

RACHEL PIEH JONES



**How Muslim Friends
Led Me Closer to Jesus**

FOREWORD BY ABDI NOR IFTIN

STUDY GUIDE

PILLARS

How Muslim Friends Led Me Closer to Jesus

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Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com



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Opening Thoughts

1. Before you picked up this book, what did you anticipate or expect from its title? What do you hope to gain from discussing *Pillars* with others?
2. *Pillars* is built around the five pillars of Islam. Why do you think Rachel structured her book this way? Which pillar most captures your attention or imagination? Is there one in particular you're interested in exploring more deeply?
3. Rachel writes about being welcomed as an outsider. How do you think this foreigner status has affected her own identity and her experience of Somalis' religion and culture?
4. What is your own faith background? What is your attitude toward other religions? Do you share Rachel's conviction that it is possible – indeed beneficial – to learn from another religion?

Pillar 1: Shahadah

1. Can you relate with the insider-versus-outsider feelings Rachel experienced as a child? Growing up, were you part of a group or tribe, and if so, how did the group determine who was in or out? How do you see these divisions now?
2. Who were your first friends from a different religious background? Did you talk about faith together? Or do you feel that is a topic better left out of interpersonal relationships?
3. Does your faith tradition espouse any creeds? How do you engage with these creedal statements, and what do they mean to you personally?
4. Rachel writes about her initial perceptions of Islam and Muslims. If you made a list of the top five things you believe about Islam, what would they be? How did you come to these conclusions? Does anything in *Pillars* challenge these ideas?
5. Describe a time you have felt incredibly out of place, or when you've experienced strong culture shock. What stands out the most about that time or location? Who were the people who helped you adjust, and how do you feel toward them now?
6. Have you participated in missionary work? If so, how has this impacted your view of other religions and your own? What value do you think there is in intentionally crossing religious boundaries, if any?
7. In Chapter 8, "The Garden," Jones writes about hearing from God. Have you had a similar experience?

Pillar 2: Salat

1. How would you define prayer? Is it something that comes easily to you, or is it more of a challenge? How do you find ways to draw closer to God? What prompts would you compare to a “call to prayer”?
2. Are you familiar with the story of Hagar? Why do you think Rachel incorporates her story into *Pillars*, and what does it add to the book?
3. What do you think about Rachel praying the salat with her Somali friends? If you’re not a Muslim, would you feel comfortable joining? Why or why not? If you’re a Muslim, would you invite a non-Muslim to pray with you? Why or why not?
4. Can you relate to Rachel’s experience of being an outsider? How does that make you feel? What are some ways you could put yourself into the position of being an outsider in order to learn?
5. In Chapter 12, “Call to Bread,” Rachel writes about “signs” are strewn throughout the world, pointing people to God. What for you are signs that speak to you of the divine?
6. In Chapter 13, “Jinn,” Rachel writes about various spiritual beliefs and practices women engage in. Do these sound strange or unusual? Do you have any comparable beliefs or practices? How have you been taught to think about the spiritual and physical worlds, and their intersection?
7. How many names of God can you list? Which ones feel the most personal or precious to you?

Pillar 3: Zakat

1. Why do you think both Christianity and Islam encourage generosity as important aspects of religion?
2. Rachel is honest about the challenge of connecting with poor people and about her feelings of guilt regarding her relative luxury. Have you experienced these feelings? How do you reconcile them in your daily life?
3. Chapter 21, “The Hard Work of Unemployment,” shows the intricacies and relationships of the informal marketplace. Does this chapter help you see people not as “poor” but as individuals with names and stories, dreams and struggles? Why is this important in this section about the pillar of zakat?
4. Jones notes the ways Djiboutians give in their daily lives, rather than for showy photographs or out of vast amounts of wealth. How does this affect your ideas about giving and generosity?
5. In the face of endless poverty, do you feel encouraged by this section on giving, or do the needs overwhelm you? What are some creative ways you can be more generous in your daily life?

Pillar 4: Ramadan

1. Have you ever fasted? If so, why did you decide to fast? What did it feel like, and what lessons or experiences linger from that time?
2. Before reading *Pillars*, what did you know about Ramadan? What did you know about Christian fasting? How have these chapters changed or expanded your understanding? Are you motivated to attempt a fast?
3. Rachel writes about how holidays highlight the sense of being a foreigner, outside the dominant culture, and how lonely that can be. Can you relate to that outsider feeling? Are there ways you can include a foreigner in one of your holidays?
4. What does community, or ummah, mean to you? How do you engage in a community or communities? Is it easy or challenging, and what keeps you committed?
5. Chapter 29, “Tawhid and Shirk,” addresses irreconcilable beliefs regarding the oneness of God, the concept of Trinity, and the personhood of Jesus. How would you explain these concepts to someone who didn’t share them? What do you think of Rachel’s conclusions in this chapter?
6. Have you ever engaged in a spiritual practice that was totally new to you, like Lent and Ramadan were for Rachel? How did that impact you and what did you learn?

Pillar 5: Hajj

1. Have you been on hajj or another religious pilgrimage? What are some lasting memories or insights from that experience?
2. What did you know about the hajj before reading *Pillars*? Which aspects of it were most intriguing or unexpected for you?
3. Have you ever had to flee or been forced from your home or country? Do you relate to Rachel's identification of displacement with the concept of hajj, or pilgrimage? What hope might that offer to someone experiencing displacement?
4. Jones is often asked to become a Muslim, or told she is close to Islam. She responds with, "I love Jesus." How do you explain your personal faith to someone else?
5. What is your understanding of jihad? Of violence in the Bible? How have the concepts of jihad, or the Crusades, or just war affected your own faith tradition? Does religion lead to violence, or can it be a force for peace instead?

Takeaways

1. If you are a Muslim, what surprised you about Rachel's perspective on Islam? If you are a Christian, what surprised you about her perspective on Christianity? If you hold to another religious tradition, or none, what surprised you about her spirituality?
2. Rachel writes about discovering new spiritual practices from her Christian tradition as she sees things in a fresh way through her Muslim friends. Which spiritual practices (for example, fasting or pilgrimage or liturgical seasons) do you personally find most compelling? What are some ways you might incorporate these into your own spiritual life?
3. One might say this whole book is Rachel's testimony, the story of her faith pilgrimage. What is your testimony, your story of faith? Would you tell it differently if the listeners shared your spiritual tradition than you would if they did not? Why does it matter to share our testimonies and to hear those of others?
4. Community and friendship are important themes in this book. How did Rachel's friends contribute to her adjustment to life in the Horn of Africa? Who are your most treasured friends? Have you developed cross-cultural friendships? What are some of the biggest challenges and greatest joys in these relationships?