

FOR SCHOOLS · KS2 (YEARS 5–6) AND KS3 (YEARS 7–8)

The 99 Names of Allah: how Muslims describe God

Tile. Unknown maker. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, J. Lionberger Davis Gift, 1967 · CC0 1.0

One 50–60 minute lesson, adaptable to two. Pupils learn that Muslims come to know God through His Names and attributes in the Qur'an, compare this with how the Hebrew Bible and the Christian tradition describe God's character, and reflect on what a name can and cannot tell us. It works as part of a unit on beliefs about God, or on sacred texts.

Curriculum links

- Locally agreed syllabuses in England (via each SACRE) typically require pupils to learn what Muslims believe about Allah and to compare beliefs about God across religions and worldviews. Check your own syllabus's wording.
- KS2 themes: beliefs about God; sacred texts and what they teach; how people express belief through words, prayer and art.
- KS3 themes: the nature of God (tawhid, attributes, the problem of describing the infinite); ways of knowing about God (revelation, reason, experience).
- Supports the Ofsted (2021) emphasis on substantive knowledge (what is believed), disciplinary knowledge (how we know) and personal knowledge (pupils' own reflection).

Objectives

- Know that Muslims believe God has many Beautiful Names (al-asma’ al-husna), traditionally counted as 99, found in the Qur’an and hadith.
- Explain the meaning of at least three Names, such as ar-Rahman (the Entirely Merciful), al-Basir (the All-Seeing) and as-Salam (Peace), and give a Qur’an reference for one.
- Compare the Muslim Names with the description of God’s character in Exodus 34:6 and with Christian titles for God.
- Reflect on why believers say no name or list can fully describe God.

Starter

Ten minutes. Write your own first name on the board and ask: what does a name tell someone about a person? What doesn’t it tell them? Pupils list three names or nicknames people have for them (friend, sister, goalkeeper) and what each shows. Then show Qur’an 7:180 on the board: “Allah's are the fairest names. Invoke Him by them.” Ask: why might a religion give God many names rather than one?

Main activities

- Name cards (15 minutes). In small groups, pupils receive cards with eight Names in Arabic transliteration, English meaning and one Qur’an reference each: ar-Rahman (1:3), ar-Rahim (1:3), al-Malik (59:23), as-Salam (59:23), al-Khaliq (59:24), al-Basir (42:11), al-Wadud (85:14), an-Nur (24:35). They sort them into groups of their own choosing (for example, Names about power, about kindness, about knowing) and explain their sorting to another group.
- What do we know, and what must we take away? (10 minutes). Using the site’s method, pick one Name, such as al-Basir, the All-Seeing. Pupils list what human seeing needs (eyes, light, being close) and its limits (can’t see behind you, in the dark, inside people). Then explain: Muslims believe God sees without any of those limits. Introduce

Qur’an 42:11: “Naught is as His likeness; and He is the Hearer, the Seer.”

- Three faiths, one character (10 minutes). Show three short texts side by side: Exodus 34:6 (“The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth”, JPS 1917), 1 John 4:8 (“God is love”, World English Bible) and Qur’an 1:1–3 (“In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds”). Pupils highlight words that are similar and note any differences.
- Listen (5 minutes). Play part of a recitation of the 99 Names. Pupils note how it makes them feel, and one Name they recognise.

Plenary

Five minutes. Exit card: “If I had to choose one Name of God from today that I think matters most to Muslims, I would choose… because…”. Finish with the key point: Muslims believe the Names describe one God, not many gods, and that God is greater than all of them; the scholar Ibn Kathir noted that God’s Names are not limited to 99.

Differentiation

Support: give pupils four Names rather than eight, with pictures (a heart for mercy, a crown for King, a light). Provide sentence starters for the sorting explanation. Stretch: ask pupils to research the difference between ar-Rahman and ar-Rahim (both from r-h-m, the root of “womb” in Arabic and Hebrew), or to compare the Muslim idea of the Names with Maimonides’ teaching that we speak most truly of God by saying what God is not. KS3 pupils can debate: “A list of names makes God easier to understand.”

Assessment

Look for pupils who can (a) correctly explain the meaning of at least three Names with one reference; (b) state accurately that Muslims believe in one God, with many Names; (c) make one fair comparison with Jewish or Christian descriptions of God; (d) give a reason why believers say God cannot be fully described. Common misconception to correct: that the 99 Names are 99 different gods, or 99 parts of God.

Three faiths: fact box

JUDAISM

Jews use several names for God. The holy four-letter name (YHWH) is not said aloud; Jews say Adonai (“my Lord”) in prayer and HaShem (“the Name”) in conversation. Exodus 34:6–7 lists God’s “Thirteen Attributes of Mercy”, recited on festivals.

CHRISTIANITY

Christians call God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and use many titles from the Bible: Lord, Creator, Shepherd, Light, Love (1 John 4:8). Many Christian prayers begin with a title that suits the prayer.

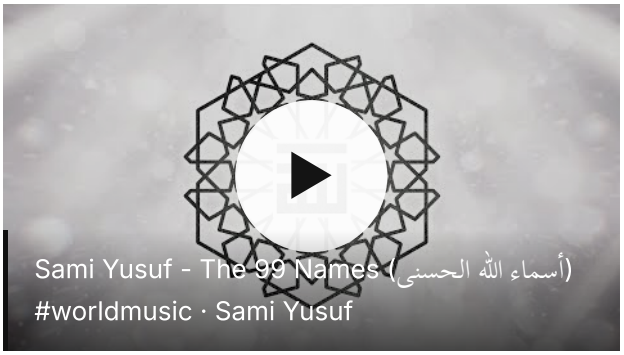
ISLAM

Muslims believe God has many Beautiful Names (Qur’an 7:180), traditionally counted as 99 after a hadith (Bukhari 2736). Allah is God’s proper name. Muslims often call on God by the Name that fits their need: ar-Rahim for mercy, ar-Razzaq for provision.

TAKE CARE

Present the Names as describing one God. Avoid asking pupils to draw God, and avoid colouring or scribbling on the written name Allah, which many Muslims treat with great respect. Use transliteration consistently and say Names respectfully; invite Muslim pupils to share pronunciation only if they wish.

Watch



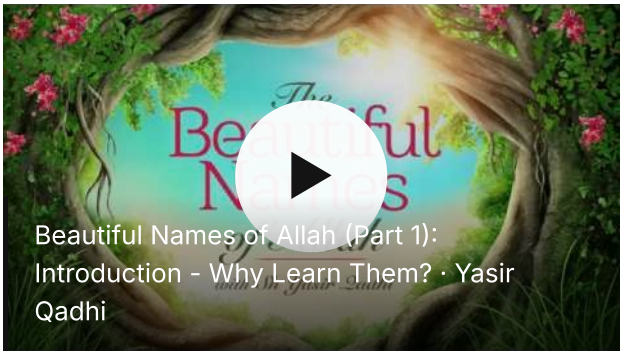
Watch on YouTube ↗

The 99 Names sung by Sami Yusuf, for the listening activity.



Watch on YouTube ↗

BibleProject on Exodus 34, where God describes His own character in the Hebrew Bible.



Watch on YouTube ↗

For teachers: a Muslim scholar introduces why Muslims learn the Names.

Resources

- Ofsted research review: religious education (2021)
- NATRE: National Association of Teachers of RE
- The 99 Names on this site (pupil pages)
- Qur'an 59:22–24, the Names in the Qur’an (Quran.com)
- Exodus 34 (Sefaria)
- 1 John 4 (Bible Gateway, WEB)
- BBC Bitesize KS2 Religious Education