Islam in the United States
Addressing Islamophobia in the Public Schools

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In this article, a brief overview of the demography and status of Muslims in the United States is presented, followed by a more detailed discussion of the nature and growth of Islamophobia in American society. The implications of both the changing demography and the increase in Islamophobia in recent years with respect to how they have impacted Muslim children and young people in U.S. public schools are then explored and an analysis of efforts to challenge anti-Muslim bias and Islamophobia in public education is presented. The backlash to such efforts to challenge Islamophobia in public education in the United States, originating largely in conservative Christian circles, is discussed, and suggestions are made for how anti-Islamophobic education can be made more effective.

Keywords: education, Islamophobia, Muslim children, teaching about Islam, toleration

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INTRODUCTION

More than two decades ago, John Esposito argued that “a basic knowledge of Islam is becoming essential for every American today. . . . Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is an American religion” (1994, p. 243, my emphasis). The recognition of this fact has been, and continues to be, problematic in many settings in the United States. The conflation of Islam with what has been labeled “militant Islam” coupled with perceived ties of Islam to terrorism (especially in the post-9/11 era), all contribute to the challenges that are faced by Muslim children in public schools, as does the more general politicization of the discourse about Islam. In this article, a brief overview of the demography and status of Muslims in the United States will be presented, followed by a more detailed discussion of the nature and growth of Islamophobia in American society. The implications of the changing demography and the increase in Islamophobia in recent years with respect to how they have impacted Muslim children and young people in U.S. public schools will then be explored, and an analysis of efforts to challenge Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias in public education will be presented. The backlash to such efforts to challenge Islamophobia in public education in the United States, originating largely in conservative Christian circles, will be discussed, and suggestions will be made for how anti-Islamophobic education can be made more effective.

MUSLIMS IN THE UNITED STATES

Islam is a relatively recent part of the religious diversity that characterizes American society. Although there were small numbers of Muslims in the United States as early as the late nineteenth century (and almost certainly earlier),¹ it was not really until after the Second World War that a robust Muslim community began to develop (see Haniff, 2003, pp. 303–304). By the 1990s, both the number of Muslims in the United States and their visibility had grown substantially; according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), between 1994 and 2000 the number of mosques in the country increased by 25% (from 962 to 1209), while the total number of mosque-goers had increased by 300% (from half a million to over two million; CAIR, 2001). Reliable data on religious affiliation is not easy to come by in the United States, but the most reliable estimates suggest that there are four to five million Muslims in the country, which means that Muslims constitute the third largest religious group in the nation after
Christians and Jews. Demographically, there are five significant facets of the Muslim population in the United States:

- Muslims are extremely diverse ethnically and linguistically, including groups from some 80 different countries.
- The Muslim population is disproportionately composed of immigrants (some 64% of U.S. Muslims are foreign-born), though this is changing as increasing numbers of American Muslims are native-born.
- The Muslim population is young (47% of Muslims in the country are 35 years of age or younger, and 61% are under the age of 49).
- Both the number and percentage of Muslims in the United States are growing rapidly, and by 2050 Muslims will constitute the second largest religious group in the United States.
- The Muslim population is concentrated in specific parts of the United States, including parts of California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and Ohio. (CAIR, 2001)

The Muslim population in the United States is also distinctive in several other significant ways. Unlike the situation in western Europe, for instance, Muslims in America are better educated than the general population of the country (58% of Muslims have college degrees, while only 37% of the general population are college-educated); they are economically prosperous (28% of the Muslim population have incomes of $75,000 or more, in comparison with just 17% of the general population); and while formal religious affiliation is declining among many young Americans, about 47% of Muslims under the age of 35 attend mosques regularly (see Haniff, 2003, pp. 308–309). This overview makes evident the importance of education (and public schooling in particular) in the United States in meeting the needs of Muslim students—and of their non-Muslim classmates as well.

