

Back to Basics: Where Is Allah? - A Survey of Generation Z Youth at the Canadian University of Dubai

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Abstract—The belief of a heavenly God is enshrined to all Abrahamic religions which form the three major religions of the world today. Muslims believe in Allah who is above the seven heavens. The youth in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) study Islamic courses as part of their high school curriculum and are required to take at least one Islamic course at the university level to gain credit hours towards their general education (GENED). This paper provides an insight of what the youth studying in the UAE think of where Allah is. Our analysis shows that a big number of Muslim youth were not sure, especially those from the Middle Eastern and Arab countries bringing to conclusion that this subject needs to be revisited again in the course work.

Keywords—Allah, Islam, Tawheed.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE question of “Where is Allah” may sound trivial to many and especially to Muslims living in a Muslim country.

Dubai being a Multicultural and a modern society, it is believed that people of different religions and cultures are intermingling freely as suggested by [1]. Herbig & Dunphy [2] define religion as “a socially shared set of beliefs, ideas, and actions which relate to a reality that cannot be verified empirically yet is believed to affect the course of natural and human events.” Tayeb [3] deduced that Muslims have in the last quarter century revisited their Islamic traditions as a way to affirm their identity. The United Arab Emirate (UAE) is a predominantly Muslim country (i.e. following Islamic religion) of Sunni sect. Islam, part of the three major Abrahamic religions, believe in the Heavenly God unlike Hindus, for example, according to [4] believe that God is formless, attribute-less and Omnipresent meaning that God is everywhere and is both transcendental and intermixed in everything.

In Islam, the study of Tawheed (Oneness of Allah) is fundamental and vital for the spiritual growth of a Muslim. It is thus assumed that in order to understand the concept of God in Islam and have basic knowledge with regards to Tawheed [5], one would wonder or ask where Allah was especially when Islamic Studies is compulsory in all schools in the UAE.

The objective of this paper was to gauge Dubai’s generation Z youth group perception and their Islamic understanding of where Allah was and whether there is a need for such a topic

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to be covered or revisited in the Islamic Studies courses in order to reinforce the study of Tawheed. The next section outlines the Islamic View followed by the methodology taken in this study. Section IV presents the findings of the study. Finally, the conclusion of the study is highlighted at the end of the paper in Section V.

II. ISLAMIC VIEW ON WHERE ALLAH IS

In the Islamic point of view, according to the two main sources of Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia) i.e. the holy Quran and the narrations of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him), Allah is above the heaven outside his creation while His Attributes and Knowledge is Omnipresent. This can be understood from the following verses in the Quran:

Meaning:

“Then He rose over (Istawa) towards the heaven and made them seven heavens and He is All-Knower of everything” [6].

“Are you sure that He Who is Above the heaven will not cleave the earth beneath you? Or are you sure that He Who is above the heaven will not send against you a stone-charged hurricane” [7].

“He manages all affairs from the heaven unto the earth” [8].

And from the verses of the Quran the mentioning of Ascension to Allah such as the miraculous journey of the Prophet (*Isra’ walMiraj*) from Mecca to Jerusalem and then Ascending to Heaven [9].

Also from the following verses:

Meaning:

“To Him do ascend (*yas’adu*) the good words, and the good deeds, lift them up (*yarfa’uhu*)” [10].

“And when Allah said: O Isa (Jesus), I am going to terminate the period of your stay (on earth) and cause you to ascend (*raafiuka*) unto Me and purify you of those who disbelieve” [11].

We find that even Firaun (Pharaoh) while trying to mock Musa (Moses) and his preaching of Allah was able to identify that Allah is in the heavens. It is assumed that Musa must have explained to him the concept of Islamic *Tawheed* and pointed that Allah is above the heavens. Firaun said to his loyal minister Haman as indicated from the following verse:

Meaning:

“And Firaun said: O Haman, build for me a tower that I may attain the means of access. The means of access to

the heavens so that I may climb to the god of Musa, and I surely think of him to be a liar" [12].

From the narrations of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) we can understand from the hadiths of which amongst are:

Mu`awiyaibn al-Hakam came to the Prophet and told him: "I am very newly from the Jahiliyya, and now Allah has brought Islam," and he proceeded to ask about various Jahiliyya practices, until at last he said that he had slapped his slave girl, and asked if he should free her (as an expiation of the sin), as was obligatory if she was a believer. The Prophet requested that she be brought, and then asked her, "Where is Allah?" and she said, "In the heaven (*fi al-sama*)"; whereupon he asked her, "Who am I?" and she said, "You are the Messenger of Allah"; at which he said, "Free her, for she is a believer" [13], [14].

Abdullah ibnAmribn al-Aas narrated that the Prophet said: If you show mercy to those who are on the earth, He Who is in the heaven will show mercy to you [15].

And from the sayings of the great Imams, the founders of the four madhahib of the Sunni sect, Imam Shafi iterates that "The creed which I hold is the same creed the Muslims before me were holding, namely, the Testimony of Faith: There is no god worthy of worship but Allah, that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and that Allah is above His Throne, above the heaven [16]. The same creed is reported to be that of Imam Ahmad [17].

