

Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet

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Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet is a collection of articles by contributors who have been teaching classes about Muslims and Islam especially in the Western contexts. This book is edited by Courtney M. Dorroll, an Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern and North African Studies at Wofford College in South Carolina.

As an academic at a small college, the editor is alert to the challenges presenting advices on how to teach this important but sensitive issue of Islam to new academics and students in the communities. In the age of misrepresentations and stereotypes of Islam, this book is considered important to teachers and students as a means to encourage them to thoughtfully engage with the topic of Islam.

The original idea of *Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet* is initiated from a talk given by Richard C. Martin, a Professor Emeritus of Religion at Emory University. He gave a talk at Wofford College under an invitation from the editor of this book, Courtney M. Dorroll. Professor Martin has written and edited several books including *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mutazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* and

Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism.

In this book, the contributors especially shared their personal struggles and address the challenges of teaching about Islamic religion while the media mostly promote Islamophobia and violence. They proposed some approaches to Islamic studies pedagogy and provided some suggestions to better structure the course. These approaches and suggestions are based on their own experiences facing the students and parents who might initially fear the topic related to Muslims and Islam.

In order to encourage a deeper engagement in this course, the contributors include collaborative teaching models by doing reading and media suggestions. This approach will result in a broader thinking of students on this subject. It can be said that by reading this particular book, students are exposed to challenging ideas of Islamophobia and encouraged to confront these ideas fairly and objectively. More importantly, this book provides a fair and open discussion of an important issue in teaching about Islam.

The present of this edited book is welcome and timely, especially in a time where Islam is seen as promoting violence and Muslims are seen as extremists. In term of its structure, this book consists of fourteen chapters and divided into three parts. They are Approaches and Theories (Part I), Islamophobia and Violence (Part II), and Applications (Part III). The foreword of the book is provided by Richard C. Martin, while the introduction was written by the editor herself, Courtney M. Dorroll.

Richard C. Martin wrote a foreword for this book entitled *From Khomeini to Trump: A Reflection on Islamic Studies in America*. He shared his perspectives on teaching the courses of Islam to university undergraduates. It all began with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 in which the image of Islam was portrayed by the media during the 444-day Iran hostage crisis in Tehran. Commenting on the essays written by the contributors, Professor Martin raised up some questions related to teaching the topic of Islam in the modern era. "Should scholars well trained in Islamic studies adjust the curriculum they teach to speak to contemporary events? Are courses on the Qur'an, Islamic history, Islamic religious thought, and other traditional curriculum topics less relevant today? How do we make the curriculum relevant to today's undergraduates who learn and communicate largely through the Internet and social media?"

Professor Martin shared his personal experiences studying and teaching the subject of Islam in the past and in the modern era. Compared to the

previous era, today everyone can access the information freely from the Internet. However, sometimes the information is misleading. On the other hand, the previous era focused more on a direct interaction with Muslims. Professor Martin described that (p. 10):

*When I was an undergraduate student in the late 1950s, on the other hand, only one Muslim student, an exchange student from Jordan, was enrolled in the university where I attended. Muslim immigrants had arrived and settled in America at mid-twentieth century, but in small numbers. Atiyeh and I became good friends during our four years of undergraduate studies. However, there was little opportunity or effort to learn about his faith, Sunni Islam. Presumably, he prayed and practiced his religion in private, necessarily without the benefit of a masjid, a common place of prayer, an Imam to lead the prayer and provide guidance and counsel, or family and friends with whom to celebrate the *juyud*, the ritual festivals.*

In the introduction part of the book, Courtney M. Dorroll as an editor described a little background pertaining the formulation of the book and this particular topic. She mentioned that she has been teaching about religion and Middle Eastern and North African studies at a small liberal arts college since 2013. She specifically described that (p. 14):

As a new teacher and a southern transplant, I first viewed my students and my classroom as somehow unique to this particular place, but as I began to share stories with scholars in the same field at conferences such as the American Academy of Religion, the Middle East Studies Association, and the American Anthropological Association, I found that the issues related to teaching Islam in the United States are not tied to a particular place. Instead, the national media and general American opinion on Islam and the Middle East is similar from Massachusetts to Colorado to South Carolina. This realization allowed for fruitful conversations and techniques to be passed along from scholars across the United States on the themes that ran through our pedagogical experiences. These conversations revolved around the role of the media (particularly the internet), Islamophobia, and the specific challenges that the age of ISIS had brought to our classroom.

