

Studying Islam Abroad

Bridget Blomfield

Acquire knowledge, because he who acquires it in the way of the Lord performs an act of piety; who speaks of it, praises the Lord; who seeks it, adores God; who dispenses instruction in it, bestows alms; and who imparts it to its fitting objects performs an act of devotion to God. Knowledge enables its possessor to distinguish what is forbidden from what is not; it lights the way to Heaven; it is our friend in the desert, our society in solitude, our companion when bereft of friends; it guides us to happiness; it sustains us in misery; it is our ornament in the company of friends; it serves as an armour against our enemies. With knowledge, the obedient servant of God rises to the heights of goodness and to a noble position, associates with sovereigns in this world, and attains to the perfection of happiness in the next.

Introduction

During the fall semester of 2006, I had the opportunity to take a group of twelve American students to Turkey, India, and New York City to study Islam – and, more importantly, Muslims. Offered by Long Island University Global College, the Comparative Religion and Culture program (CRC) is an introduction to religion and culture and takes as its mission the development of well-educated world citizens. CRC is touted as “a one-of-a-kind experience, combining careful theoretical study with extensive exposure to religious practice in several, quite different cultural contexts.”¹

It stresses the importance of a well-rounded education so that students can critically engage global issues affected not only by religion, but also by anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, feminism, women’s studies, art, meditation, ritual participation, dialogue, and more. This program helps students recognize the multiplicity of academic

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approaches and the diversity of the world's populations so that they can frame their responsibilities as world citizens in a broader perspective than one might achieve by staying in one's own culture.

Using the support provided by expert scholars, texts, and local practitioners, students are guided through cultures other than their own in order to broaden their sense of understanding and responsibility. They learn in the classroom and also directly by experiencing rituals and practices with local practitioners. This learning style incorporates other ways of knowing and asks students to confront their biases, assumptions, and stereotypes by questioning and changing the lenses through which they view the world in order to prepare them "for a life of committed action in the interest of the world community."²

Without the use of an experiential praxis, students are left knowing about rather than knowing. Engaging multiple ways of learning helps them to be intellectually challenged and personally engaged so that they can become self-reflective. They can relate personal experience to what they learn in the classroom and be involved in such contemplative practices as journaling, free writing, poetry, photography, listening to music, moments of silence, and reflection as part of their educational process. I argue that students have a better understanding of Islam and Muslims as a result of this educational style. By studying Islam abroad, students experience its nuances as they create and explore connections between themselves and Muslims.

Before we began our journey, the students took a class on Orientalism. We discussed "otherizing," critical thinking, and issues of "insider/outsider" dilemmas associated with conducting research. The students were asked to be aware of the difference between religious ideology and popular piety and to pay special attention to their own assumptions and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. As part of the program, they were taught ethnographic research skills that would enable them to find appropriate research styles. We continued to address these subjects through readings and discussions throughout the semester. Having little or no prior knowledge about Islam, they were mature enough to realize that they had biases and were outsiders. As one student mentioned:

Although in many ways I will never be able escape my "insider" point of view, I can hopefully learn to use it as a tool. By considering what aspects of culture I examined as an outsider, I can question how these aspects are in my own culture and self. If I focus my thoughts while observing others, I will get a reflection not just about others but also about myself.

Students were assigned an extensive reading list of ethnographic research techniques, how to study religion and culture, and texts about Islam. Among the concepts they studied were the basic tenets of Islam and popular piety. They were asked to view these ideologies through multiple lenses and see if they could be understood and possibly integrated into their own lives.

Finally, the students were asked to view their experiences of Islam through positivity and not comparisons of what is western and what is not. They were asked to move beyond personal likes and dislikes and frame their experience from a tender curiosity. Ultimately, the goal is to help them to see the diversity of Islam as it is lived in a variety of communities and to realize that even within those communities different practitioners have different interpretations of what is “Islamic” and what is not. Placing something within its context offers an alternative perspective. Visiting three different countries and witnessing the lives of their Muslims helped the students question their assumptions about Muslims and gave them the opportunity to acknowledge how they “otherize” and unconsciously “Orientalize.” Recognizing the stereotypes that the Orientalist media has conveyed for decades helped them realize that they were guests in another culture and, therefore, not the center of the experience.

Islam exists within multiple interpretations and discourses. Students were asked to pay attention to how they might view Islam through their own religious beliefs, making assumptions and comparisons that might be quite different than a Muslim’s experience of Islam. They were able to question personal stereotypes about Muslim women and the hijab, covering their hair when in public, and other Muslim practices. The following student observed her assumptions after spending a day with Muslim girls close to her age:

When I’m studying Islam, it’s easy to think about Muslims only as a concept. While reading texts and discussing Muslim identity in class, Muslim people become an abstract entity. Muslim women especially become consolidated into a single block, or a few blocks. There are the women who don’t wear the hijab and those who do. I was not just seeing a sea of women in hijab ... I wasn’t just seeing Muslim girls. I wasn’t constantly comparing or analyzing each girl’s behavior to what I have learned about Islam. I was interacting with them on a purely human level, and that kind of experience does not happen nearly as often as it should.

