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Special issue edited by Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst and
Zahra M. S. Ayubi, University of Vermont and Dartmouth
College

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Shifting Boundaries: the Study of Islam in the Humanities

Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst and Zahra M. S. Ayubi*

University of Vermont and Dartmouth College

In January 2015, two brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, forced their way into satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo's offices in Paris. They murdered eleven people, and wounded eleven more inside the offices; upon leaving, they killed a police officer. They identified themselves as Islamicists affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and stated that they attacked to avenge the Prophet Muhammad. The attack brought up issues of freedom of press, of French national identity, of *laïcité*, and (perhaps obviously) terrorism. As we might expect, campuses were quick to respond. The University of Vermont held a panel discussion titled "Free Speech Rights: France as a case in point," billed as a response to Charlie Hebdo, and sponsored by the French department. As the scholar of Islam in the Religion department, Ilyse was called on to offer parity and balance to a panel of scholars of modern France and French literature—to offer, it seemed, the "Muslim" perspective.

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In April, August, and October 2015, Saint Michael's College in Winooski, Vermont and the University of Vermont in Burlington, Vermont found themselves awash in anti-Islam, anti-Muslim literature. Identical flyers titled "Islam vs. Democracy" circulated across these campuses on three separate occasions. The flyers were posted in student unions, academic buildings, and dining halls. These flyers are unsigned, and convey the seemingly ubiquitous trope of Muslims and Islam as necessarily beyond the pale of democratic societies as well as unwaveringly bent toward the destruction of those democracies. The flyer contained a warning against Islam as well as a call to action—"Wake up!" it cried.

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In late November and early December 2015, Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, called for surveillance of American Muslims, then proposed that all

*Morgenstein Fuerst and Ayubi have contributed equally to the research and writing of this paper.

Muslims should be banned from entering the United States. The *Valley News* of rural New Hampshire contacted Zahra as a scholar of Islam for comment on how the current climate of Islamophobia in American politics is affecting Muslims of the Upper Connecticut River Valley. Following this, members of her department asked her to help plan a panel at Dartmouth Campus on the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment.

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On the first day of classes, Zahra has always asked students to introduce themselves and discuss why they are enrolled in her courses. Without fail, all of her students take Islam courses to fulfill their geopolitical urgency. Learning about Islam and Muslims' lives helps them make sense of their own lives and times. The second reason they take her courses is to fulfill degree requirements. It is no surprise that a course on Islam fulfills many general education requirements for the liberal arts degree. Her courses at Dartmouth fulfill both the non-western culture requirement as well as the distributive requirement of social analysis or international comparative studies. The fulfillment of these requirements with a single Islam class demonstrates how the study of Islam is a prime example of, and therefore integral to, the contemporary liberal arts college curriculum.

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These anecdotes speak to the many roles we play in our professorial jobs: the particular scholarly labor of research and teaching, where research is more narrow on a delineated field of expertise and teaching, while related to that expertise, takes a broader scope by necessity, especially when in the context of undergraduate education. It is also the work demanded in the above stories, of which these are a mere selection of many. As scholars of Islam, we are teachers of courses of self-evident value to students and administrators because of the position of Islam and Muslims in our socio-political milieu; we are often respondents, poised to explain all manner of global events involving Muslims; and we are interpreters of local and national evidences of anti-Islam or anti-Muslim rhetorics. These are many jobs in one, and all affect our research and scholarly production, just as the research shapes what we teach in the classroom and affects our presence in our various publics.

Critic and scholar of religion Russell McCutcheon in both "A Default of Critical Intelligence?"¹ and elsewhere² has rightfully addressed the need for scholars of religion

¹ Russell T. McCutcheon "A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 443–468.

² E.g., Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

to critically and carefully assess how we navigate public aspects of scholarship, mindful not to “caretake” even as we carefully navigate. He suggests, as well, that scholars of religion at universities already have a public—our classrooms. He notes that scholars of religion are translators, that we are responsible, as critics, not only for uncovering “rhetorical and ideological window dressings” but also for “teaching others to uncover” as well.³ Part of our essay thinks through what the above anecdotes represent (that is, the obviousness of the reason undergraduates may take an Islam class, the collegial request to serve on panels as “the Islam scholar,” or the presence of anti-Islam, anti-Muslim literature on our campuses) and what this might tell us about the shifting boundaries of theory, method, and engagement in Islamic studies. How does the field—including research agendas and pedagogy—change? If the work of scholars is not limited to scholarship, what can be said of the nature of the work we do in fields that comprise Islamic studies? And, which fields comprise as Islamic studies? How is Islamic studies humanistic?

