

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Islam in Higher Education

Since 9/11, there has been a remarkable growth in the study of Islam in higher education. Whereas a decade earlier many universities were eager to close down or at best amalgamate their Islamic studies programs into larger departments, there is now an urgency on the part of academic administrators to begin teaching about and encouraging research on Islam. Not only is there a demand from students, but there is also an understanding that Islam, as a religion and a social force, will continue to have an impact on global and domestic realities for the foreseeable future. However, there has been little discussion about how to approach the study of Islam, given the current political climate.

The Islam in Higher Education conference, organized by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists UK (AMSS-UK) in conjunction with the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations (CSIC) at the University of Birmingham and the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, was held on 29-30 January 2005. It encouraged participants to engage in a critical analysis and dialogue concerning the status of the study of Islam in higher education, employability and recruitment, academic standards and pedagogy, the depiction of Islam and Muslims in higher education, and comparative international approaches to Islam in higher education.

In opening the conference, CSIC's Bustami Khir, senior lecturer in Islamic studies, spoke of the critical role that such events could play in shaping the future of the study of Islam and Muslims in the United Kingdom. Michael Clarke (vice principal, University of Birmingham) discussed the city as a historical space of interaction between religion and modernity in an industrializing world. He added that with over 140,000 Muslims residing in the city, Birmingham was set to become the first majority non-white city in the United Kingdom and that the city could not be understood without reference to its faith communities.

Shearer West (School of Historical Studies, University of Birmingham) spoke about the interdisciplinary interest in Islam and how the coming together of theological and religious studies within the School of Historical Studies enabled an exploration of global religious cultures borrowing from anthropology, sociology, and theology. Gary Bunt (subject co-ordinator, Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical Studies and lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter) stressed that the conference was a culmination of a series of efforts, including a workshop sponsored by the Higher Education Academy. He noted that the academy was particularly interested in recruitment and employability issues facing Islamic studies graduates.

Anas Al Shaikh Ali, chair of the AMSS-UK (www.amssuk.com) and lead organizer of the conference, welcomed participants, mentioned that he looked forward to the beginning of a fruitful, multidisciplinary dialogue on Islam and higher education, and stressed that it would lead to a series of workshops and seminars. The period since 9/11 has been characterized by increased conflict as well as increased dialogue, for many people have realized that awareness and engagement with the “other” is critical to dispelling ignorance. Those who advocate potential civilizational conflict and interpret Islam as a “green” threat engender global instability. However, he also noted that the Islamic camp must assume its fair share of responsibility, namely, the rise in a cynical interpretation of religion. It is time, he said, to separate the faith from its practitioners.

One particular area of concern that Al Shaikh Ali noted was issues of translation. A sophisticated approach is needed to promote standards and excellence in translation, as poor translations of Islamic language texts is central to poor scholarship. He also noted that the “sexing up of translations” has caused a great deal of damage not only to the translation of textual material but has also caused several security problems and foreign policy blunders.

The first session examined approaches to the study of Islam in higher education. Mallory Nye (Al Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dundee), in his “Mapping an Agenda for the Development of Research and Teaching in the Study of Islam and Muslims,” cited Orientalism as the dominant philosophical trend in the study of Islam and Muslims. He challenged its binary premises and investigated its upholders’ claims that they are open and committed to academic inquiry. In addition, he called for a shared academic, post-Orientalist Islamic studies (based on the March 2004 Dundee Declaration) that is decidedly multicultural and cross-cultural, post-traditionalist and interdisciplinary – one that accepts a range of method-

ologies and acknowledges a distinction between the study of theology (faith based) and religious studies (examining human expressions of faith and the experiences of Muslims).

Gary Bunt spoke on “Approaches to the Computer-Mediated Study of Islam in Higher Education,” exploring how academicians can best use the Internet to teach and research Islam and Muslims. He discussed questions of representation, information overload, referencing, the online proliferation of polemical views, and the rise of plagiarism. Furthermore, he stated that there are few guidelines on the use and construction of web-based materials on Islam and Muslims, and that many sites, among them sites dealing with the Qur’an, do not provide any context or interpretation. Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (International Islamic University of Malaysia) spoke on “The Experience of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) in Higher Education.” He posited that since its inception 1983, IIUM has transformed the study of Islam by being the first modern institution to combine a study of Islamic revealed sciences and human sciences. He also discussed how IIUM differs from other Islamic universities.

