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# Politicizing Education: Examining Islam in Tennessee's Proposed Social Studies Standards

RHODES INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL STUDIES

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## Introduction

When describing religion, an educator noted that while the word is common and seemingly easy to define, it is actually quite difficult to explain (Danker, 2005). Religion, and how to teach about it, has been a point of controversy in education for centuries. Religions and their followers are regularly stereotyped, analyzed, and, in some cases, discriminated against. Simply put, religion is complex and frequently politicized. The social studies curriculum in public schools is often forced to confront this when addressing the study of world religions. Still, teaching about Islam in American public schools presents challenges that few other religious traditions face in a classroom setting. As a result of biased media coverage and a politically confrontational climate in our country, a division has been created that pits “us” against “Islam.” Consequently, the average American citizen has little opportunity to view Islam outside of an oppositional narrative that depicts it as anti-democratic and radical in nature (Said, 1981). Public education has the chance to present an alternative narrative about the historical and societal importance of the Islamic tradition. Sadly, schools often fall short of this goal because of the politics that plague the development of standards, curriculum, and classroom materials in education.

Social studies classes are where students learn local, national, and world history. Often these topics can be divisive or skewed by the agendas of politicians and other public officials. In Tennessee, where education maintains a Christian-centric standpoint, the social studies standards set by the state have been under fire for several years. Fears of indoctrination appear to be the motivating concern for many who oppose the teaching of academic standards that cover Islam in public schools. However, this Western-focused narrative is not unique to Tennessee schools, but rather a national issue (Douglass & Dunn, 2003; Jackson, 2014). School calendars nationwide center around Christian holidays like Easter and Christmas, while celebrations like Ramadan are

rarely discussed (Danker, 2005). The contributions of other parts of the world or history where Christianity and democracy are not present are disparaged, vilified, and exotified, if mentioned at all. As a result, it is not surprising that the teaching of Islam in schools became a controversial topic in Tennessee, where 81% of the population is Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015). Because of a Western-imposed narrative, education is often a tool by which politicians and citizens alike control the portrayal of Islam through state standards, local curricula, and its representation in the media. The social studies standards revisions process in Tennessee exemplifies this idea. By attempting to diminish the role of Islam in history and today's society, the proposed state social studies standards portray the religion as having no intellectual or cultural value, potentially leading to the perpetuation of discriminatory behaviors by students and impairing their ability to think democratically. The politicization of the social studies standards revision process in Tennessee through legislative action, media coverage, and the minimization of Islam in the standards proposal is indicative of a larger issue regarding the prevalence and dangers of Islamophobia and its manifestation in public education.

#### The Importance of State Social Studies Standards Explained

In an article now published on the website of the Tennessee State Board of Education, the headline reads "Social Studies Standards in Tennessee: Changing for the Better" (Roach & Curtis, 2016). While many Tennesseans support the claim that this headline boasts, it has also been met with skepticism from the media, educators, and other citizens on both a state and national level. While the manageability of the current social studies standards was criticized heavily by teachers, most now agree that the new standards would allow them to cover certain topics with more depth rather than encouraging students to purely memorize historical facts. Instead, the controversy that the proposal has garnered centers around the changes made to the standards that require schools to teach about Islam in the seventh grade.

In 2015, the Tennessee State Board of Education began the process through which the existing social studies standards were revised. The decision to revise the standards was made, in part, as a response to parents, local school board members, and legislators who alleged that Islamic indoctrination was taking place in public schools. The process was highly politicized and directly affected by several pieces of legislation passed by the Tennessee General Assembly. Advocacy groups also attempted to influence the revision of the standards with their own agendas. Quickly, this period became the most extensive social standards review in state history. Unlike the current standards, which were primarily crafted by four people, the proposed standards were reviewed by multiple committees made up of Tennesseans with varying backgrounds from across the state. The Tennessee State Board of Education prided itself on the transparency and inclusiveness of the process. Finally, through public feedback and an in-depth review process, a new set of standards was proposed in 2017.

The issue of religion in the standards was one of the most prevalent topics of discussion throughout the process. Many citizens were concerned that the current standards risked overexposing children to Islam. Some claimed that discussing Islam in schools was a violation of the First Amendment. Local school boards declared that they would not teach the current standards that cover Islam, while other districts fended off accusations of bias towards the same religion. As a result, pressure from the media, local school administrations, and citizens was anticipated. Thus, it is no surprise that the process was politicized since social studies standards are the framework for the curriculum developed and adopted by local schools, which may cover topics or events that are divisive in some societies.

First, it is important to note the difference between the standards, which are set by the Tennessee State Board of Education and adopted by the Tennessee Department of Education,

and curriculum, which is designed by the local education administrations (LEAs). These two elements serve distinct purposes in education. As one educator described, “Curriculum is the specifics of how to get there. The standards [are] the benchmark of where you need to be” (Personal Interview, 2017b). The LEAs design curriculum based on the standards that are adopted by the state with the goal of preparing students for testing. Because standards are used as an outline for the development of curriculum, it is vital that they present a comprehensive and fair view of the topics they cover. While curriculum developed by the local education administration (LEA) usually directs how these topics are discussed, standards are important because they determine if a topic has to be covered at all. Therefore, if Islam is not mentioned in the standards, then local school districts are under no obligation to develop a curriculum that includes information about the religion. Likewise, if limited information about Islam is included in the standards, as is the case in Tennessee, curricula are not expected to expound on the topic. For many students, school is the only setting in which they encounter factual information about Islam. Moreover, textbooks and the academic standards developed by states may be the only intellectual framework through which students are exposed to Islam or Muslim culture and values. For this reason, it is essential that the material presented is holistic and fair (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). Sadly, if schools are only required to teach a fact or generalization about Islam according to the state standards, students are likely contextualizing this information through what they hear from the media or their parents, which can have dangerous implications for how they perceive Islam. As a result, students may perpetuate stereotypes about the Islamic tradition and a cycle of prejudice against Muslims in America will subsist.

#### Legislation Affecting Social Studies Standards

In October 2014, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam ordered an evaluation of all academic standards. The review, scheduled two years ahead of the original schedule, was a response to the

political controversy in which Common Core had become entrenched. Adopted in 2011 by the state of Tennessee, Common Core had required a complete revision of the state's existing standards in language arts, science, math, and social studies. Common Core was not popular among Tennessee's legislators. A member of the Standards Recommendation Committee, which guided the social studies revisions process, recalled specifically being asked about his views on Common Core, which many legislators saw as a liberal byproduct of the Obama administration (Personal Interview, 2017c). State lawmakers felt that Common Core was an overextension of the federal government's authority, especially since states were incentivized to adopt it (Aldrich, 2017). Later in 2015, House Bill 1035 was passed to initiate the standards review process that would reevaluate Common Core. The bill required that two committees be established to review the current standards and to propose a new set. This bill created the process by which the standards for all four core subject areas were revised (TN H.R. 1035, 2015). Language arts and mathematics were reviewed first, followed by science, and eventually social studies.