By having an immediate and direct experience with practitioners “on a purely human level,” Muslims were no longer otherized. The students were able to frame their biases as ethnocentric and see the complexities of cultural Islam. They realized that every culture has its own way of interpreting

Islam and that their personal interpretation might be skewed because they are not insiders. Their images of Islam were often defined by American media sources that possibly have a slanted viewpoint or agenda that lacks an awareness of the complexities of Islam and culture. Another student recognized her own biases when she wrote:

... we are constantly inscribing our bodies with values. At earlier times in my life, I would have considered hijab removal an escape from making a religious political statement, but now I realize that one makes just as much of a statement by taking it off as one does by wearing it. Flipping the lens around to me and my culture, I realize the ignorance of interpreting the hijab as one single statement. To assume that all Turkish women (or all Muslim women) wear the hijab for the same reason (or even assuming that they wear it at all) would be ethnocentric and dismissive of cultural complexity. (Naheed, 24, MA international politics student, p/t, Bangladeshi)

By visiting another country, students experienced firsthand how they have “Orientalized” the Other. They question their assumptions and motives. As one student said:

When I have expectations I am automatically assuming that the experience is going to fit into the parameters already established in my mind; however, that mindset only keeps me from seeing the positivity of the other world. If I let the world just come to me in all that it is, I can better understand it within its own separate context.

Moving outside of the classroom, the students experienced an educational style that offers and articulates information that has a “felt” experience and is grounded in appropriate research. In the field, they began to see Islam in various contexts. The classroom, then, “becomes a place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears.”³ The students, now beginning to question their own culturally created biases and assumptions, acquired an awareness that more than one truth or viewpoint is possible. The student quoted below recognized that women’s bodies are inscribed with cultural and religious values in every country.

I then began to understand the positivity of the other side, to recognize our own cultural values as also telling women that they should wear one thing and not wear another. [This] begins the process of recognition of differ-

ent views, and the positive parts that those views may have. With the hijab example, I began to think about how our culture encourages women to show more skin and that encouraging modesty instead of baring all is a different value, not a worse one.

The positivity of the “other world” means that it is what it is, regardless of one’s interpretation or experience; therefore, it exists without our interpretation. Suddenly the students can see from another perspective, one that is not influenced by what they have seen on television but one that they have personally witnessed. It was through the direct interaction with scholars and local inhabitants that their viewpoints were challenged and changed.

Why Study Islam?

Given today’s political, religious, and economic climate, the study of Islam is critical. Historically, this field has been popular only among religious studies students; but today, there is a broader audience interested in studying Islam in higher education. Such an undertaking is all about approaching a mystery – a mystery of religious beliefs and teachings practiced by 30 percent of the world’s population. Studying Islam gives us an understanding about human nature and multiple cultures, broadens one’s horizons, and creates diversity in thought and action. Studying Islam abroad positions students in an environment where they can see the popular piety of the lived religion. It was because of such personal interactions and dialogue that this student was able to form a new perspective:

I feel like I was better able to learn the material if I felt personally connected to it and/or to the person who was presenting it. It was easier for me to write papers about the Sufis, something that I felt in my heart, than about Mughal history, something that felt very distant to me. I was able to absorb a lot of information about the parts of Islam that had to do with the living peoples’ experiences and that related directly to my life.

Learning about Islam through studying texts and participating in the community adds to the experience and understanding of how Muslims interpret their religion. Seeing Muslims in specific contexts, the students could see that a great deal of Islam is experienced through interpretation, whether cultural or religious. They started to observe the oral traditions and textual assignments given in the cultures they visited. Doing this caused stereotypes to diminish. An example of this is one student’s response after visiting Ankara’s Kocatepe mosque:

I was really shocked to see people talking on the cell phone ... I expected it to be so holy, which it was but it also wasn't. The minute we went out of the mosque, I saw a girl pull her scarf off and stuff it in her purse.

Vignettes like this show the diversity of Muslim experience. Again, it helps to dismantle all stereotypes, whether positive or negative, which the students had held when they entered the program. They also saw the diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices, which are often cultural rather than ideological. When we enter into another person's belief system, we can have a greater understanding of who he/she is and why he/she is that particular way. We can also define or redefine ourselves by borrowing from other religious practices.

Just What Is a Muslim?

The first question that the students had to grapple with was: What is a Muslim? A Muslim supposedly follows the five pillars of Islam. But beyond that, they learned that Islam's interpretation is left to scholars, clerics, and practitioners and that their interpretations are largely cultural. The students were assigned readings from the holy texts and historical and contemporary scholars. They studied with Sunnis and Shiah's; Mevlevi, Bektashi, Chisti, and Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufis; and Alevi Muslims. They began to shed assumptions as they learned about the diversity of the Muslim communities. As one student said:

Before we [went] to Turkey, we were asked to think about our expectations of Muslim people and Turkish people. I didn't know what to say or what to anticipate. But I think the one thing I have realized [is that] I subconsciously expected a certain degree of uniformity in such aspects as culture and religious rituals. Instead, what I have seen has only confused me more – contrasts, paradoxes, and contradictions.

Was it possible to be a Muslim and not wear hijab? Could a Muslim drink alcohol? Were music and dancing *haram*? What were women's rights in Islam? The answers to these questions seemed to be different in every community we visited. These questions swirled through the students' heads as they tried to concretize an idea of what Islam is and is not. Throughout the semester, their notions were constantly challenged as they became aware of contradictions. What Islam says and what Muslims do proved to be somewhat different at various times of the semester.

In Turkey

During our first week in the field, we visited a *masjid* (mosque) in Turkey. The female students struggled to wrap scarves around their heads, wanting to be respectful and culturally appropriate. Their stereotypes were immediately challenged when our young hostess showed up in tight jeans, a T-shirt, and uncovered hair. One student, writing in a reflection paper, expressed her frustration at not being sure what type of religious etiquette was appropriate:

Perhaps it is because I know so little about Islam that I feel as if I could offend anyone at any moment. I immediately wanted to be back in my own church where I knew where the lines are so I can break them if I choose. But I don't know anything about Islam ... Inside [the *masjid*] I felt as if I was in the way of everyone, as if I was blocking the people's WiFi and messing up their wireless connection to God.

