



OBSERVING  
THE OBSERVER  
THE STATE  
OF ISLAMIC  
STUDIES IN  
AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITIES

Edited By:

Mumtaz Ahmad, Zahid Bukhari & Sulayman Nyang

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# FOREWORD

THE STATE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES was a project undertaken by IIIT and the Center for Islam and Public Policy (CIPP) between the years 2004 and 2007. The current state of relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world, as well as debates about Islamic education and study programs in American campuses, necessitated a thorough and rigorous study of Islam in American universities. Through both qualitative and quantitative research, the project sought to develop an understanding of the origins, history, and growth of the discipline, tracing the historical roots of Islamic studies in American universities, examining their current state, presenting and analyzing the theoretical frameworks and methodologies of approaching the study of Islam and Muslim world affairs, and collecting and disseminating data on the major academic programs for the study of Islam and Muslim world affairs in American universities.

As part of the project research, a scholarly, edited volume was compiled forming this work: *Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities*, a collection of papers covering a wide variety of topics, including the historical development of the field, Western approaches to Islamic studies, the study of Qur'an, gender, and Sufism in Islamic studies programs, conversations with scholars, and analysis of Islam 101 courses.

We hope that both general and specialist readers benefit from the perspectives offered and the overall issues examined in the book.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been



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added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the author.

The IIIT, established in 1981, has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts based on Islamic vision, values and principles. The Institute's programs of research, seminars and conferences during the last thirty years have resulted in the publication of more than four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We express our thanks and gratitude to the contributors for their cooperation throughout the various stages of production. We would also like to thank the editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book including, Shiraz Khan, Dr. Maryam Mahmood, Tahira Hadi, and Salma Mirza. May God reward them for all their efforts.

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# INTRODUCTION

THE field of Islamic studies in the U.S. developed due to the keen desire of Americans to probe the historical sources of Islam and document encounters between American society and the peoples of the Muslim world. Inspired by a series of historic events in U.S. history, the study of Islam and Islamic societies has been growing significantly in American institutions of higher learning and research. Such events include the founding of the Republic, diplomatic and economic relations of the U.S. with Muslim countries, migration of millions of Muslims into the country over the last century and a half, conversion of a large number of Americans to Islam, U.S. interests in the Arab oil resources, involvement of Muslims in the American public square; challenges of the Cold War, and the rise of militancy and international terrorism associated with some fringe groups in Muslim societies.

The events of 9/11 gave further impetus, even urgency, to the need to understand and analyze Islam, primarily to examine the possible links between the teachings of Islam on the one hand, and the incidence of violence and terrorism on the other. Although for the wrong reasons, the tragedy of 9/11 has engendered such an interest in Islam that some observers have noted the rise of an “Islam industry” in the U.S., run primarily by fly-by journalists, think tank pundits, and cut-and-paste “experts.”

Some observers have pointed out to another aspect of understanding the history and development of Islamic studies in America and in the West: the loss of the Cold War as a unifying emotional and psychological connection between Muslims and Americans. Since both the West and most leaders of the Muslim World shared a common allergy to communism and its godless ideology, and because many Muslims feared the political ambitions of the Soviets in Muslim lands, they saw

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in the West, and particularly in the U.S., a bulwark against the penetration of Communist ideas and Soviet power into their territories.

Real or imagined, this state of affairs contributed immeasurably to the phenomenon of coincidence of interests between liberal democratic capitalists of the West on the one hand and the authoritarian Muslim royals, and military dictators of the Muslim World, on the other. The logic of the Cold War, and the strategic importance of winning the support of the Muslim countries against the Soviets, gave rise to area studies programs in American universities of which the study of Islam and Muslim societies formed an important part.

The volume begins with Professor Anour Majid's chapter which presents a critical analysis of the origins and development of Islamic studies in the U.S. Working on the assumption that Islamic studies in the United States cannot be understood without being linked to the U.S. and its history, Majid sees the link between Islam and the U.S. in dialectical terms. America, in his view, "was established as the antithesis of Islam, first the refuge of pure Christianity, the community of saints, then a beacon of freedom that stands in sharp contrast to Islamic despotism and the slavish conditions of Muslims in general."

Majid sees an interesting dialectic between the creation of America and the enslavement of persons of African origins in the U.S. He suggests that American Muslims today cannot understand the perception of their fellow Americans of Judeo-Christian backgrounds if they do not take into consideration the categories in which America placed the Muslims since its existence. First, Muslims came as slaves during the antebellum period; then they emerged as freed men along with the other captives from Africa; subsequently, they were Arab or other Muslim immigrants from distant lands in search of the American Dream and a toehold, if not a foothold, in the American society. Finally, they emerged as full citizens with rights to vote and be voted into Congress.

Majid draws our attention to the African-American experience with the middle passage and the implications thereof for Muslims, and reminds us about early American republican encounters with the North African groups that attacked Americans from across the Atlantic Ocean. Known to Americans as peoples of the Barbary Coast in the

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eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their threat to the American trade interests became the first encounter with the Islamic world, thus prompting President Monroe and his successors to set the stage for the earliest articulations of American attitude toward Islam. Hence the paradox: though Morocco was the first country to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with America, the activities of the pirates from the Barbary Coast left a bitter taste in the mouths of American leaders and the people.

Majid sees the struggle between Islam and the West or the U.S. as unacademic and rooted in individual self-definition. He traces this source of conflict to his metaphor of the Islamic gene, which is critical and rebellious. For him, the Islamic message harbors both interfaith dialogue and critical analysis of other religions. Islamic perspectives about the world, the purpose of creation and the role of man in this world have always been in conflict with those of its Semitic cousins in the West. The emergence of America in 1776 and the many scientific and intellectual developments that took place since the eighteenth century have not altered the equation between Islam and the West.

Like the original equation of Islam as the final revelation, the present situation in the relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world is affected by mutual self-definition. Majid's view finds echoes in other writings as well. Citing the works of Timothy Marr on *American Orientalism*, he approvingly quotes Marr's assertion that "America's 'national project' wouldn't have been the same without negative references to Islam." Majid also endorses the observation of Robert J. Allison in *The Crescent Observed* who provides some powerful data about the literary utility of Islamic history and experience to the American thinkers and writers looking for an American antidote to the Muslim experience. Majid reminds us that this "the literature conveyed a persistent picture of the Muslim world, an inverted image of the world the Americans were trying to create anew."

The Christian right and its dreams at home and abroad serve as another avenue of potential hostility or prospective healing between Americans and Muslims. Majid discusses the impact of history on American studies of Islam and Muslims by pondering how and why the activities of the U.S. against the Taliban and other targets in the

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Middle East and beyond contribute to the study of Islam and Muslims. With a deep sense of appreciation of how history plays games with humans through irony and paradox, he shows how Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan assumed different and conflicting roles during the times of the Cold War and then during the times of war against international terrorism.

As Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues in the third chapter of this volume, a concatenation of historical circumstances has made Islam a subject of international significance. Not only does Islam have a past that lingers in the western mind and imagination, but also inside western nations such as America, “several million Muslims constitute an element of American society which can no longer be ignored.” Despite this proximity in terms of inter-civilizational and intercultural ties from the past, Nasr argues, the state of Islamic studies in America is far from satisfactory.

Professor Nasr identifies a number of reasons why Islamic studies has yet to emerge as a strong and formidable field of study when compared with European centers of learning. The first problem relates to the history of the development of the discipline in the U.S. The earlier role of Christian missionaries in the study of Islam gave it an antagonistic bias. Although some of these early American students of Islam were of Rabbinical backgrounds, their objectivity before the triumph of Zionism in the Middle East has almost disappeared.

According to Nasr, not only did the Christian missionaries and Jewish scholars interested in religious studies affect the direction of Islamic studies, but Christian Arabs living and working in the West also contributed a great deal. Nasr mentions the late Professor Phillip Hitti who wrote many books about the Arabs and Islam trained a large number of students at Princeton over half a century of his teaching and research. In addition, western writers best known as Middle East area studies experts produced a type of scholarship that owed a great deal to the Cold War and the U.S. attempt to win and influence peoples of the Third World.

He laments that Islam lacks due recognition and attention. Nasr believes that Muslims were to some extent the targets of false propaganda, and sees problems not only in the failure to develop and train

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competent scholars in the field, but also in the lack of proper attention to Islam and its major languages. He sees the study of African Islam as neglected territory. Yet while acknowledging this disparity, Nasr tells us that social sciences have, in recent years, tried to fill the gap in the field of Islamic studies.

Nasr's evaluation of the field of Islamic studies reminds American readers of the global nature of the Islamic presence and the urgency of dialogue and communication. He cites the incredible distortion of Islam as a major obstacle to greater communication and understanding, and hopes the development of Islamic studies "cannot but be the greatest benefit to both America and the Islamic World."

The fourth chapter of this study is a historical analysis by Professor John Voll of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University. Professor Voll offers a number of remarkable observations about the historical and intellectual circumstances that contributed to the evolution and development Islamic studies in the United States with reference to the contribution of Professor Hossein Nasr. Through a careful and effective combination of personal memories of his early encounters with Professor Nasr and the subsequent follow-up with his writings, Professor Voll traces the intellectual traditions and methods that provided the basis for Nasr's thought. He reminds us that prior to the arrival of Professor Nasr at Harvard University in the 1950s, Islamic studies in the U.S. had undergone some changes that were linked to intellectual developments taking place in Europe. Drawing heavily on the writings of American and western scholars of Islam in the West, Voll notes the scholastic antecedents and how that tradition created new perspectives about Islam and Muslims. Caught in the web of Christian polemics and with the intent to offer their religion as the better one *vis à vis* Islam, early Christian writers wrote not to shed light about the realities and subtleties of Islam but to portray it as negatively as possible.

This polemical attitude faded away, and during the Renaissance and the Reformation new views entered the Christian mainstream, although the rivalry between Catholicism and Protestantism did not dissipate their mutual antagonism against Islam. Another point shown in the Voll's analysis of the transition in the western portrayal of Islam

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was the gradual breaking away from a strictly religious approach to Islam, and the beginning of enlightened understanding of Islam in the west. Beginning with the American and French Revolutions, the study of Islam began to undergo another transformation. The scholars who wrote from the late eighteenth to the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries laid the foundation of what came to be known later as orientalist tradition.

One unique characteristic of this intellectual caravan and its tribal chiefs of scholarly tradition was their total disregard of the lived Islam and the daily lives of Muslims they studied. Rather, they preferred to engage with classical texts, medieval manuscripts and ancient languages. Voll quotes Anne Marie Schimmel as saying that people like her who studied Arabic never saw an Arab and were not instructed in an Arab country. It appears that this closing the eyes to the existence of the people and the cultures of Islam largely resulted from the colonial mentality of emerging dominant European powers. Concerned with governing their colonial subjects but mindful of the role and place of power differentiation, many European students of Islam became the intellectual apologists of colonial domination by reading both Islam and Islamic history as deficient.

In tracing the history of Islamic studies in the West, Voll tells us that from 1917, when the British created their Department of African and Oriental Studies, to the last days of empire and the Cold War, Islamic studies underwent several transformations. During the last century, particularly before the Iranian Revolution, theorists of modernization, whether Marxist, liberal, or conservative, promoted the notion that religion was a dying breed of human thought. Peter Berger and Harvey Cox were widely cited as harbingers of radical change of human thought patterns due to the interconnected processes of industrialization and secularization.

Since modernizing societies were supposed to fit into this dominant western pattern of simultaneous industrialization and secularization; sociologists like Daniel Lerner, in his *The Passing of Traditional Societies* announced the end of the public role of Islam in the new pattern of behavior among the Middle Eastern Muslims and boldly predicted the eventual triumph of secularism in Muslim societies as a result of the

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expansion of education, communication technologies and industrialization. The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 and the increasing role of Islam in the public affairs of several Muslim societies since the 1970s, however, saw the emergence of a new generation of Islamic scholars who were not only more sensitive to the new “realities” of Islam but were also theoretically more sophisticated and discerning.

Farid Esack’s chapter on “The Territory of the Qur’an: ‘Citizens,’ ‘Foreigners,’ and ‘Invaders’” is a brilliant metaphorical tour de force to describe the approaches of scholars toward the study of the Qur’an by using the categories of citizens, foreigners and invaders. Professor Esack employs the theme of beauty to tie together different approaches to the Qur’an and Qur’anic scholarship and draws on an analogy of the personality and body of a beloved and how she is seen and approached. For Esack, the first level of interaction with the Qur’an is analogous to that between a lover and beloved in that the “presence of the beloved can transport the lover to another plane of being that enables him to experience sublime ecstasy ...” At this level of interaction with the Qur’an, the relationship is only “to be enjoyed rather than interrogated or agonized over.” This is the type of relationship that one can identify with the position of ordinary Muslims towards the Qur’an – consoling his “aching heart.”

The second level of interaction is that of a lover “who wants to explain to the world why his beloved is the most sublime ... that cries out for universal acclaim and acceptance.” This is the position of “confessional Muslim scholarship” that wants to share its own experience of the awe-inspiring beauty and wisdom of its beloved with others.

The third level of interaction with the Qur’an, according to Esack, takes place at the intersection of both profound love and commitment for, and a critical and interrogative stance toward, the beloved. This is the path taken by critical Muslim scholarship of the Qur’an – a path that leads Muslim scholars to ask questions, not to deny the divinity of the beloved but to gain a deeper understanding and reaffirmation of one’s love for her.

