

## **The Study of Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Hermeneutic of Humaneness**

Jerome Richfield Memorial Lecture for 2003

Wednesday, October 22, 2003

Delivered by Amir Hussain

Greetings and good afternoon. I am honoured, delighted and humbled to stand before you and deliver the 2003 Jerome Richfield Memorial Lecture. Let me begin with a very simple and sincere “Thank you” to all of you here. I need to single out our previous and current Provosts, Louanne Kennedy and Linda Bain, and Mack Johnson and Hedy Carpenter from Graduate Research and International Programs who along with the members of the research and grants committee selected me for this award.

I came to Northridge in 1997, and so never had the opportunity to meet Dean Richfield who passed away in 1992. However, I did attend the ceremony on September 22, 1997, when President Blenda Wilson dedicated Jerome Richfield Hall. I am also privileged to count Kathy Jacobi as a friend, and it was Kathy who painted the portrait of Dean Richfield that is displayed in the foyer of Richfield Hall. And of course as someone teaching in the College of Humanities, I have heard many stories about Dean Richfield from those who worked closest with him. In this way, I do have some small connections to Dean Richfield. Those of you that know me know that I do not usually dress in such formal clothes (my students probably don’t recognize me today), but I’m told that Dean Richfield never appeared in public settings without a jacket and tie, and so I wear the same in his honour.

As someone who teaches in the College of Humanities, where Professor Richfield was the first dean, I am particularly honoured to be selected as the Richfield Memorial Scholar. Historically, the humanities have formed the core of any traditional university. And within that core, whether it be at the first university in the Western world, Al-Azhar University founded in Egypt in 969, or at Oxford University in England a century later, the centre has been the study of religion. In the memorial brochure for Dean Richfield, Professor John Clendenning wrote: “The University is not, however, made of concrete and plaster. The University is made with minds,

minds critically alive, minds that meet the urgent challenges of contemporary society, minds also that are always steeped in the past, in traditions that inform and direct the present.”

I have had the great privilege of being mentored by the greatest Canadian scholar of Islam (and one of the two or three greatest scholars of religion) in the past century, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Prior to his death in 2000, Professor and Mrs. Smith left their collection of books and papers on Islam to our library. In many ways, I am a traditionalist, not a modernist. I certainly count myself as one who is steeped in the past, one who respects and honours the elders. As Confucius is reported to have said, “I am a transmitter, not an innovator. I believe in antiquity and love the ancients” (*Analects* 7:1).

This year has seen the deaths of many of our grandmothers and grandfathers in the study of Islam. Annemarie Schimmel of Harvard, my own thesis supervisor Willard Oxtoby, Franz Rosenthal of Yale, Edward Said of Columbia, and most recently Cesar Majul who was the expert in Islam in the Philippines. I dedicate this lecture to the memories of all of them, and particularly to the three that had the most profound influence on my work, and indeed my academic life. For the lives and work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Willard G. Oxtoby, and Edward W. Said I am profoundly thankful. I begin my lecture to you in remembrance of them.

In remembering all of them, I am reminded of the words of Bill Reid, perhaps the most famous artist of the Haida people, who passed away in 1998. The Haida live in what we call the Queen Charlotte Islands in the Pacific Northwest, but are known to the Haida as the Haida Gwaii, “the Islands of the People”. In a collection of Haida stories, *The Raven Steals the Light*, Bill wrote: “I consider myself one of the most fortunate of men, to have lived at a time when some of the old Haidas and their peers among the Northwest Coast peoples were still alive, and to have had the privilege of knowing them. Protected by the sure conviction of who they were, they survived terrible assaults on the way of life which had served them so well for so long, and they responded to the rigours of an arrogant, often unfriendly, disdainful world with dignity and courtesy, embodied in inbred instinct for doing the right thing. I certainly shall not see their like

again in my time”.<sup>1</sup>

Dignity and courtesy, embodied in inbred instinct for doing the right thing. That sentence is just as descriptive of my elders as it is of the Haida teachers of Bill Reid. Unfortunately, Bill’s phrase “an arrogant, often unfriendly, disdainful world” is also an accurate depiction of much of the academy. I learned a great deal from my teachers, and one of the greatest things that they taught me was how to **be** in the world. To act, always, in a dignified and courteous manner. I rarely live up to the model that they provided me with, but I am so grateful to have their model to follow. Professor Said, for example, never wore a shirt in public without cufflinks, and so I wear them in his honour.

