

Islamic Studies at UKZN: Personal Reflections

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Abstract

In this article I will discuss the founding of the Islamic Studies Department and the development of Islamic Studies through my personal reflections on the years I was associated with the discipline, that is, from 1974 to 2010, first at the University of Durban-Westville and subsequently at the Howard College campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

1. DEPARTMENT OF ISLAMIC STUDIES

1.1 Introduction

Before discussing the establishment of the Department of Islamic Studies, it is essential to understand the context in which it was established. What is generally not known (or acknowledged) is the role that politics played in its establishment.

The Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 divided the South African population into three main racial groups: Whites, Natives (Blacks) and Indians and Coloureds (people of mixed race). Indians were later listed as a separate classification. This segregation of the population into racial groups was to impact all aspects of the lives of South African citizens, including, of course, education.

In 1948 the then Prime Minister, F. Malan, declared that the introduction of apartheid at universities was an “essential measure”. While giving the assurance that “non-Europeans”

would not be deprived of higher (tertiary) education, he declared that it would be “in their own spheres, in separate institutions”.¹ If one understands “spheres” as “traditions and culture”, this declaration could be construed as the precursor to the introduction of religion-specific and culture-specific disciplines at ethnic² colleges and universities – also known as “bush colleges” – in South Africa.

Hendrick Verwoerd, who was appointed as Minister of Native Affairs in 1950, recommended the establishment of two new university colleges, one for the Sothos in the then Transvaal (now Gauteng) and Orange Free State (now Free State), and another for the Zulus in Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal). He also recommended that the University of Fort Hare (established in 1916) be declared an institution specifically for Xhosas, and that separate institutions for Coloured students (in the Western Cape) and Indian students (in Durban) should be established.³

In 1961, the University College (UNICOL) for Indians was established on Salisbury Island, Durban. Three years later, Indian education was removed from the jurisdiction of the provincial departments and placed under the auspices of the central Department of Indian Affairs in Pretoria.⁴ This earned UNICOL the designation of “Indian university”. In 1971, UNICOL became the University of Durban-Westville (UDW).

In 1953 the then Minister of Education, J.H. Viljoen, detailed the rationale for establishing “ethnic” universities, stating

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- 1 Mary Alice Beale, *Apartheid and University Education, 1948-1970*. A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Johannesburg, 1998, p. 128.
 - 2 This term was used to describe non-White institutions by Z.K. Matthews (see Z.K. Matthews, *Ethnic Universities*, South African History Online, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/files/asjul57.8.pdf>, accessed December 7, 2021).
 - 3 Beale, pp. 149-150.
 - 4 Johan Wassermann, “Managing the University College for Indians on Salisbury Island – 1960-1964”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 31, 2013 – Issue 1, pp. 157-175, published online 29 January 2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com>, accessed December 7, 2021.

that in his view, “the university is in a place within a particular community ... it must have a knowledge of the community whom it wishes to serve ...”. He proposed that the new institutions be based on “the necessity of maintaining ethnic ties in university institutions...the future leader, during his training, including his university training, must remain in close touch with the habits, ways of life and views of members of his population group.”⁵

It is evident from the above that Viljoen perceived the university as an institution entrenching students’ ethnic origins as well as promoting their culture and tradition. This was the guiding philosophy behind/underpinning the founding of racially-segregated schools and tertiary institutions in South Africa. Apartheid was characterized by an authoritarian political culture based on *baasskap* (boss-hood), which ensured that South Africa was dominated politically, socially, and economically by the nation’s minority white population. According to this system of social stratification, white citizens had the highest status, followed by Indians and Coloureds, then black Africans.

1.2 Establishment of the Department of Islamic Studies

As far as university faculties and departments are concerned, there was nothing apart from the racial composition of the student population that distinguished the Historically Black Universities (HBU) from the historically White universities (HWU) . The only “justification” for the existence of HBUs was the inclusion of “ethnic” language and culture studies in the Bachelor of Arts curriculum.

