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A Comparative Study of the Teaching of Islam in Selected Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the inner dialectics in the teaching of Islam in some selected Nigerian Universities with a special focus on Crescent University of Abeokuta, Nigeria. A comparison is made between the teaching of Islam there and at other universities involved in the academic study of Islam, especially in south-western Nigeria. One common factor to the teaching of Islam in these universities is the inclusion of logic, philosophy and critical thinking in the curriculum, which is a major strong point that has contributed to its relevance and growth in Nigerian academia. But while *Al-Hikmah* and other Nigerian universities are fully teaching the twin disciplines of Arabic and Islamic Studies, especially in the case of *Al-Hikmah* since the university rose from a former College of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Crescent University, which takes after the International Islamic University Malaysia, on the other hand, is engaged currently in teaching Islam both as a general university course and with other subject combinations.

INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the new initiative introduced to the Nigerian academic study of Islam at Crescent University, as well as the challenges and prospects of Islamic universities in the prevailing educational milieu. The paper submits that in order for scholars and students to extricate themselves from cultural and popular assumptions about Islam and Muslims,

objective and multidisciplinary approaches must be embraced in the study of Islam as done in many universities in Nigeria, such as Crescent University.

The Study of Islam in Nigeria

The study of Islam in Nigeria has come a long way with the number of academic departments offering Islamic Studies growing along with the proliferation of universities in Nigeria. The teaching of Islam is today offered in almost all the federal and state universities, as well as some private Islamic universities like *Al-Hikmah*, Fountain and Crescent universities. A unique feature of all these universities is their inclusion of the Islamic philosophy of education in their curricula. The individual the Islamic educational structure seeks to produce is one that is refined, cultured and disciplined, and can therefore be instrumental in restoring Islamic leadership and scientific, moral and spiritual values. Thus, the goal of education in Islam is to lead humankind to become true *'ibād* or servants of Allah, which is translated into *khilāfah* or vicegerency of Allah. The search for knowledge in Islam is thus not essentially for material but divine pursuits and the attainment of perfection, orderliness and balance in the order of creation. In the same manner, knowledge is therefore meant to serve humanity as part of creation.

The History of the Academic Study of Islam in the Muslim World

Considering the Islamic philosophy of education, Muslim scholars agree on the need for the establishment of

International Islamic Universities for the academic study of Islam, which is directed at addressing the dilemma created by bifurcation in Muslim education. That has led to the emergence of two different sets of graduates in Muslim countries. On the one hand are graduates of secular institutions that could articulate modern the concerns of human rights, pluralism, globalization and equality, etc. without knowledge of Islamic traditional sciences, while on the other hand are graduates of Islamic traditional institutions well versed in Islamic traditional sciences, but cannot grasp the intricacies of modern concerns. This approach by the International Islamic University Malaysia and other Islamic Universities on the scientific study of Islam based on an adequate conceptualization of Islamic epistemology or the theory of Knowledge gave birth to the Islamization of knowledge movement. It was conceived out of the rejection of the inadequacies of both secular and traditional institutions that produced half baked intellectuals and westernized Muslims who became authorities on Islam (Safi, 2004).

The above epistemological inadequacies, according to Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), can be overcome by nurturing the growth of a genuine, original and adequate Islamic intellectualism (Rahman, 1982). This is "the Islamization of Knowledge", which is now widely accepted all over the Muslim world. The aim of Islamization is to bring the epistemological and philosophical foundations of modern science in line with the teachings and principles of Islam. It calls for an all-embracing study of the secular sciences and

their applications – technology – based on revealed knowledge, or in other words an integration of revealed knowledge with the whole body of human knowledge. This elective approach must be employed to select from both the traditional Islamic and western approaches that are most sound and correct and welded together to form an Islamic intellectual structure.

Many Muslim scholars, such as al-'Attas, al-Faruqi and Hussein Nasr, and institutions, such as the International Institute for Islamic Thought and the International Islamic Universities, have pioneered studies in this area. It is a paradox that the *Academic Study of Islam* had started earlier in Western countries before later finding a stronghold in the US. As early as 1635, Archbishop Laud encouraged Oxford University to establish a chair in Arabic (Abubakre, 2004). In Africa, the academic study of religion started with the establishment of the Fourah bay College in 1827 at Freetown, Sierra Leone with most of the pioneer students coming from Nigeria (Fafunwa, n.d.). Though the college was started to train scholars for the Church, the subjects were not restricted to Christian Studies and in fact it was an Arabic Tutor from Fourah bay College, al-Hajj Harun Rashid, who was instrumental to the teaching of Islamic Sciences in Nigerian Schools. He came to Lagos in 1894 and became the headmaster of Epe Government School (Gbadamosi, 1967).

