Reflections on Islamic Studies in an Interreligious Context

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Abstract

In these reflections, I want to highlight some of the challenges and opportunities in Islamic studies in theological schools, focusing on the Center for Islamic Studies (CIS) at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU). I will begin with a brief historical overview of the GTU and CIS, followed by an outline of some of the institutional challenges as well as some of the personal challenges I have had to navigate both as the Founding Director of the Center for Islamic Studies and as Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Anthropology. Finally, I want to share some of the opportunities I think deserve to be encouraged, especially in the area of Muslim contributions to interreligious studies, dialogue and leadership, both in the academy across disciplines, and in the larger public sphere. These reflections are prior to April 2018.

1 Historical Context

During the first half of the twentieth century, several Protestant denominations and Catholic orders relocated their seminaries to Berkeley. Drawn by the proximity of the educational resources at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB), individual seminaries opened their classes to students of other schools, listed courses in multiple course catalogs, and shared library resources. In the early 1960s, theological education in Christianity began shifting from a denominational focus to approaches that were more ecumenical. Seminaries began to understand the advantages of working cooperatively to strengthen curricula and to offer advanced degree programs, and to promote ecumenical dialogue.

With this local historical background, a cooperative degree program was negotiated by Protestant seminaries resulting in the creation of the Graduate Theological Union in 1962. A couple of years later, the first Catholic school was admitted to the consortium, and in 1968 the Center for Jewish Studies was established. In the decades to follow, the GTU added several additional

academic centers, including the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences, the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, and the Institute of Buddhist Studies. In 2007, the Center for Islamic Studies was created as an academic program unit of the GTU. The Mira and Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies was inaugurated in December 2015, and both the Center for the Arts and Religion and the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences became official program units of the GTU in 2016. Today, the Graduate Theological Union is the largest partnership of ecumenical and interreligious theological schools, seminaries and centers in the country.

2 The Center for Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union

Founded in 2007, the Center for Islamic Studies has become integral to the cooperative ethos and interreligious engagement of the Graduate Theological Union. The CIS provides an academic space for research and scholarship on Islamic texts and traditions, and on the diversity of Muslims in their theological, historical, cultural and comparative contexts. It offers a certificate and master's in Islamic Studies, supports Islamic studies in the various GTU departments at the doctoral level, and provides graduate courses on Islam and Muslim societies for students throughout the GTU consortium and the University of California, Berkeley. The Center contributes to and works collaboratively with many GTU member schools and with a wide range of partners, including departments and centers at UC-Berkeley, expanding the resources available for classes, research, teaching, and public programs.

A recent study by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding estimated that 250,000 Muslims, across a variety of ethnicities and countries of origin, live in the San Francisco Bay Area where the GTU is located.¹ Our location positions us as an important place for deepening engagement with Muslims and the Islamic tradition in an interreligious context. The CIS attracts thousands of attendees from Bay Area communities to its programs annually, and since its founding ten years ago, has offered more than 700 educational programs, forums, and public events. Within this diverse interreligious context, the CIS is uniquely positioned to build bridges of understanding within and across religious traditions, through informed scholarship and teaching in Islamic Studies that fosters balanced perspectives and invites deeper conversations and reflection.

¹ See: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, "The Bay Area Muslim Study," accessed April 2, 2018. <http://www.ispu.org/public-policy/the-bay-area-muslim-study/>.

3 Institutional Challenges for Interreligious Studies

As the GTU expands its religious diversity and public outreach, and as it establishes programs and academic courses in underrepresented traditions, such as Dharma studies (including Hindu studies, Jain studies, and Indian Buddhist studies), Sikh studies, Swedenborgian studies, and Mormon studies, along with its continued support of Jewish studies, Buddhist studies and Islamic studies, it continues to meet new challenges. On the one hand, each underrepresented tradition has an immense task to establish and/or continue its academic and public programming within its specific tradition, including teaching about the diversity of interpretations and expressions within that tradition. On the other hand, there are many increased demands today by the institution and the larger public to include underrepresented traditions in various classes, to teach more interreligiously, and to provide interreligious programming. Some courses are collaboratively taught, modeled along the lines of an introduction to world religions, in which each professor teaches about her or his specific tradition or field of study for a week or two. Another model brings together professors from various traditions and across academic disciplines to collaborate in thinking through theoretical approaches and methodologies, identifying different pedagogies, and convergences and divergences around specific topics (e.g., identity, pilgrimage, war and displacement, environment/ecology, violence, art, law). Other models are more ministry-oriented and concerned with practical theology. But in an interreligious context, such programs must consider the diverse practices of other faith communities, including sensitivities around the intersectionality of religious identity and belonging with race, gender, sexuality, class, culture, ethnicity, nationality, language, and able-bodiedness.

As we move at the GTU and within the larger society from being religiously representative (multireligious) to engagements within and across traditions (interreligious and intrareligious), there is an even greater need to balance faculty time and scarce resources, particularly for minority faculty and those in underrepresented traditions, who are generally much fewer in number. Key to this balance are time-management and careful setting of priorities, as well as fundraising. While finding such a balance remains a major challenge for many theological institutions, extraordinary steps have been taken at the GTU to address these challenges by providing opportunities for collaboration in new ways.

Another challenge is presented by a changing student body that is increasingly diverse and non-Christian. Some students identify as spiritual but not religious; many are simply interested in religion as an academic study. Within this diverse student body, each student may design a particular configuration

of courses, finding a personal fit within what the GTU offers. The newly reconfigured doctoral program is a good example of how academic programs can be structured to advance research, teaching and interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching across traditions in innovative ways, attending to the changing religious landscapes in the United States and globally.

In addition to the academic requirements of teaching, advising students, conducting research, and publishing, there is the ongoing challenge of fundraising and growing the program. At the CIS this also involves recruiting new students, and building and maintaining academic partnerships locally, throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. This includes collaboration with schools and centers at the GTU and partnering with departments at UC-Berkeley and neighboring Zaytuna College (the first accredited Muslim liberal arts college in the United States). It also requires building public partnerships with Muslim organizations and among journalists, policy makers, religious leaders, state officials, and international visitors. The work takes place in a variety of settings, such as schools, prisons, social/media, museums and arts organizations, think tanks, non-profit organizations, and Muslim and other religious and interfaith communities.

Growing the Islamic studies programs simultaneously means growing the interreligious programs as we are in conversation with students, scholars and practitioners from different faith traditions. This requires thinking in new ways—about contextual learning and pedagogy, whether engaging religion in the city, or in sacred spaces; about the use of media in classrooms; and about models of online learning and immersion learning—all of which may contribute to the diversification and global reach of our programs.

4 Particular Challenges for Islamic Studies and Muslims

As we expand offerings in Islamic studies, there are numerous urgent demands in the public sphere, especially in an era of increased divisiveness, Islamophobia, and daily negative news stories about Islam and Muslims. The world in which we find ourselves today demands constant engagement, and ready, thoughtful responses to increased academic queries and public requests for explanations. Serious and pressing questions from media and the public must be addressed in a timely manner, and this puts us in crisis management mode. This takes an extraordinary amount of time, energy, skill and patience, as well as taking an emotional toll. There are also risks in scholarship, such as research topics (for example security and terrorism), and travel for research, which can make a scholar a target for particular kinds of scrutiny in the West and elsewhere, especially if the scholar happens to be Muslim. This has had a

huge impact on academic freedom for such scholars in the United States and abroad. Much needed critical scholarship on the Islamic classical tradition is too often eclipsed, while focus is centered on Islam and Muslims in contemporary political and media contexts. The ongoing global situation distinguishes the challenges faced by those in Islamic Studies from those in other disciplines and areas of study, for whom there is less political scrutiny of professional and personal engagements, and considerably reduces the time available for scholarship and publications.

I very often have to navigate being seen only through my identity as a Muslim. In other words, I must be saying what I am because I am a Muslim, regardless of my academic credentials or other subject positions and identities. This often puts me, and minorities in general, on the defensive, because we are trying both to attend to excluded histories, while at the same time often being evaluated on our “objectivity” and judged as not having a sufficiently critical distance from our identities. For example, in many of my discussions in and out of the class, when I am looking at the history of Euro-American empire and its continued violence in the world, my critiques are often viewed as coming from “Islam” or my being a Muslim, rather than, for example, my training in anthropology, or being Canadian—just go north to get a vast and steady stream of critiques of the United States! In my own field of working within contemporary Islamic studies, teaching on topics such as secularism, modernity, liberalism, war and violence, identity, media, art and aesthetics, Islamophobia, the politics of pluralism, religious formation, inter-religious engagement, and the diversity of Muslim expressions, I find myself needing to work within the normative frames through which Islam and Muslims are most often represented in the Euro-American public sphere and media. These frames are what I call the five “media pillars” of Islam, namely: 9/11 as the predominant temporal lens through which we approach Islamic history and theology and Muslims in the United States; terrorism and violence; Muslim women and veiling, and more recent discussions on sexual minorities; “Islam and the West”; and finally the Middle East as the geographical/spatial lens through which we view the entire “Muslim world,” focusing on politics.

5 The Five “Media Pillars” of Islam

5.1 “9/11”

The first frame, “9/11,” tends to be the most dominant temporal frame used in thinking about Islam and Muslims, most certainly in the United States. As Jean Baudrillard wrote in his provocative 2002 publication, *Spirit of Terrorism*:

When it comes to world events we had seen quite a few. From the death of Diana to the World Cup. And violent, real events, from wars right through to genocides. Yet, when it comes to symbolic events on a world scale—that is to say not just events that gain worldwide coverage, but events that represent a setback for globalization itself—we had had none. Throughout the stagnation of the 1990s, events were “on strike” (as the Argentinian writer Macedonio Fernandez put it). Well, the strike is over now. Events are not on strike any more. With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the “mother” of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all events that have ever taken place.

