

The Academic Study of Religion in the U.S. and Pakistan: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the history and contested status of the academic study of religion within American Studies through a comparative assessment of practices in the United States and Pakistan. Beginning with an overview of the study of religion as it emerged from Western theological traditions during the European Enlightenment, the article examines how American constitutional provisions have facilitated its unique status in American education. While the study of religion can foster understanding that is critical for civil society, it is often misunderstood and sometimes constitutionally challenged by American citizens. In turn, the article explores how Pakistan's national history and constitutional provisions as an Islamic republic provide a distinctive, potentially more restrictive framework for pursuing the study of religion in secondary and post-secondary contexts. The conclusion notes the contribution of Pakistani-American scholar Zareena Grewal to advancing the academic study of religion, and specifically Islam, in the context of American Studies.

In 2002, the University of North Carolina (UNC) selected the work *Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelations* as the common reader for freshman entering the university that fall.

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The book was written by Michael Sells, a scholar of Islamic history and literature. The decision thrust UNC, North Carolina's flagship public university, into the national spotlight when the Virginia-based Family Policy Network sued on First Amendment grounds, stating that the university was "forcing . . . students to study Islam against their will."¹ After the U.S. District Court in Greensboro ruled to allow the book assignment to proceed, both sides claimed victory. The Family Policy Network, a socially conservative Christian organization, cited students' eligibility for exemption from participation through an opt-out assignment. For their part, UNC officials noted that virtually no students pursued this option—one that was consistent with past summer reading assignments. The university chancellor later offered a wry assessment of the whole matter, when he publicly averred, "there were no known conversions; Carolina's religion remains basketball."²

This controversy over a reading assignment on the Qur'an serves as a window onto features of the academic study of religion within the context of American Studies. Both interdisciplinary fields came into their own in the United States (U.S.) in the mid-20th century. The relationship of Religious Studies to American Studies in addressing religion and politics at the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and geographical region was the focus of an entire issue of *American Quarterly* in 2007.³ The present article, by contrast, focuses more narrowly on the constitutional roots, and sometimes contested status, of the academic study of religion in the United States. It does so with a Pakistani audience in mind, and with a concluding inquiry into the possibilities and limits of the study of religion in the political and educational context of Pakistan.

This article begins with a brief overview of the historical context and constitutional provisions that have facilitated the unique status of the academic study of religion in American higher education. The second section of the article uses the

UNC controversy to demonstrate ways in which the academic study of religion has been contested, misunderstood, and sometimes rejected by American citizens, on constitutional and epistemological grounds. The final section of the article examines the academic study of religion in Pakistan in light of the nation's constitutional framework and Islamic identity. In so doing, it considers the perspective of American Studies graduate students at the Area Study Center at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, on the study of religion within their field. The article argues that whereas controversy in the U.S. has not diminished a constitutionally sanctioned and civically valuable academic discipline, the constitutional framework and Islamic national identity of Pakistan make the academic study of religion more difficult to imagine and to implement. Still, the U.S. experience may be instructive as scholars work collaboratively and internationally to extend research and teaching about religion.

The Study of Religion in the United States

The roots of the modern study of religion in the U.S. can be traced to Catholic and Protestant academic circles during the European Enlightenment. As the historian of Islam Carl Ernst explained, this emerging field coincided with the broader shift to modernity, which elevated the state over religion in matters of law and political authority, and left religious groups to compete among themselves in the realm of belief. What made the newly formed United States distinctive was the decision by the framers of the American Constitution formally to reject an established state religion. This stance went beyond much of Europe, where many countries continued (and continue still today) to offer state recognition to particular religious traditions.⁴ As Ernst noted, this political difference would affect the approach to studying religion. In the U.S., constitutional provisions have allowed scholars to form academic departments of religion, unattached to particular

churches or theologies, in hundreds of colleges and universities across the country. By contrast, teaching about religion as a separate subject, outside a theological or seminary context, is comparatively rare in Europe, Asia, or Africa.⁵

An important early document that articulated a rationale for the disestablishment of religion in relation to education was the “Memorial and Remonstrance” by James Madison, a Virginian who was to become a leader in the framing of the U.S. Constitution. Writing in 1785 to members of the Virginia General Assembly, Madison set forth fifteen points of opposition to a bill calling for a three-cent tax to support teachers of religion. Among his arguments, Madison defended the unalienable right of conscience in matters of belief and insisted that a civil magistrate was not a competent judge of religious truth. In turn, he warned his potentially skeptical Christian audience that the majority’s establishment of Christianity to the exclusion of all non-Christian religions could easily lead to a yet more restrictive establishment of just one *sect* of Christianity over all others. The proposed establishment effected through the tax, he claimed, differed only in degree from the Inquisition, whereby “the one is the first step, the other the last in the career of intolerance.” Free exercise of religion, he insisted, must not be held less dear than citizens’ other fundamental rights, all of which stand or fall together.⁶ Madison’s claims would come to be reflected in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, penned by Thomas Jefferson, and subsequently in the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1792. Notwithstanding, however, the new Constitution and Thomas Jefferson’s subsequent reference to the “separation of Church and State,” it would be decades before all the states ended their established churches.

