

CSIC

JØRGEN S. NIELSEN

**The CSIC was founded in 1976 as a central teaching department of the federation of Selly Oak Colleges. Its roots lay in a lectureship by the Edward Cadbury Charitable Trust (ECCT) in the 1930s, when Dr Alphonse Mingana was the first incumbent. With Cadbury family support he had been able to collect a large amount of Arabic and Syriac manuscripts still housed today in the library at Selly Oak. Dr Mingana started a tradition of text-based study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations which was notably continued by Dr John Sweetman in his magisterial work on *Islam and Christian Theology*.**

In the early 1970s, the existence of an increasingly self-aware Muslim community in Britain was becoming obvious. At Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham the then lecturer in Islamic Studies, Dr John Taylor, became involved in the ecumenical discussions on Christian approaches to other faiths, which led to his becoming the first officer for Christian-Muslim dialogue at the World Council of Churches in 1973. His successor, Dr David Kerr, confirmed this change of emphasis from the traditional orientalist to the contemporary when he was able to call together an international consultation in 1975.

This joint meeting of Muslims and Christians recommended the creation of what was to become the CSIC. The idea was for the Centre to comprise a joint venture of Christians and Muslims, true to both traditions while also meeting the criteria of the British university system. Given the institutional context of the Centre, both of these targets were problematic. The various colleges of the federation at Selly Oak are of Christian foundation, some of them mission

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training colleges, which in itself tended to raise questions about academic credibility and hence support had to be earned.

It is probably safe to say today that both targets have been reached. Academic staff, today counting five lecturers and three researchers, have academic recognition at the University of Birmingham through its Department of Theology, and the academic degrees are awarded by the University. For the first decade or so, student numbers were low, seldom exceeding 20. Today there are nearly 70, all on postgraduate degree programmes. For the first many years only very few Muslim students came. Today 80% of students are Muslims. Two thirds of all students come from Africa and Asia, including countries like Malaysia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and Lebanon.

The process has now reached culmination: after successful completion of negotiations, on 1 August 1999 the CSIC will become an integral part of the University of Birmingham's Department of Theology, retaining its specific identity and programmes within a new graduate institute for theology and religions.

As a postgraduate teaching and research centre, the CSIC for many years concentrated on developing its teaching programmes and a couple of quite specific research and documentation projects. The teaching programmes include a Postgraduate Diploma, a Master of Arts, a MPhil and a PhD. As generally is the case throughout the British system of

higher education, the first two are based on a combination of taught courses and a short dissertation completed altogether in 12 months of full-time study. The MPhil and PhD are research only leading to submission and examination of a thesis. We are now beginning to develop an MA in Middle Eastern Christianity, which should be available from September 1999, and as we become part of the University of Birmingham, we are looking at working in conjunction with other departments and faculties, particularly education, law and social studies. The Centre has also gradually expanded its cooperation with other academic institutions around the world. Some of these links have taken the form of joint seminars – a list with related publications is available from [j.nielsen.islam@sellyoak.ac.uk](mailto:j.nielsen.islam@sellyoak.ac.uk). Formal agreements with the University of Jordan and Al-Azhar involve exchanges of students and staff.

In terms of research and documentation, the Centre has had a particular interest in Africa and Europe. We can fairly claim to have been among the earliest to direct attention towards Islam in Europe. Apart from numerous publications in this field, this focus has now led to the award of a research project grant from the Economic and Social Research Council within its Transnational Communities Programme (reported in the last issue of the ISIM Newsletter by Dr Steven Vertovec). This project, which deals with a transnational Sufi order, includes fieldwork in Britain, Dagestan, and Lebanon.

Details can be found on the project website at [www.sellyoak.ac.uk/csic/research](http://www.sellyoak.ac.uk/csic/research). At the same time, it has been possible to revive the areas of study with which Drs Mingana and Sweetman were identified. Since 1990, we have hosted three 'Woodbrooke/Mingana Colloquia on Arab Christianity and Islam', and our website is now the home for a newsgroup on the subject (contact [d.thomas.islam@sellyoak.ac.uk](mailto:d.thomas.islam@sellyoak.ac.uk)).

The Centre's interests determine that we cannot be limited to academic work narrowly defined. From the beginning, staff have been involved in both Christian and Muslim agencies as consultants or members of working groups and the like. As the field of Christian-Muslim relations has broadened into and become part of wider social and political processes in the 1990s, so has the CSIC become more widely involved with governments – local and national – and international agencies.

While the first almost quarter century has been a period of establishing ourselves and getting our feet firmly on the ground, it seems probable that the coming merger into the University of Birmingham will provide a foundation for both expansion of the existing work and the development of new programmes of teaching and research. ◆

*Jørgen S. Nielsen is professor of Islamic Studies and CSIC Director, Birmingham, UK.  
E-mail: [j.nielsen.islam@sellyoak.ac.uk](mailto:j.nielsen.islam@sellyoak.ac.uk)*