

Mounting an “Islamic Studies” Program: A University of the Free State (South Africa) Initiative

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Abstract

The study of Islam at many universities around the world has been on the increase for the past three decades for various regions. In South Africa, where it was initiated by Semiticists in Semitic Studies departments and Missiologists in Missiology courses, its study gradually developed into full courses. Since the popularity of “Islamic studies” has been of interest to secular academics as well, the country’s University of the Free State (UFS) proposed the offering of a Baccalaureus Divinitatis Degree in Islamic studies. But before doing so, the university decided to host a colloquium to which the organizing committee invited various stakeholders. This essay contextualizes this colloquium by locating the teaching and study of Islam in a broad South(ern) African context and offers a critical report on the ensuing two-day colloquium.

Keywords: Islamic Studies, South Africa, University of Free State, Baccalaureus Divinitatis

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Introduction

The study of Islam at many western universities has been on the increase for the past three decades. Although numerous reasons may be forwarded to account for this, the 9/11 tragedy may be considered the one key watershed event that triggered it. In its aftermath, a plethora of appointments occurred at numerous American and European academic institutions, and existing programs were revamped and transformed so that Islam was taught as a subject in its own right and included in area studies (e.g., Middle Eastern Studies¹), discipline-oriented programs (e.g., religious studies²), and other academic programs. Traditionally Islam was only taught in the faculties of theology at many western institutions; however, scholars who operate within the social sciences have begun to appropriate it willingly – a healthy development indeed.³

Turning to southern Africa, a unique terrain in which Islam has been taught for more than fifty years, it says much for those who introduced and taught it despite the ensuing criticism for doing so. The previous rationale for teaching the course differs vastly from the current one. Among the southern African universities that clutter its landscape, South African universities generally introduced Islam as a theme/unit within missiological studies programs or as a separate subject in Semitic/Oriental studies departments.⁴ Many of their graduates acquired a rudimentary understanding of Islam and were armed with mis-logical intent; others emerged with a pure historical notion of where to locate Muslim communities on (southern) Africa's religious map.

Around the 1960s, the scholarly tradition remained within the fold of the European tradition that looked at Islam from a Semiticist cum Orientalist perspective, and thus the account narrated below does not differ significantly from what happened in Europe.⁵ However, young emerging Muslim groups challenged this tradition during the early 1970s and, as a result, Islam was no longer taught purely as a tradition but as a formal academic discipline known as "Islamic studies."⁶

This essay does not intend to regurgitate the information presented elsewhere,⁷ but only to narrate what transpired at the University of Free State (UFS) colloquium. But before describing this event and raising several critical questions, one has to briefly reflect upon the discipline within the southern African context to appreciate where this interesting initiative is located within the larger picture of theological and religious studies.⁸

The UFS Proposal in Context

Although Islamic studies was offered at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW; now amalgamated with the University of Natal to form the University

of Kwa-Zulu Natal [UKZN]) as an independent program, it also found a home in religious studies units and/or departments. Institutions were constructed and programs were designed to serve various religious stakeholders in South African society. Consequently, over the past few years a sizeable number of individuals completed or majored in Islamic studies and either remained in the field or branched out into other sectors (e.g., law and sociology).⁹

That aside, new developments have been taking place since the late 1990s. For example, fresh courses were being woven together to suit the needs of the society and those individuals who wanted to pursue higher degrees in Islamic studies. For the record, some of these individuals came from private Muslim theological seminaries (MTS) that had managed to complement those secular tertiary institutions of higher learning that offered courses on Islam. The MTS, established over the past forty years, gradually influenced the theological outlooks of South(ern) Africa’s Muslim communities, a development that automatically affected their perceptions of how Islam was taught in the region’s secular institutions.¹⁰ Despite the lack of official recognition by the South African Ministry of Higher Education and Training and its counterparts in the region, the MTS, at least for Muslims, continue to play a significant theological role in the higher education sector.

Their contributions, alongside those of the secular tertiary institutions (e.g., UKZN, the University of South Africa [UNISA], the University of Cape Town [UCT], the University of the Western Cape [UWC], and the University of Johannesburg [UJ]), in which Islamic studies has been and remains on offer, cannot be ignored or overlooked by scholars active in the higher education sector. Fortunately, a few studies have helped place the MTS on the region’s educational map and should, hopefully, stimulate other researchers to reflect further on their role and impact.¹¹ The graduates, unlike those at the secular institutions, have been seeking some form of recognition with the idea of moving academically upwards. During the 1990s and early 2000s, some of them were able, through the higher education sector’s Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy¹² (subsequently revised), to enter the post-graduate Islamic studies program at the above-mentioned institutions. A few of them adapted to the secular educational environments and eventually completed their BA Honours and MA degrees; a handful even successfully obtained their doctorate degrees.

