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# Popular Themes in Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies

*Masooda Bano*

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College of Islamic Studies | Hamad Bin Khalifa University

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## “Popular Themes in Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies” by Masooda Bano

### Summary

As part of collaboration between Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies and Oxford University, Dr Masooda Bano, research lecturer at Oxford Department of International Development, gave a series of talks. The title of her first lecture was the *Popular Themes in Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies*. The main purpose of the talk was to present from the perspective of an Oxford academician what the influential themes are in the study of Muslim societies and how they have been studied in the western academia. Dr. Bano emphasized that giving this lecture in a place like Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies has a special significance, in terms of comparing the research preferences and exploring the opportunities of collaboration between the two institutes in mutually interested subfields.

Before moving to discuss the major themes she identified, Dr Bano briefly presented the historical evolution of the study of Muslim societies in the western universities. According to her, the pre 1950s period in the western academia was dominated by what was labeled as “*orientalistic approach*” and criticized for its idealizing or mystifying tendencies which, instead of “reality”, presented what “the West wanted to show as the other”. This sort of critique, highly influenced by Said’s “Orientalism”, was very decisive for the later developments in the field. At least, it produced what Dr Bano called as “*investigative scholarship on Muslim Societies*” and contributed to the emergence of much more sophisticated studies. Between the 1950s and 1970s, the scholarship witnessed “*grounded histories of Muslim world*” a prominent example of which, to her view, was Marshall Hodgson’s “The venture of Islam”.

For the last phases of the development, Dr Bano emphasized two important historical incidences, namely, the Iranian revolution and September 11. According to her, the former triggered a lot of studies on the notion of political Islam. She argues that those studies were “led by a certain sort of fear or fascination by the West on how Muslim countries might turn around under Islamic groups or movements.”

Similarly, post-September 11 context, it was concerns about radicalization and jihad and the notion of “Islam as threat to the West” that heavily shaped the western scholarship on Islam and funding preferences. Interestingly, Dr Bano expressed that she doesn’t see this necessarily as a negative development. Despite the so called negativity of such incentives, they had lots of positive impact too:

it created much greater number of research positions and “beyond that scholars are independent on what they can write”.

As a result of above mentioned developments in the field, Dr Banoo stated that the question of **Islam and radicalization** has become one of the most popular themes in the study of Muslim societies whether we look at the Muslim majority countries, Muslims in minority contexts or transnational networks. The questions asked under this theme are usually “what are the roots of radicalization?”, “what is terrorism?”, “what is the threat from the Muslim groups?”, “how can we understand the psyche of the youth which voluntarily join to the radical groups?” etc.

She provided the calls made by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC), the prestigious student funding body for social sciences in the UK, as evidence to the popularity of the radicalization theme. Since September 11, she said, the ESRC has had a number of calls on “Islam and Jihad” with large funding opportunities. However the reaction to the ESRC’s interest in the question of radicalization was not all positive within the British academic circles. The ESRC’s link to the Foreign Government Office made it more controversial to some academics and they wrote protest letters. Dr Bano explained that her position is that in long term such kind of funding is not inevitably negative; it contributes to the generation of more nuanced studies. She gave the example of her work on Pakistani madrasas (The Rational Believer) which was funded by the ESRC. In her opinion, her arguments were “very different than what western governments might want to hear” in this book.

She argued that the interest in Islam and radicalization also paved the way to a larger theme, the study of religion as a force in general. A later call by the ESRC entitled “**Religion and Society**” gave the researchers the opportunity to study how religion functions in a society as a phenomenon and how it contributes to the other issues such as economic growth or spiritual well-being.

The second popular theme in Dr Bano’s presentation was the **study of political Islam or Islamism**. According to her, intellectuals like Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Abu A’la Maududi (1903-1979) representing two dominant Muslim intellectual traditions (i.e. Middle Eastern and South Asian) remain very influential to date in this sort of scholarship. She gave an example of recent publication - a reader on Islamic thought - by one of the prominent publishers which still focus on mentioned figures.

**Transnational Islamic networks** and **the centers of Islamic polity** are other two themes that enjoy popularity in the western academia according to Dr Bano’s findings. For her, Tablighi Jamaat and Salafism are among the transnational networks that scholars have been interested in studying. As for the study of centers of Islamic polity, Barabra D Metcalf’s work on Darul Uloom at Deoband and Malika Zeghal’s work on the evolution of Al-Azhar were presented as prominent examples of the

interest in the field. Dr. Banoo also mentioned that she is currently working on a collaborative project that focuses on three different institutes (The book has been recently published under the title of *“Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa”*).

As general themes, *“Muslims in Europe”* and *“Islam and democracy”* were discussed as continually influential in the study of contemporary Muslim societies. Dr Bano shared her observation on how Arab spring has augmented the interest to the question democracy. Under the theme of Muslims in Europe, the study of mosques and Islamic law in relation to personal law are the main two subfields, in her findings.

She also argued that *female preachers*, as another popular theme, witnesses interesting development. Female piety movements and Muslim feminists who are arguing “within Islam” have been subjects of much nuanced scholarship. Dr Bano named Saba Mahmood’s study on Egypt as a prominent example of such scholarship.

In addition to the themes she presented, Dr Bano provided her explanation how the study of Muslim societies and development studies converge. Apart from the fact that most of Muslim majority countries fall under the developed world (which make them a natural study object of the development studies), she suggested that the study of Muslim societies is related to a “deeper issue” within the social sciences. As a scholar of development studies, by looking at Muslim societies she can contribute to the theoretical debates on multiple conceptions of modernity, empowerment and poverty.

Lastly, she expressed her concern about a common tendency that dominates the study of Muslim societies. This is the practice of reducing the study of Muslim societies to the study of Middle East. For her, the scholarship that defines itself as the study of Muslim societies has to take the contexts outside the Middle East (such as South and East Asia or West Africa) more seriously and come up with comparative studies.