

Islamic Theology in Malaysia and Germany

Interview with Professor Dato' Sri Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin, Rector of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)*

Introduction

Malaysia is a rapidly growing state in South East Asia with a heterogeneous religious population. That means that we find alongside a slight Muslim majority of autochthonous Malay people different religions. These include Buddhism, Hinduism, both Christian denominations and two Confucian and other Chinese religions. Despite this religious diversity Islam is the state religion. That is the reason why alongside politics, religion also plays an important role in Malaysia.

The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) was officially established on 20 May 1983 and was / is co-sponsored by the Malaysian government, a number of other Muslim governments as well as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The university's main campus is located 25 km away from Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The philosophy of the university was inspired by the spirit of *tawhīd* leading towards the recognition of Allah as the absolute creator and master of mankind. All disciplines of knowledge should lead towards subservience to this truth, given that the spirit of *tawhīd* represents the very peak of all knowledge. IIUM aims at becoming a leading international center of education excellence for the Muslim *ummah* and the world. IIUM offers more than 150 academic programmes in 15 kulliyahs (faculties) and institutes. The medium of instruction is English with Arabic used in courses related to the study of Islamic sciences. To this date, more than 50.000 students have graduated at the IIUM, including international students from over 100 countries in the world. The IIUM currently accommodates more around 30.000 students. Since 11 August 2011 Prof. Dato' Sri Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin (born in Raub, Pahang, Malaysia) is rector of the IIUM. Prof. Kamaruddin obtained her doctorate at the University of London. She has written many books and articles on law and provides consultancy services to ministries, departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

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Prof. Kamaruddin, the IIUM's mission statement places special focus on "integration", "Islamisation", "internationalization", and "comprehensive excellence" (known as "Triple-ICE") in all of its activities. Can you please enlarge on the concepts of "integration" and "Islamisation", and how they are implemented in academic research, teaching and learning at the IIUM?

Islamisation of knowledge focuses on epistemological and methodological concerns, particularly in utilizing and reproducing modern sciences with reference to the Islamic value system. As stated by al-Fārūqī, one of the pioneers of the Islamisation initiatives, Islamisation and integration aim "to evaluate critically the current secular-religious duality of the educational system in the Muslim societies and the lack of clear vision to guide and direct Muslim action and reformulate the existing educational system within the framework of Islam."¹

This concept is reflected in the IIUM's mission where it seeks to integrate Islamic revealed knowledge together with human sciences and thereby achieve a form of excellence that is holistic and imbued with Islamic moral-spiritual values in all of the processes of teaching, learning, research

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¹ Ismail Raji al Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan*, Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1987, p. 9.

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and so forth. In teaching, for example, the university produces textbooks for a number of disciplines that are based on these two concepts of Islamisation and integration.

In the debate about Islam in Germany – as a country predominantly shaped by Christianity – “integration” and “Islamisation” are often pejoratively connoted keywords. Particularly the notion of “Islamisation” (German: „Islamisierung“) provokes fears among the population that Islam might become the dominant religion in Germany and that a social system based on the Sharia might be introduced. With this in mind, how do you think that the newly established Institutes for Islamic Theology in Germany might nevertheless be able to potentially profit from the concept of “Islamisation”?

I truly hope that these institutes will be able to demonstrate the peaceful essence of Islam to the German society through the theoretical aspect of Islamic teachings and practical examples throughout Islamic history. These examples include the coexistence of Muslims, Jews and Christians in peace in cities that symbolize Islamic heritage such as Cairo, Istanbul, Andalusian and other major Islamic cities. In current times, Malaysia is also an example of this co-existence.

Through the concept of Islamisation the institute can foster a better understanding, among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, of science that is based on religious values where Islam is not seen as an obstacle but rather an impetus for scientific growth and contribution.

Can you state and describe the positive effects which Islamic Theology has for the multi-ethnic and in a religious sense heterogenic Malaysian society?

One of the major themes in Islamic belief is that there are two realms of existence: God and the creations of God. The human being is at the centre of all of God’s creations, and is the best of God’s creations. The human being is also the servant of God, and His vicegerent on earth. Thus, the human being is endowed with several attributes that enable him to undertake the task of being God’s vicegerent, and the most obvious of these attributes is the faculty of intellect.

According to Islam, all human beings are servants of God. Here comes another central concept of Islam: equality. All human beings are the same in the sight of Allah, they are all His servants. On the basis of ethnicity, skin colour, physical appearance, and economic, social or political ranks, no single human being may claim to be better than the other. Thus, the Islamic concept of belief offers a ground for interracial and interreligious respect and tolerance among human beings. In light of the Malaysian multi-racial and multi-religious society, the concept of equality would always be the guide for how Muslims look at ‘the Other’, with understanding, respect and acceptance.

To what extent does the IIUM allow for and integrate non-Muslim members of Malaysian society? What steps would you suggest taking in order to ensure that the German institutes pursue an adequate and effective information and public relations policy with often ignorant and suspicious members of German mainstream society?

The door is open for non-Muslim Malaysians to join the university at all levels: staff and students.

How do you find the notion of non-Muslims working at an Institute for Islamic Theology in Germany?

To my understanding, non-Muslims can work at the institute in their specialized area such as theology in various religions and contribute with their Muslims colleagues to better understand German society and its value system.

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KIRKHS – the “Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences” is the largest kulliyah in the IIUM with over 4.000 students. The main aim of the KIRKHS is to offer courses “that bridge the divide between the Islamic and secular sciences”. What does this gap consist of and what methods do you apply in order to overcome this divide, both as regards theory and in the practice?

