

Islam 101
Transcript of Part 3
The Five Pillars of Islam

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So what is it that Muslims all believe in? Muslims have these things called the Five Pillars and all five of these pillars, the point that unites them, is that they are very community focused.

Pillar number one is the *shahadah*, or the declaration that there is no god, but the one God. And that's followed by a statement that Muhammad is God's messenger. So this is recognition of the Qur'an as God's revelation to the prophet. It's a statement of absolute monotheism and a statement of belief in revelation.

When you proclaim the shahadah, this marks your entry into membership in the Muslim community. So if you need a Christian parallel, that would be baptism, when you become a member of the Church. You are supposed to make your shahadah in front of two witnesses because this is a public statement, a public act, that you are joining into this community. And if you're worried that you may not be able to find two Muslims near you, you can go to IslamicCity.com which will set you up with a teleconference with two Muslims in some other city so that you can proclaim your shahadah. And they have a little runner on the left side of the page that indicates brother or sister so and so proclaim the shahadah at such and such a time on such and such a day, so that you can statistically keep track of this.

Second pillar, or the five daily prayers. The music you heard at the beginning was actually the Sunni call to prayer. If you ever visit the Muslim world, five times a day you will hear that call coming from the minarets. And the idea is that it's an invitation. It's not supposed to be something you force people to, but it's an invitation. Something that calls to you.

Sometimes, we hear, "Oh my goodness, you know, they have to pray five times a day. That seems so burdensome. That's a lot of praying." Well, life is all supposed to be prayer at some level. But what's the deeper purpose behind five daily prayers? You pray first thing in the morning, noon, mid-afternoon, at sunset, and in the evening. All throughout the day, you are remembering God. This is about keeping God as a very active presence in your life.

And it's not intended to be a burden. Prophet Muhammad said that "Islam was not sent to be a burden to people," so there are exceptions to the rule. If you happen to be away on travel, for example, you're allowed to collapse the prayer times into three times of the day.

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You still want to say your five prayers, but you do it in three time slots. Shiis tend to do that on a regular basis to kind of distinguish themselves.

What happens if you happen to be in outer space? This is a picture of Prince Sultan bin al Salman. He's the son of the new King of Saudi Arabia. He was the first Muslim and first Arab to go to outer space. He flew with the Challenger in 1985. He was a payload specialist, and I had the opportunity to interview him about that experience, and well, how did you do it? How do you pray in zero gravity? How do you know what direction to turn? And you're supposed to pray facing Mecca. What time frame do you use because you're orbiting the Earth?

He said, well, he had to talk to some of the religious scholars about these things. And it was determined that because he had taken off from Cape Canaveral, that he would follow whatever the timing was in Cape Canaveral. He said when it came to finding the direction of Mecca, he ended up having to look out the window to see where it was on the Earth from where he was.

But he said the hardest part was the prostration, because as you can see from the positions there, Muslim prayer is actually, physically, very involved. Try prostrating in zero gravity. They had to build special shoes for him that were attached to the floor and then have two of his fellow astronauts hold him one by each arm to help him be able to get down to where he needed to be able to perform the prostrations correctly.

And then I also asked him about—I had heard—it said that he had recited the entire Qur'an in space because that was reported in all of the Saudi press and all. And at that point he got this rather pained expression on his face. He said, "Yes, well, I was there for a scientific mission, you understand. My religion is my own personal business, but the reason why everybody heard about this is because my mother kept calling Mission Control to ask them to remind me to say my prayers, because she wanted to be sure I got home safely."

So now you'll remember the prince. If you have difficulty figuring out what time the prayers are supposed to be or what direction Mecca is, this is actually an app that you can get for your iPhone or what have you. It's called Pocket Salat, and you can just carry it with you. The idea is you're supposed to have a clean space, typically on a carpet. And if you're worried—if you don't have an iPhone, the Japanese have made a prayer carpet that has a compass that always points to Mecca, that's in the front of the carpet. So there are ways of making prayer easier for people.

One point I should make with respect to prayer though, is if you look at the third position of prostration, it really reflects what Islam talks about. This idea of submission. Being face down, with the back of your neck exposed, is the most vulnerable position that a human being can take. It's the one place you never want anybody to hit you because you can sever your spine. And that's a reflection of a very old tradition of prostrating before the emperor. If you went before the emperor or the king to make a request, you did so in a position of prostration. And if you were fortunate enough to have your request answered, the king or emperor would lift his face and you would be asked to stand up. If you were in a lot of trouble and they just wanted to get rid of you, you already set up to lose your head.

