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Teaching about Sectarian Differences in Islam

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Due to the diversity of Muslims in the southern Ontario region, my classes on Islam always bring together students from a variety of different sectarian, legalistic as well as interpretive, understandings of Islam. For instance, in my “Introduction to Islam” course, one can find Sunnis from various regions of the world, Shias from Ithna al-Ashariyya and Ismaili backgrounds, and Ahmadiyya Muslim students as well – all in one classroom. With such diversity, intra-Muslim dialogue becomes one of the best pedagogical tools I can use to help all of my students (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) understand the complexities of Muslim identity and the great debates that have shaped Islamic thought. While teaching about these many facets of internal Muslim diversity can be a delicate matter and care must be taken to create an atmosphere of curiosity and mutual respect, engaging the real-life distinctions present among Muslims in the classroom can bring the subject matter to life in remarkable ways.

Muslim differences are on display quite regularly in the daily news, yet much Muslim discourse tends to downplay their significance. In classes, I try to cultivate greater openness to exploring these differences in an effort to understand them better and build relationships, rather than to dwell on them from a particular partisan standpoint. I point out that for centuries sectarian differences have remained far more resistant to accommodation than differences in jurisprudence. Despite contemporary voices calling for an Islamic ecumenism that embraces Shia as well as Sunni practitioners, early differences over religious leadership have led to

enduring intramural rivalries, exacerbated in the last decade by patterns of sectarian mobilization amidst protracted power struggles in present-day Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as well as simmering tensions in Pakistan, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

In order to unpack this history, students learn that the past politicization of sectarian differences has left an imprint on communal attitudes, beliefs, and narratives. In the absence of a robust, well-developed framework for Islamic ecumenism, conflicts rooted in problems of theological, as well as socio-political and economic exclusion, have the potential to cascade in destructive ways, with events in one country or context impacting tensions in other regions.

Since the regular class sessions are devoted to helping the students navigate these historical tensions intellectually, I also facilitate supplementary “dialogical” sessions for interested students who would like to explore classroom topics in more detail. These sessions enable some of the best conversations about differences to emerge. For instance, I always open the dialogical session with a student asking a question or sharing an experience. In one session, a student who was a leader of my university’s Muslim Student Association (MSA) started the conversation by stating, “I cannot pray behind a Shi’ite Muslim.” This statement, of course, was met with a strong reaction from one of my Ismaili students who was himself a member of the Ismaili Student Association (ISA). For the rest of the session, we had a very important sharing of different understandings of Muslim prayer and the meaning infused in different forms of prayer. From this one session, a dialogue between the MSA and the ISA started. We then formed a weekly dialogical session in which the leaders of these two groups and some of their members came together to discuss differences and similarities in rituals, beliefs, and understandings of history. After a year of dialogical sessions, the same student who had stated that he could not pray behind a Shi’ite Muslim shared with me that “every chance I get I try to pray with a Shi’ite Muslim.”

Another pedagogical tool that I like to use when teaching about sectarian differences in Islam is taking my students on a field trip to the Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Arts in Toronto, the first museum in North America dedicated exclusively to Islamic Arts. Instead of learning through a lecture or textbook about Islam, students learn through rare art, artifacts, material culture, and stories about the different historical circumstances within which these objects were created. They also learn about the Ismaili Muslim community and Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, who is the current spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims. Known internationally for his various charitable works and developmental projects (the Aga Khan Development Network is a well-respected NGO in the development field) and in Canada for opening the Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa as well as the Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre in Toronto, the man whom Ismailis regard as their 49th Imam provides a counterpoint to many non-Muslim preconceptions about Muslims.

Although the Aga Khan Museum highlights particular Ismaili and Shia experiences, it also sheds light on the character and internal diversity of traditional Islamic civilization in a much broader sense. During the field trip, students experience a general tour of the permanent collection. This enables them to learn about many artistic, intellectual, and scientific heritages

of Islam and its many cultures, from North Africa to Southeast Asia. In addition, the Aga Khan Museum offers regular exhibits of contemporary Muslim art as well as programs featuring international artists and scholars, thus affording opportunities to learn about more recent manifestations of Muslim music, poetry, and thought through mediums as diverse as workshops, lectures, live performances, and film screenings. Since the museum is located adjacent to the Ismaili Centre, students also get a tour of a distinctive space for community assembly and worship, with its unusual architecture, a library, and a *jamat khana* (prayer hall) for daily prayers. Muslim and non-Muslim students alike testify that this field trip offers a rich, immersive experience and encourages them to reflect on Islamic religious and cultural heritages in new and exciting ways.

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