These are good things. Some of us, if we're very fortunate, skillful, or diligent, or more likely some combination of all three, may even be able to live with some measure of luxury and leisure.

That's all good. And yet if we think about it, what is it that we really need from our life? What do our loved ones really need most from us? Beyond the necessities of survival, we human beings need love, work that gives us joy, a relationship with the natural world around us, and some sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. Our families and circles of kinship and friendship need our love, our attention, and our time; they need an authentic experience of whatever combination of playfulness, tenderness, compassion, wisdom, passion, and commitment makes each of us who we uniquely are.

Money isn't high on that list. This isn't to say that money doesn't matter, or that it can't bring good possibilities into our lives, or that it can't help us to create positive change in the world around us. The best things in life may be free, but a lot of things aren't, and some of those we can't get along without. It may be true that I've got rhythm, I've got music, I've got starlight,

sweet dreams, and my gal—or guy or non-binary sweetheart, but I could in fact ask for anything more, and so could we all.

The tragedy is that our culture, blinded by the false mythology of the Industrial Growth Economy, has a tendency to confuse worthiness with net worth, and wealth with disposable income. And so it's easy to allow the pursuit of money to take an underserved first place among our priorities to the detriment of other things we actually value more. We can forget that the true worth of wealth depends entirely on how we gain it and how we spend it. To decide who is truly wealthy, as opposed to merely rich, we have to decide what wealth is for.

Most of the religions of the world teach the importance of charity, of caring for the poor and the sick, the suffering and the orphaned. From Jesus teaching that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, to the prophet Micah telling the people of Israel that God despises their religious ceremonies and sacrifices because they are not properly caring for the poor, or for widows, orphans, and immigrants, the message is clear: Those who have wealth are meant to use it not just for our own comfort and security, but to care for others and to make our world better. The teachings of Islam are equally explicit on this subject, and I want to lift them up for you because they have a particular approach to why it matters so much what we do with our wealth.

Before I do, though, I want to take just a moment to set these teachings in a basic context. With more than 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, Islam is the world's second-largest religion after Christianity, and it is the fastest-growing faith in the world. It's also one of the least well-known traditions in the west. Even among people who value religious tolerance and don't think that an entire global faith should be seen only through the fanatical interpretations and actions of a few small groups of its most fundamentalist followers, learning about Islam hasn't been a priority until the last 15 years, and there has been more misinformation than useful education in our public discourse since then.

So I offer this quick sketch: The life of a Muslim believer is guided by five precepts called the "Five Pillars of Islam" by Sunni Muslims. The Five Pillars are the practices of submission to God that turn a set of beliefs into a life of faith. They are requirements for all Muslims; if you're not adhering to the Five Pillars, your Islam isn't genuine.

The first Pillar is called the *Shahada*, the testimony of faith. It's a simple statement of belief, and making this statement aloud, in Arabic, with sincere conviction is how you become Muslim: "There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

The second Pillar is *Salat*, or prayer: Prescribed prayers, including both words and simple rituals, to be offered at five different times throughout each day. According to many sources, saying the prayers gives Muslims a feeling of inner happiness, peace, comfort, and connection with God.

The third Pillar, the one we'll return to in a moment, is *Zakat*, alms-giving, the support of the needy through charity.

The fourth Pillar is *Sawm*, the act of fasting during the days of the holy month of Ramadan, the month in Islam's lunar calendar when the Prophet received the first revelations that became the *Quran*. The fast is meant both to purify the body and to remind believers to have empathy with the poor and all who suffer hunger and want.

The final Pillar is *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which all Muslims are expected to make once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able to do so.

These five practices, according to the Muslim scriptures called the *Hadith*, were spoken by the Prophet in a conversation with the Angel Gabriel which was witnessed by his Companions in the first years of his leadership. They mark Islam as a religion that is meant to be lived as a practical matter in the world, not just believed as a set of creedal statements.

Returning to the Third Pillar: *Zakat* specifies a percentage of wealth which is to be given for the care of orphans and the poor. If you make or own more than a certain amount of money during any year beyond what is needed for your and your family's basic needs, 2.5% of that wealth is to be donated.

In some Muslim countries there is a public structure for making *zakat* donations; in most of the world, though, it's done individually through charitable organizations like the Zakat Foundation of America, who are expected to see that the money goes for the support of the poor. Even if you don't earn or own enough to make the prescribed offering, though, charitable giving is expected of all Muslims, even those with very little wealth.

The underlying principle behind this is that *all wealth* belongs to God; whatever part I am holding on to is just the part I've been entrusted with. The alms I give are not a gift from me to poor people; they are, as one teacher puts it, "the right of the poor in the wealth of the rich." That portion belongs to them as much as the portion I keep belongs to me. It's like a return to the question of Nasruddin's gold coin: the part he had promised to God wasn't his to decide what to do with, so when he tried to hold it back, he lost it.

What wealth is for, according to Muhammad's teachings, is to be given away and to be spent. The part we use ourselves sustains life and livelihood for ourselves and our families, and for those who may work for us and do business with us; the part we give away sustains those in need. In fact, according to the words of the Prophet, our *only* real wealth is the part that we give away as alms.

If the purpose of all wealth is to sustain life and make a better world, some contemporary Muslims challenge whether alms-giving is really enough. A South African political scientist and Islamic scholar named Farid Esack writes: "[A Muslim businessman, for example,] may give his workers hot soup in winter and be quick to dispense his *zakat* However, he underpays his workers and feels that 'at least they have a job:' if it were not for him 'where would they have been?' He may never have considered how his exploitative business practices prop up a system that will forever need free soup for the workers. . . . The truth is that when hunger is the most logical outcome of an entire economic system, the problem needs to be addressed at the level of both the symptoms and the actual causes."

This more progressive interpretation of the Third Pillar as a founding principle for social change reminds me of the eco-spiritual values of environmental activists like Joanna Macy, who argue that the wealth derived from the Earth's resources cannot be "owned" by individuals or corporations. The wealth of our planet, they say, is entrusted to us—and like Islam's Third Pillar, they say our stewardship of that wealth is meant to provide a sustainable life and livelihood for all, not to hoard the wealth for the sole benefit of its "owners."

One of the greatest gifts, for me, of looking at the faith traditions of the world is to challenge myself to take my own faith as seriously as devout Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Catholics, or others take theirs. The Third Pillar of Islam confronts me with questions like this.

What would it mean for us, each in our own way, to decide that wealth belongs to God, to the Infinite, to the Universe, and that the true purpose of wealth is to sustain and enrich both our individual and family lives, and also the lives of those in need, and the larger well-being of the world around us? Might this be a path toward making financial choices that serve our highest values—rather than finding our lives and our values subordinated to the demands of our financial life? Would anything change for me, if I thought that the primary purpose of wealth was to serve love, to serve justice, equity, and compassion, to serve the sustenance of this one precious earth we all share? Would anything change for you?

It is so easy to be misdirected and derailed by the surrounding culture, telling us in thousands of ways every day that the purpose and fulfillment of human life is the production and consumption of wealth and possessions. Here in this community of love let us call ourselves and each other to counter the culture. May we remind ourselves and each other that the purpose of wealth is to serve and sustain lives that are rich in love, abundant with justice, overflowing with beauty and compassion and hope.

May we be the ones to make it so.