To understand where we are going, it is necessary to know where we have been. Let me say a few words about the study of Islam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the previous century, the study of religion was concentrated in departments of religious knowledge or theology. Within theological institutions, if Islam was studied it was studied not for its own sake, but largely to train missionaries who would spread the gospel to Muslim lands. In secular institutions, the study of Islam was subsumed under Oriental or Near Eastern Studies. The world of Islam was largely confined to the Near East, even though the majority of the world’s Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia.

From Professor Smith I learned not only about scholarship, but also about humanity and social justice. At the time that he began his work, before the Second World War, the study of Islam consisted almost entirely of the study, by non-Muslim scholars, of texts written by Muslims. His undergraduate degree, from the University of Toronto, was in Oriental languages. Growing up in Canada, where there were very few Muslims, he went to India, which at the time was the country with the largest number of Muslims. This was a revolutionary idea. To actually live with Muslims, and to actually ask them what they thought, and then to actually write about it. Predictably, Cambridge, where he was enrolled for his doctorate, wanted nothing to do with

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst, *The Raven Steals the Light*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre,

his dissertation, and rejected it. Imagine, the audacity of writing about what Muslims actually thought and did and passing that off as “scholarship”, when everyone knew that “scholarship” meant writing a lengthy treatise on an obscure Arabic or Persian text that most Muslims had never heard of, let alone read. And, of course, everything old is new again. Nowadays, the current thinking is that, to do proper ethnographic scholarship, one must have a deep knowledge of the culture that one writes about. Professor Smith was doing this in 1941, over 60 years ago.

When he set up the Institute of Islamic studies at Montreal’s McGill University in 1951, he wanted Muslims to be involved with it. Again, a radical idea. Muslims, being involved in the study of Islam? To quote from his obituary, “He recruited Muslim scholars and students to the faculty and graduate student body, involving them in a joint venture of scholarship formerly carried on largely by Western orientalists. By giving emphasis to numerically dominant South and Southeast Asian Islam, he also balanced earlier reliance on classical Arabic, Persian, and Turkish texts.”

Last semester, I taught our senior seminar on the work of Professors Smith and Said, a course entitled “Religion, Description and Empire”. My inspiration for that course and combination of scholars came from a line by the Harvard professor of Islam (and student of Professor Smith) William Graham: “He was the critic of ‘Orientalism’ years before Edward Said, a critic of intellectual colonialism long before the post-colonial debates, and these ethical and scholarly stances came from his moral and his intellectual rigorism”.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Said was a scholar of comparative literature, but he wrote several books that had a direct impact on the study of Islam. His most important book was *Orientalism*. Published in 1978, it remains one of the classics of humanities scholarship in the past twenty-five years. In that work, Professor Said defined Orientalism as: “. . . a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not

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1996, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Graham, “The Scholar’s Scholar: Wilfred Cantwell Smith and a Collegial Life of the Mind”, in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer 2000, Vol. 29, No. 2, p 7.

only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other." (*Orientalism*, p. 1). As Professor Said so ably demonstrated in that book, much of the scholarship on Islam in the past two centuries was deeply entwined with European colonial enterprises. The images of the East created by scholars of various European empires helped to provide justification for the supremacist ideology of imperialism.<sup>3</sup>

With recent American attempts at imperialism, it is no surprise then to note that the first Associated Press news reports on Professor Said's death did not mention this work which Columbia University had honoured earlier in the year with an international symposium to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its publication. In 1981 Professor Said published another work on the study of Islam, entitled quite cleverly *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. That book was occasioned by the Iranian Hostage Crisis, where not one of the almost 300 American reporters who covered that story could speak Farsi.

Professor Said was never shy about speaking the truth to power. In an interview during the first Gulf War, he said: "Re-engagement with intellectual process means a return to an old-fashioned historical, literary and, above all, intellectual scholarship based upon the premise that human beings, men and women, make their own history. And just as things are made, they can be unmade and remade. That sense of intellectual and political and citizenly empowerment is what the intellectual class needs. . . .For the American intellectual, that means, at bottom, that the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world, now based upon profit and power, has to be altered to one of coexistence among human communities that can make and remake their own histories and environments together. This is the number one priority –there's

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 166.

