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Teaching Islamic Themes at the College Level

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Following the Oil Crisis of 1973 and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, pundits and politicians in Western countries have increasingly paid a great deal of attention to the Muslim world. It goes without saying that Muslim societies in North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Indonesia have strategic geo-political interests as well as resources in which the West is very interested. As a result, American, Australian, Canadian, and European governments are pursuing more and more foreign policy objectives in Muslim countries. Moreover, these same countries have attracted millions of Muslim immigrants who, along with their children, have made the West their home during the course of the past 30 years. Despite numerous interconnections with the Muslim World, few Western educational institutions offer their student bodies an in-depth study of Islam, its history, its peoples, or its traditions.

My interest in Islamic Studies stems from my experiences living in an American oil compound in Saudi Arabia for the first 17 years of my life. The close proximity to Muslim societies in the region fed my lifelong fascination with Islamic cultures and societies. My mother and father, both Christian Armenians from Lebanon and Syria, respectively, regularly took my family off the compound for weekly shopping excursions where I witnessed first hand the dynamics of a Muslim society. In Saudi Arabia this included the mandatory closing of shops during prayer time, patrons being escorted out

of the stores for 20 minutes while prayers were called out from the various mosques dotting the landscape. Growing up, it never occurred to me that this was novel in any way. Rather, it was simply a part of the urban landscape we happened to inhabit at the time. Although I am not a Muslim, I have grown to appreciate the vibrancy of the religion. Perhaps my most vivid memories of growing up in Arabia are the streams of heavily decorated cars, buses, and trucks from Jordan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, India, and Pakistan ferrying pilgrims to Mecca during the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage. Seeing the trains of heavily decorated vehicles teeming with sacks, mattresses, and people from countries I had only know as locations on maps somehow brought me to the realization of the enormity of Islam. It was this vast subject that I would later choose to earn two graduate degrees in Islamic Studies.

College-level teaching, in the Canadian Province of Quebec, offers a unique avenue for the teaching of Islamic themes in a post-secondary setting. The two-year academic or three-year technical program for high school graduates is designed to prepare them for either university studies or the job market. All students enrolled in the province's five English-language colleges are required to take a number of general education courses, which include English, French, Physical Fitness, and Humanities. The Humanities component of the curriculum is comprised of general interest courses that cover a vast array of topics taught by instructors who have a graduate degree in a relevant field. This chapter will discuss how one course that I teach, offered through the Vanier College Humanities Department, provides students with a perspective on Islam that seeks to demonstrate the vibrancy and diversity of the faith, while at the same time debunking a number of stereotypes.

I first taught my Islamic World Views class in the fall of 2001. Prior to that time, the college had not offered a class specifically on the Muslim world; although one professor did offer Religious Studies and Humanities classes where Islamic themes were prevalent. Moreover, a number of current faculty members teaching in various academic disciplines cover topics related to the Muslim world in their respective courses. The decision to offer a course focused exclusively on the Muslim world was not one taken at the college's administrative level. Rather, as in all Humanities classes offered across the provincial curriculum, it is the responsibility of the individual instructor to choose the actual course content and make it fit within the competency-based learning approach administered by Quebec's Ministry of Education.

Because Islam is often poorly understood by North American audiences, one of the primary goals of my course is to introduce some of the basics of the tradition to a non-Muslim audience. However, because a large number of students who register for this particular class are themselves Muslim, a secondary goal is to offer these particular students an approach to their religion

that is academic in orientation as opposed to one that is experienced from a believer's point of view. The course itself is broken down into various sections, each one dealing with specific components of Islamic society and culture. What follows is a brief description of some of the components of the class and the pedagogical motivations for teaching these particular themes.

The Particular Challenges Involved

Vanier College is located in a district of Montreal that is richly populated by recent immigrants as well as second-generation immigrant communities. As a result, many of the students who register for my class are Muslim. This fact makes teaching my Islamic World Views class particularly challenging and rewarding. Unlike other courses where the subject matter may be unfamiliar to those enrolled, a number of students in this particular class are fully engaged in the religious tradition we are studying. These students regularly contribute to the class discussions, making for a healthy pedagogical experience for students and instructor alike. Moreover, owing to the multicultural nature of Montreal, many of the non-Muslim students have Muslim friends and are thus naturally curious about the tradition, adding another layer of inquiry and commentary to the class.

