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Fear & Faith in Texas
A Multimedia Report

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Fear & Faith in Texas

A Multimedia Report

by

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Report

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Dedication

Fear and Faith in Texas is dedicated to anyone who has ever been persecuted or mistreated because of their beliefs. It is also dedicated to my family and friends who supported me throughout all of my academic and journalistic endeavors thus far.

Abstract

Fear & Faith in Texas

A Multimedia Report

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Renita B. Coleman

Fear and Faith in Texas is a multimedia journalism report about Islam in Texas.

Islam has gained significant media attention recently so it is important to know more about a religion that has a growing congregation in the United States. This project answers questions like “What are the basics of the religion?” “Is it really such a foreign concept, or is it grounded in concepts and history familiar to non-Muslims?” Getting to know and break down the barriers that keep stereotypes alive and misconceptions thriving is an important part to understanding Islam. Fear and Faith in Texas highlights the truth about Islam and Muslim Americans that often is ignored due to fear and a lack of knowledge. The project incorporates text, video, interactive graphics and other visual aids to give background on the religion of Islam, Muslim Americans, and show the role education plays in communicating information about religion in Texas.

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Islam in the News

Scan the headlines any given day and you might read about burning Qurans, a mosque near Ground Zero, and violent attacks in the Middle East. All of these stories might be true and might be newsworthy, but what about other stories about Muslims or Islam?

Those are harder to find, especially when it comes to the coverage of Muslims in America. While there may not be readily available statistics on how the coverage is weighted, a simple Google News search indicates that these types of stories get most of the attention.

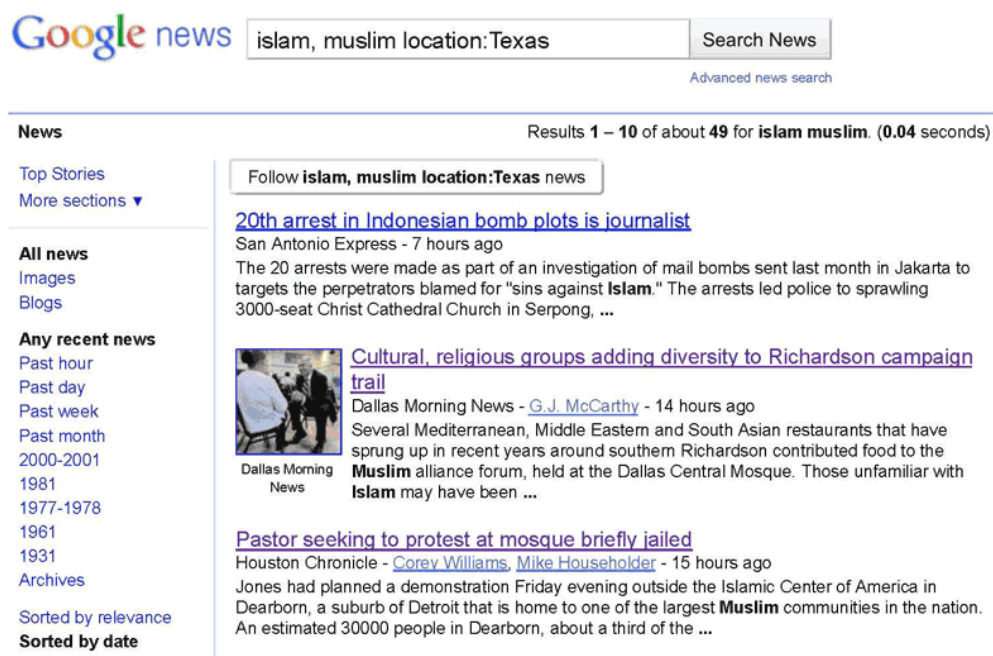


Figure 1.1: A basic Google news search with terms Muslim, Islam, from Texas media sources and about Texas

And typical American Muslims remain misunderstood and left out of conversation and the radical, political minority abroad overshadows them.

Besides the prominent national stories like Terry Jones and violence in the Middle East, Islam and Texas Muslims are written about too. Depending on the region, local Muslim population and who publishes letters to the editor, stories about American Muslims in Texas runs the gamut.

As the media industry continues to change, revolutions rage in the Middle East, and political and religious differences become more polarized at home, the future news coverage of Muslim Americans is unknown. It is clear, however, that there is a need for more diverse and accurate depictions of American religious communities.

Teaching Texans

WORRISOME WORDS: WHAT RELIGIONS ARE ALLOWED IN TEXAS TEXTBOOKS?

