



Jewish Reconstructionist Communities
In Association with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Twelve Things I Learned About Islam and Muslim Americans

Like many Americans, before 2001 I knew only a very few things about Islam and Muslims. Unfortunately, most of what I “knew” was not correct. While I still have much to learn, at least I now know a bit more than I did. Here are just 10 things that surprised me when I first learned them. Since I am not an authority, you should not take my word for any of this. I have included links for each item. Please follow up for yourself.

1) Allah is the Arabic word for God, not a proper name.

Despite the title of a recent well-meaning book (*God and Allah Need to Talk*), God and Allah do *not* need to talk because "Allah" is the word for "God" in Arabic. Jews and Christians, when speaking Arabic, refer to God as Allah. (Here is a link to an Israeli [movie](#) from the 1950's in which a recent Jewish immigrant from an Arabic speaking country sings a refrain : “God knows” or, as he puts it, “*Allah Yodeah*.” The song begins at 23 seconds.)

Why is this important? For me, as for many Jews, Islam once seemed impossibly exotic. Once I learned more about Islamic civilization, including getting to know many Muslims and learning a little Arabic, that changed. Now, there are aspects that still seem foreign to me, but many more that feel remarkably familiar.

2) The Qur'an is not the best place to begin an education about Islam.

While it is true that the Qur'an is at the heart of the faith of Muslims, the book itself can be misleading for a beginner (much like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.) I had heard that the Qur'an is considered "the word of God," but did not understand that most Muslims have read and interpreted the Qur'an for centuries in creative ways. The Protestant-inspired reactionary Arabian movement known as Wahabism, a literalist approach to the Qur'an, emerged in modern times. It should not be confused with classical Islam, nor with the way Muslim Americans today are likely to understand their text. As Omid Safi put it, "The Qur'an is more than merely the holy book...It is read, debated, memorized, critiqued, emulated, internalized and expounded upon." And, perhaps most important, chanted. Just don't sit down and try to read it straight. For a good introduction, try Michael Sell's [Approaching the Qur'an](#)

3) Islam is not a religion of war.

But neither is it a religion of peace. Islam, like Judaism, is a multi-vocal, evolving religious civilization that includes within its texts, traditions and practitioners a great variety of ideas, including those that can be used to justify violence and those that can inspire the opposite. Islam does not “say” anything. Muslims

do. When Muslim Americans are confronted with the charge that their religion is essentially one of violence, they often respond with a similarly essentialist statement, arguing that the religion is all about peace. While the defensiveness is understandable, neither claim does justice to the nuances of a civilization spread over five continents and 1300 years.

While we are on the subject, the word jihad does not mean "armed terrorism." Jihad is an Arabic word meaning, "the struggle for good, be it spiritual, intellectual or military." For more on this, check out <http://www.myjihad.org>

4) Many smart, thoughtful, feminist women are also proud Muslims.

Relying on reports by some Muslim women (e.g. Irshad Manji, Asra Q. Nomani, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Nonie Darwish) I had one perspective on the role of women in Islam. I now know there are many smart, thoughtful Muslim American women who view the role of women in their faith community with the same nuanced love and critique one finds in the writing of Jewish and Christian feminists. Check out www.altmuslimah.com, or a popular magazine like www.azizahmagazine.com.

As we know from our own Jewish experience, "native informants" are not always the most reliable source for understanding a community. That said, dissident Muslims, like dissident Jews, may have an important perspective. Sorting this all out can be a challenge.

5) Only a small minority of African American Muslims currently identify with the Nation of Islam.

The Nation of Islam is a new religious movement founded in 1930 in Chicago. Since the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, the majority of Black American Muslims have followed his son, Warith Dean Muhammad, into mainstream Sunni Islam. So they are "Black" and "Muslim" but they are not "Black Muslims." Most of them consider the Nation of Islam to be heretical because of its black separatist roots; core Islamic teachings are anti-racist. There are many excellent short introductions to the history of Black Americans and Islam, but if you want to really get the story, read the foremost intellectual, Professor Sherman Jackson: [*Islam and the Black American*](#).

6) One quarter of Muslims are Arab, both worldwide and in this country.

When I thought I knew more, I confused Muslim with Arab. At most a quarter of Muslims worldwide are Arab. Muslims live in Arab countries, but also throughout South Asia, East Africa, China and elsewhere. A similar percentage of Muslims in the United States are Arab, although when I ask Jewish audiences, they always guess higher. Muslim American communities are among the most diverse religious groups racially, economically, and politically. The other Muslims in America are African American (as many as 40% by some counts), immigrants from South Asia and Africa, Hispanic Americans, and Caucasian Muslims by choice. For more details on the demographics of the Muslim American community, the [Pew Research Center](#) is an excellent resource.

