

# Deconstructing Myths and Clarifying Truths: Teaching Islam in an Age of Misinformation

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**T**here are times when I recognize the importance of my job as a history teacher more than others. Now is one of those times. I am a teacher at a large, comprehensive public high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I teach a semester-long course about global history with a focus on the modern Middle East. With a significant emphasis on recent conflict in the Middle East, I aim to push students to grapple with the intent and impact of U.S. foreign policy decisions in the region. During the last decade, I have worked to push my students to explore the historical roots of modern conflicts so they can better understand what's happening today in the proper context. I also aspire to turn them into critical consumers of news media, where, if I have done my job right, they will question what they read, cross check the information, and not take anything at face value. When the course is over, students walk away with a more complete framework for understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S.'s historic relationship with Iran, and the causes and effects of the current war in Syria.

The number one thing students tell me after taking the course is that they feel more confident having conversations with adults about the news. I feel gratified when I hear this and heartened that maybe I've played a part in helping my students be more globally informed citizens. But what's been nagging at me over the last couple of years is what I have neglected to do for my students in my pursuit to build their understanding of history in the Middle East. In light of what now seems like almost constant misinformation about Muslims in our contemporary media and political environment, I know I haven't done enough work to build my students' understanding of the diverse conceptions of Islam.

This year, I shook things up. I decided to lay some cultural and religious groundwork before I started teaching my students about Middle East history and foreign policy. What I failed to fully recognize until this point was that despite my own knowledge about religious literacy—informed by Harvard Divinity School Professor Diane Moore's religious literacy framework—I hadn't communicated this at all to my students. Her framework emphasizes three major tenets of religious literacy—religions are internally diverse; religions evolve and change over time as opposed to being ahistorical and static; and religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture. I assumed my students had a similar set of guiding principles concerning the study of religion and that as a result of growing up in an ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse city they would, by default, know this stuff. While I'm sure many of my students did understand these tenets on some level prior to my course, were these messages ever explicitly communicated to them? I no longer wanted to assume they were. So, instead of jumping right into the lessons of border drawing and nation building in the Middle East, we started our unit with lessons on religious literacy, with a particular focus on deconstructing myths and clarifying truths about Islam.

My students spent several days becoming acquainted with the religious literacy framework. They read, we discussed, we struggled with theoretical language, and we watched videos to help us make sense of what we read. We grappled with what it means to be religiously literate and looked at case studies where students had to put some of their own beliefs aside in order to develop a fuller understanding of who is included in a religious tradition. For example, can a group who

espouses what many might regard as intolerant and hateful rhetoric in the name of God still be considered part of a religious faith even if it doesn't square with one's own understandings of what it means to practice that faith tradition? Using the methodological framework around religious literacy, we applied our understandings to this question and others.

Then we took these lessons and focused them specifically to our study of Islam. Most of those who live in the region we refer to as the Middle East today are adherents of Islam. Many of the countries we study are majority Muslim nations. And yet, much of what students have heard about Islam and the Middle East more generally over the course of their lifetimes has largely been through the lenses of terrorism, war, and fear. Exploring Islam within its historic, cultural, and social context before diving into our study of contemporary conflict in this region becomes even more critical in this sociopolitical environment. In an effort to deconstruct myths and clarify truths about tenets of Islam, students worked in focus groups to become more knowledgeable about different sects of Islam, veiling traditions within the faith as understood scripturally and historically, Islamic law, and Islam in different socio-political contexts. After our week of exploring religious literacy and its applications to Islam, I felt students had learned something. Many things, even. I asked them to share their takeaways with me. What I received from my students confirmed for me the importance of beginning our unit in this way. A few comments from the students:

*“I used to think that violence and war in the Middle East were caused by Muslims and what is written in the Quran. Now I think that's not true; I believe Islam promotes peace but individuals interpret the word of God in different ways.”*

*“I used to think religious literacy was the ability to read your holy book but nothing else. Now I know that it's being able to look at a variety of religions through different historical and cultural lenses.”*

*“I used to think religion played a more concrete role in informing people's ideologies; now I think about perspectives from a more socio-political-religious standpoint: you cannot see religion out of its political/cultural context.”*

After nine weeks of studying the Middle East, I feel more certain that my students have walked away with an understanding that this region and those who live there should not be understood only through the scope of war and terrorism. I think they understand that groups who carry out acts of violence in the name of religion do not represent the beliefs of everyone who identifies with that faith. In our current political climate, where our leaders rely on easy and facile explanations for complex issues around faith and politics, the importance of our roles as history teachers comes into even starker relief. We are called upon to step up and resist fearmongering and to continue the work that has always been critical to historians: to put what has happened in the past and what is happening now in the proper and complicated historical context that is necessary if we are to be truly informed and engaged citizens. My hope is that my students are now better equipped to right incomplete narratives about those deemed “other,” question and challenge information they receive from media and elsewhere, and step off the sidelines to serve as advocates for themselves and allies for others in the face of policies and rhetoric that threaten the democratic ideals we all hold dear.