On Sept. 24, 2010, the Texas State Board of Education passed a resolution dictating how textbooks should report on Christianity and Islam. On the surface, the resolution may appear to be about the issue of fairness and balance when covering world religions in social studies texts, but upon further investigation it appears there is more to the issue than many would like to admit.

The language of the State Board's resolution indicates the board's religious leanings, such as "pro-Islamic/anti-Christian bias has tainted some past Texas Social Studies textbooks" and "pro-Islamic/anti-Christian half-truths, selective disinformation, and false editorial stereotypes still roil some Social Studies textbooks nationwide."

The resolution essentially attacks Islam and claims that social studies textbooks in use promote Islam and disparage Christianity, according to Dan Quinn, the Communications Director for Texas Freedom Network, a non-profit, non-partisan watchdog organization aimed at monitoring far-right issues, organizations, money and leaders.

It goes on to outline specific instances where the textbooks' raise up instances of Muslim actions throughout history as more positive than the contributions of Christianity. It also mentions that Middle Eastern people are attempting to buy into and control the American textbook "oligopoly."

Since September, many have spoken out in support and opposition of it, including State Board members. Patricia Hardy is the State Board member in charge of District 11 of the Fort Worth area, a Republican from Weatherford, TX, and voted against the resolution. She indicated several reasons for voting against the resolution.

A citizen at the State Board's July meeting first proposed the resolution, but a vote on it was postponed so it could be further reviewed, according to Hardy. But it never was. Four board members brought it back at the September meeting and pushed the chairwoman to bring it to a vote before other board members had time to analyze or rewrite the resolution, said Hardy.

After serious discussion and division amongst the board, it was passed in a majority vote.

There are several reasons Hardy found the resolution faulty. First, the mistakes listed in the textbooks were never vetted by anyone prior to the vote to see if his claims were true, said Hardy.

State Board Chair Gail Lowe said she read through the appendices and one study mentioned in Randy Rives' resolution, the citizen who initially proposed it. She thought his claims were correct. Lowe said that although she did not know how Rives collected his research and did not go through the textbooks in question, his documentation appeared to make sense.

The four board members thought the resolution would focus on balance and removing bias from coverage of all religions, but no one chose to rewrite Rives' resolution under those same terms, said Lowe.

The resolution's language and clear intention to pit Islam against Christianity in preferential coverage was another reason why Hardy voted against it. Rives said so much was written about Islam in the textbooks but just because Islam is written about doesn't make it biased coverage, said Hardy.

"It very well could be because Islam is something important for people to know about. It's not like you're pushing it, it's like you need to know about it," said Hardy.

Including Hardy, several other critics of the resolution were quick to point out that if you break down the portion of the books that is about the protestant reformation, Christianity gets more coverage than Islam, which could be perceived as bias under the resolution's language.

"They claimed that Christianity was downplayed, that you didn't get very much of it compared to discussions of Islam, but the analysis that they used actually skipped entire chapters that focused on Christianity, like the Reformation," said Quinn.

Both Quinn and Hardy cite major elements in the history of Western Civilization as being primarily focused on Christianity.

“The books actually have a very balanced view, you get warts and all, positive and negative in portrayals of both in those textbooks. The truth is Christianity is discussed in large sections throughout the textbooks,” said Quinn.

“My goodness, if you talk about the Middle Ages, which was so much the period of the Roman Catholic Church dominating Europe, is that history or is that Christianity that you're pushing?” said Hardy. “So it’s kind of a fine line of what is a push for that religion.”

Quinn also said Rives’ resolution incorrectly characterized the coverage of Islam in the books. He said their readings of chapters on Islam were very selective; that they skipped over large sections of those chapters that really talked about a lot the problems that were created throughout history by Islamic invasions, for example.

“If they found something in a chapter that didn’t portray Islam in a sufficiently negative light, in their opinion, that it was whitewashing it,” said Quinn.

Ultimately both sides think the resolution has no technical effect, at least not on current textbooks and social studies curriculum. Lowe said that the resolution is only an indication of the board’s sentiment at the time, informing textbook publishers and the public that they want balanced books.

“The resolution was never intended to present a plan for itemizing things in the future. It was intended to say this is what the State Board feels about this issue and going forward we’d like to see balance across the religious groups,” said Lowe. “What happens

three or four years from now when textbooks come up for adoption, the board could feel completely different.”

Hardy agrees that the impact is moot because the textbooks outlined in the resolution have not been in use since 2002, when the state adopted new social studies textbooks—though Hardy says the 2002 books probably are extremely similar to the books in question.

“It has no impact, none, zilch, nothing, nada. It has no impact. It might have raised a few eyebrows at the time it was done and caused attention to be drawn to the board,” said Hardy.

