Teaching High School Students About Islam in a National Context of Islamophobia

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This qualitative case study examined the instructional practice of one secondary social studies teacher to explore the following questions: What strategies and approaches does one world history teacher employ to teach about Islam and Muslims? To what extent might these strategies and approaches counter misconceptions and promote accurate and nuanced understandings of Islam and Muslims? The focus of this study is a Pakistani-Indian American Muslim who was chosen to participate because of his commitment to, interest in, and extensive experience with teaching about world religions, particularly Islam. Data for this study were collected through seventeen hours of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of instructional artifacts. A conceptualization of Islamophobia, provided by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (2010), guided the data analysis. The participant used four key strategies for teaching about Islam and Muslims: addressing misconceptions, humanizing Islam, exploring diversity within Islam, and highlighting similarities. Each of these approaches has potential for combatting misunderstandings and promoting more accurate knowledge and understanding. A key finding that complicates the claims of prior research (e.g. Merchant, 2015) is that comparisons can be made between Islam and other religions that promote understanding rather than ethnocentrism and Islamophobia.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Muslims, religion, world history, high school, social studies

In 2017, U.S. adults with varying religious affiliations reported feeling more negatively toward Muslims than any of the seven other major religious groups they were asked about (Pew Research Center). About half (49%) of over 2000 U.S. adults surveyed in 2016 indicated that they think at least "some" American Muslims are anti-American (Pew Research Center). Such suspicion, fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims—commonly referred to as Islamophobia—has led to a significant increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in recent years. According to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2017), the number of anti-Muslim hate groups nearly tripled from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016. FBI Hate Crime Statistics documented 307 incidents of anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2016, approximately double the incident documented in 2014.

Where do adults in the U.S. acquire the ideas and perceptions they hold of Islam and Muslims? Given that only 45% of the U.S. adults surveyed know a Muslim personally

(Pew, 2017), U.S. news outlets play a major role in informing the public about the Muslim community. Unfortunately, news coverage of Muslims and Islam is largely negative in tone. From April 2015 through March 2017 there was not a single month in which *CBS Evening News*, Fox's *Special Report*, and *NBC Nightly News* aired more positive than negative TV news stories about Muslims in a protagonist role. Negative stories outnumbered positive stories by four-to-one or more in 40% of those months. War and terrorism accounted for 75% of this coverage of Muslims and Islam, and Muslims spoke for themselves in these segments only 3% of the time (Stone, 2017). An analysis of *New York Times* headlines from 1990-2014 revealed the terms most frequently associated with Islam and Muslims include "Rebels" and "Militant"; none of the 25 most frequently associated terms were positive (Arshad, Setlur & Siddiqui, 2015). *The Seattle Times* used the imprecise term "Islamist" 388 times in 2012 alone, and frequently connected the term directly to violence (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2012). Through language, images and symbols, media sources shape public perception of Muslims and draw attention to some aspects of the Muslim experience over others, in particular deemphasizing positive developments (McQueeney, 2014). Media representations are particularly impactful on viewers' perceptions of Islam and Muslims when the subject matter is outside of media consumers' direct experience (Stone, 2017).

An increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States since the 9/11 terrorist attacks is part of what has motivated a call for more attention to teaching about world religions in social studies curriculum (James, 2015; Kunzman, 2011, 2012; Lester & Roberts, 2011; Moore, 2006, 2012; National Council for the Social Studies, 2014; Passe & Willox, 2009). Unfortunately, textbook analyses (Douglass & Dunn, 2003; Eraqi, 2015; Saleem & Thomas, 2011) and investigation of the curricular experiences of Muslim students (Merchant, 2016) suggest that both instructional resources and enacted curriculum about Islam often promote misconceptions and overgeneralizations. Scholars have offered recommendations for strengthening teaching about Islam within social studies curriculum (Elbih, 2015; Hossain, 2013; Moore, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015; Phelps, 2010; Ramarajan & Runell, 2007; Yoder, Johnson, & Karam, 2016), but little empirical research has examined how practitioners actually address the topic of Islam in their classrooms. Few studies have explored the affordances and constraints of teachers' efforts to advance religious literacy and counter stereotypes and inaccuracies. To address this gap in the literature, the present study focused on the following research questions:

(1) What strategies and approaches does one world history teacher employ to teach about Islam and Muslims?
(2) To what extent might these strategies and approaches counter misconceptions and promote accurate and nuanced understandings of Islam and Muslims?

By focusing on a social studies teacher who is committed to combating misunderstandings and fear related to Islam, this piece provides a much-needed window into what is possible in a high school classroom at this particular moment of prevailing Islamophobia. This study parses apart different pedagogical approaches to teaching about Islam in order to examine critically how each holds potential to combat misunderstanding or further a misconception. The resulting empirical data invites a reconsideration of the recommendations offered by prior scholarship on teaching about Islam. In particular, this inquiry sheds light on the possibilities and perils inherent in focusing on the similarities between Islam and other religions, an approach that some have argued can encourage ethnocentrism and Islamophobia (Merchant, 2015).

Teaching About Islam in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms

In 2014, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published a position statement affirming study about religion as an essential part of social studies curriculum. Religious literacy, the statement asserted, "dispels stereotypes, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and encourages respect for the rights of others to religious liberty" (p. 202). In further support of attention to religion in social studies, NCSS (2017) published the *Religious Studies Companion Document for the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*. This document includes guidelines and recommendations for religious study that empowers students to "recognize and evaluate assumptions without undermining personal religious identity, to navigate diverse and shifting cultural values, to engage respectfully with diverse neighbors, and to resist common misunderstandings that have negative real-world consequences" (p. 93). Several scholars have suggested that much of the teaching about religion that occurs in classrooms does little to promote goals such as those articulated by NCSS (Barton, 2015; Prothero, 2011). According to Prothero (2011), it has been fashionable for decades to emphasize similarities among world religions. He argued that such as approach can ultimately limit understanding of different religions by failing to attend to the unique ways in which each religion frames problems and provides solutions. Identifying another concern, Barton (2015) asserted that school curriculum often fails to consider diversity within religions, religious diversity within ethnic and political boundaries, and changes within religions over time. Anderson, Cook and Mathys (2013) found that pre-service social studies teachers evidence Christian-bias in their approach to teaching about world religions (e.g. equating Nirvana to heaven and assuming all students can "relate" heaven).

