

## THE STUDY OF ISLAM AND RELIGION IN BRITISH AND TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

Islamic studies and religious studies are attracting growing interest at worldwide. British universities accommodates Islamic studies as subject studies for long time with various names. Theology and religious studies in Turkey is called as *İlahiyat faculty*. In Muslim world, Turkish experience is quite unique with teaching various subjects from basic Islamic sciences to philosophy, from history to literature. It can be world-wide good model for theology and religious studies.

### Key Words

Theology and Religious Studies, *İlahiyat Faculty*, Turkey, Britain.

## İNGİLTERE VE TÜRK YÜKSEK EĞİTİMİNDE İSLAM VE DİN ÇALIŞMALARI

İslami ve dini araştırmalar bütün dünyada giderek artan şekilde ilgi çekmektedir. İngiliz üniversiteleri uzun süredir konu araştırması olarak İslami çalışmalara farklı isimlerle yer vermektedir. Teoloji ve dini çalışmalar Türkiye’de İlahiyat fakültesi olarak isimlendirilmektedir. İslam dünyasında temel islam bilimlerinden felsefeye, tarihten edebiyata farklı konuların öğretilmesiyle Türkiye tecrübesi farklı ve özel bir yere sahiptir. Bu alanda dünya ölçeğinde güzel bir örnek olarak kullanılabilir.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Teoloji ve Dini Araştırmalar, İlahiyat Fakültesi, Türkiye, İngiltere

‘Islamic Studies’ as a subject within Higher Education in the United Kingdom is generally understood to include the study of Islam and Muslim societies in a variety of disciplines and departments. In primary form it includes the Islamic Studies programmes as well as Religious Studies. In the secondary meaning, it can also be found within History, Languages and Literature, Politics, Anthropology and Sociology, and the interdisciplinary area studies programmes in Middle East or South Asian Studies. With the increased student interest in Islam

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and the Muslim world in our contemporary times, many United Kingdom universities have developed modules related to Islamic Studies that have been incorporated into different degree programmes. Themed courses such as Islamic finance or introductory courses on Islam for a general student population have also been developed. In addition, universities have engaged in outreach education for those working in social services or government to develop their knowledge of Islam and the Muslim society in large.

Historically, the study of Islam and Muslim society as an academic field in Britain has its foundations in Orientalism, being the study of the cultures and languages of the Muslim world, encompassing the Near and Middle East. The first chairs in Arabic were created in Cambridge in 1632 and in Oxford in 1634.<sup>1</sup> By the nineteenth century, increasing contact with the Muslim world through travel and trade saw an expansion in the provision and interest in Islamic Studies.<sup>2</sup> In 1916, the School of Oriental and African Studies was opened as part of the University of London. The establishment of this institution followed the 1909 Reay Report, which saw a need for studies of the Islamic world for the 'training of persons who are going to the East or Africa, either for public service or private business'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this report also insisted on a balance between practical training and scholarly independence. It sought to strike 'a balance between the teaching of classical and of living spoken languages, and between teaching languages and teaching the history, religion and laws of the societies which used them'.<sup>4</sup> Hence, approaches to Islamic Studies in Western universities today include the study of Islam through classical texts and languages as well as the study of Muslim communities and practice.

The development of Islamic Studies continues to be influenced by the historical context within which it finds itself in the United Kingdom. The report of the study of Islam at Higher Education by El-Awaisi and Nye in 2006 spoke highly of the good engagement between classical study of Islamic subjects and the related subjects within the higher educational institutions of the United Kingdom. It reported that Islamic Studies is taught and researched in a diversity of areas, contributing extensively to scholarship on Islam and Muslim communities.<sup>5</sup> While the teaching of Islamic Studies remains in part within the legacy of its heritage, the study of Islam and Muslim societies also takes place on a multi-disciplinary level. A particularly important development in Islamic Studies has been the growth in

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 33-34 and 63-65.

<sup>3</sup> Reay Report quoted in Hourani, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>5</sup> El-Awaisi, Abd al-Fattah and Malory Nye. *Time for Change – Report on the Future of the Study of Islam and Muslims in Universities and Colleges in Multiculturalism Britain*. Dundee: Al-Maktoum Press, 2006.

Islam being taught from within a Religious Studies tradition from the 1960s and 1970s. There are very few named Islamic Studies centres or departments in Britain and universities such as Lampeter, Oxford and SOAS are rather exceptions. In general, Islamic Studies is taught and researched mainly in Middle Eastern departments and Religious Studies departments.<sup>6</sup> Hence, scholars engaged in forms of Islamic Studies come from a number of academic disciplines, including Religious Studies, History, languages and literature, Politics, Anthropology and Sociology, and interdisciplinary area studies programmes in Middle East Studies and South Asian Studies.

