

Teaching about Tragedy

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At Risk of Prejudice Teaching Tolerance about Muslim Americans

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IT WAS FALL 1979. The Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati was gathering for its annual meeting. The top item on the agenda was the Iranian hostage crisis and how to handle the anti-Iranian fervor that was growing in the United States. Particular attention went to a young boy in Wilmington, Ohio—a small, closely knit farming community that was proud of its Quaker college, considered a beacon of tolerance and intellectualism. The fifth-grade boy on the meeting's agenda had an American mother and an Iranian father working at the college. Being the lone child in town with an Iranian connection made him the only target of abuse in the entire school system. The first sign of trouble, a large rock, flew through his bedroom window, shattering glass on him and landing in the crib of his baby sister. By the end of the week, things were so bad that school administrators decided to dismiss the boy fifteen minutes early every day. This would enable him to run home and lock the door before the other children caught up with him and beat him up, as they had done from the beginning of the hostage crisis.

That child was my son, Jason. Although he had always been a confident and popular boy, he was never again able to fit into the social scene of his school. He carried the stigma of being "Iran Man" until graduation, and as an adult, he feels little desire to see any of his school colleagues again.

As an Anglo-American Muslim, I'm now facing the same fears as I listen to people on the radio call for revenge, on both a local and an international level. As evidence points to Islamic extremists as responsible for the attack, I'm also glad to hear commentators admonish the callers to differentiate between the terrorists and the rest of America's Muslim population.

Students will have questions—not only about the terrorist attack on the United States, but also about Islamic beliefs and practices. Listed below are some questions that teachers are probably grappling with in the classroom, as well as some comments that may help answer those questions. Throughout the article, I've listed websites where teachers and students can find more extensive answers. At the end of the article are some classroom discussion questions and activities that relate to the questions.

How do the world's Muslims feel about what happened? Is Islam really a religion of violence, as the media sometimes claims?

It's become obvious that the terrorist acts were, indeed, the work of men who refer to themselves as "Muslims." I don't

consider them Muslims, and the majority of the world's Muslims would agree. Our sentiments are exactly the same as those of Jews, Christians, and anyone else who is disgusted with this attack on innocent civilians. The attack does not represent Islam. The perpetrators, in their efforts to justify their actions, can pretend that it does, but no religious teaching in Islam justifies the killing of innocent bystanders. In fact, such killing is forbidden by the faith. So although these men may be touted by a small minority as "martyrs for Islam," the rest of the Islamic world has been quick to point out that their actions actually contradict the very teachings of the religion they profess to follow. The murder of innocent people is prohibited not only in the Islamic holy text, the *Qur'an*, but also in the *Shari'a*, or Islamic Law, which forbids the killing of innocent people, even within the context of a full-scale war. There is, however, a difference between how religion teaches us to behave and how we, as human beings around the world, fail to live up to that sacred standard. That's the real tragedy of recent events in New York, rural Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.

Muslims around the world have condemned the attack. Even leaders who have traditionally been antagonistic toward the United States, such as Mu'ammar Qadhafi of Libya, have expressed sorrow over the loss of U.S. civilian lives. Large Islamic organizations in the United States have issued official condemnations and messages of condolence. For example, the American Muslim Council, based in Washington, D.C., issued the following statement on the day of the attack:

The American Muslim Council (AMC) strongly condemns this morning's plane attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and expresses deep sorrow for Americans that were injured and killed. AMC sends out its condolences to all victims of this cowardly terrorist attack. There is no cause that justifies this type of an immoral and inhumane act that has affected so many innocent American lives. AMC supports all efforts of the investigation in order to track down the people responsible for this tragic act of terrorism.

Textbooks often erroneously state that the word *Islam* means the same as the English word *submission*. The word is actually derived from the Arabic word meaning *peace*, the inference being that one who willingly submits to the will of God is a person who has found peace. It's a sad fact that war has been around since the dawn of humanity. Archeologists have discovered signs of war all the way back to the world's first settled civilizations. A little-known fact is that one of the

earliest historical documents to give human rights to civilians during a time of war was written by Islam's Prophet Muhammad. In 625, he wrote the Constitution of Medinah. At a time when it was considered normal behavior for an army to rape, pillage, and plunder the people it had just defeated, the Prophet Muhammad decided to put an end to that "tradition." The constitution forbade Muslim soldiers from attacking civilians. In fact, the document even protected the crops and animals of the defeated peoples, so the Muslim armies couldn't destroy the food supply of their enemies. This was more than a millennium before the first Geneva Convention of 1864 established "Laws of War," which set policies for the rights of non-combatants during war. It is still an evolving document that continues to have massive implications for how all nations behave in a modern conflict.

