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# PORTALS

Opening our hearts and minds to  
ministry among muslims.



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## **Portals: Opening our Hearts and Minds to Ministry among Muslims**

### **Introduction – Preparing ourselves**

When we meet a new person we immediately make many decisions about whether we will like that person when we hear their voice, see them, and learn their name. Actually, many decisions and assumptions are made even before anything is said or done; they are solely based on what we see. We evaluate their appearance – clothing, hairstyle, physical appearance. We evaluate their mannerisms – facial expressions, gestures, body position. We evaluate the location – lighting, sound, ambience. These decisions will affect how we listen to them, if we listen to them, how we respond to them, if we choose to respond, and our opinion of their worth. This sounds so superficial and unfair but it is the truth.

If we choose to take the next step, meaning all of the above fit our concept of what is acceptable, we may be willing to enter into a conversation with the person. This decision is then affected by where we meet. Is our meeting occurring at work, at school, in public, or in private? Is it a social event, recreational activity, and or business meeting? The setting will have a significant impact on how open we will be to say more or less than is absolutely necessary. You know – your name, occupation, and phone number. Or name, city where you live, school you attend or attended. Again, all very superficial and not designed to learn anything of any value. When I say of any value, I mean information that might help me know the person and who they are.

All of the above opens the door to making many assumptions about the person we have just met; assumptions about why they look the way they do, why they act in a certain way, what their behavior and mannerisms mean and so on. Often they are false assumptions, but we do this to avoid the work of investigating further and beginning to understand who the person is, what has happened in their life to bring them to this place, and events that may have shaped them but are not evident from a brief meeting.

Let us use the person's name to explain. Names, often but not always, indicate places of origin. They immediately call to mind descriptions of specific groups of people and the way they behave because of their place of origin. Names can also indicate social and economic status. There are names that only appear within certain social levels and groups. Names can be used to determine our level of interest in exploring further who the person is. We can do the same name game with location information. Certain geographic locations predetermine, in the minds of many, the value of a person and how they will behave. This again impacts how we will respond to them.

Physical appearance is one or the more complicated factors used in our evaluation. If a person has an evident defect or something that appears abnormal, (and that is a very subjective concept), we begin another process of evaluation. This process depends on what part of the body is affected, how it affects their movement, and so on. Again - superficial.

Another aspect we could look at is emotion. Are they energetic, sad, focused, or distracted? This list could get very long - and is the most subjective area of evaluation. It is also the area where we make the most assumptions about a person and whether we want to invest our valuable time in knowing them, risk our possessions in helping them, or risk ourselves in understanding them.

The most complicated aspect in all of this is that not one of us uses the same method of evaluation. We all place different levels of importance on things like appearance, names, education, and so on. Two people can meet the same person and have completely different opinions about that person and make very different assumptions about why they behave the way they do and what happened in their life for that to cause that behavior.

We make all kinds of assumptions about others, about what is happening around us, and so on. Sometimes, and I emphasize the word sometimes, we are right. But often, all too often, we are wrong. But many, if not most, are not willing to invest the time necessary to get into origins and explanations. We depend heavily on our observations, what we have learned about race, culture, and geography, and what we have been told by others related to such areas of evaluation.

We do this at work, at play, at school. We most certainly do it in the area of politics. We do it in the area of social status, economics, and education. We do it all of the time.

We also do it in the area of religious belief. We decide many things about a person by just hearing what religious group they are a part of, for example: protestant vs catholic; Baptist vs Methodist; Armenian vs Calvinist; liberal vs conservative. A long list of comparison and evaluations could be compiled of these groups. They strongly impact development of relationships among individuals.

We do this between religions as well: atheist vs deist, agnostic vs animist, universalist vs pantheist. Yes, those are real ways in which people make evaluations. But they are not as obvious as when we here terms like Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist and many others. The terms cause us to evaluate and define the person before we even know them. We tend to place a label on a person based on what religion they follow. That label forever colors our relations or possibility of relations.

Obviously, the best thing to do is to go beyond the superficial and discover who the person really is and what happened in his/her life to bring them to this point in time. We need to ask enough questions to go beyond the labels and assumptions to base our evaluation on and the possibility of sharing life and truth with them.

Having said all of that, let us take some time to learn about the origins and sources that formed Islam. This will help us understand the beginnings of the faith that a Muslim follows.

### **Introduction - Founding of Islam**

Mohammed, the founder of Islam, was born around 570 AD in Mecca. He was part of a tribe that were descendants of Ishmael, and were considered monotheists. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was a child. He was raised by his paternal uncle and traveled with him on caravans to Syria. During that time, he encountered different groups of Jews and Christians and learned about their beliefs and history.

As he grew, Mohammed earned a reputation as a respectable and impartial business person. This gained the attention of Khadijah, the widow of a successful trader. She proposed marriage and he accepted. She was 40 and Mohammed was 25. They had six children. Only their daughter Fatimah survived childhood. It was during this time that Mohammed developed the habit of spending time in a cave in seclusion to meditate. At about the age of 40 he had his first vision of Gabriel, the archangel, who told him he had been sent to give Mohammed a revelation from God. This event caused him a great deal of fear and stress. When he told his wife and her cousin (who was a Christian) they

encouraged him to continue to listen to the vision, believing that he was being called to be a prophet. These visions would continue until his death in 632.

