

An Exclusive Debate:  
Including Islam in Tennessee Middle Schools  
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### Abstract

An issue of debate has befallen many public schools in Tennessee. The teaching of Islam in curriculum standards has upset many teachers and parents, while many believe that Islam education is vital in modern American culture. This tension has created much controversy between the idea of the separation of church and state and religious education. In my research, I have weighed both sides, concluding that Islam should indeed be taught in public schools. Both sides have valid arguments, but it is ultimately the school's job to educate, especially impressionable youth who are the future of our nation. It is imperative that they know the history of Islam and its influence on America in order to properly function in political, cultural, and social affairs. My paper takes this stance while addressing common stereotypes of Muslim culture. It seeks to absolve these misunderstandings, such as the role of violence and jihad. I address the First Amendment, the Constitution, and religion's role in education. My research results in a positive view of Islam in schools with respect to religious boundaries and encourages informed Americans to live at peace with different cultures.

*Keywords:* Islam, Religion, Curriculum, Tennessee, Public Schools, Education

Nearly one hundred parents and town leaders stood outside Vance Middle School on an overcast morning in Bristol, Tennessee. Tightly gripping their signs, which contained anti-Islamic sentiments, they protested Islam being taught in school. Children being dropped off, passerbys, and civil citizens making their morning commute read signs such as, “One nation under God, not Allah” (Howell, 2015). Although these protestors’ ultimate goal was to peaceably raise awareness and promote change, they awakened the community to controversial issue that has since become a national debate: the required teaching of Islam in Tennessee middle school public education.

This story is merely one example of many protests against Islamic teaching in secondary education. Parents and lawmakers in Tennessee have become skeptical and raised concerns. They “fear indoctrination” and feel that these standards question Constitutional rights and the separation of church and state (Boucher, 2015). However, many argue that this is an overreaction fueled by misunderstandings of Islamic culture. After all, interaction with Islam is not a new issue for the United States. For years, U.S. foreign policy has included affairs with the Islamic world. Tragedies such as 9/11, however, have influenced a heightened sense of suspicion toward this religion and culture. The majority of Americans now hold a negative view of Muslims, characterized by stereotypes, prejudice, and an overarching lack of understanding. This is certainly true in Tennessee, where politically conservative views are common and generations are rooted in tradition. This kind of misinformation causes many problems, especially in Muslim-American affairs. Education of cultural and religious differences is vital to human interaction, and it begins at a young age. Children must be educated in cultures other than their own to promote healthy collaboration, influence a broader worldview, and understand their own humanity. This is specifically important for American citizens who occupy a powerful nation

boasting ethnicities of all kinds. Diversity awareness in secondary education should be prioritized in schools. Therefore, Islam should be included in Tennessee middle school curricula in order to teach students history and religion while promoting cultural understanding.

### **American Education: Exclusive Roots**

American education dates back to the 1700s, when Puritans came to America seeking freedom from the Church of England. Schools were established reflecting religious ideals of Protestant Christianity. At this time, the Spanish were converting colonies to Catholicism. Many schools were started as a response to prevent this influence (Glasson, 2007 qtd. in Kauchak & Eggen, 2014, p. 109). Although schools differed regionally, they still possessed a sense of nationality contingent upon religion. Early American education was exclusive on the basis of religion and culture. For example, colonial schools characterized by Protestantism rejected most other views. Education exclusivity is still seen today and does not stop at religion, for cultural divisions are still prevalent. Racial barriers were once the leading controversy, as schools began as institutions reserved for wealthy, white males (Kauchak & Eggen, 2014, p. 109). Although racial discrimination has fortunately evolved to accommodate all races and cultures in modern day, a new issue has arisen. The inclusion of the major world religion Islam has created a perceived exclusion of other religions and raised problems of intolerance. But before deciding what religion is or is not right to teach in schools, one must have a legal understanding of religion's role in the education system.

