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Perception and Misperception of Islam in Polish Textbooks¹

Abstract

The paper presents a qualitative analysis of the image of the Arabs and Islam in Polish history, geography and WOS textbooks for gymnasium and lyceum students. There are two predominant patterns: if dry facts are described (climate, cultivation, natural resources – for geography; course of wars, colonialism or battles – for history) they are presented in a non-biased way and hardly any stereotypes occur; as soon as cultural and religious matters are introduced or involved, the narration often becomes subjective or even misguided. That is why the analysis focuses on the latter approach, presenting narrations related to: Muhammad and his revelation, duties of Muslims and the notion of *jihad*, status of women, the Sunni-Shia division, and the so called “Arabisation” of Islam. Although attention is paid especially to stereotypes and misconceptions, few examples of positive practices are presented as well.

The reform of Polish educational system that took place several years ago was crucial for Polish textbook market as it allowed more and more authors to publish their own textbooks. Despite the great variety of textbooks, a common educational framework exists which enables, to some extent, to compare the textbooks with one another and pick up topics shared by most authors. The following qualitative analysis covers a selection of textbooks for history, geography and WOS (knowledge about society) for gymnasium and lyceum (secondary school) students, respectively aged 13–15 and 16–19. Due to the fact

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that Islam as a religion is predominantly introduced in history textbooks in gymnasium, these books constitute a majority of investigated textbooks².

The aim of this article is to present certain narrations focused on Islam as religion and culture. This approach is essential – much more than information related to historical or geographic facts – for a better understanding of Muslims as people of a different faith and culture. It will be argued that the way of the narration is in some way influenced by a common reception of Islam in Polish society.

More information about Islam in Polish textbooks has appeared probably due to a bigger concern about the world of Islam in international politics so it seems to be a recent phenomenon. Therefore, it cannot be argued that narration referring to Islam as presented in textbooks has influenced the Polish public opinion since it has lasted just for a few years. However, it is certainly going to have an impact in the years to come.

An Overview of the Muslim Presence in Polish Textbooks

Islam and Muslims do not account for lots of space in Polish textbooks. It is usually not more than about a dozen pages per book. In history books, their presence can be framed into several chronological categories: the early days of Islam (from Muḥammad to the rising of the Arab caliphate); the Crusades (causes, course and consequences); the Mongol expansion and Turkish wars (often presented within the Polish context); the colonialism and the newest history (mostly the Arab-Israeli conflict and other ethnic and/or religious conflicts). Depending on the grade, these topics are present in most textbooks, even though they are often just mentioned by name only.

The spectrum is much more diverse in geography textbooks. In gymnasium, the world of Islam is presented only in the second grade, as a part of the world geography. Depending on a book, the “Islamic representative” is Turkey, Egypt and/or the Balkan countries. One textbook covers a wider range of Islamic countries – Indonesia, the Gulf, Turkey and Central Asia [GG4]³. In secondary schools, the instruction is focused more on socio-economic geography and therefore Islamic countries are presented in socio-political (conflicts), economic (agriculture, natural resources) and cultural (Islam as a religion and its influence on social life) framework. In textbooks for knowledge about society, Islam comes out in reflections referring to the world order, international conflicts, terrorism and fundamentalism – as problems of the contemporary world.

As one can notice, Islam comes out in Polish textbooks in many subjects and approaches. However, in most cases it is just mentioned. As for way of presenting issues related to Islam and Muslims there are two predominant patterns: if facts are described

² For a detailed list see the Annex (textbooks quoted). The annex includes only the books quoted in the article.

³ In order to make the article clearer, textbooks are quoted as abbreviations, with labels meaning: H, G or W in the first place respectively for history, geography and WOS; G or L in second place respectively for gymnasium of lyceum (secondary school) and number – the ordinal. The list of textbooks quoted is at the end of the article.

(climate, cultivation, natural resources – for geography; course of wars, colonialism or battles – for history) they are presented rather objective and hardly any stereotypes occur (another thing is the selection of topics); as soon as cultural and religious issues are introduced or involved, the narration often becomes subjective or even misguided. That is why these problems are particularly important and were selected for further exploration.

