TEACHING INSIDE-OUT: ON TEACHING ISLAM[1]

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It is in colleges and universities that Muslim students in North America usually have their first serious opportunities to learn about their own traditions and to articulate their own ways of being Muslim. There is a marked difference here from the experience of Christian or Jewish students. There are any numbers of Christian or Jewish schools in North America, in addition to a number of religious institutions of higher learning. By contrast, only a small percentage of Muslim students are the product of Islamic schools. They do not have the same opportunities to learn about their religion that are available to Jewish or Christian children. In this regard, there are a great many similarities with the other South Asian religions that are discussed in this volume.

My own thoughts on the teaching of Islam have been shaped by a decade of trying to integrate theoretical issues with pedagogical concerns. I began to teach courses on Islam at several different universities (McMaster University, the University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University) in Southern Ontario in 1994. In 1997, I moved to Southern California to start teaching full-time at California State University, Northridge. Twelve relevant issues have arisen for me over the past decade of teaching Islam in North America.[3] I have divided this list of issues into the following four categories: the assumptions of the instructor; the assumptions of the students; the role of the instructor in the modern university; and events post 9/11.

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[1] The title of this article is an allusion to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's collection of essays, On Understanding Islam. I am profoundly thankful to Wilfred and Muriel Smith for their impacts on me, both personally and professionally.

[2] I wish to thank Arti Dhand, Eliza Kent, Stuart Ray Sarbacker, Deepak Sarma, Vasudha Narayanan and Anne Vallely for the conversations and presentations that led to this article. I also wish to thank Michel Desjardins for his close reading and comments on an earlier version of this article.

[3] For a more detailed discussion of the issues involved, see *Teaching Islam* edited by Brannon Wheeler.

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1. *The assumptions of the instructor*

1. There is the question of teaching Islam. I use a deliberate ambiguity here: although I always strive to teach *about* Islam, I am aware that I also *teach* Islam, mostly to Muslim students, but to non-Muslim students as well. At the beginning of each course I ask students to say something about themselves, and why they are taking that particular course. Usually, about half of the students self-identify as Muslims, and many of them state that they are taking the course to learn more about their religion. With this, the easy dichotomy of religious studies versus theology becomes not so easy any more. The Muslim students are learning about Islam, but since it is their own tradition, it has a personal impact on many of them. They may have no other place to learn about their own tradition.

Let me discuss a bit about my own history as a way of clarifying my thoughts on this issue. I completed a Ph.D. at the University of Toronto's Centre for the Study of Religion. There, I was taught by Donald Weibe and Neil McMullin about the academic study of religion, and how it was different from the teaching (or doing, for that matter) of theology. I have always advocated the religious studies paradigm (i.e., as a secular, non-confessional discipline), and was fortunate to have conversations about this with another fellow graduate student who is well known to readers of *MTSR*, Russell McCutcheon. However, when I began to teach courses on Islam, I realized that there were no North American seminaries to which I could send students who wanted a more theological approach to their tradition. There was no Muslim equivalent of the Toronto School of Theology. Moreover, no matter how adamant I was that my courses on Islam were *about* this religious tradition, for some of my Muslim students, this class presented the only opportunity for them to seriously engage with their own religious understandings. I would also argue that for religious non-Muslim students, my class also allowed for them to add Islam to the list of traditions against which they had to define themselves.

Complicating all of this was my own Muslim identity (discussed below). Many times students would ask me what I, as one particular Muslim, thought of a particular issue. Or they might ask me about my own practices with some part of the tradition (e.g. "What's it like to fast during Ramadan?" or "Have you made the Hajj?"). Generally, when students ask me for my personal opinions, I give them, but am always explicit that these are my personal opinions, and not necessarily those of other Muslims. Of course whenever my own opinions are in conflict

with those of other Muslims, I try to list the points on which we differ. All of this to say that in trying to be in the religious studies mode, I sometimes (unintentionally) end up being the closest substitute for a Muslim theologian that my students will encounter.