Students had to acknowledge their discomfort and yet remain present and open-minded in a new and sometimes difficult environment. Sometimes they felt stressed out because they did not know what was politically or culturally correct. They were consistently challenged by new situations for which they could not possibly have been prepared. Another example of this is how the students imagined Islam's concept of holiness. Many students thought of a *masjid* as a sacred place where people bow down in prayer. A *masjid* is a holy place for Muslims, but what behavior is seen in the *masjid* contradicted what the students imagined. Another student responded:

I then ask myself, to what degree is someone Muslim? I don't even know if every person in this mosque is religious. When I was small, I remember going to synagogue and not listening to the prayer at all, but counting the minutes until it would be over and it would be time for eating *challah* and sweets.

As I walked down the stairs, there was a woman in the middle of the walkway who I had to step over as she recited the Qur'an and bowed her head to the floor. But then I passed a woman talking on her cell phone. It made me feel strange. We were in a holy mosque, the largest mosque in all of Ankara, and I was watching a woman talking on her cell phone like it was no big deal. And what is even more, underneath the mosque there was a three-story shopping mall. How holy can a place be? Is it determined by what is located around it, or under it in this case? In New York, there are churches and then porn shops right next to them. What makes a place holy? I am in a holy place and I see activity that is contradictory to that. My impressions of Islam are constantly changing.

The above response shows how students could compare and contrast images and representations of Islam. Initially, the only Muslims the students could recognize were those with their hair covered. Soon notions of what Islam is and is not were questioned by the students. Female students who wear hijabs and and male students who have beards are, according to law, not allowed to attend a university in Turkey. For Americans who think that there is freedom of religious expression, it was shocking as they watched Muslim girls remove their hijabs as they walked through the university gates. Some young women wore wigs over their hair so they could attend classes.

Students were amazed by what they witnessed as Islamophobia in Turkey even by some of our professors. Why should Muslims not be allowed to practice their religion as they wished? Was that not their religious right? In one of the local newspapers, Sufis were criticized in a full-page article suggesting that they had an underlying desire to Islamicize Turkey. How students imagined Islamic piety was contradicted at every turn.

While in Turkey, we spent a fair amount of time with various Sufi *tariqahs* (brotherhoods). The first one was the Mevlevi Brotherhood in Konya. Before we ventured into this world, I drilled the students on *adab*, the good manners expected in the Sufi community. After meeting us with open arms, we were taken to the *derga* where the students had tea and were immediately taught to turn. The Mevlevi brothers hosted us at their guesthouse, thereby allowing students to see firsthand how the practitioners lived, ate, and prayed. Our evenings were spent doing *dhikr* and playing music. So beloved was Sufism to our group that we started our own little *tariqah*: the *ashk olsun* (may it become love). Students created their own style of *dhikr* complete with guitars, drums made from empty containers, beat boxing, and the chanting of *la ilaha illa Allah*. Christian, Jewish, and atheist students were able to participate in these activities, whole-heartedly recognizing *tajwid* under any name – religious or not. After meeting the Mevlevi, students relinquished even more stereotypes. One student had the following reaction:

There were a few things that really surprised me about the Sufis in Konya. I had always pictured Sufis as people who lived in seclusion, and who were always very serious and only talked about God and Sufism. However, this is not how they were at all. In fact, they were very jovial and cheerful, and they lived just like normal people in the city, functioning in society. They all were supposed to have jobs and participate in their community and society. They went out to dinner with us, smoked, and just hung out and talked with us and listened to us sing and sang for us.

The students were able to demystify the Mevlevis; they no longer held images of holy men clad in long white dresses whirling in circles advertising tourism in Turkey. They were simply human beings living ordinary lives. What set them apart from others was that they embraced the sacred teachings of the mystic Rumi.

We were invited to attend another *dhikr* session with other Sufis. The students were extremely excited by this, because they were told that there would be many participants there with drums and neys and that they would be allowed to turn with the dervishes. Every single group of Muslims that we had met argued for equality of the sexes. Yet when we went to the *derga* for *dhikr*, the female students were terribly disappointed and angered that they were put into a separate room and not allowed to participate. When they saw the girls' tears, our hosts apologized profusely, but even they had no control over cultural traditions. Fortunately, the love of the Mevlevi Sufis was ultimately able to pierce their hearts. This visit was the single most beloved and favorite thing we did during the semester.

The students were very surprised to hear one of our sociology professors tell about how some Muslims define themselves in opposition to other groups of Muslims. He gave the example of an Alevi group offering to hold a free circumcision event for poor Sunni Muslims. Sunnis and Alevis alike attended the circumcision ritual, but after it was finished the Sunnis refused to eat meat cooked by Alevis because since the latter were not "true" Muslims, their meat *haram* (forbidden). As one student wrote in a reflection paper: "A Sunni in this situation will entrust his son's penis to the Alevis but he won't trust his meat. What kind of messed up logic is that?" The student went on to express how different sects of Islam are prejudiced against each other, something he had never thought of before visiting Turkey.

He was also amazed that one of our tour guides was especially negative toward Sufis, lumping them all into one large group of fundamentalist politicians. Sunnis were seen as conservative too; they wore hijabs and had beards, an externalized expression of Islam. They purposely chose to identify themselves as Muslims. One of our guides told us that these Sunnis were fundamentalists influenced by the Wahhabis. This was extremely confusing to the students, one of whom asked: "Then why did some Sunnis go to saints' shrines? Only the Shiah believe in intercession. Isn't praying at a shrine considered *haram* by Sunnis? From our readings, Wahhabis frown upon this." Again, they witnessed the complexity of Muslims' lives and how Islam is interpreted by different groups of believers.

