# Teaching Islam without the Phobia: What We can Learn from World History Textbooks

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***Abstract***

*This study is an investigation of the representations of Muslims and Islam in high school world history textbooks available for adoption in Tennessee from two consecutive six-year adoption cycles—2008-2014 and 2014-2020. Informed by critical theory and Said's Orientalism, we used critical discourse analysis to identify six major themes: people and their roles, fabricated religion, mysticism, timelessness, violence, and internal conflict. By sharing that school curriculum is socially constructed with students, teachers can help to foster critical social justice literacy so that students may in turn challenge social injustice.*

***Keywords****: critical discourse analysis; high school history textbooks; orientalism; social justice literacy; Tennessee*

## Introduction

In the fall of 2015, a group of parents attended a town hall meeting in Sparta, Tennessee, to protest the religious studies curriculum in their children's school textbooks, decrying Islamic indoctrination of students in public schools. While the school and district leaders pointed to the social studies standards, it was a media frenzy that fueled Islamophobia. Incidents like these are not uncommon in school districts across the United States. Misinformation and misunderstanding about Muslims and Islam is ubiquitous, and the research on K-12 curriculum reveals limited or skewed coverage that reinforces Orientalist discourse. Our research challenges curricula on Islam, specifically high school world history textbooks available for adoption in Tennessee from two consecutive six-year adoption cycles—2008-2014 and 2014-2020. This paper begins with a contextualization of the study, describes the theoretical grounding, details methods and analysis, presents findings, and concludes with recommendations for informing an engaged citizenship.

We do need to point out that while we examined world history textbooks for which content and methodology are primarily driven by history content standards, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) has provided curriculum standards that serve as guiding principles to crafting a quality social studies curriculum. The purpose of social studies is the promotion of civic competence or, as defined by the NCSS (1994, p. 6), "to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." With this in mind, we present our work in efforts to realize a rich and respectful education on Islam.

## Background

In the current context of increasing standardization and assessment in schools, we caution against the collapsing of standards and testing (Ravitch, 2010). Curriculum standards are intended to serve as guiding principles for the selection and organization of content specific to a discipline. In 1994, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) published their first edition of curriculum standards, which represent educators' best thinking about providing a framework to prepare young people for the challenges of citizenship. The NCSS (1994) emphasizes the importance of civic competence to foster a commitment to the ideas and values of democracy:

- Consideration of civic competence does not refer exclusively to those who are legally recognized members of a nation, but more broadly to the responsibilities and relationships everyone has as a member of a complex network of groups and communities;
- Civic competence requires the ability to use knowledge about one's community, nation, and world, apply inquiry processes, and employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving;
- Young people who are knowledgeable, skillful, and committed to democracy are necessary to sustaining and improving our democratic way of life, and participating as members of a global community. (pp. 5-6)

The NCSS framework provides ten themes that represent a way of organizing knowledge through which to situate content, state standards, and other curricular materials.

School curriculum in the United States is the result of intense negotiation and sometimes conflict. School textbooks are objects of social and economic regulation and are situated in larger social contexts. Highly competitive, textbooks are cultural artifacts and economic commodities that are market and state driven. The textbook is an economic commodity because "it is subject to intense competition and to the pressures of profit" (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 7). It is a regulated commodity because it has political and cultural roles, including a "legally assured captive audience" with its enforcement and sanctioning in public schools (Luke, de Castell, and Luke, 1989, p. 254). Textbooks are typically considered to be factual, authoritative, and value-neutral, or as Apple (1993, p. 9) aptly coined, arbiters of "official knowledge." Textbooks signify through content and form particular ways of selecting and organizing a vast body of possible information, hence "arguments about textbooks are really cultural politics" (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 7).

There is a plethora of research (Altbach, Kelly, Petrie, and Weis, 1991; Anyon, 1979; Apple, 1986, 1993; Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991; Calderon, 2014; De Castell, Luke, and Luke, 1989; Douglas and Dunn, 2003; Elson, 1964; FitzGerald, 1979; Leahy, 2010; Willinsky, 1998; Woodward, Elliot, and Nagle, 1988; Zagumny and Richey, 2012, 2013) on textbooks that corroborates the legitimization of knowledge via textbook content. In education systems, and particularly in textbooks, knowledge is all too often presented as standard, static, and neutral (Spring, 1991). Seen by the general public as objective and above criticism, textbooks, nonetheless, contain particular constructions of reality organized for specific purposes. Textbook content embodies information that society perceives as valid—encoded and transmitted through textbooks. Or, in Calderon's (2014) terms, "US social studies textbooks widely adopted at the

secondary level…are a central delivery mechanism of normative historical narratives that promote a particular type of American national identity" (p. 315). In her examination of representations of American Indians in social studies textbooks, Calderon (2014) affirmed that such narratives maintain settler colonialism and perpetuate settler futurity.