However, it was another bill that ultimately initiated the social studies standards revision process. Tennessee Senate Bill 2186 was signed into law on April 8, 2016. According to this bill, each local school board must adopt a policy on the inclusion of religion. Furthermore, it required the Tennessee State Board of Education to initiate a process by which the social studies standards created in 2013 would be revised (TN S. 2186, 2016). This piece of legislation became known as the "anti-religious indoctrination bill" in the press that covered it statewide and nationally. The bill originated after months of public concern in Tennessee about a middle school social studies unit that focused on Islam. The unit, "Islamic World, 400 A.D/C.E. – 1500s," is a section of the seventh-grade social studies standards which focus on world history. The bill was credited as giving more independence to local school districts to determine how religion is taught

in public schools. Additionally, the bill necessitated that the Tennessee State Board of Education to begin the process of reviewing the current social studies standards. In addition to initiating the standards review process, Tennessee Senate Bill 2186 also required local school boards to adopt a policy regarding teaching about religion in schools before the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. This policy had to specifically address the portrayal of religion in the school district's curriculum and materials. In addition to the creation of the policy, the bill dictated that the public had to be given an opportunity to comment on the policy before it was adopted by the local school board. Tennessee Senate Bill 2186 also mandated that teacher training institutions provide instruction on how to teach about religions in a way that is "constitutionally permissible" (TN S. 2186, 2016). While the bill does not specify what a "constitutionally permissible" way of teaching religion is, one can infer that it is a reference to the First Amendment, which states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech" (U.S. Const. amend. I).

The Tennessee State Board of Education denied allegations that the standards review process was brought forward solely based on concerns about the representation of Islam in the current standards, which will be in effect until the 2019-2020 school year begins. Instead, the Board suggested that revision was also needed based on complaints from educators stating that the standards were too lengthy and placed unreasonable expectations for coverage on teachers (Tatter, 2015). However, the fact that the initiation of the social studies standards revision process was prompted through a piece of legislation addressing concerns about religious indoctrination in public schools cannot be ignored. This suggests that the portrayal of Islam in the current standards was the catalyst for the origination of the process.

Organizational Structure of the Process

It is important to note who played a role in the social studies standards revision process, as it ultimately affected the final outcome: the new proposal. By the end of the process, the Tennessee State Board of Education had established several committees and sought public review from Tennessee educators, parents, students, and the average citizen. To begin the process, a press release by the Tennessee State Board of Education announced the opening of the first feedback review website for the current standards. From January 22, 2016, to April 30, 2016, Tennessee citizens were encouraged to provide feedback on the standards which will be in effect through the 2018-2019 school year. The Board prided itself on the transparent and detailed process by which the standards were being revised. The press release concluded by saying that the newly revised standards will be available for public feedback in the fall of 2016. These standards will go into effect during the 2019-2020 school year.

After the initial round of a web-based public feedback review for the existing standards, the Educator Advisory Team (EAT) was the first to assess the feedback and the current standards. The EAT met throughout June and July of 2016. Candidates for positions on the EAT, all of whom are Tennessee educators, were selected through a statewide application process administered by the Tennessee State Board of Education that required both a written application and a recommendation from their local school district. A project chair led the EAT, which was divided into three groups based on grade level: kindergarten through fifth grade, sixth through eighth grade, and ninth through twelfth grade. Then, a team leader was selected from each group of teachers. Leaders acted as facilitators for group meetings and worked to ensure that goals were met and common norms were followed. When interviewed, a member of the middle school EAT discussed the significance of the role, stating that he felt compelled to attend the Standards Recommendation Committee meetings where the EAT's work was reviewed to ensure that

aspects valued by the educators, like vertical alignment (the idea that standards build upon each other from grade to grade), existed within the standards. He stressed that middle school is key to the academic success of students because it bridges the gap in knowledge between elementary school and high school.

The Educator Advisory Team played arguably the largest role in the revision of the standards. The team was first tasked with reviewing the public feedback from the initial website review period of the existing standards. Based on the feedback and their own ideas and expertise as educators, the team developed a revised set of social studies standards. Ultimately, the EAT presented the changes made to the current standards to the Standards Recommendation Committee, where group leaders offered rationale for the changes made. After feedback was given by the SRC, the EAT revised the standards to craft the final proposal which was presented to the Tennessee State Board of Education in April 2017 for its first reading before the Board votes on the new set of standards in July 2017.

The Standards Recommendation Committee was made up of ten Tennesseans. Four were chosen by the governor, three by the lieutenant governor, and three by the Speaker of the House. According to a member of the SRC, those who were appointed to the committee had to seek confirmation through a hearing with the General Assembly. In this hearing, they answered questions ranging from their thoughts on Common Core to their stance on Advanced Placement classes. This SRC member also stated that closed door meetings with legislators took place where it was indicated that the committee should keep in mind the perceived Christian values of the state (Personal Interview, 2017e). Once the nominees were confirmed by the General Assembly, their role in the standards revision process officially began as members of the Standards Recommendation Committee. They convened for their first meeting in July 2016.

After the EAT and SRC had drafted a proposal, the Board announced the opening of the public review website for the newly revised standards (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016c). Originally, the plan was for the website to remain open from September 15, 2016, to October 28, 2016. However, as noted in a press release from October 12, 2016, the period for public feedback review was ultimately extended through December 15, 2016 in order to hear from as many Tennesseans as possible (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016d). In addition to the extension of the review period, the Standards Recommendation Committee stated that they would be increasing the number of meetings to ensure that all Tennesseans have a chance to be heard. By the end of the public review process, over 200,000 comments and reviews were considered (Tatter, 2016).

#### Media Coverage and Public Participation

Because teaching about religion—specifically Islam—had been such a controversial topic in the standards, it is not surprising that many news agencies covered this part of the revision process more heavily than other aspects. Not long after the new standards proposal was released, many local and national press outlets detected immense changes in the depiction of Islam in the document (Wagner, 2016; Associated Press, 2016). These articles stated that the section titled “Islamic World, 400 A.D./C.E. – 1500s” was completely deleted in the proposed standards. According to one article in the *Kingsport Times News*, Laura Encalade, the former director of policy and research at the Tennessee State Board of Education, responded to questions about the removal of Islam from the standards with a statement reading in part, “The educator teams sought to address a mixture of themes that were raised through the public review. To see specific changes, we encourage Tennesseans to take their own look at the standards and leave their ideas and comments.” Soon, social networking based news platforms like BuzzFeed had produced viral articles that misstated several facts about the changes in the standards.

