Editorial

The Study of Islam in African Universities: Reflections on Ghana

Although not as comprehensive as the articles featured in this special issue, this editorial presents my comments and the results of my survey conducted among professors and lecturers who teach Islamic studies in Ghanaian universities. For a comparative perspective, similar questions were also sent to colleagues in Nigeria. I undertook this preliminary research to prepare myself for a roundtable discussion that was held at the annual African Studies Association meeting (Philadelphia, November 29-December 1, 2012) on "The Study of Islam in African Universities: Is it a Priority?" Based on my own on-the-ground knowledge and what I gathered from my survey's respondents, this topic does not seem to be a priority for Ghana's university administrators (viz., the presidents, vice chancellors, and deans all the way down to the department heads and their administrative support), students, parents, or policymakers.

In general terms, Ghana's university administrators see no value in supporting this stream of study because it does not "produce" graduates who can make constructive contributions to the national agenda of industrial development. The study of religion (or religious studies) in general suffers from this bias internationally, and religion itself is becoming less popular among young people. Other indications of this low priority are the courses offered in religious studies departments and the lack of "suitable" experts. After my presentation, one audience member who had earned a PhD in Islamic studies from a Middle Eastern university, pointed out that he could not find a teaching job in a Ghanaian university. He seemed to believe that his situation had a lot to do with discrimination and bias; however, I was not so sure. He is now an adjunct instructor in Islamic studies at a local junior college in the Philadelphia area.

Of Ghana's 8 public and 48 private universities,[1] only 5 or six 6 have departments that include Islam in their courses listings.[2] Apart from the newly established Islamic University College, which is not included here because it is an Islamic university, none of the leading universities offer a major or a minor in Islamic studies. The University of Ghana (Accra) does come close,

due to its undergraduate level "Islam Option." At the graduate level in Ghana's three leading universities, however, a student may major in religious studies but has to concentrate on a topic related to Islam. This approach is also popular in western universities.

As the country's religious studies departments are generally considered either neglected or inferior compared to other departments, they are staffed by scholars with expertise in non-Islamic religious traditions who wield a considerable amount of clout over the Islamic experts. In some cases the latter, who are mainly lecturers with MA or MPhil degrees, are likely to be at the mercy of the former. This is not meant to belittle the Islamic experts' expertise or to suggest any conspiracy on the part of their non-Muslim colleagues; however, it is a fact that, when combined, all of the universities that offer Islamic classes can boast of no more than three scholars with a PhD in some Islamic specialization. I am aware of some individual efforts to increase these numbers, though.

In addition, the course offerings in the religious studies departments are highly discouraging, at least according to their own websites. They range from one to two courses every year to one to two every other year. In the case of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Kumasi) where, surprisingly, the department is comparatively large and the courses are listed according to levels, no 200 level (second year) Islamic course is listed. At the Catholic University College (Fiapre-Sunyani), the religious studies department offers only an "Introduction to Islam" course for the entire four-year program. One may argue that this in itself is something positive when compared to other Islamic universities' course offerings on Christianity, although one is talking about "religious studies departments" in the Catholic University College, not a "theology department" or a "Christian department" (if there is such a thing). Under normal circumstances, teaching Islam in any religious department should be just as important as teaching any other religion, regardless of the university's general religious affiliation.

Since the inception of the department (now the Department of Religion and Human Values) in 1973 at the University of Cape Coast, I am told that only two or three people have pursued a Masters deggree with a concentration in Islamic studies. Although this may speak volumes about the attitude(s) held by the university and the department, it also reflects the attitude(s) held by the general population and individuals. One university respondent expressed his disappointment over the fact that, according to some students, the head of his department sometimes discourages them from enrolling in Islamic classes. Students are not interested in registering for classes on Islam unless they are required for graduation. For example, this particular university's Department

of Religion and Human Values requires that its students take such courses during their first and second years. After meeting this requirement, there is no reason for them to take any more classes on Islam.