By the time of the early Republic, instruction in religion had been a central curricular component of prominent private

institutions of higher education for well over a century. Dating to early years of colonial settlement and continuing to the present, this academic enterprise was avowedly theological. That is to say, its aim was the “teaching of” religion (specifically Christianity), focused on inculcating doctrine and teaching the norms of practice, rather than “teaching about” religion as an academic study.⁷ Over time, new fields known as “comparative religion” and “world religions” expanded the scope of inquiry, even as they reflected the influence of their Protestant missionary origins. “Comparative religion” entailed a method that often juxtaposed an ideal (Christian) conception of religion with the less than perfect practice of other traditions. The study of “world religions” classified religions on a competitive global scale based on geographical scope and population, thereby presenting Christianity as the dominant missionary religion while also downplaying smaller folk or local religious expressions.⁸

Religious instruction was likewise prevalent in *public*, tax-supported secondary schools well into the 20th century—a fact that might seem surprising given the First Amendment religion clauses. Reflecting the dominant presence of Protestant Christianity in the culture, such religious instruction ended only after a series of federal judicial decisions.⁹ In particular, disestablishment of religion as it pertained to public schools came to a head in the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* Supreme Court ruling.¹⁰ The Schempps, a Unitarian family with two high-school age children, brought a suit against their local school district, which followed a Pennsylvania law mandating that “at least ten verses from the Holy Bible shall be read, without comment, at the opening of each public school on each school day.”¹¹ This was to be followed by students’ recitation in unison of the Lord’s Prayer. The Schempps’ lawyers argued that the law violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Upon appeal to the Supreme Court, the justices ruled in an 8-1 decision that the activities mandated by the law

did constitute “religious exercises,” and as such violated the Constitution. “To withstand the strictures of the Establishment Clause,” wrote Justice Tom Clark in the majority opinion, “there must be a secular legislative purpose and a primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion.” In this regard, he argued that the Abington school district did not meet a standard of “strict neutrality.”¹² The majority, moreover, denied legal relevance to the fact that students could be excused from participating in the exercises upon written request from their parents. As Justice Clark clarified, violation of the Establishment Clause need not be predicated on coercion.¹³

Controversy arose immediately over Schempp’s outlawing of religious exercises in schools. The *New York Times* quoted well-known Christian evangelist Billy Graham expressing his shock over the Court’s decision: “Prayers and Bible reading have been a part of American public school life since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Now a Supreme Court in 1963 says our fathers were wrong all these years. In my opinion, it is the Supreme Court that is wrong.” Graham stated that Americans “need more religion, not less,” citing the growing moral decadence, racial tension, the threat of Communism, and terrifying new weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ Among the eleven states that required daily Bible reading and the thirteen that permitted it, some openly refused to comply with the new ruling. Fifty years later, opposition to the Schempp ruling persisted. In 2013, for example, a Republican state senator and chairman of the Senate education committee in Indiana filed a bill that would allow school districts to require recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, with an opt-out provision for individual students. Although the evident violation of the First Amendment prevented this bill from receiving a hearing in the Indiana Senate, its opposition to Schempp reflected a broader national trend that was especially pronounced in the South and among older Americans.¹⁵

Less noticed in the wake of the Schempp ruling was the Supreme Court's explicit endorsement of the study of religion. In this regard, Justice Clark took pains to distinguish the "secular" study of religion from hostility toward religion. The latter, he noted, was implied in the plaintiff's claim that denying religious exercises was tantamount to permitting a "religion of secularism." Clark rejected this premise, and then stated:

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.¹⁶

In the words of fellow justice Arthur Goldberg, "The Court would recognize the propriety . . . of the teaching *about* religion, as distinguished from the teaching *of* religion, in the public schools." In this case, teaching *of* religion was effectively viewed as a religious exercise or practice, and thus deemed impermissible in public schools.¹⁷ At the same time, the Court's advocacy of teaching *about* religion in a comparative, historical, and literary mode was, arguably, a prescient ruling. It was handed down two years before passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act substantially transformed the ethnic and religious make-up of the U.S., thereby making knowledge of diverse religions all the more important to American citizens. The Court's decision was especially significant for tax-supported public universities, which could now develop departments of "religious studies."¹⁸ And yet, just as some Christian conservatives sought in the

1960s, and continue to seek, to reverse the ban on religious exercises in public schools, so too have they been wary of the academic study of religion. The controversy surrounding the University of North Carolina's assigned freshman reading on the Qur'an highlights the latter strain of opposition to the Schempp case.