Student contributions are more than welcome in my classroom. As a non-Muslim instructor, I insist that the Muslim students feel comfortable to correct me if I make a mistake or express something in a way that they find offensive or problematic. For instance, one semester, during a discussion on the concept of God, I kept pointing to the ceiling whenever I mentioned the word "God." Toward the end of the class, one student intervened and informed the class that he found this particular action on my part troublesome. His main concern centered on my pointing toward the ceiling and by extension the sky. By pointing toward the sky, he felt that I was limiting God's presence to that one particular locality. The student wanted the class to understand that God was everywhere and not just above us in the heavens.

During the time I have taught this class, I regularly have Muslim students offer fascinating details that would not otherwise be part of my official lectures. This information may pertain to things as curious as the physical makeup of angels, or the games the Prophet Muhammad used to play with his children. Although this kind of material may strike the non-Muslim as novel, to the initiated Muslim, these facts are important and significant in the understanding of their faith. Creating a learning environment where students feel welcome to discuss these kinds of notions is crucial in enhancing the learning experience within my Islamic World Views course.

When a student offers this kind of commentary, I welcome the intervention and integrate the new idea into the content of the course. I do this by

asking the students to take note of the remarks made by their colleagues and announcing that these student contributions may be referred to in the tests and essays assigned during the term. By opening up the floor to this kind of participation, it allows the intervening students to feel empowered, while also demonstrating to the other students how valuable such contributions are to the overall class dynamic. In my mind, this is the best kind of learning that can take place in a classroom.

One of the greatest challenges of extensive classroom participation lies in scenarios where a student misrepresents facts about Islamic culture that defy historical, textual, or theological fact. For instance, during a class on the reforms the Prophet Muhammad made in Arabian society during the 7th century, I informed the students that the religion beseeches individuals to treat slaves with dignity and free them whenever possible. One student took exception to this remark as she assumed that Islam outlawed slavery altogether. In reality, Muslim societies throughout the historical Near East, Europe, Asia, and Africa used slaves in various capacities following the death of the Prophet. Conveying this kind of information, where the facts may interfere with an individual student's personal perceptions, requires considerable delicacy and tact.

I certainly want and demand student participation, but when the student's comments are inaccurate, I am required to not only correct the false assertions, but to do so in a manner so as to not offend the student who raised the inaccurate point. Here, the tone I adopt in my response is crucial, as is my body language. If I come across too harshly, briskly, or condescendingly, I run the risk of quashing the student's enthusiasm and silencing their future commentary. Moreover, such a reaction could send a message to other students that I am not open to student challenges and arguments. Moreover, my status as a non-Muslim correcting the assertions of a Muslim student does not go unnoticed during these exchanges. In these situations, rather than adopt a defensive posture, I will often walk toward the student, smile and welcome the contribution verbally. Following these gestures of openness, I will offer a response with some kind of textual or historical support.

In this particular instance, where the student was adamant that slavery was abolished by Muhammad and the Qur'an, I simply referred to the Mamluk and Ottoman Empires and their regular use of slave soldiers (Pipes, 1981). These medieval Islamic empires purchased young boys as slaves, trained them in the arts of war, converted them to Islam and eventually promoted them into various government positions where they gained not only prestige, but in some cases a great deal of wealth and political power. At the end of the day, the class became aware of something that was not necessarily part of the official curriculum, but something that furthered their knowledge of the

Muslim world. Moreover, and most importantly, when I am able to successfully harness student challenges, I create an atmosphere where members of the class feel comfortable to debate interesting points with me. This will often blossom into interesting discussions for the entire class.

Owing to the nature of the topic, I find that there are a number of expectations on the part of the students long before they arrive for the first day of class. Some Muslim students have expressed to me their initial suspicion at having a non-Muslim teach them ideas about their own religion. Meanwhile non-Muslim students may harbor certain misunderstandings of the Islamic faith. Because of the various pre-conceived ideas that students may have before the course begins, I feel that the first day of class is the most important day in teaching this class. From the start, students are told that the course is not one where I will be promoting the religion or looking at the religion from a believer's perspective. Rather, the course they have enrolled in is a college survey course where students are asked to consider various Islamic themes. The course content is to be approached with the objective of learning *not* judging. Meanwhile, I explain to the Muslim students that although I am not a Muslim, I have over 10 years of graduate training in Islamic history, religion, and law. However, I also make it very clear to the Muslim students that my degrees do not qualify me to speak for Muslims, emphasizing that my role in the class is that of a moderator and instructor.

Course Content and Pedagogical Objectives

I often begin my survey course on Islam with an analysis of the pre-Islamic Arabian society that flourished during the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Zeitlin, 2007). By contrasting the religious, economic, and social systems of 7th century Arabia with the revelations that appeared in the Qur'an, students can begin to appreciate how revolutionary Muhammad's message and mission was. One of the first challenges some of my Muslim students encounter during this section of the course is divesting themselves, at least for the duration of the course, of negative value judgments they have of the pre-existing Arabian polytheism in Mecca and the rest of Arabia. Prior to the revelation of the Qur'an, Meccan society paid tribute to various gods while the city itself hosted a yearly pilgrimage where over 300 deities were worshiped at the Ka'ba, the cubed structure at the heart of the city (Hoyland, 2001). This form of worship is in stark contrast to the principle of *tawhid* (oneness of God), which is the central credo of the Muslim faith. Worshiping more than one deity is a form of polytheism, which Muslims will refer to as *shirk*. In adopting an academic perspective, I do not discount the polytheistic idolatry that existed in Arabia during the time of the Prophet. Rather, I point out that this particular religious phenomenon is a long-standing part of the human

condition and is found throughout the world. It is essential to establish this academic and impartial tone early in the class in order to not offend students who may come from religious traditions that are in fact polytheistic.

Another pedagogical goal of the course is to demonstrate to students that an academic approach to religion does not assume that individual faiths are distinct entities. Rather, different religions are frequently fusions of pre-existing spiritual and cultural traditions. Thus, I point out that a number of pre-Islamic tribal institutions remained following the appearance of the Qur'an and were altered to fit the newly emerging religious movement introduced by Muhammad. For instance, I describe how the pre-Islamic pilgrimage ritual would later become the *Hajj,* and that rather than commemorate the 300-plus gods housed in the Ka'ba, the Arabs of Arabia would now pay homage to one god (Peters, 1994). Over the years, I have discovered that this kind of thinking is perhaps the greatest challenge certain Muslim students face while enrolled in my course. My goal is to never offend or challenge their particular beliefs; rather I seek to introduce to them how academics view Islam within a post-secondary learning environment.

Meanwhile, some of the challenges non-Muslim students have during this introductory section of the course is letting go of some of the negative stereotypes they may have. For instance, it is often taken as fact throughout the West that men in Muslim societies regularly abuse women and that this abuse is sanctioned in the Qur'an. Approaching this topic head on, I begin by stressing the ethical and social reforms Muhammad introduced, such as the legal status granted to Arabian women, which significantly improved their rights as members of that society (Hekmat, 1997). It is important to point out that the rights in question, namely, the right to contract their own marriages, the right to an inheritance (albeit half that of their brothers') were revolutionary for 7th century Arabia despite the fact that certain inequalities between men and women persisted. By demonstrating these points, I try to impress upon the students the notion that Islam is a reformative religion seeking to improve the human condition. For students whose knowledge of Islam has been shaped by a post-9/11 discourse, these realizations are the first steps toward a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Muslim societies.

