



# The Sunni and Shia Schism: Religion, Islamic Politics, and Why Americans Need to Know the Differences

James Moore

**To cite this article:** James Moore (2015) The Sunni and Shia Schism: Religion, Islamic Politics, and Why Americans Need to Know the Differences, *The Social Studies*, 106:5, 226-235, DOI: 10.1080/00377996.2015.1059794

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1059794>



Published online: 31 Jul 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 221



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The Sunni and Shia Schism: Religion, Islamic Politics, and Why Americans Need to Know the Differences

JAMES MOORE

*Teacher Education, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA*

Research indicates that most American citizens know little about Islam and, specifically, the major differences between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims and why this matters to the United States. Although the two major Islamic factions share many common core beliefs and practices, there are some significant religious and political differences dating back to the disagreement over the succession of leadership in the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632. Indeed, sectarianism has played a pivotal role in the turbulent geopolitics of the Middle East for centuries. Islam must be studied for its contributions and role in world history. Therefore, it is crucial that social studies educators teach not only the core beliefs, rituals, and history of Islam but the differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. This knowledge is vital if Americans are to make prudent decisions regarding support for specific foreign policy positions and decisions regarding Islam and Muslim countries. This article describes and explains the differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims and discusses the implications for the United States and social studies education. Finally, the article shows how Islam can be implemented in the NCSS C3 Framework.

**Keywords:** Islam, Sunni, Shiite

## Introduction

It is infeasible for social studies educators to effectively teach about history, geography, domestic politics, economics, and contemporary international affairs without offering a comprehensive examination of the world's most influential religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Chapin 2015; Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson, and Thomas 2003; Nord 2010; Prothero 2010). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS 2014, 202) recognized the pivotal role that religion has played and continues to play, in domestic and world affairs when it asserted that "Religious literacy dispels stereotypes, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and encourages respect for the rights of others to religious liberty."

The NCSS guidelines for teaching about religion in social studies classes—in large part influenced by Supreme Court decisions indicating that teaching about religions is integral to meaningful social studies education—emphasizes that the study about religions should be academic, descriptive, scholarly, and neutral (teachers may not promote nor denigrate religion) and should examine the core beliefs, practices, and impact of religions on history, politics, law, the humanities, and

contemporary issues. The study of religions must distinguish "between confessional and historical fact" and examine the relationship of religions to broader political, economic, and social institutions (NCSS 2014). It is crucial that all citizens understand the core beliefs, values, obligations, and rituals of the major religions; this is paramount to understanding the politics and cultures of civilizations, geographic regions, and countries.

Furthermore, the study of religions should promote tolerance, respect for diversity, and student knowledge and understanding, not conformity. Qualified teachers should use pedagogically sound methods, materials, and activities that promote critical thinking and research skills, questioning, and communication skills. A well-educated citizen must possess knowledge about comparative religions to understand references in literature, art, music, and politics (NCSS 2014). Religious affiliations and beliefs impact public policies in law, health care, welfare, criminal justice, immigration, and education.

Associate Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark affirmed the right of educators to teach about religion when, writing for the majority opinion in the *Abington School District v. Schempp* decision, he stated:

It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we

have said here indicates that the Bible or religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment (Haynes et al. 2003, 51).

Associate Justice William Brennan, writing in a concurring opinion in the 1963 *Abington School District v. Schempp* case, argued that it would be “impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion” (*Abington Township v. Schempp*, 301). If students are to acquire an intellectually sophisticated understanding of history and contemporary society, as well as developing tolerance for diversity and respect for religious liberty, they must have knowledge of the basic beliefs, rituals, symbols, and historical role of the world’s major religions (Haynes et al. 2003).

For example, students cannot comprehend the creation of the United States without a solid knowledge about Christianity and its influence on European and American culture, politics, capitalism, and law. The propagation of Protestant Christianity in the colonies, the evolution of democratic thought (with an emphasis on the idea that rights originate with God and not government), the abolition movement, efforts to ban alcohol, the creation of social welfare programs, and the Civil Rights Movement were all deeply influenced by Christianity and its core tenets of equality, love, social justice, and compassion (Schweikart and Allen 2004). In fact, dissent—a core virtue in Protestantism—has become ingrained in American politics and is essential to the democratic process.

Nevertheless, an examination of American history textbooks reveals that religion is virtually ignored, distorted, or marginalized in many important historical events (Carter 1993; NCSS 2014; Nord 2010; Prothero 2010; Schweikart and Allen 2004). For instance, students exposed to many textbooks would not have any understanding of the importance of Christianity to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s (Prothero 2010). The primary motivation for Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders was their unshakeable faith in a loving and just God who would guide them in their difficult quest for equality and social justice. This critically important fact is often absent from the social studies curriculum and leaves students mournfully ignorant of historical truths (Nord 2010).

Therefore, to no one’s surprise, research studies and surveys show American students are woefully ignorant about religion and its pivotal role in history, politics, international affairs, law, and culture (Pew Research Center 2010; Prothero 2007). Moreover, many citizens are misinformed about judicial decisions on the proper role of religion in public schools. Many Americans continue to believe that the “separation between church and state” is absolute and that there is no role for religion in public schools or public spaces (Nord 2010; Nord and Haynes

1998; Prothero 2010). This is patently false, and social studies teachers would be committing educational malfeasance if they omitted teaching about religion from their classrooms because of fears of controversy, parental complaints, or misguided notions about the First Amendment.