While these may be regarded as important educational developments, one question has been raised intermittently: Should the MTS and their theological programs receive full recognition by the South African Ministry of Higher Education and Training? Interestingly, after many years of seeking

accreditation as a *bona fide* educational institution, the International Peace College of South Africa (IPSA),¹³ which belongs to the MTS group of institutions, obtained official recognition. Minister Blade Nzimandi conducted the ceremony in March 2013,¹⁴ a very encouraging development. However, up until now there is no “Association of Muslim Institutions of Higher Learning” and, as far as is known, IPSA remains the only seminary to apply to the ministry for formal recognition. Perhaps these institutions should study the ongoing educational developments in the United Kingdom, where some universities are attempting to reach out to such institutions through various forms of educational partnership.¹⁵

The UFS initiative should be appreciated and understood within this context. Its inventive project should be viewed as a challenge to the Muslim community at large and to Muslim seminaries in particular. Under the leadership of UFS’s award-winning vice-chancellor Professor Jonathan Jansen, the university has begun to seriously consider providing “a home” for an MTS-modeled program. This proposal can be described as rather unique, for such an arrangement was unheard of before due to the traditional (and ongoing) perception that such Christian-oriented universities as UFS were (and remain) bastions of secular learning and therefore “closed” to the teaching of other religious traditions.

In an attempt to reach an inclusive, as opposed to an exclusive, decision at the colloquium, various Muslim stakeholders were invited. It was somewhat unfortunate that representatives from the long-established MTS were not present to engage in the ensuing debates. In fact, only the staff and students of the long-established Madina Institute (MI) responded positively.¹⁶ A brief historical account of how this initiative came about is presented in the next section.

The Historical Background of the UFS Initiative

As indicated above, the UFS’ unique invitation was given the green light by its dynamic Professor Jonathan Jansen,¹⁷ its current rector and vice-chancellor who grew up in multicultural greater Cape Town. At the colloquium, he mentioned the rationale behind this request and stressed that since South Africa has transformed itself into a multicultural society, it also has to open up its structures to reinforce the society’s new identity. Despite enjoying the financial support of the vice-chancellor’s office, it was in fact the brain-child of Maniraj Sukdaven,¹⁸ who had spent almost two years planning it and meeting with the vice-chancellor. This project formed part of his vision of the department’s future, which is explained below.

The Department of Religion Studies

Maniraj Sukdaven,¹⁹ a Christian scholar, joined UFS’ Department of Biblical and Religious Studies in 2006. Up until then, it had offered “religious instructions” rather than “Religious studies” as such, a traditional teaching “instruction” approach that formed an integral part of the Christian Education’s system curriculum rigidly imposed by the apartheid regime’s Ministry of Education. But by the time the democratic government came into power during May 1994, it had requested each ministry to dismantle all (educational) vestiges of apartheid so that the interests of all social sectors would be adequately represented. The Department of Education, which had to be overhauled, eventually began to change. Thus when Professor Kader Asmal stepped in as minister of education, one of the tasks he paid attention to was his ministry’s *White Paper on Religion Education*. As soon as it was finalized, he implemented its recommendations, one of which was that the “Christian Education” curriculum be automatically replaced by a “Religion Education” curriculum.

As a result, UFS’ Department of Biblical and Religious Studies changed its name to the Department of Religious Studies; during 2009/2010, under his successor Sukdaven, it was renamed the Department of Religion Studies, “where the Religion, in a right of its own, could be studied as an academic discipline without the baggage of belief systems.”²⁰ This conscious name change was in line with the “phenomenology of religion” approach toward the study of religious traditions.²¹ In essence, Sukdaven managed to separate religion as a discipline from theology. Ever since, he has pointed out in his correspondence that the department gradually shifted out of theology’s shadow, which implies that theology has lost its former hegemonic status and has gradually become a subdiscipline of religion studies.

The Inter-Religious Forum

While these developments were being realized, Sukdaven – after some persuasion – was able to convince the Faculty of Theology Board to approve the formation of an Inter-Religious Forum (IRF) unit in the Department of Religion Studies. Despite the ensuing challenges, it eventually devised a feasible constitution that protected all religious traditions. According to him, the underlying rationale for adopting such an inclusive structure and comprehensive approach was part of the department’s plans for the future. The outcome of this approach was the hosting of several conferences and colloquiums to discuss such religion-related issues as reconciliation, gender, ecology, education, freedom of expression, and ethics. Since the last-mentioned variable holds

such a pivotal position in all sectors of university life, Sukdaven decided to invite Martin Prozesky to join as Professor Extra-Ordinaire with the intention of developing a Religion and Ethics unit.

Given Sukdaven's pro-active involvement in these academic developments, he was tasked with bringing together members from different religious traditions to illustrate the proposed forum's viability. Not only did the IRF members demonstrate an interest in the syllabi, curricula, and related aspects, but they also began to review the course material and provide input. In this context, Asgher Mukhtar²² played an essential role. All of this was greatly appreciated by the UFS administration. In Sukdaven's view, when taken together these developments helped break theology's hold over religion and allowed the department to be "independent" of it. However, the department did commit itself to pursuing and implementing inter-disciplinary approaches by working closely with the theology and other departments.