nothing else of that magnitude”.<sup>4</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I envision a return to the serious, traditional intellectual scholarship advocated by Professors Smith and Said. At CSUN, I am fortunate to have colleagues such as Rachel Howes in History, Mehran Kamrava in Political Science, and Nayereh Tohidi in Women’s Studies. All of us study Islam and Muslims in different disciplines, and I hope that having multiple experts on Islam in the same university is a trend that will continue at other universities. In far too many institutions of higher learning, the study of Islam is usually left to one person. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Professor Smith was famous for his disapproval of “interdisciplinary studies”, thinking instead that we should be able to use every discipline in the university to understand our subject. In 1981’s *Towards a World Theology*, he wrote: “The recent concept of ‘interdisciplinarity’ is an attempt to construct a ladder by which to climb out of a hole into which genuinely humane studies never fell.”<sup>5</sup> However, he was certainly in favour of having a group of scholars work on problems, rather than single scholars working in isolation.

What other trends do I see in the future aside from more collaborative scholarship? At least five come to mind. First is the involvement of Muslims, as Muslims, in the academic study of Islam. This is the case in the study of most other religious traditions in the world, yet somehow Muslim scholars of Islam are seen as suspect in a way that, for example, their Christian colleagues who study Christianity and their Jewish colleagues who study Judaism are not. Second is less concentration on traditional languages and classic texts as the only way to study Islam. Let me be unambiguous here. I do not mean to demphasize the study of languages. I think source languages are crucial to any serious study. That said, knowing only a language or a particular series of set texts does not indicate deep knowledge of a particular religious tradition. I see more concentration on cultural studies, politics, art, history, and contemporary culture in the

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<sup>4</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, Editor, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 366.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Cracknell, Editor, *Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Reader* (Oxford: Oneworld

study of Islam, which is in fact a common trend more generally in the study of religion. Third, I see the need for more scholarship on cultural and national diversity among Muslims. Fourth, I see more studies on North American and European Muslim communities. Fifth is the awareness by scholars of the relationship between knowledge and power. Ours is the generation that came of age after *Orientalism*, and recognizes much of the colonial context and subtext of Islamic studies in the past century. To quote from the words of a latter day prophet, Bob Marley, “We’re forwarding this generation triumphantly”.

Some of you might remark that the title of my talk, The Study of Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is not sufficiently scholarly. It has no colon, and no subordinate clause. I did that deliberately, as there were two different subtitles between which I could not choose. The first is “The Hermeneutic of Humaneness”. This phrase encapsulates for me the methodological advances that Professors Smith, Oxtoby and Said brought to the study of Islam. Where my sisters offered to us the much-needed “hermeneutic of suspicion”, let me offer alongside it the hermeneutic of humaneness as my guiding principle for the study of Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To be humane, of course, does not mean to be unscholarly. William Graham’s reminiscence of Professor Smith for the Bulletin of the Harvard Divinity School was entitled “The Scholar’s Scholar”.<sup>6</sup> And Professor Smith was certainly that, the greatest scholar of us all. But he was also one of the kindest men, one of the most human beings, that I have ever met. I will say more about his humanity throughout his lecture. And so the basic meaning of the hermeneutic of humaneness is to come to the scholarly study, the serious scholarly study, of Islam with humanity.

Let me elucidate what I mean by the hermeneutic of humaneness with four points. The first is a deep knowledge of the subject. The second is an honest and critical evaluation of that subject, that does not at the same time do violence to the subject. The third is in spreading

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Publications, 2001), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> William A. Graham, “The Scholar’s Scholar: Wilfred Cantwell Smith and a Collegial Life of the Mind”, in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer 2000, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 6–7.

information about that evaluation. And the fourth, simply, is a way of being in the world that honours one's colleagues and students. Let me explain, briefly, how Professor Smith exemplified these four points.

The first point is a deep knowledge of the subject. Professor Smith certainly had a deep knowledge of Islam and Muslims. For six years, he and Mrs. Smith lived in Lahore. They learned about Muslims not simply through the study of texts, but from living with Muslims. And they did this over sixty years ago, decades before the current scholarly trend towards long-term participant observation. I am reminded of words that Edward Seidensticker (the first translator of the Nobel Prize winner Kawabata Yasunari) spoke about Kawabata at a lecture in New York City on October 18, 1990: "He stands at the cutting edge of the traditional, or at the point where the traditional and the new and modern intersect, or at the head of the march pulling the traditional into the future". Professor Smith studied the texts that Muslims wrote, and the languages that we speak. This was the traditional scholarship of his day. The dissertation that was accepted by Princeton University (in 1948) was on the Azhar journal in Cairo. But Professor Smith also studied what it was that Muslims did. It was here that he was an innovator. The dissertation that was rejected by Cambridge University was a Marxist critique of the British in India that became his first book, *Modern Islam in India*.

