

Ibrahim Abu-Rabi': Islamic scholar

EARLE WAUGH AND DAVID J. GOA

University of Alberta

Scholars on several continents were shocked at the premature passing of one of Islam's premier spokespersons on July 2, 2011. Likewise at the University of Alberta in Edmonton Canada, where we felt particularly bereft. As the first holder of the Edmonton Council of Muslim Community's Chair in Islamic Studies, Dr. Abu-Rabi' had endeared himself to both the academy and the people in a marked way, as evidenced by the range of articles in this memorial edition of *Religious Studies and Theology*. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. First, a brief overview of the professional trajectory of Ibrahim Abu-Rabi'.

After acquiring his Ph.D. at Temple University and having two temporary positions at the University of Texas and Virginia Commonwealth University, in 1991 Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' was appointed professor at the MacDonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. He remained at the seminary until 2008, when he left to assume his new position at the University of Alberta.

Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' demonstrated at the Seminary both his desire and ability to be a public intellectual, not only in Connecticut but throughout many parts of the world. He did this numerous ways: engaged in extensive Christian-Muslim interfaith work, coordinated and led groups of people on study trips to Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, North Africa, and Indonesia; arranged for students and faculty from abroad to come to and study for varying periods of time at the Seminary and brought Islamic religious leaders from Syria and Turkey to the United States for discussions with American religious scholars, clergy and others. During the 2006 academic year, as a senior Fulbright scholar, Ibrahim not only taught in Singapore and Indonesia; he also lectured on the merits of interfaith activity and work.

It is well-known that Ibrahim concentrated his *oeuvre* around five interlocking themes. We have not been able to represent all of them here, but it is worth rehearsing them for a wider audience. First was his work on his Palestinian heritage, a theme that cropped up in all his public discourses in one way or another. The second is his interest in Said Nursi's Philosophy of Non-Violence, a perspective that came to dominance towards the end of this

life. The third was clearly the mystical tradition in Islam, usually referred to as Sufism, but for Ibrahim a much broader category of religious experience than its institutional form in Islam. The fourth is the rise of political Islam, usually in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood and its related ancillary minority strains of Salafism and Jihadism. The fifth is his sense of Islam as cultural force through the role of public intellectual—he insisted that international Islamic culture could be used for a force for good if seized by Muslim intellectuals. Finally, Ibrahim was a global citizen of Islam, and saw Islam from a global perspective. Hence he was concerned with the way that global presence was interpreted in the local environment, including research on its distortions and conflicts in the contemporary world. We end this memorial with a testimony from a student, who speaks for many as she articulates the loss his death brings to the sincere student’s worldview.

The papers here represent but a fraction of Ibrahim’s wide-ranging interests, but they represent intellectual pathways he trod. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’s interest in and focus upon modern Islamic thought led him to a study and analysis of the Turkish Islamic theologian, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960). Ibrahim wrote numerous articles and book length studies about Nursi. He was particularly amenable to analysis of the Sufi influence in the Islamic world, and two papers here address different topics. Waugh surveys Abu-Rabi’s writings and finds evidence of several refining concerns: that the mystical trajectory in Islam was part of the Islamic movement right from the beginning; that that tradition was not just a movement for the unlettered and social outcast, but an intellectual movement with widespread attraction to the lettered; that in latter moments of his career he, like Nursi, had eschewed the term Sufism for a more generic Islamic mysticism because Sufism spoke of an elite—he thought Islamic mysticism far more inclusive; that the real meaning of Islamic mysticism was to be more allied with the post-colonial experience of “thrownness into history” where the pain of separation was paramount, than with any elitist religious experience. Likewise, Al-Nouhi challenges the long-standing secularist ideology that shifting leadership away from religious leadership ushers in a division between “church and state” to the extent that the ‘church’ entity loses its power. He explores how Sufism has been formative in North African culture and continues to operate there with wide-ranging authority systems despite the operation of regional “secularist” governments. He argues that research on the ground in the Western Sahara proves quite the opposite: that there is no rupture in the Islamic power system even though governmental structures of the modern sort have arisen.

