

A TEST OF FAITH

➔ **LAST YEAR, WELLESLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ON A FIELD TRIP WERE FILMED PRAYING IN A ROXBURY MOSQUE. AFTER BEING BATTERED BY NATIONWIDE CRITICISM, WHY IS THE PUBLIC SCHOOL STILL DETERMINED TO STAND BY ITS RELIGION CURRICULUM?**

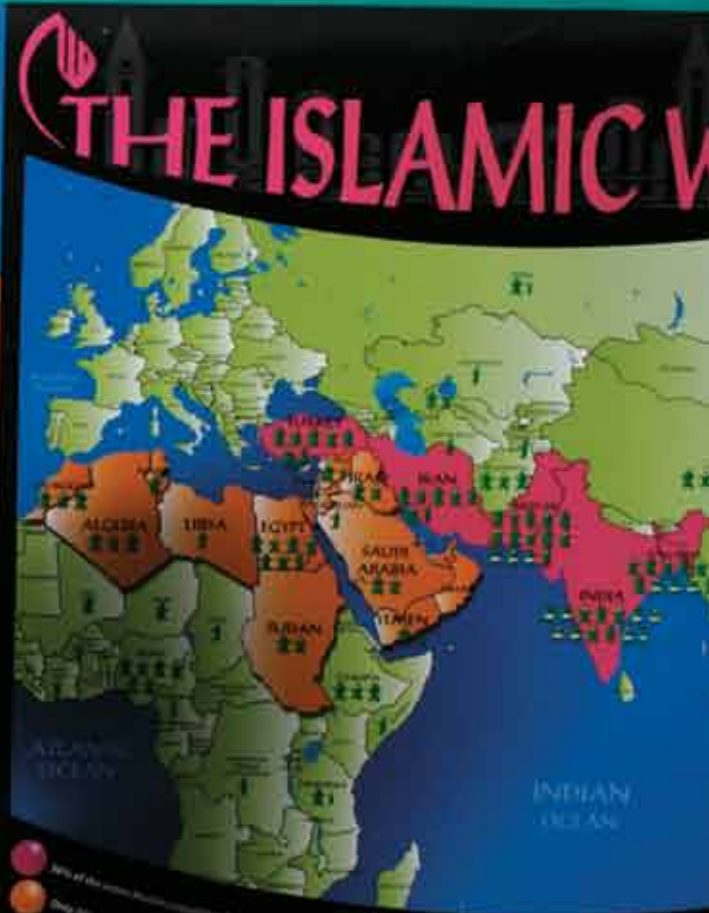
By **LINDA K. WERTHEIMER**



“REMEMBER, THE REASON WE’RE GOING TO THE MOSQUE IS TO CONTINUE OUR LEARNING,” Jonathan Rabinowitz tells his sixth-grade social studies students. Dressed in a button-down shirt and khakis, the lanky 38-year-old teacher stands in the aisle of a school bus idling behind Wellesley Middle School. He holds up a hand to quell chatter and giggles from the 11- and 12-year-olds. “I want to be proud of your behavior. Make us proud in how you ask questions.”

Katie Pyzowski, her hair pulled back in a headband, sits quietly in a window seat as the din of her classmates resumes. Just a few days earlier, the then 11-year-old, who sings in her Episcopal church youth choir, had felt conflicted about visiting other houses of worship. “I feel kind of like I’m intruding on the holy places,” she had said. “It makes me feel like I don’t belong there.” Now, though, she says she feels more excited than nervous.

A short drive later, the bus pulls into the parking lot in Wayland of the Islamic Center



TEACHERS DISCOVER

HIGHER LEARNING
Jonathan Rabinowitz in
Wellesley Middle School
classroom.



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I CAN SAY, ‘I’M MUSLIM.
I DO THIS. I’M VERY
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→ ZAIN TIRMIZI, 12



of Boston, a rectangular brick building that could pass for offices if not for a few touches of Middle Eastern architecture, such as triangular arches. A few greeters – including three women in *hijabs*, the traditional head covering of Muslim females – are waiting outside.

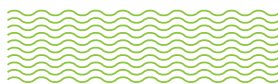
“I’ve never been to a mosque before,” Katie says. Neither have most of her classmates, which is part of the school’s reason for this trip – to bring course work to life with real-world examples.

For more than a decade, Wellesley Middle School has been an outlier among the country’s public school systems because it requires sixth-graders to study the world’s religions for a full semester. After years of uneventful field trips to mosques and temples, it drew a maelstrom of criticism in 2010 when a video was made public showing Wellesley boys on a field trip appearing to pray in a Roxbury mosque.