He goes on to say:

This goes far beyond hatred for dominant world power among the disinherited and exploited, among those who have ended up on the wrong side of the global order. Even those who share in the advantages of that order have this malicious desire in their hearts. Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is—happily—universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments in their very twinning of that definitive order.²

“9/11” not only becomes a temporal frame marking Muslim presence in the public sphere in the United States, but it erases the long history and presence of Muslims in the Americas, forcibly brought over during the Atlantic Slave Trade, as Sylviane Diouf and others remind us. It also erases the important history of African-American Muslims in the United States, central to understanding America and Islam in America. In addition, 9/11 becomes a way of thinking about the questioning of symbolic power—the twin towers as both symbols of global capital and a site of sacredness. In what now probably seems like a dated example from 2010, public debates about the Park 51 Islamic Community Center were often couched as questions of sensitivity, as if proximity of the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” would profane the otherwise sacred ground of the fallen twin towers. What is interesting here are the liberal markers we use to make Muslim public space thinkable and acceptable to a wider public: the mosque could not just be a mosque, for example, with a dome and minaret (though not essential or required features). Initially, the mosque only registered

² See Baudrillard's 2002 work, *Spirit of Terrorism* (New York: Verso, 2002), which when first published was often viewed as insensitive given how soon it was published after the events of September 11, 2001.

as thinkable because it was presented as a proposed community center, open to Jews, Christians and other faiths, with an interfaith center, art exhibits, a culinary school, a recreation center, and a memorial to pay tribute to those who lost their lives on 9/11. Even though the idea of Park 51 was modeled on the YMCA or Jewish Community Center, it was never quite accepted as a community center. Again, imagine if it were just a mosque and not an extended community center, there would likely have been even more of a public outcry. Indeed there was once the “Stop the Islamization of America” organization (also called the Freedom Defense Initiative), co-founded by Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, began calling it the “Ground Zero Mosque,” sometimes also the “Victory Mosque.” This was the issue around which we also saw the coalescing of the Islamophobia industry in their attempt to disrupt the 2010 mid-term election.

Public conversations are not only confined by how they are framed, but the discussions within those frames are further scripted. As the work of George Lakoff reminds us, “frames are the mental structures that shape the way we see the world.” For example, in the case of Park 51, there seemed to be a significant disconnect between particular and localized conversations about the architecture and logistics of the building (how it aimed to be the greenest building in New York City, the designs and aesthetics of the building, what the recreation facility would look like, etc.) and the public understanding that was focused on the politics of the proximity of the “mosque” to ground zero. If one only focused on the aesthetics of Park 51 or say, for example, the recreation facility they were hoping to have at the center, the general public would think these conversations odd, or missing the larger, national conversations about Park 51 in relation to 9/11, ground zero, and how shari’a was taking over. These are the scripts and codes within particular frames to which I am referring. If I were to talk about Park 51’s green architecture, I would be seen as an apologist, as not dealing with the “real” and wider public issues, even though much of my own interest in and work with the community center were concerned with these architectural and aesthetic details. Years later, the story about the community center (which was never built as planned) is hardly remembered, and when it is, it is usually as a national controversy.³

5.2 *Terrorism and Violence*

The second frame used to discuss, think about, and represent Islam and Muslims in the American public is terrorism and violence. We can hardly think

3 There have been many excellent articles and works, even a PBS film, on Park 51, but see especially Rosemary Corbett’s 2017 book, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service and the “Ground Zero Mosque” Controversy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

about Islam and Muslims today without thinking about terrorism, or constantly asking Muslims to denounce terrorism. Jihad, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, burqa, and madrasa are all English words now and most of the American public knows them only as English words. Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib—these are all the frames and archives through which we think about Islam and Muslims, consistently connected to violence.

Talal Asad's book on suicide bombing is instructive for its discussions on death dealing and the effects of different forms of violence—some forms of violence shock us while some do not, even as they destroy lives.⁴ I would argue along the lines of Butler, that in addition to Asad's discussion on the scales of violence, our different responses to violence are also related to whose lives count as lives to begin with. I would argue that some forms of violence are acceptable to us when we perpetrate violence on others (justifying it as being in their best interests and for the sake of freedom, democracy, and security). Yet, when these same forms of violence are perpetrated against us, we interpret them as the products of hatred, evil, religious fervor, fundamentalism, and terrorism. These forms of violence are also differentiated by whether or not they are state-sponsored. It is often the spectacular nature of violence and the lack of predictability of violence perpetrated by Muslims that is said to be the reason for such differentiation, but I would argue the endless "War on Terror" is also unpredictable and has killed far more people. To understand our differentiated approaches to violence and death dealing requires studying these phenomena both in terms of power and in terms of classifying people (individual or collective) as subject or objects, as victims or perpetrators of violence.