Recently, there has been an increased focus on Islam spawned by demography—the world Muslim population of 1.2 billion is expected to expand to 2.2 billion by 2030 (Pew Research Center 2011)—and the perversion of Islam by a small, but nevertheless dangerous, minority who have used violence and terrorism to achieve their political and religious goals. Likewise, Islam plays a pivotal role in politics in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia (the Hindu and Muslim conflicts between India and Pakistan have simmered since 1948 and are dangerous, given that both nations possess nuclear weapons), Southeast Asia, and Europe. Finally, Islam, like all major religions, is worthy of study for its cultural impact on countries and regions, its role in history, the intellectual and moral aspects of its ideas and values, and contributions to human civilization in the sciences, literature, medicine, and the arts and humanities. However, research indicates that Americans know very little about Islam and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are pervasive and harmful (Aslan 2011; Prothero 2007).

Therefore, this article examines the rationale for teaching about Islam in social studies courses and explains the primary differences between Sunni Islam and Shi’ite Islam, an often overlooked, but critically important, aspect of Islamic history and contemporary world politics. The article also discusses how teachers can help reduce prejudice and discrimination against the “other” by organizing social studies content to break stereotypes and increase historical knowledge. Finally, the article integrates teaching about Islam with the NCSS thematic standards; this will provide social studies teachers with ideas for linking content with the important themes of economics, history, government/civics, and geography.

### The Rationale for Teaching about Islam in Social Studies Classes

For most Americans, Islam remains a poorly understood religion, and Muslims are often stereotyped as misogynists, religious fanatics, terrorists, and a mysterious “Other” that represents a direct threat to Western civilization (Aslan 2011; Findley 2001; Pew Research Center 2009a). The vast majority of Americans receive their information on Islam from the popular media, which often misrepresents Islamic beliefs and practices and perpetuates myths, distortions, and misconceptions (Aslan 2011; Feldman 2003; Findley 2001; Smith 2013). Media bias, distortions, omissions, and misinformation—from both sides of the political spectrum—must be countered by a comprehensive education program that is objective, academic, and

presents a multitude of competing views (Smith 2013). Many non-Muslim Americans feel threatened by Islam and are suspicious of American Muslims; a volatile combination that could aggravate religious tensions in the United States and throughout the Islamic world (Aslan 2011; Barrett 2007; Feldman 2003; Findley 2001; Pew Research Center 2010).

According to a 2010 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, Americans hold conflicting views about Islam; only 30 percent have a favorable view of Islam, whereas 38 percent hold an unfavorable view. It is interesting that 32 percent of respondents expressed no opinion or are uncertain of their views. These figures reflect the poll's finding that 55 percent of Americans say they know very little (30 percent) or nothing at all (30 percent) about Islam. This is untenable in a democracy; informed citizens who participate in civic life are the heart of a viable and functioning free society. The suspicions by non-Muslim Americans about American Muslims are indicative of the stereotypes, misinformation, and ignorance that characterize debates surrounding Islam in the United States (Aslan 2011). It is important that students understand that violent and radical Muslims who engage in terrorist acts are no more representative of Islam than the Ku Klux Klan is representative of Christianity.

These anti-Muslim views are at odds with empirical data; American Muslims, regardless of sect, have assimilated into the American mainstream—they participate in the democratic process, follow American laws, and participate in social activities like their fellow non-Muslim citizens—and have retained their religious identity while making important economic, scientific, and cultural contributions to the United States (Aslan 2008; Cornell 1999; Feldman 2003; Findley 2001; Pew Research Center 2007). The vast majority of American Muslims reject terrorism and violence in the name of Islam (Pew Research Center 2009c). This is a crucial point that educators must make in their classes to help reduce prejudice and common stereotypes about Muslims.

Simultaneously, there is growing concern in the United States about rising Islamic terrorism and extremism at home and abroad (Pew Research Center 2014); 62 percent of Americans are very concerned with the global rise of Islamic extremism, and 53 percent are very concerned about increasing Islamic extremism in the United States; the latter figure ties a record high (Pew Research Center 2014). ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is using social media—Twitter and Facebook are being used to post violent videos, threaten its enemies, and spread propaganda—to recruit young people in the United States, especially disaffected immigrant Muslims and others experiencing economic problems and cultural confusion (Siegel 2014). For example, ISIS is attempting to recruit Somalis who have migrated to Minnesota—initially, the federal government assigns legal refugees a location and this state offers expansive social services—and are

sympathetic to radicalization against the West. Some of these people have gone to fight for ISIS in Syria and Iraq (Yuccas 2014). ISIS is a Sunni militant group at war with the Shi'a Muslim Iraqi government and Shi'a militias; its ideology is rooted in the teachings and traditions of seventh-century Islam (Wood 2015). ISIS, like some other Sunni sects, regards Shi'ites as apostates; thus, ISIS has Muslims and non-Muslims for death based on their extreme ideology. Adults and students must understand that the current conflagration in Iraq and Syria is spawned, in part, by bitter sectarian differences—not all Muslims agree on required beliefs and practices—not amenable to compromise (Wood 2015). This is a vital distinction that teachers must make in class if students are to understand that Islam is far from a monolithic religion and complex nuances, as well as major schisms, are inherent in all religious traditions.

Efforts to achieve intercultural understanding, religious and cultural tolerance, and peace have been hampered by the long history of conflict between the West and the Islamic world (Armour 2003; Huntington 1996; Lewis 2003), the complexities of understanding religious ideas and practices, ethnocentrism, the behaviors of some extremists who have unjustly conscripted Islam to justify terrorist acts throughout the world, and profound disagreements among scholars—that trickle down to secondary teachers and hinder efforts to develop historically accurate curricula regarding the role of Islam in world history—over the true nature of Islam and its relationship to the West, particularly the United States (Lewis 2003; Pipes 2003; Wheatcroft 2004). However, it is vital that secondary students study Islam and other religions to gain an understanding of historical complexities and the fact that experts often disagree over historical facts, causation, and the consequences of events, laws, and policies.

