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**“Middle Eastern Studies in American Universities:
Past, Present, and Future”**

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Reading the history of the development of Islamic studies as a discipline in American universities and colleges highlights crucial facts that add to the shortcomings experienced in these academic programs. First, since most of the early American scholars of Islam were missionaries opposed to Islam, the religion was neither well understood nor received in the West. Second, in addition to the opposition to Islam in the Christian West, the Crusades and the reconquest in Spain, unconsciously affected the attitude of many modern westerners, including the way in which Middle East Studies and/or Islamic Studies evolved. Third, although Islam is theologically couched in rather abstract language, and whose teachings include a sacred law which is closer to Judaism and Christianity than to Indian and/or Far Eastern religions with their emphasis on myths and symbols, the study of Islam was not developed in university departments due to these historical issues. This paper will show how there was a greater understanding of Hinduism and Buddhism than Islam due to well developed academic disciplines in Far Eastern Religious Studies programs as opposed to Islam or Islamic Studies. In Middle Eastern Studies Departments in American universities, Islam was not taught as a religion, but rather as a history, language (Arabic, Turkish, Urdu), culture, and political science. More than two decades ago, a number of scholars of Islamic studies called for the study of Islam as a religion, rather than a discipline. For example, several American Muslim scholars promoted the need to study the sources of knowledge by integrating both the philosophical and mystical approach, and instituting the monotheistic concept of the Abrahamic faiths. Although many universities and seminaries are providing Islamic studies programs, the following questions need to be examined to better understand how these programs can be improved: “How is Islam being taught as a religion? What are the goals, objectives and expectations of Islamic Studies Programs? What philosophical and methodological approaches are being applied? How is the curriculum developed and what teaching methods are applied? What is the role of the teacher in these studies programs?” This paper attempts to present questions that consider some of the factors which prevent Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies programs from assuming a more substantive and effective place in an academic framework. Second, it hopes to explore different ways to improve these programs by building bridges based on social and religious values shared by the West and the Muslim world. Therefore, this paper will focus on a selection of “Islamic Studies Courses” applied at various institutions as “case studies” that can be used by universities as a curriculum guide to help them outline practical and workable Islamic studies programs. Hopefully this examination will help analyze, evaluate and compare different

teaching methods. Interviews with Islamic and Arabic scholars will be highlighted to compare various programs and teaching methodologies.