5.3 *Muslim Women, Veiling, and Sexual Minorities*

The next frame is Muslim women and veiling. We often talk about "Islamic patriarchy" as if patriarchy were intrinsic and limited to Islam and Muslims. Our concerns about women driving in Saudi Arabia, honor killings in Pakistan, or saving Afghan women (from the Taliban-imposed *burqas*—itself having a long colonial history), seem misplaced and excessive given the alarming rate of rape of women in the United States, or the fact that women are exploited by and enslaved to a multi-billion-dollar beauty and sex industry. Given the magnitude, scale and insidiousness of the exploitation of women here, one would expect to see a lot more national and collective outrage.⁵ It seems then

4 See Talal Asad's book *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), and also how Judith Butler takes up his points in her book *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009).

5 This is not to undermine the incredible work that has done to expose various exploitations of women in the West and their lack of rights, but my point here is that given the scale of rape, harassment, sexual exploitation, and exclusion of women, there should be more awareness

that the defining difference is that women in the West are free to choose (their exploitation) and women in the rest of the world (especially the Muslim-majority world) are in need of such choices.

The discussions marking and evaluating different societies according to the rights they accord their women and other minorities is now extended to sexual minorities, which Massad, Puar, and others have written about so brilliantly.⁶ Focusing on legal categories at the level of the state alone often misses out on accounting for the great diversity of lived experience, and hence the importance of looking at both. For example, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan recognizes the category of the third gender on national identity cards. Long seen as part of South Asian societies, *hijras* (as they are most often identified, and in Pakistan often as *khawaja sira*), are protected by the state, and can choose the category of third gender to identify themselves. (There are numerous examples of how Muslim societies have protected sexual minorities in various ways across time and place.) And among the most watched television shows a few years ago in Pakistan was “Late Night with Begum Nawazish Ali,” where the male host Ali Saleem, performed in drag the female character, Begum Nawazish Ali. Given his popularity, Ali Saleem now hosts his own show as himself. In light of such national and legal recognition, does this all of a sudden make Pakistan more “liberal” than the West? Can the West learn from Pakistan about gender and sexual minorities given that it is hard to imagine recognition of this sort currently in the United States? What about the fact that Pakistan has had a female Prime Minister?

The ideas we hold prescribing a state to specificities and scripts based on whether they are Islamic or not tells us little about the way in which people live their lives. The same is true if we focus on the *hijab*, or more specifically on Muslim women’s various forms of headscarves. Headscarves have been mobilized as a colonial strategy to secure entry into the Muslim-majority world, including the way the *burqa* was used to gain military entry into Afghanistan.⁷ Returning to my point about Pakistan’s third gender, notice how

and outrage in the United States, given we are so confident in moralizing about the status of women in other parts of the world, especially the Muslim-majority world.

- 6 See Jasbir Puar’s work, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), and Joseph Massad’s work, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015) for detailed analyses and critiques of how LGBTQ rights have been mobilized against Islam/Muslims, especially as they are used in civilizing discourses and neo-liberal and imperial practices.
- 7 See the many excellent works by Lila Abu-Lughod, Leila Ahmed, and Saba Mahmood, among many others, who have written and spoken so extensively about Muslim women, veiling and colonialism.

those transgendered men, or men who cross-dress as women, don't think twice about wearing headscarves—that is not their focus. My point here is that veiling by Muslim women has been taken up in the West as a major frame and focus, especially as it relates to rights discourse and legitimizing war, but that the discussion lacks the nuance of Muslim lived experience. Where gender advances are made in the Muslim-majority world, they are often ignored on procedural grounds, especially when Muslim women look to the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition for liberation and guidance in living more piously. Saba Mahmood's many excellent works help us understand these discussions in more detail, including the importance of rethinking categories of "freedom, agency, authority, and the human subject."

5.4 *"Islam and the West"*

The fourth frame is "Islam and the West" or the so-called "clash of civilizations." The idea that Islam and Muslims are somehow "foreign" to America and American values is problematic on many levels. As mentioned in the first frame on 9/11, first and foremost this binary forgets the long history of Muslims in the West, African Muslims who were forcibly brought over to the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade, or the long history of African-American Muslims. Or, in the context of Europe, we forget to go beyond the immigration debates to remind ourselves of Bosnian Muslims as Europeans. In this frame, the primary discussions generally focus on questions of democracy and freedom, and Islam's compatibility with the West in terms of values—reinforcing somehow that Muslims are less American or less European, returning to the language of "us" and "them" with Muslims having to prove their loyalties. The most insidious part of this, as we have seen in the efforts by Pamela Geller and "Stop the Islamization of America" organization, is that even if Muslims seem to be "good American citizens," they are not to be believed because they might be practicing *taqiyya*—a marginal concept in Islam that permits religious dissimulation if under threat (especially within the Shi'i tradition). Geller's group attempts to instill fear in the American public by stating that Muslims following "Islamic ideology" are appearing to be moderate and hiding their real efforts at exerting a "jihad" against America, which she and other Islamophobes refer to as "stealth jihad." An example of this, according to Geller's group is how "shari'a" is supposedly taking over the American legal system. More importantly, she attempts to show how Islamic values, laws, and traditions have always been at odds with so-called progressive Judeo-Christian civilization. Were it not for the millions of dollars being poured into funding the Islamophobia industry, very often endorsed by state officials, we might be able to dismiss such blatant Islamophobia, but unfortunately, mobilizing the

concept of freedom of speech and expression permits the exercise of such hatreds.⁸

