

ISLAM IN THE AMERICAN MOSAIC : THE WRITING COMPONENT

Liyakat Takim
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“Islam in the American Mosaic” will be my writing intensive course that I will teach. Many scholars who study the phenomenon of American Islam tend to homogenize American Muslims. Those who restrict their study to this generalized analysis of Muslims in America tend to ignore the nuances that characterize and differentiate the diverse Muslim segments in America. It further postulates a monolithic Islam that expresses the “normative Islam.” Hence any variant religious expression is perceived as an aberration that is to be ignored or discarded.

This class will explore the different expressions of Islam, especially as it is practiced in America. It will introduce students to some of the essential features of Islam and help them develop a sense how and why Islam came to be a global religion. It will also help students comprehend how various groups came to develop different understandings of Islam. Students will be exposed to a mosaic of Islamic cultures and will be encouraged to compare and contrast the different manifestations of Islam in America.

The course will have guest speakers (2) an “experiential” component that includes visits to specific mosques/worship centers around Denver (3) a discussion and analysis of contemporary manifestations of Islam in the American context that utilizes co-operative learning methodologies.

Incorporation of writing

The class has always included considerable writing. Apart from three quizzes, students are required to write a 5-6 page midterm essay. The class also has one take-home essay examination to be answered in 6-7 pages.

The course will be revised to bring it into the "Writing Intensive" category. First, students will be required to write longer papers, totally about 15 pages per quarter. Instead of quizzes, students will be asked to compile bi-weekly “journals”, which will take the form of recording their observations regarding an item in the media pertaining to Islam. In addition, they will be required to write short

papers (2-3 pages each) highlighting their observations from a visit to a local mosque.

Learning Outcome

The course will emphasize not only observing and learning about Islam and the Muslim world but also talking to Muslims and writing about their experience. Hence, the learning outcome of the course will be based on the follow categories:

1) Understanding the different expressions of Islam – Sunni, Shi’i and Sufi – by visiting the centers and observing the rituals

Assignment: Visiting and observing the centers; students will be rated by the site visit papers they write. In particular, they will need to write on the differences in decorum, the calligraphy, architecture, symbols etc. They would be rated based on how they describe and analyze what they observed on a 1 – 5 scale

2) Learn how the rituals impact and transform the practitioners – by talking to practitioners of the faith and reading about the important of the rituals

Assignment: In the site visit papers, they will also discuss the rituals they observed and why they are so important to the practitioners – here, they will be asked to speak to the local Imam (priest) or some practitioners. Students will be assessed based on their writing of the importance of the rituals and their symbolic and phenomenological significance. Students will also be offered extra credit to present their observations to the classroom.

3) To compare and contrast the different rituals – why would Muslims adopt different rituals.

Assignment: Here, they can discuss the different genres of rituals in the major papers. They will be given the opportunity to discuss, compare and analyze the rituals. The kinds of issues to be discussed - Why do Sunni prayers take the form they do? Why do Shi’is flagellate? Why do Sufis

perform dhikr (remembrance rituals)? Students will be graded based on their ability to analyze the rituals and encouraged to couch their papers within the wider framework of the theory and functions of rituals. They will also have to show that that far from being monolithic, Islam is multi-dimensional and variegated.

4) Students will have to respond how the course has challenged them to think of Islam differently – compare and contrast what they thought of Islam before and after the course. In addition, they will also have to discuss Islam in the media.

Assignment: This would be in the form of bi-weekly class logs they that would write. Most importantly, they will need to show that the course has forced them to think of Islam as a living, vibrant force in the eyes of its practitioners. They will also need to show how Islam has impacted the American religious landscape and focus on some aspects of the media presentation of Islam.

Overall, students will be expected to focus on religion as a living, changing force in individuals' lives and society. Hence, the concepts that we discuss in class will be linked to issues in the Muslim world, especially those concerning fundamentalism and violence. Students will not only learn about Islam but also experience Islam as a religious phenomenon. By stressing experiential learning, and by requiring them to write field trip reports, students will understand what Islam means in the lives of Muslim practitioners and to have both an insider and outsider's perspective on Islam. By observing and writing about religious communities engage in rituals, students will grasp first-hand what it means to be religious in different socio-cultural settings. Many students report that this strategy helps them dispel myths they had held about Islam and challenges them to conceive of Islam in an entirely new way.

In addition, students will be able to compare and contrast different forms of Islam. They will be exposed to Sunni, Shi'i and Sufi versions of Islam.

I want to challenge students to think of religion in general and Islam in particular in a wholly different way. As far as the reading of texts is concerned, students will learn that different hermeneutical devices can be used to interpret texts and impose a certain reading of texts.

Students will know that the authoritarian reading of a text is interwoven with the closing of the interpretive process, restricting thereby, the text to a specific reading or determination. This determination is then submitted as the final and only possible interpretation of the text.

Assessment and grading

The grades for the course will be based on the two major papers (25% for the mid-term, 35% for finals), 20% for the journals, 10% for site visit papers and a component of 10% of the grade for class participation.

The major papers will be 10-12 pages each, bi-weekly journals 2-3 pages and the site visit reports will be 3 pages long each.

In addition, I want students to develop writing skills that will serve them in their future careers. Hence, the mid-term and final papers will be graded on the following criteria:

- 1) There is a significant central thesis:
- 2) Effective argument for the thesis or major ideas
- 3) Organization is strong and systematic.
Paragraphs are focused, coherent, unified and developed. Transitions between paragraphs are smooth
- 4) Grammar, punctuation, syntax, and format are correct
- 5) Depth of analysis
- 6) Adopts critical and objective perspective on the subject matter
- 7) Sources are varied, appropriate and sufficient

Teaching Practices

In my courses, I try to utilize as many different teaching styles as possible so that as many students as possible will be engaged. Some of these different styles include the traditional lecture, small group projects, in-class discussion, and student presentations. I try to make students aware of the impact Islam has had, and continues to have, on different societies and cultures. For example, in my Introduction to Islam class, I show my students different artistic expressions of Muslim cultures. We discuss how Muslims shaped and molded local cultures wherever they went. I also emphasize that Muslims appropriated some of the cultures they encountered.

In addition, I sometimes I break up my students into small groups and ask them to actively deliberate on thought-provoking

questions and to present their conclusions to the class. I also offer students opportunities to make short presentations in class. Such strategies encourage them to analyze and research the issues we discuss in class. Students' appreciation of my

pedagogical methods and techniques is demonstrated by the fact that I have consistently scored high grades in their evaluation of my classes.