### **The Separation of Church and State: Are They Truly Independent?**

When the U.S. Constitution was established in 1789, it created the guidelines by which our country would operate. It has had a series of modifications, the First Amendment being the separation of church and state:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

(Constitutional Topic: The First Amendment, 2011)

By this law, the federal government cannot promote a singular religion over another; the state and the church must function as separate entities (Kauchak and Eggen, 2014, p. 115). However, this poses an issue for schools, which originated as an entity of both the church and the state. Though the church and the state must now function independently, it is inevitable that they will still influence each other in some way.

Just as with the Colonial schools in the 1700s, there are regional preferences even in public schools, where certain cultures and people groups dominate particular areas. Schools are often characterized by their geographical location. Nearly 55% of Tennessee residents claim to be religious (Tennessee State: Religion, 2015). While Tennessee represents a variety of religions, over 30% are Baptists, and only 0.24% are Muslim (Tennessee State: Religion, 2015). There are exceptions, but Tennessee schools are typified by conservatism resulting from tradition and religious doctrine. Many schools are located amongst churches and employ teachers which may even attend such churches. This is true of many Tennessee middle schools; T. A. Dugger Junior High School in Elizabethton is located right beside Calvary Baptist Church. Even if teachers and faculty do not attend that church, it is certain that at least some students do. As part of the “Bible belt”, it is clear to see how Tennessee Christian conservative views dominate ideology and leave little room for inclusion of others. I am not advocating for the change of Christianity or

conservative views, indeed this is the worldview that I grew up with. But I am simply suggesting that individuals be more open to the teaching of other religions.

As much as teachers must abide by state law, their religion is their lifestyle, influencing how they teach students. Religion, or lack thereof, is a way of life influencing every aspect. Though the state strives to establish objective learning, education will never be fully objective. In turn, religion's role in schools is questioned regarding topics like prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, teachings, and the freedom to express religious practices.

### **Religion's Role in Public Schools: Addressing the Standards**

Public schools, which are financially supported by the federal government, must operate in accordance with the state. Today, prayer is prohibited, and strict laws govern what is said about religion. Teachers must do their best to objectively teach about religion, looking through a historical lens, careful not to reflect their own views or advocate a particular religion. However, students are still free to express their beliefs as long as it is not offensive. Tolerance seems to dominate school board ideology, yet people still argue over specific religious inclusions. This double standard promotes tolerance while creating intolerance by those arguing against any religion they do not agree with. Education officials cannot conform to every individual's preferences, so a broad teaching of every major religion must be implemented.

Far too many children grow up with a singular worldview, as I did. They need to have a broader understanding for cultures other than their own. This would eliminate many issues still dealt with in modern day, especially in the case of Islam. Phelps, author of "Critical Literacy: Using Nonfiction to Learn About Islam," claims that "Schools have a legitimate and vital role in providing students with a better and more accurate understanding of the Muslim world" (Phelps, 2010, p. 190). Islam is arguably the fastest-growing religion in the world. Approximately one-

fifth of the world's population claims to be Islam, with several million in the United States (Phelps, 2010, p. 191). As these numbers increase, so does the need to educate children.

Before solutions can be implemented, people must realize this importance of an expanded worldview for children of all ages, so as to eliminate solipsism. Having a broader perspective of the world will promote acceptance of more people. Beyond cultural interaction, knowledge of religion is necessary to establish morality. Warren A. Nord, author of *Does God Make a Difference: Taking Religion Seriously In Our Schools and Universities* (2010), explains how the ultimate goal is “to make students informed, empathetic, motivated, and thoughtful” (p. 283). He advocates for the mutual relationship between religion and morality in education; one cannot exist without the other. Even without a designated religion, every school abides by a moral code. Standards of right and wrong are crucial in maintaining control and sustaining productive learning environments. Without technically defining it, these convictions of right and wrong are inspired by some sense of morality, most often associated with religion. Not only does religion foster this sense of morality, it can also promote practical skills like critical thinking (Moore, 2005, p. 155). Students need to learn and think creatively on a daily basis. If they learn how to think abstractly about the world and solve problems, this will also be helpful in future cultural affairs. It is the classroom's duty to expose children to multiple perspectives, and this in turn inspires children to think independently. The home by itself does not suffice in providing a broad worldview.

