CROSSCURRENTS

TEACHING OTHER FAITHS ABOUT ISLAM
A Transformative Journey

Zainab Alwani

Over the course of the last century, we have witnessed a revival of religion and religious traditions, contrary to speculations about the gradual decline of religion in society. While in the fifties, the religious landscape of America was reflected in Will Herberg's book, Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, in the sixties, theologians were talking about the impact of secularization on religion and theology. The dominant theories expected religion to decline, especially in the public realm, and thought that it should be marginalized, limited to private life, and the development of religion would be succeeded by science. Today, in American academia and the public sphere, we are witnessing the study of world religions, interreligious dialogues, comparative religion studies become part of the educational curriculum.[1]

Religious education remains a core component of society's advancement toward cultural competency when education requires us to look beyond our own faith traditions and into the interfaith domain. Although many faiths have a fundamental aspect of proselytizing to spread their truth to others, religious education in interfaith settings is often regarded as the indispensable work of a pluralistic society. There are extensive academic traditions of biblical literacy to narrate the stories and passages of the Bible, just as there are scholarly endeavors to learn the Hebrew Scriptures and recognize the early conceptualizations of faith and justice as recognized by Jews. These are earnest attempts to know others by knowing their faith traditions. It is through this legacy that I draw on my own motivations to teach the Qur'ān to interfaith audiences of Christians,

Jews, and others in the Howard University School of Divinity. In today's context of religious illiteracy compounded with anti-Muslim sentiment, my work reflects a larger implication toward religious equity and justice in a pluralistic society.

Howard University School of Divinity (HUSD) is one of the oldest fully accredited (1940) theological schools affiliated with the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. As one of the 13 schools and colleges within Howard, it is the only African American theological school connected to a comprehensive category one research institution. Although Howard University is widely reflective of the growing significance of Islam in the United States and within its student, staff, and faculty composition, it was not until 2011, when the Howard University School of Divinity (HUSD) established a Master of Arts (M.A.) in Islamic studies and hired, for the first time in its history, a Muslim professor to lead the new initiative. It became the first of its kind among the Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTI).

As the first Muslim scholar and the founding director of the Islamic Studies at Howard University, I understand the challenges are great and my responsibility is vast because my role is critical to the growth and trajectory of the entire program. Since I joined the HUSD community in 2011, my goal has been to implement the vision of the school to the best of my ability. This has placed students and faculty at the forefront of current events and intriguing conversations within the Christian, Muslim, and other faith communities. The program's extensive course work and authentic, hands-on methodologies continue to foster critical thinking. The HUSD faculty has recently voted to include Islamic Studies courses among those required for the M.Div. and M.A. degree programs.

As I believe that humanity is one family, it is my goal to build bridges between the different religious, social, and cultural perspectives through genuine interaction and *ta'āruf* (the Qur'ānic concept of getting to know each other). This has manifested itself in my teaching, scholarship, and helping my students prepare for lives of faithful witness and public service. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how I teach Islam in a rich pluralistic environment, what I teach and how I evaluate my teaching.

Contemporary critical questions: humanity seeking answers

The main challenge that confronts scholars is how to understand the sacred texts. A follower of faith should internalize this worldview and virtues in order to become a loving, just and disciplined citizen of the society. As a faith community, how do we evaluate our performance in our world today? How do we read and interpret our sacred scriptures? How do we as religious scholars read the sacred texts of other faiths without violating their integrity? As a Muslim scholar, what do I teach my students from different faith communities about the Qur'ān? How, and in what manner should this book of scripture be approached and in what ways could it impart significant purpose and meaning for readers of different faith traditions? How could a better understanding of this sacred text contribute toward a more dignified life for others, to less conflict and wars and to greater success of peace efforts today? How do we come together to build a worldview on a moral, ethical, and peaceful world? How do we define morality and ethics in a world full of confusion?