One-fifth of the world's population—the total number of Muslims—would not embrace a religious tradition that encourages violence. Every one of the world's major faith traditions calls for the peaceful coexistence of humanity, purity of the heart, and love for all of God's creation.

Do Muslim Americans feel threatened? How are they being treated during this time of anger, frustration, and national grief?

Like everyone else, American Muslims feel a deep sense of loss. We are devastated by the loss of innocent lives. While trying to mourn, we also have to worry about retaliation against us. Many of us read the newspaper with fear, concerned that something else has happened for which we may be attacked. Since September 11, mosques have been attacked, Muslims have been beaten and even killed, and random acts of violence against anyone who even looks foreign have taken the lives of innocent people, both in America and abroad. On radio talk shows, we hear such comments as, "Let's just kill all the Arabs" and "Why can't those Muslims just go home?" Considering the fact that so many of us are American, the last question is particularly quizzical: We are home. (I was born and raised in Ohio.) In contrast, we have also heard strong calls for restraint from blaming all Muslims for the actions of a small, violent group.



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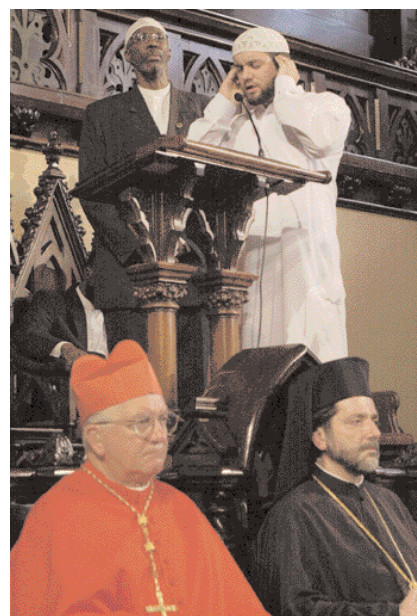
Young Muslim women at a question-and-answer period in the Islamic Center of San Diego Mosque, September 23, 2001.

People who wish to portray Islam as a religion of violence have also taken advantage of the tense situation. Their claims that "this is what Islam is all about" are reflections of their lack of knowledge about the similarities among the teachings of all great faith traditions. No religion espouses the use of violence. Many Muslims feel as though the airplanes used in the attacks weren't the only things that were hijacked; the truth and beauty of Islam were also hijacked by this terrorist act. It's frustrating, for those of us who want people to understand our faith better, to be judged by the actions of people whom we have nothing to do with—but unfortunately, terrorists have the power to commit all sorts of evil.

As tragic as this act was, some good things have resulted. People are beginning to learn more about the similarities among the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Interfaith prayer services have brought together thousands of Americans who never would have met under normal conditions. A young Muslim whose life was saved by a Hasidic Jew during the attack on the World Trade Center wrote a touching story and circulated it to fellow Muslims on a network sponsored by American Muslims Intent on Learning and Activism (AMILA). Having evacuated Building 7, he turned and saw the first World Trade Center tower collapsing.

The next thing I remember is that a dark cloud of glass and debris about 50 stories high came tumbling towards us. I turned around and ran as fast as possible...I fell down trying to get away....

I was on my back, facing this massive cloud that was approaching, it must have been 600 feet off, everything was already dark. I normally wear a pendant around my neck, inscribed with an Arabic prayer for safety, similar to the cross. A Hasidic Jewish man came up to me and held the pendant in his hand, and looked at it. He read the Arabic out loud for a second. What he said next, I will never forget. With a deep Brooklyn accent he said, "Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here." He helped me stand up, and we ran for what seemed like forever without looking back. He was the last person I would ever have thought who would help me. If it weren't for him, I probably would have been engulfed in shattered glass and debris.¹



ASSOCIATED PRESS

An interfaith prayer service in Detroit, September 23, 2001.



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A young Muslim woman at a Muslims for Peace rally in New York.