This type of sensationalized media ultimately distracts from real issues about the portrayal of Islam that the proposed standards presents. In every interview that was conducted with agents of the Tennessee State Board of Education, criticism of the media was a common theme during the standards revision process. One interviewee emphasized the difference between what was reported in the media and what he experienced firsthand as a participant in the revisions process. Another blamed “liberal press outlets” for trying to heavily influence the revision of the standards. The terms “fake news” and “democracy” appeared in many of these conversations and a desire to gain readership and push an agenda was often deemed as the motivating factor for writers covering the standards review process (Personal Interview, 2017b; 2017c; 2017e). An article appearing in the Tennessean by Jason Gonzales (2016) was viewed more positively by at least one interviewee who called it “a very fair piece.” Gonzales’s article paints a contrasting picture to that depicted by other local news outlets. This is immediately apparent from its headline, “Islam Will Still Be Taught in 7th grade Under New Draft Standards”. The writer acknowledges the controversy regarding religion in both the current and proposed standards, writing, “[S]ome of the standards that asked students to go in-depth about religions, including Christianity and Islam, have been removed, according to review of the standards by The Tennessean. The number of changes are slight, with some references integrated into standards elsewhere.”

As discussed, criticism of the media coverage concerning the standards revision process was a popular theme in the personal interviews conducted for this project. Articles alleging a bias against or the removal of Islam were dismissed as dramatized pieces designed to invoke readership or to push a leftist agenda. Many unfounded claims made by several media outlets appear to have ultimately distracted from valid concerns regarding the content in the proposed

standards. When discussing the role that the media played in the standards review, several participants in the process specifically cited articles that misstated facts. While many of these articles correctly stated that standards covering Islam had been removed from the proposal, flagrant misstatements of fact detracted from critical statements of merit within the same pieces. For example, in several articles, anti-Islamic assertions made by a school board member in East Tennessee are framed as though they came from an employee of the Tennessee State Board of Education, rather than from a local official. As a result, the State Board is able to dismiss these quotes as false rather than acknowledging their true source as problematic. Furthermore, by ignoring these comments, the Tennessee State Board of Education and the broader government miss an opportunity to address Islamophobia at the local level, which would ensure that the standards are interpreted in a way that fairly portrays Islam. This seems to be indicative of the priorities of the state when it comes to combatting anti-Islamic biases in education.

On the other hand, the public review feedback period did receive the media coverage that the Tennessee State Board of Education was hoping it would, especially during the second review period. A reporter for a statewide education publication said that she believed that this had likely been a point of frustration for the Board. Despite issuing a press release, a very small number of news outlets encouraged Tennesseans to log onto the website where the standards could be viewed, rated, and commented upon. This may have contributed to lower rates of participation than what was expected from the public during the feedback review period.

#### Themes from the Public Feedback Review Period

Interestingly, based on the data from the public feedback review website, it appears that few parents and local citizens took advantage of this opportunity to provide their input on the revisions. As a result, the data collected from the website during both period of feedback review demonstrates that the majority of the reviews were from Tennessee teachers (Tennessee State

Board of Education, 2016a). During the first round of feedback, which began in January 2016, 80.43% of reviews came from those who identified as kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers (Balakit, 2016). This is not surprising considering that many teachers were concerned about the amount of material that they were required to cover each year. The public review period was a chance for them to weigh in on what standards should be cut to attain a more achievable amount of material to cover. On the other hand, only 8.84% of reviews came from parents. This may be due to a lack of public interest or awareness about the opportunity to give feedback. A member of the EAT attributed the lack of public involvement and interest in the process to his belief that a few individuals and organizations were given loud platforms on both sides of the political spectrum to voice discontent with the standards, so more participation was anticipated than occurred (Personal Interview, 2017c).

Parents, teachers, and other community members had the opportunity to review the standards online and rate them as “keep,” “review,” or “remove” during the public feedback period. Standards from the seventh-grade were among the mostly frequently reviewed, especially by parents (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a). In *Table 1*, standards from the seventh-grade unit “Islamic World, 400 A.D/C.E. – 1500s” appear as they did on the feedback review website. In the right column, the percentage of reviews that recommended that the standard be kept is shown. The standards outlined below in *Table 1* will remain in use until the beginning of the 2019 school year. They were selected for analysis because they contain either the word *Muslim* or *Islam* in their text. While standards that contained words like *Arab* or phrases like the *Middle East* were also more likely to be reviewed than others, they still did not draw the level of feedback that the standards in *Table 1* did during the public review period.

Table 1

<b>Current Standards 7.4-7.8 Web Review Data</b>	
<b>Standard</b>	<b>Keep %</b>
<b>7.4</b> Describe the expansion of Muslim rule through conquests and the spread of cultural diffusion of Islam and the Arabic language.	67.06%
<b>7.5</b> Trace the origins of Islam and the life and teaching of [Mohammad], including Islam’s historical connections to Judaism and Christianity.	46.29%
<b>7.6</b> Explain the significance of the Qur’an and the Sunnah as the primary sources of Islamic beliefs, practice, and law and their influence in Muslims’ daily life.	55.2%
<b>7.7</b> Analyze the origins and impact of different sects within Islam, Sunnis and Shi’ites.	57.93%
<b>7.8</b> Examine and summarize the contributions Muslim scholars made to later civilizations in the areas of science, geography, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, art, and literature.	63.19%

*Note: Standards text from TN Department of Education (2013), web review data from TN Board of Education (2016a).*

Table 1 demonstrates that the standard with the lowest “keep” rate is standard 7.5. The same standard also received the highest amount of reviews of those listed in Table 1, with 175 instances of feedback collected. In addition to rating the standards, reviewers were also able to leave comments if they desired. Two common themes emerged from the responses to standard 7.5 and were prevalent among all five of the standards listed in Table 1.

The first notable theme can primarily be seen in the reviews left by parents. Many commenters attacked standard 7.5 for suggesting that there is a connection between the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. One parent wrote, “We [must] be very cautious on how much detail is focused on Islam in our current society. The connection between the [three] should really be handled cautiously. I am a Christian and I don't want my daughter being taught in school that Islam’s and Christian’s [sic] worship the same God. That is simply not true” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a). It is important to observe here that the commenter’s use of the term “Islam’s” to describe Muslims demonstrates a lack of core

knowledge about Islam and its practitioners. Respondents seemed particularly concerned about the conclusions that students may draw if they are taught about the connections between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Several commenters stated that any standards discussing a connection with Christianity and Judaism to Islam should be removed and no association between the three religions should be mentioned. Perhaps most troubling are the comments that suggest that such connections are fictional.