5.5 *Middle East*

If 9/11 is the temporal frame through which we think about Islam and Muslims in America, the fifth frame is the Middle East as geographical and spatial frame. The focus on the Arab world and on Israel and Palestine is central to this frame, even though we know that the majority of Muslims live outside the Middle East, namely in South Asia, with the largest Muslim-majority country being Indonesia. While a focus on the Middle East may be relevant given the origins and practice of the faith (for example the annual *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca), and the centrality of the Arabic language, the fixation on the Middle East is usually tied to politics, oil, terrorism, and Orientalist fantasies, and is generally not about the profound intellectual contributions of Arabs/Muslims to the West, including the incredible history of Arab/Muslim contributions to the sciences, aesthetics, architecture and art.

6 Overcoming Challenges by Rethinking Frames

In class we unpack these totalizing frames and discuss how difficult it is to work outside of them, given the risks of being unrecognizable or apologetic. We often begin with the language we use, such as “progressive,” “moderate,” and “fundamentalist,” including unpacking other English words such as jihad, madrasa, Taliban, al-Qaeda—notice how none of them come up as errors in spell-check! We also focus on how to unlearn or challenge the predominantly Christian lenses through which we attempt to understand the Islamic tradition, for example, by not imposing the methodologies of biblical hermeneutics onto Qur’anic studies; by noting how religious norms are so often liberating in many communities around the world, by challenging liberal and/or secular norms and values, or by not dismissing feminisms that might base their liberation in the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition. Or, for example, when I am trying to get my students to think about how Islam is mobilized and instrumentalized in claims about “religious” violence in the world, I challenge them how not to think about Islam/religion/theology alone, but instead to focus on the historical, social, political and economic contexts, and the military industrial complexes in a globalized world.

⁸ See the report, “Fear, Inc. 2.0,” by the Center for American Progress, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2015/02/11/106394/fear-inc-2-0/>.

This takes a lot of imagination among my diverse MA, MDiv, MTS, Ph.D., and DMin students, who, even in their care and sensitivity, often find it difficult to extend themselves to think beyond the confines of Euro-American Christianity, secularism and liberalism, which present themselves as “universal.” Having international students present, or students from different traditions adds significantly to the breadth and depth of class discussions. There is also a difference in the way class discussions are experienced by Muslim and non-Muslim students, and those who are in Islamic studies and those who are studying other traditions or from different academic disciplines or perspectives.

Often it is not students alone who need opportunities to learn about Islam and Muslims, but also faculty, administrative leaders, and leaders in ministry at the GTU member schools. We must be willing to ask the difficult questions of our own traditions that we so confidently ask others, and become aware of the biases we hold that often reproduce the larger political and media frames I mentioned. Many tend to think because we are a “progressive” consortium, this makes us more “inclusive.” In my own experience, this has not always been the case. First and foremost, there is a profound ignorance about the history of exclusion of Islamic studies in theological schools and the secular academy in the United States, which if better known, would help theological schools and seminaries understand the need for Muslim traditions to also be studied normatively and confessionally, like Christianity and Judaism.⁹ Interestingly, in my experience at the GTU, it is often the more liberal ministries claiming to be the most inclusive, that have set up the most obstacles in our diverse academic study of Islam, often subjecting us to identity politics and practice of faith issues that are part of their ministries and particular denominational and ideological approaches, rather than allowing us our focus on the underrepresented scholarly tradition of Islam and Muslim diversity in the academy.¹⁰

Indeed, while we are becoming more publicly aware of the systematic production and dissemination of Islamophobia by the right, we tend to overlook

9 For example, most of my ministry colleagues forget that there has not been a place in academia or theological schools in the West for Muslims to study Islam theologically and confessionally. Islam has mostly been studied in academic secular institutions in the United States through area studies. In such a context as the GTU, it should be noted that not all those who study Islam are Muslims, and Muslims also study other traditions here. These are very complex considerations given that the CIS is an academic center: students don't have to bracket their religious commitments and ideas, but they do have to navigate religious difference alongside other differences.

