

Islam in Social Studies Education: What We Should Teach Secondary Students and Why It Matters

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One of the most important and difficult challenges facing social studies educators, particularly world history teachers, concerns the role of Islam—one of the world's fastest growing and most dynamic religions—in historical and contemporary domestic and international affairs (Douglass and Dunn 2003; Esposito 1999; Gollnick and Chinn 2006; Huntington 2004). Some of the most important and controversial questions facing teachers include: (1) What should American students be taught about Islam's role in history? (2) What are the core beliefs, values, and practices of Islam? (3) Is Islam compatible with democracy? (4) What attitudes should students have regarding American and non-American Muslims? (5) Is Islam a threat to American national security? American society is currently debating the answers to these questions; universities, public schools, private organizations, the media, legal organizations, and the federal government are formulating opinions, producing curriculum guidelines, and establishing formal and informal policies regarding

America's relationship with Muslims and the Islamic world.

The continuing war in Iraq, persistent conflicts in the Middle East and other regions, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil, the increasing Muslim population in America, and our hostile relationships with some Muslim countries and factions, highlight the importance of schools taking Islam seriously and presenting accurate information in all social studies courses (Armour 2003; Douglass and Dunn 2003; Findley 2001; Smith 1999). Because of its historical importance and contemporary relevance, teaching about Islam provides teachers with excellent opportunities to transmit knowledge, stimulate critical thinking skills, and help students develop tolerant attitudes based not on stereotypes, myths, and rumors, but on historically accurate information. Thus, curriculum and instruction issues—what we choose to teach about Islam and how we present it—are critically important in fostering positive group relationships, producing competent citizens, improving America's relationship with the Islamic world, and protecting the civil and political rights of all citizens.

Teaching about Islam presents educators with numerous decisions regarding curriculum, resources, and instructional

methods and strategies. Islam has a long and complex history, an intricate theological foundation, highly developed legal systems, and a comprehensive list of achievements in philosophy, medicine, art, architecture, geography, mathematics, literature, and science (Esposito 1999). Additionally, Muslims often disagree about theology, law, and other such practices. Scholars and educators have a responsibility to develop a historically accurate curriculum and instructional program that complies with constitutional law and is pedagogically sound. This can lead to confusion because many teachers are not familiar with the constitutional requirements for teaching about religion in public schools.

Social studies teachers have an obligation to teach about world religions and their profound impact on human civilizations without proselytizing or expressing personal viewpoints. In *Taking Religion Seriously across the Curriculum*, Nord and Hayes (1998) present detailed guidelines for religion teachers in public schools, and suggest that instruction should be compatible with the First Amendment. To alleviate fears that many educators have about teaching religion in public schools—fears that arise from the controversial nature of the subject, including church-state

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conflicts, and curriculum and instructional concerns—Nord and Hayes present a cogent argument for teaching about religion. In addition, they provide a wide variety of suggested readings and resources, which can help teachers make educationally sound decisions. Finally, it is critically important that to be educated and competent citizens—students must first understand the pivotal role of religion in history and contemporary world affairs.

Social studies teachers in high school (and possibly middle school) may find this article useful in teaching both world history—a required course in most school districts—and traditional electives, such as world geography, world religions, comparative sociology, or global issues. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has established academic content standards that include teaching about all major world religions. Obviously, given the current importance of Islam in American and world affairs, teachers could discuss the religious and political aspects of Islam in American government or civics classes. In addition, it is possible to design lessons about Islam that incorporate the humanities and the sciences, as well as the social sciences.

Teaching about Islam: Political and Educational Controversies

The teaching of Islam to American students is a relatively recent phenomenon, heavily influenced by the Arab-Israeli conflict, the legacy of colonialism, and American policies throughout the Islamic world (Douglass and Dunn 2003). Generally, the teaching of Islam in the United States has been characterized by numerous stereotypes, distortions, omissions and textbook inaccuracies. Islam is often framed within the politically motivated narrative of Western civilization (Douglass and Dunn 2003; Findley 2001; Hermansen 2003; Kassam 2003; Reinhart 2003; Wheeler 2003). Many Americans are profoundly ignorant about Islam and often conflate it with terrorism and political regimes that unjustly conscript Islamic Law to justify their oppressive policies and

practices (Douglass and Dunn 2003; Findley 2001; Haddad 1999; Kassam 2003; Reinhart 2003). Furthermore, profound disagreements among scholars over the true nature of Islam—particularly its role in contemporary world politics—may frustrate educators over what to teach young students about the religion (Douglass and Dunn 2003).

