



Profile: Bruce Lawrence
Scholar of Islam with Sweeping Vision

A nation's treatment of its minority citizens reveals much about that nation itself. "Since 9/11, multi-confessional nationalism, once a weathervane of social comity, seems at risk throughout Africa and Asia, in Muslim-Christian states as well as in Christian-Muslim states," says Dr. Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University's Nancy and Jeffrey Marcus Humanities Professor, professor of Islamic Studies and inaugural director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center. "Among unnoted victims of the 'war on terror'," he continues, "are indigenous minorities, not recent refugees or stateless migrants but groups who for centuries have been the standard bearers of deep pluralism within several African and Asian nation-states."

Among these standard bearers are the Copts of Egypt, who strive to maintain a Christian loyalty within the largest Sunni polity of the Arab/Muslim world; the Oromos and Hararis of Ethiopia, Muslim minority groups in a majority Christian state; the Kristens and Katolics of Indonesia, who try to project a Christian presence in the world's largest Muslim country; and the Moros of the Philippines, a beleaguered Muslim minority in Mindanao, the southernmost island of that nation.

"Each of these countries—Egypt and Ethiopia, Indonesia and the Philippines—has its own history and its own trajectory," Dr. Lawrence continues. "Yet together they reflect patterns of portentous change beyond their national or regional context. On a global plane one cannot assess the future of Muslim-Christian relations unless, or until, one confronts both minority fears and majority paranoia in real life, by looking at the experiences of

Christians with Muslims in Egypt and Indonesia, and Muslims with Christians in Ethiopia and the Philippines.”

A letter describing Dr. Lawrence’s interest in researching these minority groups was written by Dr. Richard Brodhead, the president of Duke University, to nominate him for a Carnegie Corporation Scholars fellowship. “Among contemporary scholars of Islam, few can claim the breadth, depth and productivity of the scholarship of Bruce B. Lawrence,” Dr. Brodhead wrote. “In a career spanning nearly four decades, Dr. Lawrence has pioneered cutting-edge interdisciplinary scholarly work on Islam and Muslim societies with disciplinary synergies in the humanities, social sciences, law and theology. His monographs and research collaborations, which are superior examples of scholarly rigor and methodological innovation combined with theoretical insight, have shaped the field of Islamic studies in particular and the study of religion more generally.”

That nomination resulted in Dr. Lawrence becoming one of 20 new Carnegie Scholars in 2008. He is using the two-year fellowship to research “Pious Patriots: Religious Minorities as Secular Citizens in Ethiopia, Egypt, the Philippines and Indonesia.” This study across four significant yet diverse nations will allow Dr. Lawrence to explore why religious minorities remain a crucial index to the success, or failure, of deep pluralism and social comity. His work will also analyze how location—whether in Africa or Asia—produces not only different narratives but also variable outcomes for minority and majority religious communities. And he will cast helpful light on the dynamics that compel ideologues to claim religion as the major explanation for both policies and actions that, in fact, have little to do with religious beliefs or practices.

Dr. Lawrence’s multi-faceted project draws on his years of fieldwork and scholarly analysis to address “complicated ideas in key places,” says Patricia Rosenfield, director of Carnegie Corporation’s Scholars Program. “He also presents a distinctive and welcome plan for nurturing the next generation of scholars in these countries where he will be working. He will help to build vital intellectual networks in support of his research themes.”

Members of the reviewing committee who read Dr. Lawrence’s proposal for “Pious Patriots” wholeheartedly agreed. “An excellent proposal on religious minorities, their roles and prospects by an accomplished scholar,” said one. “The fact that the author examines the question of challenges to multi-creedal nationalism—not only from the perspective of Christian minorities in Muslim-majority countries but also Muslim minorities in Christian-majority countries of Asia and Africa—adds to its value,” said another.

To meet the challenge of such a far-reaching project, Dr. Lawrence will employ

the intellectual and intuitive skills he has honed over many scholarly years. As Duke's Dr. Brodhead points out, Dr. Lawrence's ability to juxtapose the commonalities and differences in each culture he is studying will provide new insights on a topic of increasing geopolitical and scholarly importance.

