

Teaching and Learning Committee Honors Zayn Kassam with 2005 Excellence in Teaching Award

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By Eugene V. Gallagher, Connecticut College

Zayn Kassam, chair of the department of religious studies at Pomona College, will receive the Excellence in Teaching Award at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. A historian of religions, she teaches a variety of courses, including “Engendering and Experience: Women in the Islamic Tradition,” “Islamic Thought,” and “Muslim Literary Landscapes.”

In addition to her own scholarly work, Kassam has written several essays on teaching, including “Engendering and Experience: Teaching a Course on Women in Islam” (in *Teaching Islam*, Brannon Wheeler, ed.); “Reflections on Teaching Islam at a Liberal Arts College” (in the *Bulletin* of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion); and “Mindfield or Minefield Teaching Religion in a Multicultural Classroom” (in *Spotlight on Teaching*). Extending her teaching beyond the college context, she has written a variety of articles intended for a lay audience. In addition, she is preparing *A Student’s Guide to the World Religions: Islam* for Greenwood Press.

Students have expressed profound appreciation for Kassam’s “never-ending commitment” to supporting her students emotionally and as scholars. They praise her teaching methods for striving to involve all students equally and appreciate her skillful and fluid use of various media and educational technologies to enhance her teaching.

Colleagues observe that Kassam is equally adept at leading discussions and delivering lectures. One colleague said “Zayn has an incredible ear for the students’ partial insights, their half-articulate reflections, and their struggles with difficult material. She displays a sensitivity that genuinely respects the students without showing a trace of condescension, and she has the skill to show the larger implications of the issue under scrutiny.”

Another colleague praises Kassam’s ability to address volatile subjects with students in “an environment of candor and honesty.” Students and colleagues alike attest that she deeply deserved Pomona’s “Wig Distinguished Teaching Award,” which she received in 1998, in her first year of eligibility, and then again in 2005.

At this year’s Annual Meeting, participants will again have the opportunity to engage in conversation with the Excellence in Teaching Award winner during a special session on Saturday, November 19, 1:00 PM–3:30 PM (A19-53). The session is sponsored by the Committee on Teaching and Learning and will be chaired by Eugene V. Gallagher. Prior to the Annual Meeting, Professor Kassam will post some of her teaching materials on the Web site of the AAR’s Virtual Teaching and Learning Center

(<http://www.aarweb.org/awards/teaching/default.asp>), and they will serve as the basis for the session.

Professor Kassam is an impressive example of dedication to the craft of teaching, especially for her careful and unflinching consideration of issues that often carry a heavy emotional charge for her students. Along with the previous winners of the AAR Excellence in Teaching Award — Tina Pippin, Eugene V. Gallagher, William Placher, Janet Walton, and Timothy Renick — she demonstrates the resourceful, creative, and fully engaged teaching found among so many members of the Academy. The Committee on Teaching and Learning greatly appreciates the opportunity to review and learn from the materials submitted by the candidates for consideration and acknowledges the commitment, ingenuity, and energy that they devote to teaching about religion.

The Committee on Teaching and Learning encourages colleagues to send letters of nomination for this significant award to Kyle Cole, Director of College Programs at the American Academy of Religion, kcole@aarweb.org. The guidelines for this award are on the AAR Web site at <http://www.aarweb.org/awards/teaching/default.asp>.