Definitions and Boundaries of Islamic Studies and Acts of Scholarship

This special issue attends to these broad questions by highlighting scholarly research which expressly interrogates the spaces in which theory, method, and the study of Islam meet; pedagogies and trends in contemporary classrooms and departments; and the question of what Islamic studies *might* (and might not) *be*. The conference from which this edition draws—like the anecdotes above—moved between and among the experiences of scholars as researchers, colleagues, campus members, teachers, and public intellectuals. This is a purposeful location of the scholar in her scholarly contexts in its broadest conceptualization: the study of Islam in the humanities is undoubtedly affected by the shifting boundaries of what scholars do, where scholars work, how scholars publish, and what topics, geographies, and histories contour the study of Islam. It is simultaneously a purposeful location of scholarship about Islam and Muslims within broader categorizations of such scholarship into the field of Islamic studies within the broader study of religion.

Islamic Studies, a broad and porous field, is shaped by and in turn shapes humanities and humanistic disciplines. In this paper, we explore the ways in which the field of Islamic Studies is engaged in a dialectical relationship with the humanities, by standing at the nexus of responsive pedagogy and use of critical theories and methodologies. We argue that in this dialectical relationship, the field of Islamic studies both benefits from and contributes to the study of religion across the humanities, particularly through questioning *how* we study religions; we further suggest, as part of this dialectical relationship,

³ McCutcheon, “A Default of Critical Intelligence?”, 461.

that the disciplines engaged in the study of Islam distinctively contour the humanities and its theoretical frameworks, and internal debates about how to study and conceive of Islam are shaped by developing theories of humanistic inquiry. We first maintain that the academic study of Islam distinctively addresses crucial concerns of the contemporary academy—pedagogy, the value of the humanities, and critical theoretical advancement—and then introduce the contributions within this special edition thematically.

Where Islamic Studies fits in American liberal arts has shifted over time, indicating that the framing of Islamic religio-cultural data in the academy has been closely tied to global geopolitics involving Muslims. The study of Islam emerged in the western academy as part of Oriental studies and area studies programs. In 1974, Charles Adams lamented that such programs did not view religion itself as an important category of inquiry since they were under the influence of secularization found in the social sciences, and thus isolated the study of Islam from the study of religions.⁴ Gabrielle Marranci explains that in the discipline of anthropology, the study of Muslims was part of “interest-based relationships with colonial powers” until about the 1970s and 1980s when anthropologists began to take Islam as a serious category of inquiry in the anthropology of Muslims.⁵ At first, anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner isolated Islam from Muslim cultural practices by excluding participant observation or Muslims voices from their work.⁶ This was followed by a corrective by Talal Asad, who argued that Muslim theologies cannot not be separated from Muslim practice in order to have clarity on what the category of Islam itself is.⁷ Gabriele Marranci argues that scholarly definitions of Islam should be construed as a map that navigates Muslim beliefs about Islam—that Islam is not theology, but rather what Muslims believe and practice, and thus all anthropologies of Islam are the same as anthropologies of Muslims.⁸ More recently, scholars have turned to analyzing the issues surrounding both writing and thinking “Islam.” Mahmut Mutman, as but one example, argues that writing about Islam, a modern trend that arose during colonialism and the establishment of the university, is necessarily political; rethinking theoretical frameworks and methodological tactics to study Islam is thus similarly necessarily political.⁹

⁴ Charles Adams, “The History of Religions and the Study of Islam,” *ACLS Newsletter* 25, nos. 3–4 (1974): 1–10.

⁵ Gabrielle Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 10.

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). One year after Gellner, Gilson argued that Islam cannot be essentialized and that it is instead a discourse within a changing society. See: Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1982).

⁷ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Washington, Center For Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986.

⁸ Gabrielle Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam*, Oxford: Berg, 2008, 8.

