

Ramadan/Eid al-Fitr

Islam's holy month of fasting and feasting

Learning About Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr

Teaching about religion in a classroom might seem fraught with difficulty but focusing on the customs associated with important faith-based holidays is a great place to begin, especially with kids. This text set explores the Islamic, month-long observance of Ramadan and the festive holiday of Eid al-Fitr, which occurs when Ramadan ends. Throughout the month, family, friends, and community members gather together for prayers, charitable giving, and evening feasts. Islam is the 2nd largest religion in the world (behind Christianity) with over 1.5 billion adherents, and Ramadan is Islam's most important holiday period. This has prompted world-wide interest in the month-long holiday, which means there are lots of available educational resources, even for those not affiliated with the religion.

Ramadan is the 9th month on the Islamic calendar, so the holiday and the month share the same name. Islam uses a lunar calendar with each new month starting with the new moon. There are only about 354 days in a lunar-based year (compared to 365 days in the solar-based year), which means that the start of Ramadan “moves up” about 11 days every year. As a result, it eventually falls during every season.

Ramadan is primarily known for its rules of fasting: no food or drink from dawn to sunset for each day of the entire month. Muslims (the word given to followers of Islam) are also instructed to refrain from destructive behaviors (like arguing and gossiping), smoking, swearing, and sex during the same hours. People who are old/sick and women who are pregnant/menstruating/breast-feeding are not required to fast. Children generally begin fasting as tweens/young teens, but younger children sometimes try fasting for shorter parts of the day. While the observance means different things to different people, many Muslims say Ramadan provides opportunities to focus on one's faith. It also provides a glimpse into what it is like to be hungry, which can be an important lesson for children.

Muslims are allowed to eat before dawn. This early-morning meal is called *suhoor* {soo-HOOR}. The rest of the day continues as usual. In Muslim-majority countries, schools and workplaces may close a bit earlier in the day but, in most parts of the world, no official modifications are made. Parents go to work, kids attend school, and athletes practice their sports; they just do so while avoiding all food/drink. Muslims are also allowed to eat after sunset. Often, the daily fast is broken with dates and water. After that, big meals, called *iftars* {IF-tarz} are served. Friends and relatives gather in homes, community members gather at mosques (Muslim houses of worship) and, in Muslim-majority countries, restaurants stay open into the wee hours of the morning to accommodate evening diners. In most mosques and homes, non-Muslims are also welcome to attend *iftars*, and interfaith *iftars* are becoming increasingly popular around the globe.

Observing Ramadan through fasting is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Another Pillar is praying 5 times a day. Specific prayer times are determined by the sun's position in the sky and are announced with the *adhan* {AHD-hahn}, or call-to-prayer, which is broadcast from mosque towers, called minarets {MIN-uh-retz}. During Ramadan, most *iftars* also include additional prayers, as well as Arabic recitations from the Quran {ker-AN} by faith leaders, called *imams* {ee-mamz}. Another Pillar of Islam is *zakat* {ZAH-kaht}, or charitable giving. Opportunities for performing community service, making monetary donations, and sharing food with neighbors or those who are less fortunate abound during the month of Ramadan.

At the end of the month, when the new moon is sighted, once again, Ramadan concludes with a 3-day celebration, called *Eid al-Fitr* {EED ahl-FITTER}. Decorations, gifts, special treats, and carnivals all help to make the festival special. The most common greeting, said by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, is “Eid Mubarak” {EED moo-BAR-uk}, which means, “Blessed Festival”!

