



Cultural insights:

Building cultural competency: Understanding Islam and Muslim

By Lobna "Luby" Ismail

Only 30 years ago, a famous American sociologist called the United States a nation of three religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. How much our religious landscape has changed.

Since the events of September 11, many have been in search of understanding what is Islam and who are Muslims. More than six million Muslims live in the U.S. making Islam the second most practiced religion in this country, as well as around the world.

Prior to the tragedy of September 11, Muslims were misrepresented and very little was known about their faith. Now, perhaps even more so. But, now the nation is searching to learn and to understand. The Qu'ran (the Muslim's holy book) is #1 on the best seller list for Amazon.com.

As interculturalists and through our diversity initiatives, it is imperative that we have a foundation of knowledge to build understanding and promote a dialogue across religions, ethnicities and cultures in our work environments.

Hopefully, the following information will provide you with some of the basics on Islam and Muslims and eliminate some of the misperceptions about this faith and its more than one billion believers worldwide.

Quiz on Muslims and Islam

Answer true or false to the following statements:

1. _____ Muslims worship Muhammad, who they consider to be the founder of Islam.

2. _____ Muslims believe that Muhammad wrote the Qu'ran, the Muslim Holy Book.

3. _____ Muslims pray to a god named "Allah."

4. _____ Muslims do not believe in Moses, Jesus, Mary, or John the Baptist

5. _____ Islam has many detailed creeds that all Muslims must believe

6. _____ Most of the world's Muslims are Arab

7. _____ Most Muslims living in America are of Arab descent

8. _____ Most Arab-Americans living in the U.S. are Muslim

9. _____ There is no difference between 'Islam' and 'Muslim.'

10. _____ Louis Farrakhan is one of America's spokesmen for mainstream Islam

Read the following scriptural passages. Determine which are from the Jewish Torah (T), Gospels (G), and Muslim Qu'ran (Q).

11. _____ Adam, dwell in the Garden with your wife and eat freely of its fruits, whatever you desire; but do not come near this tree, or you will become wrong doers.

12. _____ O children of Israel, remember the favors I bestowed on you. So keep your pledge to Me, and I will keep mine to you, and be heedful of Me.

13. _____ Say: He is God, the One, the Only, Eternal and Absolute. He does not give birth, nor was He born. There is no one comparable to Him.

14. _____ In the absence of Moses, his people prepared the image of a calf from their ornaments, which gave out the mooing of a cow. Yet they did not see it could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path. Still, they took it for a god and did wrong.

15. _____ The angels said: "O Mary, God brings you glad tidings of good news from Him, whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the next, and one of those brought near unto God."

16. _____ Jesus said: "Surely God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. This is the straight path."

17. _____ Indeed, be they Muslims, Jews, Sabians, or Christians, those who believe in God and the final day and who do good have nothing to fear, and they will not grieve.

18. _____ You were created as different nations and tribes, Not that you should despise one another, but that you should learn from one another.

The Answers

True/False questions:

1. _____ Muslims worship Muhammad, whom they consider to be the founder of Islam.

FALSE. Muslims do not worship Muhammad. He is not the focus of the faith, as Jesus is in Christianity or, to a lesser degree, as Buddha is in Buddhism. The Qu'ran says:

"Muhammad is but a messenger." The closest comparison to

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Muhammad in the Judeo-Christian Tradition is Moses, whom Muslims also regard as one of God's messengers, along with Abraham, David, Solomon, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. If Muhammad has any special status among these figures, it is only that he is considered the last in that line of God's messengers.

To protect against him ever being turned into an icon, Muhammad forbade any physical depictions of him. Sometimes well meaning non-Muslims wanting to mark a Muslim holiday or discuss Muhammad will include a picture to represent him. This should not be done.

2. _____ Muslims believe that Muhammad wrote the Qu'ran, the Muslim Holy Book.

FALSE. The Qu'ran, which literally translated means "the recitations," is a compilation of the many revelations Muhammad received during the 23-year period of his religious mission, which began when he was 40 and continued until his death at age 63.

Muslims believe that Muhammad repeated verbatim the word of God, which was transmitted to him through an angelic intermediary, and did not compose the verses himself.

3. _____ Muslims pray to a god named "Allah."

FALSE. Allah is simply Arabic for "the God," which is understood to mean "the God of Abraham." Arabic speaking Jews and Christians would also use the expression "Allah" when making any reference to God.

4. _____ Muslims do not believe in Moses, Jesus, Mary, or John the Baptist.

FALSE. The Qu'ran mentions

many figures familiar to any reader of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian Gospels. Just as Christians consider the prophets and religious figures from the Hebrew Scriptures to be part of their tradition, Muslims consider many of the personages of the Bible to be part of the Islamic tradition.

5. _____ Islam has many detailed creeds that all Muslims must believe.

FALSE. As a matter of religious practice, Muslims profess one simple creed, considered the first pillar of Islam. The creed is: "There is nothing worthy of worship but the God of Abraham, and Muhammad is God's Prophet."

The other four of Islam's Five Pillars are all action oriented. They are Prayer, Fasting during the month of Ramadan, Annual Payment of support for the poor, and Pilgrimage to Mecca. Muhammad is quoted as saying: "Faith is that which is firmly in the heart and which is proved by deeds."

6. _____ Most of the world's Muslims are Arab.

FALSE. Only 1/5 of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims are Arab. The majority of the world's Muslims are Asian. The largest Islamic country is Indonesia with 160 million Muslims, followed by Pakistan with 120 million. India, which is not a Muslim country, has a 100 million Muslims.

7. _____ Most Muslims living in America are of Arab descent.

FALSE. The largest ethnic background of America's estimated six million Muslims is African American (42 percent), followed by South Asians (25 percent). Only 12

percent of America's Muslims are of Arab descent.

8. _____ Most Arab-Americans living in the U.S. are Muslim.

FALSE. The majority of Arab-Americans are Christian. Only about 20 percent are Muslim.

9. _____ There is no difference between 'Muslim' and 'Islam.'

FALSE A 'Muslim' is the person, the believer in the religion 'Islam.'

10. _____ Louis Farrakhan is one of the leading spokesmen for mainstream Islam.

FALSE. Louis Farrakhan is the leader of the Nation of Islam, not a spokesperson for America's mainstream Muslims. The Nation of Islam is a distinct religion, which developed during the early part of the 20th century in America. While influenced by some Islamic ideas, the Nation of Islam has many beliefs and practices that are contrary to mainstream Islam and are rejected by most Muslims.

Scriptural passages:

11. – 18. ALL the Scriptural Passages quoted are from the Qu'ran. ■

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