Curricular attention to Islam in U.S. public schools is a relatively new phenomenon stemming back only several decades (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). A focus on Islam is most likely to occur in the context of world history or world cultures / geography survey courses. In their review of 11 world history textbooks, Douglass and Dunn asserted "that Islam is generally not interpreted as its adherents understand it but as the editors believe will be acceptable to textbook adoption committees" (p. 59). This included deemphasizing continuity among the three Abrahamic religions in favor of a compartmentalization of the monotheistic faiths. Also, in more contemporary history, textbooks often portrayed Islam "as a traditional holdover, as anti-western, and often as merely militant and extremist" (p. 70). In a content analysis of five secondary U.S. History textbooks published after 2007, Eraqi (2015) determined that Muslims, Islam, and Muslim-Americans were absent from the historical narratives presented for approximately 500 to 800 years. For example, after briefly mentioning Muslims in a chapter on pre-exploration of the New World, one U.S. History textbook did not refer to them again until a section on the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims in 1995. None of the texts analyzed made any mention of African-Muslim slaves brought to the United States, later Arab immigration patterns, struggles to assimilate, or contributions to America. In post WWII history, the texts included Arabs and /or Muslims—typically during times of tension, violence and conflict. Arabs and /or Muslims were commonly portrayed as reacting "to situations in rage and anger with little to no justification" (p. 72).

Merchant (2016) examined the experiences of Muslim girls from "minority communities of interpretation" as they made sense of and responded to curriculum on Islam. The students repeatedly found their own experiences of being Muslim or practicing Islam minimized and essentialized in the classroom context. They encountered

Muslim stereotypes as well as misperceptions regarding who constituted a Muslim and who didn't. Saleem and Thomas (2011) explored the reactions of Sunni Muslim students to American textbook accounts of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The textbooks included terms such as "Muslim terrorist," "Muslim extremists," or "Islamic extremist groups," which seemed oxymoronic and insulting to some of the young Muslim readers. Such language equated Islam with violence against Americans, leading the Muslim students to feel distanced from their American identity.

In an effort to strengthen the quality of teaching about Islam in the social studies classroom, scholars have presented numerous recommendations. Moore (2006) advised that curriculum on Islam should include the religion's "core beliefs and contributions to human civilization, as well as the Islamic world's relationship with other civilizations and countries" (p.142). He added that a study of Islam should combat "information from the popular media, which often misrepresents Islamic beliefs and practices, and perpetuates myths, distortions, and misconceptions" (p. 143). Similarly, Elbih (2015) argued "teachers must help their students unlearn what the media teaches about Islam and Muslims and replace such misconceptions with a more complex and informed understanding" (p.112). She further claimed that teaching about Islam should directly address the rise of intolerance and discrimination toward Muslims and Islam.

Some authors have paired recommended goals for curriculum on Islam with suggested instructional strategies and resources. Moore (2009) advised teachers to use primary sources that allow "Muslims to articulate the essentials of their religion" and avoid presenting only interpretations of the religion offered by non-Muslims (p. 142). Elbih (2015) encouraged teachers to invite Muslim students, teachers, parents, leaders, or community members to speak to their classes, arguing that such presentations can humanize Muslims for students. Phelps (2010) provided a list of nonfiction books authored by Muslims since 9/11 that might promote critical appreciation for the cultural and ideological diversity within both the worldwide and the Muslim American communities" (p.190). He argued that any of these books might be utilized to promote critical literacy, which requires students to consider which perspectives are included and excluded and which interests are served as a result. The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding has designed a high school curriculum based on a case study of two Nigerian religious leaders—a Muslim and a Christian—who were once at war with each other and then came to use their respective religions as resources for conflict resolution. This curriculum focuses on developing students' skills for resolving conflicts related to misunderstandings about diverse beliefs and cultural assumptions (Ramarajan & Runell, 2007).

Despite the abundance of recommendations regarding how Islam should be taught in middle and high school classrooms, few studies have examined teachers' related pedagogical reasoning and practice. Klepper (2014) reported on his own efforts to engage high school students in examining multiple perspectives on two issues: the Islamic view and treatment of women and the place of extremism in Islam. Through student survey responses and work samples, he demonstrated that his instructional efforts had moderate success in fostering more nuanced views about the place of women in Islamic societies and extremism within Islam. Klepper's study, however, offers only minimal critique of the instructional methods employed. One example of a more critical study is Merchant's (2015) examination of the reported curricular experiences of eight high school social studies educators who taught about Islam. She found that most of her participants were committed to combatting Islamophobia, but

their varied curricular approaches often served to reify one of the basic tenants of Islamophobia—namely treating Islam as a monolith. Merchant's important work relies on self-reported data about teachers' curricular experiences; therefore, additional work is needed to examine critically how teachers enact their curricular goals for teaching about Islam. The study reported on here aims to fill this void in the literature by providing a rich description of one teacher's efforts to teach about Muslims and Islam and to consider the potential of these efforts for developing misperceptions or more accurate and nuanced understandings.

Islamophobia

The term Islamophobia has been in circulation for 25 years (Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project, n.d.) and is defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary (2010) as "a hatred or fear of Islam or Muslims, esp. when feared as a political force." A 2010 report published jointly by the University of California, Berkley Center for Race and Gender and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) identified several beliefs that are central to Islamophobia. One is the view that Islam is "monolithic, static, and authoritarian" (p.12). This assumption stands in contrast to the reality that Muslims are diverse and dynamic and even disagree substantially among themselves about the manner in which Islam should be lived out. It fails to recognize that religions generally are "animated through individuals who practice the religion" (Merchant, 2016, p. 99).