Continuing the analogy of the beloved, Farid Esack categorizes the “outsiders” who study the Qur’an as “participant observers,” “disinterested observers,” and “polemicist observers.” The participant



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observer does not claim to be a lover but shows “enormous sense of responsibility to the sensitivities of the lover ...” This is the Qur’anic scholar who, in the words of Fazlur Rahman, “may not be a full citizen of the world of the Qur’an, but is certainly no foreigner either – let alone an invader!” The disinterested observer, on the other hand, feels no such responsibility of showing empathy for the lover and claims that “he is merely pursuing the cold facts surrounding the body of the beloved regardless of what she may mean to her lover.” Then we have this polemicist observer who is, in fact “besotted with another woman, the Bible or secularism.” Terrified by “the prospect that his Muslim enemy’s beloved may be attracting a growing number of devotees,” he now resorts to telling the Muslim “how ugly his (i.e., the Muslim’s) beloved is.” It is this kind of “scholarship,” informed by religious prejudices and political goals that blames the Qur’an for all kinds of violence and militancy in the contemporary world and wants the world to believe that there could be no peace in the world as long as Muslims adhere to the teachings of the Qur’an.

Professor Farid Esack concludes his chapter by examining the “beginnings of the emergence” of hermeneutics as a new discipline in Qur’anic studies and emphasizes the need for the Qur’an to be “decoded in the light of its historical, cultural and linguistic milieu.”

In Professor Saba Mahmood’s paper, “Islam and Gender in Muslim Societies: Reflections of an Anthropologist,” one finds some interesting perspectives about Islam and the manner that scholars in the field of anthropology have come to address the issue. Mahmood brings a great deal to the table. Not only is she deeply immersed in the theories and perspectives in her own discipline, but she is also mindful of the impact of the debates and the challenges generated by these theories for the study of the gender issue in western academia. Reminding us of the timeline when gender became a cause of disagreement for anthropologists and others in the field of social science in the 1960s, Mahmood gives us a guided tour of the scholarship that has developed significantly in the field in general and within Islamic studies in particular.

Mahmood unpacks the theoretical perspectives and approaches that ruled over the discipline and the male bias that informed women studies and gender relations. She argues that the increase in the

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representation of women researchers in the field changed the way gender issues were identified and analyzed. In her view, the turning point in the development of a more gender-friendly approach was the 1970s. In her critical survey of the literature on gender and the question of the Muslim women Mahmood states, “It was not until the 1970s ... that gender as an analytical category emerged in the study of Muslim societies, substantially transforming the conceptual presuppositions of the literature produced on Islam.”

Mahmood reminds us that during this transition to new paradigmatic views and approaches to the study of gender, anthropologists writing on Muslim world affairs soon found it useful to see gender not a biological divide between male and female but as a relational category “that marks the difference in power between men and women.” In Mahmood’s view, gender in this circumstance “is not synonymous with women, but elucidates the broader production of social inequality in a variety of social domains, including politics, economics, law, and religion.”

What is most interesting in Mahmood’s analysis is her elucidation of how some new approaches to gender relations are crucial to the operation of modern capitalism and the market economies, to the sustenance of ideological boundaries such as public/private and production/reproduction, to the valuation of religious and spiritual practices, and to the operation of law and politics.

Having established the robustness of gender theorizing in the field of anthropology, Mahmood goes on to introduce two critical currents that swept through the discipline in the 1980s. The first current concerned the debate about the colonial origins of the field and the impact of colonial rule on how colonized people were presented or represented by colonial anthropologists. Talal Asad’s *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) was the work of a founding pioneer who was almost immediately followed by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. In Mahmood’s view, these two texts, particularly Said’s:

exposed how scholarly tropes used to describe non-western societies were not only misrepresentations of the social reality they purportedly captured but were also premised on assumptions of western superiority that helped facilitate projects of imperial and colonial rule.

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Mahmood amplifies this fact by saying:

Talal Asad differently emphasized how the power of western forms of knowledge lies not only in their ability to re-present social reality but also to intervene and remake non-western traditions, practices, and institutions, thereby transforming what it means to live as a Muslim subject in the modern world.

Professor Mahmood notes that since the appearance of these texts, things have changed radically in the field and a vast amount of scholarly work has come to light that genuinely enhanced our understanding of the gender question within the Muslim world.

The second current that changed the theoretical landscape in the 1980s focused more specifically on the discipline's claim to "objective" knowledge, drawing attention to those aspects of fieldwork and ethnographic writings that entail ambiguity, approximation, subjective judgment, and inequality of relations between the observer and the observed. Mahmood reports that some of her colleagues in the field have coined a new genre of anthropological writings better known as "reflexive anthropology," in which the anthropologist "foregrounds her privileged position as a researcher, drawing attention to the problems of reductionism, reification, ventriloquism, and essentialism that are endemic to any anthropological enterprise."

After having explored these theoretical and conceptual transformations, Mahmood demonstrates that Islamic studies, particularly in areas focused on women, benefited from these path breaking works in that they allowed Muslims and others to dispose of the colonial charge that Islam – rather than a complex of social, cultural and historical factors – was the web that kept Muslim women subdued and dominated. Mahmood shows how subsequent scholarship on gender and Islam has helped displace the stereotype that Muslim women are passive victims of patriarchal oppression. She reminds us about the cultural pluralism that exists in Islamic societies. Paying attention to such diversities could prove helpful in our attempt to understand the complex nature of the Muslim world.

Writing on post-Orientalist scholarship, Mahmood tells us that the

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search for greater understanding of gender and Islam is not straightforward; there are conceptual booby traps to be avoided, and problems reflective of shifting historical realities also deserve considerations. She raises the question about the persistence in the use of the term “Muslim women” in the literature. She argues that the term “Christian women” is hardly used when writing about women in non-Muslim lands. In addition to this persistence of terminologies in the literature, she also talks about the failure to tackle the problems of gender in relational terms. Arguing that even in predominantly Muslim-populated countries there are sizable non-Muslim populations – which makes theorizing about “Muslim women” difficult – Mahmood contends that the coexistence of Muslims and others from different religious backgrounds complicates the drawing of conclusions without taking into account the influence of such cultural relationships.

Furthermore, she cites the case of Indian Muslims who live in a predominantly Hindu society but whose sizable numbers makes it dangerous and unwise to describe their condition as inhabitants of a Hindu culture. Due to these theoretical difficulties, she writes:

It is crucial for scholars interested in these issues to ask how the rubric of ‘Islamic cultures’ articulates with the narrow discourse of nationalism that reduces heterogeneous forms of religion and ethnic belonging into the simplistic calculus of minority and majority culture.

Mahmood also addresses the question of economic transformation in Muslim societies and how such a process affects women. She analyzes the relationship between this phenomenon and the rise of the Islamic revivalism. She sees a paradox in the embrace of Muslim women in Islamist movements and the problematic complication of the gender questions.

In the chapter written by Professor Marcia Hermansen, we come to learn a great deal about “The Academic Study of Sufism at American Universities.” Hermansen’s paper examines three interrelated issues: the place of Sufism within the broader curriculum in Islamic studies, as well as some themes and approaches to this subject taken by western scholars; the academic context in which Sufi studies are located; and

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the role of contemporary positions in Islamic and western thought in shaping the academic study of Sufism. Hermansen also addresses issues she believes would be of interest to Muslims who are likely to find this study helpful in discerning western opinions on and attitudes towards Islam in general and Sufism in particular.

