

ISLAMIC STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Four universities in South Africa offer Islamic Studies as a distinct subject. An overview is given of the courses taught. The article closes with an evaluation of the quite marked variations in foci and methods.

Introduction

The study of Islam at the tertiary level in South Africa began with the study of Arabic by biblical scholars who looked for clues to a forgotten Semitic tradition. Arabic, and by extension Islam, were thought to hold the keys to the world and culture of the Bible (Naudé, 1991). The second motivation for studying Arabic and Islam came from mission departments of theological faculties in South Africa. This was also the origins for the study of all religions other than Christianity in South Africa.

Since then, however, the study of Islam has grown enormously. It now forms part of the general academic tradition at English speaking universities. The study of Islam differs widely from one university to another. At some, like Rhodes University, the University of Natal, and the University of the North, for example, modules in Islam form part of the general focus on religions. The University of the Western Cape's Department of Arabic Studies offers a single general introductory course on Islamic Culture. At other universities, with which this article is directly concerned, the study of Islam is pursued at both under-graduate and post-graduates levels. The following account provides a concise picture of the courses on offer at the four universities in South Africa where an Islamic studies major may be pursued.

1. The University of Durban-Westville

The Department of Islamic Studies at this University, exclusively reserved for Indians, during apartheid, was established in 1974. Prof. Sayyid Salman Nadvi, who obtained his Ph.D. from Chicago University in history, was the first head of the department. This development at the university was promoted by a group of Muslims in Durban, led by the Women's Cultural Group and the Muslim Youth Movement. Working against the Muslim community's misgivings of teaching Islam in a modern institution, supporters of the formation of the Department were inspired by Professor Isma'il Al Faruqi of Temple University (Philadelphia, U.S.A) who assured them of the need for

such an institutions for the development of Islam in South Africa in particular, and the development of Islam in Africa in general.¹

The major focus of the under-graduate programme in the Department is Islamic history. A major in Islamic Studies consists of three full courses. Beginning with the life of the Prophet in the first year, the programme then covers a study of the first four righteous caliphs, the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, Islamic Spain, the Ottoman, Mogul and Safawids empires, and then finally the history of Muslim peoples in the modern world. The historical surveys include an examination of the political leaders as well as the contribution of the major religious figures of Islam. In addition to history, the under-graduate programme also deals with the basic beliefs and concepts of Islam, and the fundamental principles of the Islamic disciplines of *tafsîr* (exegesis) and *hadîth* (Prophetic traditions).

The post-graduate programmes includes honours, masters and doctorate degrees. The first consists of 4 seminar courses, including one paper in Arabic translation. Under certain conditions, the translation paper may be waived. The following areas constitute the seminar choices:

1. Life of the Prophet, Qur'an and Prophetic traditions.
2. Theology, philosophy and jurisprudence.
3. Sufism and political thought.
4. History of Islam in Egypt, Iraq, and Indonesia.

The honours seminars require students to compile a bibliography which becomes the basis for reading and discussing individually with lecturers. The masters and doctoral programmes consist of theses and dissertations written under supervision. Students at the Department of Islamic Studies have produced research covering the history of Islamic institutions particularly in Durban, as well as general Islamic topics such as Islamic law and *hadîth*.²

2. Rand Afrikaans University

The Rand Afrikaans University's courses in Islamic Studies are located in the Centre of Islamic Studies (established 1980) within the Department of Semitic Studies. According to its founder and head, Professor Jacobus Naudé, the study of Islam was not located in Semitic Studies because of its historical place in South African academia. Rather, it was deliberate attempt to prevent Christian misgivings of Islam, still considered a threat among some faculty members. The Centre of Islam Studies was part of a general trend among some Afrikaner academics to 'look over the wall' and break the cultural ghetto in which Afrikaners were confined.³ This has been viewed by some Muslim critics as a euphemism for a wide-spread attempt by Afrikaners to break the cultural boycott during the apartheid era.⁴

1. 'Department of Islamic Studies,' 3:8 (November, 1978), p. 9.