Human sciences, unlike pure sciences, are not free of value, where a certain worldview is involved in organizing the theories. The presence of this worldview indicates subjectivity in the field of social sciences. As for pure sciences, the issue lies in the values guiding the sciences, where its absence may produce negative outcomes or effects. Science for example can be used for beneficial purposes such as the production of cheap energy or can be misused for destructive purposes such as the creation of an atomic bomb. Without ethical and moral values guiding the scientific discipline, men may exploit or misuse sciences for misguided reasons. What the IIUM intends to achieve is the unification between these sciences with Islamic revealed knowledge where the latter serve as the guiding values for the pure sciences and a means to reinterpret the human sciences within the Islamic value system.

In KIRKHS, degree students of human sciences are required to enrol in six Islamic courses that equip them with basic Islamic knowledge and create awareness of the epistemological differences between revealed knowledge and secular knowledge. Students are also encouraged to have a minor in Islamic sciences. In the classroom the teaching staff is also expected to compare and create awareness of the differences between the theories in their respective fields with the Islamic perspectives.

How does the approach taken towards teaching Islamic Theology in higher education differ from the more traditional pondok / pesantren² / kitab kuning³ based method? Do you incorporate techniques of teaching from the traditional settings?

I believe such efforts taken by anyone in promoting the understanding of Islam must be viewed positively, as aiming at interpreting, applying and presenting Islam in different space and time. As such, I believe that the so-called “traditional” or “pondok” method has contributed and is still contributing to the understanding of Islam.

The approach in the teaching of Islamic Theology at the IIUM is centred on the dynamic aspect of the Islamic belief. Man as the agent and subject of change must always be the central theme. The theological foundations of Islam such as the purpose of the creation of man, the nature of God – man relationship, man as dynamic agent of change and the destiny of man are main themes of focus. Taking the efforts taken by Muslim scholars at every phase of the Islamic history as significant, we look at these efforts as efforts that relate to the time-space settings, and thus have the pros and cons when it comes to applying them in our contemporary situation.

Many Malaysian students obtain religious knowledge abroad, chiefly in Arab countries. Does any form of competition exist between students graduating at the IIUM and those graduating at other Malaysian institutions of higher education in the field of Islamic Theology?

Malaysian students studying Islamic Theology in Arab countries do so in the Arabic language, while the medium of instruction at the IIUM is both Arabic and English. Through the Arabic language, students are taught the sources of Islam while the English language is used to teach contemporary worldviews and issues. This is to produce graduates that are well-versed in the Islamic heritage and sources, whilst being at the same time aware of contemporary issues in order to be able to evaluate the challenges of the contemporary world through the Islamic values. In addition to this, the IIUM

² Pondok / pesantren = madrasa.

³ Kitab kuning = Islamic classical texts.

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provides students with an international environment where it accommodates students from 116 countries and lecturers from more than 50 countries. This is beneficial to students as it builds their understanding of different cultures and their social skills.

The university's program structure also exposes students in the field of Islamic sciences to an interdisciplinary approach. While they major in Islamic sciences, they may also choose a minor in human sciences, such as psychology, political science and history amongst others.

While differences are present between Islamic universities, all of them aim to serve humanity in the best manner.

How might the academic Islam employed in research and education at Malaysian universities be able to positively and constructively influence the discourse between an indoctrinating form of Islam (Salafi) and the traditional teachings of Islam in Malaysia?

Looking at the dynamism of Islam, it must be conceded that to apply all aspects of the teachings of Islam in the ever-changing and developing world, even though it is not impossible, must certainly be a challenging task. In this respect, differences in views should be seen positively. Attempts must be made to look at shared grounds and similarities where different conflicting trends can be put together and work together on the basis of the shared elements. Furthermore, to me, the different ways taken by the Salafi trend and the so-called "traditional" trend can be seen as two controls that ensure the preservation of Islam which is embedded in the concept of "justly balanced" (*al-wasaṭīyah*).

Where do you see the future of the academic discipline of Islamic Theology in Germany, what do you think it will consist of and what role do you think it will play in German society?

This institution will be able to provide Islamic training within the context of German society. It can focus on the specific problems faced by Muslim communities in European countries, particularly Germany. In addition to this, it can play a positive role in the relations between the Muslim community and the rest of the German population. This role may even be extended globally where it bridges Germany with Muslim countries through publications, conferences, programs etc.

The different Islamic schools of thought / groupings interpret the Sharia in a variety of different ways. Which notion of the Sharia do you regard as being most appropriate for Germany as a country?

Muslims do not necessarily abide by one single trend or interpretation of the Sharia, since they are all different ways of dealing with the same Qur'an and Sunnah. The best approach is to learn from all these schools, and to benefit from all of them. Different views among the schools of thought will be of great help for Muslim communities of different settings and situations to see which view is more appropriate, or more applicable.

How do you think that the IIT at Osnabrück University and the IIUM might be able to benefit from each other most in a future cooperation? In which areas you see most beneficial synergy effects?

The IIUM looks forward to working with the IIT as well as Osnabruck University in general. Both universities will be able to collaborate with each other in the aspect of academic development of staff and students and joint research. New opportunities can be explored not only in academic activities that are of interest to both universities but also in contributing to the development of both our societies through community engagement and other innovative ideas.

As for collaborations between faculties, the IIT in particular can collaborate with our faculty of Islamic Revealed Knowledge which consists of the Usuluddin and Comparative Religion Depart-

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ment, the Fiqh and Usulul Fiqh Department, the Quran and Sunnah Studies Department, and also with the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).

Dear Prof. Kamaruddin, the editorial team sincerely thanks you for your elaborate answers.