In *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), for example, Samuel Huntington asserts that “Some Westerners, including President Clinton, have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other’s ‘Other’” (209). Huntington represents a school of thought that argues the major problem for Western civilization is not Islamic fundamentalism, but Islam itself. Islam is incompatible with democracy and thus poses a threat to the West. The two civilizations, according to Huntington, differ irreconcilably over the most fundamental religious and political issues. The Christian concept of the Trinity and the Western concept of separation of church and state are anathema to Muslims. Each can find common ground only in the fact that both claim universality and are convinced of their cultural superiority. Profound cultural differences, opposing worldviews, and dissimilar political aspirations have been, and continue to be, the primary causes of competition, conflict, and violence between Islam and the West (Fregosi 1998; Savage 2004). The end of the cold war, signified by the collapse of the Communist Soviet Union, removed a common threat to both Islam and the West and created a climate in which the centuries long conflict could intensify (Huntington 1996).

Other scholars argue that *only* Islamic fundamentalism, also called Islamism, militant Islam, radical Islam, or political Islam, is a threat to the West. By perpetrating terrorist attacks on American and Western interests and populations in a quest to achieve its political goals, Islamism has perverted the true nature of

Islam (Burgat 2003; Findley 2001; Hotaling 2003; Kepel 2002; Lewis 2003; Pipes 2003; Tibi 1998). Pipes asserts that radical Islamists—constantly in conflict with moderate Muslims for the soul of Islam—constitute no more than 15 percent of the population in most Muslim countries (2003, 20), yet pose a serious threat to the West because of their extremist ideology, strict adherence to *Shariah* (Islamic law), and willingness to use violence to achieve their political goals. Islamic fundamentalism is a major response to the many woes—high poverty rates, political instability, a lack of human rights, and low levels of education—that characterize much of the Muslim world (Pipes 2003). There is a major battle within Islam—pitting moderates against radicals—the outcome of which is of extraordinary importance to the international community, as well as the future of the religion.

Thus, the teaching of Islam in secondary schools, like many complex and controversial issues, has come under intense political and academic pressure from numerous factions, each with its own competing ideology and goals. Teachers can use this controversy to help students understand that the writing of history is a social and political construction and involves competing interpretations, value judgments, partial truths, omissions, and distortions (Douglass and Dunn 2003). Rather than confusing students, this fact will help them understand that human knowledge is a “work-in-progress” and undergoes revisions in light of new evidence, technological advances, and current cultural and political trends. Furthermore, students will learn that controversy and competing narratives are important aspects of social studies and are indispensable in the search for truth and understanding.

Despite pervasive stereotypes, controversies, and the difficult task of designing an appropriate curriculum, scholars generally agree that there are some core values, beliefs, historical events, and practices that characterize Islam and should be part of the secondary school curriculum (Wheeler 2003). Specifically, teaching students

about Islam's core beliefs and contributions to human civilization, as well as the Islamic world's relationship with other civilizations and countries, would serve as a basic introduction to the study of Islam. This basic curriculum will provide students with a knowledge base while simultaneously developing their critical thinking skills and enabling them to discard stereotypical images of Muslims. Through this process, students will develop a sense of the complexities and contradictions common to all religious and political worldviews, and will be able to make informed and rational decisions that will hopefully lead to greater intercultural understanding, improved social justice, and advanced international security.

Islam: Major Beliefs and Practices

God, through the prophet Muhammad ibn Abd Allah (ca. 570–632), revealed Islam—"submission to the will of God"—to humanity in western Arabia in the early seventh century (Donner 1999). At the core of Islam is the belief that an individual makes a "deliberate, conscious, and rational act" to submit his limited human will to the "absolute and omnipotent will of God" (Cornell 1999, 67). Islam's holiest text, the Quran, governs all aspects of religious, political, and social life, and affirms the universal obligation to believe in one God. Monotheistic in nature, Islam claims that all human beings descend from the same God, have similar needs, wants, and experiences, and can relate to a set of universal moral principles (Cornell 1999). Thus, what is considered good for a Muslim ("one who submits" to Allah) is considered good for all human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or origin. We can attribute Islam's rapid expansion in the late seventh and early eighth centuries as well as its dynamism today to its claim of universal validity across time and space (Cornell 1999).

