

So this priest walks into Qatar . . .

A Jesuit teaches theology in the Persian Gulf

by Ryan Maher, SJ

THE CLASS I was teaching was called “The Problem of God,” but I was facing a more immediate problem. Would I, one of my students had asked a classmate, be going to hell?

The class held its breath; I pretended to focus on erasing the board. After what felt like an eternity, the other student replied, “Yes.” And then, “Sorry, Father.”

Not quite what I was hoping to hear. But her answer—and my experience with a class of mostly Arab Muslims in Doha, Qatar—revealed more than I ever imagined it would about the struggle to teach about faith in a world where religious fervor fuels many of the fires our diplomatic corps struggles to put out.

In spring 2005, I was asked to move from Washington, D.C., to Doha for two years with a group of Georgetown University faculty members opening a branch campus of our School of Foreign Service at the invitation of the Qatari royal family. I was the first Jesuit priest ever assigned to that tiny Persian Gulf emirate, a distinction that my Irish friends cheerfully assured me would be worth a line in my obituary.

Without a moment’s hesitation I went. The majority of my students came from across the Middle East, from varied social and economic backgrounds. They arrived at Georgetown’s campus in Qatar in search of an education that would prepare them for jobs in international affairs. Many will become professional diplomats. My job—the gig I’d signed up for when I left the comfort of my cozy room overlooking the Potomac for a sterile, marble-tiled apartment in a baffling city halfway across the globe—was simple: lead them through a version of Georgetown’s tra-



ditional freshman theology course. “I was the first Jesuit priest ever assigned to that tiny Persian Gulf emirate,” writes Fr. Ryan Maher, SJ, about his two eye-opening years teaching theology in Qatar. The emirate’s royal family had asked Georgetown to open a School of Foreign Service campus there. This article first appeared in the *Washington Post*.

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It was not an easy course to teach. I imagine it was not an easy course to take, either. We were all aware that we were engaging in something novel, a class of mostly Sunni and Shiite Muslims exploring with one another and with their Catholic priest professor some of the basic theological issues: the existence of God, free will, sin, prayer, and Judgment Day.

One day, in the middle of a discussion on the definition of revelation, one student, an intensely bright Muslim from Bosnia, heaved a deep sigh and blurted out, “I hope we don’t get blown up for talking about this stuff.” I was writing on the blackboard, with my back to the class. I laughed. When I turned around, I saw that he wasn’t joking.

During my two years in Qatar, I learned that many of my students approached discussions of faith and religion with an intensity and passion that differed in kind, not just in degree, from what I had grown accustomed to in the United States. Sure, there were those, Muslim and Christian alike, who were more interested in arguing than learning. But there were many more for whom religion was something more profound: the outward manifestation of an inner relationship with the divine.

I had spent years discussing religious matters with smart American students in excellent schools before I was sent to the Middle East. Those conversations were enjoyable, often challenging, and usually sincere. But something was often missing, something I found

hard to pin down. An Egyptian Muslim friend helped me understand what that something was. Talking with Americans about faith and religion, he told me, is like having coffee with Forrest Gump: pleasant enough, but not of much substance. “They just don’t have much to say because they just don’t get it,” he said.

“They just don’t get it” is never something a teacher wants to hear. That’s especially true when I think about our mission at Georgetown, where we educate many students who will become foreign service officers for the United States and other countries. One of the more important and pragmatic qualities I hope our students carry with them into those careers is a felt-in-the-bone understanding of what it is to live one’s life committed to one’s faith.

Most professors I know nod vigorously when I suggest to them that an understanding of faith and its claims on the imagination of faithful people is essential for future diplomats. “Of course, of course,” they say. “If we don’t know about Islam, we will never be able to help untangle the mess in the Middle East.” I usually don’t have the heart to tell them that they have missed my point entirely.

THE majority of Georgetown students I know are fairly knowledgeable about religion. They can talk intelligently about Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The glitch is that they talk from the perspective of anthropologists and sociologists and historians. These are valuable perspectives. But they are not enough. We need to raise young people who can be smart, savvy, sophisticated participants in international affairs. What we also need are young people who can be all of those things while at the same time knowing and understanding what it is to live one’s life with a commitment rooted in faith.

That’s a tall order for American higher education. A few years ago, I had an enjoyable conversation over dinner with a friend, an accomplished diplomat with

experience in difficult negotiations all over the world. It was the fall of 2004, and our conversation quickly turned to the presidential campaign. My friend argued that Sen. John F. Kerry’s reluctance to talk about his own faith was a good thing, showing that the candidate understood that faith has no place in politics or public policy.

Out of the blue, a question occurred to me: “Other than me, do you have any friends or professional colleagues of any religion who attend services every week?” He was quiet for a long, thoughtful minute. “Not that I know of,” he replied.

I have thought about that conversation for a long time. It has helped me understand what hobbles American higher education when it comes to educating people for careers in international affairs. It’s not that we don’t know about religion; it’s that we don’t understand faith and its life-shaping power.

The majority of people I know in higher education would argue that there is nothing wrong with religion for people who feel they need it. Their sentiments come down to something like this: “You have your religious convictions, I have mine. Let’s acknowledge our differences and agree to disagree with one another within the confines of polite debate.” That makes sense, of course, but it is not enough to prepare diplomats who will be asked to engage the Muslim world in the decades to come.

This template for discussing religion and faith is fundamentally flawed. It presumes that different groups of faithful people approach their religions in the same way football fans approach their favorite teams: I cheer passionately for mine, you cheer passionately for yours, and we all agree to play by the rules and exhibit good sportsmanship. For people of faith, religion isn’t like that. A person of Muslim faith and a person of Christian faith engaged in honest conversation about religion are not like two fans pulling for their respective teams. They are more like two men in love with the same woman, each trying to express, safeguard and be faithful to his relationship with his

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beloved. Love brings with it complexities that football does not.

Recently, I had a conversation with a young woman who is about to begin her sophomore year at Georgetown. She has a passion for art history and American democracy and is serious about her Jewish faith. She hopes to work in international affairs one day. We were discussing the courses she might take this fall.

She said that people had been telling her she should take more economics. “What if instead of that,” she said, “I took only four courses this semester and used the extra time to go with my Christian and Muslim friends to their churches and mosques? I just think that if I had a better sense of how they prayed and what they mean when they use the word ‘God,’ I’d be able to have much better conversations with them about the situation in the Middle East.”

What do you say to that, except “Amen”? And, “Have you thought of taking the foreign service exam after you graduate?” 