The tendency to join together in the face of a national tragedy has enabled most Americans to look beyond the race, nationality, and faith of the person who is holding their hands during prayers. This is where America has won, and the terrorists have lost.

What is Jihad? How is it defined within an Islamic context? Is the concept of Holy War mentioned in the Bible?

The Arabic word *Jihad* does not translate into Holy War. It actually means *striving*. It is used often in the Qur'an; Muslims are asked to strive to live in a manner that is most pleasing to God:

And strive [Jihad] in His cause as ye ought to strive [Jihad] with sincerity and under discipline. He has chosen you and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion; it is the faith of your father Abraham. It is He Who has named you Muslims both before and in this (Revelation); that the Apostle may be a witness for you and ye be witnesses for mankind! So establish regular Prayer give regular Charity and hold fast to Allah! He is your Protector the Best to protect and the Best to help! (*Qur'an, Chapter 22: Verse 78*)

In an Islamic context, the worst enemy that Muslims have to strive against is our own *nafs*, or the human ego, which causes people to behave in an arrogant, self-centered, and even violent manner through their love of power and money. For this reason, Islamic teachings discuss two Jihads: the Greater Jihad (against oneself) and the Lesser Jihad (against an outside aggressor).

The Qur'an and the Bible both deal with war; in fact, the Qur'anic attitude toward war is similar to the Biblical concept. Muslims are told that God does not permit them to be the aggressors:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors. And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression. (*Qur'an, Chapter 2, verses 190 and 193*)

Muslims are permitted to defend themselves against aggressors, but only within well-defined limits of a "just war" against oppression.

People who want to prove that Islam is a violent faith point to the Qur'anic verses that told the early Muslims to fight against the "unbelievers." In the Islamic context, an unbeliever is not a Christian or a Jew, as many critics of Islam have claimed. (In fact, those two groups have special religious and protective status as *Ahl al-Kitab*, or People of the Book.) The Qur'an is referring to pagan idol worshippers when it discusses unbelievers. The pagans attacked the early Muslims and the two groups were in a state of war.

What issues separate us from the Muslim world? Why does the United States so often seem to be unpopular among Muslims?

Even though there is no way that terrorist acts such as these can be justified either on a religious or a political platform, those who commit them or sympathize with them often cite grievances against the United States that are felt widely in the Islamic world.

Following the attacks, when the United States endeavored to form an anti-terrorist coalition, it obtained the support of many Arab and Islamic governments. As the United States pursues its response to the attacks, it will continue to want this support. U.S. diplomats will need to take into consideration a number of issues that occupy a high profile in the Islamic world on which there have been and are major differences between the United States and its allies, as well as its adversaries, in the Arab and Islamic worlds. These issues may also cause other U.S. allies around the world to question the fairness of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestinian Arabs are currently in a tragic situation in which more than 3.5 million are refugees (about one-third of whom still live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza). Even though a Palestinian authority under Yasser Arafat has been established in parts of the West Bank and Gaza, these regions face extreme problems of poverty and deprivation, and the Palestinians there have fallen far short of their aspirations of statehood. Because the United States has favored Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict, there is a widespread sense in the Islamic world that its policies are unfair and lacking in evenhandedness.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a holy city for Muslims as well as for Jews and Christians. (Its name in Arabic, *al-Quds*, is derived from the Arabic word meaning “Holy.”) The future of the Arab and Muslim part of Jerusalem, which was occupied and annexed by Israel in the 1967 war, has been one of the most intractable issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it is one that resonates throughout the Muslim world. Muslims see the United States as standing against Muslim rights in Jerusalem (even though the United States has not recognized Israel’s annexation of 1967).

Civilians under embargo in Iraq. There is widespread sensitivity in the Arab and Islamic worlds (and also among many Americans) to the plight of civilians in Iraq as a result of the sanctions that were imposed on Iraq in 1990. The intention of the sanctions was to destabilize Saddam Hussein’s regime, but the main consequences have been borne by Iraqi civilians. Problems of malnutrition and the lack of medicine have had terrible effects on children in particular. A report by UNICEF that compared the mortality rate of Iraqi children under the age of five after sanctions were imposed with earlier trends in mortality rates from 1960 to 1990 concluded that about half a million children under five died between 1991 and 1998 who would not otherwise have died.² In October 1996, Philippe Heffinck, UNICEF representative for Iraq, stated that “around 4,500 children were dying every month from hunger and disease.”³

As we evaluate these issues, we need to be aware of the different perspectives from which all the involved parties view them. There is a widespread sense in the Islamic world that the Muslim perspective is overlooked in the West and that Muslim concerns and aspirations mean little to the United States.