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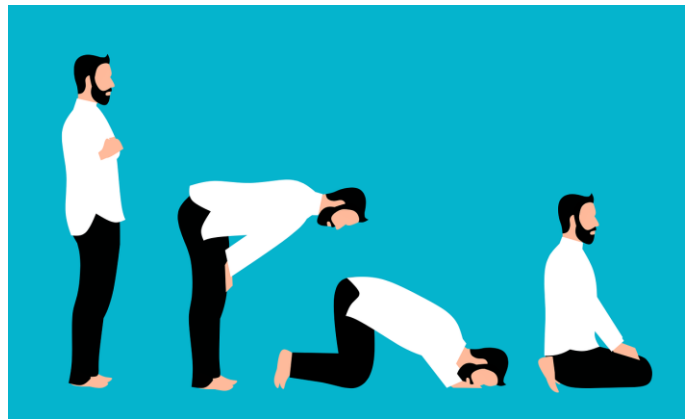
Muslim houses of worship are called mosques. They come in all shapes and sizes, but many have domes, and they all have at least one tower, called a minaret, which broadcasts the calls-to-prayer five times a day. (Pixabay: Makalu)



Mosque interiors also vary widely, but the décor often includes colorful tile mosaics, elaborate geometric designs, and calligraphy. The floor is often carpeted for prayers, and shoes are removed before entering. At some points in the past, it was acceptable to show the face of the Prophet Muhammad. Nowadays, it is considered highly disrespectful. (Pixabay: strategeme2015)



The daily fast often ends by eating dates and drinking water before enjoying the evening's *iftar* feast. (Pixabay: SW Yang)



Ramadan observances usually include additional prayers. In Islam, everyone performs the same prayer postures at exactly the same time while standing shoulder-to-shoulder in a line. Women generally pray behind the men. (Pixabay: Mohamed Hassan)



When inside a mosque, both women and men dress modestly and respectfully. Women almost always cover their heads with something like the *hijab* {hee-JOB} shown here. Muslim men sometimes cover their heads with a prayer cap. Some people wear head coverings whenever they are out in public. Others wear head coverings only when visiting a mosque. (Unsplash: Qalam Eka Maulana)

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Primary Sources

What is Ramadan? The Islamic Holy Month - Behind the News. Uploaded June 25, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pvmUoYNbmU>

This video (3:30) from the Australian Public Broadcast service is a great overview of Ramadan. It includes information on the fasting rules, *suhoor* (pre-dawn meal), *iftar* (break-fast meal), and the Eid. It also provides opportunities to see the inside of a mosque, some of the foods that are eaten, and Islamic prayer postures. The narration is punctuated by interviews with tweens.

What is Eid al-Fitr? Ramadan & the Festival of Breaking the Fast - Behind the News. Uploaded June 4, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OF4HEGNBRQ>

This video (3:30), also from the Australian Public Broadcast service, features tweens describing Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr from their perspective. It contains some of the same footage as the 2015 video, but it has a bit more on the Eid.

What is Ramadan? Reading Through History. Uploaded May 30, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5Hra3KwWqQ>

This video (4:35) offers a straight-forward voice-over narration that is accompanied by great still photos from around the world. Traditional faith practices, as well as some intrafaith differences, are depicted. At the 1-minute mark, the narrator mentions “smoking” and “swearing” when he says, “Muslims are supposed to refrain from smoking – or engaging in other activities that might be harmful to the body. Swearing and arguing are also discouraged during this holy month.”

Recommended for kids in grades 3-5.

What is Ramadhan and Why Do Muslims Fast? Uploaded June 27, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Y8768sLli6g>

This mesmerizing video (3:45) shows an artist quickly drawing simple, but relevant, images on a whiteboard while he talks about the month of Ramadan and the rules of fasting. It does not mention Eid, and he does draw a cigarette at one point since Muslims are supposed to refrain from smoking during Ramadan. Recommended for kids in grades 3-5.

Ramadan by Hannah Eliot (auth.) and Rashin (illus.) – Mama Read Me a Book. Uploaded July 22, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT6Jp7fkW1M>

This read-aloud video (2:30) is a great way to introduce Ramadan to kids in Preschool/Kindergarten.

Tell Me More About Ramadan by Bachar Karroum & Tanja Varcelija – Michele Thomas. Uploaded April 28, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRh1FE7nNXA>

This video (5:30) starts off a bit slowly as she reviews the vocabulary words, but then the pace picks up. The narrator is African American. Many African-American children know someone who is Muslim, so this might be particularly appropriate for some classrooms.

It's Ramadan, Curious George by Hena Khan & Mary O'Keefe Young – Storytime with the Mayor Uploaded May, 12, 2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cMRqrf_xx0

Many people are familiar with the Curious George brand, so there are several read-aloud video options. This one (6:30) is read by the Mayor of Cambridge, MA, Sumbul Siddiqui, who came to America from Pakistan when she was two years old.

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Secondary Sources

What is Ramadan? Uploaded July 22, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kM27b-iaBg>

This kid-friendly video (4:15) provides a quick overview of Ramadan and the fasting rules. Footage is taken from kids who attend an Islamic school in Australia. The information about the Islamic lunar calendar during the last minute gets is fairly detailed.

What Is Ramadan? – NowThisWorld. Uploaded June 19, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ikpzGMOB5Y>

This newsy video (2:30) about Ramadan offers a solid overview for adults.

Why Muslims fast during Ramadan – Global News. May 17, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyaJZ29BkNE>

This news story (2:45) also offers a great overview for adults.

KT Explains: Eid Al Fitr – Khaleej Times. Uploaded June 2, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X7P9-soFv0>

This video (4:00) is geared to their audience in the United Arab Emirates, but it's a good overview of the Eid holiday. (It doesn't really discuss the fasting month of Ramadan.) It also touches on some of the intra-Islamic differences in how Muslims around the world celebrate.

For African-American Muslims, Ramadan Has Special Meaning – Voices of America. Uploaded August 3, 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhOSMhTWMGk>

This video specifically focuses on Ramadan from an African-American adult perspective.

My First Ramadan by Karen Katz - Kids Book Read Aloud. May 3, 2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0EWsn83TGk

This video (3:30) offers a read-aloud version of this popular board book geared to kids in Preschool/Kindergarten.

Rashad's Ramadan by Lisa Bullard (auth.) and Holli Conger (illus.) – Sarah's Reads. May 14, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aeufrv37dIY>

This read-aloud video (2:30) is geared to kids in K-2. There is additional information on each page that she doesn't read but, since it is visible, you could easily use it to expand the lesson. Also, Rashad is a person of color.

Night of the Moon by Hena Khan and Julie Paschkis – Curiosity Club with Mrs. Ghazali. Uploaded May 22, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhePsizIzbQ>

This book explains both Ramadan and the Eid while focusing on the changing moon over the course of the month. Mrs. Ghazali also incorporates interactive questions along the way. The book is a bit long, and her pace is somewhat slow, so the video lasts about 16 minutes.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Basic Content Questions

What religion observes the month of Ramadan?

What are people who follow Islam called?

What is one of the main practices during Ramadan?

Do Muslims eat at all during Ramadan?

Besides avoiding food/drink during daylight hours, what else do Muslims avoid during Ramadan?

What should Muslims focus on instead during Ramadan?

What is the holiday at the end of Ramadan called?

Critical Thinking Questions

Have you ever known anyone who avoided food/drink for any reason?

Do you think you could avoid eating/drinking from dawn to sunset?

Do you think you could do that every day for a month?

What holidays are important to your family and does that holiday include special foods?

What are some of the similarities/differences between Ramadan and the holidays you celebrate?

EVEN MORE

Islamic Call to Prayer

The *adhan* {AH-dahn} is the Islamic call-to-prayer sounded from minarets five times a day by a *muezzin* {moo-EH-zin}. In the past, the *adhan* was sung from the top of the minaret. Nowadays, the *muezzin* usually remains at ground level and sings into a microphone which is attached to a speaker at the top of the minaret. The words are always the same, but the length of time varies depending on the *muezzin*'s pace. Styles also vary. In fact, a *muezzin* can become quite famous in the Islamic world if his *adhan* is particularly beautiful. Here are three links to some amazing *adhans*.

Adhan – Idris Aslami. Uploaded May 6, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBNUdeWw-wE>

Adhan – Faisal Latif. Uploaded July 27, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSpGndN3LoQ>

Adhan – Mohamed Tarek. Uploaded March 23, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vS0zBleiJuk>

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Islamic Prayer

In Islam, everyone prays side-by-side, using the same prayer postures. Women are usually grouped behind the men.