The manner in which textbooks function in these legitimizing ways is particularly problematic given that research (Altbach, Kelly, Petrie, and Weis, 1991; Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991; De Castell, Luke, and Luke, 1989) confirms teacher and especially novice teacher reliance on textbooks. Teachers may rely more heavily on textbooks for unfamiliar material. Of greater concern are pre-service teachers who have little knowledge about Muslims and Islam who may or may not be willing to reflect on their own positionality (Lévesque, 2014; Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown, 2002; Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2006; Subedi, 2006). The potential exists for them to become in-service teachers who perpetuate misunderstandings of Muslims and Islam. A recent article by Sensoy and Ali-Khan (2016) further situates the problem with insufficient reflective practices on behalf of teachers and teacher educators. Despite the best intentions to teach about Muslims and Islam, "incomplete knowledge, misinformation, and weak arguments…cement stereotypes, promote intolerance, shut down learning, and thwart education for social justice" (Sensoy and Ali-Khan, 2016, p. 506).

Mass media and popular culture serve as curricular and instructional sources. The study of the organization and regulation of culture by corporate producers and their connections to formal education has a strong scholarly history and certainly informs our work here (e.g. Giroux, 1999; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997). Popular culture as informal educational space influences students' and teachers' thinking about Muslims and Islam. Media depictions of Muslims and Islam include monthly serials (Steet, 2000), news media (Falah, 2005; Jackson, 2010; McAlister, 2001; Kamalipour, 1995), movies (Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2003), television and comic books (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2004; Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Stonebanks, 2010), and comics, music, and dolls (Sensoy, 2009, 2010, 2014; Sensoy and Ali-Khan, 2016; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010). Sensoy and Ali-Khan (2016) explained how media sources fuel common misunderstandings: "Shaped by media stories, representations in pop culture continue to matter because the iconic fictional texts from the past have influenced the most popular character-types, story elements, and plots of today related to the Middle East" (p. 517). The intersection between education and mass media makes clear the pervasive cultural forces influencing schools, helping us to see education relationally (Apple, 1986).

## Methodology

The data for this research include six high school world history textbooks (Adas et al., 2007, 2011; Bentley and Ziegler, 2006, 2011; Bulliet et al., 2008, 2011) available for adoption in Tennessee from two consecutive six-year cycles—2008-2014 and 2014-2020. In Tennessee, only a select group of textbooks is available for adoption in each six-year cycle. A state textbook adoption committee reviews all available textbooks and reduces the selection for districts and schools who are then able to adopt a specific book from the already narrowed selection. The textbooks examined here are the books that were determined to be available for adoption in the two cycles via the adoption committee. Our approach to examining these school textbooks is criticalist in that asymmetrical power relations structure official knowledge disseminated via school systems. Much of what we are taught about Muslims and Islam is filtered through authorial sources that are extensions of colonial legacies.

In our study, we considered how the narrative constituted Orientalism and how those constructions were infused socially and culturally. Sections of the written text were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to initiate a process for coding. Potential codes were then identified and sorted into categories and eventually themes. This procedure was followed for each textbook, after which categories and themes were further combined resulting in the final themes. We do not intend for these themes to stand alone in isolation or be neatly distinct from one another. They tend to overlap and blend into one another. We also stress that these codes and subsequent categories and themes are not the only possible configurations for these data. Considering the social and cultural sources through which information is filtered, these themes are always already limited, partial, and spatially and temporally bound. The themes that we identified fall into two general categories: attributes assigned to Muslims and attributes assigned to Islam. Attributes assigned to Muslims include inability, opulence, corruption, unruly, inequity. Attributes assigned to Islam include fabricated religion, mysticism, timelessness, violence, and internal conflict.

## Findings

### Attributes Assigned to Muslims

Attributes assigned to Muslims address various characteristics ascribed to Muslim identity.

#### *Inability*

Each time a Muslim political entity's failure is exposed, the failure is attributed to the incapability of its rulers and administrators to solve problems and maintain stability. Adas et al. (2007) reinforced the idea of incompetence in their description of the first Caliph: "He received no financial support from the Muslim community. Thus, he had to continue his previous occupation as a merchant on a part-time basis, and he only loosely controlled the military commanders" (p. 136). This passage presents the first caliph as incapable of financial and military leadership. This passage indicates Muslims are incapable of establishing an appropriate system of government and are therefore unable to lead successfully.

