

RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM*



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Because of the Taliban, the whole world is claiming we are terrorists. This is not the case. We are peace-loving. Our mountains, our trees, our flowers—everything in our valley is about peace.

—MALALA YOUSAFZAI

BACKGROUND

“Islam is arguably the most misunderstood religion of the 21st century.”²

WHAT IS ISLAM?

Islam is a monotheistic religion. It began in the 7th century AD in what is now Saudi Arabia, led by the Prophet Muhammad^ﷺ³ who Muslims believe is the last prophet of Allah (the Arabic word for God). Followers, known as Muslims, adhere to the Qur’an, the central text of Islam, and follow 5 pillars of faith:

1. **Shahada:** There is only one god, God, and Muhammad^ﷺ is his prophet
2. **Salat:** Ritual prayer five times a day
3. **Zakat:** Giving alms to the poor
4. **Hajj:** Pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah
5. **Sawm:** Fasting during the month of Ramadhan

WHERE IS ISLAM PRACTICED?

Over 1.5 billion people in the world are adherents of Islam. In other words, 23% of the world’s population is Muslim. Islam is the religion of various people around the world in places such as North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Islam is often exclusively associated with the Middle East, although only 15-18% of the world’s Muslim population is Arab. In fact, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world is Indonesia. Approximately five to six million Muslims live in North America. A number of leading scientists, physicians, athletes, and scholars are Muslims.

*Adapted from resource guide material written by Kelly Pemberton

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³The salawat, “salah allahu alaihi wa sallam”, is a phrase that Muslims use to pronounce blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad^ﷺ. Sometimes the phrase is abbreviated as SAW or PBUH for “peace be upon him,” but these abbreviations are controversial and to some, suggest a lack of respect. With this in mind, we have used the full salawat in Arabic, as a superscript, in line with contemporary literary conventions seen in texts about Islam.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM?

Religious extremism is any behavior, attitude, or belief outside the norm of religious beliefs or practices. Often, this extremism manifests itself in the form of violence or the creation of smaller groups or cults. Religious extremism is present in *all* religions.

- Some groups, like the Taliban, have interpreted select Islamic religious practices in ways which have suppressed human rights. Likewise, extremist Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu groups have committed acts of violence that do not align with the core values of the religions they claim to represent.
- Because of terrorism and the media, many misunderstand Islam and often mix up the practices of a small minority with the entire religion. Many Islamic people challenge extremism in their own religion.
- Malala remains a devout Muslim while condemning the religious extremism of the Taliban.

ACTIVITY

The purpose of this activity is to gain a broader understanding of religious extremism and how it can be dangerously confused with mainstream religious principles. By distinguishing the two, and by understanding that religious extremism pervades every major religion, not just Islam, we can better understand how many more things there are that bring us together than there are that divide us.

Originally an “ice breaker”, this activity was designed to find commonalities among various groups of individuals. Here, we’re looking to find both similarities and differences, but not in individuals: in **religions**. Then, after the activity, you’ll come together to discuss what you found.

As a club, pick 3–5 religions to compare and contrast. There are hundreds of different religions, so get creative! Keep in mind that there will be more information readily available on the more prominent religions, but don’t let it discourage you—the information is out there! To better understand Malala’s backstory we do recommend choosing Islam as one of your religions.

Below are a few resources from which you can gather information:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions>

<http://www.uri.org/kids/world.htm>

<http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org>

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0113529.html>

<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency>

Once you’ve decided on religions to analyze, create a massive Venn-Diagram or other chart. Under each religion, be sure to identify:

- The origin of the religion
- Fundamental beliefs
- Where the religion is practiced
- Leader(s) within the faith
- Interesting facts
- Anything you want!

Then, highlight in different colors the commonalities between religions. You might be surprised by just how much these religions have in common.

- After you’ve created your chart, host a discussion with your club. You might discuss what surprised you about the similarities and/or differences between religions. You can also share something you learned about another religion that you previously did not know. How many people do you personally know who practice each religion identified in the game? What impact do you think personal relationships have on understanding religions different from your own?

TAKE IT FURTHER!

Turn your country research into a game. Brainstorm enough religions for each club member to select one out of a hat. Give everyone no more than five minutes to gather information. Then, it's time to start playing!

- As a group, form a circle of chairs, with one person standing in the middle. One by one, go around the circle and state the religion you are representing.
- The person standing in the middle will start off the game. Think of an aspect of the religion you represent, and say "Stand up if your religion...[insert aspect]", finishing that sentence with a fact about the religion you researched.
- Anyone whose religion identifies with the statement will stand up, and must quickly move and try to find a new chair. This includes the person in the middle.
- You cannot move to a chair that is next to you.
- One person will be left without a seat. This person will take his/her place in the middle of the circle, and start again.

Think about your core values or religious identity. Based on this game, which concepts resonate most with you? Which the least?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

LISTEN:

"WOMEN IN ISLAM: RELIGIOUS STUDY"

<http://muslimvoices.org/women-islam-religious-study>

Discuss:

1. How does Islam guide the lives of the various women in the interview?
2. How do the women define Islam differently?
3. What does the last woman say about misuse of power (particularly against women) in Islam? What is the difference between culture and religion and how do they intersect?

LISTEN:

"WOMEN IN ISLAM: TASLIMA NARIN"

<http://muslimvoices.org/women-in-islam-taslima-nasrin>

Discuss:

1. What is Taslima's opinion about the separation of religion and state?
2. What are the roots of women's oppression according to Taslima?
3. Who does she blame for Islamic Fundamentalism?
4. What are Taslima's views about secular education and criticism in Islam?

LISTEN:

"HERE IS WHY GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION CAN SPAWN RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AROUND THE GLOBE"

<http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-28/bribery-fraud-spawn-religious-extremism-worldwide-author-says>

Discuss:

1. What are some examples of government corruption in the news story? What are some examples of government corruption in your community?
2. Discuss how government corruption can spawn religious extremism.

WATCH:

"RHETORIC, RELIGION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST EXTREMISTS"

<http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/rhetoric-religion-and-the-fight-against-extremists>

Discuss:

1. When you discuss extremist groups, how can you avoid making generalized statements about the religious groups extremists claim to represent?
2. What are your thoughts on the president's new approach to discussing extremist religious groups?