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Before 9/11, teaching Islam presented a challenge simply because of what Edward Said has termed Orientalism, that is, a view of Islam and Muslims so deeply entrenched in European and American culture that it is difficult to think of Islam or Muslims in a nonprejudicial manner. Said argues that European fears of increasing Muslim encroachment of Europe at the time of the Crusades, and later, the European desire to colonize Muslim regions of the world, led to the construction of an anti-Islamic discourse that was expressed in four ideas, which became part of the Western understanding of Islam and Muslims:

Firstly, that there is an absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior.

Secondly, that abstractions about the Orient are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities, thus rendering the Oriental passive, speechless, powerless, and requiring interpretation.

Thirdly, that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself: therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a

Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically “objective.”

And finally, that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or to be controlled. (1979, 300–301)

The implicit presence of such ideas about Orientals, in this case Muslims, was and continues to be revealed in student discussions around issues they find highly problematic from a Christian and from a Euro-American perspective. So, for instance, they ask how could Muhammad claim to be a prophet and yet marry so many wives and participate in war? How could Muslims force women to veil and expect them to obey their husbands? Why aren’t Muslim societies democratic, or conversely, why are Muslim regimes so despotic? Why don’t the Palestinians understand that the Jews were there first? Why are there so many Muslim fundamentalists and militants? And the list goes on.

While such issues make class discussions quite spirited and interesting, I find that nearly the first half of a course on any Islamic subject is spent in drawing parallels to show that every major world tradition struggles with issues that from the outside appear irrational or inhumane. This situation has only been exacerbated by 9/11, as students fear that Muslims are irrational fanatics who blindly resort to wreaking violence on the innocent and the defenseless in their attempt to express hatred of America. Many students also feel that America has the responsibility, in the interests of building a safer world, to teach Muslim societies what democracy is about, and also to teach them how to treat their women better.

The goal of a liberal arts education is to facilitate critical thinking from an informed perspective, and to enhance the student’s ability to address issues in complex and nuanced ways. I find it essential in all of my teaching to encourage students to explore multiple positions in examining a subject; although this is difficult at times, it is absolutely necessary if we want to educate future leaders who are informed, critical, and constructive in their thinking. Given the increasing role of Muslims in world events, it is vital to prepare our students by examining Orientalism and Islam in the post-9/11 classroom.

Instead of bowing to the temptation to become defensive in the classroom, I take my cue from Edward Said and attempt to let the Oriental — in this case the Muslim — speak for him or herself in the readings I assign for class. For instance, in “Muslim Literary Landscapes,” a freshman critical inquiry seminar, students will read all of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, or *Culture and Imperialism*

, alongside six novels written by Muslims from different parts of the globe. This approach allows the student to connect, through the lens of a literary work, to multifaceted issues. Through the empathetic bridging that is possible — in hearing a character speak, in being presented with characters who love, suffer anguish and abandonment, who dream and hope, who live in political and social realities that they bring alive to us — students are able to see the deleterious effects of colonization on many of the Muslim (and now European) societies that are producing fundamentalists and militants today. They also learn from the diverse voices presented through different characters that Muslims are not uniform in how they address challenges.

So, for instance, the novel *Wild Thorns* by Palestinian author Sahar Khalifeh takes the reader into the mind and logic of a suicide bomber. Khalifeh introduces multiple voices into her narrative in the form of characters who draw out for us how Israeli political and military decisions are experienced by Palestinians, and how they are in fact differently experienced. Utilizing the lens of a novel enables students to understand the many sides to the conflict, the lack of easy solutions, the terrible losses experienced on both sides, the different understandings of history by the Israelis and the Palestinians, and that this is not so much a conflict between faiths as it is a conflict over land and water and resources.

I can now expect to see fifty students on the first day of my “Women in Islam” class in contrast to the nine or ten that showed up ten years ago. Here, too, I utilize Muslim sources to allow students to assess for themselves what is going on with Muslim women. We read from the Qur’an to find out what in fact it has to say about women. We learn that the Qur’an considers men and women perfectly equal in the eyes of God in terms of their ethical, moral, and religious responsibilities; that women were given rights such as maintenance after divorce, and inheritance rights long before such rights were given to women in Europe or America. We read Muslim female authors on how the Qur’an was interpreted by male Muslim scholars: often, to the detriment of women. As with every course on gender, we read some feminist theory to understand what patriarchy is and how historically it has played a role in every major religious tradition to curtail the rights and freedoms of women and to construct social roles for women as a result of their biology.

We read literary works by Muslim women to see how they articulate and experience restrictions in their lives, and how they take control of their lives in ways that are at times subversive, at times quite bold. We learn that the veil is the least of their worries even though we in the West are fixated upon the veil as a sign of Muslim male oppression of women. Instead, we learn among other things, first, that both men and women in Muslim societies are oppressed by political dictatorships (and often propped up by Western interests). Second, that they suffer the economic impoverishment of globalization that furthers the turn to an Islamist, or what we call fundamentalist Islam, in the hopes that creating an Islamic society governed by Islamic principles of social justice presents a viable alternative to their current governments. Third, we

learn that Muslim societies grapple with the attempt to restore a sense of pride in their culture in the face of Western cultural, economic, and military hegemony that has consistently sent the message, at least since colonization, that all the backwardness in Muslim societies is due to their faith and culture, rather than due to the very real material conditions in which they live.

All three factors — political dictatorships, globalization, and Western hegemony with its concomitant unequal power relationships with Muslim societies — have led many Muslims to question whether the wholesale adoption of Western culture provides the answer to their problems. Indeed, many Muslims conclude that they have to find solutions that are sensitive to their own cultural, historical, political, social, and economic contexts, and since Islam is both a culture and a religion, it is not surprising to find Muslims using language that draws upon the rich heritage of Islamic civilization, and by extension, religion.

The point of such discussions in my classes is not to brainwash students into agreeing with the most strident voices emerging from Muslim societies, but rather to help students critique the many differing Muslim points of view, because through understanding can come the possibility of working in partnership rather than in antagonism. Students see that one cannot talk about the liberation of Muslim women without addressing the profound challenges facing Muslim societies in a world in which their culture is ignored, if not devalued, in our pursuit of the resources that are found in their parts of the globe, resources that are necessary for propping up our own lifestyles, and our economic survival.

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