



Extreme Prejudice

Why teach about extremism? *Not* teaching about it can put students in danger.

BY MARISA FASCIANO ILLUSTRATION BY DONGYUN LEE

LATELY, THE NEWS HAS BEEN full of horrifying stories and images linked to the actions of such terrorist groups as ISIS and Boko Haram, which self-identify as Muslim. There is additional fallout closer to home. As the number of media events portraying Islam as a dark threat increases, so do threats to American Muslim students—and to their Sikh classmates, who are often mistaken for Muslims. Ignorance about religious diversity and extremism has left these students vulnerable to stereotyping and bullying by classmates and even teachers, and has created hostile environments that can make it difficult for students to learn. Such

environments can also be the breeding ground for other religious identity-based bullying perpetrated against students who are considered different or “other.”

Here’s what that hostility can look like: According to a survey of Muslim youth by the California chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, nearly half of all respondents were subjected to bullying because of their religion. Girls who wear hijabs (Muslim head scarves) worry about having them yanked from their heads at recess. Ahmed Jamil, president of the Muslim American Society Queens Community Center in New York, told *The New York Times* that Muslim youth

frequently suffer such taunts as “Your father is ISIS. Are you ISIS?” Youssef ElGhandour, a public school student, said a classmate once told him, “You are probably going to bomb up the school.”

A Nigerian-American Muslim student in Brooklyn, New York, described feeling powerless when faced with misconceptions about her religious and cultural identity. According to a *Voices of NY* article, “Amina Adekola, 15, was in her 10th-grade global class learning about the Boko Haram massacres when another student asked, ‘Why are all Muslims terrorists?’ She said that she wanted to stand up for herself, tell him that she was a Muslim and not a terrorist.



But she was embarrassed in the face of what she felt was an overwhelming majority. ‘About 90 percent of the kids in my class feel that way,’ she said.”

American Sikh students encounter similar attitudes. Even though Sikhs are not Muslim, Sikh students can be victims of Islamophobia because their peers—and many adults—are unfamiliar with their religious dress. In its study *Go Home, Terrorist*, the Sikh Coalition found that more than two-thirds of turbaned Sikh children report being bullied at school (32 percent of all students ages 12 to 18 say they’re bullied) and that the bullying can turn physical.

Aasees Kaur, the sister of a Sikh boy who endured a broken nose, a swollen jaw that required two surgeries, and the cutting of his hair, explains that many Sikhs keep their hair unshorn

and wrapped in a turban as an external aspect of their religious identity. “For devout Sikhs, the turban is a declaration of Sikh identity, representing a commitment to the Sikh religious ideals of equality, justice and love,” she writes in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. “For many, the turban reminds them of otherness, making it an easy target for mockery and even violence.”

Why Teach About Religious Extremism?

Each of these bullying instances and the stereotypes that feed them stem from a lack of religious literacy, combined with the generally monolithic depiction of Muslims in the media. The fact is that many kids don’t know much about Islam, Sikhism or the meaning of the term *extremism*. If the media are their only exposure to Islam and only extreme practices of Islam are depicted, students have very few opportunities to learn about more typical practices. This imbalance leads to a belief that all terrorists are Muslims and vice versa. It also contributes to students being unaware of the full scope of extremist activities that involve other religious groups around the world.

That’s where educators come in. Expanding knowledge is the only way to combat these dangerous stereotypes and foster empathy among students, and teachers can do that by adding religion to the curriculum—including extremism that claims the mantle of religion.

Approaching Religious Extremism in the Classroom

Dramatic stories about extremist terrorism need to be counterbalanced with well-rounded and nuanced information about religion delivered via the classroom. Here are some suggestions for providing a complete picture.

➔ **Clarify that extremists are a minority within the religion (e.g., not all Muslims are terrorists).** By definition, extremism is a belief on the fringes, not upheld by most people. It’s important to give students the tools to distinguish

between the diverse mainstream followers of a religion and a religion’s extremists. For example, explain that most Muslims oppose violence in the name of Islam. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center survey, distinct majorities in many of the of 11 Muslim publics surveyed—including over three-quarters of respondents in Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria and Tunisia—think “suicide bombings or other acts of violence that target civilians are never justified.”

Along with statistics like these, you might share examples of individuals from the faith in question who have spoken out against religious violence. “What Can Muslims Do to Reclaim Their ‘Beautiful Religion’?” an essay signed by 23 Muslim leaders, addresses the actions of militant groups and asserts that leaders must affirm and promote universal human rights. The essay includes an image of Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, whose autobiography, *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World*, offers older students an inspirational voice of peace and perseverance.

