

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.2—The Five Pillars' Many Dimensions

The Five Pillars of Islam are formal acts of worship—essentials of practicing Islam. Islamic teachings also require a person to live according to moral values and to work toward just relations among people in the family, community, and the world. Simply put, Muslims are supposed to live in knowledge that every act happens in the sight of God.

Even though there is much more to living as a Muslim than the Five Pillars, these universal acts have influenced Muslim societies in many ways. The Five Pillars are individual acts, but they have social effects. Each has a spiritual meaning, but it also has worldly significance. During more than 1400 years of Muslim history, practice of the Five Pillars has shaped the places where Muslims live, the form of their homes and cities, their buildings and cultural institutions, and even the links between regions of the world where Muslims live and travel.

Belief in one God, the first pillar of Islam, helped spread a simple message that attracted many people over time. The idea of spreading the message and living out its ideas opened up whole new branches of learning, like law and the sciences. Curiosity to know and understand led to the building of libraries and the spread of science and technology across much of the world.

Daily prayer, the second pillar, resulted in the constructions of *masjids* (mosques) everywhere that Muslims live. From the simplest mud-brick structures to huge, decorated edifices of stone, brick and tile, a wide variety of *masjid* styles developed in different Muslim regions. To have a clean place to pray, Muslims often use a mat or carpet at home or elsewhere. Local design traditions and techniques produced wonderful designs for these rugs. The need Muslims had to know the exact time for prayer and the direction of Makkah from any place in the world encouraged the sciences of mathematics, astronomy, and geography. The rhythm of the prayer times regulated daily life in Muslim societies everywhere.

Zakah, the third pillar, provided a steady source of charity because it is required, though additional giving is voluntary. One way of giving is to donate the money from a business on a regular and permanent basis, for example, from the sale of fruit from an orchard each year. These goods and money may be put into a foundation, as a kind of contract with God, or a trust fund that would last as long as the source lasted. By comparison, today in the U.S. wealthy people and organizations of many faiths give money to charitable foundations for hospitals, education, the arts, and other purposes.

Ramadan fasting, the fourth pillar, has been a special month of the year for Muslims for more than 1400 years. The rhythm of daily life changes, and Ramadan is a time of charity, community, and celebration that affects everyone in the society. Like the winter holiday season in the U.S. and Europe, the month-long celebration brings an economic boost to merchants and producers. Families host guests, and those who are able provide prepared food for anyone who attends the *masjid* in time for the *iftar*, the meal that breaks the daily fast. At the end of the month, gift-giving and obligatory charity in the form of foodstuffs and other necessities have a ripple effect

on society's prosperity and well-being. This burst of energy is balanced by an overall slowing of the pace of life and work, with the idea of putting more time and energy into the spiritual side of life.

Finally, the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Makkah each year, has had an enormous effect on Muslim societies and on the world. Muslims from Arabia, Africa, many parts of Asia, and now the Americas and Europe have made their way to the city of Makkah for the annual pilgrimage. The idea of the pilgrimage obliged people in the smallest villages to look outward on the world. The journey renewed contact among the world community of Muslims, helping to unify beliefs, practices, and knowledge. Muslim rulers were proud to build roads, watering places, ports, and way stations, doing their part to help pilgrims achieve the goal of the *hajj*. It did not matter that the Muslim world did not remain politically unified after the eighth century because Muslim society took on a dynamic of its own. Islam continued to spread, and new ideas, technologies, and even new foods and clothing spread with it.

When Muslims today carry out the Five Pillars, these basic acts of worship continue the traditions of unity-in-diversity among Muslims. These simple, regular practices have had far-reaching effects in many areas of Muslim life and civilization.