What Teachers Need to Know About Islam

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Introduction

This fastback is designed as a concise introduction to the commonly held teachings of Islam and the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims. The information is presented in a manner that reflects how Muslims themselves view their faith tradition, and its relationship to other traditions. As such, the contents of this fastback emphasize the ideals expressed in Islam and understood by most Muslims.

This approach toward religion, in this case Islam, is consistent with the standards produced by numerous states related to history-social studies, in so far as the tenets of the faith are concerned. Equally important, the contents of this fastback conform to guidelines for teaching about religion that have been expressed by such institutions as the First Amendment Center, which advances a constitutional basis for the coverage of religion in the school curriculum in a manner that neither promotes nor denigrates faith.

This fastback does not provide in-depth information about the lived experience of Muslims, historically or in modern times. It does not address different aspects of Muslim history, art, architecture, literature, and sci-
ence, for example. Nor does it address current events and the social and political issues that often are associated with Islam. For discussion of these subjects, teachers should turn to the Council on Islamic Education’s “Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom,” and the organization’s website at www.cie.org.
Islam as a World Faith

Islam is a major, monotheistic, world religion that emphasizes right living, charity, good neighborliness, humility, justice, and personal accountability. Islam is a word based on the Arabic three-letter root s-l-m. These root letters produce words connoting peace, surrender, completion, commitment, and safety. Islam refers to a state of being that reflects these qualities. A believer in Islam is called a Muslim, "one who willfully surrenders or commits to God."

In a historical sense, Islam is the religion preached by Muhammad ibn Abdullah in Arabia between 610 and 632 C.E. (Common Era), and practiced since then by billions of Muslims all over the planet. At the same time, Muslims consider "islam" to be the religion preached by many religious figures prior to Muhammad, who did not so much start a new religion as re-institute monotheistic teachings that began with Adam and the first human communities. This "primordial" belief in God’s oneness and the act of surrender to God acquired the name "Islam" in the text of Qur’an, the scripture that Muslims believe was divinely revealed to Muhammad during the nearly 23 years of his prophetic mission.
Islam teaches that each human being is given a soul that is naturally inclined toward its Creator, the One God. However, God has granted humans a fundamental quality of free will and agency in order to choose how to live. All other things in Creation — microbes, plants, animals, mountains, rivers, heavenly bodies, and so forth — function according to His will, and therefore are intrinsically “muslim.” Human beings, as unique creations endowed with abilities of reason, judgment, and choice, can choose a God-conscious, righteous path toward divine reward or veer away with the consequence of divine punishment. Islam is practiced as a complete way of life, going beyond belief in specific doctrines and performance of important ritual or devotional acts. Muslims believe that religious teachings bear on all aspects of life, and they strive to keep God at the center of their consciousness, intentions, and actions.

Judeo-Christian-Islamic Tradition

Monotheism is at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The three faiths share many of the same ideas about human origins, ancient religious history, and religious figures, such as Noah, Jonah, and even a common patriarch, Abraham. (Thus the three faiths are sometimes called together “the Abrahamic religions.”) All three faiths emphasize belief in the One God and teach similar “commandments” prohibiting idol worship, dishonesty, theft, infidelity, and violence; and they emphasize the reality of the life to come in the Hereafter. However, important doctrinal differences
exist between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, based on the way in which believers in the three faiths have interpreted the scriptures and the teachings of the prophets and their early followers. Historical, social, and political contexts also have shaped the development of the faith traditions over the centuries.

In a sense, this "one religion of monotheism" has emerged repeatedly in historical time, acquiring formal qualities necessitating such labels as "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam." In concept Islam simply means committing oneself to God, an idea that is hardly foreign to any person of faith. Muslims consider the religion of Islam as taught by Muhammad to be a return to the pure monotheism embodied in the original teachings of such figures as Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Indeed, Muslims honor these figures, as well as such women as Aasiya, the adoptive mother of Moses, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, as true and righteous believers in God. It can be argued that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while distinct religions, constitute a larger collective tradition of monotheism.

The Qur'an has a special term, "People of the Book" (Ahl al-Kitab), for Christians and Jews. Islam encourages positive relations between all people and establishes a special bond between members of the Abrahamic religions. These ideals continue to be refined and cherished through interfaith conversations, cooperation in good works, and simple goodwill.

Historically, early Muslims gained control of territories formerly part of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Muslims created a large empire in which Jews, Chris-
tians, Zoroastrians, and others continued to live and thrive. In the medieval period of human history, religions often provided the primary basis for group identity. Conventions of the time prompted the Muslims to create an administrative structure in which non-Muslim subjects were considered “protected communities” (Ahl al-Dhimma), whose rights of freedom of worship and religious autonomy were to be safeguarded by the Muslim government. They were not expected to participate in the armed forces that protected the Muslim empire. Members of these communities paid a tax called the jizya. Talented and knowledgeable members of these communities often played important roles in the Muslim administration as ministers, translators, and scientists.

**Basic Beliefs**

One God. Islam teaches that God exists as a “unity,” self-sufficient and all-powerful. Muslims believe that God has no partners or associates who share in His divinity or authority. God is considered Lord and Sovereign of Creation, and so devotion and allegiance must be to Him before all else. God is viewed as the source for all knowledge and understanding. The challenge for human beings is to try to understand God’s will and live in accordance with it.

Muslims believe that God is transcendent and has no physical form. God cannot be represented by any material object or idol. The Qur’an states, “No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all
things” (6:103). God reveals His omnipresence in the world through signs, and the entire natural world is considered a sign of God’s existence and guiding presence.

The Qur’an lists 99 divine attributes, or “names,” that describe God. Some commonly known attributes include the Most Merciful, the Most Forgiving, the Most High, the Unique, and the Everlasting. Human beings, like other creations, are unlike God, though they aspire to exhibit the good qualities of divine origin, such as justice, love, and compassion. While God is beyond traditional human perception, the Qur’an states, “He is with you wherever you may be.”

