

# REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING ABOUT THE MUSLIM REALITY

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*The author reflects upon her own experiences having taught a social work elective course about the traditions and experiences of Muslims living in the United States over several years. She also shares the narratives of three of her students as they convey ways the elective course transformed their thinking about one minority religious group and has convinced them of the value of learning about cultural, religious, and spiritual diversity as they pursue their own practice.*

## Introduction

Approximately six years ago I sat with my colleagues in the department discussing possible course electives. Some of us were feeling creative that day and in the midst of our brainstorming session, I suggested a course about the experiences of Muslims living in America. To my surprise, my chair and the rest of the faculty thought it was a good idea. So along with courses on the Gay experience, Hispanic cultures, and substance abuse, an elective on the Muslim population was developed and offered. I knew from the literature (Canda, 1989) that many social workers felt ill prepared to address matters of religion and spirituality. I was familiar with the stereotypes and labels about Muslims (Shaheen, 1997). The presentations I offered in the community and the reactions of students to seeing a Muslim female professor wearing a traditional Islamic headscarf provided anecdotal evidence that many social workers in the field and students in the classroom knew little about Islam and the Muslims. I was also familiar with the literature that pointed to Muslim's reluctance to seek the assistance of mainstream providers because of the bias about Muslims in society as well as their perception of social work as an agent of societal values that sometimes conflict with Islamic practices. When Muslim clients do meet with social workers who are not Muslim, they want a professional who is sensitive and

aware of their religious traditions (Altareb, 1996; Kelly, Aridi, & Bakhtiar, 1996; Nadir & Dziegielewski, 2001).

I had no idea about what the response would be to a summer elective about this population. The first time I taught the course was in the summer of 1999. I took a break the next summer to study for my comprehensive exams. The second time the course was offered was the summer of 2001 just before the World Trade Center attack. Five classes and approximately eighty students later, I can say that offering this summer elective, "The Muslim Reality: Living in America," was an important step for me personally and professionally, as well as for our department and the students who took the course. It was an opportunity to develop my research focus in the area of religious and spiritual diversity in social work, at a time when our society and world had become keenly aware of the need to answer the many unanswered questions about Islam and Muslims, as well as the domestic and global impact of religion in society. It was an opportunity for students who took the course to develop their knowledge regarding the role of religion, culture and diversity in social work. It may have been the start of our department's effort to play a pivotal role in equipping social work graduates with knowledge about the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of their clients. In this

narrative, I hope that my reflections about the course as well as the writings of three of my former students will provide an illustration of the course's meaning and usefulness as regards effective, sensitive multi-cultural practice.

### Course Description

Of the over one billion Muslims in the world, approximately seven to eight million live in the United States (Rashid, 1999). In "The Muslim Reality: Living in America" summer elective, students learn about the early history of Islam, basic Islamic beliefs and traditions, the history of Muslims in the United States (Nyang, 1999), and contemporary social issues facing Muslim Americans (Nadir & Dziegielewski, 2001). The purpose of this course is to provide opportunities for students to develop awareness, knowledge, and practice skills that prepare them to work with Muslim clients in various settings, as well as with members of other faith and non-faith traditions. It also provides an open forum for students to explore their concerns about religion and working with religious clients.

The course also sets a foundation and provides a framework for students to work with clients from culturally, spiritually, and religiously diverse traditions. The first unit focuses on the meaning of religion, spirituality, and faith within social work practice. Next, a basic overview of the early history, worldview, and beliefs and practices in Islam are provided. A socio-cultural-historical perspective of the life experiences of Muslims in America is discussed along with contemporary issues and challenges facing Muslims in America. Students learn about the demographic background of the Muslim community in America. Social issues that affect the human service experiences of Muslims in America, such as immigration, social readjustment, hate crimes, adolescent identity issues, family violence, and poverty,

are identified. Students learn about culturally competent strategies for working with Muslims in various settings, such as schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, and social service agencies.

