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## **“I Want to Love Islam, I Really Do, But . . . ”: Islamophilic Classrooms in Islamophobic Times**

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THE WABASH CENTER

# JOURNAL ON TEACHING

## SPECIAL TOPIC

# “I Want to Love Islam, I Really Do, But . . . ”: Islamophilic Classrooms in Islamophobic Times

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## ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on a critical incident that occurred during a seminar discussion about the age of Aishah at the time of her marriage to the prophet Muhammed. I take students’ discomfort with the material and their expression of emotions—especially their desire to love Islam—as an opening to think about the opportunities and challenges of working with students’ emotions in the classroom. I begin by problematizing love (or the want of it) as an Islamophilic response to students’ awareness of the dangers of Islamophobia. I then go on to entertain the possibility of embracing love as a ‘productive’ emotion that offers insights into the study of Islam and Muslims. While I caution against the traps of Islamophilia, I take love as an important and perhaps overlooked dimension of pedagogy. This is one of three essays published together in a [special topic section](#) of this journal on critical incidents in the classroom.

## KEYWORDS

Islam, emotions, frustration, love, Islamophobia, Islamophilia, gender, sexuality

## I Want to Love Islam

One student spoke while others shifted awkwardly in their seats.<sup>1</sup> “I want to love Islam, I really do. But . . . ” We sat together in anticipation of the remainder of the sentence, but her point was clear. This student had tried to imagine Islam as good, and here, in week six, she was running out of steam.

In Fall 2018, seventeen bright juniors and seniors sat in a semi-circle in Jordan Hall at Butler University. They were enrolled in the seminar “Islam, Gender, and Sexuality.” That day’s class was part of the theme Women in the Quran and Tradition. They had read from Kecia Ali’s *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Quran, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (2016). There was a palpable sense within the group that their patience was being worn thin. The chapter that had pushed them to their limits was “The Prophet Muhammed, His Beloved Wife Aishah, and Modern Sensibilities.” Students struggled to contribute to the discussion. The chapter opens with a prophetic tradition (*hadith*) as epigraph: “Aishah narrated that the Prophet married her when she was a girl of six and he consummated the marriage when she was a girl of nine” (2016, 173). Ali’s interest lies in how contemporary Muslims grapple with the ethical implications of the hadith. For the students, the hadith seemed too similar to the false claims of Islamophobes that they were skilled at challenging.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the lively seminar students who participated in these discussions, and especially to those who generously allowed me to share their words. I would like to thank Aun Hasan Ali, Rose Aslan, and Junaid Quadri for their critical comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

Only in the nineteenth century did Aishah’s age at the time of marriage become a matter for discussion for polemicists. Muslims have reacted in various ways, from asserting the authenticity of the hadith, to questioning it. Some Muslims theorize a later date of marriage, while others cast the union as normal in its historical and geographic context. Aishah bint Abu Bakr (613/614–678 CE) holds special reverence, especially for Sunnis, in the Islamic tradition. She is the source of much of what is recorded about the prophet Muhammed’s life, and he is described as having had a special fondness for her.

I was prepared for the classroom frisson. Most students had prepared a 300-word reading response on Moodle prior to class. In their responses, they shared their confusion: “Much of this chapter just left me frustrated because I didn’t know how to feel.” The posts presented a class in crisis. I decided to postpone my lesson plan to respond to them. In what may have seemed obvious to many, I opened our session by asking: What makes this topic so uncomfortable? Why did you find it frustrating?

Two students shared how in reading about the relationship, they kept thinking about their younger siblings, and were unable to imagine that they would be prepared for a sexual relationship at such a young age. Another seemed to test the waters of what could be shared at a moment when their professor asked them to describe their reaction to a text. “The idea of her being that young, well, it is. . .” (face scrunched up) “disgusting.” I facilitated the discussion, offering very little response to their reactions, calling on students, one after another, to share.

Eventually we made our way to some of my planned questions: What are the ethical and methodological issues that Ali raises? What does the debate tell us about polemics and apologetics? What assumptions do various interpreters make about Aishah’s body (and puberty)? In other words, I wanted to treat this topic with the same kind of critical inquiry we had used in other classes. As an illustration of Muslim discussions of the hadith, we [watched a clip](#) from a lecture by Georgetown professor Jonathan Brown titled “Why are you agitated about the age of Hazrat Aysha?” (2012). In the video, an audience member asks Brown to comment on the hadith that mentions the age of Aishah. Brown responds: “You seem agitated about this. What is your agitation? Why are you so uncomfortable?”