Hermansen begins by looking at the institutional foundations for the study of Sufism. She raises a number of theoretical and practical points. With respect to the institutional basis for the study of Sufism as a phenomenon and an object of academic inquiry, she wants the readers to notice the difference between the western and the Muslim contexts. In Muslim lands, colleges and universities patterned after their western counterparts tend to harbor their academic programs in theology departments or halls of learning that parallel their Catholic or Protestant counterparts in the U.S.

Another institutional point is the difficulty in defining what is specifically American in terms of scholarship and scholars. Hermansen states that the period after World War II led to the hegemonic presence of European scholars such as Hamilton Gibb, Gustave von Grunebaum, and Franz Rosenthal. According to her, one aspect of this Orientalism “was the sense of ‘Islam’ as constituting a unifying essential and somewhat static factor unifying disparate cultural, intellectual and social realities in Muslim societies.”

Echoing some of the points mentioned earlier about the interplay between area studies and Islamic studies (and by extension Sufi studies), Hermansen reviews the transformation in the academy with respect to the location of Islamic studies programs. By the 1970s, she maintains, within the academy, programs such as Near Eastern studies departments were becoming rare and their services were being channeled elsewhere. The growth in area studies as a companion partner to Islamic studies in certain universities led not only to the primacy of the social sciences in the degree-granting institutions, but also led in the 1960s and 1970s to the majority of M.A. and Ph.D. graduates in non-western traditions to come out of area studies programs.

Hermansen addresses how the establishment of religious studies as an important component in many universities created the opportunity for courses on Sufism to thrive among undergraduates.

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Hermansen then traces the effects of the Cold War on the American development of centers of learning that focused on the languages of the Muslim world. Taking note of the circumstances that came together to make this possible, she argues that the rigorous qualifying requirements limited the number of potential recruits for Islamic studies or Sufism. Those who embarked upon such a task were expected to gain command of two European languages and two Muslim languages, particularly Arabic. Some of the students who wished to specialize in Islamic studies or Sufism had to develop proficiency in these languages and, at one point, were expected to service in the government. In this context, the role of Public Law 480, which gave the U.S. access to the academic resources of the developing countries, was critical in promoting American scholarship of foreign countries.

Identifying those who became students in such Islamic studies and Sufism studies programs, Hermansen tells us that in the 1970s they could be characterized as “a part of the ‘generation of seekers’ who pursued personal edification as well as intellectual depth in graduate programs.” Building on this point, she argues, “unlike the European experience, the American academic encounter with Islam was more comparative and of varied interests in aspects of Islam and therefore in Sufism.”

Explaining how Islamic studies and Sufism studies developed in the American academy, Hermansen tells us that the dominant approach to comparative religion during the 1960s and 1970s was the “Patternist school” inspired by the works of Mircea Eliade of the University of Chicago. This approach to the study of mythology and traditional metaphysics beyond the Abrahamic religions created room for the study of Sufism. Together with phenomenology, this patternist approach allowed Sufism to shine in the academy.

In addition to these two theoretical approaches within the study of comparative religion, another important development that took place related to the debates within the walls of social sciences and the humanities. In her view, this led “to the increased role of theory derived from anthropology and literary theory as well as new critical initiatives such as feminism, post-modernism, and post colonial theory that interrogated the very foundations of the production of

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authoritative knowledge.” Hermansen sees Edward Said’s seminal work on *Orientalism* “as a major force in the challenge to occidental hegemony that heretofore dominated the views of other outside of the West.” Yet, while noting and appreciating this development, she argues that despite the paradigm shifts, the marginalization of Sufism has largely remained unchanged in the academies of Muslim countries as well as in Muslim organizations in the West.

Looking at the teaching of Sufism in the American academy, Hermansen talks about the pervasive hypothesis or trope on the decline of Islam in general and Sufism in particular. This idea was decline dominant in the years after the end of World War II. Since the 1960s, what Daniel Lerner called “the passing of traditional society” was also upheld proudly by many secular modernizers in the Muslim world. That idea has been discarded by the scholars now and religion is back with a vengeance. Due to this state of affairs, she argues, scholars writing on the subjects of Islam and Sufism are caught in the struggle between competing paradigms about Muslim life and culture. She argues that Sufism is increasingly perceived as a desirable intellectual and spiritual lifestyle that could serve as a bridge in the ideological contest between the radical and the moderate Muslims.

Besides this analysis of the theoretical changes in the study of Islam and its mystical dimension, Sufism, Hermansen explores the approaches to the study of the subject and the development of discipleship within the academic realm and beyond. She argues that scholars such as Naser, Schuon, and others have created networks of students and disciples and their writings are widely sought.

Jane Smith’s contribution in this volume is unique in that the topic of the study of Islam in Christian theological seminaries has rarely been studied with such thoroughness and perception, and with a wealth of personal experience in teaching Islam in a Christian theological seminary. Professor Smith notes that students in these seminaries want to include Islam in their program of studies to know more about Islamic scriptures, traditions, theology and law, and to understand the similarities and differences between Christians and Muslims. More recent interests of students in Christian seminaries focus on the reasons of the rise and spread of Islam in America and Europe; Islam and violence;

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Islamic theology of jihad; the status and welfare of Christians in Muslim majority societies; the place of Islam and Muslims in the religious pluralism of Western societies; and potential for Christian-Muslim understanding and cooperation in projects from welfare work in local communities to global peacemaking.

Of course, as Professor Jane Smith notes, some faculty members in these seminaries teach Islam primarily “with a hope of advancing the cause of the Christian mission” but there is also an interest in the academic study of Islam and the motivation to engage Muslims in interfaith dialogue. Interestingly, a few seminary institutions now have full-time faculty positions in Islamic studies that are filled by Muslims and “more Muslim students are finding their way into seminary classrooms.”

Christopher Buck’s chapter on “The Constitutionality of Teaching Islam: The University of North Carolina Qur’an Controversy” is a brilliant case study of the “perils” of studying Islam – even in an academic environment – in a political context charged with both fear of, and hostility toward, Islam in the post-9/11 era. The controversy generated by the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill faculty requirement that its 2002 incoming freshman class, as part of its Summer Reading Program, read and discuss Michael Sell’s *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* raised a number of important constitutional and pedagogical issues. Michael Sell’s translation of the Qur’an was included in the reading list to promote a better understanding of Islam through the study of its founding text. Although the reading list was compiled by the faculty on purely academic grounds, a conservative Christian activist group, the Family Policy Network (FPN), filed a suit in the U.S. District Court in July 2002 seeking a preliminary injunction to prevent UNC from conducting its summer program. The FPN alleged that UNC violated the Establishment clause of the First Amendment and abridged students’ right to the free exercise of religion by requiring them to study Islam against their will.

