One Classroom, Different Perspectives: Promoting Mutual Understanding between “Secular” and “Religious” Students of Islamic Studies in Russia and the United States

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Abstract

The article discusses the results from several co-taught courses in Islamic studies shared as a virtual exchange between the University of Michigan (U-M), USA, and Saint Petersburg State University (SPbU), Russian Federation. These courses were designed and taught to expand the range of perspectives to which students were exposed and allow them to learn how their study subject is conceptualized and studied by their peers in the partner country. The SPbU student cohort included graduates of Islamic religious colleges from different regions of the Russian Federation who shared the classroom with “secular” university students specializing in Islamic studies. The U-M cohort included students of various religious, ethnic, and academic backgrounds. In addition to weekly online meetings, the international teams met virtually outside class to prepare questions for weekly synchronous discussions and to work on a group presentation to be delivered at the end of the semester.

Keywords

Islamic studies – religious education – secular education – student exchange
One Classroom, Different Perspectives

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فصل دراسي واحد، وجهات نظر مختلفة: تعزيز التفاهم المتبادل
بين طلاب الدراسات الإسلامية في روسيا والولايات المتحدة

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ملخص
يناقش هذا البحث نتائج العديد من الدورات الدراسية المشتركة في الدراسات الإسلامية في الجامعة المشتركة في الدراسات الإسلامية في جامعة ميشيغان، والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، وجامعة سانت بطرسبورغ الدولية، الاتحاد الروسي. وتتم تصميم هذه الدورات وتدريسها لتوسيع نطاق وجهات النظر التي تعرض لها الطلاب والسماح لهم بمعارف كيفية تصور موضوع دراستهم ودراسته من قبل أقرانهم في الدولة الشقيقة. ضمت مجموعة طلاب جامعة خريجي الكليات الدينية الإسلامية من جميع أنحاء الاتحاد الروسي الذين تفاهموا الفصول الدراسية مع طلاب الجامعات U-M مثلاً من خلفيات دينية وعرقية وأكاديمية مختلفة. بالإضافة إلى الاجتماعات الأسبوعية عبر الإنترنت، اجتمعت الفرق الدولية خارج الفصل لإعداد أمثلة للمناقشات الأسبوعية والعمل على عرض تقديمي جماعي يتم تقديمه في نهاية الفصل الدراسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية
الدراسات الإسلامية - التعارف العلماني - تقديم الطلبة

1 Background and Rationale

The political and religious authorities of the countries of the European Union and the Russian Federation seek to integrate their Muslim populations by...
placing “secular” and “religious” students in the same classroom and allowing them to study and exchange their views on Islam and Islamic studies. The goal is to achieve mutual understanding between the two groups of students destined to live in the same society and to bring secular and religious educational systems and philosophies closer. To this end, faculties of Islamic studies were established in several EU countries. This initiative is especially noticeable at German universities, such as Tübingen. In the Netherlands, there is the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS) that organizes seasonal schools for religious and secular teachers of Islamic studies, network days, and other educational activities on themes fundamental to the study of Islam and Muslim societies.

Similar goals are pursued by the authorities of the Russian Federation, whose Muslim population is estimated around 20 million people, representing some 30 different nationalities. In 2013, the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Russian Federation, headed by the country’s chief religious authority, Mufti Ravil (Rāwī) Gaynetdin (ʿAyn al-Dīn), and his first deputy Damir Mukhetdinov (Ḍamīr Muḥyī al-Dīn), launched an experiment in “integrated education.” This experiment brought together graduates of Islamic religious colleges (classified as “religious” students) and universities with students pursuing BA and MA degrees in Islamic studies as an academic rather than a religious discipline (classified as “secular” students).

2 Integrated Education through Telecommunication in St. Petersburg and Michigan

In 2016–2020, my colleagues in the US and Russia and I taught several joint courses on various sub-fields of Islamic studies (Sufism, Islamic Intellectual History, Islam and/in Russia, and the Qur’ān). Our overall goal was to expose the internally diverse groups of our students to a wide range of interpretations of Islam while also allowing them to learn about the educational methods and
general educational philosophy of the partner country. The student profiles are as follows: students from St. Petersburg were undergraduate and graduate students majoring in Middle Eastern, Arabic, and Islamic Studies, as well as some non-majors specializing in the humanities and social sciences, current and future religious teachers and leaders (imāms, press-secretaries of religious boards, instructors), and volunteers from other academic programs interested in Islamic studies. The U-M cohort consisted of students of various religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds, including practicing and non-practicing Muslims from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. The SPbU cohort also included practicing and non-practicing Muslims representing different ethnic groups of the Russian Federation, especially Tatars, Bashkirs, Daghestanis, Chechens, and Ingush.