Muslims use the word Allah, but Allah is not a separate deity of Muslims alone. Allah is rendered as “the God” in English and is analogous to the Hebrew/Aramaic Eloh, reflecting the common Semitic linguistic and theological roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews use Allah when speaking of God. The Bible, Gospels, and other Jewish and Christian texts printed in Arabic use the term Allah. Muslims tend to use Allah in their everyday speech, even in languages other than Arabic. However, they also use the term interchangeably with God (English), Dios (Spanish), Dieu (French), Khuda (Persian), and similar words.

The Unseen. Muslims believe that earthly life is but one realm of existence and that God has created other realms that ordinarily are unperceived by human beings. In Arabic, the unseen world is called al-Ghayb.
Creations such as angels and jinn exist in the unseen realm.

Angels are considered heavenly beings, innately good, and charged with various duties by God. Muslims believe that each human being is assigned two angels — one records a person’s good deeds, the other the bad deeds or sins. Tradition holds that these angels will present the records to each individual as he or she stands to account before God on Judgment Day.

A select few angels play prominent roles. Gabriel, familiar to each of the Abrahamic faiths, is known as the “Angel of Revelation.” Islamic tradition holds that he brought God’s revelations to the human prophets time after time. The Qur’an describes Gabriel uniquely as a “Spirit” (ruh) from God because of his role in bridging the divine and human spheres. Muslims believe that he announced to Mary that she would bear the expected Messiah of the Children of Israel. The Angel Michael is responsible for distributing God’s providence, such as rainfall, throughout the world. The Angel Esrail retrieves the soul when a person dies, and the Angel Israfil will sound the trumpet signaling the end of this world at a time known only to God.

Another class of beings created by God is that of the jinn. The Qur’an indicates that, like humans, the jinn have freedom of choice. The jinn have their own communities and societies, albeit in the unseen realm. This realm is believed to overlap with the physical realm of Earth, with the result that at times jinn can interact with the human sphere, for good or ill.

The figure known as Satan, whose name is Iblis in
the Islamic tradition, is considered the powerful and
hauty leader of a malevolent type of jinn, rather
than a fallen angel. In the Qur'an's account of Cre-
tion, when God commanded Iblis to bow before Adam
in recognition of human eminence among Creation,
Iblis refused, believing himself superior, and was cast
out with his followers. Iblis asked God for a respite
from punishment until the Day of Judgment, in order
to prove that he could undermine humankind's claim to
superiority. A recurrent theme in all of God’s revelations
to humanity is that Satan is an avowed enemy of
humankind and works to lead people astray. The
Qur'an repeatedly warns against deviating from the
“straight path” by falling prey to Satan’s temptations.
Muslims believe that Satan has no independent source
of power over humans — only what they cede to him.

After Satan’s departure from God’s presence, Adam
and his mate, Eve (Hawwa in Arabic) dwelt in inno-
cence and bliss in the Garden. The Qur'an describes
how the two were tempted by Satan to eat of the for-
bidden fruit. Muslims believe that both Adam and Eve
disobeyed God and, realizing their error, repented to
God and were forgiven. Then God placed the two on
Earth and multiplied the human race in order to test
humanity and to give humans the opportunity to
demonstrate their highest potential in the face of con-
tinued temptation from Satan and his followers.

Muslims do not believe in “original sin,” the con-
cept that the sin of Adam and Eve is inherited by all
humankind. Muslims believe that each person is per-
sonally accountable to God and will be judged by Him
according to his or her good and bad deeds, independent of those of others. Sincere repentance and prayer are sufficient for receiving God's forgiveness and grace. The Qur'an states, "Those who believe and work righteous deeds, from them shall We blot out all evil, and We shall reward them according to the best of their deeds" (29:7).

*Prophets.* Muslims believe that God has provided guidance to humanity over the ages through the institution of prophethood. Throughout history, God chose thousands of prophets from among all peoples of the Earth, culminating with the last prophet, Muhammad. Though commonly called "prophets," these persons did not prophesy (foretell the future) per se; rather, they called on people to worship God alone, teaching them to live a good life in accordance with God's commandments. The prophets gave warnings of punishment in this world and the next for unjust, immoral people who turn away from God and His teachings, but glad tidings of reward in this world and the next for those who are conscious of God and follow His guidance. Muslims believe that prophets and the scriptures given to some of them are the only sure sources of God's guidance. Muslims hold all of the prophets in high honor, and Muhammad was instructed thus:

Say: *We believe in God and that which is revealed to us, and in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, to Moses and Jesus and the other prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to God we have surrendered ourselves.* (Qur'an, 2:136)
In Islam, the prophets are seen as spiritual brothers one to another; and of the thousands, the Qur’an mentions 25 prophets by name. Muslims consider Jonah, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and many others to be prophets of God.

Abraham is considered a patriarch, or father figure, who established important rituals and laid the foundation for subsequent prophets to preach monotheism. The Ka'bah, a cube-shaped structure in Makkah (Mecca) is believed to have been built by Abraham thousands of years ago as a gathering place for monotheists. Moses is highly regarded for his willingness to confront tyranny and lead the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage. Muslims believe Jesus’ mission as “the Messiah” was to reestablish the foundational principles of God’s religion and to challenge some of the social conventions of the time through his emphasis on mercy, compassion, charity, sacrifice, moderation, and faith in God’s will. Muslims share with Christians the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin mother, and they believe that in the course of his life Jesus was granted the power to perform various miracles as signs to those he admonished and inspired. The Qur’an states:

Lo! The angels said: “O Mary! Behold, God sends thee the glad tiding, through a word from Him, of a son who shall become known as the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, of great honor in this world and in the life to come, and of those who are drawn near to God.” (3:45)

