

Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society
Volume 3, Issue 1, Spring 2011, pp. 5-24

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Oueslati, Bechír, Mc Andrew, Marie, Helly, Denise. „Islam and Muslim Cultures in Quebec French-language Textbooks over Three Periods: 1980s, 1990s, and Present Day.“
Eckert.Jemms 2011/1. <http://www.edumeres.net/urn/urn:nbn:de:0220-2013-00134>.

Post peer preview precopy edit

Final printversion accessible from publisher Berghahn Journals under
bergahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/emms.

edumeres.net

**Islam and Muslim Cultures in
Quebec French-language Textbooks
over Three Periods:
1980s, 1990s, and the Present Day**

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Abstract • This article examines the evolution of the representation of Islam and Muslim cultures in textbooks in Quebec. Results indicate significant improvements in the new secondary school history textbooks both quantitatively (for they contain more information about pillars, key concepts, and relations with Christianity and Judaism) and qualitatively (on account of their depth, fewer negative views than in the 1980s, and fewer factual errors than in the 1990s). The positive role played by Muslim scientists in preserving old knowledge and enriching it is also recognized. However, textbooks still view Islam as a religion of submission, proscriptions and forced conversion, and fail to recognize diversity within Islam and Muslim cultures.

Keywords • textbook analysis, Islam, Muslim cultures

Context and Problems

Textbook analysis sheds light on the way society constructs images of itself and of the “other.” In the case of the representation of Islam, a negative image traditionally fed on the political perspective which tended to construct Islam and Muslims as the enemy and the symbolic frontier of “otherness”¹ and the cultural perspective of the Orientalist tradition. The latter,

while romanticizing the “Orient,” spread the negative view of Islam and Muslim cultures as monolithic and backward, as ones which oppress women and which are inherently incompatible with democracy.² Mass media have also played a key role in reinforcing a biased perception of Islam and Muslim cultures in Western minds through a shallow coverage that focused more on stereotypes and sensationalism than on objective analysis and facts.³ In the post 9/11 context, this treatment sometimes amounts to a kind of cultural racism that assumes the existence of an irreconcilable gap between Western civilization and the Muslim world.

On the educational level, despite international initiatives around controversial topics related to the representation of the “other,”⁴ several studies have demonstrated the existence of both implicit and explicit biases and stereotypes regarding other cultures and religions. The representation of Islam and Muslims is clearly marked by more factual errors and ethnocentric biases than that of other religions, civilizations or ethnic groups.⁵ Falaturi⁶ uncovered many errors and instances of bias against Islam in European religious education textbooks which he attributed to a deeply-rooted negative image in Western culture and in its corresponding psyche. In the USA, Suleiman⁷ showed that 85 percent of interviewed American high school teachers were unaware of biased representations of facts or opinions in the coverage of the Middle East peoples and cultures.

Studies carried out from the 1990s onwards show some improvements in the level of complexity in the treatment of Islam and the Muslim world when compared to the more biased or stereotyped representations and even the demonization of Islam which prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s. But they also confirm the persistent essentialization and inferiorization of Islam. For instance, a large study of European, African and American textbooks points to a paradox between a positive depiction of the contributions of Islamic civilization to the advancement of humanity and a negative description of Islam as an archaic and violent religion which denies women equal rights, promotes slavery and terrorism, and is responsible for the underdevelopment of Muslim populations.⁸ In the USA, a study⁹ has revealed an overrepresentation of exotic images and a biased description of historical events. By contrast, in the post 9/11 context, a new study by the American Textbook Council denounced a presumed panegyric treatment of slavery, the status of women, polygamy and jihad in Islam and Muslim cultures.¹⁰ In France, Nasr has exposed the negative image of the Muslim world, which is described as being in favor of slavery, and which oppresses women and fosters internal divisions.¹¹ However, she has pointed out one positive development, for some recent textbooks deal with the question of tolerance in Islam and the nature and importance of its scientific contributions to universal civilization.