Within the Religious Studies departments the study of Islam include both the more traditionalist manifestations of Islamic Studies concerned with language acquisition and the study of Islamic texts and the more interdisciplinary subjects of Islam that focus on various aspects of Islam and Muslim societies, including modules on 'Islam in Contemporary Britain', 'Christian-Muslim Relations', 'Muslims in Britain' and 'Islam in the West'. These modules approach the topic from a sociological, political or anthropological perspective. The students are also generally obliged to do some sociological and anthropological modules such as 'Theory of Religion', 'Philosophy of Religion', and 'Methods and Approached to studying Religion'.<sup>7</sup> This model seems to be the one most closely resembling the *Ilahiyat* faculties within Turkish Universities. The strength of this aspect of studying Islam in the United Kingdom is that students are fully able to engage with sociological, anthropological and philosophical concepts of the modern world. The weakness of this programme seems to lie in the lack of emphasis on the traditional Islamic sciences, especially the Islamic texts and the acquisition of Muslim languages. In this sense the *Ilahiyat* faculties have developed their programme in a much better way since they give equal weight to the traditional Islamic sciences, acquisition of Muslim languages and the subjects such as philosophy and history.

The historical origins of the establishment of *Ilahiyat* faculties lie in the late eighteenth century. The *madrassa* system in the Ottoman State, which had been an evolving higher education system since the classical Islamic period (eleventh century), was surpassed by major educational reforms based on contemporary European structures.<sup>8</sup> One of the main reforms implemented was the establishment of numerous Western-style higher education institutions and the first Ministry of Education in 1857.<sup>9</sup> Due to these reforms, the Ottoman State acquired a dual higher

<sup>6</sup> Bunt, Gary R. 'Islam in Higher Education: University of Birmingham 29 – 30 January 2005' Discourse 4, no. 2 (2005): 104-19.

<sup>7</sup> See Martin, Richard C. *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See Amjad M. Hussain, *A Social History of Muslim Education: From the Prophet's Period to Ottoman Times*, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Selçuk Akşin Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire 1839-1908* (Brill: Leiden, 2001), 20-22.

education system that had the traditional structure (*madrasas*) and the Western type (*mekteb*).<sup>10</sup> By 1924, the new Republic of Turkey passed the Unification of Education Act Law, which put all educational institutions under the state.<sup>11</sup> During that year, the Darul Fanun Faculty of *Ilahiyat* (Faculty of Divinity within the School of Arts) in Istanbul (1924-1933) was opened. At the same time *imam-hatib* schools at the secondary level were introduced to train imams. The *imam-hatib* secondary schools did not just concentrate on Islamic sciences but used a pedagogy that included subjects such as Civil Law, sciences, Mathematics, Economics and Sociology. The new curriculum at the Darul Fanun Faculty of *Ilahiyat* in Istanbul promoted a modern and active understanding of religion, and it was argued that it would train specialists in Islamic Studies, meet the need for religious instruction in schools, and produce graduates fluent in modern scientific methods. The faculty was allowed to accept students from *imam-hatib* schools. The faculty received more than 400 students that year directly from the closed down *madrasas*.<sup>12</sup>

In 1948 the parliament argued that a faculty of *Ilahiyat* should be established and some other religious education institutions should be opened to get qualified men who could lead prayers and funeral ceremonies. Eight new *imam-hatib* courses were therefore opened that year. In 1949, Ankara University Senate established the first Faculty of *Ilahiyat*. Since 1959 numerous *Ilahiyat* faculties have been established and since 1966 graduates of *imam-hatib* schools have been given the opportunity to attend university.<sup>13</sup> By 1982, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) transferred all of the private higher Islamic Studies institutions into the *Ilahiyat* faculties through extensive reforms.<sup>14</sup> Since the 1980s many conferences have addressed the status of Islamic Studies at various universities across the nation.<sup>15</sup> One of the main national conferences was entitled ‘Symposium on the Problems, Restructure and Future of Higher Religious Education in Turkey’ in 2003, hosted by Suleyman Demirel University (SDU). This conference dealt specifically with what should be taught in *Ilahiyat* faculties with regards to religious service.

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<sup>10</sup> Yasin Aktay, ‘Political and Intellectual Disputes on the Academisation of Religious Knowledge’ (MPhil Thesis, Ankara University, 1993). Available at <http://www.angelfire.com/art/yasinaktay/tezler/MSThesis> [accessed 18 February 2008].