Contesting the Study of Religion in the United States

The challenge posed by the Family Policy Network in 2002 to Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an* reflects in part the fear and misunderstanding about Islam in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. These were compounded, however, by a long history of conservative animosity toward the perceived liberal biases of the University of North Carolina.¹⁹ What is striking is the charge that the university was forcing students to study Islam against their will. The lawsuit's reference to force sought to demonstrate that UNC had violated the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment, for which evidence of compulsion is a critical factor. In turn, the implied assertion that the "purpose and primary effect" of the university's assignment was the "advancement of religion" sought to prove that school administrators had violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Sells responded to the lawsuit in a *Washington Post* op-ed entitled "Understanding, Not Indoctrination," published a week before the District Court ruled in favor of his book. Rather than address the constitutional principles at stake, he questioned the epistemological and hermeneutical premises on which the suit rested. He first countered the premise that studying something implies affirmation of it—in this case that studying Islamic texts constitutes an endorsement of Islamic claims and, more specifically, constitutes being "soft on terrorism," as critics charged. As a non-Muslim scholar of Islamic texts, Sells pointed out his long-standing public statements against the

Taliban and its Saudi-influenced Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. More fundamentally, he challenged his Christian critics' hermeneutical approach, which used select passages from the Qur'an as evidence that Islam was a violent religion, in contrast to Christianity. These critics argued that Sells' focus on early Meccan verses in the Qur'an presented a falsely benign view of Islam as a "religion of peace." To this he responded:

Approaching the Qur'an presents the passages that Muslims consider the earliest revelations to Muhammad, those with the most direct account of core theological ideas and literary themes. Similarly, in a college course on Western civilization, students are more likely to read Biblical passages from Exodus than the gruesome accounts of slaughter in Joshua. Do such selections present a deceptively benign view of the Bible? Only if they are used to make generalized claims about the Bible as a whole.²⁰

Sells challenged the whole notion that "you can generalize and say 'Religion X is peaceful,' or not peaceful," describing such claims as "unhealthy simplification."²¹

Two weeks later, after the District Court's favorable ruling, the *New York Times*' published a handful of letters from its readers responding to its strong defense of UNC's choice of Sells' book. These letters illustrate support, but also concerns and confusion, as well as potential hypocrisy, in response to the UNC assignment. One writer—a professor of religious studies at a private liberal arts college—offered a cogent defense of the necessity and value of the academic study of religion: "Ignorance of religious traditions, not the academic study of them, is the danger to our society," he wrote. He continued:

For the vast majority of the world's population, religion is not just a private matter, but a pervasive cultural and political force that shapes entire societies. To be an educated person in the modern world, one must understand the power of religion in contemporary cultures. To this end, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill . . . was merely trying to foster an understanding of Islam among its incoming freshman. Now, more than ever before, Islam must be understood.²²

Another writer applauded the university for seeking to “clarify a culture that has been thrust into an unfair spotlight” by taking the first major step “in bridging the gap between the understood and the misunderstood.” In an institution that is nurturing tomorrow's leaders, “shouldn't open-mindedness be encouraged rather than restrained?” asked the writer.²³

Other letters, however, raised questions of interpretive bias and First Amendment overreach. One castigated “politically correct Western academics” for “sanitizing” Islam, and claimed that rather than read Sells' book, it would be more instructive for students to live under Islamic law for a day “in the grip of a religion that does not allow for the separation of church and state.”²⁴ Another writer averred that separation of church and state precluded mandatory reading about Islam as proposed by UNC, but surmised that Christian conservatives would not have raised similar objections had a book about the Bible been assigned.²⁵ Yet one other writer granted that a great feature of America's democratic society was that it “permits a wide range of views to be heard,” but said that it would be most newsworthy if universities in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia undertook to better understand American society. “After all, we were the ones attacked, not the other way around.”²⁶

As these letters suggest, the Court's ruling and Sells' clarification notwithstanding, legal and epistemological challenges persisted. Critics equated the proposed requirement for the academic study of religion with the unconstitutional imposition of the exercise of religion. The legal charge of the coercive advancement of Islam by the university, moreover, masked a profound epistemological challenge. The lawsuit, that is, effectively presumed that certain religious commitments admit no possibility of neutral intellectual ground for inquiry into religious traditions. From this point of view, a nuanced, historically contextualized interpretation of a tradition other than one's own can only be regarded as a ploy of political correctness. More fundamentally, to engage in the study of another tradition and its texts is akin to participating in religious heresy if not outright apostasy, and thus must be rejected. From this perspective, the study of religion as part of a "secular program of education" is epistemologically untenable, even if it is legally permissible.

