



# Uncommon Experiences: Comparative Religion Through Musical Co-Creation and Service-Learning

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## Abstract

Since Spring 2022, Mercer University (Mercer) and Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco (AUI) have collaborated on the design and implementation of a program exploring inter-religious dialogue, particularly between Muslims and Christians, rooted in commonalities in religious texts and practices. Since Spring 2023, this program has been augmented through engagement with musical styles and performances facilitated by local Moroccan experts. Further, the program has since included a service-learning project that allows the students to benefit from the vocational programs at AUI's Azrou Center for Community Development. Through this program, students and professors from Mercer, AUI, and the Azrou Center collaborate on arrangements of both traditional and original musical pieces that are performed publicly in a variety of venues, including AUI, the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Fès, the Fes Sacred Music Festival, and the Azrou Center. In addition to the musical preparation and performances, the academic aspects include readings, reflective responses, peer dialogues, and a culminating creative project.

## Keywords

Faculty-led, inter-religious dialogue, Morocco, musical co-creation, service-learning

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## Introduction

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco (AUI) and Mercer University in Macon, GA, United States (Mercer) have a partnership dating to 1997 for general collaboration and student exchange. In this framework, starting in Spring 2022, AUI and Mercer have enhanced their collaboration through the co-design and implementation of a 10-day AUI Spring intersession course on inter-religious dialogue. These courses, respectively called “Common Word” in 2022, “Common Refrain” in 2023, and “Common Roots” in 2024 have explored connections between religious faith and practice particularly in Christianity and Islam. Table (1) below presents a summary of the program profile (further details can be found in the supplemental materials). For Mercer, this is a faculty-led education abroad program. For AUI, it is a regular intersession course available to the student body. The faculty and students themselves represent the diversity of Mercer and AUI and the United States and Morocco. The Mercer participants have had many different racial or ethnic backgrounds and come from many regions of the United States or globally. The AUI students represent Morocco’s many regions and have included participants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, and the United States.

**TABLE (1)**

PROGRAM PROFILE

<b>Course Titles and Numbers*</b>	Spring 2022 - HUM 2306/3309: Common Word Spring 2023 - HUM 2306/ART 1399: Common Refrain Spring 2024 - HUM 2306/ART 1399: Common Roots
<b>Target Student Population(s)</b>	AUI and Mercer students interested in interreligious dialogue and music or other artistic expression.
<b>Content Focus, Field, or Discipline</b>	Comparative religion, art, and service-learning
<b>Credit-Bearing</b>	Yes
<b>Program Level</b>	Undergraduate and graduate (masters)
<b>Program Duration</b>	10 days for full combined AUI-Mercer class 10 additional days for Mercer
<b>On-site Location(s)</b>	Morocco: Ifrane, Fes, Merzouga, Marrakesh

		2022	2023	2024	Total
<b>Student Participation</b> (67 in grand total)	Mercer	12	7	8	27
	AUI	10	8	10	28
	Azrou Center	-	6	6	12

\* See List of Supplemental Materials for the 2022-2024 course syllabi

These courses as a collective study abroad program aim to engage students in exploring, through readings and music, the deep connections between religious traditions, especially Christianity and Islam, and how religious convictions and beliefs inform musical expression. Upon completion of the program, students are expected to be able to:

- Identify key commonalities between Islam and Christianity,
- Engage in fruitful dialogue with peers of various religious and spiritual backgrounds,
- Experience a range of spiritual and religious musical styles,
- Learn a select set of traditional religious songs; and
- Co-create, compose, and perform original spiritual songs as a service-learning project with the Azrou Center.

The program is supported by the Mercer On Mission program, so Mercer students spend additional time, approximately 10 days, in Morocco working on service projects, primarily in the Marrakesh region. For example, in Spring 2024, the Mercer students conducted a Music and English Camp in Tadderte, a community in the High Atlas' El Haouz province impacted by the September 2023 Earthquake, culminating in a community concert. This element is not formally part of the AUI Intercession class and is more focused on the learning outcomes for the Mercer students. However, AUI students have been able to participate individually in some of the activities depending on their schedules.

The connection between inter-religious dialogue and music comes through the selection, preparation, and performance of a set of songs representative of Christian or Islamic religious or spiritual traditions. However, all students are invited to suggest songs for performance that speak to their desire for human connection and reflection. Thus, some of the songs selected and prepared in the last two years have been clearly religious in nature such as the Arabic hymn *Anta Adhimum* [You (God) are Great], the Christian hymn *We Shall Overcome*, or *Allah ya Moulana* [God our Lord]. However, some have been more spiritual or secular such as Boston's *Peace of Mind* or the popular

Moroccan song *Shams al-'Ashiya* [The Evening Sun]. In addition, Maalem Sadik and Nouamane Lahlou added to the set by teaching some of their songs or styles to the group. For example, the 2024 group learned Nouamane Lahlou's *Ya Markib* [O Boat], a song expressing the young artist's desire to return to Morocco when living and working in the United States. Thus, in both 2023 and 2024, concerts at AUI, Fes, and the Azrou Center included a range of songs representative of Christianity, Islam, Morocco, the United States, and the importance of music and religion/spirituality to the human condition broadly.

The powerful combination of inter-religious dialogue, music, service, and travel rooted in a curriculum of academic readings, class discussion, reflective writing and peer dialogues, culminates in creative projects demonstrating the students' deep engagement with the program themes and experiences.

These individual elements each have their own pedagogical foundations and align with many aspects of The Forum on Education Abroad's (2023) *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*.