Muslims believe that prophethood ended with Muhammad (570-632 C.E.). Like his ancestor Abra-
ham, he was a *hanif*, someone who rejected idolatry and sought a pure relationship with the One God. Around the age of 40, while meditating in the cave of Hira in the mountains above Makkah (Mecca), Muhammad had a dramatic and life-changing experience. The Angel Gabriel came to Muhammad and instructed him to “Recite.” Muhammad at first protested that he was unable to recite, but Gabriel persisted and revealed to Muhammad the following passage:

*Read, in the name of thy Lord, Who Created —
Created man, out of a clot.*

*Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,
He Who taught the use of the pen —
Taught man that which he knew not. (Qur’an, 96:1-5)*

From that point on, Muhammad was visited repeatedly by Gabriel and began sharing the revelations to a small group of followers. Muhammad’s message soon spread and appealed to the downtrodden and the privileged alike. The Quraysh, leaders of Makkah, became increasingly concerned and hostile to Muhammad. He and his followers migrated north to the city of Yathrib, later named Madinah (Medina). This event is known as the *Hijrah* and has been likened to the American pilgrims’ search for religious freedom and escape from persecution at the hands of the British. In time, the Muslims overcame the opposition and hostility of the pagan tribes and gained control of Arabia.

Islam teaches that Muhammad’s role was to confirm the authentic teachings of previous prophets and to return the practice of faith to a form that emphasized
God-consciousness and right conduct. The Qur’an and Muhammad’s life example (Sunnah) are seen as a completion of God’s guidance to humanity. The scope of Muhammad’s mission is seen to encompass all people, rather than a specific region, group, or community; and Muslims believe there shall be no prophets or scriptures after him. Muhammad died in Madinah in 632 C.E. as he approached the age of 63.

Divine Scriptures. Muslims believe that God revealed scriptures to some of the prophets to communicate His commandments and guidance to humanity. Muslims believe that Scrolls were revealed to Abraham, the Torah was revealed to Moses, the Psalms were revealed to David, the Gospel was revealed to Jesus, and the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad. Collectively, these scriptures reflect the main narrative of the spiritual history of humankind.

The word Qur’an literally means “the reading” or “the recitation.” The Qur’an is believed to be the final revelation from God to humanity, a literal record of the Speech of God to Muhammad in the Arabic language. The Qur’an comprises more than 6,000 individual lines or verses that are organized into 114 chapters. Tradition holds that on receiving a revelation, Muhammad recited the new passages to his growing body of companions. The passages were memorized, written down, and recited in the formal worship that took place five times daily. The growing collection of verses expanded the repertoire of God’s teachings in the Muslim community and became a part of the collective religious practice
and living memory. The Qur’an’s contents were collected into a single bound text based on the existing writings and maintained in a standard sequence that has remained unchanged for more than 1,400 years.

The Qur’an, like the Bible, has been translated from its original language into many other languages. Only the original Arabic form is considered the Qur’an itself, but translations are considered useful renderings or explanations. Qur’an translations exist in English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Urdu, Chinese, Malay, Vietnamese, and many other languages. Muslims the world over, regardless of their native language, learn how to read the Arabic Qur’an, so as to recite the scripture properly, though they might use translations in order to understand the meaning of the text.

Day of Judgment. Islam teaches that human beings are responsible to God for all of their words and deeds. The relatively short span of human life, therefore, constitutes a period of trial. The Qur’an states: “He is the One who created death and life that He may test which of you is best in deeds” (67:2); and “Say: ‘Behold my prayer, and my acts of worship, and my living and my dying are for God, the Sustainer of all the worlds’” (6:162). Such belief gives Muslims a sense of purpose, and every moment and event in life has religious import. A hadith (saying of Muhammad) states: “Actions are judged according to intentions.” Awareness of God helps purify intentions and should deter sin, crime, corruption, immorality, and injustice.

Islam teaches that death is not the end of life, but is
merely a transitory state. After death, life continues in a different form. Muslims believe that a part of God's divine plan is the end of the present world and the resurrection of all humanity in assembly before God. Muslims believe that each person will be judged by God individually and will be either rewarded with permanent bliss in Heaven or punished in Hell as a manifestation of Divine Justice. Islam teaches that God's Mercy precedes His Anger, and that timely and sincere repentance brings God's forgiveness. God alone is the sole judge, and Muslims believe that no human being can judge another in spiritual terms. A hadith states: "A person may appear to be working the deeds of the people of Paradise, while he is among the people of the Fire. And a person may appear to be working the deeds of the people of the Fire, while he is among the people of Paradise."

**Religious Obligations: The Five Pillars**

Muslims believe that life comprises a series of opportunities to worship God. Any act of goodness or behavior conforming to God's guidance is considered an act of worship. Thus helping someone in need, providing charity, attending to the sick, inspiring and teaching others, greeting a stranger, opposing injustice, and even simply giving someone a hug is considered an act of worship that promotes spiritual growth and draws God's favor and reward.

Within this overarching framework of worship, Muslims are expected to perform certain specific devotional acts. These practices are religious obligations commonly
known as the “Five Pillars” of Islam. These practices foster cohesion and brotherhood amongst Muslims, in addition to demonstrating an individual’s commitment to God. Each Muslim is personally accountable to God alone for fulfilling or ignoring these and other obligations, and Muslims exhibit varying degrees of practice.

Declaration of Faith (shahadah). The basic creed statement of Islam is, “I bear witness that there is no deity except God, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Witnessing or testifying belief in this statement is an act of self-identification as a Muslim. It is therefore considered the first pillar of Islam. From a Muslim point of view, belief in Muhammad as God’s prophet connotes belief in prior prophets as well, many of whom, as noted, also are religious figures in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The shahadah is one of several expressions that Muslims recite during formal worship, as well as in their day-to-day lives as they face various challenges and seek guidance and blessings from God.

