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FROM THE EDITOR

This issue of *IJMES* presents what might seem an utterly disparate collection of articles, dealing variously with early Islamic political discourse, Sufi religious practice, the role of religion in contemporary Egyptian politics, the response of a few 19th-century Egyptian officials to the peoples and societies of Sudan, and the use of the shari‘a court system by non-Muslims in late Ottoman Syria. These subjects, in turn, are explored through an equally varied array of theoretical and methodological approaches, some long-established within the field of Middle Eastern studies, others of much more recent vintage. Professor Afsaruddin subjects a body of highly formulaic, topos-shaped texts to a meticulous source-critical analysis to see what light these texts might shed on how the notoriously complex and elusive doctrines of succession to the caliphate were shaped in early Islamic times. Professor Hoffman shows how the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi have continued to influence Sufi doctrine and practice, even (or especially) among the reformist and supposedly “orthodox” orders that arose in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Professor Zeghal gives us a political-historical analysis of the strategies by which the state-supervised ulema of al-Azhar have subverted official purposes to carve out an autonomous and influential role for themselves in contemporary Egypt’s religio-political conflicts. Professor Powell presents a post-colonialist reading (happily jargon-free) of texts composed by three Egyptian travelers and officials in the Sudan during the early and mid-19th century; she demonstrates how these writers both exoticized this region and progressively incorporated it within Egypt’s imagined political realm. Finally, Prof. Al-Qattan analyzes the legal and political implications of a collection of shari‘a-court records from mid-19th-century Damascus; she suggests that the *maḥkama* should be understood not as an exclusively Islamic institution, but rather as a kind of public space accessible (albeit not on equal terms) to all residents of the city.

Things are not always just what they seem, however, and I believe that most readers will discover, as I did when choosing these articles, many linkages and shared concerns among them. Here I will mention only two common threads. First, all of these studies are based on the close study of difficult texts, where what is not said is usually far more important than what is. In contemporary American universities, both the humanities and social sciences are increasingly driven by the quest for ever more elegant and sophisticated theory. The increasing centrality of theory within the

academic enterprise tends to discount the need for a thorough knowledge of languages and of the literary-rhetorical traditions in which they are embodied. There is a tendency to suppose that the whole world speaks English, or can be induced to do so. For some subjects, aggregate data and the presence of English-speaking interlocutors might in fact do the job, but that is decidedly not the case in the topics (all of crucial importance) presented here.

The second common thread among these five articles would be the enormous range of political, social, and cultural situations in which Muslims have found it appropriate to apply specifically religious criteria. Such criteria determine whether, and on what level, a man may claim the right to rule the community, a spiritual experience is authentic and valid, a given policy or political system is acceptable, a people is to be regarded as truly civilized, or a non-Muslim can claim the protection of his or her government. Sometimes (as in shari^ca judicial practice) these criteria are as precise and concrete as any human concepts can be; in other contexts (as in the response to foreign cultures and societies) they are, at least initially, inchoate and intuitive. It is of course a grave fallacy to suppose that everything in the Middle East can be reduced to "Islam," but it is crucial to remember how many aspects of life, both in medieval and modern times, are imbued with values and concepts that are felt to be irreducibly Islamic. The articles presented in this issue demonstrate beyond all question what a protean word "Islam" is.