

Guest Editorial

Scholarship and Social Engagement: Reflecting on the Career of Sulayman Nyang

The theme of this editorial is inspired by the passing of a dear friend, Sulayman Nyang, whose life epitomized the nexus between scholarship and social engagement. Dr. Nyang's life and career follows a long-held Islamic tradition stretching over a millennium. I would like to begin my reflections by citing the tradition of social engagement and social responsibility within Islamic scholarship, and then briefly examine how that tradition was upheld by Dr. Nyang and offer a synopsis of his thoughts and actions.

Scholarship is a quest for knowledge and truth, and a concerted effort to enhance the human condition. Scholars are dedicated to discovering the nature of social reality and the inner workings of the human spirit, and to shed light on the social patterns that permit human beings to institutionalize their values and beliefs to better their lives and bring purpose and meaning to their day-to-day reality. This quest requires a high level of discipline and of critical thinking to overcome individual and cultural biases. It requires dedication to methodical inquiries and to conclusions based on evidence rather than emotions or attachments to established social and cultural norms. This dedication to methodical inquiries that aims at overcoming social and intellectual contradictions and limitations, and rejecting distortions and prejudices, is what sets the scholar apart from the ideologue, and allows for positive change borne out of critical reviews of inherited notions and biases.

Muslim scholarship is replete with examples of scholars who were able to improve society and advance knowledge and understanding as a result of their dedication to finding true meaning and to critically examine psy-

chological and social claims. The list is quite long, as Muslim scholarship evolved over the first eight centuries of Islam until it reached a plateau in the beginning of the ninth century of the Islamic era, or the fifteenth century of the common era. Al-Kindi, al-Muhasibi, al-Ash'ari, al-Tabari, al-Ghazali, al-Razi, Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn Khaldun are few outstanding examples. These scholars were not only prolific writers who produced voluminous works, but they were also active in institution building and social reform.

Take for instance Ya'qub al-Kindi, who authored dozens of foundational research in philosophy, divinity, mathematics, and chemistry. His greatest contribution of all was the establishment, with the support of Caliph al-Ma'mun, of Dār al-Ḥikma institute, which became a beacon of Islamic learning and scholarship. Dār al-Ḥikma translated hundreds of books of philosophy and science, stimulating scholarship and scientific research throughout the Muslim world for generations. Similarly, al-Tabari and Ibn Rushd were active in public debate, striving to address the issues of the day, and to advance positive thinking about philosophical and rational pursuits. A century later, Ibn Khaldun was involved in intense negotiations with Timur, the Moghul Sultan, during the siege of Damascus.

While scholars who cherish critical thinking, and who relentlessly examine society and social behavior, are well aware of the need to take a longer view of social development and maintain a healthy distance from daily tumults and irregularities, they are equally mindful of the need to engage society, advance the common good, and be part of the social debate about the best way to uplift the human spirit and advance social conditions. The drive to translate intellectual knowledge to social relations and institutions constitutes the essence of the social responsibility of the scholar. Unlike the scientist who deals with inanimate objects whose utilization is contingent on understanding the inner workings of nature, scholars understand that knowledge relating to society can be brought to bear on the human condition only when people are persuaded to embrace scholarly findings. Scholars who are driven by a deep sense of social responsibility do not only introduce their findings in academic settings via their daily interaction with students, but often feel the urge to educate the public about their discoveries, and to engage in public debate.

One remarkable example of a scholar who brought both unity and enlightenment by combining scholarship with social engagement and activism is that of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari. Al-Ash'ari lived in Baghdad in the late third century of Islam (874–936 AD). Al-Ash'ari was a member of

the Mu'tazilite school who favored a rationalist interpretation of Islam and was locked in a fatal and destructive conflict with the traditionalist Sunni majority. Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari played a decisive role in bringing about a far-reaching social transformation that brought social peace and unity. He achieved this unity by undertaking a creative synthesis that combined the Mu'tazilite's rational methodology with the Sunni core beliefs, thereby introducing what could be described as Sunni rationalism that produced the most illustrious scholars of Islam from al-Baqillani in the fourth century of Islam to Ibn Khaldun in the eighth century. The role played by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari is typical of all original thinkers who played a leading role in advancing knowledge and society across the ages.