We also spent a day with Alevis who, until recently, had to practice underground because Ataturk banned most of their religious practices in

1923. We were shown Alevi dance rituals by women in beautiful costumes. The dances had sacred meanings about one's relationship with God and the cosmos. Although men do participate in these dances, that day only the women performed while the men accompanied them on classical Turkish instruments. We were told that Alevi Muslim women are some of the most educated in Turkey and have long been afforded equal rights in their community. The students were fascinated by this group that follows the teachings of Imam Ali, which they had initially only thought of as Shiah tradition.

That same week we were invited to the home of a Bektashi Baba. At the time, we did not realize that we had been invited to break the fast of Ramadan. When we arrived at his house, we were met by twelve people who had prepared a feast for us. They also played music and sang for us. The Baba explained that the Bektashis believe in absolute equality for women. Men and women served us enormous plates of food and we each received a small glass of wine. The students shot me glances with furrowed brows. Isn't drinking wine *haram*? One student wrote in a response paper:

I thought it was interesting that the Bektashis used wine in their ceremony, because alcohol is technically forbidden by Islam. I could see how Bektashis differed from mainstream Muslims in this way. The Baba said that many Muslims say that on the table that God sent there was vinegar, not wine. "God was not a fool!" he exclaimed.

We sat down at a table that was set and waited for the Baba to start eating. I had warned the students to watch the dervishes so that we might follow the correct ritual and *adab*. Whenever the Baba spoke, everyone would stop eating. At first the students seemed confused, but they watched carefully. One student later admitted her frustration:

At first, I didn't see why we kept stopping while we were eating. But soon I began to get an idea, which the Baba later confirmed – it was in order to teach us patience. I could understand this – I tried to be patient, and when we would start eating again after a pause, the food tasted as good as it had when I took my first bite, and I felt grateful. However, I found it hard to be patient towards the end of the meal. "Why can't we just finish?" I thought. I realized that I had to be patient all the way through, that it was at the end where this was the most challenging. I could only imagine how hard this was for the people who had been fasting all day. Patience is an important Sufi principle [that] we also saw in the Mevlevis. After all, just becoming a Sufi in both orders takes a lot of time and patience.

Here, students were able to experience firsthand the expected behaviors of certain Muslim groups. They watched the dervish take his wine as the Baba explained that the dervish drinks first, just in the case the wine is poisoned. The dervish told the group about the Janissaries and the importance of loyalty to the *tariqah*. Working as a physician at the local hospital and teaching medicine at a nearby university, he told the group that wine was never to be used for drunkenness, for that is the purpose of music and poetry!

On more than one occasion, our hosts stressed the importance of the fast of Ramadan as a way to teach compassion and gratitude as well as an opportunity to feed the poor and develop piety. So when one of the students was invited by some new friends to break the fast, she gladly accepted. What she imagined to be a somber, pious, and holy event turned out to be a grand celebration. In her response paper, she described a park that had a roller coaster, food booths, and tents with all sorts of entertainers. She wrote that there were many styles of music and dance, and even boys with shaggy wigs dancing and drumming for the audience. She reflected:

I did not expect late nights in Ramadan (since people get up early to eat before sunrise), nor did I expect such a celebratory atmosphere. I had been taught that Ramadan was a month to experience the hunger and pain of the impoverished, so as to develop compassion and generosity. The impression that I got from last night was that Ramadan is a month filled with traditions and serious rituals, but it is also regarded as a chance to stay out late and enjoy the pleasures of life. I would be interested to hear how a Turkish Muslim might reconcile what I perceive as two conflicting purposes.

All of these situations allowed the students to see that Islam and Muslims cannot be neatly tucked into a single package. Cultural interpretations of Islam are as varied as each individual's experience. They were able to witness the commitment of Muslims through prayer and ritual, the lightness of being that Islam encourages through the Sufis, and the holy and celebratory acts of breaking the fast of Ramadan. Any notions of what they had thought Islam might be were challenged. They recognized that Islam had a multitude of facets, and we had only visited one country so far.

In India

Unless we were invited by Muslims to a specific event, the students felt that it was far more difficult to "see" Islam in India. Since the hijab is associated with being a marker of who is Muslim, it was completely different than in Turkey. Wearing the hijab is far more relaxed in India, but Indian fashion

is generally quite modest for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Of course some women wear the *niqab* (a face veil that only shows one's eyes), but many do not cover at all and consider themselves equally pious.

The students visited a clinic run by Chisti Sufis at the Nizamudin Derga in Old Delhi. Before finding the clinic, we walked through a most sorrowful neighborhood filled with people who were ill, crippled, and begging. This was the first time the students saw India's extreme poverty. The clinic's doctor assured them that the Muslims in the area were doing everything they could to end such suffering. As a commitment to the tenet of *zakat* (charity), the Chistis fed the poor every afternoon.

Since it was still Ramadan, the students could see the food prepared for breaking the fast, just like they had at the Bektashi Baba's house. Women were filling hundreds of dishes with food covered by flies for the poor lying outside the mosque. This was in complete contrast to our Turkish experience. We walked a few feet further to see the shrine of the great Chisti master, but as we approached we saw a sign: "Please – No Ladies Allowed." There were no tears this time, only smirks, rolled eyes, and sarcastic mutterings of "I suppose this isn't Islam, it's cultural." The female students had already accepted that they would not have the same privileges as the men in our group.

This was another chance for them to see the contradictions in Muslim communities and to observe their own reactions to situations beyond their control. An interesting conversation ensued. At what point, if ever, will women be allowed into certain sites? What would have happened if the men in our group had graciously said: "Thank you, but out of respect we will not enter without our sisters." Why was it that women could serve food and not have equal rights in serving Allah?