Individuals can convert to Islam by practicing the Five Pillars of Faith and adhering to the core values, laws, and behaviors outlined in both the Quran and the teachings of Muhammad, the

Hadith. The Five Pillars of Islam mandate specific values and behaviors that all Muslims must adhere to. These tenets distinguish Islam from its monotheistic predecessors, Judaism and Christianity. The first pillar of Islam is called the *Shahadah* (the act of bearing witness). It requires that a Muslim declare his devotion to Allah by saying "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Theologically, this profession of faith asserts that Allah is the only God and not part of a pantheon. By openly proclaiming the *Shahadah*, Muslims acknowledge their submission to Allah, the ultimate divine reality of the universe. Thus, Islam categorically rejects the concept of the Trinity and presents a direct theological challenge to Christianity. This disagreement has been at the core of Islamic and Christian tension for fourteen centuries (Smith 1999) with the intractable views held by both religions fueling tension and preventing any compromise.

The second pillar of Islam requires Muslims to pray at five specified times a day. When praying each devotee must face in the direction of the Great Mosque in Mecca, the holiest city in Islam (Cornell 1999). These prayers, known as *al-Salat*, are performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and in the evening. They are viewed as a vital component of one's submission to Allah and involve a variety of important rituals, each of which signifies the centrality of prayer in Islamic life. By praying five times daily, Muslims acknowledge humanity's total dependence on the will of Allah.

The third pillar of Islam requires Muslims to pay an annual tax to a religious official or a government representative. The Quran mandates that this tax, usually 2.5 percent of the individual's wealth, be used to help the poor, relieve debt, help travelers, encourage conversion to Islam, and assist those actively serving Allah (Cornell 1999). The tax, known as *al-zakah*, reflects the importance of alms-giving (charity) and emphasizes the Quran's view of important virtues such as social justice, equality, and compassion.

The fourth pillar involves fasting from sunrise until sunset during the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar—Ramadan (Cornell 1999). During Ramadan, Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink, and sex. This fasting period, called *al-Sawm*, is viewed as an act of self-sacrifice and moral awareness. By fasting, Muslims develop a deep sense of devotion to Allah and are cognizant of their membership in, and responsibility to, a larger moral community (Cornell 1999).

The fifth pillar of Islam is the *al-hajj*, or annual pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. This pilgrimage occurs during *Dhul-Hijjah*, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar and requires every healthy and financially able Muslim to make the journey to Mecca once in their lifetime to perform a series of required rituals, such as circumambulating the *Kaaba*—a building inside the al-Masjidi'l-Haram mosque—seven times in a counterclockwise direction, wearing the *ihram* (proper clothing), and recalling the final pilgrimage of Muhammad by standing at Mount Arafat. The *Hajj* symbolizes the believer's entry into the earthly House of God in Mecca, which Muslims believe is a replica of the cosmic House of God in the Seventh Heaven (Cornell 1999).

In addition to practicing the Five Pillars of Islam, Muslims adhere to the Six Pillars of Faith: a belief in Allah; a belief in Allah's angels; a belief in Allah's revealed texts, including the Quran; a belief in Allah's messengers; a belief in a judgment day; and a belief in Allah's complete control over all worldly affairs (Cornell 1999). Generally, Islamic societies closely link religion and politics. Muslims are expected to follow a plethora of rules governing all aspects of their lives. The *Shariah* and *fiqh*, two complex sources of Koranic Islamic law, attempt to balance divine revelation with human reason. They provide a moral justification for the formation and enforcement of laws that govern religious practices and obligations, social life, marriage and divorce, business and commerce, taxation, government, criminal justice, economics, citizenship, and other areas (Kamali 1999). For example,

Muslims are forbidden from committing murder, charging interest on loans, engaging in sexual promiscuity, eating pork, gambling and consuming alcohol (Cornell 1999).

While Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is a highly complex religion that causes scholars to debate interpretations of Islamic values, history, beliefs, laws, and practices, secondary students

el-Islam—the “house of Islam,” which refers to all areas under Islamic sovereignty (Bentley and Ziegler 2000, 304). Many Islamic achievements, therefore, are the product of both indigenous efforts and the dynamic processes of cultural diffusion.

For example, while Arabic became the dominant language of Islamic theology and law, the Persian language was

my, and geography. They also improved the astrolabe (an instrument used by sailors to measure latitude), created maps of the Eastern hemisphere, developed alchemy, and produced *The Canon of Medicine*—a monumental volume that attempted to summarize all medical knowledge into one comprehensive structure (Dallal 1999). These few examples of Islamic contributions to human civilization demonstrate the intellectual vitality of Islamic civilization and the vital role of cultural diffusion in producing cultural, scientific, technological, and artistic progress.

Teaching American secondary school students about these achievements, as well as emphasizing the prominent role of contemporary American Muslims in science, computer technology, engineering, medicine, and business, will help to reduce the prejudice and discrimination currently directed at Muslims (Findley 2001; Hotaling 2003). While Muslim societies have experienced severe political, social, and economic problems in the past few centuries, it would be grossly unjust to ignore, distort, or denigrate the past achievements of Islamic civilizations (Lewis 2003). Historical knowledge about Islam, the success of Muslims in America, and the ability to recognize the great diversity of Islamic civilizations—including the profound difference between militant/radical Islam and moderate Islam—may help secondary school students dispel some of the most insidious myths and stereotypes that haunt the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims (Ernst 2003; Feldman 2003; Findley 2001).

Implications for Education in Secondary Schools

This fact provides the primary reason for teaching about Islam in secondary schools. For many, if not most Americans, Islam remains a little understood religion. Muslims are often stereotyped as religious fanatics, terrorists, and mysterious “Others” who represent a direct threat to Western civilization (Findley 2001). The vast majority of Americans

The importance of Islam to contemporary world affairs makes it an essential topic for social studies classrooms. Teachers should be careful, however, to emphasize the rich and diverse contributions that Muslims have made to world culture and history.

should be taught the core values and practices of Islam to foster cultural understanding, ameliorate religious conflicts, and develop the analytical skills necessary to evaluate the contradictions and complexities inherent in any highly complex religion, political ideology, or philosophy.

Contributions of Islamic Civilization to World History

The current political, cultural, and economic problems that exist in many Muslim countries should not detract from the diverse cultural achievements of historical Islamic civilizations (Findley 2001; Hotaling 2003; Lewis 2003). Shortly after Muhammad’s death in 632, Arab conquerors spread Islam throughout North Africa, southwest and central Asia, and Iberia. This rapid expansion—owing primarily to military conquests and the appeal of Islamic values, such as equality, social justice, and monotheism—produced enormous cultural exchanges with India, Greece, and the Persian and Byzantine empires (Bentley and Ziegler 2000). Islamic society developed by incorporating elements of these cultures to produce a truly multicultural civilization. Simultaneously, the Islamic religion transformed the cultural traditions of the conquered societies and created the *dar-*

used in Islamic literary works, such as the *Rubaiyat*, *The Arabian Nights*, and other works of poetry, history, and political philosophy (Bentley and Ziegler 2000). Muslim scholars examined, adapted, and preserved many works of Greco-Roman civilization after the fall of the Roman Empire generated chaos in western Europe. Muslim philosophers, notably Ibn Rushd (known as Averroes in the West) attempted to reconcile the teachings of the Quran with the hallmark achievement of ancient Greece—the establishment of human reason as the primary guide to ultimate truth. Ibn Rushd’s work had a profound influence on the development of scholasticism, an attempt by medieval European philosophers to reconcile Christian theology with Aristotelian reason (Bentley and Ziegler 2000).

