

What Do French Textbooks Teach About Islam?

by Hugh Fitzgerald (November 2016)



The historian Barbara Lefebvre took it upon herself to find out what is taught about Islam to students in French middle and secondary schools. What she discovered was not surprising, but deeply disturbing nonetheless. And her close analysis may encourage others – in Germany, in Great Britain, in Sweden, in the U.S. – to engage in a similar examination of what young people in the West are now being taught about Islam.

It takes the form of [a detailed answer to a question](#) posed by the leading center-right newspaper *Le Figaro*:

What is the purpose of the history taught in schools? Is it to teach us to “live together” or to instruct pupils?

Barbara LEFEBVRE: History as taught in our schools, defined by the official curricula and faithfully transcribed in textbooks, is not history as taught in the universities. It is not a history in which the present-day historiographical debates, often virulent, are treated. It is the story of the past reflecting the state of research where there is academic consensus. History in the schools serves a positive goal: to transmit to pupils factual knowledge, based on critical analysis of the sources. One hopes, possibly naively, that later on the

students will exercise their critical reason and think for themselves. Yet this discipline is most often used to impose value judgments on pupils. Today the problem is aggravated because of the crisis of identity and of massive deculturation.

It is interesting to study the new history syllabus that the present government wants to impose, the major themes of which are, however, recycled from previous syllabi. A lot of noise for nothing? Not really, for France is now at a breaking point on the question of national identity. How history is presented in the schools is a sensitive area on which we can have an effect, and though the fire has been simmering since 2000, with the attacks of 2015 and the grotesque business of the burkini, the pressure-cooker is really beginning to whistle. The tension is due to the pressure exercised by a tyrannical minority of political Islamists, some of whom who are being presented as "moderates" and thus legitimized by the government, who treat with opprobrium a silent majority of Muslims who are often non-observant or even non-believers, but who are used for political ends. The teaching of religion, in this case Islam, has never been as necessary and as demanding. Now if one wishes to fight, as is claimed, against a politico-religious ideology, it is especially important not to hide troublesome things under the rug, which leads us to teach a history of Muslim civilization without any warts, sometimes bordering on apologetics, all in the service of dogmatically glorifying this whole business of "living together."

I base my observations on the 2016 programs of study and the official resources to be found online, and then I've observed how these programs have been transposed in the school textbooks for the 7th grade that are most in use [published by Hachette, Belin, Bordas, Hatier]. What do these programs say?

"The study of religion... allows pupils to better situate, and understand, present-day debates," with an approach which must not be too fixated on such a long period. That's it. To approach the question with notions of theocracy and of "contact" between the Western and Byzantine Christians and Islam is judicious, but one has a right to be disturbed by the explicit intent of these programs to spend more time on "peaceful contacts" such as commerce and the sciences, rather than the warring contacts, that is to say, the Crusades and the Jihad. The war between Christians and Muslims dominates the history of the Middle Ages and even beyond, in the form of Muslim raids on the Mediterranean

shores of Europe. Minimizing the effect not just of these facts, but of their social and cultural effects in the two civilizational spaces, Muslim and Christian, reveals the political message here: "relations between the Christian and the Muslim worlds are not limited to military clashes," the curricula insist.

On the question of contacts, the official instructions call for teachers to "balance things, by not giving too much weight to the "study of events that put too much emphasis on bellicose contacts." And thus one proceeds to the construction of social and cultural representations, and in this the 2016 school program is scarcely different from that favored by the Third Republic and its famous "our ancestors the Gauls," regarded with such contempt by today's educational establishment. The only difference being that present-day school history presumes to represent an objectivity in the service of multicultural progressivism, an aim that the Third Republic did not have, for it wanted to create a French people, from its various elements, without distinguishing origin or social class. I want to raise another point: the creators of this history curriculum, who defend a "global approach to historical facts," a constant leitmotiv in the official instructions, want very much to offer a "mixed history." By that is meant that "the conditions and actions of women and men of a certain period will be treated in the same way." But curiously, about the condition of women under medieval Islam, silence reigns. In fact, none of the textbooks say anything about women [Belin] in Islam except for one regent of the Ayyoubide dynasty in the 13th century, as if this singular exception could be used to describe the place of women in Islam. What would one think of a historian who described the condition of women in France at the end of the 16th century by giving the example of Catherine de Medici?