That the lawsuit against UNC gained little traction in 2002, and almost no students opted out of the reading, suggests the limits of conservative Christians' sway in challenging the Schempp Supreme Court ruling on the study of religion in public schools. But the academic study of religion has also had critics from very different quarters. A few years after the UNC incident, nationally publicized debate emerged at Harvard University, a private institution not subject to Establishment constraints. In this case, a well-known experimental psychologist and Harvard faculty member, Steven Pinker, organized faculty opposition to a proposal to add a required course on "Reason and Faith" to the university's new general education curriculum. Central to Pinker's opposition was his claim that the primary goal of a Harvard education is the pursuit of truth through rational inquiry. In an interview, he emphasized that he did not "want to go on record suggesting that people should not know about religion." Rather, in

likening the course to one on “Astronomy and Astrology,” Pinker argued that it presented reason and faith as equal paths to truth. He insisted that, “reason and faith are not yin and yang. Faith is a phenomenon. Reason is what the university should be in the business of fostering.”²⁷

What is noteworthy is how this argument represents a kind of mirror image of religious conservatives’ argument in the UNC case. Coming from an assertively naturalistic, scientific perspective, Pinker effectively dismissed the possibility of an academic approach to the study of religion within the liberal arts. Specifically, his oppositional stance collapsed a distinction between teaching *about* religion, on the one hand, and the teaching *of* religion, premised on affirmation of religions’ truth claims, on the other. As with the religious critics of UNC’s freshman reading assignment, Pinker and his Harvard supporters challenged the required study of religion as epistemologically untenable, even if legally permissible.²⁸

The Study of Religion in Pakistan

As the above discussion shows, the study of religion—specifically a proposed requirement to study religion—has been challenged by stakeholders at both public and private universities in the United States. Nonetheless, voluntary enrollment in undergraduate and graduate academic programs in the study of religion continues across the country. By contrast, the relative absence of academic inquiry into religion in Pakistan reflects a distinctive set of political, cultural, and religious factors. Emerging out of a long and rich history rooted in India, Pakistan has existed as a nation no longer than the modern period of constitutional debate about the study of religion in the U.S. Since the nation’s founding in 1947, says the historian Rais A. Khan, Pakistani scholars have been preoccupied with Muslim nationalism in South Asia, and with Islam in the context of the “Pakistan movement.”²⁹ This history

has shaped the identity of the country in ways that influence an understanding of the study of religion in general, and in the specific context of American Studies.

In 1947, when Britain's colonial rule over India ended, Pakistan was created as a new state for India's Muslims out of land in the northwestern and northeastern sections of India. Significantly, in his first presidential address to the Constituent Assembly given just days before Partition, Muhammad Ali Jinnah stated that faith should be a matter of personal commitment, not political identity. Citing the history of Britain, whose people sought to end mutual persecution between Protestants and Catholics and grant equal citizenship to all, Jinnah said of Hindus and Muslims:

[W]e should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.³⁰

Jinnah clarified that Pakistan's citizens were free to go to their temples, mosques, or any other places of worship. They were free to belong to "any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State."³¹ From a contemporary American religious studies perspective, Jinnah's speech articulated a notably "Protestant" view of religious faith. Reflecting the interiority of Christian faith emphasized in the Protestant Reformation, and philosopher's subsequent call to separate religion from the power of the State, Jinnah presented "faith" as individuals' personal experience, rather than their communal, political identity.³² He died little more than a year after Partition, and the constitutions that were subsequently adopted in 1956 and in 1973 expressly proclaimed Pakistan an Islamic Republic. Today, whether this

avowal is seen as the epitome of Jinnah's vision or as its antithesis, Islam does define the political identity of the country.

