A Saudi Prince’s Controversial Gift

Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Alsaud, reportedly the richest member of the Saudi royal family and head of the investment firm Kingdom Holding Company, has given $20 million each to Harvard and to Georgetown University, those institutions announced in December. Almost immediately, the press reported unhappiness that the gifts had been accepted.

Harvard will use the gift, which was initiated by the prince, to create the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program, a University-wide project run by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in close coordination with the Divinity School. The money will fund four new professorships, one known as the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal chair in contemporary Islamic thought and life, and provide support for graduate students. It will also launch a $1-million initiative within the University Library, the Islamic Heritage Project, that will digitize historically significant Islamic materials and make the resulting images, including digitized texts of the classics of the Islamic tradition, available on the Internet.

Islamic studies at Harvard are currently found within disciplines ranging from religion, history, and law to art and literature. The prince’s gift will make it possible to add strength in the history of science and in new areas such as Islamic Inner-Asian, Southeast Asian, or South Asian studies. “For a university with global aspirations, it is critical that Harvard have a strong program on Islam that is worldwide and interdisciplinary in scope,” said provost Steven E. Hyman, who will coordinate the new program’s implementation.

A sampling of the opposition, much of it indicative of the divided opinions on the Middle East and concern about terrorism, came from Washington: “Accepting money from a member of the royal family legitimizes the regime,” wrote Suzanne Gershonowitz ’04 of the American Enterprise Institute in National Review. “Much of the concern about Islam and the Arab world is in fact a justified reaction to that world’s uncomfortable realities, such as the oppression of women, Islamist incitement, and apology for terror. But universities—and especially Georgetown and Harvard—are not the place to find this sort of distaste. Their classrooms, and especially Middle Eastern-studies departments, tend instead to amplify anti-American rhetoric, legitimize conspiracy theories, and, in the name of cultural relativism, gloss over the oppression that exists in the Arab world.”