

Ramadan Starts Soon (Religion in the Classroom)

by Emily O. Gravett

Sent: Thu 03/31/2022

We talk a lot about [“intersectionality”](#) these days in higher ed, but, in my experience, religion doesn’t often come up. But it’s also in [the mix](#). Religion can be a tough topic to address in classes, for [both faculty and students alike](#). It’s tough for me sometimes too, and this is what I teach! Religion can be personal or sensitive or controversial or offensive or inspiring or fulfilling. It can be wrapped up in someone’s identity or morals or values or family or lifestyle or community. Or not.

As I routinely say in class, we don’t know everything about a person just because we know that they’re religious. Let’s say I learn one of my students is Christian (and many say they are); that doesn’t mean I know who they voted for or how they feel about abortion or what they did last Sunday or how they treat their neighbors. We don’t know how a Muslim woman will choose to dress, we don’t know whether a Jewish person will abstain from eating bacon, we don’t know whether a Buddhist meditates every day—or at all. Religions are not homogenous, monolithic, static things. They are made up of real people living real lives all over the world and often those real lives don’t completely correspond to the (necessarily) simplified guidelines, rules, precepts, or creeds that might be laid out in [an introductory class or a textbook](#).

As a grad student, I audited some courses in other departments at the University of Virginia that dealt miserably, even irresponsibly, with religion. I wished that those professors had taken an introduction to religion course or even just familiarized themselves with some of the basics of teaching this topic. ([Harvard’s core principles](#) are a helpful primer, for those of you who are interested.) But even professionals don’t always get it right. In the book I use for my Religion and Disability course, the chapter on Islam makes many assertions like “All Muslims adhere to...” and “all Muslims abide by....” Well, no. There are over 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. They don’t ALL do anything.

Still, it’s helpful to have a sense of the basics of the various religions. This is an ongoing project for me, even as a person with a Ph.D. in it. (There are a lot of religions, y’all!) Scholar Stephen Prothero thinks [“religious literacy”](#) is essential for being an effective citizen. After all, religion is entangled in just about everything: history and politics and literature and art and language and international affairs and science and and and. It can affect what’s happening in the classroom, whether we know it or not (see [here](#), for example).

Of course, we all have on our syllabi (I hope!) [the required statements](#) about religious observation accommodations. To be honest, I don’t think much about it and have only had a handful of students over the years seeking those “accommodations.” But, as disability studies and universal design have taught me, it’s helpful to be [proactive and preemptive](#) (rather than having to make ad-hoc adjustments for those individuals who are brave enough to ask).

Here's one concrete example to consider: Ramadan is [starting this weekend](#). If you're unfamiliar with Ramadan, there are lots of places to learn more (like [here](#) or [here](#)), but for this Toolbox, I'll just say that it is the holiest month in the Muslim calendar, it is one of the "[Five Pillars of Islam](#)" (though, just to reiterate a key point from above, not everyone who identifies as Muslim does each of these five pillars), and it involves, for Muslims who do participate, a month of fasting from sunup till sundown. Muslims who choose to fast wake up early to eat and drink for the day before the sun rises. If fasting, Muslims aren't to avoid regular activities, like work or school; it's supposed to be business as usual.

So, what might Ramadan mean for Muslim students? It might mean taking tests, working on major essays, spending time in the lab, contributing to in-class discussions, trying to coordinate group projects with peers, starting to study for finals—all with low blood sugar and, likely, less sleep than normal (which we know [negatively affects learning](#)). As a person who gets [hangry](#) about every two hours, the prospect of going a full day without eating or drinking—and carrying on with my life as usual (interacting patiently with other human beings, completing complex tasks, not napping for hours on end)—sounds challenging.

How aware are we of important religious dates that fall during the semesters? How do we acknowledge or build those dates into our syllabi? How do we adjust our instruction accordingly, let alone other campus happenings (like how late the dining halls are open)? Whenever my students and I talk about whether the United States is a "Christian nation" (and the accompanying [Christian privilege](#) that many experience living here), I note that we get winter break off to cover Christmas and my daughter doesn't have to go to school (a Harrisonburg City Public School) the Monday after Easter. But every year I personally have to Google when [Yom Kippur](#) and [Diwali](#) are. (Yes, in part, this is because many religious dates are on the lunar calendar and so they move around each year.) In the past, Muslim students at JMU have [expressed their frustration](#) about the lack of support for them during Ramadan.

[Professors elsewhere have tried to be proactive](#). For instance, during finals, they have offered test times that didn't occur during the daylight hours or they provided multiple exam test times from which students could choose. My [colleague CJ Uy, our Islam professor](#), suggested I reach out to JMU's Muslim student association (why didn't I think of that?? *face palm*) to find out more. Their VP Ammara Sheikh graciously shared these suggestions with me:

- The best way to support Muslims during this month is to simply ask what support they would need. Each Muslim has different needs during this month, so acknowledgment and asking goes a long way!
- Please do not feel guilty about eating in front of a Muslim who is fasting. You need to eat, and we are not starving, we are making a conscious choice to abstain from food. We appreciate the consideration; however, if it becomes too much, please allow your Muslim friends to excuse themselves.
- Please be considerate of scheduling meetings around sunset when Muslims will be having iftar [the evening meal] and breaking their fast.
- Please be aware that Muslim students will be praying five times a day and will need to excuse themselves to do so.

- Unless they feel comfortable in sharing, please refrain from asking someone why they might not be fasting. Although fasting is important for all Muslims to do, there can be personal reasons for why they are not fasting at the time.
- During Ramadan, many Muslims are happy to be wished a “Ramadan Mubarak (mu-bar-uk)” or a “Happy Ramadan.”
- If possible, please allow Muslim students to complete assignments and exams after sunset to ensure they are not at a disadvantage during the daytime.
- Additional considerations include supporting student-athletes and students doing physical activities who are fasting. Coaches and instructors should be aware that these individuals are likely going without water in addition to forgoing food. However, leave it up to their discretion whether they choose to fast or not.
- During Eid-al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan, many Muslims are happy to be wished an “Eid Mubarak (mu-bar-uk)” or “Happy Eid.”

So: Awareness and self-education. Acknowledgement. Avoidance of assumptions. Approachability. Asking. Adjustments. What else might we all be able to do?

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