

BOOK REVIEW

## Towards a More Just Society: Considering Islam and Muslims in the Classroom

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

On 3 May 2015, two gunmen opened fire on an art exhibit and cartoon contest organized by a free speech group in Texas (Stack, 2015). The event featured drawings and artistic portrayals of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. Aside from a security guard who was shot, no bystanders or attendees were harmed, and the two gunmen were killed by local law enforcement agents. In the aftermath of the shooting, a debate was sparked or—perhaps more accurately—a debate was reignited concerning the tensions between the sanctity of religious beliefs, respect for the tenets of Islam, and freedom of speech and artistic expression (Fernandez, Pérez-Peña, & Santos, 2015). The chief organizer of the contest characterized the shooting as a war on free speech and made comparisons with the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris that took place five months earlier (Bever, 2015). On the other side of the debate were people who advocated for respect for the Muslim belief that forbids visual representations of Muhammad. Events like this provide opportunities for discussion about key issues facing the US; however, few people are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to participate meaningfully in these conversations so that all voices are heard and greater understanding is achieved. It is within this political and social context that Liz Jackson's book, *Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism*, is placed. The goal of this book is to help students and school teachers develop the skills and knowledge necessary for participation in the debates that follow events like those in Texas and Paris, as well as daily conversations about the status and treatment of Muslims and other minority groups in the US.

Jackson asserts that educators too often either ignore Islam or, if the religion is explored in classroom spaces, teachers paint with broad, simplistic strokes that fail to portray the diversity of Muslim practices, cultural heritages, and expressions. Because Muslims are a minority group facing significant challenges in the post-9/11 world, Jackson advocates for an expanded set of curricular offerings, especially given the profound ignorance that exists within the media and popular culture about what it means to be Muslim. In Jackson's view, students must be taught critical media literacy so that they can make sense of the way the media treats Muslims. Students must also be provided with opportunities to develop civic skills that will prepare them to participate in an ever diversifying democratic society. On all of these points, I could not agree more.

In order to achieve this vision for education, Jackson situates her suggestions within existing theoretical perspectives that have guided educators in helping students engage with issues of human diversity. Her treatment of these viewpoints is a particular strength of the book because she not only describes the thinking that undergirds them but also explores how they inform policy debates and the creation of curriculum and textbooks. The first perspective Jackson describes is that of a desire for the assimilation of minority groups. Those that hold this perspective advocate for schools to assist minority groups in assimilating into mainstream society by adopting the practices of the majority. Jackson invokes a widely known metaphor for society as a melting pot to clarify this thrust in educational practice and thinking. The second framework that Jackson describes is that of

pluralism which is a reaction against assimilationist demands for conformity. Pluralism dictates that the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and religions be highlighted and celebrated. The metaphor used by pluralists is that of the country as a tossed salad, the message conveyed by this image being one of the need for diverse groups to coexist and tolerate one another. I have long struggled with the use of the word ‘tolerance’ to describe how we as a society must engage with diversity because it feels as though we are being forced to *endure* those who are different than us, and Jackson astutely points out the deficiencies of notions of tolerance. Jackson also critiques pluralism’s overemphasis on aspects of identity, particularly racial identity. The third theoretical perspective that Jackson describes is interculturalism which is a ‘cross-cultural engagement of different groups in US society across race, religions, culture and class’ (p. 112). In this pedagogical framework, students are encouraged to move beyond *tolerating* difference to *embracing* and *engaging* with it, the overarching goal being to achieve deeper understanding of other people through perspective sharing and taking. It is within this framework that Jackson makes her recommendations.