III. METHODOLOGY

The Canadian University of Dubai is centrally located in Dubai and boasts a multicultural environment where students from over 86 countries are enrolled in several undergraduate degree programs [18]. All students are required as part of their General Education (GENED) credit hour courses to take an Islamic Culture course in which Islamic core beliefs such as the five pillars of Islam (*arkanul Islam*) from the hadith of Jibril [19], [20] are covered in detail in the material. Thus, it was our assumption that irrespective of the student's origin and culture, religious beliefs etc. that they would find the question of "Where is Allah?" as trivial.

The quantitative research study used data generated from a random survey of 417 students. The students are both Muslims and non-Muslims. A self-developed closed-ended questionnaire was used as a research instrument used to collect the data comprising of two sections; section A covered the participant's demographic data and section B consisted of one question gauging the understanding of the participant's perception of where Allah was. The demographic variables were measured using various ranges and answer categories:

- Gender: Was measured using two categories, i.e. male and female.
- Age: Was measured using three options, i.e. 17-25, 26-30, and 31 or above.
- Religion: Was measured using five categories, i.e. Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Other.
- Origin: Was measured using four categories, i.e. European/Western, Arab or Middle East, African, Indo-Pakistan, Far East.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the 417 participants, 73% were Muslims compared to 27% non-Muslims. The vast majority i.e. 89% belonged to one of the groups of three major religions generally referred to as Abrahamic. The gender representation was 53% male and 47% female. Majority of the respondents i.e. 49% identified themselves with backgrounds originating from Middle East/Arab followed by 15% from Africa, 14% European/Western, 12% from Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, and 10% from the Far East. The sample had a well-balanced gender group and the majority of participants were the targeted age group fairly distributed across region of origin with the majority from Arab or Middle Eastern countries.

TABLE I
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (N = 417)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	221	53%
	Female	196	47%
Age	17-25	395	95%
	26-30	14	3%
	31 & above	8	2%
Religion	Muslim	304	73%
	Christian	66	16%
	Jew	0	0
	Hindu	17	4%
	Other	30	7%
Origin	European/Western	57	14%
	Arab/Middle East	206	49%
	African	62	15%
	Indo-Pakistan	51	12%
	Far East	41	10%

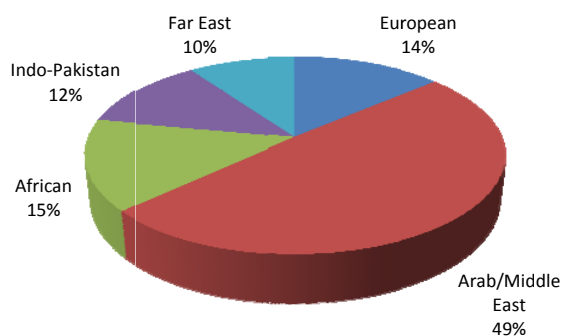


Fig. 1 Origin of Participants

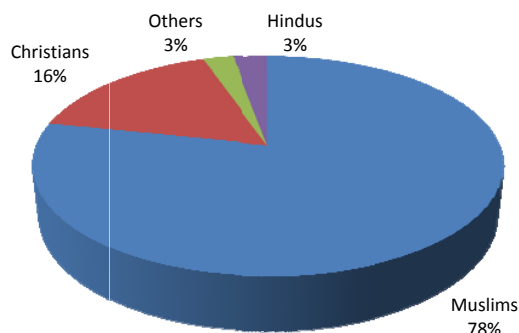


Fig. 2 Religion of All Participants

Section B of the survey contained the question “Where is Allah?” and three choices (Everywhere, Above the Heavens, and Not Sure) were given for the participants. Fig. 3 shows the general responses of all those surveyed.

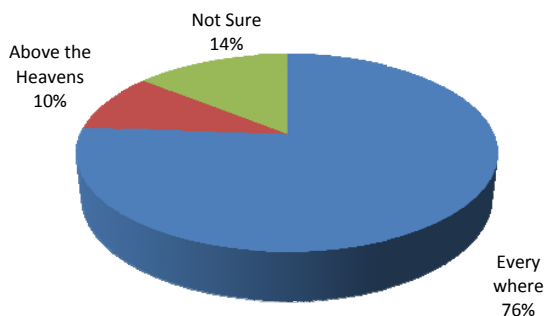


Fig. 3 Responses of All Participants

As indicated above, 76% selected “Everywhere”. Fig. 4 below shows the responses based on their identified religion e.g. Muslim, Christians, Hindus, or Others. None of the participants identified themselves as Jewish. It must be noted that the UAE does not permit holders of Israel passports entry to the country. Of those who responded “Everywhere”, 52% identified themselves as originated from either Arab or Middle Eastern countries and 16% from Africa compare to 14% from Europe, 10% from Indo-Pakistan, and 8% from the Far East.

