

David Vila, John Brown University



David Vila is Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. He earned his PhD from Saint Louis University and wrote a dissertation on Christian-Muslim relations in Syria/Palestine during the first Abbasid century. He has worked with an archaeological excavation in Jordan since 1990 and was awarded a Fulbright grant in 1995 to study Arabic and early Christian-Muslim relations in Jordan.

On September 15, 2001, I got lost as I took my family to the Benton County Fair, so I pulled over at an IHOP to ask for directions. Behind the counter stood a young man whose black hair and bushy eyebrows didn't seem to match the pasty-white skin of his face. As he spoke, his voice startled me. In a thick Arabic accent he politely told me how to get to the fair. When he had finished I looked him right in the face and asked (in Arabic), "Do you speak Arabic?" He froze. After what seemed to be forever, a small tear formed in his eye, and he answered me very quietly, "Yes, I speak Arabic." When I asked him where he was from, much to my delight he answered, "Jordan." I then told him that I had lived in Jordan for two years and studied at Jordan University, and it turned out that the archaeological excavation I work with is just a few miles from his village. Before we could talk any more, a customer approached and I had to leave for the fair. As I walked out to the car I couldn't help thinking about his face. Then it hit me. His face was white because he was wearing a thick coat of pasty-white make-up. Four days after 9/11 he didn't want anyone to see his Arab face.

Violence isn't done only with bombs and guns. A recent report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) indicates that reports of anti-Muslim violence, discrimination, and harassment are up 15 percent over the past year. For me and my students, the violence that we perpetrate against those who are different, either religiously or culturally, is often the marginalization and stereotyping that leads them to feel (rightly or wrongly) that they have to cover their faces to feel safe. Violence, both physical and psychological, is everywhere. We cannot deny the reality of the horrendous physical violence that is sometimes perpetrated, but we often overlook violence of a more subtle sort.

John Brown University, where I teach, is a private, independent, liberal arts college in northwest Arkansas. Both in its faculty and its student body, JBU is clearly within mainstream Evangelicalism. Many students here would not take offense at being called “fundamentalists.” This context is important because, as I began a recent course on Islam, national news headlines were filled with reports of Jerry Vines (former president of the Southern Baptist Convention), Jerry Falwell, and Franklin Graham saying “Islam was founded by a demon-possessed pedophile,” or “I think Muhammad was a terrorist,” or “The God of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. It’s a different god, and I believe it is a very evil and very wicked religion,” respectively. Violence was in the air — not physical violence, of course, but violence of a much more insidious type, the type that led the Jordanian man to cover his face.

In addition to the more emotional and inflammatory challenges faced in teaching Islam at an Evangelical institution, there are also obstacles of a conceptual nature. At the 2002 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, a presenter who had a PhD in Islamic Studies declared that since Muslim understandings of God, atonement, and redemption are so fundamentally opposed to Christian understandings of these things, there can be no “points of contact” between the two traditions. An odd claim, I thought. On a more popular level, Don Richardson, whose books have sold widely, is the architect behind a way of approaching non-Christian religions called “redemptive analogies.” He argues that all the religions and cultures of the world have “analogies” to ideas in Christian theology which can serve as bridges for Christian witness to members of these religions. His most recent contribution, *Secrets of the Koran*, takes a different turn. There he calls Islam “the great exception,” arguing that Islam is so fundamentally different from Christianity that there are no “redemptive analogies” in Islam.

Despite such formidable obstacles to teaching Islam at an Evangelical institution, two strategies allowed me to circumvent many of these obstacles and help students sort through some of the dynamics involved in understanding the complex relationships between religion and violence, both in Islam and in their own tradition.

The first strategy was to help students to see that they have the resources within their own Evangelical tradition to approach the study of Islam with empathy and hopefulness. All students at John Brown University take a first-year seminar in which they read *The Idea of a Christian College* by Arthur Holmes. One of the main themes that Holmes addresses is the notion that in a world created by God, there is no other source for truth than God. Pressing Holmes further, I suggested that since all human beings are created in the imago dei, we should expect that people everywhere, from every culture, and even from every religion, would come to apprehend God’s truth, to a greater

or lesser extent. We ought to be surprised and even incredulous then at any assertion that there is any sphere in life that is devoid of God's truth. This is no less true when we study Islam. Many students were taken aback at the thought of applying what they took to be true from Holmes in what was for them such an unexpected way.

