

Conference Report

Webinar on Islam and English Studies

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On 24 September 2021, the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL), International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), with the help of the Secretariat of English Language & Literature (ELITS), hosted an online seminar titled “Islam & English Studies.” Opening the webinar, the Head of DELL, Dr Tanja Jonid welcomed the two speakers, Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dr Mohd. Kamal Hassan, who is a former IIUM Rector, and Dr Salman al-Azami, Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Hope University, United Kingdom. Dr Tanja Jonid expressed her happiness that the department is hosting this event and looked forward to having more Islamisation-based events in the future. Framing the discussion using the Islamisation of Human Knowledge (IOHK) approach as a means of decolonising and desecularising mainstream knowledge and principles, the webinar focuses on the philosophical and practical applications of IOHK in analysing the relationship between Islam and English Studies.

Mohd. Kamal Hassan presented his “English Studies and Islam: IIUM’s Approach to Islamisation of Human Knowledge (IOHK) Towards Harmonious and Beneficial Islam-West Relationship” by first establishing the ontological, epistemological, and axiological underpinnings of IOHK. He made a case for IOHK to be a principal part of the intellectual discourse at universities and learning institutions in Muslim countries, as is the case with IIUM. Generally, the mainstream discourse of Islamisation/Islamicisation can be understood as a peaceful global Muslim effort to live in accordance with the social, spiritual, and moral principles of Islam.

Hassan made clear that IOHK functions on two principal objectives: to revitalise and redevelop the Muslim world, and to promote inter-civilisational dialogue, particularly between Islam and the West. The first of these objectives involves remedying the spiritual, political, and sociocultural crises faced by many Muslim communities around the world. To this, Hassan asserted that the various Muslim malaises we witness today are caused by the deviation of Muslims from a life built on Islamic principles. To rebuild the Muslim world according to the

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Qur'anic worldview, Hassan reasoned that Muslim leaders and the educated elite, who are often the ones who champion views and practices discordant to Islam, should experience a process of desecularisation and comprehensive Islamicisation.

Hassan maintained that IOHK may serve as a conduit for a peaceful and reciprocally advantageous dialogue of civilisations. The historical discourse surrounding the relationship between Islam and the West has, for the most part, been coloured by antagonism arising from a perceived clash of civilisations that has morphed today into widespread Islamophobia. But going back to history, Hassan iterated that contact between the Muslim world and medieval Europe had been one of civilisational synthesis. Referring to the intellectual culture of Al-Andalus in Muslim Spain, Hassan explained that this civilisation embodied the international vision of balanced intellectual development and articulated through the harmonious and symbiotic multi-faith spirit of *La Convivencia*. It was Europe's contact with Islamic centres of learning in this intellectual and cosmopolitan milieu that influenced the birth of the European Renaissance. Hence, IOHK can help encourage a similar peaceful dialogue between the Muslim world and the West within the matrix of today's socio-cultural and geopolitical contingencies where the Muslim world is often positioned as the antagonistic Other or "New Enemy."

Consequently, what is the position of English studies within this relationship? As the use of literary texts in the pursuit of Empire in colonised nations has shown us, works of literature are never value-free. Regardless of its aesthetic value, most if not all literary texts, are imbued with the norms, mores, and values of a culture. Works of literature are political. Whether or not an author of a particular text intends it to be so, these value-ridden texts have been used as instruments of power.

Bill Ashcroft (2001) made a point about the centrality of language and its products such as literary texts in (post)colonial experiences. Through the postcolonial lens, the language of the oppressor is seen by some as a destructive tool to perpetuate and maintain dominant discourses. Nonetheless, language's ability to perpetuate soft power through its value-imbued products can be positioned not only as a means of resistance, of "writing back," but also to transform the nature of imperial discourse. Like Ashcroft, Hassan believed that despite its use in British colonialism, English language and literature can be transformed. From an IOHK perspective, it can be used as a space of engagement and harmonious dialogue between the Muslim world and the contemporary hegemonic order centred in the West. English departments at universities in Muslim countries can apply the philosophy of IOHK as a non-political means of bringing together these two civilisations. Accordingly, it is through English studies that Islamic epistemology could provide the transcendent dimension that is lacking in contemporary Western civilisation.

Yet, Muslim academicians and students, whether they are consumers or producers of knowledge, are encouraged to be mindful of their practices. They must be discerning and selective of the knowledge they consume and/or produce by having sound knowledge of the different worldviews, ideologies, philosophies, and theories in English literary texts. In fact, Hassan added that Muslim academicians, as consumers or producers of English studies, should understand the relevant areas of specialisation, engage with the subject matter with a critical mind, and use three principles from the three branches of Qur'anic worldview, which are *Aqidah* (Creed or Belief System), *Shari'ah* (Divine Way of Life and Divine Law), and *Akhlak* (Ethics and Morality) to analyse the different works or genres that make up English Studies.

Hassan concluded his presentation with a plea to Muslims to use the IOHK approach in their consumption and production of knowledge in the field of English language and literature. He also expressed the hope that English, once the language of the colonial master in much of the Muslim world, will one day morph into a language and culture of Islam. Places like IIUM may become the epicentre for such important civilisational scenarios to take place.

After Hassan's presentation, Salman al-Azami presented his paper titled "Islam and English Studies: Perspectives of a Muslim Academic in the West." Al-Azami's presentation was a complement to Hassan's because it provides the practical application of IOHK within an academic context. Using his personal experience of teaching, conducting research, and engaging the community as an academician in a British university, he explored the various ways in which people, particularly academics, can apply the concept of IOHK in what they do.

Al-Azami started by pondering several questions as a way of unpacking the nature of IOHK. He asks questions such as what Islamic education entails, whether it is limited to the study of the Quran, Hadith (Prophetic Narrations), and Islamic Literature. What is the position of science, technology, the humanities and social sciences in this equation? Does IOHK mean inserting Islamic concepts into these areas of knowledge? To this, he added that all forms of knowledge that serve and help better the condition of humanity is considered Islamic because the Qur'an provides scientific points for people to reflect, think, ponder, and research.

Therefore, the Islamisation process is about the transformation of the mind and heart. To do this, a Muslim ought to identify and understand why they are studying, and whether their pursuit of knowledge is for worldly gains or for humanity's benefit. This is because there is a tendency among Muslims today to separate religious and worldly knowledge and treat them as mutually exclusive. From an Islamic perspective, there is no demarcation between these two forms of knowledge. For Muslims, the question centres on whether Muslim identity is at the core of what we do in our personal and professional lives. Whatever good that is done, explained al-Azami, is not only for this world but also for the

Hereafter. Additionally, much like Hassan, al-Azami also placed emphasis on the importance of cultivating this purpose in the education system, starting with primary schools. In institutions of higher learning, the goal of contributing to humanity should be the foundation of the curricula for Muslims.

Therefore, al-Azami suggested several ways where Muslim academics can pursue a life based on the Islamisation approach. One approach is to incorporate IOK/IOHK in the curriculum, citing that IIUM is a product of that approach. Furthermore, academics can conduct and publish research that synthesises their individual area with aspects of Islam. At the same time, as educators, academics should also encourage their students to prioritise Islamic values in their professional life. This is because students are the future of the *Ummah* (the global Muslim community). Al-Azami acknowledged that the environment in Western countries is different and that there may be impediments to implementing the approaches he had recommended. In this situation, he encourages academics to instead focus on publishing research that contribute to one's *Deen* and *Ummah*.

Al-Azami then went on to demonstrate how he incorporates his identity as a Muslim into his teaching, research, and community activities. At Liverpool Hope University, he encourages discussion on issues such as ethnicity, identity, immigration, and multiculturalism in the modules he teaches. In his undergraduate Honours seminar "Religion in the Media" for example, al-Azami elicits discussion on how religion is positioned in various mainstream media genres. Moreover, Al-Azami also brings Islamisation into his role as Deputy Director of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies, a prominent research organisation at his university. Currently, he leads an ongoing discussion surrounding the theme of decolonising education, where decolonising curricula is a principal talking point.

The main premise of the decolonisation of education is to decolonise the mindset by subverting long-embedded epistemologies and practices of colonial powers. This process seeks to aid the resurgence of the Muslim world. Thinking critically about colonisation, establishing dialogue, and encouraging engagement about decolonisation are especially important in a country like the United Kingdom. Outside of academia, Muslim scholars can participate in various research and engagement initiatives that can help address the issues faced by various groups. Al-Azami cites some of the activities in which he participates outside of academia such as serving as an advisor to the Centre for Media Monitoring wing of the Muslim Council of Britain. Academics can also help by contributing analyses and data to similar organisations.

The methods and approaches al-Azami uses in his teaching, research, and community work involve debate, dialogue, and engagement as key practices in transforming minds and hearts in the Islamisation process. These examples of how Muslim academics can incorporate Islamisation in their work, even in a

primarily non-Muslim context, present the myriad of possibilities through which they can contribute to the betterment of humanity.

On this note, al-Azami concluded by pointing out that for Muslim academics, seeking the pleasure of Allah S.W.T should be what he calls the “mantra.” Regardless of whether they are teaching, conducting research, or engaging with members of the community, the goal of their efforts should be the pleasure of Allah S.W.T through helping humanity. Within a Muslim environment, academics can help guide students to this ethos, while for those in non-Muslim societies, that can be an opportunity to help change students’ negative perceptions about Islam and Muslims, which have been fed to them in mainstream media. In addition to seeking Allah’s pleasure, the pursuit of excellence should also be part of Muslim academics’ work ethos. There is no alternative to this path in one’s professional life. He encourages Muslim academics to ensure the quality of their publication because publishing for the sake of it is not enough. This will not only mean that there is meaningful contribution to knowledge but can also help improve visibility on pertinent issues affecting various groups of people. Similarly, this pursuit of excellence is also applicable to students who are encouraged to dedicate themselves to contribute to humanity via whatever paths they choose to take.

Hassan’s and al-Azami’s presentations underscored the importance of cultivating a positive connection between Islam, Islamisation, and English studies despite the perceived incongruity of such a relationship. This effort will not only re-orientate English studies, but also foster a better understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly those from the West. Above all, at the crux of both presentations is the encouragement to understand one’s intention for pursuing knowledge and one’s role in consuming, creating, and perpetuating such knowledge, as in the case of English language and literary works. Muslim academics and students will need to re-orientate their intentions and endeavours so that they can play a role in helping rebuild the Muslim *ummah*, cultivate civilisational dialogue, and address common issues for the betterment of all.

Prof. Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf of DELL, IIUM and Dr M. Obaidul Hamid of the University of Queensland made brief contributions and commented on the two presentations. DELL’s Dr Md. Mahmudul Hasan helped put the event together and also acted as its moderator.

To view a recording of the online seminar, please visit:

https://youtu.be/_CVs6sTrscw

Work Cited

Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge, 2001.