I AM MALALA:
A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

THEME 4: Religion and Religious Extremism

For more information or to submit feedback about the resource guide, visit malala.gwu.edu.
To expand the reach of Malala’s memoir—*I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*—and spread Malala’s message to young people and activists, the Global Women’s Institute (GWI) of the George Washington University (GW), in collaboration with the Malala Fund, developed a resource guide for high school and college students around the world. Building on the content of Malala’s memoir, the resource guide supports global efforts to mobilize women and men to address women’s and girls’ rights to an education.

Malala’s memoir opens the door to some of the greatest challenges of our modern world. It is about politics, education, culture, religion and violence against women and girls. It is a moment in the life of a young girl and in the history of a country. To do these broad themes justice, faculty from a wide range of disciplines contributed to the development of the resource guide.

The resource guide challenges students to think deeply, share their experiences, and engage with their communities. Each theme is divided into 4 parts:

- **Part 1** is the narrative with learning objectives to frame the conversation and help plan lessons;
- **Part 2** lists the resources to help students and teachers deepen their knowledge about the theme;
- **Part 3** lists individual and group activities, including some to be done outside of class if students are interested;
- **Part 4** is the high school supplement intended to help high school teachers introduce and discuss some of the concepts and context that appear in the theme narratives.

Each part may be printed separately to be used by teachers or students.

**THE EIGHT THEMES ARE:**

1. Memoir as Literature and History
2. Education: A Human Right for Girls
3. Cultural Politics, Gender and History in Malala Yousafzai’s *I am Malala*
4. Religion and Religious Extremism
5. Malala and Violence against Women and Girls
6. Malala Leadership Essay
7. Malala and the Media
8. Global Feminisms: Speaking and Acting about Women and Girls
Islam in Its Religious and Cultural Manifestations

Characterized alternately as a religion of peace, ecumenism, and gender egalitarianism, or as a faith predisposed to intolerance, extremism, and misogyny, Islam is arguably the most misunderstood religion of the 21st century. Discussions of Islam are rarely informed by a grounded understanding of its foundations or of its varied manifestations in different cultural, political, and religious contexts. While Islam is often cited in the mass media as the cause of the oppression of women in Muslim-majority nations, it is much less explored as a force for progressive change in the world. Yet when examined critically, both in its foundational context and in light of major developments taking place among religiously observant Muslims today, it is clear that Islam can, and does, operate as such a force. The theme “Religion and Religious Extremism” addresses the challenges of assessing Islam in its religious, sociocultural, and political manifestations. By religion we mean the faith-based beliefs and practices that Muslims observe. By sociocultural we mean the variety of social relationships and customary practices that are associated with Muslim communities. These practices are controversial among Muslims because some, such as pilgrimage to the tombs of deceased holy men and women other than the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad,1 festive celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday (milad), or hiring a female dancer to perform at a wedding, are considered to be outside the pale of Islamic faith and within the realm of extra-Islamic regional or local cultural observations.

Operating from the assumption that it is impossible to speak of a single, monolithic Islam, yet that there is something about Islam as a religion (belief, practice) and culture (moral guide, way of living) that has the power to unite the majority of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims as a community of believers, we will discuss:

- the problematics of defining Islam
- the varied forms that Islam takes in different social and cultural contexts,
- the question of extremism in Islam
- how Muslim girls and women (and the men who support them) have been transforming Islam into a force for progressive change in the world today

These themes are all evident in Malala Yousafzai’s memoir, I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban. Through Malala’s story we learn about the ways in which Islam is expressed, lived, interpreted, and manipulated.

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1 The salawat, “salahu alaihi wa sallam,” is a phrase that Muslims use to pronounce blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad. 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.
**The Challenges of Defining Islam as it Relates to Gender**

