



AN EDUCATOR'S  
GUIDE TO ISLAMIC  
RELIGIOUS PRACTICES



**CAIR**

Council on American-Islamic Relations

*"Read! For your Lord is most Generous.*

*(It is He) who taught by means of the pen;*

*taught man that which he knew not."*

The Quran, Chapter 96, Verses 3-5

# CAIR

The Council on American-Islamic Relations is a non-profit, membership organization dedicated to presenting an Islamic perspective on issues of importance to the American public.

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## Glossary of Muslim Terms

<i>Eid</i>	A holiday.
<i>Halal</i>	Permissible by Islamic law.
<i>Hija b</i>	Clothing Muslim women wear in public. It is generally loose-fitting and includes a head-covering. Also called <i>Khimar</i> .
<i>Jum'ah</i>	Friday prayer.
<i>Kufi</i>	A cap worn by some Muslim men.
<i>Qur'an</i>	Islam's revealed scripture.
<i>Ramadan</i>	The month of fasting.

## CAIR Research Center

CAIR Research Center conducts research on the American Muslim experience. Dr. Mohamed Nimer is the research and author of CAIR guides to Islamic religious practices.

**D**emographers say that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States and around the world. American Muslims are found in all sectors of society. This presence is perhaps most evident in the public school system, where Muslim students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds make up an increasing percentage of the school population.

Recent studies show that most Muslim children are enrolled in public schools. This growing demographic segment adds a new dimension to be considered as educators work with issues of diversity. The information contained in this booklet is designed to assist teachers, principals and other educators in formulating and implementing policies and programs that will help to create a culturally-sensitive academic environment. It will also serve as a guide for the accommodation of religiously-mandated practices of Muslim students.



## **U.S. Legal Protection of Religious Rights**

Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, religious celebrations, as well as dietary and clothing requirements are practices of the Muslim faith. Such religious expressions are protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which protects the free

exercise of religion. Moreover, the Equal Access Act of 1984 (upheld by the Supreme Court in 1990) affirmed the right of student-initiated religious activities in public schools.

Although Islamic religious practices have similarities to elements of other religions, the details of time and procedure that define what is proper religious practice may differ. The goal of this publication is to suggest practical steps to assist educators in accommodating the religious needs of Muslim students.

## **Dietary Requirements**

The Qur'an (Islam's scripture) prohibits consumption of alcohol, pork, and any pork by-products or derivatives. Therefore, practicing Muslims are careful about the food they consume and how it is prepared. Muslims follow certain standards—called Halal (permissible by Islamic law)—in slaughter and preparation of meat and poultry. Some objectionable food items include:

- Pepperoni, sausage, and hot dogs containing pork.
- Bacon—alone or in soups, quiche, etc.
- Animal shortening—in breads, puddings, cookies, cakes, donuts, etc. Vegetable shortening is acceptable.
- Gelatin—in Jello, desserts, candies, marshmallows, chocolates, etc.
- Lard—in any product.

- Food ingredients containing alcohol, such as vanilla extract and Dijon mustard.

School lunch items containing ingredients derived from pork must be highlighted clearly, especially in elementary schools. For preschool and elementary food programs, many school cafeterias have been particularly helpful to Muslim parents and students by labeling such foods with a prominent visual marker, such as a red dot or a picture of a pig, for beginning readers.

## **Expressions of Personal Modesty**

Islam prescribes that both men and women behave and dress modestly. Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their wisdom, skills and contribution to the community, rather than for physical attractiveness. There are a number of ways in which Muslims express such teachings.

Men and boys are always to be covered from the navel to the knee. Also, some male Muslim students wear a small head covering, called a kufi.

When in public, Muslim women wear loose-fitting, non-revealing clothing, known as hijab, or khimar. This attire, which may vary in style, includes a head covering.

The wearing of a head covering may lead to teasing by other students. Teachers

should prevent classmates from pulling on or removing a Muslim student's scarf.