She thinks the worst it did was draw additional negative attention to the State Board, especially following the controversial social studies curriculum adoption the board passed in the spring of 2010. Hardy said it would also draw her criticism when she runs for reelection, but she would confidently be able to defend her vote against the resolution.

“If I really thought that those books had a heavy, pro-Islamic, pro-jihad, pro-terrorist bias, I would be signing the resolution, I’d be writing a resolution, but I don’t think that those books have that. So I think it was just kind of a conjured up fear tactic,” said Hardy.

That fear tactic is what critics like Quinn and Mark A. Chancey, Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Southern Methodist University, say is the problem with the resolution.

Chancey has several qualms with the resolution. First he says the resolution's language indicate a lack of understanding of Islam and a preferential view of Christianity.

"I thought it was based on the presupposition that Christianity and Islam are by their very nature antithetical and in opposition," said Chancey. "I thought it was also unfortunate that the resolution kind of assumes that Christianity was the normative religion that public education should promote."

And that presupposition, according to Chancey, is why the resolution has an impact.

"It appeared to be prompted by Islamophobia. This desire for some sort of Muslim conspiracy to takeover America, which I strongly question," said Chancey. "So I thought it was very unfortunate. It was a smear of a major religious tradition."

Chancey said that he thinks the resolution is detrimental. "The view point of the resolution is that Islam is an expansionist, problematic religion. It's incompatible with democracy. So to the extent that it has an impact on future teaching that is very problematic," said Chancey.

While the resolution may not have an impact on textbooks currently in use in Texas, the message sent to the public and publishers is clear. Balance is better than bias, but not everyone agrees on how to define that balance. When taken in account with the coverage of other Islamic issues in Texas, the resolution has an effect.

TEXAS TEXTS

Understanding the importance of textbooks in Texas education is the first step in analyzing and recognizing the impact textbooks have. Most everyone agrees that textbooks need to be balanced and contain just the facts. However, not everyone agrees they always accomplish that.

Communications Director for Texas Freedom Network, Dan Quinn said that although most teachers try to keep biases out of the classroom, sometimes they might creep in. But that is where administrators and school boards step in to prevent it. Unfortunately textbooks are not controlled locally.

“A lot of the young teachers end up using these textbooks and that’s what they will rely on. And these textbooks are what the kids take home. You want the textbooks in the classroom to be balanced and based on sound scholarship,” said Quinn.

This foundation is in print and lasts for years—and travels miles. According to Quinn, “Because the state’s so big and we adopt so many textbooks, unlike Vegas, what happens in Texas doesn’t stay in Texas when it comes to textbooks. These textbooks will be sold essentially across the country.”

While the printed word moves across the country and into the minds of thousands of Texas students, some hope that it is not merely the textbooks that will make an educational impression. Chair of the State Board of Education Gail Lowe said that study

questions and discussion should impact students' understanding and opinions, because textbooks should be just the facts.

"Fairness is hard to judge, it's often in the eye of the beholder. It's a more subjective standard but we hope that a balanced treatment, a textbook shouldn't take a side in something like that; it should present the facts and allow students to if they want to take their own side," said Lowe.

The facts that come into question revolve around religion. Lowe pointed out that though the six major world religions get equal coverage, certain time periods and discussion of current events revolve around particular religions.

"Buddhism, Hinduism and maybe even Sikhism are not as prevalent in current world events that students might study, as lets say the potential conflict between Islam and Christianity. So I think there does have to be a little more emphasis on some of those religions simply because they continue to be part of major events."

The connection between current events and the textbooks' facts is where some people fear biases will arise. Education is supposed to be the foundation of awareness, especially at a young, formidable age.

"In a pluralistic democracy it is very important for people to understand different religious perspectives both so that we can deliberate within American society, and also so we can have a better, more informed perspective on international relations as well," said

Mark A. Chancey, Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Southern Methodist University.

In combination with media coverage, stereotypes and other misconceptions, students are often left with a confused and complicated understanding of Islam. As long as textbooks communicate just the facts, with time that understanding will prevent additional misunderstandings.