Al-Ash'ari was not unique in providing a creative synthesis that resulted in overcoming intellectual contradiction and helped in overcoming social discord and conflict. 'Izz al-Din Ibn 'Abd al-Salam, the illustrious scholar and the author of one of the most impactful treatise of Islamic jurisprudence, *al-Aḥkām al-Kubrā*, recognized his social responsibility and played an important role in alleviating the conditions of the downtrodden in the city of Cairo where he lived in the eight century of Islam. Despite his close proximity to the Ayyubid Sultan al-Salih Ayyub, he elected to be the voice of the marginalized and gave priority to expose the ill conditions of those who were away from the circle of power in fourteenth-century Egypt, thereby risking his relationship with the Sultan and the political elites of his time. His constant interception with the Sultan on behalf of ordinary people created frictions, and almost led to his exile from Egypt.

The tradition of scholarship in the service of society and of human progress is kept alive today by small but significant group of Muslim scholars who recognize the need, even the necessity, to venture out of the ivory tower of the modern university to engage the immediate community and society at large. Sulayman Nyang was such a scholar who had the desire and determination to play a vital role in translating the ideas and thoughts he articulated in his writings into social relationships and institutions.

I met Sulayman for the first time in 1989 during the annual conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in Buffalo, New York. It was my second participation in this conference that focused mainly on issues relating to Islam and the Muslim community. He impressed me by the clarity of his thoughts, and by an unmistakable enthusiasm for research that focused on understanding the contemporary predicaments of Muslim cultures and societies, and on ideas that contributed to overcoming contemporary challenges to human progress. Sulayman was engaging in

every sense of the word. He asked questions, offered his honest views, and remained positive even when he was disagreeable.

Sulayman joined the academia after a short excursion into the diplomatic corps of his home country, Gambia, as he served as deputy ambassador and head of chancery of the Gambian Embassy in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, from 1975 to 1978. Leaving Gambia in the late 1970s, he landed in Washington DC and pursued a career in academia, as he taught in the African Studies Department at Howard University. A few years later, he assumed a leadership role as the chair of the same department (1986-1993). Yet he remained at heart true to his diplomatic roots, as he continued to build bridges between diverse communities and worldviews.

Sulayman was an effective public speaker and stayed away from academic jargon in his public talks. He used metaphors in his presentations very effectively. In one of the many panel discussions we shared, he used a river metaphor to describe Islam's relationship to the various cultures that embraced it over the centuries. "Like the river that takes its color from its riverbed, Islam takes on the color of the culture that it helps to shape." This beautiful metaphor stuck with me ever since, and I personally quoted him every time I spoke about Muslim diversity and Islam's respect for cultural diversity and human authenticity. Another quotable metaphor of his was shared by Muhammad Fraser-Rahim, one of the many students on whom he made lasting impressions, in an obituary he published online in *Maydan*, on November 14, 2018: "Dr. Nyang on numerous occasions," Muhammad wrote, "told his students in formal and informal settings, that stories are critical and must be preserved so as to document the important contributions in the time they are living. In his words, 'we must always move from being footnotes and move to the main text.'" Moving from being a footnote to becoming the main text beautifully sums up Sulayman's struggles on behalf of his people and community.

Sulayman's intellectual pursuit focused on the area where Islam and Africa overlap. Islam found home in Africa before it could establish a foothold in Arabia where Prophet Muhammad, peace be with him, was born. Eight years after the Prophet of Islam proclaimed his mission, and during the difficult years when early Muslims were persecuted in their hometown of Mecca, he directed some of his followers who feared for their lives to travel to Abyssinia (the land of Ethiopia and Eritrea today). He told his early followers: "Go to Abyssinia, whose king does not permit injustice to be committed in his territories." The Prophet referred then to the Negus, the king of a Christian nation informed by the values of compassion and

justice demanded by its Christian faith. Dr. Nyang shed light on the interrelationship between *Islam, Christianity, and African Identity* in a book published in 1984 under this title. He follows in this work in the footsteps of a dear friend of ours, the late Ali Mazrui, who published in the early 1980 his treatise, *Africa: A Triple Heritage*, which was later produced by PBS as a documentary.