According to Tennessee state standards for education, seventh grade students in World History learn about the Islamic World from 400 A.D. to the 1500s. For example, they must learn about Muhammad's teachings, the significance of the Qur'an, and the cultural impact of Muslims scholars (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). These standards seem to have

caused a heightened sense of fear. It is curious, however, why these reactions are surfacing now when Islam has been taught for years. The most recent Islam education standards in Tennessee middle schools have been in place since July 2013. This date refers to when they were last revised, not specifically when Islam was incorporated into curriculum. Janey White, a social studies teacher at T. A. Dugger Junior High School in Elizabethton, Tennessee, whom I interviewed, says that she does not understand why the overreaction to Islam is happening now, as standards have been in place as long as she has been teaching (J. White, personal communication, November 10, 2015) Mrs. White has been teaching 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade World History and Geography for five years. When asked about school standards, she said that it is good to know exactly what has to be taught, but it leaves little room for creativity. Though she has not personally experienced negativity from parents or students, her history co-worker has, and she has seen the effects (personal communication, November 10, 2015).

### **Violence, Controversy, and Fears: Oh My!**

Parents are specifically concerned about the overemphasis of Islam and their children being indoctrinated. In *The Tennessean* news article “Islam in schools: What parents should know,” Balakit and Gonzales outline these concerns and seek to clarify them (2015). Some feel that schools teach and value Islam to a greater extent than Christianity. Parents have complained that their children learn the Five Pillars of Islam but not the 10 Commandments. (Balakit & Gonzales, 2015). However, this is simply a misunderstanding; students are required learn both. Though it varies according to the teacher, students may not be required to practice learning the 10 Commandments like they are for the Five Pillars. This is because of regional identity; Tennessee students are expected to have some previous knowledge of the 10 Commandments and are less likely to know the Five Pillars of Islam. What the parents see, however, is their child



having homework assignments on Islam and not Christianity. The distinction between perception and reality becomes blurred, affirming that misinformation can lead to undue skepticism.

Other controversial homework assignments in several Tennessee counties made headline news when 7<sup>th</sup> graders were required to write, “Allah is the only God” (Boucher, 2015). Parental concern of indoctrination caused many to address state representatives and education officials. George West, host of SuperTalk radio program in Bristol, Tennessee, referred to these assignments as “blatant constitutional violations” with a motive of indoctrination (West, 2015). To listeners of the program, he urged, “We gotta take our schools back, folks” (West, 2015). His two statements are in disagreement, however, because the Constitution never established a single religion; it sought to promote religious freedom. If the act of “taking back our schools” requires ridding the curriculum of Islam and any other religion besides Christianity, the whole purpose of the First Amendment is futile. Additionally, this assignment was taken out of context. Indoctrination is an illegitimate fear, for one cannot convert a child to a faith by simply teaching its core beliefs. The fact that students had to write “Allah is the only God” is a memorization of the Shahada, not a personal indication of belief and/or conversion. Some are even unsettled by the use of the word “Allah” to refer to God. In etymologic terms, “Allah” means “the Divinity”; though it is the Islamic name for God, it refers to the same God of Moses and Jesus (Bucaille, 1988 qtd. in Geisler & Saleeb, 2002, p. 16.) Of course, a Baptist Christian would probably not refer to God as “Allah” in everyday life, but these are geographic and cultural differences. If only people were educated on these differences, perhaps there would not be an instant shudder at the alternative name for God.

Though these controversies may initially sound shocking, they can be resolved when viewed through the lens of social studies education requirements. Candice McQueen, Tennessee

Department of Education Commissioner, sought to mitigate these concerns by stating the purpose of Islam standards is to enhance world history knowledge by studying the impact of different religions (Boucher, 2015). It may appear that Islam is prioritized above Christianity, but this is not the case. Christianity is taught at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade and repeated in the start of 7<sup>th</sup> grade (Boucher, 2015). According to Janey White at T. A. Dugger Junior High School, if any religion seems prioritized, its Christianity. Islam is only taught in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, but Christianity is taught both years and lays the foundation for the Middle Ages (personal communication, November 10, 2015). Nevertheless, most of her students are excited to learn about new religions, with the extent of pushback being typical eye rolls from adolescents.

