A History of Muslims in America

An Interactive Curriculum for Middle and High Schools

Developed by ING
Introduction

This curriculum *A History of Muslims in America* was designed to supplement content standards in social studies and world history as it relates to the study of American history. The curriculum was developed by ING based on our long experience delivering this and other presentations through live speakers. If you live in an area where there is a local Islamic Speakers Bureau (ISB) program, we recommend inviting a live speaker to deliver the presentation since this provides an opportunity to interact face-to-face. If you live in an area where there is no speaker’s bureau, or you prefer to deliver the presentation yourself, we have provided the content for each slide to accompany the digital presentation.

The curriculum is composed of eight lesson plans that each focus on the different parts of the digital presentation, *A History of Muslims in America*. The curriculum begins with notes for each slide in the presentation. In addition to the presentation notes, each lesson includes discussion questions, activities, and film clips that you can link to as well as discussion questions about the films. While the presentation can be used independently, it is more effective when supplemented by film clips which highlight the different topics addressed in each lesson. Please use the clips that you feel will resonate best with your students. These lessons were designed to be used either jointly or independently as stand-alone curriculum depending on the time available and your desired focus. For educators who want a more general overview, we also provide a basic curriculum about Muslim beliefs and practices called *Getting to Know American Muslims and Their Faith*.

At Islamic Networks Group (ING) our mission is to promote interreligious understanding, tolerance, and harmony through dialogue and religious literacy. It is our hope that through this curriculum we can provide balanced information to educators that will help supplement their curriculum in a manner that is relevant, engaging and informative.

Curriculum Standards

This curriculum addresses many themes created by the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards and the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. Many of these themes are also addressed in state social studies content standards, including those of the states of California, Texas, and New York.

Relevant Themes

Concepts such as beliefs, values, mores, institutions, cohesion, diversity, accommodation, adaptation, assimilation, and dissonance – (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 1: Culture)

Different interpretations of key historical periods and patterns of change within and across nations, cultures, and time periods – (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 2: Time, Continuity, and Change)

That complex and varied interactions among individuals, groups, cultures and nations contribute to the dynamic nature of personal identity (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 4: Individual Development and Identity)

Concepts such as: mores, norms, ritual, status, role, socialization, ethnocentrism, cultural diffusion, competition, cooperation, conflict, assimilation, race, ethnicity, and gender (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions)

Concepts and ideals such as: human dignity, social justice, liberty, equality, inalienable rights, responsibilities, civil dissent, citizenship, majority and minority rights, the common good, and the rule of law (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 10: Civic Ideals and Practices)
Analyze the role religion played in the founding of America, its lasting moral, social, and political impacts and issues regarding religious liberty (National Center for History in the Schools – US History Content Standards – Era 2: Standard 2; Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 12.3.3; New York Content Standards – Social Studies 7-8: United States and New York State History – Unit 2.3.C.2.B; Texas Education Agency Curriculum Standards-Social Studies – US Government – C.1.B)

Contributions of religious groups to American social change (National Center for History in the Schools – US History Content Standards – Era 4: Standard 4; Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 11.3.1)

Religious pluralism from 20th century immigration (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 11.3.4; New York Content Standards – Social Studies 7-8: United States and New York State History – Unit 7.2.A.2; Texas Education Agency Curriculum Standards-Social Studies – US History – C.24)

Trace the origins and development of American slavery (National Center for History in the Schools – US History Content Standards – Era 2: Standard 3; Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 8.7.2; New York Content Standards – Social Studies 7-8: United States and New York State History – Unit 5.3.F.1-6)

Examples of the lives of freed slaves (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 8.6.4)

Examples of leaders of abolition movement (Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 8.9.1)

Identify the new sources of large-scale immigration and the contributions of immigrants to the building of cities and the economy (National Center for History in the Schools – US History Content Standards – Social - Era 6: Standard 2; Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 8.12.7; New York Content Standards – Social Studies 7-8: United States and New York State History – Unit 7.2.A.2)

Location and impacts of renewed immigration (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools – 8.12.5)

Modern immigration movements (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools –11.11.1

Analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society (National Center for History in the Schools – US History Content).

