Q & A with the Experts: Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im

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Q: How did you find your way to Emory?

A: I am from Sudan. I used to teach at the University of Khartoum, the law school, and I had to leave Sudan in the mid-eighties for political reasons. I was wandering around various places—UCLA and Uppsala University, Sweden—hoping to be able to go back to Sudan. But by the early 1990s it was clear that the regime was entrenching and it wasn’t going to leave soon, so I took a position with Africa Watch, Human Rights Watch Africa in Washington, D.C. In two years time I felt like going back to teaching, and Emory was one of three options I had. It was by far the best option, and one of the main attractions for me to come to Emory was the Law and Religion Program.

Q: What attracted you to the Law and Religion Program?

A: It’s my whole life. I am a Muslim. The Law and Religion Program [now called Center for the Study of Law and Religion] seemed to offer a very interesting intersection of the scholarship and policy of engagement. That’s it for me, to be able to be a scholar of my field and yet to relate to my personal convictions as a person of belief and to see how religion can play a positive role in social life and the political life of communities.

Q: How has being a senior fellow impacted your work?

A: Coming from Sudan with such limited resources all my life and finding such tremendous wealth of resources and goodwill and energy. I think one of the main advantages has been initially to focus and also to think of new creative ways for being a law teacher and being a scholar of religion to intersect and interact. The Center has provided that environment and focus, that environment where you can think ideas, you can dream, just imagine things, and people work with you to make it happen.

Q: What has it been like to bring a Muslim perspective to the Center?

A: Of course I came in the mid-1990s, 1995 when I came. Initially the current problems with international terrorism…were not yet upon us, at least not on that scale, and therefore it was initially just simply curiosity and goodwill to understand. As international events made the
issues more urgent, I felt how the Center was responding by providing more facilities, more possibilities for cross fertilization for understanding. We had projects where the senior fellows shared a seminar for a semester, where we presented our work and got feedback from each other, and it built on from there I think.

**Q: What aspect of the Center’s work appeals most to you?**

A: I like very much the continuing focus the Center has had on the family. That is one aspect where I learned how similar and different families are and communities are globally. To see that again, the same profound concerns that all of us have with all families, the most intimate, the most enduring relationships, and how the law matters sometimes in good ways, sometimes in bad ways but ultimately how we can make a difference about how our family life, our community life is organized by our understanding of the relationship between law and religion.

**Q: How far and wide is the Center’s scope of influence?**

A: I have come to realize that this Center has grown really way beyond my perception and conception of it. I mean when I travel internationally, most of my work is international and I hear about the Center wherever I am, whether I’m in Southeast Asia or South Asia or the Middle East, in Europe. People’s faces light up when I say I’m from Emory and they say, “Oh, the Center for Law and Religion.” So that sense of connecting to something that is growing bigger than life, I might say from my professional, scholarly and personal perspectives.

**Q: What has stood out for you about the law and religion dialogue in America?**

A: I remember that coming from Sudan where people talk about religion and politics all the time -- to me that was really what was worth talking about. Religion and politics are, unfortunately, what people kill for but also what many people live by and for. So I was curious to see that Americans, especially American law professors, are very shy talking about politics or religion. They’d rather talk about restaurants or movies, and I felt that was trivial. I mean food is important, and we like the food we can eat, and also art and culture is very rewarding. But for me I felt something was missing because religion is such a critical part of life that I can’t imagine a vigorous scholarly community that is not willing to engage religion. I understand why people tend to avoid talking about religion in the sense of their affiliation, because then often you get these confrontational situations. But I think that if people have a wide enough understanding of not only their respective tradition but religion at large and human society at large and history at large, they will find very useful ways of talking about religion and politics. Therefore, I think in this community at Emory I sometimes feel among some of my colleagues in the law school this reticence, this hesitation about talking about religion because it’s often seen as a narrow sort of partisan confrontational issue. But this is one of the aspects in which I have seen the community around the Center growing over the years. I would attribute this to the work of the Center -- that people are now more comfortable talking about religion and more comfortable appreciating the relevance of religion to law and to our political life, our social life at large, more than they have been before.

