Teaching Islam after 9-11 Colloquium

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Report

Context

This colloquium was organised by the PRS Subject Centre, and took place at the University of Leeds on March 12, 2002. It invited participation from Islamic Studies practitioners located within Religious Studies/Islamic Studies (RS/IS), and drew together a group of academics from the university sector.

Introduction

Following the events of September 11 2001 (‘9-11’), and the subsequent campaign in Afghanistan, new considerations emerged in relation to the study of Islam and world religions. This colloquium/workshop sought to determine the impact (if any) of 9-11 on approaches to the study of religion, and indeed to wider academic concerns. This was a rare opportunity for professional development within the field, and a chance to consider subject-specific concerns in the U.K. associated with the study of religion and Islam, outside of multi-disciplinary Islamic Studies, area-studies, and/or Religious Studies events.

No minutes were taken, and comments (unless stated) are not attributable. This report provides an overview of the colloquium, which had a broad and flexible agenda. The issues of debate included perceptions of ‘the other’, and the formulation of academic material in a rapidly shifting global context. This colloquium sought to approach these issues, with a view that sharing experiences may assist in developing a ‘way forward’ for those concerned within the multi-disciplinary/inter-disciplinary PRS learning environments.

Amongst the concerns that sought to inform this discussion were:

- Issues of pedagogy, in particular the subject-specific integration of electronic resources in the classroom.
- Perceptions of ‘the other’ in RS/IS lecture-room contexts (in relation to dialogue about subject-specific concerns), and how this influences widening access to the study of Islam.
- How lecturers present and evaluate course materials, especially those tackling themes such as jihad, martyrdom, and the place of religion in the contemporary world.
- Notions of academic ‘impartiality’ to world events of this scale in RS/IS, and whether PRS disciplines help to inform approaches towards these issues?
- Patterns of recruitment after 9-11.
Social concerns, including the attendant stress and potential psychological damage an event of this magnitude can have on students and lecturers (not just those whose disciplines may be ‘associated’ with the event).

Introductory Paper

Gary Bunt opened the discussion, by providing an introductory paper on 'Teaching Islam after 9-11', highlighting the above themes, and illustrating some of the resources and concerns. One area of focus was the use of digital resources in RS/IS to widen access to subject matter, and an overview of the application of these materials in specific research and lecture contexts was provided. There was a dialogue on subject specific issues, questions as to whether 9-11 had impacted on teaching, and discussions on various matters associated with pedagogy. There was a discussion on the role of practitioners in generating wider dialogue on subject-specific issues, particularly in relation to the media.

Short papers

Two colloquium participants kindly provided short papers: Ron Geaves discussed 'Who defines moderate Islam?', which was followed by a lively attendant discussion on issues of access, identity concerns, and the application of 'liberal' sources. Theodore Gabriel discussed 'Islam and the West', introducing significant themes associated with perceptions of ‘the other’ within RS/IS.

Group Discussion

There was a substantial group discussion, which raised issues associated with learning and teaching in RS/IS, and sought to chart a way forward for future PRS Subject Centre activities. The topics that were introduced included:

- How to maintain the agreed format and content of courses on Islam in the Contemporary World, in the light of changing global circumstances.
- Identifying the distinct contribution of Theology and Religious Studies practitioners in teaching about Islam.
- Networking opportunities for RS/IS practitioners, and ways in which participants of the colloquium can initiate future meetings and conference activities through PRS Subject Centre.
- Teaching different faith groups about Islam.
- The extent to which courses become dominated by post-9-11 developments (particularly politics), and the consequent neglect of spiritual sources.
- Different recruitment patterns, particularly the post-9-11 growing numbers of interested (and opinionated!) students within lectures - as opposed to those with no specific interest in the field.
- Opportunities for graduates, in particular Muslim students and their roles in Britain's Muslim communities and the potential for imam training in universities.
- Development of pedagogy, focused on specific needs of individual Muslim communities.
- Dialogue with Muslim communities, in relation to education.
- Research into participation issues.
- Reading the Qur'an with Muslim students at a 'secular' university.

Outcomes

Participants identified the need for a specific, follow-up conference based on the themes of this colloquium as necessary. This would seek to bring in RS/IS practitioners who had been unable to participate in this colloquium,
together with the involvement of those with specific interests in RS/IS and education. Representatives of teaching
groups and funding bodies would be approached. Given the themes of the colloquium, the conference would
encourage participation from educationalists (from school level upwards) and 'community leaders' from Muslim
communities. A key question would be how to widen participation from Muslims in RS/IS, and what types of
professional opportunities exist for graduates.

Other issues, which could form the agenda of the intended conference/workshop in 2003, would be:

- How Muslims teach Islam.
- Methodological questions.
- E-learning and digital resources in relation to RS/IS.
- The roles of Muslim teachers in higher education.
- Recruitment issues, including refocusing introductory literature to broaden RS/IS's appeal and encourage
  wider participation.
- Insider:outsider perspectives.
- Raising the national profile of RS/IS.
- Increasing participation in PRS Subject Centre from practitioners.

With these themes in mind, it is hoped to organise an event in 2003 through the PRS Subject Centre. If you wish to
participate, require further information, or want to comment on the above, please contact Gary Bunt.