At first, only a few listened to Mohammed's preaching about his visions; believing it to be of little importance. But as more people began to respond to his teaching, persecution arose. This was because a key focus of his visions was his opposition to the polytheism practiced by the majority of the tribal groups. This polytheism created an economic benefit to the city of Mecca. It was here that the Kaaba was built to house the images of all the gods worshipped by the tribes. When people came to visit, they were expected to leave gifts and sacrifices which greatly augmented the wealth and standing of the people of Mecca. Mohammed's teaching threatened this and so they attacked Mohammed and his small group of followers. As a result, Mohammed and his group migrated to Medina in 620-2. A smaller group went to Abyssinia and were granted asylum by the Christians. (This is somewhat similar to the story of Paul and the silversmiths of Artemis in Ephesus – They attacked Paul because of their loss of business as people converted to Christianity.)

Now began a period of warfare and battles with various tribes that opposed the teaching and growing power of Mohammed and his followers, who were now called Muslims. These attackers included tribal groups and groups of Jews who would not accept Mohammed as a prophet. In time, however, their attacks shifted from defensive to offensive action, because Mohammed and his followers forced them into submission. Even times of defeat strengthened the resolve of Mohammed and the Muslims.

There were two key purposes for the Muslim's ongoing fight - to end polytheism and to unite the tribes. Finally, Mohammed grew strong enough and led his army to capture Mecca in 630. They did so with little opposition. Mohammed's first action was to remove and destroy all of the idols located in the Kaaba. The following years focused on uniting the tribes of Arabia. A key condition of surrender however was that the tribes must abandon their worship of other gods and accept Islam as their religion or be destroyed.

In 632 Mohammed died soon after participating in the hajj (a reenactment of the escape to Medina). Leadership of the Muslims passed to Abu Bakr who led them in a time of conquest and expansion that would continue for almost one hundred years. At this time the great empires of Rome and Persia had fallen and the Christian church was divided and weakened. Both of these events made possible the political expansion of Islam and the conversion of the region. By the end of the one hundred years Muslim control and influence would reach from Spain to India.

### **Influence of Mohammed**

Mohammed began life as an orphan. His teen years brought him into contact with Christians and Jews. He grew up in a monotheistic tribal group that descended from the line of Ishmael. He saw the impact of idol worship and the divisions it caused. He was an intelligent person and respected for his ability to negotiate. His marriage provided him access to a larger sphere of influence. The visions gave him a message and platform to promote monotheism and unity among the factions of Arabia.

The opposition and persecution he experienced created a need to survive and resulted in the development of an army to protect his group and subjugate others. He won key victories against overwhelming odds yet even his defeats were seen as evidence that he was guided and protected by unseen forces.

The acceptance of his teaching by key people and the persecution by others formed the basis for decisions related to the survival of this new religion. It also made possible the propagation of the teachings he gave based on the visions and messages he was receiving. These messages were received over a 30-year period. At times Mohammed would receive them while meditating in private and at other times they would occur in the presence of others. These events are described as having the appearance of seizures because of the intensity of the experience.

The messages became, when gathered and bound together, the Quran. Mohammed received the messages verbatim from Gabriel who required him to memorize them before he was allowed to leave. This was necessary because Mohammed was illiterate. Over time a group of 60 people, called the Companions, gathered around Mohammed. They lived nearby so that Mohammed could call one of them at a moment's notice. They were ready at any hour to write down the latest message from Gabriel.

The verses were copied, reviewed to be sure they had been copied correctly, and then added to existing material. The location for each new revelation was given to Mohammed by Gabriel after he received it. This means that each sura, or section, of the Quran is made up of revelations received at different times throughout the life of Mohammed. As he received each message he was also told where it was to be placed among all the prior messages. This means that each sura is a mixture of messages received at different times.

After Mohammed's death Abu Bakr set up a plan to gather all of the existing written materials and organize them into a complete copy. This copy became the official version of the Quran. To improve the process of teaching and memorization of the Quran and to avoid problems with variant texts, translations, and interpretation - based on local language differences, all other manuscripts were destroyed. From this master copy six exact copies were distributed. This became the basis for all teaching and memorization of the Quran. This also reinforced the concept that the Quran should not be translated and could only be truly understood in its original language. These were distributed to key locations along with a teacher to be sure it was read and pronounced correctly.

About 100 years later the process of collecting the commentaries, sayings, and traditions of Mohammed began. These had not been recorded during the life of Mohammed and so depended on traditions and information passed down orally. This group of material came to be known as the Hadith which means reports or narratives.

## **Evaluation**

This is only a brief snapshot of the person we know as Mohammed. At first light, he appears to be a sincere man who wanted his people to serve only one god. A person who wanted to see his people united. Was he a prophet? Did he truly receive visions? The answer is yes to both questions. However, the better question is, for whom was he a prophet? And from whom did he receive the visions?

Mohammed clearly falls into the category of a prophet. He called the people to obedience. He called the people to abandon idols. He called the people to follow a better system of law and relations amongst themselves. So yes, he was a prophet. Did he receive visions? Again, the answer is probably yes. But where they came from is more difficult to answer. He, and those who follow his teaching,

claim that they came directly from God through the angel Gabriel; a direct dictation of the word of God for the people of Ishmael.

We know that God had given a word to the Jews, the line of Isaac, in Hebrew. He also gave a word to the Gentiles, in Greek, to those who followed Jesus. The Quran became the word of God, in Arabic, to the people of the line of Ishmael. This is why, in Islam, all three groups, Jew, Christian, and Muslim, are considered to be people of "the Book." For God gave to each group his word for them. However, Muslims do not believe these books are equal and they are not mutually exclusive. Yet, all Muslims are encouraged to read the Tawrat, the books of the Old Testament, and the Injeel, the books of the New Testament. We will talk more of this later on.

Does all of this help us avoid evaluating and prejudging those we meet who follow Islam? If we are talking about a people who sincerely are seeking after God (or in their case Allah) then this should be of great help to us in avoiding assumptions and errors in judgment about them as a people. But it also should reveal how little we know about all that makes up their belief system. It should make us pause and realize what we have just read is only the wrapping, so to speak. It only tells us how things originated or began. What we need to know and should investigate is the content of the package. How it is understood and how does it impact the lives of those who call themselves Muslims?