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Christians refer back to this practice as well. If you've ever heard the Old Testament benediction about "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you," that's lifting his head. "The Lord lift his countenance upon you and give you peace. May he grant your request." So a very nice symbolic connection.

Pillar number three is *zakat*, or almsgiving. Once every year, Muslims are expected to give two and a half percent of their entire wealth—that's not income after taxes, Social Security, Medicare, and what have you. This is two-and-a-half percent of your entire wealth, so stocks, bonds, bank accounts, car, house, all of those things together. And it's to be given to redistribute to the less fortunate members of the community. So again, there's this community focus on always looking out for those who are less fortunate. If you're not sure how to calculate what your *zakat* is, there is *zakat* calculators available online. You just plug-in all your assets and they'll add it up for you.

Zakat has proven to be a real challenge for Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, because there's been so much concern about this money that is being channeled to terrorists. And concern that people are going to the mosque and paying their *zakat* there or paying it to a particular sheikh or organization and not really knowing exactly where that money is going. And so there have been mechanisms put into place to try to make sure that the money is being used for legitimate purposes. I think most people understand that, but it does take away a little bit of the personalized aspect of being able to decide who you want your money to go to.

[Pillar #4, *Sawm*: Fasting during Ramadan] You may have heard of the month of Ramadan when Muslims are supposed to fast. The fast traditionally begins at the moment when you can distinguish a black thread from a white thread, and then the fast ends for the day when the sun goes down. Muslims follow a lunar calendar, rather than our solar calendar, which means that the year is shorter. And that means that the month of Ramadan circulates through all of the seasons.

So this coming summer [2015], Ramadan will fall in the month of June. The fast of Ramadan—no food, no water, no smoking, no sex from sunrise until sunset—is a little bit easier to do when it falls in December and you live in Boston where it's not very warm. The days are short in winter, and so being without food and water may not be as difficult. But just imagine the level of discipline it takes to engage in that fast if you live in Baghdad, or Riyadh, or Kabul, and Ramadan is in August, and the days are very long and very hot, and you cannot have any food or water.

Why would God ask people to do this? Again, because there is this sense of focusing on the community. It's the possibility of experiencing for yourself what it's like to be hungry and thirsty on a daily basis. The difference for you is, you know it's going to end in 28 days. There's a set time limit. But for people who live without access to food on a regular basis, or the 40% of the world that lives without regular access to a clean and safe water supply, that's not by choice; that's by circumstance. And so the idea behind this fast is that it's intended to help you feel more empathy for those who are less fortunate, and hopefully be motivated to do something to help change that.

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And as with prayer, there are exceptions that can be made. Young children learn to fast over time. You don't just get up and tell your five-year-old they can't have anything to eat for 12 hours. They'll start with a two-hour fast and grow into it. They usually only start fasting when they're around seven years old. People who are elderly, diabetics who have to maintain a certain blood sugar level—you don't want to have your ups and downs and crash. If you're pregnant or a nursing mother, exceptions are made. You have the choice, if it's a condition that's not permanent, you can make up the fast later, or you can simply feed two hungry people every day, so that you're still keeping with that idea of caring for the less fortunate.

Ramadan ends with the *Eid al-Fitr* which is one of the important Muslim holidays. [It] tends to be a three-day celebration that might be comparable to Christmas for us, because people visit each other and exchange gifts.

Pillar number five is the *Hajj*, this pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims are expected to make once in a lifetime as long as they are physically and financially able to do so. Prayer is always made in the direction of Mecca, so visiting this location that you've been praying toward your entire lifetime is—it's a very powerful experience for Muslims who are able to attend.

The Saudis describe the logistics behind planning for Hajj, as being comparable to hosting 30 Superbowls in which everybody attending is actually playing the game, because you've got two million people who come every year. Everybody does the same set of rituals over a 10-day period. So it's being in congregation. It's probably the largest religious gathering in the world on an annual basis. You don't go on Hajj alone; you always go with a group of people.

I've included a couple of pictures here, because the way you dress is expected to show humility and equality of all persons before God. Men wear two very simple towels that are not sewn together. And the idea is that when you are on Hajj, you're really practicing for Judgment Day. You're in the presence of God, and when we're in the presence of God, all of the earthly trappings that we normally have are stripped away from us. Our wealth, our status, our titles, all of those things—you're really stripped down to the bare basics. And God sees you for who you are and looks within your heart, because that's really what matters to God.