We left the *derga* to tour the clinic, where we witnessed a woman working with male patients. Again this was confusing, because women are not supposed to touch men to whom they are not related. After the tour, we went to a room where we sat down to a lavish dinner and were entertained by Qawali music. It was a joyous event as we broke the fast. There was much singing and clapping – but wait a minute ... isn't music *haram*? The students were becoming increasingly confused by what is Islamic and what is not.

As luck would have it, we were in Delhi for Muharram. We went to various functions held at numerous *masjids* and homes to commemorate the Ahl al-Bayt, the members of the Prophet's family and the Imams that followed. The students knew the story of Karbala' well and the causes of the Shia/Sunni split. Even though they had a good understanding of Shiism, they would never have been able to see the lived religion from a series of readings or lectures. On Ashura they witnessed the *jalus* (procession), men's and

women's *matam* (chest-beating ritual), as they stayed up almost all night, sleeping on the Husayniyyah's for only a few hours. One student reported:

The experience was very interesting and something I was very fortunate to have witnessed. I was able to observe something I had only heard about previously. The lived religion is much more interesting to me than learning the precepts or doctrine. However, I was also able to see how it was important for me to have understood the basics of their beliefs or I would never have been able to point out certain actions or understood what they meant. That offered a whole different perspective to the evening. I am also very glad I was able to see the traditions of both the men and the women in this community.

This student also saw a woman possessed by jinn (spirits) and how the community dealt with her. We had studied spirit possession and *zar* as part of our coursework, but witnessing it firsthand gave the student a vivid example of the importance of ethnographic fieldwork.

Every religion has its dark side, the side that creates oppression, guilt, and fear. It is easy to promote Islam's positive side when practitioners kindly welcomed the students into their circles. But we noticed that there could also be a side that was less than favorable. For example, we visited Delhi's Jama Masjid one Friday directly after prayers. That day, as a newspaper later revealed, there were 10,000 people for the *jum`ah* (Friday prayers), mostly men. As we walked up the stairs to the mosque, the men walked down surrounding us. The following is one of the student's reactions:

While we were pushing through the crowd, I felt people touching me on my back and legs. At first, I thought this was just people trying to get me to move faster, but I soon realized that it was more than that. I felt hands stay on me, groping me. I turned around to see who it was, but there were so many people around me I couldn't figure it out. Then people started grabbing me from the front too, touching my chest. One man even had the nerve to make eye contact with me before poking my breast. Before I could say anything, he had already disappeared into the mass of people. I felt completely horrible after all this, violated. I could understand why some women would want to cover themselves up completely.

We walked through the huge courtyard of the mosque and into the area where people were praying. Inside, I was surprised to see women praying right alongside men. There were women interspersed among the men; they didn't even have to go on one side or behind a screen. I wasn't expecting this because at the *masjid* we visited in the Chisti *derga*, I didn't see any women praying at all, and one of our professors told me women generally only pray in their homes. When I asked the professor who was with

us at Jama Masjid, she said that old traditions like this were being broken, and with new modern ideas, women were beginning to pray in the *masjid* and were allowed to pray beside men.

My first thought was that this was an important achievement for the women in the community. However, I wondered if this really reflected advancement for women's rights and more respect for women in general. After all, beyond the confines of the *masjid* I certainly hadn't felt respected as a woman. I had felt violated and abused. I wondered how these men, who came and prayed before God in the *masjid* alongside women, could just walk out and treat women so disrespectfully. I wished the men could treat us like equals, with respect, as they had treated the women in the *masjid* and as I believe their religion states they should.

This was probably one of the worst experiences of our travels. The female students were in tears and the male students felt helpless; everyone was enraged. They were able to see the contradictions in Islam. Here were pious men leaving Friday prayers stopping for a moment to fondle an innocent girl. Interestingly, all of the women in our group were wearing *shalwar kameez* and hijab. The students felt like their fair skin was a giveaway, and many of us understood why some women choose to wear *niqab*.

Most Muslims argue that the Qur'an offers more equal rights for women than any other religion. After reading portions of the Qur'an and the hadith literature, the students had mixed feelings about these arguments. On the one hand, the women had not had access to all the things that their male counterparts had. Yet they visited a women's organization where women reread the Qur'an, suggesting that men and women interpret the Qur'an in different ways. They were told that for men the message is about justice; but for women it is about compassion and peace. The women at the center emphasized the importance of both interpretations as equally important in order to reach a complete understanding of the Qur'an. The center was run completely by women and offered education, health, social activities, and religious studies. It offered classes to hundreds of poor women on food preparation, reading literacy, sanitation, and birth control advice.

The students also met women who had procured loans and owned their own businesses. They saw these women as empowered as well as barred from participating in certain religious functions. The students were able to see Muslim women as having the best of both worlds: they could work, get an education, and be mothers. Although it was explained to them that this was largely the right of women from certain social classes, they still saw how western stereotypes were grossly exaggerated. One student wrote:

While talking on the phone to my mother, I excitedly tell her about how Islam says that it is the right of the mother and the child to be breastfed for thirty months. “Can you imagine?” I ask her. “Can you imagine living in a community that supported mothers so much, instead of a society where mothers are encouraged to return to work weeks after giving birth?” “It sounds to me like Islam has very clear ideas about what a woman’s role is,” my mom responded.