Sulayman understood early in his career the importance of building bridges between communities, particularly in times of discord and tension. He recognized the importance of reaching out beyond one's own community and was always keen to participate in interfaith dialogues and in discussions with public officials and community leaders. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, many of us saw the need to engage the larger society through media, public discussions, and intercommunal discussions to bring better understanding and to protect both the Muslim community and society at large from the fall-out of the terrorist attacks. These meetings were crucial not only for bringing about better understanding of a complex situation, but for also defending Islamic organizations and institutions, as the far right began a campaign of misinformation to confuse the public and incite national security organizations. Dr. Nyang was always there to lend support to these efforts, and to show the best example of scholarship in the service of social peace and human progress. These efforts were joined by many Muslim academics including Ali Mazrui, Azizah al-Hibri, Mumtaz Ahmed, Akbar Ahmed, Sherman Jackson, Asma Afsaruddin, and Muqtedar Khan, to name just a few.

In 1999, Sulayman went the extra mile in his efforts to promote better understanding of Islam, and acquired, with the collaboration of Zahid Bukhari, a large grant for the "Muslims in the American Public Square" (MAPS) project, whose aim was to shed light on Islam and Muslims in America. The funds came from the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the project built a public record that illustrated the rich contributions of the Muslim Americans to society and public good. For two years, Sulayman and Zahid cohosted seminars and enlisted the support and collaboration of scholars from the four corners of North American to document Muslim life in America through the ages. The proceedings of that research were published in two volumes under the title *Muslims' Place in the American Public Square: Hopes, Fears, and Aspirations*. The volumes were edited by Sulayman and Zahid, along with John Esposito and the late Mumtaz Ahmed. I returned from a long teaching assignment in Malaysia late in the progress of this

important project and had the honor of contributing to the discussions in several meetings.

The MAPS experience allowed Dr. Nyang to write his highly-acclaimed work, *Islam in the United States of America*, which was published in 2009, a few years after he survived a serious cardiac arrest in 2004 that almost claimed his life. His health conditions deteriorated considerably and he had to go through a long recovery. Although his body was exhausted, his spirit was intact and he marched on with his usual enthusiasm. He quickly resumed his busy schedule in the service of his students, community, and society at large. Sulayman lived a busy and eventful life. In addition to *Islam in the United States of America*, he wrote eleven books, including the above-mentioned *Islam, Christianity and African Identity* (1984), *Religious Plurality in Africa*, co-edited with Jacob Olupona (1993), and *A Line in the Sand: Saudi Arabia's Role in the Gulf War* (1995), co-authored with Evan Heindricks.

Dr. Nyang's vibrant academic career and active social life did not prevent him from lending support and providing consultation for the numerous organizations he was involved with. I asked him in 2000 to serve on the board of the short-lived Center for Balanced Development, which we founded along with Dr. Mumtaz Ahmed and Dr. Mazen Hashim to lend educational and humanitarian support and relief to underfunded communities. He did not hesitate to join and did not miss any board meeting. This was one of dozens of national and international organizations, agencies, and projects he served as a consultant and advisor. These include the boards of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, the African Studies Association, the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies, America's Islamic Heritage Museum, and many others. He contributed, in 1999, to the development of the African Voices Project funded by the Smithsonian Institution, and served as an advisor to the United Nations and the World Bank.

One more important involvement of Dr. Nyang worth mentioning is that of an advising scholar for the award-winning PBS-broadcast documentaries "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet" (2002) and "Prince Among Slaves" (2007), produced by Unity Productions Foundation under the able leadership of Michael Wolfe. I was not aware of the extent of his involvement and his moral and scholarly contribution to these monumental works until I read a note by Michael Wolfe in response to a comment I made online on the passing away of our dear friend Sulayman Nyang. The note reads: "Sulayman was my mentor. Thousands could say the same. He will be

missed.” I fully agree with this succinct and brilliant summation of the most important element of Sulayman’s life: a person of compassion who spent his life enriching the lives of people around him, and many other people who may not have had the chance to know him in person but would be surely inspired by his life and story.



This issue of AJISS features three papers: Youssef J. Carter’s “Black Muslimness Mobilized: A Study of West African Sufism in Diaspora,” Abdullah Al-Shami and Kathrine Bullock’s “Islamic Perspectives on Basic Income,” and Enes Karić’s “Goethe, His Era and Islam.” The first and third papers analyze the complexity of spiritual phenomena by revealing the impact of the Islamic faith on the followers of the Mustafawi Tariqa and on Goethe, the renowned German philosopher and poet. The second paper contrasts the neoliberal notion of “Basic Income” with Islamic approaches to social justice and the redistribution of social resources to address basic human needs.

