

Islam-Correctness at Hartford Seminary

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Islamic studies in Europe began as a Christian missionary enterprise, born out of necessity rather than interest. Islam was the first religion Christianity encountered that, as theological doctrine, sought to convert Christians and regulate their religious practices. In turn, Catholic priests and monks, particularly in the Middle East, Spain, and Italy, worked to convert Muslims from Islam, as well as to educate Christians so they would not convert.¹ This changed following the fall of Muslim Spain in 1492 and the military expansion of Spain and Portugal and later England, Holland, Belgium, and France into Islamic countries. Catholic and Protestant missionaries followed their nations' armies and compiled information about Islam and Muslim peoples. This information made its way back to European universities and gradually transformed Islamic studies from a missionary enterprise into a full-fledged academic discipline, sometimes called Orientalism.

Orientalism was originally defined by both political and religious visions. Politically, the colonizing governments sought to understand people to rule them more efficiently. Spiritually, missionaries sought to understand Islam to convert Muslims to Christianity more effectively. Both groups took an

¹Islamic sacred tradition is filled with references and commands regarding proselytizing. The earliest compiled version is from the seventh century, the Pact of Umar, which governs relations between Muslims and "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews). For the pact's full text, see chapter 51 of Abu Bakr al-Tartushi, *Siraj Al-Muluk* (Lantern of Kings), or Fordham University's Medieval Sourcebook Online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pact-umar.html>. For an excellent discussion of Christian-Muslim relations, particularly in the early medieval period, see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam Series 13 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998).

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interest in studying the Muslim world. They translated and studied thousands of Islamic texts from Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish sources. Their work formed the foundation for academic disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, Egyptology, Assyriology, and of course, Islamic studies.

Islamic studies changed significantly in the decades following World War II, with the massive reorganization of European empires, national boundaries, and colonial identities. One idea that gradually took root in academia was that the Muslim world was the victim of systematic prejudice stemming from European “ignorance.” The only way to rectify this was through embracing Islamic ideals and peoples while repudiating the Christian and Hellenistic roots of Europe. Edward Said, the Palestinian-American professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, eventually codified these views in his highly influential *Orientalism*, in which he argued that criticism of Islam or of the Muslim world is either a covert attack on the humanity of Muslims or gross ignorance in need of enlightenment.² Simultaneously, Muslim groups exploited this situation to promote Islam by funding Islamic studies programs and cultural venues at universities, who in turn reformed curricula in order not to offend Muslim sentiments. In a short time, scholarship in Islamic studies was overtaken by Islamic missionary and political interests.

Academia is filled with biases and presumptions upon which entire belief systems are constructed. The inhabitants of the West are privileged to have the freedom to examine and criticize ideas and beliefs and respectfully agree to agree or disagree. This concept is anathema to Islam, since in Islam academia exists to propagate orthodox Islamic dogma. In Islamic studies at universities today it has become difficult to disagree with Islam and still maintain one’s credibility, safety, or ability to study in school. Academia has refused to question Islamic teachings, and has thus become a participant in promoting Islamic orthodoxy at the expense of academic integrity. I know this because I am a product of this environment.

My story begins at Hartford Seminary (HS) in Hartford, Connecticut, a small Protestant seminary with the oldest Islamic studies program in America. HS’s Islamic studies program began through the influence of the Scottish Orientalist Duncan Black MacDonald in 1893, and it both employed and produced many well-known early twentieth-century Protestant missionaries, professors, and martyrs. HS is a model for the changes that have

²Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

occurred in Islamic studies, as it turned from being the premier Protestant seminary for missions to the Muslim world into an institution promoting Islamization.

I was at a seminary gathering in 2009 when I met one of the last HS missionaries to the Muslim world before the missionary program was discontinued in the early 1950s. This man and a group of fellow missionaries reported back to HS that they believed Muslims did not need Christianity because they already “knew God.” These reports started a chain of events that led to the disbanding of HS’s missionary program, followed by its secularization in 1972 from solely Christian to an “interfaith” seminary. The Islamic studies program continued, however, and while HS did not receive large donations from Muslim sources as other schools have, it self-censored its own academic program in the name of respect for Muslim students. As part of this process, critical research and disagreement with Islamic teachings were eventually worked out of the curriculum.

