Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Islam and the University Curriculum: Experiences of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

This special academic event was organized by the Sociology of Religion (Socrel) Study Group of the British Sociological Association in London on December 7, 2013. One of its main objectives was to discuss, in the light of negative publicity and the increasing number of Muslim students pursuing certain professions, whether "Islam" as a module or a course has been adequately woven and integrated into the university teaching and learning contexts.

The organizers, Socrel chair Abby Day (Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London) and Sarah-Jane Page (School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University), sought answers to the following questions: To what extent are higher education institutions responding to this relationship? How do Muslim students feel that Islam is represented in higher education? Does a Christianized curriculum still dominate the way these courses are designed? How do non-Muslim students respond to the content of courses that mainly deal with Islam and Muslims? How do teachers respond to a more diverse student body that hails from various socio-cultural backgrounds?

Sociologists of religion have realized the importance of reflecting critically upon the study and teaching of religion. Publications such as Robert Orsi's edited *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) has paid attention to these and related aspects. A qualitative shift of scholary endeavors has been noted; scholars and researchers have now turned their lenses to specific religious traditions that have come under the spotlight because of their adherents' apparent "violent" acts. Since 9/11, Islam and Muslims have naturally become one of the targeted traditions (see "The Muslim World after 9/11," Rand report at www.rand.org).

This scholarly attention has resulted in the spread of Islamophobia in western Europe and elsewhere, not to mention the gradual securitization of Muslim communities. This latter development seems to have enormous implications for the academic arena where courses/modules on aspects of "Muslim extremism" in countries such as the United Kingdom have been closely watched and

monitored. Farid Panjwani, the first keynote speaker, touched upon this briefly. Nevertheless, social scientists began to reflect more critically upon Islam's status as an academic subject only in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy and within the broader context of religious extremism's emergence.

In the morning session, Farid Panjwani (University of London's Institute of Education), who teaches Muslim education and has written on "Muslim education," asked "How do we study 'Islam' in the university curriculum?" He opened by metaphorically stating that the study of "Islam" and "higher education" are respectively Heidergarian hammers. For example, Islam has become "an object" that is critically being evaluated and examined; here he reminded participants of Edward Said's oft-quoted *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978). Panjwani mentioned three "macro" factors that should be seriously considered when exploring "Islam in the university": (a) Muslim demographics in western states dramatically changed the image of some of which means that "the study of Islam as the Other" is no more intellectually and pragmatically viable; (b) the large numbers of Muslims entering and being intimately associated with the "modern university" (a child of the Enlightenment), a development that resulted in the emergence of blurry "boundaries of scholarship and community reform"; and (c) state interference, or rather its securitization policy, in the mounting, promoting, and favoring specially designed courses/modules. Page was the respondent.

In the early afternoon session Saeed Khan (Near Eastern Studies Unit, Wayne State University) related his experiences as an "Islamic studies" educator and his interaction with students studying and researching Islam within the American educational system. He shared his thoughts of how students interacted with his "Islam" course. For example, he mentioned how he and his hijabi Muslim teaching assistant were viewed and to what extent "more pressure" was placed on them as compared to their two Christian colleagues in the Islam program. In addition, Khan considered cases of religiously oriented students who were not critically engaging with the prescribed material, preferring instead the non-academic and populist works. This naturally resulted in the question of how to respond to this rather common attitude. One of the issues that emerged during the question-and-answer session was "Who possesses knowledge?" There is some truth in the claim that the Muslim practitioner knows more than the non-Muslim; however, this is not always the case. Peter Gee (the Overseas Development Institute) was the discussant.