Another tenet of Islamophobia is that Islam is totally "other," separate from the so-called West. This impression does not acknowledge that Muslims share with the followers of other religious traditions, ethical principles, a human experience and a common space. Islamophobia also incorporates the belief that Islam is inferior, backward and primitive, remaining static over time. This view fails to recognize that Islam presents ideas and practices which are different from, but potentially as relevant and valuable as, those offered by other traditions. Lastly, Islamophobia is bolstered by the view that Islam is an aggressive enemy to be feared, opposed and defeated. This assumption sees violence as somehow inherent in Islam. Such a notion does not concede that Muslims interpret and enact Islamic principles either for peace or for violence, just as the followers of any religion do and have done.

The CAIR report distinguished between Islamophobia and the critical study of Islam or Muslims. This document asserted that it is by no means "Islamophobic to denounce crimes committed by individual Muslims or those claiming Islam as a motivation for their actions" (2010, p.11). Yet such criticism should not rest on the misconceptions about Muslims and Islam identified above. The present study utilized CAIR's conceptualization of Islamophobia as an analytic lens to evaluate the instructional strategies and approaches employed by one world history teacher in examining Islam and Muslims. This conceptualization served to clarify the prevailing misconceptions and stereotypes that might either be advanced or countered by the instructional practices explored in this study.

It should be noted that the teacher on whom this study focused, Mr. Vaziri, (pseudonym) spoke frequently of fear and hatred toward Muslims but did not specifically use the term Islamophobia. For example, he bemoaned,

> Anti-Muslim ideas are continually in the news. . . Just yesterday at a political rally someone said, "We have a problem in the United States and that problem is Muslims." Right there shows that there is a huge disconnect and a problem here. Further on the same person said, "Obama is a Muslim. He is not an American."

> When did Muslim become a scarlet letter? When did we get to that point? I mean I know why – 9/11 and other stuff. But it's just scary to me that all the people in that crowd perceived Muslim to be so negative. I know that exists, but it is in our political system now. The political candidate speaking at that rally did not disagree or stop him… It's frightening how deeper it keeps getting. We fear this religion that we don't know much about. (personal communication, 9/18/15)

Mr. Vaziri did not underestimate the severity and potential danger of prevailing anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. as he mentioned several times the possibility of such attitudes leading to the internment of Muslims.

> I think that the news media is creating groups. That to me is scary. That is why I think about internment happening again. If another attack was to happen, what is possible? I don't even like to think about it, but I really don't know what is possible. (personal communication, 2/24/15)

In addition to acknowledging fear and hatred toward Muslims in the news media and national politics, Mr. Vaziri indicated that some of his own students evidenced suspicion toward Muslims. He explained, "I've had students come with pamphlets from churches that like to teach about other religions, and they are so wrong it is ridiculous. A student will say, this is what my pastor says." He acknowledged that his students often possess isolated, decontextualized knowledge of Islam that leads them to hold "stereotypes. . . . Most of them are just mistruths. Stuff that they heard somebody say or do. So, Muslims are allowed to have five wives?" Such statements by Mr. Vaziri demonstrate that without using the term, he is conscious of Islamophobia and its existence nationally and in his local context.

Research Design

To investigate the manner in which a high school social studies teacher guided his students through the study of Islam, I employed a qualitative, case study methodology (Yin, 2008). I purposefully selected Mr. Vaziri to participate in this study because of his commitment to, interest in, and extensive experience with teaching world religions in general and Islam in particular. I first met Mr. Vaziri when I served as the university supervisor for a student teacher he was hosting in his classroom. As I spent time in Mr. Vaziri's classroom, I grew increasingly interested in the unique opportunities and distinct challenges he faced as a Muslim teaching about Islam in a school district where Christianity is the dominant religion (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2010).

Participant and Research Context

Mr. Vaziri is a Pakistani-Indian American Muslim male. His parents immigrated to the United States as refugees from Uganda in the 1970s, and he was born several years later. He grew up just a few miles from the school in which he taught at the time of this study. Along with his four older siblings, he attended the local mosque that his father helped begin. His mother played the most significant role in his religious education, requiring that he and his siblings work on chapter books from the Quran right after school each day before any other activities. As a junior in public high school, he was asked by his world history teacher to do a presentation on Islam. He links his eventual interest in teaching to this event remembering, "Just to see how well my fellow students were able to respond, ask questions, to see how much they were interested, it sparked an interest for me in teaching" (personal communication, 2/24/15). After high school, he attended the local state university to earn his social studies education certification. It was during an early field experience as a teacher candidate in a

Catholic school that he was again asked to teach about Islam, this time to third and fifth graders.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred early on in his student teaching experience. Given his prior coursework on international terrorism, his cooperating teacher asked him to teach a lesson on terrorism only days after the attack. Mr. Vaziri recalls, "I remember the kids' faces when I put it out there that I was a Muslim. I mean three thousand people just died. It was tough. I remember seeing their faces from the beginning to the end. I was like, 'Ok, they are getting it. They understand what the context is.'" The assistant superintendent of the school district at the time observed this lesson, and Mr. Vaziri believes it may be part of what helped him secure a job at the school upon his graduation. At the time of this study, Mr. Vaziri had spent his entire teaching career at the school where he student taught; he was 35 years of age with 13 years of teaching experience. For these 13 years, he was the only teacher in his social studies department who identified as a Muslim. He worked under two different social studies curriculum coordinators both of whom, he believes, "appreciated" his approach to teaching about Islam. Several of Mr. Vaziri's fellow world history teachers reference his Muslim identity to their students. In some cases, they even recommend that students speak with Mr. Vaziri if they have questions they would like to pose directly to a Muslim.

