

**The Duncan Black Macdonald Center celebrates 50 years:
“constantly and creatively changing”¹**

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Welcome:

As-salaamu alaykum. Peace be with you all.

As we kick off this commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, I would like to take you on a journey to reflect on the important ways in which the Center has been “always on the move,” as Dr. Willem Bijlefeld has described it, “constantly and creatively” changing over the years as a place that has engaged in critical research in the area of Islam, teaching in Hartford’s academic programs, and through public education.

In 1972, the Hartford Seminary Foundation made a bold decision to shift its focus from offering degrees in ministry to non-degree education, particularly to those who were “already in ministry” – meaning for Christian clergy and congregations. This meant that Hartford Seminary would cease offering a Master of Divinity or Master of Arts and the PhD degree – of which there were a significant number of PhD candidates, primarily those studying Christian theology and mission, and those Christian missionaries serving in Muslim majority.

Many of you are aware how controversial that 1972 decision was. It changed the direction of HIU to this day. One important result was the sale of 30 acres of the fifth campus across the street to the state of CT, which eventually became the University of Connecticut Law School, and the construction of this building on part of the remaining five acres of HIU’s campus. However, the other major result that concerns us here was the decision to shelve the PhD program that had been in existence since the early 20th century. The first PhD earned at Hartford was Edwin Calverley in 1923. He was a student of Duncan Black Macdonald’s.

¹ Willem A. Bijlefeld, “A Century of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary,” *The Muslim World*, vol. 83, no. 2 (1993), 115.

However, by the 1970s there was a significant institutional investment in the Arabic and Islamic Studies library resources and manuscripts, as well as a sizeable number of active graduate students in that field of study. In fact, the registrar's report to the Board in May 1971 stated that there was a total enrollment of 249 students – 90 of whom were in the PhD program – in a variety of fields.²

The origins of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary

Of course, the reason there were so many students in the field of Islamic Studies was due to the history of well-known faculty – notably at the time only Christian faculty - teaching in that area. The most prominent, but not only one, was Duncan Black Macdonald, who arrived in Hartford in 1892 to teach Hebrew, then Arabic, then Islamic Studies. Other prominent faculty members at the time were Edwin Mitchell, John E. Merrill, and later – Macdonald's first PhD student who Edwin Calverley, who became the first professor at Hartford to become the general editor of *The Muslim World Journal*.

It was because of Macdonald that Hartford developed an international reputation for Islamic Studies. Macdonald had been teaching at Hartford for nearly twenty years before the Kennedy School of Missions began in 1911. This school began to draw more Christian students, primarily missionaries living in Muslim majority contexts. The Hartford Seminary Foundation was a Christian institution composed of three separate schools: the Hartford Theological Seminary, The School of Religious Education, and the Kennedy School of Missions. The Kennedy School of Mission was one of the only – if not the only – graduate institutions in the United States where one could study Islam – as a religion – or from a theological perspective where one “gained a fair and meaningful understanding of the Muslim faith.”³ Hartford was a unique place at the time where Christians had the opportunity – as Duncan Black Macdonald said to learn Islam “from within” – as Muslims lived their faith. It would take another seventy years before Islamic Studies Centers at places like Harvard, UCLA, Johns Hopkins, and the

² Board of Trustees Meeting, November 29, 1971. The other fields included 27 in Theological Studies, 13 in Biblical Studies, 19 in Islamic Studies, and the others in other various History of Religions topics.

³ HIU archives, student petition to Mr. John H. Reige and members of the board of trustees – Hartford Seminary Foundation, November 24, 1971.

University of Michigan were created and funded by prominent wealthy donors and government funds.

It was only a little over ten years ago, in the fall of 2013, that Professor Yahya Michot spearheaded a commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the death of Duncan Black Macdonald. Emeritus Professor Dr. Michot became interested in Macdonald, and especially Macdonald's fascination with *The Arabian Nights*. Dr. Michot put together a conference and a course on the life and legacy of Macdonald. [His public lecture is still available on the HIU Macdonald Center website for viewing.](#) We have collected some of the items from Macdonald's library as well as items that Dr. Michot had curated for that conference. These items and Macdonald's books are on exhibition in the library.

