Q&A with Sheik Dr. Ibrahim Kazerooni,
Imam of the Islamic Center of America (April 5, 2016)

Sheik Dr. Ibrahim Kazerooni, an alumnus of the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology, was recently appointed Imam of the largest Islamic Center in the United States. Kazerooni, who earned a joint PhD in 2013 from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies and Iliff School of Theology, leads the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan. His dissertation was entitled “Islam and International Relations: Towards an Alternative Conception of Universality.” Kazerooni previously earned master’s degrees at the Korbel School (Global Studies and International Relations) and Iliff School (Theological Studies).

As Imam at the Islamic Center of America, Kazerooni is often called upon to be a spokesperson for Muslims in the U.S. and regularly meets with national and international leaders.

Through the Q&A below, we asked Kazerooni to share his perspectives on interreligious dialogue, Islamophobia, sectarianism and the idea (offered by him in his dissertation) of an Islamic international relations theory as an alternative to western-dominated theory.

Q&A with Ibrahim Kazerooni

1. What is your view of interreligious dialogue among Muslims, Christians and Jews (Abrahamic Initiative) and religions outside the Abrahamic traditions?

My experience in Colorado informed me that in most cases, with few exceptions, the understanding, humility and courage needed to turn dialogues into practical projects addressing pragmatic issues did not exist. Even the cultural sensitivity get-togethers organized by various schools, including Iliff, simply scratched the surface and was very limited in scope.
While I strongly defend the need for dialogues and conversations among various segments of our society, be it about religion or any other issue, I have reservations as to whether the current modalities that frame the parameters of dialogue are adequate in creating space for accepting multiplicity, not just tolerating the “Other.” Your 3rd and 4th questions, below, clearly support my contention. Had we approached dialogues on a correct footing we should have been in a better position now.

2. In your dissertation you posited the idea of an Islamic International Relations (IR) theory as an alternative to the Western-dominated IR theory. Why is that important?

In my dissertation I outlined the thrust of my argument in the introduction and unpacked it further in Chapter 5. In the introduction I stated:

The main purpose of this dissertation is to use categories of Islamic political thought not derived from Western International Relations theory to outline a theoretical framework upon which to engage Western and non-Western International Relations theories. The emphasis is on exploring a more universalist, as opposed to the current Euro-centric approach to the field of IR. The need for such an approach should be apparent from the recent wash of uprisings throughout the Middle East which came as a shocking surprise for many in the West.

Although the discipline of International Relations (IR) has created limited space for the expression of post-western discourses within the field, it continues to speak for, and to, the Western world. To develop a genuinely “post-Western” critical IR, we must go beyond the mere superficiality of the existing “derivative discourses” of the modern West by identifying critical discourses on political issues and incorporate the relevant material from non-Western traditions to build an ITIR (Islamic Theory of International Relations) which is capable of making a contribution to the discipline of IR.”

I further reasoned that as recent events clearly indicated, the center of gravity of the global economy slowly but inexorably moves from the West to the East. The need to know how world affairs are understood and interpreted is critical in both the new power centers and, just as importantly, in countries that have no pretensions to great power status themselves but must coexist in the neighborhood of the new giants which in most cases happen to be Muslim countries.

The absence of voices from the new center of gravity that for so long has been missing from the Western IRTs must be questioned. We need to interrogate the IR structure and ask why non-Western voices cannot be heard in the IR landscape, and why so little non-western international theory exists.
My research was intended to encourage the proponents of the Western IRTs to realize that much of the world thought and lived very differently from what is known as “Western.” It was meant to encourage western actors to view their society from a new perspective in the light of my argument, mindful that the complexity and the extensive nature of the subject matters at the center of contemporary Western IRT clearly point to the inadequacy of a single or even a few Western-centric theories to be able to cover and address all these issues at once.

3. Some candidates for U.S. political office have threatened to ban all Muslims from the U.S., if elected. How should people of conscience respond to this Islamophobic world view? What is your mosque doing to respond to the rise and expansion of Islamophobia in the U.S. today (particularly in the Republican Party)?

I do not find the Islamophobic remarks in the current political campaign, and the electioneering rant of the Republican presidential hopefuls, especially the Islamophobic components of it, to be different from other Islamophobic comments or rhetoric that I have come across before, whether in academia or public life. The language is more vulgar but the essence is the same. This mindset rests on the constructed concepts of exceptionalism and the city on the hill that always forage for “enemy” or the “Other”. Carl Schmitt was not far off in his Friend/Enemy distinction. The Muslims are the latest victim or the latest “Others.”

From the moment of the conception of this republic, there has always been the “Other, stranger, the alien, the savage, etc.” We do not seem to be able to live without the “Other,” real or perceived, so that we can configure our identity in opposition to that enemy. Those who worked with me during my endeavor at DU and Iliff, my friends and professors, know how much I suffered at the hand of a system that saw me as the “Other.”

To combat the current bigotry awash in the current political electioneering, we have developed different kinds of programs. Programs that educate our congregations on how to deal with such racist tendencies; we are working with a number of institutions on the national level to deliberate these matters with influential figures, hoping to attract enough support to push for legislative change. The other programs that focus on the local level, we are engaging faith institutions and civil society activist in an attempt to generate the “shift in consciousness” needed for resisting racism and bigotry.
4. Sectarianism is tearing the Muslim world apart. What concretely can Muslim communities in the U.S. be doing to help tackle this problem? Does your mosque have any initiatives planned that can address this problem?

Your formulation of this question—positing that the current crisis in the Middle East is solely the consequence of sectarianism—begs the question, “Where was such sectarianism in Iraq, Syria, Libya or other places in the Middle East before the U.S. invasion of these countries or covert attempt at destabilization of the others?”

The problem is that we are not prepared to accept our complicity in these crises despite admissions of the major political and military figures to the effect that the occupation of Iraq was the leading cause of destabilization of the region leading to the current crises. Shouldn’t we read William Roebuck’s report in December 2006 while being in charge of the U.S. embassy in Damascus, or Ford who proceeded him? How about the Defense Intelligence Agency assessment in 2013?

Such assessment (thinking of current crisis purely as a consequence of sectorial conflicts) could be due to either a superficial understanding of the current crisis, or a sinister intention, to be used for “humanitarian intervention” or back door colonialism, to quote Dr. Mahmood Mamdani.

To deal with the crisis in the Middle East, our center has decided to counter the media’s narratives of blaming the victim (Edward Said) by developing educational programs that better inform our members of the political reality of the region and the role of colonialism (old and new) in the destabilization of the region. We have encouraged our members to communicate their demands with their political representatives. We have organized face-to-face conversations with various political delegations to inform them of our positions and asked them to convey our messages to their respective parties.

5. What should the Abrahamic traditions be doing (concrete actions) to defeat Islamophobia? What is realistic?

The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer might provide us with an insight. He wrote:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the art of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of
others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and
even made us cynical…Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough and our
honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and
straightforwardness?

To attain the “shift in consciousness” needed to stand up to bigotry, racism, and injustice, no matter
where they come from, all people of conscious must stand together in solidarity not just followers of
the Abrahamic Traditions.

While residing in Denver, Sheik Dr. Ibrahim Kazerooni served as an imam for the Denver Muslim
community. He is the former director of the Abrahamic Initiative Program at St. John’s Cathedral.
Originally from Iraq, Kazerooni’s perspectives on U.S. actions in Iraq, were entered into the U.S.
Congressional Record. Additional publications, and biographical information including community
service and awards, can be found on the Imam Ibrahim Kazerooni blog.