

The New Assimilationism: The Push for *Patriotic* Education in the United States Since September 11

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Since September 11, 2001, arguments have been put forward for a sort of specifically non-pluralistic, conservative, patriotic educational policy in the United States, by educators historically sympathetic toward assimilationist policies and curriculum in U.S. schools, such as Diane Ravitch, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and E.D. Hirsch. In response to pluralist calls for tolerance if not positive recognition of Muslims and Islam in public schools, these and other critics of multiculturalism¹ frame positive recognition in this case as mutually exclusive with the nation's continued flourishing via patriotic, assimilationist education. However, there is little reason to regard Muslims and Islam in predominantly critical terms today, as anti- or un-American, as many productive, patriotic Muslims are also U.S. citizens. In this case, patriotic education proponents' claims about the exceptional liberties granted by the United States ring a bit hollow.

In this essay, I want to trace a line between assimilationism as an historical force and, at one time, sanctioned policy in education and elsewhere within the United States, to arguments being made more recently for patriotic education in response to calls for positive recognition of Muslims in schools since 9/11. The case suggests that while historically and today the argument has been put forward that certain others within the nation-state are "too different," and beyond mainstream toleration and assimilation in the schools, those very populations deemed intolerable and "un(s)meltable" nonetheless have arguably become and are integrated into the United States as a *pluralist* country.

Assimilationists in this context presume a cultural homogeneity to make their case, while the internal diversity of the country, today and in the past, is quite evident.

¹ I define "assimilationism" below, but often refer to "multiculturalism" and "pluralism" in passing, despite the many different ways these terms are understood in different contexts. "Multiculturalism" is understood here as an approach to cultural or social difference that seeks to enable the coexistence of different groups in society, through positive recognition of minorities cultural values, norms, and beliefs. Relatedly, I regard as "pluralism" here the understanding that difference is acceptable within a society: that different groups can coexist and flourish alongside one another.

As will be made clear later in this essay, I understand social difference as socially constructed in particular contexts. Whether one's race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other aspects of his or her identity mark him or her as "different" depends on who he or she is with, where he or she is. This does not mean the *difference* does not matter; on the contrary, one must take the distinctions seriously in social relations always marked by power inequalities. However, there is also an arbitrary quality to social constructions of difference, such as race, as well: race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and the like are not necessarily essential categories, and our understandings of the distinctions they mark can vary greatly, geographically and historically.

Further, we find today that the call for a patriotic educational policy that opposes positive recognition of Muslims and Islam in public schools risks endorsing stereotypes and hatred of difference in U.S. schools while, counter to critic's claims, an education tolerant toward religious difference can be seen in this case not only as *most appropriate* in a country where it is within individual's constitutional rights to believe as they choose in the private sphere, but *necessary* to educate students whose religious beliefs should not be the cause of classroom barriers.

Here I will first discuss assimilationism as a philosophical commitment in the United States historically, in order to flesh out the main features of assimilationism and pluralism and compare and contrast the two. Though this discussion does not focus singly on education (due in part to the fact that the early debates in U.S. education did not center on these competing views, but around questions such as whether everyone should be formally educated, for instance, which takes us in quite a different direction...),² the second and third sections will analyze more recent educational trends against multicultural education and toward patriotic education, particularly since 9/11, respectively, critically evaluating their implications for educating about difference, and in the case of Islam. I argue that historically and today these sorts of pushes for assimilationism and patriotism and against multiculturalism serve ultimately to exclude rather than to include more people, despite the proponents' alleged commitment to equality and individual liberty as promoted in the U.S. constitution.

Assimilationism in U.S. History: Early Debates

Under assimilationism, the differences or distinctions of minorities from social norms are regarded primarily as barriers to their full participation in society, regardless of the potential value of their social or cultural distinctions in other contexts, such as within the family. Assimilationists therefore want minorities to adapt to mainstream or majority cultural values and practices in order to succeed in society, and leave at home, in a sense,

² Undoubtedly pluralists and assimilationists would agree that there should be schools for youth to attend; their differences of opinion would relate to the central purposes of common schools, which takes us far beyond that particular historical event, though the question of the *religious* content of the curriculum in various early local schools may be within the boundaries of the present discussion.

practices and attitudes that make them stand out in the public sphere. Viewing adaptation to mainstream culture as essential for successful participation in society, assimilationists ask that educators help initiate minorities to majority cultural values and practices, rather than accept, tolerate, or positively recognize students as different. In this framework, majority culture is viewed as acceptably or appropriately the primary culture of the public sphere, and is frequently defended as such to multiculturalists and others who would regard it as merely one culture or tradition of the diverse society, among others.

As will be discussed throughout this essay, while critics of assimilationism often portray it as a stance of fundamental intolerance toward minority groups' distinctive traditional or historical ways of life, many in the past and today promoting assimilation emphasize not intolerance of social difference, but the essential need for minorities to acquire the capacity to act on equal opportunity in mainstream society, despite their different values or practices (from public norms) that may be established in their homes or in their communities. A paradox can be seen to emerge here, however, as mainstream society might also practice tolerance toward difference in order for equality to prevail.