In Canada, because Muslims' visibility is a recent phenomenon,¹² very few studies have examined the representation of Arabs, Islam and Muslims in textbooks.¹³ These studies have shown instances of bias, negative representation, and factual errors. Studies on the general coverage of immigration and/or cultural diversity have also touched upon the representation of Islam and Muslims in English Canada¹⁴ and in Quebec.¹⁵ On the whole, they confirm findings from international studies, which reveal superficial coverage marked by factual errors, stereotypes and bias when dealing with sensitive issues, the omission of Muslims' contributions towards world heritage, and a tendency to present Western and Islamic civilizations in a dichotomist perspective.

Nevertheless, the conclusions of these studies are outdated, and the current national and international contexts are marked by two major characteristics: that Muslim immigration is thriving, making Islam the fastest growing religion in Canada,¹⁶ and that the Muslim world is making daily headlines with the on-going "war on terrorism." Furthermore, being part of a culturally and religiously diverse society, Quebec's new curriculum guidelines contain more explicit instructions with regard to the teaching of Islamic culture and its contributions to universal civilization.

These factors provided the impetus for undertaking an in-depth study to examine the evolution of the treatment of Islam and Muslim cultures in Quebec textbooks over the past three decades. Such a longitudinal study allows us to determine the extent to which content is static or dynamic as a result of the interplay of the dynamics of power relations between majority and minority groups, the impact of both local and international contexts and events as well as the new curriculum guidelines for the selection and presentation of either objective knowledge or socially-dominant and biased views.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to trace the evolution of the coverage of Islam as a religion and Muslim cultures in textbooks used in Quebec's French-speaking school boards in the 1980s, 1990s and the present day. To this end, a two-pronged approach was adopted. First, we surveyed the literature dealing with the representation of minorities in Quebec textbooks used during the 1980s which included substantive references to Arabs and Muslims.¹⁷ Second, we conducted a content analysis of two sets of textbooks. The first set included 24 secondary education French-language textbooks used from the 1990s up to 2005, while the second set comprised 88 new textbooks approved for the current reform up to September 2006.¹⁸ Thus, 211 textbooks are covered in this analysis ei-

ther directly (112 textbooks) or indirectly by relying on findings from the available literature (99 textbooks).

Our methodological choices were based on two major trends in current reflections about the content analysis of textbooks. First, as stereotypes have been gradually replaced by more subtle forms of ethnocentrism, there is now widespread agreement that mere quantitative approaches based on counting the occurrences of specific terms cannot fully capture the nuances in the treatment of such a complex subject.¹⁹

Thus our decision to use a mixed methodology, combining quantitative elements (such as the overall representation of sub-themes in the corpus and global trends) and a qualitative inductive analysis designed to detect emerging patterns of representation and bias. Such a choice was more difficult to apply to the identification of errors or omissions, which required a specific approach. Following other experts,²⁰ we chose not to establish an ideal benchmark for specific themes since this seems to be too prescriptive and poorly adapted to current competency-based curricula. We chose instead to validate our analysis of the accuracy of experts with a double triangulation, with panels of content experts and curriculum specialists.

Building on a grid validated in large-scale analyses of the coverage of cultural, racial and ethnic diversity in Quebec textbooks,²¹ we developed our analytical tool in an inductive way as we identified relevant excerpts. This procedure allowed us to refine our analysis of both the sub-themes and of individual categories. Its validity and reliability were tested by means of a parallel analysis of a sample of excerpts by two independent coders from the research team. Inter-coder reliability exceeded 95 percent. The grid was then validated by our international advisory committee composed of experts who are familiar with our research in France, Germany, and Canada. The analytical tool is composed of a first section about the general characteristics of each excerpt: discipline, the form under which the coverage is made (photo, geographic map, and statistics) and its length. The second section deals with the representation of Islam as a religion (for example, its pillars, relations with Abrahamic religions, the Prophet, Sharia) and Muslim material and abstract cultures as well as the relations between civilizations to determine whether Muslim contributions to universal civilization are recognized, underestimated or ignored in the textbooks. A final synthesis section deals with authors' positions and presuppositions.