In exploring such questions, I advance the following propositions: (1) Rather than attempt to develop narratives that may divide humanity, religious leadership should devote energies to strengthening unity through developing theology of tolerance, creating team-taught courses, and continuing conversations on crucial global issues that impact humanity at large within a framework of mutual caring; and (2) activists, religious and civil leaders, must work together to ensure that support services can meet pressing demands without downgrading the interests of any group.

In my courses on the Qur'ān, we seek to understand its overall paradigm that communicates ethics, morality, theology, religious decrees, and a faith-based social order. Unlike any other book, the Qur'ān demands its reader to both seek to understand and seek to transform. There are numerous passages/*ayat* that communicate the complexity of the religion of Islam. The Qur'ān also outlines the essential components of a faith-based social order, organizing family structures, marriage relationships, community leadership, and social laws and regulations. For English-speaking audiences, there is a heavy reliance on translations to interpret the original message of the Qur'ān, which was revealed in classical Arabic that predates Islam. Given that translations vary in form and content, and depend on human interpreters, it is critical to understand which

translations should be used in which instances. Sometimes it could take a combination of multiple translations to get a clear picture of the true meaning and intent behind what is being said in Arabic. This exercise requires a professional who is trained in Quranic Arabic, which I have taught many times over the years. Therefore, I read with the students from different translations; the more successful translated versions they read, the closer they get to the original text. It also trains them to double- and triple-check a translation that does not coincide with the overall theme and harmony of the chapter. My instructional focus in interfaith classes is to teach students how to identify the core elements of Islam through active engagement with the Qur'ān. I strive to communicate that the Qur'ān is accessible to all of its readers when it is read with the intention of both understanding and transformation.

The Qur'anic message clearly defines the three important relationships between God, humanity, and the universe and then regulates these in such a way that develops an integrated *tawḥīdī*-based society. The Qur'ānic narrative of the relationship with God started with the Covenant to believe in Him alone (Q; 7:172). The essence of this relationship is rooted in monotheism/*tawḥīd* believing and affirming God's oneness and existence. Here, God wants us to worship him by our own free will trust *(Amaanah)*; "We did indeed offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were afraid of it. Yet human accepted it; (33:72). Once humanity accepted the responsibility, God entrusted us as His trustee/stewards on earth"*;* "Remember When your Lord said to the angels, I am putting a trustee *(Khalifah*) on earth," (2:30). The Qur'ān explains to us our nature: Consider the human self, and how it is formed in accordance with what it is meant to be, (7) and how it is imbued with moral failings as well as with consciousness of God! (8) To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this [self] to grow in purity, (9) and truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness] (91:7-10).

The Qur'ān tells us that the angels were concerned that humanity may corrupt the beautiful world and spill blood. God, with His ultimate knowledge and wisdom, assured the angels that He knows what they don't know. He emphasized His trust in humanity (2:30). People were equipped to determine what's right or wrong; however, they sometimes read it in light of their desire, pain, or pleasure and it may lead to wrong

conclusions. The Qur'ān teaches that God has given people the freedom to choose which path to take in every decision of life. He has also outlined the consequences of these choices. God has ordained accountability for humans on the Day of Judgment, He will judge us according to the choices we make in this life, not the decisions of others. The Quran confirms this as: "Whoever does righteousness – it is for his [own] soul; and whoever does evil [does so] against it. And your Lord is not ever unjust to [His] servants." *(41:46)*. As a result, each human being, whether male or female, is directly accountable to God for his or her behavior. The foremost quality of mind and character that flows from this commitment is a state of constant vigilance or an awareness of the presence of God, the All-Knowing. A holistic reading of the Islamic text shows that all previous messages brought to humanity by their respective prophets and messengers call for these same values (i.e., *tawḥīd*/monotheism, *Tazkiah*/purification, and *Umran*/cultivation of earth and protect the creations of God). Therefore, humanity's duties and obligations and performance will be evaluated according to these higher values. It is important to emphasize that people are equipped to interact with the universe in a way that actualizes *stewardship* duties and establishes the feelings of closeness and harmony between humanity and universe.