A nation-state of immigrants, the United States has long encouraged assimilation of different national and ethnic groups through common schools and other institutions. In this context, assimilationism can be seen initially as the well-intended (and/or self-interested) response of majority-culture white citizens to the presence of minority groups in the new nation, such as the Irish, Native Americans, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia, who were commonly held as unequal in rights and status naturally and/or by law.

These groups faced significant social barriers not simply because they were different, for members of these groups often shared much in common with the so called "native" American citizens. Rather, they faced barriers to equal participation because of common perceptions of what their differences *meant*; difference was often seen to imply inferiority, at least, in the new nation. As politician Edward Everett put it in a statement *in support* of Irish immigration in the mid-nineteenth century, "their inferiority as a race

compels them to go to the bottom, and the consequence is that we are all, all of us, the higher lifted because they are here.”³

In this context, the liberally minded, as well as those who saw minority norms as disruptive or threatening to the flourishing of mainstream society, viewed assimilation as necessary to permit or enable minorities to involve themselves more substantially in the fabric of mainstream culture and society. Settlement houses were established to assist new immigrants in developing practices better aligned with those of mainstream society, such as speaking and writing English, child rearing according to contemporary Anglo American norms, and abstaining from alcohol and visiting saloons. Both mainstream society and the minority member within it were seen to benefit from this sort of assimilation, according to those advocating for it, including some its recipients, such as Italian immigrant Rosa, who stayed at the Chicago Commons settlement house in the 1890s:

They used to tell us that it’s not nice to drink beer, and we must not let the baby do this and this... Pretty soon they started the classes to teach us poor people to talk and write in English... I used to love the American people, and I was listening and listening how they talked. That’s how I learned to talk such good English. Oh, I was glad when I learned enough English to go to the priest in the Irish church and confess myself and make the priest understand what was the sin!... I have to tell another good thing the settlement house did for me....⁴

Assimilation during this time often involved both changes in norms and moral standards, as well as the development of more pragmatic tools that would be necessary for immigrants’ success in the New World. Predictably some, particularly white Christians immigrating from Western Europe, had an easier time fitting in and adapting themselves to the norms of their new country than did others, whose “choice” of the United States as their home was not entirely free, or who experienced more serious legal and practical

³. Quoted in Gutman, *Who Built America*, 265.

⁴. *Ibid.*, 213.

challenges to receiving equal opportunity within the Anglo Saxon-dominant society, such as Native Americans, African (forced and enslaved) immigrants, Asian immigrants, and those hailing from Southern and Eastern Europe.⁵

Those deemed too different, or thought of as unwilling to assimilate to political majority norms—particularly during times of national crisis—were frequently held as inferior, dangerous, disruptive, or threatening to society. Thus, the continuous enslavement and oppression of blacks in the United States until late into the nineteenth century, who were widely recognized to outnumber whites in the South, was often defended in terms of their perceived incapacity for civilization or peaceful coexistence within the majority white culture,⁶ while many viewed assimilation through federally regulated schooling as the only way for Native Americans to live, in any significant numbers, peacefully and prosperously within the new European-oriented nation.⁷ Even the European-descended “hyphenated American” (identifying, for instance, as “Italian-American,” rather than as “American”) was seen as a potential threat during the first World War, carrying with his hyphen “a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic,” according to former President Woodrow Wilson.⁸

Critical responses to these attitudes and related practices quickly emerged. Known as pluralists, critics argued that hyphenated Americans were not dangerous if unwilling or

⁵. Akam, *Transnational America*, pt. 1.

⁶. Take, for instance, the Caroline Slave Code of 1712: “as the said negroes and other slaves brought into the people of this Province for [labor and service] are of barbarous, wild, savage natures, and such as renders them wholly unqualified to be governed by the laws, customs, and practices of this Province; but that it is absolutely necessary, that such other constitutions, laws and orders, should in this Province be made and enacted, for the good regulating and ordering of them, as may restrain the disorders, rapines and inhumanity, to which they are naturally prone and inclined, and may also tend to the safety and security of the people this Province and their estates; to which purpose, *be it therefore enacted*...that all negroes...are hereby declared slaves; and they, and their children, are hereby made and declared slaves, to all intents and purposes....” Gutman, ed., *Who Built America*, 387 (emphasis added).

⁷. For more on Native American assimilation and reservations, see Akam, *Transnational America*, chapters 5–6; and the ethnographic account of assimilation in Eastman, “Ohiyesa.”

