

Cultural and Religious Information for YES Students

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

Muslim beliefs

Muslims believe in One, Unique, Incomparable God; in the Angels created by Him; in the prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind; in the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for actions; in God's complete authority over human destiny and in life after death. Muslims believe in a chain of prophets starting with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. God's final message to man, a reconfirmation of eternal message and a summing up of all that has gone before was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel.

Fiver pillars of Islamic Practice

1. Shahadah – Public declaration of belief that there is only one God, the God of Abraham, and that Mohammed is one of God's messengers.
2. Salat – Ritual Prayer, 5 times each day.
3. Sawm – Month of Fasting (Ramadan).
4. Zakat – Annual Payment of 2.5% of total wealth for the benefit of the poor.
5. Hajj – Pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime, if physically and financially able.

Prayer

Salat is the name of the obligatory prayers which are performed five times a day, and are a direct link between the worshipper and God. There is no hierarchical authority in Islam, and no priests, so the prayers are led by an Imam, a learned person who knows the Koran and is chosen by the congregation. These five prayers contain verses from the Koran, and are said in Arabic, the language of the revelation, but personal supplication can be offered in one's own language.

Prayers are said at dawn, around mid-day, in the afternoon, at sundown and in the evening, and thus determine the rhythm of the entire day. The time of prayer varies with season and geographic location and is ideally measured with the position of the sun. Although it is preferable to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere, such as in fields, offices, factories and universities.

Prior to prayers, Muslims perform **ablutions** or wudu, which include performing the following gestures in the order described below three times:

1. Washing one's hands up to the wrists;
2. Rinsing out one's mouth with water;
3. Cleansing one's nostrils by sniffing water;
4. Washing one's face with both hands from the top of the forehead to the bottom of the chin and from one ear to the other;
5. Washing one's right then left arm up the end of the elbow;
6. Wiping one's head with wet hands;
7. Wiping the inner sides of one's ears with wet forefingers and out sides with wet thumbs;
8. Wiping around one's neck with wet hands;
9. Washing one's feet up to the ankles starting with the right foot.

Sacred Texts

The Koran is the primary religious text of Islam. The Koran was revealed to the prophet Mohammed by the angel Gabriel. The second written source of guidance is called Hadith, the “report” of the deeds and sayings of Mohammed. Hadiths constitute an important guide to Muslims, but they do not have the status of the Koran.

Mohammed

Mohammed was born in Mecca in the year 570, at a time when Christianity was not yet fully established in Europe. Since his father died before his birth, and his mother shortly afterwards, he was raised by his uncle from the respected tribe of Quraysh. As he grew up, he became known for his truthfulness, generosity and sincerity, so that he was sought after for his ability to arbitrate in disputes. The historians describe him as calm and meditative. Mohammed was of a deeply religious nature, and had long detested the decadence of his society. It became his habit to meditate from time to time in the Cave of Hira near the summit of Jabal al-Nur, the “Mountain of Light” near Mecca.

Ten Basic Points of Islam

1. Islam is a Monotheistic religion, like Christianity and Judaism.
2. Among all Muslims, only 20% are Arabs. Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iran make up the majority of the Muslim population.
3. Mohammed is not the focus of the religion, or even its “founder”.
4. The focus of the religion is God, not a god named Allah. Allah is the Arabic word for God. Literally, “The God” is a shortened form of “The God of Abraham”.
5. For Muslims, God is not a being; God has no gender.
6. Islam’s Holy Book is called the Koran, or Qu’ran. It means “The Recitations”. It is a collection of the revelations that Mohammed received from God during the period of his mission, which lasted from age 40 to 63. Some of the revelations address universal principles, some address particular situations facing the first Muslim community, some are retellings of familiar Biblical stories, sometimes with a slightly different twist. Some stories are metaphors, others are literal, but there is nothing to say which are which; it is up to each believer to decide.
7. The other two sources of guidance are 1) the consensus of the community, and 2) independent reason. There is no central ecclesiastical authority in Islam. Islam asks all believers to use their own minds, to learn, to “read”. The first Muslim community stressed literacy.
8. Islam is a religion, not a political ideology.
9. Islam is a religion of practice, of outwardly visible acts, such as dress, prayer and social conduct.
10. Similar to Judaism and Christianity, Islam has many different interpretations. There are 2 main sects in Islam; Sunni and Shi’a. Each sect has different denominations.

