

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1—Islamic Beliefs and Practices

The word Islam means “peace through submission to God.” Muslim practice is defined by the *Qur’an* (holy scripture) and the *Sunnah*, or example set by Prophet Muhammad and transmitted through the *Hadith* (recorded words and deeds). Islam is a universal religion, meaning that anyone may accept its beliefs and become a Muslim, or follower of Islam. A Muslim is “one who seeks peace through submission to God.” This means striving to reach a goal rather than achieving a fixed identity. “Seeking the face of God” is an expression often used to describe this lifetime goal. To fulfill the identity of a Muslim, a person must carry out certain acts, and live a moral, God-fearing life.

These basic acts required of a Muslim are called the Five Pillars. Accepting Islam requires only that a person state the basic creed, “There is no god but God” and “Muhammad is the messenger of God.” That is the first of the five basic acts or duties. The Five Pillars of Islam are:

- (1) *shahadah* -- to state belief in One God and the prophethood of Muhammad,
- (2) *salat* -- to pray five obligatory prayers each day,
- (3) *siyam* -- to fast from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan each year,
- (4) *zakat* – to pay obligatory charity each year,
- (5) *hajj* -- to make the pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime.

The following sections describe the pillars in detail.

1. Shahadah (the Islamic Creed) The declaration of faith in Islam is a simple statement that begins *Ashud anna*, (“I witness that”), and continues with the statement *La illaha illa Allah* (“There is no god but God”), and ends with the affirmation *wa Muhammad rasul Allah* (“and Muhammad is the messenger of God”). The first part defines the role of the Muslim, a continuous striving throughout life. This striving reaches into all aspects of personality and activity toward the self, the family and the community, to the entire community of humankind and the natural environment. The second part affirms the existence of one God by negating the existence of any other creature that people might worship, or any partner with God. It underlines the Muslim’s direct relationship with God as a witness and as a servant of God. No central authority nor privileged persons stand between God and the individual. The third part of the creed witnesses that God sent prophets to humankind, as stated in the scriptures revealed before the Qur’an. Then, it affirms that Muhammad was a prophet, or messenger who received revelation (the Qur’an) and guidance from God. Among the earlier revelations mentioned in the Qur’an are the Torah (given to Moses), the Psalms (given to David) and the Evangelium (given to Jesus). This series of prophets and revelation includes—among others—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and Muhammad, according to the universally accepted teachings of Islam. The Qur’an states that what was revealed to Muhammad confirmed the basic message of the earlier scriptures.

2. Salah (Muslims’ Daily Prayer) is the five daily prayers that are the duty of every Muslim. Muslims perform the recitations and physical movements of *salah* as taught by their prophet Muhammad, according to Islamic sources. Each of the five prayers can be performed within a

window of time. (1) between dawn and sunrise, (2) noon to mid-afternoon, (3) between mid-afternoon and just before sunset, (4) at sunset, and (5) after twilight until nighttime. Prayer time is determined by the sun's position, which Muslims today calculate by clock time, using charts that change with the longer and shorter days of each season. Before praying, Muslims perform a brief ritual washing. This purification prepares the worshipper for entering the state of prayer, of standing before God. It is a symbol of the cleansing effect of prayer. No matter what language they speak, all Muslims pray in the Arabic language.

In the *salah*, Muslims recite specific words and selected verses from the Qur'an while standing, bowing, kneeling with the hands and forehead touching the ground, and sitting. Each cycle of movements is one *rak'at*, or unit of prayer, and each of the five prayers has between two and four units. At the end of the prayer, and throughout their lives, Muslims pray informally, asking for guidance and help in their own words. They also recite special prayers passed down as the words of the prophets. If two or more Muslims pray together, one of them will be the *imam* (prayer leader), and the others form rows behind the *imam*.