Polish Reception of Islam – a Few Remarks

Before presenting the content of Polish textbooks, it is essential to make a few remarks about the Polish perception of Islam as well as of the Muslim presence in Poland. It seems to be crucial not only for a better understanding of the perception of Islam in Polish textbooks but also there can be drawn several parallels between the common perception of Islam and the one reflected in textbooks.

There is autochthonous Muslim population, the Tatars, living in Poland for over 600 years, who is well-integrated with the mainstream society. On the other hand, there are rather few Muslims of the immigrant origin. Altogether Muslims make up approximately 0.05% of the Polish population (20 to 30 thousand)⁴. Comparing to most West European countries it is a very small proportion, which leads to two conclusions:

- Poland has not yet experienced most of the problems related to the socio-economic integration of Muslims;
- Most of Polish people have never met any Muslim person (except maybe for buying a kebab or going for holidays in Egypt).

However, the Polish attitude towards Muslims is often comparable or even worse than in the old EU member states. According to the results of *European Values Survey*, carried out in 1999/2000 almost 30% of Poles did not like to have a Muslim neighbor (three times more than in Germany or the Netherlands and twice as much as in France)⁵. Also nowadays the Polish attitude towards Muslims is far from being positive. According to CBOS [Public Opinion Research Center] Arabs (the only Muslim representatives in the survey) are the least liked (just 8%) and the most disliked (70%) nation in Poland and this trend is growing⁶. Taking into account any possible economic, political or social threats posed by Arabs (or Muslims) living in Poland, one could speak about “platonic Arabo- or Islamophobia”⁷.

⁴ About 3–5 thousand Tatars and approximately 3–5 times more immigrant Muslims. Polish Muslims occurred only in one of analyzed textbook, but the passage was limited to Tatars only claiming falsely that there are altogether 5 thousand Muslims in Poland, most of them Tatars – see: [HG7; 14].

⁵ SPSS data calculated from EVS database.

⁶ *Stosunek do innych narodów*, CBOS, December 2005.

⁷ This wording is derived from Prof. Jerrold Post from George Washington University who used it firstly while analyzing the revival of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. “Platonic Anti-Semitism” is Anti-Semitism without Jews the same way as platonic love means love without sex.

Another issue is so called “Arabization of Islam” in the Polish perception. Often Arabs are perceived as sole representatives of Muslims. A survey carried out by OBOP [research and marketing information company] in 2001 regarding associations with the word “Islam” indicates that “Arabs” were the third most common association⁸. Another non-representative research carried out on a group of over 300 university students shows that two out of three believe that “most Muslims are Arabs” and eight out of ten that “Arab countries are Iraq, Iran and Jordan”⁹.

The absence of Muslims in Poland, the news provided by mass media, the negative image of Islam and at the same time the demand for introducing Islam in history and geography curricula cause that some of the authors seem to rely on (or at least are influenced by) the common knowledge while preparing chapters about Islam. This might explain some of factual errors and rather controversial interpretations of some phenomena, discussed below.

Islam in Polish Textbooks

Taking into consideration the geopolitical situation and reception of Islam in Poland, the narration about Islam as a religion and culture seems to be much more important to be discussed than another topic which relates history or geography to Islam or the Islamic world as playing a minor role. An appropriate way of introducing Islam and its foundations, cross-cultural differences included, could lead to a correction or at least a modification of negative stereotypes about this religion and its believers. That is why the following part focuses on some basic issues related to Islam as a religion and culture (such as Muḥammad and his revelations, duties of Muslims, the status of women in Islam etc.), paying attention to misconceptions and misbelieves. The aim is not to judge the Polish textbooks in general but to draw attention to a possible risk they might provoke. Some examples of the good practice will be presented as well.

Muhammad and his revelation

The early days of Islam – sometimes preceded with a description of the 6th century Arab tribes, are usually presented through the life of prophet Muhammad and his revelation. In most of the cases, the prophecy of Muḥammad is presented neutrally: *he was about 40 (...) when he devoted his life to meditation. Then he had visions in which Archangel Gabriel revealed to him the rules of Islam. So he started to preach the new religion as a prophet – the messenger of God-Allah* [HG10; 20].