The library was an important reason that Hartford was such a draw for Islamic Studies. In 1894, only two years after Macdonald acquired the library of August Mueller, professor of philology at the University of Königsberg, Germany. The Mueller Semitic Library contained 2,367 books and 353 pamphlets, many of them in Arabic, Syriac, or Persian. The collection contained Qur'anic commentaries, many Islamic histories (including the Annals of al-Ṭabarī), and Arabic poetry. This library acquisition was an incredible treasure for Macdonald and Hartford. Over the next forty years Macdonald would continue to add to this collection of Islamic texts – especially during his 1908 sabbatical to Cairo, Jerusalem, and Damascus. Another Hartford faculty member, Professor Mardiros Ananikian, Professor of Turkish and Armenian, also spent time in the Middle East purchasing manuscripts in the 1920s and 30s.

Steven Blackburn, former Director of the Library, was center stage in cataloging this collection in 1991. Most of this collection, along with other important Arabic MSS were sold to Yale University in 1991. I and Professor Hossein Kamaly have taken our students down to the Beineke library to view these treasures. It was Willem Bijlefeld, however, who spearheaded the publication of the *Illuminated Manuscripts of Hartford Seminary* booklet in 1994, before the MSS were sold, so that we can continue to enjoy and learn from these treasures now being displayed in the library. In 2023, Karla Grafton, the Director of the Library, secured a grant to begin cataloguing Macdonald's world class collection of *the Arabian Nights*. Nancy Lois was hired and began the work and to create further access to the collection of [Macdonald's library](#).

The creation of a Center

During the 1970s, in addition to a significant library and large number of PhD students, Hartford also had an important cadre of Christian scholars teaching Islamic Studies – including Issa Boullata, a Palestinian American, Wadi‘ Haddad, a Syrian Christian, and the then Dean Willem Bijlefeld, a Dutch scholar of Islamic Studies – whose daughters, grandson and great grandchild are here with us this evening.

Willem Bijlefeld was the son of Dutch missionaries in Indonesia. Bijlefeld received his PhD from the University of Utrecht, and then taught in the Netherlands and Nigeria, at the universities of Leiden and Ibadan, respectively, before coming to Hartford in 1966. Dr. Bijlefeld was instrumental from the very beginning of weaving Islamic Studies directly into the curriculum at Hartford Seminary. According to one colleague, “he not only inspired students, but assisted churches to adopt many of his interfaith insights.”⁴ In addition to advising master’s and PhD students, Dean Bijlefeld was also extremely active on the world stage working with the “Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (known as PROCMURA), and with the World and National Council of Churches Taskforce on Christian-Muslim Relations.

Despite the historic decision of the board to discontinue degrees in ministry, as a result of the persuading of Dean Bijlefeld, the board decided to continue to offer an MA and PhD in Islamic Studies. The problem, however, was that Hartford Seminary Foundation was no longer able to offer degrees.

The response of what to do with the historic resources in Islamic Studies was the brainchild of Dean Bijlefeld. He presented to the board the idea of a center - the Duncan Black Macdonald Center – within the new restructured Hartford Seminary which would provide for 1) the continued academic study of Islam, 2) summer programs for churches and those already in ministry, and 3) the continuation of the historic journal *The Muslim World*. However, Bijlefeld was not simply interested in continuing the work of the former Kennedy School of Missions – of training missionaries. Rather, he wanted Christians to have an “imaginative reflection” on the relationships that the church had in various Muslim contexts. Over the years, he would be responsible for bringing about a shift from Christians talking about Muslims, to Christians

⁴ David Kerr, “Professor Willem A. Bijlefeld Retires. Professor of Islamic Studies – Hartford Seminary 1966-1990,” *The Muslim World* 80, no.3-4 (1990), 296.

talking with Muslims, or what David Kerr called a movement from the “pre-dialogue stage” to “creative interfaith encounter.”⁵ So, in the fall of 1973 – fifty years and six months ago – the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations was established.

The first major obstacle for Dr. Bijlefeld was how to continue providing an MA and PhD program in Islamic Studies when Hartford Seminary was no longer offering degrees. So, he began working on a plan to create a partnership with another academic institution – the first of many. After several attempts, the opportunity came from Canada. The Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University and the faculty of the Macdonald Center created a partnership, whereby McGill would be the degree granting institution and the faculty would relocate to Montreal to teach courses there. For five years the three Macdonald Center professors – and then the first woman to be granted a PhD in Islamic Studies through Hartford, Yvonne Haddad -- taught together and traveled back and forth between Hartford and Montreal. Speaking with Yvonne, she noted to me – “those were some crazy times.” From the very beginning, the Macdonald Center was on the move – having to “constantly and creatively” change.

