Faith under scrutiny: My semester teaching Saudis

by Kendra Weddle in the June 11, 2014 issue

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My hands quivered a little as I wrote my name on the board on the first day of class. My job was to help the students critically examine not just religion in general but specifics, including their own tradition. And in this case, that meant teaching world religions to 30 Muslim students from Saudi Arabia.

Shortly before the spring 2013 semester began, the faculty at Texas Wesleyan University heard rumors about a large influx of Saudi Arabian students. But I didn't expect to find all of them in my world religions class.

I simultaneously panicked and planned. What should I do first: figure out how to pronounce the students' names or learn as much about Saudi Arabian culture as I could? YouTube videos on the country became my new best friend, streaming in the background while I flipped through world religion textbooks in hopes of gleaning some useful insight.

On day one 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: sought ways to make

connections and foster a sense of community. I shared my own background of growing up on the plains of western Kansas.

But this wasn’t just like any other class. I was nervous, unsure how to navigate this unfamiliar territory of stark religious and cultural contrasts. As I called each name, I was bewildered: How would I learn to distinguish between Meshaal and Mashael or Mouhanad and Muhannad? Before we parted that first day, I told them how I felt. “I’m a little anxious,” I said, “and I am glad to be your teacher. I’m looking forward to getting to know you, and I hope you will experience warm hospitality while you are here.”

I was surprised by the students’ rapid affirmations. They were expecting to adapt to American culture and to experience university education the same way any other student would. They seemed to respond well to my confession of anxiety. At the start of our second session, one of them gave me an Arabic coffee to enjoy while leading the class. More important, the students seemed open to a sustained interfaith exchange.

Our forays into indigenous religions and Hinduism were lively and engaging. Storytelling is a key component of most indigenous religions, and we made a tangible connection to this by sharing stories from our own lives. I read them numerous Native American and Hindu myths, stories of the Great Spirit and Ganesh that invited us to plumb their depths for meaning and insight. We explored the often misunderstood divine figures in Hinduism, learning to distinguish monotheism and polytheism. And we practiced yoga at the campus fitness center.

Actually, just the 29 male students and I went to the fitness center. The class’s only female student opted for a separate session in the privacy of my office, where we tried several poses together. Then she showed me pictures of her infant son who lives in Saudi Arabia with her parents—a situation necessitated by the time she and her husband need to complete their degrees in the United States. I wondered if she knew that her courageous spirit was inspiring.

We moved on to Buddhism, and I read the students multiple stories of Buddha, culminating with a few parallel sayings of Buddha and Jesus. How is it possible, they asked, that these two figures could convey such remarkably similar things and not live in the same time and place? They were asking some critical questions.

A few days later we went on a field trip to a Buddhist monastery. For most students, this was their first time inside a place of worship that wasn't a mosque. After carefully explaining that I was not requiring them to participate in meditation (although I did expose them to short periods of meditation in our classroom), I invited them to explore the temple and its grounds.

The students displayed a remarkable curiosity about Buddhism, asking me numerous questions and taking scores of pictures with their phones. An epiphany occurred when we gathered in the temple, where the expansive space and burning incense immediately created a familiar feeling: the temple was not so different from their Saudi mosques. As we talked more about our Buddhist encounter later, the East-West distinctions faded while the similarities between Muhammad and the Buddha took on greater dimension. I reflected with satisfaction on how far my Saudi students and I had traveled.

The next topic was Judaism. Studying this faith, with its emphasis on practice as opposed to doctrine, created an uneasy tone in the classroom that had previously been absent. When I told them about the Jewish practice of questioning God—evident, for example, when Abraham negotiates with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah—some students were astonished. How could anyone presume such a disrespectful relationship with the Almighty?

My students' anxieties deepened when we turned to Christianity. The Catholic sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking* and an eloquent opponent of capital punishment, happened to be on campus at the time, which seemed almost providential. Her conviction that violence can never be theologically justified would offer the Saudi students an example of someone who approaches her own religious tradition critically, identifies cultural assumptions, and is wary of religious claims of authority.

In preparation for Prejean's lecture, we watched the acclaimed film based on her memoir. My students were firm in their responses: convicted murderer Matthew Poncelet deserved to die. Nothing Prejean did or said weakened their position. The Bible and Islam were agreed on this point: an eye for an eye.

A few days later we gathered in the university church to hear Prejean in person. She was affable and engaging, challenging and clear. But my students were unmoved by her argument. Our group waited together while Prejean kindly signed scores of

books. When it was our turn, one student leaned in close, as if to separate himself from the rest of us. He asked her what it was like for her to watch another human being die. I wondered if his interest was driven by a curiosity about the physiological details or something deeper. Sister Helen answered simply and quietly: “It literally changed my life.” But that was a change, it was clear, that my Saudi students were not prepared to make.

When we turned to Islam, I asked my Saudi students to exercise their developing analytical skills on the Qur’an and on their own faith. I wasn’t surprised that they resisted, since I know that many Christian students do the same. The students rehearsed the certainties of faith: the Qur’an is a divine document with no cultural biases; the Sufi tradition is not an expression of true Islam; Allah is known only through the path of Islam.

The discussion was not, in the end, all that I had hoped for when I began. Yet my Saudi students and I were able to narrow the gap between the familiar and the exotic—a good first step in establishing religious understanding. Perhaps the second, more difficult task we all need to undertake—combining rigorous analysis with faithful convictions—will follow. Regardless, we experienced what some would call a major goal of religion itself: the transformative potential of human relationship.