



Exploring Islam from an American Perspective: A Study of the Views of McGill University Alumni in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the dynamics of Islamic studies from a Western perspective, through the views of Indonesian alumni who have studied at McGill University, Canada. Using a qualitative approach and case study design, this research explores how cross-cultural academic experiences can shape a more critical, contextual, and interdisciplinary understanding of Islam. The main focus of this study is the paradigm shift in Islamic studies in the West, which was initially dominated by orientalism, towards a more open and dialogical scientific approach. Based on in-depth interviews with three McGill alumni who are actively involved in academics and religious activities in Indonesia, the findings suggest that McGill University plays a significant role in shaping reflective Islamic thought, adaptive to social realities, and supporting moderate values such as democracy, human rights, and pluralism. The implications of these findings are crucial for the development of Islamic studies in Indonesia, offering an approach that is more inclusive and relevant to Indonesia's social and cultural dynamics.

Keyword : *Critical Epistemology; Moderate Islam; McGill University; Cross-Cultural Education; Islamic Studies*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali dinamika kajian Islam dalam perspektif Barat, melalui pandangan alumni Indonesia yang telah menempuh pendidikan di McGill University, Kanada. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan desain studi kasus, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pengalaman akademik lintas budaya dapat membentuk cara pandang keislaman yang lebih kritis, kontekstual, dan interdisipliner. Fokus utama penelitian ini adalah pergeseran paradigma kajian Islam di Barat, yang awalnya didominasi oleh orientalisme menuju pendekatan ilmiah yang lebih terbuka dan dialogis. Berdasarkan wawancara mendalam dengan tiga alumni McGill yang berperan aktif dalam akademik dan kegiatan keagamaan di Indonesia, temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa McGill University berperan dalam membentuk pemikiran keislaman yang reflektif, adaptif terhadap realitas sosial, serta mendukung nilai-nilai moderat seperti demokrasi, hak asasi manusia, dan pluralisme. Implikasi dari temuan ini penting dalam konteks pengembangan kajian Islam di Indonesia, dengan menawarkan pendekatan yang lebih inklusif dan relevan dengan dinamika sosial dan budaya Indonesia.

Kata kunci : Epistemologi Kritis; Islam Moderat; McGill University; Pendidikan Lintas Budaya; Studi Islam

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Introduction

Islam is a religion practiced by over a billion people. Islam, being one of the global systems of faith and religion, is a monotheistic religion that integrates Islam in the multicultural and social frameworks. It not only exists in Islamic cultures but also Western societies, especially in North America, where it has been a vast area of study within Islamic studies. The study of Islam in the Western lands, more specifically in the United States of America and in Canada, has developed within an intricate socio-political and historical context of colonization, orientalism, and globalization. Over the years, Islam has been subject to changing perceptions in the West, influenced by political developments, mass media, academic works, and the shifts of international relations (Sami, 2025). Islam and Muslim societies in the West have confronted increased challenges in the post 911 world, including the growth of Islamophobia, and escalating negative stereotypes and biases entrenched in public and scholarly writings (Rofiq & Arifin, 2024:55). The Western discourse on Islam, which has stemmed from what Edward Said (1978) termed the 'Orientalist gaze' a critiqued perspective, has turned into a landscape wrought with fear and misunderstanding, a space in dire need for fostering intercultural respect and conversation. Equally important is the need to analyze perspectives about Islam from Western countries since they have an impact on global stories regarding Islam that are taught at schools, portrayed in the media, and even embedded in the international relations of these countries (Iskandar & Firdaus, 2020).