⁸. Akam, *Transnational America*, 47. Likewise, we see today articulations of the differences between Islamic and Western peoples (for instance, Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*; and Barber, *Jihad Versus McWorld*) that frame these differences as threatening to international peace and prosperity, as we will see in later sections and chapters.

uninterested in dismissing their rich and distinctive cultural traditions in order to access equal opportunities and political representation. Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne argued respectively during the early-twentieth century that it was not just possible, but desirable, for U.S. immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe to be regarded as patriots while they preserved some aspects of their cultural distinctiveness from U.S. norms.⁹ They proposed a view of U.S. society as an orchestra of tones, wherein difference is advantageous to the whole and its parts, rather than as a (s)melting pot,¹⁰ in which minority groups conformed to maintain a homogeneous, essentially Anglo-Saxon American culture:

We have had to listen to publicists who express themselves as stunned by the evidence of vigorous nationalistic and cultural movements in this country among Germans, Scandinavians, Bohemians, and Poles, while in the same breath they insist that the aliens all be forcibly assimilated to that Anglo-Saxon tradition which they unquestioningly label “American.”...America is a unique sociological fabric, and it bespeaks poverty of imagination to not be thrilled at the incalculable potentialities of so novel a union of men...we have to give up the search for our native “American” culture....It is our lot rather to be a federation of cultures.¹¹

As justification for his propositions, Kallen emphasized (as many pluralists do today) that it was not just challenging, but harmful to develop in minorities “cultural amnesia,” or a forgetting or dismissing of their cultural origins: “Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent [but] they cannot change their grandfathers....Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, in order to cease being Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, would have to cease to be.”¹²

⁹. Ibid., pt. 1.

¹⁰. The term “melting pot,” widely used in modern-day multicultural discourse as a metaphor for the strategy of assimilation, was first popularized by Israel Zangwill’s (1908) play, *The Melting Pot*. In this play the melting pot phenomenon is held as a wonderful social good unique to the United States, carrying none of the negative connotation implied in much pluralist rhetoric today. See Akam, *Transnational America*, pt. 1.

¹¹. Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 16–17.

¹². Akam, *Transnational America*, 59.

Viewing pride and affiliation with one's cultural origins as essential to one's sense of self, Kallen argued that one's disconnection from his heritage was personally devastating and thus could hardly benefit the community around him. He argued further that fundamental differences between groups were not necessarily severe or irreconcilable, as was assumed by the more dramatic of assimilationist rhetoric—that immigrant groups could, and should, in a sense, hold onto their earlier or more traditional culture, while also participating on more or less equal footing, the political majority willing, in a pluralistic society.

Assimilationists were not without defenses for their stance, however, that likewise emphasized minorities' plight in society. Proponents of assimilation argued that (aside from the rhetoric of the few, vocal pluralists) markers of difference from the political majority stigmatized minority-group members, effectively disabling their potentially equal opportunities. Because symbols of difference from mainstream norms trace or imply historical or existing boundaries of sameness and difference, assimilationists argued it benefited not just the political majority but minorities as well to gradually diminish signs of cultural difference, to enable greater minority equality. William Thomas and Florian Znanieck's analysis of the plight of the Polish immigrant in the early-twentieth century exemplifies this strategy:

Even if the Polish-American society should maintain in general that separation which its leaders have wished, the cultural level of *Polonia Americana* would always remain lower than that of American society, since its best men are and always will be attracted by the wider and richer field. . . . But as to the Polish-American institutions already created, their destruction would mean the removal of the only barrier which now stands between the mass of Polish immigrants and complete wildness. *The only method which can check demoralization and make of the immigrants—and particularly their descendants—valuable and culturally productive members of the American society, and imperceptibly and without violence lead to their real Americanization is to supplement the existing Polish-American institutions by others—many others—built on a*

*similar foundation but in closer contact with American society.*¹³

Like Kallen in his emphasis on the salience of the primary culture of the “hyphenated American,” Thomas and Znanieck do not outright deny the significance of culture in people’s (particularly minorities’) lives. Indeed, they view Polish institutions as essential in the contemporary context to the Poles’ personhood, and their destruction as potentially devastating. Yet they shift from pluralistic concern with the need for minority toleration and *recognition*, to concern with the need for minority *Americanization*, that diminishes minorities’ differences to make them more similar and thus more able to access equal opportunities. They see the multicultural American (that is, U.S.) society as a “richer” and “wider” field, toward which Poles must step in order to gain equal footing in society. Thus, even if their cultural traditions might be tolerable, they observe that the Pole nonetheless cannot succeed in America lacking Americanization, being recognized more exclusively as Polish.

Here, assimilation is distinguishable from pluralism in emphasizing that society, including its most and least advantaged, benefits more from bringing minorities into the mainstream than from tolerating or recognizing their traditional ways as acceptable or significant, which they view as largely futile to the concrete goals of enabling equality and maintaining social harmony. While assessments of cultures’ relative worth are not uncommon among thinkers in this tradition (Saul Bellow’s in/famous statement that “When the Zulus produce a Tolstoy we will read them,” conveys a sentiment still relevant today,¹⁴ as we will see in the next section), they can be seen as largely irrelevant when one emphasizes instead the *de facto* nature of the contemporary political majority and the desirability of social equality and stability via social reproduction of mainstream norms. Thus, more pragmatic voices in this tradition emphasize that, for example, English is simply the major language of the society, and needed for success within it, regardless of its merit alongside other languages, or other interests that might be

¹³. Thomas and Znanieck, “Disorganization of the Polish Immigrant” (emphasis added).

