



Understanding Islam: Perspectives of a Turkish Educator

Elvan Gunel

During the early 2000s, at The Ohio State University, I enjoyed researching the perspectives of Muslim girls as they learned social studies in U.S. public schools. (Four were immigrants from Somalia and one was a U.S.-born Palestinian). This article comes from that research, and also from interacting with their non-Muslim American peers over five years.

There is no easy way to “sum up” one of the world’s great religions in all of its complexity, diversity, and history. This is my best attempt (in less than 2,000 words!) to provide background information about Islam to fourth and fifth grade teachers with limited time to spend on this subject. For teachers who would like more background, details, and teaching suggestions, I would recommend the third edition of *Teaching about Islam and Muslims in the Public*

School Classroom: A Handbook for Educators, published by the Council on Islamic Education in Fountain Valley, California (www.cie.org).

Also, in each section below, I recommend some websites (and occasionally books) that can provide further background or images.

THERE IS GREAT DIVERSITY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Just as Christians live in many nations and are of different cultures (for example, Christians may be American, Irish, French, Mexican, Nigerian, or Korean), Muslims live in many nations and belong to hundreds of cultures. The countries with the largest number of Muslims, with the largest listed first, are 1. Indonesia, 2. Pakistan, 3. India, 4. Bangladesh 5. Turkey, 6. Iran, 7. Egypt, 8. Nigeria, 9. Algeria, and 10. Morocco.



Key Terms

Islam is a monotheistic (belief in a single God) religion whose followers are called *Muslims*.

Allah is the Arabic word for God.

Muhammed is a prophet who lived from 570 to 632 C.E.

The *Qur'an*, also spelled *Koran*, is the holy book that all Muslims cherish. It is believed to be the words of God as spoken to Muhammed.

Mosques are buildings where Muslims worship and pray

Hadith are the sayings and traditions of Muhammed himself.

For more material on Muhammed for children, see atschool.eduweb.co.uk/carolrb/islam/muhammad.html.



In addition, Muslims are sizeable minorities in many Western European countries, including England, France, and Germany. There are about 2.35 million Muslims in the United States today according to the Pew Research Center.

Muslims around the World, thetruebelief.com/muslim_population.html.

Muslims and Arabs

There is a difference between being Muslim (following Islam) and being Arab (people of Arab culture who speak Arabic). There are Arabs who are Christian and Arabs who are Jewish. Although most Arabs are Muslim, most Muslims are not Arab. Only about 18 percent of Muslims worldwide are Arab.

As mentioned, the country with the largest population of Muslims is Indonesia, an island nation in Southeast Asia, where Arabic is not the first spoken language. Six other non-Arabic nations are listed before an Arabic-speaking country, Egypt, appears on that list (keep in mind that Persian is the first language spoken in Iran).

What it means to be Arab, www.africa.upenn.edu/K-12/Who_16629.html.

Muslims in Africa, www.islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/MuslimAfrica/index.shtml.

Religious and Secular Laws

While some countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran live under Islamic law (*Shari'ah*), other countries such as Turkey (which is 98 percent Muslim) have secular (non-religious) laws and governments.

All about Turkey, www.allaboutturkey.com/islam-topics.htm.

Malaysia/Cultures, www.geographia.com/malaysia/cultures.html.

Bangladesh/Culture, www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/bangladesh.html.

Somalia/Culture, www.saturn.stpaul.k12.mn.us/somali/culture.html.

Modesty and Dress

Modest dress is required of all Muslims. However, the ways in which modest dress is interpreted for women varies across nations and cultures, rural areas and cities, and even within a neighborhood. While some girls and women cover their heads with scarves or their bodies with long gowns, others do not believe such covering is necessary in order to follow Islamic beliefs. In Saudi Arabia girls and women never wear revealing clothes (such as shorts or tank tops) in public. Yet along the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey, Muslim girls and women can be found in shorts, mini-skirts or bikinis.

Muslim girls and women often cover their hair with a *hijab*, which can be described as a cloth that covers a woman's hair and sometimes her upper body, or they may cover their entire bodies when outside the home. Yet in many Muslim cities from Indonesia to

Morocco, Muslim girls and women can be seen wearing a variety of clothes which interpret modesty in different ways.

For more on the hijab, see, www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Veil.html.

Fashions in Turkey, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0STp3VuVM6o&feature=related

Muslim fashions in Malaysia, www.youtube.com/watch?v=igQd4ly6uFc&feature=related

Enter key words "Muslim" and "women" to see images from across the world, www.fotosearch.com/ and images.search.yahoo.com/search/

A. Elnour and K. Bashir-Ali, "Teaching Muslim Girls in American Schools," *Social Education* 67, no.1 (2003): 62-64.

Diet

Dietary restrictions include rules about what Muslims can eat and drink. They are forbidden from eating any pork, such as bacon, sausages, ribs or pastries made from lard. Meat has to be prepared according to *halal* methods (which help keep food sanitary despite having been established before our modern understanding of bacterial infection). Although most Muslims do not drink alcoholic beverages, there are some exceptions in some Muslim countries, such as Turkey. Favorite foods for Muslims vary according to region, although many love kebabs, rice and fresh fruit. Muslims wash and pray before meals. The eldest person present usually eats first.

More about Halal, www.islamicity.com.

ISLAM AFFECTS CULTURES IN MANY WAYS

Muslims do not draw human figures or animals in their art because they have been taught to worship only God. Islamic art is made up of flowers and patterns based on geometrical designs, which can be easily seen in photos of the architecture of famous mosques and buildings. For example, the Taj Mahal was built by a Muslim, Emperor Shah Jahan, who died 1666 C.E.

Islamic Art, www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/march02_index.php?l=3 Islamic art.