It is like talking to a person about their birth. We learn the birth date, the parentage, and a little about the events surrounding the birth, but know nothing about how the baby grew up and how its personality developed. Mohammed is, in a sense, the birth of Islam and maybe a little of its childhood. There is so much more to learn. Why? Because for the most part we are dealing with people who are adults and have spent years being taught and influenced by this system of belief.

What we need to explore now is how Islam has impacted and changed the lives and actions of those who call themselves Muslims. Each person will be different. For each the impact, while it may appear the same on the surface, could be very different in how it influences their lives. It is like that birthdate idea. Many people are born on the same day, in the same place, and even may look very similar, or at least belong to the same culture. But after years pass the differences can and are very evident. Even when all things are equal - social status, economic condition, and education, the differences between those two babies as adults can be extreme.

So, putting aside all negative publicity or information about Mohammed, what we have is a person who, on the surface truly wanted to see his people abandon their polytheism to follow one God. He was a person who wanted to bring an end to the constant warring among the people of his time, to help them learn to respect themselves and others. We may question his deeper motives, his methods, and other aspects of his life and activity, but that will only create barriers. That will bring us back to making assumptions about the person, a follower of Mohammed, we want to get to know.

Our goal, is, then, to identify and remove the barriers, and open the doors so we can meet the person. If, after befriending them, they reject the truth we have and the revelation of God's love for them, then let it be because they have chosen to do so. But let it not be because we have prevented them from listening because we were too prejudiced, we made false assumptions, or we created a context where they could not hear God speak.



## **Their viewpoint –**

What do they see and think when they hear a person say he is a Christian? As followers of Christ we know what we want them to believe but when you look at the context in which this word is used it may create an entirely different image.

We want them to see Christ but they see something quite different. When they are born they are born Muslims. It doesn't matter where they live, their social background or any other idea we might use to identify them. They are Muslims. It is who they are and, unfortunately, they apply the same concept to everyone born in a "Christian" nation. So Christians becomes equated with alcoholism, pornography, violence, racism, military force, etc.

This is the wrong image but it is what they see and are taught. They don't know what a true follower of Jesus looks like. So this means we have a twofold problem. We have to overcome our assumptions and fears, so we can know the person, and we have to overcome their assumptions about those called Christians.

As we move forward we will be looking at a number of topics and trying to open our hearts to them, and by doing so becoming real people they can get to know and maybe trust. Maybe trust enough to hear the truth God has given us for them.

## **Portal 1 - Creeds**

Creeds are statements of one's beliefs and are developed to help people declare clearly what they believe. They may also be called "statements of faith and practice." Creeds are used as in times of confession of belief, in times of teaching about what one believes, and as a means of reaffirming that belief. The content is usually well defined. It states the central points of the belief and often includes a comment about the source of that belief or what is used to guide someone in following what they believe.

Creeds take many forms from very simple to very involved. For example: Buddhism has a complex set of creeds or codes. They include: the three jewels, the four noble truths, the five precepts, and the eightfold path. Each builds on and is related to the others. A central aspect is belief in the teaching of Buddha.

An example of one that is simple is that of the Jewish faith. "Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One." (Dt 6:4)

This declaration focuses on the existence of only one God which includes accepting his teaching and authority as found in the law and prophets. A brief summary of its key elements is found in the Ten Commandments.

Christianity has both simple and more complex declarations. A basic one is given to us by Paul – "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Ro 10:9)

A more extensive one is the Apostle's Creed – I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the

right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

These two creeds include the beliefs found in the creed of the Jews but add key ideas, the existence of God as Trinity and the work of Jesus in providing for our salvation. Implicit in this is dependence on the Old and New Testament portions of the Bible. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” (Heb 1:1-2)

Islam as a simple creed called the Shahada. It is a declaration of faith. When recited it is almost always done in Arabic: *lā 'ilāha 'illā-llāhu muḥammadun rasūlu-llāh* (لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ). This statement must be declared publicly at least once in a Muslim's life to confirm that a person is a Muslim or convert to Islam. The Shahada usually has two parts.

- Part one: There is no god but God (Allah) – This declares their belief in one God
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- Part two is: Mohammed is the messenger of God – This declares their belief in Mohammed as the messenger and by inference that the words given to him by Gabriel are from God. Muslims are also encouraged to read the Old Testament (Tawrah and Zabur) and the New Testament (Injeel). (sura 2:87; sura 5:49)

In the Shia sect (a specific Islamic group) a third phrase is added: And that Ali is the wali of God (guardian of God). This relates to their belief that only a person of the line of Mohammed can be the caliph, or leader, of Islam.

The Shahada is whispered by the father into the ear of a newborn child and it is whispered into the ear of a dying person. Each of the Muslim's five daily prayers include the recitation of this creed. The recitation of the Shahada in the presence of witnesses is the first and only formal step in conversion to Islam. Its recitation must reflect understanding of its importance and be based in heartfelt sincerity.

Both phrases appear in the Quran but not together. Various records suggest it was not until late in the seventh century that it was officially established as a ritual. But its appearance on various buildings and forms indicates clearly that its sentiments were part of the Quran and Islamic belief early on.

It is here that we begin to encounter key challenges that affect the relations between Muslims and Christians. These are found at the level of their fundamental beliefs. Let us look at a few of them and hopefully begin to understand the gulf that separates us and also investigate how to use the creeds to build a relationship that will open the way to them discovering Jesus (Isa), the Messiah.