In their relations with the Islamic world, the United States and its western allies frequently encounter fears and suspicions that were born in the long period of western colonization and imperialism. During that time, most areas of the Muslim world fell under some form of western rule. Muslims were treated as racial inferiors in their own countries by their western rulers, and the economic gap between them and the western world widened as colonial and imperial governments supported western companies seeking to profit from the resources of the areas, but otherwise did not do much to develop them economically. Muslim countries became theaters of war during conflicts among western states.

Like countries all over the world, Muslim countries define their national security interests in the light of the major challenges and threats their countries have faced in the past. There is particular sensitivity to the presence of western troops, which evokes memories of colonial and imperial rule.

How can America respond to this terrorist act, both within our borders and internationally?

The United States will need a lot of time to mourn and heal. A major task ahead is to ask ourselves how we can prevent such a tragedy from happening again. As we consider how to protect ourselves from future terrorist attacks, we’ll be forced to do some thoughtful soul-searching, particularly concerning our past relationship with countries that are predominantly

Books about Islam Recommended for School Use

At the Elementary Level

- ▶ Ghazi, Suhaib. *Ramadan*. New York: Holiday House, 1996.
- ▶ El-Mosilmany, Ann P. *Zaki’s Ramadan Fast*. Seattle, WA: Amica Publishing House, 1994.
- ▶ Heide, Florence P. and Judith Heide Gilliland. *Sami and the Time of the Troubles*. New York: Clarion, 1992.
- ▶ Macdonald, Fiona and Joan Ullathorne. *Ibn Tulun: The Story of a Mosque*. Washington, D.C.: AMIDEAST Publications, 1995.

At the Middle and Secondary School Levels

- ▶ Alavi, Karima and Susan Douglass. *Emergence of Renaissance: Cultural Interactions Between Europeans and Muslims*. Fountain Valley, CA: Council on Islamic Education, 1999.
- ▶ Douglass, Susan. *Beyond a Thousand and One Nights: A Sampler of Literature from the Muslim Civilization*. Fountain Valley, CA: Council on Islamic Education, 2000.
- ▶ Reese, Lyn. *Women in the Muslim World: Personalities from the Past*. Berkeley, CA: Women in World History Curriculum Project, 1996.
- ▶ Ruthven, Malise. *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- ▶ Sabini, John. *Islam: A Primer*. Washington, D.C.: Middle East Editorial Associates, 1990.
- ▶ Wormser, Richard. *American Islam: Growing Up in America*. New York: Walker Co., 1994.

At the Secondary School Level

- ▶ Esposito, John L. *Islam: The Straight Path*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Muslim. During that process, we need to avoid discrimination and violence against American Muslims who are also suffering from the attack.

The mood of our country is divided, with some Americans wanting to strike such countries as Afghanistan and other states considered to be anti-American with U.S. military bombardment. Others are calling for restraint and expressing fear that a massive bombing raid would kill innocent civilians—an issue of obvious concern for a population that has just suffered such a tragedy. We need to remember that we all believe that that the terrorist attack on the United States cannot go unpunished. But we must weigh our options when considering how to retaliate while remaining within the laws of international warfare.

The biggest problem is that the nature of warfare changed on September 11, 2001, and will probably never be the same. Modern international laws have defined what constitutes an act of war and an act of terrorism. Fighting terrorists can be like fighting an invisible phantom, and international laws are still being written to deal with the problem. In the meantime, we need to turn to worldwide organizations or agreements for guidance. The United Nations and the Geneva Convention can all assist us in ensuring that the terrorists are punished.

America must also gather support among her allies when considering military options. Thus far, our allies have been sympathetic and supportive. Although they’ve offered assistance, some allies are placing restrictions on their aid, express-

ing a conviction that they will only support military actions that don't break international laws. China, for example, has offered condolences and said that it is at our service, as long as we respond in the context of the U.N. Security Council, adhere to international laws, and do not harm innocent civilians. China is not alone in seeking restraint. Such European allies as France also warn against actions that might dissolve rather than encourage efforts at international collaboration to deal with terrorism (see discuss.washingtonpost.com).

