

Ep. 48: Insight into Islam and Ramadan

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[Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Welcome, I'm Master Sgt. Michelangelo Serio from the 960th Cyberspace Wing, currently stationed at Maxwell-Gunter with the 689th NOS, Network Operation Squadron. I am joined today by Chaplain Capt. Sayedahmed. I'd like to introduce him. He's joining us from. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] San Antonio, Texas. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] You're over there in San Antonio with you guys, or at least the majority of our Cyber Wing? And I'd like to ask you to please tell us a little bit about yourself so we can get to know you. And then we'll go into some question and answers and mostly about Ramadan. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, sir. Well, thank you Master Sgt. I'm Chaplain Capt. Sayedahmed. I'm originally from Egypt and I came here in United States about 20 years ago as a student, trying to finish my degree, a Bachelor degree in Engineering. I was an Embry-Riddle and I saw a lot of pilots who are in ROTC, you know, training, we're like, yeah, I think this is a good career to consider, probably at the time. Fast forward, you know, I get my degree in Finance and Budgeting and Public Administration, MPA. And then I found myself joining the Army in 2008. I wasn't actually enlisted for almost four years as a Finance Technician, E-4 Specialist. I loved it, I like it. I know, learned a lot from the Army life and, you know, I joined the Army Chaplain Candidate Program in the Army. So I commissioned in the Army for, for two years. So I stayed in the Army for almost six years. Four years, of those active and then two years for the Chaplain candidate. And then I found myself like, you know, I guess, I can join the Air Force, you know, (laughter) for my Bachelor Degree, you know. So, I love, have passionate for aviation. So I like, yeah, it makes sense to join the Air Force. (Mumbling) So, I've been Chaplain for five years. So this is my second duty station. I was in Maxwell Air Force base from 2016, all the way to 2018, and from 2018 all the way here at Lackland Air Force Base. I'm with the 542nd Air Base Wing. And I'm actually about to PCS or PCA, let's put it that way, to Fort Sam, this summer. I'm going to be actually working for (indistinct) of the hospital Chaplains over there. So I'm not going to be going far away, just Fort Sam. So I'm going to be still within the local area, GPS. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Fantastic. I'm sure everybody over there is going to be glad to have a POC now, even though you're moving a little bit just since you'll be in that local area, they'll be able to reach out to you and contact you. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, Sir. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] So what brings us together is Ramadan. It started, I think, April 13th or 14th in the States. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, Sir. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] In your own words, what is Ramadan? - [Capt. Sayedahmed] So Ramadan, it's a Holy month. It's a Holy month of Ramadan. It's a 30 days of fasting. It's a 30 days of try to connect with God, you know, it's all about self-reflection, it's

all about God consciousness. It's about prayers. It's about devotion to God. It's about, you know, not just fasting from food and water but also a time to seek forgiveness, to self-renewal, spiritual renewal, spiritual devotion. It's just time to, I wanna to say like, you know, think spiritually about the self, try to make it more piety and try to have self discipline, self, you know, trying to, I want to say, this self discipline as I mentioned earlier. So fasting helps Muslims endure hardship because, you know, we fast right now for almost 14 hours a day. And right now it's, it's a longer hours. I mean, so it helps us just endure this hardship of no drinking water and food and from sunrise to sunset. So Ramadan it's also the month of the Qur'an. What is the Qur'an has been revealed from God to the Angel Gabriel, and the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. So, so Ramadan is about reading the scripture and, and just, you know, focusing on the self and God connection with the self and God, and this is this all about. We do worship at night and this is extra prayers actually. And we just, you know, focusing on having connection with God - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] It's interesting. A lot of what you're talking about is stuff that the Air Force and the Military presses, that self-reflection, the spirituality with the four pillars. It all seems very, very aligned with what we do not that different, you know, definitely from a spiritual context though, very, very interesting. So I'd like to ask you now, what is something that members outside of your faith, you wish they knew about Ramadan and (indistinct)? - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, so many members, it's just a general speaking, you know, some people may not know that Muslims fast and we talk about fasting means fasting. Like, we're not joking. We are fasting for any food, any water. And even people think like, really not, not even water? Like yeah, nothing. Fasting means fasting. (Gentle laughter) It's the literal word of fasting. It's not like, I can drink, you know, maybe juice or milk, but no water, no nothing. So it was actually, actual fasting. It is just not only fasting for food and water, it's just trying to do our best to fasting, even from sins. Trying to purify ourselves with our heart become more spiritually resilient. Because when we, when we try to, you know, endure this, this harsher duties, especially during the day, with the sun, you know, and the work, and the schooling and the training. It's not easy. If you, try not to drink any water or have lunch or something like that, then you have to wait all the way until 2000 just to, to eat. So maybe many, many members don't know that we actually do a night worship. So yes, we do a night worship. We worship at night because you know Muslims pray five times a day and the night prayer right now, because of the timing of the summer, it's actually a 2100. So the extra prayers is start from 2130 all the way to 2230. So, so we finished by 2230 at night, every night. So by the, so that's what many Muslims do, not just do the regular worship, but also do extra night prayers, reading the Qur'an and praying. And again, you know, trying to be spiritually resilient and connect with God in these things. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] That's fantastic. I know having been deployed a couple of times, actually during this period where you were always very mindful to make sure that we were, it was stressed heavily, you know, don't drink, don't eat, because you know, you're a guest in the country, that this is a time where they're not doing that. And it's nice to hear more about what that that interaction is, what you guys are trying to accomplish you know, with your faith, trying to build that relationship, to strengthen that relationship with God. And it's very interesting, especially looking