#### *Opulence*

Muslims and their rulers were depicted as living in opulence with no understanding of the value of money, and as eager spenders who enjoy displaying their many possessions. Adas et al. (2007) superimposed opulence on Muslim rulers in his comparison of Ottoman and Safavid rulers: "As was true of the Ottomans, the practice of confining the princes to the atmosphere of luxury and intrigue that permeated the court led to a sharp fall in the quality of Safavid rulers" (p. 437).

#### *Corruption*

The textbooks often strip Muslim individuals of morality and ethics, and depict them as corrupt, opportunistic, and self-centered. Depictions of the Muslim character as corrupt extend to visual re-presentations as well. Bentley and Ziegler (2006) provide a visual re-presentation of corruption in a section addressing commerce in the early days of Islam. The discussion centered on camel caravans and an illustration from a 13th century manuscript was used as a visual aid

depicting how Muslims engaged in commerce. In a sturdy structure, a group of men appear to be unconscious while robbers empty their pockets of personal belongings. The caption reads: "Caravanserais offered splendid facilities for caravan merchants, but they sometimes harbored dangers. In this illustration from the thirteenth-century manuscript, drugged merchants sleep soundly while burglars relieve them of their valuables" (p. 361). The image actually illustrates a scene from an Arab fairytale. In the context of Bentley and Ziegler's (2006) commerce section, however, this illustration portrays Muslims as thieves who would not think twice to steal if they had the chance.

### *Unruly*

Muslim men, especially those who have power, are represented as unable to control their desires, anger, and behavior. In addition to being driven by desire, Muslim men were shown as incapable of controlling their behavior, especially those who have power. Bentley and Ziegler (2006) portrayed Muslim rulers as historically unaffected by religious or social constraints: "The autocratic authority wielded by the rulers of the Islamic empires also reflected steppe traditions. The early emperors largely did as they pleased, irrespective of religious and social norms" (p. 762). This representation suggests that Muslim rulers were guided by their desires rather than the needs of their people. Furthermore, they had no respect for religious and social constrains that regulate social life.

### *Inequity*

Muslim women in world history textbooks are presented as deliberately discriminated against by the Islamic faith and Muslim men. An example demonstrating womens' inequity in Islam can be found in Bulliet et al. (2008) in a discussion of marital laws, "although a man could divorce his wife without stating a cause, a woman could initiate divorce under specified conditions" (p. 230). This gives Muslim men an advantage over women in marriage. Misrepresentation occurs through general information presented in a way that reinforces the theme of inequity, rather than discussing the issue in detail. Women are depicted as secluded, isolated, and deprived from participating in social life and being productive members of society.

## Attributes Assigned to Islam

Attributes assigned to Islam address various characteristics assigned to Islam.

### *Fabricated Religion*

Islam is treated as a modified version of other monotheistic religions, copied by Mohamed, and imposed on Muslims to foster a sense of unity against non-Muslims. Textbook authors often indirectly indicated that Mohamed was familiar with other monotheistic religions and relied on this knowledge to invent a new religion. Islam is isolated from other Abrahamic faiths and framed as a Mohamedist cult to distance spectators and reinforce an Orientalist divide. For example, Bentley and Ziegler (2006) clearly explained that Mohamed went to Syria and met with Christians and Jews: "Although he was not deeply knowledgeable about Judaism or Christianity, Muhammad had a basic understanding of both traditions. He may even have traveled by caravan to Syria, where

he would certainly have dealt with Jewish and Christian merchants" (p. 348). Later, on the same page, the authors stated: "He did not set out to construct a new religion by combining elements of Arab, Jewish, and Christian beliefs" (p. 348). This is an indirect indication that Mohamed knew about monotheistic religions and relied on his knowledge to invent a new religion.

### *Mysticism*

The textbooks often associate Islam with the supernatural—witchcraft, desert spirits, magic, and fortune telling—insinuating an irrational, infantile populace in need of rational, mature control. A visual from Bentley and Ziegler (2006) shows a bustling bazaar where a man attracts a crowd as he tells fortunes (p. 764). A full sack of coins at his side suggests he has good business. Harkening back to an antiquated time when superstition reigned supreme, Islam is placed in a perpetual state of stagnation. Such representations strip Muslims and Islam of rationality by depicting them as a group that relies on elements of mysticism in their daily life, rather than an intelligent society that seeks logical and scientific solutions for problems.