And so, on this pilgrimage the idea is that everyone is supposed to be equal. The clothing is referred to as *ihram*, but *ihram* is also a state of mind. You're not allowed to lose your temper when you're on Hajj. If you do, it invalidates the entire experience. You're not supposed to engage in grooming or sexual activity on Hajj either, so that you can really focus on God.

There's also a celebration at the end called the Eid al-Adha, and this is the Feast of the Sacrifice. Most of the Hajj rituals actually reenact events from the life of Abraham. So you have this running back and forth between the hills of Marwah and Safa that are in imitation of Hagar's running, looking for water to give to her son so that he wouldn't die in the desert.

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All five of these pillars are required of all Muslims, both male and female. There's this idea that everyone has the same responsibilities toward God, and everyone will be held equally accountable, and can expect the same level of reward.

So we got those Five Pillars, and we seem to be missing something: namely that [*jihad*]; that's not one of the five pillars. That's not something that all Muslims are required to do.

There are some Muslim scholars, activists, militants, who are trying to make jihad some sort of unofficial sixth pillar. But jihad itself does not mean holy war. It's really about striving and struggle and effort and Muslims will talk about this inner/greater jihad versus the outer/lesser jihad. And the most important jihad is the one within yourself to live a righteous life, to be a pious person, to live by the teachings of the Qur'an.

The outer or lesser jihad is one that is only supposed to be engaged in defense of the Muslim community, but it doesn't have to be through the use of violence. Feeling bad about something in your heart and being concerned about social issues is also a method of engaging jihad. Writing—articles, op-ed pieces, bringing attention—writing a blog would be another method of this outer jihad. Jihad of the tongue, speaking out, providing education for people about what the faith tradition actually teaches.

And then you have jihad of the hand, it can be of the sword, but there's also this idea that you personally get involved and get your hands dirty in fixing whatever it is that is wrong with injustice. Perhaps one of the most important things that certain parties need to be reminded of with respect to jihad, is that the whole purpose—if you are fighting this as a violent, militant activity—is that your goal is to end the conflict. Your goal is to end the fighting. It's not to annihilate the enemy from the face of the Earth. Your goal is to establish a treaty relationship.

That's what Prophet Muhammad did, and that's really what the goal is supposed to be. Treaties can be established for any period of time. Typically, they're for ten years. They're always renewable. Just because ten years is up, doesn't mean that it has to be over. It's still possible to have a relationship.

There are some Muslims who are really trying to reclaim jihad and its true meaning from the militants. So they're engaged in what some of them call jihad [ARABIC], civilian jihad. This is actually a Twitter campaign with the hashtag #MyJihad, where people are invited to explain what they understand their personal striving or effort to be, and what they're trying to do to make the world a better place.

So you can see there are many points of commonality in beliefs between Muslims and Christians. We all believe in God as the creator of all life. We all believe in God as a source of justice, certainly as the one who is going to judge us on Judgment Day and hold us accountable and decide where we are going to spend the afterlife.

All of us believe in the importance of belief in one God. Sometimes it's hard for Muslims to understand the concept of the Trinity, and I get into this debate with them all the time: “you people believe in three gods. You're polytheists.” “No, we believe in one God, in three persons, three capacities, three functions, but it's one God, [ARABIC], not [ARABIC].” And so that can be a little confusing, at times.

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Perhaps one of the most important beliefs that we share has to do with the creation of the first two human beings, Adam and Eve. Both faith traditions believe that God created them, placed them in the garden as caretakers, and that there was an incident with a serpent who tempted them into doing something that they should not do. And here's where the stories diverge a little bit.

In Christian tradition, God asks Adam what happened. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. God punishes everybody. And there's this sense of collective accountability. This Original Sin that is passed down from one generation to the next, to the next, that we're all accountable for.

Muslims do not believe in the doctrine of Original Sin. Muslims believe in individual accountability. Adam and Eve were responsible for their own actions and had to take accountability for that; and each one of us is responsible for our own actions and decisions, and we will be held accountable for those. I will not be held accountable for the actions of my husband, my grandfather, great great great aunt Tillie, or whomever. My children are not responsible for what I do. I'm responsible for my own actions.

In the Qur'an, both also immediately accept responsibility for what they have done. Instead of trying to pass the buck and blame it on somebody else, they recognize immediately that they are at fault, and they ask God for forgiveness. And God offers that forgiveness to them. There's still punishment and accountability, they get kicked out of the garden, but God offers them forgiveness and tells them that he will provide them with guidance for the rest of their lives.

One other interesting point I would make with respect to Creation. [The] Book of Genesis, in chapters two and three, talks about the order of Creation. And we all know that Adam was made first and then God made some animals and did some other things. And Eve, God created second, and that has led to certain theological interpretations of women as lesser, inferior, subordinate, over time.