Masjid is the Arabic name for an Islamic house of worship. The common English term *mosque* is a French version of the Spanish word *mezquita*. The *masjid* is named after the position of prayer called *sujud*, which means kneeling with the hands and forehead touching the ground. The *masjid* is a simple, enclosed space oriented towards the city of Makkah (on the Arabian Peninsula) where Islam's holiest place—the Ka'bah—is located. There is no furniture except mats or rugs, and Muslims stand shoulder to shoulder in rows, following the movements of the prayer leader all together. Because of these movements and the closeness of the worshippers, women pray together in rows behind the men.

3. Sawm (Fasting) During one month each year, Muslims fast, meaning that they do not eat or drink anything between dawn and sunset. Fasting is a duty for adults, but many children participate voluntarily, for at least part of the day, or only a few days. The fast begins with *sahoor* (a pre-dawn meal). While fasting, Muslims perform the dawn, noon and afternoon prayers, and go about their normal duties. At sunset, Muslims break their fast with a few dates and water, then pray, then eat *iftar* (a meal that breaks the fast). *Iftar* is usually eaten with family and friends, or at the *masjid*, which hosts meals donated by community members for all. After the evening prayer, many Muslims go to the *masjid* for congregational prayers that feature a reading of one thirtieth of the Qur'an each night. They complete the whole Qur'an by the end of the month.

The Qur'an links fasting with the practice of earlier prophets and religions: "*You who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may learn self-restraint.*" (Qur'an 2:183) The fast begins at dawn on the first day of Ramadan, the tenth month of the Islamic lunar calendar.

Muslims may fast individually during the year, but doing it as a community magnifies the experience. The rhythm of life changes, and people's relations soften. Daily schedules change, and some workplaces and schools can adjust their schedules. Living outside majority Muslim

countries, Muslims find ways to cope and make the most of Ramadan. Gathering with others is an important part of that, whether in homes or in *masjids* and community centers.

Each individual experiences hunger and its discomforts, but in a few days, the body gets used to it. Muslims are supposed to fast in the spirit as well, and make extra effort to avoid arguments, conflicts and bad words, thoughts, and deeds. Fasting builds will-power against temptation, helps people feel sympathy for those in need, and encourages generosity toward others. Fasting causes physical and psychological changes, and many claim that it is a healthy way to purify the body. Fasting helps people to reevaluate their lives spiritually, and draw closer to God.

3. **Zakah (Charity as a Duty)** is the annual giving of a percentage of a Muslim's wealth and possessions beyond basic needs. The word means "purification," meaning that a person is purified from greed by giving wealth to others. When Muslims have cash savings for a year, they give 2.5% of it as *zakat*. *Zakat* on other forms of wealth, such as land, natural resources, and livestock is calculated at different rates. Paying the *zakat* reminds Muslims of the duty to help those less fortunate, and that wealth is a gift entrusted to a person by God rather than a possession to be hoarded selfishly. Prophet Muhammad set the precedent that *zakah* was collected and distributed locally, and what remained after meeting local needs was distributed to the larger Muslim community through the general treasury. *Zakah* money belongs to several categories of persons: "*The alms are only for the poor and the needy, and those [public servants] who collect them, and those whose hearts are to be reconciled, and to free the captives and the debtors, and for the cause of Allah, and for the wayfarers; a duty imposed by Allah. Allah is knower, Wise.*" (Qur'an 9:60).

Muslims may distribute *zakah* to needy and deserving people and groups on their own, and each person is responsible for figuring out the amount owed. Of course, 2.5% is a minimum amount, and more may be given.

Islamic traditional sources mention charity often. A *hadith* of the Prophet said: "*Charity is a necessity for every Muslim.*" He was asked: '*What if a person has nothing?*' *The Prophet replied: 'He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity.'* The Companions asked: '*What if he is not able to work?*' The Prophet said: '*He should help poor and needy persons.'* The Companions further asked: '*What if he cannot do even that?*' The Prophet said: '*He should urge others to do good.'* The Companions said: '*What if he lacks that also?*' The Prophet said: '*He should check himself from doing evil. That is also charity.*'"

5. Hajj (Journey to Makkah)

The basic act of worship in Islam is the pilgrimage (journey) to the city of Makkah during a certain time of year. The *hajj* rites symbolically reenact the trials and sacrifices of Prophet Abraham, his wife Hajar, and their son Isma'il over 4,000 years ago. Muslims must perform the *hajj* at least once in their lives, provided their health and finances permit. The *hajj* is performed annually by over 2,000,000 people during the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, *Dhul-Hijjah*. In commemoration of the trials of Abraham and his family in Makkah, which included

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in response to God's command, Muslims make a pilgrimage to the sacred city at least once in their lifetime. The *hajj* is one of the "five pillars" of Islam, and thus an essential part of the faith and practice of Muslims.

