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Authors: Pamela Chrabieh

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Peace, Islam and the Arts in Dubai

Pamela CHRABIEH¹

Given the tendency to reduce Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalizations about the faith, its founder, and all of its people, then the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam—its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities—is perpetuated.²

Edward Said’s statement still resonate in my mind, pedagogy, activism and artwork almost three decades after I read his book *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World.* In fact, it has helped me deconstruct the many stereotypes I had and saw around me as an expatriate living in the United Arab Emirates. Before joining the American University in Dubai, I was already involved in the Muslim-Christian dialogue at different levels in Lebanon and Canada, and was well versed in the study of the religious phenomenon in Southwestern Asian and North Africa. However, I had a rather simple perception of Dubai and the Arabian Peninsula, reduced to landmarks, futuristic architecture and luxury contrasting with the aridity of the desert. Beyond this reality and the invention and proliferation of a nationalist narrative, and the noticeable differences between the rights and privileges of locals (Emiratis) and expatriates, Dubai’s current mega diversity and multilayered history stretching back to at least 5500 B.C.E. have far more to offer in terms of experiencing grey zones and complex identities. In that sense, I argue that the arts play a major role in understanding and reflecting on this experience. Indeed, as explained

(1) Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the American University in Dubai. Doctor in Sciences of Religions (University of Montreal, QC, Canada), artist, activist and author. https://pamelachrabiehblog.com

in this paper, the arts contribute to the deconstruction of Islam’s misconceptions and the construction/expression of diverse and hybrid perceptions; they operate as pedagogical devices to help students engage with Daedalian realms such as the religious and cultural labyrinth in the Arabian Peninsula; and they are instrumental in the pursuit of peace.

The relation between the arts and peace is not new in Southwestern Asia–i.e. Middle East. Peace Art or the Arts for Peace have been proliferating since the beginning of the 20th c. C.E. with artists who express(ed) their testimonies to war’s destruction, their resistance to war and their transformative vision to influence or help shape their societies, such as Iraqi Dia Al-Azzawi and Ahmed Alsoudani, Syrian Fateh Al Moudarre and Youssef Abdelke, Egyptian Mohammed Abla and Sabah Naim, Palestinian Laila Shawa, Ismail Shammout and Kamal Boullata, Iranian Shadi Ghadirian and Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Lebanese Aref Rayess, Group Atlas/Walid Raad, Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Ayman Baalbaki. These artists have visually and graphically captured the senseless slaughter of millions and the desolate landscapes and urban settlements shattered by conflicts. They have depicted the visceral way they and others experienced war traumas, conveyed the oneness of humankind and particular-contextual voices of resistance. The most common literature on the arts and peace in the region focuses on the works of these prominent artists and others like them and praises the contributions and the efforts of non-governmental organizations, museums, art galleries, art fairs, curators and large-scale initiatives such as Art Dubai, Al Serkal Avenue and the Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi. However, the focus of my paper is on small-scale initiatives that tend to be neglected, as I believe in the importance of including diverse, marginalized and invisible perceptions and practices in a bottom-up research methodology. My approach has been influenced by my personal war experience and by authors such as Mohammed Arkoun in *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*–3 particularly his critique of the dogmatic and unapproachable version of Islam by traditional ulama and ideological Islamic states–and Antonio Gramsci’s concept of

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counter-hegemonic cultures. It also reflects my orientation to pedagogy that starts ‘where the students are’ and ‘the students’ perceptions’ as a set of cultural configurations and possibilities.

In this paper, I first introduce readers to the Peace Art in Dubai project I implemented at the American University in Dubai with 160 students enrolled in the Middle Eastern Studies course on Islamic Art and Architecture from 2015 to 2017. I then present the preliminary results of a qualitative research project at the crossroads of Peace Education, Sciences of Religions and Art History on perceptions of Islam related to peace through the study of students’ artworks, and of their written/verbal response, evaluations, and class discussions. Students expressed diverse beliefs and ideas through a variety of media and art techniques. Most of them were able to use art tools to transcend verbal language barriers, to articulate previously silenced narratives or alternative narratives vis-à-vis mainstream ones, and to think critically about themselves and Islam. As indicated in their end-of-semester evaluations of the course, art workshops have helped them channel a sense of collective urgency, better understand each other’s beliefs and practices, feel the pathos and waste of war, and have instilled in many of them a desire and commitment to become active agents of peace.