Dietary Requirements

Islam requires that Muslims do not eat pork or its by-products nor consume alcohol. Some Muslims eat meat that is “halal” (similar to concept of Kosher meat). Halal meat can usually be found in major urban areas through the U.S., sold in small Muslim-owned grocery stores. Additionally, Muslims will not eat any kind of meal that pork was taken out of or cooked with wine. They will also avoid animal shortening in breads, puddings, cookies, cakes etc. and gelatin products such as Jell-O. Certain foods that contain alcohol such as vanilla extract will also be avoided.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ISLAM AND MUSLIMS

Islam has little in common with Christianity and Judaism

Even though the three religions worship the same God, Muslims are sometimes portrayed as if they worship a God, “Allah”, who is different from the God of Judaism or Christianity. It is important to be aware that “Allah” is simply the Arabic word for God. Christian Arabs, like Muslim Arabs, pray to “Allah”.

Islam acknowledges many of the prophets of Judaism and Christianity, and regards Jesus Christ as a prophet. The doctrines of Islam treat Christians and Jews as “People of the Book”, requiring that their beliefs be accorded respect because of what they share with Islam, even though Christians and Jews reject the central Muslim belief in Muhammad as the Prophet of God.

Violence and the Nature of Jihad

Some radical Islamic movements have engaged in spectacular campaigns of violence. The mere fact that these groups are violent should not be taken to mean that most Muslims either endorse the violence or believe that it is religiously acceptable. Most governments in the Muslim worlds are adamantly opposed to violent Islamic radical movements. Many of these governments are, in fact, targets of such movements. Likewise, most Muslims are not interested in violent politics and never join or support such movements.

It is also a serious error to treat terrorism as if it were some kind of problem that can be specifically linked to the Islamic world. Terrorism is a phenomenon that is associated with radical politics of many kinds, religious or not, in many different regions of the world.

Although there have been highly publicized actions of violence by radical Muslims, it is incongruous to presume that the acts of extremist groups somehow reflect on all Muslims.

A common stereotype is that all Muslims engage in acts of “jihad”, often described as a holy war against infidels, a military struggle in which death is an acceptable, even desirable result. In Arabic, the word “jihad” literally means struggle, striving or effort. It is different linguistically from the Arabic words for either holy or war. It is commonly translated as holy war, because that was the closest equivalent in English that translators could find for one of the meanings of “jihad”, which is a military struggle justified on religious grounds.

“Jihad”, however, also has much broader meaning, which includes non-military struggle for any good cause. Like most societies, Muslims tend to see wars they fight as having been imposed on them by others, so that typically when Muslims describe war as a “jihad”, they are thinking of a struggle in defense of Islam or a Muslim community rather than an aggressive war.

Marriage and Islam

Muslim men are sometimes portrayed as possessing a harem of wives who follow obediently behind their husbands, with children in tow. This interpretation of the situation of married Muslims is extremely ethnocentric and one-dimensional. Contrary to the stereotype that Islam allows polygamy, it is widely disapproved by educated Muslims, and monogamy is increasingly the rule in most Muslim countries. In Islam, the institution of marriage constitutes a religious as well as a civil contract. Divorce, though disliked and discouraged, is permissible when all other attempts at reconciliation are exhausted.

