



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **So what does solidarity mean, exactly? Ethical reflection along the way.**

Caleb Elfenbein, *Grinnell College*

Blog Series: Teaching Islam

April 13, 2016

Tags: justice | teaching with media | teaching with the arts | teaching ethics

Some time back, I wrote a blog post called “Teaching Islam and gender: why we need to set an ethical agenda for the classroom.” It described how, working collaboratively, my class on Islam, gender, and sexuality drew on the work of Lila Abu-Lughod to articulate an ethical approach to our studies. We decided that, “In order to afford others complexity, we need to use a cross-cultural perspective that avoids dehumanization via overgeneralization and that promotes solidarity.” This is a wonderful place to begin, but to make this agenda meaningful requires much more work. Solidarity brings very positive connotations, but if it is part of an ethical agenda for the classroom it needs to be more than something that makes us feel good about what we are doing.

Towards the end of that earlier post, I wrote: “It is impossible to know what exactly ‘solidarity’ will mean to each of the students by the end of the course, but I hope that doing the work of figuring it out will in fact prove to be an exercise in ethical reflection for them, and that this will be a course learning goal that continues to unfold over time.” We recently encountered just such a “figuring it out” moment, and it left many of the students feeling unsure of what “solidarity” means in the context of our studies. As with most instances of ethical reflection, students were unsettled—and this is just as it should be. I’m not sure I even want students to have come to a conclusion about what solidarity means by the end of the semester. Maybe I just want them to think about it. A lot.

We close out a unit on “Living Gender Traditions” by watching Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s *Divorce*

*Iranian Style*. Made in 1998, it is a wonderfully complex film that holds up reasonably well over time. It follows a series of cases that came up before (mostly) one judge in an Iranian family court. The cases themselves concern a broad range of issues relating to divorce, including the proper age of consent, class compatibility, marital support, domestic violence, and child custody. Importantly, the women featured in the film relate in very different ways to the legal traditions regulating divorce in modern Iran. Some chafe under the patriarchal assumptions grounding marital structures, while others draw on well-established rights within marriage to hold their husbands to account for poor behavior of one kind or another. Prior to watching the film, we read Judith Tucker's *In the House of the Law*. While dealing with a different historical moment (early modern) and cultural setting (the Ottoman Levant), this text provides students with an opportunity to develop a working knowledge of core concepts in Islamic conceptions of marriage.

Using Tucker's text as one of the resources to prepare students to watch *Divorce Iranian Style* is also helpful because it introduces an important methodological question. Earlier in the semester, when discussing exegetical traditions, we read Aysha Hidayatullah's *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*. At one point in the text, Hidayatullah draws on Kecia Ali's *Sexual Ethics in Islam* to remind the reader that the conceptual language of social and sexual equality is of relatively recent vintage. We cannot analyze pre-modern traditions, like those on display in Tucker's text, from the perspective of modern demands (no matter how committed to those demands we may be). Ali argues that when we are doing historically-oriented work relating to gender we should not confuse demands for justice with demands for equality. Reading *In the House of the Law* provides a great opportunity to discern what justice in marital relations might have meant in a particular pre-modern historical context.

Yet the situation in important ways becomes much more complex once claims of justice and equality come to coincide, or their coincidence becomes a conceptual possibility at the very least, as is certainly the case in modern Iran. This brings us back to *Divorce Iranian Style*. We never really learn what kinds of commitments about equality the different women bring to their cases. Yet it is safe to say that all of the women appearing in court are seeking justice in some fashion. One woman seeks justice in the form of release from a marriage she alleges is preventing her pursuit of an independent course in life. She also seeks her full marriage gift. Another aims to compel her husband to fulfill his material responsibilities within the context of patriarchal marriage. The former embarks on a scorched-earth campaign to accomplish her end, consistently (and admittedly) lying about her husband, who is not particularly sympathetic but who has not, it appears, broken any laws. She ends up relinquishing her compensation in exchange for divorce. The latter aims to remain in a marriage on the basis of patriarchal assumptions about gendered responsibilities, leaving court feeling quite happy that she has secured a just verdict from the judge.

Given the disparate understandings of marriage justice we can read in these very different cases, *Divorce Iranian Style* underscores the importance of a cross-cultural perspective that "avoids dehumanization via overgeneralization." Iranian women are just as likely as anyone else to have varying understandings of justice in the context of marriage, some predicated on

social and sexual equality and others on complementarity. In this sense, *Divorce Iranian Style* is an ideal resource for illustrating the analytical pitfalls of overgeneralization. Moving to the second part of our ethical agenda—asking what solidarity means in this context—is more fraught.

After watching *Divorce Iranian Style* we had a conversation about solidarity. Does it grow out of empathy? Sympathy? Does it require that we withhold judgment about the choices others make when they run counter to our own commitments? On the whole, students seemed to be much more sympathetic to, and seemingly in solidarity with, the woman seeking to chart her own independent course than to the woman seeking justice in the context of a patriarchal marriage. When considering solidarity, to what extent do we (can we?) bracket our own commitments?

This semester, the question of solidarity has clearly come to the fore in this particular class, though each time I teach it the core ethical question is slightly different. Are there particular ethical issues you feel are essential to teaching Islamic studies? Are there materials you have found to be particularly effective in helping students think through thorny ethical questions in the Islamic studies classroom?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/04/so-what-does-solidarity-mean-exactly-ethical-reflection-along-the-way/>