

Teaching religion with the Saudis

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September 24, 2013

My mother was on the phone, her voice revealing her concern. “Everyone at church today prayed for you and your class,” she said. Later my husband’s grandmother called—again—to ask if I was okay.

I was afraid, too. I remember my hands quivering slightly as I wrote my name on the board while students I had never seen before streamed into my classroom. My job was to teach them something about religion, asking them to critically examine not just religion in general but specifics—including their own tradition. There were 30 students, all of them Muslim. Twenty-nine of them were male.

Shortly before the spring 2013 semester, the gossip networks had exploded among Texas Wesleyan University faculty: we should expect a large influx of Saudi Arabian students. It was a welcome population boost.

But I didn’t expect to find them all in my Introduction to World Religions class. The day before classes began I read over the names of the students signed up for it. My eyes moved slowly from one unfamiliar name after another. The realization began forming in my mind: I had been assigned a section of 30 new undergraduates from Saudi Arabia.

My brain raced as I simultaneously panicked and planned. What should I do first, figure out how to pronounce 30 names or learn as much about Saudi Arabian Culture as I could in 24 hours? YouTube videos became my new best friend, streaming in the background while I flipped through world religion textbooks in hopes of gleaning some useful insight.

Day one arrived. I called roll and handed out the syllabus. As students introduced themselves to one another, I did what I’d do in any other class: I anticipated ways to make connections, to take each opportunity to foster a sense of community. I shared about my background as well, about growing up on the plains of western Kansas—a place not all that different geographically from the dry sands of the Middle East.

We moved onto the syllabus and talked about some of the reasons a small, private university requires students to take a religion course. Many students, not surprisingly, had assumed this was a way to indoctrinate them into the pervasive Christian milieu they had already felt upon their arrival to the United States. That's an omnipresence we often take for granted. (I was reminded of this recently at a baseball game at which "God Bless America" was performed. I fidgeted nervously, wondering how bizarre it must sound to my German exchange student standing next to me.)

My Muslim students were surprised to find out, however, that I had no intention of making them Christians. Instead, I wanted us to explore together how various religious systems are designed to aid people in making connections: drawing us toward divinity and humanity.

Our first class discussion ensued after I commented, almost off-handedly, that linguistically the term "religion" means "to reconnect" or "to rejoin." It occurred to me—and also, judging by the puzzled faces staring at me, to them—that I had already made an assumption about religion in general that may not be as readily applicable as I had imagined.

My own experience easily allows for the idea that over the course of time, ideas are challenged and childhood memories fade. This results in a comfortable state of forgetfulness: I frequently fail to remember that I am made in the image of God, that I am somehow living in the womb of God and deriving sustenance and meaning from my inextricable relationship to God. So religion as reconnection or rejoining echoes my personal experience.

But what if others find the idea of disconnection unfathomable? What if they have no concept of Allah being absent or uninterested or uninvolved, no matter what one feels or thinks? My students' blank faces revealed the conundrum I now faced: how is it that a basic concept about religion—a foundational one for my course—has no meaning to my students?

In that moment it was clear my students would also be my teachers—that I would learn not only about teaching but also about my subject, the one on which I was supposed to be the expert. As the class session quickly drew to a close, I looked out at the unfamiliar faces looking back at me. I thought, this is going to be a good semester.