

Liberal arts for Muslims: Scott Korb on Zaytuna College

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue



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*Scott Korb, coauthor of *The Faith Between Us*, did research on the nation's first Muslim liberal arts college and wrote a book about it: *Light without Fire*. Zaytuna College, located in Berkeley, California, near the campus of the Graduate Theological Union, describes its mission as preparing "professional, intellectual, and spiritual leaders who are grounded in the Islamic scholarly tradition and conversant with the*

cultural currents and critical ideas shaping modern society.” The college expects to have about 60 students when it begins its third year of classes this fall.

Can you briefly describe the nature of Zaytuna College?

The school originally began as a liberal arts college with two majors, one in Islamic law and theology and one in Arabic. In the second year, it shifted to a Great Books model and a focus on the seven liberal arts—logic, rhetoric, grammar, astronomy, music, geometry and math.

The school is trying to instill the moral and ethical commitments that the founders believe are the key to Islam. Academics are important, but training morally sound individuals is most important.

Why the Great Books approach?

One of the founders is Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, whose father was a student at Columbia University and studied the Great Books with Mark Van Doren, who wrote a book called *Liberal Education*. Sheikh Hamza believes in that model. He thinks that if students study the same materials, they can have a common conversation that goes back through history.

The program integrates Islamic voices into a Western tradition that to some extent has ignored them. But it also includes Western voices that haven't been considered as essential to an Islamic education.

Founders of the school talk about an “indigenous American Islam.” Can you say more about what that means?

At the intellectual level, it means an Islam that engages with American poetry, literature, history and so on and deals with figures like Thoreau, whom Sheikh Hamza mentions often.

The school also believes that there is no way for Islam to grow or to take root in this country if Muslims aren't building institutions that approach the culture with openness. It doesn't see any disconnect between being Muslim and being American, and it is trying to communicate that to the students.

Sheikh Hamza compares what Zaytuna is doing with the experiences of Catholics in this country. For a long time, Catholics were a despised minority. Then they built

institutions and started contributing to the commonweal of the country. Zaytuna's founders think that the school can be a place that trains individuals of all kinds, but who all wear the badge of Zaytuna in the world and participate in the common good. An indigenous American Islam is rooted here and looks forward to the time when Islam is as much a fabric of American culture as Catholicism is.

How important was September 11, 2001, to the founding of Zaytuna College?

Some scholars describe September 11 as a catalyst for Muslims in this country to begin organizing themselves and become more mature participants in the culture.

Yet before 9/11, Sister Marianne Farina of the Dominican School of Theology and Philosophy, one of the schools of the Graduate Theological Union, asked Sheikh Hamza: "Where are the Muslim colleges?" Whether Sheikh Hamza would have drawn the resources around him and been inspired to form a college without the events of 9/11 is hard to say, but the foundations were already in place.

Many religious liberal arts colleges face a conflict between maintaining their religious identity and pursuing a diverse student body. How does this conflict take shape at Zaytuna?

There will be a time when Zaytuna has to address those issues. For example, would a gay Muslim be accepted at the school?

Sheikh Hamza wrote recently, "While I do adhere to the tenets of my religion regarding the prohibition of same-sex relations, it is a personal commitment to my faith. But as a citizen of this country, I respect the secular principles that enable me to practice my faith freely, and I recognize and honor the rights of others to differ and to hold contrary positions."

My sense is that in time Zaytuna will begin to be populated by people who hold contrary positions. That won't be easy for the school, but I don't think that Zaytuna wants to make homosexuality a central prohibition. They are going to have to grapple with it, because there will be students who are gay. Those students will want to be there for the same reason all the other students want to be there: to learn sacred knowledge from people they believe possess it and to get what they consider to be a fine education.

The founders of the school are charismatic figures with national and international renown in Islamic circles. How does this shape the school?

It has shaped the school insofar as many of the students have wanted to attend because they want to study with Sheikh Hamza and other faculty. But the success of the school will come from demonstrating that an education at Zaytuna equips people to engage the culture in meaningful ways that honor God. The founders want the school to outlive them, so I doubt that the founders want the school to exist on their names.