

Islam and the Textbooks: A Reply to the Critics

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The American Textbook Council review, “Islam and the Textbooks,” was published in February 2003 (<http://www.historytextbooks.org/islamreport.pdf>). It drew abundant praise and also criticism that included vicious ad hominem attacks. Since some critics misunderstood the report's conclusions, let me try to clarify the findings and why they matter for civic education.

Misrepresentation of Islam is a major problem in today's world history textbooks. Much of it is deliberate, I believe. Sound scholarship is being ignored, and open review — the only way to reverse this process — meets adamant resistance. This situation is the consequence of the interplay of determined Islamic political activists, textbook editors, and multiculturally minded social studies curriculum planners. Organized Islamists have gained control of the curriculum by gaining control of textbook content. This long-standing process of co-operation and accommodation needs to be corrected, but how to do so remains a puzzle, since educational publishers and educational organizations have bought into claims propounded by Islamists -- and have themselves become agents of misinformation.

“Islam and the Textbooks” surveyed seven widely adopted world history textbooks used in grades seven through twelve. In particular it reviewed textbook

coverage of jihad, sharia, slavery, and the status of women in Islamic countries, comparing textbook content to what has been written by leading historians and Middle East scholars. To restate what was said and what was not said in the review:

The review faulted world history textbooks on what it called one of the most complicated and important subjects that teachers face in social studies classrooms today. “What may seem on the surface to be a minor curriculum controversy has far-reaching implications for civic education and the promotion of American constitutional values,” it asserted. “Islam and the Textbooks” concluded that (1) world history textbooks hold Islam and other non-Western civilizations to different standards than those that apply to the West, (2) domestic educational activists, Muslim and non-Muslim, insist at once on harsh perspectives for the West while gilding the record of non-Western civilizations, (3) Islamic pressure groups and their allies seek to suppress the critical analysis of Islam inside and outside classrooms, and distorted textbook content is one symptom of this phenomenon, and (4) publishers respond to pressure groups on account of political expediency and sales. As a result, they are giving American children and their teachers a misshapen view of the past and a false view of the future.

“Islam and the Textbooks” found repeated discrepancies between world history textbooks and exacting scholarship in the field. It explained how pressure groups, both Muslims and allied multiculturalists, manipulate nervous publishers who obey educational fashion and rely more heavily on diversity experts than on trustworthy scholarship. These are points that have been made many times before and have been reiterated since the publication of “Islam and the Textbooks” in Diane Ravitch’s *The Language Police*.

Textbook editors seem not to recognize that a school-related Islamic agenda in the U.S. uses multiculturalism as a device to guarantee a purely favorable and uncritical view of all things Muslim. At extremes, the report suggested, multiculturalism contributes to a form of peaceable cultural jihad meant to discredit or "problematize" European civilization in favor of non-Western cultures.

Older history textbooks did not so much misrepresent, caricature or disparage Islam and Islamic history as neglect and ignore it; this obviously needed to be corrected. No doubt stereotypes from Delacroix to Lawrence of Arabia did exist, including tales of fierce warriors and brave steeds, the 1001 nights, sheiks, and exotic harems. But these were probably more the rule in literature and art and cinema than in history courses. During the last two decades, world history textbooks and the editors who oversee their development have moved from the neglect of Islamic history to self-censorship.

To be sure, much textbook coverage of Islam is unobjectionable and sometimes elegant, notably on the achievements of Islamic civilization, for example, in medieval Andalusia. Unlike some other textbooks, the 2003 edition of Houghton Mifflin's *Patterns of Interaction* recently adopted by Texas successfully included September 11 and terrorism in its conclusion. But in considering Islam's past and present, its geopolitics, and its structural challenges to the West, the report did not discount the writings of Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, James Kurth, Daniel Pipes, and Roger Scruton, each of whom has raised troubling questions about the ability of current Islamic regimes to co-exist with other religions and to progress into a system of belief compatible with the modern world.

English political philosopher Roger Scruton, for example, wonders whether Muslims are willing to surrender to Western political loyalties rooted in “common territory and a secular rule of law.” A witness to defiant anti-Western antagonism on the European continent, he concludes: “Public anxiety concerning the ability of Muslims to assimilate is therefore not entirely ill founded.” Swarthmore historian James Kurth raises the possibility of structural incompatibility between Islam and the American polity, observing resistance to assimilation and patriotism among American Muslims on account of the demands of religious faith. These scholars should at least obtain a fair hearing. They do not. When historians or Middle East experts express concerns about militant Islam’s geopolitical aims, they incur wrath. Vituperation, character assassination, and insults are all standard practice among domestic Islamists and their allies, just as “Islam and the Textbooks” pointed out. Their vitriol and extreme language aim to silence criticism.

