



COUNCIL ON  
ISLAMIC EDUCATION

*Teaching About  
Islam and Muslims*  
in the Public School Classroom

*3rd Edition*

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### To the reader:

Muslims pronounce a blessing upon Prophet Muhammad whenever they mention him by name. The Arabic blessing *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ* means “may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him.” Although this formula is not printed within the text of this book, it is intended that it be inserted in any reading by a Muslim.


The section on usage of terms in *Part 2 – Teaching with Sensitivity* is excerpted from the Council on Islamic Education’s curriculum guide *Strategies and Structures for Presenting World History, with Islam and Muslim History as a Case Study*.

Arabic terms associated with Islam, with the exception of names of people and places, and a few other words, have been set in *italic* type. Most of these terms may be found in the *Quick Reference Glossary*.


Dates are given in terms of the common era (C.E.), a convention referring to the common human experience, devoid of specific religious connotations.

**This handbook for educators is listed on the State of California’s *Instructional Materials Approved for Legal Compliance* list. Thus, each California school district may use up to 30% of its Instructional Materials Fund (IMF) allocation to purchase this resource.**

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# About Islam and Muslims



## INTRODUCTION

### *What is Islam?*

The term *Islam* derives from the three-letter Arabic root *s-l-m*, which generates words with interrelated meanings, including “surrender,” “submission,” “commitment” and “peace.” Commonly, *Islam* refers to the monotheistic religion revealed to Muhammad ibn (son of) Abdullah between 610 and 632 of the common era. The name *Islam* was instituted by the *Qur’an*, the sacred scripture revealed to Muhammad. For believers, Islam is not a new religion. Rather, it represents the last reiteration of the primordial message of God’s Oneness, a theme found in earlier monotheistic religious traditions.

Though Islam can be described as a religion, it is viewed by its adherents in much broader terms. Beyond belief in specific doctrines and performance of important ritual acts, Islam is practiced as a complete and natural way of life, designed to bring God into the center of one’s consciousness, and thus one’s life. Essentially, by definition Islam is a worldview focused on belief in the One God and commitment to His commandments.

### *What does the term “Allah” mean?*

The Arabic word *Allah* is a contraction of the words “al” and “ilah,” and literally means “The God.” Believers in Islam understand *Allah* to be the proper name for the Creator as found in the *Qur’an*. The name *Allah* is analogous to *Eloh*, a Semitic term found in the divine scriptures revealed to Muhammad’s predecessors Moses and Jesus (may peace be upon them all).

The use of the term *Allah* is not confined to believers in Islam alone — Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews also use *Allah* in reference to God, demonstrating thereby that followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism believe in a common monotheistic Creator, a fact that many people are surprised to learn. One reason for this may be that English-speaking persons are accustomed to the term *God*, whereas believers in Islam, regardless of their native language, use the Arabic word *Allah*. This difference in usage may cause people to view the term *Allah* with reticence and uncertainty, preventing them from making the connection between the Arabic name and the accepted English equivalent term. In other words, *Allah* means “God,” like *Dios* and *Dieu* mean “God” in Spanish and French, respectively.

## *Who are Muslims?*

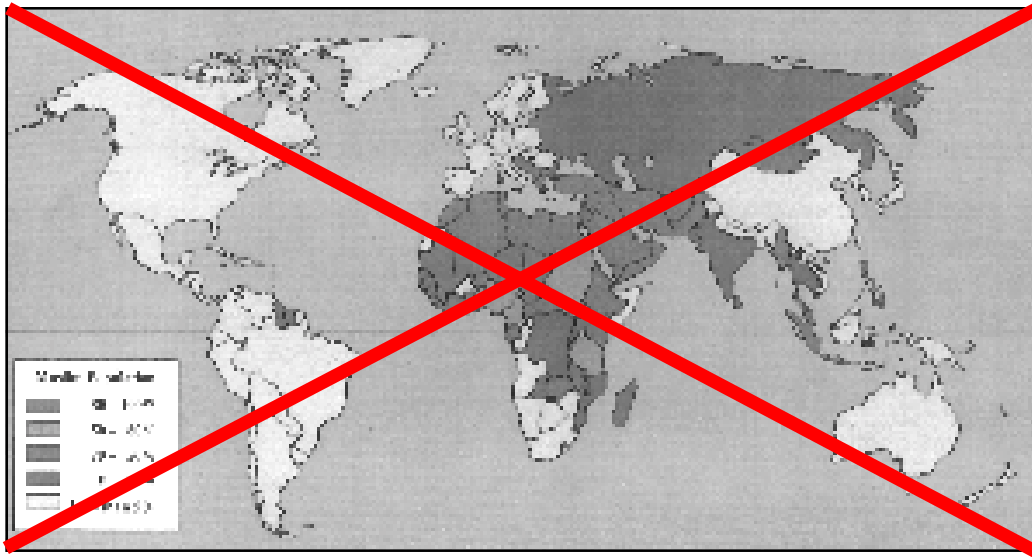
The word *Muslim*, like *Islam*, comes from the three-letter Arabic root *s-l-m*, and literally means “one who willfully submits (to God).” Islam teaches that everything in Creation — microbes, plants, animals, mountains and rivers, planets, and so forth — is “muslim,” testifying to the majesty of the Creator and submitting or committing to His divine laws. Human beings, also, are considered fundamentally “muslim” (submitters to God) in their original spiritual orientation, but being unique creations endowed with abilities of reason, judgement, and choice, they may remain on a God-conscious, righteous path towards divine reward, or may veer away as a consequence of upbringing and life-choices.

More commonly, the term *Muslim* refers to one who believes in the *Shahadah* (the declaration of faith containing the basic creed of Islam) and embraces a lifestyle in accord with Islamic principles and values. Anybody may be or become a Muslim, regardless of gender, race, nationality, color, or social or economic status. A non-Muslim who decides to enter Islam does so by reciting the *Shahadah*, (pronounced *La-Ilaha Ila Allah, Muhammad-un Rasool Allah*) witnessing that “there is no deity but Allah (God), and Muhammad is His Messenger.”

## *Where do Muslims live throughout the world?*

Over 1.2 billion people throughout the world are adherents of Islam. In other words, one out of every five human beings on the planet is a Muslim. Islam is the religion of diverse peoples living in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Central, East, South and Southeast Asia, Japan, Australia, and North and South America. The global spectrum of races, ethnicities and cultures finds representation in the worldwide Muslim community.

While Islam is often associated almost exclusively with the Middle East, Arabs comprise only about 15-18% of all Muslims. Interestingly, the country with the largest population of Muslims (over 160 million) is Indonesia, an island nation in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Muslim peoples of the South Asian subcontinent (living in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) constitute about 25% of all Muslims, while those of Africa comprise close to 20% of the total. Surprisingly to some, there are nearly as many Muslims in China as there are in Iran, Egypt or Turkey (over 50 million). Moreover, Muslims constitute sizeable minorities in many Western European countries, including England (over 2 million), France (over 2 million - about 10% of the French population), and Germany (about 2 million). See the chart on the following page for more details.



*Do Muslims share a single culture?*

Muslims throughout the world share the same essential beliefs, values, and God-centered approach to the world. Furthermore, all Muslims look to the *Qur'an* and the lifestyle and traditions of Prophet Muhammad for guidance in their daily affairs. In this respect, since Muslims the world over try to implement *Qur'anic* and Prophetic guidance, it may be said that Muslims share a common Islamic culture, focusing on shared principles and values. As a result, Muslims typically feel at home among their co-religionists anywhere in the world.

The Worldwide Muslim Population		
Country or Region	Est. Population	Percentage
South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh)	275 million	23%
Africa	200 million	16.7%
Arab Countries	180 million	15%
Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore...)	170 million	14.2%
Central Asia	50 million	4.2%
China	50 million	4.2%
Iran	50 million	4.2%
Turkey	50 million	4.2%
Europe	20 million	1.7%
Afghanistan	15 million	1.3%
North America	6 million	0.5%
South America	3 million	0.25%
Australia	1 million	0.08%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,200,000,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources:  
 Fareed Numan, American Muslim Council, Washington D.C. (1992)  
 Islamic Affairs Dept., Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington D.C.  
 World Almanac (1995)

## *Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*

At the same time, the ethnic, regional or material cultures of Muslims vary tremendously across the globe. Muslims exhibit different styles of clothing, different tastes for food and drink, diverse languages, and varying traditions and customs. American Muslims fall within this panorama and are in many ways culturally distinct from Muslims living in other societal contexts. Little League baseball, apple pie, and jazz music are as natural to American Muslims as they are to other Americans. Even so, certain aspects of popular American culture (such as pre-marital relations, consumption of alcohol, and certain styles of dress) do not accord with Islamic principles.