I- The Peace Art in Dubai Project’s Background:
The Peace Art in Dubai is an application of my Peace education approach. Peace education encompasses a variety of pedagogical approaches within formal curricula in schools and universities, and non-formal popular education projects implemented by local, regional, and international organizations. It aims to cultivate the knowledge and


(5) Refer to my previous publications on my pedagogical approach:

التربية من أجل السلام في لبنان: دراسة المسألة في الإطار الجامعي، المشرق، الجامعة اليسوعية في بيروت، ألسنة التسعون،الجزء الأول،٩٠١ص.٦١١-٦١٢.


practices of a culture of peace. I started to develop my own approach in Montreal in 2004 and enhanced it in Lebanon from 2007 to 2014, before moving to Dubai and joining the American University where I could further refine it. My approach is interdisciplinary as the topics I teach fall in the interstices among several disciplines. It combines Sciences of Religions–socio-history and interfaith dialogue theories and practices–Irenology, and Art therapy, to name just a few. Apart from addressing specific political, religious, cultural and historical issues, I stress the importance of debunking stereotypes, of building and transmitting a differentiated understanding of religions and cultures, of stepping outside familiar boundaries and building unity in diversity. The basis of this approach is the human being, perceived as a whole. Students are neither uprooted from their multiple affiliations, nor from their personal experiences and stories. Furthermore, the teaching method targets all senses and includes one major pillar: dialogue.

Indeed, my peace education approach shares common characteristics with other intercultural approaches to education and dialogic pedagogies that have emphasized the educative potential of teacher-pupil interactions. I refer for instance to: dialogic instruction, which is characterized by the teacher’s uptake of student ideas; dialogic inquiry, which highlights the potential for collaborative group

(7) My classes at St Josef University of Beirut, Holy Spirit University and Notre Dame University were attended by three thousand undergraduate and graduate students from 2007 to 2014. Students were from different religious, political, and socio-economic backgrounds. I was able to collect and analyze valuable data, and the results of my research were published in the U.S. (International Journal of Arts and Sciences, 2015), Japan (Asian Conference on Education, 2015), Lebanon (Al Machreq, 2016) and Switzerland (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).


(9) Refer here to Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1999). This classic work describes a revolutionary approach to pedagogy as the education of all humans, especially those who exist on the margins of society, to be transformed from controlled objects to empowered agents. Dialogue is at the heart of Freire’s pedagogy. Through their dialogical encounters with others, which are first facilitated by teachers and educators, students develop the capacity to think and act critically in the world.

work and peer assistance to promote mutually responsive learning in the zone of proximal development\(^{11}\). As well as dialogic teaching, which is collective, reciprocal, cumulative and supportive\(^{12}\). Dialogue here is not “a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results; dialogue is a means to transform social relations in the classroom and to raise awareness about relations in society at large”\(^{13}\).

Every context–Canadian, Lebanese and Emirati–has its own particularities and challenges. In Canada, I dealt with issues of migration, multiculturalism, interreligious dialogue and reasonable accommodations. In Lebanon, the focus was on intergenerational transmissions of war memories, psychosocial aspects of peacebuilding, and students’ visions of war and peace. In the United Arab Emirates, I have been paying particular attention to diversity management, stereotype debunking and the relation between Islam and Peace. Since arriving in Dubai four years ago, I have been witnessing the lightning urban growth and have been amazed by the postmodern and futuristic architecture. However, the “super-diversity” of both the city and the American University in Dubai’s community with over 150 nationalities represented in the student body has been blowing me away—a diversity characterized by an unprecedented multiplicity of ethnic, cultural and religious identities and different migration histories, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, legal statuses and lengths of residence\(^{14}\). This super-diversity challenges conventional notions of diversity management and asks for new approaches to analyzing such societal contexts.

How has the diversification of diversity impacted on social life on the local level? How do people deal with a new social reality? How do people get along in a context where almost everybody comes from elsewhere? What are and what shapes people’s perceptions about each other?\(^{15}\)

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I started to teach Islamic Art and Architecture among other subjects at the American University in Dubai in January 2015. Based on surveys conducted with students at the beginning of the semester and the first class discussion sessions, I realized that many students’ perceptions of Islam—from one third to half of the students, depending on every semester and section—as a historical religion and identity marker and of the relation between Islam and the arts were stereotypes or exclusivist visions. Statements ranged from “Islam is portrayed negatively by the global mainstream media and it influenced somehow my own vision and that of others”, “We live in an Islamic country but it is different than others: development, tolerance and joie-de-vivre characterize the United Arab Emirates”, “I have Muslim friends. They are like me. We go out, we drink. We have dreams. They don’t try to impose their beliefs, contrary to the vast majority of Muslims”, to “Us in the Islamic world and Them in the Western World”, “Islam forbids arts and this is one of the numerous differences between the Islamic and Western civilizations”, “Islam forbids figurative arts, and this indicates its lack of tolerance”, “Freedom of expression is rarely found nowadays in Islamic countries, this is why the artistic production is restricted”, “Muslims do not allow secular music. It is considered haram. We are not a secular people”, etc.

