# *Editorial*

In his recently published *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*, Stephen Prothero argues that although the United States is secular by law, it is deeply religious by choice: it has a Christian majority of roughly 85 percent, more than 90 percent of adults believe in God, more than eighty percent report that religion is personally important, and more than seventy percent pray daily.[1] He also notes that with 1,200 mosques nationwide, Islam will soon surpass Judaism as America's second largest religion, if it has not already done so.[2] However, he opines that although Americans' commitment to religion may run deep, their knowledge of it runs shallow. In her "Americans get an 'F' in religion," Cathy Lynn Grossman, discussing Prothero's book, writes: "Sometimes dumb sounds cute: Sixty percent of Americans can't name five of the Ten Commandments, and 50% of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married."[3]

I wonder how American Muslims – who a recently publicized Pew Research Center poll shows to be 65 percent foreign-born but middle class, mainstream and "highly assimilated into American Society" – would perform on a similar test.[4] In my introductory courses, I have had Muslim students identify *minbar* as "minibar." Once, when asked to write their name and its meaning on a piece of paper, a student named Muhammad wrote: "I don't know the meaning of my name, but I will find out and will let you know next week!"

Colleagues who teach "Introduction to Islam" courses usually have satirical stories of their own. Discussing Grossman's article, Tazim Kassam, editor of the American Academy of Religion's *Spotlight on Teaching*, cautions that dumb may be cute, but, more importantly, that "dumb is dangerous and has terrible consequences."[5] The opposite is also true, for the scholarly production of knowledge can be dangerous and have terrible consequences (and thus can hardly be considered "cute"). For example, we can discern more than mere hints of these dangerous consequences in traces deposited by the academically produced "clash of civilizations" thesis on the sociopolitical landscape. In any event, knowledge production (or the lack thereof) is a product of historical processes that, as Edward Said has shown, leaves "its traces without necessarily leaving an inventory of them."[6]

The goal of this special issue is to take stock – "inventory," to borrow from Said – of the pedagogies, the historical and contemporary state of studying or teaching Islam in higher education as well as research on Muslims' lived experiences. This issue includes articles and reflective pieces on a wide range of related issues: from the most recent scholarship on American and British Muslim women's experiences in higher education, pedagogical issues in teaching Islam at select British and American institutes, to the study and teaching of Islam and Sufism.

Bridget Blomfield's unique "Studying Islam Abroad" covers an important topic that many of us who teach Islam in the academy often think about: taking students abroad to study Islam at a time when interest in such programs is growing among American students.[7] This allows them to acquire lived experiences of Muslim cultures, both positive and negative, while confronting their own biases. It is interesting to read how, as (broadly defined) "orientalists," the displaced students become "orientalized" themselves, how the observer becomes the practitioner.

Marcia Hermansen provides a fresh overview of the history and current situation of Sufi studies at American universities. By locating the place of Sufism within the broader Islamic studies curriculum and examining some of the main themes and approaches, she points out that, historically, Sufi studies has played a larger role within the western academic study of Islam than at academic institutions in the traditional "Muslim world." She also discusses its potential for encouraging connectivity across regions and disciplines.

Fauzia Ahmad examines British South Asian Muslim women's participation and experiences of higher education and concludes that, contrary to the "religious and cultural rebels" stereotypes, many Muslim women view their experiences positively in terms of academic, social, and personal benefits. Shabana Mir discusses American Muslim women and cross-gender interaction on university campuses in the context of examining the nature of pluralism. Her study showcases a very widespread phenomenon: cultural centers constructed out of the discourse of diversity are, in fact, sites of both complying to and resisting the dominant majority gaze as well as the pressures of their own Muslim culture.

Rosnani Hashim assesses the variables affecting the intellectual inertia of Malay graduates of Islamic studies programs. She identifies important problems, such as epistemological problems related to the inadequate conceptualization of knowledge and the lack of academic freedom, and recommends a more holistic and intellectually invigorating curriculum.

In the forum section, Brannon Wheeler describes the United States Naval Academy's Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies. A military setting may not be readily identified as an engaging site for producing knowledge about Islam. However, the curriculum, faculty, and list of invited speakers of the Kylan Jones-Huffman Memorial Lecture Series reflect an open and engaging academic environment. Tahir Abbas' reflection on teaching "Islam, Multiculturalism, and the State," which reveals the parallel concerns, similarities, and differences found between teaching similar courses in North American academic environments, is particularly instructive. Our final piece is Daniella Talmon-Heller's report on a workshop held at Ben-Gurion University on teaching Islam in Israeli institutions of higher learning. Readers will find issues facing teaching Islam in the Israeli setting, which is inevitably shaped by the tense climate of the Arab-Israeli conflict, quite interesting.

Due to the amount of material received for this issue, no doctoral abstracts are included. They will appear in the next issue, as usual.

Through this special issue, AJISS hopes to present a picture of the challenges and pitfalls, as well as the successes and failures, underpinning the scholarly production of Islam in academia.

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## Endnotes

1. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 23-25.
2. Ibid., 25.
3. *USA Today*, 7 March 2007. Available online at www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-03-07-teaching-religion-cover_N.htm. Accessed June 4, 2007.
4. Pew Research Centre poll, "Does Government Single Out Muslims for Extra Surveillance?" Available online at http://pewresearch.org/pubs/483/muslim-americans. Accessed June 4, 2007.
5. Tazim Kassam, *Spotlight on Teaching: News Media and Teaching Religion* 22, no. 3 (2007): editorial, p. 1.
6. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, eds., *The Edward Said Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 65.
7. See, for example, Martin van der Werf's "A Wide World of Risk: The Growth in Study Abroad Forces Colleges to Foresee Dangers Wherever Students Travel," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 March 2007.