

Critical Thinking on Terminology about Islam and Muslims

Objectives:

Students will:

- use syntactically and culturally accurate terminology in describing a world religion's history and culture
- use geographically appropriate terminology in discussing demographic and cultural regions of the world
- differentiate between terms related to Islam as a belief system and Muslims as a historical and cultural phenomenon

Procedure:

1. The teacher should read the setup text "Critical Thinking on Terminology about Islam and Muslims," Part 1. This section of the teacher setup text provides and explains definitions and usage of a few basic terms posted in the Council on Islamic Education's online glossary, found on the web site at <http://www.cie.org/teachers/glossary.asp#TOP>.

2. Using Part 2 of the teacher setup text and the included list of questioning strategies, discuss with the students the concepts and connotation of the commonly used terms "Islamic world" and "Muslim world."

Extension: assign students to find examples of phrases using these terms and other uses of "world" to represent other regions or groups in print and broadcast media.

3. Assessment: Using the handout "Accurate Terminology about Religion and Culture," divide students into pairs or small groups, or work as individuals to discuss usage of terms related to discussion of Islam and Muslims. Students should take a few minutes to study the terms in columns 1 and 2, and then match the terms to make accurate and appropriate descriptive phrases. Some terms might not be used, and some may be used more than once. Directions are provided on the handout. After the students have completed the terminology chart, debrief in groups or as a whole class activity.

SETUP TEXT FOR THE TEACHER:

"Critical Thinking on Terminology about Islam and Muslims"

Part 1: General Terminology

The First Amendment Center guidelines for teaching about religion in public schools, available on www.cie.org and www.theIslamProject.org foster accuracy, fairness and balance in discussing world religions. Accomplishing this requires beginning with accurate transliteration and careful pronunciation of terms, and continues with attention to accurate usage of the names of the religion, its followers, and terms associated with its beliefs, practices and traditions.

Muslims believe in one God, whose name is given in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, as Allah, recognized by Muslims as the God of Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, among other prophets whom they believe were sent before Muhammad.

- **Allah [al-LAH]:** Literally, "The God." Muslims use this Arabic term as the proper name for God. Muslims view *Allah* as the Creator and Sustainer of everything in the universe, Who is transcendent, has no physical form, and has no associates who share in His divinity. In the *Qur'an*, God is described as having at least ninety-nine Divine Names, which describe His attributes.

Among the most common inaccuracies associated with terminology on Islam is misuse of the adjectives "Islamic" and "Muslim." The first is derived from the name of the religion, and should be used only for things pertaining directly to the faith itself. The second refers to followers of the faith, and can be used as an adjective to describe any historical acts and cultural products by Muslims. The glossary on CIE's website defines the terms as follows:

- **Islam [iss-LAAM]:** *Islam* is an Arabic word derived from the three-letter root *s-l-m*. Its meaning encompasses the concepts of peace, greeting, surrender, and commitment, and refers commonly to an individual's surrender and commitment to God the Creator through adherence to the religion by the same name.
- **Muslim [MOOS-lim]:** Literally (and in the broadest sense), the term means "one who submits to God." More commonly, the term describes any person who accepts the creed and the teachings of Islam. The word "Muhammadan" is a pejorative and offensive misnomer, as it violates Muslims' most basic understanding of their creed — Muslims do not worship Muhammad, nor do they view him as the founder of the religion. The word "Moslem" is also incorrect, since it is a corruption of the word "Muslim."
- **Using "Islamic" or "Muslim" as an adjective**
"Islamic" should be used as an adjective only when referring to religious teachings and practices that are rooted in the basic sources of Islam (namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah, or example of Muhammad), not the cultural or social practices and expressions of Muslims. When there is an overlap of religious and cultural impulses evident in a particular practice, it is best not to describe it as "Muslim" rather than "Islamic." As a result, there are few instances when "Islamic" should be used.

Proper Usage: Islamic teachings, Islamic etiquette, Islamic theology

Improper Usage: Islamic populations, Islamic rulers, Islamic countries

“Muslim” should be used as an adjective to describe the activities, ideas, and cultural products of believers in Islam. This term should be used in most cases, rather than “Islamic.”

Proper Usage: Muslim art, Muslim literature, Muslim countries, Muslim groups

The most common term for a Muslim house of worship is *mosque* [maask], which is a French corruption of the Spanish word *mezquita*, derived from the original Arabic word *masjid*. The glossary says this about the place of prayer:

- **Masjid [MESS-jid]:** A term meaning "place of prostration," *masjid* designates a building where Muslims congregate for communal worship. The term comes from the same Arabic root as the word *sujud*, designating the important worship position in which Muslims touch their forehead to the ground. Often, the French word *mosque* is used interchangeably with *masjid*, though the latter term is preferred by Muslims. The *masjid* also serves various social, educational, and religious purposes. There are three sacred *masjids* in the world which Muslims hope to visit and pray within: *Masjid al-Haram* in Makkah; *Masjid an-Nabawi* in Madinah; and *Masjid al-Aqsa* in Jerusalem.