“I’m not so uncomfortable about it. But some people are.”

“What makes you uncomfortable?”

“But I’m not. Bu, bu. . .”

“What makes you uncomfortable?”

“In the context of now. . . [inaudible].”

Brown rubs his chin. Another audience member intervenes: “I think the question has something to do with later sources. Ibn Hisham and Tabari. . .” The second questioner framed the question as one about how to navigate various authoritative texts that speak to the issue. Brown explains some theories of how Aishah must have been older than the hadith mentions and refutes them. The questioner follows up to reassure him: “My question isn’t an ethical one. It’s about the science of hadith.”

The clip demonstrated for students a sample of how some Muslims discuss and try to understand the hadith. Compared with Ali’s chapter (2016) that treated the subject as a challenging ethical quandary, one student summed up the contrast between the two approaches: “Brown seems very certain of himself” (2012).

## Love Hurts: Islamophilia as an Anxiety of Islamophobia

Let me state from the outset that none of my course objectives include cultivating a love of Islam. I do not say this proudly to set colleagues at ease. The active verbs I employ on my syllabus as course objectives include asking students to identify, analyze, appreciate, apply, develop, refine, and interrogate. Notably, none of these include honing the correct feeling for the study of Islam.

In fact, for a course on Islam, gender, and sexuality, love is conspicuously coy.<sup>2</sup> I carved out only a small space to explicitly contemplate love in the tradition by reading excerpts from Omid Safi's *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* (2018). Students explored *eshq*, passionate love for the Divine, through poetry. Admittedly though, this is a rare moment in a course that examines issues of marriage, family, and sexual desire and practice with very little attention to the complex emotion of love.

I take up my student's comment, "I want to love Islam, I really do," not as a riposte to what I take as a naive or misguided confession, but as an opening to think about the different ways in which love might work in the Islamic studies classroom. I begin by problematizing love (or the desire for it) as an Islamophilic response by students with a keen awareness of the dangers of Islamophobia. I then go on to entertain the possibility of embracing love as a "productive" emotion that offers insights into the study of Islam and Muslims. While I caution against the traps of Islamophilia, I take love as an important and perhaps overlooked dimension of pedagogy. I am interested in when love gets in the way of our study, and when it can enrich and guide it. The central questions the episode raises are: Is there a right emotion for our study? And can the right emotions set us up for the right relationship to our subject? I approach these questions in a spirit of experimentation and make some pedagogical suggestions on how to draw attention to the role of emotions in student learning.

Before turning to love, however, I want to consider the "but" in the student's comment, since it is the "but" and ensuing silence that drives the conflict of the scene. Looming in the silence was a student stretched to her relativist limits. In muting herself, she expressed a concern to not be insensitive. She was clearly not alone. The class was unsettled. And while I had no intention of making them comfortable—Ali is explicitly unsettling her reader as she grapples with the hadith—my prodding failed to interrogate how feelings were a part of our reckoning with the hadith. While I gave students the space to elaborate on their personal reactions to the chapter, I did not draw analytic attention to their reactions. Instead, I viewed the airing of their feelings as a first step to moving on and making the analytic observations that marked what I took as the stakes of discussing Aishah's age. The students' discussion of their feelings allowed them to cope with the ethical questions raised in the chapter. At the same time, focusing on students' reactions appeared to be the direct response that polemicists wished to elicit. Ali draws our attention to the role of polemics and apologetics in the debate about Aishah's age. Directing students' attention to how polemical modes shape the discursive field would be an effective way to harness the discussion of their feelings.