¹⁴. Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” 42. Like Charles Taylor, I use this quote to illustrate a common sentiment, and “have no idea whether this statement was actually made in this form by Saul Bellow, or anyone else.”

expressed by minority language-speaking groups.¹⁵

Nonetheless the relative lack of toleration toward difference among many assimilationists is continuously emphasized by those who ask, as Kallen did, who or what is demonstrably harmed when society tries to make use of the newer cultural elements it possesses in its nation building, rather than dismiss them—who is harmed by people carrying with them distinctive linguistic and cultural traditions of importance to them into a democratic, plural public sphere? While much has changed since these early developments, we see today assimilationists and pluralists debating roughly the same questions: Can minorities' norms be tolerated, or recognized in the public sphere? Or do markers of their differences from mainstream norms present a threat to society, or to minorities' own well-being?

Contemporary Views: Assimilationism and Patriotism in Educational Thought

While an attitude of minimal respect or toleration toward minority cultures is broadly embraced as part of American tradition today, educators remain largely split today between viewing certain forms of difference as threatening to social stability and/or equality and viewing them as wholly tolerable if not also worthy of positive recognition. Like Thomas and Znanieck, educational assimilationists today would relinquish the power, or significance, of minority cultural identities in public spaces like schools, arguing that such markers of difference obstruct their equal participation in American society. Frequently responding in part to pluralists' counterclaims that assimilationism is culturally insensitive, intolerant, and even potentially oppressive to minorities, given the presumably equal merit of cultural traditions apart from those of mainstream American society,¹⁶ today's assimilationists often further emphasize that mainstream society's historical roots in Western Europe are themselves hardly shameful, and that fair or equal representation should thus imply, in the very least, an appreciation for the *dominant* cultural traditions within the state that approaches that pluralists would afford chiefly to

¹⁵. This distinction is helpfully drawn in Feinberg, *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities*, which also critically traces the major variants of what I call assimilationist and pluralist thought here (see chap. 2–3).

¹⁶. For a well-known critique of assimilationism, see Taylor, "Politics of Recognition."

minority traditions.

Within assimilationist discourse, adapting to mainstream norms and identifying positively with the society as a whole go hand in hand on one's path to personal autonomy and success in mainstream society. To want to adapt, students must appreciate mainstream cultural values, such as personal freedom and social equality, assimilationists argue, and by the same token, to achieve equal rights in society one must first learn to navigate, or adapt to, the norms of citizenship, thereby earning, in a sense, one's equality and freedom. Yet when one focuses instead on minorities' historical *inequality* in U.S. mainstream society, this formula fails to be compelling. For those who are considerate of evidence (empirical or anecdotal) that U.S. society as a whole has been or is today less than just toward its minority population,¹⁷ the need for or desirability of initiating youth to this particular social order makes little sense; social changes—both in general norms and in practices toward minorities—seem more in order.

Given the potential persuasive power of such counterclaims (particularly in classroom settings), assimilationists defend mainstream society as greatly improved and sufficiently just today, to more compellingly argue for the assimilation of minorities as a social good. Arguments that American society is *distinctively* tolerant now often complement their cases, suggesting that if someone's values or practices should change, they are those of citizens who historically or culturally identify with less tolerant or pluralistic societies—that is, minorities—who are, they suggest, new and welcome initiates to a nation symbolically recognized the world over as particularly, exceptionally “free.”¹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger argues, for instance, that “Western hegemony...can be the source of protest as well as power,” as the “crimes of the West have produced their own antidotes”; that Western Europe remains “the source—the *unique* source—of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural

¹⁷. See, for instance, Hacker, *Two Nations*; MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It*; Kozol, *Shame of the Nation*; Zinn, *People's History of the United States*; hooks, *Killing Rage*; and Giroux, *Living Dangerously*.

¹⁸. See for instance, Schlesinger, *Disuniting of America*; Huntington, *Who Are We*; Ravitch, “Multiculturalism”; Finn, ed., *Terrorists and Despots*.

freedom”; and that “there is surely no reason for Western civilization to have guilt trips laid on it by champions of cultures based on despotism, superstition, tribalism, and fanaticism.”¹⁹

Similarly defensive of mainstream norms and “traditional” cultural foundations, Diane Ravitch denounces what she labels “ethnic cheerleading”²⁰—the more substantive cultural recognition pluralists demand—as undermining social stability by needlessly perpetuating a politics of divisiveness over an emphasis on what makes U.S. society and its public school students more universally distinctive. She disdains, in one particular instance, pluralistic educators who have “seized upon the Mayan contribution to mathematics as key to . . . boosting the ethnic pride of Hispanic children,” in favor of teachers “attempting to change the teaching of their subject so that children can see its uses in everyday life.”²¹

Here Ravitch emphasizes that “everyday life” in the United States is neither Mayan nor Hispanic, but is essentially American, assuming a “melting” of minority identities as ideal. Regarding the Western European majority culture as sufficiently pluralistic in its toleration toward difference, Ravitch holds that pluralists²² misconstrue as self-confidence building alienating minority youth from mainstream society, to their detriment, and against the social goals of equality and stability. She further illustrates her critique of “ethnic cheerleading” by referencing an interview with a black female runner who claimed to be most inspired by the discipline of Russian (male, white) ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. That one need not share a minority-group identity with another in order to identify with them on their individual quest toward personal achievement is Ravitch’s point here.

