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Welcome

Welcome to the third issue of Perspectives: teaching Islamic Studies in higher education.

The Islamic Studies Network has undergone some major changes since the last issue. John Canning from Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) will be co-ordinating the Network until Lisa Bernasek returns to work in March 2012. Despite the winding down of the Higher Education Academy’s Subject Centre Network we are delighted that Shaheen Mansoor who worked with the Law Subject Centre (UKCLE) and Malcolm Todd and Max Farrar who worked with Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP) are able to continue working for the Network. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Steve Probert and colleagues at the Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance (BMAF) and Gary Bunt and colleagues at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies for their contributions to the Network. Although he will not be working directly for the Network any longer, we are delighted that Gary has now joined the Network’s Advisory Group so we can continue to benefit from his knowledge and expertise. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome Joe Clark from the Association of Business Schools (ABS) to the Network project team. The ABS will be undertaking activities previously carried out by the BMAF Subject Centre. Although new to the project team, Joe has worked closely with BMAF in the past and was involved in some of their Islamic Studies activities last year.

Chris Allen opens this latest issue of Perspectives with some considerations on teaching Islamophobia in UK institutions. His article offers an excellent overview on the pedagogy of this subject and provides a list of teaching resources that may be used in teaching this topic together with insights into his own experience.

Max Farrar and Malcolm Todd continue on the theme of resources for teaching about Islam by reporting on how they have been working in conjunction with academic staff in social sciences to develop a number of case studies in support of the study of Islam in social science curricula. In the course of their discussion, they provide links to two collections of cases along with a number of issues encountered by staff in their teaching and ways in which they addressed these issues.

Ramon Harvey interviews his doctoral supervisor Professor M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, the King Fahd Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) and an expert in Qur’anic studies. The interview offers an overview of how Qur’anic studies have developed in the UK in the last ten years together with thoughts about how the research landscape in this area might be in the near future.

In the resources section Anicée van Engeland, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Marilyn Booth, Yossef Rapoport, and Mel Prideaux provide their views on teaching and learning in a range of disciplinary areas including Law, biographical writing, History and Religious Studies. In Viewpoint, Glenn Hardaker and A’ishah Sabki tell us about their own experience of pedagogy at al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez, Morocco. Finally, Marta Bolognani reviews Sophie Gilliat-Ray’s new book Muslims in Britain: An Introduction.

Don’t forget to join our mailing list if you have not already done so. You can follow the Islamic Studies Network on Twitter @heaisn.

John Canning
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Two regional workshops were held in Cardiff and Leeds on 17 and 27 May 2011, respectively. Both events were aimed to bring together teachers of Islamic Studies from a wide range of disciplines (e.g. Theology and Religious Studies, History, Politics, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology, Law, Business and Finance) and were highly interdisciplinary. Documents related to these events are available from the Events page of the ISN website (http://www.islamicstudiesnetwork.ac.uk) by clicking on the link to the relevant workshop.

Another regional workshop ‘Teaching Islamic Studies in Scotland’ was held in Edinburgh on 21 October 2011. This offered an opportunity for practitioners to network, share practice, update colleagues on developments since the last workshop, and discuss region-specific issues in the teaching of Islamic Studies. Please visit the website to download documents related to this event.

Reports and materials from two of the funded projects can now be consulted online on the Network website; these are Encouraging Muslim women into higher education through partnerships and collaborative pathways conducted by Alison Scott-Baumann and Sariya Contractor and Comparative Sharia Law: The development of teaching materials in the area of sharia compliant financial instruments and intellectual property by Mark Van Hoorebeek. Reports can be downloaded from the Projects section of the ISN website. Interim reports from the remaining 12 projects are also online and available for consultation.

External evaluation of Network activity was completed in 2010-11 and is now published on our website and can be downloaded from the homepage. The evaluation highlights that the work of the Network has so far been very successful.

The Islamic Studies Gateway funded by the JISC project has now been completed and a link to it is now available from the News section of the ISN website as well as from the JISC project website. The project Fihrist: The Gateway to Manuscripts in Arabic Scripts has sought to compile a catalogue for manuscripts in Arabic script housed in some of the major archives in the UK and beyond. This project builds on the significant work already funded by JISC and uncovers major ‘hidden’ Islamic manuscript collections held at Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham and Yale university libraries, the School of Oriental and African Studies and the Wellcome Library.
Recent activity in the disciplines

Law: Resources from the Islamic law curriculum development project are now online and can be used and downloaded from the Network website and the UKCLE website: http://www.ukcle.ac.uk. The second meeting of Islamic Law Special Interest Group (SIG) took place on 6 July 2011. A programme for the day may be consulted on the UKCLE website under Events. The main topics addressed by the SIG were teaching and learning Islamic Law in UK universities and the construction of a bibliographic resource containing bibliographic references for Islamic Law and Finance.

Business and Law: BMAF and UKCLE held a joint workshop on 15 June 2011 aimed at participants willing to develop an ability to locate bibliographic materials for research and teaching and learning in Law and Finance. Details of and a programme for the day are available from the Events section of the UKCLE and BMAF websites.

Languages and Area Studies: Progress on projects funded by LLAS can be found under Projects on the LLAS website: http://www.llas.ac.uk. Two collections of case studies related to Islam and the social sciences took place on 24 June 2011 in Birmingham. A programme for the day and related resources can be found on the Events page of the C-SAP website: http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk. Two collections of case studies related to Islam and the social sciences are now available on the C-SAP website. These resources are described in further detail by Farrar and Todd in this publication, see Developing approaches that support the study of Islam within social science curricula, pp. 00-00.

Forthcoming activity

The Network is organising three cross-disciplinary workshops in 2011-12. The first one of these events is in January at the University of Leeds (date tbd). Details about the other two will be published on the ISN website in due course. Descriptions for these events are available on the website under Events. The workshops are aimed at specialists and non-specialists who teach on modules related to Islamic Studies in an interdisciplinary way.

A two-day residential event will take place in February. This workshop is aimed at PhD students and will give them an opportunity to showcase their research activities and teaching interests as well as to address issues related to life as a postgraduate. The event aims to be a forum for interdisciplinary discussion. A programme is available on the ISN website. Final reports and all materials from the 12 funded projects will be made available online in February 2012. Calls for projects to be conducted on collaborations between public and private HEIs and/or student guides to Islamic Studies will be published shortly.

One size doesn’t fit all: considerations on the teaching of Islamophobia as an academic subject

Dr Chris Allen
University of Birmingham

Since the publication of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia’s (CBMI) 1997 report, Islamophobia: a challenge for us all, there has been a clear recognition of the role that good education can play in helping to combat Islamophobia. In fact, it has been a recurrent focus in a wide range of different reports and policy documents ever since. Most recently, last year’s report from the European Muslim Research Centre (EMRC) based in the University of Exeter highlighted the need for what it described as “public education” (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010, 202). This was particularly relevant for those involved in higher education: “as academics we believe we have an important role to play in this education process” (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010, 203).

But how exactly do we go about this given that Islamophobia – both as a topic and as a socio-political phenomenon – remains emotive, can inflame sensitivities, has the potential to be divisive, and is openly contested by some in the academic, political and social spaces?

Drawing upon my experience of the topic of Islamophobia and related themes into the teaching of a number of different undergraduate modules across different disciplines such as Religious Studies, Sociology and Social Policy, in this article I attempt to offer some personal perspectives to hopefully support those faced with the task of incorporating similar themes into their own teaching schedules. Over and above everything else, the inherent complexity of Islamophobia needs to be considered. As something that I never fail to acknowledge, it is best captured by the pointed observation of Marcel Mausen when he states that, “Islamophobia” groups together all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech and acts, by suggesting that they all emanate from an identical ideological core” (2006, 42). While referring to Islamophobia as a concept and phenomenon more generally, the problem is equally applicable to education and teaching.

