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Understanding Islam **Tragedy Becomes Catalyst for Change**

Not many teachers respond to the news of the hour, according to College of Law professor Adrien Wing. But for Wing, as for so many other people, everything changed in September 2001. Iowa's curriculum had a responsibility, Wing says, to address the questions. Since the terrorist attacks, she has

“There was so much interest in the Islamic tradition and civilization,” says Wing, a scholar of Middle Eastern and Palestinian law and an Iowa law school professor since 1987.

“There seemed to be a call for greater understanding of Islam, and we decided we were capable of responding.”



Visiting professor of religion Reza Aslan believes education is key to improved world relations.

appeared as a guest on study panels on campus, answered media inquiries, met with Muslim students, listened to a University of Iowa community searching for answers, and inaugurated a new course offering.

These days, University of Iowa students—undergraduates and law students alike—who want to learn what law means in Middle Eastern culture can enroll in Wing's Law in the Muslim World class. Offered for the first

time in spring 2002, the law school's new course explores the complex matrix of law systems operating in the more than 60 countries that comprise the Islamic world. For 14 weeks, students examine the law as it's practiced both in secular Middle Eastern countries like Tunisia and in religion-based regimes like Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. Guest presentations pepper the syllabus, including an appearance by Denis Halliday, former United Nations humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, who addressed the impact of military action and United Nations sanctions against Iraq.

Speaking to the 65 students enrolled in Wing's class this past spring, visiting professor of religion Reza Aslan said that the choice

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the country makes could affect the future of relations between the West and the Muslim world.

After the attacks, Aslan's Introduction to Islam course was suddenly so popular that even students who were not registered showed up to sit on the floor and listen to his lectures. Other professors used the national tragedy as a catalyst for ditching routines and developing new curricula to prepare students for the changing society now waiting for them outside the University. In the spring 2002 semester, including Wing's law class, the University offered six new courses about the religion, politics, culture, law, history, and geography of the Middle East and the Muslim world.

"We don't teach our students what it means to be citizens of a superpower," says history professor David Schoenbaum, who taught a revamped foreign policy course called The U.S. and World Affairs.

Until the middle of the 1990s, the University regularly offered courses in foreign policy, but in recent years they had been on hiatus because no one was available to teach them. Schoenbaum brought in foreign policy makers as guest lecturers.

"Ignoring foreign policy is like ignoring gravity," Schoenbaum says.

"This is a basic civic educational responsibility."

For a more general study of the region, Rex Honey, professor of geography and director of the Global Studies Program, has developed a course, The Middle East, that addresses a range of issues, including culture, conflict, history, religion, and geography. More than 80 students enrolled in the course this past spring, and Honey expects 40 to 50 students each time he offers the course during the 2002-03 academic year.

Teaching her Law in the Muslim World class so soon after the attacks has rewarded Wing with a profound sense of contributing to improved relationships between the United States and the Middle East. She admits it's hard to measure the success of this kind of course right away.

"We're only beginning to dabble in ways to help our students and the public better understand Islam," Wing says. "We need to offer a fuller range of courses across the academic spectrum, because leaders—lawyers and others—in the years to come will need a broader range of understanding than what was expected in the past. For example, we have to be careful we don't end up with another Korematsu situation where 120,000 Japanese were racially profiled and placed in concentration camps for years. We don't want the same thing to happen to Muslims in the United States."

She's also concerned that more educators must make the attempt, before too many things Islamic become condemned as barbarous or as pathological.

"The problem is that much about Islam does not make sense to most Westerners—it's seen as inappropriate, unmodern, unintelligible," Wing says. "But we can't insist they speak our exact language. We have to be more sympathetic, or else we're not going to understand, and then we've failed."



Left: Professor of religion David Klemm (standing) and professor of political science Kelly Kadera (seated, far end) spoke to professors and teaching assistants during a special workshop this September called One Year Later: Classroom Responses to the 9-11 Anniversary—Emotional Issues in an Intellectual Context. Professor Wilfrid Nixon (seated, middle), director of the Center for Teaching, moderated the workshop. Below: River Branch, a teaching assistant in cinema and comparative literature, brought her perspective to discussions of issues related to the terrorist attacks and the best ways to handle these issues in the classroom.

