

**Islam and Disability Podcast – Lauren Kinne**  
Transcript and Sources

Hi everyone! My name is Lauren Kinne and I would like to welcome you back to my second (and final, sadly) podcast centered on understanding religion and disability. As a quick recap, in our first segment I spoke a lot about disability in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We talked about the religio-moral construction of disability, which deems disability a consequence for an individual's sins, but we also talked about how this very common narrative within these religious communities is really not founded in scripture and that, in fact, in their true essence, these religions call for people to be generous and kind towards people with disabilities. But even still, that hasn't stopped there from being so many social and political barriers to disabled members of these faiths.

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Today, we are going to explore Islam, and how the Islamic faith approaches disability. Admittedly, I don't know very much about Islam at a base level. So as part of this exploration I have tried to familiarize myself with the fundamentals of the religion and I will try my best to give an overview but I am no expert, so I will link resources that I found really helpful in the transcript of this podcast. Even with what little I knew about Islam before doing the research for this project, I was generally aware of the paramount importance of prayer in Islam and that these prayers were a very physical act, so I was curious to know how people with physical disability who cannot complete these prayers in their traditional form are accounted for in Islamic tradition. And as we discussed for Judeo-Christian traditions, I was interested not only in how these concepts were discussed in the Quran, or written religious doctrine, but also how they are approached socially within the religion.

–[Ski sound]

Alright! So let's jump into things and start with a very quick overview of what Islam is all about—and again, I am no expert so I apologize if this is unclear or very incomplete. No religion, in all of its history and fluctuating dynamics, could be boiled down to a few sentences, so this will be entirely insufficient, but please bear with me! An important place to start for understanding Islam is

with the Quran, which is the sacred written text of the direct word of God, or Allah, in Islamic tradition. And this word of God was delivered to the Prophet Muhammed, who was the founder and first leader of Islam. In creating this religion and interpreting the Quran, two major themes that define Islamic tradition include, first, a very strict monotheism, and second, the necessity of taking care of those less fortunate. Persons with disabilities are considered under this “less fortunate” category, in addition to the poor or ill, which ensures that they are included, considered, and valued within the community. So baked into the foundation of this religion there is consideration for members of the disability community.

While there are certainly many different traditions under the umbrella of Islam, there are 5 core practices, called the Five Pillars of Islam, that are standardized across different Islamic groups and they entail the following:

1. Shahada - profession of faith
2. Salat - ritual prayer 5 times per day (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, late evening)
  - a. Exceptions to this are before puberty, while menstruating, if you are too ill
  - b. BUT this is a huge part of the religion that defines closeness to god
3. Sawm - month long fast during ramadan
4. Zakat - almsgiving to the poor and vulnerable members of society
5. Hajj - pilgrimage to Mecca, to be completed at least once in a lifetime

I think that it's important to note here, that while these Pillars are a vital standard within Islam, there are considerations and exceptions for those with disabilities inherent within these practices. The Quran makes it clear that Hajj is only obligatory for those who are physically, mentally, and financially able to complete the pilgrimage. Attention and care for those with disabilities is an important component to Zakat. And there is also an understanding that salat, or daily prayer, can't be completed in traditional fashion by all Muslims, and that is okay.

I read a really interesting piece called “The Process of Performing Salat While Disabled or Plagued with Impairment.” And while I think that it is worth stating that this phrasing around disability—specifically saying “plagued with impairment”—really stresses a deficit mentality, this reading stresses that

Muhammed believed that Salat can take many forms. Again, back to giving some context, as I mentioned earlier, the Quran is the primary religious document in Islam that is considered the direct word of Allah. However, there are many other sacred texts, called Hadiths, that were written by individuals to document the lifetime and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed. One of these Hadiths quotes Muhammed saying “Pray while standing and if you cannot, pray while sitting, and if you cannot do even that, then pray lying on your side.” This paper goes on to describe the most optimal alternative positions for seated prayer or prayer while lying down. Each of these descriptions includes a position diagram.

But with this being said, and while exemptions are important for people with disabilities, it's also so vital to provide accessible opportunities for individuals to participate in the Five Pillars. Ultimately, these things define the practice of Islam, and they are means of being closer to God. So in addition to adjusting Salat to fit differing abilities—physical or mental—there need to be opportunities for people with disabilities to not only be on the receiving end of Zakat, but to contribute to the almsgiving. Persons with disabilities should be met with understanding if they are unable to complete Hajj, or their pilgrimage to Mecca, but accessible opportunities for this journey should be made available.