The Qur'ān clearly explains that humankind's mission on earth is to establish an effective stewardship, while acknowledging that all men and women are created equal in worth and value regardless of race, gender, or class, and affirming that one's *taqwā* (piety) is the only feature that determines one's superiority over another person (whether man or woman). Religion provides guidelines, an external, stable source that is beyond human's desires. Though religion has no monopoly on morality, it does condition our common environment and shape our notions of right and wrong. Religion promotes the social virtues like truth, honesty, justice, equality, piety, service, love, discipline, etc.

In this complex and confusing time, we as academics, people of faith and teachers have a great responsibility toward humanity and nature. The Quran says: "O you who have believed, Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of any-one lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do. (5:8).

We have been entrusted to look out for each other, as residents under a sky-painted roof. In the Prophetic tradition, Prophet Muhammad explains the responsibility of saving the ship: "The parable of those who respect the limits of Allah and those who violate them is that of people who board a ship after casting lots, some of them residing in its upper deck and others in its lower deck. When those in the lower deck want water, they pass by the upper deck and say: If we tear a hole in the bottom of the ship, we will not harm those above us. If those in the upper deck let them do what they want, then they will all be destroyed together. If the people do not stop them, they will all fall and be failures, but if they stop them they will all be saved."

The particularity of teaching the Qur'ān in a western context

Teaching the Qur'ān to interfaith audiences is distinct from other interfaith religious education experiences because there are considerations that are solely associated with teaching a marginalized faith that is simultaneously targeted and misunderstood. Even though Islam is the second most practiced religion on earth, it can easily be described as the most misunderstood. Stereotypes, prejudices, and false associations continue to target Muslims and their faith in Islam. My work to teach the Qur'ān becomes an effort to correct the wrong assumptions deeply rooted in misunderstandings while at the same time introducing the truth of the Qur'ān.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is pervasive in our current context and it causes interfaith students to question the integrity of the Qur'ān and its essence of goodness. With media outlets and government leaders suggesting that Islam is a religion of violence and anti-Western values, people in larger society begin to assume that all aspects of the faith must be harmful— particularly targeting the Qur'ān. Teaching this unique text becomes not just an effort of religious education, but an advancement of religious social justice to frame Islam, Muslims, and the Qur'ān as manifestations of the goodness of God Almighty.

The Qur'ān describes itself as a message to all of humanity, even if society suggests that it is the book for Muslims. In religious education spaces, students come to study the Qur'ān assuming that it will only help them better understand Muslims and Islam. I use my classroom to demonstrate that the verses of the Qur'ān contain lessons to transform

all of humanity because it is the completion of the final message of The One, God Almighty.

Islam is the culmination of the Abrahamic faith traditions, following Judaism and Christianity. When teaching the Qur'ān, I am able to center its messages in conversation with the Old Testament and the New Testament to show continuity and distinctions. Fostering a Qur'ānic dialogue across faiths inspires relevant and transformative interfaith relationships that ground a pluralistic society in faith, truth, and justice.

Teaching the Qur'ān has never simply meant translating a text nor delineating Islamic faith requirements. Teaching the Qur'ān in today's interfaith context advances religious equity by denouncing stereotypes, addressing misunderstandings, and positioning Islam in the body of faiths that communicate the Oneness of God and the Unity of His Message.

What I teach

My teaching philosophy welcomes the ensuing debates, disagreements, and exchanges of ideas because I believe this is the best way to understand one another and truly grow together as a community. In this context, I argue that there are pressing needs to ensure that our students understand the other faiths from their own sources.