Worship (salah). Formal worship is a part of an observant Muslim’s daily experience and is therefore considered the second pillar of Islam. Muslims pray five times daily — at dawn, around midday, in the afternoon, after sunset, and at night. This periodic communion with God structures and shapes the rhythm of Muslims’ daily life. Prayer is meant to develop nearness to God, provide emotional and spiritual comfort, and engender the performance of good deeds and the avoidance of sin.
straight rows behind the leader, all facing toward Makkah.

On Fridays, Muslims assemble for congregational prayer at midday, usually at a local masjid (mosque). The Friday congregational prayer marks the passing of one week into another for Muslims, much like the Sabbath in Judaism or Christianity. In Muslim countries, Friday is not a working day for many companies, and Muslims spend the day visiting family and friends. In the United States and other countries, Muslims often use their lunch hour to attend congregational worship at a nearby masjid and return to work afterward. At universities, high schools, and some companies, such as Oracle in the Silicon Valley, Muslims conduct their own congregational prayer on the premises during the lunch hour.

In addition to Friday prayer, Muslims may attend the masjid during any of the other prayer times if they wish to do so. For congregational assemblies, a formal call to prayer, called adhan, is made in Arabic to signal that the prayer time is approaching. In purpose this is akin to the ringing of church bells, but it relies on a melodic human voice instead. Aside from providing a place for communal worship, the masjid often has facilities to serve as a community center for youth activities, lectures, conferences, and holiday celebrations.

Throughout the United States, there is great diversity in masjid architecture. Some structures are converted buildings, others are renovated storefronts, and others are purpose-built as masjids. The exteriors may reflect regional materials or design trends, and they may ex-
The formal worship requires entering a state of prayer lasting several minutes and involves performing several cycles of certain postures and movements. The worshipper stands facing in the direction of Makkah (Mecca) and recites from memory passages from the Qur'an. Then he or she proceeds to bow and prostrate (touch the forehead to the ground) before God, reciting additional religious expressions and phrases in Arabic, such as "Glory be to God, the Most High." The worship concludes in a sitting position during which blessings upon Abraham and Muhammad are recited. After completing the formal worship, Muslims may engage in private supplication, sitting quietly and communicating with God in a very personal manner. Typically, Muslims thank God for His blessings and pray for forgiveness, good health, prosperity, happiness, assistance in times of distress, or the fulfillment of some wish. This private and personal prayer may be expressed in any language, and even outside the formal worship times.

Formal worship may be performed anywhere, indoors or outdoors, so long as the area is clean and there are no distractions. The morning and evening prayers often are performed at home with one's family. On most days, Muslims typically take a break from work or other activities when the time for prayer has arrived and pray alone or in small groups. When praying together in a group, one of the men is chosen to lead the others in worship (in all-female groups, one of the women leads the others). The leader of group prayer, called an imam, stands in front of the others, who form
hibit some characteristic features, such as minarets, archways, Arabic calligraphy, crescents, and the color green. Typically, the worship area is a carpeted open space without any chairs or pews, so as to accommodate the various positions of prayer. A niche or alcove in one wall indicates the direction of Makkah, and some sort of platform or small stairway near it provides a place from which the imam can address congregants.

Fasting (sawm). Muslims are encouraged to undertake fasts as a spiritual discipline that complements prayer as a means of demonstrating commitment to God in the face of temptation and difficulty. Fasting is described as the third pillar of Islam, and Muslims recognize its importance in other religious traditions as well. The Qur’an states: “O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you, as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may learn self-restraint” (2:183).

Muslims fast throughout the year on days of their choosing. In the Islamic tradition, fasting takes the form of a daylong abstention from all food and drink, conjugal relations, and harmful thoughts, urges, and behaviors. The fast begins just before dawn and is completed at sunset. Muslims believe fasting teaches self-restraint, patience, endurance, and obedience to God. Moreover, it reminds many Muslims to count their blessings, as they experience in small part the plight of others whose circumstances may not provide access to the food, drink, and comforts that most take for granted. Fasting helps Muslims nurture their relationship with God and with their fellow human beings. Muslims may also fast to atone for sins.
Each year during Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar, the entire ummah (worldwide community of Muslims) engages in fasting together. Ramadan is considered a sacred month because during this month in 610 C.E. the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad. During Ramadan, Muslim families arise well before dawn to have a nourishing meal called suhoor, replete with eggs, toast, pancakes, tea, juice, cereal, and a variety of traditional dishes. They then perform the pre-dawn worship and read some passages of the Qur'an before returning to sleep or preparing for the day ahead. During the day, Muslims grapple with the occasional hunger pangs and bouts of thirst and reflect on the purpose of fasting. When sunset arrives, Muslims break the fast by having the iftar meal. In keeping with Muhammad’s tradition, many Muslims break the fast with dates and sweetened milk, along with fruits, soup, or other appetizers. They then perform the evening worship, and afterward have dinner. During Ramadan, buoyed by feelings of joy and affection, Muslims make an extra effort to invite relatives and friends to share in the iftar.

Each night during Ramadan, special additional congregational prayers are offered at the masjid. In this extended worship, about one-thirtieth of the Qur’an is recited nightly, with the result that in the course of the whole month (about 30 nights), the entire Qur’an is recited. This practice provides Muslims with an opportunity to experience the melodic recitation of the complete scripture at least once a year.

Individuals with certain medical conditions, the
very elderly, those who are temporarily sick or injured, and those making a long journey are exempt from fasting. Pregnant or nursing women may choose whether to fast or not. Those who are able to fast at a later time are to make up the missed days, or they may arrange for the feeding of two persons for each day of fasting missed.

Purification of Wealth (zakah). The purification of spirit and body accomplished through prayer and fasting is accompanied, in the fourth pillar of Islam, by purification of one's worldly possessions. Each year, Muslims assess the value of their assets and accumulated wealth and savings; and they give a small percentage (about 2.5%) of the value to others who are in need. This practice promotes circulation of wealth within the community, rather than hoarding, and provides assistance that is meant to eliminate extreme poverty and destitution in society. It is also a means for those who have been blessed with God's bounty to share their good fortune with others, thereby earning further reward from God. The paying of zakah reminds Muslims that their possessions are in reality a trust and a test from God, to be used not only for personal benefit, but for the benefit of others as well.