Finally, it is important to note that increased knowledge about Islam and Muslims (or any cultural group) is not, necessarily, enough to improve relationships or change attitudes and behaviors. In fact, increased knowledge could actually increase tensions if the contact among groups is based on unequal power or oppression, competition for scarce resources, and a high degree of cultural dissimilarity. The more dissimilar the cultures in values, practices, beliefs, and rituals, the more likely there will be conflicts or violence (Marger 2011). These findings are true whether the cultural differences are rooted in race, ethnicity, religion, or culture; historically, groups most similar to the dominant Anglo-American culture experienced significantly lower rates of discrimination (Marger 2011). For example, groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, often experienced virulent forms of discrimination based on stark physical and cultural differences from the dominant white Anglo-Saxon culture (Marger 2011).

## The Sunni

The schism between Sunni Muslims (Sunni are so named because they follow the Sunna, or traditional teachings and sayings of Muhammad and accept the first four caliphs, or leaders, as legitimate successors to Muhammad) and Shi'a Muslims (also known as Shi'a-t-Ali, or the "party of Ali) began with the death of Muhammad in 632. The dispute centered on who should follow Muhammad as the political leader of the Muslim community and was not related to any theological differences at that time (Brown 2009; Lewis and Churchill 2009).

Following Muhammad's death in 632, the Muslim leaders chose Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, to become caliph—the political leader of the Muslim community charged with keeping the Muslim community united as a single polity (Donner 1999; Prothero 2010). For the Sunnis, the new caliph had to be a male, a member of the Quraysh tribe (Muhammad's tribe), and possess the ability to keep the Muslim community united in the face of numerous existential internal and external threats (Aslan 2011). Abu Bakr saw the Caliphate as a secular position; he believed that he should serve as a military leader and chief judge (both positions inherited from Muhammad) but was not a primary source of religious authority (Aslan 2011).

Abu Bakr's Caliphate and that of his successor, Umar, were highly successful in military campaigns carried out against the "false prophets" and Arab tribes who rebelled after Muhammad's death by refusing to pay taxes and renounced their conversion to Islam (Aslan 2011). Thus, the Riddah Wars, as these military incursions came to be known, were successful in keeping the Arab tribes united under Islam and the political authority of the Caliphate; this was a crucial achievement considering that Islam—as both a new religion and political force—was in its embryonic stage and thus vulnerable to disintegration from internal or external forces. Umar's reign (r. 634–644) was characterized by the rapid expansion of Islam into non-Arab lands. He conquered southern Syria, defeated the Sasanian (Persian) Empire, Egypt, Libya, and Jerusalem; Umar recognized that the newly converted Muslims must be treated fairly to defuse rebellious sentiments spawned by conquest. Thus, he treated the conquered ethnic groups with respect and made them full members of the Ummah and tried to eliminate all ethnic differences between Arab and non-Arabs (Aslan 2011).

As Islam expanded under Muhammad's successors, Sunni Islam became dominant with the rule of the "Rightly Guided" four caliphs viewed as legitimate successors to Muhammad. In a little over a century, Islam—via military conquests and conversions—spread from Medina (a holy city in Arabia) to the entire Middle East, North Africa, Spain, and Southwest Asia (de Blij, Muller, and Nijman 2014). By 1600 Islam expanded to dominate most of India (the Mogul Empire) and Indonesia; it also became

a minority faith in China by 1600. Today, Sunni Muslims account for 87–90 percent, or about 1.4 billion Muslims, of the global Muslim population (Pew Research Center 2009b). However, it is important to note that Sunni Islam is not a monolithic entity; four different schools of law and doctrine developed as Islam expanded (Lewis and Churchill 2009). Furthermore, as Islam diffused into Africa, other regions of the Middle East, and Asia, it changed, and was modified by, contact with highly diverse cultures. Thus, Sunni Islam developed a relatively high degree of tolerance for diversity. Of course, tolerance for diversity has its limits: Polytheism and apostasy are grave violations that carry severe punishments. Monotheism, fasting, the five daily prayers, charity, and the pilgrimage to Mecca unite all Muslims, regardless of sect or legal differences.

## The Development of Shi'a Beliefs and Practices

After Muhammad died without a male heir or explicitly naming his successor (this is, of course, disputed by Shi'ites), the Ummah was torn on who should replace the last Prophet of Allah. There were some people who believed that Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, had a genealogical right to inherit the Caliphate; these supporters of Ali's claim came to be called the Shi'a, or the "party of Ali" (Brown 2009; Lewis and Churchill 2009). In fact, the Shi'a believed that Muhammad, on his way home from his last pilgrimage, did name Ali his successor at a speech at Ghadir Khumm, Arabia on March 10, 632, when he stated "He of whom I am the patron, of him Ali is also the patron" (Brown 2009, 131). The Shi'ites have interpreted this to mean that Muhammad named Ali as his successor, reflecting the divine will of Allah. Shi'ites assert that the successors to Muhammad, known as Imams, who are direct descendants of Ali and his wife Fatima, are infallible religious leaders ordained by Allah and are the only legitimate sources for religious practices and instruction (Welch 2010).

Ali's eldest son, Hasan, realizing that Mu'awiyah had secured his position as Caliph and had vastly superior military forces, made peace with the leader of the Umayyad Empire with the understanding that after Mu'awiyah's death the Caliphate would be decided by a consensus of the Muslim community (Aslan 2011). Between 661 and his death in 680, Mu'awiyah initiated several reforms that transformed the Caliphate into a powerful and absolutist monarchy that had tight control over the military, policy-making, and finances. After Mu'awiyah died in 680, his son Yazid became Caliph. This historic event marked the end of hope for a united Muslim community and initiated the Second Civil War from 680 until 692, a continuation of the First Civil War based on the same critical issue: Who should lead the Ummah and what, exactly, are the criteria for leadership (Aslan 2011)?

