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## **An Accidental Theologian: Thoughts on Islam in Public and Private Religious Universities**

Amir Hussain

Loyola Marymount University, [amir.hussain@lmu.edu](mailto:amir.hussain@lmu.edu)

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## AN ACCIDENTAL THEOLOGIAN

### Thoughts on Islam in Public and Private Religious Universities<sup>1</sup>

**Amir Hussain**

**T**here are seven issues that I raise in this essay about the teaching of religion in general and Islam in particular in a university setting. They are: teaching Islam; the nature of the university; the normative type of Islam taught; representation; the political act of teaching; activism; and partnerships between Muslims and Christian schools of theology. I begin, however, with a significant amount of information about my own background. I do this not to be self-indulgent, but because I think my example is illustrative of how a good number of non-Christian students come almost accidentally to the study of theology. As such, it is an important preliminary to the issues discussed below.

In 1983, I began my first undergraduate year at the University of Toronto. At that time, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, I just knew that I didn't want to work in the same factories that my parents did. I spent summers with my father building trucks for Ford, and picking up my mother at the end of her shifts from the plant she worked in making fans. Those were the glory days of production, when, as Bob Seger sang, "The big line moved one mile an hour / So loud it really hurt." Working on the assembly line made me want to pursue any other line of work. However, if you had told me then that I would become a theology professor at a Catholic university in Los Angeles, I would have said that you were crazy. At that point, I had not yet settled on my major (which would be psychology with an English minor), but I had little interest in theology and even less interest in working in a religious institution, especially one that didn't reflect my Muslim background. In fact, I chose my undergraduate college (University College) precisely because it had no Christian religious affiliation,

unlike the majority of colleges at the University of Toronto.

It was through the study of English literature, specifically the work of the visionary artist William Blake, that I first became attracted to theology. You could not understand Blake's poetry or art without understanding the symbolic world that he had created, which in turn was deeply influenced by the Bible. At the University of Toronto, I was fortunate to be able to learn about Blake from Professors Northrop Frye, Jerry Bentley, and Douglas Freake. They taught me to value the power of stories, and to try to understand "the mythological framework of western culture" (the title of one of Professor Frye's courses). This of course started with learning about the Bible. In doing so, I realized that I also needed to learn more about my own Muslim religious tradition. At the time that my family immigrated to Canada from Pakistan in 1970, there were some 30,000 Muslims in the entire country.<sup>2</sup> There were very few mosques then, and fewer Islamic schools. Like many Muslim students, my first chance to learn about my own religious tradition was in a university classroom, in my case taught by Professor M. Qadeer Baig. I will return to this point later in the essay, as my experience then is still that of my Muslim students now, whose first serious study of Islam almost always comes in the university classroom.

In taking a number of courses in Middle East and Islamic Studies, I realized for the first time about the depth and breadth of my own religious tradition. At that point, I also thought seriously about becoming a professor when I grew up. As the first person in my family to go to university, I had never considered the possibility of becoming a professor, mostly because I had never met one, nor known exactly what one did. The university was very much a new world to me, and because of the kindness and patience of my teachers, it was a place where I felt very much at home.

I realized that I needed to enter graduate school if I wanted to teach at a university. I did a year of undergraduate courses in the study of religion to qualify for the MA program at the University of Toronto's Centre for Religious Studies (as it was then known). I was able to learn about the Bible from Professor Michel Desjardins, and about world religions from Professors Will Oxtoby, Julia Ching, and Joe O'Connell. A study trip that summer to Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan lead by Professors Peter Richardson and Bill Klassen allowed me to experience first hand what I had learned in the university classroom. I was hooked going into my MA, which was directed by Professor Oxtoby. Through accidents of history and geography (what religious people call "grace"), I also had the great privilege of being mentored by the greatest Canadian scholar of Islam (and one

of the two or three greatest scholars of religion) of the past century, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. He and his wife Muriel had retired back to their native Toronto following his retirement from Harvard University. For reasons still unknown to me, he took my work seriously, convincing me that I just might be able to succeed in graduate school.

