



Center for  
Middle Eastern Studies

## Islam: Myths Versus Realities Presentation Notes

1. A brief explanation of spellings that you can share with your class: Islam emerged in Arabia, and the Quran is in Arabic. Arabic uses a different alphabet than English, so words have to be ‘transliterated,’ which is difficult since English has such a mixed-up spelling system. Another problem is that Arabic doesn’t write all their vowel sounds (though, of course, they do *say* those sounds). What all this means is that there are a lot of spellings of important Islamic words. Example: Muslims = Moslems, Muhammad = Mohamed or even Mehmed (and many other variations), Quran = Koran, etc. In other words, be flexible and use your imagination!

2. Myths and realities: Slides 1 – 14 are self-explanatory. The intention is to correct the false information that kids (and the adults around them!) have been exposed to.

A. Slides 1 – 6: Not all Muslims are Arabs. Turks, Iranians, and Afghans live in the Middle East but are not Arabs. Many Muslim Africans (from north, west, and northeast Africa), Asians (from Pakistan to Indonesia), and Europeans (i.e. Bosnians and Albanians) are not Arabs either. Also, not all Arabs are Muslims: there are Coptic Christians in Egypt; some Palestinians and Lebanese are Christians. Remember that Islam is a religion; Arabic is a language.

B. Slide 7 (map) that the colors signify the percentage of the population that is Muslim. The kids can see that Islam centers in the Middle East (western Asia, northern Africa) but that it is strong throughout much of Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe.

C. Slides 8 – 14: self explanatory.

3. Slides 15 – 21 (women’s dress): The Quran (Muslim holy book) directs women to dress modestly, but the interpretation of what is modest has varied over time and from place to place. The practice of women wearing a cloak over their clothes originated in the Middle East (Even Christians did that in the Byzantine Empire), but that style of dress isn’t traditional elsewhere. Here are some examples of women’s dress.

A. Slide 15 – To the left is a Pakistani woman. Pakistanis wear a long tunic over pants (Iranians often dress like this too). They wear a scarf around their neck or loosely draped over their heads. (Iranians usually cover their heads – as required by their government – but they don’t worry about covering ALL their hair. There are all kinds of styles of bangs – because that is what shows!) To the right is a Saudi Arabian woman, dressing as their government directs.

B. Slide 16 – An Iranian woman. Notice that she is driving a car, wearing make-up and cool sunglasses, carrying a cell phone, etc. Even women in an “Islamic Republic”

like Iran aren't necessarily subject to the restrictions we've heard about Saudi and Afghani women facing.

C. Slide 17 - Some African styles of dress. Notice the colors and patterns.

D. Slide 18 - To the left is the Malaysian dress style. Indonesians dress like that too, but often wear a veil that is joined at the throat and hangs down in front and in back. To the right is a Bangladeshi woman, wearing a sari like Indian women do, regardless of faith.

E. Slide 19 – Afghani women in burqas. Note: this form of dress, required under the Taliban, is much more confining than the clothing worn by women in other countries. Many women in Afghanistan even today are forced (by their husbands, by the men in their villages) to wear the burqas- even though it's not required by law.

F. Slide 20 – Girls in the United States (note the blue jeans, etc.). They are protesting not being allowed to wear a headscarf to school.

G. Slide 21 – Discussion question: Should Muslim girls be allowed to wear headscarf to school, work, sporting events, etc.? (Note that the issue has caused protests in the U.S., rioting in France, Canadians walking off the soccer field in protest, etc.) Why is the issue explosive? (Freedom of religion – what if Christians were told they could not wear a cross or Jews that they could not wear a star of David? But to some Muslims, wearing a headscarf means more than that – it means freedom to participate in activities like school, work, etc. since for many people deciding not to wear a headscarf means giving up their religion.)

4. Slides 22 – 28: Five pillars of Islam.

A. Slide 23: Faith – stresses monotheism.

1. Note that Muhammad is a prophet, NOT God. They are so strict with their monotheism that, as you will see, they don't have pictures or statues of Muhammad so that people don't mistake him for God.

2. Muslims have close ties to other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Christianity) and are generally tolerant of them. (Problems with the West arise because of Muslim hatred toward Western political control, NOT Western religion.)

a. Muslims respect and honor Judeo-Christian prophets too:

Abraham, Moses, Jesus - who they consider to be a prophet – etc. This is NOT coincidence: Muhammad, the founder of Islam, lived from 570-632 A.D. in Arabia, which was mostly pagan then. He – and other intellectuals – were in contact with Jewish and Christian thought because of trade with those areas, and Muhammad became committed to monotheism.

b. Muslims, in general, respect Jews and Christians as fellow worshippers of the one God and as “peoples of the book” that emphasize holy scriptures. Muslims believe in the Jewish texts (“Old Testament”) and in the Christian texts (New Testament), except they honor Jesus as a prophet, rather than the son of God. Muslims, for example, have the same ideas about Abraham (whom they call Ibrahim) as the father of both the Arabs (through Ishmail, the son by Abraham's concubine) and the Jews (through Isaac, Sarah's son). The Arabs are happy to be descended from

the first-born son; the Jews are happy to be descended from Abraham's union with his wife. Also: Muslims venerate Mary, the mother of Jesus. (Maryam – or Mary - is a common name in many Muslim countries.)

c. Jews and Christians are usually not persecuted in Muslim countries – though they are often considered second-class citizens. Adherents to other religions are not treated so well since there is no tolerance for people who worship many gods, who don't believe in God, or who belong to a religion that emerged after Islam (because in the latter case the people are apostates, people who switched from Islam to something else).