CONCEPTUALIZING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Although there is certainly a popular understanding of the word, the term “Islamophobia” lacks a generally agreed-upon definition (see Allen, 2010b; Bleich, 2011; Shryock, 2010). However, the lack of a precise definition does not mean that a rough and ready definition of the term is not possible. As Craig Considine has noted,

There is a cluster of terms and phrases referring to hostility towards American Muslims. The most widely known term is Islamophobia. One of the first uses of Islamophobia in English appears in an article by Said (1985); he initially brought into focus the stigmatized identity of Muslims in
his work *Orientalism*, which unpacked the Western perspectives that create dehumanizing representations of the “exotic” and “barbarous” countries of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. (2017, p. 5)

Many elements of Islamophobia are grounded in fear, but the real concerns about Islamophobia are the responses to that fear (see Beydoun, 2018; Cook, 2015; Ekman, 2015; Tibi, 2010). The rise of both explicit and implicit anti-Muslim attitudes and policies, coupled with discrimination and discriminatory practices in various settings, are one aspect of Islamophobia, as are examples of bigotry directed toward individuals and groups because they are Muslim (see Allen, 2010a, 2010b; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008; Lean, 2012; Shryock, 2010; Werbner, 2005).

A foundational effort in attempting to define Islamophobia was provided in the late 1990s with the publication of *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, by the Runnymede Trust in the U.K. (Bogacki, Jaap de Ruiter & Sèze, 2018). The original Runnymede Trust Report contrasted “open” views of Islam with “closed” views of Islam. Open views of Islam, it should be noted, are not synonymous with positive views of Islam. Rather, while presupposing an overall respect for Islam, such views allow for legitimate discussion, dialogue, debate, and disagreement about various aspects of Islam (see Benn & Jawad, 2003, p. 178). Closed beliefs about Islam, on the other hand, are part of a broader hostility toward Islam (and Muslims more generally) that has become increasingly common and acceptable in many circles in the West. While well-intentioned, the Runnymede Trust Report was flawed in several important ways (see Green, 2019, pp. 11–31). Not only was the report overly simplistic, but it essentialized Islam, and also—perhaps most importantly—failed to recognize the fact that Islamophobia is basically a form of racism (see Frost, 2008; Green, 2019; Kazi, 2019; Kundnani, 2007; Love, 2017).

**ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE UNITED STATES**

Mohamed Khairullah, who has served as the mayor of Prospect Park, New Jersey, since 2005, was traveling back to the United States in August 2019 from a family trip to Turkey. He and his family were detained at John F. Kennedy International Airport by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents for almost three hours; his cell phone was confiscated and not returned to him for almost two weeks. The family were seemingly deemed a potential security threat to the United States. The reason that the CBP agents apparently believed the family to be a threat was, quite
simply, their name and religion. This was a clear example of what he himself called “flat-out profiling” (Fieldstadt, 2019). Although one might like to believe that this was an atypical event, one for which the CBP agents involved would be reprimanded and for which they would be required to receive, at the very least, some sort of sensitivity training to help them deal with the reality of the diversity of American society, none of this was the case. Indeed, such situations are daily occurrences for Muslims in the United States. Such situations are hardly surprising when the president of the United States has repeatedly called for the banning of all Muslims being admitted into the country (and has been successful in his efforts to impose a ban on all individuals from several predominantly Muslim nations; see Berman, 2015; Hussain, 2016). Nor have such bans been the end of President Trump’s demonstrated bias against Muslims; during his 2016 campaign, he went so far as to call for consideration of the creation of a national registry of Muslims in the country (see Lind, 2016; Phelps, 2015). In short, the growing Islamophobia in the United States, abetted and encouraged by the president and other conservative politicians, is both very real and extremely frightening.

In recent years in the United States there have been a number of attacks on Islam not only from the political right but in particular from the religious conservatives who generally provide considerable support to conservative politicians. Rev. Jerry Vines provides an excellent example of this phenomenon. Vines argued that

[Muslims] would have us to believe that Islam is just as good as Christianity, but I’m here to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that Islam is not just as good as Christianity … Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives—and his last one was a 9-year-old girl. And I will tell you Allah is not Jehovah either. Jehovah’s not going to turn you into a terrorist that’ll try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people. (Quoted in Cooperman, 2002)

