

# The world comes to Qatar: Interfaith conversations in an Arab land

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

The nation of Qatar, roughly the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island, is the world's leading producer of natural gas and has the highest per capita income of any country in the Arab world. A few decades ago it was a tribal society with an economy based largely on fishing, pearl harvesting and camel and horse breeding. In 1995 a bloodless coup in which Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa deposed his father set the stage for the modernization of the country's oil and gas industries and for stunning economic growth. Qatar's economy grew 24 percent in 2006 alone, according to the U.S. State Department, and its per capita income that year was \$61,540. Qatar is on track to become the wealthiest nation (on a per capita basis) in the world.

The vast majority of Qatar's population lives in or around the capital city of Doha. Qatari citizens have benefited enormously from the economic boom, but they are a small minority in their own country, roughly 20 percent. The majority of the inhabitants are expatriates who come to Qatar to work—from other Arab nations, from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, and from the West.

Qatar, which became independent from Great Britain in 1971, has long been ruled by the Al-Thani family. The emir, selected from within that family, rules in accordance with Shari'a law and in consultation with members of his and other leading families, though some moves have been made toward having elections and a more parliamentary form of government. In 1992, following the war in Kuwait, Qatar signed a defense agreement with the United States which allowed the U.S. to build in Qatar its largest military base in the Middle East and the headquarters for CENTCOM, the U.S. Central Command for the Middle East.

Sheikh Hamad, as Qatar's current emir, has introduced many changes, including a certain amount of freedom of the press and of religion. Al-Jazeera, a broadcasting company that is viewed as the freest in the Arab world, was established in 1997. Its broadcasts are often critical of other governments in the area, but not of Qatar. In

March a Catholic church opened in Doha; while there were various places of Christian worship previously, this was the first building in centuries to be erected as a Christian church in the country. Significantly, it does not display the cross on any of its outer walls. Plans are being made for a Greek Orthodox church, an Anglican church, a Coptic church, and a church for Christian traditions from India, which will also include a space for nondenominational worship.

Not all Qataris are pleased with such openings to Christianity. Most of the country's citizens adhere to Islam's conservative Wahhabi movement. In the Islamic tradition, there is a hadith in which Muhammad says that Christians should not be allowed in the holy areas. Some Qatari Muslims believe that this principle should apply to the entire Arabian Peninsula, including Qatar. A vigorous debate in the local press took place over the building of the Catholic church, and worries were expressed about a possible violent protest. When Georgetown University's Qatar branch tried to import Christian Bibles for one of its theology courses, the Bibles were held up at customs for six weeks until the ministry of education was able to confirm that they were intended for educational purposes at the university.

Yet in other ways openness to the West is part of Qatar's agenda. The Qatar Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by the emir, is inviting applications for membership in the Qatar Symphony Orchestra. In February, Placido Domingo came to sing with the German orchestra of Baden-Baden.

An aura of artificiality envelops many things in Doha. The shopping mall Villaggio is built as a replica of Venice, with gondoliers waiting to take shoppers for a ride along a canal that goes past the shops toward an ice skating rink. Above the mall's entrance are murals depicting Venetian architecture.

Adding to the city's artificiality is the fact that most of the expatriates have little contact with Qataris or with Islamic culture. And most of the buildings—largely constructed since the early 1990s—follow modern Western architectural styles.

Education is a realm in which Qatar has invested a great deal in opening itself to the West. Since the 1980s, the country's leaders have been concerned about the quality of the educational system and its ability to prepare students for contemporary economic and social life. It is in this rapidly changing context that the 2,500-acre Education City was founded in 1997. Its Web site offers this rationale: "Qatar Foundation understands that the future of Qatar and the region depends on well-

educated citizens, actively engaged in the international marketplace of ideas, creating and finding uses for new knowledge. At Qatar Foundation, we believe that today's investments in education will make Qatar a hub of innovative education and cutting-edge research, ensuring Qatar's prosperity far into the future."

Three years ago Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., set up in Qatar a branch of its School of Foreign Service. Georgetown is one of several U.S. universities that have established a campus in the country. Virginia Commonwealth teaches communication design, fashion design and interior design; Carnegie Mellon University Qatar, business and computer science; Texas A & M University at Qatar, chemical, electrical, mechanical and petroleum engineering; Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, premedical and medical studies leading to the M.D. degree. Next year Northwestern University will begin teaching journalism in the country. These are not traditional study-abroad centers for American students but rather campuses of the home university that offer full-degree programs.