Two articles in the 1973 Constitution have particular bearing on matters of education. Article 19 guarantees freedom of expression. Such expression, however, is "subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam. . ." Article 20 of the Constitution states that "[s]ubject to law, public order and morality . . . every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion. . ." ³³ While the latter Article guarantees freedom to practice and propagate religion, the constitutional right to impose any reasonable restrictions on expression in the name of "the glory of Islam" has had serious implications for religious freedom and tolerance. The scholar Jacques Waardenburg noted that the conviction that Islam is "the final and true religion" poses significant pedagogical and political impediments to the study of religion in Muslim countries. When the focus of inquiry is Islam, a country's "official" national interpretation of the religion often stands in the way of a fair study of different orientations within Islam. It may also render critical interpretations of Islam politically suspect. ³⁴ In Pakistan, an intellectual disagreement can be interpreted as an insult to Islam, leading to charges of blasphemy punishable by death. Fear and intimidation can thus be used to restrict meaningful critical inquiry into, or debate on, Islam. ³⁵

At the secondary education level, Pakistan's government has called for reviewing textbooks and curricula to minimize attention to Islamic doctrinal religious "details" that are known to be "divisive." Even though part-time enrollments at religious and non-religious schools, rather than full-time madrasa schooling, is the norm in children's education, research shows that decisive majorities of Pakistani parents favor down-playing attention to sectarian difference in their children's

schooling.³⁶ At the same time, the presumed supremacy of Islam over other religions is conveyed in school textbooks, which shape attitudes towards religious minorities. Islamic studies (*Islamiyat*) textbooks in government schools and colleges categorize those who are not Muslims as *dhimmis* (non-Muslims protected in an Islamic state), *mushrakeen* (pagans), and *kafirs* (infidels). The effect is to foster intolerance towards minority religious groups.³⁷

In this constitutional context, there is little conceptual space in Pakistan for the study of religion as it is practiced in the United States. In contrast to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1963 Schempp ruling, which rendered daily, required unison Bible reading and prayer at public schools unconstitutional, readings from the Qur'an and short sermons are part of the daily curriculum at Pakistan government schools. Islamic religious exercises are required, while conversely there is no endorsement or protection for approaching the Qur'an as a work of literature, or for studying religions through historical inquiry—modes of study affirmed in the Schempp ruling.³⁸ Waardenburg noted that there is some teaching of comparative religion at national and international institutions in Pakistan, including Islamic International University in Islamabad.³⁹ But generally speaking, he pointed to a lack of institutionalized support for the scholarly study of religion in Muslim countries. While the conviction that Islam is “the final and true religion” politicizes the study of Islam, it detracts from the study of other religions, by implicitly posing the question “Why bother to study other religions and cultures at all?” Added to these dual obstacles are technical impediments, including the rigor of language training and the limited accessibility to affordable translations of scholarly texts.⁴⁰

The implications of the politicized role of Islam for the academic study of religion in Pakistan are relevant to thinking about the study of religion in the context of American Studies.

In the U. S., the academic study of religion represents one sub-discipline in the field of American Studies. This is less the case in Pakistan. As the historian Rais Khan noted, “American Studies” in Pakistan rarely connotes a distinctive interdisciplinary identity, and those who identify with the field focus primarily on American literature and international relations, more so than on historical, sociological, and cultural elements. The sole institutional expression of the field is the post-graduate program at Quaid-i-Azam University’s Area Study Center in Islamabad, founded in 1978. Thirty years after Khan published his assessment of American Studies in Pakistan, the disciplines of literature and international relations continue to dominate American Studies at the Area Study Center.⁴¹

The lack of intellectual space in Pakistan for the academic study of religion, attested to by scholars, is reflected anecdotally in comments made by QAU graduate students participating in classes on the study of religion in the U.S. offered during an academic partnership with Ball State University, in Muncie, Indiana.⁴² One student noted that to speak critically about Islam in Pakistan constitutes blasphemy, and in turn wondered how it was possible to talk critically about Islam in the U.S., given its minority status. At stake in his comments was an effort to grapple with U.S. constitutional provisions that protect individuals’ speech, even as these may subject a religious minority to critical rhetoric from the majority. Another student noted that in Pakistan, eight years of Qur’anic study are required to be *analim* (Muslim religious scholar), and thus asked how it is possible for American scholars to teach about Islam in the context of comparative religions. This query addressed the duration of study, but more fundamentally the idea that non-Muslim scholars could speak with interpretive authority about Islam or the Qur’an.⁴³ On the latter note, one student made the general claim that religious practitioners alone offer an account that is free of

interpretation, while non-practitioners and scholars offer “interpretations” that are, by definition, biased. Only one student identified the study of religion with an “impartial, unbiased approach,” thus echoing the language of the Schempp ruling.⁴⁴

