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What's So Bad about Polygamy? Teaching American Religious History in the Muslim Middle East

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From 2007 to 2009, I taught at the American University in Cairo (auc), a private university with a mostly Arab and Muslim undergraduate population. The university features an American liberal arts–style curriculum and all instruction is conducted in English. The nearly five thousand full-time undergraduates come primarily from Egypt (over 80 percent), with others hailing from around the Arab world (primarily Jordan, Palestine, and the Arabian Peninsula) and a few from sub-Saharan Africa, the United States, western Europe, and elsewhere. auc is prestigious and expensive, particularly in the context of a nation with overwhelming poverty, and thus attracts students mostly from Egypt's elite political, military, and business classes. Given the similar national and socioeconomic background of most auc attendees, however, the student body is remarkably diverse in terms of ideological orientation and religious commitment, ranging from the (more or less) secular Left to affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. This is reflected in the dress on campus, where you will find, on the one hand, many students sporting the latest Western fashions, and, on the other hand, many male students with untrimmed beards (usually indicating a conservative or traditional religious orientation) and female students wearing modest dresses and the hijab (veil). A significant number of students seem to bridge both worlds, or to be caught in between, such as women who simultaneously wear tight designer clothing and the hijab. All of the students are fully modern, with the latest cellular telephones and iPods, though most have a conflicted relationship with the West (and especially with the United States). Typically, they embrace America's consumer products and technology but express reservations with (and sometimes strong opposition to) its political and economic policies, particularly as they impact the Middle East.

As the lone historian of the United States on the faculty at auc, I taught the usual U.S. history survey courses and any electives I chose. In teaching electives and preparing my survey courses, I gravitated toward my own research interests, which include American religious history. Happily, my interests and those of many of the students at auc—most of whom had never before taken a U.S. history course—seemed to coincide. Here, I will share a few of my experiences teaching American religious history to my mostly Muslim students in the Middle East. Teaching U.S. history in such a unique setting forced me to reflect on the comparative and global aspects of the field. I learned, even more profoundly than I had in an American classroom, how diverse national, cultural, and religious backgrounds condition the perspective of students as they approach the historical and historiographical issues that we, as teachers, present to them. This provides a powerful lesson about how history, though deeply concerned with fidelity to facts and sources, is ultimately an interpretive experience rooted more in our own individual and group subjectivities than many students might expect.^[1] I also witnessed part of the value of studying other times, places, and cultures—how pulling students out of their own cultural context, particularly by using interactive or immersive techniques—provided them with distance and a kind of intellectual safe place from which they could critically reflect on issues that are relevant to their own experiences. At its best, a global or comparative approach to history gives teachers and students a deeper appreciation of both the universalities and particularities of not only history but also contemporary humanity.

In two different classes at auc dealing with religion in American history, I gave my students an exercise in which they were to divide into groups of approximately nine members and then discuss famous Supreme Court cases dealing with the religious freedom and establishment clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” I provided them with the bare facts of eight to ten landmark cases, dealing with issues ranging from proselytism to public funding of buses for parochial schools to school prayer to the ritual use of

peyote. Based on nothing more than the words of the First Amendment and the brief background I provided them for each case, I charged them to consider the various facets of the issue, argue both sides, and then vote and issue a ruling.^[2] The first case on my list—indeed, the first major Supreme Court decision fixing the meaning of the First Amendment’s religious freedom clause—was *Reynolds v. United States* (1879). In this case, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) were testing and protesting the provisions of recently passed federal antipolygamy statutes on the grounds that such laws violated their freedom to practice a fundamental aspect of their religion: plural marriage. The Supreme Court in 1879 unanimously upheld antipolygamy legislation and created the distinction between belief and action that has essentially governed religious freedom law in the United States ever since. In short, the Court ruled that the First Amendment provides blanket protection for citizens to believe, but not necessarily practice, what they want, especially when certain religious practices are deemed to threaten public order or safety.^[3]