Students at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service- Qatar are mostly Sunni Muslims, along with some Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Baha'is. As a Jesuit university, Georgetown requires undergraduates to take two courses in theology. I've encountered more energy in these classes than in any others I've taught. Students are eager to learn about religions other than their own, and their discussions of religious differences can move quickly into emotional disputes, with Sunni students vigorously criticizing Shi'a students, or more traditional students vehemently rejecting the views of more progressive students. I have heard anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic comments. In one class discussion, a Hindu student insisted that Hinduism is monotheistic; to demonstrate her point, she read a text of the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit, then translated and commented on it. In class, no other students disagreed with her, but afterward, outside of class, she was accosted and harshly criticized. To some students, Hinduism must be condemned as polytheistic.

The classroom also offers remarkable moments of interreligious exchange, as when a Hindu student queries a Muslim classmate about various aspects of the Islamic tradition, and vice versa. Muslim students are quite sensitive to the negative images of Islam that prevail in the West. Even students who are critical of other traditions appear interested in discussions of interreligious dialogue and the role of religion in peacemaking.

One student told me that in her earlier schooling she had absorbed extremely negative attitudes toward all other religions and that the Georgetown courses were her first opportunity to learn about other traditions in a more open-minded atmosphere. Some Muslims have accused her and others of being infidels because of their more benign attitudes toward other religions. A Baha'i student recalled her earlier sense of fear that people would attack her for following a different religious tradition; she appreciates the atmosphere at Georgetown, in which students can talk openly about different religions. Another student noted that learning about other religions can go two ways; it can strengthen one's faith or it can weaken it.

In my course World Religions Today, students read a book on the place of women in various religious traditions. In reference to this topic, one Qatari Muslim student noted that people in the West frequently accuse Islam of having negative attitudes toward women. She said that in reading the book she had learned that the treatment of women is a problem everywhere and that the real problem is not religion but rather the various cultures that mistreat women.

I invited a Conservative Jewish woman who is studying to be a rabbi to speak to one class. The students, most of whom were female, were amazed and delighted at the opportunity to converse with her. A number of students commented that they had no idea that a woman could study to be a rabbi in any form of Judaism. And at least in the class discussion, none of the common anti-Jewish attitudes that circulate in the Arab world surfaced.

One student said that in my course The Problem of God, she had been scared that she would be attacked if she questioned Islam. A Shi'a student acknowledged that she felt the same way around Sunni Muslims, who view her as an infidel.

A fair amount of religious intolerance circulates through Qatari primary and secondary schools. Students at Georgetown are the only ones in Qatar with the opportunity to study theology and comparative religion in the context of a university that has a major commitment to interreligious understanding. However difficult the conversations and conflicts may be at the school, our hope is to shape a hospitable atmosphere for exploring religious differences and building healthy religious communities.

An old adage of Catholic scholasticism says: whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient. This principle is played out weekly at

Georgetown's campus in Doha, as teachers from one cultural and religious context send messages to students from very different backgrounds. Communication does take place, but always with a difference that may not be visible for some time. The project of Western education in Doha is a significant experiment whose results will be fully known only in the years and decades to come.

At the beginning of my course *The Problem of God*, the class studied a book about encountering God in Judaism. One day a student from Saudi Arabia approached me and said that previously he had known nothing about Jews except what he had been taught in his country—that they are all evil. He added that he did not share that view. I thanked God for this opening for more conversation.

Toward the end of the semester the class watched the movie *Monsieur Ibrahim*, in which an elderly Muslim gentleman in Paris (played by Omar Sharif) befriends a Jewish teenage boy. During the course of their developing friendship, the older man gives the boy his copy of the Qur'an, which contains pressed flowers. On the day we viewed the film, the Saudi student asked me if he could keep the Bible that the school had lent to him. I told him that the Bible was not mine to give, but that I would happily give him my own copy of the Bible if he came to my office the next day.

When I gave him the Bible, I thought of the movie we had seen together and wondered about the experience that this young man would have, moving beyond his upbringing to an engagement with the world's religious heritage.