The academic institutions in North America have contributed significantly to shaping approaches towards Islam, which cannot be overlooked. As with other areas of the Islam, it was the American and Canadian Universities that intellectually facilitated the gap between the 'Traditional teachings of Islam' and the contemporary issues of Muslims living in the West.' Given that the United States and Canada are two powerful countries in the world, the perception of Islam around the world greatly depends on them. What is being called the "American Creed" has fundamental ideals like freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and the separation of religion from government, which has allowed Muslims in North America to construct a socio-political space for themselves and actively participate in the development of these countries (Moore, 2016). These frameworks safeguard the religious identity of Muslims while providing them with the means to integrate into American and Canadian society. In both the U.S. and Canada, Muslims have made social and economic advancements, claiming some semblance of success, even when facing the hardships of discrimination and exclusion. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding issues of loyalty in the post 9/11 era (Friedman, 2025).

The balancing act between one's religious beliefs and the need society places on 'fitting in' has spearheaded the phenomenon of "American Islam" (Williams, 2011). American Islam is an expression of diversity that reflects pluralistic societies for the fact that it is not isolated within set boundaries, meaning it even continues to evolve. A culture previously unknown can shift the characteristics of Islam, with all its doctrines, to become part of it by incorporating adaptations through cultural relevance, all while keeping its core teachings intact, so to speak. This alteration not only strives to keep potential American Muslims onboard but also entails the creation and alignment of structures to integrate democratic values alongside Islam. Those values include community participation and pluralism (Armin, 2022). An example of this would be seen in the U.S., where mosques have transformed from mere places of worship to community centers that encourage social interaction, educational activities, and even interfaith dialogues, thus demonstrating the flexibility of Islam in the American setting (Aroka & Zalnur, 2024).

The impact of Islamic education in North America has helped to cultivate an understanding of Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance in the West. The Islamic character education taught in the schools focusing on taqwa, ihsan, and akhlak mulia aids in forming the essence of Islam within the Western context. Research done on Islamic schools in America by Adesokan et al. (2021) shows that these schools seek to mold Muslims who readily accept the faith's teachings and actively engage in constructive social change by being peace-loving, just, equitable, and compassionate citizens. In this regard, Islamic moral education helps bridge the gap of cultural and interreligious dialogue, portraying Islam as a faith that enriches the multicultural feast of the West and responds to the call for diversity (Saihu, 2020).

The new developments further justify the need to analyze the perception of Islam in the West through the lens of academic institutions. The Canadian McGill University is one of the Western institutions that shaped modern Islamic thought because it has long been recognized as a leading center for Islamic studies. The Montreal-based McGill Institute of Islamic Studies was established in 1821. Its Islam Studies program, initiated in 1952, exercises an integrative and contextual approach toward Islam, which is critical and interdisciplinary. This attitude has enabled the perception of Islam as more than a faith to include a religion with a social, historical, and political ethos that is greatly intertwined with contemporary international relations (Shobirin et al., 2023). The Islamic studies program at McGill is characterized by a critical approach in which basic Islamic texts are studied. The contributions of Fazlur Rahman to Islamic studies at McGill University exemplify this.

Rahman, an important contributor to the Islamic intellectual development in the West, applied reason to the study of Islam, focusing on the need to adapt Islamic teachings to solve problems faced in the contemporary world (Rahman, 1979). His impact is notable on both Western and Islamic scholarship in the Muslim world as he shows how critique of Islamic traditions can meaningfully aid the revival and reinterpretation of contemporary Islamic thought (Khatami & Dina, 2024).

Understanding how McGill graduates, particularly from Indonesia, have historically utilized their educational experiences to construct and deconstruct frameworks of Islamic discourse is a critical gap, considering how McGill University has single-handedly advanced Islamic studies in the Western world. With a population that is predominantly and globally recognized as Muslim, Indonesia maintains an interesting relationship with North America and Western institutions, including McGill University. Indonesian graduates of McGill's Islamic Studies, Asian Studies, or Political Science Programs transform the traditional understanding of Islam and shape a more progressive discourse around Islam in Indonesia (Ropi, 2020). These graduates are positioned as an epistemic bridge to Indonesian Islam's Indigenous traditions and the pluralistic and rational global discourse on Islam shaped by their experiences abroad. There is scant information, however, on the extent to which these graduates are actively engaged with and impact social and religious change in Indonesia.