Many of the problematics of defining Islam’s views on gender stem from some of the foundational teachings in the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad’s sunna (teaching and practice), including the rights and obligations of women and girls, and male-female relationships. For example, women have the right to attach conditions to their marriage contract, such as the right to continue pursuing their education after marriage. As wives, women are obliged to care for and show respect to their husbands. This is a mutual obligation: The husband, who is required to spend his income to take care of his family (while his wife is not obliged to spend her income on the family), is commanded in the Qur’an to respect his wife and to treat her with kindness and love. While it is commonly assumed that there is a readily identifiable core of Islam, the evidence in these two sources suggests that there were multiple understandings of orthopraxy (correct practice) and “authentic” beliefs even among the first few generations of Muslims. Malala’s story illustrates some of these problematics. For example, her father’s commitment to the education of girls, a passion shared by his young daughter, is atypical of men and women in his Pashtun community yet wholly in conformity with the foundational teachings of the Qur’an and the sunna of the Prophet. These teachings emphasize that knowledge is to be sought after by both men and women, boys and girls. The history of Islam, from its earliest origins, is filled with examples of Muslim girls and women who were renowned as scholars, including and especially the Prophet’s young wife Aishah, who transmitted a large number of hadith (reports) about the Prophet Muhammad. These hadith, which are also considered part of the sunna of the Prophet, are one of the two most important textual sources of the faith for Muslims, second only to the Qur’an. As a famous hadith of Prophet Muhammad says, Muslims should “seek knowledge even as far as China.”

**The Varied Forms of Islam**

The early forms of Islam reflect multiple understandings and beliefs among Muslims. These include 1) the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which began in the late seventh century, 2) the appearance of alternative communities (such as the Qarmatians and the mystics of Islam, or the Sufis), and 3) the impact of pre-Islamic (and non-Muslim) cultures on the development of Islam and Islamic texts and institutions. An evaluation of these divisions will serve as a departure point for understanding how cultural and social contexts as well as key historical and political developments over time have shaped the multiple forms that Islam has taken around the world. It is commonplace to hear that the forms of Islam practiced by Muslims in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, India, and Nigeria look very different from each other. Likewise, the forms of Islam practiced by communities within these countries can look very different, too. For example, celebrations of major Islamic holidays are often combined with observances of locally significant commemorative events, and the significance of ethnic identity distinguishes Pashtun Muslims like Malala and her family from other Muslims in South Asia and the rest of the world. Still, there are key elements that unite Muslims across these countries and cultural contexts. Some of the elements include the reverence that is accorded the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad, and the ideal of Islamic sharia as a moral guiding force for Muslims (the latter differs from Islamic sharia as applied to the law, or fiqh).

Malala’s story illustrates how sectarian and ethnic divisions can trump adherence to the foundational teachings of Islam, yet it also demonstrates how Pashtuns participate in a community of shared identities with other Muslims globally. For instance, Malala’s struggle is a continuation of the nonviolence philosophy of Bacha Khan (Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), a prominent Pashtun activist who struggled with Mahatma Gandhi for India’s independence from the British. As a spiritual leader, Bacha Khan also practiced and taught the ethics of Islamic “sageness” and enlightenment—the basic moral principles of Pashtunwali and the indigenous, egalitarian-minded Pashtun society that are fully aligned with universal humanism and bonding. As Malala pointed out at the UN, “Pashtuns want education for their daughters and sons.” Malala’s narrative identifies the root causes of conflicts and how diverse perspectives and divisions have led to the development of extremist beliefs and practices among some Muslims, including those concerning gender roles and the complex relationships and agendas created in war and peace. One of the most notorious groups promoting these extremist beliefs and practices in Afghanistan and Pakistan as “true” Islam is the Taliban. Ultimately, Malala’s arguments provide a venue to study and analyze the lives and struggle of Pashtuns and Muslims and to address the root causes of conflict and war being played out in her land.
Radical Islamic Extremism

In Malala’s story we see how the rise of the Taliban and their supporters in Swat and other areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan was fueled by transformational political and cultural factors, such as the Islamization policies pursued by the regime of Pakistan’s General Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s; the U.S.-sponsored curriculum (published with support of the University of Nebraska), which taught schoolchildren the basics of counting with illustrations featuring Kalashnikovs, tanks, and land mines and glorified Jihadi culture; the impact of Westernization and wars of aggression waged by Western nations in South Asia and the Middle East, and the growth of development and other schemes focused on increasing women’s rights in Muslim-majority nations. Some Muslims became radicalized as a result of the direct support and encouragement by the West, and some understood this to be a war on their religion and culture(s), and/or their governments’ pandering to the agendas of Western nations. The third aspect of this thematic study explores the issue of religious extremism in light of factors like these in order to answer key questions that have been posed since the rise of extremist groups claiming to represent Islam. Some of these questions include the following: If Islam is not predisposed to extremism, as so many Muslims and non-Muslims alike have tried to show, then how should we understand the rise of extremist groups like the Taliban? And why have such groups attacked the rights of women and girls in particular as a key part of their (mis)interpretation of Islam in the 20th and 21st centuries?