The first belief is one we agree on. There is only one God and to serve any other god is idolatry. It is one of the key themes of the Quran. The conflict lies in our understanding of the nature of God. As Christians we believe in a triune God. But believing it does not mean we can explain it. To many, including Muslims, it appears that we have three gods and not one. In fact for many in Islam there is the belief that the names of the three gods of Christianity are God, Jesus, and Mary.

The second major belief, again, has a point of agreement. We both agree that God selects people to communicate his word to others. They are usually called prophets. Both the Quran and the Bible are

in agreement about who many of these prophets are – Moses, Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus are a few.

For Christians the final person in the line of the prophets is considered Jesus. While there are others who filled and still fill the function of prophet, Jesus is the last whose words were considered to come directly from God. Others were called to preach and teach the words given by Jesus, and because of them we have the books of Paul and others.

For Islam there is one more messenger, one more prophet, sent by God. He is Mohammed. At this point we again enter into conflict. Not with the idea of one who speaks in the name of God but one whose words are claimed to be direct words of God. This is in contradiction to the closing words of Revelation and the command to not add to or alter the word as it has been given.

It is at this point that we encounter more conflicts and issues. The Quran is not always in agreement with the Tawrah (Pentateuch and prophets), Zibur (Psalms), or Injeel (New Testament). And one of the strongest points of conflict is over the life and nature of Jesus. The Quran agrees that Jesus is the Messiah, that he was perfect and without sin, and that he performed miracles. He is also considered the greatest of the prophets. But, according to Islam, he is not God incarnate, he did not die, (God provided a substitute), and therefore did not save anyone from their sins. Islam believes that Jesus was taken to heaven and that one day he will return and that will signal the end of time.

We could go on making comparisons between the creeds and beliefs of these two systems of belief. That is not the point and it is not productive. What it does do is help us realize that we both have creeds. That many believe strongly in the beliefs represented by those creeds. And that it will require patience and understanding to overcome the barriers that exist because of them. But at the same time these points of contact can provide great opportunities to connect with and open doors to further relationship building.

The key to remember is: you may win an argument but lose a relationship. It is not about winning theological debates. It is about establishing relationships and letting that guide the direction of the conversation. Many of the authors on Muslim ministry encourage such discussions but always from the point of listening and using the Injeel as a tool in sharing.

Instead of making a list of key topics to discuss it is better to invite a Muslim to read the Injeel; even to read it together. This will allow the topics to come up in a more natural way, as part of the reading of the Word. It allows them to form their questions and maybe find the answers without the confrontational issues that usually appear when a debate type of approach used.

There is one more facet to this topic of creeds. Many times the shorter creeds begin to take on the form of a mantra. (Phrases that are repeated with the goal of improving one's meditation and so increase their connection with the spiritual world.) The shahada is used in many contexts and easily repeated over and over in the hope of gaining the attention of Allah.

At the same time, we can be accused of the same practice in our worship. We recite the Lord's Prayer, the Shepherd's Psalm, and other passages as part of our worship. We know that this practice does not provide us with special blessing or access to God. Yet those watching us may not see the difference, especially when they see the practice of penance in the Catholic Church and the repetition of the Lord's Prayer or the Hail Mary.

We need to learn what others believe, not so we can attack and correct them, but so we can find ways to connect with them and understand that they too are searching for truth. Our goal should be to join them in the search and with patience pray that God will give us wisdom in how to respond to the questions that will certainly be asked.

Our creeds will provide us the opportunity. Our task is to understand what we believe and let them explore our lives and compare that to what they believe.

## **Portal 2 - Prayer**

Prayer and meditation are a key part of all religions. The focus being to bring our hearts and minds into a state where we will be able to communicate and receive a response from the spiritual realm.

As Christians we are encouraged to pray and tell God our needs. We have many examples of those who made such commitments and were honored by God. David committed to pray regularly. Daniel prayed even if it meant being thrown to the lions. Jesus' habit was to get alone to talk with his Father. His instruction in how to pray is found in the Lord's Prayer. Paul encouraged people to pray without ceasing.

A central teaching on prayer is found in Matthew 6, which contains several instructions as well as an example of how to pray. The instruction Jesus gave created a very different concept and purpose of prayer than what was being practiced at that time. The leaders were very public in their prayers and they were very wordy and repetitious. Jesus condemned both practices because it had little to do with coming into God's presence. Rather, their prayers focused on gaining the attention and praise of men. In short, they were showing off. Jesus' recommendation is quite the opposite. He tells us to find a place of privacy and then speak to God. God knows what we need. What he wants to hear is our heart.

One other thing to note. In the example Jesus gave us (Mt 6:9-13), the focus is mainly on the kingdom of God and doing what is necessary to be part of that kingdom of God. A key aspect of this is in being part of bringing that kingdom to the world. We are to make sure that his name is treated as holy in our lives (vs 9). We are to be involved in following the will of God here on earth in the same way it is followed in heaven (vs 10). We are to seek each day the resources that are needed to effectively serve in the kingdom (vs 11). We are to learn the lesson of forgiveness so that others will be forgiven and drawn to God (vs 12). Finally, we are to seek God's power because our enemy desires to destroy all who follow God (vs 13).

This is in stark contrast to how much of the world treats the concept of prayer or petition. For many, repetition is a key element. You see it in the prayer wheels of many eastern religions. Wheels or drums are covered with prayers that are driven by the wind. The belief is that each time it makes a rotation the prayer is repeated and in so doing, provides a constant reminder of their petitions to the gods or spirits. Prayer wheels, candle burning, incense, and other practices all focus on repeating, over and over, one's prayer with the hope that, at some point, the prayers might be heard.