Regarding the portion of standard 7.5 that requires that students be able to trace the life and teachings of Mohammad, those that left feedback frequently asserted that if Mohammad's life was going to be taught, they felt that "all of the details should be included." In most instances, these comments made references to violent acts that the writer attributed to Mohammad or Muslims civilizations. Some parents were more explicit, declaring, "My children do not need to know about Islam in any fashion," and "I won't allow my child to worship anyone except [J]esus" (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a). Some respondents indicated that they felt that the current standards described Islam in too much detail, with one likening them to "Sunday school lesson[s] on how to become a Muslim that would be taught in the local mosque" (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a).

Aside from standard 7.5, standard 7.6 had the lowest "keep" rate of those that directly mention Muslims or Islam. While fewer respondents chose to leave comments for this standard, a theme was still evident: Don't indoctrinate my children. One commenter best summarizes the reasoning demonstrated in these comments by writing, "Understanding what they are is fine, but detailed explanation of Muslim religious practices and glorification thereof is indoctrination" (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a).

While standards 7.5 and 7.6 had the lowest percentage of “keep” ratings, 7.7 and 7.8 were also met with criticism and fairly low approval rates. However, these standards were less likely to incite explicitly Islamophobic language. Instead, the feedback given for them indicated a lack of understanding regarding the cultural importance and connectivity of Islam to the modern world, particularly the United States and Christianity. Statements like “Their culture has nothING [sic] to do with ours” and “my child doesn't need to know the difference of such a culture” appear to validate this observation (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a).

Perhaps most disheartening was the feedback left by educators who had been tasked with teaching these standards in the past. They frequently lamented that the struggles they faced when teaching about Islam made it impossible to meet the goals of standards 7.5 or 7.6. One teacher attributed the “uproar over teaching Islam” to these standards, saying that he received several parental complaints and that it was not fair to force teachers to navigate that criticism alone every year (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a). Another felt that standard 7.6 was not worth teaching because of the amount of backlash she faced from parents. “Go ahead. Give [into] the Islamophobia,” she wrote. “I'm tired [of] dealing with it [at] the classroom level” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a).

Some positive feedback trends did emerge. Many teachers said that while they felt these standards were important, additional resources and specificities in the standards would be helpful in teaching them. Some reviewers commented on the importance of acknowledging historical links between religions as a way of understanding past and present conflicts. Historical events like the Crusades were often mentioned. Even a student who had just finished the seventh-grade felt the need to share through the feedback website that though he was a Christian, he learned about standard 7.5 and yet no one in his class converted to Islam.

In September 2016, a second round of public feedback began where Tennesseans could preview and comment on the newly revised standards. It operated exactly as the first did, where citizens had the option to rate the proposed standards as “keep,” “review,” or “remove” and to make comments online (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016c). *Table 2* shows the remaining two seventh-grade standards that still contain the word *Islam* and their “keep” rates. Comments from the second round of public feedback were not accessible for analysis.

*Table 2*

<b>Proposed Standards 7.16 and 7.17 Web Review Data</b>	
<b>Standard</b>	<b>Keep %</b>
<b>7.16</b> Describe the origins and central features of Islam: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key Person(s): Mohammad</li> <li>• Sacred Texts: The Quran and The Sunnah</li> <li>• Basic Beliefs: monotheism, Five Pillars</li> </ul>	89.06%
<b>7.17</b> Describe the diffusion of Islam, its culture, and the Arabic language.	97.92%

*Note: Standards text from TN Board of Education (2017c), web review data from TN Board of Education (2017a).*

As *Table 2* demonstrates, proposed standards 7.16 and 7.17 boast much higher “keep” rates compared to those given to the current standards that cover Islam in *Table 1*. This may be because the proposed standards require students to be exposed to less information about the Islamic tradition. However, while standards 7.16 and 7.17 may appear to encompass previous standards that have been removed, their shortcomings will be highlighted in a later section of this paper. Furthermore, unlike in the current standards, the word *Islam* appears only twice in the proposed standards. The word *Muslim* is used only once in the entire standards proposal document for kindergarten through twelfth grade in a section discussing the impact of the Crusades on followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

It is unknown how much weight was given to the comments and ratings from the web review periods. The Educator Advisory Team reviewed the data from the first round of public feedback when creating the new standards proposal. Later, the Standards Recommendation Committee considered the data from the second round of public feedback during their review of the proposal. Still, self-selection bias is evident within the data, as is common with surveys where individuals feel strongly about a topic (Utts, 2011). Probability sampling, a technique that protects against self-selection bias and the intentional manipulation of results, would have been a more representative way to determine the general public's views on the standards (Bethlehem, 2010). An employee of the Tennessee State Board of Education described the standards review process as the most transparent in the nation. While such a statement reveals little about the public's impact on the process, it does indicate that an effort was made to conduct a review of the standards where Tennesseans could easily participate.

Aside from the second round of web-based public feedback, individuals and organizations continued to provide feedback through letters sent to the Tennessee State Board of Education. One letter from Abigail A. Southerland (2016), Senior Litigation Counsel at the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), stands out. The ACLJ is an advocacy group that describes its mission as to "protect religious and constitutional freedoms" (American Center for Law and Justice, 2017). The letter states that if aspects of Christianity are not permitted to be taught in schools, "despite [the religion's] historic importance to the United States," then it is also improper to teach "Islamic prayers, conversion creeds, the Quran, the Five Pillars, and the history of Mohammad." The same organization filed a petition to stop "Islamic indoctrination in schools," which garnered over 200,000 signatures (Mason, 2015). The ACLJ claims they have been contacted by at least 7,000 Tennesseans who are concerned about the way that Islam is

taught about in public schools (Green, 2015). These sentiments were echoed in a variety of letters from Tennesseans. Some complained that seventh-grade was too young to teach students comparative religion. Alternatively, some letter writers worried about the consequences of removing standards discussing Islam in a state where the vast majority of students rarely encounter the religion outside of a classroom setting.

#### Implications of the Feedback Provided from the Public

Several themes emerged from the feedback review data regarding the public's stance on Islam and its place in schools. These themes present the problematic, prejudiced, and misinformed views of society. For example, many citizens labeled Islam as a violent faith with no historical connections to Christianity or Judaism. Commenters also appeared unable to differentiate radical Islam from the beliefs of the majority of Muslims. This raises an important question: where are citizens getting this false information? The easiest answer appears to be from the media. Stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islam are exceptionally present in American culture and media (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). Even the government and its officials can be the sources of misinformation about Islam for many Americans (Phelps, 2010). In 2015, violence and hate crimes against Muslims reached their highest level since September 2001, reflecting a larger issue about attitudes towards Muslim Americans. Ironically, 46% of Americans believe that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers (Pew Research Foundation, 2015).

