

ISLAMIC STUDIES AS A UNIVERSITY DISCIPLINE: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Islamic Studies as an academic discipline is a contemporary approach of studying Islam. It is an [umbrella term](#) and draws on a variety of fields that include [Islamic civilization](#), [culture](#), [religion](#), [Islamic history](#), Islamic social sciences, Islamic scientific heritage, [Islamic philosophy](#), Sufism, Islamic Jurisprudence, Comparative Religions, Interfaith Dialogue, Gender studies, Islamic Economics and Finance, and Human Rights. With the tools of interdisciplinarity and comparative approach it sheds light on the multiple expressions of Islam as a spiritual tradition, the role of Islamic civilization in global history and importance of Islamic discourses in the contemporary world. The idea of Islamic Studies, in its present form as a university discipline, is of recent origin. It has roots in the history of interaction and interface between the western civilization and Islam, and in the intellectual and reformative history of Muslims in the modern world. Today it is one of the most well developed disciplines not only in the subcontinent but also in Europe and USA. The present paper aims to highlight the origin, nature and development of Islamic studies as a distinct and separate-though interdisciplinary, university discipline in its present evolution across the globe. It will follow the desk and descriptive method. The paper will follow historical and analytical methodology. The discipline of Islamic studies has evolved as an independent, multidimensional and global subject shedding its early orientalist influences and presenting Islam as a religion, culture and civilization. It, as an interdisciplinary subject, has enlarged its landscape for it takes on the continuously emerging contemporary issues, Islam and Muslims are confronting, by presenting alternative/s—discourse and solutions. It has great scope to present Islam as a universal message and bringing closer the 2 cultures and civilizations— Islamic and Western.

Keywords: *Islamic Studies, University Discipline, academic discipline, Sufism, [Islamic civilization](#)*

INTRODUCTION

Without going into the semantics of the term, Islamic Studies as an academic discipline is a contemporary approach of studying Islam. It is an umbrella term and draws on a variety of fields that includes Islamic civilization, culture, religion, Islamic history, Islamic social sciences, Islamic scientific heritage, Islamic philosophy, Sufism, Comparative Religions, Interfaith Dialogue, Gender studies, Islamic Economics and Finance, and Human Rights. With the tools of interdisciplinarity and comparative approach it sheds light on the multiple

expressions of Islam as a spiritual tradition, the role of Islamic civilization in global history, and importance of Islamic discourses in the contemporary world. It examines the thought of the key Muslim intellectuals particularly of modern age and their attempts to come to terms with modernity. The areas for consideration also include renewal and reform, the impact of colonialism and globalization on Muslim discourse, independent judgment (*Ijtihad*) versus emulation (*taqlid*) and issues associated with the civil society.

According to Prof Muhammad Mackeen Abdul Majeed (1928-2013), Prof. of Islamic Studies, at International Islamic University Malaysia, “the idea of Islamic Studies in the present form is of recent origin”.¹ It has roots in the history of interaction and interface between the western civilization and Islam, and in the intellectual and reformative history of Muslims in the modern world. The present paper is an overview to trace the development of Islamic Studies as a university discipline in the west and the Muslim world. The paper is presented under the subtitles-Islamic studies in the west, Islamic studies in the Muslim world, development of Islamic studies and conclusion with suggestions.

ISLAM STUDIES IN THE WEST

The study of Islam in the West has a long history in Western intellectual tradition. Over the centuries, scholars and thinkers worked to gain some understanding of Islam and Muslims. These efforts were always shaped by the worldviews and perspectives of the Westerners engaged in the study.² When the western civilization extending towards the East they confronted Islamic civilization. The western powers in order to understand, control and subjugate started studying Islam and Muslim culture. The early Western scholars of Islam were mostly missionaries with an often open and vocal opposition to Islam.

It was this framework that produced Orientalism, the approach and methodology of studying Islam that has been analyzed so penetratingly by, among others, Edward Said.³ The Orientalist approach to the study of Islam became the dominant perspective in Western scholarship during the first half of the twentieth century. It primarily involved text-based study and identified Islam with the “great tradition” of urban literate civilization in the Muslim world. It paid little attention to what were viewed as the superstitions and perversions of so-called “popular Islam.” In the West, the establishment of professorial chairs, journals, and institutions like the School of

Oriental and African Studies in London in 1917 reflected the dominance of the Orientalist approach to the study of Islam in the West until the middle of the twentieth century.⁴

Following World War II, scholars in the West began a major reconceptualization of the disciplines and methods to be used for the study of non-Western societies. The product of these efforts was the displacement of Orientalism by area studies as the dominant conceptual framework for the study of what had been conceived of as “the Orient.” During the twentieth century important Muslim scholars gradually became a significant part of the scholarly and academic institutions in the West. This was one of a number of factors that began the transformation in the West of the study of religion in general and the study of Islam in particular. These Muslim scholars made critical contributions to the transitions from Orientalism to area studies, and from theological studies to religious studies.⁵ Distinguished among them is Seyyed Hossein Nasr who entered the world of Western scholarship on Islam in the late 1950s.