B. Slide 24: Prayer.

1. Note that they pray 5 times a day facing Mecca. The minaret (pillar sticking up from a mosque) has a place for a Muslim official to call people to prayer. In conservative countries (Saudi Arabia, Gulf Arab countries), people stop whatever they are doing to pray. They even pull their cars off the road and pray by the roadside. In other countries, Muslims find a convenient time to excuse themselves and pray. (For example, when they get back from shopping but have a short time until dinner, they say, "I'm going to pray now.")

2. They say specified prayers – it only takes a few minutes.

3. Before praying, they wash their hands and symbolically cleanse themselves (a similar thing to Catholics using holy water, and for the same reason – it represents purification before God).

C. Slide 25: Alms – self explanatory.

D. Slide 26: Fasting – Muslims fast during the daylight hours during the month of Ramadan. This means no food or anything at all to drink (not even water) when the sun is up. Because the Arabs have a lunar, not a solar calendar, it comes at a slightly different time each year. Why would it be hard when Ramadan falls during summer? (longer days, hot days with nothing to drink) Note: Only adults in good health fast – not children, pregnant women, people with diabetes, etc. The goal is to practice self-denial and turn one's thoughts to God, not to kill someone! Also, note that Muslims have some dietary restrictions even when they are not fasting: They don't ever eat pork (like Jews and for the same reason - the meat easily became contaminated in a hot climate before there was refrigeration). Muslims also do not drink alcohol (not even when they're 21!).

E. Slide 27 Pilgrimage - to Mecca and Medina (holy cities in Arabia, where Muhammad lived and developed Islam). Believers who can afford it and who are physically able should make the pilgrimage at least once in their lives.

F. Slide 28 – a picture of the pilgrimage (hajj). Note that people don't go whenever they want, but join people from all over the world at a certain time in the year. Everyone wears the same white garment, representing equality in the eyes of God. In the old days, making the pilgrimage was very, very difficult – the great medieval ruler of Mali (West Africa), Mansa Musa, spent 2 years making the round trip across Africa with tens of thousands of slaves and members of his entourage. Today, so many people are able to do it that the Saudi government has to put limits on how many people can go from each country. Only Muslims can

participate – no outside observers – so pictures like this one are taken by Muslim reporters.

5. Slides 29 – 43: Islamic religious art and architecture. (Slide 29 defines *mosque*.)

A. Slide 30: Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Notice the carpets (People take off their shoes before entering as a sign of respect.) and the arches used in construction (Islamic architecture used this technology from the Roman Empire and built on this to create domed structures.).

B. Slides 31 – 33: Mohammed Ali mosque in Cairo, Egypt.

1. exterior – notice the minaret (on the back left hand side) of the mosque. The balconies are where officials go to call people to prayer.
2. interior – notice how it differs from a Christian cathedral: no seats (people kneel on the carpets) and no religious statues or pictures of any kind (Muhammad was afraid people would revert to paganism if they prayed in front of pictures or statues. They are so strict about this that it is difficult to even make a documentary about Muhammad since you can't show his face.)
3. decorations – Just because there are no statues or pictures doesn't mean there is no art. Stained glass, geometric designs, and calligraphy beautifies the mosques.

C. Slides 34 – 35: Sultan Ahmet Mosque (a.k.a. “Blue Mosque”) in Istanbul, Turkey. Look at slide 34 and ask why it is called the Blue Mosque. Slide 35 gives the answer – the interior is decorated in shades of blue.

D. Other mosques

1. Slides 36 and 37: mosques in Iran.
2. Slide 38: a traditional mosque in Djenne, Mali.
3. Slide 39: a Tunisian mosque with a square minaret (traditional to North Africa, unusual in other places)
4. Slide 40: Indonesian mosque in a Far Eastern style.
5. Slide 41: Islamic architecture in Spain (southwestern Europe)
6. Slide 42: Mosque and graveyard in Bosnia (southeastern Europe). Note that, as in Turkey, the gravestones have turbans carved on them to show that the deceased is Muslim. (Christian graves have crosses.)
7. Slide 43: Mosque in Tempe, Arizona (Phoenix area). Don't forget that there are 5 million Muslims in the U.S.

6. Slides 44 – 45: Quran, Muslim holy book that Muslims believe is the word of God that the archangel Gabriel dictated to Muhammad. On Slide 45, note that the Quran is written in Arabic, which is written from right to left (the opposite of English). What do you notice about the cover of the book and the way the book opens?

7. Slides 46 – 49: Muslim influences on secular art.

A. Slide 47: Notice that Quranic verses and quotes are used on many different things, including this Ottoman palace in Istanbul. This one is the profession of faith: “There is one God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

B. Slide 48: Calligraphy, as you saw in the previous slide, is a pervasive art form. Notice other ways that Arabic writing is used in art. (This artwork is Egyptian – it's secular, not religious.)

C. Slide 49: Stained glass art is not only for mosques but for official buildings like palaces. (This is the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, Turkey.)

8. Slide 50: General conclusions.