

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Opportunities and Challenges of Teaching Islamic Studies in Theological Seminaries

On Saturday, November 21, 2015, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., a panel co-organized by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) entitled “Opportunities and Challenges of Teaching Islamic Studies in Theological Seminaries,” was held during the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) at the Marriott Hotel in Atlanta, GA. The panel was presided over by Reverend Dr. Serene Jones (president of Union Theological Seminary and AAR president-elect), and included contributions from Nazila Isgandarova (Emmanuel College), Munir Jiwa (Graduate Theological Union), Jerusha Lamptey (Union Theological Seminary), Nevin Reda (Emmanuel College), Feryal Salem (Hartford Seminary), and Ermin Sinanović (IIIT). Amir Hussain (Loyola Marymount University) served as respondent.

The purpose of the roundtable was to address the growing trend among Christian seminaries in North America of offering courses and, in some cases, professional degrees in the study of Islam, which has often involved hiring Muslim academics. The panelists endeavored to explore the opportunities and challenges posed by this new context, as well as the possible future direction of theological schools in addition to the future trajectory of Islamic studies at them.

Nazila Isgandarova, a spiritual care coordinator for the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in Canada and a graduate student at Emmanuel College, spoke of her personal experience as a Muslim student in a theological school. She noted that one of the unique advantages of studying Islam in a Christian environment is that it provides a space for the exchange of ideas. Isgandarova identified clinical pastoral education (CPE) as one of the major advantages of studying at a seminary. She emphasized that Islamic spiritual care education should be grounded not only in the Islamic tradition, but also in the conceptual and methodological frameworks provided by CPE. While she acknowledged

the criticisms leveled by some that CPE was “too Christian,” she indicated that steps were being taken to render it more multicultural and inclusive.

Munir Jiwa, director and associate professor at the Graduate Theological Union’s Center for Islamic Studies, began by providing a brief historical overview of his institution. Jiwa, whose academic background is in anthropology, provided some insights on his pedagogical approaches. He stated that he teaches within the “five media pillars” through which Islam is contemporarily viewed: 9/11 as a temporal marker, extremist violence and terrorism, debates surrounding veiling and the status of sexual minorities in Islam, the clash of civilizations thesis, and the Middle East as a spatial marker. Jiwa focused on the challenges of designing courses on Islam within theological schools, given that the students are more likely to be embedded in communities of practice and thus may make the discussion of their faith in an academic setting quite daunting. He also identified how the religious positionality of the professor of Islamic studies could affect classroom dynamics. Jiwa concluded by highlighting opportunities for interfaith collaboration that draw on the diversity within the classroom.

Jerusha Lamptey, assistant professor of Islam and ministry at Union Theological Seminary, outlined several challenges and opportunities presented through teaching Islam in a predominantly Christian environment. Lamptey pointed out that Islamic studies is a discipline of its own, with its distinctive terminology, methodology, and protocol. She noted that many Islamic studies scholars were placed individually into theological schools, where faculty and students had only a limited awareness of their field. She therefore insisted that these scholars should be able to talk across disciplinary lines, which would require that they have a foundation in the study of religion as an academic subject. Lamptey also indicated that one of the distinct advantages of teaching Islam in a theological school was that it provided a “third space” for Muslim scholars who approached their tradition as believers. She added that the faith of the Muslim scholar was, for the most part, not regarded as a barrier to comprehensive instruction in a seminary.

Nevin Reda, assistant professor of Muslim Studies at Emmanuel College, noted that Islam is primarily taught as a religious tradition within the wider discipline of religious studies at most universities, having moved from its previous location within the field of Orientalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While she acknowledged that this move has removed some of the “colonialist trappings” associated with studying Islam, she argued that religion departments did not provide space for the study of all aspects of the Islamic tradition, in particular its theological and practical dimensions. She

stated that the inclusion of Islam in theological settings constituted a second institutional shift that provided opportunities for expanding the scope of its study. Reda observed that introducing Islam into theological settings posed certain pedagogical challenges for the professor, who must cater to students' increasingly diverse educational needs. However, she insisted that the presence of Islamic studies in seminaries offers opportunities for building relationships of trust and forging networks of creativity and collaboration.

Feryal Salem, assistant professor of Islamic scriptures and law as well as co-director of Hartford Seminary's Islamic Chaplaincy Program, pointed out that this program was the only accredited one in the United States. She noted that one of the major challenges for Islamic studies teachers is the Christocentric framework that was cognitively embedded in seminaries. Salem asserted that this framework, which was historically determined by the fraught relationships between religion and science and religion and reason, was not easily mapped onto the Islamic context. She added that the challenge lay in the dual process of looking at Islam from *within* the tradition and adopting an interdisciplinary approach through which Islamic studies would fit organically into a theological setting. She also indicated that one of the theological school's unique advantages lay in the fact that students could approach religious traditions from both faith-based and academic perspectives.

Ermin Sinanović, director of research and academic programs at IIIT, emphasized the institute's commitment to providing support for faith-based voices in the study of Islam. He echoed several of his co-panelists' sentiments by refuting the notion that it was impossible for a believer to engage in a rigorous academic study of his/her religious tradition. Sinanović indicated that the AAR's "Study of Islam" section was established by Ismail al-Faruqi (d. 1986), a co-founder of IIIT, and that it was intended to provide a space for faith-based perspectives in the study of religion. He further noted the increasing "securitization" of Islamic studies in colleges and universities, a trend that, fortunately, is not prevalent in seminaries.

Amir Hussein, professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount and outgoing editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, provided a brief response to the panelists. He indicated that scholars in non-theological settings grapple with issues concerning their faith just as much as do their counterparts in seminaries. Hussein asserted the need to recover the "prophetic voice" of theology, in which connections could be made with the political and economic contours of society.

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