Hence, realizing the challenges faced by the academics and students on the topic of Islamic studies, the editor invited an expert to give a talk on the subject and decided to make a collection of articles portraying different perspectives of and voices from "Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, US and international scholars, US scholars from various regions of the country, and

full professors to PhD candidates.

As mentioned earlier, the book *Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet* has three main parts with fourteen chapters. Part 1, Approaches and Theories has six chapters. In this part, the contributors discussed approaches to and theories of Islamic studies pedagogies. It includes the contributions from Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who are working in the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Egypt. Chapter one, *On Teaching Islam Across Culture: Virtual Exchange Pedagogy*, is written by Courtney M. Dorroll, Kimberly Hall, and Doaa Baumi. The first two authors teach Middle Eastern Studies courses at a small liberal arts college in Spartanburg, South Carolina, United States of America. While the third author is a PhD student at the Birmingham University in the Department of Theology and Religion. She also teaches at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, in the Department of Creed and Philosophy.

The focus of chapter one is on the use of virtual exchange platforms such as Facebook, WordPress, YouTube, and Skype to connect students in the USA and in the Middle East countries. This virtual exchange provides opportunities for students to connect with their peers through online activities so that they can build trusts within the classroom and across the cultures among themselves. On the other hand, using virtual exchange platforms is not simple. It needs a proper time and planning in addition to taking care of intercultural sensitivity of different culture.

Chapter two, *Questions of Taste: Critical Pedagogy and Aesthetics in Islamic Studies*, is written by Manuella Ceballos, an Assistant Professor of Islam at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville. This topic focuses on the role of aesthetics in teaching and learning about Islam. In this chapter, the author used aesthetic systems to invoke desire in her students and to produce certain emotions that are necessary for engagement. Ultimately, it hopes to shape the students' moral and political responses. According to the author, "I "un-teach" these discourses: I reveal their internal contradictions and make visible the racism and misogyny that underlie and sustain them, racism and misogyny that we have all learned not to see. However, in order to do that, I must teach these discourses first and teach them effectively. By "effectively," I mean develop a "taste" for them, if only so that the students can, through emotions such as guilt at their enjoyment, and pleasure in overcoming that enjoyment, move through and past them. That "taste," however, cannot be completely "undone" through deconstruction."

Chapter three, *Training Scholars to Study Non-Scholarly Life*, is written by Benjamin Geer, a Research Fellow at the Digital Humanities Lab, University of Basel. In this chapter, the author explained, "When students carry out research on canonical texts, they should be encouraged to historicize those texts, understanding each one as a stance taken in relation to the state of a particular field at a particular historical moment, by an author occupying a particular position in that field, rather than as a timeless expression of broader social phenomena. This approach requires humility based on the recognition that, with only texts as evidence, one can try to answer some questions but not others."

Chapter four, *Islamic Religious Education and Critical Thought in European Plural Societies* is written by Mouez Khalfaoui, a Professor of Islamic Jurisprudence at the University of Tübingen, Germany. This chapter portrays that certain institutional structures can shape students' research topics and methodologies in doing their research abroad. The author argued that the main objectives of teaching Islamic religious education in Europe especially in Germany, Austria, Great Britain, and France should be to "Promote integration and political participation of and among Muslims; Reduce extremism; "Produce" a new moderate Islam and "Muslims,;" Solve social and religious problems that Muslims are facing in Europe; Help Muslims to gain a better understanding of their own religion; and Improve the dialog between the majority of the population and the Muslim minority."

