**Student Reading: The Five Pillars’ Many Dimensions**

The Five Pillars of Islam are formal acts of worship—essentials of practicing Islam. 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 Muslim society.

**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 the world.

**Daily prayer**, the second pillar, resulted in the constructions of *masjids* (mosques) everywhere that Muslims live. Some mosques are simple mud-brick structures. Others are large, decorated buildings of stone, brick and tile. To have a clean place to pray, Muslims often use a mat or carpet. Since Muslims had to know the exact time for prayer and the direction of Mecca from any place in the world, this encouraged the sciences of mathematics, astronomy, and geography. The schedule 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. One way of giving is to donate the money from a business on a regular basis. For example, from the sale of fruit from an orchard each year. Similarly, 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. During this month, daily life changes. 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. At the end of the month, gift-giving and required charity impact the well-being of the society. 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 Mecca each year, has had a huge 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 Mecca. The idea of the pilgrimage encouraged people in the smallest villages to look outward on the world. The journey renewed contact among the world community of Muslims. It helped to unify beliefs, practices, and knowledge. Muslim rulers were proud to build roads, watering places and ports to help pilgrims achieve the goal of the *hajj*. Even thought the Muslim world was not politically unified after the 8th century, Islam continued to spread. 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.

**Source:** <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu>

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