### *Timelessness*

Muslim societies are often depicted frozen in time and incapable of living and adapting to a contemporary lifestyle. Resistant to modern, global knowledge and products, Muslims are portrayed living in the past. Little information was provided about contemporary Muslim societies. Rather, people were repeatedly shown timeless, backward, and resistant. For example, one textbook photograph shows a man carrying a cabinet-style television on his back (Bentley and Ziegler, 2006, p. 1142). The man wears a traditional *deshdasha* and white tennis shoes. In the background, automobiles manufactured in the 1950s United States are parked in front of a store with a sign in Arabic and English script. Despite the western influence via the automobiles, television, tennis shoes, and English language, this man is stuck in the past as evidenced by the antiquated products from the US. Instead of showing a diverse population of Muslims strongly influenced by western cultures and living in dense, urban areas, authors of textbooks constructed Muslim societies stuck in the past even when discussing recent history.

### *Violence*

Representations of Muslims and Islam are associated directly or indirectly with violence. This depiction of violence goes beyond individuals to become a generalization associated with Islam. While wars are often associated with political entities rather than religions, the textbooks over-emphasize the role of wars in the spread of Islam. Islam is often seen as a force of destruction and, sometimes, depicted through extreme acts of violence. For example, in an explanation about the defeat of a 16$^{th}$ century empire, the authors describe how an army commander was thrown out a window, dragged across the palace courtyard, and then thrown out the window again to assure he was indeed dead (Adas et al., 2007, p. 130). Especially destructive of churches and temples, Islam is characterized by gory metaphors such as bloodbath, bloodshed, and torture.

### *Internal Conflict*

Internal conflict refers to the historical struggles, disagreement, and war that took place within Muslim societies. This conflict depicts Muslims as unable to reach agreement and coexist peacefully, and implies Muslims do not possess the necessary civility and common sense to effectively communicate with one another to reach an agreement. Rather, Muslims invoke violence to settle disputes and are mentally and socially underdeveloped in comparison to people from other cultures and countries. One example from Bentley and Ziegler (2006), describes how a sultan issued a decree allowing rulers to legally kill siblings to maintain the throne. Strangulation with a silk bow prevented royal bloodshed. One sultan murdered 19 brothers, many of whom were infants, and 15 expectant mothers (p. 763). Such a dramatic snapshot of a long and complex history circumscribes a particular representation of Muslim rulers. Muslim states are repeatedly shown in decline, which is attributed to the presence of internal conflict. Such depictions promote the idea that western intervention is required to keep these regions peaceful at the same time they justify acts of war against predominantly Muslim countries.

None of these representations are new or exclusive to textbooks. Rather, such depictions are quite common in a variety of media including news coverage and films. More troubling is that these curricular materials do nothing to challenge Orientalist meaning making to teach against Islamophobia (Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Stonebanks, 2010). This research helps us to see the power/knowledge relationships in education that can lead to developing rich curriculum to engage students with civic competence in a diverse, democratic society similar to Sensoy and Stonebanks (2009) challenge simplistic and reductionist characterizations of Muslims in schools. They urge teachers to delve into the complexities and often uncomfortable classroom discussions dealing with diversity. Merchant (2016), in her examination of Muslim girls' experience with and understanding of curriculum on Islam, breaks new ground by working with Muslim girls from minority communities—minorities within a minority. She is careful to avoid reifying fixed, essentialist identities as she "advocates a curriculum on Islam honoring complexity" (p. 183).

## Recommendations

### Curriculum Standards

Standardized curriculum and increased pressure on teachers and schools often de-emphasize the sociopolitical context of curriculum. Again, we caution against the collapsing of standards and assessment. Curriculum standards are intended to guide the selection and organization of content specific to a discipline rather than serve as measures for accountability. Moreover, teachers, administrators, policy makers, families, and teacher educators must be aware that school curriculum including textbooks is socially constructed and often disguised as common sense (Kumashiro, 2009). Once we begin to realize that curricular content is material deemed worthy of study, policymakers and numerous panels of stakeholders like teachers, families, teacher educators, discipline experts, and more, can hold discussions about the variety of ways in which the materials can be mediated, interpreted, and presented.

And, textbooks are unlikely to change and adequately capture the rich diversity of global populations, especially world history or world geography. By design, these textbooks are intended to generalize about large, diverse areas of culture to give a totalizing sense for comparison. Certain constructs continue to live on in textbooks because, as Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) explained, even though publishers are pressured to include more in-depth and nuanced representations of people and cultures, "Very little tends to be dropped from textbooks…and major

ideological frameworks do not get markedly changed" (p. 10). A sentence or two in a textbook gives authors little opportunity for discussion and can lead to gross overgeneralizations, shortchanging students of an opportunity to understand or develop an appreciation. The chronological ordering in history or the nationalist divisions in geography could be organized differently in order to alleviate the need to generalize. The attempt to capture world history or geography in a single class is perhaps too ambitious if our end goal is civic competence.

