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**Abstract** • Representations of Islam in Ontario's social studies textbooks portray a dehistoricized view of a religion that is disconnected from other monotheistic religions. The varied and complex socio-political and ideological locations of Muslims in historical and current contexts are reduced to simplistic, often negative representations, either as irrational aggressors or victims of poverty and underdevelopment. More nuanced, historically grounded, and multifaceted representations are called for, in order to both reflect and promote a more inclusive society in Ontario.

**Keywords** • textbooks, Islam, Muslim, religion, multiculturalism, curriculum

## Introduction

The potential of textbooks to shape political ideology was first recognized on an international level when the League of Nations commissioned the revision of history textbooks in several countries shortly after the First World War.[1] Many scholars and activists have since criticized textbooks for their unfair treatment of a particular racial, ethnic or religious group on account of factual errors, distortions, omissions, and other indicators of prejudice and exclusion.[2] Recent critiques in Western countries have focused on the representation of Islam and Muslims. In Canada, however, relatively little attention has been paid to this issue[3] despite

the rapid increase its Muslim population[4] and the reported discrimination against Muslim children in public schools.[5]

This article presents an analysis of social studies textbooks used in Ontario's schools. We begin with a brief review of the relevant literature about textbooks as a source of knowledge, and of images of Islam and Muslims in the West. We then examine their representation at various historical times in a loose chronological order. Our analysis shows that Islam is presented as being clearly distinct from other monotheistic religions. Its expansion and cultural accomplishments are decontextualized and dehistoricized. The multiple and complex sociopolitical, economic and ideological locations of contemporary Muslim societies are simplistically portrayed as irrationally aggressive, or as poor and underdeveloped. This analysis points to an urgent need to develop a more nuanced, historically located, and multivocal narrative about Islam and Muslims. In Ontario, a province with a rapidly growing population of Muslims with varied perspectives and affiliations, it is important to revise textbooks in order to both reflect and to promote a more inclusive society.

## Textbooks as Source of Knowledge

Textbooks reflect and reinforce normative images of a society, perceptions of other societies, and relationships among them. Nation-states all over the world promote their ideologies and versions of "truth" by providing national or provincial curriculum guidelines that must be followed closely by publishers.[6] The privileged status of textbooks as the most widely used "official" source of knowledge for teachers, parents and school children is well recognized.[7]

Textbooks are always produced in particular social, political and economic contexts, within which the interests of multiple stakeholders, that is, education ministries, school boards, publishers, editors, authors, curriculum writers, teachers, parents and evaluators, are negotiated. Because of the commercial value of textbooks, publishers use their full repertoire of marketing strategies in order to have their books included in the list of officially approved textbooks. In Ontario this is called the Trillium List, and approved books are supposed to meet at least 85 percent of the stated goals and objectives of the provincial curriculum guidelines.

Over twenty years ago, Luke pointed out that, no matter what the context, the criteria for the approval of textbooks are based on "one-to-one identification of school knowledge with textually represented ideas of the dominant class." [8] Other scholars have confirmed that curriculum development continues to be an inherently political act which allows the dominant group to maintain its power and cultural hegemony.[9] In Ontario, as in other jurisdictions, the "tight relationship"[10] among textbook

publishers, author, editors and consultants makes it very difficult for smaller and newer groups to gain entry into educational publishing.

Although the impact of textbooks on students' construction of knowledge about their world is contested, they still use them as the primary source for information in most classrooms.[11] Chambliss and Calfee report that depending on the level of the class and the subject 70 percent to 95 percent of activities in US classrooms rely on textbooks.[12] Our recent empirical work confirmed that high school teachers depend heavily on textbooks when assigning homework and assessing students' knowledge, especially in areas where they had little personal knowledge and few additional sources of information. Results from two large scale studies in the US also show that social studies textbooks are used more often than any other textbooks in elementary and high schools.[13]

**Western Images of Islam and Muslims**

In Western societies, images of Islam and Muslims have been shaped by historical events which framed their encounters. Barsamian points out that the demonization of Islam began in the tenth century as a result of its expansion, which threatened other societies.[14] Clearly religious lines of division became common during the Crusades when Christian Europeans formed a collective force against Muslims, discarding previous distinctions between Arabs and Turks. Current Western involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict, continues to frame the representation of Islam and Muslims in the West.

Encounters between societies both shape and are shaped by their perceptions of each other. Edward Said used the term "Orientalism" to characterize Western perceptions of Muslim societies as pre-modern, exotic, aggressive, fanatic, culturally and civilizationally retrogressive.[15] In Britain the term "Islamophobia" was coined in 1997 in a widely known report on the increasing public antagonism against British Muslims.[16] In North America, well established scholars such as Bernard Lewis, as well as polemists such as Howard Bloom and Samuel Huntington, have reinforced the "othering" of Muslims. In Canada, anti-Muslim sentiment is also widely reported in the media as well as in academic scholarship.[17]

