

Student teachers: Reading Augustine with Muslims

by [Paul J. Griffiths](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

The public university at which I teach has an ethnically and religiously diverse student body. Accurate figures are hard to come by because the university doesn't officially collect the data, but probably about half the undergraduates are Catholic, one-quarter Protestant, and perhaps 5 percent Muslim and 5 percent Jewish. This variety makes for interesting classes.

In my classes on Catholic thought I usually have a preponderance of Catholic students, but also there are always serious Protestants of various stripes—one or two of whom are there to gather intelligence about what's really wrong with Catholicism (they're sure that something is but often not quite sure what)—and, more and more often, serious Muslims. These last are in some ways the best thing about the classes.

For example: In spring 2006 I taught an upper-level undergraduate seminar on the thought of Augustine. The course attracted 20 or so students, including two very serious young Muslim women. During the 15-week semester we did nothing but read, discuss and analyze writings by Augustine (in English). I wanted the students to get a substantial, unfiltered dose of the fourth-century theologian. We read works of his on sex and virginity, on the interpretation of scripture, on politics, on what it means to pray, on how to think about the Holy Trinity, and more.

Augustine isn't easy. His prose, while elegant, is dense and allusive and often white-hot with passion; and what he has to say is often baffling and sometimes repellent to Americans born around 1985, which most of these American students were. Nevertheless, the students were engaged and responsive, some of them passionately so. I'd expected, and I got, the objections characteristic of people living in a pagan, late-capitalist society such as ours.

But I also got from my Muslim students what I hadn't quite expected: the view, strongly argued, that Augustine isn't serious enough about scripture, that he's an idolater, that the respect with which he treats and the frequency with which he quotes pagan literature—the works of Virgil, Cicero and so on—is unbecoming for a

serious Christian, and that on the differences between the sexes he is, perhaps, a little too egalitarian.

These were good and useful responses, the responses of people who had deep convictions about matters close to those about which Augustine wrote, and who were as a result prepared to take him seriously. Some of the responses reprised Christian-Muslim differences with a very long history. There was, for instance, the view that Augustine's trinitarianism is incompatible with a strict and proper monotheism, and that trinitarianism is inextricably intertwined with an impossible claim, which is that God, the Lord of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Jesus and Muhammad, became incarnate as a particular human being.

This is why these students took Augustine to be an idolater: his understanding of God was sufficiently distant from theirs that they judged him, rightly by their own standards, to be talking not about Allah, but rather about a creature of his (and perhaps more generally of the Christian) imagination.

My Muslim students were also astonished by the fact that Augustine could not read the scripture he quoted in the language of its composition. Didn't this mean, they asked, that he wasn't really reading the word of God, but rather some translated simulacrum thereof? And didn't it also mean that he couldn't be sure whether his translations were reliable? How then could he know what God wanted to say?

They pointed with glee and laughter to the many places in Augustine's commentaries in which he discusses different Latin versions of a Greek or Hebrew original and speculates about which is the best rendering. Might this not mean that Jewish and Christian scripture has become seriously corrupt? And they often wondered about why Augustine is so willing to say that scripture is sometimes not easily understood, and that this is a good thing because it gives us reason to go on reading it. Shouldn't scriptural texts be more transparent than Augustine makes them seem?

These interventions, which occurred both in class discussions and in office-hours visits, enlivened the class enormously and permitted characteristically Christian understandings of God, scripture and associated matters to stand forth with a clarity which would have otherwise been difficult to achieve. My effort to explain what Augustine meant was enhanced by these Muslim students with their deeply felt and strongly argued views about matters closely similar to those that concerned

Augustine, but views profoundly different in substance.

The fact that these students wanted to engage Augustine on his own ground is important. The usual modern objections to Augustine—he's just too severe; he hates women and/or sex; he's a theocrat; why does he want to impose his views on everyone else?—are at too great a distance from Augustine to permit genuine engagement with him. Responding to those objections requires endless ground-clearing, so that Augustine himself, in text and texture, is never really approached. But these Islamic responses were already right there, just around the corner from Augustine. Mutual illumination was the result.

My Muslim students represented to me with vigor a tradition of whose rightness they were sure. So did I to them, to the best of my ability. This exchange, you might think, is dangerous or anti-intellectual or something else equally unpleasant. But it isn't. It's an ordinary feature of intellectual life, however much we might try to occlude it by talk of objectivity and dispassionate distance. My students' vigor, their at times polemical spirit, was in every way productive for me and, so far as I could tell, for others in the class.

That this was so shows that we are, both in our universities and in our public life, altogether too frightened of vigorous disagreement about matters of unsurpassable importance for our common life. Such disagreement can be enormously productive intellectually, as it was in this class.

It may be productive in other ways too: one of my Muslim students made serious efforts to convert me by bringing me tracts and explaining to me the benefits of Islam; I responded with what I hope was graceful explanation of Christianity's gift and promise, of its difference from Islam as I understood it, and of the blessings that Jesus Christ was even now showering upon her. I told her that I would pray for her; she said that she would do the same for me.

It may be that public universities, committed in their rhetoric to an incoherent version of secularist objectivism, have paradoxically, and largely against their intentions, become sites for a kind of theological education impossible in Christian seminaries, divinity schools or church-related colleges and universities. If this is so, it's because public universities are hospitable to those, like my Muslim students (and some of my Christian ones), who reject the universities' fundamental assumptions about what human flourishing is. That may be a great blessing; it certainly makes for interesting classes. n