The first step to addressing this complexity is to make any teaching meaningful. By meaningful I mean that it has to go beyond the superficial, to be critical and enquiring. In stating this, I am suggesting that the teaching of Islamophobia has to be undertaken in the same way as any other academic topic. It can neither be overblown nor unfounded, but grounded in the body of seminal research that is beginning to emerge in this field (I have included an indicative list of key texts at the end of this article). If this is not achieved, the result will be as Hall et al. (1978) wrote about the way in which racism was sometimes presented. For Hall et al., understandings of and engagement with ‘race’ and racism became overwhelmed and obfuscated by phoney and patronising approaches. Some of these were overinflated or were unnecessarily accusatory; others swallowed in negativity by superficially reminding everyone ‘just how bad racism is’ without making a conclusive argument as to what it was or why. For this reason alone, any consideration of Islamophobia within the educational and academic settings has to be contextualised and grounded in order to avoid repeating past mistakes.

As far as I am aware, there is not, as yet, any British undergraduate module that focuses solely on the phenomenon of Islamophobia or anti-religion phenomena more widely.1 This presents those looking to teach Islamophobia with both challenges and opportunities. The major opportunity is that your teaching can be as innovative and ground-breaking as you dare imagine as there are few precedents to compare against. This opportunity needs to be tempered, however, by the realisation that it is extremely likely that your teaching of Islamophobia will need to be ‘shoehorned’ into existing modules, some of which might not necessarily or immediately lend themselves to such a topic. Such shoehorning has, in my own experience, seen me attempting to

1 A search on the Islamic Studies Network module database (http://is.pra.hesacademy.ac.uk) produced no results in relation to the topic of Islamophobia.
incorporate Islamophobia into such modules as ‘Introduction to Multiculturalism’, ‘Islam’, ‘Social Inequalities’, ‘Muslims in Europe’ and ‘Social Issues’ among others, all of which I feel benefit from having a contemporarily salient topic incorporated into them.

Given the acknowledged complexity of Islamophobia, making the right decision about what to include becomes vitally important. Considering Islamophobia in a Social Policy module such as ‘Social Inequalities’, for instance, might be significantly different to how the same topic is addressed in a Religious Studies module such as ‘Islam’. In the latter, it might be that contemporary Islamophobia is contextualised within a historical frame, considering the similarities and differences with, say, theories of orientalism or how historical events such as the Crusades continue to provide a framework of meaning within which contemporary hatred can be duly exploited. In the former, it might be that the focus is on the way in which the socio-economic status of Muslim communities impacts on prejudicial and discriminatory processes that have the capacity to disadvantage in education, employment and housing. It is absolutely vital, however, that when addressing Islamophobic disadvantage – if indeed such a thing exists – the focus remains on ‘Muslims’ and that lazy assumptions that equate the experience of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and so on with all Muslims per se are avoided. Relevance and focus are therefore essential prerequisites in the planning required by those looking to incorporate teaching about Islamophobia into their schedules: a point that is made all the more pertinent by the likely need to shoehorn.

This, in my opinion, is outweighed by the unique opportunity that teaching Islamophobia offers. Given that it is a relatively new field, it offers academics the opportunity to explore and hopefully incorporate new levels of innovation not just in the way in which the subject is engaged, but so too in relation to teaching methods. As well as academic resources, I have used newspapers and magazines, websites and other online resources, films and television programmes to engage students and to initiate discussions. Films such as The Siege (1998) and Four Lions (2010) have both proven useful in my own teaching, as have television documentaries including Are Muslims Hated? (Channel 4 2000) and the now infamous Undercover Mosque (Channel 4 2007). Likewise, the Daily Mail, Daily Express and more recently the Daily Star regularly provide interesting – and extremely challenging – starting points from which group discussions can be easily initiated.

There are other ways in which to initiate similar discussions. A particularly good and relatively unexplored resource is YouTube. As well as allowing access to a wide range of different television programmes, YouTube also offers a wide range of different films and clips that present a vast array of different perspectives on Islamophobia. The greatest value of YouTube is that it is immediate and undeniably contemporary. Something that happens literally the day before can be found in some form or other on YouTube. Students, I have also found, particularly like the irreverence of YouTube. I have had a good response to two particularly provocative clips that have appeared on the site in the past year. The first is ‘Dude you have no Quran [sic]’[4], which I used to consider the proposed burning of a Qur’an by Pastor Terry Jones in the US as a reminder to which freedom of speech and expression might allow such acts to be undertaken; the second is the reworking of an interview with a supporter of the English Defence League (EDL) by Press TV, which have used to introduce the growing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim campaigns of the far right both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Both clips are entirely irreverent and will not be relevant to all styles of teaching or indeed all disciplines, but they have been extremely useful for me in beginning to engage students in highly controversial and emotive issues. Another approach I employed was to show the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2005[4]. Recognising the sensitivity of the images, I made all students aware at the start of the lecture what I was going to show them. I again made everyone aware before showing them to the group so that students had the opportunity to leave should they find them offensive. Maybe surprisingly, none of the students left. However, showing the cartoons did allow for any mysticism that surrounded them to be alleviated and for a number of questions to be aired from which interesting discussions ensued. In all of these instances, however, the resources were then contextualised and theoretically framed to ensure that they were not seen to be mere flippancies or novelties. In this way, the teaching remains meaningful.

Being aware of the highly emotive nature of Islamophobia and its ability to polarise opinion is something that also needs to be taken into consideration. Within academic institutions, I believe that we have a responsibility to promote freedom of speech. Consequently, there may be occasions when we encounter views being expressed that may appear to be extreme or even offensive. Like any such comments, unless these views can be expressed they cannot be challenged, so I am reluctant to be prescriptive about what people can and cannot, should and should not believe. However, these views should always be rooted in academic theory and evidence, not polemics, and so there is a need for us to challenge any misrepresentations, inaccuracies and, at worst, mistruths that may find expression.

One way, I believe, I have been able to achieve this has been through creating an environment that is conducive to open and honest academic and meaningful dialogue: a ‘safe space’. These ‘safe spaces’ allow all students to participate at the level they feel comfortable with, to be able to share ideas and thinking in an environment where challenging and controversial issues may be discussed in an inclusive and sensitive yet critical manner. On this note, I always stress that we need to go beyond the ‘politically correct’ and that if errors or mistakes are made – for example using the wrong terminology in a discussion – then we are in an environment where students can be made aware rather than reprimanded or corrected. This in itself is a learning experience for many, but can only exist if the learning environment is non-confrontational and non-threatening.

In providing this brief overview, there are no ‘off the shelf’ or ‘one size fits all’ approaches available to teaching Islamophobia. While I have focused primarily on teaching Islamophobia in a social science context in this article, the recent edited collection by Sayyid and Vakil (2010) highlights that the topic has a much wider resonance and intersection with other disciplines and subjects: in Sport, Law, Geography, History, Politics and more. On the one hand, teaching Islamophobia will always be for some a controversial and contested topic; one that some within the academic sphere will dismiss and reject in much the same way the phenomenon is dismissed and rejected by some in the social and political spaces. But on the other hand – and this is where where the real opportunity and value lies – teaching Islamophobia offers very real and tangible opportunities. It allows academics to engage in and help shape understanding and learning about a relatively new and under-researched phenomenon: as a reminder, the term ‘Islamophobia’ has only been in the popular lexicon for the past 20 years or so. It allows academics to innovate in relation to their teaching; to explore new methods, experiment with different approaches, and to facilitate learning by using a diverse range of contemporary resources.