Societal perceptions obviously influence school curricula. Douglass and Dunn point out that the teaching of Islam to American students is heavily influenced by the Arab-Israeli conflict, the legacy of colonialism, and American foreign policy towards Muslim countries.[18] Citing several authors, Moore reports that, "Generally the teaching of Islam in the United States had been characterized by numerous stereotypes, distortions, omissions, textbook inaccuracies, and within the boundaries of Western civilization's politically motivated narrative.[19] Reporting on the

schooling of Muslim students in English schools, Ipgrave distinguishes between the permissive stance, which tolerates students' manifestations of religious identity in school, and the affirmative stance, which tries to include religious culture in the school by (for example) referring to Muslim scholars' work in the curriculum.[20] Considering both these responses insufficient, she recommends epistemology-based inclusion, which invites and engages Muslims' views in combination with secular and other religious views in the school. She claims that the recognition of different sources of knowledge does not necessarily lead to rejection of some in favor of others. In Canada, Mc Andrew, Oueslati and Helly claim that the representation of Islam, more than any other religion, has been the object of stereotyping and vilification in school textbooks.[21] Their recent review of textbooks in Quebec shows that despite the disappearance of openly negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, which Mc Andrew had identified in her earlier studies, there are still many examples of Eurocentric approaches, stereotypes and factual errors.[22]

**Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to find out how Islam and Muslims are represented in school textbooks used in the Canadian provinces Ontario and Quebec. This paper draws only on the Ontario data. Our approach to this task was based on the premise that authoritative and widely used texts have the potential to influence what their readers know (information), what they do (action), and how they think of themselves and others (identity).[23] Following the tradition of other analyses of textbooks, we took a hermeneutic discourse analysis approach to our task, characterizing and interpreting the key messages of the examined texts in order to identify their underlying assumptions.[24] We noted absences of critical information as well as of contexts in which a text was placed. We traced the relationship between the semiotic contents of the texts and socio-cultural contexts in which they are read. Our purpose was to analyze and interpret the data in terms of the grand narrative they create about Islam and Muslims.

All of the listed social studies textbooks for grades one to ten in the official list of textbooks approved for use in Ontario's schools were included in our initial review. Books for grades eleven and twelve were excluded from this corpus in order to make it comparable to the Quebec data, where administrative structures of schools do not include these grades. We began by reading sections in each book that specifically dealt with Islam or Muslims (for example, the spread of Islam, the Crusades, the war in Iraq), then reviewed other sections that were likely to refer to those topics (for example, the development of culture, science and technology in medieval

Europe); and skimmed through the remaining chapters to identify any additional references to Islam or Muslims. Maps, tables and pictures were also examined. However, only those texts where there was a clear and significant reference to Islam or Muslims were photocopied and retained for analysis. A total of forty-nine social studies textbooks were examined in Ontario, which yielded thirteen excerpts related to Islam as a religion and culture, and 117 to historical, socio-political and economic representation of Muslims. Most of the excerpts came either from the textbooks for grades four or ten, primarily because the curriculum guidelines for these grades specifically call for inclusion of these topics.

Limitations of this study include the fact that textbooks used for elective subjects, such as world religions, and those used in the two uppermost grades in Ontario were not included in the data. These textbooks undoubtedly contain information that is much more complex and nuanced than the texts we examined. We also did not analyze instructional materials provided by publishers, or those that teachers themselves collect or develop. Data for this study were collected in 2006, which is why books approved for usage in schools after this time are not included. However, a recent review of the Trillium List shows that almost all of these books are still in circulation, although some are newer editions with minor changes. Collectively, the books referred to in this paper represent a significant proportion of the Trillium List. Our analysis of the texts selected from these books yielded some clear patterns, which are presented below.

**Distinction from Other Religious Traditions**

Even a cursory reading of the Qur'an shows that the narratives, parables, and injunctions in Islam are very similar to those read by Jews and Christians in their religious texts. Muslims consider Muhammad to be the last one in a long line of prophets, who are often acknowledged and frequently blessed in the Qur'an. Aslan points out that the Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as "People of the Book,"[25] and repeatedly reminds Muslims that it is a "confirmation of previous scriptures."[26] It asks Muslims to say to Jews and Christians that "Our God and your God are the same; and it is to Him that we submit."[27] Citing the extract from the Qur'an, "[God] has established for you [the Arabs] the same religion enjoined on Noah, on Abraham, on Moses, and on Jesus," Aslan claims that,

> Like so many prophets before him, Muhammad never claimed to have invented a new religion. By his own admission, Muhammad's message was an attempt to reform the existing religious beliefs and cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arabia, so as to bring the God of Jews and Christians to the Arab peoples."[28]

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However, in a textbook for grade four "Allah" – the name given to God by Muslims – is represented as a Muslim-specific god. He is referred to as "Allah (the God of Islam)," and the text states that "[Muslims] believe that there is no God but Allah." Further on, it is stated that the first religious duty of a Muslims is "to believe that there is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his messenger."[29] While these extracts emphasize belief in a single god, there is no reference made to other monotheistic religions whose traditions are followed by Islam.

