

Lessons about religion stir, and are stirred by, suspicion of Islam

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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A Muslim boy gets handcuffed for bringing a clock to school, and a presidential candidate gains instant notoriety with a comment about a Muslim in the White House.

The growth of Islam in America has been accompanied by seemingly limitless suspicion and controversy, as settled citizens, mostly Christian, watch the newcomer faith rise. The latest flare-up in Georgia was magnified because of where it took place: in the schools. Sensitivity is so great that the Georgia Department of Education just removed a teaching guide it had provided to school districts.

Some parents in Walton County [reacted angrily](#) when they learned last month that their children were being taught about Islam in social studies classes.

“This is against my religious beliefs,” said Steven Alsup, whose daughter came home with a worksheet that required her to answer that Christianity, Islam and Judaism all shared something: the “same God.”

“When I’m at church,” Alsup said, “I’m not worshipping Allah.”

That “same God” worksheet was part of the material the state education department removed from its resource list on Wednesday.

This isn’t the first dust-up over religion in school curricula.

In Tennessee, a Congresswoman spoke out after complaints that seventh-graders were studying Islam in a world history course. “There is a big difference between education and indoctrination,” U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., said in a statement reported by [The Tennessean](#) last month. That led to a letter in west Georgia’s [LaGrange Daily News](#) complaining about a “62-slide Power Point presentation on Islam” on the local Troup County School System website — a teacher resource with information about the religion’s history and beliefs.

“Why should our community be subjected to this,” the letter said.

The handcuffing of [Ahmed Mohamed](#), a 14-year-old who brought a partially assembled clock, wires dangling, to his suburban Dallas high school, triggering thoughts of a bomb, demonstrates just how wary Americans still are after the unprecedented act of terrorism here that occurred around the year he was born. Presidential candidate [Ben Carson's](#) comment last month — “I would not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation” — drew swift reaction by opponents and supporters of that notion.

The Walton incident inspired a Facebook page — [Georgia's Islamic Curriculum](#) — that has already attracted more than 3,000 members.

Alsup, a dad at the center of the controversy, said he’s concerned children could be “confused” by what they learn about Islam in school and could wind up joining terrorist movements such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. “They’re not teaching about the radical side of Islam and that’s a big issue,” he said.

The Georgia Department of Education has been requiring schools to teach about Islam, a religion with [1.5 billion](#) adherents, for years. A team of about 20 teachers, social studies curriculum specialists, and university experts wrote the Social Studies Georgia Performance Standards in 2004, in a process that involved public comment, said department spokesman Matt Cardoza.

Kim Embry, a spokeswoman for Walton County Public Schools, was puzzled by the sudden interest in her school district, since all 180 districts in Georgia must cover religion and there'd been no changes in the curriculum.

"If you're learning about the Middle East, it's very difficult not to teach about Islam," Embry said. She acknowledged that teachers spend "a little more time" on Muslims than on Christians and said it's "because nobody knew anything" about Islam.

Walton's curriculum was informed by resources from the state education department, including a [guide](#) with a fact sheet and a sample quiz that say Judaism, Christianity and Islam have the "same" deity with different names (Yaweh, Jehovah and Allah).

The same-God homework, cited in news reports and circulated online, fueled some of the backlash, showing how fraught the topic can be, especially in the Bible Belt.

"To require a public school student to affirm a teacher's judgment about who God is in order to pass a quiz is religiously coercive," the Southern Baptist Convention said in a statement to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Jesus is a prophet in the Muslim tradition but is the son of God for Christians. "To teach otherwise minimizes our core religious belief and establishes the state's interpretation as the proper interpretation of Christian faith," the statement said.

"You can say this is what Muslims believe about God, this is what Christians believe about God and this is what Jews believe about God. That's one thing," the group's spokesman, Sing Oldham, elaborated in an interview Wednesday. "But to say that they're all the same, that's a judgment call."

The Georgia education department reached the same conclusion, yanking the teaching guide from its resource list on Wednesday. "That's not the kind of example we want to put out there," Cardoza, the agency spokesman, said. "The idea is to evaluate, compare and contrast the three religions."

Yet many academics say the three religions do recognize the same God, showing just how tricky this territory can be. The texts of all three trace their lineage through Abraham, said Sandie Gravett, a professor in the department of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State University. Adherents may not be comfortable with that, she added. "That's where the clash is coming from."

Os Guinness, a prolific Protestant author and thinker, said the controversy stems from suspicions about a hidden agenda of schools, the media and other centers of influence: advancing secularism by advocating a "sloppy relativism" in regards to religion.

"Comparative religion makes people comparatively religious," he said. "It undermines what they believe at home."

