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**Religious Perspectives**

**Introduction to Islam**

“Thank you for including Islam as part of this discussion. Discussions like these are extremely important because it’s the knowledge of the other side that brings you closer. If not that, then it helps you to understand where the other side is coming from. So panels like these are extremely, extremely important.

Islam, as many of you probably know, is an Arabic word which means submission; submission to the will of almighty god - Allah. Allah, is another Arabic word, which is the single god that Muslims believe in. Islam also means peace. For one of the names of almighty god Allah is Asalam, the one who brings peace. So that sets to the next question, which is, what is, who is Allah?

There is nothing mystical, there is nothing mysterious about Allah, the word that you get to hear from time to time. He is the same god that Abraham worshiped. That Moses worshiped. That Jesus worshiped. Peace be upon them all. As a matter of fact there are Christians living in the Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and so on, they refer to God the father they refer to him as Allah. So there is nothing mystical about that word Allah. It has no plural in Arabic language. You can have a singular, you can have a two plural, you can have a multiple plurals. But word Allah has no plural. That is the fundamental tenet in Islam - monotheism. That is the fundamental sensitivity of Muslims, believing in one god.

So that then sets the next question as to, who is a Muslim? A Muslim is the one who believes in Islam. Who submits to the will of god almighty. And so Muslim has to have faith in what we call is Iman. There are two fundamental aspects of Islam; iman and arkān, which is faith and pillars. Iman basically has to do with believing in Allah. Believing in his angels. Believing in his messengers. Believing in his books. Books that we believe in are: The pages of Abraham, the Torah of the Jews, the Bible of the Christian faith, and then of course the last, which is Qur’an, which is the Muslim religious book. We believe that same message began with Abraham and continued on to the last edition of a book, which is Qur’an.

So, you know a Muslim is supposed to live his life according to Islam. For Islam, the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him said, is a way of life. So we pray five times a day, this leads to the aspects of the pillars of Islam, which is salat. A Muslim is supposed to pray five times a day and that is the obligatory prayers. Then also, in the month of Ramadan, we fast for 30 days non-stop. Start on day one and don’t eat anything and go until the last day, I’m just kidding. Each day we eat something before the twilight which is about an hour and a half before sunrise. We stop eating at that point. And then we go nonstop eating or drinking or chewing gum, nothing, up to the sunset. Then we break our fast at sunset, which is called iftar. This is the second pillar of Islam. So, fasting during the month of Ramadan we follow a lunar year, a lunar

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calendar I should say, which would be 29 days or 30 days in a month depending upon the sighting of the crescent moon.

Then we have what we call a zakāt, or the obligatory charity, which is incumbent upon a Muslim at 2.5% from his assets, from his savings. And so that is zakāt. And we have the last one which is the pilgrimage to Mecca which is our holiest shrine; Kaaba is located in Mecca. So going there for hajj as we call it, pilgrimage once in a lifetime for those who can afford it.

So, those are the four pillars. But the first pillar which is most important which is what we call a shahada. Shahada meaning bearing witness that there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his last messenger.

So those are the five pillars. So Islam is based on iman, which is faith, and arkān, which is the pillars of Islam. Muslims are also there across the world in almost the 200 countries or so that we have today. Predominated mostly, you know, in India, Pakistan, in Bangladesh, in Malaysia, in Indonesia, those countries, Sri Lanka, those countries constitute almost 50% of Muslims. Arabs constitute only 15 – 20% of Muslims. So that is one of the myths that people have.

Muslims are growing as you see in the U.S. , in Europe, in Africa, in all the continents, in Latin America too. And so, people are recognizing what Islam is and the peaceful aspect of that. The problem people like me face is that we follow all the Western principles, yet we live the life of a Muslim. This is what Islam is about. Not what we see, cultural aspects of some of the countries over in the Middle East . And Muslims are doctors , engineers, lawyers, in the military, in the sports, Kareem Abul Jabar. I heard a rumor Shaquille O’Neal also had a Muslim father and he went for pilgrimage recently. So, and there are other names as well. So we are part of mainstream. These are some of the things I wanted to share with you. Maybe later if you have questions I’ll be glad to answer. And I’m happy to be a part of this process. Thank you very much.”

**Disclaimer**

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