This student went on to write that Islam offers many opportunities for women to be empowered. She understood gender segregation and no longer saw it as oppressive:

There is special attention paid to the idea of separate but equal. One example of this is in prayer, [for] women and men cannot pray together. This is because it might be distracting because Islamic prayer requires one to bend down and to prostrate. In the mosques we have been to, the women have prayed in a separate room than men, but in other mosques they pray behind the men, or on a balcony above the men, or in a separate section next to them. At first this did not feel equal to me. I do not mind praying with just women, but the fact that we had to follow a man on a television screen who was leading the prayers instead of a woman, that felt inferior. But over time I began to appreciate that separate room.

She was able to see that Muslim women, depending on social class, education, and economic status, are afforded many rights. Those rights may vary from culture to culture, but women still have agency. Women had their own space, private and public.

One of the most important issues studied was women’s issues. Since western media representations are very specific images and offer skewed information about Muslim women, most Americans have an exoticized imagination of what a Muslim woman is. Characterized as submissive and oppressed, they are often portrayed shrouded in black, grieving yet proud of their martyred sons as they conduct their ruthless jihad against the West. These stereotypes quickly diminished as we met college-educated women who interpreted the Qur’an to support and uphold women’s rights, such as Delhi attorney Dr. Sona Khan. Among other degrees, she has a Ph.D. in Islamic jurisprudence and is renowned for the Shahbono divorce and alimony case and the freeing of Amina Lawal, who was sentenced to death by stoning in Nigeria. Famous for her legal representation of women all over the world, she uses the Qur’an and hadiths to prove her point and win legal battles affecting women. Khan argues that Islam does not oppress women; culture does. One student was enamored of Khan when she wrote:

She [Sona Khan] also talked about the freedom and power that Islam affords women versus this stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman. Islam as a religion does not oppress women; it is women's socio-economic status that oppresses them. In order for a woman to be empowered, she needs to first be educated about her rights. Secondly, a woman needs to be empowered to stand up for her rights. If these two things happen, women are able to take control of their lives. Islam affords a lot of rights to women, and especially mothers, that other cultures might not. But if a woman is ignorant of these or is ostracized by her community for standing up for these rights, they do not do her any good.

The students grappled with multiple truths about Islam. In some ways, the religion can be oppressive and in other ways it is not. They realized that culture plays a tremendous role in women's freedoms.

In New York

In Brooklyn, New York, students saw women's rights as they were expressed by high school seniors at an Islamic school. The school has a population of 750 students. For the young women in our group, it was one of the semester's most memorable experiences. Two-thirds of the high school students were girls, but first we met with the boys and asked questions. Most of them told us they would probably go into their fathers' businesses when they graduated. Some wanted to go to college, but many did not know if that was a possibility. When we asked the girls if they planned to go to college, almost every one of them responded with an enthusiastic "Yes!" They told us that they wanted to be doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and engineers. The girls said that they would attend local colleges, because their parents would never allow them to move away from home before marriage. We discussed arranged marriage, and few girls were opposed to it. One college student, who was amazed at the self-confidence and maturity of these girls, wrote:

We were asked if we had any questions for them or if they had questions for us. We asked a few general questions, but the girls really showed us up with their well thought-out inquiries, calling for deep and meaningful answers. For example, one of the girls asked us what aspect of Islam we found difficult to relate to. I had never really thought about that question until that moment she asked it.

We ordered lunch, but had to move out of the cafeteria because the boys were entering. We moved upstairs into a classroom and started to eat. Under their floor-length black coats, they had on jeans and tennis shoes. Having worked with Muslim teens in California, I was curious to get their opinions

about popular music. Was it *haram*? The principal was in the room when I asked the question. No one uttered a word; they all seemed so shy. But as soon as the principal left the room and we were alone, with no teachers or male students, the girls' behavior changed.

One girl stood at the door as a guard while some of the girls pulled out iPods. We moved the desks and formed an open circle in the center of the room. Before we knew it, we were all dancing and singing. We heard songs from Egypt, Palestine, and Morocco and learned the dances too. The two groups of women took turns tying scarves around their hips as we danced in the circle. There was tremendous bonding between all of us, and my students felt vindicated for all the time the men had been allowed into shrines or practices while they had been segregated in the women's quarters. At the end of the day, students could see the benefits of male/female segregation.

One student wrote that she was reminded of the ridiculous stereotypes she had once had about American Muslim girls, but that those assumptions had now completely changed, adding:

The students had a complex and interesting sense of identity that resurfaced many times throughout the day. In many ways, I could see how the students were normal American teenagers – they had iPods and knew pop music, they all had Brooklyn accents, and they wore trendy jackets and sneakers (I could even tell that some of the girls were wearing jeans under their uniforms). However, they all also seemed to identify with the culture of their parents and with Islamic culture. One boy put it this way, "I'm from America, but Muslim is who I am." They seemed to value Islam as a part of their lives. I was struck by how much pride they seemed to feel in their school and their culture. They spoke about their values and how they didn't date or party, and they didn't seem to feel resentment: in fact, they talked with pride about how it was a decision they had made for themselves, keeping Islam in mind.

This pride was especially evident with the girls and their dress code. They were adamant about the fact that it was their decision to wear it and that it was not oppressive but rather freeing for them. This is obviously an issue for them here in the US, where the majority of people don't wear hijab and many people don't understand why women wear it. Upon spending more time with the girls, I realized just how free-spirited and strong they really were.

It felt particularly real to this student because, as she says in the next quote, the piety of the young Muslim girls did not seem contrived and constructed for our benefit. These teenagers were like all other American teens.

I noticed that during prayers, the girls who weren't praying because they were menstruating sat in back, talking and joking. I would expect students to joke around during school announcements, but I would not necessarily expect them to joke around during prayers. I can see, though, that if praying is done every day it becomes a sort of a normal school activity, and students would feel like they could joke around.

Students had experienced Islam in a "Muslim" country like Turkey and in India, but they were surprised to have such intimacy with American Muslims. They realized how different and yet how similar we are. One student reported:

I believe what crept up most in my thoughts were the experiences I had had in the past three months. It was these experiences that allowed me to reexamine how I see my own culture and religion in that culture. In any past ordinary situation, I would have gone to that school and I would have seen Muslims. No longer could this be true, [for] I saw, primarily, Americans; I saw how being in America affected the culture of these young Muslims.

Most importantly, through these thoughts, I realized how much culture affects religion. For the entire semester so far I had been examining religion and culture simultaneously. Not possessing the ability to separate these two things at first convinced me that to be Muslim is to live in an Islamic culture. This is simply untrue, as is more apparent to me now more than ever the fact that while religion affects culture and vice versa, there can be no singular Muslim identity, even though some Muslims may believe it to be true. Regardless of, and in many cases because of, denomination, ethnicity, or country and culture of life, each Muslim will take something completely different from their faith. While what they take may be similar, there is no way in which one can separate their eyes from the world they live in. It is the same for every Christian, Buddhist, and Jew; the life one lives could never be homogenized to fit a standard. It is simply impossible, regardless of what one lets oneself believe.

This student has the ability to show how culture and religion are intertwined. Meeting American Muslims close to his age gave him an entirely new image of Muslims. In each country he visited, he was able to experience Islam and Muslims differently. Each group was comprised of unique identities and forms of expression.

While we were at the school, I asked a senior boy how many Shiah attend the school. He answered, with great authority, that none attended because the Shiah are not really Muslims. Needless to say, this raised the eyebrows of my students and later led to a conversation concluding that this

boy did not speak for all Sunnis and that we must keep that in mind. Our trip to the Shiah community center that night showed us just how Muslim the Shiah are. We were greeted by a number of women as we entered the door, and were taken to a large room that had a few hundred chairs set up. We were ushered to the front of the room as honored guests.

There were two speakers who had clearly chosen specific topics to discuss. One asked a question and the other answered. Instead of the typical conversion lecture that we often received, this was a television-like performance discussing science and religion. As contrived as it was, we were fascinated with their excellent arguments, a living example of *ijtihad* (independent interpretation). Here the students could see an important Islamic concept alive and functioning. After the question-and-answer period was over, they opened the floor for questions from the audience. There were many good questions and thought-provoking answers. When we were finished, we were, in typical fashion, invited to share a meal. My students were mobbed as if they were celebrities. The women rushed to the women and the men to the men. There were numerous college students and older professionals who had questions for the students. A few converts hovered around and asked them questions as well. One student's time with American Shiah had a strong affect on her experience. She shares:

It felt like a very loving community, openly welcoming us and sincere about having dialogue. It was interesting listening to ideas that were so unlike my own but in a space where I felt that there was room for what I thought. They weren't trying to blindly convert me. It was really nice to be given the chance to hear sincere, honest dialogue on a personal level about beliefs with space to talk and to listen. I really believe that it is through dialogues like this we will start making connections with people of all different beliefs.

The students later said that they were thankful to have studied Shiism before our field trip. There were exchanges of emails and lots of hugs and kisses as we left, returning to the winter chill of New York City.

In New York, students were again asked to think critically when we met with members of the Arab-American Association. It was an impressive visit to their organization, for they had attorneys present, an information center, and an after-school program to help children do better in school. Each student was partnered with a child for tutoring in math or English. Most of the children were new immigrants.

After our visit, we walked a few blocks to the local *masjid*. We were met by four men who gave us lectures on Islam and why it was such a great reli-

gion. All of them were highly educated, and a number of them had been in the United States for over twenty years. One of the students asked why Islam did not allow women to be clerics. One man, who was an obstetrician/gynecologist, said that men and women were given assigned roles by God, roles that are special and that each sex is best at performing. Knowing that he delivered babies, my students gave me their typical glance of “I don’t get it ... there is a contradiction here...” Before I could question him on why women could not enter the men’s world but he could enter into their world, we were whisked off to another function.

The students immediately pulled me aside and asked about *’awrah* (a woman’s nakedness). A man has no right to see a woman’s body unless she is *mahram* (a relative), and even then he can only see his own wife naked. These questions led to a long conversation with the students about double standards. In most countries, birthing is done by and for women only; men are never present. Yet here was a committed Muslim man adopting western standards. He could not see the contradiction in his behavior, which, from the students’ perspective, was *haram*.

The next day, we went to a Muslim center that had created an indoor playground for children. They offered classes in Arabic and the Qur’an. Little children played together; but as they grew older, boys and girls were separated. We met families and chatted. At one point, we asked if the “ladies” could be alone. Our hostess was Egyptian, and I wanted to see if we could have a frank discussion about female circumcision and if certain ethnic groups in the United States were practicing it. Knowing that female circumcision is not an Islamic practice but is common in Egypt, I pressed her for her opinion. She told us that it is not Islamic but that many Egyptians do it. She said it was not popular in the United States, and then smiled and said that everyone should enjoy sex – if one is married, that is. This answer satisfied us, and we all giggled.

Another woman became quite defensive, saying that she was sick and tired of the way the media represents Muslims. As she was on her tirade, one of the students gently interrupted her and said: “We do not see Muslims this way. We know that the media stereotypes and makes all Muslims look like terrorists, and we know that this is not true.” The woman heaved a sigh; it was obvious that she felt like she had to defend Islam.