## Inter-Religious Dialogue and Integrated Faculty-Led Education Abroad

As stated above, the initial focus for this class was inter-religious dialogue. Dr. Rob Nash of Mercer and Rev. Karen Smith of AUI are long-time colleagues who had discussed such a course for several years. In fall of 2021, Rev. Smith proposed the program to AUI's Dr. Brian Seilstad, who accepted in part because developing a faculty-led trip integrated with an AUI intersession class would be a counterpoint to the typical faculty-led trips to AUI from the United States, where the visiting students may spend time at AUI but lack deep connection to its students and curriculum. Through this approach, both AUI and Mercer students would benefit equally through a credit-bearing, intentionally designed curriculum built on the strengths of each partner.

Dr. Nash then invited Dr. Nathan Myrick, and all began working together on the course design in Fall 2021. This aspect of collaboration aligns closely with Standard 4.2.1. "Collaboration shall be based on mutual respect and be mutually beneficial" (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2023, p. 23). The result was the first intersession course, titled *A Common Word: Interfaith Dialogue, Encounter, and Engagement*. The title relates directly to Volf et al.'s (2009) work *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, which is a core program material. Global Muslim scholars and intellectuals published this document as a response to a controversial speech by Pope Benedict XVI (see [A Common Word](#)). This document seeks common ground through two core

principles: 1) The unity of God and the necessity of love for Him, and 2) the necessity of love of the neighbor.

To explore these core themes, students engaged daily in intentional dialogue through an “Inner circle/Outer circle.” This approach enhanced the quality of discussions and participation in and outside of class time.

## Music

The musical dimension, from a student learning perspective, heightens the program expectations and outcomes as students choose, practice, and perform publicly a range of songs relevant to their religious or spiritual backgrounds. In addition, the opportunity to work with prominent Moroccan experts is powerful, perhaps especially the Moroccan students for whom working with a famous artist such as Nouamane Lahlou is a unique experience.

Thus, the musical component relates broadly to Standard 6 in terms of Student Learning and Development to understand the value of education abroad, engage in deeper explorations of the local contexts, and benefit equally from the curriculum and co-curriculum (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2023, pp. 31-38).

## Service

In turn, the addition of service-learning with the Azrou Center in 2023 and 2024 deepens the engagement with the local community. This aspect aligns closely with Standard 4.4. about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion to engage intentionally with diverse participants (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2023, p. 25). Critically, the Azrou Center students, although their societal position can be considered marginalized in certain ways, are fully engaged in the program as active participants rather than passive beneficiaries. In each year, the Azrou Center students suggest and lead songs, travel with the group to Fes, and perform in all concerts. The intercession program does not directly relate to the vocational training of the students, which tends to be in areas such as seamstress, culinary arts, or cosmetology, but the experience does offer unique opportunities for the students they would likely not have otherwise.

Moreover, the Mercer service work contributes to this standard. The Spring 2024 experience in Tadderte exemplifies the commitment to community engagement.

## Global Learning and Intercultural Competence

Underpinning the program is the main goal of developing intercultural competence. This is met through the students developing knowledge of other cultures, skills in active listening, and attitudes of curiosity and openness.

### Intentional Assessment to Achieve Learning Goals

The following assessments achieve learning goals by focusing on assignments that encourage dialogue, engagement, and creativity:

- Attendance and active participation are the program foundation, counting for 30%.
- Recorded peer dialogues constitute 30%. The AUI and Mercer students form small groups and reflect daily in 5-15 minute audiorecorded submissions.
- Written responses to the program readings constitute 10%. The AUI students are required to write short reflective pieces about each program reading.
- Final reflective project and/or artistic creation constitute 30%. The AUI students' culminating project for the class allows for much flexibility, and students submit podcasts, poems, websites, etc. to demonstrate the impact of the class on their learning.

More specifically, the written responses and final projects are graded via a rubric with separate areas that assess how deeply and robustly the student engage with the program materials and experiences to produce reflective and creative works of their own (see the supplemental materials for a sample of completed assignments; consent to share these has been obtained from the students).

## Lessons Learned

In summary, the past three years of this collaboration have been rich in terms of the co-design and implementation of a creative and innovative curriculum, emphasis on a high-quality student experience, and engagement with local communities and stakeholders.

As the program evolves, the program leaders find that the essential core of the program in inter-religious dialogue and artistic co-creation are quite powerful for the student experience and overall learning. However, there is an awareness that the program may, at points, have too many moving parts and that students and faculty may need more intentional time to process and assess the experience. This realization will further future revisions to the program to keep and enhance the essential core of the program while considering and adapting the holistic experience and reflection/assessment appropriately.

## References

- The Forum on Education Abroad. (2023). *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* (6th ed.). <https://www.forumea.org/standards-of-good-practice.html>
- Volf, M., Talal, P. G. bin M. B., & Yarrington, M. (Eds.). (2009). *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

## List of Supplemental Materials

- Suppl. 1: [Course Syllabus 2022](#)
- Suppl. 2: [Course Syllabus 2023](#)
- Suppl. 3: [Course Syllabus 2024](#)
- Suppl. 4: [Program Itinerary 2024](#)
- Suppl. 5: [Additional Program Itinerary 2023](#)
- Suppl. 6: [Completed Signature Assignment](#)
- Suppl. 7: [Completed Signature Assignment](#) (audio)
- Suppl. 8: [Links to Other Signature Assignments](#)

## Author Biography

**Brian Seilstad** is the Director of Internationalization and Partnerships at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco.

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**Karen Thomas Smith** is the Chaplain to the Christian Community at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, a university created to be a place of dialogue and encounter between people of diverse faiths and cultures.

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