We see the impact of this thinking even in the church. Many repeat the Lord's Prayer over and over, or the Hail Mary, with the hope of it somehow influencing God's decision. Many, in their prayers, repeat key words, phrases, or the names of God over and over as if that will give greater power and credibility to their petitions. There are those who believe that repeatedly praying the scriptures will

cause God to listen. And so we wander far from the heart of prayer, which is meeting with God, worshipping Him, and hearing his direction.

With all this as background we can now look at what is called the second pillar of Islam the daily prayer, or **salat**.

A true and faithful Muslim is expected to pray five times a day, every day throughout the year. Before they pray, they are required to wash, or perform what is called ablution, wudu, or ritual washing. There are several steps to this process and they vary somewhat from group to group. However, they all include washing the hands, head, arms up to the elbows, and the feet, including the ankles; following specific directions for the manner in which the washing is done. At the end a brief prayer is recited that usually includes the Shahada.

The five times appointed for prayer are:

1. Before sunrise
2. Midday, after the sun passes its highest point
3. Late part of the afternoon
4. Just after sunset
5. Between sunset and midnight

The pattern for prayer is always the same. It is generally to be done with others and if possible in a mosque. But it can be done alone and in any place. Also one is to have a prayer mat to use while praying.

It begins with the call to prayer or adhan by the muezzin (the person appointed at the mosque to lead and recite the Quran). This signals that it is time to perform the wudu (ablution). Soon follows the second call, known as the iqama. At this time all Muslims line up and face Mecca. The salat is made up of repeating units called rakats. This involves times of standing, bowing, kneeling, prostrating, and sitting. During all of these steps specific verses, phrases, and prayers of the Quran are recited.

Interestingly, the purpose of prayer is not to benefit Allah. Muslims pray because they have been told to do so, and thus they will gain great benefit from the practice. It also is to bring them into direct contact with Allah. A second purpose is to help a person realize that humanity is one and all are equal in the sight of God.

There are many other times when a Muslim prays. These are divided into various levels of obligation with the Salat being the highest level. The next would be the prayers offered on Friday during the meeting. Others are performed during key festivals like Eid and Ramadan. There are also voluntary prayers that a person can perform at other times.

A unique form of prayer uses the subha or prayer beads. These are used to recite the 99 beautiful names of Allah. They may also be used to repeat three key phrases 33 times each. They are: Glory to Allah, Praise be to Allah, and Allah is Great.

Finally, there are times when a Muslim can make specific requests to Allah. These are called du'a and mean calling. It is an act of remembering Allah and calling on him. These may be prayers for forgiveness, thanks, guidance, and strength in difficult times, and for meals.

Muslims are quite open to followers of Jesus, the Messiah, praying for them. The key will be on deciding what name for God will be used when we pray. Will we keep our focus on God, even be willing to use the word Allah which is actually the Arabic word for God?

Prayer can provide a great opportunity for connecting with a Muslim as long as we don't get drawn into a debate on the ritual. The key is to focus on the desire to be in God's presence. Muslims should see us as people of prayer, not because of our prayer rituals, but because they see us as people who pray; praying about different aspects of our lives, praying about their lives. They should see us as people who are always ready to come before God and submit our lives to his direction and provision.

We have this in common - we want to come before God and be in his presence. We want to submit our lives to his authority and care.

### **Portal 3 - Giving (Zakat)**

Giving is a part of all religious beliefs and practices. In most it is considered a virtue and duty for those who truly believe. It generally has two purposes, to cleanse the person of dependence on earthly goods, or to express one's thankfulness and dependence on the source of what they possess.

Giving ranges from sacrifices made to appease an angry deity or spirit, to giving to care for the needs of others which opens the path to greater blessing or enlightenment. In Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikkism this is called "Dana." Its purpose is to cultivate generosity at a personal level and so purify the mind of the person. This allows a person to develop a positive karma and improve their level of happiness in this life and the next as well as improve the potential for entering bliss (Nirvana) at some future time.

In Judaism we have two key types of giving. Sacrifice, which is giving willingly of one's resources for several reasons: to deal with the debt of sin, to express one's gratitude to God for all that has been received, and to seek God's favor in one's earthly endeavors. The other type of giving is called the tithe. This represents giving one tenth of all a person produces to God. In Bible times the tithe was used to maintain those who served in the temple, provide for the activity of the temple, to care for the facilities, and, at times, to provide for teaching of the scriptures.

The first example of giving a tithe being given was by Abraham to Melchizedek after his defeat of a group of kings. He gave a tenth of the plunder to the priest of God in expression of his gratitude for the victory and the return of all that was taken from him. The formalization of the tithe was done in the time of Moses and included in the law given to him by God.

The Israelites were also encouraged to care for those in need. Generosity is encouraged because all a person has, in reality, is provided by God and so helping others opens the doors to greater blessing from God. No minimum or limit was placed on this type of giving.

In Christianity, most of the above remains true except for the area of offering sacrifices. There is no longer a need to sacrifice for the debt of sin. Jesus gave himself as the one true and final sacrifice. However, gifts of thanksgiving and to seek God's favor continue to be practiced and encouraged. The tithe is maintained as a reminder that all a person has comes from God and that the person needs to depend on God for everything.

What becomes more important in Christianity is one's giving to care for the needs of others. This starts with the command to love others as one loves himself and to do for others what you hope they will do for you. In fact, the highest expression of this level of giving is the willingness to sacrifice one's possessions, and even one's life, so that another person will be able to hear the truth, be forgiven, and restored in their relationship with God. That person becomes a channel that God can use to provide resources for the care of others, the work of missions, and more.

The tithe then becomes a minimum, or starting point in learning about giving and letting God use what one has to help others.