Muslims may distribute the zakah money to any worthy recipient of their choosing and are not required to pay it to a central authority for distribution. However, in some Muslim countries, governmental agencies do provide such a service. Alternatively, Muslims may choose to donate their zakah amount to a
nonprofit organization that engages in humanitarian relief or educational activities. Like other devotional acts in Islam, the fulfillment of this obligation is entirely a matter of each Muslim's conscience.

_Pilgrimage to Makkah (Hajj)._ Making a pilgrimage, or religious journey, is common to many religious traditions. In Islam, the pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca), known as the Hajj, is a major life experience and is considered the fifth pillar of faith. Muslims desire to perform the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime and may plan for years in anticipation of fulfilling this journey. Each year during the Islamic lunar month of Dhu al-Hijjah, the opportunity to make the Hajj arrives. During the first ten days of the month, three to four million Muslims from around the world gather in Makkah to fulfill the rites of the pilgrimage, creating the largest annual international gathering on Earth.

Those who choose to make the journey enter a special state of consecration and don the simple attire of a pilgrim: for men, seamless white pieces of cloth wrapped around the body, and for women, simple white or softly colored tunics. The attire symbolizes the believer's effort to leave behind the material world for the sake of God, and it helps remind Muslims that all people are equal in the eyes of God, no matter their earthly status. In this state of consecration, Muslims concentrate on their relationship with God, seeking His forgiveness and coming to terms with human frailty and dependence on God's mercy and blessings, realizations that are sometimes obscured by human-
kind’s seeming progress and achievements over the centuries. Muslims also try to refrain from negative thoughts and focus on building bonds of friendship and community with other Muslims from around the world.

The pilgrims walk around the Ka’bah, a cube-shaped building considered the House of God, and they perform other rites that commemorate the trials and sacrifices of Abraham, his wife Hajar, and their son, Ishmael. The pilgrimage, as a physical and spiritual practice, also is an exercise in human self-discovery. Muslims believe that God forgives the past sins of those who complete the Hajj with sincerity and repentance. In various Muslim cultures, people who have fulfilled the pilgrimage are given respect and honored with such titles as “Al-Hajj” or “Hajji” (one who has completed the Hajj). Those who are unable to perform the Hajj for financial, health, or other legitimate reasons can perform alternative acts of piety and worship or sponsor the Hajj of another person.

At other times of the year, Muslims may choose to visit Makkah and perform some of the rites of pilgrimage. This is known as the lesser pilgrimage. Muslims typically visit the city of Madinah (Medina) as well, where the Prophet’s Masjid (mosque) is located. Muhammad was buried in a room adjacent to the masjid in 632 C.E., and his masjid was expanded and rebuilt over the centuries. Many Muslims, out of love for Muhammad and feelings of piety, desire to worship in his masjid and to say prayers wishing God’s peace and blessings on Muhammad. Travelers from
afar also visit the Masjid al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, completing a visit to Islam’s three holy sites. Shi’i Muslims also make pilgrimages to visit the masjids in Karbala and Najaf, where several important religious leaders are buried.
Muslim Societies and Cultures

Virtually the entire global spectrum of races, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures finds representation in the ummah (the worldwide Muslim community). Islam teaches that there should be no privileging of any individual or group based on ancestry, gender, race, nationality, color, economic condition, social status, or other criteria. Historically, this openness facilitated the adoption of Islam by people from many parts of the world outside of Arabia, where Islam was first practiced.

From the mid-7th century onward, Muslims acquired political control of North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of western and central Asia. This expansion of Muslim territory is a process that is distinct and separate from the spread of Islam as a religion. Systematic, forced conversion to Islam is a historical myth, and non-Muslims’ right to practice their faiths was generally safeguarded. The Qur’an states: “There is no compulsion in religion...” (2:256). Over several centuries, local groups and populations slowly adopted
the language, culture, and religion of the Muslims and participated in the creation of a new civilization. Merchants and traders helped spread Islam in their journeys across the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean and across such frontiers as the Sahara Desert. Later empires, such as those of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, expanded Muslim territories in Eastern Europe, Asia, and India. It is likely that some Muslims came to the Americas as artisans and farmers in the “Age of Exploration.” Others were brought as slaves from Africa to work on plantations. In the modern era, Muslims from many countries have migrated and traveled across the globe, seeking their niche in the wide world. Muslim communities now exist in virtually every major city and in most countries of the world.

Population statistics vary from source to source, but some estimates suggest that the worldwide Muslim population exceeds 1.2 billion. In other words, about one in five human beings on the planet is a Muslim. Islam is the religion of diverse peoples living in North and South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Arabs constitute about 15% to 18% of all Muslims. The Muslims of South Asia (living in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) constitute about 25% of all Muslims, while those of Africa constitute about 20% of the total. There is a significant Muslim minority in certain provinces of China. The country with the largest population of Muslims (more than 170 million) is Indonesia, an island nation in Southeast Asia. In Europe, Muslims are sizeable and grow-
ing minorities. Muslims have lived for centuries in central and Eastern Europe in such countries as Bosnia and Albania, where the Ottoman Empire once held sway. In Western Europe, most of the Muslims are immigrants from countries formerly colonized by the European nations. Estimates suggest that there are more than two million Muslims in England, Germany, and France (10% of the population), respectively.