The FPN lost the case in the District Court and again at the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals but what made the national headlines was, in the words of Michael Sells, “suing the Koran on behalf of the Bible.” It



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was also a case testing the limits of both religious pluralism and possibilities and limits of academic freedom in American universities. To see and interpret the inclusion of the Qur'an in the summer reading program for freshman students as an attempt by the UNC to convert the students to Islam – a violation of both the Establishment clause and the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment – is to ignore the very nature and purpose of the study of religion in a secular academic setting. As Professor Buck argues in his chapter, “To acknowledge the beauty and depth of the Qur'an is not to convert to Islam, but to converse with it and with Muslims who are enlivened by it.” To know the Qur'an, therefore, is “to better prepare oneself for inevitable encounters with Muslims both in America and abroad – not as the exotic “other” somewhere in the distant Orient, but as the religion and way of life of our fellow compatriots at home – friends, neighbors, and, through increasing religious intermarriage, that of our immediate and extended families.”

Professor Buck's paper, in order to gain a proper perspective on the rationale behind teaching the Qur'an in the university, begins with a brief introduction to the Qur'an, its world-historical significance, a history of its revelation, collection and editing, and a succinct discussion of its major themes. These discussions are then followed by an examination of Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an* and then a detailed discussion and analysis of the legal case brought against the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and how the courts resolved the issue in favor of UNC taking into account the constitutional norms and with reference to a broad spectrum of cases that form the body of educational law related to the teaching of religion in public schools and in higher education institutions. Professor Buck's paper in this volume is the first comprehensive study of the religious, political, legal-constitutional, and pedagogical aspects of the “teaching the Qur'an” controversy that engaged the media, courts, religious groups, and educational institutions for more than two years and brought the issue of Islam and its study into sharp focus in the post-9/11 America.

In this volume, we also address the question of Islamic studies in terms of the contents of courses that introduce American students to the history, tradition, and culture of Islam. Working on the assump-

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tion that the collective efforts of scholars teaching and writing about Islam have over the years converged on a number of points, we set out to explore their course outlines. Our study shows that teaching Islam at introductory level involves a variety of approaches. Some scholars focus primarily on Islamic beliefs and practices and the life and teachings of the Prophet (ṢAAS).<sup>\*</sup> The focus on the biography of the Prophet is central to all the narratives in any Introduction to Islam course. Some other scholars rely heavily on the reading of religious texts – selected portions of the Qur'an, a selection of Prophetic Hadith, and some juristic texts. Those instructors who come from comparative religion background emphasize on Islamic theology and belief patterns as well as on major intellectual currents in Islam. Shari'ah and law constitute another popular focus in some cases. Another approach is to emphasize the role of Islam in history, both as a decisive political force in its formative phase and as a world civilization in later years. In recent years, instructors have shown increasing interest in contemporary Islamic developments, allocating considerable time for discussion of topics such as Islam and politics, Islamic resurgence and modern Islamic movements, Islam and the west, Islam and democracy, Islam and human rights, Islam in the west, and Islam and violence. Instructors of introductory courses on Islam often bring their own research interests to the classroom, sometime spending inordinate time on specialized topics such as Sufism and the issues related to gender in Islam. An interesting insight emerges when one looks at the intellectual preferences of male and female instructors: Male instructors tend to be more focused on Islamic history, Islam in the modern world, and Islamic institutions. Female teachers, on the other hand, tend to focus on gender, human rights, and law and Shari'ah.

Our study shows that the universe of instructors of men and women who teach these 101 courses includes persons specializing in eight different disciplines. 48 percent are in Religious Studies (excluding Islam), 15 percent are in Near Eastern/Middle Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 12.6 percent are in History, and 12.6 are in Islamic Studies. Overall, the statistical evidence suggests instructors are not

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<sup>\*</sup>(ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammed is mentioned.

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Islamic studies specialists and the pool of available talents is truly multi-disciplinary in training and research.

This finding reinforces what Brannon Wheeler and his colleagues reported earlier: the instructors of Islam 101 courses are invariably drawn from outside the field of mainstream Islamic studies. Some enter the domain of Islamic studies because of their earlier interest in Biblical, Jewish, or Indian religion studies. What is remarkable about our findings is that most American colleges and universities have not yet found it necessary to recruit persons of high quality and training to teach introductory courses on Islam. While several scholars have lamented this fact, the situation remains largely unchanged despite considerable interest in all things Islamic in recent years in the west.

Also noteworthy are the scholars' responses to the "publish or perish syndrome." Almost 78 percent of the scholars had published at least one book related to their area of expertise. Almost 39 percent had published two to five books and 16 percent of the instructors had published more than five books. Twenty-two percent of all the scholars in our sample have published articles and book chapters. It is important to note, however, that not all – or even majority – of these publications of in the mainstream of Islamic studies as such.

Another interesting finding in our study is the list of the most widely used textbooks for introductory courses on Islam. Our survey gives us the following breakdown of authors whose texts are most widely used in these courses: Frederick Mathewson Denny's *Introduction to Islam* is number one; 27 percent of instructors required this text for their classes. Professor Denny's book is followed by John Esposito's *Islam: The Straight Path* and Michael Sells's *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. Besides these three texts, there is N.J. Dawood's translation of the Qur'an is also widely used by the instructors.

In addition to scholarly papers, the volume also includes a report of two focus group discussions among a group of leading Islamic studies professional that were held at Georgetown University, Washington, DC and Temple University, Philadelphia. The idea was to elicit insights of the scholars based on their personal experiences and observations on the problems associated with the study of Islam in American universities. These conversations were supplemented by written

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responses to our questionnaire by scholars who could not personally attend the focus group meetings at Georgetown and Temple. Professor Carl Ernst's observations in this chapter are drawn from his notes published elsewhere. These informal conversations that were conducted without any structured questionnaire eventually formed their own structure as they gained momentum and enthusiasm. A rare exercise in the field, these conversations contain an enormous wealth of insights into the state of Islamic studies in American universities – the origin and the development of the discipline; its theoretical approaches and methodological orientations; the training of scholars and the institutional structures that evolved to impart this training; the development and consolidation of sub-fields; government and private funding sources and their impact on the direction of research and teaching; the growth and the role of area studies centers; orientalist and post-orientalist approaches to the study of Islam and Islamic societies; and the impact of 9/11 on how Islam and Muslims are seen and studied.

This volume is intended to inform and educate the general reader and to invite our colleagues in the field to join the dialogue about the nature, history, and the current state of Islamic studies in the U.S. and to critically examine the factors as to why Islamic studies as a discipline has lagged behind the study of other Semitic religions in the American academy. The essays included in this volume provide much-needed data and analysis that could be useful in enhancing the quality of teaching Islam in colleges and universities and in opening new avenues of research in the field. Additionally, there are data and analyses that will be immensely valuable for educational planners and administrators who are interested in strengthening programs of Islamic studies in institutions of higher learning.

