



A place for informal learning in teaching about religion: The story of an experienced non-Muslim teacher and her learning about Islam

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ABSTRACT

Teacher learning about religion has remained an under-researched topic in spite of the professional accountability placed on teachers to teach about religion in a constitutionally permissible and pedagogically sound way. Using data collected from interviews, the purpose of this study is to describe and examine how and what an experienced Non-Muslim teacher of the world's religions learned about Islam in today's climate of accountability and negative imagery of Islam. The findings of this study suggest that informal learning through independent reading and interaction with a local Muslim community can be a means to enculturate teachers of world religions into ways of learning about Islam.

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“Learning about the world's religions is important but difficult. Islam is very deep. It is so vast, and it has clamoring voices taking positions in it. And, there is so much to learn about it. I feel my knowledge is very small. I feel like I need to know more.”
(Mrs. Adams (pseudonym), a teacher of the world's religions)

1. Introduction

Many teachers like Mrs. Adams regard learning about the world's religions as necessary but challenging, and thus they are faced with a continuous need to expand their knowledge in order to teach the world's religions in a constitutionally permissible, pedagogically sound, and culturally appropriate way (Moore, 2006a,b). The need to learn about the world's religions is called upon in times when almost all countries across the globe have grown religiously diverse due to the rise in immigration. The growth of religious diversity in many countries impels interactions among people of different religious affiliations that in turn invigorate differences, conflict, and animosities, especially in educational settings (Driel, 2004).

Incidents of religious tension, discomfort, and intolerance are repeatedly reported in many European countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden, to name a few (Batelaan, 2004). For example, Richardson

(2004) narrated real stories about problems experienced at middle and secondary schools in the UK: stories of students engaging in verbal abuse, banter, and other hurtful actions toward British Muslim students. Similarly, Karakasoglu and Luchtenberg (2004) threw light on the psychological and emotional stresses that Muslim Turkish girls experienced in German schools where wearing headscarves and not participating in mixed physical education remain controversial issues. Likewise, in Italy, many foreign Muslim students face “a situation of double isolation: from their native country and from the society they live in due to incomplete integration” (Bertani, 2004, p.105). This feeling of isolation and alienation is also experienced by younger Muslims in almost every educational setting in the United States (Haque, 2004).

What exacerbates the complexities of these situations is the failure of school teachers to address religious differences in their classrooms due to their formal unpreparedness to talk about religious beliefs that are different from their own faiths (Batelaan, 2004). This can be explained by the absence of the topic of religion from multicultural education and teacher preparation in Europe and the United States (Driel, 2004). Paradoxically enough, some schools in Europe and the United States have included religion in their curriculum (Karakasoglu & Luchtenberg, 2004; Moore, 2007). In this general climate of religious illiteracy, a major question needs to be raised about how exemplary and experienced teachers who teach the world's religions in schools come to learn about religions and what they learn. More specifically, the purpose of this research study is to examine the learning about Islam of an

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exemplary and experienced non-Muslim teacher of a world's religions class in an American public school.

In the United States, teacher learning about religion has been a relatively under-researched topic in spite of the secured place that religion has on both educational and constitutional levels. The Establishment of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution¹ bans American public schools from inculcating or inhibiting a particular religion. However, the Supreme Court in the 1963 case of *Abington Township v. Schempp*² stated clearly that teaching about religion is necessary, legal, and sound for establishing a complete education. This set the ground for secular teaching about religion in lieu of a sectarian teaching of religion; the latter connotes a propensity for conversion, while the former leans toward education to promote respect, tolerance, and acceptance (Whittier, 1989).

In spite of the necessity of teaching about religion, many teachers consider teaching and learning about religion, in particular Islam, an area of great challenge (Moore, 2009; Nord, 1989). Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion founded in Arabia³ in the 7th century and is based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. Islam is predominant in northern Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, and Indonesia, and there are divisions among Muslims over theology, practices, and laws (Moore, 2009). The challenge of teaching and learning about Islam is exacerbated by a widespread disagreement among scholars over the nature and role of Islam in world history and the contemporary era (Samman, 2005). Additionally, in political and popular discourse in the United States, Islam is intrinsically linked with terrorism, violence, and extremism and is considered anti-modern and anti-Western (Moore, 2006a,b). The U.S. media also portrays Arab Muslims as "barbaric", "cruel", "bloodthirsty", "anti-Christian" and "anti-Semitic" (Majaj, 1999, p.321). The representation of Islam is further complicated in the context of the current discussion of "the war on terror" and the confrontational relationship between the West and the Islamic world in the aftermath of 9/11 (Murray, 2004). As a result, these stereotypes and distortions about Islam and Muslims exacerbate the difficulty of what to include in and exclude from the topic of Islam when it is taught in schools (Wuthnow, 2005).

Using data collected from interviews, the purpose of this paper is to examine the learning about Islam of an exemplary and experienced non-Muslim teacher of the world's religions in an American public high school. More specifically, the research questions were the following:

1. How did the experienced teacher come to her interest in the learning about religion?
2. What learning activities did the experienced teacher report to have engaged in during her learning about Islam?
3. What learning outcomes did the experienced teacher report to have resulted from her learning activities?

What follows is a brief review of the literature on teacher learning about religion and teaching about religion. I then lay out the findings of this study, which suggest that informal learning

through interaction with the local Muslim community can be a means to enculturate teachers of the world's religions into ways of learning and teaching about Islam.

2. Literature review

The review below points to teacher learning about religion that remains largely absent from teacher education programs in times when teaching about religion is increasingly infused in public school curricula in the United States.

2.1. Teaching about religion in American public schools

With the dawn of the 21st century, research on religion in public education has shifted from whether religion should be incorporated in public schooling to why it should be included and how it should be integrated (White, 2009). There is a growing body of literature that argues that knowledge of religion is important for establishing a complete education (Anderson, 2004); for engaging in political conversations (Prothero, 2007); for becoming responsible citizens (Nash, 2005); for living in a world of diversity (Head, 2005); for teaching tolerance (Wuthnow, 2005); and for developing an appreciation of differences (Blumhofer, 2002). To this end, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) published guidelines to help teachers distinguish between teaching of religion as promoting a particular religious view and teaching about religion as contributing to a secular, academic study of religion. The guidelines are as follows:

- The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does not promote or denigrate religion.
- The school informs students about various beliefs; it does not seek to conform students to any particular belief (NCSS, 1994, p. 21).

As these distinctions became widely known, teaching about religion has been implemented in most state standards and school curricula, such as social studies, history, and English, through the use of age-appropriate content, textbooks, classroom activities, and pedagogies (Douglass, 2002).

2.2. Teacher learning about religion

The examination of teacher learning about world's religions is surprisingly rare in spite of its relevance to the challenges of learning and teaching about religion. The silence about teacher learning and understanding of religion implies that educators are neutral agents and religiously literate (Douglass, 2002). However, several scholars argue that pre-service as well as in-service teachers are religiously illiterate. Subedi (2006), for example, found that pre-service white female teachers lacked knowledge of religions, were resistant to new knowledge, were unaware of religious forms of discrimination within school culture, and felt less qualified to teach about religion. In a similar context, Moore (2007) found that most of her student teachers at Harvard Divinity School had little to no previous exposure to other religions, and as a result harbored problematic generalizations about religions. This is, as Moore put it, a byproduct of "widespread religious illiteracy that goes beyond the particularities of studying a specific tradition"

¹ Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (First Amendment, United States Constitution).

² 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 (Supreme Court).

³ Arabia is a peninsula in Southwest Asia at the junction of Asia and Africa. The area is an important part of the Middle East.

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