

Muslims and Islam in European History Textbooks: Seeking Security Through Culture

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?>

Many may believe in intercultural dialogue as a promised way to dispel the myth of the “Clash of Civilizations,” but such a dialogue should go through different challenges and examinations to prove it so.

It has always been like that; culture is a component of both conflict and dialogue. But nowadays, the importance of culture as a main factor in determining international attitudes is more obvious. An international conference, The Image of Arab-Islamic Culture in European History Textbooks, was held in Cairo, Egypt, to elaborate on the idea that security cannot be achieved without more cultural understanding.

Amr Moussa, Arab League secretary-general, described the discrimination against Islam and Muslims in school textbooks, media, laws, as “Islamophobic.” According to him, the phenomena should be addressed internationally and tackled in the same way as anti-Semitism. However, the resemblance should not be taken at face value without profound analysis and examination. Moreover, a recent United Nations special seminar on Islamophobia put a spotlight on the same issues.

In the same respect, the Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero launched his initiative, Coalition Between Civilizations, with the assumption that “it goes beyond the politics but it cannot go without it.”

Between Macro and Micro

“For Giddens, there are connections between the most ‘micro’ aspects of society—an individuals’ internal sense of self and identity—and the bigger picture of the state, multinational corporations, and globalization, the ‘macro level.’ Sociology cannot make sense of these levels by looking at them in isolation.”¹ On the issue of European textbooks, we can understand the impact of the micro daily level on the macro international level as Dr. Mustafa Al-Halwaji of Al-Azhar stated in his paper, in which he discussed how misrepresenting Islam and Muslims in the European textbooks has negative effects on Muslim students: “These students might be psychologically offended. They might even turn into fanatic defenders of their misrepresented religion in attempts to prove the validity of their religion.”

Choosing a vivid specific topic, The Image of Islam and Muslims in the European School

Textbooks raised expectations that the conference would be a different event, with a clear vision and technical recommendations. Since the crisis of September 11, an almost continuous series of conferences, symposiums, forums, and so on have been held regularly. Overgeneralizations, celebratory atmospheres, monolithic visions, and repetitive topics are a few of the problematic characteristics of most of these meetings. As long as the conflicts are increasing worldwide, these initiatives can be considered as a “dialogue of the deaf”!

Beyond the Buzz: Experts Should Lead

Although the influence of politics is inevitable, as has already been represented above, the voice of the experts should lead the argument, especially as the conference focused on European history textbooks.

In this respect, academics and professionals should be the nucleus of interrelated circles—governments, institutions, and communities. Gerard de Puymege, responsible for the UNESCO Mediterranean program, emphasized the same understanding by encouraging the setting up of a database of researchers of history textbooks in both Arab-Islamic and European spheres. The organizers of the conference declared that they will seek individual experts across the organizations. On the other hand, a lot of attention was paid to subjective experiences. Dr. Joseph Huner, responsible for the higher education and research division of the Council of Europe, for example, presented an experience of the program “learn how to live together.”

Epistemological Problems

Reading most of the abstracts of the conference papers, one can see the significance of the topic and its implications. But at the same time, one can easily observe the lack of adherence to a common theoretical framework among the different contributions. The contributions varied from using the qualitative to quantitative methodologies, from subjectivity to objectivity. Several coordination and specialist technical sessions should have been held first to address these issues adequately.

Some of the participants considered the textbooks as symptoms of sophisticated epistemological problems, like the impact of the different waves of Orientalism through space and time. These waves have largely determined our approaches and terminology, and they have become the reason for many misunderstandings.

It is necessary to distinguish between the different levels of intercultural negotiations; knowing “how much of Muslim legacy and tradition is sacrosanct, and therefore non-negotiable or firmly established (thabit in Arabic), and how much is a matter of interpretive application and contextually bound to a particular era and geography, and therefore subject to change

(mutaghayyir) over time and place.”²

Some of the eye-opening experiences during the dialogues showed that theological absolute answers to non-religious relative questions are one of the reasons for miscommunication. We should understand the differences between two words, language and discourse when it comes to address our own cause and convey our message to the “Other.”

Moving from the theoretical framework to the actual discussions among the participants, the discussions strayed from the topic. Most of the contributors and the commentators, especially from the Arab side, showed a preference for recalling repetitive mutual misconceptions and the impact of the current international political scene rather than sticking to the agenda and going in depth through the issues designated for each session.

Of course the issue should not be decontextualized, especially when it is related to the complex relations between Islam and the West; but one should know when to bring in related topics without mixing them up with unrelated ones.

Experiences Speak Louder Than Words

Regularly, the only way out from the dilemma of recycling old arguments is to share real experiences with others. We could learn a lot if we tried to examine our theories and values with people from different backgrounds. This could be an example of good practice in intercultural dialogue and a form of cooperation that should be developed adequately.

Dr. Wolfgang Hoepken of the George Eckert Institute shed some light upon one of these experiences as he presented a joint textbook project between Germany and France. According to the mission statement on its Web site, the institute “continues to contribute to the effort of overcoming conflict and prejudice and to encourage peace and education.”

