

Interview with Professor John O. Voll on the Future of Islamic Studies

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ZN: What, in your opinion, is the future of Islamic Studies in Southeast Asia?

JV: Islamic Studies in Southeast Asia has become much more cosmopolitan than it has been over the years. Ten years ago, I was at a conference in Pattani (in southern Thailand) which was looking at the future of Islamic studies in Southeast Asia. Islamic studies, as opposed to traditional *dirāsah ‘ulūm islāmiyyah* as an academic discipline was just beginning then. There were scholars like Nurcholish Madjid, who was keen to study Islam *as a subject rather than an advocacy thing*. But much of what was being done was built by people who were primarily identified with western institutions for their education. I think that people who had PhDs from Temple University or the University of Chicago were important pioneers.

However, I would say *now* that one of the most significant developments in Islamic studies in Southeast Asia is the students of these people who have been studying here. Those who have graduated from *local* institutions who are engaging in a developed programme of Islamic scholarship – we can call it the *indigenisation of Islamic studies in Southeast Asia*. One of the significant aspects of that development is that – in contrast to the Middle East, say in Cairo or Damascus – this *new* mode of academic scholarship in Islamic studies has not been in battle or conflict with the *traditional* studies, or representatives of traditional studies, in the way that sometimes took place in the Middle East. In the last ten or fifteen years or so, scholars from this region are becoming more globally known compared to before for the kinds of contribution that they are making.

ZN: Would you be able to name some of these scholars from Southeast Asia who have become globally known?

JV: The people that come to mind are scholars like Azyumardi Azra from Indonesia. He may be an administrator but operates effectively as a scholar. It is this type of person who can be a scholar here *and* in Europe and North America. These are transitional people. Also, people like Osman Bakar from Malaysia who can operate

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in *both* worlds, as well as people who have degrees from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur; they are doing more by participating in conferences elsewhere.

For instance, as we speak, younger scholars from Kuala Lumpur are working with scholars from the United States to put together a panel for a World History Association conference planned for June 2011 in Beijing. They are all together in Islamic studies content, and we have a panel that has an American product of Islamic studies from the United States, two Malaysian scholars, and a Chinese scholar. What is emerging as important is not that Southeast Asian scholars in Islamic studies are individually identifiable so much but that they are increasingly becoming integrated into the network of scholars which is important for the *global* development of Islamic studies.

ZN: How do you then account for individuals like Hamza Yusuf – an American convert to Islam and one of the signatories of ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’, an open letter by Islamic scholars to Christian leaders, calling for peace and understanding – or graduates from *Dār al-Muṣṭafā* in Yemen, for instance? Are the likes of them to be considered as ‘scholars’ in your view?

JV: Someone like Hamza Yusuf is a committed public intellectual. This is an important distinction to make – even though the real definition is very vague. There are two categories of activities, and some people engage in both: the document-research type of study *and* the public-intellectual type of study. People like John Eposito are both; some people are just one or the other. Hamza Yusuf’s knowledge and presentation is based on scholarship, but his primary goal in making those presentations and enlightening is not to get writings published in scholarly journals but to be an actor in the public arena. In Southeast Asian terms, a good example of such a person who excels in both those areas of activities would be Nurcholish Madjid. He was as much a published academic scholar as he was a public intellectual. His public intellectual legitimacy was based on his scholarship, but he was not always displaying his academic scholarship when he was being public. It is not mutually exclusive, but it takes a peculiar personality to be able to do both. For instance, Fazlur Rahman was a publicly known scholar but strictly kept to his position of being an analytical hard-nosed scholar. He may have given a controversial speech but not a rousing one, hence in that sense he was not really a public intellectual but a publicly known scholar.

Here is a growing number of cosmopolitan scholars of Islam who are Muslims and who are forming an interesting global network. Some of them are recognisable ‘*ulamā*’. For example Ali Gomaa in Egypt or Mustafa Cerić; they travel all over the world, they are publicly visible Muslim scholars who are ‘*ulamā*’. On the other

hand, we have non-‘*ulamā*’ but Islamic-studies trained individuals like Azyumardi who can also go to any part of the world and who are also in this kind of network. Important scholars with global visibility depend very much on their being scholars and their being Muslim.

ZN: Islam is taught differently in Malaysia if compared with, say, Indonesia, or even the West. For example, students of Islam in Indonesia are exposed to other strains of thought, if you like, such as Shi’ism, unlike Malaysia. Do you think Malaysia is in a position to produce *credible* Islamic scholars who can make an impact?