While these academic changes were taking place, other developments were also in the offing at UFS. The university's newly revived Muslim Students Association (MSA) searched for premises in which its members could perform their daily prayers and hold weekly religious gatherings. In addition, the Department of Religion Studies organized a four-lecture series on Islam that was open to all registered UFS students. During this event, the audience was informed of its new vision of making the faculty more inclusive. These specific activities thus inaugurated what may be described as an "Islamic intellectualism" process. According to Sukdaven, "the rationale behind this move was twofold: firstly it was to help change the face of the Faculty and secondly to give Islamic Studies its rightful place in the intellectual space of a tertiary institution." The overall idea was also twofold: (a) to implement the necessary shift from "indoctrination" to an "intellectualism" that engaged with history and texts in a somewhat objective manner; and (b) to equip students to act productively in society by exposing them to other disciplines.²³

Amidst all of this, Sukdaven pursued strategies that would enable Islamic studies to join the UFS academic environment. Being in this frame of mind, he decided to work with Mukhtar and a Bloemfontein-based Moroccan-born theologian in translating a Timbuktu manuscript that he had obtained from the Washington-based Library of Congress. While this joint undertaking probed the issue of "Islamic intellectualism," one outcome caused them to pose questions regarding the role and recognition of both domestic and foreign Darul 'Ulums (i.e., the MTS), where such manuscripts and texts were readily employed and studied. Despite these institutions' critical role in educating the region's Muslim youth, the Ministry of Higher Education and Training did

not officially recognize them, and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) did not officially recognize their certificates. This reality caused Sukdaven and others to ask whether a structured theological training course could benefit these and related institutions in the future.²⁴

Their query sparked some support in 2013, when they came into contact with Shaykh Muhammad ibn Yahya al-Ninowy, founder of the South African Madina Institute SA (MI),²⁵ who both welcomed the idea and found it academically attractive. During November 2013 and February 2014, the organizing committee met with him and his team to develop the offering and mount an Islamic studies program. The shaykh, who had established a four-year academic program in the United States, networked with vibrant young South African theologians to launch a challenging one-year intensive Islamic studies program. According to my informal discussions with the MI’s administrator, Mohamed Mukadam, at the beginning of 2014 more than 100 students had enrolled.

The UFS’ organizing committee thus viewed the MI’s program as somewhat in line with what it wanted to adopt and introduce in its own department. The MI’s program may be described as traditional in its make-up but quite flexible and open to weaving contemporary Muslim and secular thought into its program. Thus it is probably something quite similar to California’s Zaytuna Institute.²⁶ Having been positively impressed with the MI’s model, Jansen responded rather assertively when he gave the go-ahead for the envisaged colloquium in the hope that UFS would make certain that its offering would agree with what the university was trying to achieve academically.

The Colloquium

Despite the non-response from a few key Muslim stakeholders, the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCASA) appointed its secretary, Mawlana Yusuf Patel, to be its representative.²⁷ But as he was unable to attend, he requested Mawlana Ashraf Dockrat, who has had a long-term relationship with Rand Afrikaans University’s (i.e., UJ) Centre for Islamic Studies and its Department of Semitics, to provide some input; he agreed.

The colloquium was held on June 11-12, 2014. The organizing committee chose the theme “Islam and the Academic Tradition: Curricular and Pedagogical Opportunities for South African Universities”²⁸ because it would, one assumes, stimulate open and frank discussions regarding Islam within the secular academic environment. One would have liked to have heard the inputs from such retired and active scholars as Salman Nadvi (UDW), Suleiman Dangor (UKZN), Muhsin Ebrahim (UKZN), Abdulkader Tayob (UCT), Shamil Jeppie

(UCT), Yasien Mohamed (UWC), Yousuf Dadoo (UNISA), and Sa'diyyah Sheikh (UCT),²⁹ for their views would have enriched the both the event and the proposal. But despite their absence, the colloquium may be described as a reasonable success.

Shaykh al-Ninowy: Reflections upon the Past

The decision to limit the number of presentations to six gave the audience a chance to interact with the presenters soon after their input. The first presenter, Muhammad ibn Yahya al-Ninowy,³⁰ reflected upon the “Traditional Transmission – Islamic Perspective – Engagement from an Academic Perspective.” He argued that although Muslim rulers/governments have generally supported the formation of Muslim institutions of higher learning, they also generally drafted the framework within which the religiously trained personnel had to operate and thus could exercise some control to limit their influence and sacred power.

The political leadership has traditionally regarded the graduates of privately sponsored educational seminaries – which teach more than just theology – with a certain degree of suspicion because their influence often travelled far beyond the seminaries or mosques to which they were attached. In any case, he asserted that they were multi-skilled bearers of knowledge in the true sense of the word for they were not only well-versed in theology, but also in the hard sciences (e.g., medicine). Today, however, such individuals are rare; moreover, he stated that most MTS graduates are unable to demonstrate their mastery of other fields (e.g., mathematics and physics) and are therefore appointed, by default, as the community's resident scholars.