⁸ *Skojarzenia ze słowem „islam”*, OBOP, October 2001. The other top associations were „religion” and „terrorism” – the latter is partly due to the date of the survey, just few weeks after the events of 11 September.

⁹ K. Górak-Sosnowska, W. Widera, *Studenci Warszawy a islam: wiedza – postawy – wyobrażenia*, „Przegląd Orientalistyczny” nr 3–4, 2006, pp. 167–178.

However, the narration in some textbooks might lead to a conviction that in some way Muḥammad thought up his religion, like in these two: *in the beginning of the 7th century Muhammad, who lived in Mecca, started to preach a faith in one God – Allah. He claimed to be the prophet of Allah (...) [HG9, 58] and: Muhammad (...) traveled a lot but eventually settled down in Mecca, where he announced to its citizens that he was chosen by Archangel Gabriel to become a prophet. Gabriel was supposed to order Muhammad to recite the Word of God and this way preach “the true religion” [HL11].* In theory, there is nothing wrong with a “secular” narration stating that Muḥammad acted intentionally but for a better understanding it could have been better to take the “Muslim” point of view – he did not “claim to be” but he was¹⁰ a prophet.

Few authors mention common roots of the three great monotheistic religions. A good example is e.g.: *the Muslim concept of God constitutes a continuation and development of Middle Eastern monotheisms [HL1; 404]*¹¹. It is focused on similarities between Christianity and Islam, which seems to be essential in order to understand the other religion better or, at least, not to perceive it as something completely different. The author seems to be aware of this need: *often Christians seem to forget that the word ‘Allah’ is not a name and means in Arabic just “God” [HL1; 405].* Other authors introduce Christian-Muslim relationship in a rather different way: *[Muhammad] was impressed by tales of Jews and Christians about one God. Soon he announced himself to be a prophet inspired by God [HG4; 160].* Muḥammad drew on the experience of Jews and Christians but such a narration seems to deprive Islam of any originality and – again – might suggest that Muḥammad became a prophet on purpose.

Duties of Muslims and the Notion of *Jihad*

Some textbooks introduce Islamic faith more extensively, presenting the five pillars of Islam and foundations of the Muslim faith. In most cases this information is rather laconic¹², limited to a list of the five pillars, whereby *jihad*, alleged “6th pillar” occupies most space. The typical way of thinking is summarized by the following passage: *Arabs are a peaceful merchant people. Two travelers on camels don’t make us anxious. The harder it is to imagine that these people raised to a “holy war against disbelievers”, conquered a good part of the world and through centuries posed a threat for Europe. But so it was [HG4; 160].*

¹⁰ The way of presenting the revelation of prophet Muḥammad often corresponds to the interpretation of *hijra*. Authors who believe that Muḥammad acted intentionally often state that he “flew away”, while those who state that he was somehow inspired by God say that he “moved” or “emigrated”.

¹¹ A comparison between Islam and Christianity can be found in [HG9; 58].

¹² Despite the brevity some small errors occur. For instance, according to one author Muslims believe in *demons* [probably genies were meant] [HG7; 123, GL1], while another claims that Muslims are obliged to *go on pilgrimages to holy places of Islam (particularly to Mecca)* and that the most important pilgrimage places are: *Mecca, Medina and Mountain Arafat* (sic) [GL5; 67-68]. On the other hand, some authors mention that it is a duty of a good Muslim to *treat others well, be helpful, kind and patient* [HG3; 109].

Some authors put it more subtly stating that *some Muslims believe that there is one more duty – of the holy war (jihad)* [GL2; 28] or that *some Islamic fractions promote the obligation of conducting the holy war* [Hg15; 109-110], or that *the holy war (jihad) is the 6th but not binding pillar of Islam* [Hg1-3; 123]. Others present it in a much more straight way claiming that the holy war is a moral duty of every Muslim: *[Islam] puts forward (...) the idea of a common fight for spreading the true religion among disbelievers* [HL11], or *Muslims were obliged to spread their religion through jihad (literally from Arabic – “holy war”)* [HG4; 162] or even: *leading the troops seized by religious eagerness, Muhammad conquered Mecca (...) according to Muhammad’s teachings in order to be saved Muslims have to obey the religious regulations, adore God and spread their religion not only by words, but also by arms, that is through “holy wars” (...) Muslims, since the very beginning have started with fanaticism to spread their religion through conquests* [HG2].