In both of my classes at auc, however, when given nothing more than the facts of the case and not informed of the Court’s decision before they made their deliberations, my students voted unanimously in favor of Mormon polygamist George Reynolds. Their reasoning was quite straightforward: polygamy was an essential part of mid-nineteenth-century Mormon theology and practice; therefore, to prohibit it—especially when consenting adults entered into those plural marriages voluntarily—was a clear violation of the Mormons’ constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom. When I revealed the Court’s historical decision, and even after extensive discussion and explanation of the justices’ rationale behind their opinion, my students collectively shook their heads in dismay and disbelief. They argued that it was hypocritical for America to claim to protect religious liberty while restricting some of its citizens from practicing a central aspect of their religion. Some cited contemporary examples, such as airport security officers forcing Muslim women to remove their veils, as proof of a seeming American double standard of religious freedom that made Reynolds seem poignantly relevant to them, sitting an ocean away and more than a century removed.

I was genuinely surprised the first time I conducted this exercise and had such univocal outrage from my students at the Reynolds decision. When I conducted the same experiment at the University of Notre Dame, my American students did exactly the opposite, voting unanimously with the 1879 Court in upholding antipolygamy legislation. When I tried to engage my American students on some of the problematic logic in the Reynolds opinion or to explain what plural marriage meant for nineteenth-century Mormons, the discussion of polygamy elicited a relatively narrow range of reactions, from tittering (mostly from the males) to disgust (mostly from the females). In contrast, my Muslim students at auc viewed polygamy as an entirely acceptable—if not always attractive—marriage practice stemming from genuine and legitimate religious revelation. None of my students expressed a particular desire to practice polygamy personally, but their religious and cultural backgrounds dictated an entirely different approach to the subject than I found among my predominantly Catholic, Protestant, and secular students in the United States.

Of course, cross-cultural exchanges offer not only exciting moments of discovery and exploration but also real pitfalls and opportunities to offend. While my discussion of polygamy and American jurisprudence was an example of the former, in my first semester at auc I stumbled into the latter—escaping thanks only to the graciousness of my students. Wanting to expose them to Native American religious beliefs and practices, I assigned *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), the narrated autobiography of an Oglala Sioux medicine man who was present at both the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876 and the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre.^[4] Throughout the book, Black Elk recounts his many visions and dreams, which more often than not came after he had been ritually smoking peyote, an integral aspect of Native American spirituality. As we read one such passage together in class, many of my students—for whom this was their first exposure to Native American culture—started snickering. When I asked them what was so funny, they said of course he had “visions” once he got high. Trying to defend the integrity of Black Elk’s experience, I countered (without forethought), “So when Moses saw God in the burning bush, was he smoking something?” I was on shaky ground, but mindlessly plowed ahead: “And when Muhammad saw the angel Gabriel and received the words of the Qur’an, was he smoking something?” Oops. Visions of certain Danish cartoons, and the violent riots that ensued across the Muslim world in response to them flashed before my eyes. The looks on my students’ faces said the rest. I backpedaled hard and fast, profusely apologizing if I had offended anyone. Fortunately my students were

quick to forgive and chalked it up to a rookie mistake. Even so, the incident made me profoundly aware that even in a university setting that embraces and seeks to train its students in the liberal arts tradition of critical thinking and analysis, certain cultural sensitivities dictate that some things not be said, or be said very circumspectly, with the greatest of caution, and in a climate of trust, respect, and understanding.^[5] While I could have predicted, had I thought before opening my mouth, that slandering the prophet Muhammad's revelatory experience would be an ineffective pedagogical technique in Cairo, Egypt, I was pleasantly surprised when certain aspects of American history fascinated my Egyptian students in ways I could not have guessed. For instance, in my short experience, there seems to be no better way to put American students to sleep than to utter the word "Puritans." It is almost magical, the way that virtually any discussion of Puritanism can completely devastate the mood of an American classroom. I suspected it would be even worse in the Middle East, where most Arab students' interest in U.S. history is focused on America as a modern global hegemon and most decidedly not on what seem to them to be the more arcane elements of America's colonial past. I was shocked, then, when my students not only stayed awake but were genuinely interested and engaged as I lectured on Puritanism and as we read a handful of sermons and other writings—including John Winthrop's famous 1630 oration, "A Modell of Christian Charity."