SULAYMAN S. NYANG, MUMTAZ AHMAD AND  
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# CONTRIBUTORS

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and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith (1999), as well as a number of book chapters, encyclopedia articles, and scholarly journal articles. Many of Buck's publications may be downloaded for free at Christopher Buck's academic website at [www.christopherbuck.com](http://www.christopherbuck.com).

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## ESSAY I

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# Quixotic Quests: In Pursuit of Islam

ANOUAR MAJID

TO discuss the state of Islamic studies in the U.S. is ultimately to talk about America, if one chooses the narrow scope of geographies involved, or of the West, if one expands the scope of analysis beyond the territorial limits of the U.S. The layers of analysis keep unfolding ad infinitum, as the nucleus of our long quest for meaning keeps eluding us and shifting toward new sets of theoretical challenges. Islam may well be an impossible subject of study – it is too broad a category, one that comes awfully close to mimicking life itself. Just as college students cannot sign up for a course on life (despite what many may think), no one can seriously major in Islam. We know that Islam is *dīn wa dunyā*, a philosophy that covers the spiritual and the temporal life on this earth and in the hereafter. Islam, in short, claims to cover the whole human experience, a cradle-to-grave road map that leaves nothing to improvisation. No detail falls outside the all-seeing eye of the faith; everything, with the help of the ever-ready ‘*ulamā*’, the religious scholars, must bend to its dictates. Islam, for Muslims, is nothing short of life itself.

How then does one approach the study of Islam in American colleges and universities? Naturally, the description of basics is essential: contexts and actors in the saga of the religion’s appearance; the nature and pillars of the faith; the study of the large and complex corpus of canon law and jurisprudence; the main schools, or *madhāhib*; and the historic split and differences between the Sunnis and the Shia, a division that has acquired significant meaning in the post-Saddam Hussein

Middle East. To describe such matters would require a good deal of time and attention, for, as with other subject areas, these are complex matters with voluminous literatures. One could therefore spend a good number of years studying the nooks and crannies of the faith, wrestling, for instance, with what constitutes legitimacy and authority in Islam. If the study of Islam were confined to such matters, the study of Islam would resemble the study of other Oriental religions that are significant to interested scholars, American Muslims, and, perhaps, people interested in the study of world cultures.

However, Islam is not a mere religion; it is, perhaps, more *dunyā* than *dīn*. Islam is often compared and contrasted to the West, a secular entity, as it used to be with Christianity in the past. Not only that, but the meaning of Islam in the U.S. cannot be read outside of the process of America's self-definition, for, like Europe and the West in general, the U.S. was established as the antithesis of Islam: first the refuge of pure Christianity, then as a beacon of freedom in sharp contrast to Islamic despotism and the slavish condition of Muslims in general.

To study Islam in the U.S. one must study America itself, or, at least, the aspects of American history that shed light on the experience of Islam in this continent. The 2006 election of Keith Ellison from Minnesota to the U.S. Congress was the first time in American history a Muslim was so honored, and reached back to the legacy of Muslim slaves in antebellum America. The line between, say, the West African Job ben Solomon and Keith Ellison turns and twists the longer we depart from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the legacy of the stoic African pioneers is certainly not erased. The spirit of resistance and the quest for justice continues to animate U.S. Muslim minorities, whether native-born or immigrant, not least because the plight of Muslims in America cannot be read outside the historic clash of Islam and Christendom, beginning with the emergence of Islam itself in the lands of Arabia.

For if America is a progeny (however idiosyncratic) of European culture, the transatlantic extension of a long history of struggle with an upstart Arabian religion borrowing from, and claiming to surpass, the Church in matters of divine legitimacy, then such a history, which found expression in the statements of the first Protestant, Martin

Luther, was bound to emigrate to the U.S., as had Iberian prejudices to the lands south of the border. The Christian dispute with Islam, we need to recall, has never been a purely academic matter; the rivalry of the faiths was about self-definition. Europe would not be Europe without Islam, and Islam would not be Islam without Christianity or Judaism. The spirit of defiance was born with Islam itself, intensifying the Christian march toward orthodoxy. Despite all exhortations in the Qur'an to respect other monotheistic faiths, the clash of religions, and, therefore, of civilizations, was born with the advent of Islam. Things have not changed much since then, and are unlikely to change in the future, as long as faiths, with their universalist outlooks, make blanket claims on our lives.

Islam, then, was marked by its critical, rebellious gene, but Europe, too, emerged as the antithesis of *dar al-Islām*, the stronghold of the Christian faith. Just as Europe cannot be imagined without Islam, just as the U.S., not to mention the entire American continent, is inconceivable without the long war to defeat the dangerous imposture of Muhammad. It is not an accident that the 1492 defeat of the Nasirid kingdom in Granada, the last bastion of Islam on Iberian soil was also the beginning of a new world order, the discovery of a continent of natives whose fate was subjection to the sword, enslavement, or policies of annihilation. The New World was imagined as the long-sought-after utopia, a world without Muslims (although the natives quickly acquired quite a few Muslim traits), but such fantasies were soon tempered by the realities of globalization, for one cannot do much in this world without coming across Muslims. Thus Islam, despite restrictive immigration policies, found its way to America, shaping theologies and philosophies of liberation, even as the preachers of freedom enslaved Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

To what extent is the study of Islam in the U.S. such an undertaking different from the first medieval Latin translations of the Qur'an or from George Sale's English version in 1734? Christian leaders, like their secular descendants today, wanted better knowledge of this mysterious faith, but the driving impulse was not knowledge for its own sake, but an understanding that culminates in the evisceration of Islam – knowledge, in other words, for domination and control. Edward

Said famously lamented and condemned such an approach. Governments act out of interest, to increase, or perpetuate, the power of the nation they represent; to expect them to act out of mere curiosity is unrealistic. Muslims also conquered without seeking to know the cultures they conquered. The only piece of information needed was that the conquered were not Muslim. Even today, despite centuries of defeat and struggle, the study of Christianity, Judaism, and non-monotheistic religions remains laughably peripheral. The Muslim superiority complex is etched in graying rock.