from the outside for a lot of times you're just trying to be polite but you don't really know what you're doing. You're just like, make sure I'm not eating or drinking water out in public, you know, just as a respect. But what you're telling me now is a lot deeper and not that I thought it was shallow or anything like that but it's very, very interesting, to not be privy to that information or to have a lot of kind of insight to any of that religion or any part of that religion. It's really right there for you to share with them. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, Sir. And also one more thing, because when I was in the Army we used to do PT every single day, like six o'clock in the morning, PT in the morning. So, so during Ramadan, I have to request adaptive PT, so I can do it later. So some people like thinking like, hey, why he's not coming to PT with us. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Oh, yeah. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] So because of Ramadan. (Gentle laughter) Because you cannot drink, you cannot eat. You cannot do anything in the morning. So we're trying to keep ourselves, you know, safe and healthy, like, you know, running, especially outside and get dehydrated. So we can actually do PT at night instead of during the day. But this is one of the things that maybe members don't understand why many Muslims don't do PT in the morning during Ramadan, because of the fasting. Even some, some Muslims can do it, so it depends on the person. Me speaking, I have a dry skin, so I get dehydrated quickly. So, some other people may not. So, it depends on the person, but generally speaking we're trying to avoid any exhausting workout or training. And we can do that either right before we break the fast. So anytime, like from maybe 1900 to 2000, we can do it because we can actually break the fast at 2000, like right, do a little bit light PT before, or maybe right after we break the fast we can do PT at night. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Yeah. That's something I'm sure not many people think about but especially how taxing some Army PT's can be. That is not something that you'd want to jump into after you know, a full day of fasting. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, Sir. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] So my next question I have for you is, do you mind sharing your perspective as a practitioner of Islam on how the Air Force has improved, or can improve its inclusion of Muslims? - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, sir. So, thank God the Air Force has improved significantly in the last, I think even the last year, year and a half because they updated the AFI 36-2903, you know, for the appearance and for religious accommodations. So it used to be taking, for a long time, for any member of the Islamic faith to seek Religious Accommodation in a hijab, for the women or beard for men. It used to go all the way to A-1, and many signatures has to be implemented and people who work, and sometimes, you know, the member may request it, just example today, it takes about at least four to five months to get approved. It was a very hectic long, long, long, long paperwork. Thank God right now, it has been a dedicated authority to the Wing Commander and so the Wing Commander will be a little bit faster than anyone. So, so right now I am, I'm a Chaplain for BMT So, so when we have a, you know, a Muslim trainee, who would request, for example, either a female hijab or a male, for a beard, a lot of times, even to do the paperwork is very easy compared to it was before. And so it take about 30 days from the time the Airman is writing his or her memo to go to the Wing Commander within 30 days, the memo already been approved by the Wing Commander. So, the Air Force saves a lot of time. A lot of, you know, signatures from leaders, all actually most likely the Religious Accommodation, most likely it's going to be about a hijab or a beard. So it's