When the time University College Ibadan attained university status in 1962, the academic study of Islam was already assured a place with Prof. Kenneth O. Dike, a professor of History and the first Vice Chancellor to take interest in

Arabic because of historical utility. According to him, the interest of the university in Arabic is as old as the university itself (Dike, 1965). The Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies was founded in 1961. It was established to meet the growing needs and desires of Nigerian students to learn the Arabic Language and to study the religion and culture of Islam. Islam has been, and is still, playing a very important role in shaping the life and outlook of millions of Nigerians, particularly in areas now known as northern Nigeria, as well as Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, Delta and Edo States. It opened with Dr. B.G. Martins (now Professor Martins, in the U.S.A.), Mr. J.O. Hunwick (now Professor Hunwick also in the U.S.A) and Mr. F.H. El-Masri (now Professor El-Masri in the University of Nairobi, Kenya). They were joined in 1963 by Mr. A.R. Dehaini (a Lecturer seconded and paid by the Lebanese government). In 1964, Mr. M.O.A. Abdul (later Professor and Head of Department, who passed away in February 1986) joined as the first Nigerian member of the academic staff (<http://www.ui.edu.ng/?q=node/268>).

In addition to the B.A. Honours Degree offered by the Department, a Certificate course in Arabic Studies was introduced in the 1963/94 session. This is a one-year intensive course for Arabic teachers some of whom had had many years of experience in the teaching of the language. Two years later, the course was expanded to include Islamic Studies. In the 1975/76 session, a Diploma course in Arabic and Islamic Studies was also introduced. It was specially designed to cater for Grade Two Certified teachers who had taken Islamic

Religious Knowledge as one of their subjects at the Teachers' Certificate examination. However, holders of the WASC/G.C.E. (with five credits) were also admitted into the programme. The University started the academic study of Islam with a certificate programme in Arabic and Islamic studies. This programme which continued till the 1980s was to train students who had no background in Arabic led to bridging the gap between the products of traditional Arabic and secular schools. It recorded a great success such that one of its products, Professor Isaac Ogunbiyi, rose to attain near native fluency in the language and even wrote novels and books in it (Abubakre, 1996 and <http://www.ui.edu.ng/?q=node/268>).

This humble origin of the academic study of Islam in Nigeria made for the location of Islamic Studies in various Departments of Religion, Religious Studies and Arabic and Islamic Studies is similar to the prevailing situation today in most western and American universities where mostly the study of Islamic Studies can be found in the Departments of Religions or Religious Studies (Mitchell, 2004:78-82). These departments today engage in broader multidisciplinary and methodological approaches in the study of Islam that readily make their programs available and relevant to diverse scholars in the social sciences (Martin, 1985). Hence, most degrees in Islamic Studies are today awarded in the social sciences and humanities departments. This is the case with the study of religions generally widening the scope for offering the study in many departments of liberal arts universities and colleges. This in turn provides better job prospects for graduates of Islamic

Studies, as well as extends the teaching and growth of the academic study of Islam (Szanton, n.d.).

This approach is what has been adopted by the International Islamic Universities established for the scientific study of Islam. Based on the need to recapture this Islamic intellectualism, as defined and articulated at the first and subsequent conferences on Muslim education, the International Islamic University Malaysia for instance teaches Islamic traditional sciences like *Usul al-Din*, *Fiqh*, Qur'an and Hadith and secular subjects in an integrated curriculum. This exposes students to a broad, balanced and holistic curriculum and orientates them not only to memorizing and reporting Islamic theoretical heritage, but also methodological gathering, analyzing, questioning and critiquing Islamic texts and contemporary issues. The curriculum inculcates in them the ability to relate the sacred to the profane, theory to practice and the religious to the secular. At IIUM, the Islamization of Knowledge is implemented through students majoring in one of the Islamic traditional sciences like *Usul al-Din*, *Fiqh*, Qur'an and Hadith and doing their minor courses in any of the social sciences or humanities. They may also combine Islamic Law with Common Law and specialize in Finance, which includes Islamic Finance, as part of the core courses.

These major and minor courses constitute core University requirements designed to realize the well defined aims, vision and mission of IIUM. The IIUM aims at becoming a center of excellence, which integrates revealed knowledge in all disciplines with the vision of restoring the rich Islamic

heritage and leading role in all the branches of human knowledge, and commitment to a mission of revitalizing the Islamic concepts and traditions of learning and seeking knowledge as an act of worship. Its teaching and learning process seeks the inculcation of moral, spiritual and scientific values through Integration, Islamization, Internationalization and Comprehensive Excellence (IIUM, 2004).