Dr. Bijlefeld would spend the first years mostly on the road. In addition to teaching courses in Montreal, advising Hartford PhD students still in Hartford, he traveled extensively to create opportunities for Christian-Muslim dialogue for programs in the World Council of Churches and in partnership with the National Council of Churches Taskforce on Christian-Muslim Relations with Byron Haines and Marston Speight. Throughout the 1980s, Dr. Bijlefeld and Marston Speight organized conferences in Egypt, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Europe, and in the U.S., including here in Hartford. At first this was for Christian clergy and scholars, and then he began inviting Muslim scholars to be present. With his extensive connections he was able to work with Fazlur Rahman, and Imam Warith Deen Muhammad, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, among others.

Dr. Bijlefeld’s vision was to move the seminary from a place that talked “about” Muslims, to talking “with” Muslims, not only about Islam as a religious system but about Islam and Christianity as lived religions. His vision would ultimately lead to Hartford moving to the next steps of having Muslim faculty. He wrote, “Many of us began to realize that ‘interreligious

⁵ David Kerr’s address to the Trustees of Hartford, Wednesday, 4 May 1988, 2.

dialogue’... point[s] to important aspects of the reality in which we all live. The Center will make an increasingly significant contribution towards a fuller awareness of the changes we are facing and towards a deeper commitment to live responsibly to God and responsible to our fellow [human being].”⁶ Dr. Bijlefeld embodied the center’s commitment to “to work towards a genuine knowledge of Islam and greater mutual understanding in Christian-Muslim relationships.”⁷

Over the years the actual location of the center has been in various places. For the first five years it was in Montreal and in the offices of the Dean in Mackenzie Hall. Then the Center moved into 96 Sherman (currently where the international students live). During renovations it was relocated to 80 Sherman for a time (where the HIRR is now located), then back to 96. Finally, it was re-located to 60 Lorraine (what were originally the offices of the Connecticut Council of Churches), now renamed the Ava and Martin Budd Interfaith Building.

Setting the stage for Muslim own-voices

In 1988, at the invitation of Dr. Bijlefeld and President Mike Rion, David Kerr – the founder and Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, England – was invited to Hartford to be part of the Center. David was interested in continuing his work of Christian-Muslim Dialogue, but now in North America. Selly Oak was a model for me in my own academic and professional life (where I was fortunate enough to study and earn my PhD), and it was a model that David Kerr brought to Hartford. David believed that the vocation of Christian-Muslim relationships was not only an interesting and important program but it was part of the “guiding hand of God” that was bringing the Church along with the Muslim community.⁸

In David’s final lecture at Selly Oak, before he came to Hartford, he confessed to his academic community there, what has been my experience as well. He said:

“As a Christian I knew and know myself to be in debt of Islam; my theological understanding of Christian doctrine has been shaken by Islam; more importantly my faith

⁶ Hartford Seminary Foundation newsletter, 1973.

⁷ Willem Abraham Bijlefeld, “Islamic Studies within the Perspective of the History of Religions,” *The Muslim World*, vol. 62, no. 1 (Jan. 1972), 7.

⁸ David A. Kerr, “A Personal Pilgrimage with Islam,” *CSIC Newsletter*, no. 19 (May 1988), 6.

has been strengthened by Islam – and if faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit, I have found its hospitality within the Islamic tradition as much as my own.”⁹

David would become the next Director of the Center on the retirement of Willem. He was the Director from 1988 to 1996. David Kerr took Bijlefeld’s vision a step further and challenged the board at Hartford to take the next step – and not only to invite Muslim scholars to speak about Islam – but to make room for Muslim full-time Muslim faculty.

During David Kerr’s tenure, the world faced the First Gulf War, the Bosnian War, and the First World Trade Center bombings all of which raised questions in the minds of many American Christians about the Middle East and Islam. David spent much of his time speaking with churches and schools to put these events into context and to humanize those affected by these events.

However, a most significant event for Hartford was the recognition that the treasured library of Arabic manuscripts was in bad shape. The manuscripts were deteriorating. David and Dean Bill McKinney spent much time devoted to how to care for these manuscripts. The manuscripts were organized and catalogued by Steven Blackburn and were finally sold to the Beineke Library at Yale University.