Muslims from all over the world, including the United States, travel to Makkah (in today's Saudi Arabia). Before arriving in the holy city, Muslims enter a state of being called *ihram*. They remove their ordinary clothes and put on the simple dress of pilgrims--two seamless white sheets for men, and usually, white dresses and head covering for women. The pilgrims are dressed in the same simple clothes. No one can tell who is rich, famous or powerful. White clothes are a symbol of purity, unity, and equality before God. The gathering of millions of pilgrims at Makkah is a reminder of the gathering of all humans before God at the Judgment Day. It is a symbol of the Muslim ummah, because pilgrims gather from all corners of the earth. It is a symbol of the past, because the pilgrims visit places where Abraham and his family faced the challenge of their faith, and where Muhammad was born and preached. Pilgrims go around the Ka'bah. According to Islamic teachings, it was the first house of worship for one God on earth. Pilgrims call "*Labbayka Allahumma Labbayk,*" which means "*Here I am at your service, O God, here I am!*" This echoes the call of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible, in answer to the call of God. Pilgrims also walk seven times between the hills named **Safa** and **Marwah**, where they recall how Ishmael's mother searched for water for him, and the spring of water called Zam-zam flowed under his foot, and still flows.

Other stations of the pilgrimage are nearby Makkah, where they perform prayers, camp overnight, and stand all together on the Plain of Arafat asking for God's forgiveness and guidance. They recall Abraham's struggle with Satan by casting pebbles at three stone columns. Pilgrims complete the hajj by sacrificing a sheep or other animal, whose meat is to be shared with family, friends, and those in need. Nowadays, a meat processing plant near the place of sacrifice helps distribute the meat around the world. The sacrifice reminds of the Biblical and Quranic story telling how Abraham was willing to sacrifice even his son for God, and a ram appeared in the boy's place.

Pilgrims leave the state of ihram by trimming or cutting their hair and returning to Makkah for a final visit to the Ka'bah. A *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad says that a pilgrim "*will return as free of sin as a newborn baby.*" The pilgrimage brings Muslims from all around the world, of different nationalities, languages, races, and regions, to come together in a spirit of universal humanity to worship God together.

And when We made the House at Makkah a place of assembly and a place of safety for humankind, saying: Take as your place of worship the place where Abraham stood to pray. And We laid a duty upon Abraham and Ishmael: Purify My house for those who go around and those who meditate therein and those who bow down in worship.

And when Abraham prayed: My Lord! Make this a city of peace region of security and feed its people with fruits, such of them as believe in God and the Last Day, He answered: As for him who disbelieves, I shall leave him content for a while, then I shall compel him to the doom of fire--a hapless journey's end!

And remember when Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House, with this prayer: Our Lord! Accept from us this service. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Hearer, the Knower.

From Surat al-Baqara, Ayah 125-128 (adapted from Marmaduke Pickthall translation)

Study Questions

1. What is the most basic belief for Muslims?
2. What is the Islamic statement of belief called?
3. Identify and describe the prayers required of Muslims. How do Muslims prepare for prayer?
4. Who is required to pay the *zakat*, and who may receive it?
5. Which of the five pillars is linked to the lunar month of Ramadan? When, why, and how do Muslims fast?
6. What is the *hajj*, and how often must a Muslim perform it? What is the significance of clothing for the *hajj*?
7. What is the relationship of Abraham to the fifth pillar of Islam?

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Muslim at Prayer
Heathrow Airport, London
Photo by R. Dunn