

BOOK REVIEW

A remedy for managing the complexity in teaching about Muslims and Islam

Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering multiculturalism, by Liz Jackson, New York, Routledge, 2014

I've been walking around my campus carrying Liz Jackson's *Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism* for several weeks and I am invariably stopped and asked about it at least a few times a day. Faculty, staff, students, people walking through campus are curious and wonder what the book has to say. It is a conversation starter. I've been asked naïve and negatively biased questions as well as had several challenging debates about what the role of religious and cultural education is in our schools. From my brief elevator and hallway discussions, it is clear to me the time is right for this book. We are at a critical juncture since 9/11. Exploring how Americans learn about Islam in our schools and popular media and beginning a dialogue about how we change that is crucial to living in our increasingly diverse global society. This book is a great entry into examining the American educational system's difficult relationship with religious education beyond Christianity and the importance of creating opportunities for meaningful engagement of our citizens across differences. It is also a great read—engaging, thought-provoking, and challenging. This is why I was carrying it around with me every day for weeks.

The book identifies the incomplete and distorted ways that Muslims and the religion Islam has been portrayed in American school materials and in popular media. Before 9/11, little if any course materials existed on Muslims and often created stereo- typical representations rather than factual information. After 9/11, there has been a growing acknowledgement that education about this complex religion and culture is necessary, but Dr Jackson notes that such efforts are often critiqued by local communities as somehow unpatriotic. Her in-depth analysis of the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in popular culture, American news outlets, and in texts used in American schools provides readers with a deeper understanding of the challenges in educating our youth about Muslim culture and Muslim countries. Challenging stereotypes perpetuated by media and our texts and encouraging dialogue and understanding are essential, but without educational materials and instructors who can facilitate this learning, it is difficult at best. Dr Jackson calls for creating learning environments that facilitate critical media literacy skills and provide opportunities to practice democratic dialogue.

The biggest contribution of this book is Dr Jackson' examination of the varying ways we approach multiculturalism in the United States and how our traditional ways do not meet the challenges of today's concerns with Muslims and Islam. She aptly describes and critiques the history and practice of assimilationist, pluralist, and critical multiculturalism in US education. She calls for a new direction—interculturalism as a way to address the need for new perspectives on educating learners about Muslims and Islam. She makes the following distinctions in a well-written, complex chapter.

Assimilationism regards difference as a deficit—education serves as a vehicle to help the disadvantaged learn and embrace mainstream culture. She describes conservative multiculturalism which assumes the superiority of the dominant culture and encourages compliance. In contrast, Dr

Jackson also describes liberal assimilationism which dismisses the role of culture and instead focuses on the individual, prioritising individual equality but still encouraging a move to integrating into mainstream culture. Pluralism is what we often think of as 'multiculturalism' and supports the idea that all cultures are equal and deserving of positive regard. Pluralists argue that assimilationism harms people through dismissing their cultural heritage, potentially impacting self-esteem and identity. Dr Jackson then describes the Critical Multicultural perspective which goes beyond pluralism and focuses on how inequality and oppression are structured in society and contribute to beliefs in the inferiority of a group. The target for change is on societal practices. The distinctions she makes between these world views and practices in the context of educating about Muslims and Islam are important. One's philosophy guides one's practices and while each of these philosophies and approaches have their strengths and place in multicultural education, given the complexities inherent in the complexities of understanding and relating to Muslims and Islam in a post 9/11 world, Jackson argues that these approaches are not enough. Dr Jackson's thorough examination of popular culture, the news and education's portrayal of Muslims and Islam provides the reader with a deep and rich understanding of the challenges facing educators of Muslims and Islam. Easily accessible news tends to restrict the nuances of this culture, focusing on 'news worthy' cases of violence and extremism primarily, portraying little of actual diversity of these believers. Teachers and teacher educators are part of our citizenry and this is the news that they are getting, making it difficult for them to become familiar with alternative views of events and the culture. Educational resources such as standards and textbooks are examined also. Again, Dr Jackson is extremely detailed in her analysis here. She notes that while representations of Muslims in standards and texts are more balanced and neutral than might be found in the popular press, and more plentiful than before 9/11, the information tends to be simply factual and historical in nature. Educational resources, however, don't tend to address the complexity of today's Islam and its relationship to the values in the United States—gender roles, association with terrorism—for example. There is little emphasis on facilitating discussion of difference and its implications for civil society.

Dr Jackson's chapter on Interculturalism is a call to facilitating such discussions in our classrooms. She sees this as the foundation for democratic communication across differences especially in striving to create environments for mutually beneficial integration of Muslims with non-Muslims in western countries. She also describes the importance of providing opportunities to learn and practice critical media literacy. In the case of teaching about Muslims and Islam, this is especially important given the stereotypical representations all around. Our students need to evaluate and make their own judgments, moving beyond what is presented as news or facts.

Her chapter on interculturalism provides many examples of what teachers can do to facilitate discussion for democratic discourse and critical examination of media. Educators and teacher educators will find this chapter extremely helpful in thinking about how to implement change in their classrooms and should help them get started. While the book was not intended to provide a detailed compendium of strategies for teaching about Muslims and Islam, perhaps Dr Jackson's next book should be about this. Dr Jackson understands and explains well the complexities teachers face in teaching well about Muslims and Islam. Her continued guidance in this area is needed.

As I finished the book and thought about the depth of analysis and understanding displayed in the text, I was reminded of Dr Jackson's introduction and her description of her initial interest in this topic. She describes her first teaching experience which coincidentally occurred right after 9/11 and her struggle and desire to create real dialogue and understanding in her classroom. She also describes her subsequent travel and work experiences and her commitment to and experiences of authentic, connected interaction. Dr Jackson's scholarly perspective in this complicated topic is admirable but even more impressive is her clear personal commitment to understanding and creating environments for true democratic discussions across difference. She calls on all of us to engage fully and with purpose. The ability to engage in this way is not easy but made easier with this book. Even though I've finished the book, I will continue to carry it around with me to start conversations. I encourage you to do the same.

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