Since the religion of the majority of Indian students at the University College at Salisbury Island was Hinduism, followed by Islam (with very few adherents to Christianity), UNICOL introduced courses in Oriental Studies, Indian Philosophy and Indian language studies (including Urdu). The Department of

5 Beale, p. 173.

Arabic was established in 1963, with Yusuf Zablith as a part-time lecturer.⁶ Although the claim has been made that Arab academics who were approached to teach Arabic at UNICOL refused due to the United Nations Resolutions on Apartheid in South Africa, it has not been confirmed.

The University of Durban-Westville was established in 1972 and the Department of Islamic Studies shortly thereafter, in 1974. This was achieved through the concerted efforts of Professor Cassim Lakhi (then Head of Department of History of Art at the university), Mr. A.M. Rajab (who represented the business community) and Dr. Daud Mall (who represented the Orient Islamic Trust) to establish a department or centre offering courses in Islamic Studies.⁷ Their efforts were supported by Professor Ismail al-Faruqi of Temple University, Philadelphia, who personally visited Durban at the invitation of Professor Lakhi. After consultations with leaders of the Muslim community, Professor al-Faruqi drafted a memorandum on their behalf, outlining the need for such a department.⁸

In 1982 a high-level Saudi delegation visited UDW and donated US\$100000 for the construction of the *jamaat khana*.⁹ The university's position vis-à-vis the *jamaat khana* was that while the land belonged to the university, the maintenance of the *jamaat khana* was the responsibility of the general Muslim public. The same policy applied to the *jamaat khana* that was subsequently established at the Howard College campus.

1.3 Evaluation of Islamic Studies Courses

For the purposes of this paper, I thought it might be useful to do an evaluation of the Islamic Studies courses that were taught at UDW, and contacted a select number of past students for their

6 Ebrahim Mahomed Mahida, *History of Muslims in South Africa: A Chronology*, Durban: Arabic Study Circle, 1993, p. 73.

7 Interview with Mahmoud Dawood, 28 September, 2021, Durban.

8 Mahida, pp. 106-107.

9 Ibid.

comments. The following is a summary of their reflections in their own words:

Respondent 1:

The approach was more descriptive – informative, but not critical ... At third-year level we were made to read classical Arabic texts, but we had not been equipped for it ... Our vocabulary was too limited to tackle those texts ...

One good thing about the department is that it attracted scholars from abroad, and through UDW's connections with Professor Nadvi, they were hosted there to deliver a lecture. We enjoyed this kind of exposure, and it broadened our thinking about Islam...I remember distinctly the visit of Muhammad Asad ... I was personally inspired by his two books, *The Road to Mecca* and *Islam at the Crossroads*.

Respondent 2:

Islamic Studies at UDW gave the student a broad understanding of Islamic history – from the pre-Islamic era (al-Ayyam al-Jahiliyyah) to modernity. There were brief introductions to the Sciences of the Qur'an and Ulum al-Hadith, but no introduction to Fiqh. The student left with an understanding of the broad sweep of Islamic history. It was up to the individual to pursue the many branches of Islamic Sciences at Honours level and beyond.

Respondent 3:

Though the teaching approach was more historical (that one looks back) compared to other courses, which were taught using interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, it was indeed beneficial. He understands with hindsight the reasons for the adoption of this approach at the undergraduate level: it offered a broad overview of the history of Muslim societies; it offered a fair insight into these communities, demonstrating how they formed their religious identities alongside their cultural-ethnic identities. The overview and insights into the formation

of Muslim empires was helpful and remained useful as one deepened one's understanding through reading and research ... Though criticisms were levelled by some because of the courses' too historicist approach and contents, one was given a good idea about Muslim identity through the various historical processes ...

... Islamic Studies as a discipline was a rather "fresh" subject in our region and elsewhere. That being the case, the amount of [authentic historical source] texts was limited and thus one relied heavily on those written and published in Europe and the Americas. Most of the authors were not from the tradition and this is where one encountered problems of the interpretation of Muslim history. Despite that, they were useful: *History of the Arabs* by Philip K. Hitti, for example, was popular and useful. The second is that there were too few published books by Muslim writers readily available, and this meant that the department relied on those that came from South Asia and the Muslim heartlands.

