Zayn Kassam

Zayn Kassam holds a PhD in the history of religions with a focus on Islam and Hinduism from McGill University. Her expertise lies in Islamic and Indian philosophy, gender in Islam, religion and the environment, and more recently, in Muslims in a growing queer universe and climate change. She has served the AAR in the capacity of co-chair of the Study of Islam Unit, and as a steering committee member for Liberal Theologies; Childhood Studies in Religion; Islam, Gender, and Women; Religion and Migration; and the Religion, Social Conflicts, and Peace Units at the AAR, as well as a member of the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession Committee. She also serves on the editorial boards of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion and the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion and previously on the board of the national honor society Theta Alpha Kappa. Author of articles on gender issues as well as migration, Kassam is the editor of two volumes: Islam, Indians, and Zionism/nonzionism, for the Encyclopedia of Indian Religions (Springer, 2018), Women in Asian Religions (Praeger, 2017); and Women and Islam (Praeger, 2010). She has also authored an introductory text on Islam (Greenwood, 2005).

Kathleen T. Talvacchia

Kathleen T. Talvacchia is an independent scholar based in New York. Before taking time away from university administration to pursue research and writing projects, she was most recently associate dean for academic and student affairs at the School of Theology at Union Theological Seminary. Previously she was associate professor of ministry and theology at Union Theological Seminary. She is a contextual theologian with interests in queer theology, Christian practice of marginalized communities and practical theology. She is co-editor (with Michael F. Pettinger and Mark Larrimore) of Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms (NYU Press, 2015), an anthology examining the lived religious experiences of LGBTQ Christian, and authored Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching (Chalice Press, 2003). Her recent work, forthcoming in 2018 from Cascade Books, reimagines the significance of the process of coming out and re-embracing Embracing Disruptive Coherence: Coming Out as Erotic Ethical Practice.

Talvacchia has served most recently on the AAR’s Committee on the Status of LGBTQ Persons in the Profession, including three years as a member and two years as chair. Previously she served on the AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning and the AAR Theological Education Committee.

Zayn Kassam - Statement

Facilitating and creating spaces of inclusion is essential in the pluralistic society in which we live. Differently abled, queer, racialized, and women members of the academy who have given their energies and insights into the profession and vocation of teaching and research towards the greater understanding of religions should never have to experience barriers to their full participation in the academy and its national and regional meetings. But such barriers do exist, and the robust efforts of the Status Committees at the American Academy of Religion have resolved in a growing number of units and committees that moves us towards inclusion but also opens up deeper issues that need reflection and action on the part of both the institution and its individual members.

For instance, how do differently abled members access spaces too narrow for wheelchair, or hear panel presentations if they cannot hear? What challenges do the sexual identity of faculty, graduate students and religious workers face? How do they address harassment and discrimination and being rendered invisible or incompetent not only for faculty positions and committees, but also for convincing graduate supervisors and promotion committees and reviewers that they have something important to say? What protections exist for them at their workplaces, and what curricular spaces do religion and theology departments open up at institutions both nationally and internationally that engage difficult dialogues around ability, race, gender, and sexuality? For instance, while Disability Studies is an emerging field, how many departments of theology and religious studies seriously engage disability studies in their curricula? What can the Academy do about this?

Questions such as these animate my desire to envision and work towards a more equitable Academy. My studies of Islam and Hinduism bring home the power of such questions, as well as the importance of including different religious traditions. To achieve this I support two goals. First, I aim to advocate with all of the members of the AAR for the achievement of this objective. Working with the chairs and members of the Status of Women in the Profession, the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession, the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer Persons in the Profession, and the Status of People with Disabilities in the Profession, the Status Committee Director serves as Erotic Ethical Practice.

Kathleen T. Talvacchia - Statement

The AAR’s new long-term plan states as its first goal, “Cultivate and Support a Diverse Community Engaged in the Academic Study of Religion.” The Status Director position serves a significant role in the successful achievement of this objective. Working with the chairs and members of the Status of Women in the Profession, the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession, the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer Persons in the Profession, and the Status of People with Disabilities in the Profession, the Status Committee Director provides important information to the AAR’s status committees in their work of advocacy for the needs of under-represented constituencies in the AAR. Participating directly in the work of the AAR as a member of the Board of Directors, the Status Director position brings these concerns directly to the table for advocacy and action.

The intersectional realities of under-represented groups in the academy require collaborative engagement, conversations and strategies to create inclusive policies, program unit structures and administrative procedures. During the five years that I served on the Status of LGBTQ Persons in the Profession, including two as Chair, I partnered with the other Status Committees to address our collective concerns and specific realities through joint programming at the Annual Meeting and collective action in dialogue with the AAR leadership to create a more inclusive experience for those under-represented groups in the AAR. I believe that many important tasks remain in order to continue this work and, most urgently, for it to be more institutionally integrated into the AAR’s aims and actions.

I bring to the position of Status Director a scholarly background that has sought to understand the intersectional social contexts that communities bring into their engagement with religious practices. As a scholar trained in theologies of liberation, my work is situated at the intersection of theory and practice, where social experiences of power are major starting points for academic engagement. My early work in theology and multicultural pedagogy (Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching, Chalice Press, 2003) sought to understand the spiritual groundings of inclusive teaching as the actions of a critical mind that understands social analysis and a discerning heart that understands the lived realities of people in those social contexts. My more recent work in queer theology examines the lived religious practices of LGBTQ Christian (Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms, co-edited with Michael F. Pettinger and Mark Larrimore, NYU Press, 2015). My current work reconsiders the significance of the process of coming out, articulating it as an erotic ethical practice (Embracing Disruptive Coherence: Coming Out as Erotic Ethical Practice, forthcoming in 2018 from Cascade Books).

I would bring to the Status Director role commitments to collaboration, advocacy and transparency—honed from my experience as a dean, faculty member and Status Committee member and— to advocate with all of the Status Committees for AAR policies and practices that create and sustain a more inclusive scholarly community.

Serves a three-year term. The Status Committee Director is a member of the Board of Directors, representing the particular concerns and issues of AAR’s “status of” groups, and helps to administer accountability and accessibility policies. The Status Committee Director serves on the Nominations Committee.