"He is intellectually fearless, diving into the oceans of new knowledge," says fellow Carnegie Scholar Dr. Omid Safi, a former doctoral student of Dr. Lawrence's who is now professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "While many academics mark a territory and do not venture far outside it, Bruce moves with ease and grace from pre-modern South Asia to contemporary theories of modernity, from Indonesia and Africa to Europe and North America."

Such is Dr. Lawrence's breadth of vision that going to divinity school and becoming an Episcopal clergyman only spurred him to learn more about another Abrahamic faith. "I am an Anglo-Mohammedan," he says, "a Christian who believes in the Qur'an."

What turned a New Jersey boy into an Islamic scholar? As one formative factor, Dr. Lawrence points to an early experience both with loss and with the influential legacy of an intellectually accomplished father. "My father died when he was only 54," he recalls. An ethnic German who migrated from Hungary to the U.S. in 1902, the late Mr. Lawrence overcame many obstacles to become the first in his family to attend college. A graduate of Princeton, he was also economics instructor there. He authored four books on money and banking, then continued to write and lecture widely on contemporary economic issues after leaving Princeton to become chief economist and investment officer for a small New York bank. He is described by Dr. Lawrence as "one of the fiercest, and most intellectually engaged, of the critics of Keynesian economics."

A direct result of the family's loss was that his overburdened mother was left to raise four sons on her own. Young Bruce, a native of Newton, New Jersey, was sent away to school in New England sooner than he'd expected. First he went to a junior boarding school, the Fay School, and then to Phillips Exeter Academy, where he chose to study Middle Eastern history—in part for the sheer challenge of learning about such a complex, pivotal region of the world.

As an Exeter senior, he also competed for a chance to be in a distinctive sort of religion course. It was specifically tailored to students who looked askance at religion as "transcendental gobbledygook," Dr. Lawrence recalls with a smile. He took up the challenge by writing a one-page essay on why there is no God. (His favorite creed remains Wallace Stevens' lyrical conundrum: "We believe without belief, beyond belief.") The essay

became his ticket of admission to that particular religion course—and indirectly, to so many of the scholarly choices he has since made.

Looking back on this period of his life, Dr. Lawrence says that the untimely death of his father may well have helped spark a lifelong interest in spirituality and search for meaning. Many years later, he dedicated his book, *New Faiths, Old Fears*, to “Joseph Stagg Lawrence, my father, a Hungarian immigrant, the marvel and mainstay of my own immigrant imagination.”

That imagination was kindled at his undergraduate school, Princeton University, where he was the youngest member of his class. Carrying over an earlier interest from Exeter, he began the study of Arabic, and took a course on Islamic philosophy with the late Dr. James Kritzeck, an assistant professor of the department then known as Oriental Studies.

A scholar of Islam specializing in Islamic literature and its translation, Dr. Kritzeck traveled through much of the Muslim world to do research during his academic career. He published groundbreaking books including *Anthology of Islamic Literature* in 1964. The book appears on the Muslim Literary Society’s list, Classic Literature in Islam, and was described as an “arabesque of words” by *The New York Times*.

“James Kritzeck hired me as a student assistant for his *Anthology of Islamic Literature* project” Dr. Lawrence recalls. “He was a truly inspiring teacher and mentor.” The title of another of Dr. Kritzeck’s books, *Sons of Abraham: Jews, Christians and Moslems*, published in 1965, hints at why its author became such a catalyst in Dr. Lawrence’s own scholarly career.

His mentor’s influence can also be seen in some of the choices he made soon after graduating from Princeton *magna cum laude* in 1962. First there was a two-year, stateside stint in the Navy. Then he studied for a master’s degree at Episcopal Divinity School. Three years later, he was The Reverend Bruce Lawrence. But rather than become a parish priest, he decided to continue on the journey he had found so intellectually stimulating at Princeton. A Kent Fellowship from the Danforth Foundation smoothed his way to pursue further studies of Islam and other religions.

From 1967 to 1972, he studied at Yale for his doctorate in the History of Religions: Islam & Hinduism. “I was trained to engage the large swath of Asia known as West and South Asia, with particular references to the cultures and languages, the history and religious practices marked as Muslim,” he says. But he also pursued the study of non-Muslim religious traditions in Asia, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. And he was able to explore, as well, the “turbulent reconnections of Europe to Asia that were forged in

colonial, then post-colonial encounters.” His intellectual curiosity had found its niche.