The shaykh listed various financial, social, academic, and other factors that have contributed to this declining state of affairs wherever Muslims are found. He observed that the production of well-rounded and well-informed individuals has largely ceased and that the (career) preachers who find themselves in communally appointed posts are generally low achievers and poorly paid. Naturally, high-achievers have no interest in such careers. On the social level, those individuals who fare badly in the education sector and who do not acquire the necessary skills to become lawyers or doctors usually opt for the MTS as the last resort. And indeed in the academic arena, the MTS-constructed curricula offers what may be regarded as the “absolute bare minimum,” thereby disadvantaging their graduates even more. After all, these students are exposed to a restricted curriculum that provides courses specifically focused on the preferred theological-jurisprudential school and that disseminates a “sectarian awareness and responsibility, rather than faith awareness and responsibility.”

While his observations are largely correct, some institutions have veered from this traditional model and produced well-balanced graduates.

Nevertheless, MTS graduates do not acquire “a decent general knowledge of the four Sunni *madhhabs* (theological schools) . . . and other faith systems.” So despite the designation of *mawlana* or *shaykh* bestowed upon them by the MTS and Islamic universities, they are “far away from having acquired any meaningful academic research skills or having the wherewithal to initiate and develop think-tank projects that aim to face current challenges. . . . and therefore “suffer from a lack of a tangible uniform standard for measuring knowledge attained, and a wider accreditation problem with other non-specialized higher education institutions, such as UFS, etc.”

He stressed that the MTS’ academic standards had plunged due to the lack of internal auditing and the rejection of any form of healthy criticism regarding the curricula, pedagogies, and general approach to teaching Islamic studies. In his engaging style, al-Ninowy confidently concluded that it is time for the MTS and other related institutions to provide a vigorous and challenging academic program. The shaykh remarked that such a program should (a) expose the students to a broad and rich understanding of theology, (b) immerse them totally in the Islamic sciences, (c) combine traditional with non-traditional approaches to teaching the Islamic sciences, (d) permit open-ended methodologies to be used for conducting research in the selected science, and (e) entertain the idea of questioning truths, which should (f) give ample intellectual space for everyone to freely agree and disagree.

Shaykh Sieraj: MI as an Academic Experiment

Shaykh Sieraj Hendricks,³¹ an Umm ul-Qura University and UNISA graduate, spoke on the “Madina Institute Offering: The Critical Approach to Islamic Studies,” which he co-authored Shaykhah Nawaal Manie. Since the MI’s program was the one that had caught the eye of the UFS administrators and academics, it was of interest to the attendees. He opened by outlining MI’s aims and stating its program’s rationale. As for its goals, one must say that as is the case with similar domestic and foreign institutions, they are pretty ambitious.

Among these goals are the following: MI (1) intends to become one of the country’s leading colleges in the field of Islamic studies, (2) sees itself as an institution of distinction that is essentially characterized by an (open) approach to religion, for it is based on an balanced and moderate “excellent academic curriculum,” and (3) seeks “to develop a holistic graduate who can enrich society through conscious and pragmatic leadership that is responsive

to both internal and external imperatives.” These clearly high goals will be realized, according to its brochure, by having in place an excellent curriculum that will enable its students to pursue a balanced and a moderate approach toward religion as a whole and toward Islam in particular.

The ultimate objective of this one-year foundational scholarship is not to create ulama, but to empower student-scholars with these sciences so they can understand Islam as “a comprehensive way of life” and acquire the skills needed to reflect, engage, think independently, and, eventually, conduct independent research. But while these are indeed commendable objectives, can they really be expected to pursue independent research so quickly? Is one year enough time to acquire the necessary research-specific tools and skills? Moreover, at this stage MI cannot claim that it can actually produce specialists. In fact, this goal might be realized only after a basic degree program has been constructed and set; right now, it remains a still-in-the-making program.

In line with the country’s educational developments, MI has set itself some stringent rules along with a few basic features adopted from an “outcomes-based approach.”³² Although this particular approach has been heavily critiqued within the South African system, MI’s administrators and educators apparently consider it useful. In fact, they implemented it via three interlocking phases, one of which is a system of “continuous assessment.” In sum, MI remains embedded in the traditional system but appears to be quite open to experimenting with critical approaches toward Islamic studies. But these approaches should not be confused and misinterpreted as a modernist or post-modernist approach. According to Sieraj’s presentation, they engage with the classical sources in a way that will help student-scholars deal confidently with contemporary matters.

Mawlana Dockrat: Offering an Alternative

Mawlana Ashraf Dockrat, formerly associated with the Centre for Islamic Studies at Rand Afrikaans University (now UJ) and an executive member of Gauteng’s Jamiat-ul-‘Ulama (JU), spoke in the place of Maulana Yunus Patel, who was unable to attend. As the *de facto* representative of the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCASA), he presented his thoughts on the “(Muslim) Oversight Body and the Role It Plays with Regard to Engagement of (Islamic) Intellectualism.” It should be stated that he was caught off guard, for the topic that appeared in the final program was not the one that had appeared on the invitation. Nevertheless, he attempted to address the question of “intellectualism”³³ based on his years of experience at UJ, during which he had become familiar with the critical social science approaches that he encountered

at RAU/UJ toward Islamic studies. As a result, he was able to raise some helpful points regarding the approaches and viability of adopting and adapting the MI model.