Whatever path we follow, it must lead toward a just and peaceful world, one in which America and other nations won't have to live in fear of another terrorist attack. We've had such an enormous outpouring of prayers and support from people around the world. We must always remember that we are not alone in our sorrow and we will not be alone as we begin to recover from this horrific experience.

Ideas for Classroom Discussion

- ▶ Put up a bulletin board with images of Muslims around the world. Find statistics about how many Muslims live in various parts of the world and portray such proportions accurately on the board. For instance, only 18 percent of the bulletin board should have pictures of the Arab world because only 18 percent of the world's Muslims are Arabs. That means that 82 percent are non-Arabs. How do you think the non-Arabs feel about the fact that the American media tends to clump all Muslims together, focus on the activities of a small number of Arab fundamentalists, and ignore the rest of world's Muslims? Why do you think the media does this? A helpful website for this activity is www.crusades.org/dawah/world0.html.
 - ▶ In 1993, David Koresh died in a showdown with U.S. government forces in Waco, Texas. Koresh, a Branch Davidian, considered himself a devout Christian, a Prophet of God, and an Angel of Revelation. Do you think people around the world, who watched that scene in horror, thought that his actions represented the foundational teachings of Christianity?
 - ▶ In 1995, Timothy McVeigh committed a terrorist act in America by blowing up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Innocent men, women, and children were murdered in the attack. What did you think of the early news broadcasts that claimed that the attack was probably the act of Islamic extremists? How did you feel when you first knew that an American bombed the building?
 - ▶ Find references to aggression and war in the Bible and the Qur'an, and discuss the similarities and differences in class. Contrast those with references to peace in the Bible and the Qur'an and discuss the similarities and differences.
 - ▶ How do you think we should respond to the terrorist attack against America?
 - ▶ How do you think you would feel if you were a civilian in Kabul, Afghanistan, and you were too poor to get out of the country? How would you feel toward such people as Usama bin Laden?
- ▶ Divide the class into three groups. Have each group study one major source of international cooperation and report back to the class. Because terrorism often targets civilians, narrow the focus to the protection of civilian life during a time of war (see, for example, the following websites: League of Nations: www.tufts.edu/departments/fletcher/; United Nations: www.un.org; and the Geneva Convention: Rights of Civilian Population: deoxy.org/wc/wc-proto.htm).

Additional Teaching Resources and Suggestions

- ▶ The Council on Islamic Education has written a concise, easy-to-understand teacher's guide called *Teaching about Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*. It is, by far, one of the most helpful resources for teachers about this topic. It is available from the council at 714/839-2929 or www.cie.org. The cost is \$11.
- ▶ It often helps to invite Muslims into your school to talk to your class. You can also arrange to visit a mosque with your students and have a question-and-answer session after a tour.
- ▶ More helpful teaching tips, along with "Ten Ways to Fight Hate," are available at www.tolerance.org.
- ▶ An award-winning website at the University of Georgia (www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas) answers just about any question that students might have about Islam.
- ▶ The Middle East is a complex region that even many U.S. adults can't make sense of without help. *The Congressional Quarterly Book on the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 2000) offers a balanced and helpful explanation of the history and current events of the region. It is an invaluable aid to teachers who are covering the region in their classroom.
- ▶ Do you want to get away from politics and look at Islamic cultural links to the West? A great place to begin looking at Islamic science and how it influenced the European Renaissance is the website salam.muslimsonline.com/~azahoor/index.html#scit.
- ▶ Watch the award-winning video *Tales from Arab Detroit*, which takes a cultural excursion into the world of Arab-American teenagers who are trying to cope with being part of two different cultural traditions at the same time. The video includes interviews with Arab-American poets, a rapper, a painter, and a hip-hop artist. Discuss ways in which students' own families have ties with other cultures, and how those ties affect (or do not affect) their lives. (The video is available from New Day Films at 201/652-6590. The rental fee is \$50.)

Notes

1. This account was posted by Usman Farman on AMILANet, a service of AMILA: www.amila.org
2. See www.unicef.org/reseval/pdfs/irqu5est.pdf
3. See iraqwar.org/childunicef.htm

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