

# When Exposure Falls Short: Islamophobia Beyond Islam

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## *Abstract*

*With the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States, educators are well poised to respond to the current climate of intolerance through religious literacy. While the mission for many educators and scholars is clear, the way forward is less so. This article critiques a common assertion upon which many educators rely in order to thwart Islamophobic sentiments in their students; that is the assumption that exposure to Muslims will produce religious literacy thereby reducing Islamophobia. After deconstructing this assumption, the article posits a critical curriculum frame as a more effective means of teaching against Islamophobia.*

**Keywords:** *Islamophobia; critical curriculum studies; religious literacy; Islam*

## **Introduction**

**R**eligious literacy has become particularly compelling because of the rise of hate-speech and hate-crimes against Muslims in the United States and Europe. When religious literacy is framed as a strategic response to this crisis, it may constrict the conceptual rigor and depth of what counts as literacy. The presumed cause and effect relationship between exposure to Muslims with a reduction in hate-speech/hate-crimes against Muslims, creates an ideal environment for educators to disseminating facile and simplistic information about Muslims and Islam. After all, if ignorance is the real problem, it follows that facts will fill the knowledge gap, thereby reducing prejudice. This has led to an increasing focus on religious literacy in K-12 schools. While this knee-jerk reaction to a manifestation of oppression is a worthy project, I posit that attention to educating for critical frameworks and thought-processes is a more meritorious pursuit, not only for combatting Islamophobia, but for preventing the spread of oppression more generally. In what follows, I analyze assumptions inherent in educational discourses on religious literacy after which I offer a critical curriculum studies approach to advocate for a more robust, and distinct prejudice reduction curriculum.

## **The Incompleteness in Frames of “Ignorance”**

In the spring of 2017, Teaching Tolerance released a feature article titled *Expelling Islamophobia*. After outlining the phenomenon of anti-Muslim hate crimes and widespread ignorance about Islam in the United States, Sean McCollum, author of the feature, turned to what could be done to expel Islamophobia. One of the essential problems identified by the author was highlighted using a Pew study, which stated “nearly half of Americans report not knowing anyone

Muslim” (McCollum, 2017). A strong underlying assumption of religious literacy is the assertion that more “exposure” will allow non-Muslim students to know real-Muslims and therefore understand real-Islam.

As stated in the feature, “The goal is to remove the label of “other” from Muslims by helping people recognize all they have in common with their Muslim neighbors, colleagues and classmates” (McCollum, 2017). Quoting Hanif Mohebi, the San Diego chapter’s executive director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the article went on to explain, “Whether it’s students or teachers, there is nothing more powerful than actually experiencing communication, in this case between the Muslim community and people with little experience with Muslims” (McCollum, 2017). While well-intentioned advocates against Islamophobia further the precept that exposure to Islam and Muslims will combat Islamophobia, there are two underlying assumptions that warrant further analysis.

First, we turn toward the assumption that exposure to Muslim individuals will facilitate a natural deconstruction of what is termed “Islamophobia,” or anti-Muslim sentiment. While, there are a myriad of reasons why individuals harbor Islamophobic sentiments, it is necessary to critically examine the term Islamophobia that connotes a fear of Islam or Muslims. Certainly, the paranoia of individuals and even nation states, such as the United States (which has implemented policies that undermine civil liberties and basic human rights, presumed on a statistically baseless fear that Muslims are a threat to life) continues to flourish (IRDP, n.d.). However, without a more complete analysis of why this fear persists, and even how it was manufactured, the solutions to said fear, are likely to fall short. While it is outside the scope of this article to analyze the sources of anti-Muslim sentiment, it is pertinent to unearth the assumptions underlying the claim that fear drives anti-Muslim sentiment, and, even more assumptive, the exposure to the Muslim-other, will quell the fear. While it would be difficult to find data to prove this assumption one way or the other, we can turn to examples of “others” who have been, and continue to be, the subjects of oppression, manufactured fear, and hatred.

The on-going institutional racism against Black communities in the United States, would suggest that exposure alone, does not quell fear. And perhaps, despite the attempts by individuals and institutions to integrate communities, both through living spaces and through educational efforts, oppression and marginalization is resilient and still persists (Alexander, 2010). This persistence of structural inequity continues at a stable pace, despite individuals reporting a more favorable outlook on Black communities and individuals, which may suggest that exposure itself, is unlikely to create systemic change (Alexander, 2010).

