

# From the Editor

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The present collection of articles emanated from the conference “Studying Islam and Muslims: Trajectories and Futures of South African scholarship”, which was held online from 6-8 September 2021 and organised by a team comprising academics from various, mainly South African, universities. The conference itself was conceived out of the realisation that a number of academics responsible for teaching Islamic Studies in South Africa for the past three decades or so had recently retired or were close to retirement. So it became a timeous opportunity to honour their legacies, but also to collate what has been happening in the field during this period and to get a sense of where the academic discipline of Islamic Studies is headed. To this end, not only were these experienced and respected academics invited to reflect on their institutional experiences and scholarly journeys, but they were joined by a younger group of scholars whose work reflect emerging trends in the discipline. However, Islamic Studies is by its very nature a cross-disciplinary endeavour, and some key academics specialising in other, diverse fields graciously accepted our invitation to them to reflect on *their* relationship to this field of study. Indeed, the conference was very fortunate in that almost all the invited academics were able to participate and hosted, among other notables, Professor Gabeba Baderoon; Dr Andrea Brigaglia; Professor Yousuf Dadoo; Professor Suleman Dangor; Dr Ashraf Dockrat; Professor Abul Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim; Professor Aslam Fataar; Dr. Ala Alhourani; Professor Mohammed Haron; Mrs

Farida Mahomed; Dr Mohamed Shahid Mathee; Professor Nadeem Mahomed; Dr Cherry Muslim; Professor Ebrahim Moosa; Professor Sa'diyya Shaikh; Dr Fatima Seedat; Dr Tahir Fuzile Sitoto; Professor Abdulkader Tayob, and Professor Goolam Vahed.

The panel discussions held at the conference were: “Mapping Trajectories”; “Law, Methods and Intellectual Pathways”; “Institutional legacies and possibilities”, and “The Study of Islam/Muslims Across Disciplinary Boundaries”. There was also a panel discussion dedicated to responses to the conference. After the conference, the *Journal for Islamic Studies* invited the participants to convert their presentations into papers, and once again, some very kindly took up this invitation. The result is this collection. It provides a good sense of the discussions that took place at the conference, but also stands as a cogent independent body of work. The presenters took the opportunity to further develop their arguments aided by feedback from peer reviewers. The result, we believe, is a collection of significant documents toward understanding the state of the academic discipline of Islamic Studies in South Africa, both intellectually and institutionally. To this publication's credit, at least one paper in each of the conference panels mentioned has been converted into an article. As the conference had to be postponed due to the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, the convenors felt it appropriate to add a special evening panel entitled “Race, Religion, Economy and Anarchy in South Africa” at the reconvened event. This was more of a grassroots panel comprising activists and community members at the heart of the conflict, so the presentations there have not directly found their way into this compilation. However, it is clear that these events, as well as the testimonies of community members, have continued to influence some of the papers herein, in particular, in the call to address issues of social justice as part of an activist commitment to Islamic Studies.

This particular collection is divided into three categories: intellectual, institutional and cross-disciplinary. In the first category, Abdulkader Tayob, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat and

Nadeem Mahomed discuss various dimensions of the Islamic tradition; in the second, Yousuf Dadoo and Suleman Dangor speak to the institutional unfolding of Islamic Studies in South Africa; and, finally, Goolam Vahed and Aslam Fataar speak as interlocutors to the discipline from specific vantage points and outside specialisations. To elaborate:

Professor Tayob turns the theorising of Islam from within the study of religion on its head. Employing the notion of *faltah* – an unexpected turn of events as grounds for reflection and rethinking performance, together with the debates and dichotomies these necessarily involve, he invites the reader to theorise religion from the perspective of an unfolding Islamic discourse. The modern study of religion here is a *faltah*, which, like other unexpected events in Islamic history, invites the Muslim body to respond to it in various visceral ways. In line with trends in postcolonial scholarship, Tayob continues the call for academia to observe and acknowledge its objects of study not merely as data sets but as perpetually transforming life systems, and to recognise that its own approaches, too, proceed from a specific ‘form of life’, as Wittgenstein would say. In another richly textured piece, Shaikh traces her scholarly journey from her early studies on the *tafsīr* of praxis to her continuing endeavour to wed a deeply spiritual reading of Islam to the mutually imbricating demands of political, social and, especially, gender justice. This concern with the inward and the outward, with scholarship as well as activism, has gravitated Shaikh to a non-binary, cosmopolitan approach to reality, where multiple traditions both within and outside Islam offer fertile grounds for reflecting on the realms of spirituality and justice. Shaikh sees her project as both critical and reconstructive: at once undermining what she sees as spiritually suffocating, patriarchal interpretations of Islam that subvert the ends of justice, and, in that very critique, recovering and building norms and interpretations that cultivate the ideals of both realms.