I should state that as a Muslim historian, Professor Nadvi managed to intervene with his thoughts; and this was necessary as one progressed from one course to the other. By the way, M.M. Sharif's edited *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, which was published in two volumes, was indeed a necessary text; it helped to provide a different insight and understanding, as well as an appreciation of other dimensions of Muslim societies.

As stated, this was a fresh new course/programme and the lecturer tried to make the topics pertinent and edifying; they were indeed topical and offered a fair overview of Muslim identity formation. Though the course changed in subsequent years, my response is that what was on offer then was germane to our personal and collective identities.

Considering the issues discussed and the topics raised, the approach was educative, but not necessarily critical from a social science perspective.

Respondent 4:

There was a very heavy emphasis on history in all three years. Philip Hitti's book was the main text, I think. Historiography as a discipline vis-à-vis Islamic history was never brought into focus. The study of Islamic history was very linear and chronologically presented over the three years. The Islamic history taught was hardly ever subjected to serious academic scrutiny.

I can recall that we did have lessons on the political system in Islam, women, shari'ah etc. ... Again, the level of academic inquiry and scrutiny was lacking, considering the debates that raged and still rage around these topics...

The course was beneficial in that it provided a broad understanding of, and exposure to, the study of Islam. It gave me a grasp of what was out there in terms of the study of Islam and Muslims, etc.

As mentioned in Point 2, the course did not prepare me for the real challenges facing Islam and Muslims at the time... Also, there was no focus on local and indigenous Islam and Islam in Africa, among others.

Respondent 5:

The curriculum by and large was neither faithful to the authentic source texts, nor relevant to our context as Muslims in the West.

Respondent 6:

I benefited immensely from the course and it informed my engagement in society subsequently, both within the Muslim community as well as the greater community ... One does feel that the course content should have been Africa-centred, which it wasn't.

Assuming that the above responses are broadly representative of the views of Islamic Studies students, they can be placed into the following categories:

- general overall satisfaction with the courses on offer
- dissatisfaction with both the content and approach

- general satisfaction with the contents but not the approach
- satisfaction with the approach but not entirely with the contents

Given the above, it is evident that students did not have the same expectations with regard to the Islamic Studies courses. However, even those who were critical of the course conceded that they had benefited from it to a greater or lesser degree. What is interesting is that the respondent who indicated that the curriculum was not relevant did not drop the course after the first year, as expected, but went on to major in Islamic Studies.

1.4 Staff

Professor Syed Salman Nadvi (PhD. Chicago University) was appointed as the first Head of Department in 1974 on the recommendation of Professor Ismail al-Faruqi.¹⁰ After Suleman Dangor had completed his BA Honours in Islamic Studies at the university in 1975, he was appointed as Junior Lecturer in 1976. He left the university in 1978 as he was awarded a scholarship to study Arabic at The Arabic Language Institute in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. On his return in 1980 he was appointed Research Officer, a position he occupied for twelve years, though he continued to lecture.

Academic staff worked in a “stifling atmosphere” at UDW until the appointment of Professor Jairam Reddy as vice-chancellor in 1990. Heads of departments (HODs) were accorded unbridled authority, which effectively meant that staff were completely dependent on their HODs in respect of their academic activities. Criticism of management could result in disciplinary action taken against the whistle blower, and this prevented the majority of staff members from expressing their grievances openly. It was left to the Combined Staff Association (COMSA) to represent staff on issues relating to management.

While Suleman Dangor was away on study leave, Farouk Vanker, who had returned from the University of Karachi in

¹⁰ Ibid.

Pakistan with a master's degree in Islamic Studies, filled the Junior Lecturer's position. Ebrahim Mahida, who had obtained his master's degree from the University of Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan, was appointed Senior Technical Assistant. Abul Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim, who had completed his PhD under Professor Ismail al-Faruqi at Temple University in Philadelphia, was appointed Junior Lecturer in 1985.