Following the introductory component of the class, the course then delves into the text of the Qur'an. When presenting the Qur'an to non-Arabic speaking students, it is crucial that one not overwhelms them with the complexity of the text (Cook, 2000). Though poetically and linguistically beautiful, the Qur'an is a very difficult read for the non-initiate. Its non-chronological presentation as well as its frequent repetition and non-contextualized verses can pose many complications. I begin my section on the

Qur'an by reading some of my favorite verses in the original Arabic (an act that regularly surprises my Muslim students). Frequently, I will pick verses that deal with charity in order to highlight principles of social justice found throughout the text, furthering the theme that Islam is a reformative movement (Quran, 2:261). Thereafter, we usually delve into passages that re-tell some of the Biblical stories students may already be familiar with. These include the stories of Creation as well as the struggles faced by Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus (Quran, 2:136). This serves to demonstrate to non-Muslim students how Islam fits into the Western Religious Tradition through Prophets and a similar belief in God.

After our discussion of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, students will have gathered a reasonable understanding of the main themes of the religion. From this point, I delve into issues of social history with a discussion of the early Islamic conquests as well as the cosmopolitan societies that emerged throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Spain following the Arab expansion out of Arabia after Muhammad's death in 632 CE. One of the first things we discuss is why the Arabs were so successful in conquering significant amounts of territory out of the existing Byzantine and Sassanid Empires during the 7th and 8th centuries (Kennedy, 2007). This section can pose some difficulties and has to be approached with a great deal of care.

Muslims frequently declare that their religion is one that represents and promotes peace. In fact the word Islam is a derivative of the Arabic word for peace (*salam*). Yet, along with the declarations of peace, Islamic societies throughout history have regularly excelled at military pursuits. A large reason why the Arabs were so successful at their military conquests, derives from the fact that the religion unified previously disparate tribes throughout Arabia, fusing them into a cohesive fighting force with clear motivations based on the principle of *jihad* (struggle for God) and martyrdom (Cook, 2005). Principles of cohesion, diplomacy, and sheer force would serve Muslim armies well as they would later conquer territories in Asia, Africa, and Europe. It would be tempting to skip over the astounding success of the military conquests in order to avoid linking the religion with violence, a link that is so frequently emphasized in the popular media. But a discussion of the subject on the conquests allows for a more complete and mature analysis of Islamic societies from which college students will benefit. Thus it is important not to shy away from such opportunities.

Following our discussion of the conquests, I emphasize to the students that the first Muslim empires that appeared in the Middle East represented a flowering of human achievement in intellectual, architectural, and scientific pursuits. Moreover, empires such as the Umayyads of Damascus (661–750

CE) and the Abbasids of Baghdad (750–1258 CE) made frequent use of pre-existing knowledge in order to administer and run their respective empires. For instance, although new coins were struck with the Caliph's image and inscribed with Islamic invocations, the actual monetary and taxation systems employed by the Umayyads were derived from the Byzantine Empire (Broome, 1985). Similarly, manuals of political governance used by the Abbasid Empire were in fact translations of pre-existing Persian manuals of state (Rizvi, 1978). Exposing students to this kind of cross-cultural syncretism is paramount in helping them realize that societies rarely stand alone, but regularly borrow from previous social systems. Islamic societies, like so many other world civilizations, incorporated existing social practices, all the while improving upon them.

The greatest benefit of this particular component of the course is that it demonstrates some of the major intellectual and social achievements of Muslim societies during the Middle Ages. For instance, many non-Muslim students are not aware that Spain was home to one of the most vibrant Islamic societies to have emerged during the medieval period. Islamic Spain or Andalusia is a fascinating stepping stone from which to discuss the cosmopolitan nature of Muslim societies (Glick, 1979). For instance, I focus on the use of the Arabic language and demonstrate that individuals speaking and writing Arabic in Spain were able to communicate with like-minded scholars of various faiths, cultures, and ethnicities in cities such as Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad. This represented an early form of globalization whereby religious, scholarly, economic, and scientific data were regularly exchanged throughout the Muslim world. Although not as immediate as today's techniques of telecommunication, I often describe the hand-written manuscripts transported across the countryside on caravans as a form of medieval Internet.

