

Knowledge & Diversity: The Center for Islamic Studies Celebrates Ten Years

Munir Jiwa



ENTER THE GTU LIBRARY THIS FALL, AND YOU’LL SEE scrolls of sacred texts, inspired art covering the walls, and display cases highlighting the work of students, graduates, faculty, and visiting scholars in Islamic studies at the Graduate Theological Union. This illuminating exhibition, entitled *Knowledge & Diversity*, marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Center for Islamic Studies at the GTU, and celebrates the many people who have contributed to the Center’s development and flourishing in its first decade.

The themes of knowledge and diversity, so pertinent to the work of the Center for Islamic Studies, are rooted in the Qur’an. The first verse revealed to the Prophet Muhammad begins with “*Iqra*” (“Read/Recite”), establishing knowledge as central to the Islamic tradition (Q 96:1-5). In another verse, we are reminded of our diversity and that we were created from a male and a female, and made into nations and tribes, so that we may know one another (Q 49:13).

Since its founding in 2007, the Center for Islamic Studies has sought to deepen scholarly engagement with the wisdom

of the Islamic tradition within the diverse, multireligious context of the Graduate Theological Union. CIS focuses research and scholarship on Islamic texts and traditions in contemporary contexts, supporting students pursuing Islamic studies at the master’s and doctoral levels, offering a certificate in Islamic studies, and providing graduate level courses on Islam and Muslims for students throughout the GTU consortium and the University of California, Berkeley. The Center works collaboratively with other GTU centers and member schools, and partners with a wide range of institutions and organizations in the Bay Area, nationally, and throughout the world.

Our Students: Scholars, Leaders, and Activists

For ten years, the Center for Islamic Studies has provided a home at the GTU where scholars and students of many faiths can learn about the richness of the Islamic tradition and the diversity of Muslims in their theological, historical, and cultural contexts. CIS students contribute significantly to the interreligious environment that characterizes the GTU. While the Center continues to provide introductory and advanced courses in Islamic studies for students in degree programs across the entire GTU consortium and UC Berkeley, we especially celebrate the accomplishments of those GTU students and graduates whose scholarly work has focused on the Islamic tradition during the past decade.

Today, 14 PhD students and 8 MA students are pursuing degrees in Islamic studies at CIS/GTU and 3 more are currently working toward a certificate in Islamic studies. During our first ten years, we’ve seen 9 students complete the certificate in Islamic studies, 19 graduate with an MA in Islamic

Our 45 CIS MA and PhD students and graduates, along with CIS faculty and visiting scholars, are representative of the global diversity of the Islamic tradition; they come from 17 different countries and speak, read, or write in 32 languages!



CIS graduates at the 2017 GTU Commencement

studies, and 4 who have completed their PhD in association with our Center. Our 45 MA and PhD students and graduates, along with CIS faculty and visiting scholars, are representative of the global diversity of the Islamic tradition; they come from 17 different countries and speak, read, or write in 32 languages!

In May 2017, CIS students and graduates organized the First Annual CIS/GTU Islamic Studies Symposium, *Scholarship, Leadership, Activism: Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union*. The event attracted more than one hundred attendees from the GTU and UC Berkeley academic communities, as well as from the broader public. Twenty-four students, graduates, faculty, and visiting scholars offered academic presentations during the day-long symposium, which explored five central themes: studying the Islamic tradition in academia, researching Muslim diversity and identity, teaching and pedagogy in Islamic studies, engaging the public sphere through activism, and expressing faith through creativity and the arts. The event built bridges between theological education and scholarship in Islamic studies in secular contexts, provided opportunities for networking, and contributed to strengthening academic and community connections. (For the full program, see www.gtu.edu/events/first-annual-cis-student-symposium.)

Ten Years of Partnerships

An estimated quarter of a million Muslims live in the San Francisco Bay Area, positioning CIS as an important venue for deepening engagement with Muslims and the Islamic tradition in interreligious contexts. During the past decade, CIS has sponsored or co-sponsored more than 700 educational

programs, forums, and public events, which have attracted thousands of participants.