⁹ Mahmut Mutman, *The Politics of Writing Islam: Voicing Difference* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 9, 175–178.

As the study of Islam has developed, the study of religion likewise has both changed significantly¹⁰ and remains indebted to its origins.¹¹ In the United States, the study of religion emerged as an academic study of Christian traditions, to which other traditions were added at first in a comparative model of inquiry, and later alongside a development of critical theory and methods.¹² In their essay on rethinking the physical and intellectual location of Islamic Studies in the academy, Carl Ernst and Richard Martin explain that in large part, the study of Islam still stands isolated from the discipline of religious studies (at the time of their study, they estimated that just above 10% of Religion departments in the United States house Islamic Studies).¹³

However, for Ernst and Martin, the physical relocation of Islamic studies from Oriental studies programs to religious studies is most significant: “it is important to note the expansion of departments of religious studies beyond the standard subjects of biblical studies and Protestant theology, with the inclusion of Catholic Christianity, Judaism, and the religions of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. . . . The changes to religious studies have mirrored the growth of globalization.”¹⁴ They argue that the movement of Islamic studies from departments dedicated to the study of “the East” suggests a post-orientalist juncture in the study of Islam today. In this framework, the best of post-orientalist training is attention to “languages, texts, and history of Pre-Modern Islam. . . . as a necessary basis for the discourse about Islam and Muslims today” as well as newer frameworks derived and developed in fields like religious studies, such as critical theory and cosmopolitanism. Ernst and Martin argue that these frameworks operate in tandem in much new scholarship on the history and tradition of Islam.¹⁵

While Ernst and Martin describe a set of positive changes and real movement from philologically centered disciplines, others disagree. In a special issue of *Method and Theory of Religion*, Aaron Hughes offered a “provocation” to scholars of Islam, arguing that Islamic studies has not successfully integrated into religious studies because of the existence of apologetic and confessional scholarship as a result of having to “correct negative stereotypes that abound regarding Islam, many of which stem from geopolitical

¹⁰ Many trace ongoing debates about what religion was, is, or might become. As one example, see: Craig Martin, “Delimiting Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21 (2009).

¹¹ David Chidester and Peter Gottschalk have recently explored these origins as they relate to the contemporary study of religion and specific case studies in Africa and South Asia, respectively. See: David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) and Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hindus and Muslims in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹² This literature is relatively vast. As but one example, see: Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), especially “The (Un)Discipline of Religious Studies,” pp. 131–136.

¹³ Carl Ernst and Richard Martin, “Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2010), 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

conflicts...[and] an apologetical and unreflexive postcolonialism [...]about protecting one's object of analysis from analytical and categorical harm."¹⁶ In particular, he characterizes as apologetic Islamic studies scholars' need to define what Islam may or may not be in light of terrorism and political constructions of Islam.

In the same special volume, Richard Martin responds directly to Hughes's provocation. Martin argues that Hughes's arguments rely on creating a dichotomy between insiders and outsiders to Islamic faith, whereby Muslim scholars would not be capable of employing critical methods in studying Islam. However, he shares his concern that Islamic studies scholars "tend to be *essentialist* in their scholarly construction of Islam," depending on their audience.¹⁷ Ultimately, while Martin accepts aspects of Hughes's critique, he disagrees with both the heavy-handedness of the critique as well as its substance, and is particularly disappointed by the adversarial tone with which Hughes writes. However, Martin's point about audience is most relevant here; as we suggest above, the multitude of audiences that Islamic studies scholars are responsible for addressing certainly suggests a corresponding multitude of argumentative registers, timbres, and trajectories for scholarly contribution.

Others, too, have weighed in on this debate. The blog site for the *Bulletin in the Study of Religion* hosted a series titled "Reflections on Islamic Studies."¹⁸ While it was prompted by a digital article by Omid Safi on *Jadaliyya*¹⁹ and Aaron Hughes' digital reply at the *Religion Bulletin* site,²⁰ the series featured other Islamic studies scholars whose methodological, regional, historical, and theoretical foci suggest the wide disparity of the field itself. Edward E. Curtis IV, a scholar of American and African-American Islam, states that: "Islamic studies is more than a specialized field of academic study; it is a series of discourses that play important educational, social, and political roles in multiple settings both within and beyond the academy." Curtis suggests, as Ernst and Martin above, that the shift from Orientalism to contemporary studies of Islam marks its study as a "field defined by shared and intersecting questions, themes, and data, not any one methodology or set of texts."²¹ Moreover, Curtis mentions the ongoing theoretical

¹⁶ Aaron Hughes, "The Study of Islam Before and After September 11: A Provocation," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24.4–5 (2012): 314.