The second session, entitled “Access, Recruitment, and Employability Issues,” was chaired by Gary Bunt. Ian Williams (University of Central England), in his “Muslim Identities, Higher Education, and Access to the Teaching Profession,” examined the strategies for recruiting Muslims into the teaching profession in areas with high levels of unemployment and marginalization. He opined that such recruitment benefits from high levels of minority applications to higher education, and that religion can become a gateway for young Muslim men (in particular) who are interested in teaching, by stressing its cultural value and its long-term values as a profession.

Adrian Brockett returned the discussion to a quantitative analysis of “Islamophobia and Arabophobia in English Adolescents,” a study conducted in Newcastle to measure the negative attitudes of 15 to 18 year-olds toward Muslims and Arabs, and young Muslims’ experiences of negative attitudes and victimization. The findings clearly indicate considerable ignorance and high levels of vicimization. Julie Gallimore (consultant, Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies) spoke about the subject center’s role in promoting good learning experiences as well as providing the skills and knowledge for students to move into teaching at institutions of higher education. The subject center’s present work is focused on developing a broader academic faith literacy, finding roles for religious studies students and graduates in their community as well as in academia, and engaging in consultancy projects.

The following session picked up on some of the major challenges facing the study of Islam in higher education. Pierre Lory (Ecole Pratiques des Hautes Etudes, Paris) commented on Orientalism's profound impact on French higher education, which, over time, assumed the form of two major trends: One was scholarly and endeavoured to describe a classical, fixed, non-evolutive culture (in theology, literature, the arts, and so on); and the other tried to analyze societies in terms of how they functioned in order to help the West penetrate the economic and political interests of the East. Since the end of colonization, the main centers of Islamic studies are trying to escape from this old Orientalist model; however, they face many obstacles, because the debate over Orientalism is not yet closed.

Charles Butterworth (University of Maryland, College Park) argued in his "Islam on Its Own Terms: A Plea for Understanding" that the starting point for teaching Islam in higher education should be the Qur'an as a source text, and that students should be able to engage with the text with only a minimal interpretive framework imposed on them. This view is based on seeing the Qur'an (like the Bible) as literature and that its study should be based, in the first instance, on self-discovery. Furthermore, any overarching philosophical approach must be based on a meeting of reason and faith. Jorgen Nielsen (University of Birmingham) questioned the conventional wisdom about what exactly was being taught in Islamic studies and called the continuing discussion over Orientalism a red herring. He criticized Edward Said's deconstruction approach on the grounds that when it is applied to Islam, it leaves no coherent sense of what Islam is.

Yahya Michot (Oxford University) used his study of Ibn Taymiyyah to speak about the "Myth of the Great Baddy: Ibn Taymiyyah and the New Orientalists?" He posited that the great Mamluk theologian is in serious need of a scholarly reappraisal as the most malevolent and erroneous statements are now made about his so-called "political" thought. Instead of questioning the misuse of some of his writings by various extreme Islamist movements or writers, "new" Orientalists give them a surplus of pseudoscientific legitimacy and thus become their best allies. Such synergies are very unhealthy.

The discussion about "Challenges Facing the Study of Islam in Higher Education" continued with Tariq Ramadan's (University of Freiburg) appraisal of "Western Approaches to the Study of Islam in Higher Education." Although Orientalism is problematic, it is best not to generalize, since there is a great Orientalist legacy that must be acknowledged – one that was based on text and its translation into European languages. The move from text to social science, particularly political science, has opened up Islamic

studies to the influence of media and global political interests that direct it and undermine the scientific approach to religion. Muslim scholars need not be excluded from the mainstream because they hold certain axiomatic views (like the Qur'an is revelation), but ought to be included in the broad academic discourse. Muslim scholars need to adapt their methods, integrate their environment, and address subjects of importance to them within the methodological principles of mainstream Islamic studies in the West.