I was only partially aware of this when I enrolled in the master’s program in Islamic studies at HS in fall 2007. I had already been studying Arabic at the seminary for two years via a joint program with my undergraduate alma mater, Central Connecticut State University. Dr. Jane Smith, the former dean of Islamic studies, indicated that I would be a unique addition to HS because of my strong interest in and strong disagreement with Islamic teachings. She informed me that she respected my beliefs, and that I would serve as a good counterbalance in the program. Over the next three years, I would come to understand how much of a “counterbalance” I was.

Hartford Seminary prides itself on its large number of Muslim students, both domestic and foreign-exchange. Among my first experiences with the Muslim students there was in a class on interfaith dialogue. I had done interfaith dialogue before, so this was not a new experience for me. We were separated into groups for the dialogue, and when I was permitted to speak, I said, “I am Catholic, and I do not believe in Islam.” Following me, one of the Muslim students spoke. She said that she was Muslim, and then she addressed me directly. In a soft, Arabic accented voice, she told me, “You are an infidel because you do not accept Islam” and that “according to Islam you do not deserve to live.” A second Muslim student heartily agreed, and after repeating the first student’s comments, she added that “in Islam, the Koran and the tradition of the prophet are very clear about this” and that “you deserve to die.”

This was one of several publicly-made threatening statements and insults that I would receive from Muslim seminary classmates for my open disagreement with Islam. In another incident, I was in a class on modern Islamic thought and an American male convert to Islam informed me in front of my classmates and the professor, “You deserve to die on account of your disagreement with Islam.” Another student, an American Muslim woman of Egyptian heritage, informed me that I was “dirty” on account of being a Christian. When I tried to address these and other incidents with the HS administration, I was told directly that I was “intolerant” of Muslims and needed to show a better “understanding of Islam” as a solution. No action was ever taken by the seminary.

What bothered me were neither the insults nor the menacing remarks, but the pervasive notion that respect for Muslims was conditioned upon intentionally avoiding criticism of Islam. Not a single classmate, Muslim or non-Muslim, ever spoke up in support of my opinion, even on the principle that different views should be respected. In class, non-Muslim students and even professors showed a disproportionate respect for Muslim students when speaking about Islam, would not criticize certain matters, and even apologized for asking questions. Muslim students, on the other hand, were free to speak critically and even condescendingly about Christianity without any objection from my classmates and professors.

For example, in “Contextual Biblical Interpretation,” students were encouraged to explore Old Testament Biblical themes in the context of homosexuality, class discrimination, and women’s liberation from patriarchal oppression. It was one of the most outrageous and humiliating classes I ever had, because as a Catholic I was forced to make outlandish and blasphemous arguments in order to pass with a reasonable grade. It was not possible to disagree with arguments made in that class, because doing so would invite being labeled “racist” or “intolerant,” not to mention possibly receiving a failing grade. However, in any class that discussed Islam or Muhammad, the professor never spoke about contextual Koranic interpretation, let alone from a homosexual, socialist, or feminist perspective. The Koran was taught from the perspective of orthodox Islamic theology as the uncreated and eternal word of Allah. Any HS student who disagreed with this perspective was looked upon as disrespectful of Islam and Muslims or simply uneducated.

In other classes, students were preached to about the merits of conversion to Islam from Christianity. This was usually done either through a professor

or a prerecorded video lecture given by a well-known Muslim convert such as Suhaib Webb or Zayd Shakir. If the speaker did not preface his talk with a brief summary of his life as a Christian and before Islam, he began by speaking about the logic, benefits, and wonders of Islam and the blessings conversion had brought to him.

In all cases, such speeches had two effects upon the students. For Muslim students, it emboldened them to speak about Islam, and particularly against Christianity, which only solidified their own unexamined beliefs. For non-Muslims and in particular for Christian students, this tended to cause them to question their own beliefs, leading them to ignore or to hide their own spirituality when speaking with Muslims, and to put aside questioning Islamic beliefs for fear of “offending” Muslims.