I moved on to do a Ph.D. with Professors Oxtoby, Jane McAuliffe, and Michael Marmura, at what had been renamed as the Centre for the Study of Religion. That was my first experience with the politics of religious studies. To make it clear that what we did was the academic study of religion, the name was changed from the earlier Centre for Religious Studies, which might lead people to think that we were somehow being “religious” in our work. At the Centre, I was taught by Professors Donald Weibe and Neil McMullin about the academic study of religion, and how it was different from the teaching (or doing, for that matter) of theology. As a result, I became an advocate of the religious studies paradigm of a secular, non-confessional discipline. However, when I began to teach courses on Islam, I realized that there were no North American seminaries to which I could send students who wanted a more theological approach to their tradition. There was no Muslim equivalent of the Toronto School of Theology. Moreover, no matter how adamant I was that my courses on Islam were *about* this religious tradition, for some of my Muslim students, these classes presented the only opportunity for them to seriously engage with their own religious understandings. I would also argue that for religious non-Muslim students, my classes also allowed for them to add Islam to the list of traditions against which they had to define themselves.

This raises the first issue of teaching Islam in the university. I use a deliberate ambiguity here: although I strive to teach *about* Islam, I am aware that I also *teach* Islam, mostly to Muslim students, but to non-Muslim students as well. At the beginning of each course I ask students to say something about themselves, and why they are taking that particular course. Usually, a number of the students in my introduction to Islam course self-identify as Muslims, and many of them state that they are taking the course to learn more about their religion. With this, the easy dichotomy of religious studies versus theology becomes not so easy any more. The Muslim students are learning about Islam, but since it is their own tradition, it has a personal impact on many of them. They may have no other place to learn about their own tradition.

The second issue which is implicit above is the nature of the university in which we teach. I taught courses on Islam at three public universities in Canada

while I finished my dissertation. Two of them were large schools, the University of Waterloo and McMaster University, while the third, Wilfrid Laurier University was of medium size. My first full-time position was at California State University, Northridge. This is again a large, public, state university, with a diverse group of students. In all of these settings, the religious studies paradigm that I learned in graduate school was assumed. We were there to teach our students about religion. A number of our students, as well as our faculty, were of course religious. I was asked to become the faculty advisor to the Muslim Students Association on our campus, but this was seen by the university as “service,” distinct from the teaching that I was doing in the classroom.

I soon realized that as a Muslim teaching Islam, I needed to learn more about theology. In 2005, the opportunity arose for me to move to Loyola Marymount University, the Jesuit university in Los Angeles. Prior to this move, my only formal connection to the Catholic tradition was that I was born in a Catholic missionary hospital in Lahore. However, the move was an important one for me to make. Some four decades earlier, Professor Smith had gone from McGill University to Harvard University so that he could move from the particular study of Islam to the more general study of religion. For me, it was the opportunity to move from a Department of Religious Studies into a Department of Theological Studies. It was Professor Smith’s work that helped me to bridge the two worlds. He was also an ordained Presbyterian minister, and one of his most important books was 1981’s *Towards a World Theology*. That same year, he published a collection of essays about Islam in which he wrote:

I as an intellectual in the modern world have always as my primary obligation and final commitment my loyalty to truth—subject to test at the hands of my fellow intellectuals, who constitute, of course, the primary audience of every thesis proceeding out of a university. I have developed the view, however, and articulated it elsewhere at some length, that the arguments of a student of religion or of a particular religious or indeed any human community, should in principle be persuasive to other intellectuals, not only, but in addition also to intelligent and alert members of the group or groups about which he and she writes.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the move to Loyola Marymount also allowed me to learn more about the Catholic tradition, the dominant religious tradition in Los Angeles. Of

course, the Jesuit excellence in both education and social justice was also appealing.

The third issue transcends the religious studies versus theology dichotomy. It is what, if any, type of “Islam” is considered “normative”. Is the course taught from a Sunni perspective? How does one teach about groups that are marginalized, such as the Ahmadi community, or groups, such as the Nation of Islam, that are considered un-Islamic by many other Muslims? Is there adequate discussion of the Shi’a, who form substantial minority communities in cities such as Toronto and Los Angeles? Sometimes, there is a problem when some Muslim students do not consider other groups to be “Muslim enough” for them. Many colleagues report that some of their students were concerned when they were taught about the Nation of Islam, whom the students considered to be non-Muslim. I have repeatedly had the same question posed to me by students. When I mention to them that Louis Farrakhan has made the Hajj several times, an act reserved for Muslims, the students are required to rethink their position on the Nation.

