Muslim Theological and Moral Imagination in an Age of Contingency
A Madrasa Discourses Symposium
University of Notre Dame | Jun 14-16, 2019

The symposium stems from a three-year pedagogy and research project to advance scientific and theological literacy in “Madrasa Discourses.” The project is under the aegis of the Contending Modernities Research Initiative in the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame’s Keough School of Global Affairs. Thanks to the John Templeton Foundation, we have been able to engage some 55 recently graduated madrasa students (including a handful of non-madrasa students of Islamic studies) from India and Pakistan in online sessions during the academic year and three-week face-to-face interactive seminars during the summer / winter breaks. Participants, majority males, and 8 females, attend educational programs to advance their literacy in history, science, theology, philosophy and contemporary issues in Islamic thought on gender, human rights, comparative ethics, and political theology.

The core faculty of the project are Ebrahim Moosa (principal investigator), Mahan Mirza (lead faculty at Notre Dame), Waris Mazhari (New Delhi, India), and Ammar Khan Nasir (Gujranwala, Pakistan). During the summer / winter face-to-face intensives, participants are exposed to a diverse group of additional faculty from different academic institutions covering a range of texts and disciplines. The present symposium arises out of the core faculty’s desire to generate a conversation around ideas and topics discussed throughout the three-year period with mainly two audiences: madrasa communities in South Asia and their satellites around the world, and academic scholars interested in contemporary Islamic thought. The anticipated publication flowing from the symposium will appear in both English and Urdu.

Our goal has been to foster and utilize an elicitive approach drawn from peace studies in our pedagogy. An elicitive approach means using resources that are internal to a community’s experience or a specific cultural context as a starting point from which to expand conceptual horizons to other prescriptive domains. We utilize a combination of traditional texts associated with the madrasa tradition along with a range of materials from the humanities and sciences. Ours is an integral and hybrid approach to knowledge, but we readily acknowledge that what we are doing is very much experimental. We hope
that this symposium will generate a spirited exchange that will help us refine our ideas and expand our circle of interlocutors as the project advances into future years.

**Symposium: Concept and Outcomes**

One of the key takeaways from our MD experience is the visible divide between madrasa audiences and Islamic Studies faculty in Western universities on epistemological and ontological concerns. In addition to this intellectual divide, there exists a social divide within Muslim societies between secular-educated elites, on the one hand, and religiously-trained leaders on the other. Exposing madrasa participants to concepts in the history and philosophy of modern science has been one helpful way to clarify the fault lines between both of these kinds of divides. Another way to engender a productive conversation across the divides has been to recognize and acknowledge how our lives are shaped by multiple flows of being and existence, not singular epistemes.

One notion that the project has brought to the fore is the entanglement of multiple knowledge traditions in history. The classical Islamic scholarly tradition is wedded to a particular ontological ordering of the universe that is indebted to conceptions of the natural world found in ancient philosophy. Recovering the concept of entanglement from a contemporary perspective, as made popular by string-theory, we can imagine the universe as a series of weavings (macramé) with the strands existing in different dimensions; string theory thus opens up the possibility of a multiverse, providing a fresh ontological basis for a metaphysics related to the beyond from within the framework of contemporary science. If we view the multi-dimensional “strings” holding together a seen and unseen universe in entangled knots, there may be multiple ordering ontologies that regulate reality as we know it, and our perceptions and descriptions become veritable “knotscapes.”

Contingency, what is unpredictable and hence leads to uncertainty, has been a key concept threading our pedagogical and research conversations. Multiple philosophical traditions appear in the materials we encountered in our research and teaching. The multiple journeys discrete schools of Islamic thought have made across the centuries are also a rich source of diversity and fruitful inquiry. But what all this diversity conjures
today, in light of new knowledge, is a regime of contingency rather than the certainties they once exuded.

Faculty members have chosen to write on epistemology and philosophy (Ebrahim Moosa), science, gender and Islamic thought (Mahan Mirza), the place of minorities in Islamic legal frameworks (Ammar Khan Nasir), and the potential Ibn Rushd (Averroës) offers as a resource for interpretation in contemporary Islamic thought (Waris Mazhari). We have also invited four scholars (Kecia Ali, Marcia Hermansen, Mashal Saif, Saadia Yacoob) who are unrelated to the project to join the symposium and to contribute their research to an edited volume for publication by preparing papers related to their research interests in the realm of Islamic law, ethics, theology, and concerns related to contemporary Islamic scholarship.

To sustain a symposium format: the four faculty and four invited scholars will each present a chapter to make up a total of eight chapters. Each chapter author will be paired with another for a response and in order to generate a closer connection between their papers. Eight additional respondents will respond to each chapter with an approximately 1500-3000 word provocation. Respondents should aim to raise new questions which the authors might have missed, identify future research trajectories, and highlight one or more aspects of the paper they deem worthy of special attention. Our goal is to keep alive a number of cross-cutting threads in the volume: contingency, ontology, epistemology, history, science, and entanglement, while seeking to accentuate connections between theory and practice at every turn.

Timeline and Tentative Schedule:

Mar 31: Final list of participants shared | Drafts of core faculty chapters circulated
Apr 30: Drafts of especially solicited chapters circulated
May 31: Drafts of responses circulated
Jun 14: Arrivals (morning or early afternoon) | 4:00 Project Welcome | 4:30-6.30 Grp 1 | Dinner
Jun 15: 10:00 Grp 2 | 12:00 Lunch | 1:00 Grp 3 | Break | 3:30 Grp 4 | Dinner
Jun 16: 9:00 Closing plenary | Short video interviews for curriculum site (optional) | Departures