

## Mahmoud Ayoub, Temple University



*Mahmoud Ayoub is Professor of Islamic Studies and Comparative Religion at Temple University. A graduate of the American University of Beirut with an MA from the University of Pennsylvania, he earned his PhD in the History of Religion at Harvard University. His research interests center on Islam, especially the interpretation of the Qur'an over the centuries, and interreligious dialogue. His publications include Redemptive Suffering in Islam (1978), The Qur'an and Its Interpreters (2 volumes, 1984), Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam (2003), and Islam in Faith and History (2005).*

**Mooney:** Do you think your teaching changes between classes of undergraduates and graduates? And are the rewards different?

**Ayoub:** Undergraduate teaching, unless it's a small seminar like I'm doing this spring, tends not to be participatory. When I ask students, even my Jewish students, "Participation is an important part of your grade, so why don't you participate?" they say, "Because we think you are giving us a lot of information and we do not want to interrupt you and annoy the other students who want to learn more." Now that says something about my teaching. I tend to teach like a book. At times I get classes that are very lively and very good; they challenge what I say and we engage through conversation. But often, students just take notes, and I know they are attentive although I do not see them because I am blind. Probably my teaching is affected by the fact that I am blind. It means I put a lot of emphasis on lecturing, though I tell students to interrupt me anytime.

**Mooney:** Do you use the Internet to connect?

**Ayoub:** I use it to receive the work of my students and to keep in touch with them. But I don't want it to replace the contact between teachers and students. I attended an AAR session on teaching Islamic studies and saw how widely the Internet is used. I think that it's interesting that this becomes a goal in itself. When does the real teaching take place? Maybe those who rely on the Internet so much err by relying on it to do everything. Undergraduates come to teachers with personal problems that they have to deal with. I have a student who is struggling to get her BA. She has to live in a foster home, and her twelve-year-old brother also lives in a distant foster home and he may be taken away, so she has to be treated differently — I give her more time to do her work and make sure that her grade does not suffer. The teacher-student relationship must always be more than simply the imparting of knowledge — it's helping a mind to grow, and in this sense nothing can take the place of contact between teachers and students.

**Mooney:** Is there a particular undergraduate class that stands out for you?

**Ayoub:** I think that students generally enjoy my "Introduction to Islam" course because I relate it often to what they are familiar with either from Saturday school if they are Jews or Sunday school if they are Christian. In this regard, I find that the most "headache" students are the Muslim students who think that, because they are Muslim, they know everything and don't have to read. They want to have A's in the course. You can praise the Arab states, but they don't want to accept it when your analysis isn't completely positive. Most of my colleagues don't like teaching what we call "Introduction to Western Religion," but I like it very much because I see the continuities, on so many levels, between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. I always include at least one class on Zoroastrianism because of its influence on the three monotheistic religions and also the fact that it serves as a bridge between the ancient religions of India and the major religions of the Middle East. I believe in being text-grounded — whatever I teach I like to have textual support for it. Nowadays there is more interest in religion and ethnicity or race and all these things that are modern and American.

**Mooney:** What is lost when these texts are left behind?

**Ayoub:** I believe there is an irreplaceable value to the traditional methods wherein a person becomes very familiar with a text as a primary focus of a religious tradition. Now the emphasis is more on the use of singers such as Yusuf Islam and Cat Stevens and so on. I think that these are entertainers and are not scholarship. I'm glad that I will be quitting soon and doing some

writing, you know, of the books that I have not had the chance to do, before I die. I think that the old-style teachers and scholars like me must learn to accept things more graciously than we often do.

**Mooney:** Did you always know that you would be a teacher?

**Ayoub:** I've always looked forward to being a teacher. If you look at the prologue in my latest book, *Islam: Faith and History*, I talk about my own religious experiences as a starting point. I've always wanted to be a teacher but not a teacher of the blind. My argument was from the beginning that the fact that blind people were blind need not mean that they only be taught by blind people. Blind people should be integrated and I wanted to teach at a university. So when I defended my PhD thesis at Harvard and stood alone with both copies of the thesis that were returned to me by my committee members I started to believe that I made my point and got what I wanted, and so, in my own way, I became a teacher.