Muslims view the diversity found throughout the *ummah* (worldwide Muslim community) as a natural part of God's plan for humanity and believe it contributes to Islam's continued vitality and universal ethos. Consequently, rather than imposing arbitrary cultural uniformity, diverse cultural practices are encouraged and supported. So long as a given cultural practice or tradition does not violate teachings of Islam as found in the *Qur'an* and traditions of Prophet Muhammad, it is considered legitimate and possibly even beneficial. Using this approach, Muslims throughout history have been able to retain in large part their own distinct cultures, discarding only those elements contrary to the basic moral and ethical principles of Islam.

### *How many Muslims live in the United States?*

An estimated five to six million Muslims live in North America, and of these, two and a half million are Americans who have embraced Islam (i.e. they were not born into the faith). Dr. John R. Weeks, Director of the International Population Center, San Diego State University, a noted demographer and author, states: "There can be no question that the Muslim population in this country is large and is growing at a fairly rapid pace." It is projected that by the turn of the century, Islam will be the second largest religion in the United States. Even today, Muslims outnumber Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ and many other Christian denominations, and almost as many Muslims as Jews call America their home.

The United States Department of Defense reports that there are currently more than 9,000 Muslims on active duty in the U.S. armed services. A number of leading American scientists, physicians, sports figures, and scholars are Muslim. Clearly, Muslims are part of the diverse fabric of the United States, playing a productive role in our society as neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, schoolmates, and friends. Most American Muslims share in the effort to make this nation, as well as the world, a more moral, just and peaceful place in which to live, worship and prosper.

## *What is the Muslim community in North America like?*

Muslims from various walks of life live in every state of the union. The ten states with the largest Muslim populations, listed in order, are California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Maryland. Muslims in these ten states constitute 3.3 million (more than 50%) of the American Muslim population.

There are more than 1,200 *masjids* (mosques) throughout the United States, as well as over 400 Islamic schools (126 full-time), three colleges, 400 associations, an estimated 200,000 businesses, and over 200 publications, journals, and weekly newspapers.

The number of houses of worship serves as one measure of the growth of the Muslim community in the United States. In 1930, there were 19 *masjids* in America. By 1960 there were more than 230; by 1980 over 600; and as noted above, by 1995 over 1,200.

The diversity of Muslims in the United States is a hallmark of the community — virtually every race, ethnicity and culture is represented among American Muslims, making for a unique experience not found anywhere else in the world.

The Muslim Population of North America		
Ethnic Group or Origin	Est. Population	Percentage
African-American	2,100,000	42.0%
South Asian	1,220,000	24.4%
Arab	620,000	12.4%
African	260,000	5.2%
Iranian	180,000	3.6%
Turkic	120,000	2.4%
Southeast Asian	100,000	2.0%
Caucasian	80,000	1.6%
Undetermined	280,000	5.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,000,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source:  
Fareed Numan, American Muslim Council, Washington D.C. (1992)

## *What is the history of Islam in America?*

The history of Islam in the New World in some sense precedes that of the United States itself. Some researchers claim that certain artifacts, found in the Mississippi delta and other locales, antedating the European “voyages of discovery,” lend credence to the possibility of Arab or African expeditions into the as-then-uncharted Ocean Sea, as the Atlantic Ocean was commonly known. Arab scientists and astronomers knew the earth to be round long before the concept gained currency in European circles. When it did, European sailing vessels, including those under Christopher Columbus’ command, that crossed the Atlantic in search of an alternate passage to Asia often enlisted Muslim crew members, due to their expertise in maritime navigation. Also, since European explorers, who spoke little Arabic, expected to reach India (hence the term “Indian” for Native Americans) and the Indian Ocean basin (where Arabs were heavily involved in maritime trade and commerce), taking along Arabs/Muslims as translators made sense.

Milestones in American Muslim History	
1500s	Arrival of Hispano-Arab Muslims (Mudejars) from Spain in Spanish-occupied territories of the New World.
1539	Moroccan guide Estephan participated in exploration of Arizona and New Mexico for the viceroy of New Spain.
1717	Arrival of enslaved Africans who professed belief in Allah and Prophet Muhammad and curiously (to their captives) refused to eat pork.
1856	Hajji Ali hired by United States cavalry to experiment in raising camels in Arizona.
1869	A number of Yemenis arrived after the opening of the Suez Canal in Egypt.
1908	Muslim immigrants from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, other Arab lands.
1922	Islamic Association formed in Detroit, Michigan.
1933	Nation of Islam formed.
1934	First building designated as a masjid established in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
1952	Muslim servicemen allowed to identify their religion as Islam by Federal government.
1963	Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) founded.
1965	El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) assassinated in New York.
1975	Warith Deen Muhammad renounced teachings of Nation of Islam and led large segment of African-American community into mainstream Islam.
1982	Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) formed.
1983	Islamic College founded in Chicago, Illinois.
1991	Imam Siraj Wahhaj of Brooklyn, New York offered the invocation to the United States House of Representatives.
1991	Charles Bilal became the first Muslim mayor of an American city, Kountze, Texas.
1992	Imam Warith Deen Muhammad offered the invocation to the United States Senate.
1993	The first Muslim chaplain is hired by the United States Armed Forces.
1993	Islamic Shura Council, a coalition of four major Muslim organizations, established.