Encouraged by this success, in my early American history survey course I decided to incorporate an extended historical role-playing process centered on the trial of Anne Hutchinson, whose challenge to Boston's religious establishment in 1637 earned her banishment from the colony and eventually an ignominious death at the hands of Indians. Her case raises compelling issues of religion, liberty, law, tolerance, and gender that are still relevant today, though one has to weed through esoteric theological debates and Elizabethan language to access the ideas at the heart of the debate. I employed the materials developed by Barnard College's "Reacting to the Past" instructional series, which guides students through the process of taking on historical roles and immersing themselves in colonial Boston through intense reading of primary sources.^[6] My Cairo classroom transformed into Boston Church and the Massachusetts General Court; my students, in their roles as Puritans, argued over the relative merits of new immigrants' conversion narratives or debated whether Hutchinson had in fact taught heterodox doctrine and thus undermined the authority of the ministers, and by extension the foundation of the colony itself. Listening to twenty-first century Arab Muslims denounce their friends for teaching a covenant of works, debate the relationship of individual conscience and the community good, and argue about the role that the state should play in enforcing religious orthodoxy was a jarring but intellectually thrilling experience.

Perhaps I could have anticipated this if I had thought more about it, but many of my Middle Eastern Muslim students had far more in common with seventeenth-century New England Puritans than did most of my twenty-first century American students. The way that Puritanism offered a totalizing, undifferentiated world view, in which the sacred presses upon every aspect of life, resonates in many (though not all) corners of contemporary Islam in a way that most expressions of American Christianity no longer do. In addition, the lines between religion and state are often blurry in many areas of the Arab world, even in a putatively secular republic like Egypt. So my Egyptian students could grapple with the intricate relationship of church and state in Puritan New England in a far more informed way than most American students, who, even if they are personally religious, casually dismiss religious establishments as unenlightened and even barbaric antiquities. While for the average American college student Puritanism is practically as remote, mysterious, and irrelevant as ancient Zoroastrianism, my predominantly Muslim students in the Middle East comprehended it. They recognized the core concepts—if not the precise language and terminology—of Puritanism and understood that the questions raised by the Puritan experience in America still speak to the modern world. In short, it spoke to them, and raised pressing and relevant questions that are largely lost in modern, liberal, secular America. This does not mean that my students were all Puritans or theocrats at heart—far from it—but the experience was instructive regarding how the history we offer in our classrooms can, and I would argue should, speak to the present concerns and circumstances of our students, even if we avoid being explicitly presentist in our historical pedagogy.

One way instructors can connect with their students is by assigning readings that can speak to some part of their collective and individual identity. In every possible class at auc, I introduced my students to Malcolm X,

sometimes through selected speeches but usually via his classic autobiography.^[7] Malcolm provided an ideal bridge between the world my students inhabited and the world they were studying. Both shaped by and a shaper of twentieth-century America, Malcolm was a truly global figure, particularly in his conceptions of black nationalism as taught by the Nation of Islam and then in his travels through Africa and the Middle East (including Cairo), climaxing in his hajj to Mecca. My students were fascinated with the story of this American convert to Islam; their initial interest then led them to delve into the classic account of race and race relations in America. Reading about the Nation of Islam's highly racialized theology inspired lengthy and passionate discussions about what constitutes a "real" Muslim and who can authoritatively speak for a religion. Reading Malcolm (and Martin Luther King Jr., whose work I usually provided as a counterpoint), my students grappled with America's chronic inability to live up to its founding ideals of equality, and they questioned whether democracy was an achievable ideal or only a hypocritical mask for inequality and power. The book helped my classes explore the complex roles that identity markers such as religion and race play in shaping individual and communal purpose. In short, in Malcolm X my Egyptian students found both a sympathetic and controversial character whose life opened up lines of inquiry and debate that are just as relevant and important today in the Middle East as in the United States.

