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## TEACHING TACTIC

# Tackling Islamophobia in a Course on Religion and Politics: Bringing Muslim Women's Voices into the Classroom

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### The context

I was a visiting faculty member at the College of Charleston from 2018 to 2019 and currently teach at Butler University. The former is a midsize, Southeastern public university and the latter a smaller, Midwestern private university. Both serve overwhelmingly white student populations. In the spring of 2019 and 2020, I taught a seminar on Religion and American Politics with a focus on the Muslim American experience.

### The pedagogical purpose

According to a 2019 report from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Americans who have close, personal friendships with Muslims and “know something about Islam” are much less likely to be Islamophobic. In a 2017 Pew study, respondents from fifteen European countries were asked to evaluate a negative statement on Muslims. In every country, people who knew a Muslim personally were more likely to disagree with the statement.

### Description of the strategy

I used two main texts: Bozena Welborne et al.'s *The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States* (Cornell UP, 2017) and James Morone's *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (Yale UP, 2004). The former introduced Muslim women's voices through interviews and surveys, and the latter introduced the history of religious, immigrant, and racial moral panics. Students engaged with the texts through directed readings, group discussions, and focused essays on hijab, cultural appropriation, civil religion, and othering. The second step was unpacking the roots of Islamophobia (and antisemitism). I used the 1997 groundbreaking report from the [Runnymede Trust](#) and the work of Joshua Shanes to put antisemitism in [historic](#) and [current](#) context. Lastly, I infused the seminar with online and face-to-face interactions. Examples included BBC's “10 Things Not to Say to Someone Who Wears a Burqa”; a Zoom conversation with [Aubrey Westfall](#), one of the authors of *The Politics of the Headscarf* (2017); the Jewish-Muslim couple [social experiment](#); learning about [modest fashion](#); and (almost)<sup>1</sup> hearing from an [all-female Muslim panel](#).

### Why it is effective

This tactic worked because it was sincere. On the first day of class, I introduced myself as a Hindu convert to Islam; students recognized my passion and felt comfortable asking questions in a way that made learning about religion and politics not overwhelming. In multiple reflections, students spoke of a truly profound way of thinking about Islam and holding themselves and their family and friends accountable for Islamophobic (and antisemitic) speech.

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<sup>1</sup> The event was cancelled due to a tropical storm.