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Teaching about Islam as a Black Religion

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For the past fifteen years I have tried to teach about Islam as a religiously diverse tradition practiced by communities around the globe. I have done so in hopes that my students would be able to imagine Islam as a complicated phenomenon beyond either Islamophobia or Islamophilia.

Sometimes, it is a lost cause. The positive or negative prejudices toward Islam are so deeply ingrained, the assumptions and beliefs so fundamental to a person's identity, that there is little I can do to encourage critical reflection. In these cases, my modest hope is that students will learn some useful information and this information will sharpen their intellectual commitments.

But recently, it feels like most of my Muslim and non-Muslim students come into the classroom open-minded and anxious to learn something new. One of the nicest compliments that I have ever received from a practicing Muslim recently was that I had offered an approach to Islam that she has never encountered in weekend school, Islamic halaqas (study circles), or her family. She didn't have to agree with it to find it valuable, she said.

So, what exactly have I been up to in the classroom?

I teach about the many of the same themes that other Islamic studies instructors do, including traditional and modern scholarly views of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an in Islamic religious history and practice, the pillars of Islamic practice and faith, the shari'a, and Sufism. I introduce different interpretations and practices beyond modern, reform-oriented Sunni Islam, and I include lots of audio-visual aids.

The twist is that from the very beginning, I include the story of people whom my students identify as Black or African. When talking about the Prophet Muhammad, for example, I include the story of Bilal, his companion and prayer-caller. When I introduce the Word of God, I describe how some people in West Africa literally imbibe it. The study of Islamic spiritual quest and mystical experience explores not only the Chishti, Mevlevi, and Naqshbandi Sufi orders, but also the African Indian followers of Bava Gor in Gujarat and the Stambeli in Tunis. My introduction to shari'a includes discussion of the Maliki-trained Bilali of Sapelo Island, Georgia.

These are not my only options. In the future, when I am trying to describe the widespread love for the Prophet Muhammad among Muslims, I could quote from Swahili poetry or the words of nineteenth-century West African female scholar Nana Asma'u. I could include coverage of the Tijani and Muridi orders in my discussion of Sufism, or examine Timbuktu and Jenne as centers of medieval Islamic learning, including qur'anic education. Last but not least, I could do a lot with hip hop artists such as Mos Def, Native Deen, and Poetic Pilgrimage.

As students see all these Muslims writing, drinking, dancing, singing, chanting, and calling people to prayer, they see people who, to them, look Black. Seeing these Black faces, hearts, minds, and souls seems to reach something deep inside of them. It makes sense. Race remains a primal social identity in the United States. Narrating Islam as a Black religion disrupts the widespread racialization of Muslims as phenotypically brown in the post-9/11 era. Perhaps this is just the jolt that students need to see the full humanity of Muslims.

It may be the best pedagogical technique that I have yet used in trying to teach about Muslim diversity.

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