

Engaging Islamic Radicalisation through Education

The Challenge and Promise of Teaching Muslim Constitutional Law

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The primary task of a *useful* teacher is to teach his students to recognise *'inconvenient' facts* ... the teacher accomplishes *more than a mere intellectual task* if he *compels his audience* to accustom itself to the existence of such facts.¹

Abstract:

There is an enduring crisis of governance and legitimacy under way throughout the entire Muslim world since at least the disastrous war of 1967. States throughout the region are at best underperforming, and often failing outright, leaving strained socio-economic conditions and pronounced feelings of alienation and frustration. One of the key results has been an unprecedented degree of individual and societal radicalisation, galvanised around the oppositional appeal of religious imagery and, especially, religious law.

Existing serious scholarship in these areas is dominated by an extremely sophisticated, often philological approach focussed on the study of classical texts and the analysis of interpretations derived from antiquity. As this erudition is generally impenetrable to the uninitiated, this has basically left the field to journalistic and ideological interpretations of often questionable quality and a frequently polarising style.

Based on the experience of teaching a very complex and fairly controversial online course on Muslim constitutional law, my proposed presentation aims to show the **unique potential of MOOCs to popularise objective social-science** findings about the genesis of current state failure, **provide a forum for an exchange of very diverse viewpoints** across geographical, ethnic, sectarian, and religious divides, and ultimately **challenge conventional wisdom** among participants.

Contemporary discourse on online education has rightly focussed on the **opportunities offered by MOOCs to democratise education** by lowering barriers of entry created by geography, class, and money. Our experience has impressively **confirmed these demographic benefits**. But more importantly, we have seen that the **peculiar interactive character** of the new medium has **yielded pedagogic or ideational benefits quite beyond our expectations**, in the sense of students, especially those hailing from the region, having enthusiastically, if heatedly, engaged with the **'uncomfortable facts'** of Muslim relative decline. Managing this often emotionally difficult process of students' engagement with unwelcome information has been very valuable to me as an educator.

In my presentation, I would therefore like to present the **particular pedagogical challenges**, the implications for **course design**, the **political and security context** in which online education takes place, and, importantly, the **institutional implications** for Western, especially Scandinavian universities perhaps wary of dealing with an admittedly important but potentially explosive subject matter in the wake of the **Danish and French cartoon crises**.

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¹ Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf [Science as a Vocation]," in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1922 [1918]), pp. 524-55, emphasis added.