

## SPECIAL SECTION REPORT ON THE MODERN MUSLIM SUBJECTIVITIES PROJECT

### The Role of Islam in Muslim Higher Education in India: The Case of Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi

Gry Hvass Pedersen  
*University of Southern Denmark*

#### Abstract

With the worldwide expansion of the modern university system during the twentieth century, higher education has become an important feature of our modern society at a global level. Islamic universities form part of this global phenomenon, but so far major studies on the globalized higher education system have ignored the role of religion in this field. This article briefly explores the role of Islam at three Islamic universities in India, with a primary focus on the Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) in New Delhi. JMI was established in 1920 and holds a long history of providing higher education, particular for Muslims, within the specific national context of India, where Muslims constitute a significant minority. More precisely, the article investigates how the “Islamic” is defined and expressed differently at the three institutions and what that difference means in conceptual terms. Finally, the findings are placed in relation to the issue of standardization/localization within the theory on globalized education.

**Keywords:** Islamic universities, Muslim higher education, Jamia Millia Islamia, Indian Muslims

**T**his essay is based on three months of fieldwork at the National Islamic University, Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), and visits to two Muslim universities in Kerala. The purpose of the fieldwork was to collect first-hand data from these university campuses, to establish how these central places may influence Indian Muslims in the construction of subjectivities in terms of social practices as modern working subjects and in the social complex of intimacy. The data consists of semi-structured interviews with students and faculty at JMI, the Darul Huda Islamic University (DHIU), and Al Jamiya Al Islamiya (JI) in Hidayat Nagar and Shantapuram, Kerala. Further data was collected through participant observation. The student bodies are comprised of male and female students at graduate, post graduate, and PhD levels; interviews were conducted with Muslim, Hindu, and Christian students. In comparing DHIU and JI with JMI, I try to illustrate the conceptual

differences of the universities' interpretations of being Islamic institutions and subsequently briefly place the study's findings in relation to the issue of standardization/localization within the theory on globalized education (see below).

The findings presented in this essay are first impressions drawn directly from the field research. Therefore, only tentative findings to the research question of what constitutes Islamic identity in these institutions and the issues raised by this research are presented. I take my point of departure from the perspective of globalized higher education as a field of social practices in modern subjectivity formation, applying the concept as it has been developed by the sociologist John W. Meyer and his colleagues.<sup>1</sup> In their neo-institutionalist approach, they focus on the worldwide standardization of higher education institutions, pointing to the isomorphism of universities on a global scale. Isomorphism here referring to institutional similarities in terms of the educational structure, organization, curriculum, practices, routines and goals of universities, no matter their local and national contexts. Thus, all universities aspire to enact the same cultural program of contemporary norms and practices on higher education. Local divergences from the global model are explained by the concept of decoupling.<sup>2</sup> Differences and divergences are asserted as the norm, thus, they don't undermine the main argument of global convergence, since universities are still coupled to the overall cultural model by proclaiming "common goals, and adapt[ing] similar policies and routines" (Ramirez, 2012, 432).

This sociological approach to globalized higher education, however, does not address the role of religion in this complex of norms and social practices. The underlying assumption seems to be that education is secular or will eventually become secularized. Applying the general heuristic framework of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project, I am particularly interested in the very combination of the globally shared imaginary of higher education with the particular local Indian-Muslim context. It is in this combination of the global with the local I try to understand the role of religion/Islam at JMI. Thereby, I define religion as a faith-based set of symbols, norms, and practices that influence the purpose, structure, and educational content of the university, as well as the social practices of the students and staff. Moreover, religious tradition can play an important role in the construction of moral selfhoods.

### **Jamia Millia Islamia**

JMI, the nearly one-hundred-year-old National Islamic University, lies in the district of Okhla in the southern part of New Delhi, India. It was founded

during British rule by members of the nationalist and Khilafat movements, twenty-seven years before India gained its independence in 1947. Since then, JMI has been a part of the Indian university system and is today a central university under the Indian government, catering to approximately 20,000 students. When entering the northern gate, the first impression for the visitor is two metal plates with JMI's symbol, one on each door of the gate. It depicts two date trees framing a star at the top and an open book in the middle. Across the star is written in Urdu: "Allah O Akbar"; and the book, symbolizing the Qur'an, reads: "taught man that which he knew not." At the bottom, in the shape of a crescent, it reads: Jamia Millia Islamia.