And as the EMR highlighted, it also provides academics with the opportunity to make a very real contribution towards combating potentially the most dangerous and insidious discriminatory phenomenon in today’s Britain.

2 http://tinyurl.com/2g9s76q
3 http://tinyurl.com/68tj30q
4 Rose, F. (2005) ‘Muhammeda amrjyt. Jyllands-Posten, 30 September; since publication the link to the relevant pages has been removed from the internet.’
Teaching Resources

Fils

Bibliography

Developing approaches that support the study of Islam within social science curricula

Professional development opportunities

C-SAP has long aimed to provide and enable professional development opportunities for social science staff to extend and share materials for teaching. Our own experience of working with C-SAP (formerly one of 24 HEA subject centres) for over ten years now has been that it is through this active renewal of skills and knowledge that teaching staff can enhance their own didactic work and the students’ learning experience. As part of the Islamic Studies Network project to support learning and teaching, we have been offering opportunities to improve on already-known skills, as well as to learn or share new techniques and approaches to teaching about Islam. We have run workshops and mini conferences to help support teaching staff within the social sciences to network and to become empowered, confident and enthusiastic about teaching in a wide range of areas about Islam and Muslim cultures.

We have seen professional development as a combination of formal and informal learning opportunities for staff. Not only have these opportunities been meaningful to those involved, but have also been transferrable and applicable to specific areas of interest. We believe this is critical to allow academic staff space and time to explore ideas and share knowledge.

Enhancement in curriculum design

Enhancement in learning and teaching is “the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities” (Grundy 1987, 115). At the heart of this for us is curriculum development, aligned with continuous improvement centred on informed and committed action. This approach goes beyond being simply a set of plans implemented by considering curriculum to be “constituted through an active process in which planning, acting and evaluating are all reciprocally related and integrated into the process” (Grundy 1987, 115). Conceiving of this as ‘academic development’ and of all those involved (including teaching staff) as academic developers, places the emphasis on strategy that is co-ordinated and targeted with purpose, and activity that is inclusive and collaborative. Our approach at C-SAP has been underpinned by the view that continuous reflection and review of the provision that students and stakeholders receive is central to delivering a responsive, relevant and interesting learning experience.

Curriculum development has been regarded by C-SAP as something that is a shared and supported process, and something that holds the potential not only for improving the student learning experience, but for empowering staff in their ways of thinking and delivering their subject. Offering support to staff at all stages of the curriculum cycle is key to enabling teaching staff to engage, reflect and enhance their practice. Curriculum design is a means of challenging existing practice, allowing staff to think in new and different ways (new modes of delivery, flexible provision, capacity to match the diversity of student need, for example), as well as helping staff to consider how to incorporate key issues connected to Islamic Studies into their subject delivery.

Developing a resource base

For this Islamic Studies project, we sent an appeal via email to all those who had engaged with C-SAP’s teaching, learning and research projects over the previous eight years. A small fee was offered for suitable case studies by those colleagues who were currently teaching on topics relating to Islam within their courses. C-SAP’s convenors for each of the discipline areas for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics circulated this to their own contacts outside of the C-SAP network making the same appeal. Colleagues attending the May 2010 launch of the HEA’s Islamic Studies Network were also made aware of this call, and asked to circulate the case study pro forma among their own contacts and networks. On the basis of preliminary information supplied, one or two applications were turned down, and 19 were commissioned in the first two phases of the project. When the pro forma was obtained, the author of each case study was contacted personally, and clarification and additional information was obtained as necessary. The material was then summarised and analysed and each case study was included in the two published reports. The case study authors were invited to present this work at a C-SAP workshop that took place at the University of Birmingham in June 2011.

The study of Islam within social science curricula in UK universities

We used research by Bemasek and Bunt (2010) to indicate the relative paucity of modules in British university departments of social science that devote themselves in any way to the study of Muslims and/or Islam. Where this does take place, according to Bemasek and Bunt’s review of module descriptors available online, the pre-1992 universities tend to deliver the majority of them. Nevertheless, Bemasek and Bunt’s report showed the wide variety of topics that were covered in the few departments that pay attention to these topics. The database of modules developed by the Islamic Studies Network is now available online. It provides a very useful resource for colleagues seeking to develop new modules on Islamic issues in the social sciences. The case studies presented in the two published reports will prove extremely stimulating for social scientific curriculum development.

Volume 1 included these topics currently being taught in British universities:

- Fieldwork at a Mosque with the Bristol Muslim Cultural Association (Sociology);
- Muslims, Multiculturalism and the State (Sociology/Religious Studies);
- Ethnography of Muslim Societies (Anthropology/Cultural Studies/Religious Studies);

5 This may be consulted at: http://is.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/
- Morality and Belief in Islam (Anthropology);
- Anthropology of Islam/Muslim Societies (Anthropology);
- The Inspirational Night Dream in Islam: from the Qur’an to al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Anthropology);
- The concept of Islamic civil society in Iran (Politics);
- Marriage, families and Islam (Sociology/Anthropology);
- A Community of Inquiry: talking to Muslims (Philosophy);

Volume 2 added these topics:
- Bringing Islam and Religion (back) into Social Policy Teaching (Social Policy);
- Developing undergraduate students’ skills in qualitative data analysis through the exploration of online Hajj diaries (Psychology);
- The Messages Behind Imam al-Husayn’s Martyrdom: How Shi’i Muslims Commemorate the Tragedy of Karbala (Sociology, Anthropology, History, Theology);
- Forced Marriage: an issue for social workers (Social Work, Law);
- International Relations of The Modern Middle East (International Relations, Politics);
- Seminar on ‘War on Terror – New Racism or Security?’ (Sociology, Social Policy, Criminology);
- Western Studies on the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) (Religious Studies);
- Using of Wiki for Teaching ‘Islam and Modernity’ Module (International Polities);
- Seminar on Islam and Sexual and Reproductive Health Policymaking (Health Sciences);
- Families, sexuality and citizenship in Islam (Sociology, Anthropology, Politics).

We noted the relative absence of modules directly within Sociology courses, but took some comfort from the fact that Sociology is applied in courses within other discipline areas. Whereas Volume 1 contained several studies from an anthropological perspective, we saw less application of anthropology in Volume 2. We noted that the discipline of Politics is well represented in the case studies. It was refreshing to see in Volume 2 that Islam was a focus for a methods module – since almost every social science course has such a module, this case study should have extremely wide relevance.

What all these case studies have in common is the emphasis on demonstrating that Islam is multifaceted, that the practices of Muslims vary widely both within a society and across the globe, and thus students have to be encouraged to face the issue of interpretation at all stages of their learning. This directly links to the point, made by many tutors, that students must be encouraged to approach these issues critically, learning how to weigh up the various interpretations, and apply general social scientific theories and concepts in their analysis of Islam and the life-worlds of Muslims.

What are we trying to achieve?

It is important that tutors have clear reasons for developing a module in this field. In Volume 1 tutors explained what they wanted to achieve as follows:
- to offer predominantly white students new information about Muslims and Islam (Sociology);
- to broaden the study of Islam by placing it in the context of debates about race, multiculturalism and the state and applying concepts such as diaspora, identity and hybridity (Sociology/Religious Studies);
- to use ethno historic and cultural materials to develop an understanding of Muslim societies (Anthropology/Religious Studies);
- to offer analysis of an aspect of Islam that is hardly understood outside Islamic societies (Anthropology) to enlarge the coverage of the existing Anthropology course;
- to teach on a particular research interest (Anthropology);
- to explain the complexity of one Islamic society (Politics);
- to explain what is similar, and what is different, in Muslim and secular cultures (Sociology and Anthropology);
- to develop a ‘community of enquiry’ on contentious topics such as terrorism and the veil (Philosophy);
- to encourage interfaith understanding (Philosophy/Religious Studies).