I begin all my courses by building the foundation, teaching my students the Qur'ānic worldview, its message and values. The Qur'ānic worldview explains the relationship between God the Creator of the heavens and the earth, humankind and the universe. Humanity is viewed in the Qur'ān as one family existing in a state of kinship. Men and women are equal in their origin and identity, and in their duties in the purpose of creation. All people are created equal in worth and value regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or class. This allows the students to examine and evaluate all the Muslim practices, interpretations, cultures, laws, and lifestyles in light of the Qur'ān. Human beings are equipped to interact with the universe in a way to establish feelings of harmony between humanity and the universe. God made it possible for human beings to expand their energies to make sense of the physical world, utilizing its power for the common good, uncovering its laws, and developing methodologies for dealing with revelation. This method has proven to be successful throughout my teaching career.

Muslims regard the Qur'an as the last divine speech revealed by God and it was not revealed to any specific group of people, culture, or religion. It came with a message that is universal to an audience that comprises of all humanity. By addressing Christians and Jews as "People of the Book," the Qur'an recognizes that there are other religious communities that have previously received divine guidance. The students learn that Islam is a continuation of the message received by previous prophets, stretching back from Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, peace be upon them all. The prophetic mission takes as its starting point the belief in the oneness of God "Tawhid." The Qur'an presents Muhammad as a prophet sharing a lineage of previous prophets sent to humankind. The purpose of these prophetic narratives is to underscore the unity of the mission of prophethood, the unity of their message, and the unity of their Divine source.

The Qur'an does not shy away from dialoging and presenting its arguments supported by evidence and requesting the same from its opponents. Therefore, I train my students to read the Qur'an and have an honest dialogue with it, and pose all their questions and concerns freely. Because my students are new to the study of Islam, concept maps make explicit integration of old and new knowledge. I foster critical thinking, facilitate the acquisition of lifelong learning skills, and prepare students to function effectively in any situation to help them develop their problem-solving skills. I utilize concept maps as one of my teaching methods to aid students in generating ideas, designing complex structures, and communicating complex ideas. I have found it to be a very effective method in the area of comparative religions.

How I teach

I try to match my teaching style with that of the Qur'ān, leveraging various methods to teach my students about Islam and the Qur'ānic worldview. I have found *questioning activities* to be particularly helpful because this method encourages students to learn how to formulate the right questions and look for the answers in the Qur'ān. There are no limitations on what or how many questions to ask, and no judgments or criticism of questions. This method helps increase student productivity and motivation. As students focus on what they want to discover, they learn how to generate more pointed questions and that help get them their

answers without prodding. Questions can be general or based on a particular topic or reading exercise. The questioning activities are used while responding to reading assignments or analyzing documentaries. This teaching method has proven to be very effective.

Interfaith dialogue is also central to my teaching methods. I would argue that this method is used by the Qur'ān itself.. In 2011, the Interfaith *World Café Dialogue* model was introduced to the HUSD community for the first time. I employed the World Café Dialogue model and organized a series of interreligious dialogue events. These events served three objectives: (1) to dispel the myths and misunderstandings among our communities; (2) to promote mutual respect and understanding; and (3) to build trust between our communities in order to work together on solving complex social problems. One of the programs we organized draws together notable Christian and Muslim scholars, interreligious community professionals, along with Howard University and Washington Theological Consortium students in an engagement of small group dialogue that expanded one's world view, while renouncing fear and distrust. I invited an interfaith leader Taalibah Hassan, to facilitate and help train the students in this new field. All the students were involved in this activity and worked enthusiastically. Since most of my students were community leaders, it was an effective channel to teach and train them. The students' evaluation of the event was great and the students provided valuable comments and suggestions for the future events. The World Café' Dialogue is one of many innovative activities, field trips, or lectures I coordinated as part of the Islamic studies courses at the School of Divinity. While we offer customary coursework in Qur'ānic studies, Ethics, Women Studies, Hermeneutics, Islamic Jurisprudence, and the Arabic language as requirements, additional trending classes in Chaplaincy and other interreligious courses attract both Christian and Muslim students are in the works.