10 The GTU MA and Ph.D. are academic degrees, and our criteria for admission for students in Islamic studies (like the other fields) is academic, not confessional (though the students and scholars may be confessional), a point that is often missed by our very own colleagues in schools of ministry.

the left because it often presents itself as working in the interests of Islam and Muslims. Drawing on rich scholarship, especially in postcolonial and decolonial studies and methodologies, including in anthropology and critical theory, some of my own work and critique of Christian ministries in theological schools focuses on the particular ways that discussions on women, gender, feminism and sexuality have been mobilized by the Euro-American left to discipline and exert power over Islam, Muslims and Islamic studies in its own selective liberal image. This reproduces a colonial process of divide and rule, and creates an index of “good” and “bad” Islam and Muslims: Islamophilia via befriending and promoting Muslims who uphold liberal values, and Islamophobia via intimidation of those who resist or provide nuance through critique.¹¹ So fundamentalist and self-selecting are these unquestioned liberal norms and markers, and so totalizing are their myopic frames, that efforts to reframe liberal politics puts Islam and Muslims on trial. This raises important theological and academic questions, such as, how do we understand colonial conceptions and practices of time and space embedded in terms like “progress/ive” and “universal,” so intrinsic to ministry, mission, and empire, which are colluding on the left and the right? How are Western liberalism, secularism, and the “Judeo-Christian civilization” reconfigured vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, especially when using the frames of law and citizenship? What can anthropological discussions on “native informants,” and concepts such as “savage,” and “salvation,” still teach us? By what stretch of the American imagination and under what conditions and limits, can we make possible expanded norms of recognition of Islam and Muslim life? And perhaps most importantly, how do we rethink the power inherent in the production and dissemination of knowledge? I think continuing to ask such questions is important as we build programs in Islamic studies, and even more so in interreligious studies, so that we might begin to see how discriminating our sets of questions are when it comes to different traditions.

While difficult questions are welcome and necessary for advancing scholarship and understanding, the larger concern here is that what often presents itself in the language of diversity, or as calls for diversity, are really what I have

11 The title of Mahmood Mamdani's brilliant 2004 book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon) has been widely used, even by those who haven't read the book. A central argument is that the categories of “good” and “bad” Muslims are political and not cultural or religious. Shryock's edited volume, *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Friendship and Enemy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010) shows how we tend to love the good Muslims who are like “us,” civilized and liberal (Islamophilia), and fear the “bad” Muslims who are against or unlike “us” (Islamophobia).

experienced as liberal forms of Christian proselytizing, or what I have called elsewhere, liberal fundamentalism and conversion. Singling out students who happen to be Muslim, and singling out their Muslim identity over other identities, and asking where they stand on certain issues just recently being discussed in U.S. and European contexts, makes such parochial questioning Euro-American-centric and subject to Euro-American time. Liberal tests (see Butler and others), are the new ways liberals create classes of good and bad Muslims by reserving this particular kind of scrutiny to Islam and Muslims. As Saba Mahmood has suggested, we need to question liberalism too.¹² I would add, we should also question liberalism's exclusions, its deceptions and limits, its claim to universality and its claim to liberate all people.

7 Opportunities in Islamic Studies for Advancing Interreligious and Interdisciplinary Education

While I highlight these challenges and critiques, and raise these questions, the GTU is committed to addressing them in very reassuring ways. I mentioned the new configuration of our doctoral program as an example of how the GTU is moving toward becoming more interdisciplinary and interreligious. Three examples below—*Madrassa-Midrasha*, Islamic art, and Islamophobia studies—exemplify the role of CIS in advancing interreligious and interdisciplinary education, and creating opportunities for innovative and creative pedagogy and learning, while forging collaborations at the GTU, UC-Berkeley, and with the larger public.

8 Madrasa-Midrasha: Teaching Islamic Studies and Jewish Studies Interreligiously

A model for interreligious teaching is offered by the *Madrassa-Midrasha* program at the GTU, jointly developed by the Center for Jewish Studies and Center for Islamic Studies. Since its inception in 2009, the *Madrassa-Midrasha* program has offered numerous courses, workshops, lectures, conferences, and other public programs that provide opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and community members to explore the richness, diversity, and

¹² See Saba Mahmood's 2003 essay in the *Boston Review*, "Questioning Liberalism Too," which was a response to Khaled Abou El Fadl essay, "Islam and the Challenge of Democracy."

commonalities of the Islamic and Jewish traditions. This program promotes critical dialogue among participants about contemporary issues. Students commit to the scholarly study of both faith traditions, as they are lived and practiced today through their sacred texts and in historical and cultural contexts. Shared learning includes the study of holidays, dietary laws, prayer, rituals, literature and the arts, and politics.

Events and courses over the years have included topics such as: the lunar calendar; understanding our holidays, laws and practices of *halal* and *kashrut*; circumcision; religion and the White House; Israel/Palestine; Islamophobia and anti-Semitism; Hajar/Hagar; women and gender; media representations; aesthetics of sacred space; Islamic art and Jewish art; environment and climate change; and sacred seasons: pilgrimage, piety, and personal transformation. Each of these courses and programs, including museum visits, has offered opportunities for diverse audiences to understand the particularities of studying these two traditions in their own contexts. But there is also the added learning of studying these two traditions together—acknowledging both the similarities and differences, visiting mosques and synagogues—all the while continuing to build and strengthen partnerships within academia, Muslim and Jewish communities, interfaith communities, and the public at large.

