

BOOKNOTES

educators guide

ISLAMIC CULTURE

ABOUT THE BOOK

"For whatever else Muhammad may have been, he was, without question, a man of his time."

—Reza Aslan, *No god but God*

Approximately 1,400 years ago, an Arab merchant from Mecca had a divine vision. From this first revelation, the man known as Muhammad would launch a faith that would become the world's second largest religion. Could Muhammad have possibly realized that his teachings would become practiced by one in five people on the planet, just over 1.5 billion? In *No god but God: The Origins and Evolution of Islam*, author Reza Aslan traces the creation and growth of Islam from a historical perspective, beginning in 6th-century pagan Arabia where the population worshipped multiple gods, to the birth and prophecy of Muhammad, to the years after his death and the ever-shifting cultural, political, and economic forces that expanded and shaped the faith in ways that Muhammad could never have anticipated; the results of which are still being experienced by Muslims the world over. The line that Aslan draws from Islam's conception to the present day Islamic world is a fascinating and thought-provoking survey of a faith that has endured the test of time and continues to evolve to this day.



No god but God
The Origins and Evolution of Islam



Reza Aslan

Grades 7 up
Delacorte Press HC: 978-0-385-73975-7
GLB: 978-0-385-90805-4 • Ebook: 978-0-375-89826-6



In *The Genius of Islam: How Muslims Made the Modern World*, Bryn Barnard uses short, engaging text and gorgeous full-color artwork to bring Islam's contributions gloriously to life.

See teaching ideas on page 4!

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PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Islam and the Muslim world are major topics in today's news headlines. To determine what students already know, or think they know about Islam, divide the class into small groups, giving each group three minutes to jot down every piece of information they possess about Islam or its adherents. After time has elapsed, ask students to write their responses on a sheet of poster board and display it in front of the class. Review each group's board, noting similarities between groups. As in any activity about religion, there is bound to be disagreement. Encourage a civil conversation generated by the students' responses. Revisit the boards after students have completed the reading, uncovering and discussing myths, misinformation, and stereotypes.

Chapter One: Religion in Pre-Islamic Arabia

For Discussion: On page two of this chapter, the author writes, "As unique and divinely inspired as the Islamic movement may have been, its origins are undoubtedly linked to the multiethnic, multireligious society that fed the Prophet's imagination as a young man . . ." Discuss the cross-pollination of paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and other religious movements of the early 6th century C.E. that influenced Muhammad and, ultimately, Islam.

Curriculum Connection: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are three of the world's major religions (Christianity and Islam have the greatest numbers of adherents, respectively). Although these are separate faiths, they have much in common. Give students time to research the basic tenets of each faith, and create an original work of art that highlights their common beliefs.

Chapter Two: The World Muhammad Was Born Into

For Discussion: Reread from the bottom of page 14 through the second paragraph on page 16. Lead a discussion as to the fairness and effectiveness of the Law of Retribution. How can it be considered as a fair way of settling disputes in a traditional society? Discuss contemporary examples of this law still being applied today (gang warfare, ethnic conflicts, etc.).

Curriculum Connection: Stage a mock-arbitration based on the pre-Islamic Law of Retribution. Have students work together to brainstorm possible crimes that might have been committed within the tribe, but ones that would not be so easily resolved and would require a *Hakam*, or arbitrator. (On page 15, the author used the example of a stolen pregnant camel.) Invite the school principal to act as the *Hakam*. Stage the arbitration, giving each side time to state their side and for the principal/*Hakam* to render his decision.

Chapter Three: Muhammad in Mecca

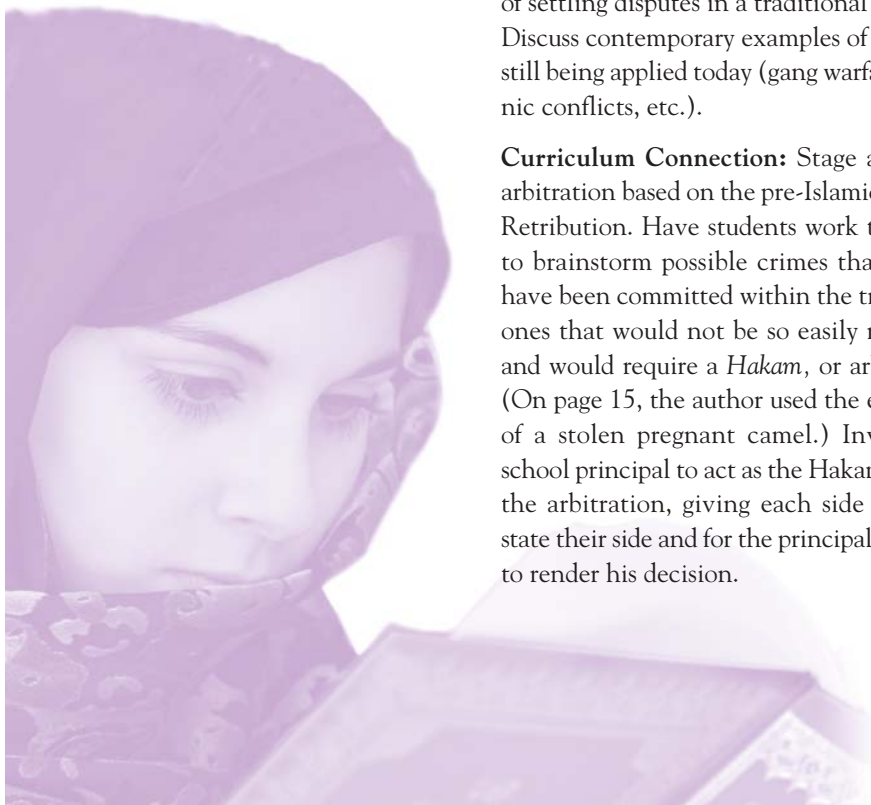
For Discussion: The author writes, "It seems certain that Muhammad, like all the prophets before him, wanted nothing to do with God's calling. So despondent was he about the experience that his first thought was to kill himself." (p. 31) Seen through the lens of time, it's hard to imagine that one who has become so revered would not want to take on the role of prophet. Discuss why Muhammad initially rejected the idea of being God's messenger. How could this role be a burden or have negative consequences? Why did his adversaries refer to him as an "insane poet?"