In their own way, Seedat and Mahomed take up lesser known or emphasised norms, practices and interpretations which, in their view, speak with greater resonance to those who experience marginalisation within prevailing structures. Seedat traces her involvement in the ongoing debates and discussions around the recognition of Muslim marriages in South Africa – an involvement that stretches over more than twenty-five years. She is on the “reformist” side of this discussion and is actively involved with organisations and groups who have challenged dominant interpretations of Islamic law by judicial bodies which, they believe, based on legal case studies and other evidence, have severely disadvantaged women in Muslim marriages, particularly at the point of the dissolution of marriage. To this end, she invites the reader to take a closer relook at classical legacy to challenge some conceptions of the legal capacity of women in the Sharia. She also draws upon lesser-known practices in the Sharia such as *khul’a*, which offer means by which women can leave difficult marriages without waiting for judicial sanction. Yet Seedat is not calling for new interpretations of Islamic law, but for a reflection on whether that law, in its South African unfolding, is meeting the ethical demands of the *Shariah*. This underlying concern would be shared by a broad spectrum of protagonists in this field and helps explain why the major judicial bodies are generally supportive of the Muslim Marriages Bill despite the inevitable differences in approach and perspectives in what is a technically complex arena. To be fair, even those who oppose the Bill may do so from a particular perspective on ethics – a higher order perspective, if you will – such as a concern with the hegemonic role of the state. Nevertheless, Seedat’s aim is to bring this ethical dimension more directly into view. Mahomed takes this ethical theme a step further, arguing that an Islamic sexuality predicated on ethics rather than on what he sees as a heteronormative, transactive approach to the issue would yield significant implications for acknowledging diversity in sexual relations, particularly as they

pertain to LGBTIQ+ Muslims. But this particular ethical focus is part of a larger argument for acknowledging margins in Islam and the way these can speak to the centre and its orthodoxies. Drawing from Islamic tradition, he argues that these margins have historically been innate to the tradition, preserved by a culture of ambiguity in relation to exclusive truth, and that this is the spirit which should drive the approach to the “legacy” (*turath*) while at the same time remaining open to ‘new ways of doings and writings and perspectives.’

Of course, the academic study of Islam takes place in institutions and, as expected, this is shaped by specific institutional arrangements and transformations. Dadoo and Dangor tap into their considerable experience to bring us pictures of the unfolding of the discipline at their respective universities, doing so with great candour. Dadoo traces the origins of the discipline at Unisa (University of South Africa), which started there in the late 1980s, and discusses its teaching philosophy, course content, student enrolment, funding and future challenges. Among the significant issues he addresses are the role of the *‘ulamā* in relation to tertiary institutions; the historically interesting fact regarding the disproportionate amount of females who have done Islamic Studies at Unisa; and the role of the phenomenological approach in teaching the discipline, given the prevalence of more sociological methods within academia on the one hand, and theological approaches, especially outside it, on the other. It should be noted, though, that Dadoo’s reflections mainly discuss the development of the Islamic Studies courses/degrees at Unisa (where he was a central figure) from 1988 to 2017. Since 2019, in particular, the Islamic Studies course at Unisa has been undergoing another extensive round of rearticulation which strives to speak more directly to the African context as well as to take into account the significant decolonial critiques of knowledge production. This is another instance of how institutional transformations continue to shape Islamic Studies, not necessarily negatively. As Dangor