2. Information obtained from Assoc. Professor Suleiman Dangor 11 July 1994.

3. Interview with Naudé 30 June 1994.

4. Muslim anti-apartheid activists who have expressed this view also note the connection between pre-revolutionary Iran and the Centre. According to Naudé, the proposal for the Centre was noticed by the government representatives of the Shah of Iran in South Africa who promised to sponsor a senior

Nevertheless, the Centre has been interested in the study of Islam as an independent discipline, and not for its usefulness for Biblical scholars. It has also tried to provide an independent source of information on the Middle East with its *Midde Ooste in die Nuus*, a development which caused some consternation among Israeli supporters in South Africa who regarded the Middle East as their exclusive preserve.

In 1994, the Centre was joined by Prof. Abdur Rahman Doi. His presence has led to an increase in students, especially seminary graduates of the Transvaal *Dar al-Ulûms*. With both Doi and Naudé, Islamic Studies at the Rand Afrikaans University examines both traditional Muslim approaches to Islamic Studies as well the more critical historical approaches developed in Europe from the nineteenth century. Naudé called the classes of the Centre a 'laboratory of ideas' which need not 'cause disturbances in the community'.⁵ The post-graduate programme may thus become a channel through which modern methods filter to the future *ulamâ* of the Transvaal provinces.

The Department of Semitic Studies offers a major in Arabic at the under-graduate level. The Centre, however, offers an honours degree consisting of six seminar courses in the following areas:

1. The Spread of Islam
2. Qur'an and exegesis
3. Islamic Law (*sharî`ah*)
4. Islam and Politics
5. Life and work of the Prophet Muhammad

In addition, a research essay is also required. The Centre of Islamic Studies offers the masters and doctoral degrees consisting of theses and dissertations completed under supervision. A number of dissertations on Muslims in the Transvaal have been completed with the Centre.

3. University of South Africa

Two departments at the University of South Africa offer extensive courses in Islamic Studies. The first is located in the Department of Religious Studies within the Faculty of Theology. The study of Islam there is pursued in relation to the study of religions in general. The courses in the department strike a balance between the content of specific religions and the social and scientific theories pertaining to the study of religions.

The first year consists of a general introduction to religions and theory. For both the second and third year courses, students are expected to choose two religious traditions for extensive study, and one paper on theory and method to complete the major in religious studies.

The first year module in Islam deals with a study of the life of the Prophet and an introduction to the Qur'an. This is followed in the second year with modules on the study of Islamic law and interpretation in historical context. In particular, the legal

academic for the Centre every two years. The fall of the Shah in 1979, however, did not materialize in any benefit.

5. Interview 30 June 1994.

and theological issues in Islamic thought are examined in relation to the particular context of caliphs, sultans and *ulamâ'* in Umayyad and Abbasid times. The module in the third year tackles modern issues pertaining to the reinterpretation of Islam, and a study of developments in Islam in South Africa.⁶

The honours programme in the Department of Religious Studies also provides an opportunity to pursue specialist courses in religious traditions as well the theory and dynamics of religions. The Islam specialisation consists of an examination of Islam and politics, Islamic philosophy including Muslim philosophies of history, and Islam in Africa.

The Department of Semitic Studies in the Faculty of Arts offers a full major in Islamic Studies. The programme was initiated in 1989 after extensive consultation with the Muslim community. Farieda Mohamed, a lecturer in the Department, played a major role in the development and promotion of the programme among Muslims in Pretoria.⁷ From its inception five years ago, the course has tried to combine Islamic history and Islamic religious issues (Dreyer).

