

## Teaching about Women and Islam

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### Teaching about Women and Islam AMEWS Roundtable MESA, San Francisco, November 21, 2004

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When I applied to be included in this roundtable, I said that I had three reasons for wanting to be part of a discussion on teaching about women and Islam.

First, I am presently the only faculty on my campus who is teaching about Islam (both religion and politics). What this means is that students come to my course with little or no prior knowledge or training, and while I'm happy to provide them with a foundation, I find it very difficult to get high levels of engagement from them precisely because they are not familiar with the subject matter.

This is particularly true of the segment dealing with Muslim women. It really is a struggle to get my students to develop some empathy for a group of people from whom they feel existentially distanced and politically alienated largely as a result of having imbibed damaging stereotypes about them over a life-time.

Another reason for wanting to take part in this dialogue is because I've often wondered if there are significant difference between how students react to faculty who are themselves Muslim compared to those who are not. For instance, my students expect that as a Muslim I will provide them a personal connection to other Muslims and while this opens up some crucial "teaching moments" for me, I can't help feeling somewhat objectified at the end of it all.

I understand of course that it is not novel for "minorities" to carry this "burden of representation," but there is very little discursive space—at least on my campus—to speak about the challenges Muslim faculty face, specially post 9/11. I am hoping, therefore, that our conversation will touch on this issue as well.

Finally, I wanted to compare notes with those of you who have taught my book in your classes because I find it inordinately challenging to teach it myself! In part, this is because most students find it too dense and in part because I am hesitant to push my ideas upon them. Yet, I wrote this book at least partly with my own students in mind and I feel quite dismayed at the low levels of response it elicits every semester. At most, only one fourth of the class really engages it.

These are the reasons I wanted to take part in this roundtable, but I also want to share some broader perspectives on teaching about Islam that I'm assuming are not specific only to me or to my students.

At one point or the other, I find that my class runs into problems because many of the students feel caught in a series of tensions having to do with

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- wanting to learn about Islam but being suspicious of some of the stuff they learn, specially if it casts Islam and Muslims in a positive light;
- keeping an open mind and not wanting to judge the course materials and in fact rushing to judge many of them. This happens most frequently when we discuss texts that focus on controversial issues like jihad; and
- wanting to learn about Islam from Muslims but then rejecting what Muslims says about Islam on the grounds that it is too partisan. This happens most frequently around issues that impinge on students' identities.

Thus, many secular students tend to reject categorical statements by Muslims because they view such statements as a marketing gimmick that is meant to "sell" Islam to them unawares. Ironically, these are often the same students who distrust the media's representations of Islam and who embrace the legitimacy of identity politics (only the group concerned can best represent itself).

Moreover, for many students, hearing a Muslim speak authoritatively about Islam is too discomfiting and in our class discussions it has emerged that they would rather learn about Islam (and religion in general) from those who have no stake in it, like an atheist. Thus, the same students who resent that Islam is being "sold" to them nonetheless feel that Islam needs to be rendered palatable to them. In effect, the site from which Muslims speak must reflect not the beliefs of the believers but the needs of the non-believers, as it were.

At the most abstract level, these contradictions manifest the eternal tension between desire and fear. Thus, on the one hand, students *want* to encounter Otherness, but when they do, they don't quite know what to make of the encounter which seems to many to undermine their sense of self.

In some obvious ways, of course, this difficulty in engaging the Other has to do with the enduring legacies of Orientalism, but I also ascribe it to the deep alienation of most U.S.-Americans from the world that results from a psychic distance that is a function of power and privilege. It is this distance that keeps them from developing the empathy necessary for engaging difference(s).

Significantly, while few Americans are exempt from the alienating effects of U.S. power, the students who are most open to engaging the Other—in this instance, Islam—are those who have some sort of a religious background themselves even if they are not actively practicing a religion. At a minimum, they have some familiarity with religion and while they may reject its institutionalized aspects, they can understand the finer nuances of a religious sensibility.

As a result, one of the divisions that appears in my classes is not just between many of my students and myself, but also between such students and those who define themselves as secular, agnostic, and atheist. Typically, the divide appears in the form of the old binary between rationalism/irrationalism with secularism claiming the label of rationality and even of a higher order morality.

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However, for this very reason, the struggle of secular students to learn about Islam is much more arduous because there is so little in their intellectual or social repertoire on which they can draw in the process. As one would expect, therefore, they are also able to stretch themselves the most intellectually.

Of course, no one is free of the tensions I mentioned earlier, but I believe that is how it should be: not only are the tensions inevitable but they are also necessary for sensitizing students to their own fears and desires. And while not everyone is equally self-aware, most of my students are in fact seriously engaged in this dual encounter with themselves and with Muslim Others.

Meanwhile, my dilemma is that even as I desire this encounter, I also fear it because I have too much invested in it to allow it to fail. I am speaking not just of the tendency some of us have to consider our students' failures our own. I am speaking of the difficulty of assimilating failure without losing some sense of myself given that to me Islam is not just a subject, but the very basis of my own subjectivity. My pedagogical challenge, then, is figuring out whether one can inhabit a subject from the inside and yet treat it as just another offering in the "marketplace of ideas." If one cares too deeply and too much about something, can one teach about it knowing that one also risks failure?

Put this way, the answer must necessarily be no says a colleague (Naeem Inayatullah) much wiser and more experienced than me at taking risks in the classroom. Besides, to him expecting failure is an equally necessary, indeed, ontological posture. That being so, he believes the real challenge is "figuring out whether one can inhabit a subject from the inside and still treat it as open when others around [one] treat it as if it were an outside?" The question then becomes "if one cares deeply and [so] much about something, how can one teach about it while also risking one's own understanding?"