In this regard, the views of McGill alumni from Indonesia form an important aspect of the study. They adopt a multicultural approach towards education, including Islamic studies, which enables them to foster a reinterpretation of Islam as a peace-loving religion respectful of democracy, human rights, and inter-religious relations. Considering that Indonesia is a multiphased and multi-religious society, the contribution of McGill alumni in Islam in Indonesia can greatly affect sociocultural and socioreligious change. Their roles in teaching, research, and writing for newspapers and policy, as well as in non-governmental organizations, place them in transformed positions for defending social justice, religious plurality, and interfaith relations. In addition, their contributions are vital regarding issues confronting the unified body of Muslims in the world today, especially the threats posed by radicalism, exclusivism, and social fragmentation (Primarni & Aminah, 2024). Through their advanced and humanitarian interpretation of Islam, McGill alumni in Indonesia can meet such issues with counter-narratives of Islam that promote mercy, justice, freedom of thought, and human diversity.

Therefore, this research intends to analyze Indonesian McGill alumni to comprehend the impact of their multicultural education on their religious

reflection and its influence on the socio-religious landscape of Indonesia. With regard to the existing literature, this study seeks to understand how these alumni reconcile local expressions of Islam with more pluralistic understandings of Islam. It will also examine the role of McGill alumni regarding the discourse on Islam in Indonesia and the possibility of constructing an inclusive and progressive discourse that advocates for democracy, social justice, and human rights within interfaith relations in a changing world. This study aims to contribute to understanding the personal narratives of McGill alumni and enhance the discussion on the relationship between the Islamic world and the West, intercivilizational dialogue, and contemplating Islam in the context of globalization.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design in investigating the experiences and perceptions of McGill University alumni who completed Islamic Studies programs (Assyakurohim et al., 2022). The guiding purpose is to assess the impact of these cross-cultural academic encounters on their perception of Islam and to ascertain changes in paradigms of Islamic studies in the West. Three alumni were drawn from two different time frames: the 1990s and post-2000. This selection provided an opportunity to analyze the evolution of Islamic studies at McGill over these two decades. The three informants underwent pseudonyms: ARA, BNM, and EWK. They were engaged in semi-structured interviews designed to capture their perceptions and influences along their education in the Indonesian context. The interview guide was tailored to capture their academic experiences at McGill and the resulting shifts in numerous aspects of their identities while considering Indonesia's socio-cultural lenses. Alongside the interviews, some relevant articles, publications, and credible academic works were used as secondary data to strengthen the analysis. The data were analyzed thematically, where the developed themes were examined and organized to enhance understanding of the critical and contextual Islamic thought produced as a result of McGill's influence.

Results And Discussion

Results

Western Understanding of Islamic Studies

Wahyuni et al. (2025) argue that Islamic studies in the West have transformed over the past decades from the problematic framework of Orientalism to a more interdisciplinary and critical approach, analyzing Islam to other fields of study. The Western academic world was characterized by an Islamocentric approach dominated by Orientalist views, which oversimplified and subjugated the Islamic world to Western civilization. Said (1978), as well as others, pointed out the

centuries of reduction and brutal domination of the East, particularly the Islamic regions, in the name of portraying them as stagnant, exotic, and inferior “Others” who are denied a voice. Muslims were systematically deprived of the ability to tell—and therefore construct—their own stories shaped by their own lived experiences (Narti & Octaviani, 2022).

Nonetheless, the field of Islamic Studies has experienced a major change. One of the most telling examples is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which criticized monolithic and superficial frameworks of the Islamic world. Said’s critique of *Orientalism* emphasized the complicity of scholarship in perpetuating colonial and imperialistic narratives, instead directing attention to the requirement that scholars dismantle such frameworks and engage with the humanity of Muslims through the countless complex voices they possess. Since *Orientalism* was published, there has been an attempt in the Western academic world, such as at McGill University, to “Islamicize” Islamic Studies by including the voices of Muslim scholars and adopting an interdisciplinary framework (Yahya 2020).