The liberty accorded to teachers is a liberty of how to teach, one must remember, not what to teach. It is not a liberty of interpreting the curriculum as one pleases. The official curricula insist on a historiographical orientation: thus one is required to treat the battle of Poitiers as less important than it was, almost as if it were an anecdote, and in fact, some of the textbooks no longer even mention it. At the same time, teachers are required to study the friendship between Charlemagne and the Abbassid caliph al-Rashid, whose name is associated with the *Thousand and One Nights*, where he appears as the perfect caliph. This is an idealized version of the reign of the Al-Rashids,

dating from the 8th and 9th centuries, since the historians today distinguish the myth of the ideal Caliph presented by Arabic literature with the historical record showing that he weakened the power of the Abbasid caliphate, as the recurrent uprisings during his reign testify, and the troubles on the edges of his empire, and the violent civil war that followed his reign. Besides, his so-called "friendship" with Charlemagne was only a diplomatic friendship, motivated by the shared desire to oppose the Byzantine Empire and the Omayyad emir of Cordoba.

Certainly, in a school textbook, one doesn't expect to go into detail about the academic debates on the historicity of Mohammed, and the reliability of the facts of his life, but nonetheless it is surprising how little there is about him in the textbooks. Let me sum up what the pupil is told about Mohammed: he was a merchant, who travelled by camel caravan, received a visit from the angel Gabriel in about 610, and founded the first Muslim community and firmly established monotheism with the taking of Mecca from the pagan Arabs in 630. Everything seemed to happen without any major obstacle: Islam spread itself through conquest and everyone was happy to submit! One of the textbooks, the one that is published by Belin, doesn't even present Mohammed as a head of state and commander of the armies of Islam. However, the figure of the Prophet, the unsurpassable model of the Perfect Muslim, surely merits a closer look at his manner of living, all the more so since his private life was made public by his disciples, and held up, in the Qur'an and the Hadith, as a model to be followed. His life is well known to all practicing Muslims, but students in French schools will not learn what all Muslims know of the exemplary life of Mohammed. Perhaps this absence of biographical information is to be explained by the difference between Western notions of what constitutes an irreproachable man of faith and head of state, and the Muslim view of the Prophet as the Perfect Man?

But everything is a matter of interpretation, and the life of Mohammed, most human in its darker side, should be placed in his historical context, precisely to counter the narrative of political Islam that produces these Jihadists, who hammer home the notion that nothing in the Qur'an is to be "interpreted" away, and tell fellow Muslims that they should live "like the Prophet." It would be salutary to stop this practice of not talking about certain things in order not to offend the delicate sensibilities of certain pupils and their families, and instead, to deal with the facts and place them within a rational framework

rather than filter them through the demands of an ideology.

The way that the conquests of Mohammed and his successors are presented [in the history curriculum] reveals the indulgence with which the politico-juridical side of Islamic history is treated. Every possible means are employed to “balance” the story and to avoid a “violent” presentation of the Muslim conquests. But the series of abridgements and outright omissions in the textbooks leads to historical falsehood. For example, when one reads that in 630 Mohammed and his followers “re-took the city of Mecca” [Bordas], using that verb suggests to pupils that Mecca in some sense already belonged to the Muslims, that what they did was only a legitimate *re-taking* of what had been theirs. But Mohammed before 630 was never in possession of Mecca; he even had to flee the city in 622 with his 70 followers, accused of disturbing the public order in pagan Mecca.

Yet another illustration of an abridgement that constitutes a falsehood is the way that Mohammed’s capture of cities and territories is presented as having occurred without any resistance. All of the history textbooks for French pupils now suggest that the Muslim conquest was so rapid because it was easy. If the conquest of Arabia was so rapid, it is because Mohammed had only to capture an oasis, which would then give him control of all the territory – hundreds of kilometers in every direction – that depended on that oasis. Similarly, in the Middle East and North Africa, internal divisions among the locals, including both political and theological disputes, allowed the Arab armies to quickly take possession of centers of power. Nonetheless, there was popular resistance [to Mohammed] in Arabia, where resistance by the Jews, in particular, is known from Arab sources, as well as in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Only the textbook published by Hatier attempts to offer – just a little – about the military dimension of Islam’s conquests.

The objectives of the Muslim conquerors are never made clear to pupils, though territorial conquest and the birth of Islam go hand-in-hand, and Mohammed’s statements in the Qur’an and Sunna are unambiguous: Islam is a proselytizing religion, with the vocation of enlightening humanity, and territorial conquest is the principal means to that end. This fusion of the political and the religious ought to be emphasized if one wants to make sense of certain statements by today’s fundamentalists, in order to deconstruct them. Here the concept of Jihad should be addressed: it has, since the beginnings of Islam,