These comments are a brief sampling that suggests the limited familiarity of some American Studies students in Pakistan with the academic study of religion. For some, it shows resistance to acknowledging the interpretive nature of any engagement with a religious tradition, be it their own or another.⁴⁵ One conclusion that can be drawn from the evidence presented in this article is that unfamiliarity and unease with approaching religious texts and traditions in the context of the academic study of religion transcend specific religious and cultural identities. Muslim students from Pakistan may be unfamiliar or uneasy with critical academic inquiry into Islam, and have given little consideration to the idea of studying other traditions. Similarly, American Christians may be unfamiliar and uneasy with academic inquiry into other religions, as well as into their own.⁴⁶ An important difference, however, is that citizens’ resistance to the academic study of religion in the U.S. has not thwarted its constitutionally sanctioned, valuable civic role in fostering understanding of diverse religions. In contrast, Pakistan’s Islamic national identity and the provisions of its Constitution currently make the academic study of religion more difficult for citizens to imagine and to implement.

Conclusion

The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1963 endorsement of studying religion “objectively as part of a secular program of education” focused on understanding religions, not compelling students’ belief in them.⁴⁷ Such an approach, it can be argued, is about conversation, not about conversion.⁴⁸ The Court’s ruling rested on the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses of the First

Amendment to the Constitution, which empower and protect American citizens in regard to religion. In Pakistan, by contrast, the Constitution's affirmation of the "glory of Islam" offers little or no support for the academic study of religion apart from the advancement of Islam. As a result, critical inquiry and scholarly debate about religion—Islam in particular—may incur serious political risk. At the same time, a conviction of Islam's supremacy may also erode motivation to engage in the study of other religions.

But this may not be the whole story. The Pakistani-American historical anthropologist and scholar of religion Zareena Grewal of Yale University has recently claimed that the global Islamic tradition in the last century has not "escaped the process of squaring itself with secular critical inquiry."⁴⁹ Grewal is among a new generation of Muslim students in the West who, to quote Waardenburg, have "taken advantage of the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the study of Islam, as well as of religions in general as it is practiced [in the West]." Indeed, Grewal has embraced such study as her profession, thus intimating her answer to what Waardenburg calls the most important question: namely, whether Muslim students will see in the study of religion "a danger or, on the contrary, a way to truth as well as intellectual and human enrichment."⁵⁰

Grewal is among a generation of scholars whose distinctive contribution is to be situated in the West while studying developments in religion—in this case her own religion of Islam—in her country of origin and globally. In her work, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, Grewal's focus when discussing Pakistan is primarily on the evolving context and norms of education in madrasas. But to the extent that her claim about secular inquiry characterizes Pakistan and its broader educational system, there may be greater space for imagining and implementing the

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study of religion. This could well be a boon for Pakistan's citizens, as well as for the collaborative, international efforts of scholars to extend research and teaching about religion, broadly and in the context of American Studies.

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Notes

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¹. Quoted in Michael Sells, "Preface to the 2006 Edition," *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, Second Edition (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2006), xi-xv.

². On the outcome of the lawsuit, see Sells, "Preface to the 2006 Edition," endnote 3. The opt-out assignment allowed students to write an article explaining why they did not want to read the book. The statement by Chancellor James Moeller was published in the *Boston Globe* (August 31, 2002), and subsequently in *Sports Illustrated*.

³. See R. Marie Griffith and Melani McAlister, eds. *American Quarterly, Special Issue: Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, Volume 59, Number 3, September 2007.

⁴. Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 43.

⁵. Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, 50.

⁶. See James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments," <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163>, and in particular Articles 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 (quotation is from Article 9). The assessment bill was tabled and in its place the legislature enacted Thomas Jefferson's Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom.

⁷. Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, 50. Harvard (1636), Yale (1701), and Princeton (1746), for example, were established with clear religious agendas and today each has a divinity school that carries on the respective tradition.

⁸. Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, 40.

⁹. See, for example, Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Significantly, Smith argues that the Supreme Court's imposition of secular neutrality in the 20th century did not manifest constitutional principles, but rather subverted a tradition of contestation between secularist and providentialist accounts of the nation.

¹⁰. The Supreme Court case is formally named *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania et al. v. Schempp et al.* See

<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=374&invol=203>. Hereafter “Abington v. Schempp.”

¹¹. See the editors’ introduction to the case in Lee Epstein and Thomas G. Walker, *Constitutional Law for a Changing America: Rights, Liberties, and Justice*, 3d ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1998), 202.

¹². Abington v. Schempp.

¹³. Ibid. Justice Clark stated that only the Free Exercise Clause required evidence of coercion to demonstrate an unconstitutional “invasion of religious liberty.”

¹⁴. “Billy Graham Voices Shock Over Decision,” *New York Times*, (June 18, 1963), p. 27.