Much of this information appears to stem from a lack of understanding about the cultural roots and connectivity of Christianity and Islam, especially throughout world history. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are frequently depicted as autonomous cultural packages as to avoid drawing connections that may cause controversy or discomfort among parents, officials, or interest groups (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). Because of this, it is not surprising that many

respondents during the feedback review period commented that they did not want their children to learn about the culture of Islam or Muslims because they believed it had no relevance to their child. America is often viewed as a Christian nation historically by many citizens. Islam is seen as a challenger or competitor in this regard, especially because it follows Christianity chronologically, while Judaism, on the other hand, is considered by many Christians as the divine predecessor to their faith. Based on these beliefs, Mohammad is deemed a false prophet and Islam the antithesis of Christianity (Said, 1981). Even if parents refuse to acknowledge the cultural relevance of Islam, knowledge and understanding of its history is necessary to understand past, present, and future global events. Comments that suggest that the historical connections between the Abrahamic religions should be disregarded make this type of knowledge impossible to instill and hinder students from developing a comprehensive and historically accurate worldview of religion.

Feedback left by teachers indicated that they struggle with how to present Islam without inciting parental ridicule. This indicates that not enough support is being offered to teachers through resources and training about how to cover Islam or other topics that may seem controversial to parents. As Haynes (1990) notes, teachers can meet the challenge of teaching the histories and cultures of religion in schools if provided with programs that cover how to teach religion in a way that is “constitutionally permissible, educationally sound, and culturally sensitive.” The state is in a position to mandate that this type of training be offered by local school districts since most are unlikely to offer it otherwise. As noted in the legislative section of this paper, Tennessee Senate Bill 2186 required that teacher training institutions provide education concerning how to constitutionally teach about religion in schools. However, the bill does not state that such training has to be continuously provided by local school districts.

However, this preparation could play a vital role in equipping teachers to confidently cover religion in social studies classes by addressing their concerns about constitutionality and managing controversy.

However, perhaps the biggest disconnect of all demonstrated by citizens who reviewed the current standards is the difference between teaching *about* religion versus indoctrination. Discussion of Islam in public schools is often further complicated by this conflict in understanding (Phelps, 2010). Some argue that to teach about Islam in schools is a violation of the First Amendment because it forces students to engage in the study of a religion to which they may not adhere. However, the United States Supreme Court case *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) stated:

[I]t may 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 such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment (Haynes, 1990, p. 299).

This case made it clear that the constitutionality of teaching the history and beliefs of Islam in schools should not be a point of question. Teaching religion, or the promotion or practice of a particular religious belief, is what the constitution forbids (Phelps, 2010). Students can easily be tested over historical facts when learning about any religion, including Islam, without partaking in religious rituals or practices. Aside from being constitutional, teaching *about* religion promotes understanding among people of different backgrounds and cultures. It also allows students to take these differences into account when discussing the significance of religion in history (Douglass & Dunn, 2003).

In Hamilton County, Tennessee, students are able to enroll in Bible History classes in public schools that offer them as electives through a program called Bible in the Schools. The

Public School Bible Study Committee, a private organization that funds the classes at no cost to taxpayers, also cited *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) as affirming the legality of such a program. According to the Bible in the Schools website, students learn the history and organization of the Bible, examine the life of Jesus, and study history as detailed in the Old and New Testaments from a nondenominational perspective. If a student asks a question about a controversial topic in the Bible, the teacher is supposed to encourage them to refer back to the text (Public School Bible Study Committee, 2017). The reception of this program sharply contrasts responses to teaching about Islam in public schools, even though both should technically be protected by the law. This difference likely stems from the fact that many Tennesseans regard Christianity as a virtuous and democratic religion worth teaching, while Islam is believed by many to inspire violence and immorality.

#### The Portrayal of Islam in the Proposed Standards

In many ways, the legislative action, media coverage, and public outcry that plagued the social studies standards revision process distracted from the reality of the changes that were made to the standards. The radically false (and even viral, in one instance) claim that Islam had been completely removed from the social studies standards was easily dismissed by the Tennessee State Board of Education, ultimately allowing the problematic changes that *were* made to go largely unnoticed. Perhaps the most glaring departure from the current social studies standards that cover Islam in the proposed draft is the title of a section in grade seven. The unit now titled “Southwest Asia and North Africa: 400-1500s CE” was previously identified as “Islamic World, 400 A.D./C.E. – 1500s” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013; Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017). When discussing the change of the unit’s title, a member of the Standards Recommendation Committee seemed to indicate that the alteration stemmed from the belief that the former heading was not historically representative of the content it encompassed

(Personal Interview, 2017e). Alternatively, Laura Encalade, the former director of policy and research at the Tennessee State Board of Education, said that the change of the title reflected a desire for consistency in the labeling of units by geographic location (Gonzales, 2016).

Table 3

<b>The Consolidation of Standards Discussing Islam</b>	
<b>Current Standards</b>	<b>Proposed Standard</b>
<b>7.5</b> Trace the origins of Islam and the life and teachings of Muhammad [ <i>sic</i> ], including Islam’s historical connections to Judaism and Christianity.	<b>7.16</b> Describe the origins and central features of Islam: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key Person(s): Mohammad</li> <li>• Sacred Texts: The Quran and The Sunnah</li> <li>• Basic Beliefs: monotheism, Five Pillars</li> </ul>
<b>7.6</b> Explain the significance of the Qur’an and the Sunnah as the primary sources of Islamic beliefs, practice, and law and their influence in Muslims’ daily life.	
<b>7.7</b> Analyze the origins and impact of different sects within Islam, Sunnis and Shi’ites.	

*Note: Current standards text from TN Dept. of Education (2013, proposed standards text from TN Board of Education (2017c).*

In the text of the proposed standards, several changes are evident as well. For example, standard 7.16 in *Table 3* introduces a new style of formatting standards that covers the history of a religion. The standard asks students to describe the origins and central features of Islam, noting Mohammad as the key person, the Quran and the Sunnah as sacred texts, and monotheism and the Five Pillars as the basic beliefs (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017a). However, the model depicted in standard 7.16 in *Table 3* with three key points and their corresponding facts was designed as a template in which any religion could be inserted and the same basic facts would be covered. The template, often referred to as the “formula” in the social studies Standards Recommendation Committee meetings, was created with the intention of ensuring equity among the religions covered in the standards: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017b). According to a member of the Educator

Advisory Team, another purpose of this three point list was to ensure that the state was not accused of giving deference to one religion over another (Personal Interview, 2017c).

While the five religions covered in the standards are presented in the same format, this does not necessarily ensure equity as was intended. Perspective is a key component of this issue. As Douglass and Done (2003) note, Islam is rarely described in grade school education as Muslims would likely explain it. In a letter to the Standards Recommendation Committee, a Muslim man raised his concerns about the lack of context surrounding the standards that teach about the Five Pillars. The writer specifically requested that the Six Articles of Faith, which describe Muslim beliefs, be included in in standard 7.18 which discusses elements of Islam like the Five Pillars and the Quran.