Lesson Topics

This curriculum A History of Muslims in America is divided into eight distinct lesson plans with accompanying presentation notes, discussion and test questions, activities, and supplemental films. Each lesson covers the topics outlined below, which can be used alone or as part of the entire curriculum.

Lesson One: Muslims and America: A Long History

- American Muslims: A Diverse Community
- Morocco and American Independence
- The Founding Fathers and Religious Freedom
- A Brief Timeline of American Muslim History
Lesson Two: Before Columbus
• Did Muslims Come Before Columbus?
• Could African Muslims Have Crossed the Ocean?
• Crossing the Western Ocean: A West African Tale
• Traces of African Muslims in Clay Figures from Ancient America (early 1300s)

Lesson Three: Enslaved West African Muslims
• Esteban: The First African American
• Second Old World Faith in the New World
• Job, the Son of Solomon
• Yarrow Mamout
• Prince Abdul Rahman ibn Ibrahim Sori
• Omar ibn Said
• Two Georgian Bilalis: Bilali Muhammad and Salih Bilali
• Descendants of Muslim Slaves

Lesson Four: African American Rediscovery of Muslim Roots
• The Islamic Mission of America
• The Moorish Science Temple
• The Moorish Guide
• The Nation of Islam
• The Legacy of Malcolm X
• The Nation of Islam under Imam W. D. Muhammad
• African American Muslim Celebrities

Lesson Five: White and Latino Muslims
• Early White American Muslims
• Notable White American Muslims
• Notable Latino Muslims

Lesson Six: Muslim Influences on American Culture
• Towns with Arabic Names
• Islamic-Styled Architecture
• Cuisine
• A Piece of Our West African Legacy: Blues and Jazz
• Muslim Rappers
• Five Percenters and Hip hop
• Sufi Influences on American Culture
• American Sufism
Lesson Seven: Muslim Immigrants

- Early Muslim Immigrants
- First Wave: Mid-1800s – Early 1900s
  - Hi Jolly (Hajji Ali) & the 1856 U.S. Camel Corps
  - The Story of the Ice Cream Cone
- Second Wave: After WWI: Early Immigrants of the 1900s
  - Ross, North Dakota
  - Michigan City, Indiana
  - Cedar Rapids, Iowa
  - Immigrants from Many Nations
- Fourth Wave: 1965–Present
  - Immigration Act of 1965
  - Students and Professionals

Lesson Eight: American Muslims Today

- Muslims in the U.S. Today
- Famous American Muslims
- American Muslims in Academia
- American Muslims Serve Our Country
- Recognizing Muslim Holidays
- American Muslims—our Friends and Neighbors
- American Muslims Tomorrow
A History of Muslims in America

LESSON ONE:
Muslims and America: A Long History
Presentation Content, Discussion Questions and Activities
Introduction

This first lesson emphasizes the fact that Muslims are not new to America, but have been here for as long as or possibly prior to others. Some evidence shows that they may have preceded Columbus. They certainly came with the early European explorers and settlers. Muslims were explicitly referenced by America’s founding fathers, and were seen as potential citizens with rights and obligations no different from those of other Americans. Muslim immigrants and converts have helped to build America along with countless other groups of people. This history and background is an important part of the multiple pieces that make up the history and rich background of this country.

Content Focus and Themes
American Founding Fathers on Islam, American Religious Pluralism, Muslims in American History

Guiding Questions

• Are Muslims a new group in America’s population or have there always been Muslims in the United States?

• Did America’s Founding Fathers envision this as a Christian nation?

• Were any of America’s Founding Fathers willing to include Muslims in the open society that they were creating?

• What were the different phases in the history of Muslims in the United States?

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

• Describe the views of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin regarding the inclusion of Muslims in American religious pluralism.