In general, the Islamic Studies staff enjoyed a good rapport with Muslim students, who invited them to speak at their conferences/seminars – though several Muslim student activists labelled the staff as “collaborators”. The department was criticised for not encouraging Islamic Studies students to become active in student affairs. Some attributed this non-involvement to concerns expressed by some of the staff about the “radicalisation” of Muslim students. However, when it came to off-campus activities, staff members were regularly invited by Muslim community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) to deliver papers, adjudicate speech contests and advise on educational matters, among other things.

Post-1994 there was an increasing demand to address the race and gender imbalance in the private sector. In response to the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), universities adopted an Employment Equity Policy to address these imbalances. Both the academic and administrative staff of the Department of Islamic Studies happened to be males of Indian origin. After the death of Ebrahim Mahida in 1997, Allie Kabeje was appointed as technical officer. When Suleman Dangor and Abul Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim retired (in 2010 and 2011, respectively) Tahir Sitoto and Cherry Muslim were appointed as lecturers.

1.5 Students

The establishment of the Department of Islamic Studies and the courses it had on offer generated great interest in both the

general Muslim public as well as Muslim students on campus. This is evident from the numbers of students (including non-Muslims) who enrolled for the undergraduate courses, as indicated in the table below.

Year	Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	BA Hons	MA	PhD
1974	23	1				
1975	10	2		1	1	
1976	20	3		1		
1977	25	10	5			
1978	43	9	5	1	1	
1979	66	26	7		1	
1980	90	20	13			
1981	50	26	13	1		
1982	82	14	11	1		
1983	51	22	9	1		
1984	78	23	15	1		1
1985	55	24	9	4	2	1
1986	55	12	15	2	2	1
1987	22	10	4	5		1
1988	12	2	7	1		
1989	32	7		1		
1990	49	11	5	3		
1991				2		
1992				4		
1993				2		
1994				1		
1995	19	7	11	1		
1996				1		
1997				2		
1998				2		

The table above indicates that the peak years for student intake for the Islamic Studies courses were between 1979 and 1986, and that between 1980 and 1986 (except for 1983 and 1985) a sizable number of students who enrolled for Islamic Studies 1 went on to complete their majors in Islamic Studies.

In that same period, a fair number of students from the Law and Science faculties enrolled for the first-year course in Islamic Studies; students were permitted to include one ancillary course from a faculty other than their own in their curriculum. This

indicates that there was an interest in Islamic Studies even by students outside of the Arts faculty.

Islamic Studies was also available to part-time students. The majority of part-time students were teachers at public schools, some of whom included Islamic Studies in their BA curriculum. However, in 19??, due to a decline in the number of part-time student applicants, these classes in were discontinued.

While many students enrolled for Islamic studies because of their interest in the subject, the majority of Faculty of Arts students majored in Islamic Studies and Arabic with a teaching career in mind. Unfortunately, the Department of Education's <year> decision not to recognise Arabic as a teaching subject saw a sharp drop in the number of students applying for the Islamic Studies course.. Most of the early graduates with majors in Arabic and/or Islamic Studies were employed by independent Muslim schools to teach Arabic and/or Islamic Studies.

Due to the dwindling undergraduate student numbers the department decided to focus on post-graduate students. The *darul ulums* were first assumed to be the ideal recruiting grounds for students, but when it was discovered that a matriculation certificate was not a requirement for admission to these institutions, this initiative had to be abandoned. There was one exception however, the Darul Ulum in Newcastle, from which a number of students – mostly of them Zimbabweans – were recruited. These students were registered by the university through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system and were required to prove their capacity for post-graduate studies by submitting a research paper. Several students who possessed neither a Bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies nor a general BA degree with majors in Islamic Studies were admitted into the postgraduate Islamic Studies programme. The university later introduced a ruling that students admitted to the postgraduate programme through the RPL system had to pass the second- and third- level undergraduate modules in Islamic Studies. This

affected the intake of students through the RPL route as most students they were not keen on spending an extra two years at the undergraduate level.