In Volume 2, tutors said they wanted to achieve the following goals:
- to help students gain a fuller understanding of the dynamic role of Islam and religion generally in the satisfaction and promotion of human well-being (Social Policy);
- to develop students’ skills in qualitative data analysis while simultaneously fostering intercultural understandings of Hajj and its importance to practising Muslims (Psychology);
- to re-contextualise the tragedy of Karbala from being a purely ritualistic event to a morally appealing historical event accessible for all human beings, and achieve a more balanced portrayal of Shia commemorative practices (Sociology, Anthropology, History, Theology);
- to enable students to understand the relevance of forced marriage as an issue for social work practitioners while also making explicit the distinctions between forced and arranged marriage and challenging misconceptions about Islam being a central force behind forced marriage (Social Work, Law);
- to cultivate a critical approach to the study of the Middle East that recognises that Islam is ultimately what Muslims make of it under concrete international, historical and social circumstances (International Relations, Politics);
- to have students engage with personal experiences in order to gain greater understanding and empathy of some of the challenges faced by Muslims in Britain. The aim was to sensitise students to the political and social dynamics in post-9/11 and 7/7 Britain, and to develop positive community relations;
- to expose students to alternative perspectives and to enable them to critique stereotypes and prejudices surrounding representations of Muslims and Islam (Sociology, Social Policy, Criminology);
- to raise students’ awareness of a range of critical points so they could read and critically assess a western biography of the Prophet through Muslim eyes (Religious Studies);
- to create a ‘blended learning’ environment that promotes technology-enhanced learning, critical thinking, independent research and collective knowledge construction in the study of the relationship between Islam and modernity (International Polities);
- to have students develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role and influence of religion in social and reproductive health policymaking in low- to middle-income countries (Health Sciences);
- to give students a better grasp on how to apply a theoretical and/or conceptual framework to enable a sociological/anthropological understanding of society (Sociology, Anthropology, Politics).

In Volume 1 we noted a mix of motives: changing students’ perceptions, expanding the curriculum (often in an inter-disciplinary direction), contributing to social harmony, developing debate on normative issues, and merging teaching with research interests. In Volume 2, we saw an even greater emphasis on countering stereotypes, exposing the complexity of the Muslim world, and developing critical thinking. All of these are appropriate to a social science degree programme. Other relevant motives for developing this type of curriculum remain important: to enable the degree to respond to contemporary social and political controversies; to demonstrate the relevance of critical social science; to have an impact on social policy and practice; and to respond to students’ interests.
In light of the HEA Islamic Studies Network project, it is also relevant for social science departments to consider how to respond to HEA initiatives, which in turn reflect a steer from Government. The authors of the case studies already have a clear set of motives for their work; if the curriculum is to be developed in this area, colleagues have to be given the opportunity to consider their own, and their departments’ pedagogic and ethical motivations. In Phase 3 of our work we shall further concentrate on developing this work more widely across British universities.

Issues in teaching and learning

Each case study author describes in some detail how he or she set about delivering their course; again these deserve detailed study. Several general points can be made:

- Explicit or implicit in each case study is the recognition that this is a contested field, intellectually and normatively. Successful teaching and learning on this topic (some would argue on all topics) relies on creating a context in which questions can be asked and differences discussed with mutual respect. Understandably, students do not want to expose themselves to accusations that they are politically incorrect. The lecture theatre and the seminar room have to be places where inclusive dialogue can take place. Two case studies in Volume 2 specifically point to the tutor’s role in challenging, but not disempowering students. The ‘community of enquiry’ approach explained in Appendix B (section 4) of Volume 1 will be particularly valuable here.

- The European and wider, global dimensions of this field of study are apparent in both volumes of case studies. In a multi-ethnic society such as the UK, British citizens whose families originated in all parts of the world convert to Islam or have Islamic cultural backgrounds. Those seeking refuge here from Islamic countries bring knowledge and experience with them that is often new to their white, secular or Christian fellows. Settlement British Muslim citizens among our students similarly bring new knowledge and experience to their white colleagues. It is arguable that lecturers in social science courses have a valuable resource here, which they can only effectively utilise if they expand their own areas of knowledge to comprehend the life-worlds of these global actors.

- Some colleagues report that some students have difficulty comprehending the analysis of Islamic society being offered to them. This is clearly most acute when the students have little or no background knowledge to draw upon, and/or their common-sense knowledge is infused with the stereotypes they accrue from the mass media in European societies. An agreed aim of the social sciences is critically to examine common-sense knowledge. Clearly, those students who take the trouble to study reading materials provided before the class are much more likely to benefit from the discussion. How to achieve those study habits among all students is perhaps the perennial question for all tutors in all subjects.

- The problem of comprehension is compounded by the paucity of published material in this field written with the needs of secular, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or Christian students in mind. Curriculum development in this area urgently needs to consider the production of readers and other teaching materials geared to the needs of those unfamiliar with Islam and Muslim societies.

- Providing an excellent starting point for teachers new to this field, most case studies include a bibliography prepared for the course described; these serve as invaluable stand-alone resources for colleagues undertaking curriculum development in this area of study.

- Successful classes seem to utilise accessible materials, particularly those with a personal focus. Volume 1 case study authors reported the use of published speeches, videos of people encountered in the field, TV documentaries, and perhaps most successful of all, a field trip to a local Mosque, where white students meet a local Muslim for, in most cases, the very first time. In Volume 2, tutors point out that using their own experience (as in the Hajj diaries) was well received by students, as were the results of their own fieldwork.

- Each case study includes bullet points of ‘what worked well’ and what concerns were raised by the teaching process, which provides a useful summary of the learning process.

Conclusion and further plans

These case studies provide much detail on how topics – some specific, some more general – of interest to social scientists have been developed with the aim of scrutinising Islam and Muslims all over the globe. Individually, they will inspire other social scientists seeking to enter this field and develop their curricula; collectively they provide a resource for whole departments to review the balance of topics offered within their course. The Higher Education Academy’s Islamic Studies Network initiative has been spurred by the recognition that Islam as a religion and Muslims as a large proportion of the world’s population are topics of enormous importance, which should be fully incorporated into the courses offered across British higher education institutions. It is perhaps surprising how few modules there are within the social sciences that focus on Islam and/or Muslims, given their geopolitical significance and that the social sciences claim critically to scrutinise society in all its fascinating complexity. This report has has sought to initiate discussion on further development of this curriculum area.

Picking up on the recommendations in Volume 1, in Phase 3 (2011-12) of this project we aim to:

- continue our work to form a network of social scientists whose teaching already focuses on Islam and Muslims;
- share the best practice through this Social Science Islamic Studies Network and further develop its members’ teaching materials.
- Specific attention might be given to utilising the HEA Islamic Studies Network website as a vehicle for sharing existing materials;
- work with information technology specialists to develop web-based reflections on teaching and learning about Islam in the social sciences, utilising students’ and tutors’ current experiences;
- contact heads of all university social science departments to seek their support for regional events involving their staff, led by members of the Social Science Islamic Studies Network, aiming to extend the number of courses that focus on Islam and Muslims.

We welcome comments from colleagues in all discipline areas on these case studies and on the observations made here.

Bibliography


Interview with Professor M.A.S. Abdel Haleem

M.A.S. Abdel Haleem is the King Fahd Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. He is the author of the current translation of the Qur'an published by Oxford University Press and is one of the most senior academic scholars of the Qur'an in the world. He is interviewed by Ramon Harvey, who is currently a PhD candidate at SOAS, researching the concept of justice in the Qur'an under the supervision of Professor Abdel Haleem.