While institutionalized racism against the Black community illuminates the pervasive nature of oppression and offers this as a challenge to the weak assumption that mere exposure to another can combat Islamophobia, a one-to-one comparison cannot be made because of the differences in community histories. However, a recent study conducted by Bruneau et al. (2018) revealed that collective blame (against Muslims for individual acts of violence in the name of Islam), was reduced more effectively by “revealing the hypocrisy of collectively blaming Muslims for acts of terrorism, but not collectively blaming White people or Christians for individual acts of violence by members of those groups” (Bruneau et al. ,2018, p. 445). This study, which compared various approaches of reducing collective blame which has been “associated with anti-Muslim attitudes and behavior” (p. 445), showed that a gentle revelation of hypocrisy in logic was more effective than exposure to videos of positive Muslim individuals who countered narratives of Muslims as violent, Muslim men as abusive, and Muslim women as submissive. While this research cannot conclusively rule out the efficacy of exposure to Muslims as an antidote to anti-

Muslim sentiment, this work does give pause to the assertion that exposure alone can combat prejudice. While the first assumption argues that exposure to Muslims will not necessarily challenge anti-Muslim sentiments, the second assumption, discussed in what follows, speaks to the conflation between Muslim adherents' practice of Islam, and Islam itself.

Claiming that exposure to Muslims will reduce anti-Muslim prejudice and lead to religious literacy, is an illogical overreach, which only highlights the nature of religious illiteracy as, at its core, it presumes that Islam is conceptually cogent and can therefore be ascertained through exposure to its adherents. This assumption reveals the trouble with equating a religion with its adherents (Rashid, 2015). At the same time, it is also true that religion is not animate on its own and requires a host in order to live and be understood (Asani, 2011). The impossibility of conceptualizing religion as something coherent, brings us to the most essential question underlying all of the assumptions in the discourse of religious literacy and Islam, that is, as Shahab Ahmed asks: "What is Islam?" Ahmed, in his masterwork titled *What is Islam?*, points out that Islam is not simply an object to be "identified and classified" (Ahmed, 2015). He explains,

Any act of conceptualizing any object is necessarily an attempt to identify a general theory or rule to which all phenomena affiliated with that object somehow cohere as a category for meaningful analysis-whether we locate that general rule in idea, practice, substance, relation, or process. (p.6)

If our understanding of Islam is as an object, coalescing around a set of general rules, then, as McCollum suggests in his article, it would follow that exposure to adherents would be exposure to Islam itself. However, academic disciplines, through human research and philosophy, have clearly challenged the oft-reified fallacy that, "civilizations possess distinctive, indeed inherent traditions that emerged largely out of the operation of mechanism internal to the particular unit" (Dunn, 2010, p. 187).

### **Islam as Object**

Learning about Islam, the fastest growing religion in the world, is a necessary topical area of study in the K-12 system. The question remains, what about Islam must be taught? As discussed earlier, the question Shahab Ahmed (2015) asks, "What is Islam?" is essential in unearthing the conceptualization of Islam itself. Before discussing the substantive curriculum question of what is taught in the classroom, it is important to recognize that curriculum is not a result of an accidental process of choosing from sparsely available resources. Instead, curriculum represents a valuing of a certain set of knowledge and curriculum fulfills a particular purpose in society. The question of curricular intent is taken up directly by scholars of critical curriculum studies, who ask: "*Whose knowledge is of most worth?*" (Apple, 2000, p. 44).

Preoccupied by questions of power and dominance, critical curriculum studies provides an analysis of the politics of curriculum at various levels (Apple, 2000, p. 10). Post-colonial theorists view the politics of curriculum as one piece of a larger colonial project where classrooms are "fundamentally political and cultural sites that represent accommodations and contestations over knowledge by differently empowered social constituencies" (Mohanty, 1988, p.16). While it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss, in detail, the various impetus and forces disciplining curriculum selection and coverage, critical curriculum theorists assert that in a neoliberal political and social environment, where serving the free-market is of paramount value, the building of a

compliant body politic is essential (Apple, 2000; Giroux, 1979). It is important to acknowledge the underlying politics of curriculum because the investigation of this politics allows us to interrogate what is often assumed as common sense, or in the case of curriculum on Islam, “the basics” of Islam.

Particularly challenging in the thoughtful design of curriculum on Islam is the shallow knowledge reservoir within a Christian-centric society with investments in nationalism and white supremacy (Giroux, 2002). The practical problem of the dearth of knowledge often relies on expertise of Islam through the eyes of the adherent. The major problem with focusing on religion through the adherent’s beliefs and practices is of course the diversity in practice and belief, from adherent to adherent (Moore, 2007). Yet, as discussed earlier, one cannot claim that religion, as an academic subject, can stand on its own without the enactment of the adherent. This curricular problem might lead down a road of relativism that ends in intellectual paralysis. That is to say, since Islam exists through its adherents, and no adherent can claim authority of Islam, it is not possible to study it as an object at all.

This curricular problem, not unique to Islam, while incredibly arduous to undertake, is not immutable. The question for investigation must center on the most useful knowledge to prioritize. In the K-12 system, particularly in the social studies, where time and depth are both threatened by a devaluing of the discipline itself, decisions on what to teach become ever more crucial.

### **What can We Know? What should We Know?**

As tempting as it is to suggest a curriculum on Islam with lofty goals of expressing the diversity within Islam and delving in deeply to the intricacies of varied historical narratives, community practices, etc., it is equally important to consider the limitations of the social studies classroom where these topics are taught. The limitations include: teachers’ limited knowledge matched with inadequate resources with overwhelming reliance on textbooks (Jackson, 2014), limited time for content coverage, and a lack of emphasis/support given to social studies within schools. These practical considerations are well known to those familiar with the K-12 context. As Layla, a high school student belonging to a minority community of interpretation within Islam, explained,

Islam it is pretty complicated like all the differences in sects they usually just teach the basics like Shia and Sunni, but think about it if this was with Islam don’t you think they would have to like...they don’t teach like everything about Christianity, they don’t teach like all the different kinds of Christianity, they don’t teach the different kind of Judaism, they can’t only be like only teaching us all this about Islam but not much about anything else. (Merchant, 2016, p.105)

Layla points out the practical limitations of teaching diversity and depth with curricula on Islam. In an effort to balance limitations with needs, I assert that critical frameworks, rather than “the basics” should be taught. In what follows I will describe why critical frameworks are necessary in reducing and limiting oppressive ideologies like Islamophobia and the implementation of critical frameworks within social studies curricula.

Islamophobia is an oppressive ideology with a set of precepts that constitute its foundation, including:

Islam is monolith and cannot adapt to new realities; Islam does not share common values with other major faiths; Islam as a religion is inferior to the West. It is archaic, barbaric, and irrational; Islam is a religion of violence and supports terrorism; and Islam is a violent political ideology. (1991, The Runnymede Trust Report)

These precepts are tied directly to the project of European colonization that relied on the degradation of Muslims, and other colonial-subjects. In other words, Islamophobia is an ideology rooted from and perpetuated by, a schema of injustice. In order to reduce Islamophobia, therefore, critical frameworks, “concerned in particular with issues of power and justice,” must be utilized (Kincheloe, 2001, p.123).

With limited time and resources, teachers are forced to make curricular selection decisions, and crucial curriculum theorists urge educators to prioritize critical frameworks and approaches over a set of neutral facts, which, in their very presentation, are oversimplified and incomplete (Au, 2012; Kinchloe, 2001; Segall, 2004). Critical curriculum theorists argue that what we think of as content embeds within it pedagogy (Segall, 2004). In other words, the content we are presented with also disciplines the ways in which we position ourselves to understand the material. With this in mind, there are several strategies social studies educators might use to prioritize critical frameworks when teaching about any “other,” in this case, about Islam and Muslims.

One approach to prioritizing critical frameworks is in educators adopting an epistemology of complexity, one that “understands the complications of producing knowledge” including the understanding “that the politics, values, research methods, and goals of social scientists profoundly shape what has been passed on to students as ‘truth’ in social studies classes” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 202). Such understandings prompt educators to engage students in pedagogies which unearth the nature of the social construction of knowledge. The questions students and teachers explore in an epistemology of complexity ask:

Whose knowledge are we teaching? Where did it come from? How was it produced?  
Whose interests does it serve? How did it get in the curriculum? Why are we teaching it?  
How does it serve the needs of students? How comfortable are we with it? Are we getting beyond the facts yet? (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 204)

While these critical questions, seeking to unearth the social construction of what is packaged as immutable facts, are worthy educational goals, it is difficult for educators to build lessons around them. The challenge is even more significant with subject matter that teachers themselves are unfamiliar, or uncomfortable with, as may be the case with Islam. Critical excavation of truth-claims (in American history, for example) is somewhat easier for teachers to approach as alternate accounts and critiques of dominant narratives, while rare, do exist in the collective consciousness. However, alternate narratives of the history of Islam are more difficult to excavate because alternatives are less known. Moreover, if the subject matter isn’t overtly Islamophobic, the need for an alternative isn’t immediately apparent. I highlight this point through an email conversation I had with a senior scholar at the beginning of my doctoral studies. In hopes for advice and mentorship, I wrote,

Particularly, I am interested in curriculum on Islam as it relates to coverage of the diversity within Muslim experiences. I also study the impact curriculum on Islam has on those students who are from minority communities within Islam. I am wondering if you know of

similar work being done around the country. I would be so happy to connect with you when you have a chance. Thank you. (Merchant, personal communication)

