THE BACKLASH AGAINST TEACHING ABOUT ISLAM
Tanenbaum Guest Article in Education Week

It’s been a rough year for some social studies teachers who teach lessons about Islam—and the administrators who support them.

In September, a parent in Walton County, Georgia became alarmed when his daughter brought home a quiz that included the question: “Allah is the _______ worshiped by Jews and Christians.” The ninth grader had filled in the blank with “same God.” Within days, parents had formed a Facebook page called “Georgia’s Islamic Curriculum,” and by the end of the month, the page had over 2,000 members.

In December in Augusta County, Virginia, a high school geography teacher's lesson on “the artistic complexity of calligraphy” asked students to copy the Shahada, the Islamic statement of faith, written in Arabic. Students were never asked to translate or recite the statement, which means, “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” Nevertheless, the school district was deluged with e-mails and phone calls accusing the teacher of indoctrinating students, demanding her dismissal and even calling for her head to be put on a stake. In the face of threatened protests at school buildings and a “risk of harm to school officials,” the Augusta County superintendent canceled all classes the day before the scheduled winter break. Acknowledging that the assignment may have been poorly considered, school officials announced that, in the future, students would practice calligraphy using a non-religious sample.

Similar controversies have erupted in counties throughout Tennessee. Here, opposition to teaching about Islam has become a full-fledged movement, with parents and activists packing school board meetings and charging that social studies courses are indoctrinating students in Islam, devoting a disproportionate amount of time to Islam, relying on pro-Islamic textbooks, and presenting a “whitewashed” version of Islamic religion, history, and culture. These complaints have been accompanied by claims that the courses ignore Christianity and denigrate Judeo-Christian values. The criticism has been aimed primarily at the state's sixth and seventh grade world history curriculum, which covers other major religions as well as Islam and Christianity. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Tennessee school officials have defended their curriculum as neutral and balanced. While conceding that some individual assignments may be misguided, they deny that teachers are trying to proselytize for Islam or any religion.

The uproar in Tennessee has gotten the attention of policymakers and politicians. The state Department of Education has commenced its regularly scheduled review of social studies learning standards two years earlier than planned, and the Tennessee General Assembly is considering a proposal to delay learning about world religions to grades 10 and above.
Those who take exception to the treatment of Islam in schools have garnered support from advocacy groups like ACT! For America and the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLU). The ACLU has posted a petition to Stop Islamic Indoctrination in Schools and claims that their campaign of demand letters and open records requests was responsible for the Tennessee decision to move up its review of social studies learning standards.

**Why Islam? Why now?**

These scenes are not new to American education. They call to mind a long history of opposition to teaching about controversial subjects, including evolution, human sexuality, radical social movements, critical perspectives on American history, and more recently, climate change. Like the debate over prayer in schools, these issues have long generated intense backlash because many people perceive the way schools approach them as a threat to their beliefs, values, or way of life. These are issues that touch on people’s deepest anxieties about social change.

How did teaching about the world’s second largest religion get added to this list? After all, teachers have been teaching lessons about world religions, including Islam, for years. When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned school-sponsored prayer and Bible readings in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), Justice Thomas C. Clark affirmed the value in teaching about different religions, writing: "It might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization."

Over the past couple of decades, schools have increasingly heeded these words, adding comparative religion units to their curricula and world religions courses to their elective offerings. As the American Academy of Religion notes, the secular study of religion is now "embedded in curriculum standards across disciplines, and it is especially prominent in social studies and English at the state and national association levels." With the increasing diversity of schools and workplaces, many educators have come to view religious literacy as an important global competency for the 21st century.

On the other hand, perhaps the backlash against teaching about Islam is not so surprising. Since 9/11, surveys by the Pew Research Center, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and others have found that most Americans hold negative views about Islam and know very little about the religion beyond the sensationalistic portrayals they see in the news and entertainment media. Many believe that most terrorists are Muslim, despite data showing that right wing terrorists have claimed more American lives since 2001 than Muslim terrorists. The recent attacks in Paris, Beirut, and San Bernardino have made matters worse, spawning increased fears of terrorism by Muslims and a surge in anti-Muslim sentiment.