➔ **Demonstrate that extremism is not unique to a particular religion (e.g., not all terrorists are Muslim).** Help students understand that there is a spectrum of behavior within every belief system and that no single religion has a monopoly on violence. Even Buddhism, which is traditionally associated with nonviolence, has extremist factions. In Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Buddhist supremacist groups led by vitriolic monks launched anti-Muslim riots in 2014, ravaging towns, killing dozens of people and displacing thousands. The inflammatory speech and divisive tactics of these monks are similar to those of some Christian-identity group leaders who promote contempt for Jews and people who are not white. Jewish extremists, such as Yigal Amir, the far-right law student who assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, have made their mark as well. Amir and his accomplices claimed that

they were protesting the prime minister's efforts to make peace with Palestinians. Being exposed to extremism from a variety of religions will show students that the enemy is not one particular faith; the enemy is intolerance from any source.

➔ **Examine the economic and political context.** Violence attributed to religion often stems from other causes, such as competition for material resources or political control. Guide your students in distinguishing the politicized version of a religion from the religion itself, and ask them to consider how extremists might distort religious texts and teachings to

obtain and retain power. For example, in their "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi," more than 150 Muslim leaders and scholars meticulously detail how the ideological claims of ISIS have no basis in the Quran.

➔ **Highlight religious peacemakers.** By exposing students to positive voices of faith—to problem solvers instead of just problem makers—you can counteract the dominant media coverage that feeds into stereotypes and risks breeding antagonism. Try sharing stories of individuals around the world who are motivated by their religion to bridge

differences and build peace. These individuals may not typically make front-page news or receive regular public recognition, but their daily struggles have important and lasting effects.

For example, Dishani Jayaweera is a Buddhist in Sri Lanka who founded the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR) with her husband, Dr. Jayanta Seneviratne. CPBR's interfaith dialogue work promotes mutual understanding among Sri Lanka's main religious and ethnic groups: Sinhalese Buddhists, Tamil Hindus, Muslims, and Tamil and Sinhalese Christians.

In Pakistan, Azhar Hussain, president and founder of the Peace and Education Foundation, works tirelessly to help madrasa leaders develop peace-building skills and provide moral guidance for their students and communities.

➔ **Empower your students to make a difference.** Take the inspirational examples of peacemakers like Jayaweera and Hussain one step further by encouraging students to promote peace and pluralism in their school community. Whether it's standing up for a Muslim or Sikh peer, giving a presentation that teaches classmates about religious differences or supporting causes that promote interreligious peace, students can channel their concerns into healthy and positive actions that promote empathy and foster productive dialogue.

In her *Huffington Post* article on the subject, Nayomi Munaweera eloquently sums up the importance of teaching and learning about religious diversity: "Ultimately, whether Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity or any other -ism, the worldwide push toward fundamentalism is also heartbreaking in that it forces those of us sustained by some sort of faith to have to say what should be obvious: These acts of violence do not speak for us." ♦

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Fundamental Knowledge

There aren't any Muslim students in Whitney Foehl's eighth-grade U.S. history class, and only a few in the Washoe County School District in Northern Nevada where she works. But Foehl still thinks it's critical to discuss religious extremism—Islamic and otherwise—in her classes.

"To explain ISIS to an eighth-grader is not my objective," Foehl explains. "It's more about the theme. It's my philosophy that if you don't understand religious extremism, you can't understand the issues facing our nation or our world today."

For Foehl, understanding religious extremism means understanding negative stereotyping and scapegoating—topics that she introduces early in her scope and sequence. She teaches about how colonizers of the American West constructed an image of American Indians as subhuman savages to control popular opinion and further their expansion agenda. She also teaches about the Scopes trial of 1925 to introduce the concept of fundamentalism. And, because of where her school is situated, she uses another religion her students are familiar with, Mormonism, to help reinforce the concept of intra-religious diversity.

"[I'll say], 'Here's the mainstream religion, and then here is the extreme sect or faction of that mainstream religion.' And we talk about how Mormons, for example, ... everyone thinks that they have multiple wives, but no, that's the fundamentalists. So then you're stereotyping the entire religion on [one] sect."

Foehl also uses an activity during which she shows caricatures of various racial, ethnic and religious groups to help students see the folly of essentialism.

"I start with a German who's drinking a beer. I have an American, I have an Italian, I have a French person, and then I go to actual real clips of Muslims that I got from the news, of Muslims being violent," Foehl explains. She then passes out a worksheet that lists stereotype "sentence starters" and asks students to fill in the blanks based on each picture. "We start, 'All Germans are ...' and then you look at the picture. 'All Americans are ...,' 'All Muslims are ...'" She notes that she often has the opportunity to bring this activity back up later if her students refer to stereotypes in class. "I'll use that statement like, 'Oh, are you stereotyping right now? Are you saying all people who believe in Islam are terrorists?' So they've had a lot of training with that, which is so, so important. I don't think you can talk about religious extremism without backing it up with multiple lessons of negative stereotyping."

— ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK

