

Guide for Non-Muslims Working in Islamic Schools

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There are several cultural issues that a non-Muslim entering an Islamic school environment may encounter. The purpose of this guide is to educate non-Muslims about such things in order to set "guests" in the Muslim school at ease. Some of these issues may stem from religious beliefs, while others may be purely cultural.

1. **Multiculturalism** – Americans are used to the terms “diversity” and “multiculturalism” but they may not be completely prepared for the variety of ethnic backgrounds and nationalities in attendance at Muslim schools. Students in Muslim schools may come from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and other places. Their families speak a variety of languages and dialects. Ties with their home countries are usually still intact and families feel quite strong about the importance of keeping the heritage and culture alive in their children. Of course, there are American Muslim families as well, and many households may even be multicultural.
2. **Religious observations** – Islam is considered by Muslims to be more than just a religion, but rather, a way of life. In fact, teaching this way of life to Muslim youth is one of the purposes of establishing Islamic schools. At least one, if not two of the 5 daily prayers are scheduled into the school day. During the month of fasting known as Ramadan, the school schedule may be altered to accommodate the increased religious observances made during that month. Religious classes are usually taken by all students throughout the year. Arabic is usually taken as a second language since Muslims believe that God’s word has been recorded for humanity in Arabic in a book called the Qur’an. Students usually strive to memorize this book, and the book itself is treated carefully with the utmost respect.
3. **Religious terms & phrases** – Muslims often employ religious terminology into their speech as well. For example:
 - **Greeting:** Muslims may greet one another with “Asalaamu Alaikum ” and “Walaikum Salaam” which mean “May the peace of Islam be upon you”. This greeting is usually not extended to non-Muslims, due to the religious implications of the meaning. Instead, casual American greetings would be used.
 - **Exclamation:** “Subhan Allah” meaning “Glory to God” or “Allahu Akbar” meaning “God is Great”
 - **Praise:** “Alhamdulillah” meaning “Praise to God”
 - **And another common phrase:** “Insha’Allah” meaning “if God wills” which is usually said anytime something is planned for the future.
4. **Islam in the curriculum** – While the subjects non-Muslims may be hired to teach are so-called “secular” subjects, the belief that Islam is a way of life means that religion permeates even the secular subject matter. For this reason a Muslim teacher would try to integrate an Islamic approach into each course. For non-Muslim teachers, a Muslim teacher’s assistant may be provided to bring this perspective to

the class and to help make the non-Muslim teacher aware of areas where the subject may become controversial or inappropriate in an Islamic school. For example, while the concept of evolution may be included in the curriculum, an approach that accommodates the Muslim belief in God as The Creator must be incorporated.

5. **Gender Relations** – Muslims hold conservative views regarding relations between the sexes. The reason for this is to safeguard the family and to build respect for people based on their personal qualities rather than physical attraction. In general, casual mixing between unrelated males and females is forbidden in Islam. However, interactions that take place for a particular reason (such as professional meetings or parent conferences) are allowed with certain safeguards in place:

- No physical contact should be made, including handshaking or other casual touching.
- Eye contact may be sporadic. This should not be taken as a sign of shiftiness. Rather, both Muslim males and females have been commanded to lower their gaze in the presence of non-relatives of the opposite gender out of respect for one another.
- Meetings should not be completely private. A meeting could be held with a third party present or the door could be kept open.

Other ramifications of gender relations in Islam may also extend to the classroom. For example, dating and boy/girl relationships are not allowed between the students. Students may be seated separately according to gender, and in some case separate classes may even be established. Non-Muslim teachers involved in personal non-marital relationships should not discuss them with students, nor should the possibility of exploring such relationships be posed to students. If a Muslim student asks questions of such nature, they should be referred to their Islamic studies teacher for an appropriate answer

6. **Physical appearance and Attire** – In light of the previous point about gender relations, Islam requires that modest dress be employed in the presence of non-relatives of the opposite sex. Some aspects of this modesty are specified for each gender. Both genders must wear non-revealing clothing that is loose, non-formfitting, and not see-through. For the woman, such clothing should cover all of her person except her face and hands. Some Muslim women opt to include their face and hands as well. Perfume, make-up, jewelry, and other means of external beautification are reserved for the privacy of the home and are not appropriate in public places such as the school. Muslim men often grow beards to imitate the Prophets. Since the teacher in the Muslim school is expected to set an example for students, most schools require their staff to abide by these standards while on the job, regardless of their personal habits outside of the school. This usually applies not only to non-Muslims, but to Muslims who may not personally observe these conditions, though policies may vary from school to school.

7. **Dietary considerations** – Muslims do not eat pork or pork-based products. Such meat is considered to be an impurity and unfit for consumption. Some Muslim families also may not eat other meat that has not been slaughtered in a “halaal” manner.
8. **Holidays and celebrations** – Muslims only celebrate the holidays specified in Islam which are called “Eid”. The first of these is the eid of breaking the fast which is celebrated when Ramadan ends. The second is celebrated during the season of the “hajj” or Muslim pilgrimage. It is a commemoration of when Prophet Abraham was commanded to slaughter his son Ishmael and the ram was miraculously put in his place. These holidays should be scheduled on the school calendar. Other non-Islamic holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentines, Easter, and Birthdays are not to be celebrated in the school. Classroom parties that have nothing to do with any holidays may be held in accordance with school policies.
9. **Islamic Art** – Muslims have been forbidden from sculpting or drawing animals and people or displaying such imagery. Some may even object to having their picture taken for this reason. However, for specific needs, such as identification or education, such images may be used in the school. Musical instruments are also not generally an approved form of art in an Islamic school.

Conclusion: It is hoped that this list could serve as a useful introduction to common scenarios one may encounter in an Islamic school. This list is not comprehensive, and must be accompanied in the school by a Muslim assistant or mentor who can help the non-Muslim make the cultural adjustments needed to function effectively in such an environment. It is also recommended that one may learn more about the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims by looking into classes or programs available at the school or Islamic center which may be available for the non-Muslim public.