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What's the difference between education and indoctrination?

The primary difference between education and indoctrination is that education is objective, while indoctrination elevates one system of thought over another.

- For instance, when it comes to the presentation of religions within the public school system, public schools must be able to educate students about the Bible and other religious texts as part of an objective study of religion, literature, etc. However, schools must be careful that such instruction does not inappropriately indoctrinate students in the tenets of a particular faith.

Religious indoctrination in public schools is, in fact, contrary to the First Amendment.

- The “First Amendment does not forbid all mention of religion in public schools; it is the advancement or inhibition of religion that is prohibited.”[1] Thus, public schools are prohibited from endorsing a religion or coercing students to participate in religious activity.
- For example, any teaching of Islam that forbids another religion’s criticisms of Allah or that otherwise instructs students on Islam’s superiority over other religions is likely an unconstitutional endorsement of Islam. Such conduct is a direct violation of public schools’ obligation to comply with the Establishment Clause.

Examples of indoctrination:

-A middle school in one state required seventh grade students to learn the Muslim conversion prayer, the Shahada, which asserts that “Allah is the only god and Mohammad is his prophet.” [2] This lesson required students to recite the conversion prayer aloud or write it down. [3] Though other religions were studied, students apparently were not required to write or recite the conversion creeds of other religions. [4]

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-That state's curriculum devotes a section of Seventh Grade social studies to "the Islamic World." [5] When incorporating these lessons, some Tennessee schools spent more time covering Islam than other religions, including Christianity. [6]
 -In other states, students were required to write an essay "pretending" to be Muslim, [7] craft Muslim prayer rugs observing "Islamic artistic values,"[8] or recite the Shahada as a class. [9]

[1] Committee of Public Educ. v. Nyquist, 413 U.S. 756, 788 (1973).

[2] Tim Hodge, Parents Concerned over Religious Curriculum, COLUMBIA DAILY HERALD (Sept. 5, 2015), <http://columbiadailyherald.com/news/local-news/parents-concerned-over-religious-curriculum>; see also Greg Jinkerson, Maury Parents Angered Over Islam Unit, SPRING HILL HOME PAGE (June 28, 2016), <http://springhillhomepage.com/update-12-30-p-m-maury-parents-angered-over-islam-unit-mcps-to-release-statement-thursday-cms-5213>.

[3] Jinkerson, Maury Parents Angered Over Islam Unit, SPRING HILL HOME PAGE (June 28, 2016), <http://springhillhomepage.com/update-12-30-p-m-maury-parents-angered-over-islam-unit-mcps-to-release-statement-thursday-cms-5213>

[4] Parents Object After 7th-Graders Write 'Allah is the Only God' in History Class, FOX NEWS (Sept. 8, 2016, 10:11am), <http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/09/08/students-write-allah-only-god-tennessee-middle-school-history-class>.

[5] TN Social Studies Standards, TENNESSEE EDUCATION STANDARDS REVIEW, https://apps.tn.gov/tcas/pdf/TN_Social_Studies_Standards.pdf (last visited Apr. 26, 2016).

[6] Dave Boucher, Lawmakers Fear Islamic 'Indoctrination' in Schools, USA TODAY (Sept. 10, 2015), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/10/lawmakers-fear-islamic-indoctrination-schools/72038416/>.

[7] Union Grove High School Assignment: Pretend You Are a Muslim, Wisconsin Dailey Independent (Apr. 13, 2015), <http://wisconsindailyindependent.com/union-grove-high-school-assignment-pretend-you-are-a-muslim/>; Leo Hohmann, School Snubs Christianity in 'Be Muslim' Assignment, WND (Apr. 16, 2015, 8:53 PM) <http://www.wnd.com/2015/04/pretend-to-be-muslim-assignment-had-no-christian-equivalent/>.

[8] Joshua Gillin, High Schoolers Had to Recite Islamic Prayer in Class, Make Prayer Rugs as Homework, Websites Say, Politifact (Feb. 24, 2015), <http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2015/feb/24/blog-posting/high-schoolers-had-recite-islamic-prayer-class-mak/> (Gillin argues that some fears about Islam being taught in a Florida school were exaggerated but confirms that students were actually instructed to make Islamic prayer rugs for an assignment about Islamic art.).

[9] Id.; 9 Investigates: Dad Protests Islamic Lessons at School, WFTV (Feb. 9, 2015), <http://www.wftv.com/news/local/9-investigates-dad-protests-islamic-lessons-school/69473209>. Witnesses dispute whether the Florida high school required its students to recite the Shahada or merely had students read it. Requiring students to recite the Shahada would certainly implicate constitutional concerns, but learning about the conversion creed could also raise concerns depending on the context and the way other religions were treated.