Islam Is Essential for General Education

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ABSTRACT

The religion of Islam is often portrayed with false and negative stereotypes. If we expect our students to understand and participate in the global world and to be informed and engaged citizens in a democratic America, then it is essential that they develop a basic and sound understanding of Islam. Furthermore, learning about Islam can facilitate the development of students' critical thinking. I describe how I engaged my students with Islam in a general education course with four hundred students and provide examples of critical thinking from students' papers. Given the importance of Islam at this point in history, America's colleges and universities should strengthen their general education programs by requiring that all students become more familiar with and knowledgeable about the religion of Islam.

Keywords: citizenship, critical thinking, general education, global understanding, Islam

Misunderstanding of Islam and stereotyping of Muslims are centuries old. The *Song of Roland*, for example, is based on the eighth-century ambush by the Basques of Charlemagne's rear guard led by his nephew Roland. Yet, when this poem was composed in the eleventh-century context of the First Crusade, the Christian Basques were replaced by the Muslim Saracens. Over subsequent centuries, the *Song of Roland* became central in how Europeans defined themselves as people of honor, loyalty, and courage, in opposition to the Other, the treacherous Muslims.

This dualism of a good Christian Europe fearing and resisting an evil Muslim threat persisted throughout the Crusades and the fifteenth-century Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula. The Battle of Lepanto, in which Spain and Venice defeated the Ottomans and ended the sixteenth-century conflict over control of the Mediterranean, and the Ottoman sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683 were turning points that might have led to deeper penetration of Islam into Christian Europe. This enduring representation of Islam as the evil yet powerful Other continues to influence how we view Islam today.

Islam in the World Today

Having an informed and accurate view of Islam's place in the world is extremely important for Americans now, in the twenty-first century. Islam is one of the world's great monotheistic religions, accounting for about a quarter of the world's population. Muslims are the major religious group in fifty countries, stretching from Morocco to Indonesia, from Kazakhstan to Nigeria. Globally, in Europe and the United States, and among students on college and university campuses Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions. Many threats to global stability, with the potential to engage the United States, involve Muslim countries, for example, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Pakistan, and countries with large Muslim minorities, for example, Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Uyghurs in China, Rohingya in Burma, Muslims in India, Muslims in France, Chechens in Russia, and Tatars in Crimea. Of the dozen countries with the greatest oil reserves, three-quarters are primarily Muslim. Higher education has a responsibility to prepare today's students to be global citizens (Watt, 2012); a sound understanding of Islam must be a core component of that preparation.

A broader and deeper understanding of Islam's place in the United States, where numbers of Muslims and Jews are now similar, is also important. Americans have an increasing likelihood in their daily lives of interacting with Muslims. Colin Powell's incisive question—"Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country?"—is relevant not only when Americans consider who will be president of the United States. Americans must answer this question correctly when they consider who will be their representatives in Congress and their governors and mayors, their colleagues and employees and employers in the workplace, their service providers and customers and clients, their children's teachers and counselors and friends, the members of their local police and fire departments and our nation's military services, their next-door neighbors, and the students and professors in America's college and university classrooms.

Unfortunately Islam continues to be portrayed by many American political leaders and in the popular media with false and negative stereotypes, as a religion

of violence, extremism, and terrorism, as a force to fight against rather than a movement to understand. Muslims are often depicted as strange, threatening, and un-American and as fair targets for prejudice and discrimination. According to *Washington Post* and ABC News polls, roughly half of Americans view Islam negatively, a third have heard prejudiced comments about Muslims recently, and a quarter admit to feelings of prejudice against Muslims. Similar attitudes are reported in a *Time* cover story, "Is America Islamophobic?" (Ghosh, 2010). The federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports increasing discrimination against Muslims in America's workplaces (Greenhouse, 2010). Negative attitudes and prejudice toward any religious or ethnic group corrode and destroy civic life. American democracy cannot be described as healthy and holding promise for the future as long as such negative views and prejudice toward Islam persist. A greater effort is needed to counteract widespread misinformation and stereotypes regarding Islam and to tell the stories of moderate, mainstream American Muslims.

Teaching About Islam

Fortunately, our colleges and universities can contribute significantly toward instilling in students a more accurate understanding of Islam and the reduction of negative stereotypes. Indeed, American higher education is already well positioned to do this. The mission statements of America's top colleges include goals for undergraduate education such as social responsibility, critical analysis and logical thinking, appreciation of and respect for diversity, engaged and responsible citizenship, and international and global understanding (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Learning about Islamic history and culture is consistent with the essential learning outcomes of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative, in particular the development of personal and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement and intercultural knowledge and competence. Ahmed and Rosen (2011) argue that American educators must respond appropriately and imaginatively to Islamophobia: "If combating ignorance is the overarching mission of educators, then not since the great era of civil-rights awareness in the 1960s has there been such a compelling need for involvement by the academic community on behalf of a minority population."