Ramon Harvey
PhD candidate
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

Your dedication to Islamic knowledge has taken you from Egypt to the UK, and from memorising the Qur'an in the traditional manner to founding the only specialised academic journal focused upon its study. Do you have any reflections about this journey you would like to share?

The first key milestone was learning the Qur'an by heart. This was in the village school, the kuttab. It is called. You go there from the age of five – and in the village time didn’t matter, you can be there for as long as you like – I think I must have finished by the age of ten or eleven. Learning the Qur'an of course was the most fundamental thing in my life, because it governed my career after that. I learnt it all by heart, which meant I was qualified to go to the al-Azhar school, in our area of Egypt called Zagazig in the eastern part of the delta, for nine years to study Arabic and Islamic Studies. The interesting thing was that at the end of every year they had to examine you, in an oral examination of many things, but first of all was the Qur'an, to make sure you hadn’t forgotten it. In addition to this – and this is what made me able to now to know the Qur'an by heart – my father made me promise that I would read something of the Qur'an every day.

Then I went to Cairo University and there was a big change there, because in addition to Arabic and Islamic Studies we had scholars who were educated in France and Britain, so we had comparative literature, modern poetry – Romanticism was a very important subject – and modern literary criticism. It was amazing for me when the professor of comparative literature introduced us to the Greek mythology. That experience shaped my future in that I have two sides to my character: one purely Arabic and Islamic; the other able to feel at home with the English and European literature and way of thinking. That helped me, otherwise I would have remained a shykh in the old sense, and it must have widened my outlook and perspective. I could have been very conservative, but I am not. It enabled me to open up to others and I feel you gain more by listening to other people and knowing about them. I am now involved in interfaith relations for instance, and I was given the OBE for service to both Arabic literature and interfaith understanding.

When I finished the four years in Cairo University – again being one of the top students – it was taken for granted that I would be appointed in the faculty and then sent abroad for a PhD. I was sent here, to this country, and I worked on modern Egyptian poetry at Cambridge University; this consolidated the linguistic and literary aspects of my training.

When I came to SOAS, I taught mainly Arabic language and literature. But then, there was a change, when I realised that there were people in western universities who leave their subject and come to write about the Qur'an. I said to myself, “Well I know the Qur'an by heart, I have been in that life, I have to concentrate on Islamic Studies now.” That led to the establishment of the King Fahd Chair in Islamic Studies in 1995.

There is one thing I would like to say about the mixture of disciplines in my education. It made me concentrate within the Qur'an, more on its language and style. I consider this the most basic thing. If you want to understand the Qur'an well, you will have to read the text very closely and understand the language and style, or the linguistic habits, then you can produce new research. If I have done anything in Qur'anic Studies, this is the central core of it.

You are currently King Fahd Professor of Islamic Studies at SOAS and Director of the Centre of Islamic Studies. What have been the challenges and highlights of the role?

One very important thing in my thinking has been how to bring together the scholars of the Qur'an in the Muslim world who were writing for themselves and western scholars who were also writing for their own audience. So we had the two of them away from each other, sometimes knowing nothing about each other. That was a challenge for me. I wanted to do something about this and I have done something: the Journal of Qur'anic Studies. This journal aims to bring scholars from the two traditions to work together, publish together, meet each other at the related conference, and to learn from each other. I also consider the journal to be one of my great highlights here, since I was appointed Professor of Islamic Studies.

Also very important, has been the MA in Islamic Studies, which I created at the same time as the establishment of the Centre of Islamic Studies in 1995-96. This incorporated a solid base in Qur'an, Hadith and Arabic texts, while being open to modern studies, so you have modules such as ‘Modern Trends in Islam’, you have politics, economics and so forth, I see this as the future. It also fulfilled the same aim of bringing together people from different disciplines, different areas of the Muslim world and different schools of thought.

Other highlights have included the London Qur'an Series, which has published translations of seminal works by the scholar M.A. Draz, as well as something called the Distinguished Speakers Series. As part of this, I brought over the head of the Coptic Church in Egypt. I am Egyptian myself and I thought, “This is the School of Oriental and African Studies. Egypt is the only country that exists in Africa and Asia.” So we invited the Pope of the Coptic Church and it was a very great success. Also, of course, my translation of the Qur'an, the Dictionary of the Qur'an, and a new series of PhD scholarships, which we are currently in the process of organising. I am from now on to try to find money for bright ideas.

You are probably most famous for your translation of the Qur'an. Can you tell us when and why you first decided to undertake this work and why you think it has met with such a good reception?

After starting the MA in Islamic Studies, and having students study my course ‘The Qur'an: Language, Style and Translation’, I asked a group of students here, BA, MA and PhD, “What do you think of the existing Qur'an translations?” Nearly all of them said, “We don’t read them. They are written in a language that we didn’t read at school, and we can’t read more than two or three pages, before putting it aside.” So I translated one page and gave it to them saying, “What do you think of this?” They said, “It is better, but it is still...” So I went on changing it, until they felt that it was very nice. So that is a translation based on market research.

Two things mark translations, one is the language, which tends to be overly traditional. Secondly and more important than that are the concepts in the Qur'an, such as wujūl, that is different meanings of the same word, according to the context. I have discovered that they keep translating the words kufir and kufr as disbelief, when in fact it isn’t disbelief. I can’t talk about a Christian or a Jew as a ‘disbeliever’, because these people believe in God. You see, you will have to find different terms than this.

The context of the verse is so important. I have found out, when the Muslims go wrong, and the non-Muslims go wrong about the Qur'an, it is because they ignore the context. I consider this crucial. I wrote something called ‘The Sword Verse Myth’. I have discovered in it that Muslim extremists and extremists amongst journalists and even academics in the west, both of them, stand in the same ground and use the very same tactics of wrenching a verse from its context and claiming that this is the Islamic view. I see now that an evolution needs to take place in Qur'anic Studies based on the context and on letting the Qur'an inform you what it means. Because I know it by heart, when I think of a verse I find that other verses about the Qur'anunderthe supervisionofProfessorAbdelHaleem.

Interview with Professor M.A.S. Abdel Haleem

M.A.S. Abdel Haleem is the King Fahd Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. He is the author of the current translation of the Qur'an published by Oxford University Press and is one of the most senior academic scholars of the Qur'an in the world. He is interviewed by Ramon Harvey, who is currently a PhD candidate at SOAS, researching the concept of justice in the Qur'an under the supervision of Professor Abdel Haleem.
same theme come to mind like a magnet. That informs my understanding.

When more study is done of my translation, people will begin to realise that more than just the easy language, which no doubt is very important for the readers, my translation of the Qur’an contains explanations. I have provided these through the introduction, through each chapter’s short introduction, and the footnotes, which give something people crave for, to show how things are connected to one another. Also literalism is something that has afflicted translations of the Qur’an for a long time in so many ways. My feeling was that if I am going to write a translation of the Qur’an into English, it has to be in English, not in Arabic English’, or Arabic written in the English alphabet!

Islamic Studies as a discipline has developed substantially during the course of your career. What long-term changes seem most remarkable to you and what trends have you seen emerging in the past five to ten years?

A significant change is that openness to the area studies approach has entered the discipline alongside traditional textual scholarship. This is the attitude now in the Islamic Studies Network: you have on the one side solid religious Islamic Studies, and on the other side, a numerous community of scholars, consisting of historians, economists, art experts, and so on. Both sides are useful, but we must have in this country, always, people who are solid in the basic religious and textual studies, as it was in the era of what are called ‘orientalists’. These people were good in one thing. They knew how to study texts. Even if I didn’t agree with much of what they were saying, I respected them for their scholarship on texts.

