

FEATURE STORY IDEAS FOR JOURNALISTS UTILIZING  
HARVARD FACULTY AND STUDENT RESOURCES

# TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BY SHENILA KHOJA-MOOLJI

Master of Theological Studies degree candidate, Harvard Divinity School

**PARAMETERS FOR USE**

We have solicited the support of a series of individuals to provide area expertise for the story. We request that you contact them not as sources for further resources, but to answer questions regarding their specific research and areas of expertise.

**EXPLANATION**

The purpose of this feature story would be to highlight the many explicit and implicit ways in which the subject of religion is taught in the public schools through students, teachers and curricula. The story would revolve around the experiences of recent student teachers from the Program in Religious Studies and Education (PRSE) at Harvard University. The PRSE is a unique teacher training program in which students graduate with a master's degree in religious studies and a license to teach in one of several middle and secondary school disciplines, with a special expertise in teaching about the study of religion. Based on the rich experience of these interns, the story can evolve in a variety of directions: the role of the interns' own religious orientation in teaching about religion, teaching about religion through a contextualized lens that presents religion from a cultural and social perspective (instead of a devotional/confessional stance) and the overlap of religion with other fields of study.

**JUSTIFICATION**

The study of religion from a contextualized lens, which the PRSE advocates, aims at promoting the study of religion in the public schools as part of the formation of students as responsible and informed citizens. By reflecting on the experiences of the PRSE interns, the story would not only break the myth of the absence of religion in the public schools but would also highlight the on-going creation of a constructive dialogue on how best to equip teachers to engage their students in a study of religion.

## HARVARD RESOURCES

**ACADEMICS** **PROFESSOR DIANE L. MOORE**, Professor of the Practice in Religious Studies and Education and Director of the Program in Religious Studies and Education, Harvard Divinity School  
Email: [dlmoore@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:dlmoore@hds.harvard.edu)  
Phone: 617-496-8508

Diane Moore teaches the courses Religion, Democracy, and Education, the Colloquium in Religion and Secondary Education, and the PRSE Research Seminar. Her research interests are in the areas of religion and public education, educational theory, and multicultural literacy. Diane Moore is a member of the editorial board of the journals Religion and Education and British Journal of Religious Education. Her book *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* appeared in 2007. Diane Moore has also taught at Phillips Andover Academy in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

**PROFESSOR ALI ASANI**, Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures, Harvard University  
Email: [aliasani@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:aliasani@fas.harvard.edu)  
Phone: 617-495-5755

Ali S. Asani is the author of many articles and several books, including *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia*. He is currently working on a new book *Infidel of Love: Exploring Muslim Understandings of Islam* to be published by Harvard University Press (2010). Ali Asani is a member of the board of directors of the American Islamic Congress as well as the Academic Council of the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University. He was recently invited to join the Council of Sages, a multi-faith, multi-national group of prominent religious thinkers and leaders responsible for crafting a charter to promote increased compassion among various faith communities.

**STUDENTS AND STAFF** **ANNA MUDD**, Master of Theological Studies candidate, Harvard Divinity School  
Email: [aamudd@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:aamudd@hds.harvard.edu)  
Phone: 857-998-0269

Anna Mudd is pursuing a Master of Theological Studies (MTS), concentrating in the Program in Religious Studies and Education (PRSE) at the Harvard Divinity School (HDS). In her work and studies, Anna Mudd explores the intersection between religion and public education, particularly the pedagogy of teaching about religious history, in the context of public school social studies classes. Anna Mudd's student teaching practicum through the PRSE involved leading a five-week unit on the emergence and expansion of Islam in a public middle school in Arlington, MA.

**WENDY MCDOWELL**, Editor, Harvard Divinity Bulletin

Email: [wmcowell@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:wmcowell@hds.harvard.edu)

Phone: 617-496-0605

Wendy McDowell is an editor of the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, a quarterly magazine about religion based at Harvard Divinity School (HDS). She holds a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and a Bachelors of Arts (BA) in Religion from Hamilton College. Before becoming editor, Wendy McDowell worked in media relations and public relations for HDS and the National Council of Churches. She started her professional career as a journalist.

**LISBETH LILES**, Master of Divinity candidate, Harvard Divinity School

Email: [lliles@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:lliles@hds.harvard.edu)

Phone: 802-522-6272

Liz Liles is a Master of Divinity (MDiv) candidate and a student in the Program in Religious Studies and Education (PRSE) at Harvard Divinity School (HDS). In her work, she focuses on the role of storytelling in developing religious identity. Lisbeth Liles completed her teaching internship in a 9th grade classroom in fall 2008, and currently teaches a 10th grade English and 12th grade Women and Literature elective.

**MICHAEL PREHN**, Master of Theological Studies candidate, Harvard Divinity School

Email: [mprehn@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:mprehn@hds.harvard.edu)

Phone: 650-793-2554

Michael Prehn is a Master of Theological Studies (MTS) candidate and a student of the Program in Religious Studies and Education (PRSE) at Harvard Divinity School (HDS). Prior to graduate work, he served as a residential counselor at a psychiatric facility for children in San Francisco and as kindergarten-12th grade substitute teacher in the Palo Alto School Unified School District. Michael Prehn interned as a 9th grade world history teacher, teaching two classes of 14 year-olds.

**NOE VENABLE**, Master of Theological Studies candidate, Harvard Divinity School

Email: [nvenable@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:nvenable@hds.harvard.edu)

Phone: 415-244-3390

Noe Venable is a Master of Theological Studies (MTS) candidate and a student of the Program in Religious Studies and Education (PRSE) at Harvard Divinity School (HDS). Noe interned at the Arlington High School in the 9th grade Foundations of English and 11th grade Honors American Literature classes. An accomplished artist, Noe Venable has self-released six albums of original experimental folk songs, which have sold more than 15,000 copies worldwide. During her work for a Chicago based company, Start-To-Finish Books, which offers struggling readers age-appropriate narrative books, Noe Venable

penned more than ten books, which are now used in US schools to help struggling readers gain access to literature.

**BRENDAN RANDALL**, Master of Theological Studies candidate, Harvard Divinity School

Email: [brendan.randall@gmail.com](mailto:brendan.randall@gmail.com)

Phone: 617-230-4748

Brendan Randall is a second-year Master of Theological Studies (MTS) candidate at the Harvard Divinity School (HDS). He holds a Juris Doctor (JD) from the University of Minnesota Law School and a Master of Education (MEd.) from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), where he will begin pursuing a Doctor of Education in Fall 2009 in culture, communities, and education. Before returning to graduate school in 2007, Brendan Randall taught history, world religions, and ethics at the Emma Willard School in Troy, NY and practiced law in Lincoln, NE and Minneapolis, MN.

**INTERNET RESOURCES** [HTTP://WWW.HDS.HARVARD.EDU/PRSE/INDEX.HTML](http://www.hds.harvard.edu/prse/index.html)

Official website for the Program in Religious Studies and Education (PRSE) at Harvard University.

*At the Social Science Research Council sponsored workshop, "Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities in Context," held at Harvard University in November 2008, academics, Muslim community members and journalists affirmed the importance of combating religious illiteracy in the US, particularly around Islam and Muslim communities. These feature story items have been produced in an effort to make available more accurate and complex information about Islam and Muslim communities.*



**CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES, HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

**38 KIRKLAND STREET, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138 USA**

**TEL: (617) 495-4055 FAX: (617) 496-8584 CMES@FAS.HARVARD.EDU**