

Media contact:  
Mark Holland  
(912) 681-0405  
markwh@georgiasouthern.edu

Oct. 3, 2006

Islam is focus of new exhibit  
at Georgia Southern Museum

Although it is practiced by more than a billion people, Islam remains one of the most misunderstood religions in the world.

A new exhibit at the Georgia Southern Museum seeks to help people separate fact from fiction when it comes to Muslims and their faith.

"Islam in Belief and Practice" is an exploration of what Muslims believe, the many different interpretations of the religion, and its relationship to Christianity and Judaism.

"Even though they hear about it on the TV and read about it in the newspaper, most people don't really receive much information on Islam," said John Parcels, the curator of the exhibit.

"Our goal is to explain the beliefs and practices and to answer the most important questions that people have about Muslims and Islam."

Featuring authentic clothing, prayer rugs and religious artifacts, the exhibit addresses the origin of the Qur'an, common beliefs shared by Muslims, the significance of Ramadan, the role of women, the meanings of jihad, and the goals of extremist factions.

The exhibit also reveals quite a bit of background information that may be interesting to non-Muslims. For example, did you know that:

- Most Muslims are not Arabs?
- Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal word of God, spoken through Muhammad as he received it from the angel Gabriel?

- Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, and his name appears more times in the Qur'an than Muhammad's?
- Every Muslim who is physically and financially able must make the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in their lifetime?
- Four Muslim countries – Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey – have elected female heads of state?

"More than anything, people should discover that not every Muslim believes the same things," Parcels said. "Just as Christianity has Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, and then further divisions within each of those, there is a wide variety of beliefs and practices in Islam."

Parcels taught philosophy, religious studies and English at Georgia Southern from 1972 through 2005. For the past 15 years, he has served as executive director of the Southeast Regional Middle East and Islamic Studies Seminar, a 10-state professional society for faculty who teach classes on the region and its primary religion.

Parcels also serves as treasurer for the Middle East Outreach Council, a national organization that provides information to educators about the region's people, places and culture.

In 2003, Parcels was the curator for the Georgia Southern Museum's "Objects of Faith" exhibit, which featured art and artifacts from many of the world's religions.

"With Mr. Parcels' unique insight on Islam, we felt like this was a good time for us to address a topic that so many people are interested in," said Brent Tharp, the director of the Museum. "Everyone has seen all sorts of images and all sorts of news stories that pertain to Islam, but how much is myth and how much is reality?"

"Through this exhibit, Mr. Parcels is presenting our visitors with a clear and objective picture of the Muslim religion."

A series of presentations and workshops will be offered in conjunction with the exhibit. A complete schedule of these events will be released at a later date.

In addition, lectures and group tours of the exhibit can be arranged.

"Islam in Belief and Practice" will remain on display through Dec. 31.

There is no admission fee for the Museum, which is located in the Rosenwald Building on Southern Drive. The Museum is open from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and from 2 p.m. until 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

For more information, visit <http://ceps.georgiasouthern.edu/museum/exhibits> or call (912) 681-5444.

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