• Explain the significance of Rep. Keith Ellison taking his oath of office on Jefferson’s copy of the Qur’an.

• Name the different phases in the history of Muslims in the United States.
Lesson One Presentation Content: Muslims and America: A Long History

The following presentation notes are designed to explain the subject matter on each respective slide when delivering the digital presentation that accompanies this curriculum. Italicized notes are either instructions or tips.

**Slide #1: Copyright**

*Notes:*
- Do not remove this slide. However, you should skip over it in a presentation.

**Slide 2: Title: A History of Muslims in America**

- America prides itself on being a pluralistic society—a society of many different groups of people (ethnic, racial, and religious). One such religious group is American Muslims.
- This presentation looks at the history of Muslims’ presence in America and their various contributions.
- We often speak of “Islam and the West” but we should also speak of “Islam in the West” since Muslims are, and have been, part of America since the beginning.

**Slide #3: Outline of Presentation**

- This presentation and curriculum is divided into the following topics:
  - In part one we will look at the long history of Muslims in America, including mention of Muslims by some of the Founding Fathers.
  - In part two we will look at the possibility of Muslim exploration of America even before Columbus.
  - In part three we will look at the history and some stories of enslaved West African Muslims.
  - In part four we examine African American rediscovery of their Muslim roots and in part five we will look at white and Latino Muslims.
  - In part six we will discuss various Muslim influences on American culture.
  - Part seven looks at the history of Muslim immigrants to the United States and part eight concludes with a discussion of American Muslims today.

**Slide #4: Part One: Muslims and America: A Long History**

- In this first lesson we will look at a brief description of American Muslims before discussing some of the foundations of the long history of Muslims in America.
- These include Morocco’s recognition of the new nation in 1777, and mention of Muslims and their faith by the founding fathers, who explicitly referred to them as potential citizens with rights and obligations no different from those of other Americans.
Slide #5: American Muslims: A Diverse Community

- Today there are between 3-6 million American Muslims, making Muslims a significant religious minority in the United States.

- Large American Muslim communities exist in all major urban areas such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, Detroit, Houston, and South Florida. Muslims in the United States are highly skilled, well-educated and have been contributing to American life for a very long time.

- Muslims in the United States make up one of the most talented and successful groups in the world.

- However, a growing number of American Muslims were born in America. In fact, a sizable segment of America’s Muslim population is African American—a group that is integral to the American story.

Slide #6: Morocco and American Independence

- The first nation in the world to recognize the United States was the Kingdom of Morocco in 1777.

- Ten years later, the two countries approved a treaty of peace and friendship, which today remains the longest unbroken treaty of its kind in all history.¹

Slide #7: The Founding Fathers on Religious Freedom

- America’s Founding Fathers established a nation founded on the concept of religious freedom. More than 200 years later, their views on religious liberty remain nothing less than inspirational. Many of their writings and actions explicitly showed that, though most Americans were Christian, the nation should be open to people of all faiths—including Muslims.

- In 1785, George Washington stated a willingness to hire “Mahometans,” and indeed people of any nation or religion, to work on his private estate at Mount Vernon. His criteria included neither religion nor ancestry, but work ethic and skills. Washington stated only that they needed to be “good workmen.”

- George Washington also suggested a way for Muslims to “obtain proper relief” from a proposed Virginia bill that proposed taxes to support Christian worship.²

- In 1776, John Adams published *Thoughts on Government*. In this book, Adams praised Muhammad as a “sober inquirer after truth” alongside Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, and other thinkers.³

¹ See: https://ma.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/io/. Also see the transcript of a speech by President Clinton about this event, remarks that were repeated by Presidents Bush and Obama: http://clinton6.nara.gov/2000/06/2000-06-20-remarks-by-the-president-and-king-mohammed-vi-of-morocco-a.html

² At the time, Muslims were commonly referred to in the West as Mahometans, Mussulmen, Moors, or Saracens, terms that Muslims themselves did not use.