Assignments and activities are varied in consideration of course learning objectives and various learning styles. The first assignment asks students to reflect upon the place of religion and spirituality in their lives, past and present, and the ways their perspective may have changed over time. Students are asked to conduct an interview with a Muslim community member. This gives students an opportunity to actually meet and talk with someone who is Muslim. Most students indicate that they have never met a Muslim prior to taking this class and most students' image of Muslims is based on what they have heard from television, movies, and newspaper headlines. Students have an opportunity to experience Muslim traditions when they take a field trip to a *mosque*, a Muslim religious center. They begin the visit by dressing in clothing (a *hijab* or headscarf, long sleeves, ankle-length, loose fitting clothing for the women and a *kufi* or traditional cap and *thobe* or ankle-length shirt for the men) that is in keeping with Islamic traditions. They witness a Muslim prayer service, meet community members and eat at a local Muslim-owned restaurant that provides an opportunity for many of the students to taste Middle Eastern cuisine for the first time.

Later in the semester in a short paper, students explore a social issue of interest as it relates to the Muslim community. Topics include Muslim youth in the public school, hate crimes and Muslims in America, mental health issues among Muslims in America, and domestic violence among Muslims in America. Throughout the course, students learn basic Islamic concepts and language so that they become familiar with some of the words and phrases their clients may use such as *hijab*, *mosque*, and *AsSalaamuAlaikum* (peace be

upon you). Case summaries about fictional Muslim clients are discussed to help students critically assess problems clients experience as well as, spiritually sensitive intervention strategies. Students learn about the religiosity continuum as it relates to Muslims in America (Nadir & Dziegielewski, 2001). Graduate students are asked to develop a case summary and assessment based on a situation facing a Muslim refugee family. They develop a possible intervention plan, considering the resources as well as data they still need to formulate the plan. This information is presented to the class and critically analyzed.

### **My Reflections on the Course**

Over the years student feedback, verbal and written, has indicated that the warm, open classroom environment provided during the course enables them to ask any question and test their preconceived notions about the Muslim community. I am still surprised when students share conversations they have had with friends and relatives about what they have learned in the first week. They speak about challenging stereotypes and correcting misinformation with confidence after one week of class. Students indicate that they begin to listen to the news and movies with a much more critical ear questioning messages they never did before. They begin to hear the generalizations about Muslims and they became more sensitive to stereotypes about other religious and cultural groups in a way they had not considered prior to taking the course. They begin to develop an appreciation of the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of their clients as a strength, a resource, and a challenge.

### **Learning to Ask Questions**

The following student narrative demonstrates the impact of the stereotypes one is raised with. It also demonstrates how one social work student perceived the Muslim community, yet allowed her thinking about this

group to be challenged as a result of taking the Muslim Reality course. It also reveals the effect awareness raising, contact with members of the community, and knowledge about the beliefs and the diversity of intra community behaviors can have on a social work student's understanding of the community and its experiences in America. This student went from being the bearer of a very clear belief that she knew all about the Muslims, none of which was good, to the recognition that much of what she knew was based on stereotypes and generalizations. She acknowledges the impact that her stereotypic beliefs would have had on her practice with Muslim clients and is now a strong advocate for diversity education about different cultures and religions.

### **Luana's Story**

"Ever since I can remember, I always thought of myself as an incredibly open-religion minded person. It never occurred to me that I had a terrible misconception about a certain religious community. I was born in a large city in Romania called Timisoara, and because I grew up there I like to think of myself as very fortunate for I was able to gain a wide general knowledge. At a very young age I was introduced to several different religions. Being brought up as an Eastern Orthodox, while my grandparents belonged to two different religions, I was able to become a well-rounded person on the aspect of religion. However, while there were many other religions around me, there was one stigmatized as the "bad religion." This "bad religion" was the Islamic religion practiced by Muslims all over the world. No questions were ever asked as to why the Islamic religion was branded as bad. No explanations were ever needed; we all saw how they treated their women, making them cover their entire body as if veiling them from the world, locking them up behind dark, thick doors and throwing the key away where it may never

be found. And what about the luxurious notion the men had of having the right to marry and own up to four women. The followers of this religion were too fanatical and too suppressive. So why would we ever question these awful truths?