In the first morning session, Adam Dinham and Mariam Motamedi-Fraser, both from Goldsmiths, made their respective presentations. Dinham formulated his paper's title in a somewhat provocative manner by asking the following question: "Universities: Christian, Muslim, Secular, and Plural –

But Do They Know It?" Dinham, who directs a religious literacy programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, interviewed, among others, a coterie of vice-chancellors and senior management staff to somehow contextualize and engage religion (viz., "Islam"). His survey illustrated how different stakeholders perceived religion's status within the higher education system. Motamedi-Fraser's "But God Is Neither Like Politics Nor Birds" specifically addressed Islam in the university and the university classroom. She underlined at the outset that sociology "is impoverished … when it neglects to address the specificities of religious philosophies… and reduces the study of religions to … the scientific study of religion" and – referring to Ataulla Siddiqui's 2007 report – questioning "how far are social science methods appropriate to the study of Islam?" She first interrogated what "the university" is there "for" via Stefan Collini's insights into intellectual activity and then drew from Talal Asad's conceptualization of (religious and non-religious) practice and employed it as a lever for her critical assessment.

The second morning session featured Sandra Maurer (Cardiff University), who spoke on "Studying British ISOC Students: An Ethnographic Experience of a Non-Muslim." She narrated her insights and experience as someone who comes from the outside to witness Muslim practices as an "outsider." Her co-panelist, Abby Day, essentially responded to the question of "What's Religious about Religious Identity?" This presentation belongs to a special national study that tries to investigate the "religious" dimension of "religious identity" within the British setting. By the time these presentations were tabled and presented, participants had a great deal to explore during the lunch break.

In the first afternoon session, Alison Scott-Baumann and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (University of Derby) discussed the issue of "Collaborative Partnerships between Universities and Muslim Institutions: Dismantling the Roadblocks." Their research, which obtained funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, reflected upon the possibilities of a contextual and an applied theology for Muslims in the higher education sector – possibilities that may be realized through a partnership between the (secular-oriented) universities and (selected) Muslim colleges that operate in different parts of the United Kingdom. For their project, they organized a series of "knowledge exchange events" that resulted in a better and more informed understanding of "good practice" and that proposed solutions to "potential obstacles." The participating academics, practitioners, and institutions listed five roadblocks that need to be addressed when "developing collaborative partnerships" between the mentioned academic structures.

Laurens de Rooij (Durham University) then spoke about "Islam in the British Education System as the Locus of Both Recognition and Integration."

While he zoomed in on Muslim education's role in the country's higher education sector and mentioned such institutions as the Muslim College (London) and the Markfield Institute of Higher Education (Leicester), he went on to highlight the bias that existed in the Old UK university system as compared to the New UK university environment toward South Asians – who form two thirds of the country's Muslim population – and other regions. One outcome was the recording of various types of inequalities (e.g., gender and race), which led to the tabling integration issues. Part of de Rooij's argument was that British society should acknowledge and recognize that Muslims have, over time, become an integral part of it and that Muslims should accept that "Islam," as a subject, will be scruntized and critiqued just like any other discipline. In his opinion, all of these developments will assist the integration process.

In the final afternoon session, Muhammed Haron (University of Botswana) provided an overview and an insight into "Islam in the Southern African Universities' Curriculum: Challenges and Opportunities." Apart from showing how "Islam" as a module or "Islamic studies" as a discipline has been woven into the overall humanities and social science curriculum in some southern African universities, he highlighted the distinct approaches adopted by individuals who had been trained in different disciplines. He also shared ideas about how the discipline of "Islamic studies" eventually landed up within the "Religious studies" arena, where it continues to flourish. Co-panelist, Rana Jawad (University of Bath), spoke on "Islam and the Teaching of Social Policy" within the higher education system based upon her experience in teaching an undergraduate course focused on "religious social welfare activism." In this class she had empirically explored how Muslim actors, institutions, and sets of religious values, constructed both socal welfare provision and grassroots activism in the United Kingdom and parts of the Middle East. She then looked at various organizations ranging from Lebanon's Hezbollah to the United Kingdom's Muslim Hands.

The lively and informative set of exchanges reflected upon such diverse aspects as interrogating the methods adopted to disseminate the discipline of Islam. They also drew examples from several (academic) communities. In conclusion, the participants seemed to have reached a general consensus that both the commercialization of university education and the securitization of the program cannot be ignored and should be tackled by the academy.

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