

The Historian (of Religion)'s Task, by Zayn Kassam, Pomona College

That first day of my first class on *Women in Islam*, a student raised her hand and asked: “Professor Kassam, are you Muslim?” I replied that I was. “Then how do we know you won't spend this class defending how Muslims treat their women?”

I have been thinking about that question ever since. It could legitimately be asked in all my classes: Will I be defending how Muslims write, think, act, govern, convert, pray, and now, since 9/11, kill? Without doubt, students sometimes try to push me into a defensive posture. A student once told me “Muhammad and Islam have brought nothing but trouble for Jews.” Another asked why Muslim women were “into submission.” Yet another asserted, “Everything Muslims have written about is borrowed from somewhere else, especially Christianity.”

A classroom in which students can express what's in their minds is critical to the process of learning, whether it is about Islam or not. In the first meeting of our *Women in Islam* class I draw a line down the middle of the blackboard, write “Muslim Woman” on one side and “American Woman” on the other, and ask students to tell me what adjectives come to mind. It is fascinating to watch the list appear. In making it, the students relax, knowing they don't have to be politically correct; at the same time they begin to wonder what I am going to do with it. I turn to the “American Woman” list and ask how such characteristics got there. So instead of defending the Muslim's right to create a submissive, pious, family-oriented and veiled Muslim woman, we as a class move into thinking about what kinds of social, political, economic, and cultural connections need to be made in order for women to take ownership of their own lives. Then we turn to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article “Under Western Eyes,” which outlines how we in the West construct the idea of Third World women as a category, and the students look at the “Muslim Woman” list afresh. We have begun to think critically, which is what teaching and learning are all about.

Over the semester, we consider a range of materials about patriarchy, the interpretation of religious texts, power politics, feudal models of social organization, economic realities, the legacy of colonization, the construction of the other. In one class we watched an ABC Nightline segment

on honor killings in Pakistan. When the commentator asked a panelist why brothers and fathers would kill their sisters and daughters—suggesting that Americans, of course, would never think of such a thing—a student who worked at a local rape crisis center burst out: “The family is the least safe place for women in the U.S.! What is he talking about?!!” As we make connections between forms of patriarchal power here in the U.S. and there in the Middle East and South Asia and Africa, students stop wondering if I am going to defend Muslim men's treatment of Muslim women. Rather, they become critical thinkers, able to see how a sacred text translates into something much more layered: patriarchal interpretation that underscores social arrangements, managed by legal regimes and reinforced by state, economic and educational institutions.

In their final take-home assignment, students are asked to analyze a news item relating to Muslim women, and the perspicacity of their analyses makes me proud. They have learned to see what is NOT reported, to see how a journalist's words may say more about his or her own viewpoint than about the subject, to see which institutions promote the subordination of women, and to see how women are able to give meaning to their own lives in spite of such institutions.

As I teach, the words of Jonathan Z. Smith, a pre-eminent historian of religion, ring in my mind: “The historian's task is to complicate.” I do that, in part, by making transparent the critical tools I use as a trained academic. So when Emily says it is terrible that Muhammad, a prophet, consummated a marriage with a nine-year-old, I ask Kate if she can tell us what the sources report the child herself to have thought (source criticism). I ask Michael which other societies practiced child marriage (regional and global contexts), allowing John to observe that Muhammad felt reluctant but was left with no way to save face, as the child's father insisted on a consummated marriage to consolidate kinship with the prophet-ruler (politics and power). We don't endorse Muhammad's actions, but we understand the complexities of his choice.

At the end of one semester, a student told me: “I'll never be able to say ‘Islam says...’ again.” Frequently, in place of that simplistic notion, I begin to hear something more nuanced: “Ghazzali, a twelfth-century thinker in Baghdad, said that...” Or: “The Wahhabi view of Islam is...”

My goal is a safe, yet engaged classroom, critically examining textual sources, the historical development of ideas and institutions, and analyzing the social and cultural contexts both shaping and being shaped by the various discourses and institutions claiming hegemony in the region. But will students retain any of this when they leave the class, and go on to other pursuits? In order to maximize learning opportunities, students are given many different tools through which to process the materials placed before them. Every week students post a reflection of the week's readings on Webct, where they can read other students' reflections and in addition to posting their own, comment on what someone else said. Mary, for the *Interpreting Religious Worlds* (a methods seminar required for all RS majors) class, asked, "What's the point of all this theory, anyway? It drowns out my own thought; I feel I have to ape the Great Ones." To which Eric responds, "I feel the same way sometimes, but then I find myself disagreeing with what the Great One said and so I'm learning what *I* think". He's finding his own voice. The voice takes physicality when students sign up to present the reading materials in class in which they summarize the main points and come prepared with questions for their colleagues. Students also write papers on several different topics. They attend guest lectures on related topics on campus and write a reflection on that lecture connecting it to issues pertinent to our own materials. At the end, they write a capstone essay, reflecting on all that we have done in class. For instance, in the *Comparative Studies in Religion* class, we read texts from five different religious traditions around the theme of the Divine Body. As their final exercise, students were asked to construct their own bodily theology, drawing upon the texts we had read in class. Thus, as one student reported to me, she was drawn into thinking about what DOES it mean for her to think about the cosmos and herself within it as part of the "divine" body, even though she holds a secular approach to life?

In the end, my response to that student in my first class is: I'm not going to defend how Muslims treat their women, but at the end of this course, you might. Or you might rethink the question.