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OPINIONS**STAFF EDITORIAL****In discussions related to the Trump presidency, let students lead****HOW WE SEE IT**

It is not the job of the professor to stand in front of the class and start important conversations in a certain, partisan way

Since Donald Trump was announced the 45th president of the United States, professors from all departments — many of whom have no political science expertise — have likely stood in front of students, lesson plan in hand, and considered the question, “Do I address the red elephant in the room?”

We think yes, absolutely. It doesn't matter if you're teaching statistics or principles of art. Glazing over a

result that has polarized the nation, caused a spike in hate crimes and that has and will continue to create policies that directly put many marginalized communities at risk is doing a disservice to an academic, liberal arts environment that fosters open dialogue.

But when initiating these conversations, it's important for professors to avoid setting the tone. For open dialogue in classrooms related to the Trump presidency — to truly

be productive — professors must focus on facilitating and not on interjecting their partisan views.

As voices of authority in the classroom, setting the stage for a conversation by condemning a certain opinion can be detrimental to encouraging students to openly share their views and, therefore, think critically about the reasons why they voted for one candidate over the other.

This is not to say that professors can't signal to minority students that they are safe and loved in their classrooms or can't acknowledge that Trump's campaign negates

many values that are central to Elon University's academic environment, including evidence-based reasoning, inclusion, religious tolerance and gender equity.

This is not to say professors can't express these views at events such as “A Gathering for Action,” on Wednesday, Nov. 16 or reach out individually to students who seem distressed.

But it's important for professors to distinguish between spaces where students have gathered with a certain partisan perspective and spaces where all perspectives should be recognized. It is not the job of

instructors to stand in front of classrooms and start these important conversations in a way that might limit opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue. It's important for members of the “silent majority” to speak so that dialogue can actually happen across partisan lines.

Being able to react to this divisive election on a college campus means we have the unique opportunity to engage with various perspectives in a way that can foster productive, critical dialogue inside and outside the classroom.

But this can only happen in the classroom if student voices lead.

CAMPUS VOICES

Campus Voices are written by members of the Elon community, not ENN staff members, and represent their informed opinions. Campus Voices and other opinions content are separate from news coverage.

Light upon light

Ariela Marcus-Sells
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

There is a popular verse from the Quran that begins, “God is the Light of the heavens and the Earth...”

This verse inspired a long tradition of reflecting on both God and the act of creation as light. Muslims who contributed to this tradition often saw human beings as emanations from this divine light. I have always found this tradition particularly moving and beautiful, and have spent the last few weeks sharing it with my students.

I am new to my teaching. After finishing my degree last year, Elon University gave me the opportunity to teach students for the first time. And so, for three semesters, I have shared my love of Islamic history, Muslim cultures and religious studies with earnest, intelligent and caring young people. It has been an unparalleled joy.

My teaching draws on seven

years spent studying the writings of West African Muslims. I have analyzed how these deeply intelligent people of the past understood the relation between God and their own human society. How they absorbed, reworked and built on the intellectual and cultural traditions of their predecessors. How they worked to shape their present and futures by writing about literature, philosophy and religious practice.

In the course of these studies, I have gained insight into the relationship between intellectual elites and popular movements. I have tried to show the link between philosophy and practice and to understand how people draw on the past in an attempt to shape the future.

I am new to my field, to my discipline and to my teaching, but I don't have words to describe how much I love my work. I never expected everyone to share my love of these subjects, but yesterday, I learned just how many of my country mates may in fact fear these very traditions that have moved me for so long.

I am questioning many aspects of my life and work today. I worry that my teaching simply preaches to a choir, that university education reaches too narrow a population and that my interest in African-Muslim thought is selfish. But despite these doubts, I do believe deeply in the lessons that have emerged from my work.

I believe that we need to commit to studying human thought and action, to understanding relationships of power and authority and to tracing the connections between the present and the past.

I don't know if higher education will succeed in remaining relevant to the discussions ahead or if we will manage to reach beyond a narrow sliver of the population. But I know that educators who want to accomplish these goals will have to

reinvest in the lessons of history, religious studies, anthropology and literature. And students who want to have conversations about the

relationship between themselves and others will need to see their degrees as more than a set of professional skills. We need to understand people as

humans and the location of that learning is the humanities.

If we cannot achieve this vision of education as individuals, we will fall into the self-centered narcissism that leads to hate and fear. If we cannot achieve this vision as an institution, we will lapse into irrelevancy until we are finally, and rightfully, dismantled.

I have always loved this verse from the Quran, but I am not a Muslim. I do not believe that the divine light hidden in every human

heart binds us all together as part of one luminous God.

I believe that each of us kindles and fans the embers of understanding that bind us one to one. These flames can be extinguished by the external winds of fear, violence and dislocation or smothered by the internal pressures of impatience and forgetfulness.

I believe that these connections require work, reflection and practice. Going forward, they will also require courage. But I believe that these flames rise and leap in the presence of others and can run like wildfire from heart to heart.

These beliefs stem from my personal experiences and reflections over the years. They are beliefs, but they are also hopes. I hope to find a community with which to build this bonfire. Among the faculty, staff and students here at Elon, I have already found individuals whose light has grown my own.

I hope to find more and to work with all of you so that together we can finish the verse and become light upon light and guide to our light whom we will.

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