



Nearly every people group in the world has a religious system. Many believe that religion was created as a way for people to explain the unexplainable or as a way to control the hearts and actions of people. It is also possible that there is something in the heart of mankind that longs for “something” beyond and direction by which to live purposely. In this track we will explore the frameworks of various religions and set the table in the next track to explain Jesus and Christianity within a contrasting context of other world religions.

THEOLOGICAL POINTS

Every religion points to a problem and resolution between a deity/god and people. Predominant philosophies equally identify a “problem,” but without the centrality of a deity. Within this track we will contrast the views of Islam and the philosophies of Buddhism and Humanism. Clearly there are more faith systems, but these were chosen because they are the primary influencers of spirituality of our age. We will compare each view’s base perspective on:

1. Identification of the problem.
2. Understanding of the solution and what must be done to satisfy.
3. What the outcome the religious system or philosophical system promises.

DISCUSSION: Islam

Every religion points to a problem and resolution between a deity/god and people. Predominant philosophies equally identify a “problem with humanity,” but without the centrality of a deity. Within this track we will consider the views of Islam and the philosophies of Buddhism and Humanism. Clearly there are more faith systems, but these were chosen because they are the primary influencers of spirituality of our age. The framework we will use for this process is to discuss three aspects every faith system has in common. We will identify the problem this faith system addresses, look at the proposed solution, and consider the outcome of faithful obedience.

In this article we will outline the foundational beliefs of Islam; the Muslim faith.

**The topic of Islam is vast, with many books dedicated to explaining it in great detail. This discussion guide is intended only as a summary and a means for an open conversation on the subject.

MY STORY | Starting Place

What drove you to consider religion? How old were you when that first happened? What were the circumstances surrounding your exploration? What were you looking for?

DIGGING DEEPER | Practical Biblical Application

One aspect of the attractiveness of Islam is that it is somewhat inclusive of Christianity and Judaism. Muslim people believe some of the Bible and hold some biblical characters in high regard (including Jesus). The difference is the authority given to each individual. A good example is that of Isaac and Ishmael, Abraham's sons. Muslims revere Ishmael as the first born of Abraham, therefore the person through whom God's blessing came. (This is in stark contrast to Jewish and Christian teaching). Additionally they revere Jesus as a prophet and good teacher.

Identification of the problem:

Islam teaches that the fundamental problem of mankind is ignorance, that man needs to be guided in order to live good lives. Once people learn what to believe, and submit in thinking and lifestyle, they will begin to earn the pleasure of Allah. The Quran has five words that equate to sin (Dhanb, Ithm, Khati'ah, Jurm, Junah/Haraj), but they all flow from a lack of ignorance of truth and can be rectified by strict adherence to obedience as outlined in the Quran.

How do you engage with the idea that you can earn God's favor? What is the difference between our problem being ignorance vs. the biblical view of a deeper sin problem?

What does the revelation of our ignorance to truth stimulate in you? Do you fundamentally believe people are ignorant, sinful, or something else? Explain your perspective.

The solution and what must be done to satisfy:

Islam teaches that the solution of our great ignorance is to learn and be obedient to the tenants of the Islamic faith. Below are the cultural values Muslim men and women are expected to follow. These tenets are known as the "Five Pillars." Every Muslim is required to live by and fulfill these tenets to gain favor with Allah.

1. *The Profession of Faith—The Shahada*

The Profession of Faith, the shahada, is the most fundamental expression of Islamic beliefs. It simply states that "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet."

2. *Daily Prayers—Salat*

Muslims are expected to pray five times a day. This does not mean that they need to attend a mosque to pray; rather, the *salat*, or the daily prayer, should be recited five times a day. Muslims can pray anywhere; however, they are supposed to pray towards Mecca. On Friday, many Muslims attend a mosque near mid-day to pray and to listen to a sermon. *khutba*.

3. *Alms-Giving—Zakat*

The giving of alms is the third pillar. Muslims believe that they are meant to share their wealth with those less fortunate in their community of fellow Muslims.

4. *Fasting during Ramadan—Saum*

During the holy month of Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, Muslims are expected to fast from dawn to dusk.

5. *Pilgrimage to Mecca—Hajj*

All Muslims are required to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and the surrounding holy sites at least once in their lives. Pilgrimage focuses on visiting the Kaaba and walking around it seven times. Pilgrimage occurs in the 12th month of the Islamic Calendar.

What comes to mind as you read these requirements? Do you think you could do them? How similar or dissimilar are they to what you know to be true of Christian faith?

What do you think obedience to these creates in the life of a follower?

What do you think is so attractive about this faith system to so many people?

The outcome and fruit of faithful obedience:

Islam teaches that there is life after death, and this is known as Akhirah. Islam teaches one heaven, Jannah, with seven “levels” of heaven. Equally Islam teaches of a tangible hell known as Jahannam. Punishment and suffering in hell in mainstream Islam, is physical, psychological and spiritual, and varies according to the sins of the condemned person. Its excruciating pain and horror described in the Quran often parallels the pleasure and delights of heaven (Jannah). In addition to choosing when a person dies, Allah will assign each person to their heaven based on their good deeds and obedience, or hell if their sinful deeds merit.

These seven heavens are:

1. *Raqi'a*: The first heaven is described as being made of water and is the home of Adam and Eve, as well as the angels of each star.
2. *Araqun*: The second heaven is described as being made of white pearls and is the home of Yahya (John the Baptist) and Isa (Jesus).
3. *Qaydum*: The third heaven is described as being made of iron (alternatively pearls or other dazzling stones); Joseph and the Angel of Death (named Azrael) are resident there.
4. *Ma'una*: The fourth heaven is described as being made of brass (alternatively white gold); Cassiel, the “Angel of Tears” resides there.
5. *Di'a*: The fifth heaven is described as being made of silver; Aaron holds court over this heaven. Maalik, the guardian of hellfire, is assigned to this place.
6. *Daqua*: The sixth heaven is described as being composed of gold (alternatively garnets and rubies); Moses can be found here.
7. *'Ariba*: The seventh heaven, which borrows some concepts from its Jewish counterpart, is depicted as being composed of divine light incomprehensible to the mortal man (alternatively emerald). Abraham is a resident there and Sidrat al-Muntaha, a large enigmatic Lote tree, marks the end of the seventh heaven and the utmost extremity for all of God's creatures and heavenly knowledge.

Discuss your observations on these levels of heaven. What would be appealing about believing all this?

How does Allah's appointment of your “heavenly” experience differ from what you believe to be true?

How would this motivate your allegiance and how you live?

What do you think is attractive about this faith view?

What are some problems and/or holes in it?

GROWING TOGETHER | Spiritual Friendship

How have you personally experienced the influence of Islamic faith?

Do you have family members or friends who are Muslim? What additional insights do you have, from relationships (not just what you read), on Islam?

How can a Christian engage with Muslim friend in a healthy and godly way?

MOVING OUTWARD | Faith in Action

What are some stereotypes or assumptions that Christians make in regards to the Islamic faith?

How is it harmful to make such assumptions apart from relationships with people?

Are there Muslims in your circle you might be able to engage in love this week?