Nor has Vines been alone in his attacks on Islam; the Rev. Franklin Graham described Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion” (quoted in Alberts, 2015) and claimed that the Qur’an “teaches its followers to hate” (quoted in Williams, 2016), while the Rev. Pat Robertson has asserted that “Islam is a political system that is intent on world domination…. It isn’t a … religion as such. It is a political system masquerading as a religion” (quoted in Hanson, 2015) and has described Muslims as “fanatics … motivated by demonic power” (quoted in Joyner, 2006).
My concern here is not for the accuracy (or, more properly, the inaccuracy) of such claims; rather, it is on the implications of such beliefs and the actions that they inspire for Muslims in the United States in general and for Muslim children, and Muslim children in public schools, in particular. Although the focus of this article is on the case of the United States, it is important to bear in mind that this is part of a much larger issue in many parts of the world. Although most Muslim children are educated in societies that are predominantly Muslim, increasing numbers are found in settings in which Muslims constitute a minority population, sometimes a relatively small minority population (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015; Shah, 2012). In some places, Muslims have had a significant presence for centuries, while in others they are relative newcomers. Many of the countries in which Muslims constitute a minority population are predominantly Christian, while others are Hindu, Buddhist, or some other religious tradition (although it might be more accurate, in many cases, to identify many of these countries, as in western Europe, as basically secular in nature). In such settings, the challenges of Islamophobia present problems not typically encountered in the education of Muslim children in Muslim societies.

**ISLAMOPHOBIA AND MUSLIM STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Although there is a growth in both the numbers and in the percentage of Muslim students enrolled in Islamic schools, such schools serve only about one-third of the total population of Muslim children, which means that nearly three-quarters of Muslim children attend public schools (Al-Romi, 2000, p. 634). Muslims in K-12 public schools face numerous challenges, some social and interpersonal, some academic, and some religious. Roughly 53% of Muslim students report having been bullied, in contrast with around one-quarter of Jewish students and 10% of non-Muslim and non-Jewish students (Dupuy, 2017; Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017, p. 3; Tahseen, 2019). Perhaps most depressing, such bullying of Muslim students is not limited to peers:

[T]eachers and school officials have participated in one in four bullying incidents involving Muslim students … the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed letters of complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education on behalf of an 11-year-old Muslim Somali refugee student who was repeatedly discriminated against by his teacher in Arizona. “I can’t wait until Trump is elected. He’s going to deport all you Muslims,” the teacher exclaimed, according to the ACLU
There is a growing recognition about the extremely harmful nature and potential outcomes of bullying for all children (see Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2010; Sullivan, 2011; Ttofi & Farrington, 2009), but these dangers are significantly greater for students who are members of marginalized groups. Farha Abbasi, an associate professor of psychiatry at Michigan State University, has noted that with respect to Muslim children in U.S. schools racism and discrimination can cause a cycle of “defensiveness, dissociation, disconnection, dissonance and, finally, distress or desperation” ... [and] the increase in bullying among Muslim schoolchildren is a life-or-death matter. People who are bullied are more susceptible to suicide. “Think of trauma and toxic stress as putting brick over brick on someone’s shoulder.... Right now, many Muslim children are carrying a very heavy burden and one more brick can be the breaking point.” (Ochieng, 2017)

Academically, Muslim students are often faced with curricula that either overlook or ignore the significant contributions of Muslims, or which distort or misrepresent Islamic history and civilization across different subject areas. Teaching about Islam and the Islamic world is an essential component of any curriculum concerned with offering students a knowledge of the shared history and civilization of humanity writ large. Indeed, the history of Islam is not separate from that of the West; it is deeply intertwined with that history (see Reagan, 2018, pp. 119–165). Further, insofar as we hope to prepare students to critically think about, reflect on, and make sense of the modern world, an understanding of the Islamic world, in all its diversity and complexity, is an absolute requirement. As the number of Muslims and the percentage of the population of the United States that Muslims constitute increases, and as the population’s significance inevitably grows, it will also become more and more important for non-Muslim students to learn about Islam. In fact, a compelling case might be made that for students in U.S. public schools not to learn about Islam verges on educational malpractice.
When we talk about the curricular element of addressing Islam in public education, there is an unfortunate tendency in the West to attempt to deal with Islam and the Islamic world as if the two were synonymous and monolithic. Karim, in a study of the treatment of Islam by Western media, has argued that “the terms ‘Muslim world’ or ‘Islamic world’ . . . reinforce the false impression of a monolithic global Muslim entity, the self-image of a unified Muslim ummah notwithstanding” (2000, p. 7). This is a significant point that has been made repeatedly in any number of texts about Islam, and yet it is also one that has often failed to be understood:

Islam is ... Islam is ... Islam is ... Islam is many things. Just as there is no single America or Europe or the West, a seamless caption etching diverse groups and persons with the same values and meanings, so there is no single place or uniform culture called Islam. There is no monolithic Islam. There is a Muslim world spanning Africa and Asia. It is as pluralistic as the West, outstripping both Europe and America in the numerous regions, races, languages, and cultures that it encompasses. The Afro-Asian Muslim world is also internally pluralistic, containing multiple groups who might be said to represent Islamic norms in each Muslim country. (Lawrence, 1998, p. 4)

The inclusion of content about Islam in the curriculum needs to take into account a number of issues and factors. First, students need to understand that Islam is part of the Western tradition—or, more accurately, of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition (see Taylor & Omar, 2012). It is not an alien cultural, historical, and religious tradition in any sense but rather is closely tied to the history and development of the civilization in which we live. Nor are the contributions of Islam and of Muslims to the world in which we live merely historical ones; Muslims continue to make very significant contributions to the world, and in virtually every domain of life. One of the interesting aspects of an exercise to identify Islamic contributions to different areas of study (especially in the sciences) is that there is a tendency to focus on the “Golden Age of Islam” (roughly, the eighth to fourteenth centuries CE). This implicitly suggests that Muslims have not made significant scientific and intellectual contributions since then, which is demonstrably false. There is a similar problem found in many of the textbooks used to teach about Islam more generally, as Susan Douglass and Ross Dunn have pointed out:

The textbooks disconnect Islam from the Judeo-Christian tradition even as they emphasize how Islam borrowed from Jewish and Christian scriptures. Textbook writers portrayed Islam in light of the Arab nomadic
society and the life of the Prophet of Islam while deliberately downplaying the Abrahamic legacy in Islam. (2003, p. 52)

The study of the Islamic world, as part of the examination of contemporary world events, is an incredibly important aspect of such teaching and learning. Many contemporary issues that directly impact the lives of Americans are related, either directly or indirectly, to events in the Islamic world, and it is important for students, both as educated persons and as future citizens, to understand the contexts and backgrounds of such events. Last, students should be provided with overviews of the principal elements, beliefs, and practices of all of the world’s major religions, not for reasons of proselytization—which would be not only inappropriate but unconstitutional in the U.S. context—but rather, simply as part of the general knowledge base of any educated person. Although this point is valid for all of the major world religions, it is perhaps especially true with respect to Islam, since unlike Buddhism, Hinduism, and many other religions Islam is, along with Judaism and Christianity, one of the three Abrahamic faiths (see Feiler, 2002; Peters, 2006)—and is therefore closely tied historically, theologically, and in other ways to Judaism and Christianity.

Perhaps even more important than what is taught about Islam is what is not taught. Throughout the corpus of his work, Edward Said warned of the dangers of what he called Orientalism (1978, 1993, 1994; see also Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001; Hussein, 2002; Kennedy, 2000). Orientalism not just colors but indeed permeates much of the current teaching about Islam in the public schools. One especially unfortunate example of the results of such teaching took place when President George W. Bush used the term “crusade” to describe the U.S. war on terrorism (see Buzbee, 2001; McSmith, 2001; Waldman & Pope, 2001). Soheib Bensheikh, the Grand Mufti of the mosque in Marseille, France, indicated that this choice of words “was most unfortunate,” since “it recalled the barbarous and unjust military operations against the Muslim world” by Christians over a period of several centuries (quoted in Ford, 2001). The inappropriate use of the term “crusade” by an American President, problematic though it was, is far less significant than the ongoing discourse found in contemporary media and, even more relevant for our purposes here, in national educational standards, textbooks, and the like (see Jackson, 2011).

Finally, Muslim students in public schools face a number of challenges that are to a significant degree religious in nature. Understandably, students from more conservative homes are more likely to face challenges in this
regard, but most Muslim students are affected to a greater or lesser extent. As Iftikhar Ahmad and Michelle Szpara have argued,

Awareness among school officials about issues including clothing (especially for physical education and swimming), provision of halal food, music, sex education, and the separation of sexes is crucial. Although it may be impractical for schools to be completely accommodating, small changes can be made easily. As an example, one mother said, “The teacher knows the Jewish children don’t eat pork, but they don’t know about Muslims. There should be a non-pork option in school lunches” … school officials also need to facilitate Muslim children’s needs for observing prayers and religious festivals such as Ramadan and Eid holidays, without penalty. (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003, pp. 299–300)

The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim students in U.S. public schools is actually part of a much broader problem, one that is by no means unique to Muslim students. Regardless of the constitutional status of religion in the United States, normatively the society remains very much a (nominally) Christian one, and children from non-Christian religious backgrounds are all too often placed in positions of being seen as “outsiders” and even “un-American.” In short, as Dhaya Ramarajan and Marcella Runell have argued,

Despite the significance of religion in public life in the USA, American school curricula generally fail to address religious pluralism. This omission is creating problems that are compounded by increasing Islamophobia.… Taken together, these trends call out for a response—educational programming that effectively promotes interreligious respect and inclusion, notwithstanding the complicated and difficult history of religion in public schools. (2007, p. 87)

The “complicated and difficult history of religion in public schools” to which Ramarajan and Runell refer is complex. The standard formula for understanding what is legitimate with respect to educational efforts concerned with religion is typically presented as “teaching about religion” is acceptable, while “teaching religion” is not. Public schools, basically, are not to engage in proselytizing on behalf of any religion but are legitimately able to teach students about the history of different religions and the beliefs and practices associated with different religions and to engage in the study of religious texts as literary texts. As Supreme Court justice Tom Clark wrote in his 1963 opinion in Abington v. Schempp,

It might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the
advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be affected consistently with the First Amendment.

Teaching about Islam, then, is not only permissible in the context of the public school but is arguably essential, especially in today’s world. Further, many educational curricula that are designed to provide students with an introduction to the study of Islam also contain curricular components that are anti-Islamophobic in nature. Such curricular developments, meaningful and positive as they certainly are, do not in and of themselves constitute solutions to the challenges of Islamophobia in public education, however. Todd Green, in writing about the differences between the first and second editions of his book *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*, writes:

>[My] own thinking on Islamophobia had evolved somewhat since the first edition…. It … involved a greater concern for how the most conventional explanation of Islamophobia—the notion that Islamophobia is driven by ignorance of Islam—was not up to the task of explaining why hostility toward Islam and Muslims seemed only to be getting worse. The dominant paradigm for understanding Islamophobia since 9/11 has been through the lens of ignorance. The assumption is that those who harbor negative opinions toward Muslims do so because they do not know enough about Islam. If they were better educated on the basics of Islamic practice and beliefs—if they knew the five pillars of Islam, if they understood what sharia really means, if they understood the nuanced meanings of *jihad* in Islamic history—then there would be less prejudice against Muslims…. [T]here is an ongoing need to correct misunderstandings about Islam that are prevalent in public discourse. I also recognize that ignorant stereotypes frequently serve a more insidious political function: distracting Western nations and their majority populations from their own moral failings on issues such as violence or gender inequality. (2020, my emphasis)

In short, although ignorance about Islam (and, concomitantly, about Muslims) certainly can contribute to Islamophobia, addressing that ignorance—while incredibly important—does not on its own eliminate the problem.

THE BACKLASH

One excellent curricular package designed to provide students with an introduction to Islam is *Access Islam* (https://www.thirteen.org/edonline/accessislam/lesson.html), which was produced by PBS/WNET in New
York with financial support from the U.S. Department of Education. Access Islam is part of a larger undertaking, Access World Religions, “designed to help students gain awareness and understanding of the diversity of religions and religious experiences, and the reasons for particular expressions of religious beliefs within a society or culture.” The series includes units on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism as well as Islam. The Access Islam unit includes not only ten videotape lessons but also lesson plans, a glossary, and other resources to assist teachers in utilizing the program. The content of Access Islam is not dissimilar to what one would find in any standard academic introduction to Islam:

Lesson 1  Religion and the First Amendment
Lesson 2  The Five Pillars of Islam
Lesson 3  Salat: Prayer in Muslim Life
Lesson 4  Ramadan Observance
Lesson 5  Qur’an: Sacred Scripture of Islam
Lesson 6  The Hajj: Journey to Mecca
Lesson 7  Scholarship and Learning in Islam
Lesson 8  Islam in America
Lesson 9  Women in Islam
Lesson 10  Art in the Muslim World

Access Islam, like other parts of the Access World Religions series, is intended to provide teachers with a well-constructed, well-researched, pedagogically sound curriculum to assist them in introducing students to different aspects of Islam.

The voluntary use of Access Islam in some school districts—it was never a state-mandated curriculum anywhere in the United States—quickly led to a powerful backlash. The Christian Action Network denounced it, claiming that it was an “outright Islamic indoctrination program” aimed at the conversion of American schoolchildren to Islam. The position of the Christian Action Network, which was widely circulated in conservative Christian political circles, was that by giving students a one-sided view of Islamic beliefs … [Access Islam] is nothing more than an attempt to convert our children into Islam and not only that, but in some cases an attempt to turn our children into evangelists for Islam.… When children are asked to draw the Five Pillars of Islam to be displayed in
the classroom or posted up-and-down the school hallway, this is an attempt to use children to spread the message of Islam…. Clearly, having children engaged in such activity goes well beyond any argument that students are simply learning the basic facts about Islamic beliefs. (Mawyer, 2017)

The Christian Action Network denunciation of *Access Islam* went beyond public objections; a petition was sent to Department of Education secretary Betsy DeVos, asserting that the program “is outrageous and HIGHLY unconstitutional,” claiming that “no similar program is offered for Christian [sic], Jews or any other major religion” and demanding that the Department of Education end its support for the program (Mawyer, 2019). The fact that the position of the Christian Action Network is full of misleading claims and outright factual errors notwithstanding, objections to *Access Islam* have continued not only to spread but have become a widely used talking point in attacks by conservative Christians on public education. Typical of such attacks was Marisha Dowdell’s polemic, appearing in the *Conservative Daily Post*, which asserted that *Access Islam* “is a major threat not only to our children but to our communities and our country. With the rise of homegrown terrorists and suicide bombers, it is appalling and dangerous to allow this religious ideology [to] be taught to our innocent children” (2017).

At the request of the Poynter Institute, the *Access Islam* curriculum was carefully reviewed by a number of prominent educators, including Linda Wertheimer, Mark Fowler, Charles Haynes, and Diane Moore (Sherman, 2017). Their evaluative comments offer a very different perspective on the *Access Islam* curriculum:

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Nothing in these lessons crosses the constitutional line dividing education and indoctrination. Students learn the basic tenets and practices of Muslims and then are assessed on what they have learned. Students are not asked to affirm or reject any religious teachings. Nor are students required to participate in any religious or devotional activities. (Charles Haynes, quoted in Sherman, 2017, my emphasis)

*[Access Islam] is not preaching or promoting Islam over other faiths. In fact, the lesson plans include questions about comparing and contrasting beliefs and practices of Islam to those of other faiths. (Wertheimer, quoted in Sherman, 2017, my emphasis)*
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When any religious tradition is only represented in its positive light, it can feel like indoctrination to those who don’t believe the tradition has merit or has equal credibility to one’s own faith. This is why it is so important to make
the distinction between teaching about a religion and teaching religion, and the Access Islam site makes this distinction in its first lesson on the First Amendment. (Moore, quoted in Sherman, 2017)

Indoctrination has as its motivation having children choose a faith over another … [but the lessons in Access Islam] [do not] ask students to choose a religion or rank them. (Fowler, quoted in Sherman, 2017)

The Christian Action Network, although providing an important outlet for misleading information about education concerning Islam, is far from alone in such efforts. The National Coalition Against Censorship has documented more than 30 examples of protests and challenges raised between 2013 and 2017 to educational materials about Islam (see National Coalition Against Censorship, 2019), and this appears to be just the tip of the iceberg. As The Wall Street Journal has noted, “[L]anguage about Islamic history in school textbooks is spurring battles across the nation, with some parents’ groups and lawmakers objecting to what they see as an overly benign portrayal of the religion’s spread and its teachings” (quoted in McWhirter, 2016). Such resistance is grounded not so much in what curricula teach about Islam as in the fact that such curricula do not teach the superiority of Christianity over Islam and other religions. This is, in fact, simply a reflection and manifestation of the growing power of Islamophobia in U.S. society and political life.

Finally, a number of related stories have recently appeared on Facebook and in other social media claiming “that the Supreme Court recently ruled that public schools cannot teach Islam”—and, further, that the deciding vote in this landmark but split Supreme Court decision was cast by Justice Neil Gorsuch, who also wrote the majority opinion (Spencer, 2018). In fact, none of this is true. There was no such Supreme Court ruling on the teaching about Islam, nor is there any reason at all to believe that such instruction could be considered unconstitutional. Further, as Saranac Spencer noted, “When that story began circulating, Gorsuch had yet to hear his first case as a member of the court—let alone author an opinion” (2018).

Given the presence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias in American society, as well as its politicization and ties to right-wing populism, it is hardly surprising that efforts to incorporate accurate and appropriate information about Islam into the curriculum of American public schools have been met with considerable resistance. The case of Access Islam provides one clear example of this sort of backlash, but it is far from the only one. The challenge, then, is how to engage in efforts to address both Islamophobia
and the need for greater knowledge and understanding of Islam by American students while at the same time dealing with the backlash from those who see virtually any inclusion of curricular content about Islam as threatening. We turn now to that challenge.

TOWARD A SOLUTION?

Islamophobia is without any question a serious and increasing problem in the United States, as well as in much of Europe (Ahmed, 2017; Bayrakli & Hafez, 2020; Massoumi, 2020), and the growth of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias presents significant challenges for any democratic, pluralistic society. These developments are especially important with respect to their implications in the educational domain (see Ahmad & Szpara, 2003; Isik-Ercan, 2015; Peek, 2003; Sabry & Bruna, 2007). We have already seen how difficult it can be to challenge Islamophobia in the context of the public schools, and yet that is precisely where such challenges are most urgently needed.

Challenging Islamophobia in the context of public schooling does not take place in a vacuum. Such teaching is best understood as part of broader initiatives that are already underway in multicultural education, antiracist education and social justice education. In addressing Islamophobia, it is obviously important that we include discussions of the nature of Islamophobia, the evidence for the presence of Islamophobia in U.S. society, and explanations for why it is important that Islamophobia be challenged. It is also important that students learn about Islam and the complexities of the Muslim world. While all of these things are significant—indeed, essential—they are not, however, sufficient. In addition to such instruction, students must also learn to critique the narratives of Islamophobia. Critiques of the narratives of Islamophobia would include

- correcting factual mistakes about the nature and teachings of Islam,
- challenging the conflation of Islam with violence and terrorism,
- pointing out that Islam in not and has really never been “un-American” in any meaningful sense,
- explaining how the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment protections have been misunderstood and misinterpreted in the debates about Islam and Islamophobia, and
- demonstrating the role of Christian exceptionalism in critiques of Islam and Muslims.

Not only do students need to be able to challenge and critique the narratives of Islamophobia, but they must also be able to offer compelling counter narratives that are grounded in accurate knowledge and
understanding of Islam, familiarity with Muslims, and the more general components of multicultural, antiracist, and social justice education.

The need for better education about Islam, and for education that not only teaches about Islam but leads to challenges to Islamophobia, is a growing concern. It is also, it should be noted, a matter that applies not only to students in K-12 settings but also to the case of teacher education. Although a far more detailed rationale for this could be easily provided, Amina Easat-Daas provided what is perhaps the clearest justification for such education when she argued, “The ultimate goal in countering Islamophobia should be to create a fair and just society for all, one that values and safeguards the citizenship of its members” (Easat-Daas, 2019).