Sam Gill has written (2002: 222-223) the following about the dichotomies in our academic lives:

> We divide scholars into schools and traditions. The theological versus the academic is a standard one. I have recently dealt with this division in an article entitled "Embodied theology" (Gill in press). The distinction of "textualists" versus "comparativists" or "theorists" is another. The religious and cultural identity of scholars—insiders versus outsiders—is another. And so on. What I have argued is that our field cannot exist without doing both kinds of work, without wholly embracing the antithesis and, indeed, it should hold this as its hallmark.

Perhaps the issues that I am describing come from dealing with this antithesis.

2. There is mixed in with the above the issue of who teaches whom. Muslims/non-Muslims teach Muslims/non-Muslims. Jane McAuliffe, now Dean of Arts at Georgetown University, has talked about what it meant for her as a Catholic to teach Islam to Muslim graduate students at the University of Toronto, where at times she was the only non-Muslim (and also the only female) in the classroom. One also thinks about the questions of gender raised by Annemarie Schimmel when she was the only woman teaching at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Turkey. In my own classes on Islam, between 30 and 50% of the students self describe themselves as Muslim.

What attitude does the instructor, usually non-Muslim, have to Muslim students in his or her class? On January 4, 2000, the *Detroit News* reported that Muslim students at two community colleges had filed complaints against their instructors (Cohen 2000a). One student at Washtenaw Community College was prevented from saying "*bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim*" before the beginning of her presentation. She was offered a formal apology by the college's president the next day (Cohen 2000b). Here one sees another facet of the religious studies versus theology question. If the student is a believing Muslim and wants to begin all of her public presentations with a standard invocation, why should she be prevented from doing so? In past centuries, certain universities were closed to "unbelievers" (Masuzawa 2003: 322). In the modern secular university, should we exclude all expressions of religious belief? All of my syllabi contain a section first articulated by Tina Pippin with her

students. In part, that section reads: "we have the right to voice an opinion that is based on a self-chosen value system; we have the right to dissent or differ from the professor and from others in class". To take another example, I do not invoke the traditional formula of blessing and praise after mention of the name of the Prophet Muhammad, but I do not think it would be appropriate for me to censure students who wish to do so.

The other case was more troubling, involving a student at Oakland Community College, whose instructor brought in an article entitled "Should we be afraid of Islam?", and then allegedly said: "A religion that has a sword for a symbol, I guess we should be afraid of them". I note that both of these incidents occurred in Detroit, a city with a large and established Muslim population.

When the instructor is a Muslim, Muslim students, even more than usual, may expect to learn about only the type of Islam with which they are familiar. As an example, I had a conversation with a Muslim woman who was a volunteer at a Muslim social services organization in Toronto. She was also enrolled in a course on Islam at a university in Toronto, where her instructor was a Muslim woman. The student complained to me about her instructor, claiming that the instructor was "not a good Muslim". She expected to have her own version of Islam taught exclusively in the class and was distressed that the instructor was teaching about other versions of Islam. She was also concerned that her instructor did not wear any covering over her hair and sometimes wore short-sleeved clothes.

There is also the question of whether or not the instructor chooses to disclose her/his own religious background (or lack thereof). In my own case, being visibly South Asian, bearded, and named "Amir Hussain", it is fairly difficult to hide my Muslim identity from my students, and so I self-disclose during the first class. Other instructors may not feel comfortable doing this, but in my case, it would be difficult to deny my background. There is also the interesting issue of converts to Islam who may be reluctant to disclose their religious identity to their students.

3. The above comment raises the issue of what, if any, type of "Islam" is considered "normative". Is the course taught from a Sunni perspective? How does one teach about groups that are marginalised, such as the Ahmadi community, or groups, such as the Nation of Islam, that are considered un-Islamic by many other Muslims? Is there adequate

discussion of the Shi'a, who form substantial minority communities in cities such as Toronto and Los Angeles? Sometimes, there is a problem when some Muslim students do not consider other groups to be Muslim enough for them. Herbert Berg, while teaching a course on Islam at York University, mentioned that some of his students were concerned that he was spending time teaching them about the Nation of Islam, whom they considered to be non-Muslim. I also had the same question posed to me by a student involved in the Muslim Students' Association of McMaster University when I taught a course on Islam in the Modern World. When I mentioned to the student that Louis Farrakhan had made the Hajj several times, an act reserved for Muslims, the student began to rethink his position on the Nation.

