

Islam as a Worldview – Muhammad Ali

1. Muhammad Ali the boxer

Who was he – he was a world class athlete and one of the greatest boxers the world has ever seen.

Muhammad Ali is often celebrated as a human rights activist or as a campaigner for black rights and sometimes as a Muslim, but we must remember that he was first and foremost an athlete. He was able to take a punch like no one else and unusually he had a style of fighting that relied both on his strength and speed. In any discussion of Ali's beliefs and values it is important to remember that his actions inside the ring are just as important if not more important to understanding him as his nonsporting life.

He won an Olympic gold for Boxing when he was 18 and he introduced new techniques in the boxing ring. Most heavyweight boxers rely on the power of their punches to win fights but Ali was probably the quickest heavy weight boxer in the world. Some people said that he was so fast and elegant as a fighter that it looked like he was dancing, he was nimble and light-footed and could literally run rings around his opponents. Ali's most famous quote about himself describes his unique fighting style. He was amazingly quick but also powerfully strong.

Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.

During his career as a boxer he fought in and won several iconic fights. Two of his most famous fights illustrate how he constantly challenged preconceived ideas about how a black athlete should behave in public while at the same time demonstrating his boxing expertise. The first was his match with Sonny Liston and the second was his match with George Foreman – the *Rumble in the Jungle*, sometimes called the greatest sporting event of all time. He fought Sonny Liston in 1964 who was the reigning heavy weight champion. When he arrived at the match he was the underdog and no one expected him to win, 93% of the press coverage predicted that he Liston would humiliate Ali. Liston trained to box in the Missouri State Penitentiary where he was serving time for armed robbery, he had ties to the mob and he had the reputation of being ferocious and with a punch that was said to be harder than Mike Tyson's. Before the match sports reporters predicted that Ali would be humiliated and the New York times said he would be knocked out in the first round. Most boxers let their managers do the talking but Ali was sparred with the press and dominated the pre match interviews. Throughout the match Ali taunted Liston and danced rings around him managing to evade most of his punches. Ali won in the seventh round, he moved to the centre of the ring with his arms raised and danced a jig that became known as the 'Ali Shuffle'.

The famous *Rumble in the Jungle* fight with George Foreman was held in the Democratic Republic of Congo (called then Zaire). George Foreman was the undisputed heavy weight champion of the world and again Ali was the 4-1 underdog. He decided to let Foreman keep punching him so that Foreman was eventually too tired to fight. In the second round Ali lent against the ropes and let Foreman punch him as hard as could so that Foreman became exhausted. Foreman said afterwards that Ali taunted him all through the fight, in the seventh round Foreman punched Ali hard in the jaw and Ali held him close and whispered 'that all you got George?'. The fight was watched by a record 1 billion viewers world wide and has since become one of the most famous fights in the world.

He was the first fighter to win the heavy weight title three times and he defended his title 19 times. Even more impressively he was able to sustain a successful career after he was banned from boxing during what should have been the successful years of his sporting career.

LESSON 1: MUHAMMAD ALI THE BOXER

1: 1964, Liston vs Clay

- To give pupils a sense of context, search online for images of the 1964 fight between Sonny Liston and Cassius Clay. It is extremely famous and there are many striking images of the two men, their fight, and publication of the fight.
- Read the document 'Liston vs Clay 1964 Programme'. Ask the class to predict who looks likely to win the fight.
- Read the 'match report' document. Who won? What tactics did Clay use? How did he confound expectations?

2: What does this tell us about Ali's character?

- A word-gathering exercise, go back into the notes- describe Ali. Choose three words
- Activity: create a slogan, or use the three words to describe Ali. Search online for an image of Muhammad Ali in a boxing robe- imagine pupils' slogan or three words printed on the back of a boxing robe.

3: Why did Ali become a boxer?

Read the quote below about Ali's childhood by a journalist:

'When Clay's father told him all about the case of young Emmett Till, who had been beaten, mutilated, shot in the head, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in the summer of 1955 by a pair of white men, Clay saw himself as Till, who was just a year older than he was. The killing helped reinforce in him the sense that he, a black boy from Louisville, was going out into a world that would inevitably deny him, rebuff him, even hate him and so he sought a means of escape in the ring. "I started boxing because I thought this was the fastest way for a black person to make it in this country," he would say years later.'