The study of Islamic history and culture can readily be integrated into courses in comparative literature, history, political science, art history, music, religious studies, philosophy, and economics. A complete outline of world history necessarily includes the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, which united Western Asia and North Africa from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, as

well as the three major Islamic empires—the Ottomans (fourteenth to twentieth centuries), the Safavids (sixteenth to eighteenth), and the Mughals (sixteenth to nineteenth)—and the reform movements from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Islam's golden age of philosophy, science, and technology lasted from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, during which Islam transmitted Greek learning to medieval Europe and mediated cultural influences between East Asia and the West. Readily available resources such as Wikipedia provide a wealth of information about Islamic literature, poetry, art, architecture, philosophy, banking, democracy, ethics, and music. Yet engaging students with Islamic history and culture requires that they have at least a minimal understanding of the religion of Islam, just as an introduction to Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or Christianity is foundational for understanding other histories and cultures. Our students are not disconnected from today's world, and they will bring their questions to the classroom and expect informed discussion about Islam as a religion, even if their professors have not planned for this.

Stepping up and teaching about Islam is easier urged than done, especially given widespread misinformation and negative stereotypes in American society, among our students, and among us as faculty. There is a temptation to leave teaching about Islam to the few Muslim professors on campus or to the occasional specialist in Islamic art or Ottoman history. Unfortunately, this continues to marginalize Islam and Muslims as the exotic Other and further means that few students will become familiar with the achievements of Islamic civilizations and be prepared to work in a global society. Instead, all faculty have a responsibility to model for their students how citizens in a democratic society can strive to acquire valid information and test the reality of negative and prejudicial stereotypes about each other. Our students, aware of rapid social and cultural changes in America and globally, expect to learn how they can participate effectively in conversations that will shape their future in America's diverse society and beyond. In short, it is my responsibility, particularly as a non-Muslim, to engage my students in learning about Islam (just as it has been my responsibility, as a white, male faculty member, to embrace teaching about issues of race and gender when these belong in my courses).

All faculty can incorporate issues of diversity into their teaching. The challenge is finding a way. I first engaged students with Islam in World Civilizations, a general education course with four hundred students. My goal was to strengthen the students' understanding of Islamic history and culture, topics about which many were initially ignorant and misinformed and likely held negative views. Of course, my goal was not to have students agree with the tenets of Islam or convert. Instead, the student learning goals were to become more knowledgeable about Islam, to become familiar with what Muslims

believe and do, and to recognize and be critical of common stereotypes and misunderstandings.

I could not avoid teaching about Islam myself and merely trust that the students would learn sufficiently from the textbook. In many world history texts Islamic religion and culture are allotted only half a chapter, shared with the Byzantine Empire (why?). I resisted the temptation to rely on documentary videos or guest speakers. Of course, there are gaps and errors in my understanding of Islam. Yet I wanted to convey to students that knowing about Islam is so important that we should not rely on what others tell us but, instead, should do the research ourselves and think critically about what we will believe. If I had brought an expert into my classroom to introduce Islam, the implicit message would have been that the students, too, could abdicate their responsibility for learning and simply trust to presumed authorities to tell them what to think. I tried to be a good model for my students, that is, someone who is not Muslim and yet is striving to better understand Islam.

I supplemented the history text by adding, each semester, three to four lectures on Islam and the history of Islamic civilizations and by focusing two of the weekly discussion classes on selections from the Qur'an. Elsewhere, I list five student learning objectives and specific verses from the Qur'an that I asked students to read (Meacham, 2007). I organized this material to begin with "cool," informational topics and delay discussion of "hot" topics until students had acquired a foundational understanding of Islam (Meacham, 1995). We started by addressing common misunderstandings, such as where Muslims live, what they believe and do, and what the Qur'an says about relations between Muslims and people of other faiths. Only later did we read and discuss, for example, what the Qur'an says about equality of women with men and the rights of women in Muslim society.

Can this approach to teaching about Islam—only a few lecture and discussion classes, modest student learning goals, and focusing on basic facts about Muslims and what the Qur'an actually says—be effective in bringing about substantial learning when the students have likely come to class with misinformation and negative stereotypes? The answer is yes. (The pedagogy and assessment procedure are described more fully in Meacham, 2009.) At the beginning of the course, only a quarter of the students agreed that they could describe, explain, and give examples of Islam, and even fewer agreed that they could do so for Islamic history and culture. At the end of the course, three-quarters of the students now agreed that they could describe, explain, and give examples of Islam, and slightly more than half agreed that they could do so for Islamic history and culture. Further evidence of the effectiveness of teaching about Islam comes from student papers. The most common theme was the students'

discovery of similarities among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. For example, one student wrote, "I thought that Muslims were very different from Christians, but reading *The Qur'an* reminds me of the Bible in many ways."