This first point about a deep knowledge of the subject, particularly if that subject is Islam or Muslims, is, after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, even more salient. Suddenly, all sorts of people who have never done any serious study of Islam and Muslims are now expert commentators. In the two years since the attacks, I have missed more than ever my conversations with Professor and Mrs. Smith about the Muslim world.

Tomorrow, I will be speaking at a panel entitled "Encountering Islam", moderated by Teresa Watanabe, a religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*. My topic will be on Islam and violence, and I have been asked to address the question: "Is Islam more violent than other religions?". In the past two years, I have often had to address this question, and I take it quite



seriously. With the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Islam and violence became synonymous in the minds of many people. More than 20 years earlier, the Iranian revolution (and its aftermath) first alerted many people to the role of violence in the contemporary Muslim world. While many people consider Islam to be a religion of violence, many Muslims consider Islam to be a religion of peace. Clearly, anyone teaching courses in the study of Islam has to deal with issues of peace and violence. The project that I will be engaged in while given release time as the Jerome Richfield Memorial Scholar is to work on a chapter on religion and violence in the study of Islam for a book on religion and violence. This chapter will examine the issues of peace and violence in the study of Islam, with a particular focus on the introduction to Islam course that is taught at most universities that have courses in religious studies. There are important issues of peace and violence that need to be addressed with respect to the biography of Muhammad, the Qur'an, the spread and historical development of Islam, the contemporary Muslim world, and the self-understandings of Muslims.

In the next few days, I have a chapter coming out in a new book entitled *Human Rights and Responsibilities in the World's Religions*. My chapter, on Muslims and Human Rights, is entitled "This Tremor of Western Wisdom". That phrase is spoken by one of the most powerful anti-colonial characters created in the last decade, Kirpal (Kip) Singh, a Sikh sapper for the British Army in Michael Ondaatje's brilliant novel, *The English Patient*. In the novel, Kip, who is defusing bombs while stationed in Italy at the end of the Second World War, hears of the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on the civilian populations of Japan. In his outrage, Kip speaks to the English patient:

I sat at the foot of this bed and listened to you, Uncle. These last months. When I was a kid I did that, the same thing. I believed I could fill myself up with what older people taught me. I believed I could carry that knowledge, slowly altering it, but in any case passing it beyond me to another.

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories

and printing presses?

You and then the Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be *pukkah*. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this? Here . . . listen to what you people have done. . .

One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki.

. . . If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom.

. . . My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed –by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For *this* to happen?

. . . All those speeches of civilization from kings and queens and presidents ... such voices of abstract order. Smell it. Listen to the radio and smell the celebration in it. In my country, when a father breaks justice in two, you kill the father.<sup>7</sup>

It is sobering to remember that the United States, a White Christian nation, remains the only country to have used nuclear weapons, twice, on civilian non-White, predominantly non-Christian populations. Perhaps not surprisingly, the above scenes were absent from Anthony Minghella's filmed version of the novel.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), pp. 283–285.

This leads me to my second point, about an honest and critical evaluation of the subject. I am surprised at how, unfortunately, some people seem to equate criticism and being critical with being rude. These are two very different beasts. Professor Smith was, for me, the paradigm of critical scholarship. From his deep knowledge, he was able to offer critique when it was needed. He was not a Muslim. He was not an apologist for Islam. Yet his critique never did violence to what it meant for other people to be Muslim. Let me quote something from *Islam in Modern History*: “A true Muslim, however, is not a man who believes in Islam— especially Islam in history; but one who believes in God and is committed to the revelation through His Prophet”.<sup>8</sup> Those words were published in 1957. In 1962’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*, he continued: “. . .the essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is the degree to which Muslims, instead of giving their allegiance to God, have been giving it to something called Islam”.<sup>9</sup> Those words could have been written today with equal force and validity. It is a mark of Professor Smith’s genius that those words were written over forty years ago and yet they continue to inform us today.

