CHAPTER SIX

A Case Study: Teaching About Islam

In Chapter Five I outlined the importance of constructing a strong learning community as a foundation for a cultural studies model. I gave examples from my own classroom practices through the lens of two different types of courses: one that is explicitly focused on the study of religion (*Islamic Cultural Studies*) and one where religion is introduced as one lens of analysis among others (*Responses to the Holocaust*). Here I proceed with the discussion about how to teach about religion by continuing to focus upon the *Islamic Cultural Studies* course as a case study. In this chapter I will 1) briefly outline how I constructed the *Islamic Cultural Studies* syllabus as one rooted in a cultural studies framework; 2) identify and discuss my responses to five issues that emerged in the early days of the course that are common for students who are new to the study of religion; and 3) share reflections from student evaluations regarding their responses to both the method and content of the course. My aim is to help further illuminate how to implement a cultural studies model in an actual classroom and to include student reflections regarding their experiences.

As I have emphasized throughout this book, the specific school context, student personnel, and group dynamic that is formulated in a given class really matter in a cultural studies approach. My focus on a *particular* course, therefore, is to illustrate a method rather than model specific assignments and responses intended for replication. As all educators know, when the focus shifts from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered classroom, the dynamic is a deeply relational one. Each day is unique and possesses the potential for vitality, imagination, and meaningful encounter. In this way, it is certainly possible and appropriate to chart the contours of a given course, but educators

need the freedom and support to be responsive to their students rather than merely directive. What follows here is a further glimpse into my own ongoing attempts to model the methods I outline in Part One. I hope these reflections will be helpful for educators who share similar aims.

Constructing the Islamic Cultural Studies Syllabus

I have already addressed the pedagogical dimensions of the *Islamic Cultural Studies* course in the previous chapter and will focus on the content dimensions of the syllabus here. Let me say at the outset that I am deeply indebted to my Harvard colleague Professor Ali Asani who teaches an introductory course at Harvard on Islam entitled *Understanding Islam and Muslim Civilizations*. He introduced me to many of the musical, literary, and artistic resources alluded to below, and his own course at Harvard is a model for the content dimensions of a cultural studies approach to teaching about religion.

Remember that a cultural studies model should include an array of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary resources that expose students to 1) the diversity of expression within a particular tradition; 2) the way that religion is profoundly shaped by and shapes other dimensions of human political and cultural expression across time and place; 3) the interpretative nature of the educational enterprise and, specifically, the interpretative nature of discourses regarding religion; and 4) the relevance of the study itself. The discussion below is organized in segments that represent units for the *Islamic Cultural Studies* course that I teach at Phillips Academy. I change the syllabus each time I teach the course, so the following discussion focuses on general categories rather than specific assignments. I do, however, usually adhere to the following unit sequence:

I. Introduction and Points of Departure (outlined in Chapter Five)
II. Overview of the Tradition
III. Foundations: Muhammad and the Qur'an
IV. Groups in Islam: Shi'a, Sunni, Sufi
V. The Expansion and Influence of Islam and Muslim Civilizations: Case Studies on Cordoba, Timbuktu, and Baghdad
VI. Islam, European Colonialism, and Modernity
VII. Contemporary Issue One (To be determined based on student interest)

VIII. Contemporary Issue Two (To be determined based on student interest)
IX. Final Projects (To be determined based on class progress and student interest)
X. Final Portfolios and Evaluations.

The discussion below references specific basic secondary sources that I use regularly and refers more generally to other types of resources. The intention is not to offer a detailed syllabus but rather to give readers an overview of the types of materials utilized in a cultural studies approach.

I) Introduction and Points of Departure

These first few days of class are so important for establishing a strong learning environment with clear expectations that I devoted the entire last chapter to this dimension of the syllabus. What follows assumes that readers will be familiar with these foundations.

II) Overview of the Tradition

Once a classroom culture is established as outlined in Chapter Five, I have found that students appreciate having an overview of the tradition that helps them understand the larger context before delving into specific dimensions of inquiry. It is always a challenge, however, to find an introduction that is sufficiently short to serve the purpose of an overview and one that also reflects the diversity inherent in the tradition in accessible and interesting prose. One such introduction that meets many of these needs is written by religious studies scholar Azim Nanji.[1]

III) Foundations: Muhammad and the Qur'an

When introducing students to foundational dimensions of the faith, it is important to represent a diversity of interpretations in order to underscore the interpretive nature of the enterprise itself and to challenge the common association that many students have of religion as uniform, timeless, and ahistorical. Following Nanji's general introduction, I spend a few days focusing on Muhammad as both a historical figure and one venerated by Muslims in diverse and varied ways for nearly 1,400 years. Carl Ernst's chapter on Muhammad in *Following Muhammad*[2] provides a good foundation for this section and I supplement his chapter with

several different types of resources, including excerpts from anti-Muslim depictions of Muhammad's life and significance, songs in praise of the Prophet from several cultural contexts, poems from diverse cultural regions, different manifestations of festivals associated with Muhammad and representations of those Muslims who criticize such festivals as idolatrous, excerpts from *hadith*[3] collections and their interpretations, and so on.

In a similar way, I introduce the Qur'an through diverse lenses and interpretations. For example, Michael Sells' excellent volume *Approaching the Qur'an*[4] situates the Qur'an in its historical context. I then usually focus on Qur'anic recitations and calligraphic representations from a variety of diverse cultures and contexts. Finally, we often study diverse interpretations within Islamic tradition itself of specific Qur'anic passages related to issues of interest to the students (e.g., gender and the role of women, the relationship between Islam and other religions, the meaning of *jihad*, etc.). If there is time and interest, I sometimes include a section comparing the Joseph story in the Bible and the Yusef story in the Qur'an with accompanying artistic interpretations of each account.

