



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Curricular Suggestions for Teaching Islam

Najeeba Syeed-Miller, *Claremont School of Theology*

Blog Series: Teaching Islam

June 01, 2016

Tags: student diversity | ethics of disagreement | juristic method | teaching lived religion

In my last entry, I made curricular suggestions on teaching Islam and pluralism. The curricular suggestions continue as follows:

• **Juristic Approaches to Diversity**

Ethics of Disagreement: This method is an internal modality for dissent for scholars of Islam who developed a systematized approach for juristic differences. They focused on methods of disagreement, methodologies for dissent, and the internal ethics that determine the goals and processes of disagreement. For example, when a disputant is no longer focused on pursuit of truth, but merely on proving himself right, the process becomes unethical in its contours. ('Alwani, 1993, passim.)

The jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities: The goal of this strain of jurisprudence is “to reshape and reinterpret Islamic concepts such as dar ul harb, while not appearing to be a religious reform movement that breaches orthodoxy.” (Fishman, 2006, 2) The effect allows Muslim minorities, such as those in the United States, to take into account their deeper cultural

context and engage their own tradition and others with a hermeneutic of appreciating diversity and difference. Two major contributions of this juristic method are to emphasize the practice of religion and to elevate the role of context and local custom of practice (*taysir ul fiqh* and *urf*). (Fishman, 10-11)

The potential for pluralism is found by scholars learning to cross-pollinate theologically, jurisprudentially, and culturally, while maintaining the essential goals of a Muslim identity and method of relating to textual authority.

4. Enlarge and thicken the hermeneutic of pluralism when engaging the stories of Prophet Muhammad and other prophets seen as legitimate for the Muslim community.

Rabia Terry Harris says, "Theological thinking that removes the dimension of individuality thereby removes itself from reality, obscuring the forces that drive and inform it." (Harris-Terry, 2009, 107) Harris-Terry talks deeply about the personalization of the narratives of Prophet Muhammad and cites a very important story in which he stood up for a Jewish member of his community against a Muslim member. This story is important not just for the juristic conclusions one can draw from it but also from the profound example of sharing these stories of diversity that were actualized at the time of the inception of Islam, often viewed as the most authoritative period for later generations of Muslims.

I use the following process when engaging stories of Prophet Muhammad:

1. Is there a non-Muslim present in this story? The very presence in an embodied form shows that there was a form of diversity that was accepted in that period.
2. How did Prophet Muhammad respond to a conflict brought to his space for counsel?
3. How did Prophet Muhammad exhibit hospitality to the other?
4. What was the tone of his language to the other?
5. What can we learn/teach and actualize in practice for Muslims who model their behavior regarding pluralism on his?
6. As is the case with Harris Terry's analysis, are there times when he stood up against a co-religionist on behalf of the other? How did both communities receive this? How did he handle the theological reasoning and sources for his actions? Did he draw on examples of other prophets' stories? Shared stories in which he accessed examples of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others also build theological affinity and empathy between different traditions that share these stories. Did he honor the sources of other traditions, demonstrating a sort of theological humility?

5. Examine Lived Religion and non-Written Theologies

One of the greatest American Muslim leaders was Warith Deen Muhammad. He birthed many institutions, especially in urban settings, that were naturally embedded in the communities surrounding them and served everyone, no matter what the religious backgrounds of those in the neighborhood were. Because much of his practical theology of peacemaking was not

written, educators can access case studies of his communities to teach, for example, see the Harvard Pluralism Project example (Pluralism Project description:<http://pluralism.org/profiles/view/71295>)

"Warith Deen Muhammad's emphasis on community involvement and interfaith dialogue can be seen in this congregation's vision for its activities and goals. The members view all persons of faith as having the same moral ideals. It is this commonality upon which they hope to find mutual ground for community activism and service in an attempt to integrate all of humanity together, regardless of religion, in an attempt to counter what they see as a morally declining American society. Their theology is a practical one. It is one in which the best Muslim is one who leads by example, one who lives the religious life proactively by doing, not by preaching. This integrates their vision of a unified moral community.

They also emphasize that they are not interested in converting non-Muslims; rather, they aim for all people of faith to live up to their respective moral standards of excellence, regardless of what their conception of the Ultimate may be. They see their anti-crime, anti-violence initiative as their contribution to society as a whole. The beginnings of this can be seen in the fact that many non-Muslim parents send their children to their Christian Sunday school simply for the moral education and healthy social life. These parents may have been attracted to the citation of excellence by Mayor Vincent Cianci for the recently established "Putting the Neighbor Back into the Hood" anti-crime program that encourages communal involvement and service, fighting such societal ills as teenage pregnancy and child poverty, regardless of one's faith. (This program was inspired by the vision of Warith Deen Muhammad in his stressing the importance of a neighborly culture of respect and caring within a community. ["So woe to the worshippers who are neglectful of their prayers; those who want but to be seen among men, but refuse to supply even neighborly needs." (Qur'an 107:7)])

In addition to attending and inviting local churches to dialogue, Imam Ansari serves on the National Council on Citizenship and Justice (NCCJ) interfaith council. Members also visit high schools and churches to educate others about Islam. In addition to service to local correctional institutions, the congregants are active in crime prevention measures through the Opportunity Knocks program, which has been responsible for revitalizing and rebuilding the Cranston Street Area of Providence. They are also involved in partnerships with local churches on initiatives against youth violence and drugs. The Muslim-American Dawah Center of Rhode Island has been cited numerous times in the *Providence Journal* for its efforts toward an improved community through active engagement of diversity."

6. Engage scholars who are in Muslim minority status

There are scholars from the South Asian and Southeast Asian contexts often not taught in general Islamic studies courses. They are important voices because their scholarship reflects their deep naturally plural context, and therefore they mine the tradition deeply. They avoided the cautionary note that Khaled Abou El Fadl mentions that classical commentators did not fully explore "Implication of diversity or peaceful conflict resolution...existence of diversity as a

primary purpose of creation remained underdeveloped in Islamic theology." (Abou El Fadl, 16, 2002)

Examples of this include the following:

- Maulana Wahiduddin Khan is an Indian Muslim scholar who has written extensively in the area of Islam and peacemaking. "If you are well-mannered towards those whose views are similar to yours, you may be said to exhibit a fairly good character. But, if you behave properly with those holding divergent views from you or who criticize you, then you deserve to be credited with having an excellent character." (Khan, 2002, 99)
- Abdurrahman Wahid, recognized for realizing and respecting the diversity of ideas and identities brought about by differences in faiths, beliefs, ethnicity, and locality. He has been called "the father of pluralism and multiculturalism in Indonesia." His key conceptual frameworks include the expansion of the *ummah* concept to include Muslims, the development of Muslim norms that focus on social justice, ethical engagement with the state, and reconciliation of Muslim identity in a pluralistic, modern society (Abdurrahman Wahid Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peace – Universitas Indonesia).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/06/curricular-suggestions-for-teaching-islam/>