The first year begins with the life of the Prophet and an introduction to Islam, the Qur'ân and the Prophet's *hadîth*. History is taken up again in the second year up to 1800, covering the political and religious history of the pre-modern period. In addition, a study of the Qur'ân, the *hadîth*, and general Islamic literature constitutes the second part of the second year course. The study of the Qur'ân continues in the third year together with the study of Islamic law and philosophy. In addition, the third year also offers an additional module, where students may choose between twentieth Islamic history (including Africa) and modern Islamic literature. The major in Islam in the Department of Semitics has a central focus on the Qur'ân, in particular the work of Fazlur Rahman.⁸

The Department is presently preparing an honours programme consisting of 6 papers, including a research paper:

1. Qur'ân and exegesis
2. *Hadîth* Criticism
3. *Sharî'ah* and *fiqh* (jurisprudence)
4. Islamic Thought: Sufism and philosophy, Theology, or 20th Century Arabic Islamic Readings
5. Contemporary Islam
6. Research Paper

4. The University of Cape Town

The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town offers a number of majors, including one in Islam. The first year consists of a broad introduction to religions. The Islamic section has been taught by a number of individuals, from

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6. *University of South Africa Calendar 1993 Faculty of Arts*; interview with Prof. C. Le Roux 6 July 1994.
 7. Interview F. Mohamed 28 June 1994. Prof. Dreyer, who was head of the department at the time, presented the community's participation in the development and acceptance of the course as part of the University of South Africa's new approach to university education Dreyer.
 8. Interview Iqbal Jazbhay 28 June 1994.

Christian theologians in the department to Shaykh Abu Bakr Najjar of the Muslim Judicial Council. In 1986, Muhammad Haron and Yasien Mohamed from the University of the Western Cape introduced second and third year specialization courses in the Department. When student interest increased, the part time arrangement was changed in 1989 to a full-time status with the support of the Islamic Academy, a group of Muslim businessmen in South Africa.

The Department, in general, includes both theologians and historians of religions, and the study of Islam reflects both these approaches. An introductory survey of religions in the first year includes a three-week introduction to Islam. This is followed by four semester courses at the second and third year levels. Two of these cover Islamic thought including the Qur'ân, *hadîth*, law, theology, mysticism, and philosophy. Here, a historical survey exposes the students to the key issues in Islamic thought, and developments in Islamic ritual. Islamic beliefs and rituals are also presented in the context of the study of religions, as sacred texts, places, communities and the like. The two other seniors courses are surveys of contemporary Muslim societies in Africa and Asia, again focussing on both religious issues and comparative reflections. Students majoring in Islam are also required to complete one independent research project in an area of their choice.

The Department of Religious Studies also offers honours and masters degrees by course work, and masters and doctoral studies by dissertation. The degrees by course work consist of four seminar courses consisting of weekly meetings and terms papers. These are some of the seminar choices:

1. Readings in Islamic Law
2. Early Islam
3. Studies in the Life of the Prophet
4. Methodological Options for the Study of Islam
5. Qur'anic Studies
6. Islamic Philosophy and Theology

An independent research paper is required for both the honours and masters degrees. So far, students have undertaken a number of research projects covering diverse topics, from a study of adult Islamic education in Cape Town, a study of the *hadîth* in Bukhârî, to an examination of Badsha Peer's '*urs* (death anniversary) celebrations in Durban.

5. Evaluation

The study of Islam in South Africa, though limited in terms of the number of institutions, is varied in methods and foci. The courses, and also the research undertaken by Islamists in South Africa, can be divided into at least four broad trends. The first trend is the emphasis on the study of Islamic history, both of Islam from its inception in seventh century Arabia and of Islam in South Africa. The focus on Islamic history at the universities may be contrasted with the almost total absence of the subject in traditional seminaries in the country and abroad. At the University of Durban-Westville, in particular, the study of Islam was accepted by the *ulamâ*, the religious leaders of Islam, because it focused on history and not on the major Islamic

disciplines. History, it was believed, did not encroach on the sacrosanct sciences of the *Qur'ân*, *hadîth* and theology. This trend in Islamic history is duplicated in a number of Universities in the Muslim world such as Egypt, Pakistan and Malaysia. At most of these institutions, the tension between the *ulamâ* and the university professors is ever present. The result, at most of these institutions, therefore, is a fear to develop critical approaches in the history of Islam. In South Africa, this approach to Islamic Studies is best represented by the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville, but not exclusively so.