Our examination focused mainly on students' books. Teacher guides and activity books were examined quickly to determine if they contained relevant supplementary information and instructions which might elucidate authors' positions and presuppositions. In view of the large number of textbooks to be analyzed, we followed a three-step approach in identifying excerpts in the social studies and moral and religious education

textbooks. First, we targeted the chapters that dealt directly with various aspects of our research object (Islam and the Crusades, for example). We then examined chapters which could deal with some aspects (the renaissance in medieval Europe, for example) to determine the extent to which Muslim cultural, scientific and philosophical contributions are covered or ignored. Finally, chapters and units that bear no direct relationship to our research object were examined quickly.

Textbook examination yielded 18 excerpts (7 from general history and 11 from general geography) in the 2004 exploratory study²² of a sample of secondary education textbooks, whereas 64 excerpts were identified in the 2008 larger study which included elementary and secondary school books. The excerpts vary in length and complexity depending on the level (whether elementary or secondary) and the discipline. New secondary school history and civics textbooks contain the longest excerpts which deal with Islam as a religion and its cultural contributions (up to 10 pages).

Results

Overall, despite the persistence of some problems, results show significant quantitative and qualitative improvements to the coverage of Islam and Muslim cultures. On the quantitative level, much more space is devoted to covering our research object (from a few lines to 10 pages, especially in secondary school history textbooks adopted for the current school reform). The number of excerpts also increased significantly, partly because of the inclusion of more disciplines in our 2008 study, but mostly because of more explicit curriculum requirements to cover Islam and the contribution of Muslim culture. Qualitatively speaking, more recent textbooks are characterized by more depth and objectivity. A shift is clearly observable from openly negative views and attitudes in the 1980s to a less negative, but very superficial and biased coverage full of errors in the 1990s to a more complex, precise and balanced coverage in the new textbooks. Despite these quantitative and qualitative improvements, some problems still persist such as the focus on Islam as a religion of submission to many obligations and proscriptions, and the absence of recognition of religious diversity within Islam, thus conferring on it a monolithic, archaic and fixed character. There is also a limited and non-contextualized description of polygamy, while Islam's expansion is explained mainly with reference to "jihad."

As far as Muslim cultures and their contributions are concerned, we can observe a significant shift from omission in the 1980s to a partial view focused exclusively on material cultures in the 1990s to a more extensive depiction in the textbooks adopted for the current Quebec school reform.

This is especially observable in the history textbooks that give detailed descriptions of the various roles Muslim scientists and thinkers played in conserving, translating, enriching, and transmitting knowledge of the ancient world to the rest of humanity. Muslims' influence in various areas (concerning language, architecture, food) is also discussed.

Two shortcomings are to be mentioned, however. First, there are puzzling absences of Muslim contributions apart from the direct treatment of Islam in history textbooks and an excessive ethnocentrism that excludes Muslim scientists, thinkers and explorers in language and cross-curricula textbooks. Second, there is overrepresentation of desert life at the expense of urban life in current Muslim societies, which contrasts sharply with the depiction of the thriving urban Muslim societies in Baghdad, Timbuktu, and Spanish cities during the glorious age of Islam.

Islam as a Religion. From an Open Attack to a More Balanced Coverage

Analysis of the coverage of Islam as a religion over the three periods shows a sharp decrease in the openly negative description of the 1980s. Our survey of the available literature regarding the textbooks used in the 1980s reveals a very negative image of Islam, the prophet Muhammad and Muslim societies. One key aspect of this negative view is the blaming of Islam for underdevelopment due to its presumed archaic character and the belief in predestination as illustrated by the following excerpts:

[...] The Qur'an prevents all progress when applied strictly.²³ [...] because of the constraints it imposes and the predestination it teaches, Islam is an obstacle to progress.²⁴

In another case, Islam is described as being crippled by the lack of progress, obligations and proscriptions throughout its history:

Islam. A religion frozen by obligations and proscriptions that are fourteen centuries old, still influences the life and thought of a large part of humanity.²⁵

In the following quotes, the representation of Islam as an inferior religion when compared to Christianity is apparent in terms of economic success and belief in the human will:

Religious proscriptions have shaped many mentalities and ways of life: for instance, the proscription of pork consumption and alcohol in Muslim countries ... Some sociologists have shown that some religions would favor the spirit of enterprise and thus economic success.²⁶

The Christian, and therefore the Westerner, refuses fatalism. This negation of destiny represents the differences between Western and Oriental mentalities.²⁷