**Diversity of Islamic Practice**

Space does not permit a thorough review of Muslim societies and cultures, but some of the more prominent are as follows:

*Sunni and Shi'i Muslims.* At the time of Prophet Muhammad, the terms *Sunni* and *Shi'i* did not exist. They developed later in Muslim history. The terms reflect the two major branches of the Muslim community that originated in the decades following Muhammad's death amid disagreements about who should lead the community as his successor. A gathering of leading Muslims had selected Abu Bakr to succeed Muhammad as his *khalifah* (caliph), but other Muslims felt that Ali, son-in-law of Muhammad and representative of his household, should become the community's leader. Abu Bakr and his followers over the centuries became associated with certain formulations of Islamic law (Shari'ah) and in time this majority view came to be called Sunni, based on the idea that their teachings about religious belief, law, and practice best reflected the *Sunnah* (life example) of Muhammad. The Shi'is
maintain that legitimate rule belonged only to the Imams — Ali and certain of his descendants.

Sufism. The effort to refine and improve one's inner self and to live outwardly in a way that transcends material or physical concerns is at the heart of religion. In Islam, those who choose to adopt a worldview and a lifestyle that facilitates such a spiritual journey are often called Sufis (from the attire made of suf, or wool, that such individuals wore). The term "Sufism" refers to the historical growth of this type of religious outlook in Muslim societies. Over the centuries, the practice and teachings of individual Sufis became institutionalized in sufi orders that welcomed men and women to share in a variety of ritual practices known as dhikr (remembrance of God). Sufism is not a "sect" of Islam but a way of practicing Islamic teachings that emphasizes personal spiritual growth above the explicit obligations of religion. Some famous Sufis have become saintly figures in various Muslim lands. There is no formal "beatification" of saints as in Catholicism; these figures are revered locally and their tombs become places of congregation and prayer in the belief that worshipping God in their presence accrues more blessings.

Islam in America

There is some evidence that Muslim expeditions reached the shores of the Americas before the European Age of Exploration. In the 1500s some Muslims may have served as crewmembers on various Spanish and Portuguese sailing vessels, settling in various places in the Americas. Muslim artisans and architects from
Spain helped produce the Spanish colonial style in Mexico and Latin America, which influenced design in the American Southwest. While some Muslims came by choice across the Atlantic, others came in chains. Some scholarship suggests that about 20% of the African slaves brought to the Americas were Muslims.

Since the late 19th century, Muslims have been among the many groups that have immigrated to the United States, often fleeing war, famine, or political turmoil. The 1965 Immigration Act made America the beneficiary of numerous educated and talented peoples from around the world. In their search for a better life in America, many immigrant Muslims in turn have contributed to the prosperity, leadership, and rich cultural fabric of our country. Native-born converts to Islam and their descendants, along with the native-born children of immigrants, make up the majority of American Muslims today.

American Muslims, especially those born and raised in the United States, are in many ways culturally distinct from Muslims living in other societies. 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 environment not found anywhere else in the world. The Muslim population in the United States is estimated to be between six million and seven million. Native-born African Americans form the largest group among American Muslims, some 25% to 30% of the total. Many of these Muslims embraced Islam in the last three to five decades, while some have much longer
family affiliations with Islam. Other native-born converts to Islam include Americans of European, Latino, and Native American backgrounds, some 5% to 10% of the American Muslim community. Since the 1950s, Muslim immigrants have come to the United States from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe; they and their children and grandchildren compose another sizeable segment of the American Muslim community.

Muslims live in every state. The 10 states with the largest Muslim populations, in order, are California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Maryland. Muslims in these 10 states constitute about 3.5 million (roughly 50%) of the American Muslim population. The number of houses of worship also serves as a measure of the growth of the Muslim community in the United States. In 1930, there were 19 masjids (mosques) in America. By 1960 there were more than 230; by 1980 more than 600; and by 2003 more than 1,300 masjids. There are also more than 400 Muslim schools, several colleges, more than 250,000 Muslim-owned businesses, and several hundred publications, journals, and weekly newspapers.
Islamic Concepts

Being aware of the concepts that Muslims share can help educators understand the way they live their lives. An educator who is acquainted with the basic concepts of Islam will have a better understanding of his or her Muslim students.

Religious Scholarship

When Muhammad died, his companions were faced with the challenge of safeguarding the early Muslim community and propagating Islam to others who, from their perspective, would benefit from the teachings. The companions who succeeded Muhammad were called *khalifahs* (caliphs); and while they acquired the responsibility of overseeing the political and economic affairs of the community, no one could replace the religious function of the Prophet.

Throughout Muslim history, those who have expressed interest in religious knowledge and wished to help convey religious teachings became scholars in various disciplines. These individuals are not vested with any particular authority or ordained by any formal or official body of decision-makers. Muslim scholars
are functionaries of various sorts, but not priests charged with facilitating or mediating the fulfillment of other Muslims’ religious obligations or their relationship with God. While the term “clergy” has become commonplace to describe leaders of any faith tradition, it is technically not accurate as a term to describe Muslim religious leaders as there is no single, formal, institutional body to which scholars belong or whose interpretations scholars must accept. Scholars may acquire their knowledge and training at various universities and institutions that provide the relevant curriculum, or they may study independently or with a private teacher.

Some scholars are given titles that indicate their area of expertise. The term *alim* (pl. *ulama*) is a general title for anyone engaged in deep study of religious matters who has demonstrated competence in interpreting various sources. A *faqih* (fem. *faqiha*) is one qualified to make interpretations and legal judgments that shape Islamic law. A *hafiz* (fem. *hafiza*) is one who has memorized the entire Qur’an, while a *qari* specializes in reciting the Qur’an in a formal melodic manner. The term *shaykh* (fem. *shaykha*) is an honorific title applied to respected elders or leaders, and in Sufism it is the title for someone accepted as a spiritual master or guide for other believers. The term *imam* among Sunni Muslims designates a prayer leader, teacher, or respected religious functionary, while Shi’i Muslims use the term in reference to Ali and a number of his descendants who are considered the rightful historical leaders of the community. Within the Shi’i tradition, the term
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Ayatollah (literally “sign of God”) is an honorific title for a select few learned and pious religious authorities.

**Islamic Law (Shari’ah)**

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, being religions based on divine revelation, each has a tradition of rulings and judgments designed to provide believers with a framework for proper belief and practice and the protection of mutual rights. In each, the accumulated concepts and rulings form a body of sacred law believed to represent God’s will for humanity. Such a corpus of law is reflected in the form of the Talmud in Judaism, Canon Law in Catholic Christianity, and the Shari’ah in Islam. The advent of the modern age, with the introduction of common law and secular ideas, has created a scenario in which religious teachings and laws exist in complex interplay with secular systems of laws.

The term *Shari’ah* is an Arabic word that means “the path.” The Shari’ah delineates which practices or actions are obligatory or permissible (*halal*), which are recommended, which are a matter of personal choice, which are discouraged, and which are forbidden or sinful (*haram*). The Shari’ah also provides a framework to distinguish authentic religious teachings from cultural practices or popular mores in a given society.

The Shari’ah contains rulings stating that Muslims are to abide by the law of the land wherever they may reside, whether they are in the majority or minority. Naturally, in a Muslim majority country, the legal system tends to be more accommodating of Muslim conventions and practices. In other countries, such as England
or Canada, Muslims have set up “parliaments” to represent the Muslim communities’ interests and to interface with the common national government within an overarching secular framework. In the United States, some Muslim conventions are accommodated by various legal mechanisms, based on provisions of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment.

Marriage and Family

In Islam, the family is considered the cornerstone of society, and marriage is highly encouraged. A well-known hadith states that “marriage fulfills half of the Islamic way of life.” Marriage should be a partnership based on mutual respect, trust, and affection and is considered the only proper context for sexual relations between a man and woman. Dating is not considered appropriate by observant Muslims, because individuals often become involved in emotional, physical, and sexual relationships prior to marriage. Adultery is considered a grave sin in Islam. Islamic law (Shari’ah) requires that the decision to marry must be mutual between a man and woman and does not condone the compelling of individuals to marry against their will. Divorce is permitted in Islam, though it is highly discouraged. It is to be a last resort after all attempts at reconciliation have been made. Both men and women can seek divorce in Islam, and men cannot simply pronounce a woman instantly divorced, as is sometimes believed.

The Qur’an does provide for the possibility of a man having more than one wife (restricted to four), but only under exceptional circumstances. Historically, the
Qur’an sought to reduce the widespread practice of unbridled polygamy and concubinage that existed among the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. The restriction introduced by the Qur’an was revolutionary for its time, and polygamy is not a normative teaching in Islam.

**Dealing with Death**

Muslims believe that life and death are completely in God’s hands, and that God appoints a time for each person to pass from this existence into the next. Muslims are conscious of human mortality and contemplate the relationship between actions in this world and one’s fate in the Afterlife. When a Muslim dies, his or her body is washed and wrapped in plain white cloth. A funeral procession carries the body to a local cemetery, and the person is buried after a funerary prayer is made to ask God to forgive the deceased. Burial, with the absorption of the physical body into the earth, is a return to the most elemental state. Cremation, artificial preservation of the body, internment in above-ground mausoleums, or other methods of handling the body are not practiced in Islam.

**Jihad**

Jihad is an important concept in Islam. The word in Arabic literally means “to strive,” “to struggle,” or “to exert oneself.” In the context of Islam, it is to do so for the sake of God. This striving is seen as part of humankind’s responsibility upon the Earth. Muslims believe God has vested human beings as His agents and
stewards and that they must act, or struggle, to maintain justice and freedom, create goodness in the world, and thwart those who seek to enslave and oppress others. Jihad can take many forms. Muhammad is reported to have said after a battle against the pagan Quraysh, "We are returning from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad — jihad against the self." Thus jihad is not in itself a word for warfare, though it may apply to that context. Islamic law stipulates that warfare is justified only in defense and for the preservation of life, liberty, property, and freedom of religion. Unsanctioned warfare or violence against innocents is considered hirabah (wanton mayhem), not jihad. Jihad is a highly nuanced concept. Limiting its meaning to contemporary geopolitical events or usages (such as "holy war") undermines its significance and positive nature.

Rites of Passage

For those born into Muslim families, induction into the faith is simultaneous with birth — the call to prayer (adhan) is whispered into the right ear of newborn babies. After a few days, a widely practiced tradition is the aqiqah, the shaving off of the newborn baby’s hair to signify the start of a new phase of life outside the womb. A celebration and prayers for the health and happiness of the baby accompany this rite. Male children, nowadays soon after birth, are circumcised. This practice, as in Judaism, marks the male as a member of Abraham’s “tribe” and an inheritor of his covenant with God. Children are raised with the teachings of Islam, modeled by their parents and relatives.
Boys and girls are tutored in the reading and recitation of the Qur'an, and they memorize some chapters of the Qur'an for use in prayer. Over a period of months, schoolchildren complete the reading of the entire text in Arabic, which is considered an important accomplishment. Parents in some cultures recognize this achievement by hosting a dinner at which the child demonstrates his or her recitation skills. This is similar to the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah in Judaism. This celebration, while a common practice, is not a formal rite of passage.

The Islamic Calendar

Understanding significant dates for Muslims will help schools accommodate their Muslim students. The migration of Muhammad from Makkah (Mecca) to Madinah (Medina) in 622 C.E., known as the Hijrah, marks the starting point of the Islamic calendar. The Hijri lunar year of about 355 days comprises 12 lunar months (29-30 days in length) that have Arabic names. The Hijri calendar indicates the month of Ramadan, the dates of the Muslim holidays and other events, and the time for the performance of the annual Hajj. Muslims correlate the dates of the Hijri calendar to dates in the common calendar that is fixed to 365 days. For example, the start of Ramadan correlated to October 27 in 2003 and October 16 in 2004. Thus Islamic events do not acquire specific seasonal connotations, and Muslims around the world experience these events under varying climatic conditions.