Passing through the gate on my first visit, I enter a calm campus area with an almost park-like atmosphere. Some of the buildings have Islamic architectural features, others are neutral and plain. A few students emerge from the Faculty of Engineering building and go to the small juice store for refreshments. All wear jeans and shirts, some of the girls combine jeans with traditional Indian dress. Approaching the History and Language Departments, more students are sitting on the grass in front of a small university café. Some are wearing traditional religious outfits such as hijabs, kurtah and skull-caps. They sit together in mixed groups, regardless of attire and gender. The short walk across JMI's campus gives an impression of a university, which selectively draws upon Islamic symbols in its self-representation, as seen in its official logo and in some of its architecture. Additionally, it illustrates how some of the students apply religious identity markers. To a certain extent, Islam seems to play a role, both at the institutional and the individual level. The question remains however, *what* role?

### **Jamia Millia Islamia and the Islamic Educational Tradition of India**

JMI traces its roots back to the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), but was founded in opposition to the political disposition of the latter. The AMU was initially founded as a college in 1875 on the initiative of Sayyed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), an educational reformer, who represented a modernist approach to Muslim education (Lelyveld, 1982, 2003; Minault and David, 1974). Contrary to the inward looking approach of the school of Deobandi, which rejected western subjects and argued for a full embracement of traditional Islamic teachings instead, Khan insisted on including the teachings of Western sciences in the curriculum of his school (Metcalf, 1978, 1982). His intentions were pragmatic and shaped by the larger context of his time, where Indian Muslims had lost their political status in society after British ascendance to power. This decline was mostly due to new

procedures of achieving government positions. The British rulers set up a number of new educational institutions to disseminate English language, sciences, and values; and graduates from these new institutions were favored in public administration (Basu, 1989; Forest and Altbach, 2006). Muslim candidates were often rejected because they continued to receive their education through Islamic institutions. In addition, English replaced Urdu as the official language of the central administration in 1844, a development which further decreased the Urdu speaking Muslim class' chances of government jobs. Based on these circumstances, Khan sought to address students from the Muslim aristocracy with English education and English language skills. They were, however, educated with an additional Islamic component and ethos to preserve their Muslim identity. The aim was to produce a certain type of Muslim subjects, the Muslim gentlemen. Thus, Khan sought to strengthen the Muslim community through embracing western education along with Islamic traditions, all in cooperation with the British rulers.

In 1920, an internal faction at AMU, mostly consisting of "Aligarh Old Boys," along with members of the Khilafat movement, Gandhi, and the national movement established JMI in an act of protest against the college's pro-British position. JMI built on the same educational approach as AMU, providing Western education with Islamic subjects to uplift the Muslim community; however, it changed the medium of instruction from English to Urdu and Hindi and emphasized its Islamic heritage as a part of the Indian national movement (Minault and David, 1974). Its purpose was to construct a new national type of Muslim subjectivity, "God-fearing Muslims and country loving Indians" (Hasan and Jalil, 2006, 66). This new Indian Muslim should contribute in the nation building of the independent state to come and not as the Muslim gentlemen serve in the British government apparatus. From this ideological perspective, JMI also objected to the idea of Pakistan and continued to support the concept of an all-Indian nation state before, during, and after partition. In 1925, JMI moved from the grounds in Aligarh to New Delhi. Since then, it has developed into a complete university consisting of nine faculties, thirty-eight departments and twenty-seven centers.<sup>3</sup> It was run by a Muslim trust until 1988, when it became a Central University under the purview of the Indian government. Thus, JMI is today a modern Indian university, fully integrated in the country's higher education system (Altbach and Selvaratnam, 1989; Forest and Altbach, 2006).

In 2011 JMI obtained minority status, which entails a fifty percent reservation for Muslim students (Dhar, 2011). Since the partition in 1947,

Indian Muslims have become a contested and marginalized minority (Hefner, 2008; Sachar, 2006). So, besides its position within the larger Indian higher education context, JMI is still linked to the discourses attached to the Muslim community due to its Muslim origin and heritage and its minority status. As an integrated part of the formal education system, JMI offers non-religious courses within a modern institutional structure, and through the minority status for Muslim students, the university has continued to represent the modernist Muslim educational tradition while adapting to the present Indian context.