Ravitch and other assimilationists’ defense of each person’s individual potential and

¹⁹. Schlesinger, *Disuniting of America*.

²⁰. Ravitch, “Multiculturalism.”

²¹. *Ibid.*, 344–5 (emphasis added).

²². In fact she refers to “multiculturalists,” a label with which she does *not* self-identify (nor would she claim to be an assimilationist).

equal opportunity in U.S. society is initially compelling: U.S. schools should aim to increase student opportunities, not limit them, and so to regard minority youth as extensions of cultural groups rather than as individuals, or the society as one that is inevitably unequal or unjust toward its minorities, goes against an important educational ideal. However, a false dichotomy can also be observed in much assimilationist rhetoric, which falsely suggests that supporting America's commitment to individual freedom and equality requires forsaking absolutely one's minority affiliation(s). Ravitch uses a binary, either/or logic in making her claims, fundamentally dismissing the possibility of one strengthening their sense of distinctive cultural origin through patriotic or nationalist commitment within a pluralist national context, or of one cultivating patriotism through pride about his or her continued ability to commune with others based on ethnic or other minority heritage.

Against assimilationists' emphatic claims that recognition of personal origins and group identities is a potential source of harm to minorities and/or the larger society, one can identify meaningfully as female, or black, for instance, without brandishing in any substantial sense his or her commitment to a broader social field. And teachers need not participate either in "ethnic cheerleading" or nation building, but can do both, at least in a minimal sense, without fear of incomprehensibility or incoherence, as Walter Feinberg suggests in his discussion of *minimal* multicultural recognition:

If a student felt bad because classmates looked down on her because of cultural or racial affiliation, the teacher may become more active in promoting the self-esteem of the child. This could entail encouraging her to bring in cultural items that speak to the accomplishments of the group. Recognition here is still minimal, however. It is provided in order to aid the *child's performance or comfort in the classroom, and it may or may not have any importance for the culture itself.*²³

While it is possible that Schlesinger, Ravitch, and other assimilationists would not see the harm in teachers boosting students' self-esteem in this sense, they often suggest in their texts that this sort of recognition could nonetheless hardly take place in classroom

²³. Feinberg, *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities*, 169 (emphasis added).

settings without wasting valuable time that could be devoted to what they see as *more important* matters: of social reproduction (teaching the skills needed to participate in society), assimilation (teaching students to identify with the larger, U.S. society), and nation building (teaching students to support the nation-state). Indeed, they commonly paint “ethnic cheerleading,” or any sort of positive minority recognition, and learning what is needed to participate in U.S. society as mutually exclusive options. This trend is illustrated in recent assimilationist educators’ discussions of Muslims.

Muslims, the “Clash of Civilizations,” and Questionable Methodologies

As we have seen here, groups viewed as “unmeltable” or unwilling to assimilate were frequently regarded as dangerous by assimilationists in the past, while pluralists argued that they hardly posed any clear threat, and could instead be recognized as possessors of rich cultural traditions of value and integrity. Identifying themselves as part of a mainstream political majority today, contemporary educational assimilationists likewise see modern-day pluralist educational strategies as fuelled by special minority interests unaligned with those of society as a whole, thereby drawing a boundary between minority interests and those of the rest of society. This approach to difference is perhaps nowhere more evident than in assimilationists’ responses to pluralist calls for positive educational recognition of Muslims.

Examples abound particularly since September 11, 2001 (9/11) of assimilationists framing pluralist toleration and recognition of Muslims as coming at the cost of teaching what is needed for social reproduction and nation building in U.S. schools (apparently due to the fact that Muslims who explained their acts in terms of radical political-religious beliefs took responsibility for the attacks, a point I will discuss in more detail later). A particularly clear instance of this can be seen in a recent edited collection for educators produced by the Fordham Foundation, *September 11: What Children Need to Know*.²⁴ The editorial statement by Chester Finn describes the collection as a critical

²⁴. Finn, ed., *September 11*. Alongside Finn’s editorial, which I discuss here, most essays in the volume are written with the aforementioned framework, including especially Damon, “Teaching Students to Count Their Blessings,” Hymowitz, “Celebrating American Freedom,” Kersten, “Teaching Young People to Be Patriots,” Mirel, “Defending Democracy,” and Sesso and Pyne,

response to pluralistic pedagogy that emphasizes in the context of the attacks of 9/11 the equality and toleration the United States can (and should) afford to its minority citizens, including Muslims, some of whom were themselves attacked and victims of hate crimes after 9/11.²⁵

As Finn puts it, “that advice was long on multiculturalism, feelings, relativism and tolerance but short on history, civics, and patriotism,” and its antidote, he claims, are voices whose “reverence for tolerance [does not dwarf] their appreciation of other compelling civic values.” Finn gives an indication of which civic values he finds more compelling in closing, choosing Al Shanker’s “side of this pedagogical divide” and his commitment “to teach the *common culture*, the history of democracy and centrality of freedom and its defense against aggressors.”²⁶ One must take a side, suggests Finn: either promote multicultural toleration of diversity and difference or nation building and patriotism as civic virtue in the classroom. Finn implies that if one is oriented toward the latter goals, as he is, then interest in inculcating toleration and the like are little more than a waste of energy—a detractor from education for nation building (and national defense), as he sees it.

