

MEDIA REVIEW

The Traditional World of Islam. Six films, each 30 minutes. Film study guide. Available in 16 mm film. Order from Institutional Cinema, 915 Broadway, New York, NY 10074. \$600 per unit.

Islam is a global faith practiced by a significant portion of the population of almost half the countries of the world; one of every six people in the world is a Muslim. Muslim cultural, scientific, artistic, political, and scholarly contributions are innumerable, and the political import of Islam in the contemporary world is axiomatic. Yet most Americans are woefully ignorant of Islam and of Muslim peoples and cultures. This deficiency needs to be addressed in our schools, and this valuable film series can help immensely.

The series of six 30 minute films was commissioned in conjunction with the World of Islam Festival (London, 1976) to help the West better appreciate Islamic thought, practice, and contributions. Much has happened since the late 1970s to make an understanding and intercultural appreciation of Islam even more important today than in the period before the Iranian revolution/fundamentalist explosion. Since the films emphasize traditional Islamic culture, deliberately avoid modern Western influences, and eschew political issues, they are not dated by events of the last decade; nor will they inspire partisan debates over Middle East questions.

Generously funded by Exxon, the films are a costly and beautifully crafted contribution. The on-location footage, marvelous color, and creative editing make them a powerful visual experience. Each film is self-contained; teachers can use the ones which they deem most appropriate for their purposes and in whatever order desired. I have employed various combinations of the films, from one unit to the whole series, many times to different audiences, e.g. introductory level history and international relations courses, advanced courses on Islamic and Middle East politics, high school audiences, church and community groups. High school teachers, whom I had in a summer institute to prepare them to deal with Islam and Middle East issues, report that the series was most appropriate for their students.

If only one film from the group can be used, it should be "Unity," which serves as introduction to and overview of the entire series. The film presents the tenets and practices of the faith and emphasizes the theme of the unity of all Muslims, culturally diverse as they are. The visual images of the Grand Mosque, Ka'bah, Hajj, communal prayer, role of Islamic symbols in daily life, and other vignettes from across the Muslim world are instructive and moving. The powerful narration employs generous quotations from the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Muslim philosophers and poets to explain Muslim doctrines and practices. However, since little is directly attributed, it is impossible for the non-specialist to know what is Qur'anic and what is commentary. The film stresses Islam's monotheistic centrality, global expanse, racial tolerance, and bonding rituals. Although the concept of jihad is never mentioned, the common Western myth of a militant, intolerant faith hostile to the West and to other religions is directly confronted.

"Unity" and the entire series emphasize the various peoples and cultures of the major adherents of Islam--Arab, Turk, Persian, Indian, Pakistani, and Central Asian. However, the great Islamic civilization of Spain receives bare notice; and Sub-Saharan Africa, China, and Southeast Asia (including Indonesia, the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world) are totally ignored. One would assume that the producers might

argue that the syncretic or "popular" forms prominent in much of Africa or in East Asia do not represent traditional Islam. More importantly, the film's breadth and emphasis upon unity poses some problems because students are not introduced to the tremendous cultural cleavages within Islam--between Sunni and Shia, Arab and other Muslims, fundamentalist and moderate, modernist and traditionalist.

Space will allow only brief glimpses of the other five units of the series. "Nomad and City" compares the life styles of Middle East and Central Asian nomads with that of urban dwelling Muslims, two traditional modes of Islamic life which have contributed greatly to the nature of Muslim culture and vitality. "Man and Nature" examines how the Muslim concept of the unity of man and nature manifests itself in culture, i.e. the development of life styles consistent with the natural landscape and the stewardship of resources (water, energy, cool air, etc.). "Patterns of Beauty," probably the most widely useable of the films, is an extraordinarily beautiful and instructive piece which explains traditional Islamic art forms and demonstrates the role which art plays in fostering the sense of Muslim identity. The film focuses upon the three basic elements of Islamic art: the line and the angle, interlacing geometric designs, and calligraphy, which all come together in the distinctiveness of Islamic architecture, whether Arab, Turkish, Persian, Indian, etc. The film is very effective in providing a foundation for the appreciation of Islamic art and civilization. "Knowledge of the World" expresses the importance Islam places on knowledge, and it depicts Islamic contributions in areas such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, science, theology, philosophy, history, and literature. "The Inner Life," the most intellectually challenging of the films, deals with Muslim spirituality and mysticism, especially the historical role and importance of Sufism. This sophisticated subject is essential for a fuller understanding of the faith of Islam.

Valuable as this series is, it only scratches the surface of a subject as immense, diverse, and complex as the world of Islam. While it challenges common stereotypes and myths, it tends to romanticize traditionalism, and the films sometimes tend toward a travel guide simplicity. References to "typical Muslim cities" or a "typical Muslim house" (in these cases from Morocco) project erroneous stereotypes. Nor could the Indian maiden replicating "a dance which might have been performed before the Mughal emperors of India," to Hindu music, be considered traditional Islamic behavior by the Saudis or by other conservative purists. The films give only fleeting and inadequate glimmers of the divisions noted above, the tremendous tension between contemporary secular values and traditional Islam, or the overlay of Western political, legal, economic, and social forms and values upon contemporary Muslim societies.

One cannot rely exclusively upon the series, as the films must be augmented with lectures and other materials. Certainly the controversial political dimensions of the modern Middle East must be addressed. But for what they profess to be, the films are an invaluable source for high school and college classrooms, or for church, civic, or other groups. Finally, the films are inordinately expensive to purchase, but they are readily available from most film rental centers at exceptionally inexpensive rental fees.