The school at which this study took place is the single high school in a suburban/rural school district in a large, mid-Atlantic state. The high school included 2200 students, who were required to take a world history course at one of three levels: foundations, college preparation, and honors. The county in which this district is situated has a religiously active population. The most recent data show that 49% of the population regularly attend religious services. 98% of those individuals attend Christian churches (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2010).

Data Collection and Analysis

The design of this study involved the triangulation of data sources to reduce the biases or limitations of any specific source (Maxwell, 2012). Over the course of the spring 2015 semester, I observed Mr. Vaziri teach 13 lessons—approximately 17 hours total—in his honors level world history course. In addition to lessons devoted solely to Islam, I observed lessons on Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism to learn what, if any, connections and comparisons were made between these religions and Islam. During observations, I took detailed, electronic field notes and obtained copies of all instructional materials distributed. Additionally, I conducted three one-hour-long "semi-structured" interviews with Mr. Vaziri (Seidman, 2013). The initial interview focused on his educational, personal, and professional background; beliefs about the purpose of teaching about religions; and factors that had influenced his approach to teaching about religions. Subsequent interviews centered on his objectives and decision making related to the classroom instruction I observed. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

To analyze the resultant data, I isolated all data directly related to teaching about Islam or Muslims. I engaged in open coding to identify various strategies and approaches utilized or discussed by the participating teacher (e.g. "accessing students' prior knowledge," "identifying similarities between religions," "sharing personal perspective"). Next, I created *a priori* codes based on the components of Islamophobia—identified by CAIR (2010)—and ideas that stand in opposition to these components (e.g. Islam as static, "Islam as monolithic," "Muslims as diverse," "Islam as evolving"). These codes allowed me to analyze the role that particular curricular strategies and approaches might have in

promoting either misperceptions or accurate and nuanced understandings of Muslims and Islam.

Findings

To engage his students in a study of Islam, Mr. Vaziri facilitated a range of instructional exercises including direct instruction with ample question and answer interchanges, viewing and discussing news reports and documentary films, reading and discussing articles, student-led discussions about current events and issues, and independent internet-based research. He explained that addressing misconceptions about Islam and Muslims was a key goal of his instruction.

> I think that in light of current issues, students need to be global citizens in the global community. You see the different rhetoric in the news from different political organizations and media organizations. I would not be surprised if tragic historic events happened again. As a Muslim, I think about internment. I have kids. It's scary as a parent to think about what it might be like twenty years from now. . . . I feel like I have some platform to say it's not all bad. There is some good that is happening. I think to accentuate those components is a civic duty I have as a teacher—to try to get kids to see the other side. Without that, all you hear is one side. You are never going to see the flipside. (personal communication, 2/24/15)

This statement suggests that Mr. Vaziri has both personal and civic motivations for helping his students build more nuanced understandings of Islam and Muslims. He views this task as less of a choice and more of a responsibility. Analysis of his related instruction revealed four prominent approaches, which warrant examination for their potential to combat misunderstandings and promote more accurate knowledge and understanding. He often used these strategies in concert, but they are each explored separately in the sections that follow.

Addressing Misconceptions

Mr. Vaziri began his unit on Islam with a word association activity. He asked students to jot down words and phrases that come to mind when they hear the terms "Muslim" and "Islam." As students began to contribute their ideas, he reassured them that they should feel comfortable stating whatever honestly came to mind, claiming "Anything is safe" (observation, 3/31/15). One female student shared, "I just said 'confusing' because I feel like there are just a lot of conflicting things that you hear. The news presented all Arabs and Muslims as alike, but I have also heard that that is not true." When another student admitted she thought of the word "terrorists," Mr. Vaziri responded, "Ok that's the word I was looking for. . .. It's kind of like that elephant in the room." He went on to say,

> The fact that a few of you mentioned terrorism, you shouldn't feel bad about that. It is an issue that is going to come up. My focus is going to be on how the perception of Muslims is that they are extremist, fundamentalist. There are issues that exist there, but there is a lot of good there. That is what we want to accentuate.

Here he signaled to students that discussing misconceptions was going to be a goal in their study of Islam. He indicated that students need not avoid identifying misconceptions out of fear of appearing to hold them; rather they should raise these ideas in order to explore them.

In the same lesson, Mr. Vaziri asked his students to read an article entitled "What are some typical misperceptions and stereotypes Westerners hold about Islam and the Middle East, and vice versa?" The article presents several misconceptions that many

Westerners hold about Islam (e.g. "Arab" and "Muslim" refer to the same people. Islam is violent.) and misinformed notions that some outside of the U.S. have of Americans (e.g. All Americans are rich. Americans have no family values.). After reading, his students discussed the article at length, sometimes admitting to holding one of the inaccurate understandings about Muslims or Islam. Mr. Vaziri invited students to consider where misconceptions come from. He asked, "How do you think they [people outside of the U.S.] get their ideas about how we live?" One student suggested, "Hollywood." Mr. Vaziri responded,

> Yeah. And movies provide an element of life in the Unites States, but the way that Hollywood portrays life in America is not exactly accurate or fully representative of the U.S. The key point here is, just as they do that to us, we do the same thing to them. There are extremist elements in the Middle East with fundamentalist components, but we just assume this is true of everyone over there.

He then asked, "Why do misperceptions become our reality? Even when we have facts to suggest that a perception is not true, why do we hold onto it?" One student responded,

> The media holds a lot of sway over the common person. Rather than to just look up the facts, it's easier to just believe what you see on the news. If you believe something for a certain amount of time, even when you get accurate facts, it is a lot harder to change your mind.

Mr. Vaziri presented two media portrayals of Muslims for students to consider—one of a group of Muslim Palestinians celebrating the 9/11 terrorist attacks and another of a peaceful gathering of Muslims in Bangladesh to show solidarity with Americans following 9/11. He asked students to guess which one was repeatedly shown on American news sources in the days following the terrorist attacks and to consider why.