Outside class, students discussed reading assignments with partners and posted discussion question(s) on the shared Google Drive specifically created for the course. Class discussions were conducted via synchronous video conference using the BlueJeans cloud service. The last class on the Qurʾān in 2020 was taught via Zoom, which created some technical problems that were eventually resolved. The final assignment for each course included group projects in which students chose a research topic of interest, studied it collectively and individually, and then presented it to the class as a team at the end of the semester. In preparing their presentations, students exchanged notes and slides with their partners via the Google folder allocated to each group.

During group discussions, the instructors observed the following general patterns. For example, “religious” students
- tended to quote the Qurʾān, prophetic sayings (ḥadīth), and the founders of their “native” theological/juridical school (Ḥanafism, Māturīdism, and Shāfiʿism) to make their arguments and defend their intellectual positions;
- used examples almost exclusively from the Muslim world (especially from their native region) and the standard Muslim accounts of Islamic history, jurisprudence (fiqh), and theology (kalām).

On the other hand, “secular” students
- tended to use academic analyses and arguments from the readings assigned to them;
- were interested in comparative perspectives, bringing into discussion references to other religious and philosophical systems, cultures, and academic disciplines. For example, students cited Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, European philosophy, political science, anthropology, area studies, and women’s and gender studies.

In summary, students from religious educational institutions were less prone to use examples from the historical experiences of societies outside the Muslim
world (for example, the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism in Europe). In other words, they used the views of their own theological and legal schools as their principal benchmark. “Secular” students from both St. Petersburg and Michigan preferred to support their intellectual positions with arguments taken from academic sources that, as a rule, did not advance any version of Islam as exclusively true or authentic. These differences may stem from the fact that “secular” students usually had a better reading knowledge of English, the language of most reading assignments. On the other hand, these differences can also be attributed to the differences in the religious-versus-secular educational systems in the Russian Federation, which can be summarized as follows:

- Islamic religious education is tightly focused on the Qurʾān, the Sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the teachings of various legal and theological schools (*madhhabs*) (mostly Hanafī and Shāfiʿī) while providing solid training in classical and modern standard Arabic. Muslim educational institutions in Russia and the former Soviet Union generally promote the normativity of religious discourse, which translates into their graduates’ focus on defining “orthodoxy” and identifying “heterodoxy.”

- Russian secular Islamology emphasizes philological skills in Arabic and other languages of Islam and assigns to students both religious and non-religious texts during instruction. Religious treatises and creeds are used alongside “profane” pre-Islamic and Islamic lyrical poetry and medieval and modern fiction, especially short stories and rhymed novellas known as *maqāmāt*. Like the “religious” students, their “secular” classmates in St. Petersburg had a good grasp of the formative period of Islam and early Islamic history. Yet, both cohorts occasionally had difficulty articulating their ideas in English and had to be assisted by the instructors.

- Students trained in the US, both Muslim and non-Muslim, were more interested in analysis and theories current in sociology, literary criticism, and anthropology to which they had been exposed at U-M and other teaching institutions in North America. They were generally not shy about expressing their ideas and opinions, even when they did not know all the facts that were known to their partners from Russia.

- Both cohorts of students were keenly interested in contemporary events in the Muslim world and in the regions where Muslims live as a minority (which is the case in both Russia and the US). The instructors did not prevent the students from discussing these events, occasionally at the expense of the topics announced in the course syllabus.

As for joint presentations, both cohorts of students showed interest in the Islamic arts, including calligraphy, various interpretations of the Qurʾān,
influence of Islam on statecraft/governance, the role and scope of the Sharīʿa in Muslim societies and the Muslim diaspora in the West and the Russian Federation, Islamic mysticism (Sufism), jihād, the Ḥanafi legal school (madḥ-hab), Islamic philosophy and its major representatives, the ideas and agendas of modern Muslim thinkers, and Tatar-Bashkir reformers of the 19th–20th centuries CE.

While working in groups, students eagerly exchanged resources not readily available to their partners, consulted them regarding facts and events they felt they needed to learn better, and occasionally shared their personal spiritual and quotidian experiences and insights. Such exchanges helped them to learn about their partners’ cultures and personal interests, which expanded their intellectual horizons.