IV) Groups in Islam: Shi'a, Sunni, Sufi

For this unit I often return to the Nanji overview and supplement his brief descriptions of these groups with concrete representations depicting the diversity within each designation as well as the differences between them. I often have students do focused research projects on different dimensions of these groups (e.g., how religious authority within each is demonstrated and recognized, depictions of contemporary communities and/or leaders, etc.). How do religious differences manifest themselves politically in different geographical regions and historic circumstances? What ritual practices are associated with each group and how do they manifest themselves in differing social historical contexts?

V) The Expansion and Influence of Islam and Muslim Civilizations: Case Studies on Cordoba, Timbuktu, and Baghdad

These three diverse yet highly influential examples of Muslim civilizations in the Middle Ages are wonderful topics for guided group

research projects with a prescreened bank of resources representing a variety dynamic interactions in political, religious, cultural, and economic spheres. It is useful to have the class explore one civilization together as a group to offer a template for understanding the intersections of religion with other forms of human agency more generally. They can then work in groups on one of the other two case studies to prepare a class presentation. Fatehpur Sikri is another potential case study for this unit.

VI) Islam, European Colonialism, and Modernity

It is nearly impossible to understand contemporary global tensions within and between nation states without understanding the legacy of colonialism. This is especially true in the mislabeled tensions "between Islam and the West" which falsely implies that the two descriptors are discrete and somehow unrelated. There are many ways to approach this unit but minimally students need to be exposed to the impact of shifting world powers between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries when European forces associated with Christianity gained ascendancy and forces associated with Islam declined in influence. Muslims responded to both internal and external tensions through a series of revivalist and reform movements that formed the foundation for the diverse expressions of Islam in the contemporary world. John Esposito's overview of these developments in "Islam: The Many Faces of the Muslim Experience"[5] provides a useful foundation for this complex discussion. In class I often focus on specific examples of different reform and revivalist traditions and their contemporary influences so that students can understand these connections in a concrete way.

VII) Contemporary Issue One: Women and Islam in Contemporary Societies

Readers may recall that I try to leave the syllabus open in places in order to respond to student interests. I leave this flexibility for students to choose at least one and sometimes two contemporary issues for us to focus upon. For this case study, there was nearly unanimous interest in exploring issues related to women and gender more broadly. At this point in the course they had already been consistently exposed to forms of gender analysis in the other units, so I chose to focus this section on a series of case studies depicting a diverse range of Muslim women in

their social and cultural contexts. Students worked in pairs to make presentations to the class on these differing representations.

VIII) Contemporary Issue Two: The Cartoon Controversy

In this particular iteration of the *Islamic Cultural Studies* course, students also expressed interest in exploring the issues surrounding the controversial cartoon depictions of the Prophet that were first published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* as part of an editorial on September 30, 2005. At the time, several Danish Muslims protested and, as the controversy grew, many media sources reprinted the cartoons and the debate became international in scope. Students researched and examined the full range of opinions expressed and engaged in a thoughtful and informed discussion about the tensions represented between freedom of expression and respectful public discourse. Issues of power and powerlessness were central categories of analysis.

IX) Final Projects

As noted earlier, it is important to leave as much room as possible for students to explore issues of interest and significance for them personally. Providing the opportunity for students to construct and implement individual final projects is one way to fulfill this aim. How much latitude there is for topic selection depends on the progress the class has made through the term. If students have really understood the issues addressed in the units of the course and therefore have a solid foundation in the study of Islam as well as sufficient tools for further exploration and analysis, then I will allow for a wide variety of different topics of exploration for the final projects. If students are still struggling with fundamental conceptual or analytical dimensions of the course, then I will be more directive in providing categories for their final projects that will help further their individual and collective grasp of the material.

X) Final Portfolios and Evaluations

As part of the requirements for the course students are expected to 1) complete an anonymous course evaluation; 2) complete a self-evaluation; and 3) submit a portfolio of all their work in the course for the term. These components provide the opportunity for students to assess themselves and the course and further emphasizes the learner-centered

dimension of the course methodology. Course evaluations include questions regarding content, assignments, and pedagogy. Self-evaluations include questions related to what students learned, their individual effort and participation, personal assessments of performance on graded and ungraded assignments, personal assessment regarding development of critical thinking, writing, listening, and oral communication skills, and a proposed final grade. These self-assessments are submitted with their portfolios. I explain that if their proposed final grade differs by more than half a grade with my assessment of their work then I will contact them to schedule a conference to discuss the difference. In my experience of employing this method in many of my classes, I have only had to schedule five or six conferences of this nature over the past 13 years.

One final note is in order. I believe it is very important to have both a clear outline and course progression prepared and finalized within the first few days of a new course *and* to remain flexible regarding the schedule as the course progresses in order to be responsive to student progress, interests, and capabilities. It is important to have a clear outline so that students know what to expect, but flexibility and responsiveness are critical components of a cultural studies method.

Common Issues that Emerge When Teaching About Religion

Over the years I have seen some patterns emerge regarding the kinds of issues that students often raise in the early days of courses about religion or when religion is first engaged in the context of other disciplines. In this section I have highlighted five such issues as they arose in the early days of the *Islamic Cultural Studies* course. The five I have chosen to address are:

1. The treatment of religious practitioners as "experts" on their own tradition by virtue of their faith commitments;
2. An overly simplistic view of religious faith and practice;
3. Understanding how to reconcile competing interpretations of God;
4. The assumption that "other" religions are uniform and simple versus diverse and complex;
5. The potential for misunderstandings to become compounded.

This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it does capture a representative sample of the types of issues that commonly emerge when religion is overtly addressed. It is important to note, however, that even if the

themes are similar, the issues themselves emerge in unique contexts that require particular rather than pat responses. My aim in this section is to highlight the significant role that individual student assumptions play in the learning process. Being attentive to these assumptions is especially important in relationship to complex topics like religion where illiteracy often couples with strong opinion to form a maze of presumptions that can distort information and thwart understanding. Many of these presumptions are unconscious and thus require an opportunity to surface in order for students to interrogate them and decide consciously whether they should be retained, modified, or discarded.

This individualized dimension of inquiry is also crucial to ensure that students' own beliefs and practices are honored and respected. This is true in relationship to all categories of identity, including those related to religion. Whether a student self-identifies as an atheist, devout Christian, agnostic, cultural Jew, humanist, Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim convert, or one of countless other self-understandings, the response to the literature and questions engaged will be informed by these and other dimensions of identity that need to be acknowledged and respected. A learner-centered, cultural studies approach to teaching about religion gives credence to the interpretive nature of the educational enterprise and thus recognizes the legitimacy of diverse approaches and lenses of analysis. For example, the questions and assumptions that an atheist, a devout Christian, and a Muslim bring to the literature of a course on Islam will often vary greatly, but all are legitimate perspectives that need to be acknowledged and engaged so long as the topic of inquiry is represented in an accurate light. Readers will encounter a diversity of perspectives represented in the continuation of the case study below.

Treating Religious Practitioners as Experts

This first issue emerged at the beginning of the third meeting of the class when we began to focus on Islam directly in response to the first half of the Nanji overview that I referenced above.

I asked students to form pairs to respond to the following general questions that served as a basic template for all discussions of assigned texts throughout the term:

1. Who is the author? What did you learn about his/her background? Who is his/her audience and what is s/he attempting to convey in this text?

2. What are your initial responses? Are there questions you have about the content that you do not understand and/or that need further clarification?
3. What did you learn that was new and/or surprising to you?
4. What did you find compelling and/or problematic in the text that you would like to discuss further?

Following the initial discussion of the Nanji reading, we moved into a full group conversation. After students discussed questions about Nanji himself and his audience, the focus shifted to the content of his article and the classroom dynamic changed immediately. Those who spoke began to direct all of their comments and questions about Nanji's commentary (and Islam more generally) to Farid because he was the only Muslim in the room. I immediately intervened to remind them that a practitioner of a faith should not be expected to know information about the tradition from a religious studies lens since that lens involves studying a diversity of expressions. I said that a practitioner might be familiar with a particular branch or representation of faith but that learning about a tradition through a devotional lens is a very different enterprise than learning about it through an academic one as we had already noted in previous class sessions. Though it is perfectly appropriate for practitioners of any faith tradition (or none) to refer to and speak out of their experiences during discussions and assignments, it is not appropriate to expect (or even to allow[6]) practitioners to act as "experts" on their tradition.[7]

Farid was appreciative of this intervention and reminded everyone that one of the reasons he enrolled in the course was to learn more about Islam just like everyone else there. "I don't even know as much as I want to about Sunni traditions, let alone other expressions," he said. I added that it was extremely common for people to turn to religious practitioners and/or to religious leaders as "experts" of the tradition as a whole. This failure to recognize the distinction between a devotional and religious studies approach to religion is one widespread manifestation of religious illiteracy.

An Overly Simplistic View of Religious Faith and Practice

The group conversation then returned to the text where the relationship between ritual and judgment day was the topical focus. In one section of

the assigned reading, Nanji gives an overview of some of the ritual practices that many Muslims perform that include (but are not restricted to) what is sometimes referred to as the "five pillars" of Islam: the declaration of faith, daily prayer, fasting during the daylight hours of Ramadan, sharing one's assets through *zakat*, and the *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca.[8] The first topic that was raised for discussion (and originally directed toward Farid but then addressed more generally to the group) was "how Allah decides who should go to heaven or hell." Some felt as though the "requirements" for Muslims to pray regularly, to fast, to share their earnings through the practices of *zakat*, and so on were "excessive" and "imposed." They asked questions like the following: "If a Muslim doesn't practice these rituals consistently or in the right way, will s/he be punished with hell on judgment day?"

This understanding of ritual as "imposed" and practiced to avoid punishment in either this life (via reprimands from parents or religious leaders) or the next (eternal damnation in hell) is quite typical and the students in the class either agreed with these opinions or were struggling to articulate an adequate response. It was clear that several students were not satisfied with this understanding of ritual but they were unable to construct a coherent alternative.

After a few fits and starts, I asked members of the class to work in groups of three or four and return to the specific sections of the reading that would help them address the question regarding whether Allah will punish those who do not practice religious rituals in the "proper" way. I pointed out four different sections for their review[9] and posed the following specific question for them to respond to in their small groups: "Are there alternative answers besides fear of punishment for why Muslims engage in ritual practices?"

Students spent the next ten to fifteen minutes returning to the text selections that I suggested as well as others that they chose themselves. Their small group discussions were animated and engaged and I had to interrupt them to return to the large group conversation. In response to the question regarding why Muslims engage in ritual practices, each group agreed that there were alternative responses besides fear of punishment that they all found compelling and persuasive. For example, one group stated that ritual ideally served as a "tool" or a "vehicle" for Muslims to keep themselves "in harmony with God." Another spoke about regular prayer as a way to "keep perspective about what matters." There were other responses as well, but the main point was that they moved away from the idea of ritual *solely* as an imposition and/or a requirement to one that could be *also* be understood as a welcome and

revitalizing opportunity for Muslims to align their beliefs with their actions in the world.

In returning to the original question regarding whether a believer would be "sent to hell" if he was not consistent in his ritual practices, the group realized that the issue was not the practice of the rituals themselves but that the rituals were often a way to keep one focused on the "straight" path rather than being "diverted" away from important priorities in pursuit of more superficial desires. Thus, they concluded, one would not be sent to hell for failing to pray regularly, but that such failure may lead to acting in "sinful" ways. When a particular believer is exposed to her own "record that will reveal all" on judgment day, she will become conscious of her own moral choices and their positive and/or negative consequences.

I encouraged the students to extend this understanding of ritual as a "tool" or "vehicle" rather than simply an "imposition" in relationship to other religious traditions besides Islam. There was an interesting conversation that ensued regarding ritual practices in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Jewish traditions that enabled students to think about dimensions of those practices in a new and sometimes more empathetic light. Rebecca commented that this conversation helped her think about ritual practices in Hinduism in a new way.

By the end of this discussion, some still raised concerns about how ritual obligations in religion can be manipulated and abused by religious and other community leaders to enforce certain kinds of conformity. Examples such as the obligation to wear the veil in some Muslim contexts and social pressures within Christian communities to participate in public rituals were mentioned, among others. I was pleased that this perspective was voiced and would have raised it myself if it had not been. Students recognized this potential for abuse, but they also had a better understanding of the positive role that rituals *can* play in the lives of Muslims in particular and, by extension, other religious practitioners.

Understanding how to Reconcile Competing Claims About God

As I have emphasized throughout this book, when studying religion from a nonsectarian, cultural studies perspective, students are inevitably exposed to differing interpretations of God or the divine, both within and between religious traditions. Because so many students associate religion with devotional practice, initial exposure to diverse and sometime

competing claims about God can be both conceptually and theologically challenging. In our study of Islam, this issue arose most explicitly when learning about theological disputes related to differing interpretations of the Qur'an and sectarian divisions between and among Sunnis and Shi'ites. (When I teach courses about Christianity these same issues arise regarding interpretation of the Bible and differing Christian sects.[10]) In my experience, students are eager to discuss the relevant issues that arise in the face of such encounters with diverse views but have limited tools to do so in thoughtful, respectful, and critically engaging ways. For example, when encountering different interpretations about specific passages in the Qur'an, many students initially wanted to know which interpretation was "right." The notion that there could be legitimate differing (and even competing) claims within and between religious traditions was a difficult concept for students to grasp. It took time for them to recognize that questions about the veracity of one interpretation over others arise out of a theological[11] as opposed to a religious studies framework. I reminded students regularly that the focus of inquiry from a cultural studies lens is to learn *about* differing interpretations of religious expression as opposed to asserting the truth of one interpretation over others. In other words, the focus needed to shift from "God" and/or the "divine" as subject to *interpretations about* "God" and the "divine."

A very rich and thoughtful discussion ensued throughout the course between those that believed in some form of God and those that challenged the legitimacy of such a belief precisely *because* there were so many differing and often competing claims. During the fourth class session these issues emerged in discussion as well as through reflection papers. Two papers were especially relevant. Both authors framed the question as one between an absolute Truth represented by God on the one hand, and human interpretation as purely relative and therefore highly suspect on the other. For example, Carrie (who identified herself as an atheist) offered the following reflection:

> This idea that the religious expression of a region depends more on its political situation than the long-held beliefs of its residents seems almost sacrilegious. The profound influence of human actions/situations on religion seems to point to theology as an outgrowth of human/regional conditions *rather than* as an otherwordly conception. (Emphasis added.)

Carrie's *concern* that theology might be a product of human interpretation *rather than* an "otherwordly" conception is typical. Similarly, her

assertion that residents could possess "long-held beliefs" that somehow exist independent of a community's "political situation" is also common. Carrie goes on to ask the following:

> For if religion is an established truth and a god really does exist, shouldn't faith be universal and independent of time and place? Why did God instill his knowledge in multiple prophets? Did he change his mind somewhere along the way, or was it [people influenced by] regional circumstances that revised his original message? And, if our sociopolitical environment really is so intertwined with our religious beliefs, how can we separate the two?

The idea that reflections about God are human constructions that are necessarily subjective as opposed to objective was problematic for her and raised questions regarding the credibility of religion itself.

> In this vein, can we view Muhammad solely as an objective messenger of Allah? Certainly, he possessed strong social views of his own: he felt sympathy for the poor/disadvantaged and was disgusted by the materialism of Mecca. Not surprisingly, the revelation which Muhammad received from Allah is completely congruous with his social views. Did Allah choose Muhammad as a messenger because Muhammad possessed these views? Or did Muhammad distort Allah's message through his own opinionated lens? If the latter is the case, can we ever truly know God's message to humanity?[12]

The notion that the legitimacy of religious worldviews rests on whether religion can withstand "objective" scrutiny is a common one and informed by a host of often unacknowledged assumptions that include but are not restricted to the following: 1) that "God" can be known and discerned "objectively"; 2) that "objectivity" is the self-evident standard of judgment; and 3) that "objectivity" is itself possible to achieve. All of these assumptions are based on a misrepresentation of "scientific" ways of knowing that many accept as normative.[13]

Sharon (who identified herself as agnostic) raised a similar question in her reflection paper for the day. She, too, was interested in identifying the "right" interpretation and voiced concern regarding the implications of multiple views. She spoke of the dangers of how religion can be used

to justify individual interests and desires and implied that multiple perspectives can invariably lead to a dangerous form of relativism.

> In attempting to understand religion and particularly Islam, which has so many different interpretations and adaptations to various cultures, is there a "right way" to interpret the word of God? Are we free to interpret and adapt it to fit our own lives? If that is true, then is religion more about the individual and how a particular religion can best serve the individual rather than ultimate truth or the "right way" to worship?[14]

Sharon and Carrie both shared their ideas during class and helped articulate common issues that many in the group were pondering and eager to engage.

In the ensuing discussion, my aim was to help students understand a third alternative between the assumption that God is able to be understood *independent* of human interpretation (i.e., "objectively") and the assumption that human interpretations of God, by definition, lack credibility because they are "subjective." An academic approach to the study of religion from a cultural studies framework provides the tools to give legitimacy to multiple perspectives without having to adopt a stance of relativity that is devoid of moral discernment. I asked the following question as a way to frame the discussion: "*If* one assumes that God exists, how are diverse (and sometimes even competing) opinions about God justified?" I reminded students that this *presumption of belief* is, itself, ultimately debatable. However, given that the aim of the course is to better understand Islam in particular and religion more generally, the intellectual acceptance of this premise is necessary in order to move beyond philosophical debates about belief per se. Such debates are important and appropriate for students to engage, but the study of any religious tradition will necessarily remain superficial if the question of the legitimacy of belief itself remains paramount. In this particular instance, the issues we were discussing in class were framed as a challenge to belief itself. I wanted to acknowledge the legitimacy of that perspective while also moving beyond it by reframing the question from the lens of assumption appropriate to our subject: *If* one assumes that God exists, how are diverse (and sometimes even competing) opinions about God justified?

In order to address this question, I explained that I wanted to introduce them to philosophical and theological resources from Islam as well as other monotheistic traditions that presume the existence of God.

I told them that I wanted to help them recognize how these existential questions regarding fundamental questions about belief and authority were widespread ones and not unique to Muslims.

I first introduced them to a saying attributed to Muhammad that values diverse opinions about God. "Difference of opinion in my community is a [result of divine] favour."[15] Second, I reminded them of Nanji's discussion about the rigorous monotheism of Islam expressed in the concept of *tawhid*, or the oneness of God. Idolatry is strictly forbidden and constitutes the sin of committing *shirk*, defined literally as "association" and understood as the association of anything with God. Third, I shared the quote by the eighteenth-century Christian mystic Tersteegan that I highlighted in Chapter Three: "A god understood, a god comprehended is no God." In a related point, I described the Jewish practice of writing G-d rather than spelling out the full name as a reminder that G-d cannot be fully represented in language or other human frames of reference.

Finally, I introduced them to Jewish philosopher Eric Fromm's suggestion that humans should dispense with the notion of theology (the study of God) and adopt, instead, the rigorous pursuit of "idology" which he defines as the study of human devotion to idols which are human constructs and, by definition, self limiting.[16] According to Fromm, study of God is impossible since God is ultimately unknowable. But studying human idol worship is a worthy pursuit because it helps people realize how common it is for individuals and entire communities to give ultimate allegiance to human constructions (idols). His claim is that when we do so, we hinder and perhaps even thwart our ability to be "open" to the revelations from God because our consciousness is cluttered and distracted with the self-limiting worship of idols. He offers examples that include giving ultimate allegiance to the pursuit of wealth and status, certain forms of patriotism, and even the idolatrous worship of god as an entity able to be clearly defined and fully comprehensible. Fromm's hope is that consciousness of "idol worship" will itself become a motivation to cease its practice and thus increase the possibility of fleeting encounters with the divine.

In light of these insights, I asked them to return to their original question: "If one assumes that God exists, how are diverse opinions justified and (according to the *hadith* quoted above) even valuable?"

I asked everyone to respond to this question first in small groups of two or three and then in a large group discussion. One pair believed that differences were justified because there were lots of ways that "Truth" could be expressed and manifested. Another group believed

that diversity was good because it kept any one religion or perspective about religion from dominating and claiming to "own God." (They also commented on the fact that this did not actually work in practice because "all" religions claimed to be "right.") The third group was similar to the second in that they discussed how it is impossible to really know God because to do so would be to put humans on the same level as the divine.

By introducing students to the *hadith* (saying) of the Prophet regarding the legitimacy of multiple views in concert with a discussion of *tawhid*, *shirk*, Tersteegan, and Fromm, they were able to shift their lens of analysis away from God and onto human understandings of God in a more sophisticated way. Their responses to the question regarding how multiple perspectives of God could be considered valid provide evidence for this shift, and they clearly appreciated this new way to think about the dilemmas of multiple interpretations that they had been struggling with since the first class session. There were still lingering questions and related issues continued to arise throughout the term. This session, however, provided a helpful foundation upon which they could build.

The Assumption That "Other" Religions are Uniform and Simple versus Diverse and Complex

As the discussion progressed, I asked students to focus on the different expressions of Islam outlined in Nanji (Sunnis, Shi'is, and Sufi expressions) with the following question in mind: "How can these different expressions still fall within the same faith tradition?"

They struggled here with the difference between what someone called "the ideal and the reality." In practice, Sunnis and Shi'is seemed often to be at odds (as in Iraq) in spite of the fact that they were all Muslims. Then Peter speculated that he thought the reason there was so much tension between Muslims was because their beliefs constitute "more than a religion, they are a way of life." In that way, he asserted, there is more at stake if there are disagreements.

I was glad this point was raised because I wanted to make sure we addressed it and the underlying assumption that it represents. (This same assertion emerged in the previous class when a couple of students asserted that Islam was "more encompassing that Christianity.") I asked the class to ponder whether the assertion that Islam was "more than a religion" was accurate. Farid jumped right in to say no, it was not accurate at all. "Muslims are just like everybody else. Some are really,

really religious and some aren't so much. It's just the same for Christians or Jews or anybody else. It's crazy to say that all Muslims are more religious or even *more* than religious!" Hope agreed, saying she knows Christians who are "super devout" and others who are "Sunday Christians" or "even worse, Easter Christians!" Rebecca, however, defended the interpretation that Islam was more encompassing by pointing to the ritual practices that encourage more daily attention than the Christian practice of attending weekly services. Someone countered that claim by articulating how many Christians also practice their faith in "daily" ways and that Muslims are not alone in that way. "It seems that the issue is more about how devout someone is rather than about the religion itself."

Another student asked why Nanji represented Muslims as "different" in this way if it "wasn't true." No one was able to adequately respond, so I stated that Nanji was representing the fact that the traditions account for all aspects of life but that does not mean that all Muslims practice their faith in the same ways. Introductions to other religious traditions will often approach the topic in a similar fashion. I also pointed out that the reason it was easier for some people to make the assumption that all Muslims were more devout is because of a lack of experience with the diversity of Muslims themselves. In this way, familiarity breeds complexity. Sharon agreed, stating that it usually is not difficult for Americans to recognize the diversity within Christianity regarding issues of faith (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, different Protestant traditions) as well as different levels of devotion because Americans are more familiar with Christianity and Christians whether they are practitioners or not.

I returned to Rachel and Paul to hear their further thoughts given that many in the class were expressing disagreement with their assertions that Islam was more encompassing than Christianity. Paul said that he changed his mind and Rachel commented that it was wrong to assume that all Muslims were "the same" yet she still felt that there were more ritual opportunities for Muslims to integrate their faith in their lives than there were for many Christians. She also made the astute observation that when Muslims are in a minority (as they are in the United States) one common reaction is to adopt more uniform practices as a way to strengthen identity as a form of resistance. This is a theme we addressed directly later in the course.

One final reflection on this topic is worthy of note. Though I am still committed to the idea that it is important for students to have an overview of the tradition before delving into specific dimensions in more depth, there is also a danger that any basic introduction will

reinforce the notion that broad generalities are acceptable. Nanji's introduction is still one of the best ones I have found in that he emphasizes the diversity within the tradition in the context of a relatively short and accessible narrative. Even then, the assertion that "Islam is not just a religion but a way of life" is an example of generalizations that students glean from the text in spite of Nanji's direct warnings against making such claims. I have tried to use more complex and qualified introductions (like Carl Ernst's text) but learned that they are confusing to those with little to no previous exposure to Islam. In the context of my experience teaching about other religious traditions in addition to Islam, I have come to realize that initially most students make sweeping generalizations about all categories of religious thought and expression and that this is, itself, a byproduct of widespread religious illiteracy that goes well beyond the particularities of studying a specific tradition. In this way, it is inevitable that most students will organize their initial experiences learning about any tradition in these broad categories that need to be problematized as the course progresses. As I stated earlier, the recognition that there is significant diversity within religious traditions becomes one of the foundations for developing religious literacy.

The Potential for Misunderstandings to be Compounded

In session five, the topic was Muhammad and the readings included a short passage from Carl Ernst's text *Following Muhammad*.[17] Charles wrote a reflection paper on Ernst that provides an example of how a reader's own lens of analysis will sometimes lead to overtly incorrect interpretations that need to be addressed directly before they get compounded. In this particular reflection, Charles responded negatively to a passing reference that Ernst made to how stories of Muhammad's "ascension"[18] were downplayed in some modern circles to diminish the mystical interpretations of the Prophet. Ernst refers to Muhammad's ascension in the following passage (that Charles quoted in his paper) *before* Ernst describes this event later in the chapter. Because Charles had no context to understand ascension in relationship to Muhammad, he automatically associated Ernst's articulation as an attack on the ascension of Jesus to Heaven.

> Supernatural events and miracles are de-emphasized to such an extent that the ascension of Muhammad to the presence of God,

> the subject of countless stories and commentaries in pre modern Muslim literature, recedes in the twentieth century to become for many a psychological event that in no way confers extraordinary status on the messenger of God.[19]

Charles misinterpreted Ernst's comments here as anti-Christian. Earlier in this section Ernst compared how Jesus and Muhammad were both venerated by their respective followers (albeit in very different ways), so this is where the comparison with Jesus probably originated in Charles's mind. I explained the context and the ascension story to Charles in my comments on his paper and followed up with him during the next class session. His reflection helped me realize that there are still passages in Ernst that assume knowledge that the novice simply does not have, even after reading the Nanji overview. It also helped reinforce how important it is for students to have frequent opportunities to respond to the literature in written and oral formulations in an ongoing way rather than only at designated pauses to test knowledge and comprehension. The chances for misunderstanding are legion and unless corrected they can easily compound. Charles was visibly relieved to hear that Ernst was not "attacking" Jesus in the way he had assumed. At the same time, Charles did realize that Christian interpretations of Jesus as divine were different than Muslim interpretations of Jesus as fully human and one of many in a long line of prophets that preceded Muhammad.

Summary

Again, these are five examples of common issues that emerge when students are first exposed to the study of religion. Though these issues can be broadly characterized, they always emerge within unique contexts that require unique responses if students are to be treated with respect and if their ideas are to be valued and affirmed.

As I stated in the Introduction to Part Two, given the climate of religious illiteracy that I review in Part One, it is inevitable that most students will harbor problematic assumptions about religion. Religious literacy includes cultivating a way to think about religion that students can develop through their own narratives. Simply being told that a particular perspective or assumption is problematic will not always address this wider theme. In many cases, students need to discover for themselves how to become self-reflective. Consequently, rather than always naming and attempting to overtly "correct" their unconscious assumptions, I often tried to raise questions that asked them to rethink

assertions made in light of particular dimensions of the reading and/or class conversation. It is important to restate here that individual assumptions *always* shape the nature of inquiry and how students learn. Shifting the focus from a teacher-centered to a student-centered environment makes this process more transparent and reveals the complexity of engagement and comprehension. As I have emphasized throughout this book, I believe that tackling this complexity directly is an essential feature of effective teaching and is one that is especially important when trying to teach about religion, where unconscious and unstated assumptions are so widespread.

Student Evaluations and Reflections

One important dimension of a learner-centered methodology is to solicit explicit feedback from students at regular intervals regarding their responses to both pedagogy and content. Formal and informal evaluations provide invaluable feedback for instructors and underscore for students the fact that their voices and opinions really do matter. In my comments below, I focus first on anonymous student responses to both pedagogy and content via final course evaluations and close with commentaries from two different sets of student self-evaluations.

Anonymous Final Course Evaluations

Given that there is a full compilation of these evaluations included in the appendix of this book, I will limit my discussion here to providing an overview of results and selected significant findings. The evaluation form included questions that required short answers as well as categories where students were asked to provide a rating on a 1–5 point scale (1 = poor; 3 = average; 5 = excellent). The rated segments included room for comments and comprised the following categories: texts, the instructor, the organization of the course (including specific assignments), and overall rating for the class. The short answer segments included the following questions: Which section did you find most interesting and why? Which section did you find least interesting and why? What did you like most about this course? What did you find most problematic? What suggestions do you have to strengthen the course? What were the two most significant things you learned in this class? There were also a series of yes or no questions that related to whether writing and critical thinking skills improved and whether the evaluator would recommend the course and the instructor to a friend.

Ten students out of a possible eleven submitted anonymous course evaluations and students responses were very favorable across the board. Of the 23 categories that students rated from 1–5, only 2 received compiled ratings below 4.0 (one at 3.5 and one at 3.8) and 14 of the remaining 21 categories averaged ratings between 4.5 and 5.0. Every student gave the course an overall rating of either 4 or 5 and the compiled responses averaged 4.6. There were, however, 2 categories where at least one and up to four students offered ratings of 2 or 3 on a 5 point scale. These responses will be highlighted along with those in the section on course organization that averaged 4.7 or higher.

The first of the two compiled ratings in the 3 range is the 3.5 rating that students gave to Michael Sells' text *Approaching the Qur'an*. I have used this text in other *Islamic Cultural Studies* classes as this is the first time it has received a rating below 4.7. I attribute this uncharacteristically low rating with the fact that the Sells' readings were longer than normal and fell during an especially busy week in the term.

The other relatively low rating requires more attention, however, for it corresponds to a central dimension of my classroom pedagogy: small group discussions. The overall rating for this category was 3.8 and the specific breakdown is as follows:

1 (poor) = 0 responses
2 (fair) = 2 responses
3 (average) = 2 responses
4 (good) = 2 responses
5 (excellent) = 4 responses

Clearly there were two students who did not find this very central aspect of my learner-centered methodology to be helpful or rewarding and two others found it simply adequate. Unfortunately, there were no specific additional comments that accompanied these ratings so I was not sure how to interpret them. Though I certainly do not expect each student to find every dimension of the course compelling, the small group conversations are such a fundamental aspect of my approach that these numbers gave me pause. They prompted me to wonder if I had became overly confident regarding this aspect of my method and therefore not as attentive to the more subtle dynamics of individual engagement and participation. These numbers also prompted me to evaluate this dimension of my classroom practice at more regular intervals in subsequent classes.

Other aspects of the learner-centered method of the course faired much better in the evaluations. High ratings for the full class discussions (4.4), reflection papers (4.7), and final projects (4.7) were accompanied by several positive comments. The Qur'an essay and gender presentation were both rated at 4.1 each and student comments reveal that many found the assignments interesting and worthwhile. Six out of ten students claimed that the learner-centered, discussion based method is what they liked most about the class itself. The following comments were offered in response to the question "What did you like most about this course?"

- The classes. Discussion is effective.
- I enjoyed the discussion the most.
- I enjoyed class discussion. I felt like our class was very intelligent and most of the people contributed interesting things throughout the term.
- Exclusively based on class discussion.
- The emphasis on our views and ideas.
- The focus on discussion.

One student did, however, comment that the "large group discussion" was the most problematic dimension of the course and two others made more qualified critiques. One stated that "some of the class discussions seemed slow and circular" while another articulated that "some people had a tendency to talk a lot [which made it] hard to get in any word at times." These latter comments also deserve attention. Creating a classroom atmosphere that is dynamic and where everyone feels supported and encouraged to participate in both small and large group discussions is an ongoing challenge and one that requires constant vigilance. These evaluations reinforced the importance on ongoing attentiveness to these dynamics even after a class has "settled" into a conversational routine.

Though the concerns highlighted above and others expressed in the evaluations are important to consider and address, the overall responses were quite positive. All of the 10 students who submitted evaluations reported that 1) their critical thinking skills improved and 2) they would recommend this course to a friend.

Student Self-Reflections

I will close this section by focusing on how Farid (who self-identified as a Sunni Muslim), Hope (who self-identified as a conservative Christian),

and Carrie (who self-identified as an atheist) responded to questions regarding what they learned in the course. I highlight these comments to demonstrate how the academic study of religion can complement and deepen rather than undermine a student's own beliefs and/or faith journey.