Chapter five, *Studying Islam and the Ambivalence of the Concept of "Religion"*, is written by Alfons H. Teipen, an Associate Professor of Religion at Furman University. The topic of this chapter suggests to be critical of religion making in our day-to-day teaching and learning. The author explained that, "Yet not only is the question of an essentialized alterity being challenged in such comparative reading, but the very question of a neat division between the religious and "the secular" is opened to scrutiny. Commonalities between the religious and "the secular" highlight the conceptual problems of the construction of religion as binary opposite to "the secular." Religion and the secular do not only mutually constitute each other, as Anidjar reminds us, but the secular itself may be no more than a child of European Enlightenment, itself nothing more than Western Christianity in disguise."

Chapter six, *Paradigm Shifts for Translation and Teaching* is written by William Maynard Hutchins, a Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Appalachian State University. In this chapter, the author presented several paradigms

shifts within teaching and translating Arabic literature. The paradigm shifts include the turning from orientalism to area studies, the announcement of Naguib Mahfouz as the Noble Laureate for Literature in 1988, the opening of Internet access for the general public approximately in 1995, the series of political and military disasters during which autocratic governments in the Middle East crashed into the Arab Spring, and the heralded by the new thinking of Kahlil Gibran and the success of literature written in English by Middle Eastern authors such as *The Prophet* in 1923.

Part 2, Islamophobia and Violence has three chapters focusing on Islamophobia and violence. As a continuation from the previous chapters, chapter seven, *Interdisciplinary Education for Teaching Challenging Subjects: The Case of Islam and Violence*, is written by Laila Hussein Moustafa, an Assistant Professor and Middle Eastern and North African Studies Librarian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In this chapter, the author examined and evaluated Islam and violence through interdisciplinary approaches. This lens encourages scholars to go beyond traditional textbooks and focus more on the lives of ordinary people to reveal the different contexts of Islam. To do so, the author proposed a team-teaching model which involves two or more instructors working together to teach one course.

Chapter eight, *The Immanent Imminence of Violence: Comparing Legal Arguments in a Post 9/11 World*, is written by Nathan S. French, an Assistant Professor of Comparative Religion and an affiliate of Middle East and Islamic Studies at Miami University. In this chapter, the author introduced a reading exercise to his students in the intersection of religion and its political instrumentalization. In this exercise, all symbolic discourse, such as *jihad*, Americans and infidel, is removed from the texts so that the students can focus on the argument. Following the reading, students are asked to answer five subsequent questions: (1) Who is writing? Describe the author. What is his or her education level? (2) To what is the text calling the reader? Why should one fight? (3) Whom should one fight and why? (4) What are the methods that may be used to fight? (5) Who is the intended audience of the passage?

Chapter nine, *Teaching Islamophobia in the Age of ISIS*, is written by Todd Green, an Associate Professor of Religion at Luther College, and a former US State Department Advisor on Islamophobia in Europe. In this chapter, the author argued about the significance of teaching Islamophobia in the current age and proposed a more effective ways to address biases, stereotypes, and

misinformation concerning Islam. The author commented on the consequence of Islamophobia, "On my course evaluations, students' most common complaint was the dire note on which the course ended. They appreciated the exploration of the historical and political causes of Islamophobia. They found the widespread discrimination experienced by Muslims both eye-opening and appalling. But how do we respond to Islamophobia? What can we do to combat Islamophobia? The pilot version of the course did a great job of deconstructing anti-Muslim prejudice, but it left much to be desired when it came to exploring constructive ways forward."

Part 3, Applications, has five chapters. It discusses specific hands-on approach how to set up and teach the courses of Islamic studies. Chapter ten, *From Medina to the Media: Engaging the Present in Historically Oriented Undergraduate Courses on Islam*, is written by Sabahat F. Adil, an Assistant Professor of Pre-Modern Arabic Literature and Culture in the Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In this chapter, the author explained about the meaning of teaching Islamic history in the contemporary American undergraduate classroom. To facilitate opportunities for students to deal with the pre-modern past and nurture productive learning spaces, the author address three main questions for the students: "(1) How do students encounter Islam, the Middle East, and Muslims before they enter our classrooms? (2) Should we address their encounters and conceptions in a course that is historically oriented, particularly toward the pre-modern past? (3) If so, how do we harness students' preexisting conceptions to create a productive space for learning, given the vast diversity of students in our classrooms?"