Islam was born at a time when religion was the primary marker of identity and was explicitly used to sanction the state. Grand empires were created by theocratic regimes, such as the Byzantines, the Sasanians and the Roman Catholics, through territorial expansion. Military conquests, proselytization, political alliances, and economic sanctions were all legitimate strategies designed to increase spheres of influence. The spread of Islam is discussed in textbooks for the fourth grade without any reference to this historical context. An extract from one textbook reads:

> Islam spread rapidly. Mohammad's wish was to carry his religion to other people. This was done by fighting "holy wars" against "enemies of Allah" or nations where the people did not believe in Islam. The armies of Islam quickly conquered their neighbours. By 750, all the lands from Spain through North Africa to the north of India had become Muslim.[30]

Although a few pages earlier, it is stated in the same book that "The Christian church played a very important part in the daily life of the village. The Catholic Church was a powerful force in the Middle Ages," there is no further elaboration on the similar role of religion in the social, political, and economic lives of Muslims.[31]

**Christendom versus Islam**

In the descriptions of the Crusades, the othering of Muslims is clearly underscored. While there is cursory acknowledgment of socio-political and economic imperatives that sustained the battles between Christians and Muslims for over two hundred years, religious difference is identified as the primary reason for the conflict:

> We all have strong beliefs. These affect the choices we make. All through history, people have been willing to fight, even die, for what they believed in. One example of this in medieval times was a series of wars called the crusades.[32]

Additional reasons why different people joined the Crusades are acknowledged in one book by using characters such as a monk, a trader, a blacksmith, a knight, and which state their motives, such as opportuni-

ties for trade, quest for adventure, and desire to learn new skills. In another book, this is done through a brief statement: "Most crusaders went because of their strong religious beliefs. Some went looking for wealth, land or adventure."[33]

A clear distinction is made between winners and losers in the Crusades. The suffering of the Christian armies is attributed to the climate and, while they have some setbacks, the term "defeat" is associated only with the Islamic forces.

> [The Christian armies] suffered terribly on the journey. The men and horses were not used to the not climate of the Middle East.

> Gradually the Islamic forces recovered from their defeat in the First Crusade. In 1114 they recaptured some land … Over the next 18 years, Saladin's armies captured Crusader castles and took back more lands. When Saladin recaptured Jerusalem in 1187, the pope quickly called for another Crusade.

For the most part, the impact of the Crusades on Europeans is considered to be positive. The adoption of new technologies, progress in trade, exposure to new products, and increase in knowledge are listed as positive outcomes of the Crusades.

> Europeans captured and held parts of the Middle East for about 200 years. They build castles and churches and settled among Muslim peoples. While they lived there, they adopted some parts of the way of life. European crusaders who returned to Europe brought with them new ideas and taste for new products.[34]

The impact of the Crusades on Muslims is not discussed, except in terms of the general cost of wars, such as, "The Crusades had a huge cost in lives and money," or as "Thousands of lives were lost on both sides"[35] and, "The financial costs were also enormous."[36] In one paragraph, however, only a very careful reader would notice that the word "mosque" indicates that Muslims were also victims of Christian cruelty:

> The sieges and battles were terrible. There was little mercy shown to people living in captured cities. Thousands of ordinary people were killed. There was great violence and cruelty. Soldiers and knights looted mosques, businesses, and homes to steal anything of value.[37]

**Cultural Accomplishments of Muslims**

Muslims' contributions to the arts and sciences at the time of the Crusades and in the following centuries were spread across many lands from

Spain to Indonesia. Some of their accomplishments are acknowledged and favorably compared to European civilizations. For example:

> At the time of the Crusades, science, technology, mathematics, and medicine were much more advanced in Islamic countries than in Europe. There were large libraries of written works in Islamic cities. Education and ideas were very important.

In other excerpts the comparisons are implicit. Among them is the following:

> Islamic countries were very civilized. The people were advanced in medicine. Muslim doctors used surgery to fight diseases. They knew that disease was not the work of the devils. They knew it had natural causes. The Arabs also learned about astronomy, the study of stars and planets. They built buildings and instruments for looking at the stars. They loved poetry and stories. A famous collection of their stories is called *The Arabian Nights*. They loved music and beautiful gardens with flowers, pools of water, and trees. The Arabs invented our modern numbers. They made better maps and found new ways of steering ships at sea. They invented instruments like the astrolabe, which helped sailors find their way at sea.[38]

In excerpts such as the above, the significance of Muslims' accomplishments is lost without their proper location in a larger comparative context. To a young reader in the twenty-first century, inventions such as the above would seem quite archaic and trivial. Furthermore, the conflation of Muslims with Arabs ignores the existence and accomplishments of well-developed non-Arab Muslims civilizations in many lands across the world.

**Colonization of Muslim Lands**

Although Muslims inhabited many of the countries colonized by Europeans, they are not identified in descriptions of Western colonization.

> The Western European nations were competing once again to build empires. They were scrambling for colonies in Africa and Asia, which would provide valuable resources and then buy back manufactured goods. The term used to describe empire-building, or the control of overseas territories, is imperialism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain was the leading world power, and it sought to increase its power, wealth and trade opportunities through imperialism. Many Britons at that time believed that their nation was superior, and they also saw imperialism as a way of bringing their own civilization and religion to people they considered to be "lesser races."[39]