9 Aesthetic Engagements: Understanding Islam and Muslim Diversity through the Arts

As reflected in nearly a decade of public educational programming, the arts have been a major emphasis at the CIS and throughout the GTU. But the study of Islamic art, architecture and aesthetics is significantly underrepresented in Islamic studies throughout the United States, and the study of Islamic art is usually restricted to the discipline of Art History.¹³ While this is very much needed to diversify studies in the history of Western art, it is important to encourage more collaboration across disciplines, and to integrate Islamic art and architecture within Islamic studies.

In April 2016, the CIS convened a day-long conversation with historians of Islamic art, museum curators, and educators called, “Negotiating Cultural Boundaries Today in the Study and Teaching of Islamic Art.” Drawing upon these rich conversations, and what we have learned from CIS public programs over the years, Islamic arts and architecture need to be increasingly included

¹³ This is true for the visual arts, though there are many who study literature and poetry within Islamic studies; music and performance are also taught in separate departments or programs.

in educational curricular development throughout the GTU and in our commitment to public engagement. A major initiative in the arts involved the planning and organizing of an exhibition, “Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art,” which opened on January 31, 2017 in the new Doug Adams Gallery of the Center for the Arts & Religion at GTU, through May 26, 2017. Historian of Islamic Art and CIS Research Scholar, Carol Bier, served as curator.¹⁴ This exhibition highlighted the work of seven American artists whose contemporary artworks engage with the Islamic tradition in different ways. Building upon the tremendous success of this innovative exploration, and to celebrate its 10th anniversary, in fall 2017, the CIS had an exhibition at the GTU library, called, “Knowledge & Diversity.” The exhibition highlighted the work of our students, graduates, faculty and visiting scholars in Islamic studies, and displayed the works of several artists who have worked with us over the years.

The CIS’s goal is to continue including the arts as part of larger efforts in challenging stereotypes, countering prejudice and misconceptions, and providing a platform for conversations through shared reflections among diverse audiences. The arts are also important in further opening up conversations on identity, cultural heritage and destruction, colonialism and imperialism, museums, galleries and art markets, beauty and suffering, war, displacement, migration and refugees, social justice, the environment, ecology and sustainability, and issues of Orientalism, artistic and cultural appropriation, translation and representation.

The arts and artists provide a platform for dialogue and understanding Islam and Muslims, and we also hope that by drawing on the arts in our academic courses and programs, including through exhibitions, we can provide a better understanding about the arts themselves. The artistic process and the formal aspects of art-making (whether visual, performance, musical, literary, media or other) are important dimensions of our curricular development and provide a way to dialogue across histories, cultures, languages, and religious traditions. The arts also provide an opportunity for aesthetic engagements at the level of affect and experience, embodiment and spirituality.

While promoting a better understanding of the Islamic tradition and Muslims through the arts, or studying Islamic artistic and architectural contributions to the West (as in many other fields such as science, medicine, mathematics, sociology, anthropology), I am mindful that such efforts can easily be seen as cultural diplomacy, which often hardens the binary of the “aesthetic,

14 See Carol Bier’s 2017 book, *Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art* (Berkeley CA: Graduate Theological Union), which was published on the occasion of the exhibition.

interreligious, good Islam/Muslims” as opposed to the “politicized, insular, bad Islam/Muslims.” Rather, at the CIS/GTU we incorporate a critical approach to the arts and aesthetics to help us enrich our teaching and learning about Islam and Muslim diversity, past and present, and also include discussions on art as resistance and subversion. We recognize that an aesthetic education is central to how we might imagine the world with hope, justice, new forms of solidarity, and an awareness of power relations.

10 Islamophobia Studies

One of the most important projects that the Center for Islamic Studies has co-sponsored is the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) at the Center for Race and Gender at UC-Berkeley, directed by Dr. Hatem Bazian. IRDP was the first such project in the country, and takes a systematic and empirical approach to the topic, including studies of the well-funded Islamophobia industry. The importance of the project has not only been in advancing scholarship in this growing field and sharing it through the *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, the website also provides extensive resources, all the while forging academic and public partnerships. The annual IRDP conference has also played a significant role in creating an international network of scholars in dialogue with the larger public in diverse fields, and has provided a place for students to present papers, and be mentored by faculty.¹⁵

We live in perilous and precarious times marked by violence and war, refugees and displacement, environmental crises, the rise of white supremacy, ethnonationalism, xenophobia and growing Islamophobia. The latter entails state-sponsored Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs and surveillance of Muslim communities, the monitoring and curtailing of religious and academic freedoms, and the consistent underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Muslims in mainstream media, politics and beyond. In this post-truth era of alternative facts, fear, rage, and the rise of white nationalism in the United States and parts of Europe, Islam and Muslims occupy a strange national platform through which Islamophobia and Islamophilia can be expressed and mobilized by those for and against Trump’s bans, walls, profanities, and exclusions. Within the last year or so in the United States, Muslim women in hijab went from mostly being seen as oppressed, to temporarily becoming the face of freedom in the 2017 Women’s March. In response to Trump’s Muslim ban in

15 See: April 2, 2018. <https://irdproject.com/>. See also Georgetown University’s Bridge Initiative, last accessed April 2, 2018, <http://bridge.georgetown.edu/>.