provided religious justification for conquest of the imperialist type – at the time entirely commonplace – consisting of pillaging, massacres, and colonization. The work of Sabrina Mervin is used many times to describe the conquest, but what she wrote was not factual history. It is, rather, intended to be a study of Islamic doctrines through history and the present. In Mervin's preface, she emphasizes that her book does not claim to trace "the political or social history of the Muslim world," but that is exactly what excerpts from her book are used for in the textbooks, distorting her work. The excerpts that were taken from her book depict Islam as a perfect theocratic project, realized without any obstacle, and describes a "social representation" of this project by Muslim theologians. In the Hachette textbook, there is even worse: "The Muslim caliphs took control of vast territories peopled by nomads. In order to better control these nomads, they developed cities ruled by emirs." Now in what sense were the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East in the pre-Islamic period [of Judaism, Christianity, or the Persian or Roman Empires], who for centuries had lived a settled existence, having developed a high level of urban civilization – in what sense were any of these "nomads" comparable to the Bedouin tribes of Arabia Islamised by Mohammed? Alexandria, Jerusalem, Damascus, Yarmouk, Cairo, Mosul and many other cities, were not, to my knowledge, founded by Arab conquerors. The Muslim conquerors did redesign some aspects of the urban landscape in order to better Islamize its inhabitants, but did not found any of these cities that retained many traces, especially archeological, of their glorious pre-Islamic past. It is errors like this in the textbooks that leave one perplexed.

There is much to say about the way that the wars between Christianity and Islam are depicted in the treatment of the Crusades. Most startling, in the Hatier textbook, one finds in the chapter titled "The violence of holy wars" that the authors discuss only the Spanish Reconquista and the Crusades, focusing on such crimes of the Crusades as the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Not a word about Jihad in this sub-chapter, even though this is the chapter on "Holy Wars." Jihad is to be found, however, only in the chapter on Islam!

In this undertaking to show that Islam is open and tolerant, the theme of "peaceful co-existence" on the model of Andalusia has become routine. Despite the work of historians, and despite the Arabs themselves, describing the social and economic life of the dhimmis [Jews and Christians living in Dar al-Islam],

pupils are presented not only with an "angelic" history, but one based on distortion. The school textbooks, without exception, insist on the warm welcome the conquered peoples supposedly offered to the Muslim conquerors, all on the basis of Arab sources alone, of debatable objectivity. How often, after all, does the victor depict himself unfavorably? A critical look at sources serves to avoid anachronisms! In the textbooks, it appears that in Arabia, after 632, everyone became Muslim, as if by magic, without any military pressure whatsoever. To claim that is to leave out the fact that the conquest resulted in a choice between conversion or death for the pagans and for certain Jewish tribes. Many converted in order to survive, and it was the same in all the areas around the Mediterranean conquered by the Arabs, from the Judaized Berbers and the Syriac Christians to the Zoroastrians, condemned to disappear. It is disconcerting to see the textbooks all rely uncritically on the same Muslim source, to offer an idyllic view of the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. One finds texts by different medieval Arab authors that the pupils must simply accept. For example, this quotation from Al-Baladhuri dating from the ninth century is used in several textbooks and depicts Jews and Christians accepting the Muslim invasion of Syria as a blessing. "The inhabitants opened wide their doors [to the Muslims], came out with musicians and singers who began to play, and paid the Jizyah."

The only question pupils are asked is: "How were the Muslims welcomed?" The pupil has to paraphrase the author, taking what he says as truth, a "truth" that will be applied more generally later on in the same lesson.

It's as if one were to learn about the life of Charlemagne only from the Chronicle of Eginhard! Many other Arab texts are used that present the conquest of Jerusalem first by Omar, and then by Saladin, as a liberation from Byzantine oppressors or as an act of pacification. The textbooks pass over in silence that for the Christians, the main population in these lands during the High Middle Ages, the Islamic conquest meant the loss of sovereignty, and for the many Jewish communities it meant passing from one oppressor to another. So when one reads "in the territories dominated by the Arabs, the populations converted little by little to Islam" [Belin, Hatier], one has the feeling that nothing is done to enlighten the pupil as to the true conditions of this Islamisation, which, just like other conquests in the ancient or medieval worlds, meant depriving those conquered of their sovereignty, their property rights, and

imposing on them both social and cultural submission. In Spain, for example, the Christians resisted, as at Toledo in 713, and the reprisals [by the Muslims] were ferocious, with mutilations and public crucifixions. The way in which the manuals evoke a supposed "coexistence" among the three religions, under Muslim domination, is, if not outright false, at best incomplete, for in speaking of "coexistence," the conditions of that coexistence – submission by Christians and Jews – are not mentioned.