JV: The problem is with terminology. There are ‘Islamic scholars’ or ‘scholars of Islam’ who happen to be Muslims. This is an important distinction but not a problematic one that is unique to Islamic studies. In the last century, there has been a broad evolution of religious studies in the United States. It has only been in the last thirty years or so that religious studies have shifted from being an essentially advocacy study to a balanced study. Fifty years ago, if any research university were to offer a course on the ‘Protestant Reformation’, it was unthinkable to have a Catholic teach Protestant Reformation. That kind of advocacy teaching was important and continues in some ways to be important as an issue in professional religious studies in the United States. One can go to the American Academy of Religion meetings and you will see two types of scholars: people who teach their religious faiths in a university context; and there are those who are religious-studies scholars who teach about a religious faith that may or may not be their own.

I had a very interesting experience in this regard: a couple of years ago, I spent a couple of weeks in Kosovo, and the Grand Mufti there – a young man and a good sociology-of-religion person – and I did a series of lectures for the Islamic faculty for the University of Prishtina. This was meant to help the development of the curriculum in newly independent Kosovo. As I was giving the lectures, I had this feeling that I was missing something in terms of the questions that I was being asked, until it dawned on me that many of these people that I was speaking to, who were part of the Islamic faculty, are people whose training had been in an atheistic graduate programme during the communist era.

These intellectuals were Muslims who had been trained in atheistic methods of social science but are now post-atheist in both methodology and faith. However, in teaching about Islam in a state university in Kosovo, they must avoid appearing to be proselytising because this could cause the Serbian Orthodox Christian minority to feel pressured and subject to discrimination. This situation emphasises the importance of the balanced, non-advocacy approach to the study of religion.

All around in the believing world you have these questions: how do you academically teach or teach in a scholarly way religious traditions? In India, for instance, there is a huge problem with the Hindu nationalist parties complaining about text books trying to be balanced rather than advocating Hindu positions. So, in general terms this relationship between advocacy, faith presentations, and research analysis offers alternatives that are really shaping the future religious studies industry in general – not just in Islamic studies.

ZN: Do you think that the ideal situation is that the academic instructor who teaches the Christian faith should ideally be Christian and this applies to the other major religions as well?

JV: There is no such thing as an ‘objective’ set of scholarship; every position is a constructed position, and the building-materials for the constructed position are the preconceptions of the person who is doing it. It does not matter if your building-materials for your construction start off being a Muslim or Christian or atheist or whatever. If you are in a classroom and you build a building of analysis it has to be open to training the students in that classroom to construct their own buildings, using the carpenter skills that have been given to them by the professor. If the building that the students construct looks identical to the building of the professor, then I think that the teacher has failed. The teacher must make it possible for students to come to their own conclusions. Good carpenter-teachers construct approaches that make it possible for students then to make their own constructions. Doctrinaire teaching is simply advocacy and proselytisation. Moreover, proselytisation is also a danger for those people who think that religion does not count. Secular subjectivity is as prejudicial as religious subjectivity unless the people recognise their own subjectivity and that everything is a construct.

ZN: I have read that in a classroom-setting in America religious studies professors would ask their students – Muslims or non-Muslims – provocative questions such as ‘did the Prophet Muḥammad really exist?’ What do you think of such exercises? Would you recommend that we do that here in Malaysia?

JV: Yes, why not. Historical and analytical questions should be asked in the classroom just like ‘Did Abraham really exist?’ or ‘Did Jesus really exist?’ A good amount of Christian scholarship has been spent on the ‘search for the historical Jesus’. Some have said, in the middle of the twentieth century, that Jesus never existed and insisted that it was nothing more than allegory or a metaphor. It is similarly an important question to ask if King Arthur ever existed. If you cannot ask these questions then you are blocking off yourself from a body of knowledge. I would say ‘seek knowledge till China’ (in reference to a well-known *ḥadīth*) is not

just geography but go wherever you can go to seek knowledge. And one location to go is to ask a critical historical question.

ZN: Finally, how is Turkey developing its Islamic studies sector *vis-à-vis* Southeast Asia? Can you draw a comparison?

JV: Most Turkish scholars in Islamic studies these days are willing to go to great lengths in terms of ideas. They explore new frontiers that other Muslim scholars are not willing to go yet. I think right now scholars of Islamic Studies in Turkey are involved in debates that are not yet taking place in other parts of the Muslim world. Turkish intellectuals are engaged in major debates about the nature of modern Turkish national identity. This modern Turkish identity had been initially defined by Kemal Atatürk and involved viewing ‘secularism’ as an important part of that identity. In recent years, however, many Turks have resisted this rather belligerent secularism, and scholars in Islamic Studies have been involved in redefining the relationships between religion and secularism in Turkish state and society. In Southeast Asia, early nationalists like Sukarno and Tun Razak were not as belligerently secularist as the Kemalists in Turkey, so discussions there about religion and state have had a different character from those discussions in Turkey.

ZN: Thank you, Professor Voll.