¹⁵. On state laws prior to the Schempp ruling see Don Conway, “Religion and Public Education in the States,” *International Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 32, no. 7 (March 1956): 34-40. On the effect of the Schempp ruling, see Fred M. Hechinger, “Wide Effect Due: Decision Will Require Change in Majority Of States,” *New York Times*, (Jun 18, 1963), p. 1; and Ben A. Franklin, “School in Pennsylvania Defying Supreme Court Ban on Prayer,” *New York Times* (Nov 23, 1969), p. 74. On the proposed legislation in Indiana in 2013 see Mary Beth Schneider, “Ind. senator’s bill seeks Lord’s Prayer in schools,” *USA Today*, January 4, 2013.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/04/indiana-lawmaker-school-prayer-bill/1808507/>. A 2012 General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago found that disapproval of the Court’s prayer ban ranged from 42% in the Northeast to 73% in the South; by age group it ranged from 38% among 18-29 year olds, to 71% among those 75 and older. See Jaweed Kaleem, “School Prayer 50 Years Later: What Do Americans Believe?” *Huffington Post* (Jun 19, 2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/19/school-prayer_n_3461479.html

¹⁶. Abington v. Schempp.

¹⁷. Ibid. Ernst reiterates this distinction between teaching *of* and teaching *about* religion forty years later (see *Following Muhammad*, 50).

¹⁸. During the fifty years in which public university departments of religious studies have developed, scholars have addressed the lingering Christian theological influences in methodologies and definitions of religion. See Ernst’s critique of “comparative religion” and his advocacy of an historical approach (Ibid., 48); and historian of religion Bruce Lincoln’s discussion of the Protestant definitional emphasis on religion’s “interiority,” to the exclusion of practice, discipline, and community (Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion After 9/11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁹. See Sells, "Preface to the 2006 Edition," *Approaching the Qur'an*, xii.

²⁰. Michael Sells, "Understanding, Not Indoctrination," *The Washington Post* (August 8, 2002), p. A17.

²¹. Michael Sells, "Qur'an at UNC: Interview with Prof. Michael Sells, et al." by Lucky Severson. *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, August 23, 2002.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2002/08/23/august-23-2002-quran-at-unc/18695/>.

²². "Teaching Islam: A Controversy," The Opinion Pages, *New York Times*, August 21, 2002.

²³. Ibid.

²⁴. Ibid.

²⁵. Ibid.

²⁶. Ibid.

²⁷. On the debate about the course proposed at Harvard University in 2006 see

Justin Pope, "Harvard committee recommends returning religion to curriculum," *Boston.com News* (Oct. 4, 2006),

http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2006/10/04/harvard_committee_recommends_returning_religion_to_curriculum/; Johannah S.

Cornblatt and Samuel P. Jacobs, "After 4 Years of Debate, Faculty Approves Gen Ed." (May 16, 2007),

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2007/5/16/after-4-years-of-debate-faculty/>; and Lisa Miller, "Why Harvard Students Should Study More Religion," *Newsweek* (February 10, 2010),

<http://www.newsweek.com/why-harvard-students-should-study-more-religion-75231>. Intended to address such "big issues" as intelligent design, debates within and around Islam, and the history of American faith, the content of the proposed Harvard course was certainly amenable to critical, comparative, and historical approaches, rather than the theological approach that Pinker inferred from the title.

²⁸. The proposed requirement at Harvard was a semester-length course, not a single text. The real issue, however, was neither the duration nor the required status of the course. It was Pinker's perception of the inevitable conflation of critical study and confessional affirmation that made inquiry into religion a problem. It bears noting that Pinker's challenge took shape within Harvard's institutional context, in which there is no independent department of religious studies. Instead, an interdisciplinary "Committee on the Study of Religion," with members from both the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Divinity School, oversees undergraduate and doctoral (Ph.D. and Th.D.) programs. The blurring of critical and confessional lines in the program's structure may have influenced Pinker's criticisms of the proposed course on "Reason and Faith."

²⁹. Rais A. Khan, "The State of American Studies in Pakistan," in *American Studies International*, XXV, no. 2(October 1987), 72-73.

³⁰. See the text of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's August 11, 1947 "Presidential Address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan" at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt_jinnah_assembly_1947.html.

³¹. Ibid.

³². The evolving understanding of "religion" in the Protestant Reformation is discussed in Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 1.

³³. For the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan see http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf

³⁴. Jacques Waardenburg, "Observations on the Study of Religions as Pursued in Some Muslim Countries," *Numen* Vol. 45, No. 3 (1998), 246.

