

# Islamic studies find niche on Catholic college campuses

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Universities have long offered courses in comparative religions, but the demand for classes specifically on Islam has increased in recent years.

Catholic colleges are keeping pace by offering individual courses and seminars on Islam, advanced degree programs in Islamic studies and campus centers aimed to promote Muslim-Christian understanding.

For Amir Hussain, a Muslim professor in theological studies who teaches Islamic courses at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, the experience has been a rewarding one.

He said the classes are particularly beneficial to Catholic students, who make up about half the student population. “To be Catholic is to be informed by other religions” he told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview, adding that amid the diversity of Los Angeles students “need to be aware of other traditions.”

In his classes he is able to point out some of the connections between Catholic and Islamic traditions. He said he finds that some of his Catholic students who are not familiar with fasting, but have heard stories about Lenten fasts from their parents, or more likely, grandparents, can “find something meaningful in their own tradition” when they see how it connects with the Muslim tradition of fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

Similarly, the students make connections when they realize both Islam and Catholicism emphasize that Jesus was born of a virgin, though the two faiths have different perceptions of the role of Christ. Islam does not recognize Jesus as the Son

of God, but it considers him a great prophet. When students compare these interpretations, Hussain said it makes them think more deeply about their own beliefs.

Another key aspect in teaching Islam is the opportunity to clear up misconceptions. Hussain said most of the Muslim students at Loyola are American citizens long immersed in a primarily Christian culture. On campus, he said it is the students from Christian backgrounds who end up learning more about Hindu, Muslim and Jewish cultures.

Although only a small percentage of Muslim students are enrolled in Hussain's upper-level classes, he enjoys getting their input in class discussions. "It's great to have them speak up about their tradition," he said, because it shows that there is a wide range of diversity among Muslims, not unlike the variety of viewpoints among Catholics.

The degree of Islamic studies varies at different schools. Some with fewer resources offer short-term programs by hosting Fulbright Muslim scholars as the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in Baltimore did last year.

Other universities have broader programs. For the past three years, the Bediuzzaman Said Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University in Cleveland has offered a variety of courses on Islam including a course this past summer on Islam and terrorism, examining how some terrorist groups have used passages from the Quran, the sacred book of Islam, to justify their actions. Other courses include Islamic spirituality and Islam in America. The university's department of religious studies received financial support to establish the Islamic studies chair from two Turkish businessmen inspired by the teachings of Nursi, a prolific writer on Islam.

Loyola University Chicago initiated a minor in Islamic world studies this fall and Georgetown University in Washington plans to launch a doctorate program in

Islamic studies next year.

Thirteen years ago Georgetown University founded its Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. Last year the center was renamed the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding after it received a \$20 million dollar gift from the Saudi Arabian prince.

At Xavier University in Cincinnati, the university's Edward B. Brueggeman Center for Dialogue recently sponsored a town hall meeting about Islam and globalization. Last year, the center was honored by the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati for its efforts in bringing together local Muslims and members of the Cincinnati community.

Imam Yahya Hendi, the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University, knows the benefit of a variety of interreligious programs, but he also does not overlook the significance of a simple informative class discussion.

Six years ago, he began teaching, along with a rabbi and priest, a spring course called "Interreligious Encounter." The three teachers discuss, argue and work together, and ultimately, if the class succeeded, the students walk away with the ability to make connections among various faith traditions.

When that happens, the imam feels he has done his job, particularly today when "so many people talk about religion as a source of problems in the world."

It's only when students learn more about one another's faith traditions, he said, that they begin to see religion in a different light, viewing it as "a source of help and social justice."