### **“Not Islamic but Muslim” – the Role of Islam at Jamia Millia Islamia**

As a central, Indian university, JMI closely resembles the educational structure, organization, policies, routines, and goals of the world models on higher education. It offers modern education to all its students, no matter their communal affiliation. The non-religious character of teaching is reflected in the curriculum of the various departments, and was furthermore confirmed by all my interviewees; both students and faculty. Thus, religion does not play a direct role in JMI’s education. However, by observing the university on a daily basis, it seems that JMI is Islamic within two areas. First and foremost, it is expressed in its minority status. Hence, JMI’s Islamic rationale is to continue to uplift the marginalized Muslim community in India through education. By the special status granted to Muslim minorities, JMI has found a way to secure Muslim students’ access to higher education in the competitive educational environment of India. Thus, the Islamic rationale is of a more political nature than religious, that is to say aiming at teaching a proper way of Islamic life. Secondly, JMI offers a cultural-religious sub-structure for observing one’s faith as a Muslim. For example: All the gents’ toilets have specific facilities for observing Islamic purification and on Fridays, teaching schedules leave room for prayer in the two university mosques. This cultural-religious sub-structure and Muslim ambience is also reflected in the architecture, the food in the canteens, and the mosques at campus and at the hostels. A JMI student explained the Islamic character of JMI in this way: “Islamia does not mean Islamic in the sense of an Islamic university. It means a Muslim university, a university for Muslims.” Thus, the purpose of the university, its structure, course content, and social practices at the institutional level are not informed by faith-based beliefs and norms. Rather, the role of religion is reflected in the university providing an environment for Muslims to practice their faith, and thereby facilitating the construction of specifically Muslim Indian subjectivities. JMI does not teach religious social practices or otherwise hold any official policies on social

norms. However, according to several interlocutors, some Muslim faculty members, guards, and students have tried to influence the social practices of other Muslims, particularly female students (to wear the hijab, dress more modestly, restrict the social interaction between male and female students, etc.). So, even though not institutionalized, religiously rooted norms and morals are still occasionally enforced on students by certain institutions and groups representing the university.

In comparison, Darul Huda Islamic University (DIHU) and Al Jamia Al Islamiya University (JI) in Kerala have a different approach regarding the role of religion.<sup>4</sup> Both institutions have constructed a dual education system, providing their students with a purely Islamic faith-based education, that is to say they offer degrees in hadith, the Qur'an, fiqh, etc., which they combine with non-religious, government approved university degrees. These degrees are typically in fields such as history, English, and sociology. Both universities have accepted the necessity of government approved degrees to improve their students' career options, while still remaining focused on religious education and the dissemination of their interpretation of Islam. DIHU and JI thus represent a different position within the Islamic educational tradition than JMI in deliberately trying to educate their students as specifically Islamic modern subjects. At the same time, both universities draw upon the collectively shared imaginaries of what constitutes a contemporary university, and to some extent they mirror the isomorphic institutional structures of the larger cultural models. Interestingly, these global imaginaries are applied in order to preserve their particular interpretation of religious knowledge and practices. So, even if following the non-religious world models, their purpose, courses, and social practices are religiously informed and contingent. DIHU and JI are thus explicit religious educational institutions in comparison to JMI's more cultural-religious character.

### **Conceptualizing the “Islamic”**

The three case studies presented above illustrate how the institutions interpret the concept of “an Islamic university” differently. Hence, the term “Islamic” does not refer to a single definition or content. In conceptual terms, the meaning of “Islamic” has changed over time in the case of JMI. Where being an Islamic university initially meant constructing modern Islamic subjects and catering to the Muslim population at large, it has today been stripped of the religious education content. In this sense, the historical development of JMI could be explained in reference to the well-known narratives of secularization. “Islamic” now seems to signify JMI's Islamic

history and its minority status. It has in other words changed to denote the cultural-religious dimension of Islam, not religion in the sense of belief and its teaching traditions itself. This further suggests that “Islamia” holds a political meaning in JMI’s definition. This is reflected in the observation that JMI offers Muslims the possibilities to preserve their religious and cultural identity, while constructing their working identity. Thereby, it enables them to be God-fearing Muslims, but it does not (actively) teach them how to become a Muslim subject. Against the backdrop of the Indian context, which is rather hostile to Muslims, this implies that the role of religion at JMI is to sustain or protect the existing Indian Muslim identity. Thus, by providing a public, institutional space JMI enables Muslims to be Muslims while also being Indian students and future employees. Opposed to JMI’s emphasis on “Islamic” as a place for Muslim learning, DHIU and JI represent places of specifically Islamic learning. Conceptually this means that Islamic teachings, norms and practices are the main purpose and content of the institution at all levels. DHIU and JI, in other words, aim to construct God-fearing Muslims through their educational institutions. They try to combine the construction of modern working subjects with a specifically Islamic form of the moral subject.

