

Book Review: Muslims and Islam In U.S. Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism

Liz Jackson, L. (2014). *Muslims and Islam in U.S. education: Reconsidering multiculturalism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

A review by:

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The 21st century is in many ways defined by the multiple dynamics of globalization, bringing about contentious questions for citizens of the United States regarding their knowledge of and relationships with the members of this burgeoning global society. In particular, in a post-September 11th world, many Americans are grappling with their understanding of Islam and Muslims, a particularly salient matter considering U.S. interventions in predominantly Muslim countries and shifting national demographics. Many popular sources of information and entertainment that represent Muslims have historically been problematic as they are fraught with reductive depictions and mischaracterizations that play into a *Clash of Civilizations* thesis. This thesis posits that Western civilization is antithetical to that of Islamic civilization as they are each distinctive in their values, social structures and cultures. This thesis is replete with notions of cultural superiority on the part of those who consider themselves to be the bearers of a Western tradition. A Clash thesis also fails to recognize the interplay between religious, political and societal influences between peoples that allow for a diffusion of ideas and cultural productions. Instead of being innate, static and remote, cultures and civilizations are constructed, fluid and porous. The prevalence of a Clash thesis has engendered the propagation of stereotypes about Muslims as a people and Islam as a faith. In bifurcating global societies between Western and Islamic, pluralistic communities are categorized in a manner that renders them as monolithic and containing essential traits that remain unaffected by cultural exchange. It is this contemporary climate of global interconnectedness and the prevalent perception that Islam and Muslims are discrete from the West that underpins scholar Liz Jackson's work in *Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism*.

Jackson's study examines the question of how knowledge of Islam and Muslims is constructed in public school settings in the United States. Jackson explains, "Today, many educators may feel uncertain of what or how to teach in relation to Muslims and Islam" (p. 2). Recognizing that certain forms of knowledge are privileged while others are displaced, Jackson explores some of the various educational paradigms within the umbrella framework of multicultural education. In doing so, Jackson reveals there

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is no universal consensus regarding how Islam and Muslims are to be introduced to students, with proponents of certain currents of thought actively reinforcing a Clash thesis and others concertedly deconstructing and dismissing it outright. Moreover, Jackson does not only introduce the contested nature of studying Islam and Muslims, but also presents the opportunity to better appreciate the selectivity inherent in determining what knowledge is championed in schools and the ideological currents that imbue all the mainstream options espoused by educators of various backgrounds. Finally, Jackson concludes by introducing intercultural education as a viable alternative to a content-centric approach to multicultural education as it applies to the teaching of Islam and Muslims.

Before broaching her evaluation of the content of school knowledge, Jackson first establishes a foundation for the imperative to grapple with the manner in which Islam and Muslims are taught. This is accomplished by discussing the ubiquitous understanding of the mission of education in the United States. According to Jackson, schools serve as incubators in society that foster students' development of the skills, knowledge and dispositions required to actively participate in a thriving democratic society. Yet, Jackson is cognizant that the reality of life in the United States means that social problems and inequality continue to persist unabated alongside the problem of political polarization. These realities necessitate reflection on the role of schools in the process of promoting democracy under such ongoing circumstances that tend to adversely affect the most vulnerable segments of society. With regards to Muslims and Islam, Jackson contends that schools may not necessarily be satisfying their mission of equipping students with the tools to coexist with Muslim citizens or understand Muslim cultures and contemporary issues throughout the world. The shortcomings of schools, for Jackson, pertain to the paltry space allotted to the study of topics germane to familiarizing students with Muslims and Islam as well as the low quality of educational experiences when time is permitted for such content. Jackson underscores how this is counter to the mission to promote democracy in schools as students who complete their formal studies ignorant of Islam are susceptible to internalizing demonizing perspectives that intrinsically associate Muslims and Islam with terrorism, violence and anti-Americanism. Jackson explains, "Muslims and non-Muslims alike are unintentionally harmed by educational tendencies today that preclude students learning much useful information about this religion and community" (p. 3). Jackson goes on to explain that popular depictions often fail to convey to students that Muslims are not all Arab and that the largest population centers are outside the Middle East. After formulating this problem, Jackson segues into an explication of multicultural education and the inadequacy of certain permutations to redress the underwhelming schooling experience for students in need of more substantive deliberation on Muslims and Islam in order to thrive in a globally interconnected world predicated upon a democratic ethos.

Jackson reminds her readers that multicultural education is not necessarily unified but that multiple incarnations exist that differ in outlook and orientation. Therefore, no consensus exists regarding how schools should treat difference and diversity. Jackson elaborates, "How to understand and manage diversity and inequality in society has been and remains a hotly debated question, with different general solutions implying divergent paths forward in education" (p. 12). The discord between the three currents of thought Jackson identifies and introduces produce a tension in schools and society, regarding the preferred way to promote democracy. The complexity of these disagreements is compounded by the fact that schools are not only domains of knowledge production and dissemination but are also instruments of socialization. Jackson reminds, "A distinctive feature of U.S. public education

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historically has been its deliberate aim to integrate young members into society, to develop a kind of unity across lines of ethnicity, religion, language, and socioeconomic status” (p. 11). Such a mission means that the content of schooling is not objective. Instead, it is selected and framed to promote induction of youth into society. As U.S. society is diverse and replete with various social and political interests, some of which do not compatibly align, this rather straightforward mission becomes terrain ripe for controversy and debate. The advent of *assimilationism*, *pluralism*, and *critical multiculturalism* as three variations of multicultural education speak to the absence of any universal understanding of society and the role of schools in satisfying an induction process.

In presenting each of the three branches of multicultural education in question, Jackson provides a historical overview of their development and the fissures that exist within each. As much of her critique of how Americans understand Islam and Muslims speaks to the tendency of neglect diversity, Jackson herself succeeds in avoiding this fault when articulating the various shapes multiculturalism has taken. According to Jackson, assimilationism is a response to the disconnect between a normative American society and the diverse demographics of the citizenry. Proponents of assimilation seek to equip communities whose cultures, norms, and values differ from mainstream American society with all that is required to migrate from the periphery to the center of society. Jackson explains that this outlook defines difference as deficient and that by accepting hegemonic American values minority communities can find success. As such, “Education should therefore initiate those disadvantaged by their background to embrace majority cultural values and practices” (p. 120). Jackson considers this to do a disservice to students as it is predicated upon an a priori conclusion that American society is just and devoid of major problems. Jackson also identifies assimilationism as most likely to embrace the Clash thesis, “concluding that Muslims are too different and threatening to U.S. society to be positively recognized in schools” (p. 26-27). What this means is that in a post-9/11 America, educators that subscribe to assimilationism tend to overemphasize difference and to cast the particularities of Muslims and Islam as incompatible and insurmountable. For Muslim students, this means that schools may not be places where the value of their identities and heritages are affirmed and for non-Muslims this means that schools echo media depictions that illuminate conflict, terrorism, and fundamentalism at the expense of other Muslim experiences that are detached from such accounts. While Jackson issues criticisms of all mainstream versions of multicultural education, she is particularly critical of assimilationism as one that promotes schooling wherein students are only provided with cursory studies of Muslims and Islam that these serve to crystalize negative associations.

Jackson next addresses pluralism and similarly considers it to be an unsound alternative to assimilationism as it is epistemologically grounded in the same reductive and apologetic representational form. Whereas assimilationism sanitizes U.S. history and society of social problems and is unabashedly scathing in its understanding of Muslims and Islam, pluralism is reductive in its own right. Jackson explains that pluralism represents a vacillation from one absolutist understanding to another albeit one that favorable champions diversity and encourages students to see Muslims and Islam in the most flattering terms only. Jackson defines it as “a perspective that emphasizes that difference in society is good and that cultures, views, or practices that diverge from mainstream norms are generally worthy of equal toleration and/or positive recognition in the public sphere society” (p. 13). While this serves to humanize and affirm the value of marginalized and dehumanized communities and their traditions, particularly Muslims and Islam, Jackson also takes issue on the grounds that such an

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overcorrection from assimilationism arrests students' and teachers' abilities to be critical in a manner that is not based on cultural chauvinism. Critical thought is curtailed, according to Jackson, when the attempt to humanize Muslims and validate Islam is accomplished by removing the option to scrutinize without being disrespectful. Additionally, pluralism speaks of Muslim society as monolithic and Islam as though there is a universally understood notion of the faith. Even while concerned with dispelling stereotypes, pluralism as a model for teaching about Islam and Muslims may resort to broad conceptualizations that presume identity to be innate and fixed and for religion to be easily understood and uncontested territory.

Founded upon an epistemology of deconstructionism, rather than the more positivistic assimilationism and pluralism, Jackson then introduces critical multiculturalism. While ultimately deeming it insufficient for the study of Islam and Muslims, Jackson does laud the effort to cultivate classrooms that interrogate and deconstruct knowledge to expose the ways meaning and perceptions are socially contingent rather than objective truths to be discovered and deemed definitive. The value of this is in enabling students to locate the intersection between the knowledge of subaltern communities and oppression that extends from unchecked notions of superiority and inferiority. Jackson writes, "Critical multiculturalism is promising in highlighting the contingent nature of social knowledge and learning, and the way ideology can interact with attitudes and beliefs in exploring issues of social difference" (p. 45). While critical multiculturalism unearths the existence of truth regimes in school knowledge, Jackson has reservations about its own a priori tendency to produce dichotomous thinking as it "risks the same oversimplification and binary good/bad thinking" (p. 47) when examining power disparities between empowered and disempowered groups.