Yazīd's succession angered many in the Ummah because dynastic succession was frowned upon in the Arab world and Yazīd was perceived as insufficiently pious (Brown 2009). In 680 Hasan, Ali's younger son, was murdered and decapitated in Karbala by Yazīd's troops who were ordered to stop him from arriving in Kufa to aid the anti-Umayyad rebellion (Aslan 2011). This slaughter of the Prophet's grandson produced insurrection across the Empire and provided the Shi'a with a profound act of martyrdom that contributed to the transformation of the Shi'a into a distinct religious sect (Aslan 2011). Moreover, they began to believe that they were an oppressed political subgroup within the Muslim community, and Shi'ism developed as a religion to seek justice in the face of extreme subjugation (Aslan 2011; Donner 1999).

In 684 a small group of Penitents (*tawwabun*) gathered in Karbala to mourn the death of Husayn, and, in part, to atone for their failure to help him in the battle of Karbala against Yazīd (Aslan 2011). This display of public guilt expressed via emotional lamentations was unprecedented in Islam and served to absolve the Penitents for their sins (Aslan 2011). Every year, on Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, the Shi'a commemorate Husayn's martyrdom by telling stories, participating in mourning processions and passion plays that dramatize the events of October 10, 680, and take part in funeral possessions in which they beat their chests in an act of contrition or flog themselves with whips or chains while chanting the names of Hasan and Husayn (Aslan 2011, 183). Of course, the Sunnis reject these practices as religious innovation (*bid'a*) and this demonstrates the primary difference between Sunni and Shi'a: The Shi'a believe that "salvation requires the intercession of Muhammad, his son-in-law Ali, his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, and the rest of the Prophet's legitimate successors, the Imams, who not only serve as humanity's intercessors on the Last Days, but who further function as the eternal executors of the divine Revelation (Aslan 2011, 184).

Slowly, other differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites evolved that continue to distinguish the two major sects in Islam. For example, the Shi'ites allow the veneration of saints, sanction the practice of temporary marriage (*mut'a*), a contract for marriage that may range from one day to a few years (the Sunnis reject this as a legal form of prostitution) to accommodate people on long journeys away from home (sexual relations outside of marriage are not sanctioned in Islam). Shi'ites also practice the doctrine of *taqiyya*—dissimulation, the disguising of one's true goals, beliefs, or thoughts in the face of persecution—as a coping mechanism as an oppressed minority in need of protection; many Shi'ites claim that this is supported in the Quran: 16:106 (Lewis and Churchill 2009).

Most Shi'ites believe that there have been twelve divinely inspired Imams—infallible and sinless individuals chosen by Allah who have special religious wisdom and

represent the living spirit of Muhammad—and are above any temporal rulers (Aslan 2011). Shi'ites believe that the twelfth imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi went into hiding (*ghayba*) in 874 and will return at the end of time (Brown 2009). These beliefs constitute a significant departure from Sunni Islam and explain, in part, the conflicts between Sunni-dominated states and the Shi'a dominated states of Iran and Iraq. Over the course of history, there have been some significant differences among various Shi'ite factions that continue to be divisive, but these differences are beyond the scope of this article.

What started as a purely political rift over succession to Muhammad eventually led to some differences in law, theology, and rituals. For example, the profession of faith for Shi'ites is "There is no god but God, Muhammad is God's Messenger, and Ali is God's Executor (*wali*)" (Aslan 2011, 185). The addition of the phrase with Ali distinguishes the Sunni profession of faith from the Shi'ite version. Shi'ites are more demonstrable in their rituals and allow self-flagellation to atone for sins, such as the failure of the Penitents to help Husayn in Karbala in 680. Generally, both sects accept monotheism, follow the five pillars of Islam, read the Quran (although interpretations may differ), and consider each other Muslims; although some Sunnis, such as the Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia, consider Shi'ites to be apostates, which fuels hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Currently, the Sunni and Shi'ite schism fuses some religious differences with geopolitics, especially in the Middle East, that has created a frequently violent and hostile region; these differences have been exacerbated by external intrusions into this region by several European powers and the United States.

However, it would be accurate to claim that the real contemporary differences between the two major sects of Islam are spawned by Sunni domination and the oppression of Shi'ites in Muslim countries. Iran is the exception to this generalization, where Shi'ites are about 95 percent of the population and are politically, economically, and socially dominant (Lewis and Churchill 2009). Since 1979 Iran has been a theology based on *sharia* law and represents the main threat to Sunni states.

### Sunnis and Shi'ites in the Contemporary World

Currently, the Middle East is torn by ethnic, religious, and geopolitical divisions that have been exacerbated by the competition for oil and natural gas and the colonial partition of the region after World War I (de Blij, Muller, and Nijman 2014). Sunni Muslims constitute about 87 percent of the global Muslim population and Shi'ites are about 13 percent. Shi'ites constitute a majority in Iran (ca. 95 percent), Azerbaijan (65–75 percent), Bahrain (65–75 percent), Iraq (50 percent), and Lebanon (45–55 percent); simultaneously, there are Shi'a minorities in Saudi Arabia,

India, Yemen, and Pakistan (Lewis and Churchill 2009; Pew Research Center 2014).