These days, the mere potential for controversy is enough to convince the average school to steer clear of teaching about religion. But just a year after the uproar engulfed Wellesley Middle School, it did something that makes it even more unusual among its peers: It took students to a mosque yet again.

“I felt it was important to establish we can teach about religion,” says Joshua Frank, the school’s principal at the time. “There is nothing like being inside a mosque, inside a temple. These experiences are powerful for kids. They are going to remember them long after they forget Mohammed was born in 570 AD.”

But Diane Moore, a Harvard Divinity School scholar and author of *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, says Wellesley’s difficult experience affirmed her belief that public schools should avoid such field trips. There are just too many risks, from giving students the impression all temples are the same as the one they visit, to crossing the constitutional divide between church and state. “You’ve got this very fine line,” Moore says. “There are so many opportunities for this to go awry.”



FOR THE PAST 50 YEARS, exposing children to religion in school has been a flashpoint in American public education. Schools and state governments have battled with parents and others over whether religious music could be sung at holiday concerts or graduation ceremonies could be held in a church. For years, schools have shied away from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance because of that problematic phrase “one nation under God.”

Administrators at Wellesley Middle

School, however, believe the risks of teaching about religion are worth the potential rewards, which is why it takes the unusual step of making its class mandatory. Even though most US states now include world religions in their education standards, they rarely require that students take a class. According to state records, roughly two-thirds of Massachusetts school systems offer comparative religion courses, but those are usually electives.

Wellesley’s decision to create its class in 2000, says social studies department head Adam Blumer, came from a place of “intellectual angst.” Even before the terrorist attacks of September 2001, teachers worried that their students weren’t grasping the importance of religion in international politics. Blumer recalls thinking, “Are we really preparing kids for the world they’re walking into?”

Over the half-year course, students spend roughly a month on each of three religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and then three weeks on Hinduism. They cover seven aspects of each faith, including “stories of origin” and “core beliefs,” and take field trips to places of worship. For the first several years, those trips went off without a hitch; then there was last year.

On May 27, 2010, some 200 students visited the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury, which had opened less than a year earlier. A commanding presence with its black dome and brick minaret, the mosque is part of a 68,000-square-foot complex that includes a cafe, a shop, and an Islamic elementary school. It offers prayers five times a day, which Blumer felt was important: Students could witness the full racial and ethnic diversity of worshippers.

On the tour, a female guide escorted the group into the mosque’s social hall and delivered a PowerPoint presentation about Islam. “You have to believe in Allah, and Allah is the one God, the only one worthy of worship, all forgiving, wise, knowing,” she said at one point. “Everything we do is to please God because God has guided us to do these things.”

After the early afternoon call to prayer was piped over loudspeakers, the guide took a group to see the prayer hall, pointing out features such as a clock listing the five daily worship times. The students asked to watch, so she escorted them to the perimeter of the room, advised them to sit quietly, and left to pray in an area reserved for women.

When she was gone, a male worshiper looked over to five Wellesley boys. “You guys can participate if you’d like,” he said, according to Jackson Posnik, one of the students. Jackson remembers thinking, “That’s, like, cool that we’re allowed to do that.”

None of the Wellesley boys were Muslim,

but they copied the movements of the Muslims around them, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating on the rug. “I didn’t think I prayed,” Jackson says. “I just kind of mimicked the motions.”

School and mosque officials did not realize what had happened until the beginning of the next school year, when on September 15, 2010, a video titled “Wellesley, Massachusetts Public School Students Learn to Pray to Allah” turned up online.

Unbeknownst to teachers, students, and mosque officials, a Wellesley mother had videotaped the field trip. A Boston-based group called Americans for Peace and Tolerance then posted it on YouTube. The next day, TV news trucks surrounded the school and coverage appeared on local news, CNN, and Fox, as well as in newspapers and on blogs from around the nation.

The reaction to the video was split. Parent after parent in Wellesley praised the school’s program in interviews with reporters. In the meantime, though, a spokesman for Americans for Peace and Tolerance told Fox News Radio that if a Catholic priest had given students Communion on a field trip, “the furor would be visible from outer space.” An anonymous commenter on the *Wellesley Townsman*’s website wrote, “How idiotic to take our precious little ones into the lion’s den.”

Subsequent news reports said the mother, who has never been identified, took the video on behalf of Americans for Peace and Tolerance, which is run by Charles Jacobs, a columnist for *The Jewish Advocate* newspaper. When the mosque was being built, Jacobs had alleged its financial backers had ties to radical Islam. Mosque officials have continued to strenuously rebut that claim and note that they have longstanding partnerships with federal and state law enforcement and interfaith leaders.