## **Adolescence and Gender Relations**

Puberty is a major turning point in the life of a Muslim. For those who have reached puberty, Islam prescribes certain parameters for relations between the sexes. For example, many Muslims are reluctant to shake hands with the opposite sex, even with teachers or administrators. This should not be taken as an insult, but as a sign of personal modesty.

Also, Muslims may raise religious objections to coed physical education classes and to school-sponsored dances. Students should not be pressured to participate or penalized for not taking part in such activities.

## **Physical Education**

Muslim boys and girls may not take same-sex communal after-sport showers without wearing appropriate covering of their bodies. Private showers should be made available, or gym classes could be scheduled in a late period, allowing the student to shower at home.

School administrators may discuss with students alternative clothing in physical education classes. Alternatives could include knee-length shorts for boys and full track suits for girls.

Muslim students should not be forced to participate in coed swimming classes.

Schools that require swimming skills have offered outside certification as an option.

## **Muslim Holidays**

There are several days in the Muslim calendar with special religious significance, but the major celebrations common to all Muslims are the two Eid (holiday) days. The first Eid day is celebrated on the day after the month of Ramadan (the month of fasting). The second is celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth Islamic month.

The festivities include congregational prayer, gatherings with family and friends, and gifts and entertainment, especially for children. A typical greeting on these occasions is "Eid Mubarak," or "Blessed Eid." To accommodate the needs of students during these observances, schools should add Muslim holidays to their calendars.

Celebrating Eid requires that Muslims take at least one day off from school. There should be no penalty for this religious obligation. Because the occurrence of Eid depends on the sighting of the new moon, the exact date can only be determined with certainty the night before. Muslim communities around the country would like to see that Eid receives recognition similar to that given to Christmas and Hanukkah, especially in schools where Muslims constitute a significant segment of the student population.

Where the number of Muslim students is low, schools can demonstrate commit-



ment to diversity by refraining from marking students absent when they do not attend school on Eid. Also, major events (games, exams, plays, etc.) should be scheduled around these holidays.

## **Fasting**

Islamic holy days and festivals follow the lunar calendar. Like the solar calendar, it has twelve months. However, a lunar month, which is marked by the appearance of a new crescent moon, may last only 29 days. As a result, the lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year.

The month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the time when Muslims are required to fast. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five "pillars" of Islam. (The other pillars include a declaration of faith, daily prayer, offering regular charity, and pilgrimage to Mecca.)

Observing the Ramadan fast means refraining from eating and drinking from break of dawn to sunset. The dates of this fast change each year; so the fast will eventually rotate throughout the full solar year. Ramadan is a period of self-restraint and a time to focus on moral conduct. It is also a time to empathize with those who are less fortunate and appreciate what one has.

Fasting is prescribed when children reach the age of puberty. Still, Muslim families allow their young children to experiment with fasting. Fasting students should be allowed to go to the school

library instead of the cafeteria during lunch. Also, they should be excused from strenuous physical activity during the fast.

To turn the diversity in the classroom to educational advantage, a teacher may invite a Muslim student or guest speaker to explain the practices and traditions surrounding the Ramadan fast. This will help the Muslim student avoid a feeling of awkwardness about not having lunch with his or her fellow students during the month. By providing opportunities for students of varied religious backgrounds to share their special occasions, the school helps to support parents and communities in their efforts to teach beneficial values. Such information is also important preparation for students as future citizens.

## **Curriculum Issues**

Many Muslims feel their faith has been treated with bias in textbooks and school programs. Although availability of more accurate and balanced instructional material is increasing, the continued use of outdated material in social studies and world history classes reinforces perceptions of Islam as a foreign creed and Muslims as enemies.

Such divisiveness has contributed to incidents of harassment and violence against Muslim children by their schoolmates. In a number of cases, Muslim children have been mocked as "devil worshipers," "sand n-gers," and "camel jockeys."

