

Reflective Teaching

REFLECTIVE TEACHING



Teaching Black Lives Matter through Islam and Muslims

Martin Nguyen, *Fairfield University*

Blog Series: Teaching Islam

April 26, 2017

Tags: power and privilege | black lives matter | course design

The questions and challenges concerning the teaching of Islam and race that I raised last year in “Teaching Islamic Theology through Black Lives” are no less urgent and relevant now as they were then. In that contribution, I attempted to delineate ways in which I could make important interventions on race and racism in a relatively conventional course offering on Islam. The deepening consciousness and raised campus awareness over the Black Lives Matter movement has continued to spur learning interventions across campuses. One concrete way in which this has emerged here at Fairfield University is the formation and development of a Black Lives Matter course in the spring semester of 2016. Students, faculty, and staff came together to establish what is hoped to be a regularly taught course. I was able to join the second iteration of this course for the present spring semester of 2017. I took this as an opportunity to see if I could develop the converse of what I had implemented earlier, namely to teach Black Lives Matter through the lens of Islam and the experience of Muslims.

This new opportunity for engagement, of course, presented a significantly different set of challenges, especially with respect to structure. Typically when I undertake a course, like my Islamic theology one, I have an incredible amount of autonomy because I serve as the sole instructor. I can plot out the content of a course, scale its pacing, and ultimately direct it as appropriate. In contrast, the Black Lives Matter course was designed from the outset to have a

collaborative teaching structure. While the students enrolled in the course have a single instructor of record joining them for the duration of the course, a rotating group of University faculty and staff cycle through the classroom. On a weekly basis visiting instructors enter the classroom to offer their perspectives and share insights from their respective areas of expertise. While the diverse array of voices joining the students serve to both broaden and deepen the experience, it also entails negotiating some pedagogical hurdles. As one of the visiting instructors, rather than the instructor of record, I had to work around certain limits. As I sat down to plan out my contribution to the course, two pressing issues rose to the fore: 1) How could I navigate the challenges inherent to teaching in a rotation where my engagement with the students is limited to a single 75-minute session? and 2) How can I introduce most effectively Islam and Muslims as an important frame of analysis for the broader subject of Black Lives Matter?

To spell out the difficulties of the first issue, I will enter the course in the fourth week as a newcomer and outsider whereas the students and the instructor of record will have developed by then into an ongoing and self-reflective learning community. My fellow colleagues will be facing a similar dynamic for their scheduled visitations. We will be entering as unknown entities offering ideas and starting conversations that may not be consistent with or may not bridge well with the concepts and terms previously introduced. We will have our own presuppositions and expectations. We will not be privy to the idiosyncrasies of the class. With this set of difficulties in mind, the faculty and staff contributing to the course took several steps in anticipation. First, several weeks prior to the beginning of the semester we came together for a half-day workshop. As a large group and then in smaller breakout ones, we shared our topics and approaches with one another in hopes of better understanding how the course as a whole would unfold and hold together. The syllabus was also circulated in advance so we could get in touch with those who would precede our visit and those who would follow us. We spent time as well discussing general pedagogical strategies for discussing sensitive matters related to issues of race and identity. In sum, efforts were made to prime each of us to connect with one another as we prepared to join the students for our one-time visit and to familiarize ourselves with the learning culture for this particular classroom community.

With regards to introducing the relevance of Islam and Muslims to the course, I sought to build explicitly upon previously assigned materials while also providing new pieces for consideration. With respect to prior readings, I identified two pieces in particular that I thought worth recalling and reframing for the set of issues that I hoped to cover: (1) *The Racial Contract* by Charles W. Mills, which served as the course's main textbook and presents an incisive critique of the ways in which white supremacy are operative politically and socially, and (2) the 2016 documentary *13th* by Ava DuVernay, which explores how mass incarceration came to and

continues to target disproportionately black communities. While Islam and Muslims do not figure explicitly in either exposition, I believe both works offered important windows for contemplating connections and points of intersection with the larger subject of Black Lives Matter. As for new material, I settled on the following reading:

Edward E. Curtis, IV, "The Black Muslim Scare of the Twentieth Century: The History of State Islamophobia and Its Post-9/11 Variations," in Carl Ernst, ed. *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 75-106.

The benefit of Curtis's contribution is that it both provides a historical overview of black Muslim American experiences while also shining a light on the ways in which black Muslim groups have been subjected to state surveillance, animus and at times suppression. A week before my visit I pre-circulated several questions for the students to consider. These questions made the task of revisiting and rethinking these earlier works more concrete and fostered a sense of continuity. Specifically, I wanted them to think back to 13th to see how they might imagine how the discourse on Islam and Muslims in America relates to the history of black criminalization and imprisonment in the United States. Furthermore, I asked them to think how the "racial contract" is at work with how Muslims are racialized presently in American society.

When the day of my visit arrived, I drew explicit parallels between the country's political discourse in the late 1970s and early 1980s over the war on crime and the war on drugs with the more recent discourse over the war on terror. I sought to illustrate the ways in which blackness and Muslimness have intersected in a number of significant ways: from the racialization of Muslims in America to the enduring place of Islam in the African American imagination, to the long historical experience of African American Muslims that includes groups like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, and persons like Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali. Finally, we concluded by looking at the ways in which citizenship is used, even weaponized, as a means of exclusion and containment. Ultimately, working with structure of the course, I felt my time was best served by building my discussion of Islam and Muslims as explicitly and carefully as possible upon the ideas already seeded by previous readings and ongoing conversations in the Black Lives Matter course. While the visit produced a rich discussion, the need to adapt and connect is ongoing as this course and the call around which it is built moves forward.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/04/teaching-black-lives-matter-through-islam-and->

muslims/