The pact of the dhimma [a contract of submission] that Mohammed imposed in 628 on the Jews of Khaybar subsequently served as a model for all Arab conquerors. It is this notion of the dhimmi that must be grasped if we want to comprehend how the collective representations of the non-Muslims were forged throughout the centuries in the Islamic world. It is the legal, social, and economic framework, based on a theological foundation, of a perfect society. It is a contract of protection that the Muslim conquerors offer to Jews and Christians. Muslim society is based on juridico-theological discrimination, with Muslim Arabs at the top of the social and political pyramid, then the Islamised Berbers, then the *muwalladun*, that is, the non-Arab converts to Islam, and lower down, but above the slaves, one finds the dhimmis, whose situation, according to one textbook's simplification, is this: "They are free to practice their religion, in return for payment of a tax."

Another textbook relies on a text of Al-Tabari from the 9th century to note the pact of dhimmi, but without defining it or explaining its discriminatory aspect, which prevailed throughout Muslim lands until its abolition in 1856. Those who were dhimmis lived in a state of perpetual uncertainty, subject to a Caliph's whims or to those of a Sultan sterner than his predecessor, who might exaggeratedly raise the capitation tax on non-Muslims, the Jizyah, in order to pressure more of them to convert, or to ransom their co-religionists, as the Jews and some Christians of Hebron in the 19th century. If the Jizyah was a graduated tax, it was also demanded of widows, of orphans, and even of the deceased. If many Jews and Christians managed to avoid conversion by paying the Jizyah, historians have shown that through the centuries, there were also many who decided to convert so as to be better integrated and to avoid being pariahs, inferior both socially and legally. Could one talk quite so easily about "peaceful coexistence" if the textbooks told the truth about the treatment of dhimmis, as for example the humiliating requirement that they wear identifying

marks on their clothes, a practice which the Church copied in the 13th century when it required Jews to wear similar marks? Also forbidden to dhimmis were collective prayers said aloud, the building of churches or synagogues taller than mosques (when the building of such structures was not forbidden outright). Dhimmis could not ride horses or carry arms. In court, the testimony of a dhimmi was worth less than that of a Muslim, and different sanctions were imposed according to the religion of the guilty party. These rules, fixed by the Islamic law, or Sharia, were applied everywhere in the Islamic world, with more or less rigor depending on the rulers. To sum up the dhimmi condition as the “protection of religious minorities” upon payment of a tax is either a semi-truth, or a semi-lie, depending on your preference.

For years now, in the certainly praiseworthy aim of showing that there is more to Islam than its present-day politico-religious obscurantism would suggest, we hear constantly repeated as an obvious truth that the West benefited from the Muslim presence in Andalusia, that without Arab scholars we would have forgotten our Greek heritage. I note that the myth of Andalusia has spread far and wide, now applied to all the lands under Arab or Muslim domination. The West is supposedly in debt to medieval Arab science – that’s what emerges from these textbooks unanimously describing Islamic civilization as “brilliant.” Obviously, this isn’t a matter of calling into question the reality of a civilizational crossroads under Islam in the Middle Ages, which did transmit knowledge, but to question the simplistic way in which facts are presented and used to construct certain commonplaces that flatten out our study of history, a matter of academic consensus.

The discourse about the golden age of medieval Arab civilization, flattering and a little naïve, serves to sift the facts and to favor the image that is judged most beneficial for today’s needs, that of an “enlightened Islam.” But this ideological project ill serves both scientific thought as well as the intellectuals (Muslim) who are fighting in their own countries for the emergence of a objective and rational discourse about the Muslim past. But we see the history of medieval Arab science being rewritten for our (French) pupils, not to put it on the same plane as other civilizations, but above them, and thereby giving credit to Islam, even though religion has no place in this matter. Would one attribute the Copernican Revolution to Christianity? Einstein’s theory of relativity to Judaism?

In one of the textbooks [Hachette], an Arab chronicler of the 11th century, Said Al-Andalusi, is cited, without any critical distance supplied to the pupil, who will thus learn that before the arrival of the Arabs, "this country knew nothing of science and those who lived here knew no one who was noted for his love of knowledge."

Then comes a passage on the contribution of the Arabs to the sciences both ancient and modern, through the translation of Greek texts. This apologetic reading is further supported by an assignment for the pupil: "Show how the presence of Muslims in Andalusia promoted the development of science and philosophy in the West," and by the lesson that repeats that "the texts of ancient authors were rediscovered in the West thanks to their Arabic translations." Passed over in silence is an important fact: many of these translators were users of Arabic, but were neither Arabs, nor Muslims.