No memorial to Ibrahim would be fitting without a reference to the wide-ranging views he held on Islamic politics in the contemporary era. Mojtaba Mahdavi problematizes the complexity of Muslim approaches to the ques-

tion of modernity in his “Muslims and Modernities: From Islamism to Post-Islamism?” as he explores multiple post-Islamic modernities in the Muslim world. Norton Mezvinsky and Joshua Kolb develop this theme in “Eyes Upon the Land: Chabad Lubavitch on Israel” in documenting the influence of a remarkable Jewish community and its implications for how Palestinians are seen. It is the kind of documentary study our colleague Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ lauded because only when we map the trajectory of influential ideas do we have any chance of engaging them deeply.

Most ordinary people in Edmonton, whether they were religious or not, responded to Ibrahim as a public intellectual. He carefully maintained this stance throughout his short but productive time among us. Two selections assist us to grasp the magnitude of this role. David Goa and Norton Mezvinsky explored the impact he made on the larger community in his essay entitled “Engaging the Religious Life: Abu-Rabi’ as Public Intellectual.” Abu-Rabi’'s stance within Canadian society was essential, for it arose out of a position of fostering discussion around how various communities should relate and react to each other. In Hasan Hanafi’s contribution “The Future of Political Islam and the West: The Islamic Movement in the Arab World with a Focus on Egypt” we perceive some of the motivators that shaped Abu-Rabi’'s life. The essay brings us closer to understanding what drove Ibrahim to spend so much time moving from his University to venues of intellectual encounter all over the world—it was for him, the special burden laid upon the Muslim intellectual. The role was not to criticize the community, not to point out its weaknesses, but to provide understanding in a coin that all people everywhere could comprehend. It was and is the role of mediator and peace-builder.

In the recent turbulent history of Islam, how Muslims come to “feel at home” in foreign environments is a conflicted area of discourse. Ibrahim knew that his role in Canada was not just to teach students; he knew it was not just to be a “go-to” person for journalists seeking enlightenment on the most recent jihadist action. He knew that he represented a religion that was under fire in Canadian culture. In an effort to provide a window into one such conflicted event in Canada, Maryam Razavy presents “Canadian Responses to Islamic Law: The Faith Based Arbitration Debates.” An analysis of the Ontario attempt by a group of Muslims to provide a “state-sanctioned alternative dispute resolution” with an emphasis on the *shari’u* as the ground for conciliation and arbitration. The quickly accelerating antagonism to the notion and the subsequent response of the Ontario government is a case study of the deep emotions family law adjudication can have. That Faith-based Arbitration (FBA) was subsequently banned and it raises critical issues from a multicultural standpoint. Razavy’s paper demonstrates how frayed the discourses could be within a culture that is widely held to be successful as a

multicultural society, and how dextrous someone like Abu-Rabi‘ had to be as he mediated these various strains in Canadian culture.

From the beginning of his academic career, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi‘ was a prolific and creative scholar. His highly praised books and articles established him as a distinguished scholar in the field of modern Islamic thought. As the chief editor of the journal *Muslim World*, Abu-Rabi‘ raised the level of that publication. He was also a popular and outstanding teacher and it is well to remind ourselves that Ibrahim loved students. He was at home in front of the class and found it very rewarding to nurture young minds. Colleen Keyes completes our memorial with a glimpse of the impact of this great teacher. In “Wandering Scholar: A Memoir,” she points to a restlessness for knowledge within Ibrahim that was transferred by osmosis to his students, resulting in a whole generation of students committed to understanding Islam in all its diversity and significance. It was a setting-aside of narrow perspectives and the framing intellectual understanding in a new way. We conclude this commemorative issue with a meditation by David Goa, long-time friend and Alberta intellectual who worked with Ibrahim on many projects. It is a fitting memorium to a scholar who willingly engaged the world and brought it to his students.