¹⁷ Richard Martin, "The Uses and Abuses of Criticism in the Study of Islam: A Response to Aaron Hughes," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, Volume 24, Issue 4–5 (2012), pp. 371–388.

¹⁸ A few of the blog essays were later printed as part of a journal issue. *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, Vol 43, No. 4 (2014).

¹⁹ Omid Safi, "Reflections of the State of Islamic Studies," *Jadaliyya*, January 31, 2014. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/16269/reflections-on-the-state-of-islamic-studies>

²⁰ Aaron Hughes, "When Bad Scholarship Is Just Bad Scholarship: A Response to Omid Safi," *Religion Bulletin*, February 3, 2014. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2014/02/when-bad-scholarship-is-just-bad-scholarship-a-response-to-omid-safi/>

²¹ Edward E. Curtis IV, "Ode to Islamic Studies: Its Allure, Its Danger, Its Power," as part of the "Reflections on Islamic Studies" series, *Religion Bulletin* (May 2, 2014).

conversations in religious studies and other disciplines that arise from works in Islamic studies, and notes the ways in which questions about Islam and Muslims undergird a collegiate liberal arts experience: “The very definition of freedom, goodness, beauty, and justice invoke Islam and Muslims in one way or another.”²² His short essay—and its provocations—stand to demonstrate how Islamic studies must be defined broadly, given its multiple avenues of study across disciplinary boundaries, its ongoing relevance in a post-9/11 classroom, and the ever-expanding frontiers and boundaries of its study.

At least two scholars, Vernon Schubel and Juliane Hammer, have articulated that the normative/descriptive dichotomy is false. Schubel argues studying Islam was not unique, but rather part and parcel of the study of religion; he asks his readers to move beyond the normative/descriptive dichotomy by considering the author’s ability to move between and among her various intersectional identities. “I, myself, sometimes speak and write as a Muslim, sometimes as a historian of religion,” he wrote.²³ Juliane Hammer—who has also contributed an article to this special issue—wrote for the “Reflections on Islamic Studies” series. There she contends that normativity need not be the enemy but instead ought to be reframed. She questioned how and why some normativities (work on some religions and the environment) are accepted or taken for granted while others (like gender and Islamic studies) receive immediate and negative response.²⁴ While Schubel readily suggests moving between his identifications, Hammer makes clear that her identifications are omnipresent.

The conversation about identification, insider/outsider standing in the study of Islam, and the questions around normativity are major aspects of recent critiques of Islamic studies broadly and in the abovementioned pieces specifically. Yet no one has solved the problems posed. Curtis flatly suggests that this is not a productive aim in the first place and that drawing or redrawing boundaries to the study of Islam is not the work of scholars. Schubel implies that a self-reflexive author can nimbly address multiple audiences in divergent voices, moving between and among normative/descriptive labels. Hammer states that normativity is not a scholar’s enemy on its own, but rather the problem is an articulation of objectivity that is undesirable in various studies and unobtainable in most others.²⁵

<http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2014/05/ode-to-islamic-studies-its-allure-its-danger-its-power-reflections-on-islamic-studies/> Accessed October 30, 2015.

²² Ibid.

²³ Vernon Schubel, “Some Thoughts on Navigating the “Normative/Descriptive” Divide: Reflections on Islamic Studies,” as part of the “Reflections on Islamic Studies” series, *Religion Bulletin* (March 17, 2014). <http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2014/03/some-thoughts-on-navigating-the-normative-descriptive-divide-reflections-on-islamic-studies/> Accessed October 30, 2015.

²⁴ Juliane Hammer, “Changing the World: Reflections on Islamic Studies,” as part of the “Reflections on Islamic Studies” series, *Religion Bulletin* (June 6, 2014). <http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2014/06/changing-the-world-reflections-on-islamic-studies/> Accessed October 30, 2015.

