

Lecture 13: The Five Pillars

Last time we began our explorations of Islam. Islam, as I told you, is historically the youngest of the three western religions, though at the same time it's a tradition that claims to be the faithful continuation of a revelation going all the way back to the very beginning of time, and from this point of view it's regarded by Muslims as the oldest religion. Islam means both peace and submission, and if we define it as "the peace that comes from submission to God", then the term in its widest sense can refer to anyone who is obedient to God—in fact to *anything* that obeys the Divine laws of nature, including falling stones, growing plants, and burning fire. More narrowly understood, however, Islam is the name for a religion which began with the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century A.D. and which is today the second largest religion in the world. I gave you a quick sketch of Muhammad, focusing on several key events in his life: notably, the "Night of Authority", when he first began receiving messages from God; the *miraj*, in which he was miraculously transported from Mecca to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem to the Throne of Heaven; and the *hijrah* or "migration", which concerns Muhammad's escape from Mecca to Medina. Finally, we discussed the Qur'an, which is a written record of the revelations Muhammad received and which is for the Muslim the central authority and basis for the whole religion, comparable (I said) to what Jesus Christ is for Christians.

In this lecture, I want to introduce you to the basic teachings of Islam. You're already aware of the most important of these teachings, for as I've explained before the Western religions are alike in their emphasis on the unity of God and in the way they picture the relationship of this God to the world and to history. All of them believe in a supremely good, wise, and powerful Deity, who created a good world that includes uniquely valuable human beings. The specifically Muslim variation on this basic idea can be found in the Qur'an, where we hear God described as "one" and "eternal", as "beyond all conceiving" and "infinitely aware", and as "infinite in power and wisdom", and where we're told that "He knows everything pertaining to mankind in the present and everything about them that is yet to be", that "it is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then assumed His Throne", and that "He makes the night to give way to the day and the day to the night, and He knows the innermost heart". The Muslim view of God is perhaps best summed up in the "Ninety-Nine Excellent Names of *Allah*"; these are traditional names or

descriptions of God that can be found in the Qur'an. Several of these are expressed as pairs of opposites: God is at once the First and the Last, the Hidden and the Manifest, the Giver of Life and the Bringer of Death, the Defender and the Afflicter, the One who Exalts and the One who Abases. Like the other religious traditions we've studied thus far, Islam agrees that the Supreme Reality is humanly inconceivable and must be described in paradoxical terms. It's therefore no wonder that the One Hundredth Name of God in Islam, the one that comes closest to describing Him, is . . . silence.

In spite of this great variety of descriptive terms, what often strikes outsiders most about the Muslim view of God is its emphasis on power, an emphasis that at first glance sometimes causes Christians to wonder what happened to love and mercy. There's a *hadith*—as I briefly mentioned last time *hadiths* are traditions concerning the life and practices of Muhammad and reports of his sayings—that tells a story about Moses (Sayyidna [or “Lord”] Musa, as he's called in Islam), who once asked *Allah* to reveal Himself so that Moses might see Him directly. *Allah* politely declined, we're told, explaining to Moses that he didn't fully grasp the implications of what he was asking for. But Sayyidna Musa persisted, and God finally relented and said, in effect, “Let's try a little experiment first. Do you see that mountain over there on the horizon? Before I show myself to you, I'm going to show myself to that mountain”—whereupon, as Moses watched in awe, the mountain instantly crumbled to the level of the surrounding plain. Sayyidna Musa, we're told, immediately withdrew his request!

One shouldn't assume, however—as many critics have done—that the power of *Allah* eclipses, undercuts, or compromises His mercy. Unfortunately, many Christian seminaries still teach that the God of Islam and the God of Judaism are primarily Gods of judgment and wrath and that it was up to Jesus to introduce a note of mercy and forgiveness into man's view of God. This claim, however, is belied by the fact that for both Jews and Muslims God's mercy not only equals His judgment, but far surpasses it. You'll recall what I said about “God's patience” in my lecture on Judaism. As for Islam it's important to note, and to emphasize, that every chapter of the Qur'an except one begins with an invocation addressing God by the names “The Beneficent” and “The Merciful”: *Bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim*: that is, “In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful”. Moreover, according to yet another *hadith*, the words “Verily, My [God's] mercy takes precedence over My wrath” are inscribed on the very throne of *Allah* in the Heavens.