It is important to also look at what gave rise to changes, things like the Iranian revolution, 9/11, and the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis. They led to people taking more interest in the Qur’an and Islam, especially with extremists and terrorists being given attention in the media. That resulted in greater interest not only on the part of the media but also on the part of scholarship. So you have a number of encyclopedias written about the Qur’an in the past 15 years, for instance. The idea of ‘Clash of Civilisations’ led to greater dialogue and to interfaith relations, which is a very active movement at the moment. It also resulted in more people attacking Islam in the west, the media and others, and it resulted in the British Government taking an interest in Islamic Studies and wanting to know more about what is taking place. Thus with the involvement of HEFCE, you have the establishment of the Islamic Studies Network, which is a very great achievement. For the first time, we have a record of who is doing what in the country as a whole, contacts between these people, conferences and publications like Perspectives. Another trend is a greater number of second generation Muslims coming to study Islam in higher education, as well as someone like me, as a Muslim, being a Professor of Islamic Studies, and there are many examples like these. This was beyond anyone’s imagination 40 or 50 years ago. Also, the use of IT and digitisation of Islamic sources in the Bodleian Library and all the PhD theses written on Islam are all new trends that point to a new future for Islamic Studies.

How do you think that teaching and research in Islamic Studies at higher education level can be best developed in the future?

Hopefully, we will have more people studying Islam objectively. When 9/11 will be behind us for some time and people will get more settled in seeing the Muslim world as it really is, not as a threat to the west, but as a neighbour and a partner in dialogue and trade, we will have more objective academics working on Islam. I would like to see more Muslim, western-educated scholars studying Islam, as well as Islamic institutions like the dār al-ḥullūm add to what they are doing, so they can become part of the higher educational system in the future. Finally, we need to find people with creative ideas, and then find funds to put them into action for the benefit of Islamic Studies and for the benefit of society. We are all here as one community. What we need from now on is a new way of thinking.

Bibliography


Accessing Muslim Lives

Dr Siobhan Lambert-Hurley
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Accessing Muslim Lives is about improving the accessibility of autobiographical writings from Muslim contexts through translation and digitisation so that they may be better used for teaching and learning, particularly in higher education. Ultimately, we aim to compile about 200-300 pages of primary source extracts which will be made available in January 2012 through http://www.accessingmuslimlives.org as part of an internet-based collection. Students, practitioners and the general public alike will thus be given access to the wide array of Muslim lives – both male and female, historical and contemporary – represented in these autobiographies. The authors range from scholars, saints and socio-religious reformers to princes, bureaucrats, nationalists, educators, writers and actors. The project thus intends to provide a rather more nuanced version of the stereotypical depictions of Muslims and Islam so widespread in the current political climate.

So far, we have drawn on two main sources for our materials. The first is bibliographies of our existing undergraduate modules, ‘Muslim Lives: Autobiography, Identity and the Self in Modern Islamic Societies’ at Loughborough University and ‘Harems, Homes and Streets: Gender and Space in Middle Eastern Literatures’ at the University of Edinburgh. As most of this material is already available in published form in English or English translation, the major concern here has been getting permission from publishers to digitise materials still in copyright for open access. As we are only including short extracts from published works, we have sought to facilitate the process by convincing publishers of the publicity value of the website. This process is ongoing. Where materials are already available online, we will link from our own website.

The second main source for materials has been participants in the AHRC-funded international research network, ‘Women’s Autobiography in Islamic Societies’: http://www.wais.org. When participants were invited to offer materials from their own research that they would be willing to translate for the purpose of the website, the response was overwhelming. Much of this material, originally composed in Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Farsi, French, Bengali and Punjabi, can only be found in archives or rare collections and thus is especially difficult to access. Of course, the focus of this network means that most of these autobiographical extracts are produced by women. However, as this material is the rarest in published contexts, it represents the ighting of the usual gender imbalance when it comes to sources for Muslim history. It also means that this project will be able to respond to a specific challenge highlighted in previous issues of this magazine of making Muslim women’s voices more accessible.

The primary source materials offered by members of the network include:

- a 17th-century autobiographical Sufi treatise from Mughal India;
- an autobiographical poem composed by a former prostitute in mid-19th century Punjab;
- a number of 19th- and 20th-century travellogues from South Asia, Egypt and Iran;
- several memoirs serialised by female educationalists in women’s journals in Urdu and Arabic;
- the memoirs and prison narratives of Turkish nationalists;
- autobiographies originally published in French by feminists from North Africa and Mali;
- autobiographical essays composed by Egyptian poetsess, journalists and Islamist scholars in the 20th century.

We welcome further suggestions or even contributions of autobiographical extracts from Muslim contexts to add to this collection.

Islamic Law in the Law School: Implementing a New Pedagogy

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The project entitled Islamic Law in the Law School: Implementing a New Pedagogy focuses on the delivery of Islamic law in a law school; project leaders also seek to increase students’ employability skills by developing contacts with relevant practitioners in the field of Islamic law.

Islamic law is rarely taught by lawyers in law school and when it is, it should be taught in a ‘legal’ way, finding a balance between theory and practice. Law schools provide a professional training and have to develop an Islamic law curriculum that fulfils this mission. The School of Law at the University of Exeter opted to work on finding the right balance, with the support of the Islamic Studies Network.

Project leaders opted for an extensive consultation of law firms’ solicitors, barristers and law academics to draft the course syllabi that will be taught at the University of Exeter starting in 2011. These are ‘Introduction to Islamic law for lawyers’ at undergraduate level and ‘Islamic law and human rights’ and ‘Islamic finance’ at postgraduate level.

The first step was a presentation of the project to the Islamic Law Special Interest Group in November 2010. Academic feedback has been ongoing since, in conversation with universities such as School of Oriental and African Studies, Durham and Warwick.

The second step took place in July 2011 in Exeter and London: project leaders met with solicitors and barristers to understand their expectations and needs when it comes to Law graduates taking a module in Islamic law.

Two elements emerged: the first one is a real contribution from those consulted to practical case studies and legal decisions. We were advised mainly in relation to Islamic commercial law and family law. While it became clear that the former is particularly useful for addressing the expectations of students wishing to become solicitors, it is hoped that future barristers will acquire knowledge of both. The second element that emerged from the conversation is that there is room for further consultations with barristers but also public and administrative bodies in order to develop the practical side of the course and to further students’ employability potential. We have now agreements for three vacation scheme placements for next Summer and an agreement that some of the practitioners consulted will give talks in the class and will also mentor students.

The course descriptors the practitioners and academics worked on are now online for comment. The next step of the project will be to integrate all the comments in the syllabi in order to finish the first part of the project by September 2011. Suggestions, comments and criticisms from practitioners and academics will enable us to develop a course description that encompasses both the theoretical and the practical aspects of Islamic law.
Teaching the history of Muslim rural societies

Pre-modern Islamic societies were overwhelmingly societies of peasants, and the achievements of Islamic civilization depended, first and foremost, on agricultural production. Even today, much of the worldwide Muslim population is still rural. Most current teaching on Muslim societies, however, neglects and marginalizes the countryside. Apart from Bedouin nomadic communities, which receive some interest from historians of early Islam and from anthropologists, the vast majority of past and present peasant communities remain unknown to undergraduate and even postgraduate students of Muslim societies. Most courses of Middle Eastern or Islamic history do not touch on basic questions, such as the social and religious identities of village communities, or the peasant’s relationship to the state – questions that are central to comparable courses on European history, and which are crucial for our wider understanding of political and economic institutions in Muslim societies. This resource aims to fill this gap by offering teachers in Islamic studies cross-disciplinary educational and bibliographic resources on the history of the countryside in the Islamic world, delivered through a dedicated webpage. It offers a curriculum, suggested readings and bibliography for a one-term module, aimed at Level 5 (second-year) students, on the history of rural societies in the Muslim world. The readings for this module bring together papers from the disciplines of History, Archaeology and Anthropology. The module proceeds chronologically from the emergence of Islam, but also considers thematic issues, with focus on the peasantry and their relations with the state and transhuman communities.