In the 1990s, Quebec French-language textbooks witnessed a total disappearance of this kind of openly negative and biased descriptions of Islam. These came to be replaced by a shallow description marked by many errors and problematic formulations as the following excerpts illustrate. In the first one, it is clear that qualifying Mecca as present-day Saudi Arabia is an anachronism. Besides, there were not 600 million Muslims 14 centuries ago. The chronology and geography of Islam's expansion is also problematic since Islam spread first in the Middle East and then in North Africa. Furthermore, depicting Allah as Muslims' own god potentially misleads students to believe that Allah is different from the same God which revealed Christianity and Judaism, and is therefore specific to Muslims. Finally, only Mecca is mentioned as a holy city.

Islam was founded by Mahomet in Saudi Arabia in the seventh century. The 600 million Muslims expanded first in North Africa, then in the Middle East, Far East and black Africa. They worship Allah as their unique god and Mecca is considered to be their sacred city.²⁸

In the following excerpt, one could note the confusion between Islam and "Islamism." Misunderstandings similar to those concerning Allah and Mecca in the previous excerpt are also obvious. Finally, the Qur'an, contrary to the claims of the textbook authors, does not contain all that was revealed to the Prophet.

Islamism was founded by Mahomet in Arabia in the seventh century. Their god is Allah and their sacred city is Mekka. Qur'an, the sacred book, which contains all that Allah taught Mahomet, is also a collection of precepts that govern the behavior of Muslims.²⁹

In a sharp contrast with the previously used textbooks, the ones adopted progressively as part of the current Quebec school reform represent an important quantitative and qualitative leap. This improvement can be seen in a considerable increase in the space devoted to the description of Islam (for example, pillars, direct quotes from the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings, and the definition of key words related to Islam, such as Islam, Qur'an, chari'a, jihad, shahada, djizia, khalifa, Sunnah, salat), and a more substantial depiction of the link between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. As a result, Islam is more clearly described within the continuity of the Abrahamic tradition via the discussion of Abraham as a common ancestor, the status of Jesus in Islam, the holy books of the three religions, and Jerusalem as a common sacred city.

Islam is considered to be the third religion of the Book, after Judaism and Christianity. The three religions of the Book would have the same ancestor, Abraham ... They have other elements in common, such as Jesus.³⁰

[The Qur'an] establishes links between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Thus, it confirms the messages of Jesus and many other Jewish prophets of the Old Testament.³¹

Jerusalem is depicted as a common city for the three monotheistic traditions.

Jerusalem, in Palestine is a sacred city for Jews, Muslims, and Christians ... To Muslims, Jerusalem is the third sacred city after Mecca and Medina³²

Jerusalem counts many sites sacred to the religions of the Book: the Wailing Wall for the Jews, The Saint-Sepulcher for Christians and the Al-Aqsa mosque for Muslims. Jerusalem remains the principal point of encounter between the three religions of the Book.³³

Islam's respect for Christians' and Jews' freedom of religion is also mentioned.

In the conquered territories, the Islamic state applies the tolerance prescribed by Sharia. Christians and Jews are People of the Book ... they have the right to security, free dom of worship and state protection.³⁴

As far as the discussion of Sharia is concerned, much emphasis is placed on its etymological origin and its function as a framework for Muslim behavior.

A word that means "way" or "path." Sharia governs the life of Muslims, from birth to death.³⁵

However, this discussion fails to refer to the importance of consensus and the presence of various religious schools within Islam. This results in the definition of Sharia in terms of its primary sources (Quran and Sunnah) and conveys the impression of a static and monolithic religion.

The Qur'an is divided into 114 surates that define the religious obligations of each Muslim, as well as the rules for everyday life. This Quranic law (Sharia) fixes the civil law and commercial law in addition to family, social and international ties.³⁶

In the following excerpt, although the flexible character of Sharia is recognized, it is rather limited to the current period although earlier efforts were made to adapt Sharia to the various socio-historic and cultural contexts.