Chapter eleven, *Muslims are People; Islam is Complicated*, is written by Kecia Ali, a Professor of Religion at Boston University. In this chapter, the author explained and gave examples of how to understand the concepts of Muslims are people and that Islam is complicated. The author argued that, "Undergraduates arrive in college and university classrooms across America already knowing a great deal about Islam and Muslims. Much of what they know is wrong; some of it is technically correct yet fragmentary and misleading. Myriad challenges confront us as we attempt to correct outright errors in their knowledge and provide useful frameworks to think about Islam and Muslims using the tools of religious studies specifically as well as the humanities more broadly. Although my topics and strategies vary depending on the course, my main goal is always the same. By the end of the semester,

students should understand that Muslims are people and that Islam is complicated.”

Chapter twelve, *The Five Questions About Islam Your Students Did not Know They Had: Teaching Islamic Studies to an American Audience*, is written by Phil Dorroll, an Assistant Professor of Religion at Wofford College. This chapter basically suggests to take into account contemporary political and cultural discourses when designing Islamic Studies courses. This is important in order to make the academic goals of the introductory Islam understandable in the current American classroom. According to the author, there are at least five major frames through which students approach the topic of Islam. They are: (1) religion and violence, (2) religion and politics, (3) religion and patriarchy, (4) religion and foreign policy, and (5) religion and national identity. Based on these five frames, five specific questions should be addressed: (1) Is Islam violent? (2) Does Islam want to dominate non-Muslim societies or politics? (3) Does Islam oppress women? (4) Who are the terrorists and where do they come from? (5) Is Islam a threat to the United States?

Chapter thirteen, *Reflective Practice in Online Courses: Making Islamic Studies Interactive and Approachable*, is written by Lyndall Herman, a Global Risk Analyst with CARE USA. She is also an affiliate researcher with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arizona. In this chapter, the author provided step-by-step online courses in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies by applying the concept of reflective learning. In particular, the author argued that, “Guided reflection has an important place in making the study of non-Western cultures and traditions more approachable and relatable. In the instance of my courses, this meant encouraging students to address any biases of Islam, Muslims, and the greater Middle East through their guided reflection assignments.”

Finally, chapter fourteen, *Teaching Islam, and Gender*, is written by Shehnaz Haqqani, an Assistant Professor of Religion at Mercer University. In this chapter, the author offered some pedagogical strategies and tips for teaching Islam and gender. They include debates, dialogues, role plays, and guest speakers. Among the productive ways to address the questions on gender and Islam in an American college classroom include blogs, films, everyday ‘conversations’ with Muslims.

From the above description, overall, the book *Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet* has successfully achieved its goal to help undergraduate students understand about Islam and lecturers

about pedagogical approaches and techniques in teaching Islam in the twenty-first century. Since it focuses on broader issues of pedagogy, this edited book is useful not only for Islamic Studies lecturers but also for non-Islamic studies specialists in engaging with Islam in the general study of religion.

Looking closely to the book, there are several weaknesses that can be presented in this review. The first one is no list of contributors at the beginning or introduction of the book. They are, however, presented in brief at the end of each chapter portraying their position and affiliation only. On top of that, most of the contributors are academics and scholars who are just beginning their career in teaching Islamic studies. The positive side is the contributors agreed that the primary driver for Islamophobia is a lack of accurate information about Islam and its practices.

The second one is not all references in the endnotes are collected and cited in the bibliography at the end of the book. The bibliography should contain all references cited in the endnotes of each chapter. More importantly, since the book aims to present the experiences of teaching Islamic studies in the Internet era, the contributors should also emphasize more on the role of social media as the primary sources for students' biases and prejudices in seeing the truth about Islam.

Lastly, *Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet* provides no easy solutions for the problems about Islam and Muslims. Nonetheless, the essays have captured some beneficial food for thoughts and provided practical hands-on ideas to try to solve the problems.**