Students enrolled in my classes come from different religious backgrounds: Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus... as well as diverse ethnicities: Southwestern Asians, Central Asians, Europeans, North Africans and Southeastern Asians; and diverse socio-economic, political, national and gender identities. Most of them were born in the late 1990s. They came from middle or upper class urban environments, except for students who were in refugee camps and poor neighborhoods but had the opportunity to get a scholarship via the Mohammed Bin Rachid School for Communication or the Minister of Education in Lebanon Elias Bou Saab, main founder of and stakeholder in the American University in Dubai. Most of them rely on social media platforms to gain knowledge, establish social relations and for entertainment, and few of them actually read an academic paper, a book or critical analyses of online news. One could agree with Edward Said that the construction of a static “Muslim” identity and a monolithic
“Islam”, are indeed the product of “ignorance”—whether natural or accidental ignorance, or constructed and transmitted ignorance—and that there is a fine line between ignorance and Islamophobia\(^\text{(16)}\).

Looking back at the last four years, Islamophobia has been on the rise on a global level, following every high-profile attack in European countries and the U.S.A., and accompanying the “refugee crisis”, the American race for presidential elections and Donald Trump’s call for a “total ban on all Muslims”\(^\text{(17)}\). Despite some positive shifts in the way media channels and publics dealt with and responded to this phenomenon, prejudice towards and discrimination against Muslims intensified, especially with all of the above mentioned situations occurring against the backdrop of local and global conversations asking “How Islamic is ISIS or Daech?” According to data collected by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamophobic incidents jumped in 2015 and 2016\(^\text{(18)}\). According to the SETA European Islamophobia report 2015 that comprises 25 Eastern and Western European national reports, Islamophobic discourses, images and actions are not only on the rise but they vary in different contexts and are not restricted to the traditional right-wing political parties and their adherents\(^\text{(19)}\).

‘Othering’ dynamics and numerous levels and ‘genres’ of the ‘phobia of the Other’ do exist in classrooms. However, based on my own observations and on private discussions with students, Islamophobia rarely manifests itself out in the open. Most students who are Islamophobic or who start the semester with an Islamophobic perspective fear the repercussions of criticizing Islam or Muslims beyond the verbal and visual expression of common stereotypes, and most of those who identify themselves as Muslims and who claim their

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rejection of the ‘Western’ values and political/military hegemony rarely communicate their thoughts of Christianity or other religions, except for Judaism which is often misidentified as Zionism. Although every class dynamic is unique, a common trait I noticed at the beginning of every semester is this atmosphere of status-quo and relative coexistence between multiple perspectives, and this is the canvas I had and still have to fill, manage its shapes, colors and fifty shades of grey, with the help of my students, in order to reach a positive outcome, beyond the basic learning outcomes listed in the syllabus: that of conviviality or unity in diversity.

In that sense, I founded the Peace Art in Dubai project, which consists of a series of art workshops in classrooms, students’ individual assignments (research and artistic activities), outdoor agoras, cultural events, and an online exhibition in a blog I established in the spring semester of 2015. Students were asked to think of the relation between Islam and Peace by tackling a sub-theme such as stereotypes in the mainstream media, women’s roles and situations in Southwestern Asia and North Africa, and the role of sacred arts in building inner-peace and peace in the community. From 2015 to 2017 students expressed and exchanged their perceptions, visions and their researches’ results verbally and in writing on several occasions, and via diverse media techniques and styles, from calligraphy to arabesque, poetry, culinary art, music, dance and collage.

The Peace Art in Dubai blog features 160 artworks and its goals, as stated in the homepage, are: 1) to provide a forum for American University in Dubai students and artists in Dubai and the United Arab Emirates in which the arts are used to express their perceptions of issues affecting their communities, and their shared human interests in peace; 2) to create a space in which individuals from different backgrounds can acknowledge difference and advocate nonviolent conflict resolution by engaging with each other and their audiences; 3) this intercultural/interreligious/inter-human exchange of artistic ideas aims at fostering new aesthetic directions and endeavors, while renewing individual and collective commitments to peace.
II- Students’ Perceptions of Islam and Peace:  
a Preliminary Analysis

This study is based on primary data including +160 artworks, end-of-semester qualitative feedback by students and my own observation notes during storytelling/sharing sessions, workshops and class discussions. I used a post-structural narrative analysis in social sciences to sort the collected data, the main principles of which are developed by Michel Foucault. Written, visual and audio-visual narratives were not studied as parts of a well-defined structure, but as constructions of meanings and polymorphous phenomena in a specific context. I looked for common themes, but also for differences, irregularities, paradoxes and grey zones, for how it is possible to express certain things at a given point in time and space, “why some things have to remain unsaid, who is doing the talking, and where they are located in the network of social power”.

Students used diverse styles and techniques to express their perceptions of Islam in relation to Peace: from paintings, sculptures, videos, calligraphy, design, photography, digital arts, to poetry. Peace is a broad concept used by them in variations. Contrary to some of my students in Lebanon who portrayed peace as the elimination, deportation or destruction of the ‘other’ perceived as an enemy, not one AUD student told a similar story or conveyed an identical message, although there were Lebanese Christian, Muslim, Druze, agnostic and atheist students in all classrooms, including pro-8 of March and pro-14 of March coalitions of political parties and ‘politically independent’ students. Striking similarities are found though between some of my students’ definitions in Lebanon and my AUD students—from different national, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds/belongings—when it comes to identifying peace with interreligious dialogue and conviviality, or with harmonious relations between peoples.