### **Zakat**

In Islam the key process for giving is called the "zakat." The zakat is the money that all Muslims, who are financially able, are required to give to help care for the needy and the poor. It is considered a required tax that must be paid either to the zakat collectors or approved programs that distribute these funds. This is the third of the five pillars of Islam

The word zakat means "that which purifies." The purpose of the zakat is twofold: 1. To purify the desires of a person and help him focus on the source of all that he has (the source being Allah), and 2. To purify his wealth and income in case any of it might come from unclean methods or sources.

Not all Muslims must give. The poor and needy are excluded from giving and there is a formula used to determine who is required to give. The first step in this process is to determine if the person has wealth that can be taxed. This starts by determining what funds a person has that fall under the zakat. Items such as the cost of food, clothing, housing and living expenses are excluded. Profits, savings and other similar items are included.

The second step relates to determining the "nisab." The nisab is an amount that you are allowed to have that is not taxable. There is a special formula that is used to set this amount each year. Anything above this amount is then taxed. Usually the rate used for the tax is 2.5 % of any funds above this base amount. The process is done once a year at the end of the lunar year. When it is paid is at the discretion of the person. Many pay it during Ramadan as it is believed that good deeds done at this time will earn more rewards.

This money is paid to the zakat collectors who then have the responsibility of distributing it to those who are in need. Some countries have special departments who carry out this work. Others assign specific leaders or imams in the mosques to receive the zakat and distribute it.

Here is the list of those who are approved to receive the zakat.

1. The poor
2. The needy
3. The zakat collector
4. The poor and needy who are recent converts to Islam
5. The slaves (to help them purchase their freedom)
6. The stranded traveler in need of financial assistance
7. The debtor
8. Those far from home in the "path of Allah"

This is quite different from what is taught in the Scriptures. In the Bible everyone is expected to give. In the case of some of the Old Testament sacrifices there were options provided so that all could

fulfill the requirements of giving in this area. Another key difference is the amount. Zakat is limited to excess wealth and only 2.5%. The tithe is given on all income. Jesus told the people that money given out of one's wealth had less value than what was given in faith in God (Mk 12:43-44).

What is the same in Islam and Christianity is the teaching that all we have comes from God (Allah). Human beings hold their possessions as stewards. Giving is a way to remind ourselves of this truth and demonstrate our dependence on God and not ourselves.

Another area that is the same is the responsibility to care for those who are poor or in need. The difference in Christianity is the fact that those who receive help when in need are not excluded from the responsibility to give and care for others as well.

Islam also includes giving that is not obligatory. This is called "sadaqah." This includes giving out of compassion, friendship, love, and generosity. There is no specific time, place, or amount specified for this type of giving. When a person sees a need or desires to give they do so. The bible calls this charity and it too, has no specified time or amount. It is the response of a person to the need of another with no concern for recompense now or at any time in the future.

The question we must ask ourselves is, do others see us as people who are charitable? Not in fulfillment of a law or obligation but because we see the needs around us and respond. Not to reach a certain level of giving because that is what is required. Instead, do they see a willingness to give even when it may cause risk to our own well-being because we care more about others than ourselves? Do they see us laying down our lives to benefit others?

This is the ultimate level of giving, the willingness to sacrifice my life so that others will receive the truth and be directed to God who is the source of all we have.

True giving is so much more than the tithe. So much more than being charitable. It is about placing others before ourselves so that they will not see us but see the one whom we follow. That they will see Jesus and be willing to learn more about the one who gave everything so that we could be restored and know God.

#### **Portal 4 - Fasting**

Fasting is a part of the process of presenting key concerns to God and allowing God to speak to us. Within Christianity there is no specific time that is set aside for fasting, unless you consider what is done during the Lent Season within the Catholic Church. In that context people are asked to give up something during the forty days leading up to the death and resurrection of Christ. A person may abstain from a particular food, drink, or activity as a way of focusing their attention on what Christ has done for them.

As with prayer, Jesus made some strong statements about the practice of fasting. He criticized the public manner in which fasting was being done. It had become a way to attract the attention of the public to the apparent piety and sacrifice of the individual rather than a desire to seek out God. Jesus stated clearly that fasting should be done quietly with little outward evidence that a person is fasting.

We do have examples of fasting done by large groups of people. The king of Nineveh ordered his entire city to fast in response to Jonah's warning about the impending judgment of God. It resulted in



the salvation of the city (Jonah 3:10). Also, Josiah called the people of Judah to a time of fasting which delayed God's judgment until the reign of a later king (2 Kings 22:19-20).

Another notable instance of fasting was that of Daniel. His fasting and act of penance on behalf of the people of Israel resulted in God sending an angel with information about the future of various kingdoms (Daniel 9). Here, fasting had two purposes, confession and a desire to understand God's plan for the future.

In the New Testament we see this second type of fasting demonstrated by the church in Antioch. They began their time of fasting by calling on God to reveal his plan and direction for the future ministry of the church. It resulted in sending Paul and Barnabas as the first missionaries. Later, Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed when selecting leaders for the new churches.

There are three examples of people who fasted in preparation to serve. Moses fasted forty days on two occasions to be ready to receive God's law and direction for the people of Israel. Elijah fasted forty days in preparation to return and continue proclaiming the word of God to the unrepentant people of Israel. Jesus fasted forty days in preparation for his ministry here on earth.

From all of this we see that fasting is an important activity in the life of a Christian. Clearly we should be involved in times of fasting so that God can speak to us and show us what he wants us to do and to call on God for direction and strength to carry out his mission.

Fasting is also a part of many religions of the world. One of the most extreme forms is found in one of the religious groups of Japan (Shugendo Buddhism) where the person fasts until they die. It is done in such a way that the body is mummified in the process. They do this in the belief that it will guarantee them entrance into bliss. The monks of Buddhism also fast. They do not eat any food after the noon meal. This is to aid in meditation and good health. Hinduism practices a weekly day of fasting.