As long as I'm on the subject of misperceptions, I should point out that misunderstandings have flowed historically in both directions: Christians have misunderstood what Muslims are up to, and Muslims have misunderstood what Christians are up to. I mentioned one aspect of this tension last time in discussing the place of the Qur'an in Islam. The Qur'an, I explained, is for Muslims what Jesus is for Christians, while Muhammad is for Muslims what the Virgin Mary (or perhaps Saint Paul) is for Christians. It's therefore a great mistake to equate Muhammad and Jesus, even though they were both human beings, and similarly it's a mistake to equate the Qur'an and the Bible, even though both are sacred scriptures. And yet these are precisely the faulty comparisons that are often drawn. The Christian looks at Muhammad and says to the Muslim, "Your guy isn't as good as ours; your guy was a man and he died, but our guy was God incarnate and He rose from the dead." Meanwhile the Muslim is thinking, "So what if Muhammad died? He never claimed to be anything but a servant of God, like Abraham and Moses before him. *My* faith is not in a messenger, but in the Message, the Holy Qur'an, and when I compare it to the Christian scriptures I find that my book is obviously better. It was revealed to one man, not many; in one language, not two; at one period of time, not several; and it possesses a single, uniform, and supreme authority throughout rather than combining (as does the Bible) the commands of God with the opinions of men."

In many ways these misunderstandings can be traced back to two very different views of salvation—two views of what is needed in order for man to be delivered from suffering and sin. As many Christians see it, especially Roman Catholics and conservative Protestants, sin has so deeply infected mankind that we're unable to do anything of our own to be saved. All a man or woman can do is have faith that Jesus Christ has already accomplished the work of salvation for them. Muslims disagree. They *don't* disagree about the reality or presence of sin in our life. In fact, the over one billion Muslims of the world are in complete agreement with the over one billion Catholics that sin has affected the entire human race since Adam—with only two exceptions, and neither one (say the Muslims) was the Prophet Muhammad; Muhammad like the rest of us was born into sin. The only exceptions were Jesus, whom they call the "seal of sanctity", and his mother Mary, whom God chose "above all the women of the world". This is precisely the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. (I might also mention another quite surprising fact—surprising, I mean, to many Christians: Muslims, like Christians, believe in the Second Coming of Christ and not in the return of Muhammad.) In any case, Islam definitely teaches that we're all in fact sinners. Where

Muslims disagree with Christians is in the degree to which they think sin has affected us. They admit we're subjected from birth to the conditioning effects of an evil environment and that temptations meet us on every side—this is what it means to be “born into sin”. But in their view we nonetheless retain the moral strength to resist. Man is created in the “image and likeness” of God (see Genesis 1:26)—Islam concurs with Judaism and Christianity on this important point—and no matter how dirty or tarnished that image becomes, human beings retain deep a fundamental God-likeness, which includes (Muslims argue) a continuing capacity to avoid sin. All man needs, therefore, is the knowledge of what is right and the resolution to do it. Guidance, not redemption, is the key.

To put this dispute into the form of a picture: Christianity and Islam both see man as sitting on one side of a river, separated by water from the opposite bank, which is Heaven or Paradise. For the Christian, getting across requires being carried by Jesus—carried by the Lifeguard, as it were, who's always on duty—and Jesus of course simply walks across the water with man on his shoulders. Crossing the river for the Muslim, however, means diving into the water and swimming, following the instructions that *Allah* has mercifully given us. That last adverb is crucial: God has *mercifully* provided humanity with the means of return. His commandments, His precepts, His injunctions, His law—in short, all those things that often strike Christians as connected not with mercy but judgment—are instead for the Muslim, as for the Jew, signs of *Allah's* infinite compassion and love. Their word for God's law is the Arabic term *shariah*, which is basically the same as the Jewish concept of *torah*, and Muslims consider this *shariah* a great and wondrous and most sufficient gift. If a man fails to put this law into practice, if he doesn't make use of the divine “swimming instructions”, he has no excuse for complaining that God has not been merciful, and he shouldn't blame anyone but himself.