Along these same lines, but more related to the study of world religions, is a recent excellent book by Gerald McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from the World's Religions?* According to McDermott, "most learning is not a matter of seeing entirely new things but of seeing old things in new ways" (14). He suggests that seeing old things in new ways can consist in a "shift in emphasis," or seeing a "new aspect" of an old idea, or of "teasing out the implications" of an existing idea. All three of these, McDermott argues, are a large part of what it means to learn, and it is possible for all three to happen in varying degrees when one studies the world's religions.

Through the work of these two respected Evangelical writers, I took principles that most students at John Brown University would accept as true and helped them to apply that truth in a way that many would never have considered beforehand. Most students left the class not only with a greater knowledge of and sympathy for Islam and Muslims, but also with a new understanding of how their own Christian faith can be enriched from their study of Islam.

A second issue that allowed me to address the issues of violence in religion, especially as this relates to the study of Islam, is that we used only Muslim sources and focused almost exclusively on the formative period of Islam. While this might sound surprising to some, it is not uncommon at some Evangelical and Fundamentalist colleges to find Islam taught in classes on "the cults," using texts that are clearly anti-Islamic. In addition to the book by Don Richardson, a recent book by two Christian converts from Islam, Ergun and Emir Caner, is widely used in teaching Islam. Their *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Belief* has sold over one hundred thousand copies and recently was given a Gold Medallion Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. This book was the source for Jerry Vines's comments about Muhammad and is clearly written with a profound anti-Islamic agenda.

Many of the prominent Evangelicals who make pronouncements about the violence of Islam know little more about the tradition than a smattering of the more negative events of recent years. Little if any consideration is given to why Muslims (and Christians!) in the Middle East or southeast Asia are so frustrated with the West, or to the broader traditions of Islam that span the last fourteen centuries. Focusing on formative Islam shows students that it is inappropriate to take one slice of the Islamic pie (for some Evangelicals, the last fifty years of Christian-Muslim violence) and to define the whole tradition by that slice. Students read Karen

Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History*, which allowed them to see the development of the religion beyond the period of our concentration. Their research papers often dealt with issues of more contemporary concern, but they had to address their topics in light of the historical development of Islam.

My focus on "formative" Islam also gave us a chance to discuss the issue of jihad and religious violence. At Evangelical institutions, students generally take their Bible very seriously, a fact I used for pedagogical advantage. As we read through the biography of Muhammad we discussed the similarities and differences between the conquests of the "promised land" in the book of Joshua and those of Muhammad and the early Muslims. The similarities were many. One student responded, "Yea, but God told Joshua to do what he did, and so that makes it OK." This opened up an important discussion on how we can and ought to live as religious people in a world where many people from various religions believe that their tradition has special sanction for what it says and does. Students began to see the parallel between their belief in religiously justified violence and the Muslims who believed that their early conquests had Divine approval. While the tension was never fully resolved, students came a long way in learning how believers, whether under Joshua, Muhammad, or during the Christian Crusades, rationalize violence in their tradition. Later in the semester, as we read al-Ghazali's *Revival of the Religious Sciences* students saw how this prominent Muslim thinker used the word jihad to mean inner rather than outer struggle against the lower self. As they read about al-Ghazali's quest for a more authentic spirituality, ridding his life of those things that hindered progress down the spiritual path, they saw the term jihad used in ways that were very similar to how their pastors might speak of "sanctification" in the Christian life. My students began to see that just as they have the resources in their own Christian tradition to reject the violence of the conquests of the "promised land," Muslims also have the resources within their own tradition of interpreting jihad in ways that foster peaceful coexistence among members of different faith communities.

A final factor of some significance in my success with students was being able to share with them my own experience of living and traveling among Muslims in various parts of the world. From my own store of anecdotes and experiences, students began to see that the wild-eyed fanatics that they so often see in the media are not representative of all Muslims or of Islam.

Thinking back to my encounter with the Jordanian man whose face was plastered with white make-up, another image of a face comes to mind. And that is, that as I teach Islam, I hope to help students understand the significant truth of Sura 2:115: "To God belongs the East and the West, Wheresoever you look is the face of God."

Resources

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