1.6 Scholarships and Awards

In an effort to attract students, the Head of the Department of Islamic Studies obtained the following awards/scholarships:

- The Arabic Study Circle of Durban scholarships, awarded to several students of Arabic and Islamic Studies each year.
- The Ebrahim Bawany Memorial Medal and cash prize was awarded to the best-performing student in Islamic Studies III each year. This was sponsored by Joosub H.S. Ebrahim, a well-known philanthropist from Pretoria.
- The Hafiza Mayat Trust of Durban Book Prizes, awarded to outstanding students of Islamic Studies annually.

1.7 Centre for Research in Islamic Studies

In 1980 the Department of Islamic Studies established a Centre for Research in Islamic Studies. The Centre published an annual journal, *al-'Ilm*, which contained articles pertaining to the history of Islam and Muslims in South Africa, as well as articles dealing with contemporary issues in Islam. Some articles were syndicated from previous publications, while others were generated by the Islamic Studies staff and commissioned authors. It had a fairly wide distribution, locally and abroad. The first issue was published in 1981 and the last in 1998, when the department was incorporated into the Interim School of Religion.

1.8 Courses/Modules

The Department of Islamic Studies officially started offering Course 1 in the BA Curriculum in 1974, introducing Course 2 in 1975 and Course 3 in 1976. Special provision was made for Suleman Dangor to enrol for the BA Honours degree in 1975, as he had already completed his BA degree with majors in Arabic and Oriental Studies at UNICOL.

While Islamic Studies was offered as an ancillary course in the BA degree curriculum, students could choose it as a major if they had passed the second-year Arabic language course. The reason for this was that most students found it difficult to translate the Arabic texts at the second-year Islamic Studies level after having completed only first-year Arabic language studies. This condition deterred some students from continuing to the second course in Islamic Studies.

The Islamic Studies curriculum introduced at UDW covered the political and cultural history of the contemporary Middle East, Asia and Africa, revivalist movements, prominent scholars, as well as introductions to the Qur'an, Hadith, theology, philosophy, mysticism and jurisprudence. The idea was to give students a bird's-eye view of these subjects which would enable them to pursue postgraduate studies in any of those fields.

After the modular system was adopted by the Faculty of Arts in 2000, I introduced a module on Islam in Africa and subsequently published a booklet based on my lectures in that module titled *Africa's Islamic Heritage: Muslim Regimes in East, North and West Africa*.

After the merging of UDW and the University of Natal in 2004, the Religion and Social Transformation programme introduced the following Islam-specific modules: Primary and Secondary Sources in Islam, Islamic Institutions in South Africa, Islam in South Africa, Contemporary Muslim World, Islam in the Modern World, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism.

Apart from teaching Islam-specific modules, Muslim staff teach the Islamic component of multifaith modules and co-ordinate several multifaith modules.

At the post-graduate level, students are free to focus specifically on Islam and Muslims.

2. Visiting Scholars

The UDW Department of Islamic Studies hosted Muslim scholars regularly between 1975 and 1998, as the following list indicates:

1. 1975: Dr. Kalim Siddiqi (Professor of Political Science and International Relations, University of London) and Bekal Utsahi (distinguished Indian poet)
2. 1977: Fatima Heeren (Germany); Dr. Abdullah Umar Nasseef (Vice-Rector, King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia) and Dr. Jamal Badawi (Assistant Professor in Business Administration, St Mary's)
3. 1978: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss, Morocco) <? not Germany or Poland?>.
4. 1982: Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens, UK)
5. 1983: Dr. Hisham Badran of Canada; Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah (Professor, University of Sorbonne, Paris, France]; Sharif Mahdavi (Iran); Senator Karl Snow (Utah, USA); Dr. A.R. Santoro (President of St Joseph's College, North Windham, Maine, USA); Dr Mansur Abdussalam; Professor A. Samad and Dr. Hashim Seedat (Granada, Spain)
6. 1985: Wan Uthman Taib (Malaysia); Muhammad Jafar Shaykh (Pakistan); Dr. Omar Hasan Kasule (USA); Habib Mayar (Afghanistan); Mujeeb Siddiqi (UK); Professor Pirzada Qasim Siddique (Pakistan)
7. 1986: Khalid Sohail (Canada); S.I. Kadiri (Mumbai, India); Professor Elie Kedourie (London School of Economics, UK)
8. 1987-Hakim Mohamed Said (Hamdard Foundation, Pakistan); Dr. A.A. Noor (Jakarta, Indonesia); Ahmed Najib Manfudh (Indonesia); Himayat Ali Shair and Raghbir Muradabadi (poets, Pakistan)
9. 1989: Dr. Jamal Badawi of Canada; Abdulla Abbas Nadvi (Umm al-Qura University, Makkah); Saeed Ahmed (former Pakistani cricket captain); Abd al-Razaq Iskandar (Jamiat al-Ulum al-Islamia, Karachi, Pakistan); Dr. Hashim Mahdi (Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami, Makkah); Dr. Y.D. Peters (Belgium); Dr. Abdullah F.H. Muhammad (King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia); Muhammad Salahuddin (editor-in-chief, Takbeer Weekly); Dr. Abdussattar Dalvi (Professor and Head: Department of Urdu, Mumbai University).

10. 1990: Dr. Khalid Al-Mansour of the USA (Director of Islamic Centre of America); Professor S. Ali Ashraf (Director-General; The Islamic Academy, University of Cambridge, UK); Ahmed Abdullah (Pakistan), Professor Karanjith Singh (University of Notre Dame, USA).
11. 1991: Shaykh Mansoor Ubaid (Member of Parliament, Egypt); Dr. Shaikh Mustafa Abu al-Faghrani, Muhammad al-Khawli, Muhammad Basyuni, Daniel Pipes (USA); Farooq Salman Murad (Islamic Foundation, Leicester, UK); Qari S. Basayuni (Egypt); Dr E C Mandivenga (Zimbabwe); Nasser Saghafi Ameri, Saeed Naghizadeg, Morteza Abu Talebi and Hooshman Sijani (Institute of Political and International Studies, Tehran, Iran).
12. 1993: Mawlana Muhammad Tasin (Director, al-Majlis al-`Ilmi, Karachi, Pakistan); Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Sabuni (Saudi Arabia); Mohammad Fazli Yusof (Syarikat Takaful Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia); Dr Coulon (Islamic Studies, Talence, France); Professor A.R. Doi (International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia); Professor Tama Sonn (Islamic Studies, Sir John Fisher College, Rochester, USA)
13. 1995-Abdul Wahab Darawesh (Leader of Arab Democratic Party, Nazareth, Israel); El Sana Talab, MP of Arab Democratic Party, Beer-Sheva, Jerusalem]; Mawlana Fazlur Rahman (Amir, Jamiat Ulama al-Islam of Pakistan); Aneesuddin Ahmed (Pakistan High Commissioner to South Africa:Pakistan); Muhammad Umer Chapra (Economic Advisor, Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia); Professor Sabry Hafez (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK)
14. 1996: Professor Abdel Wahhab Elmesseri (Professor Emeritus, Ayn Shams University, Cairo, Egypt); Munir Shafiq (President of International Islamic Organisation of Human Rights); Azzam Tamimi (Organisation of Liberty in the Muslim World)
15. 1997-1998: Professor Jan Knappert (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK); Abdalla Idris Ali (Principal: ISNA Islamic School, Canada); Professor Abdulaziz

Sachadina (Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia, USA); Dr. Irfan Khan (World Parliament of Religions, Chicago USA)

Despite having been visited by this array of eminent scholars over the years, as well as those listed below, the Department of Islamic Studies did not maintain any formal links with the academics among them nor did it enter into arrangements with them which might have benefited the department in terms of collaborations in research, student exchanges, and co-hosting of conferences, among other things, as well as enhancing the status of the department internationally.