Large list of websites on Islamic culture, including lessons, www.princetonol.com/groups/fad/lessons/middle/islamic.htm.

Charity

Giving alms is an important practice in Islam. The *Qur'an* explicitly requires that people give alms, which helps maintain a minimal standard of living for the least fortunate members of society. Alms were enforced by the state in ancient times, but today it is left up to the individual, except in Saudi Arabia where religious law is in place. Alms are usually 2.5 percent of the value of one's possessions.

Zakat , www.missionislam.com/knowledge/zakat.htm.

Holidays

Ramadan is a holy month for Muslims worldwide. Muslims fast (do not eat or drink) each day between sunrise and sunset. At the end of that month there is a three-day celebration. The celebration generally includes visiting relatives, sharing food, and offering children candies, gifts, and money. Ramadan is a time for reflection, devotion to God, practicing self-control, reading the *Qur'an*, charity, and doing good deeds.

The *Eid al-Adha* or Feast of Sacrifice follows Ramadan. It is the most important feast on the Muslim calendar. Lasting for three days, it commemorates Ibrahim's (Abraham's) willingness to obey God by sacrificing his son. According to *Qur'an*, Ibrahim was about to sacrifice his son when a voice from heaven stopped him and told him to sacrifice a sheep instead. The feast re-enacts Ibrahim's obedience to God. Families eat about a third of the meal and donate the rest to the poor.

Muslim students should have permission from teachers and schools to be absent on *Eid al-Adha*.

Council on Islamic Education, *Muslim Holidays: Teacher's Guide and Student Resources* (Fountain Valley, CA: CIC, 1997).

Pilgrimage

Muslims are required by their religion to travel to Mecca (in modern-day Saudi Arabia) at least once in their lifetime if they are financially and physically able to do so. The *Hajj* bring Muslims together from all the various nations, rich and poor, of every ethnicity and age, to pray and perform rituals over a seven-day period. It is a memorable and profound event in the lives of Muslims.

The Haaj, www.thewaytotruth.org.

Reading and Education

Education is highly valued. The first word that God revealed to Muhammed was *Iqra*, which means "read." The *Qur'an* also refers to an obligation for all Muslims to seek knowledge and educate themselves.

Scholarship is a strong tradition within Islam. During the Middle Ages in

Europe, Islamic scholars in the Middle East translated and saved much of the Roman and ancient Greek classics that would have otherwise been lost. Beautiful libraries were constructed to house books and scrolls in many different languages and from all over the known world.

Council on Islamic Education, www.cie.org/

Information for and by American Muslims, www.soundvision.com

Islam for Children, www.jamaat.org/islam/Muhammad.html

S. L. Douglass and the Council on Islamic Education, *Teaching about Religion in National and State Social Studies Standards* (Fountain Valley, CA: CIE, 2000).

ISLAM STRESSES PEACE AND TOLERANCE

Islam reinforces the idea of working towards peace and harmony. Despite television news shows' focus on acts of fanatical violence, the great majority of Muslims strive to be useful citizens within their societies. The *Qur'an* says "If they seek peace, then seek you peace. And trust in God for He is the One that heareth and knoweth all things" (*Qur'an* 8:61). Another saying from the *Qur'an* that explains how important peace and tolerance are for Muslims is: "Their greeting on the day they shall meet Him will be: Peace. And He will prepare for them a generous reward" (*Qur'an* 33:44). Students should be able to distinguish between terrorists and peaceful Muslims who live in United States and other parts of the world.

ABC News Nightline, Producer, *Muslims in America: The Misunderstood Millions* (a documentary film, New York: ABC News, 1997).

Muslims Against Terrorism, www.awesomelibrary.org/Muslims.html

Practicing Tolerance

Tolerance toward to other Muslims and non-Muslims is also an important social value in Islam. Not only in the *Qur'an*, but also in Muhammed's teachings, tolerance is often emphasized. Muhammed said, "Anyone who believes in God and the Last Day (of Judgment) should not harm his neighbor" (*Hadith*).

ISLAM SHARES HISTORICAL ROOTS WITH CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are related religions with similarities as well as differences. For example, three faiths share some basic values such as honesty and charity. Muslims worship the same God as Christians and Jews. Many stories are similar, such as the story of Noah's Ark and the birth of Jesus.

Muhammed is not considered to be the founder of Islam, and Muslims do not worship him. Muslims only worship Allah (in Arabic, Allah means God). Muslims believe Muhammed was a prophet chosen by God to deliver his message. He is not considered a divine person. The Islamic tradition believes in many of the Jewish and Christian prophets, including Abraham and Moses. Jesus is considered to be a great teacher and a prophet, but not the son of God.

Gerald Krell and Meyer Odze, *Three Faiths, One God* (New York: Auteur Productions, 2006), www.threefaithsonegod.com.

A leading online source of information on Islam and Muslims, IslamiCity, www.islamicity.com/.

PBS Global Connections, www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/religion/index.html.

Islam, thetruebelief.com/index.html

A leading online source of information on Islam and Muslims, IslamiCity, www.islamicity.com/.

Top ten misconceptions of Islam, home.c2i.net/minhaj/topten.html.

J. Chalfonte, *I Am Muslim* (New York: Rosen, 1996).

Conclusion

Our students come to us from many different family, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Learning about Islam can help U.S. teachers to understand their students and their own society, as well as to more deeply comprehend history and better interpret current events. Since one of the founding ideals of the United States is Freedom of Religion, we might feel some eagerness to do so.

ELVAN GUNEL is an assistant professor of social studies at Anadolu University in Eskisehir, Turkey. She has a M.Ed. in social studies from the University of Missouri and a Ph.D. in social studies and global education from The Ohio State University.