Today, Jacobs says he remains concerned about the boys’ praying and what he says students were taught by the guide in the mosque. “The five students prayed to Allah. As Americans, we shouldn’t be proselytizing each other’s kids. That’s just not right for any religion,” he says. “American schools don’t know what to do about the ‘other.’ They take them to the mosque and accept as given the tall tales given to kids.”

Both mosque and school officials say the video was not an accurate portrayal of what happened, and the guide’s talk was not preaching, but an informational presentation about the beliefs and practices of Islam. The tour guide, who asked not to be named for fear her family would be harassed, also says her comments were taken out of context on the video.

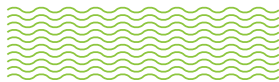
“As a mosque, we didn’t invite them to pray,” says M. Bilal Kaleem, the president

of the Muslim American Society of Boston, which runs the mosque. “It is our clear policy not to invite visitors to pray.” But it is plausible, he says, that a worshiper invited the boys. (Guides now escort visitors to the balcony during prayer.) “This was a learning experience,” Kaleem says. “Once you take kids out of the school, there are challenges. They’re curious.”

After the video was released, Wellesley Schools Superintendent Bella Wong issued a mea culpa in a letter to parents. “I apologized for [the praying] part, because that to me crossed the line from observation to participation,” she says. “As a public institution or public school, we really have to honor the separation of church and state. While we can teach about religion, we really can’t do anything that would encourage the practice of religion.”

The border between observation and participation can be a subtle one. Many Americans don’t realize that the First Amendment to the Constitution only bans public schools from endorsing or promoting religion, it doesn’t prohibit educators from teaching about it. According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 89 percent of respondents knew teachers could not lead the class in prayer, but only 36 percent knew it was legal to offer a comparative-religion course.

“There’s still a great confusion in the public about what the First Amendment permits and where the lines should be drawn,” says Charles Haynes, a senior scholar at the First Amendment Center in Washington, D.C. Haynes believes taking public school students to houses of worship during prayer times is problematic, even if the kids are told they must only observe. “We have impressionable young people,” Haynes says, “and they are there as a captive audience.”



EVEN AS THE ROXBURY brouhaha shook up teachers and school district officials in Wellesley, it did not diminish their faith in the academic promise of the religion unit. “It’s a very rich experience,” says Wong. “With appropriate guidelines, you can do this without breaking the separation of church and state. I wish other communities would step forward and say they’ll teach it, too. We’ll stay the course.”

To avoid another round of controversy, though, the school did make changes to its field trips. Teachers were instructed to be clearer with students about the difference between participation and observation. In addi-

BEFORE THE COMPARATIVE RELIGION CLASS, “I DIDN’T REALIZE THAT CHRISTIANITY CAME OUT OF JUDAISM. NOW WE’RE ALL RELATED.”

→ CELIA GOLOD, 11



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→ KATIE PYZOWSKI, 12



tion, Wellesley earlier this year chose to visit the mosque in Wayland, a place that doesn’t offer regular prayers during the day. “We live, we learn,” says Adam Blumer.

Although Kaleem is disappointed Wellesley classes didn’t return to his mosque, he was pleased the field trip wasn’t canceled outright. “That really would have been sad,” he says. “I think visiting religious spaces should be a part of education in America so people have a better understanding of people of all different faiths.”

On a morning in mid-April, a month before the Wayland mosque visit, Jonathan Rabinowitz ends the unit on Christianity and reviews what students had already learned about Judaism. He posts a big question on a projection screen at the front of his classroom. “In what overall ways are Judaism and Christianity the same? Different?”

The teacher hands out work sheets with a Venn diagram; one circle is labeled “Christianity,” the other “Judaism,” and the overlap between them is “both.” Attached to the worksheet are 44 statements, such as “Believe that Jesus is the Son of God” and “Reading from the Torah at age 13 is a rite of passage for these people.”

“Get up and walk around the room. Talk to everyone,” Rabinowitz says. “Does it belong in Christianity, Judaism, or both?”

The students huddle in groups, although a few approach Rabinowitz for hints to the trickier statements. Rabinowitz shoos them away. “I want them to debate,” he says. “The hard thing is kids want right versus wrong. There isn’t always a right.”

Rabinowitz has been teaching Wellesley’s religion unit since 2002, though he readily admits that doesn’t make him a religion scholar.

But over the years he and his colleagues have worked hard to find effective and unbiased course material. To continue his own learning, he visited Jordan in 2005 as part of an exchange program with teachers from the Middle East.

