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Randa Elibih
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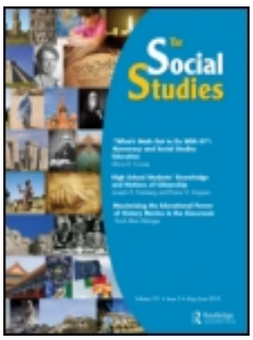

The Social Studies

ISSN: 0037-7996 (Print) 2152-405X (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vtss20

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To cite this article: Randa Elbih (2015) Teaching about Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentations, The Social Studies, 106:3, 112-116, DOI: 10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712

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Published online: 22 Apr 2015.

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The Social Studies (2015) **106**, 112–116
Published with license by Taylor & Francis
ISSN: 0037-7996 print / 2152-405X online
DOI: 10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712

Routledge
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Teaching about Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentations

RANDA ELBIH

Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan, USA

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Contemporary global events of the War on Terror, the War on ISIS, and the United States contentious relationship with Muslim societies make it crucial to teach about Islam and Muslims in school. However, negative representations of Islam and Muslims often impede this process. Overcoming these challenges is critical for the development of compassionate and informed students who are capable of thinking critically in a complex and globalized world. This article shows the importance of addressing Muslim representation in the media, debunks myths about Islam and Muslims, and provides concrete classroom recommendations for teachers.

Keywords: concrete classroom recommendations, cultural representations, islam, muslims, social studies teachers

Introduction

Contemporary global events, such as the War on Terror and now the War on ISIS, reflect a conflictual involvement between the United States and Muslim societies. This involvement is often portrayed in a one-dimensional way within the United States, reproducing and reinforcing incomplete, uninformed, or untrue beliefs about Islam with dangerous results. Paulo Freire (1998) in the *Pedagogy of Freedom* wrote, "Teacher preparation should go beyond the technical. . .and be rooted in the ethical formation both of selves and of history." As we live this moment of conflict, we must, as teachers, reflect on and address how military engagement and surveillance of terrorist suspects will impact the formative minds we cultivate in our classrooms. To encourage critical thought, compassion, and appreciation for diversity among our students, we must learn and teach about Islam and Muslims in our social studies and world history classes.

This article serves as a how-to guide for presenting a more complex understanding of Muslims and Islam within the classroom and helping students develop important critical thinking skills that can be applied in any real-world setting.

First, this article provides an overview of some cultural misrepresentations about Islam and Muslims and the assumptions that often result from such misrepresentations. Second, the article provides examples of diversity within the Arab world and among Muslims. Finally, the article provides actionable strategies and activities to teach students to think critically about the portrayal of Islam and Muslims.

The Problem: Misrepresentations

Media

Muslims are often represented as a homogenous group with violent tendencies by television, movies, video games, and news media (Nimer 2007). For young and impressionable minds, these representations can foster ignorance, misunderstanding, and hatred. This article calls on teachers to do two things: help their students unlearn what the media teaches about Islam and Muslims and replace such misconceptions with a more complex and informed understanding.

The problem with Muslim representation in popular media is that there are so few positive or nuanced portrayals. Unlike Buddhism, which is treated with reverence in films like *Lost Horizon, Seven Years in Tibet*, or *Kundun*, the flames of the Islamaphobia fire are fanned with every new blockbuster (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). The overwhelming image of Muslims in popular media today is as the "bad guy." What does it mean to be the "bad guy"? It means that in popular media, Muslims are depicted as "crude and exaggerated," according to a 2007

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Address correspondence to Dr. Randa Elbih, Grand Valley State University, Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies, 224 Lake Ontario Hall, Allendale, MI 49401, USA. E-mail: elbeihr@gmail.com.

report by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (Ameli 2007). This portrayal often includes traits such as cruelty, fanaticism, and violence. Even if the Muslim characters do not explicitly manifest these traits, popular television shows like *24* suggest to the viewers that even "good Muslims" deserve suspicion (Nimer 2007). In season four of the show, for example, the friendly next-door Muslim family was in fact a sleeper terrorist cell. The Islamic Human Rights Commission study suggests that Hollywood greatly impacts society's view of Muslims and Islam. Therefore, with the pervasiveness of this "bad guy" role for Muslims in popular media, it is not surprising to hear that conservative American political pundits believe "Muslim Terrorism is the #1 problem on Earth," as Bill O'Reilley stated on October 24, 2014, on the Fox News Network. The media plays an important role in communicating official and unofficial state policies to the public, visually asserting the enemy, and distracting the public from the casualties of war and cultural imperialism (Said 1993).

Politics, Policy, and Influential Leaders

Though Hollywood certainly impacts society's view of Muslims and Islam, public policy and influential leaders certainly contribute as well (Nimer 2007). For example, Jerry Farwell, an influential Baptist, said on *60 Minutes*, "I think Mohammad was a terrorist. . .Jesus set the example for love, as did Moses, and I think Muhammad set an opposite example" (85). In addition, General William Boykin, the United States Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence said: "Americans' enemy on the war against terrorism is a spiritual enemy. . .called Satan" (reported in Nimer 2007). These deeply problematic understandings of Islam vilify Muslims while sanctifying Christianity and are used to hold up an infallible and righteous America against a fear-mongering Muslim world (Haque 2004; Zine 2007).

Impact

What is the impact of these images on our youth? Fear, hate, and ignorance. For example, the video game "Muslim Massacre: The Game of Modern Religious Genocide" encourages gamers to, in the words of creator Eric Vaughn, "blow the *gently caress* (the world filter for "fuck") out of Arabs," as reported by Murad Ahmed in *The Times* on September 11, 2008. My Muslim students report daily harassment at school, on the street, even among people they considered friends. As a Muslim woman who wears hijab, I have also been subject to cruel remarks. While this treatment of Muslims is unacceptable, we must move beyond treating symptoms and treat the cause of this fear, hate, and ignorance. We must address the issue itself, breaking down the assumptions built by the media, politics, and misinformed leaders. Arabs and Muslims are *not* the same people. Muslim societies are *not* homogenous and monolithic. Islam is *not* a religion that teachers terrorism, and, most importantly for the critical moment in which we find ourselves in history, all Muslims are *not* terrorists.

It is crucial that we help our students to recognize not only the error in these assumptions but the horrific consequences of letting these assumptions continue to flourish. We must address these assumptions within our students and ourselves to cocreate a new understanding of Islam in our classrooms.

The Solution, Part 1: Debunking Myths about Islam through Education

To prepare our students to understand Muslims in a more complete and nuanced way, it is critical that teachers debunk assumptions and myths about Islam.

Myth 1: Arabs and Muslims Are the Same People

What Is a Muslim?

Muslims believe in the religion Islam, which states that Allah is the only God and the prophet Muhammad is His messenger (Sirin and Fine 2008). Islamic doctrine is built on the belief in the oneness of Allah, the prophets of Islam (beginning with Adam and includes Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus), the Holy Scriptures (including the Qur'an), Judgment Day, Qadar (predestined fate), and angels (Haque 2004). The rituals that a Muslim must follow include daily prayers, annual fasting (Ramadan), giving alms to the poor, and the pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca. Muslim ethics are based on good treatment of self, family, other Muslims, non-Muslims, the world, and the creatures within it. Sharia'a Law (Islamic Law) describes how legislation should govern the individual and society in an Islamic community. In non-Muslim societies, Islam asks adherents to live in accordance with local government unless asked to do something that directly contradicts their faith, in which case they should refrain without causing disorder. No more than 20 percent of Muslims live in the Arabic-speaking world. Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population. The Pew Research of 2009 recorded there are over 1.57 billion Muslims worldwide, making up about a quarter of the world's population (http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/).

What Is an Arab?