A set of life rules and moral principles drawn from the Qur'an. It is the principal source of Islamic law, or Sharia. However, these rules are often adapted, nowadays, to the country or to the context.³⁷

Even when a detailed presentation is made of aspects of Sharia in secondary school history textbooks such as *Regards sur les sociétés* (volume 1, p. 207) and *D'Hier à demain* (volume A, p. 215) and many verses are quoted, the focus is mainly on proscriptions and restrictions regarding food, alcohol, gambling, and clothing. In the following excerpt, a dichotomous presentation of Islam and the West occurs when discussing Islam's influence in modern society against a background marked by the controversy over the potential application of Sharia law for family arbitration in the Canadian province of Ontario. Sharia is also directly associated with fundamentalism.

For instance, wearing the veil by Muslim women or their submission, the rise of religious fundamentalism and the application of Sharia ... are opposed to certain Western values such as freedom, and equality of human beings.³⁸

By contrast, textbooks from other disciplines (such as language, cross-curricular, and moral and religious education) quote positive aspects about solidarity and good deeds.

Islam: None of you is a believer, until you like for others what you like for yourself. Sunnah.³⁹

Muhammad said: "What actions are the most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful."⁴⁰

Other shortcomings in the representation of Islam are the frequent explanation of its expansion by Jihad. Although, in some textbooks, attention is given to the interplay of multiple factors in the spread of Islam (contact through trade, voluntary conversion due to attraction to the Islamic model of justice), Jihad, understood as forced conversion, is presented as the main driving force. A transposition of the concept of holy war is also observable in the following excerpts.

Raids soon turned into Jihad that is a Holy War against the polytheists and atheists. In 630, a ten-thousand strong army marched on Mecca, which surrendered without bloodshed.⁴¹

Under the authority of a Caliph, ... Muslims embarked on a veritable Holy War. In less than a century, a Muslim empire spread from east to west from the Indus River to the Atlantic coast in Spain. It included all the Middle East and North Africa.⁴²

Remarkably, only three textbooks tried to nuance the notion of Jihad by discussing its various levels and its use for self-defense.

A Muslim's duty is to fight for the establishment and defense of Islam (Holy War or small Jihad).

The biggest and most important Jihad is that of the individual against vice and passion.⁴³

Arabic word meaning "an effort made towards a goal." The big Jihad (al djihad al akbar) is the struggle against evil, including that hiding inside believers' hearts. The small Jihad (al djihad al azghar), less important, is combat in case of attack.⁴⁴

The textbook *D'hier à demain* associates the notion of Jihad with discussion and preaching by example. It also underlines the use of force for legitimate defense.

Like Christians, Muslims sought to increase the number of their faithful. The conversion of non-believers is even encouraged in Islam: it's Jihad. Jihad commends the persuasion of other peoples by words and deeds. It can also mean using force, especially when Islam is threatened.⁴⁵

Only one textbook stresses the role played by economic exchange and the good model offered by Muslims who spread Islam in Black Africa and Southeast Asia.

It was not Muslim armies that spread Islam in South-East Asia and Black Africa. It was merchants, sailors ... They established commercial ties with foreign peoples and, proud of who they were, preached by example. Not all their clients converted to Islam, but many of them did.⁴⁶

The absence of distinction between the spread of religion per se and the political system leads many textbook authors to make excessive generalizations about the speed at which Islam spread. For instance, it took several centuries before the population of today's Syria and Egypt became predominantly Muslim.

... less than eighty years after the Prophet's death, Islam covers not only the entirety of Saudi Arabia, but also extends to Spain in the west and India in the east.⁴⁷

A final problematic aspect of the coverage of Islam in Quebec textbooks is the question of polygamy. The recently adopted textbooks simply quote Sourate IV, verse 3 without sufficient socio-cultural and historical

contextualization. Only in the following excerpt do we see a complex treatment of the notion of polygamy (reference to its presence in other religions, conditions imposed on men in Islam) although, contrary to the claim in the excerpt, polygamy is not limited to contemporary Islam.