Rabinowitz, whose students call him Mr. R, was born in South Africa to observant Jewish parents who wanted him to stay home on Friday nights, the start of Shabbat, rather than play soccer. After moving to the United States at age 6, he spent most of his youth and early adulthood in what he calls a “Jewish bubble” – he went to a Jewish day school and mainly socialized with other Jews. “Growing up, I never knew how to talk or even ask questions about Jesus Christ,” he says. He tells students that what they’ll learn in his class will help them discuss religion with others as they get older.

At the start of the Islam unit, Rabinowitz asks his students to name some common Muslim stereotypes. “All Muslims come from Saudi Arabia,” says one student. Rabinowitz shows a world map of areas where Muslims live: The country with the most is Indonesia. “All Muslims are terrorists,” says another student. Rabinowitz urges the class not to use the word “all.”

Another day, students watch a news clip about Muslims’ push to include their major holidays on New York City’s school vacation calendar. Then the class discusses what Wellesley should do. Zain Tirmizi, who also attends religious school at the Wayland mosque, and a boy named Anand Ghorpadey, who describes himself as an atheist, still debate after the bell rings.

Anand, who celebrates Hindu holidays with his family, points out the school’s scarcity of Muslims and Hindus. He says the school should not alter the calendar.

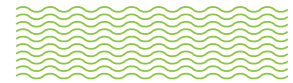
Zain disagrees. “I want my education,” he says, adding it’s hard to catch up after missing classes for his religion’s holidays.

Anand raises his eyebrows. “Hard to catch up three days?”

“We should have both Hindu and Muslim holidays off,” Zain says.

As the pair walk out, Anand grins and shakes his head. He’s not convinced.

Rabinowitz watches his students leave. “I like when class spills out in the hallways,” he says.



RABINOWITZ LIKES it even more when class discussions continue at home. His students can give a PowerPoint presentation on religion to friends and family during the unit. He also encourages them to have family discussions about a CNN special report he screens for class called *Unwelcome: The Muslims Next Door*. The documentary is about the venomous opposition to the construction of a mosque in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Protesters torched construction equipment, someone fired shots at Muslim leaders, and a lawyer for mosque opponents evoked 9/11 and said Muslims do not believe in God.

The video saddened Caitlin Gillooly, who discussed it with her mother. “I’m really glad now that I’ve learned more about religion,” says Caitlin, an altar girl at her family’s Episcopal church. “One of these people could be me. I could be one of those people who misinterpret about religion.”

The class prompts families to have conversations they never would otherwise, accord-

ing to the parents of Celia Golod, a Jewish student. “These kids in sixth grade were infants during 9/11,” says Celia’s mother, Lisa. “It’s important that they understand the good and bad. Religion sparks a lot of controversy, but there’s good in all of the religions.”

Her daughter, though, is skeptical about whether the course can really change students’ minds. In fifth grade, some kids interrogated her about why she did not believe in Jesus, she recalls. Last December, a classmate called her a “typical Jew” in a text message. “People who do tease people about [their religions] probably will never learn,” Celia says.

“But maybe you’re making a dent,” her mother says. “Do you think, Celia, the fact that you understand more about Christianity makes you more understanding?”

Celia nods. “Yeah,” she says. “I didn’t realize that Christianity came out of Judaism. Now we’re all related.” She crosses her fingers to indicate the connection.

Occasionally, Rabinowitz invites parents in to talk about their religions. On a Wednesday in late May, Ali and Hadia Tirmizi, Zain’s parents, arrive to discuss their experience. The couple, originally from Pakistan, immigrated to the United States in the 1990s, before their children were born. They tell students that Muslims vary in their practices. “I have two kids,” says Hadia Tirmizi, who’s wearing a knee-length black dress and lavender sweater. “I’m a physician. I don’t pray five times a day.”

When Hadia mentions her son’s name means “leader” in Arabic, Celia’s hand shoots up. “We watched a movie, and it said, ‘Zain means beautiful.’” Hadia nods.

“So Zain means beautiful leader?” Rabinowitz says.

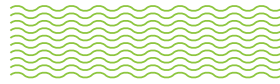
Zain laughs and ducks his head a little in embarrassment. “Zain is not going to like that,” his mother says.

Later, at the family’s home, Ali Tirmizi raves about the class: “To introduce that religion study class where he’s learning about Hinduism from Anand’s mom, and Judaism, and Christianity, and Islam, it opens up horizons.”

The couple originally resisted sending Zain to a public middle school for fear that he would be bullied. One day in fourth grade a boy approached him and said, “You’re a Muslim. I’m going to check you for bombs.”