Misinformation and negative stereotypes held by students can make some faculty reluctant to incorporate significant, updated, relevant material into their courses. They may fear that doing so could open the classroom to students' questions, both sincere and disruptive, that faculty might not be prepared to answer or to students' opinions and emotions that they might not know how to handle. The best response to such concerns is to "teach the issues," that is, rather than try to block controversial issues and students' views and questions, invite these into the classroom as starting points for serious teaching, discussion, and learning. Some questions to raise with students during discussion or for research outside of class include, Is what you have heard—a particular belief, practice, or event—true? Does it really happen? How can we move beyond anecdotes to well-grounded evidence? What is the meaning or significance of this for the Muslims involved, in their community? What is the broader context—is it religion, ethnicity, cultural tradition, modernization, or urbanization? Is this belief or practice typical of all Muslims, for example, in Morocco, Indonesia, or Nigeria? In Istanbul, Cairo, or Dhaka? Are there parallels in other religions and other countries, including our own? Finally (unfortunately, this is where discussion often starts), what are our own reactions and views? Would everyone agree, or are there different opinions, even within our classroom? And most important, does what we have now learned provide insight into our own religion, culture, and society and how we think about others and ourselves?

Critical Thinking

Teaching and learning about the religion of Islam can facilitate the development and strengthening of students' critical thinking. Too many students (and perhaps some faculty) believe that to think critically is to present arguments and evidence that expose the flaws in another's reasoning, that justify discounting what others believe and say, and that will convince them of the rightness of one's own views. To the contrary, the essence of critical thinking is not criticism of others' ideas but reflection on one's own assumptions and beliefs, strengthening of one's own understanding, and holding one's own thinking to a higher standard. This is especially important as students are prepared to be citizens in a tolerant democracy, in which they must be able to listen to and engage with both sides of issues—both the opposition's and their own—with an open mind. What better context in which to encourage students to become more proficient at critical thinking than one in which what they initially know may be largely

incorrect and they may be resistant to having their views challenged? Recent research suggests that students' critical thinking increases when they take diversity courses (Berrett, 2012; Cole & Zhou, 2014).

Many students provided evidence of critical thinking in their papers, that is, reflecting on what they previously believed in light of what they were now learning. For example, one student wrote, "Before learning about Islam in this course I was under the impression that the Islamic faith had violent roots in its religious beliefs and was intolerant of other religions. But after reading parts of *The Qur'an* and learning more about the Islamic faith, I see that this could not be further from the truth." A second student wrote, "My original opinion of the Islamic religion wasn't necessarily a bad one, it was just an uninformed opinion about a complex group of people. I felt that Muslims were people who hated the Western world and Americanized ideas. I came to learn that it was only certain groups of fundamentalists who felt this way. I always considered myself a tolerant person, but I had a diminished opinion of Muslims because I didn't know better." And a third student noted: "My understanding of Islam and its place in history has changed. I knew that Islam had been a part of different nations. Yet I failed to realize that it is more than that. It is the way people live. What is so scary about Islam? I don't find anything."

Other students reflected on and were critical of not only their own assumptions and beliefs but also American media and societal attitudes. For example, "The biased United States media, I feel, has mostly caused this mentality of mine. They use words like Islam fundamentalists and extremists; however, they never say these extremists are only a few among millions. As we discussed the foundation of Islam and the beliefs, I realized that my thoughts about Islam were totally wrong." Another student wrote: "The several lectures that were given about Islam opened my eyes into the true side of Islam, a side I did not know because the media portrays it a certain way. The media portrays Islam only from the side of the fundamentalists; only the violence of the religion is shown isolating it from other religions. What I have learned is that Islam is similar to Judaism and Christianity." And finally, another noted, "Before studying the material and listening to lectures on Islam I was victim to many of the stereotypes that most Americans carry. I denied that I held them but through studying about Islam I found myself disproving the things I didn't think I had. I thought that *The Qur'an* was a book that was ancient and inapplicable in today's society, even though I hold my own religious beliefs and my bible as still sacred. I found that the things that the bible and *The Qur'an* say are parallel." These students' intellectual gains reflect their sense that the focus of our discussions was not only Islam, per se, but also their own beliefs and attitudes. Learning to listen with respect to what others say and then reflecting

on and perhaps modifying one's own beliefs and attitudes is at the heart of critical thinking.

Conclusion

I encourage my colleagues at America's colleges and universities to strengthen their campuses' general education or core curriculum programs by requiring that all students learn more about the religion of Islam. Depending on each campus's students and mission, implementation might involve a required stand-alone course, or the addition of themes and issues to one or more existing courses, or the inclusion of more about the religion of Islam in many courses at several levels on campus, with, of course, appropriate programs for faculty development (Meacham, 1993; Meacham & Ludwig, 2001). The goal is not to require any students to agree with or convert to Islam; rather, the goal is for all students to become more familiar with and knowledgeable about Islam. The goal is not to exclude other world religions from our general education programs and our teaching. Indeed, our students are increasingly ignorant about religions in general, including their own (Kristoff, 2014; Prothero, 2007).

However, at this point in history, in both international relations and American society, it is the religion of Islam in particular that demands the attention and engagement of our students and us. It is imperative that we strengthen and deepen our understanding of Islam and critically examine our misunderstandings, stereotypes, and prejudices. Learning about the religion of Islam is essential as we prepare our students to be citizens in a tolerant, democratic American society; to work and live in a rapidly changing and shrinking global society; and to be better able to confront significant challenges in their lives by engaging in critical thinking.

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