This idea of God's having given us a set of laws and instructions naturally leads to a discussion of what precisely this law requires. In the Islamic perspective, the essential requirements can be very easily summarized, more so than the teachings of any other religion; Muslims say this simplicity is in fact one of the great strengths of their religion. Five things are required of a person who seeks to be as faithful as possible to the will of God. These five things, the basic building blocks of *shariah*, are known as the “Five Pillars”. Like the pillars of a temple, these five requirements are understood to support the entire “house of Islam” (*dar al-Islam*). As I've stressed several times this semester, every religion includes both a doctrine and a method,

both theory and practice. On the one hand a religious tradition is meant to provide us with a key to the way things really are, and on the other hand it give us instructions on how to use that key. This distinction is especially clear in the case of Islam. The first of the Five Pillars states in the clearest possible way the essence of Muslim doctrine, while the four remaining Pillars are all concerned with Muslim practice. (Compare this with the first three of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, which summarize Buddhist doctrine, and the fourth Noble Truth, which comprises Buddhist method.)

The First Pillar, called the *shahâdah*, is the basic creed of Islam, its statement of faith. *Shahâdah* is an Arabic word meaning “testimony” or “witness”, and it consists of a pair of very short phrases. Reciting those two phrases in Arabic with full knowledge of what you're doing and with the intention of expressing your own personal faith—of witnessing to your deepest conviction—is equivalent to the Christian rite of Baptism and thus constitutes initiation into the religion of Islam. The *shahâdah* consists of the words: *Lâ ilâha illâ 'Llâh, Muhammadan rasûlu 'Llâh*; in English translation this means, “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” One sometimes hears the first phrase rendered as “there is no god but *Allah*”, but this is actually a little deceptive because it makes *Allah* sound like a proper name—like Zeus or Shiva—whereas in fact the word is a combination of the Arabic definite article (*al* = “the”) with the word for “Deity” or “Divinity”. Hence *Allah* simply means “the God”: the One without a second, the utterly unique and supreme Creator of the Universe. For the Muslim the first part of the *shahâdah* (“There is no god but God”) thus contains not only an explicit profession of faith in the true God of all creatures but also an implicit prohibition against directing one's worship toward anything else. It is for Islam what the first of the Ten Commandments is for Judaism: “I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods beside Me” (Exodus 20:2-3). In fact the fundamental sin for Islam is idolatry, called *shirk* in Arabic. *Shirk*, sometimes translated as “association”, means treating a creature, any creature, as if it were on the same level as its Creator. According to the Qur'an, “God will not forgive those who serve other gods besides Him.... He that serves other gods besides Him is guilty of a heinous sin” (*Sûrah* 4:48). From the Muslim point of view—as I mentioned in my last YouTube lecture—Christians are guilty of this sin when they “associate” Jesus with God, believing that Jesus (whom Muslims regard as solely human) was at the same time Divine.

As for the second part of the Testimony—*Muhammadan rasûlu 'Llâh* (“Muhammad is the Prophet or Messenger of God”)—this is usually interpreted with a stress on the definite article: Muhammad is *the* Prophet of God. In other words, though he is but one in a series of Divine messengers, he’s nonetheless the most important. Muhammad is understood to be the last of God’s prophets, the “Seal of the Prophets”, and Islam is therefore regarded as the culmination of Divine revelation. To say *Muhammadan rasûlu 'Llâh* is to say that Islam is the total truth, and it’s to testify implicitly to the trustworthiness of the entire Qur’an. If I say, “Muhammad is the Prophet of God”, I’m saying that I believe everything the Qur’an teaches, whether about God or creation or history or the final Day of Judgment. And at the same time I’m obligating myself to put into practice whatever the Qur’an commands. The most important of these commands and practices constitute the other four Pillars.

