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# Islamic History at BSC: An Interview with Keith Lewinstein

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# Islamic History at BSC

## An Interview with Keith Lewinstein



Last Fall, the Bridgewater Review caught up with Dr. Keith Lewinstein, Associate Professor in the Department of History, to ask him some questions about his research and teaching at Bridgewater State College. Dr. Lewinstein has been a member of the History Department at BSC since September 2003 and has served on the College's Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. Currently, he is the Director of Graduate and Continuing Education in the Department of History. Dr. Lewinstein was interviewed by Dr. Andrew Holman, the Associate Editor of the Review.

**BR: How would you define or describe your specific field of scholarly research?**

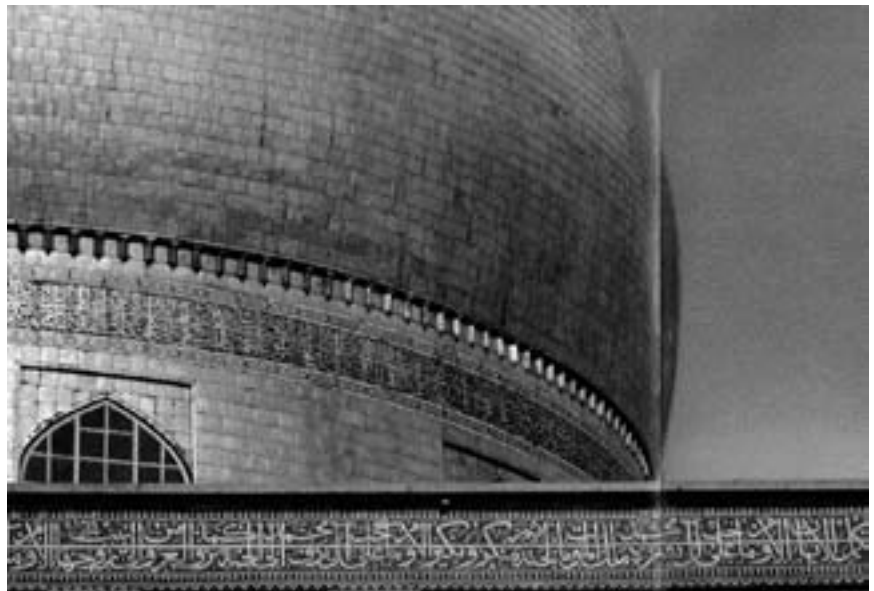
**KL:** I work in early Islamic history and that means the 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the period when Islamic civilization first crystallized. My own interests run to religious literature. I have done work on theological and legal writings and I'm interested in the ways in which Islam as a religious tradition went through its formative period as Muslims created for themselves a distinctive religious identity.

**BR: How and when did you first become interested in the study of Islamic history?**

**KL:** When I was an undergraduate at Berkeley, I had the good fortune to take a course with a very distinguished professor of medieval Islamic history. Nowadays, Islamic history classes (even pre-modern ones) are full, not just at Berkeley but anywhere in the country. But when I took it in the late 1970s, there were only 9 or 10 students in the class. I got hooked on the subject for a couple reasons. First, it was something I knew absolutely nothing about when I started, so it was exciting for me to be able to gauge how much I was learning. Second, although I had expected Islamic history to be exotic and different, in fact I found that many of the major themes one encounters in European history (reason versus revelation, religion and state, and so forth) are also important in the Islamic world. There was something familiar yet different about it that I found very attractive.

**BR: You have contributed articles and book chapters and reviews to your field. What is the piece of research or project that you would say you're most proud of?**

**KL:** I've written on various topics, but I really do two kinds of work—one fairly technical and pitched narrowly to a small group of specialists, and the other more open and accessible, and directed at scholars in other fields who need to know something about Islam. I enjoy doing both. But if you really pressed me, I'd have to say I'm proudest of the technical work, because of the level



Twelfth Imam Shrine. Samarra, Iraq.

of philological skill and concentrated effort that's required. I enjoy taking apart classical Arabic texts, and trying to figure out how they were actually composed and what they tell us about how early Muslims came to conceive of their identity.

**BR: This is the heavy lifting of an historian's work.**

**KL:** Some of the books I work with are rather heavy, yes.

**BR:** *You are currently working on a book for Cambridge University Press. Can you tell us something about that project?*

**KL:** The book is on heresy and dissent in the early Islamic world. What I am trying to do is get beyond the narrow technical compass I usually work within and look at heresy more broadly as a social as well as intellectual phenomenon. I want to understand the way in which heresy was disseminated in the early Islamic world—the mechanics through which these kinds of ideas spread and appealed to different sorts of groups in different parts of the Muslim world. To put it another way, I'm trying to describe why certain teachings came to be seen as unacceptable—as heterodox—despite the absence of a church with the authority to define orthodoxy. The book traces how “orthodox” and “heterodox” labels evolved during the first few centuries of Islam.