There is also the fourth related issue of representation, especially the question of who “represents” Muslim interests in North America. There is a wide variety of groups claiming to speak for North American Muslims. Some of them are in competition with each other to claim an (or “the”) authentic voice of Muslims. One thinks, for example in Canada, of the struggle between the Canadian Islamic Congress and the Muslim Canadian Congress. In November 2004, the Progressive Muslim Union of North America was launched to the acclaim of many Muslims, and the concern of many others. Those of us who teach about Islam have to talk about these issues of representation. On my web page, for example, I have the following disclaimer to a list of North American Muslim groups: “This list includes links to various groups who consider themselves to be Muslim. I make no judgement about their Islam, but I understand that others may be all too willing to do this.”

The fifth issue is that of the political act of teaching, of when and whether to politicize certain issues—and whether any issue can be without political implications.<sup>4</sup> The first event about Islam that I co-ordinated at California State University, Northridge, was a showing of a documentary film on the national poet of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish. The film, *As the Land is the Language*, was made by an Israeli/Moroccan director, Simone Bitton, who spoke about the film that she had made. I deliberately wanted to have her as the first speaker, as she is a non-Muslim. I do not want to narrowly define “Islamic Studies” as a topic

suitable only for Muslims. There is a scene in the film where Darwish is reciting one of his poems and repeats the line “I am, and I am here, and I am, and I am here. . . .” Darwish is not at all an “Islamic” poet, yet the issue of Palestine and the Palestinians is such an important one to Muslims. At the end of the film, a number of students came up to me and said that they had never heard the Palestinian cause articulated before.<sup>5</sup> Now, when appropriate, I use some of his poems in class, particularly a few lines from “Identity Card” (*Bitaaqat Hawweya*), published the year before I was born, when Darwish was himself only 22:

Write down at the top of the first page:

I do not hate people.

I steal from no-one.

However

if I am hungry

I will eat the flesh of my usurper.

Beware beware of my hunger

& of my anger.<sup>6</sup>

How can we not talk about situations such as those in Palestine or Bosnia or Chechnya or Darfur in our courses on Islam? Of course, this is not unique to the study of Islam. Can one talk about South Asia without talking about the problems of sectarian violence?

What is unique to the study of Islam is that both the media and some university departments have taken a pro-Israel stance that is in direct conflict with the position taken by most Muslims across the world. To teach about Palestinians, therefore, and to question the pro-Zionist position, is to take a daring political stance—made all the more challenging by the fact that some conservative Christian groups in America, who now wield enormous political power, also hold a pro-Zionist position. To support Israel in university classrooms, therefore, can be seen as “neutral,” while to support the Palestinian cause can be seen as “radical,” and even anti-American after 9/11.

Tied into the political awareness mentioned above, there is the sixth issue of the sense of activism that I try to pass on to my students, something I feel much more comfortable in doing in my current theological setting. I often make reference to Muhammad Ali, and how he, as a Black Muslim, affected America. In the 1996 documentary film *When We Were Kings* (directed by Leon Gast), George Plimpton recalls his memories of the fight between Muhammad

Ali and George Foreman. In his reminiscences, Plimpton talks about a poem that Ali read to a gathering of university students. The poem was two simple words, and Plimpton claimed it was the shortest poem in the English language. The poem was “Me. We”. This, for Plimpton was the essence of Ali’s gift: the ability to make a connection with people, to transcend the “me” and get to the “we”. As an academic, I try to get students to do this: to think not only of themselves and how ideas affect them in isolation, but how they are an integral part of the world around them, to link experiences, to share them, to make people aware of how they are connected to other people. I also keep directly in front of me the reality that there are multiple variables in any analysis of human beings, and that while we may focus on race or class or gender for a particular study, we also need to be aware of how these factors (and others) interact in all of our lives. This is what informs my ideas of pedagogy.