Likewise, Ravitch argues that world history textbooks’ financially based concessions to pro-Muslim and/or Islamic groups desiring positive recognition of Muslims today in U.S. schools have led chiefly to “their *omission of anything that would enable students to understand* conflicts between Islamic fundamentalism and Western liberalism.”²⁷ As we saw in Finn’s editorial, promoting tolerance of minorities in the classroom is cast as at odds with teaching “anything that would enable understanding,” or “what children need to know”...to develop an appreciation for (among other things) their distinctively

“Defining the American Identity.”

²⁵. Finn discusses specifically the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Council for the Social Studies, and National Educational Association, and Michael Apple as overly concerned with “tolerance, peace, understanding, empathy, diversity and multiculturalism.” For information on attacks and hate crimes against Muslims immediately following 9/11, see Wing, “Post 9/11 Hate Crime Trends”; and CAIR, *Unequal Protection*.

²⁶. Finn, *September 11* (emphasis added).

²⁷. Ravitch, *Language Police* (emphasis added). Ravitch does not compellingly make this case here, instead merely claiming it is so, rather than providing any evidence to back up her point of view.

American identity.²⁸ What makes Muslims too different to be viewed as a distinguished, rather than threatening, part of the U.S. or world story is not explicated here; it is merely assumed that they should not be treated as an internal or *similar* group, but as an outside, *different* group that threatens, conflicts with, the Western liberal tradition that Ravitch sees as undergirding U.S. society. Any potential harms done to Muslims through representing their beliefs in this basically negative way is not viewed as important to Ravitch and Finn, in light of their desire to educate about a distinctly American ideal that they simply regard Islam as brushing up against.

E.D. Hirsch also argues against pluralistic approaches to educating about Islam and Muslims that the “critical issue” since 9/11 is “intolerant medievalism versus the tolerant Enlightenment,”²⁹ emphasizing again mainstream American society as tolerant and acceptable, hardly worthy of critical reflection in the course of a classroom discussion, and positive educational recognition of Muslims as (paradoxically) contradictory to this message, thereby establishing the aforementioned binary: We can either recognize Islam or recognize (tolerant) America, but not both. Once again, the implication is that any treatment of Islam that aims to more positively recognize Muslims, as pluralists would advocate, contradicts the more general goal, in assimilationists’ writings, of instilling appreciation for majority norms through education. American Muslims seem to have to falsely choose between their religious and national identities in this educational framework, as Islam and the United States seem to be regarded by assimilationists here as two mutually exclusive entities.

When it comes to educating about Muslims, assimilationists thus pit against each other positively recognizing difference and developing and sustaining a distinctive and

²⁸. Similarly Finn speaks out in *September 11* against the National Council for the Social Studies’ promotion of a story in support of tolerance, “My Name is Osama,” arguing that while such a story *can* be helpful in reminding schoolchildren not to be biased against Muslim classmates, the “rest of the comprehensive effort” is not there: “the patriotic part, the history part, the civic part... Why had Osama and his family migrated to U.S. shores? What is it they came for? What was it important to them? Where is that part of the lesson?” Finn implies that the greatness of the United States is more fundamental to any lesson than are elaborations of its more particular commitments to tolerance and pluralism.

²⁹. Hirsch, “Moral Progress in History.”

coherent U.S. society, seeing the former as unnecessary for, if not disruptive to, the latter goal. In accepting the premise that the difference Islam makes is too great for toleration of Muslims through education to be tenable, assimilationists follow the political theory associated today with Samuel Huntington, known as the “clash of civilizations.”

Huntington’s thesis is that Western societies face significant challenges today particularly from Muslims, whom he casts as members of a fundamentalist, pre-liberal culture that developed in relative isolation from Western civilization and is thus a world apart socially today.³⁰ Likewise suggesting that the development of Islam and the norms of Muslims are simply too dramatically different from those of U.S. mainstream society to be positively recognized in the classroom, Ravitch, Hirsch, and Finn promote an education about Muslims and Islam that is cautionary in nature, rather than pluralistic or tolerant.

Yet as critics of the “clash of civilizations” view point out, there is no real or empirical boundary between Muslims or Islam and the West to justify the view that these groups are completely separate from each other and cannot coexist more peacefully.

Demographically, Muslims are of the West, Europe, and the United States, as well as of the East, of the Arab or Islamic “world.” Historically, most Muslim cultures have developed side by side with those of “Westerners.” And the challenges some particular contemporary Muslim groups pose to Western societies need not cause wide-scale prejudice or bias toward a much larger and more diverse cross section of the world’s population, that includes as well a significant population of Muslims living peacefully and successfully within the United States³¹:

The Islamic world accommodates diverse, talented, and hospitable citizens: lawyers, bankers, doctors, engineers, bricklayers, store managers, waiters, construction workers, writers, musicians, chefs, architects, hairdressers, psychologists, plastic surgeons, pilots, and environmentalists...traditional and Western...peaceful, not violent...Their lifestyles defy stereotyping...In fact, most of the world’s

³⁰. Huntington articulates his theory and framework primarily in “Clash of Civilizations.”