The Sunni and Shi'ite schism in Iraq exploded with the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and the long-oppressed Shi'a have been engaged in overt and covert operations against the Sunnis since 2003 (Mansfield 2013). Sectarian and tribal differences, hitherto controlled by the brutal Hussein dictatorship, led to the virtual disintegration of Iraq, which is now under attack by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), a violent Sunni faction that is beheading, enslaving, and conquering large parcels of territory in their attempt to reestablish the Sunni Caliphate under sharia law (Mansfield 2013; Wood 2015). ISIS will kill Shi'ites, Sunnis they deem insufficiently pious, Christians, and others who stand in their way; ISIS presents a major threat to the entire region and poses difficult policy decision for the United States. Iraq was never a country united by a strong national bond; sectarian and tribal identities always undermined any sense of national unity (Mansfield 2013).

Iran is the most powerful and populous Shi'ite country in the world; 90–95 percent of Iran's 75 million people are Shi'ites (Pew Research Center 2014). Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia—a country that practices Wahhabism, the most conservative form of Sunni Islam and considers Shi'ites to be heretics—have a deep-rooted hostility to Shi'ite Iran and their prudent fear of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and have welcomed American protection (Rossi 2008). Moreover, at least 40 percent of Muslims surveyed in North Africa and the Middle East assert that Shi'ites are not Muslims (Pew Research Center 2012). Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups classified as terrorist groups by the United States—an ardent foe of Iran since the 1979 revolution that established a theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini—were created to help Iran destroy Israel and drive out Western countries (Phares 2007; Rossi 2008).

Thus, 1,400 years after the Sunni and Shi'ite schism began over the proper succession to Muhammad, sectarian differences, over many centuries, fused with theological and legal disagreements, tribal loyalties, and the geopolitics of oil continue to render the Middle East an extremely volatile region (Mansfield 2013; Rossi 2008). The Palestinian and Israeli conflict, Pakistan's internal struggle between moderate and radical Islam, and terrorist attacks in England, India, Indonesia, and Spain all contribute to the volatility. Though the Sunni and Shi'ite schism originated in the Middle East, the expansion of Islam across Africa and Asia aggravates the schism.

Furthermore, there are bitter disagreements among various Muslim groups over the correct path for the future. There are hardline Islamists (fundamentalists) calling for the revival of traditional Islam and the restoration of Islamic values and law as the proper course to combat godless secularism, colonial exploitation, and the encroachment of Western values—feminism, tolerance for

homosexuality, rampant materialism—deemed un-Islamic (Aslan 2008; Bukay 2008; De Blij, Nijman, and Muller 2014). Then there are Muslim secularists calling for democratic reform characterized by separation between mosque and state (of course, this is considered heresy by many Muslims), gender equality, and representative democracy that would allow Islam to adapt to modern realities (Brown 2009; De Blij, Nijman, and Muller 2014; Lewis 2003).

Finally, there are violent and radical Muslim extremists who call for *jihād* (a complex term meaning “struggle” or holy war in defense of Islam) to restore the Caliphate (De Blij, Nijman, and Muller 2014). All these groups—fundamentalists, reformers, and extremists—may contain Sunni, Shi'ite, and other sects in their ranks, confirming this truism about Islam: it is an incredibly diverse faith characterized by profound differences in historical experiences, geography, political ideology, racial/ethnic identity, theology, and law. Understanding these differences and the intricacies of religion and politics is of vital national security to the United States.

### Implications for Social Studies Education

Generally, the teaching of Islam in the United States has been characterized by numerous stereotypes, distortions, omissions, textbook inaccuracies, and within the boundaries of Western Civilization's politically motivated narrative (Douglass and Dunn 2003; Esposito 1998; Findley 2001; Prothero 2010; Wheeler 2003). Many Americans are profoundly ignorant about Islam and often conflate Islam—a complex religion characterized by specific theologies, laws, and practices—with terrorism and political regimes that unjustly conscript Islam to justify their oppressive policies and practices (Douglass and Dunn 2003; Findley 2001; Haddad 1999; Hasan 2000; Kassam 2003; Levin and McDevitt 2002; Nord 2010). For example, the Sunni and Shi'ite schism is poorly understood in the United States, yet it is a fundamental cause of war, violence, and conflict in the Middle East (as well as other world regions, such as Africa), and students must acquire some basic knowledge about this sectarian schism if they are to have any meaningful understand of the region and the role of Islam in world politics.

Anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination stem from entrenched stereotypes and ignorance, often perpetuated by the media and inaccurate educational practices and materials that characterize Muslims as anti-American, prone to violence, and supporters or participants in terrorist activities (Aslan 2008; Marger 2011; Prothero 2010). Seeing Muslims as the “Other”—groups viewed as physically and/or culturally inferior—has, historically, allowed for numerous forms of discrimination, ranging from slavery, segregation, and miscegenation to violence and

genocide (Banks and Banks 2012; Gollnick and Chinn 2013; Marger 2011; Myers 2007).

In addition, incorporating religious education would further some of the primary goals of multicultural education—reducing prejudice and discrimination, respect and tolerance for cultural differences, providing equal educational opportunities to all cultural groups, including the narratives, stories, and identifying the contributions of non-Christian minorities to the American nation (Banks and Banks 2012). The increase in religious diversity will require students to learn about all major religions and recognize there are multiple perspectives about morality, government, law, and education that reflect deeply held religious beliefs. For many Americans, their religious identity trumps all other forms of identity, and educators must understand the importance of religion to many students (Gollnick and Chinn 2013).

In the months following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC, there were hundreds of incidents of violence, intimidation, and discrimination aimed at Muslims or people that “looked” like Muslims (Levin and McDevitt 2002). Apparently, people of color or individuals speaking with an accent were signaled out for attacks by perpetrators of hate crimes unconcerned with the fact that the vast majority of Muslims reject terrorism and violence. Moreover, these attacks, including murders and vandalism against mosques and temples, were carried out by individuals who did not know or care that there are profound differences among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and other religious, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Levin and McDevitt 2002). This exacerbates attempts to ascertain the causes and nature of discrimination and violence directed at minority groups; for example, attacks on Muslims could be based on religion, race, nationality, or some combination of these factors.