²⁵ Critiques of objectivity are vast and long standing. Salient examples include, but are not limited to: Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kim V. L. England *Getting Personal: Reflexivity,*

While a number of authors including and beyond the ones mentioned above have varied on approaches to the study of Islam, what has emerged as a product of these debates is evidence of the shift Curtis, Ernst, and Martin describe. Namely, the definitions of the study of Islam are less about sources that seem exclusive to Islam (i.e., Qur'an, shari'ah, fiqh, hadith, or other classical, text-based inquiries) and more about what constitutes the practice of study. The boundaries of Islamic studies are still influenced by lingering politics of both Orientalism and Arabic-centrism insofar as undergraduate and graduate programs, job listings, and textbooks (among other scholarly products); news media and EuroAmerican politicians also locate Islam in Arabic-speaking locales and the Middle East broadly. Put differently, an Orientalist production of Islam as originally and perhaps essentially Arab/Semitic still influences both scholarly and popular knowledges about Islam.

Hammer, Schubel, Ernst, Martin, Hughes, Safi, and Curtis espouse differing perspectives on Islamic studies, its history, and its trajectory, but these exchanges take as given that Islamic studies includes regions, languages, and methodologies beyond the philological and Arabic-centered roots of the field. These authors collectively raised several questions about *how* scholars of Islam affects the ways in which religious studies grapple with questions of essentialism, insider/outsider dynamics, distinctions between critique and criticism, and the relationship to the goals of the secular liberal arts.

And it is this question, ultimately, in which we are most interested: how scholars study Islam, how their various roles as scholars contour those studies, and how Islamic studies offers rich contributions to humanities inquiries. The anecdotes at the outset gesture toward one avenue worth exploring, demand for Islamic studies: students report taking courses about Islam because they are self-evidently instrumental, in varying ways (career prospects, civic engagement, pluralistic ideals/ideological concerns, and so forth). Carl Ernst and Charles Kurzman attended to the mushrooming of interest in Islamic studies in the post-9/11 landscape, and articulated a few metrics by which to demonstrate the growth of Islamic studies across disciplines. They measured a numerical increase of dissertations about Islam, flagship or top-tier journals featuring an increased number of articles about Islam, as well as an "avalanche" of books about Islam.²⁶ They articulate that the demand created in the wake of 9/11 was based upon fear of violence and, in some cases, of Islam broadly, and as such, demand itself—while presenting career opportunities—fundamentally poses a deep problem for scholars of Islam. Kurzman neatly describes the conundrum of the scholar of Islam: "It's not just that the field

Positionality, and Feminist Research *The Professional Geographer* Vol. 46, Iss. 1, 1994; Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Charles Kurzman and Carl W. Ernst, "'Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities' Paper for Social Sciences Research Council workshop on 'The Production of Knowledge on World Regions: The Middle East'". Available: http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/pdf/Kurzman_Ernst_Islamic_Studies.pdf. Accessed November 11, 2015.

benefits from Muslims committing atrocities, but that it benefits also from non-Muslims ignorance and paranoia. As a result, Islamic studies scholars spend much of their time in the limelight trying to dispel the very stereotypes that helped bring them to prominence.”²⁷ The growth of the field, and its very existence in many institutions, demands that scholars address stereotypes and geopolitical crises involving Muslims.

The limelight Kurzman discusses need not be attention from television or digital media; this public presence might simply be a scholar’s presence on a public (or private) campus. We benefit structurally in terms of course or major/minor enrollment, faculty lines, speaking engagements, publication opportunity or interest from, as Kurzman bluntly puts it, “Muslims committing atrocities.” We also, then, find ourselves in positions to necessarily decenter monolithic and omnipresent articulations of atrocities as Muslim authenticity.

What this interest in Islam also highlights is how scholars of Islam find themselves speaking to multiple audiences across humanistic disciplines. It is no wonder that the recent study of Islam is both informed by and informs these very disciplines. We cannot determine the boundaries of Islamic studies, nor has that been our aim; however, we submit that the following essays attend to and demonstrate the shifting boundaries of Islamic studies, and represent a dynamic, disparate field that both incorporates and contours humanistic theoretical work.