Questions:

- Work out together what Ali heard about when he was young. How did this make him see the world as a young black man?
- Why did he decide to get into boxing? Discuss together.

2. Muhammad Ali the Muslim

Ali was once called the most famous Muslim in America. Like most people Ali sometimes had contradictory beliefs and he changed his mind, religiously and religiously. Ali always considered himself religious and a believer in God.

The Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam is an American African movement that combines traditional Muslim beliefs with Black nationalist ideas. Islam first came to America when it was practiced by black slaves and although many slaves were forced to convert to Christianity, Islam continued to be practiced amongst many black slaves. The place of Islam amongst Africans who were enslaved and taken to America is often forgotten. Nobody knows exactly how many African slaves were Muslim but we do that Slaves were forcibly taken from areas of Africa, the Senegambia and central Sudan, where there were significant Muslim communities. All slaves were forced to give up their names and take on the slaves of their new owners. This means that their Muslim names were replaced with the names given to them by their owners.

At the beginning of the 20th century Black nationalist teachings became associated with Islam through the work of Wallace Fard a salesman from Detroit. Elijah Muhammed took over the movement and developed it into the thriving political and religious movement it became in the 50s and 60s. Elijah Muhammed stressed that there was one God (Allah), that it was important to submit to Allah, that Muslims shouldn't smoke or eat pork and that the family was important. They also believed that black people had been systematically discriminated and oppressed by white people and that if they ever wanted to be treated fairly and with respect they needed to racially isolate and to rebuild their communities. This belief is called racial separation and is probably one of the Nation of Islam's most controversial ideas. Christianity was seen as the white man's religion; it was forced upon them by slave owners and the Church was seen as complicit in the slave trade.

The 1950s and early 1960s were times of enormous economic growth and opportunity in America, this new prosperity accentuated how badly black Americans were treated in all areas of life, they were paid less, they were segregated in education on public transport, housing and employment. Black Americans were literally second-class citizens and were treated as such. In North America where there was less structural discrimination black people were still routinely discriminated against. The young civil rights movement advocated integration and a belief that that equality could be achieved through peaceful means but by the end of the 1960s discrimination and the brutal treatment of black people was still endemic. Legal equality had been achieved through the courts but there was no economic equality and black people were still living in poverty. It was in this context that support for the Nation of Islam began to really grow.

To some Americans the Nation of Islam was an organisation run by thugs and ex-prisoners. It was also an organisation that taught black Americans to respect themselves, practice economic solidarity, stop crime and to support the family. It preached

that white people were 'blue eyed devils' and that black people should work to rebuild their communities without looking for support from the white police, teachers and courts that had discriminated against them in the first place.

Malcolm X

In the year he was murdered the FBI thought that Malcolm X was the most dangerous man in America. He was also one of the most famous members of the Nation of Islam and mentor to Muhammad Ali. When he was a child the Klu Klux Klan burnt his house and his father was murdered, probably by white racists. He started life as a petty criminal and pimp in Detroit and then New York. When he was in jail he converted to the Nation of Islam and as a member of the Nation of Islam he was articulate and outspoken, he rejected the civil rights movement because they called for racial integration and believed that violence was sometimes a necessary part of political struggle. In a speech given at the University of Berkeley in California Malcolm X explained why he believed that integration wasn't a path to equality:

First the Negro leadership demanded the white man's house, and the whites vacated their rundown houses for us and built homes for themselves out in the suburbs. Then the Negro leaders demanded seats for our children in the white man's schools. The whites evacuated the schools as our children moved in and they built schools for themselves in the suburbs. But now the Negro leadership is demanding the white man's job. Can the whites vacate their jobs like they did their homes and their schools and move to the suburbs and create more jobs? No. Not without violence and bloodshed.

He left the Nation of Islam in 1963 after becoming disillusioned with the behaviour of its leader, he travelled to Africa and the Middle East where he performed the Hajj and embraced mainstream Sunni Islam. He publicly refuted many of his comments supporting segregation and he advocated more peaceful approaches to racial equality. In 1965 he was assassinated by members of the nation of Islam.

Why did Ali convert to Islam?