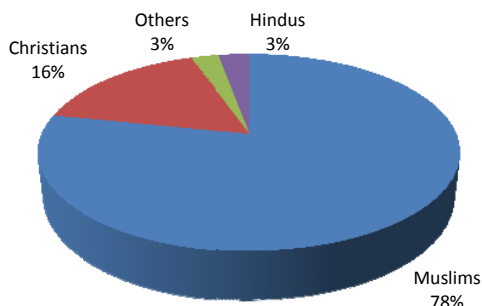


Fig. 4 Those Who Responded “Everywhere”

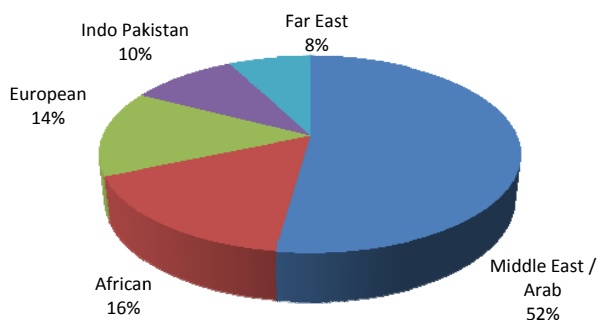


Fig. 5 Origins of Those Who Responded “Everywhere”

A small group of 10% of those surveyed selected “Above

the Heavens”. Fig. 6 highlights the percentages based on their religious affiliations.

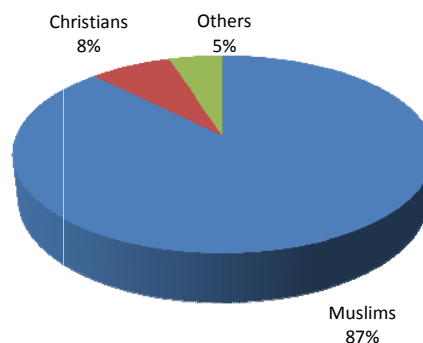


Fig. 6 Religious Affiliations of “Above the Heaven” Respondents

Finally, 14% of those surveyed selected “Not Sure” as their response. Of those who selected this, 34% were Muslims, 19% Christians, 15% Hindus, and 34% who identified themselves as other religion.

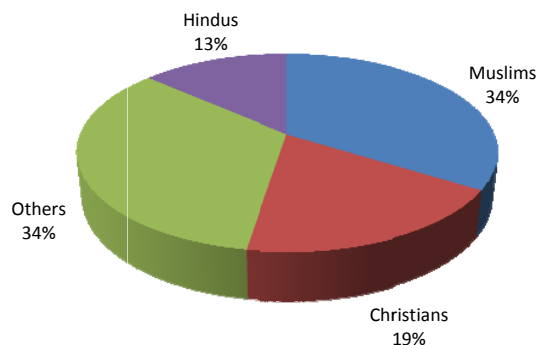


Fig. 7 Religious Affiliations of the 14% Who Responded “Not Sure”

Of the Muslims who were not sure, 68% originated from Middle Eastern/Arab country. Fig. 8 highlights the percentages.

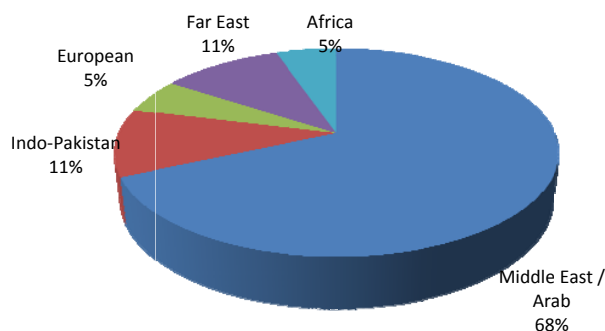


Fig. 8 Origins of Muslims Who Responded “Not Sure”

V. CONCLUSION

In this study we presented an analysis of a survey conducted to a student population that is multicultural and young.

Students who graduated their high school in UAE are required to take Islamic Studies as part of their high school curriculum. At the university level, all students are required to take an Islamic Culture course in order to fulfill their general education (GENED) credit hours requirements. The course covers topics such as the 5 pillars of Islam (*Arkanul Islam*), the 6 articles of Faith (*Arkanullman*) etc. which both cover the *shahada* (testifying the Oneness of Allah – *Tawheed*) and belief in Allah (*Tawheed*) respectively. However, when asked such a trivial question about Allah, only 10% were able to select the correct response and a big number of those who were not sure were actually Muslims from the Middle East or Arab backgrounds. This shows that there is a need for such a topic to be revisited and/or reinforced in order to bring awareness to the youth population. While the study focused on the student population in the age category of 17-25 years old, it should not be assumed that the general population is able to answer such a trivial question correctly.

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- [7] Quran (Chapter 67: Verse 17-18)
- [8] Quran (Chapter 32: Verse 5)
- [9] Quran (Chapter 17: Verse 1)
- [10] Quran (Chapter 35: Verse 10)
- [11] Quran (Chapter 3: Verse 55)
- [12] Quran (Chapter 40: Verse 36-37)
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- [17] *Ibid.* pp. 123
- [18] Canadian University of Dubai, "Inspiring Minds Transforming Lives" Undergraduate Student Handbook, 2013-2014. Pp. 10
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