2017, people of all backgrounds came together in solidarity and protest at airports throughout the country, where public prayers were welcomed. Public sites became venues for public expressions in support of pluralism and patriotism in solidarity with Muslims. Yet while we have seen such apparent Islamophilia in the past, it is usually short-lived, and Muslims and other minorities know all too well how such solidarity can be temporary, contingent and political. As we often hear, Islam and Muslims become a means by which white liberals can vent their frustration at Trump. As many ask, would any of this have happened if Hillary Clinton became President?¹⁶ And yet, this painful lesson is now ironically forcing the nation to face itself and its history of denials and exclusions.

In the spirit of learning and dialogue, and in the privilege of our classrooms and public programs, it is important to advance scholarship and critique, and to continue asking and addressing the difficult questions that prepare us for an unpredictable world. I often remind my Christian colleagues that much of what they say and do needs to be in dialogue with, and kept in check by, the communities they claim to include. If we extend our interreligious studies outside our comfortable contexts, we quickly begin seeing our biases, the limits of our rhetoric, and the often white, Christian liberalism, which is a profoundly different experience in communities of color. This means attending to issues of power and place—the *where* of interfaith—and being mindful that the assumptions we make and the positions we take in one context, will be challenged in another.

11 Working Together and Looking Ahead

The presence of Islamic studies is critical today in theological schools and seminaries, not only for reasons of historical exclusion, but also to acknowledge the profound contribution of Muslims to Western civilization. Islam is also an American religion here, right from the time African Muslims were enslaved in the Americas during the Atlantic Slave Trade, and there is a long struggle and rich history of African-American Muslims who have upheld the faith. Islam and Muslims make significant contributions to how we collectively reflect upon ourselves in profoundly new ways in the interreligious and interdisciplinary

16 I have had many conversations on such topics with my students, our faculty and visiting scholars, and I thank them all. For this particular question, I thank Paula Thompson, one of my doctoral students, who is also the Coordinator of the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at the Center for Race and Gender, UC- Berkeley.

contexts where we study and live our faiths. Islamic studies is not just an add-on to how we think about, teach, and practice interreligious studies; it is integral to these. We need to study and reflect on the Islamic tradition in its own specificity and history, and we need to do so in the context of mutually constitutive histories—histories of overlap, entanglement, and messiness, but also histories of shared intellectual and spiritual learning.

CIS exemplifies the critical role that Islamic studies and Muslims play in theological schools and the larger academy. As we reflect on the CIS's first decade and think to the years ahead, addressing the challenges we face today and anticipate in the future, CIS provides and facilitates opportunities for dialogue at a time of heightened divisions, nationally and internationally. To date, our over fifty MA and Ph.D. students and graduates in Islamic studies, along with CIS faculty and visiting scholars, bring vast experiences and histories that transform the GTU and beyond, coming as they do from seventeen countries and speaking, reading or writing in thirty-two languages—a remarkable global diversity that characterizes Islamic studies at the GTU. The CIS has established itself as an important and leading partner in the GTU consortium—which is also intrareligious, interreligious, intercultural, interdisciplinary, and international—by advancing sound scholarship in Islamic studies, while also contributing to the dialogue on the pressing issues of our time within the academy and beyond.

As we grow our programs in Islamic studies, which include the arts; as we continue discussions in areas such as Islamic leadership, chaplaincy, and spiritual care, environment and sustainability studies; and as we expand pedagogical initiatives such as online and immersion learning and course intensives, and diversify and increase our library resources, there is still so much that needs to be learned and shared, academically and administratively, within and across institutions. There are major contributions that the study of religions in theological contexts can jointly make. Because interreligious education aims to equip students with skills and professional competencies of sensitively navigating commonalities and differences within and across traditions, we have the opportunity as a group of scholars and faith practitioners to advance the positive role of religions in academia and public life—in media, the arts, museums, public policy, law, social justice work, business, and religious communities. I think of this work as mediation, translation, and boundary-crossing, as it reframes religions and religious practitioners as sources of divisiveness to ones that promote dialogue and understanding through critical engagement. Advancing religious and interreligious literacy in theological schools, which includes understanding people in their intersectionality and understanding things in their historical, social, political, and economic contexts, has tremendous transformative potential in the larger public sphere.

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