Tennessee state standards strive to equally represent all major world religions, so the argument for Christianity not being in schools is inaccurate. As evidence, standard 6.68 for 6<sup>th</sup> grade world history requires the teaching of Christian central features, such as the lives and teachings of Jesus and Paul (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). In fact, Tennessee middle school curriculum teaches seven major world religions, including: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Islam (Balakit & Gonzales, 2015). The exclusion of Christianity by the inclusion of Islam is an illusion created by misconceptions, publicity, and debate. Still yet, the Department of Education will review the standards in January 2016 as opposed to the regular 6-year cycle in response to reactions. Parents are encouraged to voice their opinions and concerns that will be taken into account by education officials (Balakit & Gonzales, 2015). Hence, an effort is being made to appease the offended while maintaining equal balance and order.

**Suspicion by Stereotypes: Absolving Fears through Religious Understanding**

Many people have suspicions about Islam due to associated violence, giving rise to stereotypes and prejudice. Americans will never forget the events of September 11, 2001, when Muslim extremists of al-Qaeda attacked the nation via hijacking airplanes and crashing into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. The United States has been involved in war with Iraq and Iran, as well as the capturing and executing of Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. These events have led to a national fear of Muslims, but we must realize that not all Muslims are this way. Many question what could motivate a person to commit such horrendous acts, and the answer must be viewed in cultural and religious terms.

Although some Muslims are motivated by violence, the majority of Muslims desire peace and act from obedience. Phil Parshall, author of *Understanding Muslim Teachings and Traditions: A Guide for Christians* (2002), seeks to ameliorate cultural stereotypes and prejudice by explaining facets of the Muslim faith. A key to understanding Islam violence is the concept of “Jihad.” This term refers to a holy war in which Muslims are to fight to spread the truth of Islam. But unfortunately, it is universally known and associated with terrorist attacks (Parshall, 2002, p. 97). Jihad is a religious fight for Allah outlined in the Qur’an, Hadith, and other teachings (Parshall, 2002, p. 98-99). In a conversation between Abdullah and Muhammad in the Hadith, Abdullah asks the Prophet what is the third greatest deed of goodness. He replies, “To participate in Jihad in Allah’s cause” (1:300; 10.5.505 qtd. in Parshall, 2002, 99). Even though this command was born from Muhammad’s divine revelation, it is unfortunate that many Muslims today use it to justify violence (Parshall, 2002, 99). They will attack and kill in the name of Allah for the purposes of Jihad, but this has deviated from the original intent. The Holy war was meant to establish unified Muslim peace. Not all Muslims act in violence, but generalized views

prevent this understanding. Non-Muslims may better understand the motivation behind terrorist attacks if they were familiar with the faith. If they actually studied the values of Islam, they would also realize Muslims' desire for peace. From this, they would better know how to respond to attacks.

The approach to education of Islamic concepts, like Jihad and violence, could be better understood when compared to other religions, such as Christianity. Christians are also called to partake in "holy wars" or "spiritual battles" to fight evil. There are numerous accounts in the Old Testament in which prophets were instructed to wipe out entire cities. For example, Moses and Joshua fought the Canaanites to enter the Promised Land. King Saul wiped out entire people groups, such as the Amalekites, under the instruction of God. It is evident that Islam is not the only religion with a violent history. However, violence observed in Christianity has been replaced by the peace of Jesus Christ. Many Muslims, too, embrace this peacefulness, though they do not regard Christ as the Savior or Son of God. It is unfortunate that the terrorist acts of a few have tainted the general view of Muslims, many of which are horrified by this violence. I am not justifying the terrible acts of Muslim terrorist in any way; I am simply advocating for the education of such Islamic faith concepts. If Christians learned about Islam in familiar terms, such as relating it to the Bible, there would be a greater likelihood for cultural understanding.