Understanding the Islamic Studies Redefinition Through the Lens of McGill University

McGill University has played a crucial role in this paradigm shift. As one of the leading academic McGill has begun paying more attention to Islamic studies and has shifted more towards an acceptance of a multifaceted Islamic Studies approach. ARA, BNM, and EWK noted in their interviews with McGill’s constituents that the University has contributed towards eliminating the Orientalist structure framework by employing Muslim scholars as both teachers and researchers. This change placed McGill in a position where it could and has come to diagnose Islam’s religious, social, and political facets previously ignored in the Western world.

All three ARA, BNM, and EWK noted the impact of this change on their academic studies. The addition of Muslim faculty members at McGill has greatly transformed the way Islamic studies are taught, enabling students to learn from perspectives that are based on the realities of Muslims. Additionally, they pointed out that the McGill approach is far more systematic and integrative, incorporating Islamic studies alongside anthropology, sociology, and political science. This integration helps students not only appreciate the theological dimensions of Islam but also its extensive sociopolitical relevance in contemporary affairs.

Alumni Insights on the Change in Focus of Islamic Studies at McGill

During the interviews, ARA remarked that the change in focus of the Islamic studies curriculum at McGill became most noticeable after the release of Said’s *Orientalism*. ARA elaborated that there was only a singular perspective on Islamic studies that was taught, and it was a colonial one. According to him, Islam was

viewed as aberrant and was exoticized, packaged in colonial terms which sought to 'other' it in the Western context. A dominant trend was to reduce Islam into a set of beliefs – Muslims were framed as straightjacketed within dominant ideologies and extrapolations of control.

As noted by ARA, with the increase of Said's critique, it seems that along with other Western institutions, McGill started adopting modern approaches. He elaborated that about McGill, Muslim scholars were already making contributions to the academic discourse, which were, quite literally, Islamic in their traditions and experiences. In ARA's view, this was a vital milestone towards achieving a more balanced and complete understanding of Islam from the perspective that supported moving away from colonialist narratives because students did so around that time."

BNM also expressed comparable views, remarking that the incorporation of Muslim scholars into the Western academic landscape, McGill in particular, has been instrumental in advancing the study of Islam as a discipline. He stressed that the study of Islam in the West was almost exclusively dominated by colonial perspectives for decades, but now, Muslim scholars are increasingly contributing to the discipline. According to BNM, this change is not only observable through the presence of Muslim scholars but also through the fact that these Western institutions now accept students from Muslim backgrounds, whom they invite to enrich the discourse with their social, cultural, and political context of Islam. He seems to promote the idea that the recent shift has provided a more realistic and genuine Islamic studies through diversity.

Yet another name provides a more detailed insight into the life of Islamic Studies at McGill, an alumnus, EWK. He stated how the all-encompassing model at McGill, which includes not only theological studies, but also anthropology and sociology, has led to developing a more comprehensive understanding of Islam. As EWK rationalized, this model allows students to grasp the significance of Islam in society, culture, politics, and many other domains, which is imperative for solving issues in the Muslim world today. He also pointed out that the use of Muslim scholars has greatly enhanced this approach, as their interpretations of Islam have broadened the understanding of Islam from diverse angles in academia as well as in real life.

Discussion

The Impact of Muslim Scholars on Islamic Studies

The involvement of Muslim scholars in Islamic studies, particularly at institutions like McGill, has had a profound impact on the way Islam is understood in Western academic settings. According to ARA, the presence of Muslim scholars at McGill allowed students to gain a deeper and more authentic understanding of

Islam, which had often been misrepresented or oversimplified in the past. Muslim scholars, ARA noted, bring direct experience and insight into the social and cultural contexts of Islam, which is vital for dispelling misconceptions and biases that have long been embedded in Western academic discourse.

BNM further emphasized the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to Islamic studies, noting that McGill integrates various academic fields, such as history, sociology, and political science, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Islam. BNM argued that this approach allows students to explore Islam not just as a religious doctrine but as a social and cultural force that shapes the dynamics of Muslim societies. By integrating multiple disciplines, McGill has been able to offer a more nuanced understanding of Islam, which is particularly important for addressing contemporary challenges faced by Muslim communities globally.

