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FROM THE EDITOR

This is the first issue of the journal that I edited and sent off to the press, but I did so as part of a team rather than as an individual. I must offer warm thanks to my predecessor as editor, R. Stephen Humphreys, for having done much of the pre-production editing, with his usual attention to detail and search for excellence, and for consulting so closely with me on acceptances. And, of course, I am deeply in his debt for having done such a fine job with the journal for the past five years, leaving to my charge a flourishing enterprise. Thanks, too, are owed to Liz Montana and the others at the Santa Barbara office who shepherded these pieces through the editorial process, as well as to our book-review editors.

The subsequent issues I send to press will continue to be a matter of teamwork. An academic journal entering its thirty-second year, such as *IJMES*, reflects a long-term community of scholars as much as it does the tastes of successive editors. One always hopes to build on the achievements of one's predecessors and go from strength to strength, of course, and together we shall make our best effort to do so. It is no secret to this audience that severe questions have been raised in recent years about the usefulness of area studies. It has been charged that such disciplines are overly provincial and too mired in specificities, failing to give rise to large-scale generalizations about human societies. This critique, which originates primarily in the hard social sciences and in the foundation community, could be replied to in a number of ways. As a historian and Islamicist myself, I maintain that a concern with philology or particularities is foundational to some crucial fields, and I do not think that all useful scholarship must produce grand generalizations, however undeniably helpful it can be to think analytically with the help of theory.

What struck me about the articles and reviews in this issue, however, was how little they resembled the caricature painted of area studies by its critics. Tamir Moustafa's article on relations between the Mubarak regime and al-Azhar seminary, for instance, is very firmly grounded in the political-science literature of the New Institutionalism, and the author engages in the footnotes explicitly with Anthony Gill's rational-choice approach to the study of Catholicism in Latin America. For most readers of this journal, the clarity he brings to an understanding of religion–state relations in contemporary Egypt will be an important achievement in itself, but his conclusions have implications for the sociology and the political science of religion

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more generally. Haggai Erlich's study of relations between the Egyptian and Ethiopian Coptic communities in the 20th century is a fine example of the cross-regional work many scholars in area studies pursue; it is also an example of an increasingly interesting dialogue among specialists in the Nile Valley across the divide of Africa and the "Middle East," of Islam and Christianity. Paul Titus and Nina Swidler examine the myths and realities of Balochi subnationalism in Pakistan, transgressing the artificial and most unhelpful divide often set up between the "Middle East" and "South Asia." Larbi Sadiki brings a "local knowledge" critique home to the hard social scientists who doubt the usefulness of specific area-studies knowledge. He argues that political scientists working on Europe and North America have developed maxims such as "wealthy societies tend to be more democratic," "bread riots by the rabble have no long-term political consequences," and "Islam is incompatible with democracy," which they have posited as universals even though they are based on the findings and techniques of the Western academy working with Western data. He maintains that all of these maxims are flawed if one carefully examines developments in the Middle East. Vali Nasr, a political scientist who references the political-economy literature on South America, gives us a detailed study of the politics of economic planning in the Iran of the 1960s, questioning the image of the shah as pro-market. Mohammad Gholi Majd examines again the complex and controversial issues surrounding the shah's land-reform program, arguing that the position of the small holders is key to understanding its ambiguities. The work in this issue, then, is often cross-regional and explicitly or implicitly comparative or firmly grounded in the social sciences and in dialogue with many of the big questions in contemporary social theory. It represents only a part of what academics in the Middle East field do, of course, and there will be other and different sorts of issues in the future. It does stand testimony, I think, to the vigor of area studies.

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