The resources prepared so far include: course description, rationale and aims; suggested course structure and readings; suggested coursework; recommended bibliography (pre-modern); recommended bibliography (modern). These resources are available in the Teaching section of the ‘Rural Society in Medieval Islam’ website: http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/ruralsocietyislam. Through the integrated website, students and researchers will also have access to some of the output of the AHRC-funded project, including translations of sample villages, selected maps, and free access to a database of fiscal data collected from this unique cadastral survey. They will also be available on the Islamic Studies Network website and on HumBox.

In the course of the Autumn semester (2011), we will also upload to the website three, model one-off sessions on rural history and rural society in the Islamic world, which are to be incorporated into a general survey of modules on pre-modern or modern Islamic history. Such a one-off session would include a suggested PowerPoint presentation, as well as selected secondary and primary readings and questions for discussion.

Starting to study Islam

Most teachers of introductory undergraduate modules on Islam have probably at some point been shocked at the lack of general knowledge some students bring to their studies. Most of us have had the experience of marking work and thinking ‘how on earth did you get this far without knowing that?’ Although most of the work on these introductory modules can feel like undoing ‘misinformation’ about Islam, this is often related to a lack of core knowledge students have failed to pick up from school Religious Education, the media, or everyday life in the UK. For those students who arrive lacking basic knowledge of Islam even the many introductory texts can appear daunting.

The Islamic Studies Network has funded a project to create a web-based resource to assist students in preparing for introductory undergraduate modules in Islam, particularly though not exclusively in Religious Studies. The outcome of the project will be a series of activities, with multiple-choice questions and other tasks, which students can complete prior to starting their module. These will cover the basic information about Islam, including some key dates, key terms, facts and people. There will also be an activity to identify key countries of the Muslim world. Although primarily developed from within a Religious Studies perspective, it is expected that this resource will be useful in other subject areas where background knowledge of Islam would be beneficial.

The resource can be used in two ways. Firstly, the website can be advertised to students via module information and act as a stand-alone resource offered to students to enable them to gain confidence and check their general knowledge. Secondly, through provision of a printable certificate on completion, module tutors can use the resource as way of checking that students have achieved a baseline of knowledge before lectures begin. Students can have as many attempts as they choose at each activity, and the certificate will be for completion, rather than providing a grade of any kind. The intention of the resource is to build confidence, rather than identify weakness.

The resource will be open access, and it will be possible to request the quizzes as downloads so that they can be used in another form, or adapted for institution-specific purposes. Guidance material will be available for students and staff, including good quality links such as to HumBox: http://www.humbox.ac.uk.

The materials produced to date (which are very much still in the development stage) can be viewed here: http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/introductiontoislam/. Feedback and suggestions from both students and teachers would be very welcome.

Yossel Rapoport
Queen Mary University of London

Dr Melanie Prideaux
University of Leeds
In Viewpoint, Glenn Hardaker and A’ishah Ahmad Sabki tell us about their own experience of teaching and learning the Qur’an at the University of al-Qarawiyyin, Fez, Morocco.

In our time living in the ancient medina of Fez, Morocco, we embarked upon a search for excellence in pedagogy at the University of al-Qarawiyyin. Al-Qarawiyyin is a university close to the centre of the Fez medina. It was founded in 859 as a religious school. Al-Qarawiyyin is known to be the oldest continually operating university and pre-dates for example the University of Bologna (established in 1088). It remains one of the leading spiritual and educational centres for Islamic studies in North Africa.

Our intention, in conducting this research, was to understand traditional excellence in Islamic teachings rooted in knowledge and the sacred. There is limited research into Islamic pedagogy and even less understanding of the inner workings of al-Qarawiyyin at a pedagogical level. There are a few remaining Islamic universities that pre-date western universities and these provide an insight into early traditional teaching methods. In addition to al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, there are the University of al-Azhar in Egypt (established in 970-972), Nizamiyya Academy in Baghdad (established in 1091), and the more recent International Islamic University of Malaysia (established in 1983). These institutions provide an insight into the use of madrasa models in Islamic education. By gaining an understanding of the teaching methods of al-Qarawiyyin you can see how the madrasa has continued to be an important institutional model that is created for the purpose of education. Typically, madrasas are distinctive in the context of spirituality, architecture, organisation, and teacher-student relationship.

For the purposes of this research, a traditional definition of madrasa has been adopted where the madrasa is synonymous for education that weaves knowledge and the sacred as one. In higher education madrasas of excellence that still remain, there is a prevailing belief in the inseparable nature of intellectual development and spirituality (Nadwi 2007). From our observations al-Qarawiyyin teachers are versed in Islamic pedagogy from a very early age and as a consequence the methods and techniques are intuitive to their practice. At the same time, al-Qarawiyyin is open to modern technologies that support the traditional teaching style and curriculum. For example, the use of mobile technologies such as laptops is increasingly common in the madrasa. Drawing on data from our field research at al-Qarawiyyin in the Fez medina, we provide some reflections on the nature of madrasa education with a brief discussion of the characterising concepts of Islamic pedagogy and the implications for learning.

Reflections on Islamic pedagogy at the University of al-Qarawiyyin

The al-Qarawiyyin model

In 2011, we spent seven months living and immersing ourselves in the ancient medina in Fez, carrying out an ethnographic study of al-Qarawiyyin and other madrasas of the medina. The purpose of the study was largely descriptive and aimed to learn about the defining concepts of Islamic pedagogy. Our theoretical research has shown that teaching methods of particular significance are based on the characterising concepts of knowledge and the sacred, and on the development of skills such as orality (both seen as oral transmission from teacher to students and as a traditional mode for transmitting knowledge in the Arab cultures) and memorisation of the sacred text. Islamic pedagogy is understood by the way these aspects are woven together. We conducted daily participant

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Medina is an Arabic word for city but it has become synonymous with an ancient city. Fez is the largest medina or ancient city in the world. It is also a UNESCO world heritage site.
observations of ‘teaching circles’ over a seven-month period. The participant observation was achieved from engaging in the daily life of al-Qarawiyyin and from developing relationships with teachers and students of the university. At al-Qarawiyyin classes are scheduled around the five daily prayers, and the call to prayer (adhān) sets the rhythm of the day. The interconnection between the teaching circles and prayer is central to understanding the integral nature of the sacred in knowledge acquisition. Al-Qarawiyyin is an open and flexible space and has the capacity to accommodate approximately 20,000 people. Typically classes take place in the form of study circles of 10-20 students. The open study circles (see picture no 2) visually represent the intimacy of the teacher-student relationship and illustrate the traditional method of teaching that has continued since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The level of memorisation that students can achieve and the importance of orality in transmitting the sacred text is unique compared with most madrasas of Islamic higher learning. We will now explore the uniqueness and also commonality of Islamic pedagogy with modern pedagogy developments.