usually, it's usually it is a sincere request from the Airman or trainee, to provide this kind of waivers. Another result, the Air Force made it a little bit easier to practice the faith. And not only for Muslims also for Jewish, for the members of Sikh, that we have a the turban. A person was requesting the turban to be, to be approved before, and he came to BMT and he was allowed to practice his faith. It was no problem, and it was easy. So, thank God the Air Force implemented a new F.I.'s to allow the trainees to practice their faith and help with the people work and make it easier for someone who wants to interact with their faith, just as, make it easier. It's a, their freedom is a provision, the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, for religious freedom. And that's exactly what this is all about. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] That's awesome. So, if a member was to come in, if we were to get a new member, it just goes up to the Wing Commander. In the meantime, not that we are going to make them shave or do anything like that, it's just a waiting period. They can kind of just show, I have this paperwork routed or go to my, you know, my supervision, they're aware of the issue. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, Sir. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] So it kind of stems more vigilant towards, AFI kind of placeholders. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, sir. And this is actually, there is actually, right now when the attorney comes many times, the Squadron Commander verbally can approve the trainee to practice his or her faith, while the package is going through. So a lot of times when, when two, three is come from the Recruiting Station, a lot of times they either come with the beard on or the hijab already on. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Uh-hum. - [Capt. Sayedahmed] And then when they go to BMT getting on the bus, and then ask the MTI, I need to practice my faith, to have my beard. So usually they contact the Chaplin right away and they can contact the Commander right away. And after a brief meeting with the Commander the Commander like, verbally allow the trainee to practice his or her faith. While the package is going through within the 30 days, as long as it really is staying within the campus of their own Squadron and just the verbally allowed, because again, most likely it will be approved. So it's actually a very, very good from the Commander to allow that you need to practice your faith temporarily until the fact that you get approved by the Wing Commander. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] That's awesome. So my final question, is there a part of your faith that members had misconceptions of, or not aware of? And if so, do you feel that this is shared by other Airmen or should be adopted or at least considered by other members? - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, sir. So, you know, Islam is one of the most misunderstood religion. Like a lot of times for example, you know watch the media and, you know, there's something bad to saying about it, they just believe it. But there are, those are going just deeper than that, just to listen to the media because the media most likely they're saying things are not true. So when they Google it, we'll try to learn. But I'm talking about in Islam in this case learning more about the religion and read them, you know the books about it and read the Holy Qur'an. And so they found something totally different. They know that Islam, it's all about peace. The word, Islam comes from the word salaam, which usually, when we say, "Peace be upon you", so, we make peace be with you, or make peace be upon you. So Islam, it's all about peace. It's about preaching peace, how to achieve peace. And, and the philosophy around Ramadan, the Holy month of Ramadan is one of the great ways to achieve peace within yourself and peace with

God and peace with others. So, at this time also, you know, so a lot of people do not know what is Islam about, you know, about obedience. Also, a lot of people may not know about the equality of men and women, and unfortunately, many, many people think that Islam, mistreat women, but this is not actually true at all. I mean, when we read the Qur'an, when God said that men and women are equal. And equal in rank or equal in rewards. Are equal in everything. So, and especially speaking, you know, for anything and, the, in Islam for the prayers, from fasting, there is nothing such a thing, that, you know getting more reward than women. Or men has to pray more, or women has to play less or anything like that. They are equally spiritually, equally the same. And, and people feel it like when we hear a big statement this kind of thing, they are really surprised. So, because you know, a lot of, a lot of culture in different countries maybe misrepresenting the religion, but culture, every country has its own culture. So when we say, when we go out to Afghanistan the culture is different from Iraq. The culture is different than when you go to Egypt. The culture is different when you go to Morocco. The culture is different go to Indonesia. The culture is different when you go to India. The culture is different when you go to United States. So, so, so unfortunately some countries took advantage of this and try to, you know, put the man in into a superior position than women. But this is not the religion. So they are not doing, what's supposed to be doing this is the culture is manipulating the religion but the religion itself, it is men and women are equal. And when we know the history of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. He used to treat men and women are equal, was no difference. It was no, it was, nobody is superior than the other. And in fact, the sermon of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, before he passed away, but he said, all men are equal. There is nobody is better than the other. Men are not better than women. Even he mentioned, Arab are not better than non-Arab He mentioned, even, white and not better than a black. No, he said, we all are equal in the eyes of God. And the most generous of you is the most person who is the most conscious towards God. The most piety, the person who was closest to God is the person who is trying to do the most good. And nobody know that, except God. So at the end of the day we were created equal and everyone is created equal. So, so that was one of the misconception. Also about the hijab. A lot of people see women wearing the hijab, they think that women are oppressed and women are being enforced to wear the hijab. That's not actually true at all. And even if we should ask, if you see a woman wearing the hijab, ask her, "does anybody force you, or did you put it in your own?" Most likely they'll tell you "I have put it in my own, nobody enforced me". Because she can take it off anytime she wants. Right? So, the hijab, it's a form of modesty for women to wear and to allow women to, you know, so, they have they have reasons why, and most likely of course, to have piety towards God and you know, to feel like, you know, the self-consciousness and the righteousness towards God and that's why, but a lot of people may not think that way. So, you know, it's just different perspectives about region as a general. But the more education we do, the more Google we do the more we ask the right people, we should be asking people who practice the faith than just to ask the non-Muslims. So, for example, if I, if I have a question about Christianity before I can ask the Christian if I have a question about Judaism, I'm going to ask a Jew. A question about Hinduism, I should ask a Hindu. So,

