Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain

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"As-Salaam-Alaikum" gives a clue to the findings of this fine study of the emerging nature of how Muslims negotiate their identities within and despite the University. Despite, I hope not because of, anything inherent in what might be an institution of higher education; knowledge, free speech and tolerance, but because of what universities may have become and the ways in which they retain a certain historic perspective on these ideas. I believe this is the first academic and evidence-based study to look at the contested nature of religion and belief on campus. The lived experience of students on campus is captured, particularly with regard to Islam, which has been reified as a risk. The book authors provide insights into the causes of this and shows how the sector has solutions, should it use them, ready to hand and in urgent need of activation.

This book brings difference into stark relief; not the comforting knowing of a homogeneity of difference to reduce complexity but the objectification of others by scrutiny which is hidden in the softer terms of risk management. It is manifest in rejecting the blame suffered by those whose legitimate ways of being should allow them to ask questions of the accepted norms, tradition and hierarchies of power in shaping knowledge and truth. In this book the authors do an excellent job of both revealing the one-way integration demanded of Muslims and highlighting the compromises they might make to be recognised in the self-deceitful institutions of an ideologically-biased state system of higher education. Of course the authors refrain from such language but they describe a narrative which allows such interpretation. As will become clear, the *Islam on campus: contested identities* team also make major contributions to the field by challenging literature and journalism based upon risk and suspicion, by the manner and scope of their data collection (that included Islamic colleges, and by their ultimate identification of powerful and positive pathways to social transformation.

A coherent and contextualised review of the higher education context is presented for a research project entitled *'Re/presenting Islam on Campus'* funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council 2015-2018. It explores the experiences of Muslim staff and students in four UK case study universities and two Islamic colleges through conversation and interviews, together with a large online survey of over 2000 students, including Muslim students, attending 132 British universities and summarised in a supplementary report[1]. In scope these are the largest and richest data sets yet collected on this topic. The methodological approach is to challenge the politics of questioning and in order to hear Muslim voices fairly whilst situating them within the voice of Christian and non-religious groups[2] in the campus case studies. Focusing on three

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[1] https://www.soas.ac.uk/representingislamoncampus/publications/file148310.pdf Islam and Muslims on UK university campuses by Guest, Scott-Baumann, Cheruvallil-Contractor, Naguib, Phoenix, Lee and Al-Baghal
[2] The study did not exclude other religious groups but their numbers were rather too small for analysis

elements of the inquiry, the book presents a compelling analysis of being in the context of these institutions. The skill of the authors in their shared writing (although there is a lead author for each chapter) pulls the reader into the stories of the participants in ways that do not fetishize the beliefs of the participants but reveal them in ways which might, however, be inconspicuous to university authorities, faculty and students unless the issues are explicitly revealed. The five authors insist upon avoiding the perception of Muslims as separate, isolated and marginalised, or as a cultural and religious 'other' but this appears as one of the failures of the higher education system we have.

The 10 chapters of *Islam on campus* are highly relevant and, although not dominating the book, the issue of Prevent (the British counter terror initiative) is presented and managed in a way which confronts its principle agents, university administration and their sub-agents, faculty, in ways that are clear and impactful. For instance, students and staff are seen to be self-censoring their discussions to avoid becoming the object of suspicion and are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching or teaching about Islam.

The first chapter presents an analysis of higher education which is clear and does not fail the test of interest in the elsewhere often repetitive critique of neo-liberalism. Chapters 2 and 3 give details of the methodology and participants. Both offer insights worthy of replication in other studies and each of the chapters ruptures the observer's complacency, at least as far as I was concerned. Chapter 4 shows the value of campus friendships, mutual recognition and trust. Chapters 5-7 provide clear discussion of the research findings, the data are contextualised and bring to the fore the consequential concerns of gender assumptions, religiosity and radicalisation. Chapters 8 and 9 contextualise the research themes with the use of Ricoeur's narrative of suspicion as power and are very helpful in understanding the existential concerns of Muslim students and teachers. This includes analysis of the gendered hierarchy of Islamic Studies, contrasting the intellectual realism of Mas (2012) with the more positive turn of Sahin (2013). The discussion in these chapters of the politics of knowledge, free speech and power are illuminating and offer a voice to the research participants. The final and concluding chapter does a good job in drawing together the themes developed throughout the book and these build into three important and feasible recommendations. Throughout the book the academic skill of the authors is evidently high and the book presents both expected and unexpected comparisons with other religious groups on campus.