Policymakers and politicians could care less about Islamic studies, for they are more interested in supporting area studies that, they believe, will make them popular with the voters. Thus they encourage the university authorities and industrial leaders to devise programs that, they think, will provide an appropriately trained workforce, enhance national economic status, and reduce unemployment. As recently as May 19, 2014, a national conference on education was tasked with "bridging the gap between education, training, and industry." President John Mahama was quoted as promising his government's support to Ghana's universities and industries, as well as encouraging them to formulate suggestions and courses that would benefit the labor market and reduce unemployment. It is generally believed that courses like "Archaeology, Swahili, Classical History and others in Humanities [are] considered unsuitable for the labor market."[3] Religious Studies" and, of course, "Islamic Studies" (being part of the humanities and social sciences) are considered part of the "unsuitable" disciplines and thus not only unworthy of perusal by students, but also undeserving of government support.

As a Ghanaian with a BA, MA, and PhD in Islamic studies, no one could be more disappointed about the current situation in Ghana. Even though I did all of my coursework abroad, I encountered innumerable discouraging remarks from family, friends, and total strangers regarding my chances and potential of securing a stable job upon graduation. Unfortunately, based on Ghana's contemporary culture, they had a point. Even I am not convinced that I would be doing as well as I am now if I had returned to Ghana after earning my PhD.

I find the following realities particularly disappointing: Given the role of Islam in Africa's history and the large number of its adherents on the continent (some of the articles provide statistics), not to mention the current and future roles of Islam and Muslims both in Africa and on the world stage, how could the administrators and students not see this discipline's compelling prospects? After the 9/11 tragedy, well-intended non-Muslims in the West greatly increased their efforts to engage Muslims positively, and politicians and university administrators began to realize that Islam and Muslims had to be studied seriously. In order to make some sense of the extremist Muslims' skewed motivations, as well as to live amicably side by side with their peace-loving Muslim neighbors and colleagues, this was a logical course of action. The percentage of Muslims in Ghana is higher than that of Muslims in any western country. Moreover, the historical and current role that Muslims have played in

Africa's history, and continue to play in Ghana's sociopolitical landscape, should have made the study of Islam in Ghanaian universities more compelling.

What is behind what my respondents' called the "lackadaisical and lukewarm attitude" toward Islamic studies? First of all, this is not a conspiracy against Islam because even though isolated incidents and problems could be traced to religious motivations, most of Ghana's troubling upheavals have more tribal motivations. Thus this lack of interest has nothing to do with the contents of Islam. What is taught about Islam at the university level is academically no less significant than what is taught about other religions. On the contrary, one could venture to say that based on various events being done in the name of "Islam" in the international arena and especially in Africa, studying Islam academically is rather compelling in Ghana. Additionally, even though the acts of non-Ghanaian Muslims may be an undue source of antagonism toward Islam, I contend that they are not responsible for the lukewarm attitude toward Islamic studies at Ghanaian universities.

I believe that the main reason for this apathetic attitude is that administrators, students, parents, and policymakers remain unconvinced that studying Islam will help them achieve their main goal: a comfortable career based upon a solid and relevant education. The majority of Ghanaians aspire to a robust and immediate reward for any education-related investment. Ghanaian society has many examples of politicians and wealthy people who come from educational backgrounds other than Islamic or religious studies. A Nigerian respondent remarked that things may be different in his country, for several prominent Nigerians do have an Islamic studies background.

Although not wrong in and of itself, this materialistic assumption is not necessarily true, especially since the primary causes of wealth are hard work, self-discipline, and ambition, as well as family fortunes and God's providence. One may even suggest that this lackadaisical attitude is a residue of western cultural imperialism, not in the sense that the West has imposed such attitudes on Africans with regards to Islam, but in the sense that Africans have been so drawn to materialistic thinking that whatever does not provide an apparent or immediate reward (rightly or wrongly) is unworthy of pursuit.

Of course the status of Islamic studies in the West is much rosier than in Africa, due to availability of diverse incentives and the possibility of a respectable career. There is also a high degree of respect for diverse knowledge and culture in the West. Based on the students enrolled in my courses on Islam and Africa, I would posit that many western students are quite curious about other religions and cultures. So when and if African nations begin to have similar diverse motivations for education, one can hope that Islamic studies

as a discipline will benefit. Sadly, this will be yet another example of African authorities imitating their western counterparts.

