Arab Baptist Theological Seminary
كليَّة اللاهوت المعمدانيَّة العربيَّة

Ayman Ibrahim Shares about his Experience Teaching the Introduction to Islam Course

Ayman Ibrahim, PhD Candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary, gave at ABTS the Introduction to Islam Course March 18 to 28. His dissertation examines Arabic sources from the second century of Islam, analyzing Muslim-Christian interaction in the early years after Muhammad's death, with a special emphasis on the impact of Muslim conquests on Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa. ABTS's Development and Partner Relations department asked him a few questions about his course.

Q: How would you describe your experience at ABTS for the Introduction to Islam course?

A: It was a great opportunity to have students from seven nationalities, and a variety of cultures hearing about Islam. I was very encouraged, satisfied, and fulfilled by the feedback I got from the students. Some came to me saying, "I am eager to start building relationships with Muslims," "I would like to study about peace building with Muslims," "I would love to learn more about contemporary studies into the Qur'ānic text," etc. It was a great opportunity to have been able to teach 22 students who will go back to their countries and make a positive impact on Muslim-Christian relations, showing the example of Jesus Christ by what they do in their communities.

Q: What were the objectives of the course?

A: Some students think they know about Islam simply because they were born in Islamic societies. Yet one of the main objectives of the course is to help students fathom different aspects of Islam through an academic and objective study so that the student may acquire an objective understanding of Islam, in order to avoid the extremist perspectives that consider Islam a demonic religion and those that look at it only in its ideal dimensions. The idea is that we want the students to adopt a moderate position that enables them to lead the church in our region as it strives to present a faithful and creative testimony within Islamic communities.

The outcomes of this course must be seen at three different and interdependent levels. First, cognitively, the students shall understand the essential components of Islam as Muslims understand them. Second, affectively, they will overcome negative prejudices about Islam and gain an internal peace towards their Muslim neighbor. Finally, behaviorally, they shall become able to read Islamic sources, interpret them academically, and develop creative approaches to help them build healthy and constructive relationships with Muslims.

Q: What were some of the issues tackled that raised debate in the classroom?

A: It is inevitable with these kinds of subjects that controversial, yet crucial questions will be raised. We got into deep debates and at times had serious arguments while trying to answer difficult questions like "Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?", "Was Islam spread by the sword?", "What are effective ways to interact with Muslims?", or "How can we affirm the authenticity of the Bible?".

Q: How did the students relate to the issues raised about Islam?

A: At the beginning of the course I gave all of the students a questionnaire with the objective of locating all the students on a spectrum that ranges from defending Islam and Muslims to attacking them. We got answers such as, "I really like Islam and Muslims", "I fear Muslims", "I have some misconceptions about Islam," etc. Many students think that they know everything they need to know about Islam from books or seminars, yet many came to realize that they know very little.

Day after day, they started feeling that they need to study many things before discussing them. In some of the classes, I sought to present Islamic thought as it is, without adding any Christian dimension to it as I wanted to echo the Islamic voice to the students.

Q: Did the course include practical elements, beyond theory and classroom exchanges?

A: I think that going to the mosque in Sidon and having the students engage in dialogue with Muslims was a crucial aspect of the learning process. And, the interesting thing was that parts of the dialogue were somehow offensive to Christian belief, however, we wanted to see how they would deal with these situations.

If the class hadn't taken the students to the level in which they think of how to share their faith and beliefs in this multi-religious community, it would have failed to achieve its purpose, that is, how to engage and dialogue with Muslims, to understand Islamic history from the Islamic point of view and how to critically assess it. We attempt to read Islamic texts as Muslims understand them and how various interpretations of these texts may lead some to create offensive materials against Islam. Hence, we were constantly trying to relate the theoretical to the practical so that the students feel encouraged to apply what they are learning in the classroom in their respective local contexts.

Images of the class visit to a mosque in Sidon on March 22nd, 2013