Through this discussion Mr. Vaziri worked to create a safe environment for students to identify and discuss misconceptions and stereotypes. Most of the misinformed notions addressed in the article he provided for students are ideas central to Islamophobia (e.g. "Perception: Muslims live in medieval times, unable to adapt to the current world."). Addressing these misconceptions directly can help make space for more complex and nuanced understandings of Muslims and Islam. Mr. Vaziri wisely went a step further by challenging students to consider the sources of their misconceptions and what it would take to combat these inaccurate perceptions. His students responded with ideas regarding better teaching about Islam and the Middle East in schools, media with less political bias, and media that avoids presenting just the extremes and "what sells." One aspect of this conversation that perhaps deserved further development is consideration of the motivations for presenting inaccurate or misleading portrayals of Muslims. Mr. Vaziri and his students discussed how the media might find it profitable to promote fear, but there was no additional opportunity to consider what other factors might lead to the predominance of negative representations of Muslims and Islam in American culture or politics.

Later in the course, negative portrayals of Muslims surfaced from time to time when current events and issues were addressed. Almost every class period in Mr. Vaziri's world history course began with one or two student-led current event presentations. When it was their turn, students would show the class a brief news report video of their choosing, summarize or provide further information about the event or issue, and then pose questions and moderate a class discussion. While Mr. Vaziri regularly offered commentary on these stories, and sometimes even his own perspective as a Muslim, he

did not typically challenge students to consider how the images and ideas presented to them by a news source might perpetuate misconceptions or misrepresentations of Muslims. This ultimately was a missed opportunity to strengthen students' ability to be critical consumers of media representations of Muslims and Islam.

Humanizing Islam

Early on in his unit on Islam, Mr. Vaziri offered the following invitation to his students:

> As you all know by this point, I am a Muslim, so ask me questions. If something doesn't make sense, if you want to compare it to something, if you see a connection and you think something sounds like something else, ask. I encourage you to ask questions because I am one of the few Muslims you might come in contact with. I hope that's not true, but if it is, this is your chance to ask me questions that you have always wondered about. Nothing is really too crazy to ask. We are going to go through a lot of principles. You might want to know why people do it. I'll try to answer that for you and try to explain the process behind it. (observation, 4/2/15)

This statement illustrates that an important aspect of teaching and learning about Islam in Mr. Vaziri's classroom is the opportunity for students to ask a Muslim directly about his beliefs and practices. He warned students that he is "no poster boy for Islam," and even identified required religious rituals that he does not consistently practice (e.g. prayer five times a day). Still he encouraged students to expand their understanding of Islam by accessing the perspective of an insider. By emphasizing that all types of questions were welcome, he sought to create a safe space for students to inquire about what, in some spaces, can be contentious subject matter.

Students responded by taking Mr. Vaziri up on his invitation; his unit on Islam was punctuated by a host of their questions. Many of these questions were about his personal experiences being raised as a Muslim, practicing Islam as an adult in American society, and raising his children as Muslims. Often, after he explained an Islamic belief or practice, students asked him if he or one of his family members actually hold this belief or observe this practice. For instance, students asked, "Do you pray five times a day?" "Do your kids know Arabic?" "Do you believe that your good and bad adds up?" "Can you still cook for your kids when Ramadan is going on?" "Are you planning on going there [Mecca] soon?" (observation, 4/2, 4/6, 4/7/15). Mr. Vaziri consistently made space in his lessons to answer these personal questions, signaling to students that he welcomed their curiosity.

Even in the absence of such questions, Mr. Vaziri taught about some aspects of Islam from a personal perspective. For example, when teaching about Muslim prayer practices, he displayed several religious objects from his home (e.g. his wife's prayer rug, a copy of the Quran, prayer beads). As he showed his copy of the Quran to students he explained,

> In order for me to bring this thing in today, I had to cleanse myself. I cannot pass it around. I'm not allowed to. This one is significant, but is not as fully revered as a Quran which is fully in Arabic. . .If I dropped this, I would have to kiss it and say a small prayer, because it is considered disrespectful. I would never put this in a place where my feet would be pointing toward it, because that would be considered unclean and dirty. (observation 4/6/15).

Rather than referring to how Muslims generally act toward the Quran, he explained these beliefs and practices in terms of his own actions. In other words, part of his

teaching on Islam is simply allowing students to get to know the individual, lived experiences of an actual Muslim.

Mr. Vaziri believes that this personal approach is particularly beneficial for those students who view the unknown as a threat, and he claimed that he has seen the positive impact of this strategy.

> I can tell this in some cases just by the way that they [students] interact with me. They are cold in the beginning, but they ease into it. They start to see maybe there is a human side to this, especially with me since I am a Muslim. (personal communication, 9/18/15)

Teaching about Islam from individual experience certainly holds the potential to break down the view of Muslims as completely other or as something to be feared. It offers students a chance to learn about Islam as practiced by a respected member of their own school community. At the same time, the teacher-student power dynamic might diminish students' willingness to pose genuine or challenging questions to their teacher. For example, in the following account of an interaction between Mr. Vaziri and a student, it is difficult to determine what motivated the student's statements:

> Right now I have an extremely conservative Christian student in class. I don't know how much I am going to get through to him. At one point the kid was telling me about Islam. I was like, "I should probably put this out there. I am a Muslim." His face was just blank. I explained some stuff. A couple days later he said to me, "I don't want you to think that I am questioning you. I really appreciate this class. I am really learning a lot." (personal communication, 2/24/15)

Mr. Vaziri himself acknowledged that it is hard to know what this student was thinking. It could be that conversation with a Muslim influenced this student's related ideas and understandings. It is also possible that the student simply did not want to appear disrespectful to a teacher, so he was no longer willing to make some of the claims he had previously felt free to make.

