

Islam and University Politics in Colonial North Africa: The Political Economy of Reform

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Studies of “Islamic reform” in the 20th century tend to rely on methods of intellectual history and textual analysis, with close attention to theological and legal debates. By contrast, my book manuscript in progress conceives of “reform” in relation to North Africa’s historic Islamic university, the Zaytuna mosque-university, one of the largest institutions of its type in the Arabic-speaking world with as many as 20,000 students after WWII. Under the French protectorate in Tunisia (1881-1956), the Zaytuna became a hub for determined student movements that contested not only the security regime of the French empire, but also the Zaytuna’s own professors and administrators who responded with repressive measures such as eviction from the coveted student housing in the Tunis medina (old city). Given the Zaytuna’s self-governance under colonialism, the key sources for my study are Arabic-language documents from the mosque-university’s own administrative records, held today at the Tunisian National Archives, rather than the French metropolitan sources that predominate in literature on colonial North Africa.

Class differences and divergent locations in the colonial economy underpinned the tension between students from provincial regions and the high-level professors who staffed the Zaytuna’s administrative positions. Notably, however, both groups identified themselves with the cause of “reform” (Ar. *iṣlāḥ*), a finding that shows the limitations of conventional distinctions between reformists and “conservatives” or reformists and Sufis (Muslim mystics). Moreover, when it came to scholarly writing, students and faculty shared similar positions even as the two groups contested one another over the uneven distribution of resources at the mosque-university. In the field of history of universities, my study proposes an analytical framework that locates the university as both economic actor (employer, gateway to the labour market, provider of basic services) and intellectual centre. While political economy explains many of the dynamics of the university—and in this case, much of the Zaytuna’s reform movement—ideas cannot be inferred from the academic rank or class position of the university’s constituents.

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History of Universities Seminar

Convened by Miles Taylor (Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany), Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang (Academia Sinica, Taiwan), and Heike Jöns (Loughborough University, United Kingdom). Hosted by the Humboldt University of Berlin on Zoom: <https://www.histgeog-uni.net/history-of-universities-seminar-2023-24>.