Later on in American history, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as many as 20% of the slaves brought to the United States from Africa were Muslims (before being forcibly converted to Christianity). Another group of Muslims, Spaniards known as *Mudejars*, established roots in the New World after the conquest of Granada in 1492 and the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain resulting from the Inquisition. The influence of these highly-skilled Hispano-Arab Muslim craftsmen and artists has had far-reaching effects in American architecture and design, which are still in evidence today, especially in the American Southwest.

In the modern era, since the late 1800s, Muslims from all over the world, along with people of other faiths, have immigrated to the U.S. to make a better life for themselves and to contribute their unique talents and sensibilities to the ever-evolving American social matrix. In the last fifty years, a dramatic increase in native-born American Muslims and converts to Islam has taken place as well, providing new generations of Muslims prepared to interact fruitfully with fellow Americans and raise the contributions of the community to higher levels.

## BASIC BELIEFS

### *What are the beliefs of Muslims?*

The central concept in Islam, reflected in the *Shahadah*, is *tawheed*, or Oneness of God. For Muslims, there is but One God who is Lord and Sovereign of Creation, and devotion, allegiance, and obedience must first of all be to Him. This view serves as the foundation from which the basic beliefs of Islam emanate, since God is recognized as *the* Source for all knowledge and understanding. More specifically, the beliefs of Muslims are delineated and described in the *Qur'an* and in the sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad. The practice of Islam is based upon belief in One God (*Allah*), creations (whether humanly perceivable or not) of God, prophetic leadership, revealed guidance, and a Day of Judgement. Details are provided below.

### *Is there a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition?*

Important doctrinal differences exist between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even so, each of the three faiths proceed from a monotheistic worldview interconnected with that of the other two. The three world religions share belief in successive prophets and revealed scriptures — in fact, the three faiths trace their religious history back to the patriarch Abraham, and earlier to the first human, Adam (considered a prophet in Islam), demonstrating a common history and outlook. Thus, for Muslims Islam culminates what can be described as the *Judeo-Christian-Islamic* tradition of monotheism.

## ALLAH

### *How is God viewed in Islam?*

The *Qur'an*, the divinely-revealed scripture of Islam, contains numerous verses describing the nature of God. The role of human beings as creations of God upon the earth and their relationship with God are also discussed extensively in the sacred text.

*“Say: He is God, the One, the Eternal, Absolute. He does not beget, nor is He begotten, and there is none like unto Him.” (Qur'an, 112: 1-4)*

*“It is He who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing, and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections that you may give thanks.” (Qur'an, 16:78)*

*“No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things.” (Qur'an, 6:103)*

Muslims believe that God has no partners or associates who share in His divinity or authority. Muslims also believe that God is transcendent and unlike His creations, and thus has no physical form. Nor is God believed to exist in (or be represented by) any material object. A number of divine attributes or “names,” which serve to describe God, are found in the *Qur'an*. Some commonly known attributes include the Most Merciful, the Most Forgiving, the Most High, the Unique, and the Everlasting, among others.

In Islam, human beings, like other creations, are seen as completely unlike God, though they may aspire to exhibit various attributes manifested by God, such as justice or mercy. Furthermore, even while God is believed to be beyond traditional human perception, the *Qur'an* states “He is with you wherever you may be” (57:5). For Muslims, God’s Oneness heightens the awareness that ultimately all life is bound by Divine Law emanating from a singular source and that life has a meaning and purpose which revolves around the consciousness of God’s presence.

Moreover, belief in a singular Creator compels conscientious Muslims to view all humanity as one extended family, and treat others with justice and equity. Respect for the environment and natural resources also follows from the Muslim view of God.

### Basic Beliefs of Muslims

#### Muslims believe in...

<b>Allah</b>	The One God
<b>Angels</b>	(and the world of the Unseen)
<b>Prophets</b>	(and Muhammad as the final prophet)
<b>Divine Scriptures</b>	(and the Qur'an as the final scripture)
<b>Day of Judgement</b>	(and reward in Heaven and punishment in Hell)