Study of Islam in the U.S. exposes the vexed and troubling histories of Islam and the West. Timothy Marr's recent book on American Islamicism, a particular form of American Orientalism, leaves no doubt that Islam "has provided a powerful reservoir of global rhetoric and imagery that Americans have regularly appropriated to authorize and to criticize cultural constructions of national mission, religious faith, moral behaviors, ethnic identity, and gender performance." America's "national project" would have been different without negative references to Islam.<sup>1</sup> As Robert J. Allison argued in his classic, *The Crescent Obscured*:

a flood of books on the Muslim world poured from the American presses in the 1790s: captivity narratives; histories, including two biographies of Muhammad; novels and poems; and the first American edition of the *Arabian Nights*. This literature conveyed a persistent picture of the Muslim world, an inverted image of the world the Americans were trying to create anew.<sup>2</sup>

The belief that Islam fostered tyranny was deeply ingrained in the revolutionary mindset, and no sooner had the U.S. got its independence (first officially recognized by the Muslim nation of Morocco) that it found itself fighting the Muslim Barbary states and ransoming American hostages from Muslim rulers. Sounding like suicide bombers today, Americans, in plays and action, prided themselves in their willingness to die in the fight against such a mighty foe. In a five-act play called *The Young Carolinians, or, Americans in Algiers*, published in 1818, a young gambler is redeemed by taking up the cause of rescuing captive sailors, stating "our sailors shall make the crescent bend to

our fixed stars.”<sup>3</sup> The Islamic threat justified the construction of a naval force and fanned the nation’s nascent sentiments of patriotism. By trumpeting the exploits of Stephen Decatur and William Eaton, “the Navy was no longer a threat to Americans but had itself been transformed into an emblematic instrument of national honor.”<sup>4</sup> Even the U.S. national anthem, celebrating the victory of 1814, echoes an older version commemorating the defeat of Muslims in the Mediterranean:

*And pale beam’d the Crescent, its splendor obscur’d  
By the light of the star-spangled flag of our nation  
Where each flaming star gleam’d a meteor of war  
And the turban’d head bowed to the terrible glare  
Then mixt with the olive and the laurel shall wave  
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.<sup>5</sup>*

By 1831, the U.S. Navy could reduce the town of Kuala Batu in Sumatra to ashes because the Malays, a “band of lawless pirates,” in President Andrew Jackson’s formulation, had captured an American vessel following a trade dispute. That same year, the Naval Monument, honoring the lives of Americans who had fought Libyans in the Mediterranean, was placed near the Capitol in Washington.<sup>6</sup> It was only after the Ottoman power ebbed in the 1830s that repulsion gradually gave way to pure exoticism, and even a more realistic portrait of Turks, for instance.

The essence of Islam, however, would remain unchanged, or, more accurately, caught between the extremes of existential threat and benign exoticism. The new nation kept Britain’s imperial outlook, as Malini Johar Schueller argued, deploying the same language of liberty to launch missions against Arabs and Muslims. While military victories opened the way to the long-term scramble for hegemony in the region. Islamicism, with its Orientalist tropes, started guiding, as Douglas Little showed in *American Orientalism*, national foreign policy toward Arabs and Muslims in general. America’s “imperialism of virtue”<sup>7</sup> would henceforth be the strategy of choice for such an intractable people.



We are accustomed today to the incendiary discourse of the evangelical right, with its dedicated support to the state of Israel and long-term goal of converting Jews in anticipation of the second advent of Christ. Perhaps we think this is the outcome of a new fundamentalism, no older than the twentieth century itself. Not so. The recapture of the Holy Land, through the removal of Ottoman/Muslim obstacle, and the return of the Jews to their Promised Land in anticipation of the Second Coming was a driving goal of the American Board of Commission for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), founded in 1810. When Levi Parsons, a pioneering missionary in Palestine and western Asia died, less than five years after the Middle East mission was launched in 1819, a requiem celebrated him with such lines: “Thy spirit, Parsons, lur’d by seraph’s song/...who like him [shall] destroy Mohammed’s sway?”<sup>8</sup>

The defeat of Islam in its native lands was a longstanding policy of the U.S. Although Americans cheered the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and the schisms within the Islamic community, Islam proved to be resilient, a fact that not only led to disappointment, but also induced some grudging admiration on the part of a few missionaries. The failure to convert Muslims, however, channeled missionary energies into public works, which, over time, “had a lasting impact in the region and help[ed] to foster the rise of Arab nationalism.”<sup>9</sup>

Through islamicist consciousness, anything that seemed out of the bounds of Protestant morality or republican values was orientalized and dismissed as some sort of Islamic outpost within the expanding territory of the U.S. Thus, no sooner had the small community of Yerba Buena been baptized by Anglo-Saxon occupiers as San Francisco, and soon attracted all the vices of the sea to its waterfront district, that the latter was named the “Barbary Coast.” Orientalizing “western spaces” helped contain the Mormon movement, during its westbound exodus to the Rockies, around the same time San Francisco was established in 1846.

The initial reaction to Mormonism, its leader and prophets, was nothing less than a call to arms to resist the Muslim infiltration of America. Mormons were seen as what one what might today call “sleeper cells,” fifth columnists for the Muslim powers in some distant,

nebulous East. The Mormon migration was dubbed a hijrah, and Utah, the Holy Land, and Salt Lake City, a new Makkah. Joseph Smith Jr. was “the Yankee Mahomet,” or “the American Mahomet,” and his Book of Mormons, a new Qur’an. Brigham Young, who took over after Smith’s death, was also called “the New World Mohammed” and “the Mahomet of Salt Lake.” And so it went, with the issue of polygamy giving further ammunition to the new religion’s detractors. Novels, plays, and poems depicted a world of harems and seraglios. In her 1882 book, *The Women of Mormonism*, Frances Willard, the President of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, saw Utah as nothing less than Turkey in America: “Turkey is in our midst. Modern Mohammedanism has its Mecca at Salt Lake, where Prophet Heber C. Kimball speaks of his wives as “cows.” Clearly the Koran was Joseph Smith’s model, so closely followed as to exclude even the poor pretension of originality in his foul “revelation.””<sup>10</sup>

In the end, such animus, as during the Barbary wars and now after 9/11, turned out to be the proverbial negative advertisement, leading many to inquire about this new (and perhaps exotic) faith at home. And so, like Islam, it kept growing. Moreover, the dwindling power of the Ottoman Empire, and, therefore, of Islam, and the rising commercial and military might of the U.S. attenuated the anxiety associated with Islam and replaced it with a continuous romantic exoticism that influenced American customs and costumes. American “howadjis” undertook “cultural pilgrimages” to the Levant in search of fabled Circassian and eastern female beauties. “The Eastern Beauty is another glory than the pale sweetness of your Blonde,” wrote well-known traveler George William Curtis in 1852.<sup>11</sup> Yet no heavenly bodies were to be found in the East, only regular, heavily-clad women, leading to quite a few disappointed tourists. The only nudity found was in Hiram Power’s sculpture, *The Greek Slave*, depicting an angelic woman in Turkish captivity. So popular was this sculpture that it toured the country between 1847 and 1850, giving average Americans their first exposure to nudity in art (conveniently displaced onto the Orient).