3. DEPARTMENTAL SEMINARS

The Department of Islamic Studies also organised a number of seminars, including the following:

- 1975: Dr. Kalim Siddiqi: The pre-requisites of an Alternative Model for Muslim Countries
- 1977: Mrs. Fatima Heeren: The Relevance of Islam in the 20th Century
- 1978: Muhammad Asad: Islam at the Crossroads
- 1982: Yusuf Islam: My Encounter with Islam
- 1983: Dr. Hisham Badran: Islam and the Muslim Youth
Mrs Iman al-Qadi (USA): Muslim Women Today
Professor M Hamidullah: The Principles of an Islamic State
- 1989: Dr. Jamal Badawi: Socio-economic system: An Islamic Perspective
- 1990: Professor S. Ali Ashraf: Values and Flaws in the Present Education System
- 1990: Dr Khalid Al-Mansur: The Palestinian Cause and International Law
- 1993: Professor Abdul Rahman Doi: Islam in Africa: Problems and Prospects
- 1994: Professor Bashir Ahmed Khan: The Challenges of Living in a Multifaith Society
- 1995: Dr. Basheer Ahmed Khan: Muslim Personal Law in India

- 1997: Professor Paul Luback: Globalisation and Islamist Movements: The Quest for an Alternative Transition to Modernity
- 1997: Dr. Saleha Mahmoud Abedin: Muslim Women: Global Challenges and Response
- 1997: Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina: Iran Today¹¹

As mentioned earlier, staff of the department were often invited to speak at seminars organised by students, as well as by community organisations and institutions. These have not been listed here.

4. SCHOOL OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

The UDW Department of Islamic Studies was closed down in 1996 by what amounted to a decree by the vice-chancellor, Professor Mapule Ramashala, on the grounds that it was no longer feasible to offer courses that attracted very few students. The intention to close down unproductive departments was announced during a senate meeting. The university had been contemplating amalgamating departments or closing them down.

The decision to retrench staff teaching Indian languages and Arabic and placing religion and theology staff members into an interim centre was communicated by the dean of the Arts faculty, Professor Donal McCracken, at a special meeting with the affected departments. The meeting turned out not to be a consultation, as expected, but a communication by management that left no room for negotiation.

The Faculty of Theology and Departments of Science of Religion, Islamic Studies and Hindu Studies merged in 1996 to form the Centre of Religious Studies in 1997. Between 1997 and 1999, three programmes – Religion (UG); Religion and Social Transformation (PG) and Religion Education (PG) – as well as inter-religious templates focusing on contemporary cultural and social matters, were generated. These programmes and module templates were approved by the UDW Senate and SAQA in 1999. The Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Theology were both closed down in the same year and replaced by the Faculty

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of Human and Social Sciences in 2000, under whose auspices the School of Religion and Culture now operated.¹²

5. MERGER

On 2 November 2002 the Minister of Education Kader Asmal announced the merging of certain tertiary institutions including that of UDW and University of Natal (UN). Inter-institutional negotiations and merger arrangements commenced in 2003. These included talks between the UDW School of Religion and Culture and the UN School of Theology. After the founding of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in 2004, the UDW School of Religion and Culture moved to the Howard College campus, where it joined the Faculty of Humanities, Development & Social Sciences.¹³

6. SoRAT

Following the merger, a cross-campus school, the School of Religion and Theology (SoRAT) was founded in 2004 with the discipline of Religion offered at the Howard College campus in Durban, and primarily Theology with a few modules in Religion offered at the Pietermaritzburg campus. As per the negotiations, the Religion undergraduate programme was expanded to include four streams: African Religion, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Each of these streams has two modules at the second-year level; and one module at third-year level. Students were given the option of doing a BA major in Religion, and choosing the Islamic Studies Stream.¹⁴

The merger between Religion and Theology generated intense debate about the appropriate approach to teaching religion and theology in an academic institution. Theology staff claimed that they used the EMIC¹⁵ approach in their teaching of theology.