Reading this book has had a profound impact on me for it leads one to confront the issues of joining, belonging and sameness; of rejection and assimilation and of caring to understanding and the superficially dogmatic platitudes of the openness and values of Universities. This research challenges, or at least questions, our understanding of the purpose of a university as to whether it is, as Rorty suggests, an institution for questioning society or for subjugation of difference to the norms of the powerful. So what is the contemporary purpose of higher education in the UK? Its regularly debated essence is a central theme of this book. From the evidence presented, what emerges is a structurally rigid, Eurocentric model, superficially willing but actually resistant to reviewing its traditional epistemological precepts of truth and knowledge; a stance which is not just that of secularism but of the undefinable truth of this as the way of revelation of the world. This is a way that is contestable through the spirituality of Muslims, Christians and other religions but which is left uncontested in much of how higher education institutions present higher learning. It is seen in how institutionalisation implicitly favours epistemic practices which objectify the world, creating an anthropocentric hegemony where only truth revealed

through rational thought can hold sway, while truth and wonder and mystery need to be expunged from academic practice. This rejection of other truths and realities, the truth of indigenous knowledge and of faith unsusceptible to rational deconstruction is appropriately termed in the book as epistemic injustice; an injustice sprung from the European Enlightenment. This change, ironically, was emergent in Islam's theo-epistemological thought, recognised following our dark ages. In different places and eras, it is Islam that has been the pioneer of reason, Muslims who have been the standard-bearers of progress. Indeed one might argue that it was Muslim scholarship that was responsible for the arrival of the great medieval universities through the Arabic translations of ancient Greek texts. The contribution of scholars such as Avicenna and Averroes (their Latinised names), although infrequently discussed today nevertheless inspired thought leaders such as Duns Scotus, Bacon, Newton and Galileo. The book is gentle on this assertion.

This research builds on evidence that shows how securitisation narratives (Greer and Bell 2018) can come to dominate the public imagination (Holmwood and O'Toole 2018) and provides rich new evidence to demonstrate how the democratic experience of all students is weakened by discrimination against the few. Yet the research team also make an immensely valuable contribution to the literature by refusing to make easy decisions. Consider, for example, their handling of the much debated concept of 'safe spaces' on campus: they understand the concerns raised by sceptics like Furedi (2016) and they also consider student safety in the context of the Equality Act 2010. In chapter 9 Scott-Baumann shows that widespread libertarian media handling of ideas like 'safe spaces' has made students, especially Muslim students, more cautious and the team argues that universities should provide more support in learning how to debate controversial issues. This book offers an understanding of Muslims caught up in the patterns of disadvantage in the university and in wider society. Understanding the world views of Muslims in their diverse forms enables the world to be seen differently and one that is implicit in the progress of our humanity. This sense of being ought to require engagement and embracing in whatever form it presents itself in the same way as the diverse belief system of Christians is recognised. We see this in the two Islamic college case studies in the book.

The authors point out that the system is able to find recognition for Church of England or Roman Catholic institutions' alignment easily enough but not for the belief-based institutions of Islam. The book encourages us to consider why. It is nothing to do with the quality of scholarship but reveals a prejudgement hiding in plain sight, built on years of accommodation by Muslims and students of other faiths. Indeed the book identifies three such forms; subtle forms of discrimination and unfair treatment, a climate of prejudice (a prevalence of Islamophobia)[3] and illegal, evidenced discrimination. Indeed, if we question the prejudice in what we take to be knowledge institutions, could we not change in ways which embrace the values of others or has our audit-based control of higher education lost all that it ought to prize most highly about understanding? Might this also be a selective forgetting of the past when faced with a created fear of fundamentalism as violence rather than fundamentalism as conservative? In a time of awakening to the value of religiosity and spirituality, universities need to confirm how such engagement can be with the secularity privilege within our universities. As the authors clearly state, this levels an obligation of those of faith to central stands of epistemological neutrality and applies to Muslims and

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[3] Lopez describes "a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on the image of Islam as the enemy and as a vital, irrefutable and absolute threat to 'our' well-being and even to 'our' existence, irrespective of how Muslims are identified, whether on the basis of religious or ethnic criteria" (2011:507)

Christians alike but such neutrality is never possible unless there is one truth which is findable; but then the circularity of the argument begins again. I was also taken by the argument of lifestyle choices which are promoted by the university, often to increase commercialism, choices that are excluding if not unnecessarily offensive to those of all religions – and the lack of social spaces for those whose disposition is not bettered by alcohol and by images that many might find frivolous if not degrading.

The multidisciplinary approach adopted here makes this book sparkle with fascinating and novel approaches to the dilemmas facing the modern university and the Islamic college, including the idea of helping these two parts of the higher education sector to work together. Modern continental philosophy, sociology of religion, gender studies and Islamic Studies are all deployed to analyse this unprecedentedly politicised environment and suggest practical remedies that require attention and are all already present on campus. For me the spirit of the book appears in a section heading toward the end of the book. This is 'Muslim students embrace learning, but university learning struggles to embrace them'. Surely such a critique of a university system is damning, for clearly knowledge and tolerance do not just belong to one belief system but to all. The book is worthy, as the jacket endorsements suggest, of a wide read and I hope for change, in individuals and through them to institutions, which does not seek to passively accept but to learn and change from the views of others, thus changing all for the better. *Islam on campus: contested identities* highlights how Muslim students and faculty can contribute to what a university can become through the values, if enacted, that it currently holds. Embracing otherness but at the price of the loss of their identity does not seem to be commensurate with a liberal educative cause and if universities continue this cultural racism then humanity will be the loser. To understand the gravity of that loss read this important book.

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