The intercultural view is a clear strength of the framework as it attempts to account for the dynamic nature of cultural expression, which is particularly relevant given the diversity inherent in Muslim cultures. Jackson suggests that a way to achieve interculturalism is through meaningful dialogs that extend beyond scripted forms of discussion that are structured and fail to grapple with or represent a variety of perspectives. Given the treatment of Muslims in the media, Jackson offers the very practical suggestion that teachers develop the media literacy of students with a view to helping them adopt an analytical stance when consuming media. Jackson rightly asserts that this critical media literacy will help students interact meaningfully with media representations of Muslims so that they can identify portrayals that may be overly simplistic, problematic, and/or stereotypical. The goal of intercultural pedagogies that advance media literacy is to expose students to a variety of perspectives that help them develop skills to participate in discussions about contentious and polarizing issues. Intercultural education correctly resists asserting a specific moral viewpoint and is aimed instead at helping students develop their own beliefs and perspectives. Dogmatism has no place in the classroom, especially in a democratic society, and while dogmatism is often thought of as a religious act, it can also be a political act that attempts to force students to adopt the political beliefs and views of their instructors. Jackson’s reticence to advance a specific moral code or set of values is particularly salient because it places the onus on students to arrive at their own moral understandings of the world.

While this book makes a number of important contributions, there are two ways in which it could be strengthened. First, Jackson describes her desire to ensure that schoolchildren are exposed to a variety of perspectives on Muslim life in the US. Given her efforts to shed light on this diversity, it is surprising that Jackson focuses almost entirely on Muslims of Middle Eastern descent, with only brief mentions of Muslims of African, Asian, and Turkish origin. I was surprised that she completely overlooked Muslims from the Nation of Islam movement that began in the 1930s in the US and remains active to this day (Jackson, 2011). There is a large population of African-American Muslims, some descendants of family members who, inspired by Malcolm X, converted from Christianity to Islam, and others who have converted more recently for less political reasons. With Jackson’s overriding emphasis on the Middle East, she fails to reflect the full diversity of Muslim life in the US—a stated goal of the book.

Related to this issue, I would have liked to see more exploration of the racialized experiences of Muslims worldwide, and particularly in the US. Although Jackson briefly mentions that in the animated movie *Aladdin*, nefarious characters have a darker skin tone, I found scant other examples of how Muslims have been racialized. In order to demonstrate why it is important to show students how this operates, I share an anecdote. A few years ago, a colleague of mine who I was traveling with told me that she had spent her flight terrified because of the people onboard with her. When I asked her why, she showed me a picture on her phone of a group of Indian Sikhs waiting at the baggage claim turnstile of her flight. When I again asked why she was afraid, she said, ‘Because they are Muslims!’ This, of course, was a teachable moment that I will forever wonder how well I handled, and it also illustrates my point: not only are Muslims misunderstood in US society, so too are people

who do not fit within the US Black/White binary and may *appear* to some to be Muslim, underscoring the racialized experience of this group. As further proof of the racialization of Muslims, I offer the example of profiling that takes place in airports, with reports of people of Indian and Latin American descent being stopped by security agents for extra screening (Bhatnagar, 2009). Without grappling with the racialization of Islam and Muslims, I cannot imagine how students may truly understand the diversity of perspectives and experiences of Muslims, as well as those assumed to be Muslim, in the US.

To address these issues, I suggest that educators use Jackson's book in conjunction with the Black feminist notion of intersectionality. Intersectionality, conceived of by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), demonstrates how the interconnectedness of various aspects of identity can compound, confuse, and/or complicate how oppression operates in society. When using this framework, educators should heed Jackson's critique of the overemphasis of aspects of identity in educational spaces, particularly racial identity. With this in mind, though, intersectionality offers a helpful framework for exploring how perspectives and identities, especially those of marginalized individuals, are multidimensional and taken up in various ways to oppress people.

Despite these two oversights, *Muslims and Islam in US Education* is an important contribution to the literature exploring issues of diversity and representation in the curriculum. Indeed, the question of how minorities are treated is a perennial concern of a democracy. Jackson's focus on the experience of Muslims in the US is timely given the contemporary issues facing US society—issues that are not likely to disappear and that demand meaningful civic dialog and participation with the view toward creating a more just society.

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