It’s understandable that heinous acts of terrorism inspire fear and predictable that some will respond with scapegoating and hate. Clearly, the backlash against teaching about Islam is fueled in part by these forces. *The Atlantic* provides a particularly stark example: In White County, Tennessee, a group called Citizens against Islamic Indoctrination put an advertisement in a local paper inviting parents to a town hall meeting. The ad featured a photograph of children of Middle Eastern appearance holding machine guns, with the words, "While your children are learning to tolerate these children, these children are training to kill your children."

It’s not clear, however, that rising antagonism toward Muslims, fueled by the conflation of Islam and terrorism, provides a full explanation for the backlash against teaching students about Islam. Much of the opposition focuses on concerns that teachers are indoctrinating students in Islam—a remarkable claim since presumably most American teachers are Christian (given that 70.6% of Americans are Christian) and would have no discernible reason to want to convert students to Islam. It’s worth considering, then, whether this concern expresses a deeper fear that learning about other faiths poses a threat to children’s commitment to their own faith.
Can Learning about Other Faiths Undermine One's Own?
Can introducing students to other religions weaken their commitment to their own? The short answer is no. There is no evidence to support that concern, and there may be reason to believe the opposite: Learning about other faiths may actually strengthen one's own beliefs.

There has been little research on this question, but one major study offers relevant insights. In 2000, the Modesto, California school district became the only school district in the nation to require all students to take a course in world religions. Researchers Emile Lester and Patrick Roberts conducted a large empirical study of the course, surveying and interviewing students to examine its impact on their knowledge and attitudes. Overall, they found that the course increased students' knowledge of world religions, their support for religious rights and other civil liberties, their willingness to defend others from religious insults, and their appreciation of the shared moral foundations of the major world religions.

In their analysis, Lester and Roberts gave particular attention to whether learning about other religions encouraged students to change their own religious beliefs. They found that students were no less likely to believe in the truth of their religion after taking the course than before. Rather, they noted that students were able to differentiate between respecting others’ religious beliefs and endorsing those beliefs. Their increased appreciation for the moral similarities of different religions did not translate into increased relativism about religion.

Finally, and most intriguingly, some students reported that learning about other faiths had strengthened their own beliefs. Lester and Roberts describe a Christian student who was motivated to learn more about her faith and went to her parents with questions, and a Hindu student who felt more connected to her religion as she learned more about it. It seems that exposure to other faiths inspired at least some students to seek a deeper understanding of their own.

The Value of Teaching about Islam and Other Religions
The Modesto study provides reassurance for those who are concerned about the teaching of Islam in public schools. Learning about different religions expands students' knowledge, opens their minds, and heightens their respect for differences. But it does not weaken their faith.

The Modesto example also highlights the importance of teacher training. In her book, Faith Ed: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance, Linda K. Wertheimer describes the integral role teacher training has played in Modesto’s success. Teachers received instruction in different beliefs and practices from religious scholars and in constitutional guidelines from First Amendment scholars. While not all of these teachers became experts in world religions, they did learn to teach about religion with neutrality, civility, and sensitivity. Although Modesto is a conservative community in the heart of California's Bible Belt, its world religions program has been in place for 16 years with very little controversy.

The backlash against teaching about Islam is troubling for those who believe that teaching about religion in public schools is critical to preparing students for global citizenship. As a former Modesto student recently wrote in Religion Dispatches, “If Modesto’s Public Schools Can Teach World Religions, It Can Happen Anywhere.” Let’s hope that educational leaders answer that challenge and that the nation's schools don’t fail our children by succumbing to fear and stereotypes.

To explore best practices for teaching about Islam and other world religions:
- The American Academy of Religion’s “Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States” provides teachers with methodological approaches to addressing religion.
• **Islam, Public Schools and the Challenge of Teaching about Religions**, by Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center, comments on recent controversies and offers guidance for avoiding charges of indoctrination.

• **Supporting Your Diverse Classroom and Resources for Teaching about Islam** is a free webinar hosted by Islamic Networks Group in which panelists from a wide range of organizations provide tips and resources for teachers.

• **Religious Diversity in the Classroom** is a free, five-part webinar series created by Tanenbaum and Teaching Tolerance to help teachers create inclusive classrooms and promote religious literacy.


• Asia Society's *Islam in Southeast Asia* website contains curriculum ideas.

*This article was originally written by Tanenbaum for Education Weekly’s Global Learning Blog.*