The Arab League defines an Arab as someone who speaks Arabic, lives in an Arabic-speaking country, and upholds

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Arabic culture. The Arab World consists of twenty-two countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt, Somalia, and Sudan. Most Arabs are Muslim, but 10 percent are Christian.

Myth 2: Muslim Societies Are Homogenous and Monolithic

Muslims are socially, culturally, economically, and politically diverse. Muslims speak many different languages (e.g., Arabic, English, Hindi, and Urdu), and their understanding and application of Islam differ greatly.

Muslim populations in the United States have diverse roots. The Pew Research Center in 2011 recorded that 37 percent of Muslim Americans are US born. Muslims Americans immigrants also come from at least seventy-seven countries, predominantly from the Arab world (http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-1-a-demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/).

Muslim Americans represent different societal classes. Half of American Muslims in 2001 earn more than $50,000 a year and 58 percent graduated from college; however, 29 percent of Afghan American children, 26 percent of Iraqi American children, and 22 percent of Pakistani and Bangladeshi American children live in official poverty, compared to 8 percent of white children (Sirin and Fine 2008).

Muslim Americans contribute in various ways to the construction and diversity of American society. Ninety percent of Muslim Americans are US citizens (Sirin and Fine 2008). Forty percent of Muslim Americans are Democrats, 23 percent are Republicans, and 28 percent are independents. In a three-year project conducted by Pew Charitable Trusts through Georgetown University (https://www.aclu.org/files/fbimappingfoia/20111110/ACLURM001733.pdf), 69 percent of Muslims were shown to want tougher laws to prevent terrorism, and 87 percent of Muslims support the efforts of the United States to defeat social, economic, and political inequalities around the world as a means to defeating terrorism. The poll also showed that Muslims support social justice: 96 percent support universal healthcare for citizens, and 95 percent support elimination of all forms of racial discrimination

Myth 3: Islam Teaches Terrorism and All Muslims Are Terrorists

Oftentimes in Western countries, people attribute the practices they see in Muslim societies with the Islamic religion. Samuel Hunington (1996) in the *Clash of Civilizations* explained that there is a difference between Cultural Islam "Traditionalism" and Islamic Culture. He argued that the former is what is practiced in most Muslim societies today. The latter contains some elements of the Islamic religion and culture but is influenced many other practices handed down by previous generations. Just as in many religions, religious practices mix with cultural practices. Islam itself is very different, depending on the context in which it is practiced and the people that are practicing it.

In addition, like Christianity, Islam has many different sects that greatly impact how it is practiced and to what ends. In Islam there are around seventy-three sects, such as Sunni sects, including Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shi'a sects, such as Jaffari, Ismailliyah, and Alawite. Just as we cannot hold Protestants accountable for pedophilic priests in the Catholic Church, we cannot hold all Muslims accountable for the fall of the World Trade Center.

Finally, most Muslims are opposed to terrorist methods. The Pew Research Center conducted a study in 2009 to investigate the number of Muslim Americans who support extremism (http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/17/little-support-for-terrorism-among-muslim-americans/). They found that 68 percent gave the Al Qaeda organization an unfavorable view, and 58 percent gave the organization a very unfavorable view. Only 5 percent gave the organization favorable ratings. In the same study, 78 percent of Muslim Americans considered violence against civilian target, such as suicide bombing, as never a justifiable way to defend Islam.

The Solution, Part 2: Helping Students Analyze the Portrayal of Muslims and Islam

Teachers can challenge the portrayal of Muslims and Islam through the following actionable strategies and activities:

Teach the Difference between Arabs and Muslims

There are a variety of multimedia tools teachers can use in the classroom to educate students about the difference between Arabs and Muslims. First, it is helpful to begin where students are by surveying the class to see what they think the differences are between the two. Second, showing students a map of the Arab world (composed of North Africa and the Middle East and easily found in a quick Google search) and a map of the distribution of Muslims throughout the world will serve as helpful visual tools in describing the differences listed in the previous section.