Another major change can be seen in a shift of language and terminology used across the standards that once framed how students learned about the history of Islam. For example, standard 7.4, which is currently in use, asks students to “Describe the expansion of Muslim rule through conquests and the spread of cultural diffusion of Islam and the Arabic language” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016a). What appears to be its condensed counterpart in the proposed set, Standard 7.17, asks students to “Describe the diffusion of Islam, its culture, and the Arabic language” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017c). The deletion of the term *Muslim* is evident again in the shift from the current standard 7.8, which asks students to examine the contributions of *Muslim* scholars to later civilizations, to the proposed standard 7.18 which asks students to identify the contributions made by *the regions’* scholars. Based on these changes, students are no longer required to identify or describe the specific roles that Muslims played in history and the advancement of civilization. Furthermore, because the term *Muslim* is not used at all in the standards that still mention Islam, a confusing picture is painted for students

about the connection between Islamic tradition and Muslims. When students are not able to situate the religion or its followers in a historical context, much of history is made needlessly complex and difficult to understand (Moore, 2012). For example, students are no longer expected to learn the difference between two sects of Islam, the Sunnis and Shi'ites. This omission makes it impossible to understand the conflict that exists between the groups and its manifestations in history.

Additionally, an element of standard 7.5 that discusses the historical connections between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism is notably missing from the standards proposal. As mentioned earlier, this standard was a point of contention in the comments collected during the public feedback review periods. Several respondents did not like that Christianity was being discussed in relation to Islam, with many claiming that there simply were no historical connections or relevance between the two religions. On the other hand, a few commenters highlighted the importance of teaching students to compare the religions to promote understanding and tolerance. The deletion of the existing standards 7.5, 7.6, and 7.7 is another alteration observable in the new standards. Based on the standards remaining in the proposed section titled "Southwest Asia and North Africa: 400-1500s CE," it appears that standard 7.16 was intended to encompass standards 7.5-7.7 (see *Table 1*), despite the fact that the current standards cover more content than the proposed standard 7.16, as is depicted in *Table 3*. This is especially troubling because the quality and quantity of information students learn about Islam generally depends on the commitment of their state or school district to teaching it (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). Since the singular standard that covers the core aspects of Islam is now more generalized, local school districts have more freedom in determining the depth of which Islam is studied. This should be a point of concern in Tennessee, where an apparent bias against Islam is present among many local

school boards and the citizens they serve (Associated Press, 2016; Wagner, 2016; Green, 2016; Bartlett, 2015).

#### A History of Islamophobia Affecting Education in Tennessee

Unfortunately, many school districts in Tennessee have a history of intolerance toward Islam. The gaps in the proposed standards leave room for these biases to manifest themselves in curricula and classrooms. This resistance against teaching about Islam appears to be an effort to maintain a unitary narrative of Western civilization in schools that teaches universal values and democracy (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). As Moore (2006) explains, “Islam is often framed within the politically motivated narrative of Western civilization (p. 140).” If the public or local education administrators feel that Islam’s portrayal in schools does not fit that narrative, condemnation ensues, justified by the claim that the curriculum is becoming too complex and disorderly for children to benefit from its lessons or for teachers to achieve their goals for their students (Douglass & Dunn, 2003).

Representative Marsha Blackburn has criticized the state’s public school system for focusing on teaching the practices of Islam rather than the history of Christianity. Blackburn played a key role in the proposal of Tennessee Senate Bill 2186, which was signed into law in 2016. As noted earlier, this bill was dubbed the “anti-religious indoctrination bill.” Regarding the bill, Blackburn stated, “It is reprehensible that our school system has exhibited this double-standard, more concerned with teaching the practices of Islam than the history of Christianity. Tennessee parents have a right to be outraged and I stand with them in this fight” (Boucher, 2015). Another representative, Andy Holt, said that while he can understand the desire for cultural competency, “it must never be at the cost of our own cultural identity” (Boucher, 2015).

It is clear from these statements that fears of alleged indoctrination appear to have been a motivating cause behind the creation of Tennessee Senate Bill 2186. However, it is vital to step

back and consider from where these claims originated. Edward Said (1978) describes how politicians exploit caricatures of Eastern civilizations to create a narrative that renders the achievements of Western democracy as superior. This narrative appeals to many constituents who view Western culture as the measure by which others are judged. Additionally, because Islam is portrayed as anti-Western and militant in many cases, politicians capitalize off of the fear this description creates among voters (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). In the case of Tennessee Senate Bill 2186, the General Assembly passed a law that made it appear to Tennesseans that their religious freedoms were endangered by the teachings of some religions in school. Politicians like Blackburn and Holt claimed that the bill was a response to the concerns of their constituents, but it seemed to serve to increase undue concern among many as well.

Concerns about the protection of religious freedoms in schools have sprung up statewide. Williamson County, Tennessee, which is overwhelming white, wealthy, and Christian, was a focus of controversy regarding the teaching of Islam in schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015; Green, 2015). In 2015, a school board member, Susan Curlee, started a petition asking Candace McQueen, the Tennessee Commissioner of Education, to stop mandatory social studies standardized testing for seventh-graders. In the petition, Curlee stated,

A major portion of the seventh grade TNReady Social Studies test centers on religion, not history or social studies. If last year's test was any indication, the state exam will contain questions likely to conflict with a child's individual beliefs [...] If a child fails to answer even one question they personally find offensive or contradictory to their religious beliefs, or lack thereof, it will have an immediate negative impact on both the test score and final course grade [...] A child's religious beliefs should never be compromised or called into question for the sake of a grade (Bartlett, 2015).

While seventh-graders were still required to take the TNReady standardized assessment, it did contain few questions about world religion (Balakit & Gonzales, 2015). In this case, the small number of questions is likely a result of the volume of standards that are covered by the test

rather than an attempt to exclude religion. Later in Williamson County, a school board member questioned how children could reconcile current events in the Middle East if they are not exposed to radical sects of Islam (Green, 2015). Just a few miles away in Middle Tennessee, the school board of Maury County filed a resolution with the Tennessee State Board of Education questioning whether the basic tenets of world religions like Islam were necessary for students to learn, “especially given the impressionable nature of student’s ages” during seventh-grade. Later in White County, a group called Citizens Against Islamic Indoctrination placed an ad in the Sparta Expositor, a local paper, inviting citizens to a town-hall meeting to discuss Islam in schools (Green, 2015). Farther east in Tennessee, Susan Lodal, a member of the Kingsport Board of Education and Vice President of the Tennessee Association of School Boards, said that while Islam is still a part of history, Kingsport schools are just not teaching it to their children (Wagner, 2016).