There are also a great many questions of representation, especially the question of who "represents" Muslim interests in North America. There is a wide variety of groups claiming to speak for North American Muslims. Some of them are in competition with each other to claim an (or "the") authentic voice of Muslims. One thinks, for example in Canada, of the struggle between the Canadian Islamic Congress and the Muslim Canadian Congress. In November 2004, the Progressive Muslim Union of North America was launched to the acclaim of many Muslims, and the concern of many others. Those of us who teach about Islam have to talk about these issues of representation. On my web page, for example, I have the following disclaimer to a list of North American Muslim groups: "This list includes links to various groups who consider themselves to be Muslim. I make no judgement about their Islam, but I understand that others may be all too willing to do this."

4. There is also the issue of whether we read early versions of texts as the correct version, or give privilege to biblical texts. When we teach, for example, do we assume that the biblical text gets things right, and the Qur'an, where it conflicts with biblical accounts, is in error? To take one example, when I talk about Abraham in the Qur'an, I ask students why they assume that Abraham is Jewish. This startles some of them, the idea that Abraham (or Jesus, to take another example) is claimed as a Muslim by Muslims. Husein Khimjee, who taught a course on Islam at Wilfrid Laurier University, has had similar experiences when he talks about how Muslims acknowledge, as Muslims, a number of biblical prophets. It needs to be added that the question of origins is highly complex, since modern Muslim communities usually consider the Qur'an absolutely central to life—so, while wanting to deconstruct their third place standing on the Judeo-Christian-Muslim

trajectory by questioning a previous myth of origins, they also want to construct another one by placing priority on their founding text.

Related to this issue is the question of why we often do not look to Muslim scholarship, or look at it with suspicion. At the 1999 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Boston for example, a colleague used the phrase, "Muslim or critical scholarship". This statement (with its implicit assumption that Muslim scholarship was not "critical") was not questioned, but a Muslim woman (Saadia Shaikh of Temple University) talking about the Qur'an as patriarchal *was* questioned by those present, including a number of Muslims. Again, there is a discontinuity with the way in which Islam is taught as compared to the teaching of Judaism and Christianity. For both of those traditions, there is a great deal of material, written by self-identified Jews or Christians, that is regarded as "critical" and often used in the classroom. I do not know how many people use texts for their classes on Islam that are written by Muslims.

2. *The assumptions of the students*

5. There is the issue of what one does with the "fundamentalists"[4] or arch-conservatives in the classroom, who are typically young males, with the assuredness that only young males can have that they alone possess "the truth". For example, at a lecture given by Farid Esack at my university on November 11, 1999, a young man stood up during the question period. He rudely questioned why Esack presented a less than a fawning picture of Islam in South Africa and reproached him for airing "dirty laundry". While I do believe that the university should instil in students the confidence to ask tough questions to anyone, regardless of their social standing or background, in this case I was struck by the arrogant tone of the questioner. I thought to myself that this young man couldn't have been any more than three or four years old when Esack was in jail in South Africa, fighting against apartheid from an Islamic perspective (and in the words of Hunter S. Thompson (1988: 48), "that's *prison*, in *South Africa*"). And this young man has the nerve to question Esack's "Islam"?

I have had students tell me that music is forbidden in Islam. When I play them music that has been recorded by Muslims, the students

[4] I have no particular fondness for this word, but Farid Esack has reclaimed it with his South African pronunciation/contraction of "foondas".

charge the musicians with being unbelievers. Of course, the students are unable to tell me why they think that music is forbidden to them.