12 Johannes Smit, personal communication, July 3, 2021.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 The emic approach to studying human culture is one in which the members of the culture being studied are the main source of information used to understand the culture. Rather than reading other scientists' accounts of

From the ensuing discussions it was clear to Professor Pratap Kumar of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics that the Christian theology staff could not envision the study of religion outside of the Church structures largely because of their commitment to train ministers for those churches and the financial backing they received from them. He argued that the study of religion should be independent of an organised institution and that academic freedom should be given its rightful place in an academic institution.

Professor Kumar was not convinced that the theology staff were using the EMIC approach, which allows for criticism but is constrained by “certain lines of doctrine and orthopraxy”.¹⁶ Professor Kumar advocated the adoption of the ETIC¹⁷ approach, which, he argued, provides an opportunity to critique the tradition in a secular context without being biased.¹⁸ As there was no consensus, a compromise was eventually reached allowing staff to choose between the two approaches.

Another major challenge that staff at the Durban campus faced was the decision arrived at by some of the Pietermaritzburg campus staff to shut down Religion at the Howard College campus and move the staff to the Pietermaritzburg campus, leaving just one staff member behind to teach the introductory module in Religion. According to Dr Tahir Sitoto, this was to preserve the Religion discipline at the Pietermaritzburg campus as he was shouldering the responsibility of teaching Religion by himself. The other staff teaching Religion at the Pietermaritzburg campus had either established their own specialised field or spent more time in a technical capacity.¹⁹ Fortunately, Professor Johannes Smit was alerted to this agenda

the culture, the researcher will observe or even interview the members of the culture in order to understand why they live and believe as they do.

16 Pratap Kumar, personal communication, December 17, 2021.

17 The etic approach to studying human culture employs existing theories and perspectives that originated from outside the culture being studied. In other words, it uses preconceived notions and theories about culture in general in order to study specific cultures.

18 Pratap Kumar, personal communication, December 17, 2021.

19 Sitoto, T. Telephone interview. Dec. 9, 2021.

and he and I attended the senate meeting at the Howard College campus where this proposal was to be tabled. After the then head of department, Professor Steve de Gruchy, had read out the proposal, I (backed by Professor Smit), voiced our rejection of it on the grounds that the Durban staff had not been consulted. Had the proposal been approved by the senate, several staff on the Durban campus would have been retrenched and several Religion modules, including Islamic Studies, would have been discarded due to low student numbers at the Pietermaritzburg campus.

There was a great deal of tension between Black and White staff members at the Pietermaritzburg campus, which sometimes manifested in board meetings. Dr Tahir Sitoto, who was teaching undergraduate models at the Pietermaritzburg campus, expressed his frustration about this and opted for a transfer to the Durban campus, where he is now teaching.

7. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above that Islamic Studies proved popular among Muslim students in general. However, students' career choices (also affected by the Department of Education's decision to not recognise Arabic as a teaching subject) and considerations of financial feasibility by the university (at the time, UDW) itself impacted the continuance of the Islamic Studies discipline. The merging of faith-specific departments and faculties as well as that of the two universities resulted in the reconceptualisation and reconfiguration of Islamic Studies. Year-long courses were divided into modules, several new modules were generated and Islamic perspectives on contemporary issues were integrated into multifaith modules. While the numbers of students who register for the diverse multifaith modules each year are fairly substantive, that is not the case with Islamic-specific modules. The student demographics have also changed. Muslim students, though small in number, enrol mainly for multi-faith modules, and several non-Muslim students enrol for Islamic faith-specific modules.

The overwhelming majority of undergraduate students include Islamic Studies modules as ancillaries, with no intention of pursuing post-graduate studies in Islam. Many treat them as “filler modules” to complete their BA curriculum. To conclude, it seems to me that the survival of Islamic Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal will depend on attracting postgraduate students.