It is important to take into account the enormous diversity of the Islamic world. Different Muslim countries differ greatly in educational and economic development; within Muslim countries, there are great differences in the way people live and think. A middle-class Muslim woman in Istanbul or Beirut lives a life that is closer to that of a woman in the West than to that of a rural woman in South East Asia. A realistic examination of Muslim women in the world will portray them in the cultural context or country in which they reside. For example, although many women in Muslim countries choose to wear a head covering (hijab), many Muslim women in North America choose not to wear these.

Muslim Dress

The Koran says that a woman should cover her hair, neck and chest areas. Many Muslim women wear a head covering called "hijab". Female dress varies and is impacted by the local customs, culture and individual preference. Wearing the hijab is a personal choice for most women but some governments oblige women to cover. Saudi women have to wear an Abaya covering the entire body except for the face. Iranian women are obligated to wear a hijab in public spaces. Countries like Turkey prohibit women from wearing hijab in government institutions including state owned schools. Men have a dress code as well. The Koran says that men are not permitted to wear silk and gold and that they should cover themselves between the bellybutton and ankles. Remember that not all Muslims follow these dress codes. Observant and devout Muslims like, devout Hindus, Jews, Christians etc. tend to strictly follow the dress code they interpret as being prescribed by their religion. For instance, Christian nuns have a similar style of covering their body except for their face.

INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

Interacting with Parents, Elders and the Opposite Sex

Parents

The teachings of Islam emphasize treating people with respect. You will find that the respect given to parents falls just below that given to God and they are held in very high esteem. The mother is particularly venerated, Prophet Mohammed said: "Heaven lies under the feet of mothers." Special attention may need to be given to the comfort level of your student even though he/she has been welcomed into your household as one of your children.

Elders

After the parents, the elders are also treated with the utmost respect. You may notice cultural exchange students, who just arrived, lowering their glances out of respect when talking with the host mother, father or Local Coordinator. They have been taught not to stare at their faces.

People of the Opposite Sex

The relation between the man and the woman in Islam is based on mutual respect and considering people as your brothers and sisters. Some Muslim societies differ in the level of interaction socially between men and women, but it is primarily based on what the Qur'an teaches. Men and women appear in public dressed modestly as they interact. The women cover their bodies, as well as their hair. The men dress in loose clothes to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to them. Some of the cultural practices and interactions between men and women that may vary are as follows:

- Handshakes – Some do not shake hands with the opposite sex, while others shake hands if one extends their hand toward them
- Hugs – Normally only exchanged between two women or two men
- Kisses – The religious greeting for men toward men is a handshake and hug, if traveling. In the Middle Eastern countries, the cultural tradition is for men to kiss one another on the cheek and women to do the same with women. It is not necessarily like that in other countries with significant Muslim populations.
- Dress – Women's dress is described in the Qur'an as loose and covering the entire body. Religiously covering becomes mandated from the age of puberty. Cultures today have different styles depending upon the region the person comes from.
- Dating – In most of the Muslim countries, dating does not exist in the same manner as in the U.S. Even though there is a shift in the cultural practices today in many of the Muslim countries, Islamic religion prohibits premarital sex.

Manners and Behavior

Due to the respect given to elders, a student may feel shy to express their feelings about what they like and dislike. They may even agree out of respect. You may need to encourage your student to speak their minds and share their opinions when asked to do so. You may also find the opposite true since the students may go a bit overboard as they begin expressing themselves in situations they may never have encountered before.

Religious teachings always show the prophet as someone who took part in household chores. The culture in some of the countries often encourages the practice in wealthy families of males being served by maids. It is important for them to understand that it is part of the culture of this society, as well as Islamic culture, for them to help around the house. If the host parents make it clear that they need to share the responsibility, they will be more apt to do it. Similarly, if you find that your student is having difficulty following the directions of his host mother, it may be fruitful for the host father to explain that as part of their host family rules and structure the children must listen to both the host mother and father. In some societies the father is the authority figure and a student may be used to only taking direction from the father.

