What happens internally when a person comes face to face with the human “other” and must interact with all facets of the “other” that one has been taught to mistrust, dislike or even hate? What are the interior processes during the initial encounter and subsequent interactions? What moves, what shifts? If an attitude or perception shifted, what factors contributed to this?

My topic is about an observed dissipation of otherization within a particular student body during my time at Ankara University Divinity School. When students were introduced to me in the hallway, or came into class and realized that I, an American female embracing an assumed Christianity, would be teaching them, I observed scowls, frowns, a furrowing of the brow, a loss of eye contact and a dubiousness. Using questions tactfully in conversations with professors and students, I slowly came to understand the deeply entrenched taught mistrust of my religion and my country. Despite these initial attitudinal obstacles, a change in student perspective became observable as well. Halfway through most courses I taught, their questions about Christian perspectives, about Western perspectives began to emerge as if the classroom had become a safe place to pursue curiosity as objectively as possible. Sometimes they would get right to their point, either on or off topic and want to know about entrance into Heaven, the importance of the Cross to the Christian, or perhaps the God element of historical Jesus. During the semesters, life events too were interjecting themselves into the student calendar and strangely I would receive knocks on my office door from (1) students in conflict, asking me to mediate or (2) students coming in for tea but revealing their unbelief and fear of it, or (3) students knocking on my door and straightaway bursting into tears because of broken engagements, boyfriend problems or the grief of a family member who had died, etc. I say strangely because they knew I was “other” yet they sought me out. Why? How did these students move from mistrust to trust? Also present was a new inherent trust of my God, not a distrust. How did this happen when I had encountered so much of just the opposite at the beginning of the semester?

I, too, was changing. In order to intelligently teach and answer these questions I wanted to understand their context. While helping to edit student PowerPoints and papers certainly helped to jumpstart my broader understanding of what they valued in Islam, most of my understanding came from incessant reading of biographies of Prophet Mohammed, comparative religion articles, pieces on Islamic ethics, surveys and scholarly work on both the Hadiths and the Quran coupled with long, late afternoon tea soaked discussions with the professors who wanted to
practice their English and philosophize with someone from the West who knew Christianity. I found perspectives on religious and political history, God, society, Jesus, Heaven, and our responsibility to one another that shook my own beliefs to the core. My love for these theologians, old and young, along with their expression of their theology became irreplaceable. In addition, I found within me that despite my readings in either my own faith or theirs, lines were beginning to blur and duplicate with compounded tiers when we all spoke of God. I too became puzzled and yet strangely moved by this “other”, even though my “other” was conceptual and the students seemed to initially bump into me, the personification of “other”.

My research question is “How did perspectives on God shift through constant encounters with “other”? I have drafted and distributed a set of survey questions among Second Year, Third Year and Fourth Year students of the program in which I taught at Ankara University Divinity School. I am in the midst of distribution with two classes and collection from the third class right now.

My awareness of what was transpiring was raised by the writings of Marc Gopin, who is the director of George Mason’s Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution. His books *Healing the Heart of Conflict: Eight Crucial Steps to Making Peace with Yourself and with Others Revised and Updated* (2016), *To Make the Earth Whole: The Art of Citizen Diplomacy in an Age of Religious Militancy* (2009) and his article “Forgiveness as an Element of Conflict Resolution in Religious Cultures: Walking the Tightrope of Reconciliation and Justice” from the book *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice* edited by Mohammed Abu Nimer (2001). Karen Armstrong’s *A History of God* (1994) also informed my work with the students.

This poster presentation serves the field of Religious Education when religious educators care to embrace the dissipation of otherization. To participate in this process, one must be willing to become a student of the learners in their classroom, and open up time for discourse in ways that will truly make them personally uncomfortable and perhaps challenge their own spiritual beliefs. Educators of educators must instill an openness to other beliefs by modeling it themselves and providing content for the pre-service teachers to interact with. Religious multi-cultural competencies could be instilled in curricular goals for teachers of religion in the future with required field work and guided reflection before the teachers-in-training move into the field.