Multimedia Graphics

The multimedia site is published at
<https://webpace.utexas.edu/clv322/FLASH%20PKG/Main.html> or
<http://www.caseylvaughn.com/MastersReport/Main.html>

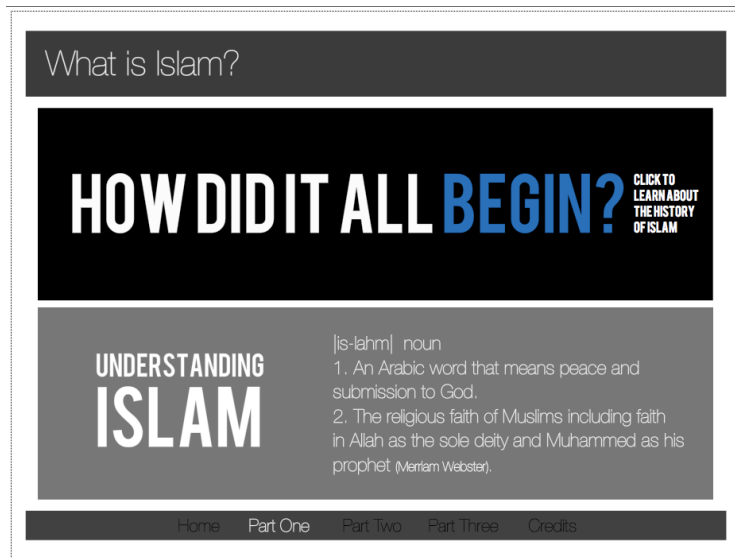


Figure 3.1: Intro to “What is Islam” online section

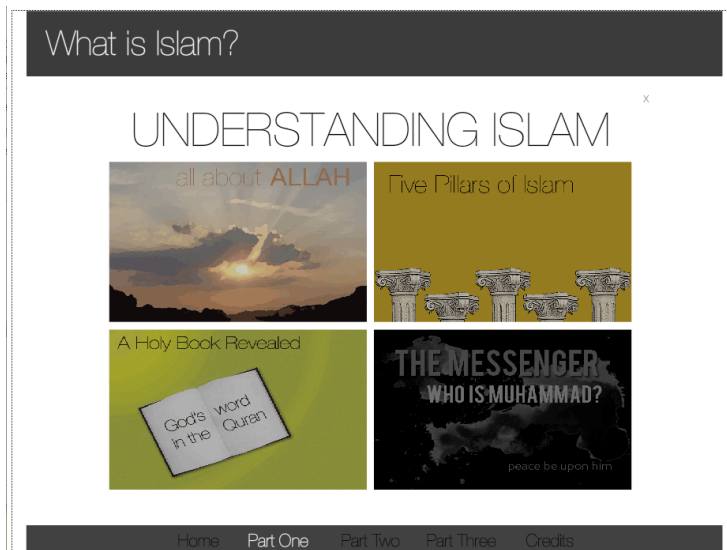


Figure 3.2: Intro to Understanding Islam online graphic



Figure 3.3: Intro to History of Islam interactive timeline

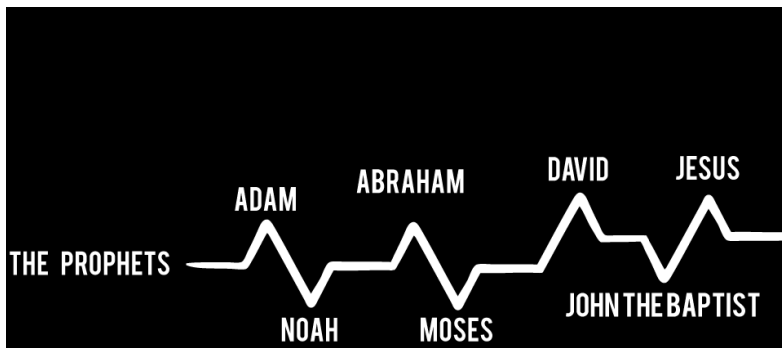


Figure 3.4: Biblical Prophets section of History of Islam timeline graphic

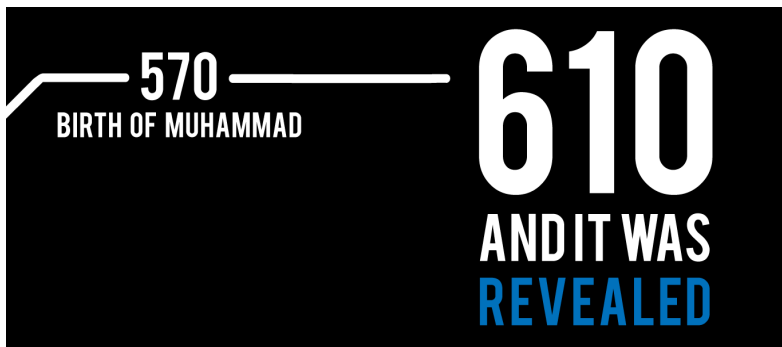


Figure 3.5: Islamic Prophets section of History of Islam timeline graphic

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