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Teaching about Racial Islam in the Media and Politics

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No better time to teach how Islam is “raced” than now. Comments by the likes of Donald Trump provide excellent fodder for discussions about race, religion, and racism. It is also true that the kinds of questions asked by journalists and the stories they tell reveal the nature of anti-Muslim sentiment. This is a high impact segment of my course on Islam in the U.S. I have two goals in mind when I teach about racial Islam. First, my goal is to transform thinking and engage student commitment to concerns of social justice. I have always endeavored to encourage independent thinking among students, and while some know that to believe all Muslims are dangerous is bigoted, the everyday experience of being Muslim in this environment is alien to them. Big deal! Right? Yes, actually, it is a big deal. If students don’t understand the ramifications of the racialization of Islam, then they won’t be able to see the link between toxic public discussions about Muslims and efforts to “ban sharia,” oppose mosque construction, and the justification behind surveillance of Muslims. My second goal is to have students realize how we are all implicated in the web of destructive and divisive politics. I want to push them in the direction of participatory citizenship--action.

I titled this two-week section of the course, “Migration, citizenship, and Muslims.” The big question we pursue in this section of the course is “what are the ethical and moral obligations of a democratic society in responding to the needs of all its citizens and to its national interests abroad?”

We start with readings on migration, borders, and the terms we use to define migrants. There is a terrific essay by Bridget Hayden titled “Impeach the traitors: Citizenship, sovereignty, and nation in immigration control activism in the United States,” in which Hayden carefully unpacks the language of both sides of the debate (*Social Semiotics*, Vol. 20, No. 2, April 2010, 155-174). This essay and news articles can set the stage. Students are aware, especially if you have a diverse classroom of international students or students who are themselves undocumented. Students gain an understanding of the political implications of the terms we use. Instantly, you can connect with a reality many will personally understand.

In the next session, we look at another kind of migrant, the refugee. I have students read the United Nations definition of human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We also examine the ways in which civil society actors have taken action to push government policy. The current refugee crisis and the closing of borders in Europe provide concrete examples. We examine what is said and not said in the media. Students identify the rise of the far-right parties in Europe with the refugee crisis. I also brought in an excerpt from Trump’s interview with Anderson Cooper where he suggests that we close our borders to Muslims until we figure out “why they hate us.” Some students are outraged by Trump’s comments, but not all. The fact that so many people believe it is acceptable to hate Islam and Muslims is what frightens so many of us who teach about Islam.

I’m not apologetic in the classroom. I don’t try to explain away Daesh (ISIS). Instead, I steer the discussion to the racialization of Islam, racism, democracy and the US Bill of Rights. I explicitly request that students suspend their beliefs about Islam and Muslims when we discuss racialization and racism. I ask them to give me an opportunity to argue that the hatred of Islam and Muslims needs to be addressed in terms of racism. There are two excellent essays to support the discussion of racialization of Islam and racism. Students appreciate Moustafa Bayoumi’s “Racing Religion,” and “Rights and Rites of Citizenship,” in his collection of essays titled *This Muslim American Life*. I also have students watch an excerpt from his lecture about the book that is available on youtube. The video allows students to see and get acquainted with the person (scholar, Muslim American, immigrant, and Arab) behind the essays. The big take away from these pieces is that students get a sense of how different identities impact one’s status, access to civil rights and privileges. The conversation moves easily into comparisons with other disenfranchised communities.

By this point in the two weeks, we address the Bill of Rights. I love teaching with the U.S Constitution because one shifts the conversation away from a particular group to democratic values. We discuss what is at stake when some demand that religious others are excluded from our society. Are all truly equal in society? Who and how do some get excluded? What are our responsibilities as members of civil society to protecting the rights of all citizens? How should American values of, for example, civil rights, religious freedom and human dignity play a role in determining government policies about security and participation in wars?

Students realize how relevant these issues are either because they have friends and classmates who are Muslim, or the students are from other groups that have been discriminated or

because they take very seriously the U.S. Constitution and Jefferson's notion of inalienable rights. Here are some student responses to selected readings from this section of the course:

1. Currently, Muslims can be viewed as the 'other' and are seen as possessing a culture or set of values that is the antithesis of Western values. However, I think Muslims are in fact too broad of a category when picturing what is perceived as a threat to the culture and politics of the global West. For this reason, I especially enjoyed "Racing Religion" by Moustafa Bayoumi. I would say the group most marginalized and otherized by the West, especially Western media, are people with visibly brown skin who also happen to be Muslim, and have a traditionally Muslim name. Race is a huge factor. As we discussed last week, not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arabs. And as Bayoumi writes, "While we may be accustomed to thinking of racial definition as being determined by the color of one's skin, what we observe here is that religion in general, and Islam in particular, plays a role in adjudicating the race of immigrants seeking naturalization in the United States" (60). Someone who is dark-skinned and wears a hijab is seen as more of an 'other' than someone who is black and Christian or than someone who is a lighter-skinned Lebanese Christian, for example.
2. Thinking about religion and race in terms of citizenship is important. What does it mean to be a citizen? In the United States, citizenship is presumed to be a political title, but these readings have shown that citizenship has cultural, racial, and religious categories. Those who do not meet these categories in a way that corresponds with the hegemony are not necessarily fully barred from citizenship, but certainly face several barriers and will continue to find their citizenship challenged even after it has been officially granted to them by the government.
3. How do we de-racialize, de-criminalize, and re-educate Americans about Islam?
4. Saying that 'Islam hates us' - who is the 'us'? If the 'us' is Americans, then what about the Muslim Americans? Are they excluded from the collective 'us' by virtue of their religion? There is no validity in stating the Islamic religion preaches hatred and violence, and it's incredibly frustrating that Donald Trump is able to nonchalantly make these inaccurate claims and know that it will gain him incredible support and following.

These were not necessarily the best of the responses, but I think they were representative. Students got excited, and I think our topics and readings got them to think, talk to each other outside of class, and take seriously the political environment. For me, this section is one of my favorite sections of the course on "Islam and the U.S." and my introduction to "Global Islamic Studies." I see a lot of students get passionate, and it is exciting and gratifying to me to see them care or learn to care. In the end, this toxic environment has to change, and we can do our part in Religious Studies classrooms to move young people to action.

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