School boards may want to review policies and programs in light of the increasing Muslim population in the public school system. Textbooks that contribute to religious prejudice are not suitable for educating students. Books that lack reliable information are usually replete with mistakes about the basic Islamic beliefs. One common error is the definition of "Allah" as a particular Muslim god rather than the same God of Christianity and Judaism. Qualified Muslim educators should participate in the textbook selection process, particularly for history, social studies and geography texts.

## **Family Life/Sex Education**

Family life and sex education material presented in schools is another sensitive matter to Muslims. In Islam individuals become religiously responsible for their deeds when they reach puberty. Islam puts great emphasis on modesty, chastity and morality and there is a specific set of teachings with regard to human development and its related issues.

Close contact with local Islamic centers is essential to encourage input from the Muslim community. Class materials should be available for review and parents should have the option to remove their children from all or part of the program.

## Daily Prayer

Islam urges "God consciousness" in the individual's life. To that end, Islam prescribes that believers perform prayer five times each day. Two such times, a few minutes after meridian of the sun and approximately two hours after that, may fall within regular school hours. It usually takes less than 15 minutes to accomplish the religious requirements of the prayer.

## Washing

Before each prayer, Muslims are required to wash their faces, hands and feet with clean water. This washing is normally performed in a rest room sink or other facility that has running water, and takes about two minutes.

## Prayer Space and Time

During the act of worship, which include specific recitations from the Qurlan, the Muslim will stand, bow and touch the forehead to the ground. Worship may be performed in any quiet, clean room. During the prayer, the worshiper will face toward Mecca (generally north-east in America). Total privacy is not required. However, others should not walk in front of or interrupt the worshipper during the prayer.

When the Muslim prays, he or she is fully engaged. He or she may not respond to a conversation. Students and teachers should not take offense if the worshipper

does not answer their call during the prayer. However, in case of an emergency, the Muslim will respond to an announcement by stopping the prayer immediately.

## **Organizing Prayers Through Extracurricular Clubs**

Teachers need not be involved in any way in student-initiated prayers. Muslim students, like their counterparts from other faiths, can establish extracurricular clubs to organize prayer activities.

## **Friday Congregational Prayer**

In Islam, Friday is the day for congregational worship, called Jum'ah. It is an obligation that must be fulfilled. Jum'ah lasts about one hour and takes place at the mosque during midday prayer. Those who are conscientious about attending this prayer may request a temporary release from school or an extended lunch period.

In high schools and universities where the number of students interested in performing the prayer is large, the function can be conducted by students on the school premises.

## **Pledge of Allegiance**

Islam discourages acts of reverence to anyone or anything but God. Some Muslims may be hesitant to recite the pledge of allegiance. This, however, should not be taken as a sign of disrespect to the symbol of the nation. Many Muslim

parents teach their children to stand up but not to recite the pledge.

In conclusion, with the recent leaps in communication technology and the changing demographics of our communities, American society is coming face to face with new cultures, new beliefs and new ideas. Giving students the tools to interact, to understand, and to learn from other cultures will offer them invaluable insights into the basic human qualities that we all share.

As the Qur'an says, *"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (Not that you may despise each other)."*

We hope the publication of this guide will be an important step toward that goal.

# Religious Accommodation Suggestions

## **Pork and pork by-products in lunches**

- Mark items with a red dot or a picture of a pig.

## **Muslim holidays**

- Schedule exams and other major events around holidays.
- Do not mark students absent.

## **Ramadan fast**

- Allow students to study in the library or elsewhere during lunch.

## **Physical education**

- Discuss clothing requirements with Muslim parents.
- Reschedule classes for students preferring samegender exercise environment.

## **Gender relations**

- Do not extend hand first for handshake with opposite sex.
- Avoid touching when comforting students and parents of opposite sex.

## **Family lifelsex education program**

- Allow parents reasonable time to review any material dealing with "sex education."
- Allow children to opt-out from all or part of the family life program.

## **Prayer**

- Allow Muslim students to pray in unused rooms.

## **Fairness in classroom and text presentations**

- Check textbook for religious bias.
- Invite Muslim speakers to social studies and world religion classes.

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