



Islam and Humanistic Teaching

Caleb Elfenbein, *Grinnell College*

Blog Series: Teaching Islam

January 20, 2016

Tags: philosophy of teaching | teaching Islam

It is probably safe to say that most of our students have not known a world without the war on terror—perhaps more appropriately called the war *of* terror, for the call and response of violence from September 2001 onward has left at least one generation in different parts of the world traumatized in one way or another by its specter. Teaching about Islam and Muslim communities in this context is, simply put, incredibly fraught. So how can we teach our courses in a way that makes learning about Islam and Muslim communities less so? I do not think that we can accomplish this goal by retreating into apologetics. But I do think we can normalize the complex endeavor of teaching about Islam in post-September 11 cultural landscapes by explicitly and effectively framing our courses in relatable, humanistic terms.

What does this mean in concrete terms, exactly? No matter how many courses or units we conceive we can't do justice to the incredible diversity of Islam and Muslim communities, even if the weight of teaching Islam in the current moment compels us to try. Instead of struggling with coverage, it seems to me in the current conditions of our teaching the most effective courses or units about Islam will grow organically out of the questions that drew us to humanistic inquiry in the first place. Each of us has our own story about how we came to explore these questions in relation to Islam, whether as specialists or novices pressed into service by institutional need. How can you draw on your own story to help students make some sense of studying Islam now, here, today?

If we build our units or courses about Islam on a foundation of our own histories—including the

broader, humanistic questions that animate our work—will this make us more comfortable, and thus make the endeavor of teaching about Islam seem even a little less fraught?

Thanks to my own coming-into-being as a teacher, the events of September 11, 2001, will forever color what and how I teach. I'd like to tell you a little bit about my own story, about how I came to teach about Islam, and about how this past affects the way I teach about Islam in what seems like an increasingly toxic environment. I hope you are willing to reflect on and share your stories in response. How did you come to teach about Islam, and how does—or could—this backstory manifest in the classroom.

My first exposure to Islam came in a political science seminar with Andrew Davison on the relationship between religion and theories of political life. It was the late 1990s, a time in which the study of Islam was much less fraught than it is today. That class left me wanting to learn more, and so to my own surprise (to say nothing of my family and friends) a couple of years later I found myself in divinity school. I was fortunate to study with Leila Ahmed, who took the modern colonial and postcolonial histories of Muslim communities seriously. She transformed my understanding of history and its effects on how we study the present, leaving me wanting to learn much more about how colonialism affected Muslim communities, how the intellectual histories that made modern forms of colonialism possible showed—and continue to show—themselves in Muslim communities then and now. As an aspiring, if not largely accidental, Islamicist, this is what I spent my years as a doctoral student studying. This training still very much colors what I teach. But when I began my Ph.D. program at the sunny University of California, Santa Barbara, on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, there was no way I could have anticipated the incredible responsibility I now associate with my teaching fifteen years later. This, too, colors what and how I teach.

I am teaching three courses this semester, and each in its own way reflects how my training and the conditions in which my career has unfolded have come together to inform my teaching. Islam in the modern era explores colonial histories in modern South Asia and Egypt, asking how legal and educational reforms transformed structures of community life over time—including changing relationships between religious and political authority. Islam and Gender charts conceptions of gender in foundational sources of Islam and the ways that Muslim communities bring to life gender and gender roles in different times and places, especially relating to social organization.

My third class is a different story. Being Muslim in America, a new course I feel a responsibility to teach given the current climate, surveys the history of Muslim communities in the United States by focusing on the conditions in which Muslims have to live as—or

not—Muslims. From slavery, racism, and anti-immigration sentiment (of old) to today’s Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiment, have Muslims ever really been free to actively participate in forging what it means to be American?

Given my intellectual interests, I would likely be teaching Islam in the Modern Era and Islam and Gender regardless of developments outside of the academy. How I teach them, however, would likely be much different. Over the years I have come to orient these and other courses, such as Being Muslim in America, explicitly around broadly humanistic questions. This is perhaps the greatest mark that teaching Islam in the United States after September 2001 has left. In really simple terms, more than anything else I want to show my students that Muslims and Muslim communities are human, sharing many of the same concerns that we all do—how to live good lives, how to live in community, how to engage the constraints in which we all live as productively as possible, how to make meaning out of a world that is both beautiful and painful. By doing so, I hope that my courses become spaces for students—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—to reflect on how they might answer these questions themselves, how their own histories might affect the way they answer these questions, and in turn how they view the ways others go about doing the same.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/01/islam-and-humanistic-teaching/>