Jews such as Maimonides, Ibn Tibbon and Yossef Kimhi, and especially Christians, mainly Syriac, were the translators of these texts from classical antiquity that then made their way to the West. One knows from different sources that caliphs such as Mahdi or al-Rashid ordered Syriac Christians to translate ancient texts, such as, for example, those of Aristotle. The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun recalled that the Caliph Al-Mansour in the 8th century asked the Byzantine emperor to send him treatises on mathematics and physics by Greek authors. Avicenna, Al-Farabi, Sohrawardi were all Persians, inheritors of pre-Islamic lore from this (Persian) civilization in contact with both Asia and the Middle East. We know that most of the Arab knowledge about algebra came directly from Greek, Indian, and Babylonian sources. As to medicine, the textbooks all try to teach students that Arab doctors were more modern (than non-Arabs), but here again there is no mention that many of these "Arab" doctors were neither Muslims nor Arabs. For example the famous doctor Ibn Ishaq of the 9th century, who translated Galen, Plato, and Aristotle, first into Syriac and then into Arabic, and whose discoveries in ophthalmology were so important, was a Nestorian Christian. Ibn Masawayh, who in the 9th century translated and edited many scientific tracts into Arabic, was a Christian. As for knowledge of astronomy among the Arabs, it comes directly from Greek, Chaldean, and Babylonian sources. The textbook by Hatier is an exception, in that it admits that a great number of scientific works by Arabs, and transmitted to the West, were based on Chinese

sources.

Arab philosophy is never discussed without mention of Averroes, a native of Spain, and a symbol of the intellectual openness of Islam in its golden age. But carefully left out is mention of how the jurist Al-Ghazali, the contemporary of Averroes, refuted the latter's rational vision, which led to Averroes's banishment for heresy, and his books being burned. It is because of translations of his works into medieval Latin that Averroes's thought survives, and for Muslims to rediscover him and make him, at present, a symbol of their intellectual openness! In another manual [Hatier] there is an edifying extract from the writer Amin Maalouf: "in every branch of learning the Western Christians followed the Arabs, in Syria, as in Spain and Sicily," and there follows a list of subjects first sown by Arab learning. And the pupil learns nothing of what the Westerners provided by way of learning to the Arabs and will wrongly conclude "No doubt there is nothing," and the title of this lesson, "Cultural Exchanges," makes no sense, because apparently the civilizational benefits are one way only, from the Arabs to the West. The textbooks salute the real talent of those who transmitted knowledge from the learned of the Islamic world, and who were able to develop established fields further, or to make use of the translations of ancient authors, but one expects a work intended for the schools will be more exact: to transmit the knowledge of conquered peoples is not the same as being either the author, or the inventor, of such knowledge.

Aside from the textbook published by Belin, that contains a brief excerpt from Al-Yacoubi that mentions in passing the "black slaves" attached to the service of the Caliph Al-Mansour, (though without drawing attention to this matter in any of its related exercises), none of them treats of the Arab slave trade. As the historian Marc Ferro noted as long ago as 1992, "while the crimes committed by Europeans occupy whole pages [in the school books], people's hands begin to tremble even at the mere mention of the crimes committed by the Arabs." It should be pointed out that the story of the African slave trade would change considerably the image of medieval Islam that the official curriculum and the textbooks wish to impose on students. The Arab trade in African slaves began in 652 with the treaty that Ibn Saïd forced on the Sudanese of Darfur, until the 20th century, and it is difficult to find any trace of Arab Muslim abolitionists, whereas Europeans did fight against their contemporary slavers for the abolition of this inhumane trafficking in humans. The Arab slave trade, according to

eminent historians, involved at least 17 million people. Some were African girls used as domestic and sex slaves, a practice authorized in the Qur'an [33:52, 5:43, 4:2, 23:1, 33:02, 5:29].

One aspect of the Arab slave trade that is rarely remembered is that it involved castration. Seven out of 10 captives were castrated so as to serve as eunuchs, but most of them died from the effects of the operation. This vast enterprise of castration explains in part how little was the demographic trace these Africans left in the Muslim societies, while millions of slaves in the Atlantic slave trade did have descendants all over the New World. One would have hoped that this subject would be treated later on in the curriculum, but no, there is nothing about it. The whole history of sub-Saharan African slavery over the centuries thus becomes reduced to the Atlantic slave trade. Here again, one sees that history as taught in our schools is very different from the claim made that it aims to create an enlightened citizenry, and to develop the critical spirit of students through the analysis of the historical sources, rather than to impose on them the reigning orthodoxy.

First published in [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish interesting, timely and thought provoking articles such as this one, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article and wish to read more by Hugh Fitzgerald, click [here](#).

Hugh Fitzgerald contributes regularly to The Iconoclast, our Community Blog. Click [here](#) to see all his contributions, on which comments are welcome.