But Zain still believes the religion class will affect how his peers treat others. “I believe the next time someone says ‘all Christians are,’ ‘all Jews are,’ ‘all blacks are,’ ‘all gays are,’ they’ll know to say, ‘Only some do this,’ or ‘That’s not true.’” But, he adds, that awareness might take awhile. For instance, he explains, after Osama bin Laden was killed, someone asked another Muslim student, “Aren’t you supposed to be at a funeral?”

“I get scared,” Hadia says of her son. “I’m so scared of him getting affected by all of this.” When the permission slip for the mosque field trip arrived, she was relieved to learn the class wasn’t going back to the Roxbury mosque. “If Wayland is a happy medium, there’s nothing wrong with happy mediums,” she says. “We don’t need any more controversy right now.”



IN CLASS before the May 9 field trip this year, Rabinowitz talks about Islamic worship practices and architecture. He passes around a prayer rug, a gift he received from a Saudi Arabian teacher during his exchange. He reviews terms. Mihrab? It’s the niche in the prayer hall that points toward Mecca, the direction Muslims face during prayer. He hands out laptops and asks the students to hunt for 20 mosques around the world. “Explore, explore,” he tells them. One student finds a mosque that has 24 domes and can hold up to 500,000 people.

On the morning of the visit, Rabinowitz and several teachers and parents stand outside the Wayland mosque with some 150 students (about 400 students in all will visit in three waves). With no dome and no minaret, the building doesn’t fit most students’ image of a mosque.

“This tour is going to be like one at an amusement park,” says their tour guide, Sepi Gilani, the mosque’s vice president. The students follow her single file up a set of stairs, where volunteers tell them about the center’s classrooms and library.

Before the students enter the prayer hall, they are asked to remove their shoes. They sit on a green and gold rug. Gilani points out the mosque’s mihrab and other architectural features and gives a PowerPoint presentation about Islam. A few students whisper and fidget, but most seem awe-struck to be here.

Why do we have to take off our shoes? a student asks during a question-and-answer period.

“We pray with our foreheads on the ground,” Gilani says. “If we kept on our shoes, we’d get our heads all dirty.”

When does Gilani wear her *hijab*? She responds that she, like many Muslim women, regards wearing the head covering in the mosque as a religious obligation. However, she does not wear it when she goes outside the mosque.

Gilani then asks a woman standing in the back to explain why she wears her *hijab* in public. The woman is Gilani’s friend, and the same person who had led the controversial tour of Roxbury’s mosque the year before.

“For me, not displaying a woman’s beauty in public is about modesty,” the woman explains. “It’s empowering not to be judged on the basis of physical appearance, but rather on the basis of one’s deeds.”

After Gilani’s talk, the students get 10 minutes to try different activities. Some browse books about Islam, while others get an outside tour of the building. They line up by the dozens to get their names written in Arabic. “Faster, faster,” urges Blumer.

Students are then rushed to their buses so they can make it back to school in time for lunch. There was no prayer to take part in. No mysterious videographer.

The next morning, Rabinowitz praises his students for asking thoughtful questions. “At the end of the day,” he says, “every one of you is able to say you’ve been to an Islamic learning center. You’ve been to a mosque.”

Most of Rabinowitz’s students say they probably won’t ever enter a mosque again, and that makes the class valuable. They might never have seen the inside of a Jewish temple, either, or heard so many different views on Islam from practicing Muslims.

“Before this unit, when I saw people wearing full Muslim clothing, I thought, ‘That’s kind of weird,’” says Anand Ghorpadey. “Now I understand how each religion is different.”

“Many people in America have stereotypes about Muslims. I’m glad they can teach about it,” says Zain Tirmizi. “I can say, ‘I’m Muslim. I do this.’ I’m very proud of it.”

A few weeks after school ends for the summer, Katie Pyzowski and her parents, Whitney and Paul, sit on their backyard deck. They talk about their strong connection to their Christian faith and their interest in other practices.

At her father’s urging, Katie brings out a photo album from their April vacation to Greece. They had seen burning crosses that were part of the Greek Orthodox celebration of Easter, and had even ducked into a monastery. There was no formal invitation, which made Katie a little nervous, but once inside, she felt as fascinated as she later would in the Wayland mosque.

“The key word to this unit is ‘about,’” Katie says. “They’re not teaching you the religion, they’re teaching you *about* the religion. They’re not trying to make you do something, they’re trying to get you to learn.”

Sitting next to her, her mother asks, “Did it work?”

“Yeah,” Katie says. “It worked.” ■

Linda K. Wertheimer, the Globe’s former education editor, is a Lexington freelance writer. Follow her on Twitter @Lindakwert. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.