The third point concerning the hermeneutic of humaneness is in the spreading of the information that one has discovered. This process is usually referred to in the United States as “dissemination”, but the feminist in me recoils at the use of that word. The works that Professor Smith produced remain models for me, for us, to this day. Humane scholarship, scholarly and humane. In the spring of 1992, the Centre for Religious Studies of the University of Toronto organized a conference in honour of Professor Smith. One of the participants in that conference was John Hick, perhaps the pre-eminent philosopher of religion. Of Professor Smith’s scholarship, Hick wrote: “An outstanding feature of Wilfred’s work is that it is on the highest level of technical historical scholarship and yet it is at the same time driven by involvement in and concern for the world-wide human community, with a keen sense of the threatening disasters

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<sup>8</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991

and the amazing possibilities before us. This human involvement goes back to his work in India before Partition and has continued ever since, as a constant thread running through all his writings".<sup>10</sup> These words are also true of Professor Said, who was never shy about speaking the truth to power. And they are also true of Dean Richfield, who took an active role in addressing racial, ethnic, and gender issues on this campus.

The fourth point is perhaps the most important to my understanding of the hermeneutic of humaneness. Many other academic enterprises comprise the first three points. What distinguishes this approach is the way of one's being in the world, how it is that one treats one's colleagues and students. In this, Professor and Mrs. Smith were without equal. Anyone that knew them had stories to tell. And one would never know from Professor Smith's humility that he was such an outstanding scholar. Let me tell my own story. The first time I formally met Professor Smith was almost fifteen years ago, in 1989. I had written a paper that had been accepted for the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, and as an MA student about to make his first major presentation, I was excited and nervous. The meeting was in Victoria, British Columbia, and we had a small conference in Toronto preceding the meeting to first test out our papers. My paper, as part of its methodology, used some ideas from Professor Smith's magnum opus, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Just before I was to present my paper, in he walked. I was mortified. What was he going to say about my use of his ideas? I had no idea. I presented, and thankfully, the paper was well received. At the reception afterwards, Professor Smith came up to me. He thanked me for my paper, and asked if he could shake my hand. I will never forget that gesture of humanity as long as I live. Here was Wilfred Cantwell Smith, **Wilfred Cantwell Smith**, and he was asking if **he** could shake **my** hand. That's the first time I thought I might be able to make it in this profession. In the years after that, as I got to know Professor and Mrs. Smith, I understood that this was simply how they were. Kind and decent people in a world in

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[1962], p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> John Hick, "On Wilfred Cantwell Smith: His Place in the Study of Religion", in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 and 2, 1992, p. 5.

which humanity and decency are in such short supply.

That humanity was passed along and through those that came into contact with Professor Smith. Out of respect for Professor Smith who would be deeply embarrassed at my use of the word in reference to him, I will not refer to it as his *baraka*, the Arabic term for an “intangible holiness that is sometimes tangible”. But there is something there that he passed on to all of us.

Professor Smith continued to live out the hermeneutic of humaneness until the end. After he and Mrs. Smith moved from the large house on Brunswick Avenue in the Annex section of Toronto to the small apartment in Fellowship Towers, they gave their books on Islam to the library of California State University, Northridge. The books could have gone to Harvard University or McGill University, but those schools already had those books. Here, at CSUN, they would increase our holdings on Islam by about one third and benefit another generation of students. And I think they also thought about aiding another young Canadian at the beginning of his academic career. There they were yet again, Professor and Mrs. Smith, helping a new scholar out.

Let me bring my words to a close with the second alternate title to my talk, “Dwellers on the Threshold”. This is who, or what, we are, on the threshold of the new century of scholarship. Professors Smith, Said and Richfield all appreciated music. Granted it was much more highbrow music than the music to which I usually listen. One of my favourite Van Morrison songs is “Dweller on Threshold”, which contains the following two verses:

I will walk out of the darkness  
And I'll walk into the light  
And I'll sing the song of ages  
And the dawn will end the night

I'm a dweller on the threshold  
And I'm waiting at the door  
And I'm standing in the darkness  
I don't want to wait no more

That song was released in 1982, the same year that Salman Rushdie published his magisterial essay about colonial and post-colonial literature “Imaginary Homelands”. Rushdie

ended that essay with a reference to a book that Saul Bellow published that same year, *The Dean's December*:

There's a beautiful image in Saul Bellow's latest novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog's protest against the limit of dog experience. 'For God's sake,' the dog is saying, 'open the universe a little more!' And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs, or not only about dogs, I have the feeling that the dog's rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone's. 'For God's sake, open the universe a little more!'"<sup>11</sup>

I can hear Dean Richfield saying, barking, the same words. This is my hope for the study of Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that we open the universe a little more. Thank you.

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<sup>11</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 21.