Research indicates that teachers can help reduce prejudice and discrimination against various religious, racial, and ethnic groups by including positive content about all groups and their contributions to human civilization (Banks and Banks 2012). Exposing students to people from different groups and showing how all human beings have powerful shared interests can alleviate negative stereotypes and improve attitudes. This is why cooperative learning that mixes racial, ethnic, sex, economic, and other categories is so beneficial: Students get to know the “other” (in this case, Muslims) as individuals—their moral and legal equal with common human traits—and not a stereotypical terrorist (Gollnick and Chinn 2013). Simultaneously, teachers should instruct students that throughout history no cultural group has a monopoly on great achievements or barbaric behaviors.

Nevertheless, despite pervasive stereotypes and the difficult choices over designing an appropriate curriculum, scholars generally agree there are some core values, beliefs, historical events, and practices that characterize Islam and

should be part of the secondary school curriculum (Wheeler 2003). Most scholars agree students should know the theological meaning of Islam, the transcendence and indivisibility of Allah, the role of Muhammad and his deeds and sayings (*hadith*), the importance of the Quran to Islam, *Shariah* (law), the Five Pillars of Islam, the Six Pillars of Faith, the contributions of Muslims to world civilization, and the reasons for the rapid expansion of Islam, and the divisions within Islam between Sunnis and Shi’ites (Nord and Haynes 1998; Wheeler 2003). Of course, students, if they are to understand major historical events and current international affairs, must understand the conflicts and competition between Islam and Christianity spawned by different theological and political worldviews (Armour 2003; Haddad 1999; Lewis 2003; Pipes 2003).

### Islam and the NCSS Thematic Standards

The NCSS thematic standards are based on the social science disciplines. The new C3 Framework (NCSS 2013) focuses on history (primarily, American, world, and European history), civics (the focus is on American government and citizenship), economics (the emphasis is on basic macroeconomic and microeconomic concepts), and geography (attention is given to political geography, population issues, environmental geography, and cultural geography). Because social studies education is an interdisciplinary field, other disciplines, such as sociology and global issues, can be incorporated into all lesson plans. The following examples are drawn from the NCSS thematic standards and demonstrate how content knowledge can be fused with specific social studies methods and activities that offer students a holistic education encompassing vital didactic, reflective, and affective goals, as well as the NCSS requirements and state standards.

An effective method for teaching about Islam (and other religions) in social studies would integrate content with the NCSS thematic standards, such as economics. For example, Islam teaches that compassion for the poor is essential and mandates that Muslims give 2.5 percent of their income to charity; this tax, known as *zakat*, reflects a commitment to social justice, equality, and the unity of all humanity. Educators could create economic lesson plans that examine the impact of Islamic religious thought on poverty, income distribution, and the moral responsibility of communities in alleviating poverty and its devastating impact on individuals and families. Furthermore, it would be prudent for teachers to demonstrate how governments, including the United States, have created social welfare programs—social security, food banks, medical care, free school lunches, financial aid to poor families—based on religiously inspired ideas of compassion, social justice, and equality. Both the Quran and the Bible attest to the importance of these virtues in numerous passages; both Western and Islamic civilizations have incorporated these religious



ideas into their economic and political systems. Nord (2010) asserts that his review of economics textbooks used in social studies classes demonstrated that there was almost no discussion of religion regarding economic issues. This is fertile ground for teachers to correct this historically grievous error and to demonstrate that individuals representing all points on the political spectrum often base their economic and political behaviors based on religious beliefs.

One of the biggest academic debates about Islam is its compatibility with democracy and modernity (Aslan 2008; Bukay 2008; Feldman 2003; Huntington 1996; Pipes 2003). Some scholars (Bukay 2008; Huntington 1996) assert that because Islam is a theocracy, it is not compatible with democracy. Others (Aslan 2008; Feldman 2003) argue that American Muslims participate in democracy and maintain their faith, thus demonstrating that Islam is compatible with modern democracy. Government or history teachers could use these profound disagreements among scholars to demonstrate that highly educated experts will often hold very divergent views; it would be beneficial for students to understand that social studies and other disciplines (including the hard sciences) are complex and controversial and that human knowledge is flawed and human judgment is fallible. The Sunni and Shi'ite schism provides teachers with great opportunities to demonstrate that Islam (like all major religions), far from a monolithic religion, is characterized by sharp and bitter divisions over theology, law, and rituals that continue to exert a profound influence in world politics.

A world history teacher could develop lesson plans that demonstrate the numerous and highly influential contributions of Islam to human civilization. One of the best instructional methods for increasing knowledge, fostering tolerance, and reducing prejudice is teaching the important contributions of different cultures to human civilization. The current political, cultural, and economic problems that exist in many Muslim countries should in no way detract from the remarkable past cultural achievements of Islamic civilizations in a wide variety of disciplines (Findley 2001; Hotaling 2003; Lewis 2003; Lyons 2010; Sayre 2015).

For example, Muslim mathematicians, using Hindi numerals, developed algebra and made significant contributions to geometry and trigonometry. These mathematical achievements, along with Muslim competence in engineering and art, manifested themselves in the brilliant architectural achievements of Islamic civilizations, such as the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Taj Mahal in Agra, India (Dallal 1999; Lyons 2010). In addition, Muslim scholars made advances in the science of optics, practical astronomy, geography, improved the astrolabe (an instrument used by sailors to measure latitude), created accurate maps of the Eastern Hemisphere, developed alchemy, and produced *The Canon*

*of Medicine*, a monumental volume that attempted to summarize all of the medical knowledge into one comprehensive structure (Dallal 1999; Lyons 2010). These few examples of contributions to human civilization demonstrate the intellectual vitality of Islam and the vital role of cultural diffusion in producing cultural, scientific, technological, and artistic progress.