³⁵. In September 2014, for example, Dr. Shakeel Auj, Professor and Dean of Islamic Studies at Karachi University, was killed after a local seminary issued a fatwa against him, claiming that he had committed blasphemy. Auj had formerly edited *Al-Tafseer*, a journal of Islamic Studies recognized by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. See Asim Khan, "Dean of KU Islamic Studies department shot dead," *The Dawn* (Sep 18, 2014), <http://www.dawn.com/news/1132736>.

³⁶. See Matthew J. Nelson, "Dealing with Difference: Religious Education and the Challenge of Democracy in Pakistan" in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (May, 2009), 591-618. This study is based on the author's interviews with parents of 3,500 school children in sixteen districts of Pakistan, from 2003-2005. On the prevalence of "part-time enrolments" in madrasas see pp. 595-598. The emphasis placed on religious assimilation is evident in the large majority of parents who viewed discussion of sectarian difference as undesirable or un-Islamic. The government's own 2006 White Paper on education also insisted that Pakistani textbooks and school curricula "must never foster, or lead to, sectarianism." See Nelson, 614-616.

³⁷. See A.H. Nayyar and Ahmed Salim, *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2005). The authors point out the representation of non-Muslims in school textbooks, highlighting the problems of textbooks in approaching other religions. Tariq Rahman's *Denizens of Alien Worlds: A Study of Education, Inequality and Polarization in Pakistan*, (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2004) is a fine study on the problems of the educational system in Pakistan. Among other things, this work highlights madrasa students' intolerance towards religious minorities.

³⁸. This evidence mirrors the observation made by the Carl Ernst, that there is no tradition of the study of religion akin to its practice in the U.S. in Asia, Africa, and Europe (*Following Muhammad*, 43). That said, European state

churches are relatively weak, and therefore citizens in those countries do not face comparable threats for critically engaging “state” religion.

³⁹. Waardenburg, 240. Just as some U.S. scholars point to the Protestant bias in the “comparative religions” approach, Islam is likely the implicit normative template in comparative religions in Pakistani education.

⁴⁰. Waardenburg, 246. Despite political liabilities, the author notes Muslim scholars’ growing interest in Christianity and Hinduism, in response to developments in Muslim-Christian dialogue and to communal tensions in India, respectively. In general, Religious Studies and the History of Religions have been institutionalized earlier in multi-faith, than in Muslim, societies (240).

⁴¹. See Khan, “The State of American Studies in Pakistan,” 66-71.

⁴². The Area Study Center of Quaid-i-Azam University and Ball State University’s Center for International Department participated in the U.S. State Department Grant 680-12N for “The Establishment of a Partnership for Studies of the United States” from August 2012 to December 2015. Ball State faculty in disciplines affiliated with American Studies worked with ASC graduate students through digital video conferencing, faculty visits to the ASC in Islamabad, and student enrollment in six-week summer seminars at Ball State.

⁴³. These comments occurred during a digital video presentation on “Methods and Themes in the Study of Religion,” by Dr. Elizabeth Agnew, an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Ball State University, on April 2, 2013.

⁴⁴. These comments occurred during a digital video presentation on “The Study of Religion in the U.S. post-9/11,” led by Dr. Elizabeth Agnew, an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Ball State University, April 16, 2015.

⁴⁵. The QAU Area Study Center’s list of “Revised ASC Courses for 2013-14” included a syllabus for “Religion in America.” Apparently the course had not been taught for some time.

⁴⁶. The latter point also applies to nonreligious adherents encountering the academic study of religion, as is evident in the opposition to the study of religion at Harvard University.

⁴⁷. *Abington v. Schempp*.

⁴⁸. In his noted book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), the American sociologist of religion Peter L. Berger draws a brief but fascinating connection between “conversation” and social order that pertains here. He writes: “Individuals appropriate the world in conversation with others . . . and both identity and world remain real only as long as they can continue the conversation . . . In other words, the subjective reality of the world

hangs on the thin thread of conversation. Maintaining the continuity of conversation is one of the most important imperatives of social order.” (16-17) Extrapolating from this, it can be argued that conversation as a means to learn about—and to engage directly with—those of different religious traditions plays a critical role in maintaining (a just) social order in the 21st century.

⁴⁹. See Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York University Press, 2014). Grewal rejects the simplistic claim (made, for example, by the State Department) that the “problem” with Islam is a curricular problem. Rather, she argues, through critical inquiry and the “reflexive questioning of modern thought,” Islamic education around the world has undergone dramatic reforms in the last century that have profoundly redefined Islamic authority. Among the multiple voices are those of American youth, who are actively engaged in the global debate about Islamic authority (22-23).

⁵⁰. Waardenburg, 248.