6. There is the issue of multiple identities. In the USA, my primary identity is as a Canadian, and not as a Muslim (however, post 9/11, I find that changing). Similarly, our students have multiple identities. How do we properly address the multiple identities that we all have? In the North American context, where I find Islam to be marginalised, I do sometimes see myself as "more" Muslim than I do at other times. Add to this the question of being a "role model", a Brown person in a job where, according to a recent survey from the NEA, 92% of my colleagues are White. What do these facts do for us and our students?

Again, this does not mean that as Muslims we are naïve or silent about the problems in our communities. We cannot see ourselves as innocent victims, and shift the blame for our internal problems to outsiders. We need to deal with the social and ideological problems such as hunger, abuse, discrimination, etc. that are part of any society. We need to address the alarming conservatism among some Muslims, whose ahistorical and non-contextual readings of Islam allow for misogyny and violence against Muslims and non-Muslims. We as scholars can provide different alternatives, different narratives to give meaning to our lives and allow us all to be fully human.

3. *The role of the instructor in the modern university*

7. The issues raised by the uses of new technology in teaching are vital throughout the academy. I have a web page and am encouraged to do so by my university. However, I am troubled by the assumption that technology makes for better students (or better pedagogy, for that matter), that a student with unlimited access to a powerful computer is somehow a "better" student. To be sure, it is precisely in "developed" countries like Canada and the United States that the use of high technology would sculpt people's self-awareness into new formations, including religious self-awareness.[5] Muslims in North America and in other parts of the world have access, through the World Wide Web,

[5] I am here thinking of the important work in this area by another Canadian, Marshall McLuhan. The University of Toronto fittingly sponsors an on-line journal devoted to his work at <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/mcluhan-studies/mstudies.htm>.

to an ever increasing number of web sites that help them to develop their understandings of what it means to be Muslim. Since the teaching of Islam in new forms would have an impact on that self-awareness, this possibility needs to be studied by communications scholars. Some questions that need to be addressed include: Are immigrant students more, or less, disadvantaged by the use of new technologies in the classroom? What are the gender implications? And will the use of new technologies lead more quickly to a loss of group identity, or can they serve to reinforce it?

8. There is the question of the political act of teaching, of when and whether to politicize certain issues—and whether any issue can be without political implications.[6] The first event that I co-ordinated at California State University, Northridge, as part of our Study of Islam Program, was a showing of a documentary film on the national poet of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish. The film, *As the Land is the Language*, was made by an Israeli/Moroccan director, Simone Bitton, who spoke about the film that she had made. I deliberately wanted to have her as the first speaker, as she is a non-Muslim. I don't want to narrowly define "Islamic Studies" as a topic suitable only for Muslims. There is a scene in the film where Darwish is reciting one of his poems and repeats the line "I am, and I am here, and I am, and I am here . . .". Darwish is not at all an "Islamic" poet, yet the issue of Palestine and the Palestinians is such an important one to Muslims. At the end of the film, a number of students came up to me and said that they had never heard the Palestinian cause articulated before.[7] Now, when I can, I try to "sneak" in some of his poems, particularly a few lines from "Identity Card" (*Bitaqat Haweeya*), published the year before I was born, when Darwish was himself only 22 (1973: 25):

> Write down at the top of the first page:
> I do not hate people.
> I steal from no-one.

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[6] This in itself is a contested idea. My own thoughts on this area were first influenced by Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra B. Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993 [1970]). I am indebted to Dr. Larry Williams of Surrey Place Centre in Toronto, who offered me his reminiscences of Freire from the time that Williams helped to establish a department of psychology in São Paulo, Brazil. Another important work in this area is bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[7] Not simply articulated well, they had never heard it articulated at all before this film.

However
if I am hungry
I will eat the flesh of my usurper.
Beware beware of my hunger
& of my anger.

How can we not talk about situations such as those in Palestine or Bosnia or Chechnya or Darfur in our courses on Islam? Of course, this is not unique to the study of Islam. Can one talk about South Asia without talking about the problems of sectarian violence?