Throughout his life Ali has given interviews and provided written accounts where he gives different scenarios of how and why he converted. It is probable that he met the Nation of Islam several times over a period of years. When he was at high school he wanted to write his English term paper on the Black Muslims (The Nation of Islam) but he was not allowed to. In a letter written to his then wife, Khalilah Camacho-Ali Ali described reading a Nation of Islam newspaper where he sees a cartoon. A white slave owner beats his slaves and at the same time he insists that the slaves pray to Jesus. 'I liked that cartoon' Ali wrote to his wife, 'It did something to me. It made sense.'

Muhammad Ali first saw Malcolm X when he spoke at a Nation of Islam rally, Malcolm X was charismatic, angry and spoke passionately about equality and freedom for black Americans. Although the two men became friends Ali kept his growing involvement with the Nation of Islam secret. He suspected that if his beliefs about Islam and pro black independence/anti white beliefs became common knowledge he would not be allowed to challenge the championship. The night of his famous fight with Sonny Liston, as everyone in the stadium cheered for Liston and expected to see the young Cassius Clay humiliated, Malcolm X watched the match from the side-lines. The next day as the world was still in shock over Ali's victory, with Malcolm X by his side, he announced he was a Muslim and that he had a new name. He said 'Cassius Clay is a slave name, I didn't choose it and I don't want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name – it means beloved of God, and I insist people use it when they speak to me'. He later said:

I believe in Allah and in peace. I don't try and move into white neighbourhoods. I don't want to marry a white woman. I was baptized when I was twelve, but I don't know what I was doing. I'm not a Christian any more. I know where I'm going and I know the truth and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want''.

Sufism and conversion to Sunni Islam

In 2004 Ali wrote a biography with the help of his daughter Hana Yasmeen Ali, *The Soul of a Butterfly*. In it he describes how he became interested in Sufism after reading the works of Inayat Khan and by 2005 he had publicly announced that he was attracted to Sufi mysticism. Ali met with Sufi leaders and studied with them. Sufism is not necessarily a distinct movement within Islam or a separate sect. It can better be understood as an aspect of many different Muslim communities where individuals chose to take a mystical path to knowing God. Sufis tend to stress the inward search for God and to the importance of tolerance and pluralism. As he grew older Ali moved towards more mainstream Islam, Sunni Islam.

LESSON 2: MUHAMMAD ALI THE MUSLIM

Starter: what is Nation of Islam?

Start by explaining that when Ali first fought Sonny Liston in 1964 the fight was almost cancelled due to unease about Ali's membership of a group called Nation of Islam. Why is that? In this lesson we will find out about Nation of Islam and Ali's spiritual journey as a Muslim man.

1: The Tree of Forgetfulness

- a) Use information on the PPT- talk about the Tree of Forgetfulness. There is a memorial in Ouidah, Benin, where many people were transported from. Find an image online. Also in Ouidah is a memorial to the enslaved people shipped for transportation, called the Gate of No Return. Find and display an image of this huge arch on the coast. You could also show a map of Benin in West Africa, where many enslaved people were transported from.
- b) Hand out sheet with 8 footprint outlines. Find a simple 'footprint' image using clipart. Pupils write inside each footprint something that the captured people had to forget before they were transported

2: Islam in Africa

- a) Teach that some regions of Africa where people were captured and enslaved would have contained large populations of Muslims. Did any pupils write 'religion' or 'beliefs' in their footprints? Confirm that enslaved people would lose their religion and beliefs as well as their name and identity. This would have been true for Muslims as well as those living by other African religions and beliefs.
- b) Ask pupils to consider why we don't know clearly where people were taken from? It is because the people lost their names and were given names by their owners. Names are a good way to place people in a culture and region, but the names were forgotten.

3: Nation of Islam

- a) Cut up the 'nation of Islam' cards and give a set to each group. Pupils follow the instructions on the PPT to make sense of the information. You might want to find images of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad.
- b) You will probably want to discuss some of the main points here: the aims of Nation of Islam, the injustice African Americans experienced and the two emerging arguments: whether black Americans could only leave peacefully separated from white America, or whether the two communities could live together in harmony.
- c) What attracted Ali to Nation of Islam? Display the information on the following slide and give groups time to answer this question
- d) Make a set of footprints to show Ali's spiritual journey.