Such narrations are dangerous for at least three reasons: firstly, the holy war is mixed with other “normal” religious duties what might lead to an assumption that it is as important; secondly, even though most authors point that it is not mandatory or introduce the concept of the holy war while explaining the Arab conquests from the 7th century, one still cannot be sure how many Muslims nowadays stick to this rule; thirdly, the notion of *jihad* is incorrectly limited just to the holy war while no consideration is shown for specificity of the culture of the early Islam, with no division between the sacred and the profane, which made all activities of Muslims (not only war, but trade, or even hands washing etc.) marked by religion. Only few authors are aware of these dangers and try to explain the notion of *jihad* in a different way: *One of the important and complicated notions of Islam that is often incorrectly interpreted in the European culture is ‘jihad’. In Koran ‘jihad’ is an expression for all actions, military included, taken in order to fight the evil* [HL1: 405].

Another sensitive topic is presented much more appropriately, namely “Islamic terrorism”, which is related to the notion of “the holy war”. Most authors, both of history and WOS textbooks, show examples of non-Islamic terrorism (IRA, ETA, RAF etc.) as well stressing that it is not a phenomenon related only to Islam [WL2; 291]¹³. Only one author seems to derive terrorism from the 11th century Assassins, labeling this part as *the beginning of the Muslim terror on a large scale* [WL1, 118].

Status of women

Some textbooks (mostly geographic) mention the status of women in Islam, usually pointing out their infamous position in the society. One of the most explicit examples says: *Women have to cover their faces and according to Islamic law they remain their husbands’ properties* [about women in Iran after the Islamic revolution] [HG8; 192]¹⁴. The belief regarding the reputed covering of the faces (not hair) by Muslim women occurs

¹³ He even states in the definition of terrorism: *Terrorism (not only Islamic)*.

¹⁴ Same belief about *complete subordination of women by men* is reflected in [HG5].

in some other textbooks [GG3, GG6] and it fits the common knowledge. According to an already quoted research over eight in ten students believe that “in public places in most Islamic countries women have to cover their faces”¹⁵.

Even though most authors are convicted about the handicapped position of women in Islamic societies some of them try to point at reforms. However, the way they do it makes the things even worse. One author says that: *women start gaining access to public offices and higher education* [HG5] (as if nowadays they did not have any), another states that *till 1922 Turkey was a state dominated by Islam. Women had no voting rights* [GG3; 53] (in USA they got them just two years before), or *[in Saudi Arabia] women actually have no rights, for instance the Council of Ministers consists only of men* [GL2; 185] (as if it had any real power). Of course, in many fields related to the position of women lots of improvements need to be done, especially in education or economic activities, but one shall not (only) blame Islam for this situation. Islamic countries, as a part of the developing world, share many of these problems with other developing countries. Another thing is the perception of Islam as a monolith – only in one case the author points to its inner diversity: *Islam itself, adopted by so many different people, has become very diverse. Muslim women inhabiting islands of Indian Ocean, who go naked in public, don't resemble in any way Arab women, who cover tightly their bodies* [HL6; 270]¹⁶.

The Sunni – Shia Division

Another interesting example of interpreting facts so that they ‘explain’ reality as it is perceived is the case of Sunni and Shia. Not many authors elaborate on this issue but if they do, they usually fall into two traps of their own perception.