3 Pedagogical Strategies

The instructors encouraged students to leave their ideological comfort zones and invited them to engage in mock debates between various schools of thought and law in Islam. For example, students were asked to stage a debate between traditionalists (ḥadīth folk; ahl al-ḥadīth) and rationalists (Muʿtazilites and philosophers) or between Ashʿarites and the Ḥanbalites. During such debates, one could occasionally hear such statements as: “Because I was asked to represent the Muʿtazilite school, I will argue that …”; “I personally do not think so, but because I represent here the Ḥanbalī school, I believe that …”

Besides these mock debates, students did not shy away from articulating their views on various topics, such as the status of women in Islam and militancy in the name of Islam. In particular, the instructors pointed out the recurrence of the insider-versus-outsider approaches to studying Islam. The insiders, usually religious students of Muslim heritage or so-called “ethnic” Muslims, often behaved like normative (constructive or systematic) theologians. The outsiders, in this case, secular students specializing in Islamic studies, usually positioned themselves as disinterested and objective observers. On closer examination, however, they often unwittingly displayed some misconceptions and prejudices about Islam and Muslims current in their respective societies. This observation applies to students in both Michigan and St. Petersburg.

Typical in this respect is the way the two cohorts of students treated Sufism, a subject of heated polemic between the fundamentalists (Salafis) and traditionally minded Muslims today. Religious students often viewed Sufism with suspicion and focused on its compliance or non-compliance with the creed
and practice of their juridical-theological school (*madhhab*). Curiously, such normative-minded students approached Sufism as outsiders, because they did not associate themselves with the Sufi tradition and positioned themselves as defenders of the purity of the Islamic dogma (either Ḥanafī-Māturīdī or Salafī) against what they considered a “heretical innovation” (*bidʿa*). On the other hand, secular students specializing in Islamic studies and other academic subjects and geographical regions were often sympathetic to mystical Islam as an expression of a refined, supra-confessional spirituality and defended its precepts almost as insiders. They were also more prone than their religious classmates to draw comparisons between Sufism and Christian or Buddhist monasticism and mysticism.

### 4 Student Impressions of Collaborative Learning

Based on several surveys of student experiences in collaborative classes, students emphasized that they most valued (1) the dynamic and stimulus of collective work, (2) communications with partners of vastly different cultural and ideological backgrounds, (3) incentives to develop and formulate an independent perspective on the subject to share it with partners, (4) mutual caring, support and collaboration within partnerships. Within the groups created by the instructors based on interests and academic levels, advanced students significantly enriched the learning experience of junior students, stimulating them to consider specific topics more profoundly or to find extracurricular sources dealing with them. In one case, a student altered the subject of her graduate thesis in response to conversations she held with her group partner. Students also reported pushing boundaries, working with resources not represented in their curriculum, or needing to be more available to others in their group. For example, one group chose to present the difference between the Ashʿarite and Māturīdī theological doctrines precisely because the latter school is usually overlooked in North American survey courses on Islam in favor of the former.

Regarding the overall dynamic of international partnerships, the secular SPbU BA students generally communicated better with their Michigan partners than their religious SPbU peers, perhaps due to the former cohort’s superior command of English. Instant communication tools, especially WhatsApp and FaceTime, were commonly used in successful partnerships. In less successful partnerships, the significant problems cited were a lack of or delay in their partners’ responses, the time difference (eight hours), and the absence of initiative on one or both sides.
5 Conclusions

Availing ourselves of the pedagogies and technologies of virtual exchange, my colleagues in St. Petersburg and Michigan and I designed and taught several joint courses on Islamic studies, connecting students in the Russian Federation and the United States. The courses significantly enriched the study of the subject by including perspectives from different countries and religious and academic backgrounds through weekly discussions of course readings, questions prepared by students, and group work on assignments outside of class. Students acquired and expanded their linguistic and communication skills while also being exposed to source material and educational approaches that they would have been unlikely to have encountered otherwise.

My colleagues and I look forward to teaching joint courses at our institutions in the future. We enjoyed the opportunity and challenge of creating and sustaining a close-knit textual and intellectual community driven by the common goal of discovering and testing various conceptualizations of Islam and approaches to its intellectual production and moral-ethical precepts, as well as cultural and historical legacies. In the process, we learned how to deal effectively and impartially, to the extent this is possible, with multi-lingual, multi-denominational, and multi-ethnic student contingents from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Despite the abovementioned difficulties, my colleagues and I consider these courses successful and hope our pedagogical experiment will encourage others to follow suit.