The integration of Muslim perspectives into the academic study of Islam has also contributed to a more critical and reflective approach to the field. As EWK pointed out, McGill's approach to Islamic studies is not solely focused on theology or religious teachings but also includes an examination of the broader social and political realities of Muslims. This shift has allowed students to critically engage with the issues facing Muslim societies today, from political conflicts to social inequality, and to develop more informed and compassionate perspectives on these challenges.

Implications for Islamic Studies in Indonesia

The paradigm shift in Islamic studies at McGill and other Western universities offers valuable lessons for the development of Islamic studies in Indonesia. As Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, the way Islam is studied and understood in Indonesia has significant implications for the broader Muslim world. The inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to Islamic studies practiced at McGill could serve as a model for Indonesian institutions, enriching the study of Islam by integrating various academic disciplines and incorporating diverse perspectives on Islam.

In particular, adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines sociology, anthropology, history, and political science could help Indonesian scholars gain a more comprehensive understanding of Islam. This approach would not only provide insights into the religious dimensions of Islam but also explore the broader social and political contexts in which Islam is practiced. As Indonesia is a pluralistic society with a diverse Muslim population, such an approach would help foster a more nuanced understanding of Islam that takes into account the complex realities faced by Muslim communities in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the involvement of Muslim scholars in Islamic studies is essential for ensuring that the field remains grounded in the lived experiences of Muslims. As BNM and ARA noted, the inclusion of Muslim scholars has been a key factor in making Islamic studies more authentic and relevant. This is especially important in the Indonesian context, where Islamic thought has historically been shaped by both indigenous traditions and foreign influences. By involving Muslim scholars in the development of Islamic studies, Indonesian academic institutions can ensure that the study of Islam remains rooted in the realities of Muslim life in Indonesia.

Challenges and Opportunities for Reforming Islamic Studies in Indonesia

While the shift in Islamic studies at McGill offers an inspiring model for Indonesian scholars, there are also significant challenges to implementing similar reforms in Indonesia. One of the main challenges is the deeply entrenched tradition of theological and doctrinal studies in many Indonesian universities, which often prioritizes religious teachings over interdisciplinary approaches. Changing this focus would require a concerted effort to integrate new methods and perspectives into the curriculum, which may be met with resistance from traditionalists.

Nevertheless, there are also opportunities for reform. The growing interest in interdisciplinary studies in Indonesia, especially in fields such as social sciences and political studies, offers a promising avenue for expanding the scope of Islamic studies. Additionally, the increasing role of Muslim scholars in Indonesian academia provides an opportunity to integrate diverse perspectives into the study of Islam, ensuring that it remains relevant to the needs and challenges of contemporary Indonesian society.

By adopting a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to Islamic studies, Indonesia can develop a more robust and comprehensive understanding of Islam that is not only relevant to the country's Muslim population but also contributes to the broader global discourse on Islam.

The Influence Muslim Scholars Have Had on Islamic Studies

The participation of Muslim scholars in McGill and other related institutions has changed how the study of Islam is approached in the West. ARA states that the effect of the Muslim scholars at McGill was to help students to appreciate Islam in a deeper and more authentic way rather than the simplistic framework straitjacketed them into. The scholars have direct experience and insight into the social and cultural milieu of Islam, ARA observed, which is crucial for dispelling some of the biases and misconceptions that have persistently abounded in Western scholarship.

BNM has also highlighted the relevance of adopting an interdisciplinary perspective in Islamic studies when he argued that McGill. BNM observed that the diverse approaches given at McGill, inclusive of history, sociology, and even political science, enabled a broader approach towards Islam. BNM contended that this makes it possible for students to appreciate Islam not only as a religious faith, but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon that influences and is influenced by the dynamics of the Muslim world. This multidisciplinary framework has enabled McGill University to provide deeper insights into Islam, which is particularly necessary for addressing contemporary issues that are problematizing Muslim societies around the world.

