

## **COURSE COMPARES WESTERN AND ISLAMIC THOUGHTS, TRADITIONS**

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THOUSAND-year-old stereotypes don't just go away overnight. But Gordon Simmons is willing to take on a few anyway.

Simmons, who has taught philosophy at the University of Charleston, West Virginia State College and Marshall University since the early 1980s, will present a semester-long comparative philosophy course at Marshall's Ohio Valley Campus in Point Pleasant starting Jan. 17.

Usually, he compares Western cultural and philosophical ideas with those of the Far East. Following September's terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., he decided to compare Western ideas with Islam.

"Ever since the beginning of the Crusades, in the West there have been some pretty basic stereotypes about, not only Islam, but [Islamic] culture," said Simmons, who works at the West Virginia Division of Culture and History.

"In reality, Islamic thinkers struggled with the same questions about God, man and the universe as their Western cousins. The very fundamental questions people have about religion are shared by both traditions. They end up dealing with a lot of the same issues."

Islamic study shares much with Western thought, Simmons said. Aristotle - the grandfather of Western philosophy - would have been lost to the West if Islamic scholars had not studied his works during the Middle Ages, he said.

Simmons said there are some basic theological differences between the two religious traditions, though. Where the Christian tradition has a multifaceted God as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Islam has a more monotheistic approach. The Christian figure of Jesus serves as a symbol of God coming to Earth in the form of man, while Islam's Muhammad is a simple prophet.

One of the more interesting similarities is that both Christianity and Islam have had to come to terms with ancient Greek philosophy and the role of logic and reason in a religion based on revelation.

"How to fit reason and faith together has been an ongoing debate within both religions," Simmons said. "So they've both used Greek philosophy as a way to do that."

Another difference is that the tenets of Islam "apply to all of life," even how a society is organized, he said. "In other words, it's not just something that's there once a week. It has to do with everything in life. So even the principles of organizing society are of profound religious importance.

"Practically, this means that the idea of secular government or the division of church and state are less common in Islamic history than in the West," Simmons said.

In Western history, as a result of the many religious wars in the 16th century, the idea of church and state being separate became more common, he said. "But in Islam it has only been relatively recently that the notion of a secular state - or the division between religion and politics - has come about. It's a very recent development."

The events of Sept. 11, the rise and fall of the Taliban and other current events in the Islamic world demonstrate "the polarity of opinion between those who would want a more open society and those who want a very religiously governed, strict society.

"How do you organize society? Should it have religious imperatives embodied in the law? If you have a religious state, does that corrupt the religion? These are all issues that have become real important since East and West are more in contact, with more interaction now.

"You also have more people in Western society who now practice Islam - they don't live in an Islamic society. That creates tension for them. Can you live in a secular society and still be observant of Islam?"

Simmons said studying such similarities and differences between cultures and faiths can help to promote better understanding. "I don't think people understand their own traditions unless they compare them with somebody else's," he said.

*The course will run from 6:30 to 9 p.m. on Thursdays from Jan. 17 to May 9. For information on registration, call Marshall University at 696-3170.*

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