³¹. Some argue additionally that Muslims’ conflicts with the West or modernity are caused in part by these very prejudicial attitudes, which preclude Muslims’ equality with others in Western settings. See for instance, Tariq, *Clash of Civilizations*; and Sayyid, *Fundamental Fear*.

1.1 billion Muslims are Indonesian, Indian, or Malaysian. Only 12 percent of the world's Muslims are Arab.³²

When one considers the diversity of Muslims worldwide today, and their living productively in Western settings, the “clash of civilizations” argument about their basic cultural difference from Western civilization hardly seems to require an educational response. While Huntington writes at length of the “fundamental differences” between Western and Muslim societies—of “different views of the relations between God and man, the individual and the group...husband and wife...the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy,” and so on—others observe similarities between the Western and Islamic beliefs, and differences within Islamic perspectives, as well:

As a tradition of inquiry, liberalism is committed to ideals of openness and equality. But these commitments are to be found within many segments of traditional cultures as well. There is a healthy dialogue in many groups between those who are wedded to hierarchal traditions and those who seek textual authority to advance new ways of understanding and organizing themselves. For example, feminist scholars in Islamic societies use sacred Islamic texts to counter the interpretation that supports male domination. Challenges such as these come from within traditional culture and yet call on concerns that are mirrored in liberal thought as well.³³

Here Feinberg challenges the view, shared by “clash” theorists and educational assimilationists, that Western and Muslim societies are basically different from each other and internally coherent/stable (as Huntington writes, “differentiated...by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion...the product of centuries”³⁴).

³². Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 3–4. For more on stereotyping of Muslims and the clash of civilizations, see also Hoffman, “Samuel P Huntington”; Said, *Orientalism; Covering Islam; and Culture and Imperialism*; Karim, *Islamic Peril*; Bush, “Islam is Peace”; Barber, *Jihad Versus McWorld*; Sayyid, *Fundamental Fear*; and Tariq, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*.

³³. Feinberg, *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities*, 242.

³⁴. Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations,” pt. 3. While Huntington also acknowledges civilizations can blend, shift as identities change, and end, Huntington maintains throughout his work that “civilizational” differences are most “basic,” and, therefore, the primary cause of future international conflicts.

Similarly, others critiquing the “clash” thesis more generally argue that its perspective on cultural difference is limited by its reliance upon traditional anthropological conceptions of culture, which they see as methodologically suspect and largely outdated. Specifically, these critics argue that the common focus of many theorists on data useful for cross-cultural comparisons precludes their more comprehensive understanding of a culture or society, possibly also betraying their less than objective, or neutral, stance toward their objects of study.³⁵

This problem can be avoided to some extent through refining one’s methodology in various ways (triangulating evidence, engaging in reflective practice, and so on).³⁶ Yet even if unequal power dynamics and personal interests need not present serious problems for scholarly objectivity, the continued emphasis in cultural anthropology on discovering cross-cultural patterns and points for comparison can obscure other important group characteristics and dynamics. Anthropologist Franz Boas thus criticized his colleagues for seeking cross-cultural patterns rather than an understanding of a groups’ internal dynamics more generally, arguing that “forcing phenomena into the straightjacket of a theory is opposed to the inductive process by which the actual relations of definite phenomena may be derived.”³⁷ Rosaldo thus concludes regarding traditional anthropological research that:

³⁵ See Said, *Orientalism*, pt. 1; and Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, ch. 1-3. As Said wrote of Orientalist scholars, frequently observations are made in the context of unequal power relations that can obscure more objective findings: “There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these historic facts of domination that allows him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tells his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental. My argument is that Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.” As Said argues, unequal power relations can bias studies toward the researcher’s point of view on the subject, failing to properly take into account the object of study on its (or his or her) own terms. Likewise Said views Huntington’s gloomy assumptions and proposals related to Muslims today as not based in deliberation or investigations taking place in a context of equal respect, but as those of a largely misinformed, though empowered, outsider, who himself stands to gain by putting forward provocative and alarming, but nonetheless poorly justified, views. See Said, *Covering Islam*.

³⁶. See for instance Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, ch. 2-4, where he argues that cultural inquiries can still be fruitful given their employment of rigorously reflexive methodologies.

³⁷. Boas, *Race, Language and Culture*.

Although the classic vision of unique cultural patterns has proven merit, it also has serious limitations. It emphasizes shared patterns at the expense of processes of change and internal consistencies, conflicts, and contradictions. By defining culture as a set of shared meanings, classic norms of analysis make it difficult to study zones of difference within and between culture...cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas of inquiry.

Encounters with cultural and related differences belong to all of us in our mundane experiences, not to a specialized domain of inquiry housed in an anthropology department. Yet the classic norms of anthropology have attended more to the unity of cultural wholes than to the myriad crossroads and borderlands.³⁸

Like Feinberg on the perceived differences between the West and Muslim communities, critics of traditional cross-cultural anthropological studies view them as emphasizing contrastable whole entities at the cost of the recognition of internal divisions, diversity, and dynamism, and the “clash of civilizations” view as an extension of biased logic in support of otherwise unfounded political arguments about the inevitability of cross-cultural conflict. While Huntington additionally provides a historical overview of cross-cultural conflicts between the West and Muslims to bolster his view,³⁹ a different focus—say, on historical cross-cultural unions, or on cross-cultural commonalities, as were mentioned by Feinberg—would yield quite different conclusions for a political theory than that these groups are simply destined to clash.⁴⁰

Educational assimilationists in the United States today, as we have seen here, nonetheless assume the logic of the “clash” view when it comes to educating about Muslims, concluding that Muslims are too different from and threatening to U.S. society to be positively recognized in the schools—that pluralist recognition, in this case, effectively undermines education for social reproduction and national preservation, which they view as more fundamental than the inculcation of pluralist values such as toleration, empathy,

³⁸. Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 27–8. See also Geertz, *Local Knowledge*.

³⁹. Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations.”

⁴⁰. For contrast with Huntington, see for instance Hoffman, “Samuel P. Huntington”; Said, *Orientalism*; Chomsky, *Pirates and Empires*; and Karim, “Making Sense of the ‘Islamic Peril’.”

and understanding.

Yet there is no compelling justification for this logic, or for this educational approach to the difference Islam makes—no reason to ignore the need for tolerance toward Muslims to teach instead only of “the conflicts between Islamic fundamentalism and Western liberalism,” and nothing of what Muslims and Westerners share, or about the vast majority of Muslims, who are more moderate and peaceful than are those who come readily to mind when one thinks of 9/11, or the recent U.S. endeavors in Iraq and Afghanistan. As pluralists contend, a key component of Western liberalism is tolerance toward difference. In the case of Muslims, assimilationists’ professed commitments to American liberal traditions ring hollow.

Conclusions

Here I have explored the history of a key conservative perspective in the United States relevant to education, assimilationism, through various threads that lead to its proponents’ interest today in regarding Muslims and Islam as intolerable in U.S. schools, despite the problematic implications this approach to religious difference raises for Muslims within their (our) midsts, and Muslims within the school walls themselves. I have argued that while assimilationists tend to treat respecting cultural difference in the case of controversial minorities and teaching civic values as mutually exclusive options, culture clashes are not inevitable when social difference is permitted, regardless of Huntington and other “clash” theorists’ claims.⁴¹ On the contrary, the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Westerners is not just possible, but common—while intolerance toward or oppression of minorities’ identities and differences can be seen to harm them and diminish their capacity for equality in society.

⁴¹. I have focused primarily on Huntington’s view here, because it is influential today and summarizes the basic concern “clash” theorists, and “clash”-influenced theorists, tend to share. His work is itself heavily influenced by that of Bernard Lewis, in particular “Roots of Muslim Rage.” There are also other clash orientations toward the cultural difference between Islam and the West that use different reasoning, such as Barber, *Jihad Versus McWorld*; and Sayyid, *Fundamental Fear*. For a good, basic overview of major “clash” views, see Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*.

As I have discussed here, we need not choose to either support social reproduction and assimilation for equal opportunity through schooling, or meet the interests of minorities in tolerance or recognition. We can do *both*, as we see in the cases of many groups whose differences from mainstream norms have been and are perceived by some as potentially threatening and impossible to tolerate in educational settings, but who, nonetheless, have by and large been able to successfully and peacefully participate in classroom settings and in the broader society, such as Catholics, Jews, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Poles, Italians, and the Irish.

What these groups' respective histories indicate, additionally, is not simply that *tolerance* and *liberty* toward minorities are basic social norms in the United States, but that *intolerance* is also a common theme in U.S. social foundations (for instance, the constitutional treatment of blacks as white property, or the prevalence of anti-Catholic sentiments in early common school curriculum⁴²). Recognizing the story of America as one of justice as well as of injustice toward minorities, and differences from norms as potential social goods rather than mere threats to order, pluralists defend minority cultures and identities as distinctive and worthy of greater mainstream recognition, in the context of assimilationist claims.

Though pluralist educational strategies are not without limitations,⁴³ certainly it is better not to discriminate negatively in public schools among students or among citizens based on constitutionally protected aspects of their identities. As in the past, assimilationists cast a blind eye to how difference is socially constructed, and to other key social realities about society that present difficulties for enacting their idealistic proposals to provide social equality through a patriotic, majority-prioritizing form of education.

⁴². Blum, "Antiracist Civic Education in the California History-Social Science Framework"; and Nord, *Religion and American Education*.

⁴³. Though this article is primarily a critique of an educational tradition, elsewhere I discuss difficulties with pluralism in educational theory and practice and promote a "critical thinking" approach to difference in multicultural societies. See (author citations); see also for general reference Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival"; Kincheloe and Steinberg, *Changing Multiculturalism*; McCarthy, "Multicultural Discourses and Curriculum Reform"; Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*; Mahalingam and McCarthy, eds., *Multicultural Curriculum*; and Torres, *Democracy, Education and Multiculturalism*.

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