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**THE MACALESTER ISLAM COLLOQUIUM
A REPORT ON THE FIRST MEETING**

Zoë Whaley

The first Macalester Islam Colloquium took place on October 5th, 2005 and focused on “education about Islam in the Western and Muslim Academe.” The subject was introduced by Professor Ahmad, from Macalester’s Religious Studies Department, and after the groundwork was established, the colloquium progressed into a series of questions and discussions that revealed the complex nature of the topic. Professor Ahmad opened the colloquium by stressing the importance of history in the study of Islam. From Prof. Ahmad’s point of view, historical events and perspectives continue to hold an important place and influences education about Islam, yet it is these varying historical perspectives which often serve to problematize the nature of the study. Professor Ahmad began by introducing the two main theses that both Western and Muslim academes inherit in the study of Islam: the Orientalists’ thesis, and the Orientalism thesis.

Briefly put, the Orientalists’ thesis makes the claim that a Muslim subject is incapable of analyzing his/her position in the world, for two main reasons. First is his/her partiality. According to this thesis, the Muslim subject suffers from an inability to objectively distance himself from events and study critical to education about Islam. The second incapacity lies in a supposed inability to articulate fundamental issues to a non-Muslim audience—a result of a language barrier and a perceived culture disconnect.

The Orientalism thesis—advanced by Edward Said—states that the Orientalists, as outsiders, are in fact the least capable of impartiality because of the context in which they are embedded. Through his examination of Western stereotypes about Eastern cultures and peoples, Said called attention to the colonial history which Western scholars invariably bring to the study of Islam and the Muslim World. By establishing the relevance of the history of colonialism, the Orientalism thesis challenges viewpoints that much of the Western academe has

historically held true, namely: the intellectual inferiority and intrinsic difference of the 'Orient.'

By briefly introducing these two theses, Professor Ahmad established his argument that the history of a given phenomenon continues to affect the discussion of that phenomenon for an extended period of time. It is difficult and perhaps impossible to end the influence of history, and as evidenced by the Orientalists' and Orientalism theses, it has become clear that the study of Islam in Western and Muslim academe has inherited perspectives which continue to influence the discussion on the subject today. As the colloquium progressed to the discussion portion, Professor Ahmad stressed the importance of an approach that will view the study of Islam in both Western and Muslim academe through the analysis and discussion of these multiple perspectives. After Professor Ahmad concluded, the floor was opened for discussion and questions by the various students, faculty, and community members present. Throughout the course of the discussion two points arose on the issue of perspectives, which dominated much of the remainder of the colloquium: the engagement and interaction of varying perspectives, and the context in which knowledge is formed.

One of the first questions that arose explored the possible existence of a hierarchy of perspectives: Can one perspective hold an inferior or superior place in relation to another? The question of engagement between two perspectives was introduced by Professor Samatar and expanded upon by other attendees. Professor Samatar focused on the inevitable encounter and interaction of perspectives, and the effect that this engagement will have on the two theses on the matter (T_1 and T_2). One insight presented stated that the introduction of a second thesis necessarily supersedes the relevance of a first. Through T_2 's provision of a new outlook, T_1 is relegated to an inferior position, while the new thesis— T_2 —gains superiority through an analysis and expansion of the first. As the discussion progressed, another line of thought was introduced which challenged the previous insight: although T_2 may provide a more comprehensive view of a subject, T_1 does not become obsolete.

While the abstract use of language such as T_1 and T_2 may seem to be limited to the privileged upper echelon of academia, the discussion of the topics throughout remained lively and

insightful, complete with input from many of the attendees. By reviewing Professor Ahmad's argument, namely: the influence of historical perspectives on the contemporary study of Islam, the topic of engagement of perspectives yields important points. For example, by applying this line of thinking to the theses presented at the beginning of the colloquium, many questions arise: Is the Orientalism thesis 'superior' to that of the Orientalists thesis because of its ability to gain insight that may transcend previous claims or theses? Do both theses remain relevant to the study of education about Islam? As new theses emerge, will one of the previous perspectives be pushed to the periphery? Among the multitude of questions that could arise remains the fact that the study of Islam in both Western and Muslim academe must contend with its inheritance of past perspectives.

The second major point that surfaced during the course of the discussion grew from the postmodernist examination of the origins of knowledge. Initially introduced by Professor Cooley, the subsequent discussion centered on the necessity for a close examination of the assumptions that both Western and Muslim perspectives bring to the study of Islam. As Professor Cooley aptly pointed out, knowledge must be examined within the context it originates from. Historical evidence of the importance of the formation of knowledge is shown through the Orientalists' and Orientalism theses. Both theses attempt to examine the lens through which the study of the Muslim world can best be viewed: Orientalists reveal the incapacity of Muslim subjects to objectively interpret the study, while adherents to Orientalism seek to reveal the inherent prejudices that the Western academe bring to the study of Islam. As Professor Ahmad pointed out in further comments, the formation of various assumptions must always be questioned, and not merely accepted. Intrinsic to the study of education about Islam in both the Western and Muslim world is the essential consideration of certain aspects, which may contribute to the formation of knowledge—to name a few: location in the world, history, perceived identities—based on stereotypes or prior interaction, and personal or national systems of belief or tradition.

As the discussion drew to a close, it became clear that the two points discussed, namely: the engagement of perspectives, and the context in which knowledge exists, are tightly

interwoven. Perspectives do not exist as separate entities, removed from the people who form them, or the historical context in which they were born. Instead, perspectives must be examined through the context in which they originated as well as through their interaction and engagement with other positions.

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Michael Sells, *University of Chicago*

MIC December 2005

"Heretics, Jihad Fighters, and Lawyers: Images and Realities of Muslim Women from Medieval Egypt to Modern Pakistan"

Alexandra Cuffel & Mashal Saif, *Macalester College*

MIC February 2006

Questioning Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

Khaldoun Samman, *Macalester College*

MIC March 2006

Can Political Islam be Trusted?

Mohammed Bamyeh, *Macalester College*

MIC April 2006

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