In Europe Islamic Studies was given eminence as early as 1500 AD when at the University of Oxford, Classical Arabic and Islamic Studies was taught, originally as a sub-division of Divinity. With the advancement of the western civilization Islamic Studies also continued to advance and carved a significant space in their academic and educational domain. As stated earlier the Orientalists, the breed of scholars associated with Orientalism, studied Islam with polemical and negative approach but with the passage of time the approach modified into an academic and intellectual endeavor to understand Islam as an important religion, civilization and culture though biases and prejudices continue to exist. The remoteness of the Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world began to disappear in the nineteenth century. With this came increased opportunity for European scholars, missionaries, entrepreneurs, and travelers to encounter contemporary Islamic societies. In the 20th century, the Orientalism has by and large accepted the traditional account of Muhammad’s life, the articulation of the Qur’ān in Mecca and Medina, and the early formation of the Muslim community.⁶ Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Orientalist scholarship has continued to evolve in its scope, as well as in its understanding of itself. To quote John O Voll, “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the study of Islam is entering a new era. In many ways, the old canons of Western scholarship are being changed and challenged in the context of intellectual globalization.” Today we have departments and Centers of Islamic studies all over Europe and America. To name a few: The

Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter UK; Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Vienna; Freie Universität Berlin, Institute of Islamic Studies; Islamic Studies Programme, International Institute, University of Michigan; Islamic and Middle Eastern University, Edinburgh University; Deptt of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Warsaw University; Oxford center for Islamic Studies, University of Oxford; Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Helsinki, University of Chicago and Temple University in America and so on.

ISLAMIC STUDIES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

The rise of Islamic studies as an independent university discipline in the Muslim world has its origin in the intellectual and reformative history of Muslims in the modern world. “The most remarkable feature in the whole history of Muslim intellectualism was its flexibility and mutability within an area limited only by the spiritual and moral conscience of Islam”.⁷ Notwithstanding the intellectual differences within the Muslim society, the Muslim in their educational field made remarkable achievements.

For many centuries Muslim studies apparently preserved a certain freedom in the curriculum which included the theological, linguistic and legal subjects given at the mosques and also supplementary courses in philosophy and science. Well known scholars like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Imam Razi, Khawarzmi and al-Kindi who rose to international levels of scholarship, were splendid examples of the products of classical Muslim education.⁸

From about the middle of the 18th century, mankind as a whole was challenged by new economic, political and intellectual concepts. It was the age of machinery, democracy and free thought. Round the steam engine, the factory and the industrial town grew powerful economic thought. In the intellectual and spiritual spheres, a deep faith in reason which brushed aside the authority of tradition,⁹ inspired humanity into dependence on the discoveries of science. New concepts and norms of education arose and were embodied in the curricula of the modern universities. These stood in sharp contrast with the institutes of traditional Islamic learning, which carried the names of *madrasah* and *ma'had*. The result was a duality of the educational streams and the categorization of Muslim education into two, one restricting itself to theological

seminaries, with limited scope of rote learning and bereft of contemporary requirements. The other being totally reason based without any divine link.

DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC STUDIES

With the dawn of awareness the Muslims began to respond to the challenges in the educational field. Thus in the form of Islamic studies started and developed a particular approach blending the past and present, bridging the dichotomy. The quest and need expressed itself in the establishment of new departments or whole faculties of Islamic and Arabic studies within the framework of modern national universities. The universities of India took the lead which thenceforth provided for the award of degrees in Islamic and Arabic studies. Islamic studies was recognized as a subject for BA and MA for the first time in India in 1920 when the AMU was established and its Academic Ordinances included Islamic Studies as a subject.¹⁰

In our times, with rapid growth of universities the concept of “Islamic studies” as a university course is beginning to provide new avenues of knowledge and research. The university of Aligarh, Dacca, Punjab, Cairo, and Jakarta provide evidence of this development. While the universities of Malaysia, northern Nigeria, Ibadan, universities at Ankara, Tehran and Pakistan, and the remolded university of al-azhar is symptomatic of new trends.¹¹

Gradually Islamic Studies, particularly in the west, has also come to familiarize itself with the body of postmodern theory¹² that has so influenced the rest of the Western academy. Added to this is an increasing interest in interdisciplinarity, highlighting the methodological usefulness of disciplines such as literary criticism and anthropology for the study of Islam. This is no doubt indicative of a wider aim to end the former isolation of Orientalism and better incorporate the study of the Muslim world into the various branches of the humanities and social sciences. An important example of these trends has been the growth and success of women's and gender studies within Islamic studies, with more and more scholars and academic publications focused on the diverse roles of women in Islam. Also, in the face of worldwide economic crisis and slump Islamic Economics and Banking is emerging as a major field in Islamic Studies. Another promising trend has been to look at the Muslim world less as a geographical entity, but rather assessing its role in the emerging field of global history.

