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Editorial

It is with great honour that I take over after Walid Saleh as editor of *Comparative Islamic Studies*. There are many ways to envision Comparative Islamic Studies. Comparative *religious* studies has at its heart the structural and typological comparison, because it allows us to transcend context and compare "religious phenomena" from different parts of the world, and different times. Contrary to appearances, this type of comparative exercise is not reductive and homogenizing; rather, it helps us define what is distinctive about particular forms of human religious thought and practices, as we "land" and re-connect them with their specific societal contexts. Nor does the approach rank the compared phenomena; rather, it celebrates the diversity of human religious forms, and cognitively resists stereotyping and hierarchies.

Comparative religious studies can be provocative: comparativists aspire to overview, not only over the human history of religions, but also over science. As the contributors to Kimberley Patton's and Benjamin Ray's millennium volume *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (2000) point out, all scientific thought relies on comparison, but usually the dependency remains implicit. Comparative religious studies, however, and for all its errors, has always *explicitly* theorized comparison as the discipline continues to develop new methodologies. Consequently, since it began in the late 1800s, Comparative religious studies has integrated systematic reflection over the relationship between religion and science. Comparative *Islamic* studies thus means the study of Islam through self-conscious reflection over universals and particulars, form and content, structure and societal context, religion and non-religion, and the impact of our scientific methodology in shaping the subject matter of our research: Islam.

CIS new remit, described on the website and in the Author's Guidelines, welcomes any approach and research problem. However, CIS also aspires to contribute to developing new problem areas and fields of

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research, and to provide an easily identifiable and accessible venue for the publication of continuous research results, through the journal and its website.

One example of a research field is how people use religion to address and solve what they perceive as important societal challenges, in historical and contemporary contexts, including research into the origins and development of religions.

The articles in this issue, which consists of a Sufism section of three articles, and a fourth article on *zakat*, illustrate what such studies could look like. Clinton Bennett, guest editor of the Sufism section, in his introduction sets out the parameters for a new project on Sufism's political and societal implications, initiated by the three fine case studies by Ahmad Hamid, Mohamed Mosaad Abdelaziz, and Sarwar Alam. The authors argue that Sufism aims at a universal social contract, which includes both Muslims and non-Muslims, and that it achieves this goal through non-literalist and non-legalist approaches to the Islamic sources. Vardit Rispler-Chaim's study of contemporary jurists' treatment of *zakat* with reference to the disabled provides an interesting case from the legal tradition. The author offers insights into the legal reasoning on the topic, including changes in the jurists' attitudes and rulings. Thus, concerning AIDS patients and the question of whether *zakat* funds could pay for their antiretroviral drugs, praxis has moved from the negative to the positive, as the jurists' views of sexual mores versus humanitarian needs have changed. We also get an idea of the kind of supplementary contributions that *zakat* can make in modern societies where governments are the principally and practically responsible for the disabled.

This interesting collection of articles (for which I cannot take credit) raises further questions. Are there any identifiably "Sufi" attitudes regarding social welfare-related matters when compared with "legal Islam," or are there different positions within each "camp"? What impact, if any, does these different expressions of Islam have on voluntary civil society-based and state-provided welfare policies and provisions? Do the religious identities matter for who can receive welfare provisions in *fiqh*? And so on. We look forward to future publications from Clinton Bennett and his colleagues and the Sufism in politics and society project, and its expansion to include non-Sufi cases, for comparison.

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