Visiting a Church, Synagogue, or Temple

Many exchange students are not used to interfaith activities and may never have visited a church, synagogue or temple before. It is part of their experience in the U.S. to be introduced to the values and ethics of other religions, which helps to dispel the misconceptions they may have.

Some host families, eager to share their lives with the new addition to the family, might inadvertently make the student feel pressured to participate in the service at their "place of worship". It is important

to help the student feel comfortable to visit and observe some of the activities without interpreting it as proselytizing.

Places of worship in America have a variety of activities, including social and civic programs. In many Muslim countries going to church means to worship, it is not necessarily like that in America where there might be youth activities or other sponsored events.

At the same time, many families go together to the service and the student may find this uncomfortable. There have been incidents where students have felt pressured to attend the service often and the situation became very delicate. These misunderstandings can be avoided by an open discussion and allowing students to participate in other activities like volunteering while the family is at the service.

Dietary restrictions

The word “Halal” is equivalent to the term “kosher” in Judaism. When a Muslim student asks for halal food, essentially it means that the food contains no pork or alcohol and that the meat has been slaughtered according to the Sunnah of Prophet Mohammed and the name of Allah has been mentioned at the time of slaughtering.

In case halal meat is not available, Muslims are instructed to utter, “in the name of God”, on the food before they eat. Some students might insist to eat only halal meat, while others may prefer to be vegetarian. In this respect, the Islamic teachings are flexible and leave this to the discretion of the individual. You can also check locally for halal food markets.

Pets and Dogs

There are a lot of misunderstandings about the issue of “dogs” in Islam. The dog itself is mentioned in the Qur’an as a loyal and honest companion. The dog, in most of the Muslim communities, is acquired for the purpose of protection as a watch dog or for special use with hunters or police. They are not commonly seen as domestic pets, while cats, birds and other pests are quite common. Religiously, the dog is not to be in the house for the simple fact that the saliva is considered unclean and should not touch any piece of cloth or part of the body. If that happens, it comes unclean and needs to be washed thoroughly.

It is helpful if you realize that at the time of the prophet in the desert of Arabia, dogs did not have the attention and care of modern veterinarians today. Dogs, in some instances, bite and may have rabies, which could be dangerous and possibly deadly. That explains why many exchange students are uncomfortable with or scared of dogs in the house. Students might request that the dog not be permitted to enter their rooms where they pray. By the time the student prepared to return to their home country, most likely their comfort level and perception of the dog changes.

HELPFUL NOTES FOR HOST FAMILIES

- ✓ To help your student locate a nearby mosque and determine prayer times, a good source of information is www.islamicfinder.com.
- ✓ At least one of the prayers is during the school day. Schools are not required to make a place available for the student to pray. Should a Muslim student wish to pray, it should be request that he or she be allowed to go to a quiet, clean place to pray during the school day. Islam puts a high value on cleanliness, therefore locations such as the gym locker rooms or the bathroom are not ideal spots for praying. A staff room, guidance counselor or teacher's office or unused classroom or library room would be suitable locations for praying. During prayer – ten minutes or so – students should not be disturbed and will not answer if spoken to.
- ✓ Although many of the YES students who are practicing Muslims will probation not choose to go to a mosque for their daily prayers, on certain days they might appreciate the opportunity to pray in a nearby mosque. As a host parent, you will probably wish to contact the imam at the nearest mosque to get a sense of the environment your students will be in.
- ✓ While you student is praying, he/she will not answer questions, it is best at that time to leave the student alone. Your student will want a clean and private space where no dog has stepped, most likely his/her bedroom to perform daily prayers at home.
- ✓ Muslims are very conscious of matters pertaining to bodily functions and hygiene. Ablutions (cleansing) prior to prayer are essential. You may notice that after your host child has been in the bathroom, the floor is wet. This would be a consequence of the student using water for ablutions. Leaving the bathroom floor wet may not be unusual for the student, so you might want to talk to your host son or daughter about drying the floor. Many students will wish to use water to wash themselves after using the toilet. A bucket of fresh water that they could keep besides the toilet for the purpose of dipping out some water would be a friendly gesture.
- ✓ Your Muslim student may not always be aware that certain American foods contain pork, and they will appreciate you letting them know ahead of time. It is always a good idea to have a talk with your student about food they are comfortable eating. To be polite, many students may say they like a certain food when they really don't. They are not trying to mislead their host family, direct communication may be considered rude in their culture and they are trying to respectful. In order to avoid this you can refrain from asking yes or no questions and instead start the conversation by asking what foods they like to eat at home and what foods they are looking forward to trying in the U.S.
- ✓ Religious Muslim students will also most likely observe the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and keep fast. Muslims are required to get up early in the morning to eat and drink. With the sunrise the fasting starts; it ends at sunset when Muslims break the fast and then eat. You may note that even if your student is not very religious, Ramadan is generally a month during which he or she will experience homesickness.

CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR

BEHAVIOR	EXPLANATION
Greetings between genders	Result of a more gender segregated lifestyle. A male student might not feel comfortable touching members of the opposite sex and wish to salute another person by bringing his right hand to his left shoulder. Holding a male friend's hand as a sign of friendship is also widely accepted at home. On the other hand, females might be expansive in their greeting and hug and kiss you on each cheek a repeated number of times. Holding a girlfriend's hand in sign of friendship is also widely accepted for females.
Limited interactions with non-family members of opposite sex	Result of a more gender segregated lifestyle. This can result in the student feeling uncomfortable looking at someone from the opposite sex in the eyes and talking to them directly.
Excessive need for guidance/support, especially from natural parents	In general, decision making in countries the students come from are traditionally made by a father figure. Your student might therefore find it particularly difficult, when personal issues arise, not to consult his/her natural family. He/she will want to be a good child and act as his/her father or mother would him/her to, even if the context is not the same.
Passivity	Your student might expect to be asked/invited to do things rather than being proactive.
Perceived laziness, disobedience	Accepted traditional gender roles; boys are doted on. Your male student might be reluctant to do household chores.
Perceived limited sense of personal responsibility	Accustomed to group problem sharing. Children are not expected to make decisions.
Difficulty managing money	Young people traditionally do not have a way of earning money; allowance are not common. Lack of experience with managing money. Natural family may pressure student to bring money home. If student perceives him/herself as a guest, expectation may be that the host family would pay.
High expectation of host family	Sense of entitlement due to perceived wealth of the US or a misconception that student is a guest and should be treated as one.
Repeated, direct or blunt requests	It is a cultural approach to problem solving as well as different understanding of barriers and limits. In his/her cultural, the student might be used to a back and forth in offerings and polite refusals prior to accepting an item (food, invitation etc.). Your students might politely refuse your offer at first as he/she expects to accept your repeated offer. If no offer is reiterated, the student might feel unhappy. You should explain in your family offers are made once in order to avoid this confusion.
Invasion of personal space	Personal space does not hold same significance in the students' home countries as it does in the U.S. Your student might come very close to you without noticing you backing up for space.
Aversion to dogs	Dogs are generally viewed as unclean animals in Islam. In many countries, there are a number of street dogs that are dangerous and should be avoided. Children are more likely to be told to be very careful, if not fearful of dogs. If you have a dog and your student is uncomfortable, you may wish to discuss ways of addressing this issue. Solutions in the past have been to keep the dog out of the student's room, understand the student will not pet the dog, and would prefer not to be assigned chores associated with dog care.
Running water; wet bathroom floor	Prior to prayer Muslims are required to cleanse their body in a certain fashion, this is called ablutions. It is not unusual for people to leave the bathroom floor wet after this process. Some students may be used to bidets, other may be used to toilet paper. Your student may ask for a bucket of fresh water to keep beside the toilet.