7) There is a clash of civilizations, but it is not between Muslims and the

West.

In the early 1990's, Samuel P. Huntington, a scholar of the Middle East, popularized a theory of the "clash of civilizations." He believed there was a clash between the "Muslim world" and "the West." But Muslims live around the world, including the West. The real clash is between those Muslims who are modernists and those who are not. A similar clash exists in Judaism and Christianity. David Brooks wrote a good [column](#) in the New York Times in March of 2011, explaining where he thought Huntington went astray.

8) Proposed Anti- Sharia legislation addresses a problem that does not exist.

The legislation outlawing Sharia that has been proposed in over 20 states is a solution to a problem that does not exist. Wajahat Ali [explains](#) it better than I can. There is no one thing called Sharia. Similar to Halacha, Sharia is a body of law and interpretation that has developed over centuries in different places. It is overwhelmingly concerned with personal religious observance such as prayer and fasting. Virtually no Muslims in America want to impose sharia on the rest of the country. If you want a more scholarly treatment, check out the Chicago-Kent Law Review [discussion](#).

9) Muslim Americans have repeatedly condemned acts of terror by other Muslims.

We hear too little about these condemnations in the mainstream media, much less on Fox News. For Muslim Americans, especially young people, it is a challenge to have to continually explain that they are as appalled as any American (if not more so) by violence in the name of their religion. Instead of being able to grieve the loss of human life along with everyone else, Muslims are often required to "denounce" the terror and defend their own faith, convincing people they are not "extremists." This is a distraction for them from their own work. The Study of Islam group of the American Academy of Religion is one of many groups that have gathered the evidence of hundreds and hundreds of [condemnations](#) by Muslim groups of terrorist acts.

10) Muslim Student Associations on college campuses have many concerns besides pro-Palestinian activism.

MSA's have been organized on campuses across the United States and Canada since 1963. Their activities include prayers, lectures, discussion, social events, lobbying for university recognition of their holidays and halal food, raising funds for charity and dispelling stereotypes about Islam. Examples of such projects include the [Islam Awareness Week](#), [Fast-a-thon](#), and [Project Downtown](#). MSA National has promoted civic engagement through educating and empowering students to register to vote. In addition, it has provided a unifying voice for students in the face of anti-Islamic bigotry through the Pride Not Prejudice initiative. While individuals and even a particular MSA may take an activist stance on the issues of Middle East politics, it is not the major concern of the groups, and views vary widely. [A May 2012 article in the Jewish Forward](#) gives a balanced perspective. Similarly, Muslim groups beyond the campus vary in their interest in Israel and Palestine, something that is often a challenge in Jewish-Muslim relations. There's much more to say and learn about that issue!

11) While the issue of Israel and Palestine can be the rampaging 500 pound elephant in a room where Jews and Muslims gather, conversation is possible.

Reza Aslan had written that the wall dividing Israel and Palestine runs metaphorically across the globe dividing Jews and Muslims. That is true, but less so than it once was. Perhaps the most exciting part of doing this work here in America is that we are in a position to breach that wall. Red lines on both sides (often, ironically, the same red line in mirror image—BDS) are softening in both communities. See, for example, the testimony of young American Muslims who went to Israel as part of the Muslim Leadership Initiative of the Shalom Hartmann Institute (e.g. <http://time.com/2917600/muslim-american-zionists/>)

12) Profiling Muslim Americans is not the most effective way to protect Americans from terrorism.

There are certainly some nuances, but my sense is that some of the most widely known examples such as the NYPD effort have been criticized not only by Muslims and their allies but by counter terrorism specialists as ineffective.

[A quick excerpt from Media Matters:](#)

Earlier this week, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the city planned to dismantle the constitutionally-questionable "Demographics Unit" of the New York Police Department (NYPD), a secretive program that relied on [blanket surveillance and racial profiling](#) of Muslim American communities both within and without the city. The program's indiscriminate spying on innocent Muslims on the basis of ethnicity and religion raised red flags not only among civil liberties advocates, but also among counter-terrorism experts. As *The New York Times* explained, the [FBI was so alarmed about this CIA-initiated program](#) that "F.B.I. lawyers in New York determined years ago that agents could not receive documents from the Demographics Unit without violating federal rules." The top FBI official in New Jersey, where the Demographics Unit conducted "surveillance of mosques and Islamic student organizations," [pointed out](#) that this widespread "police surveillance had made Muslims more distrustful of law enforcement and made it harder to fight terrorism."

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