

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue “Islamic and Muslim Studies in Australia”

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The field we call Islamic studies has a long history that could be said to date from the 8th and 9th centuries in the Middle East when Muslim scholars, including Quran exegetes, hadith compilers, jurists and historians, began to systematically write about the teachings of Islam. What many refer to as classical Islamic studies continues today in Muslim-majority countries and has been an academic field of study in Western universities since the 16th century. In more recent decades, Islamic studies has been joined by Muslim studies. While the former tends to focus on the formative Islamic texts, documents and literature, such as the Quran, hadith and a multitude of classical writings on Islam, the latter tends to be more anthropological and sociological in its focus on Muslim communities and societies. In both respects, Australian universities are relative newcomers. While the University of Melbourne has offered Islamic studies since the latter half of the 20th century, most of the handful of Australian universities engaged in Islamic and Muslim studies today only began researching and teaching in these fields in the past two decades. As such, Australia has a relatively small but growing number of scholars that contribute to these fields. The aim of this Special Issue is to showcase some of the important research currently being undertaken in Islamic and Muslim studies by Australian academics.

In total, eight articles are published in this Special Issue. All of which involve original, empirical research, using various methods of data collection and analysis, in relation to topics that are pertinent to the study of Islam and Muslims in Australia. The contributors include long-serving scholars in the field, such as Professor Fethi Mansouri; mid-career researchers, including Adis Duderija, Zuleyha Keskin, Mehmet Ozalp, Joshua Roose and myself; and early career researchers: Mirela Ćufurović, Sara Cheikh Hussain, Nafiseh Ghafournia, Jessica Mamone, Paul Mitchell, Aidan Parkes, Riyadh Rahimullah and Shane Satterley. These contributors represent many of Australia’s universities engaged in Islamic and Muslim studies, including the Australian National University, Charles Sturt University, Deakin University, Griffith University and the University of Newcastle. The topics covered in this Special Issue include how Muslim Australians understand Islam (Rane et al. 2020); ethical and epistemological challenges facing Islamic and Muslim studies researchers (Mansouri 2020); Islamic studies in Australia’s university sector (Keskin and Ozalp 2021); Muslim women’s access and participation in Australia’s mosques (Ghafournia 2020); religion, belonging and active citizenship among Muslim youth in Australia (Ozalp and Ćufurović 2021); responses of Muslim community organizations to Islamophobia (Cheikh Husain 2020); Muslim ethical elites (Roose 2020); and migration experiences of Hazara Afghans (Parkes 2020).

This Special Issue comes at a time when the study of Islam and Muslims continues to be of high academic, social and political importance. Muslim population growth in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and globally, as well as ongoing tensions in Islam–West relations, has raised the need for a better understanding of Islam and Muslims. This has been intensified by the narrow and distorted framing of Islam and Muslims within contexts of security and othering. Particularly since the turn of the century, in Australia and Western universities more generally, the study of Islam, and especially Muslims, has been preoccupied with a focus on villains and victims at the expense of the rich and



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diverse topics that have historically been pursued. This Special Issue sought to challenge and transcend the constraints of this paradigm by confronting underlying assumptions and stereotypes and featuring research that contributes to Islamic and Muslim studies more broadly.

The social and political climate post-9/11 has seen an emphasis on the study of Muslims in relations to terrorism, radicalization, extremism and other violence-related contexts. In his article in this Special Issue, “On the Discursive and Methodological Categorization of Islam and Muslims in the West”, Fethi Mansouri examines these issues. Addressing the ethical and epistemological challenges of researching Islam and Muslims in the West, he discusses the impact of how Islam and Muslims are constructed and categorized. In particular, the author considers the role of public discourses on the development of research agendas and projects. This article cautions that the ethical and epistemological foundations of social science research, including inclusion and respect, are at risk of essentialist/orientalist representations of Islam and Muslims in the West.