The second Pillar of Islam is the practice of charity or almsgiving, called *zakah*. Beyond simply telling the Muslim that she should help those in various categories of need, the Islamic *shariah* is very precise as to the amount of assistance required, calling for an annual distribution of no less than two and a half percent or 1/40 of one’s total property. This may at first sound to Jews and Christians like an easy burden, compared to their own Biblical “tithe” (or tenth). But the Muslim figure applies to all of a person’s total holdings, his net worth, and not simply his annual income. And lest it be thought that the commandment pertains only to money and property, a number of important *hadiths* of the Prophet make it clear that *zakah* is fundamentally a question of love and compassion. While material goods and services are certainly expected from those who have the financial means to give them, the essential requirement is of a spiritual nature.

The third Pillar is the annual practice of fasting (*sawm*), observed by faithful Muslims during the sacred month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the month in the Islamic calendar when Muhammad received his first revelation on the Night of Authority, and it’s also the month, albeit a decade later, when he made his historic *hijrah* to Medina. During the entire month of Ramadan, in commemoration of these great events, the Muslim must observe a period of strict ascetic discipline. From daybreak to sunset, neither food nor drink—not even water—may cross his lips (exceptions and special provisions are made for travelers, pregnant women, the sick, and the aged), and sexual activities are forbidden. Daybreak is traditionally defined as that precise moment when it’s light enough to distinguish a white thread from a black thread, and one knows evening has come when the distinction is once again impossible, at which point the fast may be broken. Since

the traditional Islamic year is based on a lunar calendar, each month running from full moon to full moon, Ramadan gradually “moves” through the solar year. When it falls in the winter and the days are short, it’s less demanding, but during the lengthy days of summer—especially in the hot desert climate of the Middle East or the equatorial regions—it can prove a very exhausting discipline. As with Lent in the Christian tradition, one of the main aims of the fast is to be reminded, through sacrifice, of one’s dependence on God.

The fourth Pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage or *hajj*. Unlike the other four components of Muslim law, this one is not absolutely required. At least once in his lifetime, if it’s physically and financially possible for him, every Muslim (no matter where he happens to live in the world) should try to make a journey to the city of Mecca. Mecca is in a sense the Holy City of Islam, in part because of its being the birthplace of Muhammad, but more importantly because it’s the site of the Kaaba. The Kaaba (Arabic for “cube”) is a cubically-shaped stone building (roughly forty feet tall and forty feet on each side) located on a site that Muslims believe has been used since ancient times for the worship of *Allah*; the first Kaaba is said to have been constructed by Adam, and another building was later built on the same foundation by Abraham and Ishmael. (The present structure, of course, has been rebuilt and repaired many times over the course of the centuries.) For Muslims it is the very “House of God”, the one spot on earth most sacred to Him. When performing the *hajj*, pilgrims must follow a number of very specific requirements. Everyone dons a very simple white garment, symbolizing that all distinctions of rank and privilege have been set aside; in the eyes of God all people are merely His servants or slaves, and one of the main points of the pilgrimage is to heighten the Muslim’s devotion and submission to *Allah*. There follow a number of prescribed actions, including a ritual circumambulation of the Kaaba (seven times in a counter-clockwise direction) and a rapid procession (again seven times) back and forth between two neighboring hills, which is intended to re-enact a key event in the life of Hagar, Abraham’s second wife and the mother of Ishmael. I’ll tell you more about this in my YouTube lecture.