Presenting Islam through a personal perspective also brings with it some risk that students might mistakenly take a single individual's beliefs and actions as representative of Islam more broadly. To the extent that this might occur, it could promote a misunderstanding of Islam as monolithic. It might also deemphasize that Islam is always enacted in a cultural context and thereby leave students ill equipped to make sense of the ways in which Islam is lived out in diverse ways in other contexts. As mentioned above, Mr. Vaziri indicated to his students that he was no "poster boy" for Islam. This comment could signal to students that Muslims enact their religion in a range of ways, but it might also send the message that there is one right or best or truest way to live out Islam, which misrepresents the religion as static and outside of its followers. The next section explores how Mr. Vaziri avoids depicting Islam as fixed or monolithic, in part, by juxtaposing his own perspectives or actions with that of other Muslims.

Exploring Diversity Within Islam

Once when asked what Muslims believe will be the fate of the followers of other religions, Mr. Vaziri responded, "You could ask ten different Muslims and get ten different answers" (observation, 4/6/15). In this way he emphasized to students the diversity of perspectives, beliefs and practices among Muslims. He asked, "Does every single Muslim follow all of the rules the same way? No, for right or wrong" (observation, 4/2/15). One way in which he made this point was by revealing the various ways

that different members of his own extended family practice their religion as Muslims. He told students that when he drives his mother places, she will ask that he pull over and stop the car at a certain time so that she can pray. He, on the other hand, does not pray five times a day even as he does observe other religious practices (e.g. *sawm* during Ramadan, abstaining from alcohol).

Mr. Vaziri recounted a conversation with a student, in which he sought to emphasize the diversity within Islam and religion more broadly.

> I had a student bring the Quran to me to say, "Look what this says."...I think this student was raising the issue of women's rights in Islam. The perception is that the hijab is a demeaning and controlling thing. My response is, I grew up in a Muslim family. Zero of my relatives wear it. No one I know wears it. It's a choice. That was my point. Her point was that it is not a choice because it says that women have to do it. It actually doesn't say that in the Quran. It is a cultural custom that has been created, the covering of one's hair. What it says is to show modesty. So if you cover your hair, maybe that shows modesty. I don't know. So we Googled what the Old Testament says about women's rights. I said, "Let's think about why nuns cover their hair? Why do Amish women do it? When you see Orthodox Jewish women's hair, that's not their real hair. That's a wig, because their real hair is only for their husbands." (personal communication, 2/24/15)

This account suggests that Mr. Vaziri wants his students to recognize that Islam is not monolithic. Rather, Muslims—like Jews and Christians and followers of other religions—make different decisions about how to live in response to scripture. He made this argument by drawing parallels to a religion more familiar to this student.

When teaching about the five pillars of Islam, Mr. Vaziri showed his students a segment produced by NBC about Husain and Hamza Abdullah, two brothers who left the NFL in 2012 at the height of their careers to go on the hajj. He explained that he chose this video, in part, because it "humanizes the concept of the hajj" and connects "the religious concepts to something they [students] understand and usually adore—athletes and football." But he added,

> There is a part in the clip where one of the brothers makes an excellent point about going to a mosque and women and men being separated and men eating first and the women having nothing left to eat. It makes an excellent point towards the perspective of the need for change/reform and it shows not every Muslim just abides by the male dominated view of life. (personal communication, 6/27/16)

One of his expressed reasons for showing this film was to introduce students to a Muslim perspective on a religious practice that stands in contrast to a traditional view. This excerpt was yet another way that he emphasized diversity within Islam as it is enacted by its followers.

In some cases, Mr. Vaziri explored the role that particular contexts played in contributing to certain views or practices. When discussing the murder of an Afghan woman accused of burning a copy of the Quran, he explained how—in this particular context—the norms of a patriarchal society with minimal educational opportunities helped create a situation for such an action to be taken in the name of Islam. He then offered his own Muslim perspective on Quran burning. He shared that, while it was clearly an offensive act, he personally did not care when in 2010 he learned that a Florida pastor was planning to burn copies of the Quran. He felt it had no implications for his own faith. This sharing exposed his students to contrasting perspectives within Islam and helped them see the influence of contextual factors.

Highlighting Similarities

A consistent feature of Mr. Vaziri's teaching about Islam was his emphasis on the similarities between Islam and other religions, particularly other monotheistic religions. All of his lessons on Islam included multiple comparative statements. He claimed, "My overarching objective is to point to the similarities. The differences are easy. Since the vast majority of my students are Christian, I want them to see, 'Ok here is how I am similar to a Jewish person. Here is how I am similar to a Muslim'" (personal communication, 2/24/15). In keeping with this objective, he began his Islam unit by informing students that their summative assessment would require them to identify and explain at least ten similarities between Islam and either Christianity or Judaism.

Some of these comparisons between Islam and other religions focused on key beliefs. For example, Mr. Vaziri taught that Judaism, Christianity and Islam each emphasize the existence of one all-powerful God. He stressed to his students that the followers of these religions worship the same god, claiming, "People argue that Muslims worship another god. That is simply not true. *Allah* just means god. It means *dios* in Spanish. It means *gott* in German, *theos* in Greek. It just means god" (observation, 4/1/15). But, his students did not always understand or accept this claim.