Teaching American secondary school students about these achievements, as well as the prominent role of contemporary American and non-American Muslims in science, computer technology, engineering, medicine, and business, will help to reduce the prejudice and discrimination directed at Muslims (Barrett 2007; Findley, 2001; Hotaling, 2003; Pew Research Center 2007). While many Muslim societies have experienced severe political, social, and economic problems during the past few centuries, it would be grossly unjust to ignore, distort, or denigrate the remarkable achievements of Islamic civilizations (Lewis 2003). Historical knowledge about Islam, the educational and socioeconomic success of many Muslims in America, and the ability to recognize the great diversity in Islamic civilizations—including the profound difference between militant/radical Islam and moderate Islam—may help secondary school students to dispel some of the most insidious myths and stereotypes that haunt the world's 1.2 billion Muslims (Feldman 2003; Findley 2001; NCSS 2014).

Finally, geography (one of the four major themes, along with history, economics, and government/civics, constitute the core disciplines of the NCSS (2014) new "C3 Framework" that accentuates the role of inquiry projects based on compelling and supporting questions, research, data analysis, communication, and recommending actions and policies) is vital in explaining how Islam became a global religion. Shortly after Muhammad's death in 632, Arab conquerors spread Islam throughout North Africa, southwest and central Asia, and Iberia (Brown 2009; Fregosi 1998; Lewis 2003). This rapid expansion of Islam, owing primarily to military conquests and the appeal of Islamic values, such as equality, social justice, and monotheism, produced enormous cultural exchanges with the Persian and Byzantine empires, India, and Greece (Brown 2009). Islamic society developed by incorporating various elements of these cultures to produce a truly multicultural civilization; simultaneously, the Islamic religion transformed the cultural traditions of the conquered societies and created the *dar-el-Islam*—the "house of Islam" that refers to areas under Islamic sovereignty (Brown 2009).

Thus, many Islamic achievements are the product of indigenous efforts and the dynamic processes of cultural diffusion (a key concept in geography and anthropology) that have characterized world history. This important lesson will help students learn that there is a symbiotic relationship among civilizations that binds humanity; unity and diversity are both important components in producing human conflicts, cooperation, and progress. Effective

teaching methods include the use of primary sources (the Qur'an, the Hadith) and vetted secondary sources to show the historical events, beliefs, rituals, values, contradictions, and complexities inherent in any religious tradition. Teachers must inform students that interpretations of religious documents (hermeneutics) is difficult—the passage of time, linguistic differences, modern sensibilities, and skepticism regarding accuracy—and they should exercise caution in drawing conclusions.

Another method, bound to create discussions and stimulate critical thinking, is for educators to structure class debates over controversial issues. This can be achieved by selecting competing narratives (the threat, or perceived threat of Islam to the West; the numerous differences in Islamic theology and law; the Sunni and Shi'ite schism, the role of women in Islam; the meaning of terms such as *jihad*) and other issues make for compelling debates and prepare students to take opposing sides. There are numerous reading materials, films, PowerPoint presentations, and other resources that are easily accessible for teachers; caution must be taken to examine all materials for bias and inaccuracies. Many Islamic materials and resources are sponsored by countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia) or groups that have a specific political agenda (Sewall 2008). Of course, this is true for many topics in social studies, and it provides opportunities for teachers to inform students that critical reading and thinking—looking for biases, political agendas, inaccurate materials, faulty logic, and attempts to indoctrinate as opposed to educating—is essential to informed scholarship and civic participation (Chapin 2015).

Finally, teachers can create their own presentations and activities—creating a Jeopardy game involving Islamic history, contributions, geography, vocabulary terms, and other issues in Islam is engaging and educational—that can teach about Islam. A PowerPoint presentation, a Venn diagram, charts, tables, academic articles, and political cartoons are excellent ways to teach the Sunni and Shi'ite schism, as well as other aspects of Islam. Creating a comprehensive unit on Islam would entail fusing the NCSS themes with the rich content inherent in history; given the plethora of resources and the Internet would facilitate acquiring materials and activities. This unit plan should highlight the rise and historical expansion of Islam, the bitter divisions within Islam, the remarkable achievements in art and architecture, science, literature, mathematics, medicine, and other disciplines. Furthermore, the unit plan should focus on the conflicts between Islam and the West (stressing that the West has often been at war with itself) and the current problems with radical and violent Islamists.

The resources used in this article represent a wide variety of views—often contradictory, confusing, and controversial—that can help teachers acquire knowledge and materials for teaching about Islam and other world religions. The Sunni and Shi'ite schism is critical to understanding

Islam, Middle Eastern history and politics, and it is important for American citizens to increase their knowledge and understanding of Islam. A comprehensive examination of the world's major religions will provide students with specific knowledge and thinking skills that will enhance informed civic participation in issues that are vital to citizenship.