Essays in this Special Issue

The following essays each were part of the Shifting Boundaries Conference, held at the University of Vermont in April 2015.²⁸ They are the work of scholars in public and private universities who are located in departments of history, religious studies, Asian studies, international studies, and Islamic studies. Boundaries are, indeed, a major thread connecting these papers that span geographically, historically, and theoretically diverse arenas. Most papers suggest that we ought to study Islam differently. Our authors stress different parts of that phrase: some suggest that we ought to study *Islam* differently, while others suggest that *we* ought to study Islam differently. Those who emphasize *Islam* do so by offering understudied or undervalued locations for Islam (and Muslims), new literatures worth incorporating into what properly merits classification as “Islam” or “Islamic,” or how Islam broadly comes to shape boundaries within and across humanistic inquiry. The authors who emphasize *we* examine the boundaries that the academy and academics place on ourselves with specific regard to the study of Islam. These are not mutually exclusive, and many—if not most—authors play with the relationship between

²⁷ Charles Kurzman, “Islamic Studies and the Trajectory of Political Islam,” *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 6, November 2007, pp. 519–520.

²⁸ The conference was generously supported by grants and awards from the Lattie F. Coor Awards for the Humanities and Fine Arts, Humanities Center, and Department of Religion at the University of Vermont.

an authority of category of “Islam” as the subject of study and the authority of the scholar in studying Islam. All papers address the notion of a boundary for Muslims, for Islam, for academics studying Islam, or for what textual, intellectual, or cultural products may be fruitfully examined as part of Islam or as part of Islamic studies.

First, Juliane Hammer navigates issues of identification within Islamic studies in her essay, “Gender Matters: Normativity, Positionality, and the Politics of Islamic Studies,” which is based upon her keynote address of the same title.²⁹ She uses her most recent research on domestic violence in American Muslim communities as a lens through which to question critiques of normativity in Islamic studies, and asks how blanket dismissals of normativity assume particular positions and subjects. If studying domestic violence in American Muslim communities is part of Islamic studies, then a normative and even prescriptive position about the issue is warranted—which is to argue, for example, that domestic violence ought not occur, and we ought to work toward its demise. Hammer’s essay highlights the critiques of Islamic studies by way of locating the positionality of the scholar herself, the position of her subject (both American Muslim women and domestic violence), and the role gender plays in navigating these complex issues within the political landscape of Islamic studies.

In *What is Islam?* (2015), Shahab Ahmed suggested “how Islam should be *conceptualized* as a means to a more meaningful understanding both of Islam in the human experience, and thus of human experience at large.”³⁰ In the second essay, Caleb Elfenbein similarly posits that conceptualizations of Islam might tell us about both Islam and human experience. Comparing Indiana with Egypt, Elfenbein asks what scholars have to gain by cross-cultural analysis of value. His contribution, “Debating the Common Good: Islam, Social Theory, and the Ethics of Cross-cultural Analysis,” weaves social theory about “the common good” and definitions of publics with conceptualizations of Islam, and how scholars (ethically) frame questions of universality, particularity, and modern life. Elfenbein argues that utilitarian and communitarian perspectives imagine the common good in ways that are at odds, but this conflict, even across disparate contexts, itself demonstrates a shared condition of modern life.

Chiara Formichi examines how the academy itself polices and produces Islamic studies, but does so by taking to task the locational boundaries of both Islamic studies and Asian studies in her essay, “Islamic Studies or Asian Studies? Islam in Southeast Asia.” She traces the exclusion of Southeast Asia from major sites of production of knowledges about Islam, namely university and college departments, especially those with graduate programs, as well as museum exhibits which focus on the Islamic world. Simultaneously, Formichi critiques the regional model of Asian studies, demonstrating that Islam—as a

²⁹ Juliane Hammer, “Gender Matters: Normativity, Positionality, and the Politics of Islamic Studies,” Keynote address for Shifting Boundaries: the Study of Islam in the Humanities Conference, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT. April 11, 2015.

³⁰ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

religion imagined foreign to this broad region—is often excluded from the academy as well as museum collections under this scholastic rubric. The limits of both Islamic and Asian studies simply fail to meaningfully incorporate or interrogate the other. Formichi effectively challenges the scholars within both fields to reexamine boundaries that do not reflect historical and contemporary patterns.

Next, Kathleen Foody explores how the academy and the impetus of a liberal education informs the contemporary campus in “Pedagogical Projects: Teaching Liberal Religion after 9/11.” Foody attends to contours of the contemporary, neoliberal university, but focuses not on discipline, as both Chiara Formichi’s and Jan Felix Englehardt’s papers do, but instead on classrooms and extracurricular spaces on campuses. She takes pedagogy in Islamic studies as a case study that poses questions about the pedagogies of religion in the humanities broadly. On post-9/11 American campuses, Foody argues, religion has returned: classes dealing with Islam have increased; religion has become part of administrative rubrics for diversity; academic journals focused on higher education publish more about religion and stress its centrality to students’ on-campus successes. She asks how this turn to religion speaks to disciplinary questions in both religious and Islamic studies and ultimately she explores “post-secular religion and ask[s] in which ways it unintentionally enacts forms of liberal religious exclusion.”

In the fifth essay, titled “On Insiderism and Muslim Epistemic Communities in the German and US Study of Islam,” Jan Felix Englehardt attends the boundaries and binaries of the academy’s approach to Islam by comparing the formalized program of the study of Islam in Germany to the fluidity of Islamic studies in the United States. In Germany, he explains, there are two distinct tiers for studying Islam: one reserved for insiders and one reserved for outsiders. Englehardt argues that these fundamental differences in method produce vastly different epistemological frameworks and intellectual communities, and he highlights the benefits and losses of these differences to the study of Islam.

Megan Goodwin’s contribution stands to complicate the boundaries of what counts as Islamic studies. In “They Do That to Foreign Women’: Domestic Terrorism and Contraceptive Nationalism in *Not Without My Daughter*,” Goodwin attends to Islamic threat, gendered violence, and nationalist rhetorics. She argues that Betty Mahmood’s *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) typifies an imagination of Muslims as necessarily un-American, and places the best-selling memoir within a broader context in which embodied religious difference is maligned, demonized, and rejected. Goodwin weaves theories of gender, religious intolerance, and nationalism in order to locate Mahmood’s pre-9/11 articulation of Muslimness and Iranianness as inherently “unincorporable within the American body politic.” In doing so, she adds to a growing body of scholars whose work calls into question ongoing prioritizations of properly Islamic texts, located within Islamicate cultures. Goodwin uses American literature here as a producer of an Islam that—while deeply problematic and even troubling—competes with other definitions of Islam today.

Last, and likewise within in the sphere of American literature, Nicholas Pumphrey examines a growing presence of Muslims in comic books. He argues that pre- and

post-9/11 depictions of Muslim and Islamicate characters—those whose Muslimness is not named, but whose nationality or presumed regionality strongly suggest Muslim-majority spaces—offer a lens through which to view American perceptions of Muslims writ large. Pumphrey focuses on Marvel comics, tracing imagery clearly inspired by Orientalist paintings and concepts to recent characters written by Muslims, like Kamala Khan, the newest Ms. Marvel. In “Avenger, Mutant, or Allah: A Short Evolution of the Depiction of Muslims in Marvel Comics,” Pumphrey suggests that as go comic books, so goes American normative assumptions, but he also suggests that comics are aspirational, and Marvel Comics in particular have been known for progressive political stances. By tracing the evolution of Muslims in this medium, he insists that we can examine both the popular American imagination of Muslims as well as an articulation of how that image might be challenged or reshaped. His contribution similarly demands that boundaries of what counts as properly Islamic studies be rethought and redrawn.

Together these essays accomplish three central objectives. First, they demonstrate the dialectical relationship of Islamic studies with the humanities through pedagogy and the practice of humanistic inquiry that is not bound by time, location, or methodologies that are seemingly outside of Islamic studies. Second, they decenter Islamic studies as a solely textual and Middle East oriented field. Third, as a collection they stand to contribute to the ongoing—and far from resolved—conversations about what Islamic studies is or is not, ought or ought not to be. By attending to questions of classroom pedagogy, public intellectual responsibilities, normativity, insider/outsider issues in religious studies and beyond, as well as what subjects, locations, and literatures are worthy of study, the essays in this special issue illuminate a post-orientalist, dialectical relationship between the study of Islam and the humanities.