### **The United States and Islam: A Relationship Strained**

The United States' interactions with the Islamic world is not limited to the events of the past. The current need for Islam education is even greater due to extremist groups like ISIS rapidly growing. These groups seek to establish a caliphate, or a unified Muslim government ruled by a caliph, and they do so by horrific acts of violence. Muslim extremist groups are even recruiting United States citizens, and I cannot help but wonder if these conversions are stemmed

by ignorance. If U.S. citizens truly knew the motivations behind ISIS and how it has deviated from the original intentions of Muhammad, fervor to join would be significantly less. The entire Middle East is characterized by political unrest, and it is spreading to the rest of the world. As a nation, we need to learn how to combat this violence, not feed it. United States foreign policy and political affairs with the Islamic world will only deepen, as will the need for cultural understanding and productive interaction.

This violence is not solely from the Islamic state, for it is seen in America, too. Muslims living in the United States often feel unsafe, even fearing for their lives. One anonymous quote in CNN's "American Facing Anti-Muslim Bigotry" by Dean Obeidallah says, "I don't feel safe. I fear that if some could shoot me and my family and get away with it, they would" (2015). This fear is rooted in long-time traditions of racial prejudice and stereotypes. Violence on America's part is evident from the February 2015 killing of three Muslim-American students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Obeidallah, 2015). Other offences such as vandalism and harassment speak to the issue of intolerance and preconceived notions. Misconceptions such as Islam's role of women, religion in politics, and the culture in general give rise such violent upheavals (Phelps, 2010, p. 193). Some women are even afraid to wear their headscarves, or hijab, which identify them as Muslim. President Obama responded by stating that bigotry does not belong in a nation like ours (Obeidallah, 2015). I agree and believe that these acts are rooted in ignorance. For such a culturally diverse nation, this discrimination is unacceptable.

### **So What?: Implementing Solutions**

In order to rid our country of bigotry, the primary concern must be to educate our children. The introduction of world religions should begin in middle school, when kids are old enough to discern and understand the differences. However, many in the state of Tennessee

disagree. Sheila Butt, a Tennessee state representative, introduced a bill proposing to ban the teaching of all religious doctrine until 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Although the bill does not pinpoint a specific religion, it was not long after the outburst of parental complaints on Islam. The Council on American-Islamic Relations feels that it is a discriminatory act created by “Islamophobes.” (Mangla, 2015). Although this bill has not yet been voted on, it represents the common, negative relationship between Americans and Muslims. Frequent cultural misunderstanding reaffirms the need for education and practical solutions.

Productive methods of Islamic teaching must be established and implemented into classrooms. Social studies standards in middle school education should remain unchanged for the time being, because they currently include all major world religions. These religions must be equally represented, remaining fact-based. In accordance with the separation of church and state, religion must be taught culturally and historically, so as not to promote one religion above another. Though religion equality prevents Islam from being prioritized, the *kairos* for Islam is greater. We live in a time when it is especially important for this growing world religion to be taught. By the acceptance of education, students can know how to think about religion and its influence on everyday life.

Children should think critically about religion and Islam not only from class lecture but also additionally from reading and writing. To promote this critical thinking, Phelps proposes the use of nonfiction texts as critical literacy. He exclaims how the overall misinformation of Islam can be decreased if Islamic texts are incorporated into the classroom. By ultimately seeking to “redefine cultural borders,” Phelps states that schools should question viewpoints, study sociopolitical matters, and strive for social justice (p. 192). He lists a number of sources that should especially be used in secondary education, such as Muslim autobiographies, eyewitness

accounts, and historical documents. Seventh grade world history standards suggest reading from the Hadith and *The Book of Golden Meadows*, but it is not required (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). I propose that reading excerpts from these texts be required, as well as incorporating other nonfiction resources. By exposing children to the truth about Islamic culture, they should look through the lens of critical interpretation. This tactic should be implemented for all major world religions. Such critical literacy is seen with Christianity, too. Sixth grade Christianity standards suggest, but do not require, reading the New Testament and Dead Sea Scrolls (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). Requiring sources beyond textbooks will extend cultural learning.