As an academic, I rage against the immorality of the notion “academic neutrality.” All too often, we academics are silent when our voices need to be heard. We are, at bottom, afraid. It is Muslim theologian Farid Esack that has helped me to conquer this fear, to help me realize the links that I need to make my voice heard against oppression and injustice. One of the men that we both admire is the late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil. Archbishop Camara’s most famous saying speaks about the nature of telling the truth and making a difference. “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist”. This is also Esack’s gift, the theologian’s ability to ask the difficult questions, which are often the most basic questions. Why is there oppression? Why do we oppress each other? Why do we not link oppression on the basis of race with oppression on the basis of gender or sexuality?<sup>7</sup> Added to this are the recent calls for oversight on departments of Middle East and Islamic Studies in the guise of “academic freedom.”<sup>8</sup>

The seventh and final issue for this essay is the training in Islamic theology offered by Christian North American theological schools. One thinks of established programs at Hartford Seminary, as well as at the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. My own university has admitted its first Muslim imam into our MA in theology. This signals an interesting partnership between theological schools who have the experience and skill to train students for ministry, and Muslim communities who have almost no seminaries of their own in North America.

This brings me back again to my mentor, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. When he opened the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in 1951, he



was adamant that Muslims and Christians both be included. It is not enough to talk about each other, we must of course engage with each other in respectful dialogue and scholarship. This comes secondarily, I think, through the scholarly literature. For me, it comes primarily through the relationships that are formed in the university. I have spent what may seem to be an inordinate amount of space in this essay in mentioning my teachers, and doing so by name. I do this because I have had the great privilege of incredible teachers. I take pride in their accomplishments, of course, but I have no desire to pin their many medals on my chest. In no way will I ever be able to match their accomplishments. However, in some small way, I am able to pass their teachings on to another set of students. In remembering my teachers, I am reminded of the words of Bill Reid, perhaps the most famous artist of the Haida people, who passed away in 1998. The Haida live in what we call the Queen Charlotte Islands in the Pacific Northwest, but are known to the Haida as the Haida Gwaii, “the Islands of the People”. In a collection of Haida stories that he illustrated, Bill wrote:

I consider myself one of the most fortunate of men, to have lived at a time when some of the old Haidas and their peers among the Northwest Coast peoples were still alive, and to have had the privilege of knowing them. Protected by the sure conviction of who they were, they survived terrible assaults on the way of life which had served them so well for so long, and they responded to the rigours of an arrogant, often unfriendly, disdainful world with dignity and courtesy, embodied in inbred instinct for doing the right thing. I certainly shall not see their like again in my time.<sup>9</sup>

“Dignity and courtesy, embodied in inbred instinct for doing the right thing”. That sentence is just as descriptive of my elders as it is of the Haida teachers of Bill Reid. Unfortunately, Bill’s phrase “an arrogant, often unfriendly, disdainful world” is also an accurate depiction of many contemporary universities. I learned a great deal from my teachers, and one of the greatest things that they taught me was how to be in the world. To act, always, in a dignified and courteous manner. I usually fail to live up to the model that they provided me with, but I am so grateful to have their model to follow, and to pass it on to my own students.

## Notes

1. This article is dedicated to Coach John Wooden, in my opinion one of the most underappreciated American theologians of the past century. I am thankful to Professors Michel Desjardins, Crerar Douglas, and Rick Talbott for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.
2. By contrast, the last Canadian census of 2001 counted 579,600 Muslims in the country, making it the second-largest religion behind Christianity.
3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), p. 282.
4. This in itself is a contested idea. My own thoughts on this area were first influenced by Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra B. Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993 [1970]). I am indebted to Dr. Larry Williams of Surrey Place Centre in Toronto, who offered me his reminiscences of Freire from the time that Williams helped to establish a department of psychology in São Paulo, Brazil. Another important work in this area is bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
5. Not simply articulated well, they had never heard it articulated at all before this film.
6. Mahmoud Darwish, "Identity Card" in *Selected Poems*, translated by Ian Wedde and Fawwaz Tuqan (Cheshire: Carcanet Press, 1973), p. 25.
7. For two essays that discuss these linkages, see Karen Brodtkin, "Once More into the Streets", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25:4 (2000), pp. 1223–1226; and France Winddance Twine, "Feminist Fairy Tales for Black and American Indian Girls: A Working-Class Vision", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25:4 (2000), pp. 1227–1230.
8. For example, see the special focus on "Higher Education and the National Security State" in *Thought & Action*, Vol. 21, Fall 2005.
9. Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst, *The Raven Steals the Light* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996), p. 13.