**Multiple Interpretations**

We cannot assume that all knowledge in textbooks represents cultural domination. One of the pitfalls of research on textbooks and curriculum has been the acceptance of these media as delivery systems of a particular ideology (Luke, 1988, p. 29). While school textbooks are the primary carriers of an authorized version of knowledge, the messages in the books are not necessarily read by the teachers or students as the publishers or authors have intended. The same text may yield different meanings for different audiences according to variations in social context. Because teachers instruct with and through textbooks, school books are objects of teacher mediation and, therefore, already undergo re-interpretation by the time they are presented to the student.

Students do not necessarily learn what is taught in schools, and more specifically in textbooks. Social context plays an important role here (Anyon, 1981). Depending on student experience, representations in school textbooks can present dominated, negotiated, or oppositional views to students. Students are far from the realist Lockean passive vessels into which information is poured. Rather, they are active learners, constructing their own responses and meanings (Freire, 1997, p. 52; Belenky et al., 1986, p. 214). As the multiple and contradictory interpretations by students attest to, textbooks are complex material artifacts, despite the overwhelming urge to view textbooks as disseminating a particular ideology.

Not all textbooks or every section of a single book represents cultural domination (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 9). Authors may completely subvert hegemonic systems or they may treat potentially hegemonic information more subtly. By including vignettes about real people and their experiences and by presenting two or more conflicting interpretations of a situation, an author helps in the process of understanding nuanced information. More critically, engaging relations with textbooks allows for those being represented to participate in the representation. Loewen (1995) encourages the use of vignettes because they "instruct by example," "show diverse ways that people can make a difference," and give space to characters otherwise relegated to the margins (p. 19). Teaching history in context helps students connect historical events to trends and developments (Ravitch and Finn, 1987, p. 205).

**Supplemental Materials**

Rather than perpetuate the myth of official knowledge (Apple, 1993), teachers can bolster textbook materials with rich classroom instruction and supplementary resources. There is an ever-increasing, substantial body of materials that can be used to supplement textbooks. Trade books for students can bolster instruction and help teachers to move beyond superficial or tokenistic approaches to less familiar cultures. Trade books can enrich the curriculum and engage students in ways that textbooks do not. Further, there are a number of centers devoted to increasing awareness and outreach programming about the Middle East and Islam. Many of these centers are

connected to universities and offer high quality programming available at little or no cost for teacher education programs and K-12 teachers. Many of these centers offer lists of trade books that contribute meaningfully to understanding Muslims and Islam. Some even offer websites rich with valuable information to bolster curriculum and instruction.

## Critical Pedagogy

Multicultural and culturally relevant education provides outlets to address diversity and promote social justice. Multi- and new-literacies give teachers and students the opportunity to craft their own curriculum to foster caring communities where all students experience a quality education (Gee, 2004; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012). Socially just educational approaches can make us uncomfortable because we are forced to question our thinking and beliefs. We need to problematize the things we take for granted and perceive as ordinary or common that may be oppressive or exclusionary to others. For example, the privileging of Christianity can be recognized so that teachers and teacher educators can develop their own awareness and critical reflection to disrupt marginalizing practices (Aronson, Amatullah, and Laughter, 2016). Sensoy and Ali-Khan (2016) offer eight instructional strategies to teach against Islamophobia:

- Foster transparency by letting students in on our own struggles with challenging experiences.
- Center historical/memory work so that students are given the chance to reflect on their lives and reinterpret their experiences.
- Give up comfort and engage students in challenging and uncomfortable conversations.
- Understand the difference between Middle East versus Islam to combat the common monolithic representation of a Muslim world.
- Recognize the cultural diversity of students to foreground heterogeneity.
- Give attention to stereotypes in media as these stories influence and shape our thinking.
- Address common fears by acknowledging the practices of privilege that perpetuate Islamophobia.
- Ask challenging questions to promote reflective practices and help students to think about their thinking. (pp. 514-518)

With critical pedagogy, teachers can work closely with their students to question and contextualize. Abdou and Chan (2017), who examined polytheistic and monotheistic religious portrayals in textbooks, recommend,

> Helping students analyze the constructions of the different traditions in the textbooks and what interests these constructions might serve is also important as it equips them with the skills they would need to deconstruct other equally problematic social constructs and divides they would encounter elsewhere. (p. 24)

Students can then recognize and challenge social injustice when they see it via "critical social justice literacy" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012, p. 19). Letting students in on the social construction of knowledge moves us one step closer to engaging students with civic competence and realizing a rich and respectful education on Islam.

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