WORLD RELIGIONS & ISLAM IN US TEXTBOOKS

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From the nineteenth century onward, world historical knowledge grew as a result of global encounters among cultures. Knowledge of the world’s religions increased dramatically. Religious scriptures and scholarly works were translated and published, religious art appeared in museums and religious studies disciplines were established. Specialised knowledge about religion seeped only slowly into school curricula. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, world history textbooks became staples of textbook publishing, but their coverage of cultures beyond Europe was inadequate. As late as the 1950s, no more than a few snippets about other religions were revealed to students—often delivered judgmentally alongside implied or overt endorsements of Christianity. Textbooks even failed to explain other branches of Christianity beyond Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. Islam was something of an exception, because of its physical proximity to Western Europe and its intersections with European history after the fall of Rome. Its coverage was invariably framed in terms of a territorial or cultural threat to Europe or competition in trade. Basic information about Islamic origins, beliefs and practices was both inaccurate and distorted by prejudice.

In the United States, coverage of world religions has been similarly inadequate. From the 1950s through the 1970s, a student could complete high school or even college without knowing anything meaningful about religions outside of western European Christianity. By the 1980s, coverage of world religions began to deepen as a result of institutional factors. In the United States, the role of religion in schools is circumscribed by the doctrine of separation of Church and state. The Bill of Rights prohibits publicly funded sectarian religious instruction, or normative “teaching of religion”. In its place a set of civic guidelines for “teaching about religion” offers a framework for fair, balanced and accurate coverage.¹

Curriculum policy in each state drives textbook content. There is no US national curriculum, but models for curriculum standards in core subjects were created by federally-funded university projects in the 1990s. Academic standards, developed in each state over the following decade, included study of religion in world and US history.² Standards required descriptions of beliefs, practices, traditions and history of major world religions. Some standards specified more detailed content such as the exploration of interactions among religions in the arts and in trade, ideas and politics. California’s History and Social Science Framework was at the forefront of improving textbook content on religion, as publishers developed books to match its three-year courses in world and US history.³ Academic reviewers and civic leaders lent the publishers expertise to produce sound content on each tradition. Teacher training and supplemental materials supported this work. Other states also improved teaching about religion in social studies, and textbooks improved at the national level. Textbooks included passages from scripture, philosophy and artistic expression. Coverage of non-Christian religions was still inadequate, usually
lacking evidence of change over time, important institutions or illustrations of lived experience, but the thumbnail sketch was much improved. In addition to this trend, interest in world history pedagogy surged in universities and schools, particularly with the development of the Advanced Placement World History course for high school. Taught within a global framework using textbooks written by world historians rather than teams of generic writers, Advanced Placement World History vastly improved teaching about world religions.

The impact of 11 September 2001 on teaching about Islam had a spillover effect on the curriculum in general. Critics already suspicious of a less Eurocentric curriculum raised their public profile by arguing that textbooks’ positive coverage of Islam was dangerous to the national interest. Right-wing activists recycled this argument, using media outlets to stoke fear among school board members and parents. These attacks used sloppy research methods to claim that coverage of Islam in textbooks exceeds that of other religions, at the expense of Christianity, that textbooks whitewash Islam and denigrate Christianity. Such claims manipulated facts about textbooks, state standards and curriculum, and won no academic credibility. Activists rode the rising tide of Islamophobia, however, putting pressure on textbook publishers and their stockholders, teachers and school administrators. This process is still ongoing.

For the most part, educators and textbook editors have resisted pressure to dumb down content on Islam, largely because of the framework of historical research, state standards and constitutional guidelines established over decades. Their detractors try to isolate Islam from the framework of teaching about the world, but in fact, Islam is never taught in isolation from other world religions. Curriculum on world religions reflects consensus that students in pluralistic societies and
a globalised world need to be literate about religious traditions. World religions have existed for thousands of years, embedded in human civilisation and culture, and cannot be thought out of historical existence because of current events portrayed as religious conflicts. Critics of teaching about other religions fail to note that knowledge of basic beliefs, practices and history of the Christian tradition should also be strengthened in US schools, as minority populations and unaffiliated Christian populations grow.

Other religious minorities such as Hindus are organising to improve textbook coverage and teaching, and academic institutions have produced alternative resources to be used by teachers or as models for textbook editors. First Amendment guidelines for teaching about religion in the US call for the basics to be taught appropriately, without asserting truth claims or making qualitative comparisons among them. Authentic teaching about religion requires respect for accuracy and responsibility for balanced coverage of diversity and change over time. Recognising common and divergent values, ethics and ideas, as well as engaging students in understanding complex historical processes is more important than memorising a catalogue of trivia about exotic beliefs and practices.

Textbooks and teacher education must continue to improve. It would help to set aside competition among religions in schools. Religious literacy is an important aspect of knowledge about the world we all share, since it is clear that polar ice is disappearing faster than religion, despite the imaginings of sociologists of previous generations.

FIRST AMENDMENT GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION

ENDNOTES