After coming to America, I began to see the media. The media only engraved what was already carved in me. Then, one hot, summer semester my very narrow mind was widened once again. A Muslim follower was offering a Muslim Reality course. The first day of class she welcomed us dressed in her hijab. At the time, I was sure she was wearing it to entertain us. Wrong. She wears it all the time, and it is not because she is forced to, but because she has respect for her religion. That first day I also made it clear to her that what I heard of this religion so far was not at all pleasing, but that I was willing to hear what her perspective was. She could tell that I was going to be difficult and ask plenty of questions so as to prove the horrible truth behind this "bad religion." Even to this day, it humbles me to think that such notions that were swimming in my head at all times were so utterly wrong. I was misled as I grew up, and I was never given the proper chance to formulate my own belief.

It is not easy teaching a course on religion with students pondering if there is some hidden agenda on secretly using classroom settings as the means of converting students to Islam, or any other religion. I, at least, always thought about that. We have become somewhat paranoid because of church and state separation. Looking back, I now feel guilty about my foolishness. Yes, it is a course on religion, but it is also on the Muslim life, traditions, and practices and, most important, on the stigma associated with being a follower of Islam. The stereotypes that have been pounded into us are laid down and dissected. I cringe at how wrongly we are swayed to think of Muslims. The world needs a scapegoat all the time; during slavery the

blacks were victimized, during Hitler's rein the Jews, and now the Arabs, who may or may not belong to the Islamic faith, but nevertheless fall prey to stereotypical views. This is exactly why we need courses such as this one to open our eyes to other theories. Once we have both sides of the story only then may we make our decisions."

### **A Social Work Student Steps into the Shoes of a Muslim Woman**

The narrative written by this student reveals what she learned while wearing a *hijab* or traditional headscarf worn by many Muslim women at work one night. As part of her experience, her coworkers and managers revealed bias against the Muslim community and a lack of knowledge about the community, which was Salina did not expect and which surprised her. While this activity was above and beyond the required class assignments, the student provided an additional learning opportunity for everyone in the class. The student and her classmates learned that the bias is real and very much a part of the experience of Muslims in America (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002).

### **Salina's Story**

"This summer while taking a class called "The Muslim Reality," I learned how important it is for us as future social workers to remember to remain open minded and continue social diversity training throughout our careers. While taking "The Muslim Reality," our professor lectured on discrimination felt by Muslims even at their jobs. I also met a young Muslim woman who indicated that she felt she had been discriminated against while trying to find work because she wore the hijab. I decided that I would like to wear a hijab to work. I wanted to learn what discrimination Muslims faced in the work place first hand. After discussing it with my professor, she gave me the go ahead, with the understanding that I had to get

permission from my work first. I also had to follow some definite safety guidelines.

I headed to work excited to get permission. I work at a local valley restaurant that has always been supportive of my schooling and volunteer work. The first two managers I talked to were my female Hispanic service managers. When I asked the big question one of them said, "But you're white." I said, "yes," in amazement. I was amazed that their comment demonstrated such a lack of knowledge. I then tried to educate them by telling them that Islam is a religion and doesn't have anything to do with ethnic background. I then explained my purpose for asking to wear the hijab to work. After about ten more minutes trying to educate my female managers, they finally agreed to call our corporate office to see if it would be okay. The corporate office immediately gave their approval. However, that wasn't my only challenge with a manager. I came to work the next day and my top manager (an African American male) began to lecture me about the Islamic religion. He talked about how during the civil rights movement African Americans everywhere rose up to say discrimination was wrong and against their beliefs, implying that Muslims should have done the same. Then once again trying to educate one of my managers, I told him how they do speak up but no one listens. The debate lasted twenty minutes and took lots of turns and twists. When he saw that I wasn't going to back down from doing this experiment, he walked angrily away. In his defense he did apologize the next day and admitted to feeling a little discrimination against Muslims.

Friday, my professor coached me about safety issues. We talked about not wearing the hijab while I was driving, taking it off before leaving work, and being escorted to my car after work. I never had to think about that stuff on a daily basis. I started to get scared. I did exactly what she told me. When

I arrived I put on the hijab and walked into my restaurant. What I experienced when I got there was shocking. My co-workers made ignorant remarks like "towel head." Customers walked out of my station so they wouldn't have to be waited on by me. Another server mocked me by putting a napkin on her head and walked through my station. A customer said, "What is that thing on your head?" I did the best I could to educate my co-workers as well as my customers.