The response I got from this senior colleague was discouraging to say the least. She responded,

I am not sure I would focus on the aspect of its impact on minorities, but would look at how the content in, say, widely used textbooks (plus actual teaching) impacts students' attitudes. The reason is that there is a ton of polemical and outright false info out there on this subject, especially since 9/11, acting like students are being proselytized to convert to Islam if the info isn't negative enough (by this they mean "accurate"). Topics such as *jihad*, women and *shariah*, to say nothing of terrorism, are among the hot-button items of course. I am far less concerned about how the coverage affects minority—Muslim students than I am over how it impacts attitudes in the US generation after generation. (Merchant, personal communication)

As I previously asserted, while focusing on “outright false info” is absolutely necessary, the root of the problem (Islamophobia) is not simply a gap in knowledge, it is oppression. To respond to the problem of religious illiteracy, a fertile ground for Islamophobia, there are two curricular approaches which can help in resisting essentialized notions of the Muslim-other.

The first of these strategies is that of internal variation. Internal variation involves describing multiple examples of a given topic, which present contrasting realities. Although variation in experience of a group of over 1.6 billion people should be commonsense, it often isn't. For example, when discussing international women's rights, it is as important to present the human rights violations against Afghan women under the Taliban as it is to present the number of women in Muslim-majority countries who have served as heads of state.

Many teachers who resist textbook narratives of “the-other” will bring in guest speakers to give more authentic accounts of Islam (Moore, 2007). However, if internal variation isn't part of this, single accounts fill the vacuum of knowledge, particular those narratives, which are consistent with existing perceptions of Muslims and Islam. This is highlighted in the following anecdote from Farheena, a high school student who describes her discomfort as fellow students applied what they learned about Muslims to her experience as a Muslim. The incident she described was in response to a Muslim guest speaker, invited by her teacher during a unit on Islam.

And I remember we had a huge section on Islam and our teacher was like I am going to bring in a Muslim speaker to talk to you guys about the different sects in Islam, and it was so odd because everyone is like, “I finally understand your religion,” but the only probably was, she brought in a Sunni person so everyone still thought that we prayed 5 times a day and we were supposed to wear hijab, but I just wasn't...like that person was saying that all Muslims wear hijabs, so I don't know if it was the best speaker...I know that speaker talked to us a lot about the 5 pillars and how women in Islam dress...that when you are crossing men in the street you don't raise your eyes to them. Yeah. So when they said, “Oh now I understand what it is like to be Muslim,” I was thinking (laughter) “no you really, *really* don't.” (Merchant, 2016, p. 106)

The fact that the teacher invited a guest speaker, a very common practice in teaching about Islam, presents the problem of personifying a religion by association with a single adherent (Moore,

2007). The “authentic” account of this guest speaker trapped Farheena in a corner, where if she contradicted the guest speaker, she would risk either invalidating the speaker’s interpretation of Islam, or worse, might expose herself to being accused of being inauthentic. Although the source of the pressure Farheena faced in giving a correct response was unclear, the environment of Islamophobia fueled by ignorance about Islam and Muslims, heightened the stakes for Farheena. Intentional multiplicity forces students to question existing assumptions and disrupts overly simplistic notions of Muslims and Islam, which unearths the facile assumptions that Islamophobia thrives upon.

The second approach, already alluded to earlier, employs an epistemology of complexity, encouraging students to critically excavate what is present in the existing curricular resources in order to better understand how knowledge within any given topical area is produced. When considering teaching about Islam, some of the critical questions teachers may engage students in might include: *How is Islam portrayed similarly or differently from other religions and why? How is Islam defined and constituted (What is Islam?)? Is there diversity in belief and practice? If not, what might be missing and why?* In addition to these questions, teachers might engage students in a cross-textual analysis of texts covering Islam in order to understand which narratives are similar/different. Teachers can leverage disconfirming accounts as a means of deconstructing knowledge production therefore better preparing students to be more thoughtful consumers and producers of knowledge.

While Islamophobia continues to persist in an environment of widespread religious illiteracy, the assumption that “facts” about Muslims and Islam, presumed to be static and universal in their belief and practice among Muslims, aren’t simply failing to address the problem of Islamophobia, rather, this educational approach is reinforcing one of Islamophobia’s precepts. That is, Islamophobia, just as any system of prejudice, is based on a dehumanizing narrowing of experience and truth. Through this article, I have argued that rather than educating students on “the basics” of Islam, critical frameworks stemming from an epistemology of complexity would go much further in resisting anti-Muslim ideologies.

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