What is unique to the study of Islam is that both the media and some university departments have taken a pro-Israel stance that is in direct conflict with the position taken by most Muslims across the world. To teach about Palestinians, therefore, and to question the pro-Zionist position, is to take a daring political stance—made all the more challenging by the fact that some conservative Christian groups in America, who now wield enormous political power, also hold a pro-Zionist position. To support Israel in university classrooms, therefore, can be seen as "neutral," while to support the Palestinian cause can be seen as "radical," and even anti-American after 9/11.

Tied into the political awareness mentioned above, there is a sense of activism that I try to pass on to my students. I often make reference to Muhammad Ali, and how he, as a Black Muslim, affected America. In the 1996 documentary film *When We Were Kings* (directed by Leon Gast), George Plimpton recalls his memories of the fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. In his reminiscences, Plimpton talks about a poem that Ali read to a gathering of university students. The poem was two simple words, and Plimpton claimed it was the shortest poem in the English language. The poem was "Me. We". This, for Plimpton was the essence of Ali's gift: the ability to make a connection with people, to transcend the "me" and get to the "we". As an academic, I try to get students to do this: to think not only of themselves and how ideas affect them in isolation, but how they are an integral part of the world around them, to link experiences, to share them, to make people aware of how they are connected to other people. That there are multiple variables in any analysis of human beings, and that while we may focus on race or class or gender for a particular study, we also need to be aware of how these factors (and others) interact in all of our lives. This is what informs my ideas of pedagogy. Hugh Urban (2002: 228) captures some of these ideas when he writes: "That is, we must finally choose a side and make a stand. By this I mean making a certain ethical and political commitment on

fundamental issues, such as human rights, freedom, and the struggle against racism and violence."

As an academic, I rage against the immorality of the notion "academic neutrality". All too often, we academics are silent when our voices need to be heard. We are, at bottom, afraid. It is Farid Esack (who was the second guest speaker for the program that I am trying to create, with Riffat Hassan being the third and Brian Cantwell Smith the fourth speaker) that has helped me to conquer this fear, to help me realize the links, that I need to make my voice heard against oppression and injustice. One of the men that we both admire is the deceased Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil. Archbishop Camara's most famous saying speaks about the nature of telling the truth and making a difference. "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist". This is also Esack's gift, the ability to ask the difficult questions, which are often the most basic questions. Why is there oppression? Why do we oppress each other? Why do we not link oppression on the basis of race with oppression on the basis of gender or sexuality?[8] Gisela Webb has edited a volume about Muslim women in North America who are scholars but are also activists as well.[9]

9. Who pays for our scholarship? Along with the notion of academic neutrality (and by the way, why is it that we in the study of religion are asked to be neutral, while our colleagues in the business school are free to make converts?) is the notion of academic freedom. Who "controls" scholarship? For whom are we writing? Who pays for our scholarship?[10] The problems with this are evident in the sciences. For example, Nancy Oliveri struggled with a major drug company, Apotex, at the University of Toronto.[11] What about for us? Whom do we try to please?

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[8] For two essays that discuss these linkages, see Karen Brodkin, "Once More into the Streets", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25:4 (2000), pp. 1223-1226; and France Winddance Twine, "Feminist Fairy Tales for Black and American Indian Girls: A Working-Class Vision", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25:4 (2000), pp. 1227-1230.

[9] Gisela Webb, *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

[10] I am here indebted to the work of Neil McMullin at the University of Toronto, who was the first person in the study of religion to make me aware of this question.

[11] For information on this case, see the following article from *The Bulletin of the University of Toronto*, available at <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/bulletin/oct25_99/art4.htm>.

Colleagues? Deans and administrators? The "community"? What if the community disapproves, and the administration backs the community (as in the case of Tazim Kassam, who was almost surely denied tenure at Middlebury College for publishing a scholarly book that met with the disapproval of some members of the Ismaili community)?[12] What about trying to do fund raising in the community for "controversial" research? Already, the University of Toronto has seen a disagreement with the Sikh community over the funding of a chair in Sikh studies. Will the same issue arise if the university actively seeks donations from the Muslim communities of Toronto?

