Special Section

Speaking Truth Beyond the Tower: Academics of Islam Engaging in the Public Sphere

Introduction

Shafique Virani
University of Toronto

There is a critical shortage of scholars of Islam in North America. While Muslims make up close to a quarter of the world's population and Islam often dominates news headlines, academic expertise of this global faith is severely lacking. Just over ten percent of religion and theology departments at North American colleges and universities can claim to have faculty trained in Islamic studies.[1] While the number of scholars in this field has increased from about a dozen in the1970s, to approximately one hundred thirty in 2004, to over four hundred today, this figure is still dwarfed by the number of experts studying other religious traditions. Only about 3.5% of the membership of the American Academy of Religion specializes in Islam, which is neither representative of the faith's total number of worldwide adherents, nor its influence in current events.[2]

In his only known work, *On Nature*, the Greek philosopher Parmenides postulated that nature abhors a vacuum. The same might be said of a public in search of information. Where academics have not been able to satisfy the public's thirst for knowledge, a host of dubious pundits have often been quite eager to pick up the slack. Even leaving aside the insufficient number of academics in this field, the staid opinions of scholars are often at a distinct disadvantage in the public sphere, particularly in the free-for-all known as the Internet. In *The Cult of the Amateur*, Andrew Keen writes,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S215134810000238X Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Out of this anarchy, it suddenly became clear that what was governing the infinite monkeys now inputting away on the Internet was the law of digital Darwinism, the survival of the loudest and most opinionated."[3] While this assessment is exaggerated, it is not entirely off the mark. Almost yearly, the presidential address at the conference of the Middle East Studies Association and countless panels at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion bemoan the difficulties that academics of Islam and the Middle East have in making their voices heard in the highly charged public sphere. Reliable, staid, and sober comment of scholars is often lost in a sea of uninformed, hateful and frequently hysterical supposition, trotted out by self- or media-styled "experts." As the proper functioning of civil society is premised on the existence of a well-informed populace, many members of the academy have tried to address this situation and to educate the general public about Islam through their writings, public lectures, media appearances and forays into the world of cyberspace, realizing that they have responsibilities that extend far beyond the Ivory Tower. These initiatives have been challenging. Though academic training prepares us to be adept at research, discovery, careful weighing of facts, and minute analysis, only occasionally are we trained at wider public dissemination of the fruits of our labors. It was to address this problem that I organized a roundtable and a panel at the annual meetings of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) respectively on the subject "Speaking Truth beyond the Tower: Academics of Islam Engaging in the Public Sphere." I was delighted to be enthusiastically joined by Carl W. Ernst, Alan Godlas and Daniel M. Varisco, who spoke at both venues and who are contributing authors to this piece, and by Laury Silvers, David Freidenreich and Eboo Patel, who spoke at the conference of the AAR.[4] They are among the most active members of our community of scholars in reaching out to and successfully influencing the public sphere. The expertise shared was much appreciated by packed audiences at both fora. They functioned as Town Hall-type meetings in which members of our scholarly community gathered to collectively address the situation that confronts us and brainstorm ways in which we can participate and engage with public discourse, raising it to a higher level. The papers are brought together here in the hopes that they may be useful to the academic guild to make scholarly expertise in our fields more accessible to a broader audience.

In "It's Not Just Academic—Writing Public Scholarship in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies," Carl W. Ernst addresses the very nuts and bolts of how we present scholarly information. An accomplished writer (in both the academic and literary senses of that word), he argues that we must learn to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S215134810000238X Published online by Cambridge University Press

communicate in clear and meaningful ways, as the gap between academia and the general public is often the function of the arcane language and style that dominate our profession. While members of the public are thirsty for knowledge in our areas of specialization, they are scared away by the esoteric forms, conventions and highly technical vocabulary found in what Ernst refers to tongue-in-cheek as *The Journal of Obscure Studies.* Unable to access reliable information hidden under lock and key in the Ivory Tower, interested non-specialists are left to sink or swim in the uncharted waters of often questionable standard media sources of information. Ernst traces the obscure and deadening writing style that dominates academia to the "dissertation-ese" painfully cultivated by doctoral students seeking to satisfy the tiny cabal of professors on their evaluation committees. He proposes an alternative model, dubbed "stealth analysis," which he elaborates in detail in his article.