shows in his article, such transformations even veered on the dramatic at times, particularly in Kwazulu-Natal. Islamic Studies and the study of Arabic started as ethnically focused disciplines at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), a university built to serve the needs of the “Indian” community in South Africa. At this institution, however, there was a focus on Islamic history as well as introductions to the key Islamic disciplines which helped students gain a more cosmopolitan perspective on the Muslim world. The discipline maintained solid student enrolment, research outputs and community support, and the department attracted Muslim academics from various parts of the world. But the coming of democracy in South Africa as well as broader forces of market rationalization led to substantial changes: UDW was absorbed into what is today known as the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, Islamic Studies has now become a subdivision within the discipline of religion, rather than a stand-alone course of study. Fortunately, however, Islamic Studies specialists continue to be appointed, offering fresh shoots for the growth of the field at the university. These have already borne fruit as staff members like Tahir Sitoto and Cherry Muslim make significant contributions to unearthing the legacies of South African Black Muslim thinkers, writers and poets, as well as to the ways in which South African Muslims are involved in the digital space. As other universities have shown, being contained within “Religion Studies” does not necessarily hinder Islamic Studies, and may indeed offer vital, inspiring ways of approaching it.

Islamic Studies necessarily exists at the interstices of, particularly, theology, social science, education, philosophy and history. And, in turn, specialists in these fields may take more than just a passing interest in the discipline, given the overlapping areas of interest. In the process, some specialists in those fields have made essential research contributions to Islamic Studies in South Africa. Vahed’s body of work has become required reading for any scholar interested in South African Muslim history,

particularly its unfolding in KwaZulu-Natal. In a gripping account of his journey as a scholar of history, Vahed underscores the need to observe “transformations in time” to understand the historically fluctuating nature of Muslim self-identity. Practices which are now contested by many as religiously unacceptable innovations, such as the Muharram procession in KwaZulu-Natal, were at one point in history dominant and accepted as normal – even by those who condemn them now. In addition, even those Muslims who continue the practice today have adjusted it to make it more “acceptable” in the light of current understandings of Islamic legal directives. But perhaps the most intriguing fact of the tradition is that in the history of KwaZulu-Natal, this practice was initially commemorated mostly by Hindus, together with Muslims of course, and these were coincidentally the only “off” days allowed by the colonial authorities to indentured labourers in the colony’s early history. The commemoration was crucial to forming a trans-religious, trans-cultural “Indian” identity in South Africa. All this, of course, might be anathema to Muslims (and Hindus) today. But it emphasizes Vahed’s broader point about the need to avoid essentialist understandings and rather focus attention on historical changes within specific social and cultural contexts.

Thinking carefully through past, present and future contexts is central to Fataar’s thinking as well. Specifically, Fataar sees reading through the framework of such contexts as essential to the development of his ethical agency, with agency defined as “the exercise of my commitment to participate as an actor in the public domain in pursuit of dignity and fairness”. Three lines of reading have shaped Fataar’s agency in this regard: his ontological moorings in Cape Muslim history, providing a sense of an abiding, if complexly layered, identity; his epistemological foundations in the readings associated with Muslim activism in the 1980s and early 1990s, sharpening a keen commitment to social justice; later, he takes up a more sustained reading of the Islamic theological tradition, and navigates the negotiation of knowledge

from both within and outside that tradition in what he calls an effort to “build a more just, more dignified world”. As he indicates towards the end of his paper, our “post-normal” times require an inclusionary, planetary approach to our current realities. Fataar intimates that, in the midst of the tumultuousness of these times, perhaps the most important contribution the Islamic tradition can make to the present moment is the continued cultivation of its ideal of beauty and goodness (ihsan) which has been at the centre of its civilizational unfolding. Here Fataar’s quote from Muqtader Khan is significant. For Khan the ethical governance of ihsan: “emphasizes love over law, process (Islamic governance) over structure (Islamic state) and self-annihilation (fanaa) over identity and self-assertion”.

And thus, despite being undoubtedly associated with almost continuous transformations at the biographical, social and civilizational levels (as other writers in this collection have also shown), there are various constants in the religion which make “Islam”, and the category “Muslim”, hang together. It is this hanging together which makes “Islamic Studies” a definable field, without this definition needing to be an essentialist one. More than that though, such constants can facilitate a deeply empathetic study of our objects of study: to truly understand what drives their realities and their adherence to the religion within the processes of change. And, simultaneously, it can help Muslim scholars, in particular, navigate their own realities as well.