One of my favorite sections in the course is the one devoted to Islamic Law. As an expert in this particular subject, I would like to spend a great deal of time on this theme, but, owing to the time restrictions of a survey course, I must limit myself to the basic structure of Islamic law (*Sharia*). In this section of the course, I attempt to correct some of the most striking misrepresentations Western audiences have regarding the *Sharia*. Frequently, it is assumed that Islamic law is "God's Law" and thus entails very little human involvement in the formulation and interpretation of the law (Hallaq, 2009). In correcting this misperception, I begin by explaining that the Qur'an has roughly 80 specific rules that Muslims must follow. I impress upon my students the shear impossibility of running a small family let alone an entire society with only 80 laws. We then begin to unpack how Muslims have traditionally formulated their laws. In doing so, I explain that Islamic law derives from four primary sources that include the Qur'an, the Prophet Muham-

mad's sayings and actions (*Hadith* and *Sunna*), the principle of analogy (*qiyas*), and, finally, legal consensus (*ijma*).

What becomes evident is how much human intervention is actually involved in the formulation of the *Sharia.* Keeping in mind the age and interests of some of the students, I find that a discussion on issues related to drinking alcohol and the use of narcotics is always of interest. We begin our discussion by pointing out the prohibition against the consumption of wine that is stipulated in the text of the Qur'an. Although the Qur'an does specifically address the consumption of wine (Quran, 5:90), it does not mention mind-altering substances more generally nor does it address whether or not it is permissible to produce, sell, and profit from the sale of alcohol or other such substances. Here, I direct the students to various *Hadith*, which provide Muhammad's verbal directives banning the avails of the alcohol trade for Muslims. Meanwhile, various jurists such as the ultra-conservative Ibn Taymiyyah (1328 CE) have used analogy (*qiyas*) to apply the ban against alcohol to other intoxicants, such as hashish, which purportedly produce similar effects. Finally, I point out that if an enterprising Muslim scholar seeks to argue for the acceptability of a specific intoxicant not mentioned in the Qur'an or the Hadith, for example whiskey, other scholars would undoubtedly cancel out his erroneous judgment by way of consensus (*ijma*) since the majority of scholars ultimately hold court in determining God's Will. The effects of these two sources of Islamic law (*qiyas* and *ijma*), clearly demonstrate to students how human intervention regularly shapes the substance of the *Sharia.*

Perhaps the most anticipated section I teach in my class is the one that deals with Muslim women. This particular subject regularly inspires interesting class discussions that require careful moderation to ensure that no one leaves the class offended or misinformed. For instance, in a typical class at Vanier, some of the Muslim students will wear the *hijab,* while other Muslim women in class will choose not to wear the headscarf. As previously mentioned, one of my goals in the course is to demonstrate the diversity within the tradition; this issue serves a visual reminder of that goal (Bullock, 2007). This section of the class usually falls during the mid-way point in the term, and by that time a classroom dynamic has been established whereby students feel comfortable expressing their views openly. Students who don't wear the headscarf will describe their motivations for not doing so, while those who wear the *hijab* will offer their perspectives. As the moderator, I will explore this divergence of practice by discussing the textual basis for the wearing of the *hijab* and highlighting the cultural pressures and influences that also come into play. What becomes clear is that the Qur'an's text is actually ambiguous on this point. Although Muhammad's wives were required to speak to the public from behind veils, there is no specific mention that all Muslim women

should adopt this practice. Rather, the Qur'an requires that women dress modestly by covering their breasts. Meanwhile, the Hadith offers the more specific instruction that all women should cover their hair as well as their bodies. On a cultural, familial, and individual level, many additional factors will influence a woman's decision to wear or not wear the *hijab.*

If asked whether or not it is incumbent on Muslim women to wear the *hijab,* I never provide a definitive answer, as this is not my role. However, I do add an academic twist that often surprises the students. In particular, I inform them of a theory proposed by a number of Western academics as to the origins of the Muslim headscarf. These scholars have theorized that the *hijab* is in fact a cultural artifact borrowed from the pre-existing Byzantine culture that once flourished in Middle Eastern cities such as Damascus. According to this particular theory, elite Greek women wore headscarves so as to visually demarcate themselves from the urban population, thereby garnering themselves a certain measure of respect. When the Arabs conquered Byzantine territories, elite Arab women took on this practice which then trickled down to other Muslim women. I don't insist that the students accept this hypothesis; I simply present it to them in order to demonstrate how scholarly research can uncover interesting ideas that may provide additional insight.