Certain religions allow men to marry many wives, such as ancient Confucianism and Judaism (see the case of King Salomon) or in some countries, contemporary Islam. In the latter case, this permission is accompanied with precise prescriptions regarding the rights of the wives and the duties of the husbands, notably to treat them with the strictest equality, and, in case of divorce, to avoid any injustice.⁴⁸

The coverage of Prophet Muhammad over the three periods reveals an equally interesting positive evolution. The following excerpt from one textbook used during the 1980s portrays him very negatively on many levels (physical violence, piracy, sexual appetite) by establishing a clear contrast with Jesus:

It should be noted here that Mahomet, in opposition to Jesus (who is full of kindness, gentleness and magnanimity), remains a violent, quarrelsome, surly, and even lewd man.⁴⁹

In the new textbooks, the description of Muhammad is not only more substantial and detailed, but also less negative. Several aspects of his life are mentioned briefly, that is, his life as an orphan, poverty, illiteracy, humble jobs, spirituality, revelation, oral transmission of the Qur'an, and persecution by Meccans. However, the focus is still often placed on the military part of his life when describing the prophet's forced migration from Mecca and Islam's expansion.

In 622, forced to flee, the Prophet takes refuge in Medina, an oasis located to the North of Mecca ... As a clever religious and political leader, Muhammad leads a community of believers while, at the same time, building an army to conquer Mecca.⁵⁰

In the following excerpt, military conflicts are stressed at the expense of other important elements such as the peace and mutual defense pact concluded in Medina with Jewish and other Arab tribes and the Prophet's invitation by local tribes to serve as an arbiter of conflicts because of their confidence in his judgment and fairness.

As a chief of the migrants and believers, Muhammad rules Medina. Soon, he became a war chief. From 623 to 629, he attacks Meccans' caravans. His combatants became the first martyrs of Islam.⁵¹

Rarely are his negotiating abilities or his moral qualities mentioned. His magnanimity towards the Meccans when he returned after forced exile is presented as a calculated move to win over new adherents to Islam.

... he treated his compatriots with tolerance in order to convert them to the new religion.⁵²

Muslim Scientific and Cultural Contributions. From Negation to Recognition

For the purposes of the present study, we defined material culture as the celebrations, life styles, architecture and arts, educational institutions, folklore, clothing, agriculture, and foods, while abstract culture is understood as the contributions to science, philosophy, literature, and language.

Like the coverage of Islam as a religion, that of Muslim cultures witnessed an important evolution across the three periods. Overall, results show a clear contrast between the three periods although some problems persist. In fact, while textbook coverage in the 1980s was characterized by omission, underestimation and even the appropriation of Muslim inventions by the West, that of the 1990s was marked by an obvious overrepresentation of material culture (traded goods and currency in the past and desert life today) and a resounding silence shrouding Muslim science and scientists. In sharp contrast with the two previous periods, the current textbooks, especially secondary school history textbooks, contain a more substantial recognition of Muslims' multiple roles in translating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge inherited from the Greeks as well as the contributions made by Muslim scientists, philosophers, sociologists, geographers, historians, explorers and cartographers as well as popular literature (*One Thousand and One Nights*). The presence of Christian and Jewish scientists in Muslim lands, who sought to learn about more advanced sciences at that time, is also stressed in many instances.

More concretely, excerpts from the textbooks used in the 1980s show Western ethnocentrism, an intellectually inferior status of other groups as well as the reduction of the ethnic diversity of the Muslim world to Arabs, thus excluding other groups (such as Persians).

Europe did not create any type of science. Arabs knew mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, pharmacy and medicine ... How then can we explain the abundance of scientific discoveries exclusively in Europe? The difference lies in the intellectual approach of European craftsmen and scientists. While oriental craftsmen were striving to accumulate recipes established by ancestors, the European craftsman was searching continuously for new methods and means to improve his techniques.⁵³

Sometimes, inventions are attributed wrongly to the West.

Following this scientific progress and many others ..., Europeans invented navigation instruments, notably the compass, the astrolabes...⁵⁴

In the 1990s, the coverage of our research topic witnessed some improvement as the extreme ethnocentric perspective became less apparent. Yet, only a vague reference is made to the role played by Muslims, once more reduced to Arabs, in preserving and enriching sciences inherited from the past.

