



MORGAN LAND

by Jonathan Brockopp
Religious Studies Program

A teacher with limited experience, Morgan Land was looking forward to teaching the department's survey course on world literatures for the first time. It was going to be a large class, and she had been told that she could expect a wide variety of students. Given her own background in European romanticism, she enjoyed stretching beyond her areas of expertise; so in addition to several novels and short stories, she assigned a reader that included numerous excerpts from African and Asian literatures.

Class was going well, though it proved difficult to get students to discuss the material. Most were doing the reading, but she couldn't get them to engage the larger meanings of the texts. When she asked the students to open up their reader to the selection by Salman Rushdie, she couldn't help but notice that one of her best students, Aisha Bewley, had BLASPHEMY written across the page in red marker. Several students stared, and Morgan decided to make this a "teaching moment" by asking her to explain why she had defaced her reader. Aisha, embarrassed by the attention, quietly said that Rushdie showed no respect for Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

Sensing her embarrassment, Morgan did not press the student further but took five minutes to explain the background to *The Satanic Verses* and the death threat that was issued against Rushdie in 1989. Most of the class had never heard much about this tale and, wanting to know more about the controversy, asked many questions. The resulting discussion strayed far from her planned direction, but Morgan let it continue, since she was pleased to see so many students involved. She did not notice that her Muslim students had become increasingly quiet.

The next morning, Morgan was surprised to find several related emails in her inbox. One student, Tariq, was particularly outraged at the depiction of Islam in the classroom, arguing that by focusing on Rushdie, the Professor had exacerbated an already difficult situation for Muslim students on campus. He went on to point out that the unassigned selection from the Qur'an in the reader was not translated by a Muslim and closed by insisting that Dr. Land spend the next class focusing on more authentic images of Muslims.

Turning to the discussion board on her course Web site, Morgan found an altogether different reaction, one she might not have noticed if it had not been for Tariq's message. There were several posts regarding the Rushdie piece, but she realized that none had to do with the content of the selection. Rather, some implied that all followers of Islam are intolerant of free thought, and one referred to Iran's support of al-Qaeda—none too subtly connecting terrorism, intolerance and Islam. She also noticed that Aisha had dropped the class.

Morgan was torn. On the one hand, she saw the force of Tariq's complaint and felt somewhat responsible for this series of events. As a student of post-colonialism, she was a bit horrified to see her students reenact the "othering" process so clearly outlined in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. On the other hand, she was afraid that coming down too hard on the students would stifle their nascent interest in the social relevance of literature, and she knew that she was not competent to

offer anything like a short history of Islam. She also felt somewhat suspicious of Tariq's motives and a bit nervous about his challenge to her authority. Clearly, something needed to be done to refocus the class, but exhausted and uninspired; she decided to sleep on it.

Questions

1. Should Morgan have engaged or ignored the BLASPHEMY note?
2. What strategies could Morgan have used to move class discussion from controversy to content?
3. What, if anything, could Morgan have done in advance of the class to defuse possible religious conflicts?
4. What sort of statement in the syllabus might have helped?

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The next morning, Morgan decided that, since she was already behind on her syllabus, she could not afford to take any more time on this issue. She responded to Tariq's email by telling him he raised some interesting points and wouldn't he please post them to the discussion board. She responded to the discussion board posts by thanking students for their interest and tried to turn the conversation to the content of the Rushdie excerpt. Neither Tariq nor the other students made additional postings, however. Morgan pressed ahead with her plans and the controversy died down, though Tariq also dropped the class. She thought it rather cowardly of Aisha and Tariq to drop the course, but was happy to be done with the conflict.

Some weeks later, Morgan ran into Aisha on campus—and though she tried to avoid her, Morgan called out and asked to speak with her for a moment. When pressed, Aisha told her that, in fact, it was Tariq who wrote BLASPHEMY in her book, and that Aisha didn't know it was there until she had opened it that morning in class. "Then why didn't you say so?" Morgan asked. Aisha confessed that she felt the need to defend the Prophet publicly, though privately she had defended Rushdie to Tariq in an argument they had had the previous evening in her dorm room. "But why did you drop the class?" Morgan asked. Aisha, who wore a headscarf, responded that she had received several disparaging remarks from fellow students and decided that dropping the class was the easiest solution. Morgan thanked her for the conversation and went away feeling deeply confused.

Questions

5. What other ways might Morgan have responded to Tariq's email?
6. What other ways might she have responded to the online discussion board questions?
7. Given what she now knows, should she have encouraged Aisha to register a complaint with the office of educational equity?
8. Is there a responsibility incumbent upon an instructor to present positive images of a religious or cultural belief—even one with which the instructor disagrees? What is the line between such positive images and advocacy?