Interfaith dialogue was a big part of my own personal journey. My first interfaith encounter was in Baghdad, Iraq, when I was a little girl. We used to live in a pluralistic neighborhood mostly populated by Christians. My father was an Imam who was known for his strong stances against injustice, where he would speak on behalf of the voiceless and this caused his popularity grow among the minorities in the area. Our Christian neighbors would listen to his Friday Sermons and come over

afterward to discuss/question what he had talked about. I was always amazed at the mutual love and respect they had for each other. We moved to Egypt when I was in 7th grade. The principal of the school I attended was a Coptic Christian, who became one of my role models. He always showed the utmost respect to learning and understanding to the Islamic faith. He encouraged me to recite verses of the Qur'ān in the morning, and to my surprise, he would correct me if I made any mistakes in my recitation. He would refer to the Qur'ānic principles and values in his disciplinary speeches and other occasions. My childhood experiences with interfaith dialogue really opened my eyes to the amount of knowledge and admiration that could be gained from wanting to understand each other's faiths. This mentality opened the doors of love and respect for my fellow humans of faith, and I invite my students to have similar experience that will positively affect their lives and their relationships with one another.

Another method I like to use is *co-teaching*. I have co-taught three courses thus far. The first course was on "Prophethood in the Bible and in the Qur'an" with Dr. Cain Hope Felder, which was unique in its nature and structure. It was a wonderful academic and theological experience. The African American theological debate on the subject was incredible. This course should be considered as the cornerstone of the field of theology, world religion, philosophy, and interreligious studies. The second course was with Dr. Alice Bellis "Women in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an." Reading and discussing both the Hebrew Bible and the female perspective on the Biblical stories enriched both the instructors and the students. The theological debate among feminists, womanists, and general theologians in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān was incredible. This course is also considered the cornerstone of the field of interreligious studies and dialogue. Two years ago, I designed a new course called "Sacred Text and Hermeneutics" along with two distinguished colleagues. "Sacred Text and Hermeneutics" was a team-taught course with Professor Gay Byron and Professor Cain Hope Felder (prior to his retirement). Since I joined the HUSD and discovered the wealth of knowledge among the faculty, I have been trying to find a way to share it with our students. It was the first team-taught course about Sacred Texts and Hermeneutics offered at the School of Divinity, which was led by three professors in Biblical and Qur'ānic Studies. The course examined hermeneutical

theories, exegetical methods, and theological perspectives from different HUSD professors. Each class session included a lecture on a particular sacred text and its methods, as well as an interactive opportunity for students to engage the professors and each other on the hermeneutical insights and other implications of the material. This course is considered to be the cornerstone of the field of theology, hermeneutics and interreligious studies and dialogue. It's been an honor to help move the needle forward with respect to religious and interreligious studies.

Indeed, my first experience in teaching team-taught course was back in 2006 at the Washington National Cathedral. I was invited by Rev. Michael Wyatt to teach for the first time in the history of the Cathedral about The Five Pillars of Islam. It was a comparative religion course. It was beautifully described: "In Islam, the Five Pillars of Religion are guidelines for living in accordance with God's will. In Christianity, these principles also exist but in quite different form and emphasis. In this course, find yourself journeying side by side as Christian and Muslim compare the practices of a devout life." I also include in my teaching, activities such as site visitation, students' presentations, and interviews. I also invite guest speakers and encourage the students to attend conferences and seminars, educational games, and other methods to engage the students. In my courses, I share my research with students and guide the students on their original research.

How I evaluate my teaching

I evaluate my teaching through the students' growth intellectually, spiritually and socially.

One time, Karen, one of my students said to me: "Dr. Alwani your class made me a better Christian and a better person. I increased my prayers especially when I had a problem with my son and his girlfriend whom I disapproved of. She had no place to go and my son was begging me to let her live with us in my big house. I have been refusing until last week when you started discussing the meaning and the role of family and the (*ummah)* community in protecting every member of it. My heart has changed and decided to welcome her in my home. I felt at peace and regained peace with my son. I felt I saved a life, what a beautiful feeling!"

Elizabeth, another student of mine who takes her work seriously told me after a few sessions, "Dr. Alwani, I have a dream that you and me

take a year off and travel to teach people that we are one, carrying the message of God, to make this world a better place for everyone and everything."

My student James wrote a post about his experience at: http://jamesthomassnyder.com/tag/zainab-alwani/

My student Ardaine came to class with his own biases and argued about everything. I encouraged him to challenge me and ask any questions or state any objections he had. He also agreed to be challenged. At the end, he decided to leave all the obstacles that blinded his view and he wrote a wonderful paper about marriage and family in Islam. This made him a believer not with blind faith, but with a critical mind and high spirit.

Rev. Lee, one of my first students at Howard, used to take notes and teach his congregation what he learned about morality, building characteristics and strong families and communities. My student Michael who expressed his appreciation of the structure of family and the *(ummah)* community (Ummah) in Islam as he stated in his remarks at the HUSD Faculty Student Colloquium Spring, 2014. http://divinity.howard.edu/pdf_forms/2014_Spring_Divinity_Magazine.pdf.

These are a few examples of the product of an honest and true interreligious dialogue. More than 60 percent of my students take more than one of my courses. I believe that is the best indicator of success and I know every one of my students will make our world a better place.

Conclusion

By their very nature, people are inquisitive. The goal of education should be to encourage seeking answers, as it is in this way that we advance. I facilitate this advancement of knowledge. I believe that the role of religious scholars is to guide by example. Teachers impart more by way of example than content, and students are very perceptive in recognizing when a teacher does not practice what she preaches. Unless there is a climate of mutual respect in the classroom, students will be very reluctant to add to the conversation. Therefore, as theologians, we need to create a learning environment in which students feel safe, yet engaged. This means they are free to contribute to the class and develop their ideas. In this context, we may come together to build a worldview on a moral, just and peaceful world.

Useful references

For more information on best practices in teaching interfaith courses, see: http://www.bu.edu/rct/files/2012/08/2012-Consultation-Executive-Summary.pdf Boston University School of Theology **2012 Consultation Executive Summary**

"The Formation of Interfaith Just Peacemakers: A Working Consultation"

http://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/chapp-reports/boston-university.pdf

Notes

1. The religious diversity became part of the American culture and the academic institutions responded to that diversity in promoting pluralism's initiatives and projects. Since 1991, Diana Eck has been heading a research team at Harvard University to explore the new religious diversity of the United States and its meaning for the American pluralist experiment. The Pluralism Project has been documenting the growing presence of the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Pagan, Sikh, Jain, and Zoroastrian communities in the United States.
2. http://divinity.howard.edu/about_us.html.
3. " O humankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you! Q 4:1".
4. "O humankind! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. Q 49:13".
5. "O humankind! Worship your Sustainer, who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you might remain conscious of Him (21) who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy, and has sent down water from the sky and thereby brought forth fruits for your sustenance: do not, then, claim that there is any power that could rival God, when you know [that He is One] Q 2:21 -22" .
6. "When your Lord brought forth offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, "Am I not your Lord?" They replied, "We bear witness that You are." This He did, lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "We had no knowledge of that" Q 7:172".
7. Qur'ān:18:29-31.
8. Qur'ān 49:13, 87:14, 35:18.
9. Z. Alwani, *Maqa¯s·id Qur'a¯niyya*: A Methodology on Evaluating Modern Challenges and *Fiqh al-Aqalliyya¯t, in The Muslim World, vol. 104 (Hartford Seminary: October 2014), 465-487* https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/muwo.12073.
10. "But seek, with the (wealth) which God has bestowed on you, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget your portion in this world: but do the good, as God has been good to you,

and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for God loves not those who do mischief." Q 45:13, 28:77.

11. Source: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2361.

12. THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM: *A course with Zainab Alwani, Michael Wyatt and others Mondays, 18 Sept. - 16 Oct., 7-9 pm, Perry Auditorium*, http://www.cathedral.org/pdfs/HE060820.pdf.