Islam influenced women’s fashion, too, allowing women to use models of Turkish and Islamic dress to resist their sartorial degradation

that weighed them down with layers of clothing and restricted their movement and agility. Thus, Amelia Jenks Bloomer introduced her pair of Turkish-style trousers, allowing American to appropriate Islamic notions of eastern beauty and reclaim the harem as a site of freedom. However, the press pilloried the women's dress reform movement. American women were depicted as allies of Muslim infidels, waging holy war on Christians. In 1852, a critic wrote for the *Knickerbocker*, asking incredulously, "Shall the harems of the East set the fashion for the boudoirs of the West?...Have we quit Paris, dear delightful Paris! for the Sublime Porte and her mantua-makers for the Blue Beards of Constantinople?"<sup>12</sup> Under relentless pressure and persecution, the reform movement eventually died, only to be reborn "during the bicycle craze of the 1890s."<sup>13</sup> By that time, American elite crack troops had taken to wearing Algerian costumes. These were the Zouave soldiers, named after their French namesakes, who adopted the dress after conquering Algiers in 1830. As the nineteenth century wore on, freemasons established Arabic orders and orientalized the habit of smoking, turning Islam into a symbol of liberty as much as it had been one of despotism, only a few decades earlier.

Islamicism, then, cuts both ways. It exoticizes Islam by embellishing it with lavish displays of Orientalia and, at the same time, denounces it as a mortal threat to the republic and its way of life. One could see this cultural habit playing itself out in the Maghreb – Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia – in the post-World War II period, when American troops landed in Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers during Operation Torch to chase the Germans out of North Africa. General George S. Patton, who led the U.S. contingent in Morocco, saw in Morocco a mixture of Old Testament and the Arabian Nights, while not failing to note, as other writers did, "the similarity between the Arab and the Mexican."<sup>14</sup>

Even as Morocco was being exoticized in films like *Casablanca* (released soon after Operation Torch was launched), army publications were describing the local Arabs as lazy and good-for-nothing natives. The Algiers edition of *Stars and Stripes* could write matter-of-factly in 1943, "if the Arab was often a pest and pretty generally a nuisance, he nevertheless was indispensable. He shined our shoes, sold

us oranges, delivered eggs to our front lines right through enemy fire, and continually reminded us what blessings we had in the form of chewing gum, chocolate, and cigarettes.” No longer a warrior, the North African Arab has thus been reduced to a neutral, small-time peddler.<sup>15</sup>

Images of Morocco as an undisturbed biblical landscape (the same topography one finds in Barbary captivity narratives in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) and a land of Oriental mystery were part of the lore that attracted Americans. Brian Edwards detailed other images in his *Morocco Bound*. Tangier, the safe house for all sorts of western malcontents, was equally admired and condemned for its excess and licentiousness, a free republic, as one writer put it, beholden to no state or nation, surviving on the wits of its residents and refugees, the whole representing almost every race and creed in the known world.

The remarkably constant image of Islam in America’s changing ideological make-up legitimizes American patriotism and contributes to the country’s strong sense of exceptionalism. “Since the beginnings of the settlement of what is today the U.S.,” Marr wrote,

The Islamic world has formed an extrahemispheric horizon that Americans have engaged to define the cultural contours of their changing sense of worldliness. The cultural discourse of islamicism dislocated Islam from its diverse everyday practices and recalibrated it into an imaginary resource for articulating local, regional, and national situations within a broader planetary perspective. Because early Americans were largely unable or unwilling to understand the religious ethos held by Muslims themselves, they imported islamicist images instead and then applied and elaborated them in attempts to generate a more global relevance for their varied domestic productions. Islamicist expression therefore is ultimately an invented appropriation of the difference of Islam used to mark American boundaries rather than an intercultural means of measuring Muslim meanings.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, Americans have consistently failed to meet Islam in its own terms. How then does one begin to teach about Islam in a cultural and political environment impregnated with deeply-rooted prejudice, whether such prejudice has some basis in fact or not? Not all

American criticisms of Islam were necessarily cut from the same Orientalist cloth. It would be too simplistic to overlook the world-historic event of the American Revolution and the zealotry for universal freedom (echoes of which are still being heard today) that it unleashed. Islam, like Catholicism and monarchical regimes, seemed relics of a dysfunctional past.

The emotions, views, and philosophies that emerge from such an event are certainly qualitatively different from the anti-Islamic attitudes of the earlier colonial period or of European ones (although in Europe, too, attitudes changed after the French Revolution, launched on the heels of the American one). The U.S. has never had a problem accepting private Islamic practices, but the country, which tied its future to remaking the world in its own image, has always found Muslim nations wanting in matters of economic and political freedom. Islam has not done well politically in its control of worldly matters.

This is a rather simplistic sketch of the tensions that traverse American-Muslim relations, one that nevertheless helps us to conceptualize, perhaps a little bit more concretely, the points of what may be unbridgeable differences and contention. Whenever the subject of Islam is raised in America (including in the classroom or in scholarship), it never appears as a neutral category, cleansed from polemics. The response to Islam may vary in intensity, as the ghosts of non-Muslim enemies occupy center stage every now and then, but Islam always returns as the reliable phantom to haunt the American imagination. The Taliban were supported during the last days of the Communist threat, but, today, they are America's mortal foe. Islam is the enemy that never fails to acquit itself of its historic function as arch-enemy most of the time and strategic ally on occasion. As the African-American Democratic presidential hopeful, Barack Obama survived a first round of slanderous attacks linking him to Islam, via his middle name (Hussein) or to a *madrasah* (since all *madrasahs*, or religious schools, are imagined as breeding grounds for Muslim terrorists). The deployment of Islam to disqualify an African-American from the U.S. presidency, or, as had happened a few months earlier in the case of the Muslim Keith Ellison, from the U.S. Congress, prove that Islam has lost none of its spectral powers.

# NOTES

- 1 Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.9.
- 2 Robert J. Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The U.S. and the Muslim World 1776-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.xvii.
- 3 Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, p.65.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.69.
- 5 Robert J. Allison wrote: “The parallels between this song and the one [Key] wrote after watching the British bombard Fort McHenry in September 1814 are striking. The tune is the same, as is the rhyme scheme of the chorus. In the more famous later version, the fate of the ‘star-spangled flag of our nation’ is in doubt throughout the perilous fight. In this song, however, it obscures the Muslim crescent, whose hollow splendor is cast in shadow by the true glory of the American flag and the republic it symbolizes.” Allison, *The Crescent Obscured*, pp.205-6.
- 6 Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, pp.78-79, 81.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.35; Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The U.S. and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.85.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.131.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.207.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp.271-272.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.286.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.287.
- 14 Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America’s Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp.29-32.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp.56-57.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp.296-97.

THE collection of papers in this volume documents the study of Islam in American Universities. Over the last few decades the United States has seen significant growth in the study of Islam and Islamic societies in institutions of higher learning fueled primarily by events including economic relations of the U.S. with Muslim countries, migration of Muslims into the country, conversion of Americans to Islam, U.S. interests in Arab oil resources, involvement of Muslims in the American public square, and the tragic events of 9/11.

Although there is increasing recognition that the study of Islam and the role of Muslims is strategically essential in a climate of global integration, multiculturalism, and political turmoil, nevertheless, the state of Islamic Studies in America is far from satisfactory. The issue needs to be addressed, particularly as the need for intelligent debate and understanding is continuously stifled by what some have termed an “Islam industry” run primarily by fly-by journalists, think tank pundits, and cut-and-paste “experts.”