
What Is Islam?

BY SEMYA HAKIM

The recent attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon have brought to the surface a lot of ignorant beliefs and stereotypes about Islam. Clearly, it is past time for teachers to educate themselves and their students about what is the second largest religion in the world.

One way to start discussions is to ask students to: 1. List stereotypes about Islam and/or Muslims; 2. List everything they know about Islam and/or Muslims.

When I ask about Islam, I often get blank stares, followed by stammerings such as, "Muslims pray a lot," or, "They believe in Allah" (or, as one of my students told me, "They believe in Allan."). Some students have even told me that all Muslim men have, and possibly are required to have, more than one wife.

One common misconception is that Jihad can be easily translated as "holy war." Jihad actually translates as "to strive in the way of God." So a person who studies Islam, preaches Islam, or defends an Islamic country is jihad. It is not someone who initiates violence in the name of Islam. In fact, the literal translation of the word "Islam" is "peace."

This misunderstanding stems, in part, from the fact that many non-Muslim Americans do not understand that Islam is a way of life. Because Muslims don't necessarily see boundaries between nation-states the way Americans do, their patriotism is more about the religion than a particular country. Also, because of religious/racial profiling in the media and elsewhere, Muslims are one of the few groups who are consistently identified by religion when they are accused of committing terrorist acts.

BASIC FACTS ABOUT ISLAM

Part of the problem is that many teachers approach Islam as if it were some distant, ancient religion. Yet there are six million Muslims in the United States, and Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the country.

Here is some basic information about Islam that can help teachers educate their students.

- Islam is the name of the religion; Muslim refers to its followers.

- Worldwide, there are 1.2 billion Muslims. Islam is the dominant religion throughout large portions of Asia and Africa, with the largest Muslim populations living in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

- Islam is the third of the three largest monotheistic religions, in addition to Judaism and Christianity. Muslims believe that the Qu'ran is God's word as revealed to the prophet Muhammad (570-632) through the angel Gabriel.

- There are five basic beliefs of Islam. 1. Belief in one god. (Allah is the Arabic word for god, not believed to be a separate god from the Judeo-Christian version). 2. Belief in prophethood (Muhammad and the ones before him). 3. Belief in the justice of God. 4. Belief in the Imams (or Apostles) of God (Shi'ite belief). 5. Belief in the Day of Judgment.

- There are five major duties of Muslims. 1. Pray five times a day — morning, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening (Sallah). 2. Make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime if

physically/financially able (Hajj). 3. Fast during the month of Ramadan (Saum). 4. Give to the Poor (Zakat). 5. Strive in the way of God (Jihad).

- According to Islam, there are five major prophets: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

- Muslims worship God directly. Religious leaders do not have any divine characteristics; people and objects are not "holy." It is, in fact, sacrilegious to worship anything or anyone outside of God.

- Muslims, unlike Christians, do not believe that Jesus was God's son, although they do believe he was a prophet.

- The Qu'ran contains much of the basic information told in the Bible's Old Testament and in the Torah as well as additional information.

- Women dress modestly out of reverence for God, not for men. Muslim women are not more submissive than other women. Some argue that Muslim women, in fact, have been treated better than women in other cultures. For example, women in Islam were given the right to vote about 1,400 years ago, centuries before other women. Of course, like many other cultures, patriarchal culture can corrupt Muslim culture.

- There are two main sects of Islam: Sunni and Shi'ite. One of their main differences is in their beliefs about who were the leaders following the death of Prophet Muhammad and how they became leaders (appointed by God or elected). Also, Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Qatar practice Wahabism, which is an extremist interpretation of Islam founded in the 18th century by Mohamed Ibn Abd-al-Wahab. It is often discounted by Islamic scholars, just as they discount the Taliban.

- Arranged marriages have changed over time. It is rarely the case where the two people involved have absolutely no input in the decision to marry. Muslim women are rarely forced into marriage, even in the most religious of families.

- Muslims follow the lunar calendar, and thus their holidays move approximately 11 days on the Christian calendar. There are two major holidays in Islam: Eid al Adha is at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca and Eid al Fitr is at the end of Ramadan.

- Islam is very family-oriented. The primary means of transmitting the religion are through the family. Therefore parents, both mothers and fathers, take on a big responsibility when raising children. This family orientation also translates into a community-oriented way of life that can greatly conflict with Western notions of individuality.

While this article does not begin to make other teachers "experts," hopefully it can give you some confidence in starting a dialogue in your own classrooms. Here are some websites for further information:

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), www.adc.org

Arab American Institute (AAI), www.aaiusa.org

American Committee on Jerusalem (ACJ), www.acj.org

American Muslim Alliance (AMA), www.amaweb.org

American Muslim Council (AMC), www.amconline.org

Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), www.cair-net.org

Islamic Institute, www.islamicinstitute.org. ■

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