

RE PAGES

When you think of the most prevalent religions in today's global society, which religions come to mind? This Spring Retreat, children and youth will delve into the world's fastest growing religion, currently the second most widespread with about 1.5 billion followers: Islam.



For a brief summary of this fascinating tradition, Muslims believe in the same God as Christians and Jews, with the central tenet being that there is only one divine voice and it is all-powerful and all-knowing (Muslims do not associate a gender for God). Where the religions differ stems from the details of which prophet (like Moses and Jesus) was the most accurate and important messenger of God's word. Muslims believe that Muhammad, a man born and raised an orphan near Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in the 6th century, was the last and greatest conduit of God's wisdom and instructions for moral living. Rather than a familial relationship with God, like Jesus being God's earthly son, Muhammad proved to be an intelligent and thoughtful leader in his community and was therefore later chosen by God to help spread righteousness through the Arab lands.

Like most others, Islam is a religion based on peace, kindness, and forgiveness. The Qur'an is the Muslim holy book and serves as the official and comprehensive record of what God told Muhammad. It is written in Arabic, so it is still a tradition that all Muslims learn Arabic in order to read the original words as they were written. No matter which sect, or denomination, every Muslim has five duties, called the Five Pillars of Islam, in which they must: 1. Make a statement of belief that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah; 2. Pray five times a day, at dawn, noon, afternoon, evening and nightfall; 3. Give part of their money or possessions to charity; 4. Fast (not eat or drink) in the daytime during the month of Ramadan, a time of confirmation of their faith; and 5. Try to make a pilgrimage (a trip) to Mecca at least once in their lifetimes.