Despite all of these situations, I remain optimistic that with the current trajectory of development, population growth, and changing attitudes due to globalization, Ghanaians (whether administrators, students, or parents), may soon realize that the discipline of Islamic studies is just as beneficial as any other discipline. Hard work, self-discipline, and innovative attitudes are necessary to reap the rewards of education, regardless of the discipline chosen.

This Issue

The research articles featured in this special issue are among the best of the presentations delivered at the roundtable mentioned in the editorial's first paragraph. The roundtable was organized by Binghamton University's Institute of Global Cultural Studies and supported by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (Herndon, VA). Ali Mazrui, the main figure behind this event and a guest editor of this special issue, was supposed to write this editorial; however, his hospitalization made this impossible. As a result, in my capacity as the journal's regular editor and a roundtable participant, I have decided to introduce these excellent papers. The first two address Africa in general, the next two present specific case studies, and the final one is considered a specific example of the topic.

We open with Thomas Uthup's "Teaching about Islam in Africa: A Cultural-Functional Perspective." Uthup discusses the seven functions of Islam in Africa, as identified by Ali Mazrui, and links them to reports published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). His article underlines the necessity for modern well-educated Africans to learn about Islam in Africa. Next is Amadu Jacky Kaba's "Challenges to the Study of Islamic Education in African Universities." He claims that the discipline of Islamic studies in African universities, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is not a priority even though Muslims account for about 44 percent of the continent's population. Kaba elaborates on four main factors that he considers responsible for this general lack of interest.

Muhammed Haron follows with his "South Africa's Institutions of Higher Learning: Their 'Study of Islam' Programs." He offers a brief insight into teaching Islam in theological, orientalist, and religious studies programs and reflects upon Islamic studies as a social science discipline that has been included in the social science and humanities syllabus. Apart from using "social change" as a theoretical frame, he also employs the insider/outsider binary to

further frame the debates on teaching and studying Islam at institutions of higher learning in southern Africa generally and in South Africa in particular. Mohamed Bakari's "The Historical and Political Backdrop to Islamic Studies in Kenya" concludes that the lack of any serious attempt to incorporate Islamic studies into the nation's academic culture may be attributed to colonial and postcolonial policies toward university education. He argues that even though the new post-colonial governments have tried to create a level playing field for all its citizens, colonialism had already left its negative mark on Muslims in terms of their resistance to a modern secular education and their invisibility at the university level. Bakari insists that local Muslims have failed to create local knowledge about Muslims or any viable local Islamic intellectual culture, which leaves them vulnerable to foreign interpretations of Islam.

We close with Mohammed Hassen Ali's "Shaykh Bakrii Saphalo (1895-1980): An Oromo Muslim Cultural Icon." Ali's paper is an example of the caliber of Islamic studies in Africa: an intriguing piece of original research on this individual's spectacular contributions to Islamic studies in eastern Ethiopia's largely ethnic Oromo Hararghe region. Many of the Oromo, who constitute Ethiopia's largest ethnic population, are Muslim. This largely unknown/forgotten scholar of Islam, an extraordinary poet, author, and revolutionary, spent decades encouraging his people's self-development and working to free them from Amharic domination. During his long and active life, he also found time to invent a writing system appropriate for his people's largely oral culture – a truly unique undertaking that no other Oromo had ever shouldered.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

Endnotes

1. http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2014/May-19th/come-up-with-suggestions-to-solve-graduate-unemployment-mahama-asks-education-conference-participants.php.
2. For more, see the websites of these leading universities: the University of Ghana, the University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and the Catholic University College.
3. http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2014/May-19th/come-up-with-suggestions-to-solve-graduate-unemployment-mahama-asks-education-conference-participants.php.

Zakyi Ibrahim, Editor
Comparative Religion Department
California State University, Fullerton, CA
zibrahim@fullerton.edu