Notes
1. In fact, the earliest Muslims in North America were undoubtedly enslaved Africans—a fascinating and important historical point that was largely ignored until the 1998 publication of Sylviane Diouf (see Diouf, 2013).
2. According to the Pew Research Center, “Muslims in the U.S. are not as numerous as the number of Americans who identify as Jewish … but projections suggest that the U.S. Muslim population will grow much faster than the country’s Jewish population. By 2040, Muslims will replace Jews as the nation’s second-largest religious group after Christians. And by 2050, the U.S. Muslim population is projected to reach 8.1 million, or 2.1% of the nation’s total population—nearly twice the share of today” (Mohamed, 2018).
3. As Abdul Rashid Moten has commented, “Much debate has surrounded the use of the term, questioning its adequacy as an appropriate and meaningful descriptor. However, since Islamophobia has broadly entered the social and political lexicon, arguments about the appropriateness of the term now seem outdated” (2014, p. 618).
4. The first Runnymede Trust report on Islamophobia, which was a seminal contribution to the field in spite of its limitations, was published in 1997 under the title Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All. Twenty years later, in 2017, a second Runnymede Trust report on Islamophobia, entitled Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All, was published.
5. It is important to note that Vines is by no means a fringe figure. He is a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest single Protestant denomination in the United States, with roughly 50,000 congregations and more than 15 million members.
6. One powerful example of this is that much of what is generally considered to be the basis for the Western tradition from the period of classical antiquity was preserved not in the West but rather by Islamic scholars in the Middle Ages (see Fakhry, 2004; Rosenthal, 1965; Tolan, Veinstein & Laurens, 2013).
7. In addition to what might be considered more mainstream contributions to different disciplines, during the past three decades there has also been an increasing focus on what has been termed the “Islamization of knowledge” (see Ahsan, Shahed & Ahmad, 2013; Dzilo, 2012).
8. The place of religion in public schools in the United States is both a complex and controversial one that has been the subject of numerous Supreme Court decisions. The First Amendment has two clauses that are relevant here: the establishment clause and the free exercise clause. Although these might initially appear to be fairly straightforward, this is often not the case in practice—hence the need for judicial involvement to resolve conflicts (see DelFattore, 2004; Douglass, 2002; Passe & Willox, 2009).

9. As Craig Considine has noted, the “constructions of Orientalism and Islamophobia (incivility, inferiority, and incompatibility) are key tools of contemporary racism in the United States. Following Carr and Haynes (2015), American Muslims appear to be caught in a ‘clash of racializations’ between exclusionary notions of American national identity and racialized ‘Muslimness,’ both of which operate to expose Muslims to racist activity while concomitantly excluding them from the protection of the state. … While Muslims are not a ‘race,’ they are examined through a racial process that is demarcated by physical features and racial underpinnings” (Considine, 2017, p. 6).

10. The financial support from the U.S. Department of Education was $166,000 in Fiscal Year 2005 and $8,000 in Fiscal Year 2006—both, incidentally, provided during the administration of President George W. Bush.

11. The objections raised by the Christian Action Network merit a full-length rebuttal that would be beyond the purpose of this article. However, the claims that have made been about Access Islam are important and powerful ones and deserve at least some degree of response here. The curriculum is simply not designed to convert anyone to Islam; learning the Five Pillars of Islam does not entail accepting them but merely learning about their significance for Muslims. The same is true with respect to learning about the name for God (Allah), and learning about the historic ties among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A curriculum can only be considered to be indoctrination if students are not allowed to develop alternative viewpoints or to challenge the content being taught (see Snook, 1970, 1972a, 1972b); there is no evidence that this is in any way part of the Access Islam curriculum (and, since the Access Islam curriculum is almost always taught by non-Muslim teachers, it seems highly unlikely that these teachers would be attempting to indoctrinate their students into a religion that they themselves do not accept). Claims that Access Islam is unique and that no other religions are studied in a comparable fashion are simply empirically wrong—we routinely expose students to Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and other faiths as part of the public school curriculum. It may be the case that formal instruction about Christianity is less extensive than that about other religions, but that would be because the vast majority of students in the classroom come from Christian backgrounds, and virtually all students in American society—whether or not they are Christian—are exposed to a great deal of information about Christianity in the general society. Concerns about the constitutionality of teaching about Islam (or of any other religion, for that matter) are misguided and demonstrate a lack of understanding of a very consistent series of Supreme Court decisions on the matter. Finally, it is important to note that the situation—constitutionally, pedagogically, culturally, socially, and interpersonally—of the majority religion in our society (Christianity) and other religions (including Islam) is simply not the same. Non-Christians find themselves in a very different position in a host of ways than do members of the majority religion. The absurdity of this can be seen when we come across the view that Christians, who constitute roughly 75% of the population of the United States, are somehow being persecuted by non-Christians.

12. Linda Wertheimer is a senior national correspondent for National Public Radio and the author of Faith Ed: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance (2015); Mark Fowler
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References


