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.

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
exemplary and experienced non-Muslim teacher of a world’s reli-
gions 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. Schempp2 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 partic-
ular 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 expe-
rienced 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 appreci-
ation 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 reli-
gious 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”
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