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STUDYING ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL SOCIETY

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Contemporary global society, sometimes referred to as the global community, is where societies of the world come together in one single global village. It is where people from different cultures with diverse skills and needs come to engage and interact with each other, share cultural values and knowledge, and learn about and from each other. In contemporary global society, complex socio-cultural, economic and political dilution and solidification occur simultaneously. It is seen as the natural consequence of globalisation, which is the process of cross-border movement of people and commodities, growing interdependence among nations and cultures, expanding interflow of investment, people and information, and increasing interaction and integration among people, corporations and governments. Due to globalisation, it is often said that we live in, not single societies, but one global society today.

Due to this, people from diverse religious backgrounds, for instance, are in never witnessed before closer contact with one another. However, without deep study, objective analysis and proper intellectual tools that are needed to understand religious difference, this closer contact has often come to be misunderstood and stereotyped. One such case is Islam and Muslims.

Although the academic scholarship on Islam and Muslims in the West, the focus of the current Special Issue, can be traced back almost two centuries,[1] it is only since the events of 9/11 that the study of Islam and Muslims in the contemporary global society has picked up momentum.[2] Referring to 9/11 events, Aaron Hughes says, "This event catapulted Islam from being a relatively minor and often overlooked subfield within Religious Studies to, at least on the surface, one of its central constituents."[3] The result is that many new centres, institutes and departments of Islamic studies have either emerged or expanded in the West and in other parts of the world, including in Muslim majority countries eager to develop or increase existing

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[1]   Léon Buskens, "Introduction: Dichotomies, Transformations, and Continuities in the Study of Islam," in *Islamic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Transformations and Continuities*, eds. Léon Buskens and Annemarie van Sandwijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016); John Mitchell and William Muir, *Two Old Faiths: Essays on the Religions of the Hindus and the Mohammedans* (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1891).

[2]   Aaron Hughes, "The Study of Islam Before and After September 11: A Provocation," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 (2012).

[3]   Ibid., 319.

offerings relating to Islam and Muslims.[4] Not only this, but the areas of expertise, jobs and special edition books and journals, for instance, relating to Islam and Muslims have witnessed an astronomical increase since the events of 9/11.[5] This seems to be an opportune time to investigate what is happening in the pattern of everyday living of Muslims, Islamic practices and institutions, and Islam–Muslim positioning in an increasingly transformative contemporary global society.

Studying Islam and Muslims has been a purview of what is often referred to as "Islamicists" and it has been traditionally undertaken under the umbrella label known as *Oriental studies* with a focus on "the earlier part of Islam and medieval Muslim culture and civilisation."[6] In recent decades, however, this has changed and studying Islam and Muslims has become an independent discipline called *Islamic studies* with a strong empirical and contemporary focus. Islamic studies has become known as the academic study of Islam, which is an academic multidisciplinary approach to study Islam and Muslims. Contemporary scholars studying Islam and Muslims examine it from different disciplinary perspectives about aspects of Islam as a religion or way of life and Muslims as adherents to Islam. Scholars from diverse disciplines such as history, culture, literature, art, politics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, economics and geography study issues ranging from urbanisation, modernisation, globalisation, gender relations, theology, mysticism, scripture and law to art, architecture, literature, ethnic politics, sectarianism, sciences, philosophy, Muslim identity, Muslim immigration, Islamic resurgence, climate change and international relations in Muslim societies.

The conditions of modernity, such as mass literacy, urbanisation, modern education, science and technology, have transformed contemporary Muslim societies. Due to this, economic activity, for example, has changed in many Muslim societies. The affinity of faith and modern socio-economic organisations in them have undergone transformation and continue to transform and a new affinity between certain types of religious ideas and particular types of economic activity is evolving such as the idea of prohibition of *riba* (interest) in Islam and the emergence of Islamic finance. Religiously, evidence shows the growth of puritanical urban Islam in the rise of Islamic movements and the challenge they pose to secular power. Politically, the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) reveal the complex interaction between modern conditions and Islam. All these are ways in which Islam and Muslims express themselves in the contemporary global society. Its internal socio-religious dynamism as can be discerned is complex and it plays a significant and, in certain conditions, critical role in defining the political integrity and socio-religious paths of Muslim societies collective called the *ummah*.

