

Session II: Doing Business in Islamic Settings

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[This material was originally presented as a poster session. Professor Fitzgerald was invited to present his perspectives in this session. Here is a transcript of his comments].



Teaching Business Ethics and Law to MBA Students from around the World

I am a business scholar at Vanderbilt University this year where I'm working with the Divinity School and the Business School. They are looking at business ethics and economics and more. In twenty years at Oklahoma City University I have been a professor of finance and economics; I have taught mainly business ethics and business law. I am here [at this workshop] not to give ideas but to get ideas, and to raise questions.

So here's my question. When I was the dean of the business school, we got lucky and met someone who helped us start one of the first MBA program in China. During that period of time in the 80's we started eleven programs in the Far East. Since that time we've had them in London, and in Canada. When I first went to Oklahoma City University we had an MBA program that was dominated by Saudi Arabians. Most of them went away. Now our MBA foreign students are dominated by people from Asia. But the students I had from the Middle East, Muslim students, were always outstanding students who are just great and now we have four or five faculty members who are from that part of the world. We've got several from Iran and some from Egypt and some from Iraq that they've very much impressed me with their knowledge and their concern with business ethics and how economics and ethics work together.

So my formal background is I am a former Presbyterian minister that went back to Harvard many years ago and studied ethics and law and economics all rolled together. And there were some of my economist friends who were saying, Why did you do that? I'm intrigued when I get my MBA students that will write a paper about their concerns about how to be a business person and how to be ethical and especially following Islam. And I must admit, most of the people I know who look like me and have names like Patrick Fitzgerald and teach MBA programs, were ignorant about how all this works. There is a huge need if you're to bring economic development, the way you were talking about it. I think a lot of people are just scared of this. They are scared because 9-11 in part, but I think they're scared because they don't understand it.

Now we Christians and my Jewish students have in our scriptures the year of Jubilee. We have debt forgiveness. We have notions of returning property to those that we got it from. In many respects we don't follow these precepts. So I assume in Islam there are strict fundamentalists, there are people who are more liberal or don't pay attention, just like we have. But I am really curious to know what this audience thinks someone like me and people like me ought to be doing

for executive MBA students and for regular MBA and undergrad students and also for the hordes of executives that ought to come to this school and study this very issue. I'm really impressed with the quality of presentations and think there would be a huge demand for this. So I'm not here to teach you anything, I'm just here to share my material with you. Ill just give you a peak at what it is.

If you only focus on teaching these students, then you're missing the boat if your not educating Americans and Europeans about the kind of material that we're learning this weekend. What I'm doing is interviewing people like yourselves who are experts, my faculty members who are experts and business leaders from over the world, the ones that I run into, and I got two really smart people helping me. What I want to do is to present the fundamentals of Islam. These slides don't have all the background, about what Islamic values and character issues and so on are, they don't have some of Max Weber and some of the other people I've been hearing about, but they do get into the principles of Islamic banking and finance. In my paper I try to say, here's what most people think that Islam requires. I don't get into some of the intricacies like some of you are doing, but I try to say what this prohibition [on riba] really means, or it can be interpreted in this way.

I'm a Presbyterian minister, so people like Max Weber, John Calvin, and Martin Luther and all those characters influenced me. But when I talk to people who aren't from that Reformed theological background they might come at it with issues of why our laws developed the way they did or why our economic systems developed the way they did, from a little bit different take than the way I do. But I'm assuming that in the paper and research that there ought to be a lot more knowledge about what the roots are of Islam and how societies evolved with different perspectives on Islam. I think what you're going to find is that though we have Pentecostals and Baptists and Lutherans and Catholics, I would assume, that if we dig in a bit harder, we talk to each one of you individually, that there are going to be different aspects of Islam. The sensitive business person, especially from the West, needs to demonstrate sensitivity and awareness to what the values are and what the system is about. In that way you will open up a lot more doors and you'll communicate better. We did this same kind of thing long ago when we first started doing business with Japan and China and we worked with executives who are pretty successful.