After enumerating the features of these variations of multicultural education and grappling with their unviability when applied to the teaching of Muslims and Islam, Jackson pivots towards a more extensive discussion of the representations that permeate America's collective consciousness in a post-9/11 world. Jackson justifies this by stating, "We learn information and values from media sources, viewing news as truthful, or behaviors in entertainment media as acceptable or normal" (p. 54) and that "Muslims have typically been framed as dangerous and violent by news media and popular culture" (p. 59). With the ubiquity of news and entertainment in the 21st century, these sources frame the dominant discourse responsible for perceptions that equate Muslims with threats to American security and speak of a global community as though it constituted a unified and cohesive group. Such a reality, for Jackson, necessitates students acquiring critical media literacy skills. The ability to recognize media as not being neutral or holding a monopoly on truth is a means to validate countervailing perspectives that may be displaced from mainstream sources. Jackson considers this to be an empowering skill for students to possess so that they may become discerning consumers of information who actively read and view rather than passively defer to the authority of others.

Before issuing her proposal for *interculturalism* as a brand of multicultural education adequately designed for deliberating on topics related to Muslims and Islam in the classroom, Jackson offers an evaluation of school knowledge in contradistinction to the media. Jackson concludes that schools are not as blatantly negative in their depictions. Rather, there are undercurrents in textbooks and curricular frameworks that are subtly and implicitly complicit in the ongoing negative associations with Muslims and Islam. According to Jackson, textbook quality is improving as authorial sensitivity to stereotypes is

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curtailing their explicit appearance. Even still, references to Muslims and Islam are limited and circumscribed to topics that are intrinsically bound to violence such as terrorism, war and the various unresolved conflicts in the Middle East. Also problematic about textbooks is, regardless of the narratives they present, that they continue to be written as closed accounts and with a voice of certainty. As historical knowledge is culturally determined and no master narrative exists, textbooks contribute to the fallacy of historical knowledge being objective and singularly valid. Jackson understands this as a fundamental problem as it deprives students of recognizing ambiguity, weighing alternative visions of the past, appreciating counter-narratives, and constructing their own personalized appreciation of history and historical actors.

The problems of media and textbook characterizations of Muslims and Islam and need for students to acquire critical literacy skills underpin Jackson's proposal for interculturalism as a tenable brand of multicultural education. Unlike the tension between assimilationism and pluralism wherein either camp vies to negate the knowledge posited by the other, interculturalism allows for a marketplace of contending ideas and forms of information to exist in the classroom. Whereas critical multiculturalism understands knowledge to be constructed and hence capable of being deconstructed, interculturalism is a way for students to traverse multiple contending ideas and, in doing so, recognize the limitations and simultaneous appeal of all social knowledge. Jackson explains, "To benefit from a diversity of views, strengths, and experiences in a society, public institutions must encourage creativity, openness, and innovation, as well as virtues of toleration, empathy and compassion" (p. 114). Rather than inculcating students to subscribe to a particular set of beliefs and understandings, Jackson considers interculturalism to be a panacea to educational practices that may border on indoctrination. Much of Jackson's argument about the teaching of Muslims and Islam is not strictly about the perpetuation of stereotypes but instead is about the tendency for a particular ideological bent to inform school knowledge as though it held a monopoly on truth. Instead, when students are exposed to multiple voices and currents of thought, they are granted the intellectual space to be active participants who can deliberate and engage in the sorts of dialogue that are fundamental to a democracy. Jackson's epistemological shift towards knowledge promotes sensitivity towards worldviews that are dissimilar to those one subscribes to personally. By allowing students to generate their own understandings by responding to problems, Jackson contends that the classroom can facilitate the growth of students' critical consciousness and willingness to be tolerant of those who are different, misunderstood, and even marginalized by the mainstream.

In *Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education*, Jackson advocates for an educational experience that is inclusive of diverse voices so that schools can become incubators of tolerance, discourse and respect for Muslims and Islam rather than grounds for contentious ideological battles that further polarize American citizens. Jackson's work is a reminder that schools are a space where knowledge is couched in ideological undertones. Rather than advocating for one ideology over another, Jackson subverts this contest by suggesting that schools become inclusive of multiple narratives and that students receive a deliberation-based experience. This would alleviate the vacillation from one perception of Muslims and Islam to another on the opposite end of an ideological spectrum. Instead, students can receive contending visions of Muslims and Islam without the teacher intentionally endorsing one as inherently more truthful or superior to other understandings. In constructing this sort of learning experience, Jackson offers a fundamentally different understanding of knowledge. When applied to the understanding of

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Muslims and Islam, this promotes a degree of cultural relativism that is required to avoid framing difference as deficient. Since September 11, 2001, Muslims and Islam have been subject to scrutiny and suspicion in the United States. By asking students and educators to question their sources of knowledge and concede the limitations of it, Jackson is asking them to reconsider the basis of their understandings of this heterogeneous community and this branch of the monotheistic tradition. In doing so, Jackson neither denounces nor romanticizes. Instead, she carves out an intellectual space to humanize and examine so that teachers may become harbingers of a multicultural education that offers nuance and justice for young learners and marginalized communities alike.