The contribution of Muslim viewpoints in the academic consideration of Islam has prompted more reflection within the sphere. As EWK noted, McGill pays attention not only to theology or the religious teaching components of Islamic studies but also to the social and political life of Muslims, including their socioeconomic concerns. As a result, students can engage with contemporary problems confronting Muslim societies, such as political strife and social injustice, and develop more understanding and humane solutions to these problems.

Consequences for Islamic Studies in Indonesia

The reframing of the focus areas of Islamic studies in McGill and other Western universities presents valuable components for analyzing the development of Islamic studies in Indonesia. As the nation with the largest population of Muslims in the world, the study and understanding of Islam from within Indonesia has particular relevance to the global Muslim community. The McGill's approach of considering Islamic studies from many other scholarly perspectives can be adopted by Indonesian institutions in order to broaden the study of Islam beyond the traditional disciplines and nurture different approaches to Islam and other related fields.

Islam is crucially relevant to sociology, anthropology, history, and political science. Hence, Indonesian scholars would benefit greatly from adopting an interdisciplinary framework towards Islam. Besides Islam, this approach would be useful in understanding the sociopolitical aspects of Islam as well. Islam is practiced globally, and hence, Indonesia's plural society with its varied Muslim population makes this model indispensable for developing meaningful perspectives around Islam and Muslim communities in Indonesia.

Muslim scholars' inclusion in Islamic studies is crucial for its further development. BNM and ARA underscored that the presence of Muslim scholars in Islamic studies has rendered the discipline authentic and, most importantly, applicable. This holds especially for a nation like Indonesia, where indigenous and foreign ideas influence Islamic thought simultaneously. Through involving

Muslim scholars to contribute to Islamic studies, Indonesian universities will guarantee that the academically robust discourse on Islam stays close to the lives of Muslims in Indonesia.

Opportunities and Challenges in Reforming Islamic Studies in Indonesia

The restructuring of Islamic studies at McGill is a positive example for Indonesian scholars, but it poses several challenges to implementing such reforms within Indonesia. One major obstacle is the prominent tradition of theological and doctrinal study within numerous Indonesian universities, which, unfortunately, is overly dominated by religious teachings. A shift in this direction entails considerable work towards adding approaches and perspectives into the curriculum, which will undoubtedly meet opposition from entrenched conservatism.

That said, there are prospects for reform. These include the widening interest in interdisciplinary studies in Indonesia, especially in the social and political sciences, which is a strong prospect for the expansion of Islamic studies. Also, the increasing participation of Muslim scholars in the Indonesian academic scene is an opening for the study of Islam to incorporate multiple perspectives and address the contemporary realities and challenges of Indonesia. The above enables Indonesia to cultivate an understanding of Islam, not only relevant to its Muslim citizens, but also contributes to global discussions on Islam by embracing a more interdisciplinary and inclusive approach to Islamic studies.

Conclusion

The outstanding shift of McGill University's Islamic studies has been taught dominantly from the lens of orientalism to be more open, critical, interdisciplinary, and devoid of colonial undertones, which has greatly affected Islamic studies in Indonesia. McGill has transformed the approach to Islamic studies by employing Muslim scholars who analyze the culture and religion of Islam as it is practiced today and infuse relevant theories into the analysis, which poses the question of utter relevance in contemporary Indonesia. In Indonesia, this shift motivates to advancement of Islamic studies that engage with local sociopolitical issues. The change enables discourse in Islam to expand beyond the theology, to other social issues, and culture as well. Through this lens, religious studies in Indonesia can foster more robust and critical discourse about the integration of religion and culture and local context. Through an interdisciplinary perspective that includes sociology, anthropology, and political science, Islam can be studied within a cohesive framework, allowing for diverse perspectives. Therefore, Islamic studies in Indonesia will foster critical and reflective discourse while deepening the study of Islam and culture to help build an inclusive, cohesive, and peaceful society.

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