3. Muhammed Ali the Conscientious Objector

One of the bravest decisions Ali ever made was not in a boxing ring but in refusing to go to war. On April the 28th 1967 Ali refused to be inducted into the American Army, he cited religious reasons for his refusal to fight and became a conscientious objector. Two months later he was convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison and fined \$10, 000 and banned from boxing for three years. He was stripped of his heavy weight boxing title in 1967 banned from boxing.

What is a conscientious objector?

This is someone who refuse to fight in a war because they believe it is unjust. In 1966 Amnesty International the group that campaigns for human rights decided to defend people who were sent to prison because they refused to go to war because of their beliefs.

Why did Ali refuse to go to war?

Ashfaq Khalfan, director law and policy for the human rights organisation Amnesty International said that Muhammad Ali was 'the greatest conscientious objector the world has ever seen'. Ali saw his refusal to fight in the Vietnam war not as a gesture of

pacifism but because he saw the war as racist. It was racist because it was an act of aggression by the most powerful white nation in the world against a small, undeveloped Asian country and it was racist because of the disproportionate impact the war had on black Americans. By 1968 19,560 Americans had died in Vietnam but young black Americans were more likely to be drafted, more likely to be placed in front line combat groups and more likely to die than white young men. In 1965, young black men were 11% of the population but they made up 16.5% of draftees. The American army 64% of eligible black men but only drafted 31% of eligible white men.

Ali said that as a black Muslim his conscience wouldn't let him travel to Vietnam to fight a war for America.

It has been said that I have two alternatives, either go to jail or go to the army. But I would like to say there is another alternative. And that alternative is justice.

His refusal to go to war had a terrible impact on his career and reputation. He was stripped of his Olympic medal and every state withdrew his boxing licence so he couldn't box. He was condemned by the media for being a coward and for being anti American. Other famous boxers like Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson had both served in the army and no one could understand why Ali refused to be a patriot. When he was deferred from the draft in 1964, his hometown Courier-Journal, ran an editorial claiming he lacked 'the dignity becoming a champion' and the editors of the New York Times refused to print his new Muslim name. At the end of 1966 the Ring magazine, the largest boxing magazine in America refused to select its usual 'fighter of the year' because it did not want Ali 'held up as an example to the youngsters of America'.

When Ali refused to fight in Vietnam his actions had a huge impact on the anti war movement. Ali started visiting universities and giving speeches about the war. At a time when most African American leaders were reluctant to criticise the war for fear of accusations of being anti patriotic Ali was one of the few voices that voiced support for the Vietcong and said that the war was unjust. Opposition to the war increased and there were 171, 700 conscientious objectors. To gain exemption men had to prove that they were a member of a church or organization that was pacifist. Ali argued that he should be exempt because he was a minister of the Nation of Islam and because no US war could be sanctioned by Islam since holy war could only be waged by a Muslim country. The US government rejected his claim, they said he was a 'selective objector' and that Muslims were a 'political and racial' organisation rather than a religious organisation.

He did receive some support. Martin Luther King Jr was one of his staunchest supporters during his draft case and the FBI wiretaps of the two talking show that they had a warm relationship even though they differed over integration.

LESSON 3: MUHAMMAD ALI AND THE VIETNAM WAR

Starter: should we always fight for our country?

Ask the class if they think people should always fight for their country. Listen to some answers.

1: Why was America fighting in Vietnam?

- a) Search online: Find Vietnam on a map and images from the Vietnam war. There are many online, as well as news footage.
- b) Read 2 entries in the 'Vietnam diary'.
- c) Split into groups. Give each group one person's diary. Each group answers their own comprehension questions (on PPT).
- d) Groups pool their knowledge and answer the question; *why was American fighting in Vietnam?* Share answers with the class.

2: How did Ali respond to the draft?

- a) Look at the information on the slide, 'how did Ali respond to the draft?'
- b) Ask pupils to discuss what they think his reaction was.
- c) Confirm that he refused to join up. Define 'conscientious objection/ conscientious objector'.

3: What was the impact?

- a) Look at the information on the slide, 'what was the impact?'
- b) Ask pupils to say which they think is the most negative impact on Ali.
- c) Are there any impacts which could be seen as positive? Discuss

4: Vietnam Diary

Return to the Vietnam Diary. Add one more entry for Ali, or his friends or family, describing his actions.