Show Muslim Diversity

Teachers could instruct their students about the diversity of Muslim societies in terms of the religious sects, religious practices, culture, language, and traditions. Specifically, teachers could use images of Muslims from different cultures. One interesting example is

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demonstrating the difference of dress code between Muslim women from Saudia Arabia and Egypt. Showing different YouTube videos of recipes (e.g., comparing foods from Pakistan and Indonesia. Celebrity Muslim Americans, such as Ice Cube and Dr. Mehmet Oz) also help students to recognize successful Muslims who serve as active parts of American culture. Listening to diverse music genres can also help students gain appreciation for the beauty and complexity within different cultures. For example, teachers can share music from Amr Diab, famous Egyptian singer, and Cheb Mami, a famous Algerian singer.

Learn and Teach about Islam and Muslims

- Invite Muslim students, teachers, parents, leaders, or community members to speak to classes and clarify misconceptions. This strategy has been proven to help humanize Muslims for students.
- Use multimedia tools to teach students about prominent Muslims, such as the Egyptian American scientist Ahmed Zawail who won the 1999 Nobel prize for chemistry and became known as the father of femtochemistry (a branch of chemistry that studies extremely fast chemical reactions); Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian American and well-known feminist scholar who won University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in 2013 for her work related to the "veiling" of Muslim women in the United States; Tawakol Abdel Salam Karman, a Yemeni journalist and corecipient of 2011 Nobel peace prize; and finally, Ingrid Mattson, a professor of Islamic studies and a well-known Muslim religious leader who defies stereotypes about Muslim women being oppressed. These are excellent options, but of course, there are many more.
- Connect with your state's Islamic Center, which organizes open house events and provides trainings and educational materials for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Discuss the Relationship between Discrimination and Governmental Policies

Muslims are often solely portrayed in the media as violent terrorists. To counter such images, teachers can develop lesson plans to (1) discuss and define with students what it means to be a victim or an oppressor and (2) facilitate critical analysis of the impact of 9/11, specifically focusing on the rise of intolerance and discrimination toward Muslims and Islam. This would comprise teaching about (a) government policies and laws developed after 9/11, such as the Patriot Act, which targeted Muslims and Arab Americans; and (b) social and cultural practices that discriminate against Muslims and Arab Americans and foster Islamophobia (a useful classroom tool for this are the What Would You Do?: Anti-Muslim Harassment and ABC NEWS "Would You Stop Muslim Discrimination?").

Facilitate a Deeper Understanding of History's Impact

Teachers can help their students conduct historical analysis to investigate the roots of the contentious relationship between the United States and Muslim societies beginning with the Ottoman Empire up to contemporary events such as the War on Terror and the War on ISIS. Teachers also can compare modern representations of Muslims to historical representations of Japanese, German, and Italian people in World War II, or historical representations of Russians during the Cold War. Questions: *What was the purpose of these images during WWII, the Cold War, and what is the purpose now during the War on Terror? What are the similarities and differences between the representations these images/videos? What were the impacts on Japanese/Italian/German-American people (during World War II), and Russian-American people (during the Cold War), and what are the impacts on Muslim people now during the War on Terror?*

Relate Contemporary Global Events to Students' Lives

Teachers can ask students: *What are the effects of the War on Terror on your life? How has the War on Terror or the War on ISIS changed your life?* Students can write a response in class and can elect to read their short responses out loud. This strategy would give students to demonstrate their personal connection to these topics. It is important to facilitate a deep trust among classmates to broach this more personal subject matter respectfully.

Conclusion

Unlike what is being promoted in the media, Islam is not a religion that promotes terrorism. Muslims, just like Christians or Jews or Buddhists, are people. A few Muslims are terrorists, yes, but most are great friends, colleagues, and neighbors—good people, with the same hopes and dreams that many of us have. To reinforce this for our students, teachers must themselves learn about and value the many important and interesting aspects about Muslims and Islamic culture. This understanding is critical to helping our students learn reliable information about Islam and its adherents and interacting with Muslim people with compassion and respect.

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