

# Introduction to Islam

## Lesson 6: Episode “Swimming Upstream”

11.5.2023

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**Objectives:** Explore the challenges and tensions inherent in living a Muslim life in Western secular society

**Materials:** Laptop/DVD/TV, blank cards.

**Time allotments** suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

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### 1. **Nametags and Graffiti Wall** (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
  - ▶ What was your most memorable Halloween costume?
  - ▶ What religions are noticeable in public? What religions are hidden?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

### 2. **Silly Fun: Guess Who?** (5 minutes max)

Give each youth 2 blank cards to write 2 little known facts about themselves. (Teachers included, too!) For example: *I was born exactly at midnight, I am ambidextrous, I have gone hiking in the Swiss Alps.* Teacher collects and mixes cards in a basket, then draws one card at a time and reads aloud for youth to guess whose fact it is. (Please don’t guess aloud if it’s your own card!) See who can guess the most correctly.

### 3. **Chalice Lighting:** Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

**Teacher reads:** (from Sufi mystic, Hafiz)

*“I said to the master of the tavern, ‘Tell me, which is the road to salvation?’ He lifted his wine and said, ‘Not talking about the faults of other people.’”*

### 4. **“Little Mosque on the Prairie” Screening and Discussion** (see Episode Viewing Guide)

**\*\*Note:** Each episode is about 23 minutes, pausing at several moments during the episode for discussions (amounting to 20 minutes of conversation). Please use viewing-and-discussing time accordingly for the 50 minutes of total classroom time.

Class will watch the episode, but pause before starting and during commercial breaks to reflect on elements of Islam. (Commercial breaks have the logo show up on the screen.) Pause the DVD, summarize the information aloud, and facilitate any discussion that arises. **Important: Teachers should read through content materials ahead of time and be familiar enough to summarize main points and facilitate discussion.**

**For teacher reference—Cast of Characters:**

- Yasir – contractor, Lebanese, married to Sarah, not a particularly observant Muslim
- Amaar – the new imam, from Toronto, moves to Mercy to serve this new mosque
- Rayaana – Yasir’s and Sarah’s daughter, doctor, feminist Muslim
- Mayor Popowicz – Sarah’s boss, mayor of Mercy, Saskatchewan
- Baber – a very conservative Muslim man (not an imam)
- Rev. Magee – Anglican priest, rents his church out to the mosque
- Fred – bigoted radio show host
- Fatima – owner of local café
- Sarah – converted to Islam when she married Yasir, works for Mayor
- Layla – Baber’s teenaged daughter, her mom died so her dad is a single parent
- Joe – a nervous, bigoted citizen of Mercy

**For teacher reference—Plot summary of Season 1, Episode “Swimming Upstream”**

Fatima and Rayaana are on a crusade to get a female lifeguard at the pool. Rayaana has suggested to Fatima that taking the women’s aquafit class would help with her sprained knee. But as Muslims, they cannot appear in their bathing suits in front of men. They feel they can’t take the class, as the lifeguard and aquafit instructor is a man, despite the fact that Johnny is gay and has no interest in Fatima, Rayaana, or any woman. The mayor agrees to hire a female lifeguard/aquafit instructor if they can find the money in the city’s budget, and if Rayaana and Fatima can get 150 signatures on a petition. As Rayaana and Fatima proceed on their mission, Sarah tries to thwart it as the money in the budget is coming from a business trip she has planned to China. As such, she tricks Fred into supporting her view. Fred causes a media frenzy about kowtowing to the Muslim community. Rayaana finds out and is angry with her mother. Ultimately, the pool pump breaks and both Sarah’s trip to China and the female lifeguard are nixed in order to fix the pump. That means that Fatima will just have to cover up to attend Johnny’s aquafit class. Meanwhile, it’s Halloween and Fatima’s son, Jamal, and Baber’s daughter, Layla, want to partake in the western ritual. Fatima allows Jamal, but Baber thinks it’s an evil practice. Amaar, wanting to support the youth, allows them to partake under the guise of calling it “Halaloween” and dressing up as items from the Qur’an. Jamal’s and Layla’s costumes as a fig and olive don’t go over well, but their escort Baber, wearing his ordinary clothes, becomes the Halloween hit dressed as “the terrorist.”

5. **Say goodbye until next time:** Extinguish the chalice, saying together:  
*“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

**6. Help clean up classroom** before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets

# EPISODE VIEWING GUIDE: “Swimming Upstream”

## BEFORE THE EPISODE

**Teacher summarizes:** What do Muslims believe about evil? Why do people commit evil acts? All religions offer an explanation for the human capacity to do evil. Muslims, like Christians and Jews, believe in Satan or *Iblis*, the Arabic name for the Devil. In these traditions, Satan is not equal to God but was created as one of the angels. According to the Qur’an, when Allah commanded all of the angels to bow down before Adam, Iblis refused seeing that Adam was created from inferior clay while he himself was an angel created of fire. As a result, Iblis was forced out of heaven and further punishment postponed until the Day of Final Judgment. Iblis vows to avenge himself by distracting humankind from the righteous path.

In this episode, you will hear Baber talking about how Western secular society is evil, and Fred Tupper portraying Muslims as evil. We’ll talk about the tension between the two viewpoints, and think about what it’s like being a Muslim in a predominantly Judeo-Christian country like the U.S. and Canada.

## FIRST COMMERCIAL BREAK

### Questions for Discussion:

- Why is their tension between Fred Tupper and Fatima? Why won’t she let him help her when she hurts her knee?
- Muslims are not allowed to touch strangers of the opposite gender. Imagine what challenges this might present in our society where people shake hands. How would you handle meeting a Muslim of the opposite gender, knowing their religious constraints but wanting to seem as friendly as you are?
- Sometimes, Muslim youth will avoid awkwardness by saying that they have a cold and shouldn’t shake hands. What do you think about this?

## SECOND COMMERCIAL BREAK

**Teacher summarizes:** In Muslim art, it’s generally forbidden to draw or paint humans or animals. It too closely imitates being God, creating images of animate beings. Most Muslim art features complex geometric and floral designs, or exquisite calligraphic renderings of verses from the Qur’an. This is why Layla and Jamal cannot be animals or people for Halloween.

### Questions for Discussion:

- Do you think of Halloween as a religious holiday? Many public schools have limited the celebration of Halloween because it has roots in pagan religious traditions.

- Why is it important to Layla and Jamal to go trick-or-treating?
- As a UU, do you celebrate Christmas? Is Jesus an important religious figure in your family? Why do you think many UUs put up Christmas trees and attend Unity's pageant, even though they don't consider themselves Christian?

## **AFTER THE EPISODE**

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- Does this episode give you new or different ideas about what it must be like to be a practicing Muslim living in the Twin Cities?
- Some difficulties in being a Muslim American come from actual conflicts of ideology, while other difficulties come from misunderstanding or lack of awareness. Can you find an example of each of these in this episode?
- Reverend Magee says to Amaar, "You don't leave your faith behind when you leave the mosque." Is that part of the challenge for Muslims, trying to live their faith in a secular culture or one that keeps to a certain "separation of church and state"? Do you leave your faith behind when you leave Unity Church?