⁴ Full-text available at the Online Library of Liberty: http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxml&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=592&chapter=76854&la=yout=html&Itemid=27
• By 1797, after John Adams had become president, he signed a treaty which stipulated that the United States had no “character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen.”

• Benjamin Franklin published his autobiography in 1791. In it, he stated that he was part of a religious community in Pennsylvania that had built a meeting place designed to accommodate preachers of “all religious persuasions.” Franklin wrote that “even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mohammedanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service.”

• Beyond the Founding Fathers, officials in Massachusetts were equally insistent that their influential Constitution of 1780 afforded “the most ample liberty of conscience … to Deists, Mahometans, Jews and Christians,” a point that Chief Justice Theophilus Parsons resoundingly affirmed in 1810.

Slide #8: Thomas Jefferson and Religious Freedom

• In his autobiography, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, expressed his strong desire that a bill establishing religious freedom in Virginia should not only extend to Christians of all denominations but also include “within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan [Muslim], the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.”

• Thomas Jefferson is also credited with hosting the first White House Iftar (breaking-the-fast dinner). On December 9, 1805, Thomas Jefferson received a Muslim guest named Sidi Soliman Mellimelli. This guest was an envoy from the ruler of Tunis and he spent six months in Washington. Mellimelli arrived during the month of Ramadan, and had been invited by President Jefferson to share a meal.

• Upon learning that Mellimelli was fasting for Ramadan, Jefferson changed the usual time of eating from 3:30 to sunset—when Muslims break the daily fast. By hosting the first White House Iftar, President Jefferson acknowledged the importance of his Tunisian envoy’s religion while also demonstrating the American model of religious inclusion. As discussed later in the curriculum on slide #64, the tradition of White House iftars was revived during President Bill Clinton’s administration in the 1990s. The tradition continued under the Bush and Obama administrations.

• Thomas Jefferson probably learned about Islam through his legal studies. In 1765, Jefferson purchased a copy of George Sale’s translation of the Qur’an, which was first printed in 1734 as Al Koran. He kept the two-volume copy in his personal library. Jefferson’s entire personal library, including his copy of Sale’s Qur’an, became the foundation of the Library of Congress in 1815.

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7 Hutson, “Founding Fathers”.
The first Muslim elected to the United States Congress, Keith Ellison, was sworn in on Thomas Jefferson’s copy of Sale’s Qur’an. The swearing in ceremony was held in January, 2007.10

Slide #9: Muslims Have Been Here for Some Time

While the exact time of their arrival is not sure, Muslims have been here for some time. This is a short timeline of American Muslim history which can serve as an overview for future lessons.

- **Before Columbus?**: Some scholars believe that Africans, including Muslims, came to America from West Africa, and perhaps even Europe (Muslim Spain and Portugal), long before Columbus. The theory is not yet widely accepted, but the evidence is also difficult to dismiss.

- **Enslaved West Africans (1500’s - 1800’s)**: There is no doubt that Muslims were a part of the Atlantic Slave trade, which transported millions of people from the Western coast of Africa to North, South, and Central America. The Atlantic slave trade lasted from the early-16th century until the mid-19th century.

- **Middle Eastern Pioneers (1800’s to early 1900’s)**: The first wave of voluntary Muslim immigrants to the United States began in the second half of the 19th century.

- **Early White Americans (late 1800’s)**: The first recorded stories of white American Muslims were in the early 19th century. While there are far more African American Muslims, there are a growing number of white American Muslims today.

- **Early African American Rediscovery (early 1900’s)**: Enslaved African Muslims were unable to pass on Islam to their descendants in America. However, starting around World War I, African Americans in Northern cities began to rediscover their Muslim heritage as part of their African past. At this point, though, many understood Islam in a very different way than their ancestors had understood it. During roughly the same period, some African American communities based on mainstream Islam also started to take root.

