

## **Teaching this Course for the First Time**

Prior to my present academic appointment I was one-half of a two-person Religion and Philosophy Department at another institution where I was responsible for teaching everything on the Religion side. In that role I became quite familiar with the challenges associated with teaching outside one's comfort zone. Some semesters I felt like I didn't have a comfort zone as the demands of the curriculum meant I had to stretch myself quite thin and venture into areas I felt woefully unprepared to enter. But I (and the students) managed to get through things just fine, and in the process I learned much about myself and the field of Religious Studies.

Perhaps this is the situation you find yourself in as you prepare to teach a course on the Qur'an for the first time. These words of encouragement and advice are meant to make that prospect a little less daunting and intimidating. One of the first issues you'll confront is the fact that, in all likelihood, most of your students will have very little familiarity with the Qur'an but they'll all have an opinion about it. To further complicate things, many of their preconceptions will be misconceptions based on stereotypes, rumors, and misinformation.

This is an excellent teaching opportunity that shouldn't be passed up! It's something you should address on the very first day of class. If you can, devote the entire period to a discussion of students' perceptions of the Qur'an and Islam. Encourage them to think about what their views are based on, and remind them that their attitudes will likely change during the semester. In this way you'll be setting the tone for the rest of the course and sending an early signal to the students that they are about to embark on a serious inquiry into an often misunderstood faith that will be based on facts, not opinions.

*Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader* adopts a thematic approach to study of the Qur'an by examining seven topics of interest to modern readers. You will be able to draw upon

many of the methods and tools of biblical studies or other areas of the study of Religion to help your students work their way through the book and deepen their understanding of the Qur'an. Two aspects of academic study of Religion that are mentioned repeatedly throughout the book are context and interpretation. In the classroom you can make use of these concepts to address many sections of the Qur'an that are often considered to be problematic or controversial, like its view of women and its seeming endorsement of violence. Students should be constantly reminded that, like any other text, the Qur'an emerged within and responded to a particular historical context, and the interplay between context and interpretation continues to loom large into the present day. The latter point is stressed frequently in the book through treatments of how modern interpreters—both Muslim and non-Muslim—have attempted to offer fresh readings that challenge traditional ways of understanding certain passages.

The affinities between the Qur'an and the Bible or other sacred texts you have studied can be effectively and creatively engaged in the classroom. The important differences between the two texts should not be whitewashed or ignored, but the presence of biblical themes and figures in the Qur'an can help the student who is familiar with the Bible think about the Islamic text in new ways. Many of these shared themes and characters are mentioned in the book, and they can serve as a good starting point for a discussion of the similarities and differences between the Bible and the Qur'an.

Depending on the makeup of the class, another useful resource might be the Muslim students who are taking your course. As with any group of students, some Muslim ones are more reserved and do not get very involved in classroom discussions. But those who are comfortable doing so should be encouraged to share their beliefs and experiences with the rest of the class because of the special relationship they have with the Qur'an. You might feel a bit strange or awkward at

first by the presence of Muslims students in your class, but they bring a unique perspective to a course related to Islam that can benefit all involved. Nonetheless it's important to keep in mind that, just like Jewish and Christian students in Bible-related courses, Muslim students sometimes come into Qur'an courses with their own preconceptions about their sacred text that will be challenged during the semester.

There has been a virtual explosion of books related to Islam and the Qur'an in recent years, and the list grows longer every day. The following bibliography identifies some that will prove useful to you as you prepare your course. The most thorough multi-volume work is the recently published *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill, 2005).

### **Books on Islam**

Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (Modern Library, 2000).

John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

John Kaltner, *Islam: What Non-Muslims Should Know* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999).

### **Books on the Qur'an**

M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 1999).

Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 1999).

Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).