As the institute strives to diminish prejudice, it offers recommendations for the improvement of textbooks, depending on different methodological techniques. Reading between the lines and analyzing underlying assumptions of texts are some of these techniques.

For the George Eckert Institute, Franco-German collaboration is a precondition for achieving European integration. The goal is to produce teaching materials on a variety of topics such as “Regions Within Europe,” “The First World War,” “From Traditional Enemy (Erbfeind) to Partner,” and “Routes to Modernity.” Hoepken emphasized the possibility of achieving mutual understanding and changing the stereotypes between Muslim and Western societies by adopting the same techniques.

The Black Sea Initiative on History is another experience that challenges the dividing lines caused by conflicts or prejudices. What is really a benefit of this project is its approach; it does not try to give the final word on every incident, but rather represents the different narratives

about historical events. The project's teaching pack "takes into account the ongoing debate concerning controversial issues in the history of the Black Sea region." It "has not been designed to provide a definitive answer to these issues but to provide an understanding of the complexity of the historical process."³

Dr. Michael Reily of Bath University, United Kingdom, decided to face the misconception about Islam and Muslims in British textbooks through teamwork—producing a textbook on the same themes for 11- through 14-year-old-students.

Reily tried to explore the image of Muslims through space and time by showing that their unity is in their diversity. Some titles in the book are "Prophet Muhammad," "Capital Baghdad," "North Africa," "Crusades," "Ibn Batouta: The Most Renowned Muslim Voyageur," "Palestine and Israel," and "Muslim Minorities."

The Weakest Link

The representation of Muslim communities in European countries was the weakest link of this conference. Although there are many challenges facing the Muslim minorities, their opportunities, especially among the younger generations, are increasing, too.

For the Muslim minorities in the West, refuting misconceptions about Islam and Muslims is not merely a theoretical problem but a pressing social need to survive in their societies. Given this, non-governmental bodies and alternative solutions should have been more obviously represented. One important organization that is concerned with the problems of Muslim minorities in the West and that should have been present is the UK-based Books For Schools. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) launched this initiative as they feel that it is "time for British Muslims to act to make the most of this immense opportunity and to turn the tide of negative stereotypical portrayals of Islam by ensuring that every school child in Britain has access to high-quality Islamic resources within their school."⁴ Their aim is to place high-quality Islamic resources (to include books, materials, CDs, DVDs, videos, and accompanying teaching aids) into school classrooms. This project has already been demonstrated by similar ventures of this kind in other countries where Muslims are a minority community, such as the project by CAIR in Washington, DC.

Using the media is an important tool to empower the people. The information in the media does not merely reflect the world, but constantly shapes it as well. In this regard, the Internet can play a key role; it has helpful characteristics that give people the chance to speak out about their fears, feelings, and views. The impersonal medium makes it no more a just one-way traffic, but we must remember that we constantly influence others and we are constantly influenced by external factors.

Accordingly, IslamOnline.net made use of this interactive characteristic and asked people to contribute ahead the conference.

These changes and alternatives may send out powerful, clear signals to show that people themselves have windows of opportunity. With more commitment and awareness, there will be a ray of hope and a touch of optimism in an otherwise deeply troublesome scenario.

Back to the Issue—History

Jihad, women, the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and the Qur'an are keywords in the classical misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims. Deliberate distortions, simplifications, exaggerations, and neglect of cultural plurality in the Muslim world are the most important characteristics of the misrepresentation of Muslim societies. When searching for the reasons, another dimension should be clarified; as Edward Said stated, "it's a clash of ignorance." Hatred, fear, and ignorance are all components of the negative portrayal. However, avoiding a monolithic and static portrayal of Islam may lead us into the trap of fragmentation. Since Islam is not a single homogenous phenomenon, a more subtle approach should be taken.

The diverse Muslim cultural expressions that can be seen around the world are obvious. However, this does not mean that there are many 'Islams,' but that there are many expressions of the Muslim way of life. Islam encapsulates values and ideas that lead to a cultural manifestation in the context of the particular area of the world where those values are implanted. This manifestation takes on the color of the society it resides in and remains willing to change with time.⁵

Images and Counter-Images

In his paper "Religious Commitment: Images and Counter-Images," Prof. Jan Henningsson of the Swedish Institute in Alexandria asserted

[The] teaching of religion in governmental and private-schools requires sensitivity and courage. Sensitivity in order to respect the feelings of the 'Other,' courage in order to ask straight questions about the 'Other' and accept difficult questions about myself.

You can find the same message in the contribution of Dr. Fawzia Al-Ashmawi of the University of Switzerland:

It is obvious that one of the ways to create peaceful societies is the development of curricula that teach young pupils to respect differences between people and to appreciate common values which can help them to overcome prejudices.