In the Qur'an, first, man and woman are created at the same time, from a single soul, and one is not created before the other. And this reality of being created from a single soul means that they are also—neither one is ever complete without the other. So if you ever heard people talk about that beautiful idea of the soul mate—there's this idea that in order to be whole again, you need to find that *zawj*, that spouse, that completes you.

Mary and Jesus are certainly very present in the Qur'an. It's interesting to note that they are always talked about with reference to each other. Mary is always described as the Mother of Jesus, and Jesus is always described as the Son of Mary. So they go together as a pair.

The Qur'an confirms the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. There's this scene where Mary has left her family, and she's taken shelter out in a far location, and an angel appears to her. And she's worried about this angel who looks like a man, and she warns him that she's a chaste woman. She's not interested in fooling around. He needs to leave her alone.

And he tells her that he's bringing her a message from God, that she is going to have a child. And her response is very similar to that in the Bible. "Really? How's this going to

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happen? Because I've never known a man." "Don't worry; with God, everything is easy." God simply says, "Be," and it is. It's the same way that the God of the Old Testament creates in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis.

The terminology that is used to describe Jesus is also reminiscent of biblical language. Jesus is referred to as a Word from God and a Spirit from God, and those phrases are only used in the Qur'an to describe Jesus. It's reminiscent of the language opening the Gospel of John. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. So we have this Word from God and Spirit of God confirming that this Jesus has a very special status and no earthly father.

And the Qur'anic telling of the story, which we'll take from chapter 19 of the Qur'an—Mary is actually the only woman who is named in the Qur'an. We have more information about the Virgin Mary in the Qur'an than we do in the entire New Testament. Some of this information comes from books that didn't make it into the canonical Bible, specifically the Gospel of Mary, which is used by Coptic Christians until today.

So we have, in chapter 19, this description of—Mary has accepted receiving Jesus into her, and comes to the moment of childbirth, which is an extremely vulnerable moment and an extremely painful moment. And we see this depiction of her, standing here, holding onto the trunk of a palm tree, crying out, "I put to God that I had not experienced this." She's alone. She's having this baby. It's very painful and God responds to her, "Don't worry, I'll take care of you. Look, shake the tree, there are ripe dates there, [to] provide you with food. Look, there's a stream here to provide you with water."

The only thing that God asked of her that day was that she simply not speak to anyone. And so she has her baby, is cared for in this very tender relationship with God, and once the baby is born, then she goes back to her family. [Her] family, not surprisingly, is not very happy. "Where'd this baby come from? What have you been doing? Mary, daughter of Aaron, your father was not an evil man. Your mother was not unchaste. What has happened here?"

So she's not allowed to talk to anybody that day. So who speaks up to defend her? The Infant Jesus. One of his miracles in the Qur'an, is to speak as an infant, and he speaks up to defend his mother, to defend a woman who has been falsely accused of unchastity.

What do Muslims believe about Jesus? They believe that Jesus was a Word from God and a Spirit from God, but not the Son of God. This is probably one of the biggest differences between Islam and Christianity. For Muslims, the understanding of God is that God is completely separate from human beings. And so the idea of God having a son, which always seems to be interpreted literally, that's not something that God would do, because God is not human like us.

Muslims also do not believe in the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, which was certainly pivotal to Christianity. And the reason for that goes back to that discussion of individual accountability. If we are not collectively responsible for the sins of other people, then it would not be possible for one individual to engage in one all-atoning sacrifice to save all of humanity. Each one of us ends up being responsible for our own actions. Islamic

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tradition teaches that when God goes to judge you in the afterlife, your good deeds will be weighed against your bad deeds. If your good deeds are heavier, you'll go to Paradise. If your bad deeds are heavier, then it's unfortunate for you, you will end up in Hell.

So what exactly do they do with the whole Crucifixion, Death, Resurrection thing, with respect to Jesus? The exegetes, those who interpret Scripture, have two different interpretations of one verse. This verse says that God raised Jesus up. Some understand that to be a reference to the Ascension: that God literally raised Jesus up into heaven, so that he did not die. Others said, well, this raising up is really more symbolic, more metaphorical.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. It was a painful and humiliating way to die. And it would be unthinkable for God to allow one of his precious messengers to die in such a gruesome, unacceptable way. And so the idea of God raising him up would be raising him above that kind of death. And so the explanation is typically that it wasn't Jesus who died. It was somebody else who looked like him. But that Jesus himself was not crucified.