As was the case in Lebanon, AUD students who focused on dialogue and conviviality offered interesting visuals and sometimes engaging emotional expressions of their hope for the possibility of further cooperative relations. Zeina drew Hagia Sophia, as a symbol of a common ground between Islam and Christianity, and between secular and religious perspectives\(^{23}\). Pakinam called for respecting all religions and breaking the chains of hatred\(^{24}\). For Majd, “peace is about standing for what is right and not wrong, it is about speaking the truth and not lies, and it is about forming unity, not conflict […]. The hand figure is used because I want to show that any person could fight for peace”\(^{25}\). According to Lana in her collection of portrait photographs, she expressed her view of “the ‘grey zone’ of Islam and its relation with other religions or beliefs in a peaceful manner […]. Grey symbolizes a zone where one does not have to take sides on things, where one could be religious or non-religious, and still coexisting with other people”\(^{26}\). For Saudi student Haneen, “we should all learn to accept people for who they are, not for the religion they practice”\(^{27}\). For Sameh, “In addition to its important in Islam, peace is significant to every religion. There is no religion that would preach hatred to the other”\(^{28}\). Turkish student Muhammed produced a wonderful poem entitled ‘A cold night in Istanbul’ about

a complex called Darulaceze established in 1895 by Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II to help the city cope with the influx of people migrating from former Ottoman lands. Today, it continues to be a shelter for Turkey’s elderly and impoverished in a multicultural/interreligious setting. Residents are provided with a place to worship in peace. Its garden houses side-by-side a mosque, church and synagogue\(^{29}\).

Chinese student Kevin represented the cross, the Star of David and the Crescent moon as common symbols of Christianity, Judaism,

\(^{25}\) Majd Al Achkar, “What Peace is all about,” Peace Art in Dubai, May 2016. Ibid.
Peace, Islam and the Arts in Dubai

for recognizability but also for the fact that these symbols are often used to differentiate amongst the faiths [...]. However, it is also strikingly poetic since it also represents continuity. All monotheistic religions have polytheistic heritage [...]. Also, I chose to use these symbols to emphasize interreligious coexistence. Rather than using them as means of exclusion, those who follow Islam and other faiths as paths to peace can appropriate these symbols to that end.  

Other students were concentrating on intra-societal dialogue in an Islamic country. For Lebanese Kuwaiti student Rasha, born in Thailand with “some Saudi Arabian, Egyptian and Palestinian heritage”, diversity of Muslims should be acknowledged and appreciated by Muslims first. Rasha produced conceptual photography that represents ‘othering’ dynamics in the Kuwaiti society. The “Other’s Others”:

communicates that othering or judgement within a community only separates us. In an Islamic country or society, one should not only put efforts in stressing globally that Islam is a religion of peace in order to deconstruct the stereotype of terrorism and violence, but most importantly, it represents peace internally within the community. Peace is about non-violence as much as it is about the unity and brotherhood.

For Aisha:

Whatever unrest between Muslims and non-Muslims cannot be fixed until we fix what is within our walls [...]. We tend to think one Muslim is better than another or the ways of one Muslim is wrong just because it is not like ours or an Arabian Muslim is better than the African Muslims [...]. We can never see ourselves as the same until we start to view every Muslim as a part of the tree.

Some students defined peace as the end of racism, such as Emirati student Saeed who produced an installation using masks and beards:

my artwork is an art piece for humanity and for all people in the world whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims […]. Muslims have been criticized for their beards. Each person who has a beard has been criticized and called terrorist […]. Even in the Middle East after the

(31) Rasha Al Shaar, “The Other’s Others,” Peace Art in Dubai, May 2016. Ibid.
Arab Spring, people started to shave their beards. And people were afraid to shave their beards in Syria and Iraq in ISIS territories [...]. For me, a beard is just hair.33

For Mohammed, the Qur’an speaks of human equality, referring to verse 13 of Sura Al-hujurat “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted”34. Other students defined freedom of expression and resistance against “suppression and mistreatment” as the basis of peace. Hani’s artwork for instance depicts a tongue tied up with metal chain and a lock on a red and black background35. For Ayesha, who made an equalizer with wood,

“there could be no peace without justice […]. Justice is for all humans as they are God’s creatures […]. Wars and conflicts wouldn’t have gone to a large extent if all the people who are living in these countries had their rights equally as others”36.