Although I don’t know anyone who converted to Islam because of a class, HS has plenty of pro-Islamic/anti-Christian missionary literature available, particularly at the seminary’s MacDonald Center for Islamic Studies. During my time as a student, pro-Islamic/anti-Christian missionary literature was displayed openly on tables and bookshelves, free for student taking. I am not objecting to the presence of such literature, but what bothered me was that when I asked about putting out Christian missionary literature, MacDonald Center staff told me that it would be “offensive to Muslims” and I was forbidden to do so. When I brought this up to the HS administration, I was told, as in previous situations, that I needed to be more “tolerant” of Islam.

Hartford Seminary does employ brilliant, highly-educated Muslim and non-Muslim professors who value scholarship and were helpful to me in my academic formation. Unfortunately, it was my experience that their efforts were often overshadowed by the many other HS professors who seemed more interested in engaging in Islamic apologetics than in critical historical or theological exegesis about Islam. This produced many curious results in the classroom. In some cases, the course material presented did not correspond with its advertised content. One such class was advertised as “Medieval Islamic History Prior to 1500,” but instead preached the benefits of early twentieth-century Islamic revivalism while bemoaning Israel’s existence and “Zionism.”

In other classes professors would ignore, denounce, or belittle students who asked questions critical of Islam. Students who spoke favorably of Islam, however, were permitted to speak and engage in discussion. One of my Muslim professors was among the 138 keynote scholars who sent “A

Common Word between Us and You,” an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI asking to engage in dialogue.³ Yet this same professor was unwilling to acknowledge any critique of Islamic theological tenets as legitimate for class discussion. Another Muslim professor was even more emphatic, and outright mocked students’ intellectual capabilities and interrupted their questions if they criticized Islam.

I realized that my beliefs were strongly different from those of the majority of HS students and professors, but I did not fully internalize the extent of it until two incidents occurred in early 2009. It began when I sent a private email to a blogger friend in which I mentioned Dr. Ingrid Mattson, then president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and a professor I had for a class. My email referred to recent events in the news surrounding Dr. Mattson, ISNA, and its indictment by the federal government over terrorism charges.⁴

What happened next I did not expect. My friend published my email online, with neither my knowledge nor my consent. I was not aware of this until I was asked to come to the office of the dean of students. The dean presented me with the email’s text, and I was immediately accused of racism, bigotry, and spreading hatred of Muslims, none of which is true. I maintained my composure, but internally I was furious, because this was the same faculty member to whom I had made appeals after being harassed and discriminated against by fellow students who were Muslim and by professors because of my differing beliefs and opinions. When I asked the dean if he, Dr. Mattson, and I could meet to discuss these accusations, I was told that she was “uncomfortable discussing them with me,” and that no meeting would be possible. I was permanently barred from the MacDonald Center for Islamic Studies and told not to contact Dr. Mattson.

A few weeks after this incident I submitted for review my original master’s thesis, written on the concept of human dignity in Islamic theology. My advisor at the time was a Jewish professor known for his work in interfaith relations with Muslims. About a week later he called and asked to

³For detailed information on and a history of this document, see *The Official Site of A Common Word*, <http://www.acommonword.com/>.

⁴See Josh Gerstein, “Obama Speaker Has Hamas Tie?” *Politico Online*, January 17, 2009, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0109/17562.html>. After this article appeared and was publicized throughout the mainstream media, Hartford Seminary published a press release in defense of Dr. Mattson, and seminary students were asked to pledge verbal support to her defense.

meet with me at the seminary. He began our meeting by repeatedly asking me if I “hate Muslims,” “feel angry towards Muslims,” am “uncomfortable with Islam,” and many other questions. All the questions had the underlying theme of attempting to link my disagreement with Islamic theology in my thesis to a personal hatred of Muslims. I repeatedly explained to him that I do not hate Muslims, and that my views on Islam are borne out of Islamic theological teachings, not personal experience. After two hours of discussion, he returned my thesis to me, looked me in the eye, and said that he could not accept it and that “the Muslims will not accept it.” I asked him to explain his statement, and he told me that I made “the Muslims feel uncomfortable”—although he would not specify who “the Muslims” were.