4. *The issues raised post 9/11*

10. There has been a great deal written about the scholar as public intellectual. For myself, I prefer a different term, the scholar as citizen. I teach in a state university. Most of our funding comes from the State of California. As such, I have an obligation to the state and its citizens that I would not have if I taught at a private institution that was not dependent on taxpayers. For me, it is important to reach different audiences. I reach some in my classes, others with the scholarly writing that I have done. But I reach a far greater number of people with my editorial pieces in newspapers, or my work with various local and national media. My students do not know me from my scholarly writing, but they recognize me from their great signifyer: they have seen me on television on the History Channel, or on the Fox News Channel, or on the local news, or on *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher.*

I mention this because I think it signals a shift for some of us as academics. Most of us work in universities (even my own, which sees itself as a teaching institution more than a research institution) where peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs are the coin of the realm. I have been fortunate to have some of those, and I recognize the value of "serious" scholarship. But I also understand the need to get our work "out there," to people who do not have the ability to take our courses or read our scholarly prose (with all of its own conventions of style and jargon). And I am also under no illusions. I am sure that no more than 50 people have read any of my scholarly pieces, but a million or so have read my work in the *Los Angeles Times*,

[12] I am indebted to Tazim Kassam for her willingness to discuss her situation with me.

and several million have seen me on television. I get far more email about Op-Ed pieces in the newspaper than I have ever received about a scholarly article. To be sure, if all of my publishing were in the local newspaper, then I would not consider myself a very good academic. Yet, I would argue that I am not a socially responsible academic if I fail to try to put some of my work out to the people who pay for my salary. In the case of Islam and Muslim communities, it is all the more important to get my work out to the widest possible audience.

There has been a great deal of discussion among academics who teach Islam about our roles with the media. Personally, I prefer to work with print or radio journalists. Generally, I do not work with commercial television, but I will work with public television. My experience working with commercial television immediately after 9/11 soured me. It made me realize that it was all about entertainment, and not about education. It was all about trying to summarize complicated situations in eight-second sound bites. This is something that I refuse to do.

11. There is the issue of the curriculum changes that many of us have made post 9/11. I used to start with a standard historical introduction that introduced the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. I now have students start by reading a book that describes how the news media construct reality (Postman and Powers 1992). Most of my students get their information about Islam and Muslim lives from television, so I think it is important to begin with how the television news works. I also use a videotape of Bill Moyers interviewing Jon Stewart and talking about *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.* My students are admirers of Stewart's work, and agree with me that the "fake" news that he presents is much better than the "real" news. I have also had guests from local television stations come to my class to talk about ratings, and how important they are to the local news.

Having discussed media constructions of Muslim lives, I sometimes then move to something of a case study. In the American media Palestinians—whether they are Muslim, Christian or secular—are constructed as "Muslims." I next ask students to read a graphic novel (i.e. comic book) that describes something of the realities of Palestinian experience (Sacco 2002) and contrast that presentation with the ways in which Palestinians are perceived in America. There is a great advantage to using a comic book in class (aside from the reactions of students who are delighted or appalled to have a comic book on the reading list). Some students still think that a photograph is "objective," that it "tells the truth." They do not consider how it is composed. It

is much easier to show this with drawings, where it is obvious that someone has made the drawing, and someone else might do it differently.

In addition to working with the media, many of us have been asked to work with various student groups on our campuses. There has been difficulty for many of our exchange students in border crossings and obtaining US visas. This has also been a problem for Muslim and non-Muslim faculty members. Two of the most famous recent cases involve Tariq Ramadan and Yusuf Islam.

12. There has also been great concern about the monitoring of Middle East Studies. At the time of writing this article, Bill HR 3077 ("to amend title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965 to enhance international education programs") has been passed by the US House of Representatives and is currently before the Senate. That bill includes a provision for the creation of an "International Higher Education Advisory Board" to monitor academic work on Middle East Studies.