With over a decade of experience communicating academic expertise on the web, Alan Godlas was one of the first scholars of Islam to take advantage of this medium for his scholarship, and one of the most successful. In his paper, "An Engaged Islamicist: The Internet and Climbing Outside the Tower," he discusses three projects that he created, representing three different genres of online communication: "Islam and Islamic Studies Resources," "Sufis Without Borders," and "Sufi News and Sufism World Report." Along with some of our other contributors, Godlas suggests that such scholarly *bid'a*, or innovation (even though it is certainly *bid'a ḥasana*, or laudable innovation) is often best pursued post-tenure. He references the role of his students and teaching in spurring him to think of new modes of communication, a common theme that runs through all four papers. As one of the pioneers of digital resources in Islamic Studies, Godlas recalls facing a situation at the very outset in which good-quality internet resources on Islam were scarce, and "even relatively unbiased websites on Islam were uncommon."

Daniel Varisco, in his deliciously pungent and punning style, continues the journey in the digital realm by leaving behind the Ivory Tower for a spell, to write on "Climbing the Virtual Minbar of Cyberspace." Addressing the digitally initiated, he wonders who will hear our scholarly *khutba*, and whether those who do will simply dismiss what we say as elitist *"khutzpah."* He cautions that, particularly in our current political and intellectual climate, scholarly neutrality must not be allowed to degenerate into a naïve form of cultural relativism that divorces critical review from moral engagement. In narrating his own adventures in cyberspace, he tells of how, in the late 1990s, he began requiring his students to conduct "webservations," assigned

https://doi.org/10.1017/S215134810000238X Published online by Cambridge University Press

reviews of websites, thus echoing the pedagogical impetus that spurred Godlas. Later, in 2002, he jointly conducted an online virtual seminar on the Qur'an, which resulted in a permanent website of resources, accessible to the general public. A few years later, exasperated with the challenges of publishing through standard news media, he launched "Tabsir: Insight on Islam and the Middle East," an academic blog that became an important and influential forum for informed commentary. In 2006, he created the internet journal, *CyberOrient*, on behalf of the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association. His article keenly reflects on the successes and challenges of these endeavors, and raises new issues. He ponders, "an even larger problem is the endemic start-up challenge: marketing...how does one get the word out?"

It is this question that I address in the fourth and final paper, "Dissemination and the Digital: The Creation of an Academic Book Trailer," in which I suggest one possible approach that draws from experience in digital humanities scholarship. Citing evidence from the medical sciences, I discuss how other academic fields are awakening to the danger of failing to adopt social- and multimedia methodologies for the dissemination of research-based knowledge. Arguing that the publication of the monograph must not be the end-all and be-all of humanistic scholars, I assert that we have a responsibility to ensure that our research has the greatest impact whenever possible, even beyond the Ivory Tower. This is, in fact, something that most granting agencies insist upon. I then describe the development of what I believe to have been the world's first academic book trailer, similar to a film trailer, which helped launch my monograph, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, A Search for Salvation*, published by Oxford University Press.

The authors of these reflections hope that the methods contained herein may prove useful and replicable by others to ensure that sound scholarly information in our fields reaches the broadest possible public, digitally or otherwise. Varisco expresses this very well in recalling the Qu'ranic tale of the famous Yemeni dam of ancient Saba (Sheba). This was destroyed by a divinely sent flood on the unbelievers of the time. However, some commentators have opined that the real damage was caused by a little mouse, gnawing away at the base. Varisco asks playfully, "How much of the Islamophobia prevalent in the media and popular culture could be destroyed by scholars today with a simple click of a different kind of mouse?"

https://doi.org/10.1017/S215134810000238X Published online by Cambridge University Press

End Notes

[1]Richard C. Martin, "Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010), p. 913.

[2]Ibid., p. 912.

[3]Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 15.

[4]Panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, November 2, 2008 and roundtable at the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Washington, DC, November 24, 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S215134810000238X Published online by Cambridge University Press