

ISLAM IN BRIEF

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will review background information on Islam.
- Students will recognize perspective and point of view in encyclopedia articles.
- Students will discuss authorship, credibility, bias, and objectivity.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

Allah	Mecca	Muhammad	Shari'ah
five pillars of Islam	monotheistic	Quran	Sunna
imam	mosque	Ramadhan	zakat
Islam	Muslim		

MEDIUM

Handouts with excerpts from articles from the Web sites Islam.com and Encyclopedia Britannica Online



MATERIALS NEEDED

- *Student Handout* (pg. 4-5) – one per student
- *Student Worksheet* (pg. 6) – one per student
- *Teacher Answer Sheet* (pg. 7)

TIME

40 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Decide if you want this to be an individual or group activity.
2. Present the *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2) to the class.
3. Distribute the *Student Handout* with the text from the Web sites and the *Student Worksheet* to each student.
4. Give students time to complete the worksheet.
5. Lead a discussion using the *Teacher Answer Sheet* as a guide.
6. Lead a discussion about the selection of resources when doing research using *Further Questions* (pg. 3) and *Additional Information* (pg. 3).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Most of us assume that an encyclopedia is a systematic and authoritative account on all subjects, written by experts who will tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In reality, an encyclopedia is simply a collection of information about various topics, written and edited by people who have their own ideas about what is important to include and what can be left out. An encyclopedia article cannot ever include all perspectives about a particular subject. There is just too much information and too many ways to interpret information for any one source to contain it all. For this reason, it is important to look at an encyclopedia as a starting place for further research. Two sources from different points of view are better than one, and three sources are better than two. Knowing what questions to ask about the perspective and bias of the author of an encyclopedia article is every bit as important as locating bias on the editorial page of the newspaper or in a blog.

This lesson will introduce some very basic information about Islam via two different on-line sources. One of the articles comes from the Encyclopedia Britannica, a well-known U.S.-based encyclopedia publisher. The Encyclopedia Britannica Online states: "We're proud to be one of the world's most trusted sources of information on every topic imaginable... Find accurate results on virtually any topic" ("About Us"). The other article is from the Web site Islam.com, which calls itself "...a humble effort to serve the spiritual, commercial, informational, communication, cultural, educational, economic, political and social needs of the worldwide Islamic community in the 21st century" ("Mission and Vision"). You will be asked to read both short excerpts, decide which is from the Encyclopedia Britannica Online and which from Islam.com and provide evidence to support your conclusion.

Most of the vocabulary for this lesson will be explained in the articles themselves. A monotheistic religion has the belief that there is only one God. Zakat, or zakah, is charitable giving of offerings to the needy, which is required as one of the five pillars of Islam.

- **Distribute** the *Student Handout* and *Student Worksheet* and instruct students to work individually or in pairs.
- **Give** students time to complete the worksheet.
- **Discuss** the answers using the *Teacher Answer Sheet* as a guide.
- **Conclude** with *Further Questions* and *Additional Information* about the selection of resources when doing research.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using only encyclopedias for your research?

Can you think of other reference sources like encyclopedias that people might consider unbiased or completely credible (e.g., dictionaries or atlases)? What biases might these sources contain?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates write in their introduction to The Dictionary of Global Culture: “An essential starting point for a more open and equal participation by Westerners in (the) emerging global civilization is an appreciation of some of the central cultural ideas and accomplishments of others, whose traditions we in the West are only beginning to learn...and to learn to respect” (xiv). For Western students of Islam, such an appreciation is a daunting task due to the vast nature of what is to be appreciated. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam contains 359 pages of definitions relating to Islam. Its predecessor, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, includes four volumes and thousands of pages of entries by more than 450 Muslim and non-Muslim scholars (Esposito ix).

As Malise Ruthven points out in the preface to Islam: A Very Short Introduction—

To write a ‘Very Short Introduction’ to the religion of approximately one-fifth of the human family has been a daunting assignment. Brevity depends on selection, and selection on exclusion. Given the vast range of human societies contained under the label ‘Islamic,’ any process of selection or exclusion must also entail distortion. In choosing to focus on certain topics at the expense of others, I am conscious of following my own instincts and prejudices (v).