Zahid Bukhari (Georgetown University) presented the initial report of his survey "The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities," which was conducted by the Center for Islam and Public Policy. The survey has found 225 Islamic studies programs and has collected 75 syllabi; 186 books are being utilized. However, there is no "center of gravity" in the field and no coherence between courses and programs. As the survey continues, it will also look at the contribution of Muslim communities in supporting and building these programs.

Providing a contrasting perspective, Mehmet Pacaci (Ankara University) traced the development of Islamic studies in Turkey. Reform after Ataturk's period linked Islamic studies in higher education to service in mosques and religious administration positions. This has begun to change, especially as Turkish education adapts and adjusts to the European standards as part of the EU negotiation process. Among the creative developments in Turkish education has been the linking of *fiqh* and citizenship, which shows the possibilities of the current discourse in Turkey.

The next morning, the conference focused on the state of higher education in Britain specifically. Sean McLoughlin (Leeds University) reflected on the "Study of Islam and Muslims in Britain in UK Higher Education" by looking at the emergence and development of the interdisciplinary study of Islam and Muslims in Britain.

Amjad Hussain (Lampeter University) addressed "Islam: Why Is There a Need To Study It in Higher Education?" He drew on the position of Muslims in mainstream education, positing that only 3 percent of Muslims go to faith schools, meaning that the vast majority of their ideas about the world are shaped through educational systems not embedded within the community. The complementarity of Christian seminaries or Jewish colleges with academic departments in higher education have few parallels in the Muslim context. Islam in higher education and the active participation of Muslims in it creates a class of scholars and potential educators who will be better able to teach Islam to children than imams trained at Muslim seminaries that are unconnected to universities. Furthermore, Islam in higher education is born

within a United Kingdom experience of religion, while imams are often linked to cultural forms of Islam and disconnected from young Muslims.

Hussain's concerns were addressed in the final session, which looked at "Private and New Initiatives." Mehmet Asutay (Markfield Institute of Higher Education [MIHE]) spoke about MIHE's development and its range of courses and programs. He highlighted innovative aspects of MIHE's approach, which has included the development of international distance learning, presently being pursued at Imam Sadiq University, Tehran. Validated by Loughborough University, MIHE is in the process of becoming part of the academic mainstream and developing joint program with other higher education institutions.

Abas Ridha (European Institute of Human Sciences [EIHE]) also spoke about his institution's development into a United Kingdom-based center for Muslims to study Islamic sciences in a rigorously academic way. He noted the links between EIHE and IIUM and the International Islamic University in Islamabad. The emphasis on competence in Arabic and the degree and diploma granting programs has added choice to the higher education options available to Muslims in the United Kingdom. Sophie Gilliat-Ray (Cardiff University) discussed the September 2005 launch of the Centre for the Study of Islam in the United Kingdom at Cardiff University. The center will launch a master's degree program in Islam in Britain, the first program of its kind in the United Kingdom. It will have strong focus on research methods and encourage the training of researchers in the field.

Finally, Johan Meuleman (Oxford University) concluded by exploring the Netherlands' Islamic University of Europe project, which is being organized to meet the needs of a diverse community by training Dutch-speaking imams who are sensitive to the changing circumstances of Dutch Muslims. The university has been operating for 4 years and has 100 students. Courses are taught in both Arabic and Dutch, and the social sciences are merged with the sciences of religion (*ulum al-din*). The decidedly multiethnic initiative is working with government agencies for certification and has entered negotiations to create a national representative body for Dutch Muslims. The training of imams will involve social work education, language proficiency training, and social sciences – all taught at the master's level.

The Islam in Higher Education Conference was a landmark gathering because it reflected the very best principles on which contemporary Islamic studies is based: It was multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and dialogical, and avoided polemics in favor of spirited debate based on mutual respect. It is critical to understand how the teaching of Islam and Muslims is being

developed and influenced in academia as a way of ensuring that that the discourse is both sound and fair. The conference was a brave, self-reflexive start to a process of discussion that must be a central aspect of our discussions for the considerable future.

The report's full transcript, prepared by Abdul-Rehman Malik (London School of Economics, UK and AMSS UK EC member) is available at <http://iiit.org/aaiiit/en/Islam%20in%20Higher%20Ed-report.pdf>.