The incident shows the need to address emotions within the classroom. The students described their confusion and frustration as negative emotions. The want for love is part of their desire to embrace Islam. I believe this desire that I call Islamophilic is related to students' awareness of and desire to combat Islamophobia. I often include a critical reading on Islamophobia early in the course to help us address the misrepresentation of Muslims, Islamic history, and contemporary manifestations of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim bigotry, particularly in Euro-America.<sup>3</sup> This framing is essential for excavating how we know what we know about Islam and Muslims. During office hours, I guided a student as she refined a research question for her term paper. In her formulation she suggested that Muslim women are always foreign. When I pointed out that there are Muslim women in America, the student appeared chastened: "I didn't mean to be" and here she mumbled, "Islamophobic." In another office hours meeting, a different student mentioned her own surprise at just how much of her previous knowledge of Islam was based on Islamophobic sources. The mumble and astonishment are signs of something cracking. Students could uncomfortably recognize Islamophobia. But the class on Aishah suggested that Islamophilia ought to be a concept to work with and through as well.

The incident prompted me to return to Andrew Shryock's edited volume, *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (2010). One of the insights gleaned from this collection of essays is that Islamophobia and Islamophilia are not opposites, but rather are two sides of the same coin. Where Islamophobia is "a generalized fear of Islam and Muslims" (2010, 1), Islamophilia is "a generalized affection for Islam and Muslims, [that] comes with its own political costs" (2010, 9). Islamophilia appeals to those ready to embrace an image of Islam or Muslims that counters mainstream depictions of an enemy. As critical as Islamophobia scholarship is, it cannot adequately address the disposition with which many students join the seminar: a desire to love Islam.

2 On the specific challenges and distinct approaches to teaching Islam, gender, and sexuality, see Haqqani (2019), Khoja-Moolji (2014), Mahmood (2012), and Tidswell (2013).

3 The resources to teach on Islamophobia have multiplied in the last decade. Some selections that include a focus on the United States include Green (2015), Beydoun (2018), Ernst (2013), and Esposito (2011).

I previously found it difficult to take seriously the dangers of Islamophilia. In a context of sometimes hysterical and other times subtle forms of Islamophobia, I assumed Islamophobia to be a serious impediment to understanding the Islamic tradition and Muslim communities; I did not take into account the motivations and orientations of many—if not most—students who enroll in my classes: to better understand a religion they know is widely misunderstood. This positioning makes them susceptible to wanting to love, which can lead to recoiling when they discover differences that challenge their values and norms. For this reason, while exploring Islamophobia must remain a critical part of our study, Islamophilia should similarly be explored as a critical framing concept. In addition to assigning readings from Shryock’s (2010) collection, classroom activities can include debates as to whether a scholarly or media source is an example of Islamophilia. The Brown [lecture](#) (2012) is another possible source around which to frame such a seminar discussion, a suggestion to which I return below.

Not only did I fail to understand the significance of Islamophilia, I did not appreciate its alliance with Islamophobia, and how critical it is to address the two together. Both Islamophobia and Islamophilia set up Islam and Muslims as either good or bad. Both reach for an Islamic essence and construct a totalizing image of Islam as an object and Muslims as a monolith. The frame is claustrophobic. It limits our conversations. If Islam is not bad, as the media reports, students hoped that their university classroom would tell them that Islam is good. These students persistently broke down binaries in our seminar. But the stubborn interdependence of Islamophobia and Islamophilia, fear and affection, are not so easily untied.

However, just as Islamophilia can be employed as a critical concept, it has its limitations. The pairing of Islamophobia and Islamophilia relies on a framework of secular criticism, as Shryock points out, one that is not interested in “Islam as a doctrinal system,” but rather takes “Muslims as social actors” (2010, 18). While this move disrupts taking Islam as an object and effectively captures a diversity of experiences and interpretations, within the religious study classroom it occludes any possibility of a relationship to the study of Islam and Muslims except as a perennially outsider’s endeavor. An approach that twins Islamophilia with phobia privileges looking in, whether the observer is non-Muslim or Muslim, as the grounds on which to understand the tradition and people who relate to it. It presumes a critical detachment. In other words, the relationship of Islamophobia and Islamophilia makes sense in a world of secular criticism. It leaves no room for love.