In Strategies and Structures for Presenting World History Susan Douglass recommends the following primary questions when it comes to evaluating the authenticity of sources on Islamic belief and practice: “1) What are the authoritative sources for Islamic beliefs and practices? 2) What is the nature of this source? What is its relation to the others? 3) How was this source transmitted from its origin to Muslims today? and 4) How has this source affected doctrine and practice among Muslims?” (109)

REFERENCES

Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Henry Louis Gates. The Dictionary of Global Culture. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Douglass, Susan. Strategies and Structures for Presenting World History. Beltsville: Amana, 1994.

Encyclopedia Britannica Online. “About Us.” <<http://corporate.britannica.com/about/>>

---. “Islam.” <<http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article?tocId=9368246&query=islam&ct=>>>

Esposito, John, ed. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam. New York: Oxford, 2003.

Islam.com. “Introduction to Islam.” <<http://www.islam.com/introislam.htm>>

---“Mission and Vision.” <<http://www.islam.com/Mission.htm>>

Ruthven, Malise. Islam: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford, 1997.

Islam Article 1

The literal meaning of Islam is peace; surrender of one's will i.e. losing oneself for the sake of God and surrendering one's own pleasure for the pleasure of God. The message of Islam was revealed to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings on him) 1,400 years ago. It was revealed through angel Gabriel (on whom be peace) and was thus preserved in the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran carries a Divine guarantee of safeguard from interpolation and it claims that it combines the best features of the earlier scriptures.

The prime message of Islam is the Unity of God, that the Creator of the world is One and He alone is worthy of worship and that Muhammad (peace and blessings on him) is His Messenger and Servant. The follower of this belief is thus a Muslim - a Muslim's other beliefs are: God's angels, previously revealed Books of God, all the prophets, from Adam to Jesus (peace be on them both), the Day of Judgement and indeed the Decree of God. A Muslim has five main duties to perform, namely; bearing witness to the Unity of God and Muhammad (peace and blessings on him) as His Messenger, observing the prescribed prayer, payment of Zakat, keeping the fasts of Ramadhan and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Islam believes that each person is born pure. The Holy Quran tells us that God has given human beings a choice between good and evil and to seek God's pleasure through faith, prayer and charity. Islam believes that God created mankind in His image and by imbuing the attributes of God on a human level mankind can attain His nearness. Islam's main message is to worship God and to treat all God's creation with kindness and compassion. Rights of parents in old age, orphans and the needy are clearly stated. Women's rights were safeguarded 1,400 years ago when the rest of the world was in total darkness about emancipation. Islamic teachings encompass every imaginable situation and its rules and principles are truly universal and have stood the test of time.

In Islam virtue does not connote forsaking the bounties of nature that are lawful. On the contrary one is encouraged to lead a healthy, active life with the qualities of kindness, chastity, honesty, mercy, courage, patience and politeness. In short, Islam has a perfect and complete code for the guidance of individuals and communities alike. As the entire message of Islam is derived from the Holy Quran and indeed the Sunnah and Hadith (the traditions and practices of the Holy Prophet, peace and blessings on him) it is immutable in the face of change in time and place. It may appear rigid to the casual eye, in actual fact it is most certainly an adaptable way of life regardless of human changes.

Islam teaches that the path to spiritual development is open to all. Any individual who searches the One Creator can seek nearness to God through sincere and earnest worship; it is central to establishing a relationship with the Almighty. This positive message for humanity fills hearts with hope and courage.

At present there are 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide and they form the majority in more than 50 countries of the world. Today Islam is the fastest growing faith in the world - its beautiful message is reaching millions in the far corner of the earth.