During the Crusades, Westerners discovered that Arabs have preserved and enriched knowledge in astronomy inherited from Antiquity.⁵⁵

The crusades and trade with the East allowed Westerners to bring Greek and Roman manuscripts of the Ancient world to Europe.⁵⁶

What is striking, however, is the absence of any reference to even a single Muslim scientist or philosopher. The emergence of universities is also described from an exclusively Western perspective which might lead uninformed readers to think that the West was more advanced than the Muslim world in the field of education. By contrast, the 1990s textbooks emphasized Muslim material cultures such as commercial practices (such as currency and accounting) and goods imported from Muslims (such as perfumes, gold, spices and precious stones)

Among Islam's numerous contributions from which the West benefited, we can cite sugar, cotton, spices, and pharmaceutical recipes.⁵⁷

Through contact with the East, Italian merchants learned the conditions of commercial prosperity: the circulation of a strong currency and strict accounting.⁵⁸

Silences shrouding the Muslim origin of the Taj Mahal and the influence of the Arabic language on European languages in everyday life as well as in various scientific fields (such as medicine and astronomy) are also conspicuous. The longest excerpt in the 1990s textbooks covering ten pages dealt with Bedouin lifestyle, thus reinforcing the exotic Orientalist image.

In sharp contrast, the new history textbooks adopted for the current school reform contain substantial recognition of the multiple roles played by Muslim scientists when talking about the rise of Islam.

Thanks to the Islamic conquest of the Mediterranean, Muslim thinkers had the possibility to preserve and translate into Arabic the important works of ancient Greece and Rome. They also borrowed scientific

knowledge from other civilizations in Asia to develop their knowledge in mathematics, medicine, geography, and astronomy. We owe to them the invention of Algebra.⁵⁹

Greek and Indian discoveries are translated, enriched, and saved by the Arabs thanks to whom they reached us. These were particularly clever in developing new calculation procedures.⁶⁰

The importance of education in Muslim lands is stressed through the discussion of the presence of educational institutions (schools, university networks in Baghdad, Africa, North Africa and Spain), the equal access to education regardless of economic status thanks to a scholarship system, the importance of books, and the thriving translation movement.

Study centers are established everywhere in big Muslim cities: Baghdad, Cairo, Bukhara, Cordoba, Fez, etc. There, texts from predecessors were translated, including Greek philosophers.⁶¹

Timbuktu became a great university and religious center. In the sixteenth century, its population surpassed 100,000 people; 25,000 students gather at the Sankoré mosque and 180 Quranic schools. Together, they form the University of Timbuktu. It has ties to the Universities of Fez, Cairo and Cordoba.⁶²

... Muslims developed a very efficient educational system. This system rests on the study of religious sciences as well as the learning of reading, writing and maths. Schools and universities were open to everyone, even to the poorest. This accessibility allowed people from the lowest social ranks to be part of the intellectual elite.⁶³

Another notable improvement in the new secondary school history textbooks relates to the more substantial discussion of Muslim scientists and thinkers whose works became core texts in Western universities for centuries. This can be explained by the direct and explicit instructions in the new curriculum guidelines.

Abû al-Walid ibn Ruchd, is one of the greatest spirits of his time. He is astronomer, mathematician, physicist, physician and jurist. He is the author of *The Universal Treatise of Medecine*, which is considered to be one of the most important of the Middle Ages. He is famous for his commentaries on the works of Aristotle. Ibn Ruchd's works, translated into Latin and studied in Christian universities, influenced the greatest thinkers of the West.⁶⁴

(Ibn Sin_), a Persian physician, wrote a voluminous treatise of medicine that would serve as a reference for Western physicians for many centuries.⁶⁵

The historian Ibn Khaldoun puts forward the idea that the function of history is to explain the past rather than simply retell it. He also insisted

that testimonies be submitted to criticism. He is considered to be one of the fathers of modern scientific history.⁶⁶

The discussion of the presence and contributions of non-Muslim scientists, especially Christians and Jews learning and working in Muslim lands, represents another positive development in recent textbooks adopted for the current school reform.

