

Paper Presented at

AMSS 34th Annual Conference

**Cosponsored by
Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
September 30 – October 2, 2005**

Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Dealing with American Students’ Notions about Islam”

**By: Manar Umar Darwish, Ph. D
(St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA)**

For the overriding majority of Muslims in the world today, religion is primarily a spiritual vehicle and a source of inspiration for living and for exploring life and the world. At the same time, because of current world events, many non-Muslims are becoming more and more curious about Islam and its teachings. This extends to university students, who lately have been eager to sign up for courses dealing with the Middle East and Islam. Sadly enough, these students often bring with them erroneous notions. They involve a primary concentration on secondary elements of the religion, in particular, ideas about warfare and women, which nearly drive out any other concepts. Although ideas about warfare and ideas about the role and status of women are part of human concerns, they do not constitute major preoccupations for most Muslims. Because students have been exposed very frequently to hostile discourses about Islam and Muslims from various media, including press and films, some of them are quite resistant to changing their ideas. The instructor is hampered further by the scarcity of materials that do not adopt some of the features of such discourses. Nevertheless, it is possible to make progress toward a more balanced view of Islam in the classroom through a combination of trying to find the least-biased materials and a sympathetic personal approach, while avoiding preaching, proselytizing, or belittling the other. A most important feature of this approach involves drawing careful parallels between Muslims both here and abroad on the one hand, and non-Muslim Americans on the other, thereby illustrating the innumerable commonalities shared by both groups. This paper will draw on my experiences as an instructor of Introduction to Islam as well as Women in Islam courses taught over a number of years at the College of New Jersey and St. Joseph's University in order to demonstrate these points.