Dockrat was somewhat critical of the conference organizers’ position vis-à-vis establishing an Islamic studies program based purely on the MI model. While he did not have anything personal against the model as such, he opined that more stakeholders, such as UUCASA members and (more specifically) leading MTS members, be brought into the debate to discuss it further. In addition, he made it quite clear that a traditional program will not fit into a university structure and that he would prefer an alternative model that allows for post-graduate training. He proposed that instead of ambitiously trying to create an undergraduate Islamic studies program tailored along traditional lines and similar to the ones functioning elsewhere, a post-graduate program that provides MTS graduates with special professional training should be developed.

Muhammed Haron: Placing MTS on a Broad Educational Canvas

Muhammed Haron’s “Muslim Theological Seminaries: Towards Transforming the South African ‘Islamic Studies’ Landscape”³⁴ sought to reveal how much these institutions have changed the Islamic studies landscape over the past two decades. According to him, this process had its roots in South Asia³⁵ and stimulated South Asian-trained theologians such as Mawlana Qasim Seema to set up the first successful Darul ‘Ulum in Newcastle (in KwaZulu Natal) in 1973. This event led to many others being established nationwide, all of which undoubtedly had a major impact on the theological thinking of sections of the country’s Muslim community. Many of these graduates are currently members of UUCASA. A sizeable number serve as imams and teachers at various madaris (e.g., Lenasia Madaris Association outside Johannesburg); others have set up their own institutions (e.g., Qaasim ul-Ulum in Cape Town) for those interested in pursuing Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Haron questioned whether there is a need to set up and manage more such institutions and how the relatively small but growing Muslim community can absorb the graduates.

Toward the end, another question came to the fore: Will a Baccalaureus Divinitatis Degree in Islamic studies, which the UFS intends to place on its academic agenda, be able to produce professionally qualified personnel? There were essentially two responses: (a) those who rejected it and who supported the MTS’ Islamic studies program and (b) those who approved of it. Since the UFS and its organizing committee were inclined to pursue the latter position,

they were advised to seriously consider the following points: (a) appoint a visionary team that is fairly representative of the stakeholders (e.g., theologians, educationists, curriculum designers, Islamic studies specialists, Arabists, and administrators), (b) plan and structure the curriculum in such a way that it can smoothly insert itself into the secular UFS environment and avoid being whittled down so much that its program cannot match what the MTS program offers, (c) select well-informed and experienced teaching personnel who can lead and sustain the program within the “secular” UFS educational environment for at least a decade, and (d) reflect as to how and where its graduates will be absorbed in the (already saturated) society.

Hasina Ebrahim: Producing Professionally Trained Theologians

Hasina Ebrahim, a member of UFS’ Faculty of Education, focused on the “Preliminary Thoughts on the Professionalisation of Islamic Scholars through a University-based Degree Qualification.” As she was unable to attend, it was read out by Hafza Iqbal, who is associated with the MI. In her opening statement, she opined that “the task of developing an Islamic scholar is indeed one of great responsibility” and that, within the UFS context, “the idea of professionalisation of Islamic scholars is linked to its vision about transforming lives through excellence.” She stressed that producing such professionals requires reflection upon at least five significant points: (a) understanding the development of Islamic scholars from the divinely revealed belief system, (b) professionalizing Islamic scholars, (c) unpacking the work of a graduate Islamic scholar, (d) the curriculum, and (e) the way forward. However, she did not define *Islamic scholar*, which was unfortunate for two reasons: (1) *Islamic* is somewhat problematic; *Muslim* would have been more appropriate, and (2) *scholar* is fine as it stands, but *theologian* might have been better because it is an accepted term among those who are MTS graduates and in sync with the event’s overall purpose.

As already mentioned, Ebrahim correctly highlighted the five interconnecting issues that must be carefully considered when implementing a specially designed Baccalaureus Divinitatis degree in Islamic studies. Her first point, which ties in with the traditional notion of a Muslim theologian, made direct mention of Islam’s two primary sources and advised the steering committee to draw from them due to their definitive bearing on knowledge, understanding, and the seeking of knowledge. This undertaking, she asserted, was especially important with regards “to the development of mindful Islamic Scholars who are active *seekers of knowledge* and growing in their quest to

be *men(women) of understanding* who are committed to contributing to the betterment of society” (her emphasis).

After explaining why there is an urgent need to professionalize Muslim theologians, she acknowledged that contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims are constantly challenged by other “isms” (e.g., humanism) and thus find themselves in terrible dilemmas. Therefore, “the professional Islamic scholar is needed in order to grow Islamic thought and local solutions relevant to people whose beliefs are governed by religion, culture and heritage.” These trained theologians should respond pro-actively to the deluge of anti-Muslim material found in the print and electronic media. She also stressed that they should “create a pervasive visible presence in scholarship, the media and the various communities of practice to ensure that an Islamic perspective is presented and taken into account,” and, interestingly, that they “also have a part to play in counselling and pastoral care in situations of vulnerability.” In rounding off this point, she categorically stated that the professionalization process is a form of investment for Muslims as such.