Muslims do not recognize an ordained priesthood, nor have a formal clergy. However convenient it may seem to use such terminology when discussing Muslim religious scholars, the fact that Islam does not include the concept of centralized religious authority is an important difference. Among the specialized or regional terms include *mufti*, *khoja*, *ayatollah*, and *mullah*. All go back to the term *'alim*, defined below:

- **Alim [AA-lim]:** One who has knowledge. This term refers commonly to a Muslim religious scholar. (pl. *Ulama* [oo-la-MA]).

Part 2: One World or Many Worlds?

Many newspapers, magazines, books, and broadcast journalists have used the phrases “Islamic world” and “Muslim world.” What exactly is meant by these phrases? Are they appropriate to the subject? Do they give an accurate picture of what it is trying to describe? If not, why not? Popular phrases often pass into our minds, and we tend to use them without much critical thinking. No matter how common a phrase might become, students in a history, geography, or civics classroom need to use terms that are accurate, fair and common to the humanities and social studies disciplines they are learning. Among the essential themes in geography are the concepts of *location*, *place* and *region*. Two key characteristics of geographic regions are that (a) people define regions according to characteristics that they recognize, and (b) changing perceptions result in new definitions of regions over time.

To help students understand why the expressions “Islamic world” and “Muslim world” are problematic, the teacher might ask the following set of questions to spur discussion.

- What part of the earth is meant by the term “Islamic world” or “Muslim world?”
- How is the term “world” different from the geographic term “region”? What do the terms “Islamic world” or “Muslim world” connote?

- What does the term “world” imply about a large region? Does it refer more to interdependence or to isolation?
- In what ways are world regions interdependent with other regions, and in what ways are they internally cohesive?
- Are Muslim regions of the world isolated or in contact with other regions? Cite specific examples.
- Under the idea of a Muslim world, are Muslims who live as minorities in some countries excluded from relationships with majority Muslim populations? What about Muslims who live in western Europe and the United States? Can they be considered part of an “Islamic” or “Muslim world”? What about Muslims whose parents and grandparents come from Europe or the US, Canada or Latin America?
- What other regions are often referred to in journalism as “worlds”? What other religions are referred to in this way?
- Considering the earth seen from outer space, how does the concept of the “Big Blue Marble” relate to a unified physical environment inhabited by a diversity of people and cultural regions, or a multiplicity of colliding civilizations?

Common usage of the term “world” has important implications for attitudes about Islam, and it also has important consequences for acquisition of geography skills. The following quotations are from a respected dictionary and from the standards for teaching geography used in nearly every state in the US. Discuss these concepts with your students in light of the above discussion.

re·gion [rɪˈdʒɪn] *n.* GEOGRAPHY **geographic area:** a large land area that has particular geographic, political, or cultural characteristics that distinguish it from others, whether existing within one country or extending over several. (*Microsoft® Encarta® Reference Library 2003*. © 1993-2002 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.)

Consider the following definitions and skills outlined in *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards*, which discuss how geographers and others divide the globe for better understanding:

Geography Standard 5: People create regions to interpret earth's complexity

By the end of the twelfth grade, the student knows and understands:

- How multiple criteria can be used to define a region
- The structure of regional systems
- The ways in which physical and human regional systems are interconnected
- How to use regions to analyze geographic issues

Therefore, the student is able to:

- A. List and explain the changing criteria that can be used to define a region...
- B. Describe the types and organization of regional systems...
- C. Identify human and physical changes in regions and explain the factors that contribute to those changes...

Geography Standard 6: How culture and experience influence peoples perceptions of places and regions

By the end of the twelfth grade, the student knows and understands:

- Why places and regions serve as symbols for individuals and society
- Why different groups of people within a society view places and regions differently
- How changing perceptions of places and regions reflect cultural change

Therefore, the student is able to:

- A. Explain why places and regions are important to individual human identity and as symbols for unifying or fragmenting society...
- B. Explain how individuals view places and regions on the basis of their stage of life, sex, social class, ethnicity, values, and belief systems...
- C. Analyze the ways in which peoples changing views of places and regions reflect cultural change...

The Council on Islamic Education web page cited above gives the following clarification:

• Alternatives to "Islamic world" or "Muslim world"

Though these terms are common in everyday usage, they are conceptually problematic. There are no separate Muslim, Christian, or Hindu "worlds." Such terms homogenize extremely diverse peoples and viewpoints, and create artificial divisions that obscure global interactions, historically and in contemporary times. They also go against recognized **geography standards** that define the term "region" as a geographic area that people identify for its cultural, physical or economic characteristics; regions change over time as people's definitions and activities change, and as the cultural characteristics of places change.

Proper Usage: Muslim lands, territories under Muslim rule, Muslim countries or Muslim-majority countries, actual geographic regions (Southwest Asia, North Africa, Southeast Asia, etc.), actual countries (Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, etc.)

Handout: Accurate Terminology about Religion and Culture

Directions: Look carefully at the terms in columns 1 and 2, taking note of which may be used as nouns and adjectives. Match the terms in column 1 with terms in column 2 to make descriptive phrases. You may use the terms in columns 1 and 2 more than once.

Column 1	Column 2
Buddhism	church
Buddhist	masjid or mosque
Christian	synagogue
Christianity	world
Hindu	place of worship
Hinduism	religion
Islam	prayer
Islamic	region
Jewish	woman
Judaic	is a world religion
Judaism	people
Muslim	practices
secular	person
traditional	man
	beliefs
	population
	scholar