As in Europe Islamic studies in America originated in the tradition of Orientalist scholarship and Christian theology, with its strong textual emphasis but has gradually expanded to overlap the Middle East Area studies as well a number of humanistic and social science disciplines, especially religious studies.¹³

In the last decade scholarly interest in Islamic Studies in the west has mushroomed, particularly after 9/11, visible in doctoral dissertations produced on Islam and Muslims.¹⁴ Another indicator of scholarly interest in Islamic subjects is the percentage of articles in the flagship journals of various academic disciplines, like *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *American Anthropologist* etc. There has been a significant rise in the funding given to and the creation of Middle East and Islamic Studies programs in last two decades in America. Likewise, there has also been a distinct increase in the number of popular studies on Islam by non-specialist historians and members of the mass media.¹⁵

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

For a field like that of Islamic Studies ‘that embraces the culture and history of a billion people stretching across the Afro-Asian land mass with important extensions in Europe and now to an ever greater degree in the Americas cannot be overlooked. Prof Sayyid Hossain Nasr, Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, a stalwart in the field of Islamic Studies, and a mentor & teacher of many orientalists, correlates the development of Islamic studies with development of the Muslim world and its relation with west particularly America. He cites the incredible distortion of Islam as a major obstacle to greater communication and understanding, and hopes the development of Islamic Studies cannot but be the greatest benefit to both America and the Islamic world.¹⁶

At the academic level the first and most important step that must be taken in Islamic studies is to study this field within the framework of religion rather than as a discipline, which no matter how significant, is not concerned with religion as such suggests Prof Nasr. Although Islam was not simply the foundation of Western civilization as was Rome once Christianized, it was one of the elements that played a great role in the formative period of Western civilization. Islamic studies should therefore be taught in the light of that role as well as independent of Western studies.¹⁷

In the context of state of Islamic studies in America Prof Nasr states that the future of Islamic studies in America is not only a matter of theoretical or academic concern. The future of both the Islamic world and America depends on the knowledge or ignorance of the Islamic world in America. The incredible distortions of the image of Islam in the American mass media complements the lack of understanding of many facets of Islam by the “experts” upon whose views depend the decisions that affect the lives of millions of human beings. The Islamic world is too large and Islam too strong a force to be relegated to the status it possesses in the West and especially America. The destinies of the Islamic world and the West are intertwined as such that ignorance of one world by the other is calamitous for both worlds.

Notes and References

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<http://iiit.org/iiitftp/PDFs/Islamic-Studies.pdf>.

³ Ziauddin Sardar. “The Future of Islamic Studies”. *Islamic Culture*.

⁴ John O. Voll. 2009. “Changing Western Approaches to Islamic Studies”.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Prof Muhammad Mackeen Abdul Majeed.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Glossary infra.

¹⁰ <http://www.amu.ac.in/departmentspage.jsp?did=78>

¹¹ Prof Muhammad Mackeen Abdul Majeed.

¹² Postmodern theory is a broad and somewhat ambiguous belief system tied to the philosophical and cultural reaction to the convictions of Modernism (sometimes equated with Humanism). Postmodernism is the philosophical proposal that reality is ultimately inaccessible by human investigation, that knowledge is a social construction, that truth-claims are political power plays, and that the meaning of words is to be determined by readers not authors. In brief, postmodern theory sees reality as what individuals or social groups make it to be. <http://www.allaboutworldview.org/postmodern-theory.htm>

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr. 2009. “Islamic Studies in America”, *The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), USA.
[http://iiit.org/iiitftp/PDFs/Islamic Studies.pdf](http://iiit.org/iiitftp/PDFs/Islamic%20Studies.pdf).

¹⁴ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2008/re0708/rd07_08.doc

¹⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr. 2009. “Islamic Studies in America”.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Glossary:

*Traditional: A civilization based on principles obtained by Revelation and transmitted across generations. The developments and explanations of these principles also enjoying a general transcendental guidance and validity. The Prophet's (Salallahu alaihi wa sallam) declaration that his Ummah will not agree on error.

*Modernity: Rejection of transcendental guidance and in fact of all principles and *a priori* knowledge of any type and, description of Reality - limited only to Corporeal / Physical level - only by empirical study of merely the Corporeal or Physical level of Reality.

*Transcendentalism: The perspective that Manifest Reality has three levels of Being: Spiritual, Subtle and Physical. The basis of this tri-partite manifest reality is 'the Absolute' that completely transcends this manifest reality. Manifest reality is known by various forms of Intuition, Objective Imagination, Reason, Logic, Mathematics and Empirical study. The transcendental and absolute basis of Manifestation is known by Revelation and Intellection / Spiritual Intuition.