Teaching of Islam at Crescent University

At Crescent University students are offered a B.Sc. degree in Islamic Religious Studies along with Computer Science, Banking and Finance, Actuarial Science, etc. At the end of their course, they are awarded Combined Honours degrees in Islamic Studies with any of the other subject disciplines. These combinations are designed in order to produce Islamic Scholars who also possess professional and basic knowledge of their second field of study. Consequently, students who have registered for the B.Sc. Combined Honours in Islamic Studies are exempted from all the general courses on the Philosophy of Islam and Beginners Arabic, which they are expected to fully study as part of their core courses in Islamic Studies.

This brings us to the general courses on the Philosophy of Islam and Beginners Arabic, which in addition to the above I was responsible for introducing, designing and have been teaching at the nascent Crescent University for three academic sessions. The courses on Philosophy of Islam 1 and 2, as well Arabic for Beginners 1 and 2, are taken by the entire University students. They constitute the cornerstone of Crescent

University's vision, philosophy and mission and span over a sixteen week semester, with a week spent on each topic within the course outline. A clarification should be made here in this paper between studying Islam at Crescent University and other Universities involved in the academic study of Islam in Nigeria.

Contrary to other Universities involved in the academic study of Islam, especially in south-western Nigeria where the study of Islam is popular only among students of Departments of Religious Studies, Religions and Arabic and Islamic Studies, but at Crescent University there is a broader student population. Islam is taught in order to produce scholars who possess professional, general and basic knowledge of other different fields of study, and also core knowledge of Islamic Studies by taking the general courses on the Philosophy of Islam and Beginners Arabic, which they are expected to fully study as part of their core courses in the University. While most departments teaching Islam at other Universities teach different sub-fields of Islamic Studies like Qur'an and Hadith studies alone, teaching Islam at Crescent University in addition to this also focuses on the pure academic study of the philosophy of Islamic tenets. This might be comparable to the academic teaching of Islam in American and western universities in the world today. Students take courses in Arabic, as the study of Islam requires a working knowledge of at least English and Arabic in addition to the native language of the students. Since most of them were not previously trained in Arabic unlike English, it is difficult for them to attain the

adequate level to read the relevant primary sources even when studying the courses at Crescent University (Crescent University *Students Handbook* 2006).

This is unlike the first generations of the students of Islam and Arabic in south-western universities who could be described like their American counterparts, who, in turn, in the period after World War Two and well into the 1970s pursued their studies with adequate resources to undergo Arabic immersion programs for extended periods abroad, especially Egypt and Sudan, in order to master the Arabic language required for the study of Islam. No wonder, it has been argued that western experts in Sufism in particular and Islamic Studies in general were no longer based in Europe, but could be found in North America after World War Two (Knysh, 2005). This is the reason why in the Nigerian society in general scholars in Islamic Studies who have no basic reading knowledge of Arabic are usually not acknowledged as real scholars of Islam despite their strong methodological and theoretical qualifications. It is against this background that the teaching of Islam at Crescent University exposes students to the concept of Islam as a complete religion, nay a way of life in modern society, in order to ensure that their understanding of Islam is not distorted by human assumptions, ideas and theories.

The Philosophy of Islam 1 and 2 is an introduction to Islam and takes as its main objective the development of an *adib*, or well-educated global scholar. It is designed to re-enact and complement the IIUM example. Hence, Crescent University seeks to major students in different ICT, social,

natural, applied, environmental and engineering sciences while they are introduced to a broad and intellectual Islamic curriculum. They are exposed to the principal teachings of Islam that develop in them skills in critically studying Islamic texts and applying the message of Islam to their everyday life in a changing world, as well as their different professions. The teaching and learning of this broad and intellectual Islamic curriculum are based on the needs of the students of the university to be well grounded on issues affecting Islam and modernity, as well as modern technology. In general, the courses are aimed at providing a detailed study of Islam and familiarizing students with Islamic Law and its sources, the mystical tradition in Islam, the concept of Jihad, the textual study of the Qur'an and Hadith and modern Islamic thought with a focus on major developments in Islam right from the time of the Prophet to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It will develop in students skills in understanding Islamic Civilization, the contributions of Muslim scholars to science and knowledge and how the contributions of Islamic Civilization can be re-enacted. It will acquaint them with elementary skills in reading Islamic texts, examining Islamic traditions critically and applying the message of Islam practically to their everyday life and activities (Crescent University *Students Handbook* 2006).

The Philosophy of Islam exposes students to Islamic practices in a multicultural and multi-religious setting, so that they can engage in global issues affecting Islam and Muslims critically, using the tools of philosophy, sociology, psychology,

theology and other multi-disciplinary approaches essential for the study of Islam and inter-religious dialogue, Muslim-Christian relations, feminism, gender studies and Islamic history, etc. The teaching employs the prevailing western methodologies of studying religion as a philosophical, psychological, historical, and socio-economic phenomenon in the society. In fact, the academic study of Islam can contribute immensely to the debate on the origins and dimensions of religion.

The vast majority of the students at Crescent University are practicing Muslims themselves. They are mostly born-or-raised-in-Nigeria Muslims from Muslim families. Their parents are largely instrumental in their studying at Crescent University, as they want them trained in Islam in addition to their professional training. Through these approaches, the students are able to relate what they learn in the classrooms to what they experience in their different religious and cultural settings. They are taught in the classrooms and also practically by experiencing Islamic rituals and practices in the University and other different communities. This will equip them to carry out their professions as responsible scholars and members of the human society. It will also give them a comprehensive understanding of Islamic ideals and Muslim practices.

The Philosophy of Islam takes the students through a class on *Orientalism*, examining the issues of otherizing, and insider/outsider problems associated with academic study of Islam. The students are taught to recognize popular assumptions and stereotypes about the teachings of Islam and

the difference between Islamic teachings and popular Muslim biases about these teachings, which affect an outsider's perception of Islam. The students learn to use insider/outsider perception as a tool for questioning cultural beliefs and lenses in order to see the positivity of the other side. They learn to move beyond their cultural, media, western or traditional lenses of viewing Islamic teachings and the consequent biases, likes and dislikes of these teachings, and see the creativity, novelty and diversity that can be brought to bear upon these teachings by different practitioners, communities, generations and ages.

It is therefore important for students of the Philosophy of Islam as future scholars of Islam to understand the other for what it is and not what they assume it to be. As these and many other scholars approach the field of Islamic Studies from the approach, Islamic scholarship must today confront theological postulations on larger socio-political, economic and environmental issues, such as feminism, peace and conflict studies, citizenship, environmentalism and inter- and intra-religious dialogue. Thus, Islamic Studies is today in need of philosophy more than before for if it is to remain a science, for the study of Islam, which is compiled, conceptualized and systematically taught, both orally and in writing, philosophy must remain one of its analytical tools.

Conclusion

The study has shown that as universities in Nigeria embraced internationalization and multidisciplinary approaches to the

study of Islam, students and scholars of Islam are well positioned within Nigerian academia. These universities have many opportunities to teach adequate courses on Islamization, as done in specialized universities with niche areas like the International Islamic University, Malaysia, which among other things run some Islamic general courses as core institutional courses. Consequently, the research calls for an objective study of Islam as part of the scientific study of world religions. To achieve this, there is the need for Islamic Universities that have already taken off in Nigeria to make their educational institutions demanding and open, respectful of Islamic traditions and open to scientific and educational innovations where students are taught to express themselves, give their opinions and articulate their doubts and hopes. There must be room for discussions, debates and the exchange of ideas and views. They can achieve all the above by emulating the approach of the International Islamic University, Malaysia where a parallel educational system integrates the fundamentals of Islamic Religious Knowledge, such as Arabic, Hadith and Qur'anic Studies with government approved secular subjects. This approach affords students the opportunity to be brought up with Islamic ethics and immersed in Islamic practices, as well as compulsory subjects from the national curricular. It is heart-warming that many of the International Islamic University, Malaysia elective approaches are already producing excellent academic statistics with many of its graduates at the top of their country's local, state and national educational institutions and administration.

But on the negative side, these Islamic universities like Crescent University often take in only a very small percentage of Muslim students from affluent middle and upper class families because school fees are very high, thus making the university very elitist in nature. Ironically, by charging high tuition fees to accommodate affluent middle and upper class students, it is expected that the staff are well educated and well paid with many having teaching and pedagogical qualifications, but this is not the case. In addition, the investment of time, energy and money in an Islamic university is very huge, with many of their founders not having the financial resources and academic competency to set them up.

On the basis of these shortcomings, there is the need for more creativity in bringing up innovative alternatives and initiatives. These may include improving on complementary and joint or community educational partnerships. Instead of Islamic universities that duplicate secular subjects already taught in private, community and government universities, Muslims should focus more on providing a complementary joint educationally partnership. This calls for involvement of as many Muslims and organizations in the life of these universities getting interested in the subjects they teach and playing more active roles in entrenching Islamic practice in their administration. Involvement may afford Muslim parents, leaders and scholars the opportunity to contribute to the running of especially private Islamic universities if they must compete with secular community and government universities and even contribute to the curricular of the schools.

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