Another section of my course focuses on Sufism, or the mystical tradition within the Muslim world. Sufism is a major form of Islamic religious expression popularized during the medieval period of Islamic history (Chittick, 2000). Although characterizing Sufism in a singular light is difficult, the movement can be described as one in which adherents seek to establish a direct relationship with their Creator. The relationship can range from the ecstatic to the sublime and can be expressed in ways as diverse as quiet meditation to energetic chanting and dancing. For some of my Muslim students, the Sufi movement falls outside the scope of their conception of Islam. For instance, when we discuss groups such as the Mehlevi Dervishes of Turkey (the so-called Whirling Dervishes), many students are at a loss as to how to explain this group's position within the overall perspective of Islamic culture and tradition. For these students, as well as for my non-Muslim students, our analysis of Sufism regularly uncovers some interesting themes that once again demonstrate the vibrancy and diversity of Islam.

Sufism first appeared in the Muslim world in cities such as Damascus and Baghdad during 7th and 8th centuries. The movement became prevalent when piously inclined individuals sought to complement the legal and theological formalities that were beginning to emerge within Islamic civilization. The Sufis wished to insert a more experiential form of religious expression into the religion. Thus, early Sufis stressed the importance of striking

a personal relationship with God using various techniques of worship and meditation. Our discussion of mysticism begins with a number of early Sufis such as Rabia al-Adawiyya (801 CE), a woman whose love for God was so great that she turned down suitors in order to devote herself to God. Rabia frequently expressed this love through her poetry, which I read aloud in class in order to illustrate how women most certainly participated in the intellectual and literary realms of the Muslim world (El Sakkakini, 1982). Western scholars have labeled Rabia a "sober" Sufi owing to the fact that she did not reject the standard forms of religious and legal expression of Islam that were being practiced during her lifetime.

Alongside our discussion of figures such as Rabia, no study of Sufism would be complete without delving into the interesting realm of the so-called "drunk" Sufis as they have been dubbed by Western scholars. Although these individuals regularly exceeded the boundaries of faith as practiced by most Muslim societies, they nevertheless represent a dynamic component of Islam. Our analysis of this particular segment of Islamic mysticism regularly raises eyebrows among the conservative students in the class who bristle upon hearing of the practices of the ecstatic Sufis who lived in cities such as Baghdad during the 10th century. Individuals such as Al-Hallaj (922 CE) who declared himself to be the Truth (he saw himself as the reflection of God), remind the class of the different perspectives that exist within the Muslim tradition (Massignon, 1982). Interestingly, studying these less mainstream perspectives also serves to reveal some biases that some of the more conservative Muslim students have against Sufism. Because of the heterodox status of these extreme Sufis, many modern students simply discount the entire movement altogether without first realizing the prevalence of mysticism within the Islamic tradition during the medieval period.

Teaching a survey course on the Muslim world offers various challenges, least of which is deciding what to include in the curriculum. Time ultimately dictates that a great deal of information is left out of the curriculum. However, by focusing on the early development of the faith along with some of the key passages from the Qur'an, students can garner an understanding of some of the major themes and goals of the religion. Moreover, analyzing some of the cultural, legal, and social achievements spearheaded by Muslim leaders, scholars and mystics will provide students with a deeper understanding of Islamic civilization. This type of knowledge is crucial in an ever-shrinking world. Moreover, as Western societies turn toward immigrants to sustain their population base, there will be a heightened need to understand the nuances of the various new immigrant communities that lay down roots in the West. Toward this end, my course plays a miniscule role in helping uncover some of the complexities of Islamic civilization.

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