Many students used calligraphy for the words Salam (Peace) and Alaykum al Salam or Al Salamu Alaykum (Peace be upon you), to assert the relation between Islam and Peace. According to Tasnim, Peace be upon you is “a standard salutation among Muslims […], the meaning of our existence [as Muslims], and the message of all religions”37. For Nouran and Mina, “Peace is a word from a Merciful God”—refer to verse 58 of Sura Yasin38. Mariam expressed a similar belief with her digital calligraphy artwork ‘Al Rahim’39. Ghazal extended her definition of peace to the 99 names of Allah40.

(40) Ghazal Salah, “In the Eyes of Muslims,” Peace Art in Dubai, May 2016. Ibid.
Some students described peace in relation to fasting during Ramadan, “we are to make peace with those who wronged us, strengthen ties with family and friends, do away with bad habits—essentially to clean up our lives, our thoughts and our feelings,” while others related peace to smiling. Emirati student Roudha wrote *Ibtassim* (Smile) using Kufic calligraphy to emphasize both Prophet Muhammad’s teachings about the importance of smiling at each other in order to bring happiness and peace, and the emulation of these teachings in many Muslim lives. Or to reading and gaining knowledge, thus fighting ignorance which is the fuel for conflicts, such as in the Esra’s artwork made of shapes choreographed with light sticks, calligraphy, and photography. Lebanese student Dana wrote the Hadith “When you are angry be silent” (reported by Imaam Ahmad, al-Musnad, 1/329; see also Saheeh al-Jaami’, 693, 4027) using both styles of pop art and Kufic calligraphy. As she explains in her statement, she believes that details “are the foundations of everything in society”. She launched a campaign called ‘Al Tafseel Al Fasel’ or the Defining Detail. Among details are words used by people. “The filtering of words could save lives” and sustain peace.

Some students focused on prayer and inner-peace. Japanese student Reiko depicted her “mind landscape” when she visited the Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi by combining arabesque patterns and symbols conveying harmony between Christianity and Islam, as well as inner-peace she feels whenever she prays:

the angel’s wing expresses the conversation with the angel. The reason I painted it is whenever I am praying I feel that to pray is similar to receiving the inspiration from an angel just like the Prophet’s revelation through Archangel Gabriel […]. Through this painting, I would like to tell that prayer is not asking God for something but remembering God and ourselves with compassion and gratitude.

In a video installation by Egyptian Muslim student Rana, she describes with sounds, colors and shapes her quest for inner-peace as

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(41) Saeed Kargar, “Ramadan”, *Peace Art in Dubai*, May 2016. Ibid.
“highly emphasized in the teachings of Islam”:

I have chosen to alter the imagery of geometric forms and natural environments [...] to free the mind of the forms of the physical world, allowing one to contemplate on the metaphysical realities [...]. This is the spiritual journey of Salah (meaning to connect in Arabic).\(^{(46)}\)

Indian Hindu Riya who was brought to Dubai “that taught her how to respect each one’s culture”, drew a man praying in front of a mosque using knife painting and the stroking method:

The first thing that came to my mind was praying because that’s the first thing you do to devote yourself to God [...]. If the prayers are sound and proper, the rest of the deeds will be sound and proper, as the Prophet himself stated [...]. Praying makes me feel at peace, it makes me feel at ease.\(^{(47)}\)

Israa painted two men in a mosque, trying to reach inner-peace through prayer and meditation\(^{(48)}\). For Hamad, the act of writing Allah in Kufic is a prayer and helps one attain inner-peace. He entitled his artwork ‘Drawing with Peace’\(^{(49)}\). Same with Georges and his artwork ‘Light through Allah’\(^{(50)}\). Turkish student Ahmet chose to combine the name of Rumi and figures of whirling dervishes: “Sufi whirling is a form of meditation […]. The dervishes, also known as the Semazens, aim to let go of their egos and reach inner-peace”\(^{(51)}\). Ola made figures of whirling dervishes with clay and wrote verses of a Sufi poem by Rabia Al Adawiyya on boards holding the figures. “Through this artwork, I meant to express my appreciation of the relationship Sufis have with God, one that is based on love and only love”\(^{(52)}\).

Many students paid particular attention to Muslim women’s situations, rights and roles. Most of them asserted the importance of deconstructing stereotypes, such as the relation between hijab-
submission-terrorism. One particular artwork by Azerbaijani student Narmin is about discrimination against Hijabi women in the UK where she lived for a while before coming to Dubai, and the different perspectives of the Hijab in the Azerbaijani society. For Narmin, “religion and religious garments should never be forced […] Faith should come from the heart.” In her series of photographs entitled ‘The Yellow Underline’, Noor criticizes the lack of gender equality in her community and “internal” stereotypes of Muslim women including a veiled woman:

who is committing the ‘sin’ of smoking, what would usually be considered as an act of mutiny against the core concepts of Islam… or actually, that’s what people might think […]. The yellow line points out to the well-known cautionary tape that is used in crime scenes […]. My intent is to highlight and emphasize the fact that women and men need to strive for equality in Islam, otherwise Islam cannot preach to be peaceful amidst tension created through gender inequality.