The framing of Muslims in relation to security has encouraged research on the prevalence, impact and responses to Islamophobia, in which Muslims tend to be studied as victims of ire, prejudice and various forms of mistreatment. Sara Cheik Hussain’s article, “Muslim Community Organizations’ Perceptions of Islamophobia”, makes an important contribution to our understanding of how MCOs have been impacted by and respond to Islamophobia. It is noted that Islamophobia has had a two-fold impact on MCOs by imposing demands on their time and resources that would otherwise be spent on addressing other community needs central to the organizations’ work. The author highlights the need to build intercommunity solidarity, utilizing supportive institutional, multicultural schemes and establishing a separate Muslim advocacy organization to respond to the problems Islamophobia poses to MCOs and Muslim communities more generally.

A number of articles in this Special Issue contribute to both Islamic and Muslim studies. My contribution, co-authored with the team that conducted the research presented, bridges the gap between the fields of Islamic and Muslim studies. Our article, “Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents”, is the largest and most in-depth study to date of how Muslim Australians understand, interpret, manifest and express Islam. Based on a large national survey and focus groups with Muslims from around Australia, we present findings on: the typologies of Muslims; sources of influence concerning Islam; interpretations of the Quran; perspectives on ethical, social and theological issues; issues of concern; social connections and sense of belonging; views on various Muslim-majority countries; and perspectives concerning political Islam, including jihad, caliphate and shariah. The picture we capture shows that the majority of Muslim Australians have a moderate, progressive, ethical-oriented understanding of Islam, while for the minority, Islam aligns more closely with puritan, Islamist and legalist interpretations. Other key findings include a strong rejection of violent extremism among Muslim Australians and a very widespread view of engaging with non-Muslims as family; friends; colleagues; and, in general, social interaction as normal and good. This research provides a nuanced and contextual understanding of Islam in Australia that challenges and puts into perspective many of the pejorative views about Muslims that have circulated among Australians in recent decades.

The gap between the fields of Islamic and Muslim studies is also bridged by Nafiseh Ghafournia’s article, “Negotiating Gendered Religious Space”, which makes a timely and much-needed contribution to our understanding of how Muslim Australian women negotiate access to and participation in Australia’s mosques. Based on qualitative interviews, the article documents the experiences of Muslim Australian women in relation to restrictions imposed on them by men who control the mosques and how this impacts on their identity, participation, sense of belonging and activism. The article also explores the views of Muslim Australian women on such contentious issues as gender segregation. This research raises important questions and insights concerning the understanding and manifestation

of Islam among Muslim Australians and contributes to the broader discussion concerning the rights and status of women in Islam and Muslim communities.

In association with the growth in research on Islam and Muslims has been an interest in studying Islam at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels among Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. Over the past two decades, more Australian universities began offering Islamic studies programs, majors and courses. In their article, “Islamic Studies in Australia’s Universities”, Zuleyha Keskin and Mehmet Ozalp focus on the teaching side of Islamic and Muslim studies, presenting a broad overview of the Australian higher education sector’s contributions to these fields. The authors discuss the appeal of Islamic and Muslims studies for Muslim and non-Muslim students and consider the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilization (CISAC) at Charles Sturt University as a case study for addressing a number of challenges arising from teaching classical Islamic studies in contemporary Australia.

The study of Muslims in the West shows significant interest in youth, particularly in the context of security concerns with radicalization and violent extremism. In their contribution to this Special Issue, Mehmet Ozalp and Mirela Ćufurović provide a systematic review of the literature on Muslim youth in Australia. The authors identify three main themes in the literature pertaining to the impact of terrorism policies on identity, the relationship between religion and civic engagement and active citizenship. Finding gaps in the literature on Muslim youth in Australia, they provide insights on key issues needing further research.

Highlighting the spectrum of experiences of Muslim Australians, the final two articles in this Special Issue focus on Muslim elites, on the one hand, and the struggles of new migrants, on the other. In his article on “The New Muslim Ethical Elite”, Joshua Roose examines the understudied area of Western Muslims engaged in elite professions, particularly how this may shape Muslim citizenship in the West and its implications for the manifestations of Islam in Western capitalist contexts. At the other end of the spectrum, Aidan Parkes’ article, “Afghan-Hazara Migration and Relocation in a Globalized Australia”, explores the lived experiences of Hazara Afghan migrants in Australia. In particular, he documents the processes of cultural and identity change associated with relocation in an individualized and globalized Australia. These studies contribute to our understanding of Muslim identity in Australia and how Islam manifests among Muslim Australians in relation to the cultural, social and political contexts.

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