Grants from several major foundations have enabled us to share in the rich potential of our region's resources to build networks among local Muslim organizations and engage local communities in support of interreligious programming. In 2009, a grant from the Carnegie Corporation seeking to address media and public policy questions concerning Islam and Muslims led to an important conference entitled, *Who Speaks for Islam? Media and Muslim Networks*. The following year, the Social Science Research Council provided a grant that enabled CIS to further expand this work. The resulting programs, *Media and Muslim Networks: Institution and Communications Capacity Building in the Bay Area*, strengthened the Center's partnerships with diverse Bay Area communities in academia, journalism, media, public policy, science and technology, and the arts, as well as with Muslim communities.

CIS has benefited from the early, strong, and consistent support of the Henry Luce Foundation. A significant three-year grant from the Luce Foundation in 2009 helped establish our MA program and enabled admission of our first cohort of students. A second three-year grant in 2013 further strengthened CIS's academic, public, and leadership programs. In celebration of our tenth anniversary, the Luce Foundation has provided additional funding to help CIS showcase, document, and evaluate our work. The generosity of the Luce Foundation has been central in supporting Islamic studies within the academy in the US, and in advancing broader understanding of Islam and Muslims in the wider public.

Funding from the Walter & Elise Haas Fund in 2016-2017



Iqra Star by Mamoun Sakkal

has allowed the GTU to strengthen its Madrasa-Midrasha program, established in 2009 through a partnership between the Center for Islamic Studies and the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies. This ongoing program seeks to advance study, dialogue, and understanding of Jewish and Islamic texts and contexts within academia and the larger public sphere by offering workshops, lectures, panels, and courses that explore the richness, diversity, differences, and commonalities of the Jewish and Islamic traditions.

Significant and ongoing collaborations with several partners including service on various boards and committees, have established CIS as a leading national and global center. These include our partnership for nearly a decade with the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at the Center for Race and Gender at UC Berkeley, work with the Public Theology Inquiry Group at the Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion and the Haas Institute's Religious Diversity Cluster at UC Berkeley, academic and public programming with Zaytuna College in Berkeley, a decade of service on the Public Education Advisory Board of the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies at Stanford University, and serving on the Contemporary Islam Section and the Committee for Racial and Ethnic Minorities, both at the American Academy of Religion.

These foundations and academic and public partnerships enable us to enrich Islamic studies at the GTU, while strengthening interreligious education and dialogue. Now, CIS is in a leading position to move forward, broaden its

impact, and provide models for other institutions, bridging theology and academia.

Faculty and Visiting Scholars

Among the faculty members who have been most instrumental in the work of the Center for Islamic Studies is Dr. Marianne Farina, CSC, a professor of philosophy and theology at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology and a core doctoral faculty member at the GTU. Dr. Farina's commitment and dedication has enriched and extended CIS academic and public programming throughout the decade, offering courses like *Christian-Muslim Dialogue* and *Religion and Peacebuilding* that are vitally important in our world today. Dr. Farina was a key figure in the establishment of the Center for Islamic Studies, working with the late Dr. Ibrahim Farajajé who led the Islamic Studies Task Force established by former GTU President James Donahue. Former GTU deans Arthur Holder and Judith Berling were also instrumental in the Center's founding, as was the significant financial support of John Weiser, to whom we are so deeply grateful.

Our outstanding faculty and visiting scholars bring a wide range of interests and perspectives within the broad field of Islamic studies to CIS and enrich discourse within the GTU community. Their academic expertise spans the breadth of Islam in many dimensions—from religious faith, belief, and practice in many cultures, to artistic, scientific, cultural, and political forms of expression.

Twelve visiting scholars have contributed to the diverse perspectives of our academic community in our first decade. Our visiting scholars have included university presidents, directors of departments and programs, curators, professors, religious leaders and filmmakers. They have come from diverse places such as Bosnia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, and Sudan, and have brought scholarly expertise in areas of Qur'anic studies, theology, law, spirituality, science, sustainability, the study of Islamic art, architecture, literature and poetry, questions of Muslim diversity and identity, works on countering Islamophobia, and institution-building and leadership. Their scholarship and service contributes substantially to the CIS and GTU, as they work with and mentor our students, provide opportunities for extended education, and share their learnings with a larger public.

Looking Ahead

We live in perilous and precarious times. With the growing Islamophobia in the United States, the monitoring

and curtailing of religious and academic freedoms, and the consistent underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Muslims in mainstream media in a post-truth era, it is essential to reframe the stories about Islam. This means challenging the normative frames through which Islam and Muslims are most often represented. These frames are what Dr. Jiwa calls the five “media pillars” of Islam, namely: 9/11 as the predominant temporal lens through which we approach Islamic history and theology and Muslims in the United States; terrorism and violence; Muslim women and veiling, and more recent discussions of sexual minorities; “Islam and the West”; and finally the Middle East as the geographical lens through which we view the entire “Muslim world.” At the Center for Islamic Studies, we are engaged in numerous efforts to nuance and question these prevailing narratives, so Muslims can be understood through their diverse and intersectional histories and identities.

One example of the GTU’s effort to highlight contributions the Islamic tradition has made to the world was witnessed earlier this year in the exhibition *Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art*, organized by the Center for the Arts & Religion and displayed in the new Doug Adams Gallery. This exhibition, curated by CIS research scholar Carol Bier, presented the work of seven American artists from diverse backgrounds, each of whom was inspired by the Islamic tradition in unique ways. This inspiration reverberates beyond the GTU, as it reminds us of the profound legacy of Islamic contributions to geometry, art, architecture, literature, the environment, science and medicine, innovative technology, and education, including the enormous contributions made by Muslim women such as Fatima al-Fihri, who established the first continuously running educational institution in 859 in Fez, Morocco. These gifts benefit all humanity.

CIS exemplifies the critical role that Islamic studies and Muslims play in theological schools and the larger academy. Islam is an American religion—here from the time African Muslims were enslaved during the Atlantic Slave Trade. It has a long and rich history on this continent, a history of African-American Muslims who have upheld the faith. Muslims continue to make significant contributions to how we reflect upon ourselves in profoundly new ways.

Islamic studies is integral to how we think about, teach, and practice interreligious studies. We need to study and reflect upon the Islamic tradition and diverse Muslim practices



CIS faculty and students at *Reverberating Echoes*

and expressions both in their own specificity and history, as well as in the context of mutually constitutive histories—histories of entanglement, overlap, and messiness, as well as of shared intellectual and spiritual learning. Advancing religious and interreligious literacy in theological schools, which includes understanding and appreciating people in their contextual and intersectional complexity, can open tremendous transformative potential.

As we reflect on the CIS’s first decade and think to the years ahead, we are deeply grateful to our many generous supporters, who provide inspiration and guidance, and trust us to forge forward with our important work. Addressing the challenges we face today, CIS provides and facilitates opportunities for dialogue at a time of heightened divisions nationally and internationally. CIS students, faculty, visiting scholars, and staff continue to serve as leaders in promoting a better understanding of Islam and Muslims. Through such efforts, the Center for Islamic Studies has established itself as a valued partner in the GTU consortium, working collaboratively as we seek together to *grow in knowledge, thrive in spirit, and unite in solutions* that promote a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

The Center for Islamic Studies is committed to advancing sound scholarship in Islamic studies, and to an ethical, aesthetic, and critical education that inculcates a love for learning, a demand for social justice, global awareness, our responsibility to all of humanity and the environment, and an education of excellence, *ihsan*. ♦

Munir Jiwa is the founding director of the Center for Islamic Studies and associate professor of Islamic Studies and Anthropology at the GTU.