> One of my students, who is pretty devout in her belief, keeps referring to Allah as "their god" in her comments and writing. I have to keep interjecting, "Allah just means god." The concept of god in Christianity is complicated, just as it is in Islam. We all kind of view him in our own particular, personal way. That's when I mention, if you go into an African American church, Jesus isn't white. He is black. Go to a white, Christian church in the Midwest and Jesus will have blond hair and blue eyes. In reality, Jesus looked more like me. Technically, she can believe that her god is different, but I can't afford to let her convince everyone else that the Christian god is a different god from Allah. I've asked Arab students from Egypt, who are Coptic Christians, what word they use for god. Allah. So it's not Islam's god. (personal communication, 9/18/15)

Mr. Vaziri appears to stress the point that Jews, Christians, and Muslims acknowledge the same god because of his belief that it will help his mostly Christian student population be better able to understand Islam. He posited, "If you can conceptualize an aspect of a religion in a way that they can connect with, then it becomes easier. Now should you only teach similarities? No. But they help with acceptance" (personal communication, 9/18/15). With similar comparisons he explained how concepts like "rebirth," the dualistic nature of good and evil, and punishment and reward are shared by multiple religions, including Islam.

Throughout his explanations of Islamic practices, Mr. Vaziri continually drew parallels to other religions. He compared Ramadan to Lent, *adhan* to church bells or the blowing of a shofar, the *Kaaba* to the Western Wall, Muslim prayer beads to a Catholic rosary, an *imam* to a pastor or *rabbi*, Muslim reverence for the Quran to Jewish affection for the Torah, mosques to churches and synagogues, among other comparisons. In a lesson that occurred right after Easter, Mr. Vaziri asked his students to read an article from the *New Yorker*, entitled, "How Muslims View Easter" (Rollo, 2012). This piece identified numerous characters (e.g. Adam, Noah, Moses, David, Solomon, Lot, Job) and stories that are important to both Islam and Christianity. In the discussion that ensued, students expressed surprise at how much overlap existed between the two religious traditions, as well as curiosity about the different roles figures played in the religions. All of this attention to shared or similar beliefs, stories, figures, and practices seemed aimed at decreasing the otherness of Muslims. Yet, the potential shortcoming

of these comparisons is an oversimplification of Islam. Islam may be represented as monolithic, when comparative claims suggest that all Muslims engage in a certain practice, hold a particular belief or give an object or story the same meaning and significance. Additionally, some of these comparisons might ultimately reduce students' understanding of Islam, if they learn to view elements of Islam as equivalent to related aspects of other religions.

Some of the comparisons made by Mr. Vaziri were less simplistic or straightforward than those cited above and focused on more complex aspects of religion. These comparisons tended to portray Muslim beliefs as diverse and evolving. For instance, on multiple occasions he discussed with students that the Torah, Bible, and Quran all have passages (e.g. regarding the treatment of women) that are difficult to interpret and apply in the present. He told students, "The role and treatment of women in all of these books would probably surprise you. But it is in there. It kind of makes you think about the context in which it was written and why it was written and how it is supposed to be applied" (observation, 3/25/15). In one lengthy discussion of a CNN report about an Afghan woman who was forced to marry a man who raped her, a student expressed dismay that any religion or society would ever demand such an unfair consequence for the woman. In his response Mr. Vaziri pointed out that the Torah, Bible, and Quran all include passages about the treatment of women, which religious adherents make meaning of in different ways. He claimed,

> Look up what the Old Testament says about adultery. It says both the woman and the man should both be put to death. It even goes so far as to say that if two men are fighting and a woman mistakenly touches him inappropriately, her arm is supposed to be cut off. It's pretty harsh. But remember that you have to go back to perspective. What meaning can you find from that? What is the importance of that? There is some pretty harsh stuff in every book you look at that people aren't 1) very aware of and 2) very proud of. (observation, 4/8/15)

It would seem important to Mr. Vaziri that students understand the Quran is just one among many religious texts that include passages which are condemnable by some modern standards. He reminded students that these texts are written in a time where social norms differed dramatically from those in some present-day societies. Some religious adherents might take the passages as literal prescriptions, while others will take different meaning from them.

The larger comparison that Mr. Vaziri made between Islam and other religions is that the adherents of all of these religions must decide how they will interpret religious texts. He explained to one student, who identified as Christian,

> The way you read a sentence of the Bible and what you take the meaning to be is not the same as somebody else. Interpretation comes in. So when you say, "This is what the Bible says," it is what the Bible says to you. It's what you believe the interpretation should be of that specific thing. . . .You find your own meaning. The same is true in Islam. (observation, 4/1/15)

This comment emphasized that Muslims, like the followers of other religions, decide how to live in response to their religious text. Therefore, there is diversity in belief and action among Muslims in the present and over time.

Another similarity between Islam and other religions, which Mr. Vaziri repeatedly worked to highlight, is their relationship to extremism. As has already been mentioned, at times students brought news reports of terrorism or violence associated with

Islam to the class for discussion. When addressing religious extremism, Mr. Vaziri wanted his students understand that "It's not just Islam as much as people just think it is Islam because it is in the news. There are a lot of groups that suffer through similar issues" (observation 3/25/15). He argued that many religions have inspired and continue to deal with extremist elements.

> Extremist elements exist in every society. There is even extremist Buddhism. There is an element in Tibetan Buddhism that wants to break off and become independent from China. They have actually resorted to violent methods. If you look at the fundamental philosophy of Buddhism, violence makes zero sense. But none-the-less, mankind has corrupted certain elements of the philosophy to make it suit their political or social needs. That is something that can be seen in many groups. Westboro Baptist Church. Do they represent all Christians? Of course not. The KKK. Does that represent every Christian right wing movement? Of course not. But we so easily believe that ISIS does represent most Muslims. Why is that? That is the question. (observation, 3/31/15).

Here Mr. Vaziri pushed back on the notion that Islam is more likely to inspire extremism than other religions. He also combated the sentiment that extremists within Islam should be considered representative of all Muslims; he did so through comparisons to other religions. After reading an article that made some similar parallels, one student responded, "Speaking of the terrorist part, I thought it was interesting that the article brought up that just because one Christian guy blew up the federal building, you shouldn't consider all Christians capable of that. I thought that was a very valid point" (observation, 3/31/15). This comment suggests that attention to the similar struggles that all religions have with minority extremist elements can counter the misperception that Islam has any unique claim on this problem.

