

Teaching for Peace in a Time of Impending War

Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajajé

Dr. Farajajé is Starr King's Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Cultural Studies and Islamic Studies. He presented this paper at a Feb. 19, 2003 panel discussion hosted by the Graduate Theological Union.

As-salaamu aleikum!

Unfortunately, this is not the first or the last time that this conversation will arise. There are some for whom teaching is always taking place in a time of war, in the wars that are carried out in the occupied territories of our inner cities, in the prison-industrial complex, or in the United States colonies in the Pacific Islands. The war is on. For this is a war on bodies, a war on lives in the interest of EMPIRE. The powerful amass more power; the disenfranchised become more disenfranchised. This is a war on bodies; this is a war on lives.

I was in New York City on Saturday for the peace demonstration with members of the city's Sufi Muslim community. We never actually made it to the main stage area, since we spent a good deal of the afternoon in detention pens the police had set up. Police had blocked side streets for no other apparent reason than to keep us from reaching the main rally in a timely fashion. At one point, we were chased from the streets by police on horseback and pinned against a glass wall (with children) for 30-45 minutes. The police on horseback actually pursued demonstrators up onto sidewalks. People were thrown to the ground and beaten. A member of our community was randomly arrested. Her husband was separated from her until 4 a.m., Sunday. This is a war on bodies; this is a war on lives.

So, this conversation about teaching in a time of impending war happens already within a context of the abrogation of our civil liberties: the right to peaceably assemble; the right to the free practice of religions; the right to be brown, and so many other rights. "Travelling while Muslim" is now a dangerous activity. In the current frenzy about immigration, Muslims are detained; FBI agents are sent into mosques and Islamic centers to monitor activities, sermons, membership, etc. This is a war on bodies; this is a war on lives.

I think that to talk about teaching in a time of impending war means also looking at the ways in which our institutions and institutional practices have helped put us where we are today. What are the ways in which theological education has helped shape and benefited from Empire? How has this complicity shaped the ways in which we understand theological education? I believe that a very important practice in teaching in a time of war is that of cultivating transparency. What does it mean?

One of the pieces of this transparency is struggling with the ways in which we teach what we do teach. Can Jewish and Islamic studies continue to be tacked on as options? Can they really continue to be peripheral to theological studies? How do we acknowledge the ways in which Western Christian theologies were often constructed with Judaism and Islam as the absent partners? How do the absence and marginalization of the study of Eastern Christianities reflect the biases of Orientalist discourse and thereby lead to truncated notions of “Christian” history? What are the ways in which these absences severely limit how we teach theology? How do these questions call us to re-shape the ways in which we teach? For this is a war on bodies; this is a war on lives.

As an Islamicist, I believe it is important to look at the history of the Crusades and the Inquisitions and the role they played in shaping contemporary realities. Islam and the Muslim world exist not as realities, but as mere extensions of Orientalist fantasies. And it is these same Orientalist fantasies that construct Jews and Muslims as enemies, when in fact we, along with Eastern Christians, were slaughtered by Crusaders from the Christian West.

In this time of war, I do believe that we have an obligation to help re-shape the discourse by reclaiming our place as public intellectuals, public theologians, public scholars of religion. The current political regime in the United States has hijacked the role of public theologian and speaks freely in terms of the apocalyptic, drawing on theologies of war. Theologies and fictions of purity (around gender, class, race, sexuality, embodiment, etc.) lead to a religiously-based obsession with ferreting out the “impure” that which will “contaminate” the purity of the United States. This leads to a dangerous linking of citizenship and religion in an already hyper-nationalized U.S. civil religion.

In conclusion, I believe that in a political atmosphere that would seek to guarantee democracy by killing thousands of people, inter-religious conversation is of vital importance, not just in an additive, formulaic way, but rather in ways which re-examine how crusading theologies were lethal for Jews, Muslims and Eastern Christians, and how these theologies promote and reflect the religiously-based violence that we experience in this time of war. The war is on. This is a war on bodies; this is a war on lives.

As-salaamu aleikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu!