PLENARY

An Interview with Dr. Amir Hussain

Atla Annual 2024 Opening Plenary Speaker

Dr. Amir Hussain offered the opening plenary address at Atla Annual 2024. Dr. Hussain is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. He teaches religion and specializes in the study of Islam, focusing on contemporary Muslim societies in North America. He served as the president of the American Academy of Religion in 2023 and was the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* from 2011–2015. Dr. Hussain co-edited the fourth edition of *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (2019) and the fifth editions of *World Religions: Western Traditions* (2018), and *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (2018). In 2016, he wrote *Muslims and the Making of America*, and contributed to *Oil and Water: Two Faiths, One God* (2006). He has published over 60 book chapters and scholarly articles about religion. For more information, visit *https://faculty.lmu.edu/amirhussain/*

Prior to Atla Annual, Atla's Alex Leiseca spoke with Dr. Hussain about his experiences in the world of religion and theology. The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.[1]

How did you decide to pursue the study of religion?

Oh, that's a great question. I grew up working class, both my parents worked in factories and I was born in Pakistan but grew up in Canada. So all my education was in Canada, and if you asked me in high school, "What do you want to do with your life?" I would have said, "I want to be a doctor." As a child of immigrants, you had three career options. You can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer, you can be

an engineer, or maybe a business owner. Maybe there's a fourth up, but that was it. And so you think, "Okay, I'm going to be a doctor, it's the smartest thing I could think of." You go to university. And within a week, there was this moment of "Wait, there's this category where you can get paid to read and write to have an office full of books?" You know, if you'd asked me in high school, "Do you want to be a teacher when you grow up?" I would have said, "Are you crazy?" because I was thinking of high school teachers, but when you go to university, it's a completely different world. And so it was like, "I want to do that. I want to be a professor. How do you become a professor? You need a PhD? What's a PhD?"

The course I liked the best was psychology. I went to the University of Toronto for all my degrees and at the time I think the University of Toronto had the largest English department in North America. And you had to take some English courses, so, my undergraduate degree is a psychology major with a minor in English. It was studying English literature that got me into the study of religion. I was fortunate to have extraordinary people there. Northrop Frye, the great Blake scholar, he taught Shakespeare, and he was working on a book that would become his book *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. If you want to read one book to understand Western culture, not just Western literature, but Western art, and Western music: it's the Bible. Shakespeare makes much more sense if you know the Bible, Blake makes much more sense if you know the Bible. I didn't know the Bible because I'm a Muslim. And so I was like, "Well, maybe I should take a course on the Bible." And then I'm thinking, "But I'm a Muslim, maybe I should take a course in my own religion and learn more about Islam." That was where I made that switch from the study of psychology because, I knew within the first week of school that I wanted to be professor, and originally I was thinking that I would be a psychology professor, but this idea that you can be a religion professor intrigued me. I didn't want to be an imam, I didn't want to lead a congregation, but I can do this. I'm interested in how people behave. But in some ways, it's much more about the religious motivation.

You were the president of the American Academy of Religion last year and part of their mission is to "foster excellence in the academic study of religion, and enhance the public understanding of religion." What do you wish was more understood about religion by the public?

One of the things that I was really proud that we were able to do at AAR was that we got some funding from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations to think about this notion of literacy around religion. And one of the things we thought about was what do we wish that every college student knew about religion because only about 20% of US colleges have a religion department.

No one goes to an engineering professor and says, "Hey, you know, I'm a smart guy, I know how that bridge structure works." And no one goes to the president of my university, Tim Snyder, lovely guy and a mathematician, no one goes to his office and says, "Hey, that set theory you have is completely wrong. Here's how the equation should be." People talk to us all the time in religion as if they know as much as we do because they're religious folks. But being able to count doesn't make you a math professor, right? Having read the Bible doesn't make you a scholar of Christianity.

I always tell my students that I think the most dangerous person is not the person who said nothing on the subject. It's the person who read one thing on the subject, and they think that they know everything about the subject.

One of the great sort of scholars of Islam is Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl and he would always start his classes at UCLA with a sort of photograph of him in front of his own library. Now, he's got 50,000 books on Islamic law since he happens to be a scholar of Islamic law. And he didn't do it to show off, or to say, "Hey, look at me, I've got 50,000 books on Islamic law," it's that "I own 50,000 books on Islamic law. How many books do you think there are in the world on Islamic law?"

How do you see religion playing a role in the increasingly secular future?

When I was growing up in Toronto in the 1980s, there was nothing else to do on Sunday but go to church. All the stores were closed, and it wasn't until the '60s when public transit started to run on Sundays. Why aren't Americans going to church today in the same way? Well, because they have things to do.

That doesn't mean that there isn't that sense of connection with the ultimate concern kinds of ideas. But my students, I think, are

deeply connected to something other than themselves, whether they define it as spiritual or mystical. And some of that comes not just in the church, but in music and art. We just had one of the biggest religious festivals in Southern California, you know it as Coachella—and of course, it's not religious, it's a music festival. But it provides this sense of being in community with like-minded people listening to and participating in something collectively. Why is it that evangelicals and particularly Pentecostals are sort of booming? Well, if church means you come in and sit down and listen while the man on stage says something, that's not all that interesting. It's the same thing with pedagogy. If I get up and start lecturing for forty-five minutes nonstop, my students after twenty minutes are going to tune out.

If church means you get up, and you move, and you dance, and you're empowered, that's a lot more compelling. I remember the first time I moved to LA, a friend took me to a service at the First AME Church here in Los Angeles. I never went back, because [the pastor] Chip Murray was at the height of his glory, he was walking in the Lord and the choir was seventy-five people, and the church was literally rocking and moving. And so when he made that altar call, I almost got up out of my chair to run down there and get down on my knees and confess my sins to Jesus. Which, as a good Muslim boy, that's going to be a little hard. But it's the non-religious compelling experience that takes the place of this religious experience because young kids are not going to go to church, they're not going to go to church camp, they're going to go to Coachella.

Your theme for your plenary address at Atla Annual is "Comparative Religion and Theology: Practical, not Theoretical Matters for Atla." Can you elaborate on this? What gave you the idea for this presentation?

I met John [Kutsko] when I was on the board of the AAR, because AAR and SBL meet together for the annual meeting every year. And it was this lovely moment when I would touch base with him. And then he moved from SBL to Atla, and he approached me and said, "Hey, would you be interested in speaking at Atla Annual?" and I said that I'd be honored. And I think for John, there's this sense of here we are with theological libraries that get put in a box of "Oh, well, theology is Christian, and these schools are Christian schools." And John is thinking about how to serve the Muslims and Jews and

Buddhists at those schools, and making sure that Atla is serving all kinds of theology.

I decided to talk about the "practical vs. theoretical" idea, because back in the day when ministers were training for the church, they had graduating classes of 100. But now there's more churches closing, and so this idea that, well, if we're going to survive, we're going to have to do something different, because there isn't the need to train 100 pastors every year for the church, and how do we connect with the Muslim community that needs chaplaincy training for people who want to work in the hospital, or want to work in the prison system as chaplains. So there's this question of how do we do chaplaincy programs. The imams are being asked to be social workers, therapists, chaplains, pastors and so there're Muslims who just say, "Yeah, we don't need to reinvent the wheel. Let's go to these Christian places that know how to do this." So, the Muslim studies program and the Buddhist studies program at Emmanuel College is really taking off and so you now have theological schools, many Christian theological schools, that have Muslims and Buddhists and Jews. Here we are at Loyola Marymount, a Catholic Jesuit school, with this Muslim who's teaching theology across the hall from the Academy of Jewish Religion, California, which is a standalone Jewish seminary that's now in the university. So here you have this Jewish seminary that's in this Catholic Jesuit school and so I think that comparative component to this is so important for theological schools and for theological libraries.

I stole the title about being "practical not theoretical" from my mentor, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who was one of the great scholars in the world for the study of religion, and he created the Institute for Islamic Studies at McGill, then went to Harvard and directed the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions for twenty years. And he would talk about envisioning a Muslim talking to a Christian theologian and saying that for us, it's really a practical, not a theoretical matter.

All this to say that, for me, as someone who's both a scholar of Islam and a Muslim, it's much more about the practical, the lived-out reality, of how do you live? How do you pray?

And for religious scholars and theological librarians, you have theory, but you also have the mission of how do you help people?

What do you do? What are the resources? So I was thinking about the practical kinds of things that come up around comparative theology.

What role do you think Atla/theological librarians play in the study of religion and theology?

As I said earlier, I was a working-class kid, and I still have my paper library card, which then became the barcode library card, because as a poor kid, my parents couldn't afford books. But I could go to the library, and I could take as many books as I could read. And then I go back and get more and more books. And that was an amazing thing for me.

And part of the job of librarians is to be a sort of bulwark and to say, "Oh, you're reading this? Have you read that? Have you thought about something that otherwise you might not have heard of?" And that's what I love about librarians.

What I love about the amazing work that librarians do, especially in this day and age: when did you ever think that the public enemy number one would be the librarian? Because you have books, and some of these books are "dangerous" and some people think we must ban them. And so that work that librarians do with digitization is fascinating and so important.

Just the other day, I got my copy of *In Trust* magazine. This is a magazine from the In Trust Center, which works with governing boards of theological schools. And so this article by Gregg Brekke is about Atla and what Atla is doing, and the changing face of the field, especially around the digitization of materials.

My presentation at Atla Annual will take place on Juneteenth, and talking about Juneteenth, talking about some of those kinds of things, like did you ever think burning books would come back? Did you ever think you'd have people saying, "Well, racism is done, and we don't need to talk about it," and it's like, no, there's still some pretty serious issues around race in this country. And what are some of those books that are being banned? Books that talk about Black people as human beings. That's part of the crucial job of librarians: to keep these books accessible.

What hopes or concerns do you have for the study of religion and theology going forward?

One of the concerns is people not seeing the relevance of the study of religion and theology. They might say something like religion is outdated or argue about religion versus science. But to me, religion and science are not mutually exclusive. And so I think that's something people think: that we need STEM, we need science, but we don't need any of this religion or humanity stuff.

One of my great mentors at the University of Toronto was Rob Prichard, who was the president there. And he would say that the humanities teach us who we are. And even if you're not religious, you live in a multicultural world, so your boyfriend's Hindu, your girlfriend's Jewish, or there's a Buddhist temple on your street. And for the humanities, think about why do we still read Shakespeare?

Why do we still talk about religion? Because these things tell us who we are.

There're two kinds of books in the world. There's the kind of book that you read once, and you don't need to read it again. And then there's the book you could keep coming back to, over and over again, whether that's *Beloved* or *Catcher in the Rye* or *The Handmaid's Tale,* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Every time you read it, you read it differently. And that's the hope: that even as the medium changes from paper to digital manuscripts, we're still going to tell those stories.

REFERENCES

Brekke, Gregg. 2024. "Reconfiguration." *In Trust.* (Spring): *https://www.intrust.org/in-trust-magazine/issues/spring-2024/libraries*

ENDNOTES

1 This interview was previously published at *https://www.atla.com/blog/interview-with-atla-annual-opening-plenary-speaker-dr-amir-hussain/*.