Discussion

A national context of persistent and growing Islamophobia has created a critical need for social studies instruction that promotes accurate and nuanced understandings of Muslims and Islam, yet so little is known about what this teaching and learning might look like. The case study provided here represents a valuable contribution to a small collection of related work, which to this point has primarily relied on action research or teacher interview data. Perhaps the most central finding to result from examining Mr. Vaziri's instruction is that even a pedagogical approach that holds significant promise for combatting misunderstanding about Islam might also further a stereotype or misconception. While this initially seems like a discouraging finding, it speaks to the difficulty of teaching about a topic such as Islam in a prevailing culture of misunderstanding and fear. The results of this study suggest the value that CAIR's (2010) conceptualization of Islamophobia might have for educators who seek to actively teach against fear and misunderstanding about Islam. By clearly identifying the misperceptions and stereotypes that currently dominate our public discourse about Muslims and Islam, the Islamophobia framework can assist teachers in evaluating the potential impact of their related instructional efforts.

Some of the more specific findings that result from this study complement the claims of other scholars. For instance, Mr. Vaziri's deliberate attention to widespread misperceptions about Muslims and Islam is a strategy that others have previously advocated for (Elbih, 2015; Klepper, 2014; McQueeney, 2014). He demonstrated how a space might be made for high school students to identify misperceptions about Muslims and to consider the sources of these ideas. The findings of this study suggest that teachers should both thoughtfully structure exercises for this purpose but also be

responsive to related opportunities that present themselves unexpectedly. Media portrayals of Muslims presented in current events discussions or textbook representations of Islam provide opportunities to identify misrepresentations and critical absences and to consider the motives for these. Teachers must be willing and able to give consistent attention to these portrayals throughout their courses, not just when Islam is the focus of the curriculum.

The efforts to humanize Muslims, which Mr. Vaziri demonstrated in this study, were also in keeping with recommendations made by scholars (Elbih, 2015; Phelps 2010). While the majority of American social studies teachers cannot teach about Islam from a personal perspective, they can certainly expose their students to Muslim voices and perspectives through guest speakers, videos, literature, art, etc. This is particularly important given how poorly represented Muslim perspectives are in U.S. news media (Stone, 2017). The teacher in this study specifically focused on presenting perspectives that would challenge the dominant image of Muslims presented by popular media. He used his own moderate Muslim perspective and the perspectives of Husain and Hamza Abdullah for this purpose.

Arguably, Mr. Vaziri would have done well to bring even more Muslim perspectives and voices into his classroom to ward against allowing any one Muslim or single perspective to become representative of a diverse group of religious adherents. Barton (2015) encouraged social studies teachers to "focus not only on what members of each religion share with other followers—a short list—but more importantly on what differences characterize that religion" (p. 67). Providing Muslim voices and perspectives from a range of contexts would illustrate the role that place and historical time play in influencing how Muslims enact their religion in different ways.

Where the findings of this study complicate previous research concerns a curricular emphasis on comparing Islam to other religions. Religious studies and social studies scholars alike have warned of the dangers inherent in highlighting similarities among religions (Barton, 2015; Merchant, 2015; Prothero, 2011. Prothero (2011) asserted that an emphasis on similarities among religions makes "the world more dangerous by blinding us to the clashes of religions that threaten us worldwide" (p. 30). In other words, obscuring the differences among religions inhibits our ability to make sense of conflicts between religious adherents. Barton (2015) warned that many of the comparisons that are made among religions represent ethnocentric views of other religions. Merchant (2015) found that when social studies teachers drew parallels between aspects of Islam and other religions they typically compared "beliefs and practices, which were not historically contextualized and were presented as universal and definitive" (p. 28). These comparisons then had the effect of presenting Islam as static and monolithic—a key tenet of Islamophobia.

Mr. Vaziri, however, displayed how one might make comparisons between Islam and another religion that could promote key understandings about Islam and religion more broadly. For instance, by making comparisons between extremism in Christianity and Islam, he was able to illustrate to students how all religions can be used to justify violence as well as peace. By pointing to the similarities in the ways in which women are regarded in the Torah, Bible, and Quran, he demonstrated that Islam is not alone in dealing with difficult scripture that will inevitably be interpreted in different ways in the modern era. These comparisons by no means presented Islam as monolithic. They also did not limit students' ability to make sense of why some Muslims might come into conflict with the adherents of other religions. These findings suggest that

comparing Islam to other religions can be done in a way that promotes understanding rather than ethnocentrism and Islamophobia.

Study Limitations and Further Research

While this study helps to address a gap in the research on instructional efforts to teach about Islam and Muslims, the project has some limitations. The teacher on whom this analysis focused has a unique identity, not commonly shared by the majority of social studies teachers in the United States. Therefore, some of his approaches to teaching about Islam—most notably his autobiographical style—cannot be directly mirrored by other educators. Additionally, this study provides an analysis of instruction and a teacher's related reasoning; it does not provide significant data about the manner in which students experienced this instruction. As such, this inquiry raises questions about the impact that various approaches to teaching about Islam have on students' learning. It should also be considered that Mr. Vaziri's instructional decisions and actions were made in response to a particular group of students—in this case those taking honors world history. How might his instruction have differed had he been working with a different student population?

Further research is needed to investigate the impact of approaches for teaching about Islam that have been advocated for by scholars. How do teachers with varying identities (e.g. novice teachers, non-religious teachers, teachers from dominant religious traditions) or in different contexts (e.g. teaching religiously diverse student populations, teaching a comparative religion elective course) approach teaching about Islam? Even more critically, we need to better understand the impact that this instruction has on students. How do students in different settings and with diverse religious identities respond to the teaching about Islam they experience? Research that takes up these questions will provide essential guidance to social studies educators who seek to promote accurate and nuanced understandings of Muslims and Islam in a context of prevailing Islamophobia.

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