Teachers play one of the most essential roles in religious education. Other than following standards and protocol, they should undergo extensive training to be better prepared for religious teaching. Teachers should attend seminars in which they learn about major world religions and how to better inform students. In order to work around schedules, these seminars are offered online. The Tennessee Department of Education website contains convenient resources, such as Training PBS Learning Media. This “Free Online Learning Series for Teachers” gives access to videos, articles, and activities for all subjects and grade levels (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). Also, the Tennessee Department of Education has partnered with Apple’s iTunes U to provide free podcasts and videos for Tennessee educators (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). Such resources give information on how to approach and teach religion standards and suggest ways for students to engage with the material. These are just a few examples of the numerous tools available on the web. With all of these available resources, teachers should be without excuse for proper training. This preparation should give practical advice on classroom methods, such as the aforementioned teaching of one religion’s ideals in

relation to another, making concepts easier for children to grasp. When introducing these religions, they must take caution to teach objectively, not advocating their own viewpoints. Janey White's approach to teaching Islam is to cover the standards and only the standards. "If it's not a standard, we don't discuss it" she says. Mrs. White also refuses to talk politics with students, keeping the teaching as objective as possible. As for her personal faith, she does not feel conflicted or jeopardized by teaching Islam. When asked if she is comfortable teaching the material, Mrs. White confirmed that she feels very safe and has a strong support group of workers and administrators at the school. She believes that religion's role in school is to educate children about civilizations and promote communication between cultures. "Christians aren't the only people," she says, and it is our duty as ambassadors of Christ to understand and love others. (J. White, personal communication, November 10, 2015)

Because there is no singular solution to Islam's place in the classroom, the conversation should be extended to professionals and laypersons across the state. Teachers should collaborate with other teachers, as well as parents conversing with other parents. They could incorporate guest speakers to provide outside perspectives. This cultural communication should entail sharing ideas, opinions, and concerns from a wide variety of perspectives. As adults set this example, children will be inspired to do the same. This peaceable interaction between adults of different cultures, backgrounds, and opinions is the very concept that we hope to promote in students.

### **Influencing a Generation: A Lifetime of Peace**

The debate over Islam in Tennessee middle school curricula is the overall result of cultural misunderstanding. Due to a history of violence and unrest, preconceived notions and stereotypes characterize the view of Muslims in America. Parental fears such as indoctrination



and overemphasis can be absolved when reviewing state standards and the true context of Islamic culture. This very issue affirms the need for education of Islam, as well as all major world religions. However, the current need for Islam is greater due to United States' interaction with the Islamic world. A greater cultural understanding would promote peace, not just with Muslims, but people groups of all kinds. The importance of education reaches beyond the individual's well being and to the nation as a whole. This should be done by keeping current Tennessee state standards as well as implementing new ways to teach. Teachers should undergo more vigorous training to be better educated before they teach this knowledge to young children. They must teach in a historical sense, careful not to advocate their own viewpoints. By making the information relatable to students in creative ways, religion's impact on the past and future can be explained. Students should read and analyze nonfiction texts for every major world religion to further a sense of exploration and deep thinking. Although religion's ultimate role in schools is not a clearly-defined set of standards like middle schools history expectations, the major impact is evident. There is no denying that the church and the state mutually influence each another to some degree, but they must legally function as separate. Still yet, it is necessary for students to think critically about the world around them. They must develop an individual sense of morality as they learn to effectively communicate with cultures outside of their own. As humans, we should seek peaceful interaction with all cultures, but the urgency of the present calls for the education about Islam. Because young children are the future, education is necessary to promote cultural understanding while developing effective communication and beneficial interaction.

In response to that overcast morning in Bristol, Tennessee, I can only hope that the protestors now have a better understanding of Islamic culture. As Americans, we should put

down our signs and instead open our arms to the people in this great nation that don't have to be exactly like us. A love for all people comes from an understanding of all cultures in order to reconcile differences. Through education, these differences are taught, learned, shared, and appreciated. We must influence the younger generations to embrace differences and seek understanding. But it should not stop at the classroom doors; this knowledge should reach beyond to a constant sharing of ideas, opinions, and perspectives. Teaching Islam in Tennessee middle schools should be a mere step towards a lifetime of conversation between cultures.

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