### **Ramadan**

Fasting, or sawm, is also a key part of the Muslim's faith. The time of fasting is known as Ramadan. Ramadan lasts for 30 days and occurs in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. This date is based on when Mohammed starting receiving the visions of Gabriel and the messages that became the Quran. During this 30 days, people will gather to read the Quran which is divided into 30 parts so that it will be recited in its entirety during Ramadan.

The fasting serves several key purposes. First, the hunger and thirst are to remind them of the suffering of the poor, to remind them not be wasteful, and to remind them to be grateful for what they have. Second, it provides an opportunity to learn self-control by refraining not only from food and drink but from evil actions, thoughts, and words as well. Third, it is a time to cleanse one's body and mind, to focus on strengthening family ties and friendships, and do away with bad habits.

Ramadan reminds Muslims that they share in a special kinship as they participate in the fast with all other Muslims. It is also a time to learn peace and dependence on God and allows them to reevaluate their lives.

Each day before sunrise a meal is eaten which is called suhoor. Those participating in the fast will not eat or drink again until after sunset. At that time the fast will be broken with a meal known as ittar. But this meal is more than just a meal. It is a celebration of family, friendship, and the provision of Allah. Also, it is not uncommon for the daily schedule to be altered during Ramadan. People rest during the day and work at night.

There are special greetings used during this month as well:

- Ramadan Kareem – Noble (or generous) Ramadan
- Ramadan Mubarak – Blessed Ramadan
- Kul ‘am wa enta bi-khair – May every year find you in good health

The 30 days of fasting of Ramadan are ended by observing Eid al-fitr or the Festival of Fast Breaking. This festival traditionally lasts for three days. A key element of this is giving to those in need. The donation is to be of food.

Fasting for a Muslim is more than just abstinence from food during the day. It is about focusing on their relationship with Allah and with others. It is also clear that it is different from what Christians understand as fasting, complete abstinence for a specific period. For Muslims, fasting is very public. For Christians, it is very private.

In many ways, Muslims consider Christians to be people who are not serious about their faith. They don't see them fasting publicly, they don't see them praying publicly. Their beliefs and commitments are evaluated based on public expressions of dependence on God. It is not uncommon for Muslims to be surprised when they learn that Christians do fast and even more so in the way in which they fast.

What is important is that we take fasting seriously and make it a habit in our lives. In many ways it would be of great value and importance to begin fasting so that we can focus our thoughts and lives on receiving God's guidance and power in learning how to reach out to Muslims. Fasting is a key part of their faith. At least for those who truly practice it. Should it be any different for us?

Ramadan can present many opportunities to relate to Muslims. During this time, they are often more open to speaking about spiritual matters. Although for many, participating in Ramadan is an act of obedience done out of obligation, (and for some to avoid the condemnation of others), many are truly using the time to seek God. This can provide open doors to talk about God. In fact, God often uses this time to send visions and dreams because they are open to seeking truth.

What if we practiced our own form of Ramadan? What if we committed ourselves to fasting in one form or another and used the time to pray for our Muslim acquaintances, friends, and for those ministering to Muslims? Would not God respond if we fast to open the doors to their hearts? Is this not what fasting is, seeking God so he can open our hearts so that we can see what God is doing and respond? Should we not fast to cry to God to prepare the hearts of those we will meet?

What will happen if we begin to fast on their behalf and they see the proof of our commitment in the changes that God works in us?

## **Portal 5 – Ritual - Hajj**

One of the key expressions of our commitment to our belief is in the performance of rituals. Rituals take many forms. In fact, most of what we have discussed up to this point can be considered different types of rituals. Creeds would be the most basic ritual; simple clear declarations of who we are and what we believe that are made at key times and contexts. These are done in such a way as to gain the attention of those around us. Prayer can become a ritual when it is simply repeated and done so using formulaic expressions. It may contain certain phrases, and content, or is said at certain times and places, all to gain the attention of the deity or power we seek to influence. Fasting becomes ritual

when it is only done only at certain times and under certain circumstances, to prove one's worth and capacity to have self-control and deny oneself to obtain higher status and recognition. Giving also can become a ritual when it is restricted to fulfilling obligations as part of gaining approval and proving one's lack of dependence on material goods.

The last level of ritual relate to fulfilling of acts remembrance that reflect key event in the history of a belief and its founder, such as communion in the Christian Church. These rituals also represent a desire to express greater commitment to what one believes.

Many religious festivals are in fact key rituals that are required as evidence of obedience and commitment. The Jews had a number of them. In the Old Testament all adult male Jews of were to gather every year in at the temple Jerusalem for several of these. The most important one being the Passover, another was called the Feast of Tabernacles. During each of these events those attending were expected to follow a prescribed set of behaviors and actions as part of the ritual. With the destruction of the temple in 70 AD this came to an end. However, the goal of many Jews today is to make a trip to Jerusalem at least once in their lifetime and spend time at the wailing wall to pray. While it is not required many feel it is a critical part of being a Jew.

Publicly establishing one's status and commitment to their belief often involves rituals. Some are done only once. Others may be repeated on a regular basis. Within Christianity, baptism is a ritual designed to publicly declare one's commitment to being a Christian. It also reflects the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism symbolizes the person's death to the past and start of a renewed life of the person as a follower of Christ. Another public ritual of Christianity is communion. This ritual is a reminder of the sacrifice Christ made for all mankind. This ritual may be enacted as often as weekly in a person's life. Many Christians hope to perform this ritual shortly before they die in order to give a visible testimony of their faith in Christ and belief in eternal life.