Changes have also occurred within the study of Islam section of the AAR. This group used to be a small group of scholars who mostly talked only with one another. Now, it is a much larger group, and we are asked to reach out and talk to all sorts of people outside our group. One of our group, Carl Ernst, has written about his own recent experiences (2003: xvii): ". . . it still amazes me that intelligent people can believe that all Muslims are violent or that all Muslim women are oppressed, when they would never dream of uttering slurs stereotyping much smaller groups such as Jews or blacks. The strength of these negative images of Muslims is remarkable, even though they are not based on personal experience or actual study, but they receive daily reinforcement from the news media and popular culture." Interestingly, Conservative Christians are now saying much the same thing, and they are in fact under-represented in universities.[13] McCutcheon (2004) has written about this, as well as the controversy when some Conservative Christians protested the decision to teach a selection of Qur'anic verses to students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (where Ernst teaches).

Ernst goes on to point out that in workshops on key issues in Islamic studies in 1992 and then a decade later, it was determined that: ". . . the real issue is to humanize Muslims in the eyes of non-Muslims" (2003: xvii). Much of our work in the study of Islam section has been on how we rework our courses in light of students who now have a

[13] I am indebted to Michel Desjardins for his discussions with me on this point.

great deal of misinformation about Islam and Muslim lives from what they see on television or listen to on talk radio stations. We have also discussed how to handle our increased obligations (mentioned earlier in this chapter) to speak to various community groups about Islam.

Of course, this concern to humanize Muslims does not mean that we take an "everything is as wonderful as the perfume of roses on the wind" attitude towards the very serious problems that exist within Muslim communities. We need to discuss issues such as gender discrimination, religious arrogance and intolerance, violence, etc. However, we also need to make clear that many people see these problems as the only reality of Islam, and are unaware of the richness and beauty that exists as well.

These are some of the many issues with regard to teaching Islam in North America. As a Canadian, I have made a conscious choice to live in the United States. Technically, that makes me an émigré and not an exile. But as an émigré, as a Canadian of South Asian background, what Americans call a "person of colour," as a scholar whose calling is to find words for complex identities, what Americans call an "intellectual," and now especially as a Muslim in post-9/11 America, the metaphor of exile deepens my compassion and clarifies my work. With his usual brilliance, Edward Said wrote this about the condition of exile: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal" (2002: 186).

And in using that metaphor, I am reminded of the work of my teacher, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who loved much of the same music that Said performed. Of Smith's work and life, John Hick (2001: viii) wrote: "Wilfred Cantwell Smith was a major comparative religion scholar. But what made him unique is that he also used his prodigious range of knowledge to further the cause of mutual human understanding and the awareness of our common humanity." In describing his own work, Smith (1981: 282) wrote:

> I as an intellectual in the modern world have always as my primary obligation and final commitment my loyalty to truth—subject to test at the hands of my fellow intellectuals, who constitute, of course, the primary audience of every thesis proceeding out of a university. I have developed the view, however, and articulated it elsewhere at some length, that the arguments of a student of religion or of a particular religious or indeed any human community, should in principle be persuasive to other intellectuals, not only, but in addition also to intelligent and alert members of the group or groups about which he and she writes.

The scholarly work that Smith first did was in South Asia. Interested in Islam and Muslim lives, for six years he lived in India, what was at the time the country with the largest population of Muslims. Current scholars of South Asia have remarked on their informants, and the words of Joanne Waghorne (2004: 78) are particularly important:

> My informants are often more educated, wealthier, and in higher status positions than this professor. Many of those who patronize new temples are scientists returning to a new-found ease with ritual. Many are successful business people. Many readily acknowledge the temple as a social world, and a very political institution. They do this at the same time that they pray and speak of God's will and intervention in their lives. I am not dealing with deluded men and women, nor am I dealing with the Wise in remote ashrams. These people are self-acknowledged middle-class persons but they do not inhabit the bourgeois world of mid twentieth-century northern Europe.

Waghorne's informants are similar to our students (as well as to us). The demographic changes in North America and Europe in the sixty years since Smith moved to Lahore are well documented. We have intelligent, educated South Asian students in our classes on religion, both as professors and students. We are both learning to construct and maintain our identities. Perhaps it is Said's term from music that is the best descriptor for those of who teach Islam, especially those of us who are Muslim. We live contrapuntal lives.

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