Muslim Prayer – True Tube. Uploaded June 4, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfFBgDtsI8A>

This video offers a straight-forward description of the prayer postures.

Muslim Daily Prayers Explained – My Long Island TV (My LITV). Uploaded February 16, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXdqFGFOsKE>

This newsy story offers a view of the daily prayers from the perspective a devout Muslim living on Long Island. It discusses when and why Muslims pray throughout the day, and the importance of the Arabic language.

Steps of Muslim Prayer Explained – The Tribune/San Luis Obispo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=girbk4odqC8>

This video offers a more devotional explanation of the prayer postures. It compares the relationship between the head and the heart for each posture and highlights the notion of “submission” or “surrender” to God/Allah.

Women in Islam

The role of women in Islam is a topic that is both contentious and misunderstood. Some of the controversy revolves around head coverings. All Islamic women (and some men) wear head coverings when praying in a mosque, but many Islamic women also wear head-coverings whenever they are out in public. Some women even wear a loose-fitting garment that covers the entire body and/or a veil that covers most of the face. For some, this represents a personal choice that reflects one’s commitment to Islam. For others, it represents gender inequality and a patriarchal faith tradition.

A full understanding of the issue is also hindered by ongoing debates within Islam, itself, and the inter-weaving of culture and religion. Some Muslim-majority countries, like Saudi Arabia, have very strict rules about women’s dress and offer women very limited freedom in their daily lives. On the opposite end of the spectrum, in more secular countries like France, it is currently illegal for many Muslim women to wear any form of head scarf, even if they so choose. Even in countries with a fair amount of gender equality, cultural norms often influence the decisions women make, making it difficult to determine if they are being “forced” into their “choices.”

At the moment, there are no easy answers, and each Islamic woman has her own story. This video offers a look at some of these perspectives.

Hijab & Me – True Tube. Uploaded May 7, 2019.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=7B0kcat32kU

Also controversial is the fact that almost all Islamic faith leaders (*imams*) are men, and that women, as a group, generally pray behind the men. However, the U.S. is now home to two mosques in CA that are run by women. The LA mosque is run *by* women *for* women. In the Berkeley, CA mosque, men and women simply pray together.

Unconventional All-Women’s Mosque Opens in LA – Voice of America. Uploaded April 8, 2015.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUQ-_dCqhIc

Men, Women Pray Together at Unconventional Mosque – Voice of America. Uploaded May 9, 2017

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPyhh5DE_yE

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About the Author

Rev. Dr. Vicki Michela Garlock is the founder of Faith Seeker Kids, which offers tips and tools for families, educators, and faith communities interested in improving children's religious literacy. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology with dual specialties in Neuroscience and Cognitive Development and worked as a full-time professor at Warren Wilson College for over a decade. She then served as the Nurture Coordinator and Curriculum Specialist at Jubilee! Community Church where she was ordained as Minister of Education. She is the author of *We All Have Sacred Spaces*, which highlights the worship spaces of 7 different faith traditions, and *Embracing Peace: Stories from the World's Faith Traditions*. She has also written extensively for both The Interfaith Observer and Multicultural Kid Blogs. She lives her interfaith life in Asheville, NC, and can be reached at vicki@faithseekerkids.com.

ABOUT US

The Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute is a nonpartisan national initiative focused on educating the public about the religious liberty principles of the First Amendment.

Reorganized in 2010 to expand on religious liberty initiatives begun by the First Amendment Center in 1994, the Religious Freedom Center has sponsored numerous public programs at the Newseum, developed partnerships with national and international organizations, and convened a broad range of religious and civil liberties groups.

VISION A world committed to religious freedom as an inalienable right for all people.

MISSION The mission of the Religious Freedom Center is twofold: to educate the public about the history, meaning, and significance of religious freedom and to promote dialogue and understanding among people of all religions and none.

INITIATIVES The Religious Freedom Center carries out its mission through five initiatives:

1. promoting civil dialogue,
2. engaging the public,
3. equipping schools,
4. educating leaders and
5. publishing religious liberty scholarship.

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