These instances of citizens and school boards taking a stance against teaching about Islam in schools are just a few publicized accounts of this occurring in Tennessee. These claims of Islamic indoctrination appear to be rooted in a misunderstanding of what the standards ask students to learn in schools, as well as a misconception of the religion itself. These biases and discriminatory behaviors ultimately are what culminated in the passage of Tennessee Senate Bill 2186, the “anti-religious indoctrination bill,” and eventually the removal of many elements of Islam from the current social studies standards to create the proposed set.

In many regards, it appears that revisions made to the standards were conducted on a good faith basis. This became evident through interviews with reporters who covered the process, officials from the Tennessee State Board of Education, the educators who were commissioned to serve on the Educator Advisory Teams, and a variety of education

professionals who were appointed as members of the Standards Recommendation Committee (Personal Interview, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017e; 2017f). However, the type of intentionality that is needed to develop standards that relay the historical significance and value of Islam are not solely dependent on the actions of those who mean well. Even those with the best of intentions may fail to present a narrative about Islam that is comprehensive, accurate, and representative of its followers' history (Douglass, 2003).

#### Teaching Skills to Combat Stereotypes, Biases, and Sensationalism in the Media

Sadly, Islam is frequently portrayed as anti-western, extremist, and violent in the media, as well as in schools (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). For centuries, America's public schools have served a fundamental role in the socialization of children, teaching them what many perceive as the norms, traditions, and values of our country (Jackson, 2014). While the classroom has the potential to serve as a space to deconstruct stereotypes and biases, it also has the ability to perpetuate them through actions and avoidance. In many schools, American citizens are collectively portrayed as accepting and kind. This discourages open discussions about the rampant discrimination that many groups in our communities face, like Muslims, as it would be contradictory to the image of a tolerant nation (Jackson, 2014).

As Moore (2006) pointed out, teaching about Islam provides teachers with the opportunity to stimulate students' critical thinking skills and to help them develop tolerant attitudes based on historically accurate information instead of stereotypes, rumors, or myths. This is especially valuable today because of Islam's contemporary relevance and its distorted portrayal in American politics and media. Douglass and Dunn (2003) note that most people get their knowledge about Islam from mass media outlets, so it is vital that they develop the skills to interpret this information correctly. While it can be difficult to comprehend the religion of another, middle and high school students are capable of understanding differences in the

interpretation of Islam, just as Christianity and Judaism are understood differently by their followers (Moore, 2006). If the goal of school is really to educate children to become productive and civic-minded members of society, then the educational system should take advantage of opportunities where facts and skills can deconstruct prejudice.

Multiculturalism is another way through which teachers can introduce students to democratic values through education. Instead of focusing on the role of Islam in world history, multiculturalists argue for its presence in school curriculum because Muslims comprise a growing portion of the United States' population (Douglass & Dunn, 2003). The National Council for Social Studies describes the mission of multicultural education in *Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education* (1991) stating, "Multicultural education seeks to actualize the idea of *e pluribus unum* within our nation and to create a society that recognizes and respects the cultures of its diverse people, people united with a framework of democratic values" (p. 1). Proponents of multicultural education declare that because of its emphasis on justice, equality, and inclusiveness, it must be democratic (Danker, 2005). Yet, in the 1980s, this style of teaching social studies became increasingly controversial. Douglass and Dunn (2003) attribute the decline in the popularity of multiculturalism to the idea that this way of teaching entailed the reconstruction of America's collective memory, which in turn disestablished the notion that American democracy has always ensured fairness and equality for all who deserved it. Religious discrimination takes place in the United States, despite the constitutionally protected right of freedom of religion (Danker, 2005). This is one reason why Islam is difficult for teachers to discuss in schools. It requires the intentional dispelling of false conceptions and misstated facts, especially since Islam is frequently depicted as incompatible with democracy (Moore, 2006). Furthermore, because parents, officials, or administrators do not see the value

and truth in inclusiveness, attributes of multiculturalism are written off as anti-American. Thus, one cannot accidentally be a multicultural teacher. Educators must make a conscience effort to dissipate the myths that Western-focused history classes have created while confronting their own biases first (Kellum, 1969).

However, students learn from what is not addressed in class, too. When Islam is omitted from a school's curriculum, this suggests it is too radically different from mainstream American society to be recognized positively in a classroom setting (Jackson, 2014). Furthermore, when topics that may be controversial among students, parents, or officials, are avoided, students are not able to participate in a classroom environment where exploring diverse beliefs and views is encouraged. This perpetuates the fear of the other, especially towards Islam, and fosters apathy and civic incompetence in students (Moore, 2012). In 1969, David Kellum wrote that our educational system would finally be able to overcome intolerance if and when it confronts fear, not intelligence, as what prevents people from valuing or respecting what is different from themselves. Fear must be overcome through the testing of beliefs. If students are never taught to critically examine their values, they will leave secondary education with a set of shallow democratic ideals that have never been fully considered or tried. Avoiding controversy, and thus intellectual debate, undermines the structure of a truly democratic system (Battistoni, 1985). If students do not learn to discuss difference in a way that is not combative or judgmental, they miss the opportunity to develop the ability to discuss it with respect and civility. Without this skill, misinformed students will perpetuate prejudice out of fear and the lack of a desire to understand, rather than learning to enact civic values and respect others in their communities (Haynes, 1990).

The proposal of the new standards included a new concept that had not appeared in past social studies standards documents: Social Studies Practices (SSP). The standards document describes the SSP lists for each set of grades as skills that students should use continuously through the year to address questions and guide critical thinking (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017c). The SSP list for sixth through eighth grade instructs that students should be able to “critically examine a primary or secondary source to draw inferences and conclusions,” “assess the strengths and limitations of an argument,” and “distinguish between fact and opinion.” It also states that students should develop a historical awareness and be able to synthesize data to recognize differences among multiple accounts (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017c, pp. 66-67). By studying Islam, students would be presented with a valuable opportunity to enact these practices that the state has mandated. Additionally, educators can use critical literacy in their classrooms in conjunction with the SSP lists to go beyond a skills-based approach to obtain a higher level of comprehension and critical thinking skills. Critical literacy involves the interrogation of multiple viewpoints and often focuses on sociopolitical issues through the reading of relevant primary and secondary sources (Phelps, 2010). As Phelps (2010) goes on to explain, when studying about Islam in schools, “[C]ritical literacy can help students conceptualize their views of Islam, their understanding of what it means to be Muslim in the United States, and their appreciation of what it means to be bicultural” (p. 192). Additionally, critical literacy can present students with a more balanced way of considering what mass media suggests about Islam (Jackson, 2010). Teachers can also use the helpful social studies practices set forth by the state in conjunction with critical literacy to examine the Islamic tradition. However, because of time constraints and the removal of several aspects of Islam from the

standards, it is sadly unlikely that teachers will have additional time to enact such strategies for teaching about the religion and how to discern fact from fiction in the media.

