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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Diverse Muslim Voices in the Classroom

Peter Masteller, Palmer Trinity School, Palmetto Bay, FL

I teach a semester course called “Islam and 9/11” with high school juniors and seniors, and although I show films that allow for a rich examination of lived religion, students in this class should have the personal experience of having a conversation with at least one Muslim. To that end, I plan on having one to three Muslims visit my Islam classes. At least one guest will hopefully be an imam, but other possibilities include community leaders and others who identify as Muslims.

Finding guest speakers will be a challenge because Miami does not have a particularly large or publically visible Muslim population. To begin my search, I will send an email of inquiry to CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, to ask if they can recommend a speaker. I will also contact some of the parents of former students who are Muslims to ask for recommendations. I may also contact professors at the University of Miami and Florida International University to ask them for recommendations.

Once I receive a few quality referrals, I will personally meet with them to determine if they are appropriate guest speakers. Guest speakers need to be capable of engaging the students in an academic rather than devotional manner, and they need to understand that their role is to help educate about Islam rather than promote it. They need to be able to talk about their own experience and community with insight that is both personal and detached. This type of thoughtfulness is something that I can only assess through a personal conversation.

Ideally, I would prefer that the visitors represent a diversity of genders (at least one man and one woman), a diversity of branches within Islam (at least one Sunni and one Shi’ite), and a diversity of roles within Islam (at least one imam and one lay member). For practical purposes, though, the Miami Muslim population is probably not large enough for me to carefully orchestrate the aspects of Islamic diversity that the guests represent. However, as long as I properly prepare my students with the cultural contexts and backgrounds of our guests, I feel confident that my students will be able to avoid creating generalizations or stereotypes based on the particulars of the visitors. I will teach the students how to engage the visiting Muslims as individual and idiosyncratic representations of the immense diversity within Islam rather than complete and total embodiments of Islam itself.

To prepare my students, I will spend a day or two helping them to create the necessary conceptual frameworks through which they can productively engage the guests. Central to the students’ preparation will be a discussion about how one respectfully and authentically engages in

a conversation with others about their religion. I will explicitly walk the students through the categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and immigration that are elements of all religious traditions in America, imagining possible points of controversy and proactively modeling ways to navigate them in a pluralistic fashion. In the shadow of 9/11, I will also need to prepare the students to consciously engage with the Islamophobia that is prevalent in American culture. I will instruct the students to be sensitive to this issue, but I will also encourage them to explicitly discuss with the guests the problems of ignorance, bigotry, and discrimination that Muslims often face.

Because class periods are only 45 minutes long, I will have a limit of one guest per day. On the day of a visit, I will ask the guest to begin by talking for about 10 minutes about his/her personal experience of Islam, possibly drawing from open-ended questions that I emailed a few days prior to the visit. (“What is your story?” “How do Islamic traditions, beliefs, and values shape your everyday life and the life of your community?” “What do high school students need to know about Muslims in contemporary Miami beyond the central doctrines of Islam?”) The remaining class time will be devoted to a question and answer session in which students ask questions that they have prepared for homework as well as spontaneous questions that emerge in response to the speaker.

I will be relatively quiet during the conversation, but I will be carefully watching for any emerging problems. Should either the guest or a student begin to take the conversation in a devotional or denigrating direction, I will promptly take control of the conversation and redirect it. I hope that the preparation of the visitor and the students will make this unnecessary, but ultimately I will be responsible for making sure the conversation is academic and pluralistic.

On the day after the class meets with the guest, I will help the students to process their experience through a class discussion that will be prefaced with a free write to prepare all of the students to participate. (“What surprised you the most yesterday?” “What did you learn that you couldn’t have learned from a book?”) Ideally, that conversation would last about 20 minutes and would then segue into a preparation for the next day’s guest speaker.

Although a field trip to a mosque or Islamic cultural center would be very valuable to my students, the fact that a field trip requires missing a number of other classes makes the field trip undesirable to many of my students. Bringing Muslims into my class to speak with students in an academic, thoughtful manner is the best way for me to incorporate the lived religion of Islam into my curriculum.

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