“Bruce has one of the quickest minds I know of,” says Dr. Robert C. Gregg, the Moore Professor in Religious Studies Emeritus at Stanford University. “His chosen studies have given him a big-picture framework, a breadth of vision.”

Throughout his academic career Dr. Lawrence has added fluency in one language after another. At Princeton he studied Turkish as well as Arabic. In seminary he learned Hebrew and Greek. At Yale he studied Sanskrit and Syriac. And after joining the faculty at Duke in 1971, Dr. Lawrence added fluency in Persian, as well as in Urdu/Hindi, which he learned while studying in northern India during the mid-70s. All the while he applied his working knowledge of French and German to his scholarly projects. Chapel Hill’s Dr. Safi remembers being dazzled by a description of Dr. Lawrence’s language proficiency during his freshman-year orientation at Duke.

“At the freshman convocation they introduced him as a professor of Islamic studies who was fluent in Arabic and Persian and Urdu and more,” Dr. Safi recalls. “I went up and introduced myself, and so began an abiding friendship, now in its third decade. Bruce is the most brilliant person I’ve ever met and the most genuinely pluralistic.”

Dr. Lawrence’s language skills, combined with his national and international reputation as a scholar, have helped provide unique access to diverse networks both within and beyond the Muslim world. Such special access gave him the ability to study worldwide religions in his own innovative way—through the lens of history. “I do religion as comparative history,” he says. “If you can do economic history or communications history, why not religious history?”

Why not, indeed? Some thirty-seven years since he chose this path, Dr. Lawrence has contributed to no fewer than 15 books, including nine that he authored or co-authored and six that he edited or co-edited. Many are considered major contributions to the field of Islam and public policy. *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence*, published in 1998, was translated into Arabic in 2003 and twice nominated for the Grawemeyer Award in Religion. *Messages to the World* (Verso, 2005), Dr. Lawrence’s translation of the statements of Osama bin Laden, led government leaders to seek him out as a policy advisor. And *The Qur’an: A Biography* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007) part of the Press’ series on “Books that Changed the World,” is considered a seminal work that has been described as helping to explain “why the Qur’an is Islam.” Hailed by *Publishers Weekly* as “a lovely read for any spiritual person, Muslim or not,” it has been translated into 18 languages and also recorded as an audiotope.

Dr. Lawrence says he draws on the strength of the Qur'an in his own life because "it is a very satisfying and calming book. I love its lyrical yet bracing quality." And although he chose not to become a parish priest after going to divinity school, "I think of myself as a clergyman," Dr. Lawrence says. He still sometimes preaches at St. Matthew's, the Episcopal Church in his North Carolina hometown.

Dr. Lawrence received tenure at Duke in 1973, one year after earning his doctorate from Yale. During the 80s and 90s he helped the university become a leader in the study of Islam as a global religion. There were no other Islamic study centers in the country when, in 1997, Dr. Lawrence and colleagues at Emory University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill founded the Carolina-Duke-Emory Institute for the Study of Islam (CDESI). This pioneering effort for the first time allowed students at the three schools to receive broad and in-depth graduate training in the history of religions with a specialization in the Islamic tradition. It continues to function today under the umbrella of its three founding institutions.

In 2002, CDEISI also became incorporated into a much more expansive unit located primarily at Duke and called the Center for the Study of Muslim Networks (CSMN). This time Dr. Lawrence was assisted by two Duke colleagues, fellow Carnegie Scholar Dr. Ebrahim Moosa and Dr. miriam cooke (who married Dr. Lawrence in 1983). Among CSMN's accomplishments is the UNC Book Series, *Islamic Civilizations and Muslim Networks*, which has published eleven titles, including several award winners. One of its books for a general audience, *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, was co-edited by Drs. Lawrence and cooke.