The Ministry of Hajj in Saudi Arabia has a website that makes clear the obstacles that disabled pilgrims may face in completing Hajj, and provides some (though very minimal) advice on how to navigate planning pilgrimage for those with disabilities. While many of the components of travel—like most housing accommodations and means of public transportation—are not accessible, the Grand Mosque in Mecca does have accessibility measures in place: there are designated wheelchair accessible areas, a place of worship for the deaf, and a place of worship for the blind. While accessibility has never been and will never be perfect, I think that these measures, beginning in the Mosque itself, the Grand Mosque of all places, are a really important standard in keeping with the teachings of the Quran.

—[Ski sound]

So, especially in comparison to what we saw in the Judeo-Christianity, it seems as though Islam is especially progressive in its rhetoric and messaging around disability. To take a step back from the Five Pillars, I found it really interesting in our discussion of Judeo-Christianity to look at the intersection between these religions, disability, and also political forces. As I mentioned in that first podcast, in the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, was passed in 1990 and called for infrastructure to be more accessible, among many other protections for people with disabilities. However, the response from many churches and religious spaces in the wake of this legislation was to look for loopholes and make exceptions for themselves to avoid having to modernize. In this very specific example, the separation of church and state in the American government resulted in this disconnect between the letter of the law and the implementation of the law in a way that had a negative effect on religious people with disabilities.

Many Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East are ruled by Sharia Law, or Islamic Law. And while I feel obligated to put out a disclaimer and say that I have no intention of glorifying Sharia Law—there are many facets to these government systems that are used to oppress and justify atrocities—I think that it is interesting to look at Sharia as a reflection of Islam in the very narrow context of disability right laws. Because, as we have discussed and will continue to discuss, the Quran really accounts for the fair treatment of people with disabilities. So when legislation or laws are decided that support those with disabilities, there seems to be, from my research, less pushback from Islamic religious spaces and leaders, as the laws derive from religious doctrine itself. And I think that this concept is reflected in the accessibility measures in place at the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

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Another interesting parallel between our discussion of the social implications of disability in the Judeo-Christian tradition versus Islam is this idea of the religio-moral construction, or the belief that disability is a punishment. And, while we were able to dig a little deeper into Christian scripture to try and dispel this idea, it was, and in many ways, still is, a predominant narrative in Christianity. And this narrative was communicated from the top-down—religious leaders preached that disability was a punishment or a

reflection of the wrath from God. Now in Islam, alternatively, a form of this religio-moral construction does still exist. In particular, the concept of fate (or “Qadar”) is the idea of predestination and fate. Sometimes individuals and families will consider disability as a destiny to be punished. This might lead some to not seek medical treatment for their disability as they believe that their suffering is fate. However, this is actually completely against the Quran and the teachings of some Hadiths. In fact, for one, suffering is not regarded as punishment, but rather a divine opportunity to be closer to Allah as is stated in the Quran.

Additionally, while medicalization has some negative connotations within the disability community, it is widely accepted that medical intervention that reduces pain and suffering is a really important and valuable resource. Islamic tradition is in agreement with this concept. One Hadith in particular states this idea:

“They asked: 'Apostle of Allah, should we make use of medical treatment?' He replied: 'Make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease, namely old age.’” (Abu-Dawud, n.d., no. 3855)

Islamic doctrine does not believe that disability is a punishment, and it affirms that any actions or interventions that make life easier are remedies from Allah.

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So, while there are shades of social shame or a religio-moral construction of disability within Islam, it seems to be much less pervasive. And it seems as though this is due to the fact that disabled figures are recognized and celebrated more explicitly in the Quran in comparison to the Bible, and this means that higher ranking religious figures are less likely to disseminate ableist ideology.

Hadiths tell different stories of the Prophet Muhammed, including one where he is teaching and preaching the ideals of Islam to people of high status and turns his back on a blind man who wanted to learn about the religion. Allah then admonishes him and challenges him to welcome the blind man, who goes on to be the leader of the city of Medina, where the Prophet Muhammed first established a muslim community. From the very beginning of Islamic

tradition, disabled community members were not only tolerated, but they were put in positions of power.

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Alright, folks! I want to thank you for learning with me today. I will say that while I really enjoyed familiarizing myself with Islam, it is much harder to find credible resources that relate to current topics and perspectives in Islamic tradition, specifically in the disability niche. However, I will say that, at its inception and in its teachings, Islam does seem to be most progressive in terms of approach to disabled members of the faith, and maintaining that a strong connection with God can grow from a disability, and not just in spite of a disability, and this idea is really powerful. I remain curious as to how these concepts manifest in Muslim communities and how this might change the everyday lives and experiences of people with disabilities.

Thank you so much for listening today. I look forward to learning more!  
Buh-bye!

## Sources

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