One is the result of the similarity between the word ‘*Sunna*’ (tradition of prophet Muhammad)¹⁷ and ‘Sunni’ (majority of Muslims juxtaposed to all other Islamic groups), which makes some authors believe that: *Islam split into Sunnis, who also recognized Sunna as a source of faith, and Shia (literally in Arabic “disbelievers” (sic!)) who rejected Sunna (sic!)* [HG4; 161] or: *Not all believers recognized Sunna, and demanded to get back to pure Muhammad's teachings, that is leaning only on Koran. This resulted in a split into two opposing groups among Muslims, which exists till nowadays: Shia (adherents to the Koran) and orthodox Sunni (recognizing also Sunna)* [HL11].

The latter is caused by connecting Shia to Iran, which results in a following simplification: *Sunni claim to be “the people of the tradition and community”. They reject the aspiration to hold secular power (?) and are less orthodox. Shia, who mostly*

¹⁵ K. Górak-Sosnowska, *Kobieta w świecie islamu. Wyobrażenia studentów warszawskich uczelni*, [w:] *Oblicza Wschodu*, M. Broda, M. Dziekan (red.), Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warszawa 2004, s. 123–140.

¹⁶ The case of Indian Ocean is probably taken from Ibn Battuta's (1304–1377) description of Maldives. All they wore was a sort of apron covering them *from navel to their feet, while the rest was bare* – see: Ibn Battuta, *Osobliwości miast i dziwy podróży*, Książka i Wiedza, Warsaw 1962, s. 239.

¹⁷ Only one author defines this term improperly stating that [*Sunna*] is a collection of deeds (whose?) which show proper way of behaving. It also presents hints of prophets that help to crystallize the general rules of Koran. Also this author believes that the cause of Sunni-Shia division is different interpretation of Sunna – see: [HG7; 124].

inhabit Iran, strictly observe the rules of the faith which can be noticed in customs [GL2; 29]. Views on Iran seem therefore to influence the perception of Shia as a religious group by presenting them as more orthodox.

Both cases (this one and the status of women) exemplify how authors' own convictions might influence the narration. It might be called a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' – seeing what one wants to see (and not the way it really is) and interpreting it so that it fits into this previously sketched image.

“Arabization” of Islam

One of the phenomena that runs through most of the mentioned cases is the “Arabization” of Islam. Islam is often presented as a predominantly Arab religion both when it comes to the spirituality and to the scope of the Islamic world.

The words “Arabic” and “Islamic” are often used as synonymous, especially in history textbooks. For example: *the year in which Muhammad flew from Mecca to Medina is recognized by Arabs as the beginning of their time calculation*. On the same page the same author states: *the year 662, when Muhammad had to escape from Mecca to Medina, determined the beginning of Muslim time calculation* [HG9; 59]. Another author claims that: *the Black Stone that is kept in Kaaba is worshiped by all Arabs* [HG3; 108], while yet another elaborates on terrorism under the following subheading: *Arabic (Islamic) Terrorism* [WL1; 120]. As one can notice this “Arabization” of Islam is about Islam being attributed mostly to Arabs – while in fact they constitute not more than a quarter of all Muslims, and parallel “Islamization” of all Arabs – while certainly not all of them (even if most) is of the Muslim faith.

“Arabization” of Islam in geography books is slightly different. It is maybe not exactly about Arabs but related to omitting some regions that are not associated with Islam while presenting the geographic scope of this religion. One author enumerates following areas where Islam dominates: *the Middle East, West and North Africa, South-Eastern Europe and Malaysia* [GL5; 68], while forgetting about Central Asia and Indonesia – the biggest Muslim country in the world. Another makes a short list: *Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia* [GL2; 28]. This time ex-USSR Islamic republics are omitted, as well as Africa, Malaysia and Turkey. It is hard to count all countries with larger Muslim communities without getting confused (e.g. India is Hindu but the Muslim minority in this country is larger than the whole population of Pakistan), but limiting the word of Islam just to the Middle East and its surroundings might lead to strengthen the idea of “Arabization” of Islam.

Conclusions

The narratives on Islam and Muslims in Polish textbooks fit, in many cases, the general reception of Islam in Poland. Islam is often presented from the Western, rather

ethnocentric, point of view that neglects most of cross-cultural differences. As one of the authors puts it: *A tendency to arbitrary pronounce about guilt and values of other civilizations is so strong that it does not allow any reliable assessments. It is hard for us to agree that our assessments depend on our value system, preferences and habits. The lack of understanding of the Islamic culture by people from the West results in their assessment of believing Muslims as irrational and fanatic* [GL1; 59]. The same goes the other way.