## Tastes and Sensibilities: Love as a Pedagogical Technique

In questioning the place of love in the classroom, I am not quite ready to leave it aside; I do, however, want to carve out a different relationship to it. Brown’s [video](#) (2012) and the questions posed by his audience represent a different kind of Islamophilia than those of the seminar students. Had members of Brown’s audience been present in Jordan Hall that day, they likely would have retorted that our conversation circled around personal tastes. Their primary concern, as they described it, was to the textual tradition and its methods of learning and preserving knowledge. Brown’s repetition of “What makes you so uncomfortable?” echoed my own foray into the lesson, but to different effect. The video clip demonstrated Muslims asking questions in a different vein than those of the seminar’s and revealed a different driving force. They implicitly asked: what kinds of questions are the right questions for our sacred texts? Critically pursuing how emotions work means to be aware of how they motivate, how they are often conflicted, and how they may appear in unexpected places. While the idea of love in the Islamic tradition for many implies the mystical tradition (as the course reinforced through our reading of “radical love” poetry), Brown and his audience (2012) may similarly be moved by a love of the tradition and a love of prophet, just as they (to some of my students’ horror) eschewed questions of ethics. The wavering love of my students was based on a desire to love the other, not oneself, and not one’s tradition. These different kinds of Islamophilia pose their own pitfalls and potentials.

My own ethnographic work on Quran education guides me to see emotions as potentially productive human responses that enable learning (Mouftah 2019). Much work in the anthropology of Islam is attentive to practices that learners apply to their lives to cultivate correct or virtuous feelings.<sup>4</sup> In the future I will draw attention to students’ emotive responses and contrast them with those grounded in ideal Islamic education, where one’s affective response is not considered natural, but is instead the site of cultivation. In her essay on deploying aesthetics in Islamic studies classrooms, Manuela Ceballos describes the concept of *dhawq*, or taste, and the significance of honing *dhawq* as critical to discernment and ethical refinement: “Even though the individual may have certain intuitive predispositions, part of the role of Islamic education is to

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4 On the role of emotions in performing and listening to the Qur’an, see for example Gade (2004; 2002) and Nelson (1985). Beyond Qur’anic education, see for example, Hirschkind (2013) and Ware (2014).

channel these subjective inclinations and to guide the student to appreciate spiritual beauty, to find pleasure in that which is good, and to guide and correct her affective responses to ethical matters (2019, 22).

My aim is not to recreate the methods and dispositions of classical Islamic education, but rather to decenter the methods of our seminar and contemplate the potentials of an epistemology that situates tastes, sensibilities, and emotions as integral to learning. Appreciating this form of education at this stage of the term would also lay the groundwork for their study of Muslim women's bodily practices that seek to develop desire for prayer and pious dispositions. Students read Saba Mahmood's seminal "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" (2001). They were challenged and intrigued by women who endeavor to hone shyness as a virtue. Centering on emotions earlier in the course would allow students more traction in thinking about the cultivation of virtuous feelings more broadly, and not exclusively related to women's modesty.

## The Right Emotions for our Study, the Right Relationship to our Subject

Institutional constraints may add to the Islamophobia/Islamophilia bind. Colleges and universities seem to want to offer courses in Islam to counter popular misunderstandings, and in doing so to construct an Islamophilic point of entry to our courses. Students are afraid to not love Islam. For some, loving Islam is politically progressive. For others, it is Christian. And for yet others, it is a rare moment for them to appreciate their tradition. But the desire for this love to be one that expects to like everything it discovers leaves us in shallow waters. It reduces a religious tradition to the fickle tastes of Facebook likes and loves. The challenge is to recognize the parameters that such judgments place on the conversation and then push against those confinements. To enable this push, I suggest we experiment with the place of emotions in the classroom.

Insights based on the incident lead me to two, at times opposing, suggestions: the first is to be just as aware of Islamophilia as we are of Islamophobia. The second is to call attention to how emotions impact our learning. We can redirect questions around student feelings, especially sentiments of confusion and frustration that leave much to be untangled. What does it mean to love Islam? What do the powers of disgust or revulsion tell us about ourselves and our subjects? Is it possible to bracket—even temporarily—our feelings towards our material? How do we know when to trust our feelings, or when they inhibit our understanding? Interrogating how emotion works adds complexity to the classroom. Calling attention to feelings does not need to be indulgent, but can further open up other course materials that are premised on understanding emotions for religious knowledge and practice. I want students to notice at what moments we love, and at what moments we see our love challenged. The seminar need not take our wavering feelings as the guide for our study, but instead as data to help us understand ourselves, our times, and our relationship to the people, places, texts, and debates that make up our study.

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#### ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL TOPIC SECTION ON CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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