She then went on to “unpack the work of a Muslim theologian” and reminded the attendees that such an individual “has a multi-dimensional role to play depending on the context in which he/(she) functions.”³⁷ She thus observed that if the community is sensitized to this particular position, then this person can be trained to act in various capacities: serve in the higher education sector by advising on Muslim educational matters, monitor the media’s coverage of Muslim affairs, address inter-religious issues, and deal skillfully “in advocacy for Islam.” As regards her penultimate point, Ebrahim accentuated the fact that the curriculum³⁸ would help professionalize Muslim theologians and thus it should consist of “carefully selected knowledge, skills, and values” – in other words, it should be holistic. Thus the curriculum developers should include a list of core and elective subjects and create a program that trains its members in, among others, the art of communication and leadership.³⁹ Moreover, they should constantly imbibe the prophetic values (e.g., trust, commitment, dedication, and devotion) as they pursue knowledge. She further remarked that when these theologians learn and teach, they should adopt the interactive prophetic approach.

Before implementing such a holistic curriculum, Ebrahim suggested that a plan of action be formulated by (a) conceptualizing the certification and qualification process, bearing in mind that this should be viewed as a form of investment, (b) forming a task team of traditionally trained theologians and academics who can drive the qualification process, (c) devising an understandable and pliable timeframe, (d) setting up a database of feeder institutions

so that the faculty members who are expected to adhere to the program understand where its stakeholders (i.e., the potential students) are coming from, (e) putting in place the necessary criteria for attracting potential students, (f) selecting the teaching staff, and (g) instituting an apprenticeship (and mentorship) program.

Toward a Conclusion

During the final day's plenary session, each presenter made a brief presentation that complemented his/her earlier contribution, responded to questions from the audience, and critically engaged one another with regards to the colloquium's theme and purpose. The concluding response was given by Auwais Rafudeen (senior lecturer, Islamic studies, UNISA; former lecturer, IPSA) and the closing remarks were given by Jansen. Rafudeen neatly brought together each presenter's main ideas. His overall "thrust (was) that an Islamic studies (program) must not only concentrate on discussions internal to the tradition (which the conference did very well), but (that it) should also look to the common problems facing religion as a whole." He further stated that there "are problems such as the increasing inequality between rich and poor, the loss of community and its eclipse by individualist driven capitalism, the loss of meaning in nihilistic modernity as well as the devastation wrought by the environmental crisis." As far as he was concerned "(t)hese are problems facing all religions and it is necessary for Muslims to enter into dialogue with other faiths in order to jointly tackle these problems."⁴⁰

Jansen, who was impressed by Sukdaven's feedback on the intellectual issues that were tackled and debated, stressed that he would like to see UFS set up this project and have it operational during the beginning of 2016. On this optimistic and enthusiastic note, he urged the organizing committee to form a task team to realize this goal. At the end of the conference a task team was set up with Mukhtar as its leader. Several issues still need to be addressed, among them: Who will be appointed to teach, and which students will register for, this program? To what extent will it be seen as an acceptable program by those whom it intends to attract? Will it be a viable in the long run or a failure from the onset? What model will it ultimately adopt, and will it be creative? Since South Africa is a unique "religious friendly" locale, how different will this UFS model be from those in the United States and the United Kingdom? And since universities have been forced to become marketable, will this specific degree be marketable and, more importantly, sustainable as the future unfolds?

Another question is will the Darul ‘Ulums recognize this program if it succeeds, or will they remain aloof? One may argue that a successful program will inevitably attract Darul ‘Ulum graduates, for many of them are searching for academic outlets to help them gain the necessary educational recognition in the country’s predominantly non-Muslim environment. They are fully aware that South Africa enjoys a fair amount of religious freedom when compared to other (western and even Muslim) countries, where their peers’ activities as teachers and preachers are curtailed. So far, southern Africa’s environment as a whole and that of South Africa in particular have been “religion-friendly,” a reality that is legally guaranteed in the countries’ constitutions. It will be interesting to see where these Baccalaureus Divinitatis degree holders end up. Will they find jobs, move in different academic directions, be readily absorbed by society and make productive contributions to it? The answers depend on how the Muslim community responds to the establishment of such a program.

At this point in time, the Muslim community remains ill-informed about this project. If one ventures to forecast how people will react to UFS’ desire to create this Baccalaureus Divinitatis degree in Islamic studies, it may be argued that UUCASA and similar bodies will probably reject the process and the project – despite its uniqueness. However, MI and UFS have reached some type of tentative agreement. So from the readings of events, there is little doubt that MI and its leadership under Shaykh al-Ninowy will act, along with the other academics serving on this task team, as critical players in designing and mounting an interesting program at UFS. This university, once a bastion of Christian Afrikaner education, has now taken a 360 degree by allowing Islamic studies to operate as a full-fledged discipline within its walls.