There is another level of ritual that involves extended periods of activity and commitment. These are called pilgrimages; repeating a journey or action of the founder or key leader of a religion. Besides displaying one's faith a pilgrimage is as an attempt to gain approval and forgiveness in the form of acts of penance. Another key purpose is to gain greater insight into one's faith.

In the Catholic church there are many of pilgrimages. For example, in Panama every year in October people walk from Panama City to Portobelo (about 53 Miles). They often wear purple robes as an act of penance and to gain the favor of God. Another popular pilgrimage is to visit Vatican City, the home of the pope, in Rome. The largest of the pilgrimages is the kumbh Mela of Hinduism. It involves bathing in a sacred river. The most common location is the Ganges River at Haridwar. Bathing in the sacred rivers is thought to cleanse a person of their sins. In 2013 over 120 million participated in this pilgrimage.

The best known of this type of ritual is found in Islam and is called the Hajj. It is held once a year. Its purpose is to reenact the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina and his return in victory to Mecca, where he destroyed the idols found in the Ka'ba. This is the last of the five pillars of Islam and every Muslim is expected to make this trip at least once in his lifetime if at all possible. Each year millions arrive at Mecca for the seven-day pilgrimage.

The first thing every person does upon arrival to Mecca is enter into the state of holiness. This is done by going through a cleansing ritual and putting on two pieces of white cloth around the waist and over

the shoulder. This is called entering ihram. This attire does two things: 1. It declares for all that this person is entering into the pilgrimage and 2. To declare to all the equality and unity of all pilgrims before Allah. This occurs on the 8<sup>th</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup> days of the last month of the Islamic lunar calendar which is shorter than the solar calendar. This results in the dates changing every year.

At this point the Muslim begins the stages of the Hajj

1. Tawaf – Circling seven times counterclockwise around the Ka’ba. If possible each pilgrim tries to kiss the Black Stone or at least point to it if it cannot be touched because of the crowds.
2. Sa’ay – Running or walking seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah
3. Mina – Spending a day and night at Mina in prayers and meditation
4. Arafat – Performing wuguf – ritual of standing which occurs at the small hill of Jabal al-Rahma at Arafat
5. Muzdalifah – Performing prayers and spending the night in prayer and sleeping on the ground
6. Ramy al-Jamarat – Performing a symbolic stoning of the devil by throwing seven stones. This is done on three different days at three different pillars.
7. Head shaving – Shaving their heads and performing a second Tawaf
8. Hadi - Sacrificing an animal to commemorate Abraham’s sacrifice of a ram in place of his son
9. Tawaf al-Wadaa – Circling the Ka’ba again to bid farewell and end the state of holiness and remove the garments of ihram.

Those who successfully complete the hajj have the title hajj or hajji added to their name.

Christians do not have anything like the hajj. Some may choose to travel to Israel and walk in the steps of Jesus, but it is not obligatory and does not change their status before God. That is constant because of their belief in Jesus and His sacrifice for their sins.

Rather than a pilgrimage, Christians are called each day is live for Christ; to take up their cross and follow Him. To love others, the way he loved us. To go to the world and proclaim the good news. To follow Christ, to live like Christ, and take the journey that brings them to those who have not heard the gospel. For some, that journey is as short as trip to their family members and neighbors. For others the journey is to help others go to those who are not close by, to those who are considered outcasts and rejects, and to those who are part of all the nations of the world. And for some, that journey means going to those places to share Gods’ message of Salvation. While the length of the journey may vary, the pilgrimage is always the same. Christians are to risk what they have to tell others what they know about the God who loves. Whether it involves a few steps or thousands of miles.

For Christians the question is this, do others see in us the commitment to follow Jesus in every aspect of our lives? Do they see that we are traveling the road he walked and living the life he calls us to live? This pilgrimage is about what we do to follow Jesus’ command to seek out the lost and help them find Him. This pilgrimage is not like any other, it requires a lifetime.

To reach those like the Muslim it may take a lifetime and even a life. Will we make the commitment to go on this pilgrimage until they see us as people who truly care about them?

**Resources** – This section provides a list of Resources used in preparing each topic.

01 - Founding of Islam

<http://www.allaboutreligion.org/origin-of-islam.htm>

<http://www.dummies.com/religion/islam/gaining-an-overview-of-islamic-origins/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Islam)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad>

02 - Creeds

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahada>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five\\_Pillars\\_of\\_Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Pillars_of_Islam)

<http://www.religionfacts.com/shahada>

<http://www.answeringmuslims.com/2012/10/what-is-shahada.html>

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/buddhism1.htm>

<http://world-faiths.com/buddhism-2/beliefs/>

03 - Prayer

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/salat.shtml>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june-web-only/how-christians-can-observe-ramadan.html>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salah>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wudu>

<http://insideislam.wisc.edu/2011/12/pillars-of-islam-prayer/>

04 – Giving

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zakat>

<http://www.zakat.org/zakat-and-beyond/>

<https://www.islamichelp.org.uk/zakat/>

<http://www.zpub.com/aaa/zakat-def.html>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadaqah>

05 - Ramadan

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokushinbutsu>

<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/ramadan1.html>

[http://islam.about.com/od/ramadan/qt/ramadan\\_greet.htm](http://islam.about.com/od/ramadan/qt/ramadan_greet.htm)

[http://islam.about.com/od/ramadan/f/eid\\_fitr.htm](http://islam.about.com/od/ramadan/f/eid_fitr.htm)

<http://islam.about.com/od/ramadan/f/ramadanintro.htm>

06 – Ritual

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumbh\\_Mela](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumbh_Mela)

<http://www.coloncity.com/blackchrist.html>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrimage>

<http://www.religionfacts.com/haji>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haji>