On our final night in New York we visited the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi center. This was the students first experience with a Sufi order in a western context. Much to my students delight they were received by a female sheikh. Finally, the students could say that it was true that Islam granted equality for

men and women. There was a short discussion and then the Sufis brought out instruments and started to sing and turn. One student said:

When I walked up to the *derga* in Tribeca, Manhattan, yesterday, I thought it was a pub. It blended in to the Manhattan storefronts surrounding it. However, stepping inside the multi-purpose *derga* and *masjid* was like stepping into another place and time in my life. It was a secret world within a world in which we were allowed entry.

It was very strange in that room, because it was covered in Turkish carpets much like the *derga* in Konya where we had first encountered the Sufis. There were even the large calligraphy wall hangings with the names of Allah, Muhammad ... The night only continued in that strange *déjà vu*. Talking to the Sufis about Rumi again was very reminiscent of Konya. The sheik even told us a lot of stories like we had heard from the Mevlevis. It was also a very interesting environment, because it was extremely ethnically diverse and equally diverse in age.

One interesting thing about this *derga* was the sheikh herself. Yes, the sheikh was a woman, and I felt that she had a very wise sense about her. In my short conversations with her and from her discussion addressed to the whole group, she just made so much sense. She said that there are infinite ways to find the truth and Sufism was just her personal favorite. She knew a lot about many different religions, but she was very well versed in her own as well. During the *dhikr*, she led the group with a sense of knowledge and assurance.

This was the last night of the semester, and the students now had to prepare their portfolios. They were asked to reflect on the entire semester and create a 200-page document to present to Long Island University.

Besides endless site visits where they took field notes, they were given a variety of writing assignments. All students were responsible for academic papers that had to have the appropriate sources and citations. These papers were properly documented and submitted to professors for their feedback. Some of the assignments included the challenge to contrast and compare communities and aspects of Islam and to explain how they differed from culture to culture. They were encouraged to think critically and also be self-reflective as they wrote personal reflection papers. These papers required the students to examine their personal insights and experiences and to consider how these moments in time had altered their perspectives about Islam and themselves. In one such paper, the students had to give examples of beauty in Islam drawn from architecture, music, poetry, art or prayer. They were asked to examine not only the landscape's sacred sites but also to

acknowledge and cultivate beauty from the perspective of *batin* (inner experience). I posed the question: “How might beauty be lived in our thoughts and actions?” One student answered:

... what I have tried to do lately is to remember to take a deep breath and think about the beauty each person has. Each person is a miracle, and each person has extraordinary qualities. So, I try to focus on the beauty in the person rather than what is annoying me, try to remind myself of the aspects I really love about them. I have found that when I do this, my annoyance is mitigated. I feel like it has really helped me to become more patient with others and helped me avoid saying something or acting in a way that I would only regret later.

I think the concept of beauty [in Islam] has also made me more grateful. Keeping this in mind helps me be more observant and more present. It also reminds me how lucky I am to have the chance to experience everything that I do, and it reminds me not to take my life for granted, to really appreciate all the beauty around me.

The students saw that beauty can be found in the holy and the mundane. Whether we were at the Taj Mahal or feeding the poor, they could experience Islam’s beauty and what it means to submit and bow down to something greater than ourselves. They could also understand the complexities of their own experiences and thus acknowledge the complexities of all humanity.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the students learned that there is no monolithic Islam, for Islam and Muslims are diverse and encompass numerous cultural values and traditions. Although the religion stays the same throughout all the countries that we visited, it manifests differently according to the culture and traditions. Sunni, Shiah, and Sufi groups shared many of the same beliefs, but each group practiced Islam in a slightly different manner, placing importance on various issues.

Students were faced with difficulties and challenges that they would never find in an American classroom. They experienced cultural and religious differences in three countries and basically were asked to adjust their lenses every six weeks. They were asked to be self-reflective, think critically, and place themselves within a context that was completely foreign to their experiences as non-Muslim Americans. Many of them were only familiar with Islam through American media sources, which are often skewed and biased. They began to understand the humanity of Muslim practitioners and

to see them as people, not just distant media images. One student felt she could deeply examine her imaginings of the Muslim community; more importantly, she could examine herself. She writes:

My Jewish identity and how I approach Judaism has influenced the frame through which I look at Islam. I realized that in order to understand Islam, I was going to have to find way to connect to it in some other way than an intellectual level. I had to have a switch in how I looked at religion. This was one of the first times that I went from trying to intellectually understand Islam to feeling like I was connecting with at least one kind of concept of Allah. This was a new way of seeing the world for me.

She adds:

What I take away from my time [studying Islam] will have a great deal to do with my ability to embrace my own humanity. One thing that I felt, at the beginning of the year, was that while it may seem obvious that there is no way of being “properly” human, one cannot imagine different realities until one’s perceptions change. What I understand after my time so far is that although it is important for my perceptions to change during my time on the program, the process of changing my perceptions will be a slow and gradual course that will require patience and the learned virtue of accepting each moment for what it is, rather than for what it is not.

Studying Islam in the field gave the students an opportunity to be involved with Muslims. Muslims were no longer objects of study, but human beings, some of whom had a tremendous impact on how the students viewed the world and themselves. As the semester ended, we all had a new appreciation for Islam. Our hearts had been opened; they had been broken and then mended by our experiences. Our assumptions were gone, but new questions had emerged. We had laughed and cried, but most importantly we had learned to submit not only to the mystery of Islam but to the mystery of our own lives by approaching ourselves and others with a tender curiosity. Realizing that each individual creates her or his own experience and assigns meaning to that experience, we could see Islam’s beauty and diversity. We found that every individual’s spiritual journey must be interpreted with an open mind and engaged heart and, *in sha’ Allah*, may it become love (*ashk olsun*).

Endnotes

1. *Friends World Program Handbook*, 2005 Edition, 53.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 195.