

## *Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports*

# **Confronting Challenges in Islamic Studies**

At the 2016 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) hosted the third annual Ismail al Faruqi Memorial Lecture. Delivered by Ahmad Atef Ahmad (University of California Santa Barbara), the lecture focused on the changing academic field of Islamic studies: where the field has been, where it is now, and where it should go in the future.

Ahmad began by outlining the history of approaching both Islamic studies and comparative religion in general. After decades of claiming neutrality, he believes that the field has now reached a new phase. “In the past there was an assumption that there is a neutral, global set of rules and tools that can help us understand religion, like those of philosophy or anthropology. However, over time we have come to realize that these tools are in no way neutral and come with their own kinds of baggage.” This failure of neutrality has particularly affected scholars of Islam, because “You find that Muslim scholars who take their primary sources seriously find the deck stacked against them, especially for those who are working in the West and trying to engage in conversations with other religious traditions.”

As a result of the realization that the tools of religious studies cannot be neutral, academia has undergone a significant shift.

The greatest achievement in North American academia is that we have been able to move from scholarship based on a particular ideology to the existence of due process. This is no guarantee of course that biases are removed or not present, but at the very least a scholar’s work will be judged by a selection of his or her peers and that he/she will get their day in court – and this is a significant step forward.

He then identified three problems that currently hinder academic work in the field of Islamic studies. The first is the bankruptcy of hypotheses, which results in borrowing conclusions from other fields.

We keep having the problem where studies are unable to present their own conclusions and therefore try to link them with changes elsewhere. In the past this was particularly related to trends in other religions, particularly when it came to the question of Islamic origins. Instead of taking Islam as it claims to be, there was a search for the “true” source or text, often connected to a heretical group within Judaism or Christianity.

The second problem is a culture of academic negation.

Connected to the first issue is that while we aren’t always very good at creating our own hypotheses, we are experts at criticizing the outcomes of others. This creates a destructive cycle where we aren’t producing anything new and are simply looking for weaknesses in arguments. Don’t misunderstand me, there is nothing wrong with criticizing the theories and approaches of any academic work and in fact it is welcomed, but the problem comes where criticism becomes the standard.

The third and final issue facing Islamic studies is the constant criticism of anachronism.

In Islamic studies we study the past. We need to understand that there is no such thing as a contemporary language that can convey the past. We are constantly re-thinking these ideas as we talk about them. Therefore, when we talk about a concept like the “state,” for example, the first complaint we often receive is “you are being anachronistic.” Maybe that’s true in the way the word is used, but the person asking the question must also understand that his or her own language is heavily anachronistic and built on concepts that have only recently – meaning in the last century or so – come to have the meaning that they ascribe to it.

During the lecture, Ahmad also emphasized the central role that Isamil al Faruqi played in addressing these problems.

Al Faruqi was the first person to challenge us as academics to view Islam as the culmination of the three monotheistic religions. In the past the view was to see Islam as the mother of all heresies, but when Al Faruqi began engaging Islamic studies particularly at the meetings of the American Academy of Religion, he demanded that we begin to take Islam seriously for the claims that it makes and as a viable methodology for approaching religion.

Following the lecture, the question and answer session focused primarily on the question of neutrality. Audience members seemed to be primarily concerned with the idea that if such neutral tools are no longer viable, then where in Islamic studies should we ground our work? Ahmad’s response was clear:

It doesn't really matter where you choose to anchor yourself academically and what kind of methodology you end up using. The point is that you are clear from the outset of your research where you have chosen to place yourself and that you are not afraid to take on the consequences – both positive and negative – of what you have stated. We need to acknowledge that when working in this field we have something meaningful to say, and we therefore need to speak with much more confidence about our work.

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