- **Continued Growth and Immigration (1965 to today)**: Since 1965, the population of American Muslims has grown tremendously. This has been due to conversion (especially among African Americans), immigration, and natural increase (birth). A growing number of American Muslims were born in the United States. Those who are immigrants to the United States mostly come from South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) or the Middle East (including North Africa and Iran).

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Post-Presentation Questions

Discussion Questions
1. How inclusive were America’s Founding Fathers when defining religious pluralism? What else could the Founding Fathers have done to promote religious pluralism here?
2. What statements made by the Founding Fathers illustrate their desire to include people of all religious persuasions to join their new republic? Why do you think they felt it was important to be inclusive of all faiths? Do you think that when they made statements about including Muslims they actually thought that Muslims would one day be a major population in the United States?
3. What were some of the different phases in the history of Muslims in the United States?

Activities
1. Divide students into teams. Ask the question: “What was the Founding Father’s vision for American religious pluralism?” Each side must discuss the intentions of the Founding Fathers and then present their position to the class.
2. Using the “Muslims have been here for some time” slide, have students create a timeline of the different periods in the history of Muslims in the United States.
3. Using the “Muslims have been here for some time” slide, have students brainstorm and list possible reasons that Muslims came to America. They should be time and group-specific.

Test Questions
1. True or false: Muslims are a group that is new to America. (answer: false)
2. True or false: None of America’s Founding Fathers were willing to include Muslims in the open society that they were creating. (answer: false)
3. Name four of America’s Founding Fathers who left clear evidence that they would include Muslims in America’s religious pluralism. (answer: Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams)
4. Which founding father owned a copy of the Qur’an? (answer: Thomas Jefferson)
5. Which United States congressman was sworn in using a copy of the Qur’an originally owned by an American Founding Father? (answer: Keith Ellison)
6. How inclusive were America’s Founding Fathers when defining religious pluralism? (answer: d)
   a. very narrow—each only included his personal Christian denomination
   b. narrow—they though pluralism should only include the Christian denominations
   c. broad—they were all open to people of any faith fully participating in American religious life
   d. a broad-leaning mix—a number of influential founding fathers included Islam in their definition of religious pluralism, but surely some less influential members did not.
7. Which statement is true? (answer: e)
   a. Muslims definitely came to the America’s before Columbus.
   b. There were no Muslims in the Thirteen English Colonies.
   c. The first African American Muslims were in the Nation of Islam.
   d. Muslim immigrants started coming to America in the 1960s.
   e. The Muslim population in the United States has grown tremendously since 1965.
Supplemental Film Content

In this section of the lesson we provide recommendations or links to films that relate to the topics we are discussing in this lesson. These films vary from clips taken from full length documentaries, to music videos and other short form documentaries. Each of the film names or links is accompanied by a brief description of the film as well as discussion questions for the class.

Note: like any online content, video or film links may change or no longer work over time. We apologize for any inconvenience.

Themes: Ramadan, American Muslims

In 1805 Thomas Jefferson hosted the first iftar dinner at the White House to honor the Tunisian ambassador Sidi Soliman Mellimelli who was visiting Washington at the time. In recent history President Clinton began the White House tradition of hosting an annual iftar dinner where American Muslim leaders gather with government officials to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan. In this speech from the 2009 dinner hosted by President Obama, he talks about Ramadan and many of the achievements and sacrifices of American Muslims.

Questions about the film:

1. In this clip, President Obama recited this quote by Muhammad Ali, “Rivers, ponds, lakes and streams - they all have different names, but they all contain water. Just as religions do - they all contain truths.” What do you think this means?

2. Why would the President of the United States celebrate different religious holidays at the White house? Why is this important practice? shows people visiting the mausoleum of Shaykh Amadou Bamba who is considered a great Sufi saint in West Africa.

3. In what ways does President Obama say that American Muslims are interwoven into the fabric of the United States?

References and Further Resources

The following are key resources that were used to research this lesson plan, in addition to internet searches which augmented these sources. They are also useful resources for further study on the topics covered in this lesson.

Books