This experience gave me a chance to experience the discrimination felt by the Muslim members of our community. As professional social workers it is important that we continue to educate others and learn about diversity."

### **Considerations for Work with People of Other Cultures**

The student whose narrative follows took the Muslim Reality course and later became my teaching and research assistant, aiding me with the analysis of my research with young Muslim women. As part of her graduate work, she has decided to explore the impact of taking this class on work with Muslims as well as those from other cultures and faiths. Her current focus is on the transference of knowledge about Muslim traditions and experiences to social work with other diverse groups. Participation in this class has fostered opportunities for her to begin to develop her own interests and ask important questions about the considerations for practice with this population, as well as with other populations.

#### **Adriana's Story**

"As a student in the Social Work program at Arizona State University's West campus, I soon became aware of the importance of cultural competence, awareness, and diversity. Every class I enrolled in touched on the subject of knowing your client's culture in order to help them effectively. I learned the variety of ways that our clients differ from each other

and from myself. I have always been intrigued by other cultures and aspects that make them unique. I was introduced to Islam during my first semester at my university when I entered a class and learned my teacher was a Muslim woman. My stereotypes were immediately confronted when she began speaking to the class, to my surprise, without an accent. I soon learned she was a Muslim-African-American woman who converted to Islam. In every class I have taken by this professor I have learned and been reminded of how a person's culture and religion can guide how, as clients, they react to an intervention put in place by professionals. I was really able to see how culture and religion can affect a client's treatment when I enrolled in the Muslim Reality class during the summer of 2002.

By this time I had taken two courses taught by the same professor and became extremely curious about Islam and Muslim people. I was curious as to how Muslim people incorporate themselves into society when, in my perspective, there seemed to be so many restrictions and obstacles. In this class I learned the basics of Islam, about prayer, societal norms, basic terms, history, and current issues. I learned that Islam is not only a religion but also a culture and a way of life. Muslims use Islam as a guide to how to live their lives, interact in society, with the law and in business. I learned how Muslims practicing Islam in America face obstacles within mainstream society. I learned that as a social work professional working with Muslims, I must also look to the role of Islam in my client's life when implementing interventions as I work with Muslim clients.

As I was learning about Islam and how it affects the life domains of a Muslim, I began to think about how other cultures and religions can affect people. I began to think about the life domains that people have and how culture and religion can affect them. As I learned how Islam guides its followers on marriage, death, societal interactions, family, and work, I began

to ask myself how these domains are affected for people of other cultures and religions. I began to see that I would have to remember that the degree to which a person is acculturated would guide how much I would draw from their culture or religion as well.

This class taught me how to become familiar with Islam and Muslims. I learned how researching, interviewing, and asking questions about another culture help me as a professional to better work with my clients. Although I learned about Islam within in a classroom setting, the class gave me tools and techniques that I will be able to use outside of the classroom. I will be able to use these techniques to learn about a person's culture and religion and how it does or doesn't affect their daily living. I have learned how to ask questions and inquire about culture and religion without being offensive but showing a genuine interest."

### **Lessons Learned**

Over the years of teaching the Muslim Reality course, I have learned a number of valuable lessons. One lesson points to the importance of providing a warm and open atmosphere so that students feel comfortable asking questions and exploring the images and stereotypes they have become familiar with. My philosophy has become "if not here then where." If I don't provide a place for students to ask the questions they have about Muslims where will they find the answers? Certainly there is an increasing array of publications on the subject, but part of my job as I see it is to provide a beginning place for students to explore their questions while directing them to the literature. In the process it is important to be as honest as possible about the strengths and weaknesses, the challenges and successes facing the community so that social work students can become effective, competent practitioners with this population. If not, the stereotypes and inaccuracies continue to be

their primary sources about Muslims and thus what their practice is based upon.