Curriculum Connection: On page 23, the author refers to *prophetic topos*. He writes, "Like the infancy narratives in the Gospels, these stories are not intended to relate historical events but to shed light on the mystery of the prophetic experience." Give students time to research the myths surrounding the prophet Muhammad, and to create a written or visual report that conveys their findings.

Chapter Four: Muhammad in Medina

For Discussion: Discuss how before Muhammad's revelations became a world faith, at its heart it was a social-reform movement. Discuss examples of Muhammad as humanitarian. How was the Ummah a "unique experiment in social organization"? (p. 54) Why were Muhammad's notions of forgiveness a radical idea for the time and place?

Curriculum Connection: The author writes, "Benevolence and care for the poor were the first and most enduring virtues preached by Muhammad in Mecca." (p. 56) Initiate a pro-social project with your students to benefit the underprivileged in the community. Have students form teams and write proposals on how the class (or school) can design and initiate a project, such as a food or clothing drive, a fundraiser for a local food pantry or homeless shelter, or other projects that benefits members of the community most in need.



Chapter Five: After Muhammad

For Discussion: In this chapter, readers learn about the period immediately following Muhammad’s death. Called the Golden Era of Islam, the author argues that this period was “anything but a time of religious concord and political harmony.” (p. 77) In light of the information presented in this chapter, discuss the following statement: “As is the case with all great religions, it was precisely the arguments, the discord, and the sometimes bloody conflicts that resulted from trying to discern God’s will in the absence of God’s prophet that gave birth to the varied and wonderfully diverse institutions of the Muslim faith.”

Curriculum Connection: On pages 95 and 96, the author introduces a group known as the Kharijites, a faction of the Ummah that are considered by historians to be the first Muslim extremists. Have students research the state of Muslim extremism today, beginning with the decade leading up to the 9/11 attacks and continuing through to the present.

Chapter Six: The Meaning of Jihad: Definition and Origin

For Discussion: Reread pages 104–107. Discuss how the stereotype of Islam as the “warrior religion” was based on Christian propaganda. Ask students to discuss the line on page 105, “Every religion was a religion of the sword.” Ask students to think about and explain why it is so important to understand the historical context of Islam (or any religion) to truly understand its people and its cultural beliefs. Given what students know about the teachings of Muhammad, discuss how the goals of Osama bin Laden and other leaders of Muslim extremism contradict those teachings.

Curriculum Connection: The word *jihad* is commonly found and heard in the news on a daily basis. Give students time to research the news of the last decade, searching for the word and how it has been used. Encourage students to study varying perspectives and beliefs surrounding its meaning.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Kidipede

www.historyforkids.org/learn/islam

Islam: Empire of Faith

www.pbs.org/empires/islam

Internet Islamic History Sourcebook

www.fordham.edu/halsall/islam/islamsbook.html



Photograph © 2011 by Mehrdokht Amini

Chapter Seven: Muslim-Jewish Relations

For Discussion: Have students reread the last paragraph on page 115. Given the respect that Muhammad had for the history and teachings of Judaism, why do you think this notion of Muslims and Jews being “spiritual cousins” has basically been lost from contemporary discourse? Why is it important to remember that the words of Muhammad were written by biographers over 100 years after his death, and not by the prophet himself? What did Muhammad mean by “People of the Book”? (p. 117)

Curriculum Connection: Have students work in teams to research the state of contemporary Jewish-Muslim relations. Assign each team a different Middle Eastern country, focusing how each of these states approaches the issue. Upon completion of research, teams will present their information to the class.

Chapter Eight: Women in Islam

For Discussion: Discuss the meaning of *code of ethics* and *cultural norms*. How can the treatment of women in contemporary Muslim societies be viewed on one hand as oppressive, and on the other as traditional? How much of women’s roles in certain Muslim countries is based on Islam and how much on cultural factors? Reread the text on pages 131–133. Discuss the evidence of misogyny in Islamic scholarship, and how the “variability of Arabic” has adversely affected Muslim women. Given what you know about Muhammad’s life and his treatment of women, how do you think he would feel about the role of women in contemporary Islamic societies?