The study of Islamic history at South African universities has also been influenced by developments in the country. Islamic history strikes at the imbalance of general history taught at South African universities which has either ignored the Islamic peoples or relegated them to the dark Middle Ages. The non-eurocentric focus of Islamic history has made it part of the general indigenisation of history in South Africa.

Since the late 1970s, Islamists have also taken a keen interest in the history of Muslims in the country as part of black South Africa.⁹ (Bradlow and Cairns 1978; Dangor 1982; Davids 1980). Writing a history of Muslims has been one way of highlighting the experiences of black people generally. Since then, a number of writings, including some honours, masters and doctoral theses and dissertations, have documented aspects of Islamic history in South Africa. Most of them are uncritical narrative accounts of personalities and organisations, and rarely venture to engage critically with Islamic traditions, institutions and personalities. There are exceptions, however, which have tried to relate Islamic history to issues raised in international scholarship including African conversion to Islam and Christianity, power relations between sectors among Muslims, and 'imagining' new identities for Muslims. These are also bold attempts to relate South African Islamic history to general social theories.

The second trend in Islamic studies is a study of the major Islamic disciplines like the study of the *Qur'ân* (*`ulûm al-qur'ân*) and Prophetic statements (*`ulûm al-hadîth*). Here too, there is a general attempt to present an account of the disciplines as they took their final shape in the ninth and tenth centuries in Baghdad and the cities of Islam. Some departments, however, like the Departments of Religious Studies of the University of South Africa and the University of Cape Town, examine the political and social contexts of the texts and disciplines. For example, the emergence of *Qur'anic* exegetical tools, regarded as divine standards, are shown to be responses to less orthodox readings in the ninth or the tenth centuries. Or, theological arguments of predestination and free-will in Damascus are reflections of competing political positions between the rulers and their opponents. This approach to Islamic thought reflects the developments of critical studies of the 'Islamic heritage' (*turâth al-islâmî*) underway by scholars like Hasan Hanafi in Cairo, Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri in Morocco, and Muhammad Arkoun in Paris (Boullata, 1990) All these scholars believe

9. The interest in Islamic history in South Africa was cultivated by studies like that of Bradlow and Cairns (1978); Davids (1980); and Dangor (1982).

that an incisive critique of the Islamic disciplines must precede their use in the modern world.

South African departments of Islamic studies, however, also have protagonists in the call for the Islamisation of the social sciences, promoted by the International Institute of Islamic Thought. A number of International Islamic Universities, including those in Uganda, Mali, Pakistan and Malaysia, are based on this philosophy. Dangor (1989), among a few others, has sometimes espoused this international trend in South Africa. Islamisation believes that modern social sciences, based on Western models and assumptions, may be Islamised by drawing on the principles of Islam and the categories of traditional Islamic disciplines. A critique of western disciplines would uncover their approaches, at which point appropriate Islamic insights may be inserted to create new sciences (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1986).

The third trend in Islamic Studies in South Africa, headed by Moosa at the University of Cape Town and followed by Islamic Studies at the University of South Africa to a lesser extent, takes up issues in society like human rights and gender inequality, and subjects them to scrutiny (Moosa 1991).

Here, the Islamic legacy, especially Islamic law and theology, is critically appraised for insights to contemporary problems. Unlike more conservative approaches, however, Islam as understood by Muslim scholars is not uncritically accepted as a panacea to all ills. Fazlur Rahman (died 1988) is one of the major inspirations for this approach, and forms the cornerstone of Islamic Studies at the University of South Africa. Rahmanian applications in South Africa, however, have not yet been seen in print.

The fourth, and lesser known, of the trends is that of regarding Islam as a religion. Surprising though this may be, Islam has not been taken seriously by historians of religions worldwide. The Department of Religious Studies of the University of Cape Town, and to a lesser extent University of South Africa, examine and study Islam from insights gained from the study of religions. Categories in the history of religions such as sacred spaces, institutionalisation, symbols, rituals, and myths, provide keys to understand Islamic history and society from completely new *angles*. This area of study holds much scope for thinking of Islam as part of the religious pluralism of South Africa society.

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