Islam: A Progressive Force for Change

Malala’s advocacy and activism exemplify a growing trend across the Muslim world: how women and girls have been contributing to the transformation of Islam as a force for peace and progressive change. This trend began in the early 1990s, when scholars and activists began speaking of a specifically “Islamic” feminism that espoused gender equity (or equality) and that focused on defining women’s rights issues through the lens of Islamic frameworks of understanding. Some call this the “gender jihad” after scholar-activist Amina Wadud’s book. The idea of a “gender jihad,” or battle waged for women’s full human rights, has taken place over the past three decades through a number of different and often crosscutting frameworks, such as legal rights, political participation, and greater representation in educational institutions and the formal labor market.

Indonesia provides one of the most striking examples: With the overthrow of the Suharto regime in the late 1990s, the new government of Abdurrahman Wahid committed itself to fostering gender equality. Seeking to bring more women into the mainstream of public space, the state encouraged women to enroll in the pesantren, or Islamic schools (which constitute about 35 percent of all schools in Indonesia). Afterward, many of these graduates not only became professors in Islamic universities, they also became successful advocates for women’s rights issues, including marriage and divorce rights, and anti-domestic violence campaigns. In Egypt, Morocco, and India, Muslim feminists and grassroots activists from across the political and ideological spectrum have waged similar battles for changes to “family law” (marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, all governed by Islamic sharia in these countries), using textual exegesis of the Qur’an and hadith to argue for women’s rights. Recently, the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan have sought to increase state control of the religious schools (dini madaris in Urdu) to combat gender stereotypes and encourage girls’ greater participation in these institutions. With increased access to the type of religious education that promotes the tolerant, gender-egalitarian, and humanistic aspects of Islam, women and girls and their male supporters alike are increasingly using the foundational texts and teachings of the religion (such as the Qur’an and hadith) to advocate for gender equity, in particular the right to equal educational opportunities for Muslim girls and women.


INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

Analytical research paper(s)

The(se) research paper(s) will engage one of the following themes:

- the forms that Islam can take in different cultural contexts (including and especially in Pakistan)
- compare and contrast Islam and forms of religious extremism in light of past and current debates about women and gender (e.g., that women should not be too highly educated, since their primary role is to become wives and mothers; that the mixing of the genders in public spaces leads to the moral corruption of women; that gender segregation is a way of “protecting” women from the vices of men in public spaces; that women are a temptation and a vice to be avoided by men; that a man should never be “ruled” by a woman; that Islam gives men the right to beat their wives; that a woman’s body and hair are awra [sexually arousing] and thus should be completely covered from the eyes of unrelated men). Relate one or more of these issues to events that take place in the book. What is the range of attitudes you can discern about “Islamic propriety” regarding the relationships between men and women (in private, domestic, and wider/common public spaces)?
- how are women and girls contributing to the transformation of Islam as a force for progressive change? What concurrent factors (e.g., political, economic, cultural, social) have helped bring about these transformations? Which of these factors stood out as germane to Malala’s story (and the evolving story of girls’ education in Pakistan and around the world)?

Individual PowerPoint presentation (narrated in class, or with recorded narration)

The presentation should touch upon one of the themes explored in this lesson: similarities and differences in the practice of Islam (“lived Islam”) in various cultural contexts, Islam vs. religious extremism, or Islam and gender activism. The presentation may be narrated in person in class, or designed as a pre-recorded narration.

In-class narration

The PowerPoint presentation should touch on one of the following themes in a single country or cultural (e.g., Pakistani, Pashtun, Swati) context. The presentation must consist of at least 12 slides (including title slide), all of which are directly relevant to your chosen subject and theme. You should create slides using both images and words, but you may choose how many of each to use. Present this slide show in class, with explanation of the content you have included on the slides.

Recorded narration

You must narrate the slides in addition to providing citations and notes to support your data. Narrations need not be extensive, though they should be detailed and specific. Keep the entire narrated presentation between 7 and 10 minutes long.

Roundtable debate

For this assignment, each participant chooses a position to defend with three pieces of evidence. The debate can be designed to take up an entire class session, Alternatively, each participant may be given five to seven minutes to speak, with classwide discussion taking place at the end of each roundtable.