**Q: Is scholarship enough, or is activism also necessary?**
A: Being a scholar, being an activist, I would say an advocate of certain human rights for example and certainly from my Islamic perspective, I have found myself sometimes tending to think that if I produce good enough scholarship and it is engaged to the public issues of the day, somehow people will pick it up and it will somehow influence life and come out of the confines of our institutions into policymaking. But often I find that I need to remind myself that it doesn’t work that way. That part of my conception of the work has to be how to reach out and communicate the conclusions, communicate the policy implications and to help people understand the relevance of what’s being done.

Q: What should the Center focus on during the next 25 years?

A: One field in which I would like to see more work done is to do the sort of very focused policy and scholarship reflection on social issues in this country applied to other countries. In particular, as an African of course my bias is for Africa, and I will say that Africans have less to work with, resources and human resources, intellectual resources and situational resources. I think we owe to share. For our blessing, we owe the obligation to share and to share that blessing with African societies in their own local context. I think when we look deep enough and thoughtfully enough we will find that all human societies and human persons share the same basic qualities and concerns and needs and desires and so on. Often this is colored by our color, by our political affiliations, our religious affiliations, but deep down we are ultimately human. So my question would be for the leadership of the Center for the future phase of the Center, how to appeal to and respond to the human in all of us globally and not only within the U.S. or within Atlanta and Georgia.

Q: What are some of those social issues?

A: Many of the social issues that are relevant to American citizens and American communities are relevant to people everywhere—health, questions of development, economic and social development, issues of freedom of religion and belief, questions of constitution and the rule of law, things that this country has been blessed with, to have such a good record and high standard of achievement. The feeling is that these achievements have come over time through a lot of struggle, but now there is enough to share without imposing, without patronizing, without pretending to preach to others. So for example, I feel that African communities out of struggling with issues of family, issues of health, issues of resources and management of resources, accountability, transparency, political stability, constitutional concerns, all of these issues are issues on which we in this country, as an American myself at this point, are blessed to have a clear advantage on. But our best ambassador and our best means of reaching out is to share in what I call “humility with respect,” with sensitivity. When we do there is no limit to how far we can take questions and issues and how far we can help people globally everywhere.

Q: Do you think that America is in a better or worse position to welcome and assimilate Muslims than Europe?

A: I think the United States has a stronger tradition and a richer tradition of being an immigrant community and nation. There is a much stronger depth of experience and a stronger commitment to welcoming people on their own terms, and very much there is a difference
between integration and assimilation. I think that in this country, in the United States, there is a much more readiness and willingness and capacity to integrate rather then to assimilate -- not to force people into a preconceived model of “you have to be this and nothing but else but this.” I have lived in Europe, in fact, several years earlier as a graduate student, and frequently I live and travel in Europe for several months at a time. I see probably because of the homogeneity of European societies -- they were more focused on colonizing societies abroad than they were welcoming of other people’s to the continent -- now that Europe by the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century is feeling the strains of having to learn fast about how to respect difference. There is a lot of rhetoric about difference and about the need to respect difference, but it has not been lived in daily experience as it has been in this county. I think for that reason the United States is in a better position to provide. I feel more and more comfortable for my family to be here even after 9/11. Our children were never exposed to any harassment or antagonism because of that. I see that how American people as a people have responded much more positively I would say than the American federal government. I think the generosity and the understanding of the American people as a people by far exceeds that of the government in reacting to the 9/11 and its aftermath. That’s why I’m confident, I’m proud to be an American, because I feel that I can do my work here, live my life here much more comfortably than probably anywhere else, including my own home country of Sudan.

Q: Why do you think the United States is perceived in a more hostile way by most of the Muslim world than Europe?

A: I think that part of the problem, that whole question about how the United States is perceived internationally, is so much a product of impressions or perceptions of what the media portrays and what the foreign policy of the United States federal government is projecting. I was in Doha, Qatar, at a conference, and I said it that I wish people could see more about this country in terms of what is here and how people’s lives are actually than what they would perceive in terms of American foreign policy. I think that, with all due respect, I say that the foreign policy of the United States has done tremendous disservice to the people of the United States because it does not project the generosity, the understanding, the complexity, and also the ingenuity of social interaction on life in this country, inside the country itself. That’s what I think people are reacting to. They’re reacting to the American foreign policy which has not been, with all due respect I say this again, has not been productive or constructive for the benefit of the United States itself as well as of other peoples in the world.