Endnotes

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2. R. C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985); R. O. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); M. Prozesky, “South Africa’s Contribution to Religious Studies,” in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Future*, ed. J. Platvoet, J. Cox, and J. Alupona (Harare: Roots

- and Branches, 1996), 229-51. It also appeared in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 70 (1990): 9-20. Also see M. Clasquin, "Religious Studies in Southern Africa – an Overview," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 2008.
3. Cf. A. Siddiqui, *Islam at Universities in England: Meeting the Needs and Investing in the Future* (London: DFES, 2007) and Anon (ed.), *International Approaches to Islamic Studies in Higher Education: A Report* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2008).
 4. M. Haron, "South Africa's Institutions of Higher Learning: Their 'Study of Islam' Programs," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 31, no. 3, (2014): 50-69; M. Haron. "Continuity and Change: The Study and Research of Islam in South(ern) Africa," *African Educational Review* 9, no. 3 (2012): 179-94. M. Haron, "Arabic and Islamic Studies Research in South Africa," *American Journal of the Islamic Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (1991): 363-77; M. Haron, "Islamic Studies at the University of Cape Town," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 2, no. 2 (1989): 57-63; T. Sonn, "Arabic and Islamic Studies Research in South Africa," *American Journal of the Islamic Social Sciences*, 11, no. 2, (1994): 274-28; A. Tayob, "Islamic Studies in South Africa," *Scriptura* 53, no. 2, (1995): 65-72; A. Tayob, "The Academic Study of Islam at the University," in *Perspectives of Islamic Education in South Africa*, ed. Yasien Mohamed, Abdul-Majied Mohamed, and Suleiman Dangor (Johannesburg: World Muslim League, 1991).
 5. See E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin 1978); C. W. Ernst and R. C. Martin, "Introduction: Towards a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. C. W. Ernst and R. C. Martin (Columbia: The University of South Carolina 2010), 1-19.
 6. R. Martin, "Islamic Studies: Its History," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press 1995); R. Martin, "Islam and Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. R. Martin (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 1-18; I. Ahmad, "Teaching Islamic Studies in the Non-Arab World: With or Without Arabic?" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 2, (2001): 273-85; B. Khir, "Islamic Studies within Islam: Definition, Approaches and Challenges of Modernity," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28, no. 3, (2007): 257-66.
 7. M. Haron, "The Study of Islam in South Africa," in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present, and Prospects*, ed. Jan Platvoet et al. (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 268-92.
 8. Y. Waghid, *Conceptions of Islamic Education: Pedagogical Framings* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).
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 11. D. Reetz, “The Tablighi Madrassas in Lenasia and Azaadville: Local Players in the Global Islamic Field,” in *Muslim Schools and Education in Europe and South Africa*, ed. A. K. Tayob, I. Niehaus, and W. Weisse (Munster: Waxmann, 2011), 85-104; M. K. Sayed, “South African Madrasahs Move into the 21st Century,” *ibid.*, 63-83; Z. McDonald, *Expressions of Post-Secular Citizenship: A Sociological Exposition of Islamic Education in South Africa*, unpublished Phd thesis (Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg, 2013); and M. Haron, *Muslim Higher Education in the Southern African Region: From Dar ul-Ulums to Secular Tertiary Institutions*, unpublished “Islamic Higher Education of Learning in Africa” (Duke University: 2013).
 12. Cf. *National Policy for the Implementation of the Recognition for Prior Learning* (Pretoria, Waterkloof: The South Africa Qualifications Authority, 2013).
 13. www.ipsa-edu.org.
 14. M. Haron, “Malaysia’s Educational Efforts in Southern Africa: Creating Opportunities, Developing Partnerships,” *Journal Pendidikan Malaysia* 31, no. 1 (2013): 1-10.
 15. R. Gleave, “An Exploration of the Viability of a Partnership between Dar al-Ulum and Higher Education Institutions in North West England Focusing on Pedagogy and Relevance,” *British Journal of Religious Education* (2013); also see R. Gleave, “Blending Islamic, Middle Eastern, and Arabic Studies,” in *HEFCE Report on the Islamic Studies: Current Status and Future Prospects Seminar, 23 November 2007* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2007).
 16. It is interesting to note that Zareena Grewel and R. David Coolidge neither mentioned nor described this institute when they surveyed the American Islamic College and Zaytuna Institute in their informative “Islamic Education in the United States: Debates, Practices, and Institutions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 246-65.
 17. The former dean of education at the University of Pretoria, he received honorary awards from Cleveland State University (USA) and The University of Edinburgh (UK). He received the “Education Africa Lifetime Achievement Award” (2013) in New York and the “World Universities Forum Award for Best Practice in Higher Education” (2010).
 18. For the record, M. Sukdaven moved to the University of Pretoria (UP) in 2014.
 19. This section has been reconstructed based upon the email correspondence between the author and M. Sukdaven on November 26, 2014.
 20. *Ibid.*