4. Muhammad Ali the Antiracist

In the summer of the first lock down the young footballer Marcus Rashford made the news as he argued that the government should continue to provide free school meal vouchers for children from struggling families. As a society we often idolise elite sportsmen men and women, they perform at a physical level that is beyond our comprehension and their lives are a combination of wealth and prestige. They are aloof from us and when they engage in political or social issues it is slightly shocking.

It was Muhammad Ali who broke the mould of the aloof athlete. Lived during a time of racial and social turmoil in America, he lived through the civil rights movement and through the protests over America's war with Vietnam. He was never aloof or silent in the face of these events , just as he was in the ring, he was loud, articulate and angry.

Ali was always aware of discrimination and inequity, even his original name links him to the struggle for freedom in America. Ali was originally called Cassius Marcellus Clay who was a 19th century anti-slavery crusader and who freed the 40 slaves he inherited from his father. One of his earliest mentors was a civil rights activist in the Louisville movement and was also the man who introduced him to boxing. When he twelve his bike was stolen and while he was threatening to beat up the culprit., Officer Joe Martin overheard him and said he had better learn how to fight and then helped train him for the next 6 years.

He grew up in an area where there was defacto segregation, if he ventured into the neighbouring district of Portland there would be racist calls and abuse. There were whites only hotels, whites only parks and whites only stores. In an interview he described how the racism of his youth affected him. The journalist later said:

When Clay's father told him all about the case of young Emmett Till, who had been beaten, mutilated, shot in the head, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in the summer of 1955 by a pair of white men, Clay saw himself as Till, who was just a year older than he was. The killing helped reinforce in him the sense that he, a black boy from Louisville, was going out into a world that would inevitably deny him, rebuff him, even hate him and so he sought a means of escape in the ring. "I started boxing because I thought this was the fastest way for a black person to make it in this country," he would say years later.

In 1971 Ali gave an interview to Michael Parkinson on his chat show:

Ali We're in Church and I said to my mother, 'How come everything is all white. How come Jesus is white and blond with blue eyes. Why is the Lords supper all white men and they angels are all white and so is Mary. I said 'Mother when we due are we going to heaven?' and she said 'Yes, naturally we go to heaven.'
And I said 'What happened to all those black angels ...oh I know the black angels are in the kitchen preparing the milk and honey'.

I am America, I am the part you won't recognise. But get used to me – black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own. Get used to me.

"The Nation of Islam taught that white people were devils. I don't believe that now; in fact, I never really believed that. But when I was young, I had seen and heard so many horrible stories about the white man that this made me stop and listen."

LESSON 4: ANTIRACISM

Starter: discuss reactions to Marcus Rashford- a footballer. What do pupils think of his campaign? Ask if sports people should get involved in social and political issues. Listen to some answers.

- a) Ask pupils, now they have learned a lot about Ali, how they would predict he would react to racism and injustice in society. Listen to some answers.

- b) What was life like when Ali was growing up? Find images of Louisville in the 1950s and 60s- this was Ali's childhood home, an industrial city in Kentucky.
- c) Find images of segregation in the US at this time. Use search terms such as 'whites only' 'coloureds only queues', bus segregation' and 'water tap segregation'. Read the first two sections of the information sheet, 'Antiracism' (Segregation and Ali's childhood). Ask the class to suggest how it might have felt growing up in this environment.
- d) Focus on religion. Teach that Ali was born Cassius Clay and was baptised as a Christian. Read the 3 quotes on the PPT slide. Can pupils suggest why Ali found Nation of Islam more attractive than Christianity initially? Give time to discuss these quotes- there might be lots of questions. Use prior learning on Nation of Islam.
- e) Finish with a '4 corners' exercise. Write these 4 statements onto large pieces of paper and stick to 4 corners of the room. Ask pupils to stand by the view they most agree with. As a class answer the question posed at the beginning of the lesson: should sports people get involved in social and political issues?

- (1) sports people should stick to sport and keep out of politics
- (2) not everyone can stand up and fight, we can't all be activists
- (3) change cannot come through violence
- (4) we must all fight injustice, whatever we do and whoever we are

NB: if social distancing makes this impossible, display the 4 statements and ask pupils to raise their hands or indicate which they most support.