#### An Ongoing Process

The review and implementation of the new standards is an ongoing process. At the time of the submission of this paper, the Tennessee State Board of Education had not yet conducted the second and final reading of the proposed social studies standards. During the same meeting, which is scheduled to take place on July 28, 2017, the Board will vote to approve or reject the proposal. Additionally, according to the agenda for this upcoming board meeting that is posted on the Tennessee State Board of Education website, the standards proposal has been altered since the first reading that the Board conducted in April 2017 (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017d). This is likely a result of legislation that lawmakers passed in May 2017 that mandated a semester-length course on Tennessee history for students. The law does not specify during which grade the semester focused on studying Tennessee history should take place (TN H.R. 1169, 2017). As a result, the State Board of Education has partnered with the Department of Education to modify the standards proposal to ensure that it is in compliance with the new law before the Board votes on it (Tatter, 2017). The bill states that “a clear and full understanding of Tennessee's history is fundamental to understanding Tennessee's place in the United States and the world,” and that promoting Tennessee history should be a core mission of the state’s educational system.

Furthermore, the proposed standards have not yet been enacted and will not be until the 2019-2020 school year, assuming that the Tennessee State Board of Education approves them. Because of this, it is impossible to know how local education administrations will interpret them when writing curricula. A teacher’s understanding and enactment of both the curriculum and the

standards can vary across districts and even within schools. Aside from curriculum, textbooks are another key factor in what the interpretation of the standards will look like. The minutes from a SRC meeting in November of 2016, summarize a statement by Laura Encalade, the former director of policy and research, which says, “The textbook companies are required to provide resources based on the standards[,] so if a textbook does not provide enough resources for a topic, it would not be on the approved textbook list” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2016e). This may present further issues regarding the portrayal of Islam in social studies classrooms in Tennessee since the proposed standards contain very little about Islam, thus requiring little information and resources covering this topic to be accessible to teachers and ultimately students. The consequences of this type of textbook selection process are already playing out in Tennessee classrooms. A Memphis social studies teacher described the textbook currently used in his school to teach seventh-grade social studies as having “the feel of [a] Western [Civilization] text more than a true World History book.” This suggests that many of the texts selected for use in classrooms based on the current standards may contain limited information about Eastern civilizations. Since the proposed standards further limit the scope of the history of Islam that must be taught in schools, it is likely that the new textbooks approved by the state and selected for use by local school administrations will reflect this. Furthermore, in an analysis of classroom materials, Douglass and Dunn (2003) found that “Islam is generally not interpreted as its adherents understand it, but as the editors believe will be acceptable to textbook committees. Moreover, certain fundamental facts are ignored, while other details are selectively emphasized” (p. 59). Because the proposed social studies standards require little knowledge of Islam to be discussed, supplementary classroom materials approved for use in Tennessee will likely fit this mold. Additionally, no evidence was found to indicate that Muslim scholars were

consulted when developing the standards about Islam. This increases the likelihood that Islam is not portrayed in an educational setting as its followers understand it, but rather in accordance with the rest of the world's perception of it, just as Douglass and Dunn found in their analysis (2003). As a result, a Western narrative about Islam is continuously imposed through the educational standards and materials selected for use.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

A common claim that emerged in several of the interviews conducted through the course of this project was the certainty by those involved in the creation of the standards that every religion was dealt with uniformly and fairly (Personal Interview, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017e). On a visual level, it is difficult to dispute this claim because each standard that focuses on a religion is formatted using the same three-point format, as discussed earlier and depicted in *Table 3*. However, while all standards that cover major religions are structured the same, this analysis of the proposed social studies standards has revealed that the contributions and roles of Islam and its followers to history and modern society are drastically minimized. This minimization and disregard for its potential consequences demonstrates a lack of dedication and urgency on the part of the state to combat discrimination as it appears in educational standards, school curricula, and classroom materials.

The U.S. supreme court argued that fairly teaching about different religions is necessary for students to understand human history and contemporary global culture. As Douglass and Dunn (2003) further explain, "This is a simple and obvious proposition, but putting it to a full test will require abandoning the current habits in American education of essentializing religions, civilizations, and ethno-racial groups in the interests of either patriotism or cultural self-esteem" (p. 70). While teaching about Christianity is encouraged in several parts of Tennessee by local school administrators and private organizations, even the mention of Mohammad or the Quran in

schools has been known to ignite a string of school board meetings and letters to legislators contesting teaching about Islam in public education. Tennessee's pattern of failing to invalidate and often surrendering to unwarranted concerns of Islamic indoctrination promotes a political agenda that permits the perpetuation of discriminatory behavior in the education of the state's public school students. Citizens and lawmakers who claim to fear Islamic indoctrination because of the mere presence of Islam in school standards or textbooks must first acknowledge that political indoctrination originating from *any* point of the ideological spectrum has no place in the education of civic-minded and democratically participatory students (Moore, 2012).

We must think critically about the educational goals reflected through our local and state school systems. Tennessee's social studies standards proposal highlights the state's indifference towards the need to combat the spread of misinformation about Islam which often fuels discrimination and intolerance. Instead, the removal of most of the lessons about Islam from the proposed standards suggests to students that beliefs should not be tested and that the media is the only accessible source for information about Islam. It devalues the important contributions of Muslims to global history and fails to describe how Islamic society shaped today's world. Fortunately, educators have the opportunity to use their skills to dismantle biases and false stereotypes, but this is a lofty and risky expectation for teachers who do not have the support of their school or local education administration. When equipped with standards, materials, and a curriculum that encourages open discussion about topics that are typically deemed controversial by other community members, educators have the opportunity to help students develop critical thinking skills and empathy. As a result, students are able to cultivate abilities that prepare them to be civic-minded citizens.

As Nicholas C. Burbules notes, the desire to provide richer and more accurate information about Islam has to resist local community culture, especially in parts of the nation where this is seen as unpatriotic or disloyal (Jackson, 2014). Instead, the Tennessee legislature and State Board of Education gave into unfounded claims of Islamic indoctrination in public schools, leading to a standards proposal that has all but removed teaching about Islam fairly in the classroom. However, this instance of attempting to eliminate or control the portrayal of a group's presence in history and society from social studies standards and curricula is not a unique or new phenomenon. Social studies lessons are an opportune medium for the reflection of the values and beliefs of the government. In Tennessee, the politicization of the social studies standards revision process indicates that the priority of the state government is not to promote diverse, inclusive, and holistic content in education, but rather to maintain a homogenous Christian-centric value system and way of thinking in public schools. Consequently, the proposed social studies standards demonstrate an aversion towards Islam, allowing Islamophobia and discrimination against the Muslim population to continue to fester in Tennessee. This case is an archetypical example of the dangers of politicizing education through media coverage and legislative agendas, potentially hindering the freedom and democracy that legislators claim to value most.

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