

Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet

Courtney M. Dorroll, *editor*

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Reviewed By

Hussein Rashid

Independent Scholar, NY

The title of this volume comes from the title of a talk by Richard Martin at Wofford College, where Courtney Dorroll, the editor, is based. As it is used by the authors of the book, it is meant to reflect on teaching students who come into classes on Islam informed by the world around them. It is an interesting premise, but is not clearly articulated across the chapters. One of the strengths of the volume is that many of the chapters provide thoughtful engagement with how to teach about Muslims in ways that transcend the political moment the title references. They are examples of good pedagogy in the field of religious studies, as it is applied to Islamic studies.

The volume is split into three sections. The first is titled “Approaches and Theories,” although chapters throughout the book address approaches and theories. A chapter by Courtney M. Dorroll, Kimberly Hall, and Doaa Baumi opens the section with a discussion of a virtual exchange between a school in the southern United States and Al-Azhar in Cairo. It is theoretically informed and offers a clear articulation of how the course is scaffolded in response to the theory. In structuring courses that rely on internet exchanges, instructors need to be mindful of students’ privacy and safety. They need to inform students of the risk of participating in public, and most likely surveilled, forums. While this caveat is outside the scope of the chapter, it is an important note for those considering similar exercises.

Manuela Ceballos’s chapter looks at the thought of twelfth-century Muslim thinker Al-Ghazali and questions of aesthetics and education. One of the highlights of her chapter is her engagement with the aesthetics of anti-Muslim rhetoric, deepening an already rich argument. Other chapters in this section offer detailed examples of ways to think about the classroom experience, including William Hutchins’s chapter on the use of texts in translation.

The second section is focused on “Islamophobia and Violence.” Laila Moustafa’s chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for team teaching courses that address Islam and violence. Nathan French gives a detailed case study on comparing justifications for violence originating from the United States and Al-Qa’ida. It is a strong activity, but a little more context would be helpful. I am not sure that I could teach this case study as a Muslim male. Todd Green’s chapter on teaching Islamophobia draws an important distinction between the study of Islamophobia and the study of Islam. He traces the rise of the former discipline and reflects on how it impacts teaching.

The last section of the book, “Applications,” focuses more on the practice of teaching than the other sections do. Sabahat Adil’s chapter interrogates how to teach the past in the context of the present. There are wonderful provocations in this chapter, and she would have benefited from more space to offer more of her thinking on each point she raises. Kecia Ali offers a reflection on teaching Islamic Law and the thought that goes into creating an upper-level class, particularly when not everyone has the same training. In his chapter, Phill Dorroll offers a way to preempt student questions that are informed by the environment they are in. It is a powerful teaching process that recognizes where students are without validating incorrect information. The final essay in the section, written by Shehnaz Haqqani, is a highlight of the volume. She deftly weaves together engagement with bell hooks, the practice of teaching, and resources that can be used at every point. Her work, as she suggests at the beginning of the chapter, is not just about Islam, but is broader in scope.

This volume has many strong chapters and pushes readers to think about how to structure their classroom experiences. Many of the authors hint at ideas of religious literacy, but none directly reference the work of scholars like Diane Moore or Stephen Prothero. There are few mentions of engaging with the scholarship of teaching and learning in these essays. Overall, the volume should be read by those interested in how Islam is taught in higher education.