The following comments from Farid and Hope were made in response to a question that I assigned at the end of our full group class sessions and before their submission of a final project topic. "Name three things you have learned thus far in the term and three things you would like to learn more about." My hope was that this assignment would help them to synthesize their own learning and begin to formulate general topics for further exploration in their final projects.

Farid commented most extensively on what he learned about Shi'i and Sufi expressions of Islam from his perspective as a Sunni Muslim.

> Prior to taking this course, I simply equated Sufism [with] a mystical form of Islam. Due to my lack of knowledge, I even believed [that] Sufi Muslims [were] not "real" Muslims. The shortcomings of the "what is real Islam" mentality became more and more evident as the course progressed . . .
>
> As a Sunni Muslim, my experience with the Shi'a form of Islam was limited to my exposure to their different ways of praying . . . In taking this course, I was able to familiarize myself with the historical aspects of the split. Though our study also encompassed other differences between the two forms of Islam, I most appreciated the provided accounting of the dispute in leadership essential to the split.

Farid also spoke about his new understanding of some central tenets of Islam itself:

> I never before realized the centrality of social equality in Islam. My view of Islam, prior to taking this course, was very much deed based. In other words, I viewed Islam as a religion of submission by which one earns his or her place in either heaven or hell. Though this view is valid, I find the perspective that Islam is a means by which humanity can achieve its potential much more compelling.[20]

Hope also found our study helpful in relationship to her own faith journey.

> I am understanding why questions about God are not futile—they only lead to richer and more important questions and, if not conclusions, then understandings that leave a person better for them than without them. The questions help in dealing with the real fear—the fear of uncertainty. My appreciation for faith has grown with this course, and with the conversations I have had that have been sparked by questions from the material we have covered as well as questions I have had all along. I feel myself only more curious to learn about religion, Islam, and the ways people have tried to bring the apparent contradictions between their beliefs and their world to a more cohesive state.

She also commented on how much she learned specifically about Islam itself.

> This may seem a little ridiculous, but I now know what the difference is between "Muslim" and "Islam". In relation to the larger picture, I mean to say that I know more about Islam, the basic beliefs and rituals of its people, and the foundation from which it has become not only a religion but also a culture, a legislative guide, and an identity. This knowledge has already become so valuable, even when just listening to the news, because the Middle East is so prevalent in today's news—and yet, it seems that articles do not [do] justice to Muslims or the Islamic faith with regards to really informing people beyond the news.[21]

Finally, Carrie offered the following reflection in her final self-evaluation for the course.

> Talking with Farid over the copying machine . . . he said that my views of Islam have changed a lot over the course of this term. I agree wholeheartedly with this statement. Before taking this course, Islam was synonymous with Allah and Muhammad, distinguishable from Christianity and Judaism only by the regions in which it was practiced. Through our readings, discussions, and my two papers especially, I have come to appreciate the complexities of the Islamic faith, and have even found some of the ideas compelling. I have also come to a better understanding about religion in general, and the variety of concepts which it addresses beyond just "God". This course has left me with more questions than when I entered, but at the same time, it has been very gratifying and

> rewarding. I have come away with the tools necessary to better appreciate and understand the role that Islam plays in our world today.[22]

Though all of the students in the course offered thoughtful and insightful reflections regarding their own learning, I was especially struck by those offered by Farid, Hope, and Carrie, who spoke explicitly about their learning in relationship to their own beliefs. Farid expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn more about his own faith tradition from a religious studies lens. Hope spoke about how she found resonance with the questions engaged in the course with her own faith journey as a conservative Christian, and both commented about how their experience of faith was enhanced through participation in the course. Carrie, too, spoke about her deeper understanding of religion in general and Islam in particular in ways that enriched her understanding of the world.

Readers may recall that in Part One, I outlined the fears of conservatives and progressives alike who have voiced opposition to including the study of religion in the schools. Their fear is that teaching about religion will inevitably turn into a form of proselytizing that will have a negative impact on personal beliefs, including nonreligious ones. While I have not done a comprehensive study, I can say with confidence that in my 13 years of teaching about religion to secondary school students, I have discovered that responses such as those offered by Farid, Hope, and Carrie are common and widely representative. Adolescents hunger to ponder fundamental questions of meaning in an atmosphere where their views will be engaged and respected. The study of religion is not the only vehicle through which to invite such reflection but it is an excellent one that can serve the dual purpose of enhancing religious literacy while simultaneously engaging in issues of critical contemporary relevance and personal significance.

Conclusion

With the exception of the comparatively low ratings given to small group discussions, these evaluations and reflections confirm my belief that learner-centered methodologies in the form of discussion based pedagogies, reflection papers, and final projects that are student generated lead to deeper interest and investment in the learning experience by students, and better content understanding. Teaching about religion

from a cultural studies lens that is learner-centered and inquiry-based is exciting for students and teachers alike. For students, they recognize that 1) they are taken seriously as individuals with thoughtful and meaningful ideas to share and 2) they can raise and address issues and questions that really matter to them. For me as a teacher, the material is ever fresh and dynamic as it comes alive in new ways through student interpretations, applications, and inferences. Together we wrestle with interpreting the profound role that religion played and continues to play in human agency throughout history and we often come to new understandings of our contemporary lives through such an inquiry. I come to class eager to hear what my students have to share and I am regularly moved by their insight, intelligence, and passion. This is one reason that I feel incredibly privileged to be a teacher.

There are many legitimate ways to teach about religion from a cultural studies perspective and I look forward to hearing from educators about their own ideas, strategies, successes, and failures. Sharing information in this way can help build collaborations across disciplines, regions, and grade levels in ways that have the potential to enhance all of our efforts. I have offered these reflections in this spirit and hope they will inspire other educators to share their practices as well.