I now had a better understanding of how Egyptian-born Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd felt during his imbroglio with Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 1995. Dr. Abu Zayd’s dissertation was rejected because, among many charges, he merely hinted at viewing the Koran through a viewpoint other than that of Islamic theological orthodoxy. He was expelled from Al-Azhar and labeled an apostate from Islam, for which the penalty is death under Islamic law. Dr. Abu Zayd and his wife fled to Holland as refugees, where he worked as a professor until his death in 2010.⁵ Although my situation did not have the same gravity, my difference of opinion with the presumed Islamic theological orthodoxy was seemingly justification enough to reject my thesis. Word of the incident spread among the faculty, and it was suggested that I abandon my master’s work and resign from the program. Thankfully, with the help of a professor friend, I was able to reorganize, write a new thesis, and graduate from HS with a master’s degree in Islamic studies in May 2010.

As I reflect on my time at Hartford Seminary, I realized that in almost no class was I ever required to delve deep into Islamic sacred tradition, especially if it involved challenging Islamic beliefs. I spent much time studying Islam on my own and I could have just educated myself instead of spending three years defending myself against accusations of bigotry, “Islamophobia,” and ignorance simply because I refused to submit intellectually to Islamic belief without question or disagreement.

If a student wants to learn about specific spiritual beliefs, there are religious schools dedicated to that purpose. Hartford Seminary posits itself as

⁵See Nadia Abou Al-Magd, “When the Professor Can’t Teach,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, June 15–21, 2000, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/486/eg6.htm>, for a summary of Dr. Abu Zayd’s story.

the opposite—a secular seminary with a religious history in which all faiths are welcome to dialogue. As such, students there must be free to believe and think as they wish, and teachers must be free to express their own opinions. Shutting down discussion about Islam out of supposed fear of or respect for Muslims is disrespectful of others and violates everyone’s rights.

Hartford Seminary’s Islamic studies program is representative of many Islamic studies programs across America and Europe, which manifest in different forms but have the same fundamental problems. Typically, the situation is the worst in programs that have significant foreign funding from Muslim sources, such as from Saudi Arabia or the UAE, because academic institutions are unwilling to allow criticism of Islam lest it jeopardize endowments. I fear that as orthodox Islam takes deeper root in Islamic studies in America and Europe more institutions will come to resemble Hartford Seminary until eventually their scholarship is swallowed up by submission to Islamic orthodoxy.

As long as Islamic studies uncritically defers to Islamic theology the situation will never improve. This is because Islamic theology, compared to the theology of the other great faiths, is extremely intolerant of everything that does not support its own viewpoint and aggressively seeks victory over, rather than an understanding of, opposing views.⁶ Islamic studies in the West grew out of the theological differences between Christianity and Islam, and it was believed that Europe could effectively respond to Islam by studying, understanding, and freely discussing these differences. The greatest threat to Islamic studies today is that the intellectual freedom that characterizes the Western approach to scholarship will be abolished if the discipline operates in accordance with Islamic principles.

On the walls of Hartford Seminary’s library hang plaques of seminary graduates martyred by Muslims while doing missionary work in the early twentieth century. These individuals cared enough about Muslims to learn about Islam and peaceably discuss religious differences with them, and they died because of it. I sympathize with them, because my academic career was nearly destroyed by students and professors who hid behind arguments of religious tolerance, and made unjust accusations of ignorance and bigotry to

⁶There are many references to this attitude in Islamic sacred tradition. Among them are Muhammad’s words: “I have been commanded to fight the people until they testify that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.” See Imam Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 1999), vol. 1, bk. 2, sec. 24.

promote—both passively and actively—Islamic orthodoxy to the detriment of true intellectual engagement. As Islamic studies arose out of necessity and not interest, it must now be born anew if it is to be of any help to the West in its future relationship with Islam.

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