so we should be asking those who practice the faith and why, and things like that instead of just going to, and also online sources and learn about the faith. And, yeah. So, that's one of the things that we should be considered. And also a lot of people don't like to ask questions about religion, about this time. Some people may think, oh, I don't want to offend you. Oh like, you're not offending me at all. Actually, Muslims love asking questions, any questions, we love questions. And, and we love the word, why, how, how did this, how do that? So, so Muslims love asking questions about the religion. So, no, you're not, you're not offending us. Please ask questions and anything like that we would love to answer and give you, give you the answer for that. So I hate, one of the members of the Air Force was telling me, "I wanted to say As-salamu alaykum, but I didn't know if that would offend you". I'm like, why you think you can offend me? "Because I was not a Muslim but I was telling you". I was like, of course, it's a peace. So we all wanted to peace. It doesn't matter if you're Muslim, non-Muslim, it's just beautiful to have peace, beautiful to achieve peace. It's beautiful that you and I have a common ground and trying to achieve peace, in regardless of what is your faith. We all human beings. We're still, God created us all. And, it doesn't matter. And we, of course, we, we should be at peace with each other and say, "peace, be with you" all the time. It doesn't matter if you're Muslim or not Muslim. We're still a brother and sister in creation and in faith. And our creator is one. God is the creator of everything. So, that's some of that. And, also a lot of people, not know that you think that the Islam is a new religion. Actually Islam is not a new religion. Islam a continuation of the Abrahamic religion. So we believe in the Lord of Abraham, we believe in all the Prophets, from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob Ishmael. And, we know the story of Abraham, you know, with his wife Hagar, (indistinct) by his wife, Sarah. So from Hager, get Ishmael from Ishmael came the tribes of the Arabian, and from the tribe of Arabian came the Prophet Muhammad. And then from Isaac and Jacob came, you know, the 12 tribes of Israel and they came Moses and Joseph, and then after that, Jesus. And so, so we're a continuation, we know that we read the Qur'an all the prophets of the Old Testament are there. We have the chapter of Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus, peace upon him. We believe in Jesus, we believe in Mary, we believe in all the prophets. So, it's a continuation of, the Abrahamic religion, Christianity, I mean, Judaism, Christianity, and then, and then Islam. So people may think that Islam is a new religion. It's not a new religion, it's a continuation of Abrahamic religion. And some that read the Qur'an, and even, a lot of chapters are, very, very close to Christianity and Judaism, speaking, you know the story of Adam and Eve, the story of a flood, the story of Abraham with Sarah and Hagar, a story of Joseph, the King of Egypt, you know, the story of, a long time, Jesus, peace be upon him as well. So, there's a lot of stories are similar, like in, in the Qur'an. So, so yeah, so Islam is not a religion. It's a continuation of a Abrahamic religion. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Well, I appreciate your sharing, everything. I know I'm going to ask some more questions. This was a great, a good way to open dialogue so that we can have those doors open and start asking those questions from the source, as opposed to getting things, you know, third, fourth order down from people who are really not educated or kind of taking things from maybe not so reliable sources like Facebook or the news, which like they report on extremism as opposed to what the majority is, what the practice of the faith is actually about. I

appreciate your time that you've brought all of the information that you've provided today. If somebody wanted to get more information how could they find you? Or how could they reach out to you? - [Capt. Sayedahmed] Yes, sir. So I am at Lackland right now. I'm available for a phone number. My phone number it's (407) 765-9874. Please give me a call, and I'm here to meet with you to answer your questions. And I have some religious materials, some Qur'an, some brochures or booklets about Islam. So if you have any questions you would like to read some materials, please reach out to me, and I'm always available. So we getting all the questions, you know from different members. And so, yeah, I'm available for you again my number is (407) 765-9874. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Well, I appreciate it. This will be available. We'll let you know when it's coming out. 960 Cyber Wing thanks you for your time and everything that you've shared today. As-salamu alayakmu. Wa 'alaykumu s-salam. Thank you for having me and thank you for allowing me to be here and I appreciate the Commanders and listed, everybody who allowed me to be here today. I appreciate you guys, thank you. - [Sgt. Michelangelo Serio] Thank you, Sir. (Background mumbling) (Upbeat theme music)