Another dimension is unfamiliarity with Islam itself caused by a very limited number of Muslims and the dominance of secondary information flow – mostly media news and the public opinion, which are often reflected in the narration. It might lead to quite a unique situation, namely where some authors try to “justify” Islam by using arguments that can lead to ambivalent results. For example, one author believes that the contemporary aversion of Muslims to disbelievers is caused by inner arguments in Islam (e.g. the Sunni-Shia division) [HL11], while another juxtaposes the “evil” Arab culture, in which e.g. honor killings are rooted, to the “good” Islam [HG5].

Even though some of the textbooks, like the one quoted above, can certainly enrich the dialogue between Europe and the Muslim world and also they show many positive examples of the influence and impact of Islam (e.g. the Islamic science in the Medieval Europe), many others make it harder, if not impossible. What is more, they can make much more harm than equal amount of books with best practice. Once internalized in the socialization process, the stereotypes are very hard to combat and it seems that the media and the public opinion will not make them any better.

Textbooks Quoted

History

[HL1]: T. Cegielski, M. Kurkowska, *Człowiek i historia, część 3: czasy nowożytne do 1815 roku*, WSiP, Warszawa 2003.

[HG2]: L. Chmiel, *Historia*, Muza Szkolna, Warszawa 2000.

[HG3]: S. Jankowiak, *Historia I*, Arka, Poznań 1999.

[HG4]: G. Kucharczyk, P. Milcarek, M. Robak, *Przez tysiąclecia i wieki. Cywilizacja starożytności i średniowiecza*, WSiP, Warszawa 2002.

[HG5]: G. Kucharczyk, P. Milcarek, M. Robak, *Przez tysiąclecia i wieki. Cywilizacje XIX i XX wieku*, WSiP, Warszawa 2002.

[HL6]: H. Minakowska, *Historia dla maturzysty. Średniowiecze*, Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN, Warszawa 2003.

[HG7]: K. Przybyś, W. Jakubowski, M. Włodarczyk, *Historia dla gimnazjalistów. Starożytność i średniowiecze*, Oficyna Edukacyjna Krzysztof Pazdro, 2001.

[HG8]: H. Tomalska, *Historia. Polska i świat w XX wieku*, Juka 2001.

[HG9]: L. Trzcionkowski, L. Wojciechowski, *Historia: starożytność i średniowiecze*, Demart, Warszawa 2003.

[HG10]: M. Tymowski, *Podróż przez wieki: średniowiecze*, Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN, Warszawa 2002.

[HL11]: A. Wypustek, M. Wójcik, *Historia 1. Ze świata do Polski przez Europę*, PPWK, Warszawa 2002.

Geography

[GL1]: J. Kop, M. Kucharska, E. Szkurłat, *Geografia społeczno-ekonomiczna*, PWN, Warszawa 2003.

[GL2]: J. Korba, J. Mordawski, W. Wiecki, *Geografia i człowiek. Geografia 2*, Operon, Gdynia 2003.

[GG3]: J. Mordawski, J. Makowski, M. Augustyniak, *Geografia. Azja i Europa. Wybrane problemy*, Wydawnictwo M. Rożak, Gdańsk 2000.

[GG4]: F. Plit, *Geografia świata, część II*, WSiP, Warszawa 2000.

[GL5]: H. Staniów, P. Staniów, *Geografia 2: świat*, Nowa Era, Warszawa 2003.

[GG6]: M. Walczak, A. Witek-Nowakowska, *Wędrówki geograficzne. Podręcznik dla klasy II gimnazjum*, Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN, Warszawa 2002.

WOS

[WL1]: Z. Smutek, J. Maleska, B. Surmacz, *Wiedza o społeczeństwie, część II*, Operon, Gdynia 2004.

[WL2]: *Wiedza o społeczeństwie*, A. Wojtaszczyk (red.), WSiP, Warszawa.