West Jewish or Christian scientists of Western countries go to study there. It is in this way that the rediscovered the philosophy of Aristotle.⁶⁷

In regions like Spain, Christians and Muslims live together: the cities of Cordoba and Toledo were important cultural centers in the Middle Ages.⁶⁸

side The Caliph Al-Mansur opened a university-hospital in Baghdad, in the eighth century. In this place, called the Old Hospital, Muslim, Jewish and Christian physicians practiced and taught by side.⁶⁹

The influence of Arabic on Western languages is also described in many instances although it is often related to food (coffee, sugar, oranges, for example) and clothing (jacket, djellaba) and rarely to scientific terms (such as zero, alcohol, algebra). Muslim calligraphy and architecture and urban life get a few mentions as examples of excellent Art.

The influence of Islamic architecture reached France and Italy. Christian architects included Arab motifs in the decoration of some buildings.⁷⁰

ver- Starting in 711 and during almost 8 centuries, Muslims ... maintained a presence in Spain. Sovereigns constructed fortified palaces with refined architecture and décor ... By comparison, the cold and humid keeps of the richest Christian lords looked really sad.⁷¹

Muslims also built worship places of a great splendor. Thus, from the eighth to the tenth centuries, Muslim rulers of Cordoba in Spain built a huge mosque. At that time, it was one of the biggest in the world.⁷²

The textbooks used in the 1990s and current ones also witnessed the disappearance of the negative views of Muslim societies (illiteracy, backward values, the systematic and widespread inferiorization of women, massive practice of polygamy, persistence of slavery) which we identified in the 1980s, as the following quotes show.

Muscat and Oman: "Little value is given to instruction and women are excluded from public life. Changes will have deep consequences given the way these countries perpetuate traditional Arab values dictated by the Qur'an. Even slavery subsists within the country".⁷³

In another excerpt authors speak about the futility of talking about freedom to:

... illiterates who would deem it inconceivable that one of their wives goes out without wearing the veil.⁷⁴

Despite these significant improvements, the new textbooks still suffer from some shortcomings. Silence over the Muslim world's contributions in many domains (such as astronomy, medicine, famous navigators, invention of wind and water mills for agricultural purposes, and commerce-related aspects such as currencies, currency trading, cheques, accounting) is striking during the discussion of Europe's Renaissance in history, language and cross-disciplinary textbooks. Another obvious example is the spread of paper use to Europe. Muslims' important role is often omitted or at most referred to in vague terms that fail to take into account their historical precedence over Europe.

For a long time, China was the only region in the world to produce paper. But towards the twelfth century, the procedure spread in Central Asia, Middle East, then in Europe.⁷⁵

As far as lifestyle is concerned, the overrepresentation of the desert, Tuaregs and Bedouins in modern Muslim societies that we identified in the 1990s continues in current textbooks. This trend is further exacerbated by the omnipresence of photos of the desert and camels at the expense of any significant discussion of urban life. The overall image of modern Muslim societies contrasts sharply with the image of highly urbanized and developed Baghdad, Timbuktu, Spanish cities and reinforces the idea of backwardness. Furthermore, there is a very conspicuous absence of the treatment of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of Muslim societies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This examination of the coverage of Islam as a religion and its cultures in French textbooks used in Quebec over a thirty-year period shows an obvious trend towards improvement. This is especially observable in new textbooks which have progressively been adopted in conjunction with the recent Quebec school reform. This can be explained, at least in part, by the direct impact of the more explicit instructions (contained in the new curriculum guidelines) with regard to the coverage of Islam as a religion, Muslim science, scientists and cities such as Baghdad and Timbuktu. The new local context, which is marked by an increasingly visible presence of Muslim minorities in Quebec, as well as the post 9/11 context, may also have pushed authors to treat the topic more carefully. The shortcomings identified in the textbooks can be explained by the reproduction of vague and biased public discourse about Islam and Muslim

cultures and the need to be brief, which sometimes leads authors to use problematic words. Also, the lack of centrality of the topic outside the direct treatment of Islam might have led authors to fail to conduct thorough research or consult experts.

Further cooperation between various local and international partners is needed to ensure a widespread dissemination of research results to all concerned parties (ministries, publishers and their authors) and the presentation of more interesting content and learning activities that develop students' critical thinking so that they understand the current stakes more appropriately. Appropriate teacher training is also fundamental to any successful teaching about Islam and Muslim cultures, especially in a general (both local and international) context, where events and their biased coverage construct Islam and Muslims as the enemy within Western societies which threatens their core values of democracy, equality and freedom.

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