

Introduction to Islam

Lesson 7: Episode “The Convert”

11.12.2023

Objectives: Explore the relationship between American media and Muslim Americans.

Materials: Laptop/TV/DVD, basket of cards.

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

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:
 - ▶ Name someone you know who changed from practicing one religion to another?
 - ▶ Do you think the media generally does a Good, Average, or Poor job of portraying religious people?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Would You Rather...? (5 minutes max)

In the classroom, there will be a selection of cards with questions “Would You Rather...?” Read a few questions aloud and ask the youth to physically move themselves to designated places in the room based on their answers (so standing vote). Give each cluster a few minutes to chatter about their reasons.

Example: “Would you rather be confined to your room for one year OR go wherever you want but always have to wear a giraffe costume?”

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, Rumi)

“Let the beauty of what you love be what you do.”

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 “The Convert”

“White” Marlon is a new convert to Islam. He is extreme in his beliefs and denounces those who are not as devout as he. His arrival sparks talk about Sarah’s faith, or lack thereof, as a former convert to Islam. She bets Rayaana that she can be a good Muslim by praying five times a day for the next month. This proves to be a little more difficult than expected as she prays all the time and gets no sleep, affecting her job and her relationships. Baber is excited to see such enthusiasm for faith in Marlon, until he spends time with him and thinks Marlon has gone a little too far in his beliefs. Yasir, Sarah, Rayaana, Fatima, and Baber decide that they need to get Marlon to “quit” being a Muslim, and stage of prank showing Marlon that the Muslims of Mercy are really not that devout or serious about their faith. After the prank, however, they feel they have done wrong by trying to deflate someone else’s faith in Islam. Marlon, a spiritual shopper, decides on his own that Islam is not for him and moves onto Reverend Magee’s parish.

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: “THE CONVERT”

BEFORE THE EPISODE

Question for Discussion:

- What makes someone a “real” Muslim versus a “fake” one?

Teacher summarizes: Of the five pillars of Islam, the primary and most important is to believe that there is one God and creator, Allah, and that the prophet Muhammad is His last and final messenger. A person is considered to have converted to Islam from the moment they sincerely make this *declaration of faith*, called the *shahadah*. Islam teaches that everyone is a Muslim at birth because every child has a natural inclination to goodness and to worship the one true God alone. The world can cause the child to turn away from this true path, but when someone accepts Islam, they *revert* (not convert) to their original condition.

FIRST COMMERCIAL BREAK

Teacher summarizes: The episode starts with the end of a sermon or *khutbah* (sermon at the Friday Prayer). There is a new person, Marlon, who is interested in becoming a Muslim. Baber exclaims, “What a blessing! Our first real convert!” unlike Sarah whom Baber thinks is a bad Muslim and not a true convert.

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you think about Sarah who doesn’t “look” the usual media portrayal of a Muslim woman (wears *hijab*, is Middle-Eastern, etc.)?
- What do you think are the main features that define a Muslim?

SECOND COMMERCIAL BREAK

Questions for Discussion:

- First, what details did you notice that help define a Muslim? (*Hint: prohibitions about gambling, eating pork, need to pray, gender roles, converting others, and more.*)
- What does Marlon mean when he talks about “taking Islam seriously”?

Teacher summarizes: As in all religions, there are a number of prohibitions in Islam. And as in all religions, not all Muslims follow every one of the prohibitions to the letter:

- Prohibition on eating pork (Baber refers to the pig as “the cloven-hooved swine”). Most Muslims agree that Islam prohibits eating pork and foods that have been prepared with

or next to pork products (in keeping with *halal* or “lawful” practice). But interestingly, most Muslims, not just the devout, avoid pork. They may not pray and have no intention of going on *hajj* but they nevertheless avoid pork *as a cultural practice*.

- Other prohibitions include alcohol, gambling, gossip, usury (charging interest on loans); yet there are Muslims who drink or gamble or carry mortgages and high-interest credit cards.
- Some prohibitions are more controversial, including ban on music. Some believe music is prohibited, but many Muslim cultures have a rich tradition of music.
- Wearing gold or silk *for men* was traditionally considered a sign of hoarding or showing off wealth, when wealth was something that Muslims were to spread around the community. Women, however, were exempt from this prohibition as gold or silk were commonly part of their dowries (money given to them by their husbands at marriage). If her husband died or abandoned her, she would have to support herself and her children from her dowry.
- One of the most controversial and debated prohibition concerns women revealing or covering their hair in front of unrelated adult males. Some believe wearing *hijab* is mandatory while others believe it is optional.

THIRD COMMERCIAL BREAK

Questions for Discussion:

- Baber invites Marlon over to his home, and when Marlon criticizes “Western decadence” and looks to Taliban beating woman into submission, Baber suggests finding a “role model a little bit closer to home.” What does Baber mean?
- Who really is the “role model a little bit closer to home”? Think about Sarah who is struggling to pray and stay awake. Is the episode trying to say that (1) you can be a Muslim without keeping to all the practices, or (2) that Sarah is really flaky and not a “real” Muslim compared to others, or (3) that following Islam itself is really unrealistic, outdated, strange, and oppressive to people’s lives today?

Why would the filmmaker – Zarqa Nawaz, a British-Canadian Muslim woman – have a character like Sarah on the show?

- To get rid of Marlon, the Muslim community fakes being decadent and everything non-Muslim. Rather than challenging Marlon’s definition of being Muslim, their prank seems to be based on those views he holds. Why is it so hard to question such black-and-white understandings as Marlon seems to have?

AFTER THE EPISODE

Questions for Discussion:

- Yasir tells Baber, “Settle down, Saladin, the Crusades are over.” (Saladin led the Muslims against the European Crusaders in the 12th Century; and at the height of his power, his sultanate included Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Hejaz, Yemen, and other parts of North Africa.) How is it that religious identity has so often been the cause of hatred, war, and violence?
- Amaar finally tells Marlon that it’s great to find a new religion but that you have to “ease into it.” Should people ease into Islam? Has Islam itself eased into a new culture and community? Even as people convert to Islam, does Islam itself convert into new place and times?
- How pronounced and noticeable is your UU identity? How is your UU identity countercultural to dominant US culture?