**BR:** *What are the particular challenges that you face as a scholar of early Islamic history?*

**KL:** Anyone hoping to understand how Islam emerged and took shape has to rely not on contemporary documents (we don't really have them) but on literary sources composed after the fact. What we have in these classical texts is a picture of how Muslims later came to understand their history—a classically accepted narrative—and we have to be especially sensitive to the nature of our sources if we want to use them to write history. We don't have archives with tax registers or census figures, for example; we have textual traditions which have to be approached with a certain literary sensibility.

**BR:** *Was the tenor or tone of scholarly study in your field altered by 9/11?*

**KL:** No, I wouldn't say so, except in the sense that scholars even in the early Islam field are now being called on more often than in the past to address contemporary issues. If the 9/11 attacks had been couched in leftist revolutionary or nationalist rhetoric, I don't imagine too many people would be terribly interested in my opinion about them. But because the rhetoric is Islamic—and the ideology is what we now call “Islamist”—those of us who read in the Islamic tradition (even in the early period) find ourselves invited to more public events. Since arriving at BSC I've appeared on several different panels addressing contemporary issues in the Muslim world; since I don't generally work on such issues myself, my contribution has usually been to offer historical context.

Qur'an (Mamluk).



**BR:** *Would you say that most of your colleagues—that is, historians of Islam—find this new milieu an opportunity or a burden?*

**KL:** For me it's an opportunity, especially when it comes to teaching. I can't speak for others.

**BR:** *Last Spring you presented a paper at a CART forum on campus called “Was Muhammad the Final Prophet?” The presentation drew a pretty large crowd of professors and students. Why does your subject appeal so broadly?*

**KL:** I think for obvious reasons a lot of people these days want to know something about Muhammad and the Qur'an. There's so much misinformation out there and even a lot of disinformation. It might also be that some of our colleagues—particularly those in the social sciences and the humanities—feel that one should know something about that part of the world. I think the discussion we had was spirited and useful—at least for me. The substance of the presentation (why Muslims came to insist on Muhammad as the final prophet) will find its way into my book in a chapter on the early Gnostic prophet movements in southern Iraq.

**BR:** *You have been a student and a teacher at some pretty prestigious institutions in the U.S. (Berkeley, Princeton, Smith and Brown). What has been your experience of researching and teaching Islamic history at Bridgewater State College? Are the rewards and challenges greater or fewer? Or are they just different?*

**KL:** The challenges are great everywhere, mainly because this is brand new stuff for a lot of people. Most students are like I was: they know next to nothing when they first come into a class on Islamic history. For teachers, starting at zero means that you have to explain the simplest things, even the way names work, to ensure that students don't get lost in some of the assigned reading. One thing that has made teaching Islam easier (and this is a way my field has changed over the past 25 years) is textbooks. When I first started studying, when I took that first class at Berkeley, there weren't many texts written for undergraduates. What we were reading was scholarship written by specialists for specialists (or at least for more advanced students), and we were expected to be able to tap into that and get what we could out of it. Nowadays, there are many more introductory-level books and articles available, and naturally I remind my students at every turn that they have it a lot easier than I did!

One thing I particularly enjoy about my job here is that I'm the only Middle East specialist in a History Department, rather than one of several people in a Near Eastern Studies department stocked with other specialists. This means I have responsibility for the entirety of Middle East/Islamic history, rather than simply my own small corner of it. I'd never get to teach a course, say, on modern Egypt or Iran if there were specialists on those subjects around.

**BR:** *And challenges or rewards as a researcher at BSC?*

**KL:** Well, I have been fortunate to receive funding for several specific research projects. The biggest challenge that I—we all—face is an extraordinary teaching load. When you do this kind of scholarly work, you need large blocs of time to sit and read and think, to say nothing of writing. I am amazed to see what some of our colleagues have managed to produce given their teaching loads. I find that time constraints are the biggest challenge.

**BR:** *Are there particular strategies or techniques that you employ when teaching Islamic history to students at Bridgewater State College?*

**KL:** I try different things in different classes. In my course on the Muslim tradition, for example, I try to get my students inside the minds of religious scholars by having them produce a *fatwa*, a response to a religio-legal question. I give them a large quantity of translated material from the Qur'an, the Tradition of the Prophet, and the Muslim legal tradition, and ask them to apply it to a specific question a contemporary Muslim might ask. I ask a different question (and give different sources) every year. In my experience, an exercise like this gives students a much more concrete sense of what religious scholars actually do. This is more than what students can otherwise get from simply reading a textbook chapter on Islamic law, even though they do read some secondary literature. This sort of exercise gives them a lesson they won't soon forget in the complexity and the malleability of sacred law.

**BR:** *There has been some preliminary administrative work done on campus (particularly by your colleague in Communications Studies, Dr. Jabbar al-Obaidi) to establish an interdisciplinary program in Middle East Studies. In what ways would such a thing affect—and perhaps benefit—your work here on campus?*

**KL:** I like the idea of Middle East Studies having more visibility on campus. It means that students who decide to take a course on a Middle Eastern subject might actually end up taking more than one or two, or even doing a minor in the subject. Personally, I want to have students who have taken courses with Dr. Obaidi or Dr. St-Laurent, because they make interesting connections and that makes my own work in the classroom more rewarding.

—Keith Lewinsein is Associate Professor of History.