Similarly, Muslim mathematicians used Hindi numerals to develop algebra and make significant contributions to geometry and trigonometry. These mathematical achievements, along with competence in engineering and art, resulted in the brilliant architectural achievements of Islamic civilization, such as the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Taj Mahal in Agra, India (Dallal 1999). In addition, Muslim scholars made advances in the science of optics (the study of light), practical astrono-

receive their information from the popular media, which often misrepresents Islamic beliefs and practices, and perpetuates myths, distortions, and misconceptions (Feldman 2003; Findley 2001). The long history of conflict between the West and the Islamic world has hampered efforts to achieve intercultural understanding and religious tolerance (Armour 2003; Huntington 1996; Lewis 2003). The complexity of understanding religious ideas and practices, as well as issues of ethnocentrism, and the behavior of extremists who conscript Islam to justify acts of terrorism throughout the world (Lewis 2003; Pipes 2003; Wheatcroft 2004) only add to the problem.

It is important for students, as active participants in American society, to understand that Islam is not a monolithic entity, immune from change over time and space. Like all religions, Islam evolves as it interacts with complex factors—race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, local cultural mores, and specific historical events—unique to particular countries and regions (Feldman 2003). For example, the type of Islam practiced in Indonesia—the world’s largest Islamic nation, with more than two hundred million Muslims—is significantly different from the form practiced in Pakistan (Esposito 1999). The world’s fifty-one predominantly Muslim countries are characterized by enormous diversity and are currently experiencing the cultural, social, and political turbulence of a rapidly changing world.

Despite the complexity of these issues, secondary school students are capable of understanding the contradictions, and competing interpretations of both Islam, and other religions and political ideologies. However, this will require multiple ways of thinking. Too often, educators and students adopt a one-dimensional view of reality, which fails to incorporate opposing paradigms, contradictory social events, and the powerful resurgence of traditional forms of ethnic or religious identities (Alvarez 1993). This linear perspective limits understanding, hinders communication, and exacerbates conflicts. Students must understand that historical

events have multiple causes and consequences, some of which may be, or appear to be, contradictory.

Alvarez (1993) advocates a nonlinear perspective, which rejects the assumption that “either the world is moving inexorably toward cultural unity OR toward ethnic diversity” and suggests instead, that we recognize that “the adoption of new cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of their coexistence with old patterns” (17). Thus, the powerful forces of globalization and democratization sweeping much of the world can coexist with powerful and resurgent religious, racial, and national identities. By adopting a nonlinear perspective, students can view the Islamic resurgence as a reaction to a fast-changing world of considerable cultural, economic, social, and political turmoil. Nonlinear analysis is designed to foster critical thinking skills, reconcile apparently contradictory ideologies, and produce students capable of analyzing the complex relationship between continuity and change (Alvarez 1993).

It is in America’s interest—given the global expansion of Islam, the high birth rates in Muslim countries, the rise of Islamism, and the rapid increase of Muslims in the United States—to educate citizens about this diverse and dynamic religion (Douglass and Dunn 2003; Ezzati 2002; Pipes 2003). America’s educational institutions must take the role of religion in history and contemporary politics seriously and design units or courses that allow students to acquire a rich understanding of all world religions and their roles in American and world history, law, and contemporary international relations (Nord 1995). American citizens must reach an adequate understanding of Islam and develop the ability to recognize that all political and religious ideologies can be perverted into virulent strains that threaten humanity. Islam will continue to exert significant impact on American society, foreign policy, and international affairs (Pipes 2003).

Teachers should design a unit on Islam that incorporates religion, history, geography, political science, and other

academic fields. This interdisciplinary approach could increase America’s overall knowledge of Islam, promote intercultural understanding and tolerance, engage critical thinking about a socially relevant world religion, and prepare students to live in a democratic and increasingly pluralistic society. Currently, the vast majority of American students can graduate from high school or college without taking a course in religion or discussing religious ideas (Kassam 2003; Nord 1995; Wheeler 2003). Given the central role of Islam in world history and contemporary international politics, this is tantamount to educational malfeasance. If students are to understand history and contemporary international affairs, teaching about all major religions must be a central focus of social studies education.

Knowledge of Islam will enable the American people to make rational decisions, improve relations with Muslim countries, understand the threat of radical Islam (a small but powerful force), and increase religious tolerance and social justice both in the United States and across the Muslim world. Social studies teachers can play a vital role in educating students about Islam. They can help transmit accurate information, abolish harmful stereotypes, reduce prejudice and discrimination, and improve intercultural understanding. Education remains a potent tool in America’s struggle to balance vital national identity and security concerns with tolerance for religious, cultural, and political diversity.

Key words: Islam, religion, world history and culture

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