In her series of photographs entitled ‘Clasping’, Karma presents an opposite message, that of solidarity and harmony between men and women in Islam. A quote of Mahmoud Darwish is written on the hands in the fourth picture: “A woman’s hand in mine is enough for me to embrace my freedom”:

The way Mahmoud Darwish says that a woman’s hand in his (showing equality and cohesion) can make him (a Muslim man) embrace freedom, proves that a woman is needed to attain even the most essential things in life […]. A woman’s role in Islam and Islamic societies is so important and is highly appreciated and cherished. Furthermore, real Islam longs for equality between men and women.

Other students depicted the situation of Palestinian women living under occupation and their role in non-violent resistance such as Reem in ‘To Come’, or their role in building peace in Arab societies and contributing to the development of their societies such as Norah’s

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(57) Reem Sabobeh, “To come,” Peace Art in Dubai, May 2016. Ibid.
‘Wonder Women’, Noora’s ‘Women and Islam’ and Uzbek student Nigina with her artwork entitled ‘Females’ power of words’\textsuperscript{58}, or the importance of recognizing the diversity of Muslim women such as in the photography work of Yara, a Muslim Egyptian student who was born and raised in Dubai:

In my family, I am the only girl who is not wearing a hijab and I get judged for that—a girl who doesn’t fulfill her religious duties. It used to affect me before, but their words don’t really define me. They don’t define the way I was raised knowing my religion, and they don’t define my relationship to Allah”.\textsuperscript{59}

For Malak, peace starts with family’s harmony and internal positive relations. In ‘Rise’, she pays tribute to female victims of domestic violence\textsuperscript{60}.

Most of the students who were majoring in architecture linked their vision of peace to the construction of a mosque, such as Nadine with ‘Tawheed’, an engraved drawing on a wooden board\textsuperscript{61}, or Lama with ‘Al Mo’men Mosque’\textsuperscript{62}, Ahmad with ‘Mosques and Peace’\textsuperscript{63} and Yousef with ‘The Peaceful Mosque’\textsuperscript{64}.

By the end of the semester, many students shared the following similar perception/belief: Islam as a historical religion is fundamentally peaceful—such as expressed by Lea in her artwork entitled ‘The Tears of Peace’ (Islam religion of peace)\textsuperscript{65}. However, interpretations and applications of the Qur’anic verses and the Prophets’ hadiths differ, depending on several factors, and on individual and group interests. There are differences of perspectives among Muslims and it is bigoted to draw conclusions about all Muslims based upon the actions of small minorities. These students firmly believed that many Muslims sit at the


\textsuperscript{60} Malak El Gohary, “Rise,” \textit{Peace Art in Dubai}, May 2016. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Nadine Kassab, “Tawheed,” \textit{Peace Art in Dubai}, May 2016. Ibid.


\textsuperscript{63} Ahmad Jabbour, “Mosques and Peace,” \textit{Peace Art in Dubai}, May 2016. Ibid.


forefront of the fight against extremism, as activists and as its primary victims. Samer Arwani for instance produced a digital visual artwork entitled ‘Pray for Muslims’ as a reaction to ‘Pray for Paris’ following the November 2015 attacks:

I personally got offended seeing ‘Pray for Paris’ everywhere while my country, Syria, is being bombed every day […]. My artwork represents how the global media focuses on the smallest terrorist attack that was possibly done by Muslims while on the other hand, hundreds of Muslims are getting killed every day.66

The following statement by American journalist and author Nicholas Kristof explains well these students’ perception/belief:

Let’s not feed Islamophobic bigotry by highlighting only the horrors while neglecting the diversity of a religion with 1.6 billion adherents—including many who are champions of tolerance, modernity and human rights. The great divide is not between faiths, but one between intolerant zealots of any tradition and the large numbers of decent, peaceful believers likewise found in each tradition.67

According to these students, the vast majority of Muslims are moderate, not militant extremists, pious people who suffer more from terrorism and violence than non-Muslims, and that the greater part of Muslims in the world do not support extremist views. Egyptian student Omar’s poem illustrates well this perception68. Iranian student Fay’s digital artwork too:

Islamophobia is a reality because most religious terrorists tend to be brainwashed Muslims who have tainted the image of Islam with their acts of violence and destroyed the lives of people not just from other religions, but also from their own religion. The rest of the Muslims around the world with good hearts and non-delusional religious beliefs are shadowed by the acts of these terrorists.69

In ‘An end to negative stereotyping’, Yogesh expresses the following message:

There are numerous people in the world who want to break stereotypes of Muslims but are not heard or promoted enough by the media [...] Asif Madvi, an Indian actor, states that: “I think Islam has been hijacked by the idea that all Muslims are terrorists [...] The late King of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz says that ‘Muslims are not bloodthirsty people. Islam is a religion of peace that forbids the killing of the innocent’. I am just an Indian student who was born and raised in the heart of the Middle East, that is, Dubai. Surrounded by Muslims literally all my life, all I have to say about them is that they walk, talk and act like any other human being and are no different than anyone else.\(^{70}\)