The Shame of Houghton Mifflin

When “Islam and the Textbooks” was published, California-based Council on Islamic Education director Shabbir Mansuri dismissed the American Textbook Council, first as “conservative,” then as “extremist,” telephoning the president of *Education Week* to complain that “Islam and the Textbooks” was even reported. *Education Week* then made the decision to review not the content of “Islam and the Textbooks” but the “furor” surrounding its publication. A strange, some would say crackpot, 5,000-word diatribe denouncing “Islam and the Textbooks” appeared on the Council on Islamic Education website. (I urge educators, parents and voters one and all to take a look at this document,

located at www.cie.org, and ask themselves whether they really want such zealots as gatekeepers of their children's textbook content.)

Among those who support Mansuri and his Council on Islamic Education is Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center. A long-standing patron of this organization and himself a Houghton Mifflin consultant, Haynes promotes the multiculturalist premise of "multiple perspectives" in the history of religion through his Freedom Forum. As a trustee of the National Council for History Education, the belligerent multiculturalist and a longtime Houghton Mifflin textbook writer-consultant, UCLA historian Gary B. Nash, made efforts to exact a formal denunciation and response.

All of the most vehement critics, Shabbir Mansuri, Charles Haynes, and Gary B. Nash -- as well as Houghton Mifflin's chief publicist Collin Earnst of course -- are or have been on the Houghton Mifflin payroll. Earnst stated in a letter to the *Washington Times* that "Islam and the Textbooks" "suggest[ed] that students should be taught that jihad represents murder and war," "lead us to believe that all Muslim culture is inherently misogynistic," and "portray Islam as a murderous culture." Such "bias has misled the public into believing that Islam is a barbaric and murderous religion," Earnst concluded.

These remarks were simply dishonest. Earnst knew that "Islam and the Textbooks" drew no such conclusions. The publisher made these cynical claims to deflect attention from the source of the problem: the textbooks themselves. Earnst refused to give the review's complaints anything close to a fair reading, nor did his bosses and editors, although he and his colleagues owe it to millions of American teachers and students to do so.

The world history textbooks speak for themselves. Here is one passage from Houghton Mifflin's *Patterns of Interaction* that was *not* included in the original report:

In Islam, following the law is a religious obligation. Muslims do not separate their personal life from their religious life, and Islamic law regulates almost all areas of human life. Because of this, Islamic law helped to bring order to Muslim states. It provided the state with a set of values that shaped a common identity. In addition to unifying individual states, law helped to unify the Muslim world. Even though various Muslim states might have ethnic or cultural differences, they lived under a common law.

This text is at once florid, repetitious and abstract. It conveys nothing concrete about any particular Muslim society or legal system. Its most glaring weakness is the failure to explain the implications of the theocracy being described. It never explains what is meant by the words "order" and "common identity." At this level of abstraction, students and teachers will fail to comprehend the transnationalism and theocratic impulse that "unify the Muslim world."

American students never read or learn that sharia bears no resemblance to U.S. law, which grew out of the British constitution and evolved into a regime intended to secure individual rights and liberties. Islamic law is not a variant of jurisprudence as it is known in the U.S. and Western democracies. What is America's relationship with the many Islamic countries where separation of church and state does not exist and where religion largely defines the culture and state?

U.S. students should have the opportunity to learn of the many Islamic countries where limited government does not exist and religion largely determines the culture. What students fail to learn is that under Islamic law, civil society, limited government, an independent judiciary, and the underlying notions of tolerance, personal liberty and freedom, notably freedom of religion, are alien concepts. They should be aware of what militant Islamic ambitions really mean for the international community and the outlook for world peace.

An Honest Critic

The University of Chicago's Fred M. Donner was a more honest critic of "Islam and the Textbooks" than Houghton Mifflin. Donner is a scholar whose writing on Islamic history overall has balance and merit, and whose models on Islam the review quoted at length. Donner said in a private letter that he wanted to disassociate himself from a report that he called a "smear" of the entire religion. Donner condemned the review's "preconceived notion of Islam as 'religion of violence.'" He added: "The report is posited on the assumption that 'Islam is the problem.' Your report represents nothing less than yet another polemic in Christianity's long onslaught against what it has chosen to see as its enemy."

These are dramatic charges, but they are overstated. The report barely considers the relationship between violence and Islam except to clarify the meaning of jihad. Repeatedly, it quotes scholars and literati who deplore Islam's capture and corruption by militant true believers. The review never equates terror and Islam, nor does it even come close, even though the critics keep saying it does. Donner speculates without foundation

that the Christian Right or perhaps Zionists fund the American Textbook Council. By this outlook, a covert religious agenda presumably lurks behind any objection to Islamist apologetics and lyricism.

Donner asserts that the report misappropriated his language. This was not the intention, nor was it the effect. At least Donner takes the trouble to clarify his views in some detail. But when he writes, “I have no desire to ‘apologize’ for ‘Islam’ or for the excesses of Muslims. Bad Muslims, intolerant Muslims, hostile Muslims, yes, these exist in some numbers, *and they are a big problem for everyone* [my italics],” isn’t he conceding one of the report’s major points? Donner acknowledges that aspects of Islam present “a big problem” for the West. He does not seem to know (or care) that textbooks turn a blind eye to the historical and theological sources of these problems.

The report's question, "*Why do Muslims so often have difficulty living with their neighbors?*" especially triggered Donner’s criticism. This question and concept came directly from the writing of Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington (“along the perimeter of Islam, Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbors”). Looking at Algeria, Nigeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, for example, where religious wars are being conducted today against infidels, this proposition is more than plausible.

Donner’s response strongly suggests that “Islam and the Textbooks” should have made it far clearer than it did that Muslims do not have a monopoly on the neighbor problem. As several critics have pointed out, correctly, the same can be said for Israelis, North Koreans, and Americans. Islamic Iraq could not co-exist peacefully with its Arab

neighbors, Iran or Kuwait, internecine conflicts that go beyond that of rival sects. Donner declares:

That you can cite favorably the work of someone like Daniel Pipes, who is widely known as an extremist bent on defaming Islam and Muslims, suggests either that you are in his camp, or that you are so out of touch with the realities of this issue that you are unaware of his standing as a leading polemicist in the debate. Of course Daniel Pipes endorses your report; it is doing his work of defaming “Islam” for him. . . . It does not help us solve the problem to smear the whole religious tradition, which is mind-boggling in its diversity.

In numerous well-documented essays Middle East Forum director Daniel Pipes has made trenchant propositions about domestic Islamic pressure groups. Pipes is lucid and unequivocal in explicating Islam’s totalitarian streak and its use of domestic multiculturalism to undermine resistance to its agenda. In February 2002, he reviewed a seventh-grade Houghton Mifflin world history textbook used in California called *Across the Centuries*. He concluded that the text’s lessons on Islam are full of “apologetics” and “distortion.” They add up to “the privileging of Islam in the United States,” he warned, and “the stakes go well beyond seventh-grade textbooks.” The Council’s subsequent review confirmed Pipes’ assertions, not just in this one world history textbook but throughout the field.

Pipes is an outspoken and opinionated scholar who is committed to Israel and its preservation. He knows Middle Eastern and Islamic history as do few academics in this country or elsewhere. What he has said about domestic Muslims and their allies who deliberately obscure the meaning of jihad in speech and writing directed at students deserves careful study -- and a reasonable and convincing rebuttal. The report merely cited Pipes in a footnote alongside a dozen or more other specialists and scholars in the

field. It devoted pages to Donner's thoughts and curriculum paradigms. Still, Donner concludes that I am "in [Pipes'] camp" or "out of touch with the realities of this issue." Islamic regimes that are capable of tolerance? Perhaps. Quite the opposite is the historical rule in modern times, and American children by the time they reach the age of twelve or fifteen deserve to learn why this is so.

To call "Islam and the Textbooks" "an anti-Islamic polemic" is to do it an injustice. The worst one could say is that some lines in "Islam and the Textbooks" are intemperate. The targets are the censors, whitewashers, and most of all, their willing accomplices, educational publishers who refuse to open to teachers or students a full range of scholarship and views on the subject.

Implications

It is dismaying to watch educational publishers and their paid consultants embrace Islamist activists, accepting as authoritative their biased educational materials. What is even more distressing, these educational publishers bear a public trust as government suppliers and profit from tax-generated revenues. These publishers have ignored some of the report's most troubling questions: Where is the Council on Islamic Education's money and funding coming from? Who are its benefactors and why do they fail to operate under 501(c)(3) status? What indeed is the Council's legal status? Where can anyone obtain public reporting and a clear picture of the Council's past, present and future? (I have requested this information repeatedly for four years, without any success.) Publishers fail to explain why they ignore fundamental questions of motives, funding, legal status and strong-arm tactics in the Islamic organizations that they listen to, appease, and defend.

If our nation's cultural underpinnings are in conflict with religious dogma and values that are intent on replacing or even eradicating them, should not children and their teachers be made aware? Just as pro-Soviet enthusiasms, Mao worship, and Cold War revisionism seem naive today, currently prescribed views of Islam may also some day seem like dangerous nonsense. And what key points might replace the obvious flaws in the current generation of textbooks? That militant Islam is a real force in the world today, an insurgency that is a real threat to the nation's democratic way of life and freedoms that its citizens often take for granted.

“We live in a time when great efforts are being made to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda; when governments, religious movements, political parties, and sectional groups of every kind are busy rewriting history as they would wish it to have been,” observed the historian Bernard Lewis a dozen years ago. Since he wrote this, Islamists have succeeded in doing the very thing. Publishers -- not only Houghton Mifflin -- have some explaining and work to do.

Textbooks that are used in U.S. classrooms should explain the historically potent strain of Islam that promotes separatism and theocracy. Instead, they are trying to trim history to please Islamic pressure groups and allied ideologues. The implications for U.S. civic education are immense, especially if students are unaware of or even accept the idea that for politically esthetic reasons they are being lied to or emotionally manipulated. To become discerning and self-preserving citizens, U.S. students must learn how consensual government, individual freedom and rights, and religious toleration based on separation of church and state are their unusual birthrights. But history textbook publishers adhere to

a “multiple perspectives” ideology and bow to Muslim pressure. There is no easy or quick solution to the problem since the imperatives of selling history textbooks put educational publishers in a commercial dilemma.