There are two major annual holidays shared by all
Muslims. After the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate the *Eid al-Fitr*, the “feast of breaking the fast.” The second holiday marks the conclusion of the Hajj and is called *Eid al-Adha*, the “feast of sacrifice,” honoring the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son for God’s sake. On the morning of each Eid, Muslims gather to worship together in a large assembly. Throughout the next few days, Muslims visit with one another and share special meals and sweets. Children often are given new clothes, toys, spending money, and other gifts. Food, clothing, and money are donated to help those in need.

**Dietary Guidelines**

It is important for educators to be aware of the dietary guidelines of their Muslim students. Like many other religions, a part of the Muslim lifestyle is the proper diet. As a general principle, the Qur’an advises eating the good things of the Earth, classified as *halal* (lawful). These include most meats, seafood, fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, and other edibles. Very few items are expressly forbidden, namely swine, blood, and carrion meat. The Qur’an also forbids eating meat slaughtered in the name of deities other than the One God. These things are considered *haram* (unlawful).

Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcoholic beverages. The Qur’an cautions that the consumption of alcohol leads to vices and jeopardizes the individual, family, and society. Likewise, narcotics, such as cocaine, heroine, hashish, and marijuana, are prohibited as well. Caffeine and other mild stimulants are not considered
harmful; and therefore chocolate, coffee, tea, and soft drinks are permissible. Some scholars consider the smoking of tobacco to be *haram*, because of its detrimental effects on a person’s health. In all cases where addiction is likely, the substance is considered harmful both physically and spiritually.

**Modesty**

Another aspect of the Muslim lifestyle is modesty. This includes the way Muslim students dress and their behavior. Modesty and humility are considered virtues in Islam. Muslims are to cultivate these qualities inwardly and to reflect them in their outward behavior and dress. One expression of modesty exhibited by Muslims is the “lowering of the gaze” when interacting with a member of the opposite sex, rather than staring or maintaining prolonged eye contact. Modesty also means avoiding aggressive behavior and refraining from seeking exclusive credit for beneficial actions or positive developments.

Muslims consider modesty of dress to be very important and seek ways to accommodate popular or traditional styles of dress to religious teachings. The styles of dress vary from culture to culture, but the clothes are meant to cover and adorn the body in a dignified manner, not to display social status or attract the opposite sex. Clothing worn by Muslim men and women is typically loose fitting and not sheer or transparent. In addition, many Muslim women cover their hair as a reflection of personal piety and identity. The headscarf worn by Muslim women is called the *hijab,*
but the word also refers to overall modest appearance. Islamic law does not specify that women should veil the face, though this is done in some Muslim cultures.
Accommodation of Muslim Students

The religious obligations in Islam become obligatory on Muslims starting at the age of puberty. Most accommodation requests to educators will come from high school students. All students of various faith traditions should be provided reasonable religious accommodation. This section lists the type of accommodations that are recommended for Muslim students at school.

Attire

The U.S. Department of Education clarified in 1998 that “schools may not single out religious attire in general, or attire of a particular religion, for prohibition or regulation.” In the United States, our Constitution’s religious liberty clause provides everyone the freedom to practice their faith as they understand it. Muslim students generally wear modest, loose-fitting attire. Many young women choose to wear the headscarf (hijab), while others do not. Some young men, as an emulation of Muhammad, choose to wear a beard and may choose to wear a cap of some sort.
Mixing of the Sexes

It is customary for Muslims to participate in same-sex group activities, especially after the age of puberty. Muslim students typically participate fully in all educational activities. They might establish friendships with members of the opposite sex, though they often feel more comfortable with peers of the same sex. Physical education classes in which males and females are separated into groups usually are preferred. Some Muslim students may not be comfortable with theatrical performances, while others will embrace them. Muslim students may be disinclined to participate in some school functions or social activities, such as dances and cheerleading squads.

Worship

The midday prayer is one of the five obligatory prayers that Muslims perform daily. The prayer can be fulfilled and typically can be accommodated during the lunch hour or early afternoon recess. School officials and teachers can provide Muslim students a clean and quiet place to perform the prayers. Such accommodation must not be confused with the issue of “school prayer” (a school requirement to pray in a prescribed manner).

Muslim students may wish to attend Friday midday congregational prayers at a local masjid (mosque). This request may be accommodated and the student’s class schedule adjusted if possible to allow sufficient time to go to the mosque and return to campus. Alter-
natively, as in the case of the daily midday prayer, Muslim students on campus may be provided a temporary space each week to congregate for worship.

**Dietary Practices and Fasting**

Muslim students typically evaluate school lunch menus to decide what to eat. If a special classroom function, party, sports team celebration, or other event involves food, Muslim students' dietary practices should be taken into consideration, along with those of other students. The most important consideration is that Muslims do not eat pork or anything that contains a pork product. Some Muslims also avoid foods containing animal or, specifically, beef fat. Muslims often opt for vegetarian dishes and baked goods made with vegetable shortening. Muslim students will avoid cakes and desserts made with alcohol.

During Ramadan, some students will be fasting during the daylight hours. Teachers can provide Muslim students a place to gather and rest during the lunch break. Physical education teachers can give alternative assignments to students during the month, so that they are not expected to engage in rigorous physical exertion that may dehydrate them.

**Holidays**

One or both of the two Eid holidays may fall on a school day. Muslim students may take the day off, unless they choose to attend class later in the day after the morning prayer and celebration. Teachers should avoid scheduling exams on these days or provide their Muslim students with a make-up exam day.
Conclusion

This fastback provides an opportunity for educators to learn more about some of the students represented in their diverse classrooms. At the same time teachers can use the information in this resource when they teach classes on world religions, including Islam. Most of all, being aware and knowledgeable of the religious beliefs and lifestyles of students is necessary to respect the religious freedoms of students.
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