The difference in the meaning of “an Islamic university” in the case of JMI, JI, and DHIU furthermore points to the overall importance of making a distinction between “Islamic” and “Muslim.” In the words of the political scientist, Donald Emmerson (2010), the semantic difference between “Islamic” and “Muslim” should be understood as an inward looking singularity vs. an outward moving multiplicity: “Some words are centripetal. Their semantic fields gravitate toward a single core. Islamic is such a term. Islamic drains attention from a multiplicity of differently living Muslims and concentrates it on the definitional uniformity of the singular noun Islam as one monotheistic faith—one God, one book, and by implication one community as well . . . . In contrast, the plural term Muslims is centrifugally humanizing—oriented outward . . . toward millions of uniquely lived individual lives” (Emmerson 2010, 26).

Following Emmerson’s overall semantic distinction, this research report argues that “Islamic” and “Muslim” are also conceptually different terms when it comes to an educational context. As the empirical material points out, a distinction between Islamic education and education for Muslims, should be made when dealing with the topic of Islamic education. Where the former signifies a certain degree of explicit religious training or teaching, the latter represents standard, none-faith related education provided for Muslim students as a cultural, political, or religious group. However, the focus of



the curriculum is not *Islamias* such. When talking about Islamic education, it is useful to distinguish between “Islamic” education, as religiously oriented education, and “Muslim” education as modern education for Muslim students with Islamic studies being only a part of a broader curriculum in the arts and sciences.

Finally, despite the different definitions of Islamic institutions, all three case studies draw in idiosyncratic ways upon the global models of higher education to perform their particularly local goals. This observation reflects back on the broader discussion of globalized education in relation to the question of standardization and localization, as it suggests that they are not mutually exclusive. In the cases of JMI, DHIU, and JI it seems to be a matter of both. They all draw on global templates of higher education while simultaneously incorporating local, cultural-religious, and political considerations and purposes.

## Conclusion

The tentative findings of this research indicate that the Islamic of JMI is best understood as the continuation of the institution’s historical tradition as providing modern education for the strengthening of the Indian Muslim community. JMI is first and foremost a central Indian university—for Muslims. It is a Muslim university in the sense that it guarantees non-religious, modern higher education for Muslims due to its special minority status. Simultaneously, it provides the cultural ambience and facilities to conduct one’s faith and feel comfortable as a Muslim on campus. Islam as a religion does not play a role in the educational content or purpose of the institution, nor officially regarding social practices. Overall it seems that the “Islamias” in JMI’s name is better translated to “Muslim”—a National Muslim University—and that the selective use of Islamic symbols and religious identity markers are just that: markers and symbols expressing the university’s and students’ Muslim identity, history, and presence in the larger non-Muslim majority environment of India.

In contrast to JMI, Islam plays a more explicit role at the DHIU and JI, where the purpose, course content, and social practices are first and foremost guided by Islamic religious principles. In conceptual terms, this signifies a difference in the definition of “Islamic” at higher education institutions, which can be characterized as Muslim learners (JMI) vs. Islamic learning (DHIU and JI). This argument also points to the necessity of distinguishing between “Islamic” and “Muslim” when it comes to the issue of educational training. Furthermore, this work illustrates how all the case universities draw on the shared global discourses of contemporary university education



to perform their particularly locally conditioned goals. More specifically, it indicates how the institutions idiosyncratically use both global and local templates in their setup.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See Drori 2003, Krücken & Drori 2009, Schofer & Meyer 2005, Ramirez 2012

<sup>2</sup>For a critique and discussion of World Society Theory, see Anderson Levitt, 2003; Schriewer 2004, 2012, 2014; Steiner Khamsi 2004, 2012, 2013

<sup>3</sup>[www.jmi.ac.in](http://www.jmi.ac.in) (accessed April 24, 2015)

<sup>4</sup>[www.darulhuda.com](http://www.darulhuda.com), [www.aljamia.net](http://www.aljamia.net) (accessed April 24, 2015)

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