Many students affirmed that Islam is not monolithic, and that its diversity constitutes its wealth. This diversity is ethnic, sectarian, political, socio-economic, etc. For them, even if there is no final and unique authority and this fact often leaves a vacuum, diversity is not a threat. All are needed in diversity management and to embrace the complexity of violent thoughts and behaviors over the simplistic black-and-white narratives. Zeena, a Jordanian Muslim who lived in Qatar for 20 years, drew different hands coming together and the words *Al wihda fi al tanawo*’ (Unity in Diversity) while calling for the promotion of “the pluralistic vision of the *Qur’an*” by referring to the verse 99 of Sura Younus:

As a Muslim, I constantly feel the need to express the beauty of my religion and to help those who have been misguided by mainstream media [...] The *Qur’an* endorses diversity and acceptance as major aspects of the Divine Will.\(^{71}\)

Not one student criticized the fundamentals of Islam, or believed that the *Qur’an* is full of brutal content. In fact, most students argued that violence and extremism cannot be due to anything intrinsic to Islam. Islam is about Peace. The *Qur’an* main message is a message of peace. For instance, there are students who refused to identify Daech

\(^{(70)}\) Yogesh Manglani “An End to Negative Stereotyping,” *Peace Art in Dubai*, June 2015. Ibid.

\(^{(71)}\) Zeena Abu Al Saad, “Unity in Diversity,” *Peace Art in Dubai*, May 2016. Ibid.
or ISIS as ‘Islamic’. According to these students there is not a single fixed cause (ex: the revelation of Islam or religious motives) to explain a variable phenomenon such as nowadays’ extremism or terrorism.

No matter what race or religion, anyone could be part of such an organization. The misconception about Islam obstructs the essence of its teaching and art I believe would fix the problem [...]. Islam does not comply to ISIS.\(^\text{72}\)

Contrary to what a former colleague of mine at the Université de Montréal and now Associate professor of religion and theology at Concordia University, André Gagné, revealed in an interview following the Paris massacre at Charlie Hebdo in January 2015. According to Gagné, it is important to:

acknowledge that the attack was religiously motivated. It is absolutely associated with religion […]. There is an elephant in the room and people do not want to talk about it because it is not politically correct. We blame mental illness problems, economic problems, political problems, but don’t talk about religion […]. Certain passages of the Qur’an do encourage violence, just as the Old Testament calls for an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth. However, while mainstream Christianity and Judaism have moved away from literal interpretation of such passages, some Muslims still believe their religion justifies violence […]. Islam needs to reform itself.\(^\text{73}\)

The call for reform is certainly not new; as it goes back to the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) c. C.E. with the Nahda, and continued to develop and to diversify throughout the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) c. In the contemporary period, Muslim intellectuals published extensive works on this issue such as Nasr Abu Zayd, Adbolkarim Soroush and Algerian scholar Muhammad Arkoun who called for the reform of Islamic thought while criticizing the so-called Islamic revivalism that, according to him, monopolized the discourse on Islam\(^\text{74}\). The call for reform was recently communicated by Somali-

\(^{\text{72}}\) Amer Badi, “ISIS is not Islamic,” Peace Art in Dubai, March 2015. Ibid.


\(^{\text{74}}\) Mohammed Arkoun, The Unthought in the Contemporary Islamic Thought (London: Saqi books, 2002).
born Dutch American activist, author and former Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Ali quotes verses of violent exhortations in the Qur’an, and argues that Muslims should recognize the fact that the Qur’an is not the literal word of God. As long as they do not, then extremists will be able to lay claim to theological rationale for their acts.

Students who obviously would not express similar perceptions as Gagné’s and Ali’s, would talk of reformation with different meanings. One student mentioned tajdid (renewal) and islah (reform) as usual perspectives and practices in Islamic thought. In that sense, reformation does not mean the rejection of the fundamentals—i.e. the Qur’an and the Prophet’s tradition. The message and mission of the Prophet Muhammad are seen as a divine endeavor to revive Abrahamic monotheism and reform the Arabian Peninsula’s society. Other students asserted the importance of reform as an answer to the collective dissatisfaction with social and political realities. Similarly to Muqtedar Khan’s statement, reform is valued here:

to restore justice, virtue, and compassion to Muslim conditions. The normative ill could be a consequence of unhealthy institutional practices (institutions like state, judiciary, university, civil society), thereby necessitating societal reform, or because of an intellectual decline. Intellectual decline that Muslim societies can face is either a decline in its ability to understand and translate the Islamic message from its sources into meaningful and salutary practice, or a decline in the processes of epistemology—knowledge retention, production, and dissemination. This would necessitate a reform in the existing dysfunctional epistemological regimes and revival and rejuvenation of the spirit of Ijtihad.76