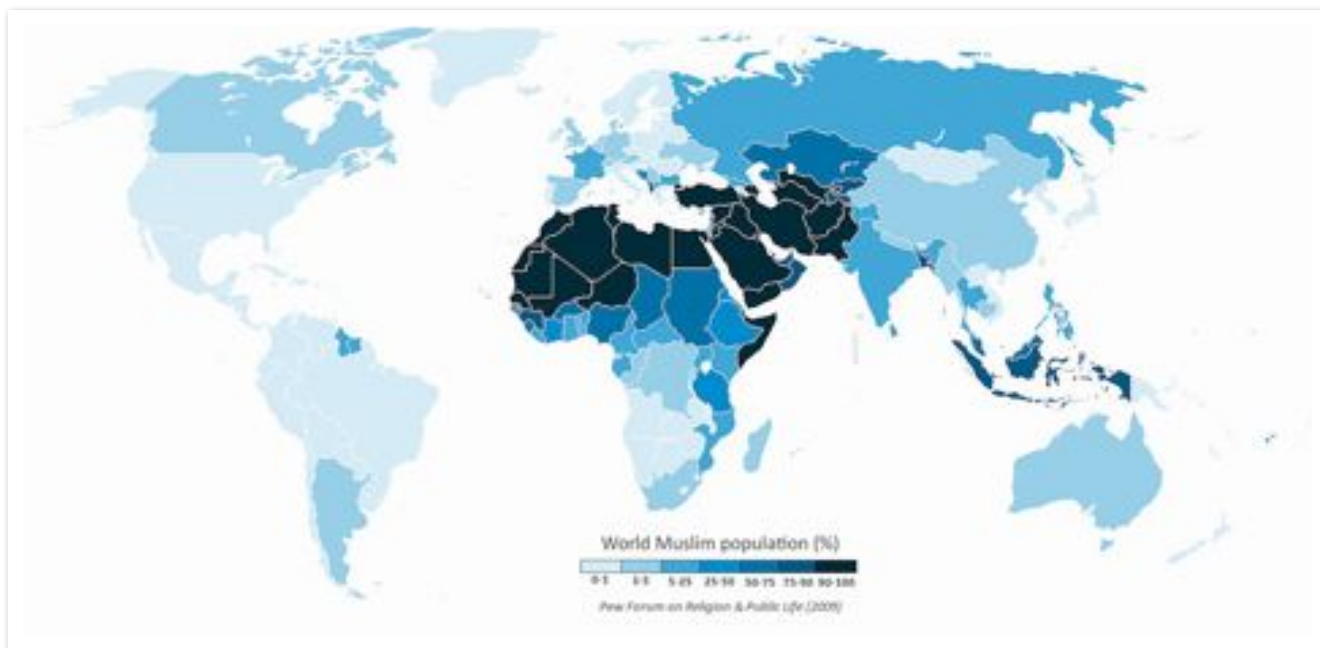


If you would ask a group of Muslims which personal characteristics they value most, they could respond with answers like "kindness," "respect," "equality," and "responsibility." Does this sound any different than com-



mon UU values? Or Christian? Or Buddhist? While certain practices may be different, like praying five times every day facing in the geographical direction of the city of Mecca or dressing a particular way, like wearing a hijab that covers a girl's hair and neck, the ultimate, collective goal is often very similar: to create a more loving, peaceful world. When it comes to human rights, Muslims point to a number of historical facts which support how Islam has helped many people to gain freedom, independence, and better living conditions, dating from the very beginning in the 7th century, when nomadic tribes were hostile toward one another and women had no property or inheritance rights. The basis of this reasoning is connected to the concept that once people believe in one God, they must also accept that all human beings are created equally, rather than on a hierarchy. This is also reflected in the Islamic Adam and Eve story, where the first humans were both created from one soul simultaneously. This way of thinking is also supported by the third pillar, which states that every Muslim must help the unfortunate members of society through mandatory charitable donations. One Muslim poet, Saadi, summarized Islam by the following:

To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.
It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets or robes.
All peoples are members of the same body,
created from one essence.
If fate brings suffering to one member,
the others cannot stay at rest.



Different from other religions, Muslims never create or display pictures of God or use human or animal forms in decorating holy places or sacred things. Since God told Muhammad that people should not depict God in artistic form or worship any idols, people have found other ways to express their reverence for the ethereal deity. Besides, they generally agree that there is no way to show what God looks like, since God is beyond human comprehension. Instead, what you see decorating such famous Muslim buildings like the Taj Mahal in India or the Alhambra in Granada are shapes, patterns, and verses from the Qur'an gorgeously written in calligraphy. While based on Ancient Greek Euclidean geometry, this style of decoration was used to create visual statements about Islamic religious ideas. Kind of an interesting concept, isn't it, that mathematical relationships could represent the divine?

For instance, infinitely repeating patterns are used to represent the omnipresent and unbending laws of God and the interconnectedness of all things, while the straight lines and rigid angles can represent the strictness and exactness with which Muslims follow many of the original rules laid out by Muhammad. Of all shapes, the star was the preferred motif for many Islamic decorations because it symbolizes equal radiation in all directions from a central point, meaning that everything was connected and supported by one God.

Everywhere in the world, there are social implications of the many beliefs and practices of religious followers, and these practices are known to change over time and across regional borders. Though the words of the holy books have not changed, the interpretations of what those words mean and the manner in which people express their beliefs change almost constantly. For example, the Qur'an does not say that women must wear veils or scarves over their heads, but most modern Muslim societies have interpreted the instructions to "dress modestly" (which was addressed to both men and women) to mean that women must wear the hijab. This was not always the standard, meaning that women could be considered good Muslims without wearing the hijab at certain times in history, while at other times, like now, it was necessary to show religious devotion. Every religion's background is full of such intersections between traditional practices and social or technological progress, where creed and adaptation must be reconciled.

Led by your incredible RE Committee of Karen Frey, Vicki-Jane Roberts-Gassler, Janie Spencer-Bellet, Jeanette Wild-Sievers, and Linda Gheysen, the RE retreat program will address these many topics in an age-appropriate fashion with plenty of fun activities in the tradition of Muslim celebrations (and other traditions, as well... Easter egg hunt, anyone?). Issues like how culture influences one's beliefs and religious practices, the many roles of art in religion, how a religion's values are expressed on the personal and societal level, and comparisons to UUism will abound in lively discussions and creative workshops. We can't wait to have everyone together again!

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