**Mooney:** That's quite an accomplishment. You were first educated in Lebanon?

**Ayoub:** Yes, at the American University in Beirut. And then at the University of Pennsylvania and then at Harvard University. I read some of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's books when I was doing my MA at the University of Pennsylvania. I wanted to continue with him, and so I went up and talked to him and ended up doing my degree with him.

**Mooney:** How has the international climate — and by that I mean the changing perception of Americans in general and the political leadership of the world of Islam — how has that affected your teaching? Has it made it easier? Has it made it more difficult?

**Ayoub:** In some ways it made it more difficult, for the simple reason that now whatever I say that is positive about Islam rubs against people's nerves. I'd say positive things, of course, about Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, whatever. I think there is a truly spiritually moving positive center in every religious tradition — otherwise, it cannot survive. What's difficult to deal with is the popular idea that Islam is only negative. Then whatever I say that might be positive about it is taken to be apologetic. Of course, I'm very happy when my ideas are challenged so that way I can either modify them or defend them. Teaching post-September 11 is so much more challenging than before.

**Mooney:** What would you say to aspiring graduate students about teaching?

**Ayoub:** I would say to every student, including my son who is now going to graduate school, that for anything you get interested in, you should really dedicate your life and energy to it, to your specialty. The main thing for a person is for him or her to really know what he or she wants to do and to find their orientation. I really think the most important aspect of teaching is to impart knowledge to young minds who will find a use for it in their relationships with the rest of the world. When I taught in California, at San Diego State, I taught the world religions course. There would be a lot of students who came to me to be enlightened. They would go watch the sunset and so on. I used to say in the first class that I come to class with the conviction that religion is a body of knowledge and it is my responsibility to acquaint you with it. But I'd add that it's not my responsibility to make you less or more religious or in any way to lead you to enlightenment. You can use what you learn here, later on, in any way you like. But I don't want to trivialize religion and make it simply a New Age business. You teach a course on world religion or an introduction to Islam, or a course on comparative mysticism, and you see the students' attitudes changing, and you feel that you have done something. Now you have to be careful when you get through to students, either undergrads or graduates. I learned a great deal from Wilfred Cantwell Smith, but I never tried to be him, and I don't want students to take my ideas and say that now they have the answers for everything. If I can train their minds to think more independently, then I think I have done my job well.

**Mooney:** If you had a teenage niece or nephew who was just beginning to mature intellectually and was getting ready to go off to college, what would you give her to read over the summer?

**Ayoub:** I recommend to anybody who wants to learn anything about Indian philosophy a book that I've read more than once and I have always enjoyed, a book by a German writer, Heinrich Zimmer. The book is called *Philosophies of India* and I find that extremely enlightening, wonderful, entertaining reading. There are so many good books out; some of the better ones are on cultural anthropology and art history. I sometimes get ideas from cultural anthropology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to apply to the study of religion. But I always tell my daughter, "Don't go into religion — it is a lot of struggle and you may not get rich" [laughing].

**Mooney:** I noticed that you have done a lot of work with interfaith groups.

**Ayoub:** I have done a lot of writing both in Arabic and English on that subject. I try to say what I've seen, you know, through the worlds and societies that I've been in. I try to create areas of understanding and greater tolerance, and this can be done through interfaith relations and dialogue. I am aware that interfaith dialogue could be unacademic and kind of emotional, and so I try to stay with the texts. You know, I try to do interfaith dialogue through some kind of accessible, academic possibility but also point to what I see as the goal of interfaith dialogue, namely, to cultivate a delicate space — in humanity — where Muslims could strengthen or deepen the faith of Christians and vice versa.