21. J. L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences, and Subsequent Debates* (London and New York: T and T Clark International, 2006); A. Sharma, *To Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001); G. Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassel, 1999).
22. Email correspondence with Asgher Mukhtar, July 2014.
23. Email correspondence with Sukdaven, November 26, 2014.
24. In this regard, Mukhtar's brother seemed to have engaged with some of the administrators of these institutions with the idea of gaining recognition. Regrettably, and perhaps as guessed, these institutions' academic leaders did not wish to be given any form of recognition by the state.
25. www.madinainstitute.org.
26. <http://www.zaytuna.org>.
27. See the UUCASA letter dated May 14, 2014.
28. They did something similar to what has been happening in the United States and the United Kingdom, where conferences and colloquiums were held to evaluate the teaching of Islam at institutions of higher learning. See, for example, P. Morris et al., *The Teaching and Study of Islam in Western Universities* (London: Routledge, 2013); C. Kurzman and C. W. Ernst. "Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities," *MESA* 46, no. 1 (2012): 24-46; S. Nyang, M. Ahmad, and Z. Bukhari, eds., *The State of Islamic Studies at American Universities* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 2009); R. Gleave, "Blending Islamic, Middle Eastern, and Arabic Studies," in *HEFCE Report on the Islamic Studies: Current Status and Future Prospects Seminar, 23 November 2007* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2007); A. Siddiqui, *Islam at Universities in England: Meeting the Needs and Investing in the Future* (London: DFES, 2007); El-Awaisi and M. Nye, *Time for Change: Report on the Future of the Study of Islam and Muslims in Universities and Colleges in Multicultural Britain* (Dundee: Al-Maktoum Press, 2006); A. Nanji (ed.), *Mapping Islamic Studies: Genealogy, Continuity, and Change* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997); and M. K. Hermansen, "Trends in Islamic Studies in the United States and Canada since the 1970s," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (1993): 96-118.
29. In addition to this catalogue of names, several other scholars function outside the Islamic studies sector and contribute to the debate on Islam and Muslims as Arabists (e.g., Yasin Dutton [UCT]), historians (e.g., Goolam Vahed [UKZN]), political scientists (e.g., Lubna Nadvi [UKZN]), and educationists (e.g., Yusef Waghid and Aslam Fataar [University of Stellenbosch US]). And perhaps the organizers should have had a local scholar, apart from Shaykh al-Ninowy, on the panel who had been trained in both the traditional and the western traditions. The names of Aziz Patel (IPSA) and Ismail Jaffer (UNISA) come to mind. For the record, Farid Esack was invited but could not attend due to a prior commitments abroad.

30. The shaykh features in S. A. Schleifer (ed.), *The Muslim 500: The World's Most 500 Influential Muslims* (Amman: The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, 2013/2014), 112.
31. *Ibid.*, 108.
32. C. Laugbsch, J. Aldridge, and B. J. Fraser, *Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa: Using an Instrument to Assess School-Level Environments during the Implementation*, unpublished "Australian Association for Research in Education" paper, November 2007, 25-29; S. P. T. Malan, "The New Paradigm of Outcomes-Based Education in Perspective," *Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences* 28 (2000): 23-28; R. J. Botha, "Outcomes-Based and Educational Reform in South Africa," *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice* 5, no. 4 (2002): 361-71.
33. See R. Hashim, "Intellectualism in Higher Islamic Traditional Studies: Implications for the Curriculum," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 24, no. 3, (2007): 92-115.
34. See M. Haron, *Muslim Higher Education in Southern Africa: From Secular Tertiary Institutions to Dar ul-'Ulums*, unpublished "Islamic Institutions of Higher Learning in Africa: Their History, Mission and Role in Regional Development" paper, Duke University, October 18-19, 2013. Also see M. Haron's report on the Duke University Islamic Center's site: <http://tirnscholars.org/2014/02/11/muhammed-haron-muslim-institutions-of-higher-learning-in-africa-and-the-way-forward>.
35. B. D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); Y. Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005); D. Reetz, "The Deoband Universe: What Makes a Transcultural and Transnational Educational Movement of Islam?" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and Middle East*, 27, no. 1 (2007): 139-59; D. Reetz, "Dar al-'Ulum Deoband and Its Mediatic Self-Representation," *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 209-27.
36. N. Patel, *An Islamic Feminist Reflection of Pedagogy and Gender Practice in South African Madaris*, unpublished M.SocSc thesis (Cape Town: UCT 2013); also see Z. McDonald, *Expressions of Post-Secular Citizenship*.
37. M. Q. Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
38. Cf. Cambridge Muslim College, *A Curriculum for Cohesion: A Three Year Project hosted at the CMC* (2012).
39. M. Makadam and A. Scott-Baumann, *The Training and Development of Muslim Faith Leaders: Current Practice and Future Possibilities* (London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010).
40. See email correspondence dated October 14, 2014, between this rapporteur and Rafudeen.