The Muslim faculty of the Macdonald Center

David Kerr ultimately left Hartford in 1996 to return to Europe and direct the new Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at the University of Edinburgh. However, before he left, he challenged the board to continue the vision of a Center of Muslim-Christian dialogue and relationship by hiring Muslim faculty. And so it was that in 1990, that Hartford hired the first full-time Muslim faculty member of any seminary in North America, Dr. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi‘. Dr. Abu-Rabi‘ would become a beloved professor, advisor, and engaged public educator on Islam and the Middle East and would ultimately become a co-director of the Macdonald Center. We cannot underestimate the important impact his hiring, especially for the Muslim students and communities that could begin to develop their own voice in graduate Islamic Studies within the Hartford perspective of interreligious dialogue.

⁹ Kerr, 18.

After David Kerr left, Hartford again looked for another Christian scholar of Islam to create a co-directorship – shared by a Muslim and a Christian – implementing an important symbol of the vision of the center. Dr. Jane Smith, the Associate Dean of Harvard Divinity School was hired. Dr. Smith came and served as the co-director with Dr. Abu-Rabi’a for eleven years, before returning to Harvard Divinity School.

Hartford continued its vision of creating a place where Muslim students could come to learn from Muslim faculty members. A newly minted PhD from the University of Chicago was hired, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, in 1998. It would not be long before Dr. Mattson made her indelible mark not only on Hartford, but in the American Muslim community, and in the field of Islamic Chaplaincy. Dr. Mattson would Direct the center from 2008 until 2012, when she returned to teach in Canada.

In 2008, under the presidency of Heidi Hadsell, two more distinguished Muslim faculty members were hired: Professor Mahmoud Ayoub, coming from Temple University, and Dr. Yahya Michot, who was at the Faculty of Theology at Oxford and the Islamic Studies Centre at Oxford. Both scholars have left their marks through their teaching, advising and their critical scholarship. Dr. Michot served as the Senior Editor of *The Muslim World* journal until his retirement in 2018, and the late Dr. Ayoub spearheaded the drive to create the first academic chair in North America of Shi’a Studies – the Imam Ali Chair in Shia Studies and Dialogue Among Islamic Schools of Thought – currently held by Dr. Hossein Kamaly, who will be speaking tomorrow.

The changing focus of the institution

Over the years, the Center’s academic focus has shifted with the times. Originally, Duncan Black Macdonald came to teach languages – Hebrew and Arabic, then Islamic Studies, from an open, but certainly an Orientalist perspective. This led other Christians to follow with what Feryal Salem calls “Christian engagement with Islam.”¹⁰ With the creation of the Kennedy Center of Missions in 1911, Christian Missionary perspectives, in all their diversity, were certainly at the core of interest in Islam. However, with the hiring of Muslim faculty members almost one

¹⁰ Feryal Salem, “One Hundred Twenty-Five Years of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary,” *The Muslim World*, vol. 108, no. 2 (2018), 278.

hundred years later, Muslim students were able to fully engage theological, historic, and legal aspects of their tradition on their own terms. In 2001, Ingrid Mattson's development of the Islamic Chaplaincy program created important shifts. That is, a venue for academic study of Islam where Muslim professionals train for various religious and public careers. Taught for many years by the likes of Macdonald and Steven Blackburn, Quranic Arabic had been a staple and necessary component of the curriculum. However, with a shift toward professional programs in 2021 there was a change from offering Quranic Arabic for study to *tajweed* and *tilawah*, formal recitation. Under the guidance of Bilal Ansari and Lucinda Mosher, the Islamic Chaplaincy program was expanded into a multireligious, professional Master of Arts in Chaplaincy.

The Center has always engaged in public education, first with Dr. Bielefeld's summer conferences and work with the National Council of Churches, then with public responses to the First Gulf War and 9/11. Faculty were a part of the public conversations about how to better understand these events. From 2016–2021, the Center facilitated the [Luce-Hartford Conferences](#), led by David D. Grafton, these public programs invited Muslim and Christian intellectuals and practitioners to address social issues such as immigration during the forced migration of Syrian refugees in Europe, the environment, women in religious leadership, and racial issues and dialogue between African American Christians and Muslims. Over the last two years we have held panels and webinars on race and religion and engaged in [interfaith art exhibitions](#) to stimulate interreligious conversations.

Fifty and counting...

As we think about the future of the Macdonald Center, only God knows how this place will need to “constantly and creatively change.” As it continues to respond to the changes in the world, our nation, and here at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace; the issues, challenges, and opportunities of relationships, and further dialogue between Christians and Muslims is still a unique and important area of both academic study and public engagement.