<sup>11</sup> OzcanDemirel, ‘Education in Turkey: From Empire to Republic’ in *Education in the Muslim World*, ed. Rosarii Griffin, 131 (United Kingdom: Symposium Books, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Mehmet Pacaci and Yasin Aktay, ‘75 years of Higher Education in Modern Turkey’, *The Muslim World Journal*, LXXXIX (1999): 389-413.

<sup>13</sup> StephenVertigans, *Islamic Root and Resurgence in Turkey* (Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood, 2003), 94.

<sup>14</sup> Bekim Agai, ‘Islam and Education in Turkey’, in *Schooling Islam: the Culture and Politics of Modern Islam*, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Pacaci and Aktay, ‘75 years of Religious Education in Modern Turkey’, 403-404.

The *Ilahiyat* faculties in Turkey today lay emphasis on the academic study of both Islam and on the epistemological study of religion. Since 1992 the main departments of *Ilahiyat* faculties across the country have been standardised into three departments: the Basic Islamic Sciences Department, the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department, and the Islamic History and Arts Department.<sup>16</sup> This is a unique system which Turkey has produced which is unlike any other system in the Muslim world. Departments of Basic Islamic Sciences offer academic subjects such as: *Tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis); Hadith (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad); *Kalam* (Islamic theology); Islamic law; history of Islamic sects; and Arabic language and literature. The department of Basic Islamic Sciences deals with subjects that are classical which gives the students a clear and strong background however, they are also praiseworthy for their approach which is academic, including textual and sociological studies. The latter especially has developed very well in recent years.

In a complimentary fashion, the 'Departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies' support the 'Departments of Basic Islamic Sciences'. This department is very similar to the contemporary Religious Studies department in the UK, where modules such as philosophy of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, epistemology of religion, and history of philosophy are taught. This is a very good academic aspect to studying religion, since this means that Turkish students of the *Ilahiyat* graduate not only with traditional Religious sciences but also develop throughout their degree the ability to understand religion(s) from a wider aspect and provide the student of the *Ilahiyat* Faculty with a wide range of approaches due to the variety of subjects. For example, the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department deals with sophisticated subjects and figures based both in the classical era such as ancient philosophy of Aristotle, Islamic Philosophy of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd and the modern aspect of sociology and psychology as portrayed by Max Weber, Jung and Freud. Another module found within this department is on logic, which is a classical Islamic subject which is unfortunately taught in very few Muslim countries today, which makes Turkish experience unique and praiseworthy. The 'Departments of Islamic History and Arts' takes an academic approach to subjects such as the history of the Islamic world, the history of Turkish-Muslim arts, Turkish-Islamic literature, and Turkish religious music, again which is essential to comprehend in order to have a context for all the traditional Islamic subjects.

These wide range of subject taught at the *Ilahiyat* faculty have been studied from historical, sociological, philosophical, textual and even scientific approaches using critical academic analysis. Accordingly, it is clear that the 'health of the discipline' is 'strong' on the basis of its academic approach and research. This kind

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<sup>16</sup> Pacaci and Aktay, '75 years of Religious Education in Modern Turkey', 405.

of interdisciplinary approaches and the possession of an integrated approach that draws on different disciplinary frameworks have for a long time been seen as an inherent strength by most Western universities. Scholars in the West study Islam from a wide range of disciplines such as History, Religious Studies, Law, languages and literature, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, area studies and Art History. The combination of distinct areas of specialisation into interdisciplinary and trans-regional centres is seen as advantageous by Higher education authorities in Australia, the Netherlands, France and the United States. Therefore, the combinations of the three departments in the *Ilahiyat* faculty are a strength that should be praised and further developed.

In recent years the study of Islam has increased both in the East and in the West. The nature of Islamic Studies in the West in recent years is mostly due to the increased presence of Muslims in Western societies, not just in terms of numbers, but in relation to changes in senses of identity and religiosity. In Turkey, the students applying to *Ilahiyat* have also increased greatly where some faculties are admitting approximately 400 students each year. The study of Islam within different countries is highly influenced by the colonial, political and economic history of the various countries – and also the ancestral affiliations of local Muslim populations. This has led to a variety of methods within different Muslim countries to teach religion at Higher Education. It is in this context that it is important to recognise that the *Ilahiyat* Faculties have already been equipped with the various subjects that deal with new demands and prepare people to adapt to a shifting society. The *Ilahiyat faculties* have been able to be faithful, interdisciplinary and adapting response to shifting global contexts. It seems that the *Ilahiyat* faculties are already far ahead of Muslim countries with their fairly rigorous three departments. The Turkish style of Higher Education in the study of Religion does not exist anywhere else in the Muslim world and it is very well modeled to suit both the traditional teaching of Islam and the modern interdisciplinary approach in relation to teaching philosophy, history and literature.

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