## References

- Abington Township v. Schempp*. 374 US 301. 1963.
- Armour, R. *Islam, Christianity, and the West: A Troubled History*. New York: Orbis Books, 2003.
- Aslan, R. "Islam Is Compatible with Democracy." In *Islamic Fundamentalism*, edited by D. M. Haugen, 89–99. New York: Greenhaven Press, 2008.
- Aslan, R. *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2011.
- Banks, J., and C. A. M. Banks. *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*. 8th ed. New York: Wiley, 2012.
- Barrett, P. M. *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Brown, D. W. *A New Introduction to Islam*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Bukay, D. "Islam Is Not Compatible with Democracy." In *Islamic Fundamentalism*, edited by D. M. Haugen, 100–11. New York: Greenhaven Press, 2008.
- Carter, S. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Chapin, J. *Middle and Secondary Social Studies*. 4th ed. New York: Pearson, 2015.
- Cornell, V. J. "Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge." In *The Oxford History of Islam*, edited by J. L. Esposito, 63–105. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Dallal, A. "Science, Medicine, and Technology: The Making of a Scientific Culture." In *The Oxford History of Islam*, edited by J. L. Esposito, 155–213. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- De Blij, H. J., P. O. Muller, and J. Nijman. *Geography: Regions, Realms, and Concepts*. 16th ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2014.
- Donner, F. M. 1999. "Muhammad and the Caliphate: Political History of the Islamic Empire up to the Mongol Conquest." In *The Oxford History of Islam*, edited by J. L. Esposito, 1–61. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Douglass, S. L., and R. E. Dunn. "Interpreting Islam in American Schools." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 588, no. 1 (2003): 52–72.
- Esposito, J. L. *Islam: The Straight Path*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Feldman, N. *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003.
- Findley, P. *Silent No More: Confronting America's False Images of Islam*. Beltsville, MD: Amana Press, 2001.
- Fregosi, P. *Jihad in the West: Muslim Conquest from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1998.
- Gollnick, D. M., and P. C. Chinn. *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*. 9th ed. New York: Pearson, 2013.
- Haddad, Y. Y. "The Globalization of Islam: The Return of Muslims to the West." In *The Oxford History of Islam*, edited by J. L. Esposito, 601–41. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Hasan, A. G. *American Muslims: The New Generation*. New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Haynes, C. C., S. Chaltain, J. E. Ferguson, D. L. Hudson, and O. Thomas. *The First Amendment in Schools: A Guide from the*

- First Amendment Center. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003.
- Hotaling, E. *Islam without Illusions*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003.
- Huntington, S. P. *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1996.
- Kassam, T. R. "Teaching Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." In *Teaching Islam*, edited by B. M. Wheeler, 191–215. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Levin, J., and J. McDevitt. *Hate Crimes Revisited: America's War against Those Who Are Different*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2002.
- Lewis, B. *The Crisis of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Lewis, B., and B. E. Churchill. *Islam: The Religion and the People*. New York: Wharton Publishing, 2009.
- Lyons, J. *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.
- Mansfield, P. *A History of the Middle East*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.
- Marger, M. N. *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives*. 9th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2011.
- Myers, J. P. *Dominant-Minority Relations in America*. 2nd ed. New York: Pearson, 2007.
- National Council for the Social Studies. 2013. "College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History." 2013. <http://www.socialstudies.org/c3> (accessed March 27, 2015).
- National Council for the Social Studies. "Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum." 2014. [http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/positionstatements/Study\\_about\\_Religion\\_s\\_in\\_the\\_Social\\_Studies\\_Curriculum.pdf](http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/positionstatements/Study_about_Religion_s_in_the_Social_Studies_Curriculum.pdf) (accessed February 19, 2015).
- Nord, W. A. *Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in American Schools and Universities*. New York: Oxford Press, 2010.
- Nord, W. A., and C. C. Haynes. *Taking Religion Seriously across the Curriculum*. Nashville, TN: The First Amendment Center, 1998.
- Pew Research Center. 2007. "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream." 2007. <http://www.pewforum.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream2/> (accessed November 7, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "Views of Islam and Violence." 2009a. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/09/09/publicationpage.aspxid1398-3/> (accessed November 7, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "Mapping the Global Muslim Population." 2009b. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed November 6, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "Little Support for Terrorism among American Muslims." 2009c. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/17/little-support-for-terrorism-among-muslim-americans/> (accessed November 7, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam." 2010. <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/08/24/public-remains-conflicted-over-islam/> (accessed November 6, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "The Future of the Global Muslim Population." 2011. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed November 6, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "The World's Muslims Unity and Diversity." 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/> (accessed November 7, 2014).
- Pew Research Center. "The Sunni-Shia Divide: Where They Live, What They Believe and How They View Each Other." 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other/> (accessed November 7, 2014).
- Phares, W. *The War of Ideas: Jihadism against Democracy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
- Pipes, D. *Militant Islam Reaches America*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.
- Prothero, S. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Prothero, S. *God Is Not One*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Rossi, M. *What Every American Should Know about the Middle East*. New York: Penguin Group, 2008.
- Sayre, H. M. *The Humanities: Culture, Change, and Continuity*, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2015.
- Schweikart, L., and M. Allen. *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror*. New York: Sentinel, 2004.
- Sewall, G. T. *Islam in the Classroom: What the Textbooks Tell Us*. New York: American Textbook Council, 2008.
- Siegel, J. "ISIS Is Using Social Media to Reach You, Its New Audience." 2014. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/31/isis-s-use-of-social-media-to-reach-you-its-new-audience.html> (accessed November 6, 2014).
- Smith, C. "Anti-Islamic Sentiments and Media Framing during the 9/11 Decade." *Journal of Religion and Society* 15(2013): 1–5.
- Wheatcroft, A. *Infidels: A History of the Conflict between Christendom and Islam*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- Wheeler, B. M. "What Can't Be Left Out: The Essentials of Teaching Islam as a Religion." In *Teaching Islam*, edited by B. M. Wheeler, 3–21. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Welch, A. T. "Islam." In *The Penguin Handbook of the World's Living Religions*, edited by J. R. Hinnells, 164–237. London: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Wood, G. "What ISIS Really Wants." 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/> (accessed February 26, 2015).
- Yuccas, J. "Minnesota Has Become a Recruiting Ground for Islamic Extremists." 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/minneapolis-has-become-recruiting-ground-for-islamic-extremists/> (accessed November 6, 2014).