Madrasa pedagogy and the student learning experience

Even though the madrasa is a declining institutional model there is an invaluable insight that can still be gained from research into the concepts of Islamic pedagogy that represent the madrasa style of teaching and learning. Our observations found that Islamic pedagogy shares many similarities with the cognitive perspective to learning theory. Cognitivism, sometimes referred to as cognitive information processing, expanded on the behaviourist analysis, which is to examine a learner’s mental state. Chomsky (1962) claimed that higher learning could only be achieved through a combination of conditioning and the internal mental state of the learner, which he argued should also be analysed and understood. This view is extended by research into cognitive learning styles that also identifies the increasing importance of cultural sensitivity (Evans and Cools 2009). The notion of ‘conditioning’ and ‘cultural sensitivity’ can also be seen in the context of the educational environment of al-Qarawiyyin, where pedagogic strategies for influencing the internal mental state of the learner are adopted.

The physical environment of the medina in Fez that surrounds the place of study, al-Qarawiyyin, affects the curricula being offered and this complements work undertaken by Dunn and Griggs (1995) focused on cognition, learning style and cultural sensitivity. This is particularly relevant in the Fez medina with physical and cultural separation from the modern city of Fez. This is supported physically by the architecture (e.g. no access for cars) and culturally by the daily prayer cycle and the way in which this defines for most the rhythm of the day.

At al-Qarawiyyin classes are scheduled around the medina’s surrounding environment. The physical environment of the medina in Fez and is one of the few cities remaining to sustain this practice. The cognitive perspective adopted by many educationalists has similar constructs of importance and for some an acceptance of spiritual belief playing an important part in the cognitive learning process. The concept of self-efficacy, a learner’s belief that they can positively take action to manage a situation, was central to the development of the theory. In our experience al-Qarawiyyin we felt that the institution’s pedagogical model provides a unique insight into such an application, in particular, through memorisation and the potential for the embodiment of knowledge.

What is unique to the Islamic pedagogy of al-Qarawiyyin is the deep certainty of belief in God and this underpins the oral transmission, thus facilitating memorisation, and the didactic approach towards sacred texts. So why is this different from other religious traditions where there are many similarities; for example, the role of memorisation and embodiment in the Christian tradition or the use of study circles in the Jewish tradition? Al-Qarawiyyin illustrated to us some important...
aspects shaping Islamic pedagogy as understood and applied at that institution including:

- the immersive environment of the medina in Fez has been supported by the medieval architecture of narrow streets that has enabled a car-free city, helping the community continue to follow some aspects of a traditional way of life;
- oral transmission from teachers who are supported by scholars with lineage to the Prophet Muhammad at al-Qarawiyyin. This still remains integral to the orality that is represented by deep cultural ties and authentication of the spoken word;
- memorisation and repeated recitation enables the acquisition of knowledge and leads to its embodiment. From al-Qarawiyyin our observations illustrated how memorisation and associated repetition move the student closer to God. From a Sufi perspective this highlights issues of lifting the veils to the unseen;
- for students at al-Qarawiyyin the Qur’an transcribes the word of God from the memory of the Prophet Muhammad and his sahabah. This is fundamental to understanding issues of the characterising concepts of Islamic pedagogy.

Concluding thoughts

Our reflections are intended to illustrate the importance of belief in religious teachings and this is common to Islam and other religions. In addition our research and personal experience at al-Qarawiyyin provides some insight into the role of Islamic belief in the cognitive learning process that supports knowledge acquisition (Alavi 2010). Further consideration is needed into how Islamic pedagogy can support the cognitive styles of the learner in improving the learning experience. Both cognitive theory and the accommodation of cultural context are currently under-represented in mainstream Islamic pedagogy research and we hope to provide greater understanding in this area over time. Further publications from our research in al-Qarawiyyin will provide some light on the fundamental nature of Islamic pedagogy and its commonality with other pedagogical styles, and this should help in understanding the construct more. A greater understanding of Islamic pedagogy will restore the capacity of teaching to form the human person for this world and the next.

Bibliography


Review of Muslims in Britain: An Introduction


Gilliat-Ray’s book may be considered the first textbook about Muslims in Britain. Although it is clearly following a Religious Studies framework, it nevertheless can be adopted as an introduction to other social sciences and Politics courses, as it engages with social issues that are currently covered by many of these curricula.

The book is divided into a ‘historical’ and a ‘contemporary’ section, has an appendix for researchers that refers to non-academic sources for the study of Muslims, and a glossary. Gilliat-Ray is aware that her book has clearly made the choice to privilege the religious identity of the population it studies, rather than any other identity layer. Given the author’s own awareness of this bias, necessary to produce a book that is an introduction to the field, the reader is not deceived. The bibliography includes a number of relevant references in case someone wanted help in finding material relevant to the issues discussed on ethnic distinctions.

The glossary is not as helpful as it could have been as it does not contain, in my opinion, the terms that are likely to confuse students coming to this field of study for the first time. For instance, no definition of ‘Deobandi’ or ‘Barelwi’ is provided, in spite of this distinction becoming more present in journal articles related to Muslims in Britain. One can argue that a quick web search could serve the same purpose, but of course the material produced by the internet may be spurious and will not have the same reliability and critical eye as what might have been produced by Gilliat-Ray. This is a shame because it would have definitely enhanced the value of the book as a supporting tool for students who may use it as a point of reference when studying various aspects of the lives of Muslims in Britain.

Although the book focuses mostly on religion and is clearly written from the point of view of a Religious Studies scholar, it will be valuable reading for students in Sociology, Anthropology and Political Sciences as it makes a very useful background reading for contextualising most of the debates that are currently tackled in those curricula. The book, however, is just as much about the extraordinary (for example, the Rushdie affair) as it is about the ordinary (how families provide Islamic education to their children, for instance).

One of the major strengths of this book, which will also help use by students, is the integration of different types of sources beyond the academic self-referential. Thus we have in the appendix a list of sources such as biographies and films that have been used by the author herself to prove the dynamics of Muslim life in Britain.

A special chapter dedicated to gender and youth makes sense in the context of an academic world that is trying to compensate for skewed representations by the media. If lacunae were to be found in this book, these would certainly not be down to Gilliat-Ray, but to the fragmentary state of current scholarship in the UK, as the book well reflects whatever has been produced so far. So, if one wanted to know more about Muslim associations, for instance, they will have to wait until a study is published in Britain that goes beyond the usual suspects like MCB. At less than £20, this is a book that can be easily recommended to students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels as an auxiliary tool to make sense of the main debates on Muslims in Britain, and also to help them contextualise historically the issues that are now being debated daily.

8 sahabah were Prophet Muhammad companions. There were only a few of his sahabah that memorised the Qur’an and embodied it in relation to actions.
Events calendar

Islamic Studies Network regional workshops:

Research-led teaching about Islam and Muslims in Britain
Date: 11 January 2012
Location: University of Leeds

Collaborative partnerships for Islamic Studies in higher education
Date: March 2012
Location: London

Teaching Islamic Studies in Wales
Date: 11 May 2012
Location: Aberystwyth, Wales

The Islamic Studies Network is sponsoring cross-disciplinary regional workshops for those working in Islamic Studies and related disciplines at higher education institutions. These events aim to bring together teachers of Islamic Studies from a wide range of disciplines (e.g. Theology and Religious Studies, History, Politics, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology, Law, Business and Finance), and are open to both specialists and non-specialists who teach on modules related to Islam. The events will be an opportunity for practitioners to network, gain a sense of the different ways in which Islamic Studies is taught in a regional context, share practice, and discuss region-specific issues in the teaching of Islamic Studies.

Please register at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/islamicstudies.

For further information please visit our website or contact us at: islamicstudies@heacademy.ac.uk.

Islamic Studies PhD workshop
Date: February 2012 (date tbd)
Location: Aston Business School Conference Centre, Aston Triangle, Birmingham

This workshop will be an opportunity for PhD students to network, discuss their teaching and research activities, and address issues related to life as a postgraduate and beyond. Please register at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/islamicstudies.

(*) Please visit the ISN website to find out about confirmed dates

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