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Islam à la Liberal Arts: On Freedom, Textbooks, and Psychedelic Visions

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For those of us who teach on the semester system, we face the daunting task of presenting our course in about 15 weeks (and for those of us on quarter systems, about 10!). Among the greatest challenges given this context is to, therefore, decide what can and cannot be left out of a course. If one teaches “Introduction to Islam,” perhaps one aims for a semi-comprehensive historical survey where students learn a bit about hadith, law, Qur’an, theology, dynasties, mysticism—and maybe science, Islamism, and art depending on some variables. Indeed, many textbooks on

Islam (books *devoted* to introducing college students to Islam) treat their topic like this. A fundamental question, therefore: What is the goal for a short undergraduate course on Islam? It’s perhaps a blessing and curse that any given instructor will answer this differently—based on training, institutional context, and personal taste—but I think mostly a blessing because the menagerie of reasonable answers reflects a freedom to make up our minds about approach and content. In this post, I’ll discuss a few outside-the-box approaches that reflect my ongoing struggle with making the best of a short semester.

Education as freedom

In his article “Liberal Education: Its Conditions and Ends,” David Corey argues that the goal of liberal education is to set us free, to achieve “intellectual freedom or, in a certain quaint sense of the word, ‘spiritual’ freedom” (2014: 195). I can jive with this, and taking a cue from JZ

Smith, “*there is nothing that must be taught*, there is nothing that cannot be left out” of a religious studies course (2012: 13)—which seems to point to freedom as a pedagogical strategy as well. What I interpret from Smith’s prescription is that courses are short, so comprehensive surveys are false gods, in a sense. In an intro to Islam course, why, for example, would attention to a scholarly monograph on the Qur’an, prove more valuable than focusing on episodes from “Little Mosque on the Prairie”? In terms of textbooks, at least, I’m not aware, unfortunately, of any that give attention to “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” so an overreliance on textbooks could also limit the freedom of the instructor to substantively explore outside-the-box sorts of topics. Carl Ernst even notes in *Following Muhammad* that he hates textbooks for similar reasons; I wouldn’t go that far, in part given my distaste for the H-word, but I strongly sympathize with the sentiment.

So if instructors wish freedom for their students, and hope to enjoy a comparable freedom through course design, are we talking about nothing more than a whimsical selection of material? No. It’s not whimsical because I presume, for the sake of argument, that most Islamic studies professors have reasonable training in their respective subfields. On top of that, Islamic studies is not a compartmental, marketable skill, generally speaking—which is why I’ve become increasingly persuaded by Smith’s emphasis on the *nothing* that cannot be left out. I actually don’t think that’s entirely true: if my course, entitled “Islam,” focused on, say, the question of whether Obama is Muslim (a totally reasonable thing to focus on in said course) *to the exclusion of* studying Qur’an or hadith, then I should expect to run into some legitimate problems of credibility—from students, colleagues, and my institution. But one should also note that drawing attention to Obama’s religion in light of political realities could uniquely intrigue and teach students.

Freedom to surprise students

Although I do spend more time in my courses focusing on the Qur’an than on Obama’s public commitment to Christianity, I can’t be sure what will impress students more, years after the class is over—that the story of Khidr is super interesting and weird, that Thomas Jefferson may have read it in Arabic, or that 30% of Americans actually think Obama is a Muslim. Questions of Obama’s religion (or attention to “Little Mosque on the Prairie”), moreover, address critical contemporary questions of Islamophobia, racism, and immigration—topics that could take a bit more creativity to excavate from Moses and Khidr. But can we have it both ways, focusing on Muslim sitcoms as well as the Qur’an? Absolutely, but we still have to prioritize, and if we include one thing we’ll probably have to exclude something else. It’s a balancing act at the end of the day and each of us will rightly navigate things differently.

As much as students may find reason to take interest in Obama’s religion—and the story of Khidr—the topic of drugs usually catches their attention as well. And the histories of coffee, alcohol, and qat all squarely tie into broad global discourses such as the consequences of intoxication, state law and sharia, and capitalism. Because I spent a summer in Yemen, and because college students already have a stake in coffee and alcohol, these three substances make regular appearances in a weeklong unit on drugs in Islam. After reading an entire book

about the subject—*Tripping with Allah*, by Michael Muhammad Knight—I ran into a compelling erotic scene involving a vision of Ali and Fatima during Knight’s experience with ayahuasca-DMT (one of the most powerful psychedelics known to science). So I included the excerpt in my “Islamic Mysticism” course last semester. One student memorably lamented her foreseen absence on the day we would discuss Knight’s chapter, writing, “I am disappointed I will be missing today’s discussion of our very weird reading.” Beyond the edutainment factor, the chapter with the erotic scene, like much of Knight’s writing, points clearly to other big questions about Islam, such as Sunni-Shi’i divides and the boundaries of orthodoxy. So as much fun as it would be to assign the excerpt to students for shock value alone, my pedagogical justification lurks steadily under the surface.

Conclusions

In my own context, I teach religious studies courses at a college with very few RS majors (currently two, to be precise). As part of the core curriculum, however, students must take at least two courses in my department. Although I always welcomed the challenge of teaching students who are there “because they have to be,” and similarly always valued a liberal arts education, it was not always clear to me how to implement my vision of the liberal arts into my courses. I’ve felt stuck in the ostensibly impossible expectation to teach a survey. What I have increasingly come to ask, though, is what kind of impression my course will leave on students years down the road. And as I continue to ask this question, I become increasingly convinced there’s precious little that cannot be left out of curricula in my courses on Islam. If the goal of learning in my courses is to cultivate intellectual freedom, then is it not only appropriate but even desirable to reflect my own engagement with intellectual freedom, synthesis, and experimentation (cue the DMT jokes) in the syllabus and curriculum itself?

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