Curriculum Connection: The rights of Islamic women vary from nation to nation. Assign each student or small groups of students a predominantly Muslim country to research. Students will focus on the rights of women in that country and report their findings to the class.

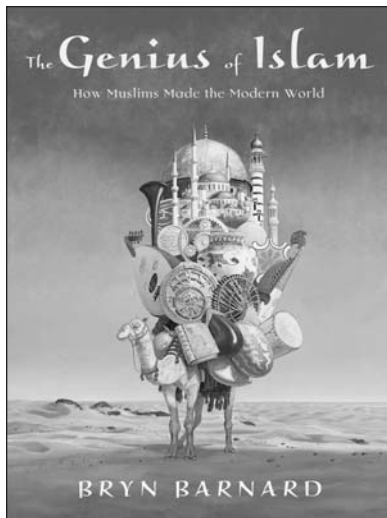
Chapter Nine: The Future of Islam

For Discussion: Given the world news, ask students what they think the future of Islam might look like? The author refers to an “inevitable cleansing” of bigotry and fanaticism, Islam’s “false idols.” (p. 140) Ask students to imagine a world where this is possible and what they believe must happen to achieve it.

Curriculum Connection: The author writes, “It is up to Muslims themselves, particularly young Muslims, to defend their faith from the ignorance and hatred of others, and thus to help write the next chapter of Islam’s story.” (p. 140) Work with students to form a club that promotes tolerance among people of differing faiths.

THE GENIUS OF ISLAM

HOW MUSLIMS MADE THE MODERN WORLD



Grades 3-7
Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-84072-2
GLB: 978-0-375-94072-9

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Write the following list of words on the board: pen, paper, pattern, pointed arch, astrolabe, hospital, waterwheel, crank, optics, marching band. Give students time to work in pairs to figure out what these words have in common. Give each team the opportunity to offer an answer. List the responses on the board. Finally, share with the class that the above words describe just a small sampling of contributions that Islamic thinkers have made to our world. Introduce the book and give students time to examine each chapter in detail.

ABOUT THE BOOK

In *The Genius of Islam*, author Bryn Barnard writes that “This new religion created one of the most innovative and influential civilizations on earth, an essential bridge between antiquity and modernity.” Spanning that “bridge” is a remarkably list of inventions and accomplishments that people all over the world enjoy to this day, many never knowing that basic acts such as handwriting, institutions such as hospitals, and basic technology such as the crank can be traced back to Islamic civilization. In fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, art, agriculture, and architecture, among others, Islamic thinkers and inventors have left their mark on our world in profound and enduring ways.

FOR DISCUSSION

After reading the book, what most surprised you about the contributions the Islamic civilization made to the world? How has reading this book changed your view of the Arab world and its history? Reread the final section of the text, *Learning to Forget*. How was the systematic removal of “all Arab learning from European education” a dark moment in human history? (p. 34)

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Give students time to read the text. Have students choose one innovation or invention from Islamic civilization to research in greater detail. Allow students time to gather information. Have each student present their research in a visual format, such as a PowerPoint slide show, a poster, or an original work of art.

INTERNET RESOURCE

1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in Our World
www.1001inventions.com

ON THE WEB

For bios, teachers guides, and more, visit our FREE online site:

Teachers @RANDOM

Be sure to sign up for our online newsletter
www.randomhouse.com/teachers



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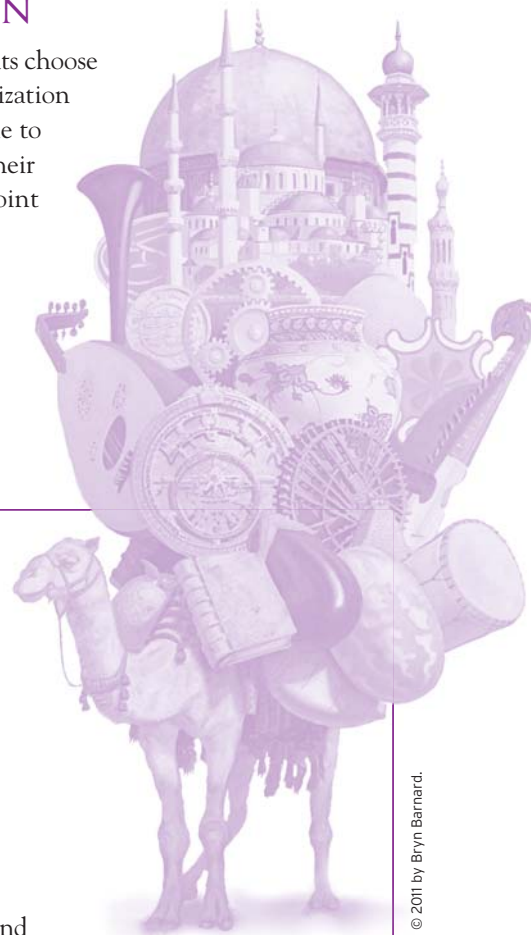


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