Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities

Mumtaz Ahmad, Zahid Bukhari, and Sulayman Nyang, eds.
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This publication, a collection of ten essays incorporating both quantitative and qualitative studies, has emerged as part of a lengthy research project conducted by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and the Center for Islam and Public Policy (CIPP) beginning in 2004 and concluding in 2007. Naturally, given the state of relations between the United States and those countries perceived as comprising the "Muslim World," as well as regular controversies and scandals relating to the American Muslim minority and those who purport to observe, study, and teach others about them and their religion, such a study is particularly welcome. The studies included are aimed at both students and specialists, not only in the field of "Islamic studies" itself, but also more broadly with regard to such related academic fields as theology and anthropology. Another audience is the more general interested reader who might wish to learn what may (or may not) have changed in that field attacked so successfully in Edward Said's great polemic, that its title *Orientalism* ultimately entered Islamic studies as a truly condemnatory and pejorative slogan.

As such, the reader will perhaps be both encouraged and disappointed by the state of Islamic studies in equal measure. Anour Majid introduces us to the history of the field in the United States by suggesting that the study of Islam's development is inextricably linked to the country's own history and self-perception, through the now well-established paradigm of "self" and "other." On the basis of this structured approach to history, American identity and its foundational narrative becomes "established as the antithesis of Islam, first the refuge of pure Christianity, […] then a beacon of freedom that stands in sharp contrast to Islamic despotism" (p. 2). Of particular note is his recalling of the history of African Muslims brought to the country as slaves, as well as encounters between the American navy and North African pirates off the Bar-

bary coast in the formative eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as key parts of this historical "othering." This usefully shifts the focus away from Arab-American Muslims and those of South Asian origin, who are all too often are seen by outsiders as the sole members of the American Muslim minority.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is, in turn, sharply critical of Islamic studies in the United States when compared to European universities. He also notes the neglect of Islam in Africa, alongside the historical impact of the cold war and the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the ensuing longstanding loss of the scholarly objectivism preceding those two events to the American Academy's generally formative role in producing a distorted and self-interested image of Islam and Muslims. John Voll, who continues the historical theme, points out the detrimental influence of the European colonial mentality's continuing presence in the United States as it became the dominant power, while interestingly using Nasr's own writings and lectures as a fulcrum around which to base his discussion of Islamic studies' further development and "signals for significant changes that would be taking place" (p. 34).

Farid Esack then describes would-be Qur'anic scholars and readers as "'Citizens,' 'Foreigners' and 'Invaders'" incorporating these unusual metaphors from Fazlur Rahman's work into an engaging literary style. He uses the theme of beauty and a loving relationship to describe the interaction between Muslims and the Qur'an, whereby the "presence of the beloved" text is "to be enjoyed rather than interrogated or agonized over […] For most lovers it is perfectly adequate to enjoy the relationship without asking any questions about it" (pp. 53-54). Saba Mahmood represents gender and anthropology, both of which are of ever-growing importance and relevance to Islamic studies. Her "reflections of an anthropologist" (p. 70) illustrates the increasing prominence of self-reflective anthropology, arguing that, for example, the growing presence of female anthropologists fundamentally changed how gender was analyzed, highlighting in particular the 1970s as a decade during which "gender as an analytical category emerged in the study of Muslim societies, substantially transforming the conceptual presuppositions of the literature produced on Islam" (p. 71).

The remaining five essays focus more specifically on the actual teaching of Islam in American universities today. Marcia Hermensen focuses on the study of Sufism and highlights the institutional and formative role played by key scholars, such as Hamilton Gibb and Franz Rosenthal, who saw Islam as a static essence that provided a unified lens through which to view the state of Muslim societies after the Second World War. In contrast, the so-called Patternist school and the subsequent interest in mythology, phenomenology, and traditional metaphysics led to the creation of institutional space for the study

of Sufism in relation to the other Abrahamic religions. Jane Smith provides intriguing insights into her own experience of teaching Islam in a Christian theological seminary, while Christopher Buck details just how extraordinarily politicized the study of Islam has become in the post-9/11 American context. He uses the dismaying example of the furore, and indeed lawsuit, aroused by the Family Policy Network (FPN) over the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's decision to include translations of the Qur'an in its 2002 reading list for incoming students.

In a similar vein, Faisal Islam and Zahid Bukhari present their findings derived from a survey of Islam 101 courses. They state that "instructors of Islam 101 courses are invariably drawn from outside the field of mainstream Islamic studies" and, as the editors point out, consider it truly remarkable "that most American colleges and universities have not yet found it necessary to recruit persons of high quality and training to teach introductory courses on Islam" (p. xxvi). Finally, Mumtaz Ahmad presents the findings of two focus groups conducted with prominent scholars and researchers as a series of "Conversations, Discourses, & Dialogue" (p. 219).

All in all, this collection of essays is a timely work of great interest to all manner of readers who are interested in learning more about this particular field. It has much to say about the state of academic research more generally in the United States, highlights the truly devastating impact of 9/11 upon the position of Islam in the American non-Muslim psyche, and provides grounds for more than a little disquiet regarding the state of relations between the American non-Muslim majority and its Muslim minority more than a decade later.

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