For students who defined Islam as a religion of Peace, it is either because the Qur’an promotes peace and its “soul does not need to be saved”, and/or because violence has complex roots. According to one of my students, the concept of one cause/one solution can be very dangerous, even if this logic has gained prominence in the post-9/11

world, attributing violent extremism from Muslims to the core tenets of Islam, or terrorism to Islam. “This is a faulty diagnosis that fuels conflicts”. For him, violence is committed by individuals, and few individuals do not summarize a historical religion. Dima expresses it well in her digital cartoon\(^7\). Furthermore, violence is the product of colonial legacies, contemporary power politics and American/European roles in the rise of extremism from Afghanistan to Tunisia, or as journalist Michael Weiss and Syrian analyst Hassan Hassan state in their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, political and military maneuvering by the United States, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have fueled ISIS’s explosive expansion\(^8\). That would explain somehow what is happening in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan for instance, along with the collapse of government institutions or the exercise of authoritarianism on national levels. As Director of Iraq, Iran and North Africa Programs at the United States Institute of Peace’s Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations Manal Omar argues:

> Religion, certainly, is part of the mix, especially in fragile nations or under authoritarian regimes, but that comes into play not because of the nature of the faith but because of the way it is abused and manipulated. To grasp this complexity, it is important to understand three areas: the role of global politics that have destabilized the region and inflamed tensions; how dysfunctional states create an opening for extremism; and finally, how religion fills the gaps created by international and domestic uncertainties.\(^9\)

Just like Omar, Robert I. Rotberg outlines in his book *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, that states’ dysfunctions, lack of political inclusion and failure to provide citizens with basic rights, such as freedom of expression and the right to live with dignity and services allow non-state actors to emerge and take control and are primary drivers of youth radicalization and violence\(^8\)

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There are students who identified just like French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin does hatred, contempt, murder and torture as the barbarities that have been marking all human history, as well as the hegemony of profit and anonymity\(^{81}\); or as Swiss academic, philosopher, and writer Tariq Ramadan points out the “quasi-ghettoization” of a large part of youth like in France, or the legacy of colonization in North Africa, and the occupation of Palestine by Israelis\(^{82}\). In fact, for many students, the modern State of Israel is to blame for the cycle of violence in the Middle East and the proliferation of stereotypes. According to these students, there is a need for justice and to develop a culture of justice, or else, violence will continue to prevail. Omar’s series of photographs is in that perspective revealing:

The first picture shows the *Holy Qur’an* resting on a rifle with the Palestinian Kuffiya and a military uniform as a base. In this shot I aimed to catch the viewers and lure them into prejudice and misunderstanding […]. Both Islam and the Kuffiya [symbol of Palestinian resistance] have been misrepresented. In the second photograph, the *Qur’an* is no longer the focus and shifts to the side to make space to a map. The map represents the Gaza strip with blood spills on the burnt map. On top sits a compass with four empty shells. The third photograph reveals a lot and the focus becomes a family portrait with a black strip on the upper left corner along with a Mahmoud Darwish book that reads: “A lover from Palestine”. A slingshot appears to rest on the family portrait with the Qur’an on the side. The weapon re-appears and rests on the Kuffiya but it has no magazine […]. In these shots, I am trying to portray the Palestinian cause and how Islam is not bound to terrorize people, however, circumstances—individual and/or communal—push people to commit acts in order to attain a goal. In all fairness, the struggle portrayed in the series hints to freedom and justice.\(^{83}\)

Finally, I usually introduce my students at the beginning of the


semester to the importance of appreciation of the rich intellectual and artistic diversity in Muslim majority countries and Muslim minority communities. During one of the class discussions at the end of the spring 2016 semester, students raised the issue again as they were telling the stories of their artworks relating Islam to Peace. Although they agreed that states have the responsibility to promote the advantages of this diversity and that religious authorities, scholars and media experts should disseminate a message of peace, they recognized the crucial role of the “voiceless” such as themselves and other young individuals in becoming both agents of peace and transmitters of the grey zones of Muslim identity. For them, new generations are already questioning their individual identities and deconstructing the demonization of Muslims as eternal ‘others’, violent, hostile, backwards, aliens and impossible to integrate. However, new media have allowed misinformed speakers to comment on Islam and Muslims, thus to “occupy” virtual platforms along with mainstream media and traditional channels. According to those students, there is an urgent need for creating alternative spaces for them to express their own visions, and to take their voices into account, whether by academics, religious institutions, media experts, policy makers and governments. Indeed:

the youth could help resolve conflicts by spreading awareness about peacebuilding, engaging in public discourse on peace, facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and contributing to the general wellbeing of the community through a positive and productive attitude.  

One of these alternative spaces is the artistic space. Students acknowledged that, “to create a culture of peace, we must first imagine it, and the arts can help us do that, for ourselves and future generations.”


(85) Carol Rank, “Promoting Peace through the Arts”, Ibid.