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[4]   Jan Ali, *Islam and Muslims in Australia: Settlement, Integration, Shariah, Education and Terrorism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2020).
[5]   Ibid.; Hughes. "The Study of Islam."
[6]   Ataullah Siddiqui, "Islamic Studies: Challenges and the Future," *Časopis Za Interdisciplinarne Studije* 6 (2019): 48.

Studying Islam and Muslims is inherently a study of a belief system and its adherents. Islam for Muslims is a prophetic, this-other-worldly, salvational religion with no separation between the sacred and profane. There is an interconnectedness between Islam and Muslims and studying Islam and Muslims is all about understanding and appreciating this relationship. Studying Islam and Muslims needs to be understood as a tool to create an objective knowledge of Islam and Muslims to convert knowledge into a transformative tool to positively change society. It is an endeavour to bring to light the multiple expressions of Islam as a spiritual tradition and how to be a Muslim in contemporary global society. It is critical to note that the study of Islam without its adherents is incomplete as is the study of Muslims without their faith. While it is important to understand Islam as a spiritual tradition and be cognisant about its internal diversity based on different textual interpretations, equally crucial is to learn about the believers and the nature of their beliefs. In this respect, studying Islam and Muslims in the contemporary global society constitutes a venture into the co-existence of the sacred and profane realms.

This Special Issue, titled *Studying Islam and Muslims in Contemporary Global Society*, critically examines different existential aspects of Islam and Muslims and, at the same time, pursues a deeper interrogation of Islamic pluralism and Muslim diversity in contemporary global society. Considering this, the first article, titled *Countering Cultural Extremism: Women's Empowerment in the Arab-Islamic World Case Study: Egypt*, examines the cultural aspect of extremism expressed towards women in the Arab-Muslim world and its problematisation relating to women's rights enshrined in the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Taking Egypt as a case study, the article looks at the position of women in Arab-Muslim culture and interrogates the challenges facing women regarding their rights and status.

The second article, titled *Fantasy in Far Right and Islamist Political Ideologies*, uses a psychoanalytic political theory to explore the role of fantasy in far and Islamist political ideologies. It examines the nature and function of fantasies in two competing ideologies: one in the far-right party, Forum for Democracy and two in a clandestine Islamist group known as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The third article, titled *Young Muslims in Australia and their Identity Formation*, examines identity construction among young Muslims in multicultural and multi-faith Australia. It argues that young Muslims have a developed capacity to work through depoliticised, hybrid and contextualised identities in multicultural and multi-faith Australia; however, they still experience unreasonable and unequal burdens to constantly prove their allegiance to Australia to be considered "true Australians."

The fourth article, titled *Nation-State and Sovereignty in Contemporary Political Discourse: Syed Abul Ala Mawdudi's Concept of God's Sovereignty*, examines the Mawdudian concept of sovereignty in modern political discourse. The idea of God's sovereignty has been a critical debate in the Muslim world for decades and this article brings attention to it and explains how it has been developed as a political concept in the discourse of modern nation-state.

The fifth article, titled *Treatment of Non-Muslims in Moderate Saudi in Muhammad Bin Salman's Religious Reform*, highlights the changes and breakthroughs brought about in Saudi Vision 2030 by the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia Muhammad bin Salma. The article explains how Saudi Vision 2030 seeks to offer better treatment of non-Muslims and reduce discrimination and persecution against them. It further explores the application and practice of purported moderate Islam in Saudi Arabia and its impact on particularly non-Muslims in this country.

The sixth and final article, titled *Building Social Cohesion Through Community Leadership: Navigating Sources of Tension in Australian Muslim Women Leaders' Relationships with Governments*, explores the current social cohesion paradigm with a focus on the grassroots actors in building a harmonious society in the context of multicultural Australia. It concentrates on the sources of tension that exist in Australian Muslim women leaders' working relationships with different levels of government. It argues that women are forced to bear gendered pressures to support certain government policies and leadership styles.

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