Carter takes us on a journey inside an evolving African-American Sufi tariqa, founded by Mustafa Gueye Haydari and promoted by his nephew Arona Faye al-Faqir. The paper attempts to capture this spiritual experience of a mixed community of American-born and immigrant Muslims with all its complexities. Carter illustrates with exquisite detail how al-Faqir was able to found a Sufi community in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, which he named after his uncle and Sheikh, and which became known as the Mustafawiyya Tariqa. The paper sheds light on new dimensions of African-American Muslim community and traditions. These are rarely studied by mainstream academia, which tends to emphasize political and ideological aspects of the African-American relationship to Islam.

The paper provides a fascinating exposure to what the author calls “Black Atlantic Sufism,” that grew from the interaction between Senegalese immigrant Muslims in the Moncks Corner Mosque, Masjidul Muhajjirun wal-Ansar, and African-American converts, or ‘reverts,’ terms the author explores. The paper shows the evolving experiences of this mixed community and documents a struggle of a community to find a sense of purpose and meaning through Sufi Islam. The author masterfully shows that Islam not only quenches the spiritual thirst of community members but also provides a sense of brotherhood that transcends time and space, as it unites the African-American and Senegalese communities across the Atlantic and across the centuries of colonial enslavement.

The second paper featured in this issue engages the concept of “Basic Income” debated in neoliberal economics, and explores its equivalency in Islam by focusing on the institute of *zakāt*, and on a variety of Qur’anic and prophetic precepts that emphasize compassion towards the downtrodden, and on redistributive justice and the obligation to uplift the poor and destitute. Recalling the contributions of classical scholars, the article delves into essential notions relevant to the debate over poverty and wealth, and outlines precepts found in the Qur’an and the prophetic traditions, including the concepts of “work”, “poverty”, “wealth”, “*zakāt*”, and “*waqf*.” The article also examines social practices that are intended to expand the notion of Basic Income through the institutionalization of public services that offer basic services that supplant the basic income. One such practice is the institution of *waqf* that historically provided a far-reaching means to enhance the quality of life through public sharing and service. The *waqf* institution, the authors illustrate, is rooted in the Islamic injunctions that urge the believers to leave behind an “ongoing charity” that perpetuates one’s good deeds even after a person passes away.

Enes Karić introduces us to the poetic world of Goethe as he examines the poet’s encounter with the Qur’an, both its form and content, through the writings of two of his interpreters: Annemarie Schimmel and Katharina Mommsen. The article gives us a glimpse of a little-known side of Goethe’s poetic and intellectual pursuit. Karić skillfully reveals Goethe’s attraction to Islamic ideas and beliefs and to the character of the Prophet. Goethe’s fascination with the Qur’an, particularly its portrayal of nature as the manifestation of God’s glory and majesty, is unmistakable. In his work, Goethe described the Qur’an as “strict, glorious, chilling and at times truly sublime.” The article also uncovers Goethe’s enchantment with the Qur’anic reference to nature and the way nature comes to live in the Qur’an as the testimony for divine majesty and glory. Goethe’s attentive reading of the Qur’an allows him to discover a spiritual dimension to the natural order, which the paper describes by citing many of the German poet’s writings and poetry. As Karić eloquently puts it: “Goethe the Poet had his own, internal, intimate and, one could say, spiritual and emotional reasons to begin reading the Qur’an. His youthful enchantment with Nature never left him and even grew stronger as he entered old age. It was in the Qur’an that Goethe found confirmation of his teachings and views on Nature.”

The obituary, written by Altaf Hussain, brings additional insights from the life of Sulayman, and illustrates Dr. Nyang’s generous and engaging

spirit by drawing from his own personal encounters during the years they spent together at Howard University. Every incident Altaf shares with us about his interaction with Sulayman reconfirms the latter's genuine desire to promote rising scholars around him, and sheds more light on his mentoring skills and gifts. Sulayman will certainly be missed by many. May the Most Compassionate receive him with blessings and mercy and reward him amply for a life of scholarship and public service!



Finally, I'm grateful to the AJISS editors, particularly Dr. Ovamir Anjum, for inviting me back to write the editorial of this issue that coincided with the passing away of a scholar who contributed to the founding of this important academic journal. This exercise gave true joy as I was reassured that AJISS continues to shoulder its sacred responsibility of keeping the best traditions of Islamic scholarship alive, and of promoting learning in the service of humanity.

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