In 2005, CSMN evolved into the Duke Islamic Studies Center (DISC), a diverse community of scholars and students that offers a unique certificate program for undergraduates and expands partnerships with universities in Muslim-majority countries. DISC is engaged in interdisciplinary teaching, interactive learning and cutting-edge research about Islam and Muslims. Its faculty comes from many backgrounds and disciplines and includes—in addition to Drs. Lawrence and Moosa—two other Carnegie Scholars who have worked on Islam-related projects, Dr. Engseong Ho and Dr. Jen'nán Ghazal Read.

The work of DISC is significant in the way it complements many of the university's top priorities, including advancing the undergraduate experience and promoting the internationalization of scholarship, according to Duke Provost Peter Lange, the university's top academic official. For Dr. Lawrence, DISC's launch has been "almost a dream come true." He is its inaugural director and its most senior faculty member.

“All my professional life,” he says, “I have been involved in trying to make religion in general, and Islam in particular, more accessible to multiple audiences outside the academy.” As part of this commitment he runs DISC conferences on Islamic art and other topics. He also delivers dozens of speeches to all kinds of audiences, ranging from book-fair goers in Goteberg to officers at the Naval Academy to students at his alma mater, Exeter. His footprint is large in the media as well. Dr. Lawrence has been interviewed on CNN by Christiane Amanpour; quizzed about the Qur’an on NPR; and profiled in *The New Yorker*. And throughout his career he has been honored for his body of work. He received two Harry F. Guggenheim fellowships, in 1991 and 1993, two Fulbright scholarships, in 1995 and 2006; and an honorary Th.D. from the Virginia Theological Seminary in 2006. He was selected as a Carnegie Corporation Scholar of Islam in 2008.

Carnegie Corporation’s commitment to enhancing public understanding—and replacing myths about Islam with facts—is what drew Dr. Lawrence to apply to its Carnegie Scholars Program, he says. He likens the work of changing public perception on Islam to “moving a boulder uphill” but says, “we have to keep pushing.”

Many associate Islam with terrorism but in fact, terrorists actually represent less than .01 percent of all Muslims, Dr. Lawrence reminds visitors to the DISC web site in his director’s message. The fact that his research focuses on everyday Muslims and Muslim communities in Africa and Asia, including groups nearly ignored by academia and the media alike, is of great interest to the Scholars Program.

Dr. Lawrence has already presented early findings from the study to scholarly audiences at Harvard and Yale, to whom he explained some of the decision-making underlying his project. He is focusing on the Muslim minorities of Ethiopia and the Philippines because “neither Oromos nor Moros have attracted attention, either scholarly or popular, except in those instances where the ‘war on terror’ can identify an insurgent protest group as Muslim *and* terrorist.” As for the Christian minorities of Egypt and Indonesia, there are many studies of both, and even several Internet sites that highlight their activities. “Yet neither the Copts of Egypt nor the Kristens and Katolics of Java have been subjected to a critical, broad-scale analysis. So in my Carnegie Scholars project, I propose to do a trans-regional comparative analysis on minority citizenship.”

Among the central questions Dr. Lawrence intends to answer are: How does religion play out in the public square? And how do the Copts, Kristens, Hararis and Moros embrace their roles in communities where they have been defined as minorities and often restricted, either constitutionally or empirically, from enjoying full citizenship rights?

Too often, members of Dr. Lawrence's four groups have been marginalized and relegated to second-class citizenship, he notes. Yet members of these groups strive to be both devout believers and pragmatic secularists, despite religious nationalists in their countries who deny both pluralism and the rights of religious minorities.

"Astonishing" is the way Dr. Lawrence describes the resilience of young people in these minority groups. "They yearn," he says, "to reclaim the future of deep pluralism for themselves, their community and their nation." And even as these young people affirm their own identities, they also show the way to cooperation and good will. The findings of this and other portions of the study will be published in several articles and then a major monograph in 2011.

Stanford's Dr. Gregg, who co-taught a course in religion at Duke with Dr. Lawrence in the 1980s, calls him a "great intellect" and predicts that his wide lens and sweeping vision will capture the panorama of his Corporation-supported project. "When I was teaching the history of Christianity, Bruce would walk my theology students through readings of the Qur'an," Dr. Gregg recalls. "He is passionate about Islam, and the need to understand its core elements as well as its contemporary profile."