I have also learned the importance of challenging students to critically analyze the messages the media promote about minority groups, including the Muslims. Teaching our students critical thinking skills is one of the important curriculum objectives. In this course students are challenged to critically think about the messages they have received in ways they have not been challenged to think about in the past. Students have shared how humbled they are by the realization that they were not more critical of the messages they received about this and other minority groups before taking this class. They are amazed at how much they don't know about Muslims and how much of the stereotypes they came to believe as true.

It is amazing to see students willing to allow themselves to step outside of their comfort zone and become receptive of the idea that not all they were taught about Muslims was accurate. I have seen the puzzlement in students' faces as they considered what they were learning. As they learned Islamic language, met a Muslim for the first time, visited a mosque, tried on traditional clothing, and tasted food from various Muslim cultures, they explored aspects of Muslim life and began to consider a new perspective. The pace varied for different students, but by the end of the five weeks most students were able to say that perhaps the messages they received in the past were not applicable to most Muslims. Students in my most recent class were so impressed by the need for awareness about policy issues facing the Muslims that they are planning to develop an advocacy and awareness project during the fall semester. The good news for me is that I have been an eyewitness to their growth and transformation.

Over the years of teaching the course, my knowledge of spirituality and social work has also grown. As a result I have added

material on many of the issues social workers are concerned about when it comes to addressing religion, spirituality and social work, like separation of church and state, the faith-based initiative, and the functions and dysfunctions associated with religion. I have also added a greater emphasis on spiritual competence as a foundation for the course. Students are encouraged to transfer what they learn about Muslims to their understanding of the broader topic and their work with other minority religious groups. Course content has been enhanced to include material on spiritual competence as well as a chart that enables students to look at the similarities and differences between the Islamic faith and other faiths. A semester long activity that encourages students to develop spiritually inclusive language, in addition to Islamic terms and language, has also been added to the course. So while students learn terms like mosque, hijab, and imam, they also learn to use terms like religious center, faith community, and religious or spiritual leader as part of the spiritually inclusive language list.

Finally, I am convinced of the importance of helping students discern the difference between culture and religion, as well as the diversity within religious groups. The Muslim community is a culturally diverse community representing ethnic groups and languages from countries all over the world, including those indigenous to the United States (Nyang, 1999). Too often the Muslims are seen as a monolithic group despite the diversity that exists among them, and religion and culture are interchanged as if they are one in the same. It is important that social workers recognize that culture may impact the way Muslims practice Islam and that some cultural traditions may not have anything to do with the religious beliefs. I have included some information about the diverse groups among the Muslims as part of a mock case review, but I plan to expand course content to include additional information about the diverse cultural groups

and experiences of the Muslims in the United States, to better prepare students as they consider intragroup diversity.

### Implications

The narratives these students have shared illustrate their growth as they challenged their own and others' misperceptions and prejudices. A seemingly new and very different world has opened up to them as they explored Muslim beliefs, traditions, and experiences in America in this course. As educators we rarely get to know what difference the things we teach and the information we share make in the lives of our students. I was given such an opportunity, however, as these students shared their stories and we worked together over the last few years. I look forward to keeping in touch with these women to learn how knowledge of the Muslim reality assisted them in their work with Muslims, as well as those of other cultures, religions, and spiritual traditions.

Based on the feedback I have received over the years, and the growing recognition of the need to educate social work students about religion and spirituality, I believe that a course like the Muslim Reality is beneficial in helping students learn about these concepts. This course provides an opportunity for students to begin to develop religious and spiritual competency (Hodge, 2004) by challenging their knowledge, as well as increasing their knowledge and awareness about a culturally diverse minority religious group that is experiencing oppression today. For many students these experiences become relevant as they realize they are not only about past experiences of discrimination but current ones as well. Traditional diversity courses tend to explore the breadth of diversity as an issue in society with a brief discussion about a variety of diverse groups in society. This course has enabled me to discuss the issue broadly as well as focus on the traditions and experiences of one group. In the brief five-

week summer session, which is never long enough for a comprehensive discussion of all of the related materials and topics, "The Muslim Reality" course makes an interesting elective with lots of creative opportunities to increase student knowledge, employ critical thinking, engage in experiential activities, conduct research, and explore intervention strategies. This course also provides an opportunity for students to explore the ways knowledge about social work with Muslims may be transferred to social work practice with other minority religious and cultural groups.

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