Guinness does not advocate ignorance of the religions. Rather, he said, schools must provide adequate training so teachers can teach it well.

Saima Ahmad, a Muslim mother from Suwanee sends her children to public school and said she has no problem with her children learning about Christianity and Judaism and the ideas they share with Islam. She wants people to learn that the religious extremists don't represent her faith.

"I think these parents should not resist learning as this is the only way to build bridges of understanding between different faiths," Ahmad said.

There is a practical benefit for former students who have learned about the traditions of people beyond their doorstep.

Tarek Abdel-Aleem, a Muslim, moved from coast to coast growing up, yet says he learned about other religions in public schools across the country. That has helped him understand and work alongside people from diverse faiths or even non-religious backgrounds at his legal practice in Lawrenceville.

And here may be a reason for others to learn about his religion, too: He's not going anywhere.

The native American is of Greek and Egyptian heritage, and has traveled overseas to visit family. Despite the "Islamophobia" he sees reflected in the U.S. media, Abdel-Aleem, 30, says, this country is a better place to live, largely free of religious discrimination in his experience.

"Growing up in America," he said, "I feel that I'm able to practice my faith more freely than any place in the world ... I think it's the best place on earth for Muslims to live."

Examples of what the students were learning

This is from a test or worksheet that some students were given. The bold words were the blanks the students had to fill in:

In 610, Muhammad was told by the angel Gabriel that he was a prophet sent to earth by God.

He began teaching a new monotheistic faith called **Islam** "**surrender** to God."

Basic beliefs of Islam:

Followers of Islam are called **Muslims** who believe in **one** God called **Allah**.

Allah is the **same God** worshipped by Jews & Christians.

Muslims believe Muhammad was the **last** of God's prophets.

The teachings of Muhammad were written down in the **Quran** (Koran), the **holy** book of Islam.

Another worksheet listed the Five Pillars of Islam, the guiding principles of the faith, which are: faith, charity, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. The students had to provide definitions.

Another worksheet shows a comparison in three columns among three religions to be studied, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The sheet shows comparisons such as the name of the faith's holy scripture, the faith's view of Jesus, sacred cities and what a place of worship is called.

The Facebook site created by parents in Georgia collected more than 3,200 members, many from Georgia but others from around the country. They posted a range of comments, though the vast majority skewed toward pro-Christian who were offended by the teaching of Islam. Here is a sample of the comments, without the names of those who posted:

- In most of history religion is intertwined. The Crusades (Christians & Muslims), Roman History (Christianity), Holocaust (Judaism), Early American History (Christianity), British History (Christianity). You can't take religion out of history lessons, if you do that you're removing part of history. You also cannot teach those lessons without going into some aspects of those religions because you'll lose the understanding of why those things happen. In saying all this, should more emphasis be put on one religion over the other? NO, they all should be equally taught.
- Another major red flag should be the misconception that was put forth initially by George Bush who repeatedly stated in public that "we all worship the same God." The basis for him saying that is that is the basic belief of the Masonic Lodge of which he is a member, and clearly, as a born-again Bible believing Christian I can tell you he is very wrong on this issue.
- This is being implemented statewide and nationwide. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. The only way to defeat this is for all Christian and all non-Muslim parents to instruct their children to walk out of the school as soon as this comes up in the classroom ... They may provide a minor tweaking but they will not stop teaching this crap because it's coming down from the federal government.
- I never learned any of this in school! What happened to the separation of church and state?!
- I am a firm believer in the freedom of religion but do not force kids to study a religion they do not practice period.
- This is completely unacceptable for Americans. Whether you're a Christian or not, you'd have to be willfully ignorant or a supporter of Islam at this point, to allow this unAmerican activity.
- We want an accurate representation of Christianity taught that has been created by a panel of Experienced Pastors Or Christian Theologians. We want the whole truth, violent and non-violent areas of theology taught. We want Accountability to make sure the religions are taught with no bias. And a method for parents to opt out of religious teachings that cross the line into indoctrination.
- They are claiming to be teaching "other religions" in general as social studies, including Islamic. I don't like it, but don't know what to do to stop it? ... They review Christianity also ... We reviewed other religions in high school.
- My son's goes to a middle school last year in the 6th grade he had to do an elaborate project on Judaism. I called his teacher and voiced my concerns as this leaves a parent to be worried about the direction the studies were progressing toward and I asked the teacher jokingly "What next, my kid is going to be memorizing parts of the Quran?" And he said that there is actually a large unit of study for 7th grade on Islam. Now, my son's in the 7th grade and that lesson is rapidly approaching. If it comes down to it I will check him out of school for that class until the lesson is over.

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