Joint PowerPoint presentation

This presentation would be similar to the one described above, and would similarly touch on one of the themes outlined for the analytical research paper, but in multiple country/cultural contexts (with each panelist taking on a single country). This could be presented in class, with responses/questions from the entire class coming at the end of the presentation, or online, with pre-recorded narrations from each panelist. Responses to the presentation from other class members may also be included as part of this assignment: Responses will be posted to online class discussion boards, chat rooms, or other collaborative venues (such as Blackboard Collaborate).
**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

1. How does Malala’s memoir help us understand the impact of religion and religious extremism upon global education efforts?

2. Why does educating girls in the Swat Valley pose a threat to the Taliban and its religious/cultural practices?

**CONTEXT**

**Why is it important to understand religious extremism, especially as it pertains to Islam?**

Religious extremism represents atypical or outlying behaviors outside the norm of religious beliefs. Because of cultural and political circumstances, some communities (like the Taliban) have interpreted some Islamic religious practices in unusual ways that have suppressed human rights. Because of terrorism and the media, there is much misunderstanding about Islam and people often conflate the practices of a small minority with the entire religion. Malala remains a devout Muslim while condemning the religious extremism of the Taliban.

**What are the different sectarian divisions of Islam?**

Islam has two main sects: Sunni and Shi’i Islam. Sunnis make up 75-90% of all Muslims. The Sunnis follow the Qur’an, then the hadith, which are the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. For legal matters not found in the Qur’an or the hadith, they follow four Sunni madh’hab (schools of thought). They believe that the first 4 caliphs after the Prophet Muhammad were his rightful successors. Shi’’ites are the next largest denomination at 10-20% of Muslims. They differ from Sunnis in believing the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali, to be his rightful successor and only his descendants can be Imams. They pray three times a day instead of five and most follow the Ja’fari Madh’hab. There are several other smaller denominations of Islam that focus on different aspects of Islam. For example the Ibadis are found in Oman and parts of East Africa. They consider themselves to predate Sunni and Shi’i Islam, since their school was founded 20 years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. They observe prayer and other Islamic ritual practices in ways that are slightly different than Sunnis and/or Shi’ites: for example, they do not say “Amin” after preforming the Fatiha prayer.

**What is Islam?**

Islam is a monotheistic religion. It emerged in the 7th century AD in what is now Saudi Arabia, led by the Prophet Muhammad, who Muslims believe is the last prophet of Allah (the Arabic word for God). It spread as a religion across Northern Africa and into the Middle East throughout the 7-8th century. Through further expansion, conversion and migration, Islam is now practiced worldwide. Followers adhere to the Qur’an, the central text of Islam, and follow 5 pillars of faith: 1) There is only one god, God, and Muhammad is his prophet; 2) Ritual prayer 5x/day; 3) Giving alms to the poor; 4) Pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah and 5) Fasting during the month of Ramadhan.

**Where is Islam practiced?**

Islam is practiced worldwide; however it is primarily practiced in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Approximately 49 countries have populations that are majority Muslim. Arabs account for around 20% of all Muslims worldwide. In the Middle East, Turkey and Iran are also large Muslim-majority but non-Arab countries; in Africa, Egypt and Nigeria have the most populous Muslim communities. Approximately 62% of Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia, with over 683 million in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

**Who is a Muslim?**

People who practice the religion of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims can be of any ethnic/cultural origin.

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ESSENTIAL TERMS OR NAMES

The Qur’an: The Qur’an is the central text of Islam. Muslims believe that it was given verbatim to the Prophet Muhammad by God over a period of 23 years. It was recorded by the Prophet Muhammad’s followers after his death. The Qur’an contains the basic beliefs of Islam. It also includes stories of early prophets (including those found in the Bible and Torah), ethical and legal subjects, and historical events. The Qur’an contains rules about right and wrong and general moral lessons.

The sunna: The sunna of the Prophet Muhammad refers to his habits, beliefs and practices, which devout Muslims strive to emulate. It is recorded in hadith (reports, mostly of his sayings). It is foundational to Islamic law following the Qur’an.

Sharia: Sharia is the term most often used to refer to Islamic law, which handles both secular law and as well as personal practices pertaining to Islamic faith (the other term is fiqh). Adhering to sharia is a defining feature of Islam and its study and evolution has produced various sects of Islam. At its core, sharia is considered the law of God and its two primary sources are the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad’s sunna.

Jihad: It means to “struggle in the way of Allah.” It can include inner personal struggles or outward physical struggles. Jihad includes armed struggle against persecution and oppression.