Finally, the last of the Five Pillars of Islam concerns the recitation of prayers, or *salah* (plural: *salat*). This without doubt is the most important of the four practical Pillars, and it’s comparable in its importance on the plane of method to the doctrinal *shahâdah*. According to Islamic *shariah* a faithful Muslim must pray every day, but not just in any fashion or according to whim. Her prayers must instead follow a specified form, which includes the precise number of prayers and the specific times of day when they’re said, certain ablutions or rites of purification

one observes before praying, the direction one faces when praying, specific postures and movements, and certain obligatory words and formulas. The prayers are normally said at home either alone or with one's family, though it's customary for the Friday noon prayers to be said with other Muslims in a *masjid* or mosque, the Muslim equivalent of a Jewish synagogue or Christian church.

Let me give you some details. The Muslim is to pray five times every day, and these times are very carefully stipulated: at sunrise, at mid-day, in the mid-afternoon (when the sun has descended half way from its zenith to the horizon), at sunset, and finally just before retiring. Ablutions or ritual washings must precede each session of prayer. The rules for these are again quite precise: one rinses the mouth, cleanses the nasal passages, washes the face, then washes each arm up to the elbow, then the face again (this time cleansing the ears), and finally the feet. A person is then understood to be in the proper state of ritual purity for the sacramental action of prayer.

Islamic tradition further specifies that prayers should be said while facing in the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca (pilgrims on the *hajj* form concentric circles around the Kaaba when they are praying), and these prayers are always linked to a prescribed pattern of physical motions, which are synchronized with particular words. At first one stands upright (symbolizing the dignity of man), and then, touching the earlobes with his thumbs, the Muslim announces, "I intend to pray ..." whatever prayer it happens to be at the hour (morning, noon, *etc.*). Then begin the canonical words—that is, the formal, revealed, and required words—of the prayer itself. These change in part from one time of day to another, and at certain times the prayers are to be recited silently, at other times audibly. Having said the first part of the prayer, the Muslim then bows, sliding his hands down the front of his thighs, and having dropped first to his knees, he makes a full prostration, placing his forehead on the ground. With regard to postural symbolism, this moment of the prayer is meant to signify extreme humility as the Muslim assumes the fetal position, occupying the smallest and lowest space possible as a sign of his nothingness and utter vulnerability before the Divine. He then comes back up to a sitting position on his heels, and then once again the forehead is placed on the prayer rug. Finally, he returns to a standing position, having completed one full part of the prayer.

During each of the daily sessions of prayer, time is also reserved for personal prayers. But *salah* consists mainly in reciting certain obligatory formulas, which are specified by the tradition. These vary somewhat from one time of day to another, but they always include the words of the

first chapter of the Qur'an, the *Fâtiḥah*, or “opening”—words that are as important for a Muslim as the Lord's Prayer (“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name”, *etc.*) is for a Christian: “In the name of God, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Ruler on the Day of Reckoning. You alone do we worship, and You alone do we ask for help. Guide us on the straight path, the path of those who have received your grace; not the path of those who have brought down wrath, nor of those who go astray.” Notice the same paradoxical balance I pointed out earlier among the various Names of God: one can see from the *Fâtiḥah* that God is at once a merciful and giving God *and* a just and demanding God, a God who requires that man freely respond to his gifts with obedience and service, a God who rewards those who obey and punishes those who do not.

Here then are the essential teachings of Islam, the five essential pillars or components of the Muslim *shariah* or law: 1. *shahâdah* or testimony, 2. *zakah* or almsgiving, 3. *sawm* or the fast of Ramadan, 4. *hajj* or pilgrimage, and 5. *salah* or daily prayer. There's a very famous *hadîth* (called “the *hadîth* of Gabriel”) that comes down to us from one of Muhammad's closest companions, a man named Umar, in which these essentials of Islam are very nicely summed up. Umar reported, “One day when we were sitting with the Prophet, there came to us a man whose clothes were of exceeding whiteness and whose hair was of exceeding blackness, nor were there any signs of travel upon him, although none of us knew him. He sat down knee to knee opposite the Prophet, upon whose thighs he placed the palms of his hands, saying, ‘O Muhammad, tell me what is the surrender (*islam*).’ The Prophet answered him saying, ‘The surrender is to testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God's messenger, to perform the prayer, bestow the alms, fast Ramadan, and make, if thou canst, the pilgrimage to the Holy House.’ He said, ‘Thou hast spoken truly,’ and we were amazed that having questioned him he should corroborate him. Then the stranger went away, and I stayed a while after he had gone, and the Prophet said to me, ‘O ‘Umar, knowest thou the questioner, who he was?’ I said, ‘God and His messenger know best.’ He said, ‘It was Gabriel. He came to you to teach you your religion.’”

