

Book Review:

Studying the Qur'an in the Muslim Academy

(Majid Daneshgar)

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There is a fundamental problem in studying the Qur'ān in universities and colleges in Muslim-majority countries, which revolves around the significant difficulties in presenting ideas from western intellectuals, or conflicting sects (p. xix). There is a clear trend of negative labelling to describe foreignness, such as orientalism or unreliability of foreign works. This could result in Qur'ānic studies being dragged towards objectivity, orthodoxy, and apologetics. This is especially the case if a western contribution to Qur'ānic studies is introduced into the discourse. If the academy is a place where diversity of thought and arguments develops, why does such labelling take place (p. xxii)? This issue serves as a key inspiration for Daneshgar's critical work on the Qur'ān as an academic subject in non-religious institutions.

This question is also a central topic of several Qur'ānic studies scholars who criticize the current trend in universities, which focus on intellectual colonialism. Among them are Joseph Lumbard in his paper "Decolonizing Quranic Studies" (2016), and Sajjad Rizvi in his paper "Reversing the Gaze? Or Decolonizing the Study of the Qur'an" (2020). Some scholars prefer to utilise another term – "Islamicate", to transform Islamic studies from religious context to social nuance.

Daneshgar concentrates on four critical terms in his discussion: 'Islamic apologetic', which he prefers over other words such as Islamic normativity or defense; 'Islamicization' over Islamization; Censorship; and Orthodoxy (p. 6–8). The book's structure flows from these terms, focusing on the Islamic apologetics in Qur'ānic Studies in the first chapter and then deducing that censorship and orthodoxy are the consequences of this apologetics (p. 135).

Daneshgar defines the Islamic apologetic as “an argument or a rhetorical forensic that substitutes a defence of identity or orthodoxy for critical methodology, analysis, or research” (p. 2). An apologetic mindset in Qur’ānic studies goes deeper beyond the inter-religious or geo-historical context since it also has roots in the Sunni-Shi’i rivalry, bringing consequences to the intellectual discourse, which ideally respects the freedom of opinion (p. 16-18). The strong presence of fundamentalists in Muslim academies is the primary factor behind the apologetic mindset (p. 24). These fundamentalists seek to preserve doctrines and tradition, while foreign sources or contributions are deemed a threat to Qur’ānic studies. He expands his discussion around these issues and builds his concluding argument as follows:

“It may be truly said that studying the Qur’ān in the Muslim academy is more political than other disciplines. In the Muslim world, state and religious politics routinely affect the trajectory of the study of Islam. Government and religious parties largely supervise universities, institutes, and academic journals. In addition, whether writing or publishing in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or the West, journals and research activities are confronted with Muslim groups whose main concern is to preserve their particular traditional Islamic orthodoxy against those of rival sects as well as against Christian, secular, and/ or critical readings of Islam” (p. 131).

Daneshgar’s conclusion not only highlights the current situation facing Qur’ānic studies as a discipline but also Islamic studies as a broader subject. As the quoted paragraph outlines, this phenomenon is not bound to conservative Muslim countries only. One can even observe this trend in liberal countries, where, according to Daneshgar, naïve liberals engender illiberal views, since fundamentalism also exists in liberal countries (p.134). This illiberal view is inseparable from the Islamic apologetic, which instigates censorship to ensure the defensive position can be maintained.

We can understand this apologetic censorship through the theory of *Irshadic* power (p. 18). This power is clearly manifested in the *Kalam* tradition, in which the ultimate goal is to ensure people’s salvation (p. 18). This view prevails in both Sunni and Shi’i worldviews, providing people with correct and “true” doctrine, preventing them from believing and knowing false teachings. The fundamentalist or the dominant group employs *Irshadic* power. Hence, any unacceptable views are subject to

censorship, and those who raise these views in classes will be subjected to a warning or, in at worst, be expelled. Daneshgar claims to be a victim of this kind of censorship, based on his experience in New Zealand, a liberal country (p. 80).

Daneshgar thoroughly outlines the categorisation of unacceptable views in the Muslim academy. Two key terms play a role here: “orthodoxy” which can be grasped as the dominant or popular notion, and “foreignness” which includes all sources from outside the orthodoxy, including Shi’i works for Sunnis and vice-versa. Depending on the context, the orthodox view enables deteriorating opinions, despite the argument’s validity. Daneshgar respectively described his educational experiences in Iran, a Shi’i-dominated country, and Malaysia, Sunni-majority country, where he completed his postgraduate studies. Avoiding censorship, Daneshgar argues that a foreign intellectual work must be “supportive and compatible with Islamic— and sometimes governmental— teachings; neutral essays or reports that do not address controversial issues regarding the origin of Islam; or critical and anti-Orientalist works presenting Westerners’ unfamiliarity with the “greatness” of Islamic civilisation or their attempts to ruin Muslims’ identity” (p. 35). This requirement manifests compliance with the orthodox group’s political, social or religious interests as the crucial point in censorship.

Western scholars’ work on *Qur’ānic studies*, such as Wansbrough’s *Qur’anic Studies*, Patricia Crone’s *Hagarism*, and Richard Bell’s translation, were excluded due to their notoriety, although they deserve an academic position in the Qur’ānic studies, as per Daneshgar (p. 37-38). Even some Muslim experts who tend to take a critical stance on the Qur’ān are also poorly received in the curriculum. Scholars like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdulkarim Soroush are labelled as unreliable at best or apostates at worst (p 139). Daneshgar’s criticism of the Muslim academy seems to imply a positive view of western scholarship on Islamic studies. However, Daneshgar forecasts that Islamic studies in the west will be reconfigured, domesticated, and sectarianized, eventually becoming apologetics. Despite this forecast, more open-minded scholarly groups are establishing Islamic colleges, courses, and centres attached to western, secular, liberal universities (p. 138). This indicates that the Islamic apologetic approach is yet to grow in the West. In addition, Daneshgar might alter his analysis if he studied contemporary Qur’ānic studies in Indonesia, a Muslim majority country where western scholarship of the Qur’ān is appreciated and criticised in equal measure.

Daneshgar's concern over the defensive approach in the Muslim academy underscores the continuing tradition of *mutakallimun* in modern Islamic studies. Intellectual colonialism should also be acknowledged as another significant factor (Lumbard 2022), only if Daneshgar tries to position western scholarship not only as a victim but partial contributor to the apologetic. Some western works were also produced based on their apologetic mindset of western civilisation and Christendom (Kalin 2009). This mindset is traceable in Crone and Cook, in which Crone claims his book is for infidels by an infidel. Some translations of the Qur'ān also contain apologetic criticism of Islam and Muhammad's personality, particularly early European language translations (Badawi n.d). This naturally provokes some Muslim scholars, institutions, and ideologues to tackle these so-called negative views on the Qur'ān and Islam. Although the requirements to pass censorship are somehow exaggerated, they emanate as a natural response of people who adhere to a specific belief.

This book *Studying the Qur'an in the Muslim Academy*, has pointed out the problematic mindset that should be avoided when developing knowledge. Objectivity and openness toward "foreign" works and a critical approach to one's own tradition enables Muslim intellectuals to evolve Islamic discourse rapidly. However, had Daneshgar placed western scholarship in dual positions as victim and contributor – rather than blaming the liberal mindset – the analysis would be more critical. He indeed tries to balance the position, but takes a fairly vague approach.

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