

Editorial

This issue goes to press as we reach the half-way mark of another month of fasting, the blessed month of Ramadan. A month when Muslims abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset is bound to bring to the fore questions of identity, especially for Muslims living in non-Muslim societies. I marveled as two of my non-Muslim students blithely ate their fruit before our morning class while the Muslim students and I could only eye their food with envy – the pungent smell of orange peel only heightened by the fast. That the students seemed totally oblivious only increased my wonder. It is, perhaps, an odd example to mention, but as we proceeded to have a heated discussion of the position of women in Islam, it reminded me of the daily complexities of maintaining an Islamic identity in the West.

This question of identity and what it means to be Muslim has, perhaps, never been so under the spotlight or so hotly debated. That is why academic analysis, done under the constraints of the noble ideals of academia (a search for as dispassionate and objective meaning about the human condition as is humanly possible) is more pressing than ever. The fate of Muslims in the West depends on it, and on the dissemination of good academic thought through the media into popular culture. The week of writing this editorial saw the arrest of a young man alleged to be behind hate literature left under the doors of the Arab and Muslim Student Associations at a university in Toronto. Under a photograph of a white male, a caption reads: “Those who follow the Islam faith [*sic*] need to be killed in the worst possible way imaginable.” These are some of the results of Bush’s “war on terror,” which, though meant to make the world safer for freedom, democracy, and tolerance, is, in fact, polarizing the globe and fuelling an ethnic and racial particularism that has been growing during the past decade.

As with this year’s other issues, the articles in this issue deal with these perennially important questions of identity, ethnicity, the state, media, and war. Two of the three relate to the current predicament of Muslims and the West, and the third looks at related questions in a historical and intra-Muslim context – the role of Arab tribes in the eighth century `Abbasid revolution.

The issue opens with Kersten's study of Muslims in southern Thailand. Cognizant of the importance of understanding the past in order to understand the present, Kersten's analysis of Muslims in southern Thailand starts with a look at the formation of Thailand as a nation-state. This allows him to develop a nuanced portrayal of the Muslim community, which gives a deeper, and perhaps more empathetic, understanding of the politics of the region under the present global discourse of the "war on terror." As Kersten concludes "the complexity of Thailand's 'Malay-Muslim question' ... makes an oversimplified and ill-defined image of some multi-tentacled Islamist conspiracy menacing Southeast Asia untenable."

Unfortunately for Thailand's Muslim community, the Bangkok government has once again launched military operations against it. According to Asia News, on October 27, 2004:

... at least 84 Muslim protesters died, mostly from suffocation so severe their eyes bled, after being arrested and locked in army trucks following clashes with security forces in the south, officials said yesterday. ... The deaths occurred on Monday after security forces fired live ammunition, tear gas and water cannons at more than 2,000 angry people in nearby Narathiwat province, including some who stormed the Tak Bai district police station. ... The clashes began when about 2,000 protesters demanded the release of six Muslim men who were jailed on suspicion of stealing weapons from pro-government volunteers.

Closely linked to Kersten's article is that of Ahmed Yousif's study of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. Yousif takes a slightly different approach to try and make a similar point: Islamic revivalism does not need to be construed as a threat to or enemy of the West. Yousif looks at the rise of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia since the 1970s and the impact of this rise on (Muslim and non-Muslim) public consciousness. The last part of his article attempts to address and allay concerns raised by non-Muslims in Malaysia that growing Islamization will disadvantage them. To this end, he is critical of the Malay tradition of tying religious profession to ethnicity – that a Muslim is a Malay. This links his article up with that of Kersten (Muslim Thais were not authentically Thai), and with Marín-Guzmán's study of Arab tribes and the role of tribal solidarity in the `Abbasid revolution.

Marín-Guzmán, whose fine scholarship on early Arab history has recently graced the pages of AJISS, has contributed another superb traditionalistic analysis of the role of tribal feuds and rivalry during the formative period of Islamic history. His use of Arabic sources makes his work of

great interest for those readers unable to access the information in the original language. Like the other essays in this volume, he explores the roles of ethnicity and identity in state-craft and state building. Understanding how these issues played themselves out historically in Muslim communities is important for those of us Muslims who grow up or embrace Islam having only vague notions about the glorious Islamic past – it helps us to understand the rifts in our ummah today.

And to end on a sad note. Sharifa Alkhateeb, a former AJISS managing editor, passed away on Wednesday, October 20. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*. (From Him we come to Him we return.) May Allah forgive her sins and grant her Paradise. We present excerpts from two obituaries to show just how much of a difference this committed woman made to society:

The Washington Post:

Mrs. Alkhateeb embraced both American and Islamic ways in her lifelong effort to bridge gaps between the two cultures. Often quoted in news reports about Muslim matters, particularly pertaining to women, she also advised schools, police departments, corporate directors, governmental agencies and textbook publishers on the nature of Islamic life. ...

After graduating from Penn, Mrs. Alkhateeb received a master's degree in comparative religion from Norwich University in Northfield, Vt., then edited the Marmaduke Pickthall translation of the *Koran*, published in 1977. From 1978 to 1987, she lived in Saudi Arabia, where her husband, an Iraqi-born U.S. citizen, was working. She taught in private schools and at a Saudi university and worked as a journalist for the English-language *Saudi Gazette*, sometimes receiving warnings for reporting on women and other sensitive issues. ...

She was co-author of the *Arab World Notebook*, which is used in public schools nationwide, and was managing editor of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. She founded the Peaceful Families Project, a nationwide program sponsored by the Department of Justice to examine violence in the Muslim community.

Islamic Horizons:

Sharifa Alkhateeb was among the first two young women to join the Muslim Students Association of the US & Canada (MSA) soon after its founding in 1963, was an outspoken advocate of women rights. Alkhateeb, founder of the North American Council for Muslim Women, was also a relentless educator and worker in the field of healing families,

working against domestic violence. In 1993, her North American Council for Muslim Women became the first national Muslim organization of any kind to discuss abuse and violence against women and children during a national convention.

On Labor Day weekend 2004, Sharifa became the first woman to receive the Mahboob Khan Community Service Award, which recognizes outstanding service to the Muslim community in North America. ... The citation noted that for the past 40 years, Alkhateeb – among the first two women to join the MSA at its founding – has been a tireless worker for the Muslim community in North America and overseas. As founder and president of the North American Council of Muslim Women, *basheer* of the Muslim Women's Delegation to the Beijing Conference on Women, founder and director of the Peaceful Families Project at the Faith Trust Institute, and member of the Board of Advisors for KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, she built a reputation as a staunch advocate for women's rights and a outspoken opponent of domestic violence.

May Allah reward her and accept her strivings for His Cause. Ameen.

Katherine Bullock