Islam Article 2

Major world religion founded by Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century AD. The Arabic word *islam* means “submission”—specifically, submission to the will of the one God, called Allah in Arabic. Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion, and its adherents, called Muslims, regard the Prophet Muhammad as the last and most perfect of God's messengers, who include Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others. The sacred scripture of Islam is the Qur'an (sic), which contains God's revelations to Muhammad. The sayings and deeds of the Prophet recounted in the sunna are also an important source of belief and practice in Islam. The religious obligations of all Muslims are summed up in the Five Pillars of Islam, which include belief in God and his Prophet and obligations of prayer, charity, pilgrimage, and fasting. The fundamental concept in Islam is the Shari'ah, or Law, which embraces the total way of life commanded by God. Observant Muslims pray five times a day and join in community worship on Fridays at the mosque, where worship is led by an imam. Every believer is required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city, at least once in a lifetime, barring poverty or physical incapacity. The month of Ramadan is set aside for fasting. Alcohol and pork are always forbidden, as are gambling, usury, fraud, slander, and the making of images. In addition to celebrating the breaking of the fast of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate Muhammad's birthday (*see mawlid*) and his ascension into heaven (*see mi'raj*). The 'Id al-Adha festival inaugurates the season of pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims are enjoined to defend Islam against unbelievers through jihad. Divisions occurred early in Islam, brought about by disputes over the succession to the caliphate (*see caliph*). About 90% of Muslims belong to the Sunnite branch. The Shi'ites (sic) broke away in the 7th century and later gave rise to other sects, including the Isma'ilis. Another significant element in Islam is the mysticism known as Sufism. Since the 19th century the concept of the Islamic community has inspired Muslim peoples to cast off Western colonial rule, and in the late 20th century fundamentalist movements (*see Islamic fundamentalism*) threatened or toppled a number of secular Middle Eastern governments. In the early 21st century, there were more than 1.2 billion Muslims in the world.

NAME

DATE

DIRECTIONS

Answer the questions below. Include specific evidence from the documents to back up your answers.

1. Which article is from Islam.com and which is from Encyclopedia Britannica Online? What is your evidence?

2. What is similar about the articles?

3. What is different about the articles?

4. Is one source more trustworthy or credible than the other? Why?

5. Why is it important to know the author of a Web site?

6. How does one determine the sponsor of a Web site?

1. Which article is from islam.com and which is from Encyclopedia Britannica Online? What is your evidence?

Suggested Answer: *Article 1 is from Islam.com and article 2 is from Encyclopedia Britannica Online.*

Evidence: *The first article contains only positive portrayals about Islam: “positive message for humanity,” “fastest growing faith,” “beautiful message.” These pro-Islamic adjectives would more likely be in a source devoted “to serve...the Islamic community.” Also, this excerpt includes religious formatting, such as capitalizing “Decree of God” and “His Messenger” as well as blessings in the text “peace and blessings on him.”*

The second article is very dispassionate in tone and includes some possibly negative impressions: “Islamic fundamentalism threatened or toppled a number of secular Middle Eastern governments.” Such a report would more likely be from a secular source trusted for its “accurate” reporting, such as Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

2. What is similar about the articles?

They both use some similar vocabulary: Muhammad, Muslim, Quran, Ramadhan, Mecca. They both give brief descriptions of the religious obligations of the Five Pillars of Islam.

3. What is different about the articles?

In addition to the points mentioned above, the articles include different basic definitions of Islam (“peace” vs. “submission”) and different numbers of Muslims worldwide (1.5 billion on Islam.com, vs. 1.2 billion on Encyclopedia Britannica Online). The first article presented Islamic teachings as truth - “the message of Islam was revealed,” while the second article reports that “Muslims regard Muhammad as the last and most perfect of God’s messengers.”

4. Is one source more trustworthy or credible than the other? Why?

While both contain aspects of truth, neither can encompass the “whole truth,” due to the necessity of selectively excluding much information (see Additional Information).

5. Why is it important to know the author of a Web site?

Because the source can help to indicate what bias or perspective the author has. A Web site devoted to “the humble effort to serve the Islamic community” will have a different perspective from one devoted to serving the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or atheist communities. Similarly, Encyclopedia Britannica Online is part of a for-profit corporation that is unlikely to publish material that would be highly controversial. Its reporting on religious topics is likely to be more cautious and skeptical than a Web site sponsored by a religious organization.

6. How does one determine the sponsor of a Web site?

One can generally find the sponsor by checking on the Home Page or About Us tab for a mission or ownership statement. Once you know the sponsoring organization, you can do a further search for articles that might be critical of that source in order to get a more balanced perspective.