Before concluding this lecture I must also mention three other well-known aspects of Islamic belief and practice, which, while not having the status of “pillars”, are nevertheless important and distinctive features of this religion. First, Islamic law includes certain ethical injunctions and prohibitions in the realm of diet and social behavior. To be precise, the faithful Muslim may not eat pork or the blood of an animal, he may not drink any form of alcohol or take

any other intoxicants, he may not engage in games of chance or gambling, and he may not practice usury, which is the practice of collecting interest on loans.

A second—and in our day increasingly controversial—fact is that Islam permits the practice of polygamy, allowing a man to have up to four wives at one time. This practice seems to have reflected an earlier historical context, one in which God permitted polygamy strictly for the benefit of women who might otherwise find themselves without protection (as in times of war) and never to have been intended—as critics often assume—simply to satisfy the lusts of libidinous men. And as if to underscore this fact, a *hadith* of the Prophet says that a man may have several wives only if he is truly able to treat all of them equally—a condition many traditional Muslim commentators have said is all but impossible, humanly speaking. One more point on this subject: Marriage is not a sacrament for Muslims as it is for Christians, but rather a social or legal contract—a contract, however, that is by no means to be entered into lightly. Yet another *hadith* underscores the seriousness of marriage: “Of all the things *Allah* permits, he hates divorce the most.”

A third and final issue that I wanted to mention is the Muslim practice of *jihad*, a volatile topic if ever there was one, especially in light of world events today. This is an aspect of Islam that is frequently misunderstood by outsiders—which is no surprise, given its flagrant abuse by certain fanatical “Islamists” themselves. If you listened only to many in the western press or to the terrorists, you might easily come away thinking that *jihad* means nothing but violence. But in fact the primary meaning of the word is spiritual. Literally it means “effort” or “exertion”, and it has to do with courageously meeting the demands of God’s law while resisting temptation. Historically, the word was used to describe the efforts of the Muslim community to protect itself from attack and to guard its sacred ways, and in this sense *jihad* can mean “holy war”. According to several passages in the Qur’an say, however, such war is to be waged only in defense and never aggressively, and it’s spelled out in no uncertain terms that (as I mentioned in YouTube Lecture 12) “there should be no compulsion in religion” (*Sûrah* 2:256)—in other words that it’s wrong to force people to convert to Islam. Traditional Muslim law also stresses that the killing of non-combatants and suicide are always wrong. Of course, having said this, one must admit at once that Muslims have not always lived up to the ideals of their religion; indeed we’re seeing today, among a number of extremist groups, a gross perversion of what the sacred texts of Islam actually require. As an antidote to these fanatical distortions, it may be helpful to quote another very important

hadīth of Muhammad. We're told that upon returning from a battle against his Meccan adversaries—who persisted for some years in their efforts to kill him even after his *hijrah* to Medina—the Prophet explained to one of his companions that they were returning from the “lesser” to the “greater” *jihad*: in other words, from a military defense of the Muslim community against its external enemies to the much more important internal warfare that all people must wage in their hearts against sin and temptation. (Recall what I said about the spiritual meaning of the “battlefield” in the *Bhagavad Gita*.)

I'll tell you in my YouTube lecture about one of the early caliphs of Islam, Muhammad's son-in-law Ali, and how he responded to provocation on the battlefield—a story that typifies a truly Muslim *jihad*.