

Professor Alison Frances Scott-Baumann

Islamic Education in Universities: Communities of Inquiry

Sixteenth century Europeans were impressed with Safavid Persia and its attendant rituals, without understanding or being interested in the piety of Shi'ism. Later Shi'ism often found itself reactive to Sunni Islam, partly due to lack of Shi'i resources. With the 1979 Iranian Revolution, scholars became motivated to consider Shi'ism on its own terms and new work is now constantly developing on Shi'i religious scholarship, ethnographies of lived experience and increased commitment to histories, to devotional practices and, above all, to the ways in which such work can help explain Shi'ism to the modern world. This is a way in which the university sector can improve the understanding, tolerance, and quality of conversation around such matters as Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Currently in England and Scotland only 20 universities teach Islamic Studies to any depth. The majority focus exclusively on Sunni Islam (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020). German philosopher Habermas considers attempts to contextualise critical reflection and engagement (the latter formulated as praxis) more broadly within proposed implementation of two important features of a functioning democracy: constitutional patriotism and respect for a public space in which important matters can be debated (Habermas, Derrida, and Borradori 2003). I suggest we urgently need this space on campus for opportunities to discuss and solve societal problems together with those of different belief systems, and I propose that to do this at university, we must also be able to call upon historical precedents. It is important to appreciate the interwoven historical connections between Islam and the West, in modes of communication, now shared by the university tradition. The world's oldest universities were Islamic, for men and women. In addition, the secular state's assertions that it is liberal and neutral are contradicted by the intertwined roots of traditional communication between Islam and ancient Greek culture. These are elusive and possibly impossible qualities, as is secularism - a necessary yet insufficient condition for guaranteeing religions freedom for everyone (Habermas 2006, 4). Habermas considers whether religious citizens are forced to shoulder an excessive, asymmetric burden because they have to translate their political arguments into secular language that is (assumed to be) neutral and accessible to all, whilst he argues that religious reasoning should be permitted in public debate. A pluralistic democratic constitution is the necessary underpinning that universities should develop, characterised by group citizenship identities that go beyond ethno-cultural identification and religion, in order that individuals can come together in higher educational on equal terms. This must involve Shi'i Islam and Sunni Islam, with other religions and secular thought, and create communities of inquiry.



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Prof. Scott-Baumann's work represents a clear paradigm shift in British parliamentary relations with Higher Education, by supporting knowledge creation between mainstream universities and Westminster. Along with her HEIF funded research team, she has developed a project - Influencing the Corridors of Power (ICOP) - that communicates influential one-page briefings to each member of both Houses of Parliament on urgent topics.

Her numerous impressive academic contributions include a recent publication entitled, '*Islam on Campus: Contested Identities & the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*'; a seminal work resulting from a comprehensive research project on which she was the lead researcher.