Ironically, one does not find one uniform image for Islam and Muslims in these sophisticated European textbooks. In his paper, Al-Halwaji concluded

History books taught in Hungarian schools present the Islamic culture of the Middle Ages as a great culture, yet the image of the religion of Islam is presented negatively in the books. For Abdel Mohsen Bin Salem Al-Ukely—head of a team that analyzes British schoolbooks for the General Directorate of Educational Research, Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—the image of Arabs and Muslims in the British textbooks was neutral and generally positive, but becomes negative when dealing with the Crusades and the Arab-Israeli conflict. This negative image is also clear in some books that connect Islam and terrorism and misunderstand the concept of jihad.

Schoolbooks in Italy acknowledge the achievements of the Muslim civilization. These books agree that the Muslim civilization preserved the Greek and Persian cultural and scientific heritage; it updated this heritage and added to it. However, the Italian history schoolbooks handle the concept of jihad and the personality of Prophet Muhammad in a negative way, stated Dr. Salah Ramadan El-Sayed of Al-Azhar University.

Dr. Mohamed Mansour, also of Al-Azhar University, placed the spotlight in his paper “Image of Islam in Austrian Schoolbooks” on an issue that is difficult to avoid: understanding and interpreting the Qur’anic verses that address jihad, women, and other such issues. “It is clear that the verses were removed from their correct historical, geographical, social, cultural, military, and political context,” he said. In addition, Al-Halwaji defined the precondition that “a verse from the Qur’an should be read in the light of the Islamic principles and the rules of the Arabic language and rhetoric.”

Moreover, Al-Ukely pointed out that the British textbooks may create a discourse that is too reductionist in nature:

It minimized the religion into orders—do that, do not do that, this is forbidden, this is permissible—so that the Western reader does not see the reality of Islam as a religion that carries a complete civilized message. The reader only gets a feeling that Islam is a religion of strict orders.

Although most of the classical misconceptions relate to historical backgrounds, Al-Ashmawi argued that after September 11, 2001, the European curricula of secondary schools were mainly concerned with contemporary Islam. This emphasizes the fact that portraying Islam and Muslims is not only the mission of historians, but of many others too, such as museum curators, filmmakers, television producers, and journalists, to mention a few.

Presenting a counter-image, Al-Ashmawi, in a comparative study about the image of the “Other” in the history textbooks of some Mediterranean countries, discussed that “the Muslim presentation of Europeans contains more critical views of Western culture: sexual liberty,

disintegration of the family, gay marriage, and so on.”

She compared the two different discourses:

While European authors use omission and neglect as weapons in order to mask historical truth, Muslim authors make use of an emphatic terminology and overvalue historical facts in order to stress the Muslim’s past glory.

What You See Matters Less Than How You See It

The discussion of images and counter-images above paves the way for introducing “Multiperspectivity,” a term more often used than defined, especially in this conference. K. Peter Fritzsche has emphasized that it is a process, “a strategy of understanding,” in which we take into account another’s perspective (or others’ perspectives) in addition to our own. In this respect, multiperspectivity means to be able and willing to regard a situation from different perspectives.⁶

Dealing with a wide range of sources and facing many narratives of the same historical incidents produces many questions concerning the techniques that should be adopted. How should we handle topics and issues that are likely to be controversial and sensitive in a multi-national and multicultural society? There is a “greater emphasis in the history classroom on students learning how to analyze, interpret and synthesise evidence obtained from a variety of primary and secondary sources.”⁷

“History education has all too often been taught from a perspective that was monocultural, ethnocentric, exclusive rather than inclusive.”⁸ Many researchers nowadays are trying to review these approaches. The precondition is a willingness to accept that there are other possible ways of viewing the world than one’s own, and that these may be equally valid and equally partial. Or, as has been transmitted by Imam Al-Shafi’i (b. AH 150/767 CE): “My view is correct though it is liable to error, and another view is wrong though it is liable to be correct.”

* The international conference The Image of Arab-Islamic Culture in European History Textbooks was held in Cairo, Egypt, from December 12 to 14, 2004.

The conference was jointly organized by the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Arab League, the European Program, the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), and other national and international organizations

Dalia Yusuf is IslamOnline.net’s Art & Culture Page editor. She has a postgraduate diploma in journalism from Cairo University. You can reach her at Bridge@islam-online.net

Notes

[1] Dilwar Hussain, “British Muslims Between Assimilation and Segregation,” in British Muslim

Identity (Markfield, UK: Islamic Foundation, 2004) p. 88.

[2] Ibid., p. 87.

[3] Gabriele Mazza, in the preface, *The Black Sea: A History of Interactions* (Council of Europe, 2004) pp. 4–5.

[4] "Books For Schools - Sponsor A Books Pack For Your Local School!" in www.mcb.org.uk (last accessed January 18, 2005).

[5] Hussain, op. cit., p. 99.

[6] Robert Stardling, *Multiperspectivity in History Teaching: A Guide for Teachers* (Council of Europe, 2003) p. 13.

[7] Ibid., p. 10.

[8] Ibid.