Teaching American history abroad also allowed me to experiment with the boundaries of the international classroom. In the spring semesters of 2008 and 2009 I partnered with Professor Stewart Winger at Illinois State University (isu) to team teach two courses: Twentieth-century American Religious History and Comparative Global Fundamentalisms. The classes in each location (auc and isu) enrolled about fifteen students each, and we ran the courses like typical university seminars. Students were assigned common readings, then we came to class and discussed them together, half a world apart but in real time. It was often a logistical nightmare—beginning with the time difference, the discrepancy in when the two countries go on and off daylight savings time, and the inevitable technical glitches (such as when the underwater cable carrying internet to all of Egypt was cut for several days). Just as in typical classes, Professor Winger and I were sometimes frustrated when the students did not do the reading or showed less intellectual energy than we wished on writing assignments (which were mostly given as small group projects that included members from each side of the ocean). But the payoff was significant, and the effort made was worth it, when the students in Illinois engaged my class about the meaning of the veil and my female students responded that it was a form of liberation and agency rather than oppression; or when my students pressed the other side about Christians' support for American foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly the 2003 invasion of Iraq and America's unblinking support of Israel's occupation of Palestine; or when my students cited verses in the Qur'an and the hadith condemning radical Islamic terrorism and the stoning of adulterers in tribal areas in Pakistan; or when the students wrestled with the proper relationship of religion and politics or religion and science. The exchange so energized a handful of students that they have kept in touch after the course ended and put together an informal intercontinental, interreligious reading group to continue the conversations we began in class.

Videoconferencing was an exciting and innovative way to open up my classroom and make it truly international in scope and content. While the initial hurdles seem daunting, I would encourage any teacher of American history in the United States or abroad to identify a colleague across the ocean and try at least one or two class sessions, if not an entire course, of cross-cultural dialogue via videoconference. Students on both sides of the Atlantic (or Pacific) Ocean will be richly rewarded and will gain lasting insights into the other culture—and the topic at hand—that could not be conveyed through standard readings or lectures.

Teaching American religious history in a predominantly Arab Muslim classroom offered many of the same opportunities and challenges as one would find in any other educational setting, but with its own wrinkles. As in any class, my students will soon forget most of the details they learned about American history. However, by using historical examples from another time and place, I was able to encourage my students to drop their natural defenses and to think critically about the pressing issues that we discussed in our treatment of American history, but which are relevant in contemporary Islam and the Middle East: religion and science, the treatment of religious minorities, the relationship of religion and gender norms, and the appropriate role of religion in the public sphere and politics. These inherently thorny issues can be difficult to discuss directly, especially in a tense political and cultural environment, but approaching them obliquely through American

history allowed students to scrutinize themselves, their previously unexamined assumptions, and their culture from the relatively safe distance of another nation's history.

The benefits of a globalized U.S. history classroom and curriculum are not just limited to the students. For my part, being at auc provided the most enjoyable and stimulating teaching experiences of my young career. Teaching American history to non-Americans, whether in specialized topical courses or the survey course, forced me to interrogate my own assumptions about American history and the ways we present it in the classroom. I constantly reevaluated and readjusted my curriculum and pedagogy as I learned more about Egyptian and Middle Eastern culture and about what my students did and did not know. My circumstances obliged me to think beyond America's shores when teaching everything from Puritanism to polygamy to race relations. This globalizing turn has helped me look at American history—which too rarely engages the world beyond U.S. borders—with a new set of lenses. In an increasingly globalized world, the internationalization of even our national history courses can only better prepare our students to be thoughtful and engaged citizens. Globalizing the U.S. history classroom transforms the way we think about ourselves, our past, and our common future.

[1] See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988); and Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, 2000).

[2] Thanks to James Bennett of Santa Clara University, whose online syllabus for his Religion in America course gave me the idea for the exercise. See <http://www.iupui.edu/~raac/downloads/0405SYL/Bennett.pdf>.

[3] *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145 (1879). For an excellent treatment of the case and the surrounding cultural and political debates, see Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2002).

[4] Black Elk as told to John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York, 1932).

[5] I would argue that this phenomenon is not unique to the Middle East and also holds true in the American academy, as illustrated by the flap over Harvard University president Larry Summers's January 2005 comments about innate differences between men and women. See Piper Fogg, "Harvard's President Wonders Aloud about Women in Science and Math," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 28, 2005, p. A12.

[6] Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England* (Boston, 2005).

[7] Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1965).

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