

## *Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports*

### Islamic Traditions and Comparative Modernities

From 25-26 September 2009, Thomas Jefferson's academic village in Charlottesville, the University of Virginia (UVA), hosted the Thirty-Eighth Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS). Cosponsored by the university's Department of Religious Studies and the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures, presenters and participants discussed "Islamic Traditions and Comparative Modernities."

In his opening remarks, Conference Chair Abdulaziz Sachedina (Frances Myers Ball Professor of Religious Studies, UVA) underlined the deliberate choice of *traditions* and *modernities* in the title to acknowledge the multiplicity of these experiences in current academic disciplines. AMSS president Ali Mazrui (Binghamton University), the second opening speaker, focused on modernity, modernization, democratization, globalization, secularization, and other related concepts, all of which were invented and defined by the West and are part of the dilemma of Islam's confrontation with it. Expanding upon globalization's various forms, he opined that its dominant category was comprehensive globalization, which represents all of the forces that have brought societies together in a globalized village. He concluded by stating that he was proud to launch this conference with the agenda of this changing dynamic of the present century.

Panel 1, "Islam and the West" and chaired by Mazrui, featured two fascinating papers. Alan Godlas (University of Georgia) proposed improving encounters among Islam, the West, and indigenous cultures by identifying and overcoming the major obstacle: the domination of maladaptive emotions. The first two cultures' negligence of emotions, given their dominant logocentric focus, could be cured by enhancing and then applying emotional intelligence via "emotion-focused therapy" at all educational levels. Junaid Ahmad (University of Cape Town) followed with his analysis of academic and popular discourse in the post-9/11 world of what he called the "Islam industry." He showed how Islam was portrayed in ways that would be

deemed offensive if directed at another religion. Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton (UVA) served as discussant.

The luncheon keynote speaker, William Quandt (Edward R. Stettinius, Jr. Professor of Politics, UVA), spoke on “Obama’s Approach to the Muslim World.” Based on his academic command of the subject and his long service at the State Department, Quandt observed the Muslim world’s positive reception of the Obama administration and the visible signs of change in Washington’s attitude, as illustrated by the use of “mutual respect” in Obama’s inaugural speech and the clear abandonment of the former administration’s policy of redesigning the Middle East. He added that Obama has made negotiation and diplomacy the major policy tools for engaging with such formerly demonized countries as Iran and Syria. Even more, he has made the Arab-Israeli conflict as a priority, and his assertion of its importance for American national interests was unheard of since Carter. His major point was that how Obama handles the Arab-Israeli and Af-Pak issues, among other concrete problems, will reveal what kind of president he will be.

Panel 2, “Islam and the Media” and chaired by Ahmed E. Ahmed (University of Texas Medical Branch), was launched by Michelle Byng’s (Temple University) paper on media representations of the hijab. She presented her results, based on seventy-two American news stories on the hijab ban (France), the niqab (the United Kingdom), and public veiling (the United States). She concluded that “hijab talk” in various western countries has culture-specific dimensions based upon their populations’ respective visions of integration/assimilation of Muslims. Notwithstanding the different versions of secularism, the media still represents these countries alike, thereby reinforcing a “common sense” that public veiling is unacceptable.

Mücahit Bilici (City University of New York) discussed temporality, authenticity, and Muslim identity in the case of moon sighting – or “moon fighting” – in a Simmelian framework of “temporal citizenship.” He pointed out that despite this debate’s embarrassing nature, the adjustment of time is a dimension of overall cultural citizenship of Muslims both for internal unification and unification with American society through synchrony. Hasan Kösebalaban (Lake Forest College) provided an alternative reading of the complex face Turkish modernization has acquired with the current JDP government. He illustrated how the authoritarian top-down isolationist and nationalist Kemalist model was supplanted by an emerging bottom-up model, one that is at peace with Islam. Daniel Lefkowitz (UVA) served as discussant.

Panel 3, “Relation between Religious and Secular in Islam” and chaired by Saeed A. Khan (Wayne State University), featured Carrie Konold (Uni-

versity of Michigan, Ann Arbor), who outlined how the elite's framing of family law and the role of the Shari`ah have shaped citizen preferences in Senegal and how secularism's multifaceted meaning has figured in the debate on Islamic family law. Ehsan Moghaddasi (University of Tehran) suggested how Hatami's reform policies led to the downfall of Iran's secular groups and paved the way for Ahmadinajad's presidency. Mahmoud Ayoub's (Hartford Seminary) "Islam and Secularism" offered a history of the relationship between Islam's religious and secular realms and argued that Islam embraced both simultaneously by not rejecting the world. Elizabeth F. Thompson (UVA) served as discussant.

The second day's first panel, "Islamic Revivalism and Modernity" and chaired by Robert D. Crane (independent researcher and scholar), led off with Ermin Sinanovic's (U.S. Naval Academy) account of *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform) as agents of social change in the Islamic context and proposed reading Islamic revivalism as offering several possibilities for multiple modernities. This was followed by Jackie Brinton's (Davidson College) analysis of Imam Sha`rawi's epistemic system, which underlined the ulema's relevance to religious discourse despite contemporary threats. The session was concluded by Marianne Farina's (Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology) interreligious approach to religious education, which seeks to integrate it not only with other fields of learning, but, most importantly, with life itself instead of just being an addendum to it. Ahmed H. al-Rahim (UVA) served as discussant

Panel 5, "Islamic Literary Hermeneutics" and chaired by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (writer and poet), sparked real debate. Hanadi Al-Samman (UVA) presented Karamah and other grassroots women's organizations' engagement with the juristic tradition to empower women worldwide. Alireza Korangy's (UVA) paper revealed how women's poetic imagery in Iranian literary history represented their own times and upheavals in ways that differed radically, from the Qajars up to the Islamic revolution, from their male counterparts. The panel was concluded by Khaled Troudi's (University of Exeter) analysis of hermeneutic aspects of the Qur'anic narrative with reference to coherence (*nazm*) between a chapter's words and verses instead to the traditional strict focus on its lexical and grammatical aspects. Sachedina was the discussant.

After this, luncheon Keynote Speaker Helena Cobban (author and publisher, JustWorldNews.org) tackled "Changing Perceptions of the Palestinian Question in the US" over the past three decades. She identified several factors that have brought this about, ranging from the changed information environment in a globalized world to the new generation of Palestinian-

American and anti-Zionist Jewish-American activists as well as recent best-sellers. She also pointed out continuing challenges, such as the Palestinians' internal conflict, violence, and the continued strength of this country's anti-Palestinian movement. In closing, Cobban stressed the importance of principles rather than actors in confronting challenges as an expression of her Quaker beliefs and journalistic ethics.

Panel 6, "Cultural Identity and Islam" and chaired by Zakyi Ibrahim (California State University), began with Mumtaz Ahmad's (Hampton University) "Ulema and Their Attitudes toward U.S.: Evidence from Bangladesh to Pakistan." Read in his absence by Saeed Khan, his survey of madrasa curriculum and the profiles of ulama, based upon statistical data compiled from anti-American publications put out by religious groups in Pakistan, mapped out the scope and causes of anti-Americanism. Ahmad argued that while the myth about madrasas as hotspots of terrorism is unjustified, it is true that in post-9/11 era the majority of madrasa ulama are anti-American. Cemil Aydin (George Mason University [GMU]) questioned a now taken-for-granted notion of "the Muslim world." Drawing on Rashid Rida, Ismail Raji al Faruqi, and other intellectuals, he argued that the current dominant narrative presents a golden age followed by a decline and the current need to revive it. In essence, "the Muslim world" is an entirely modern (late nineteenth century) notion that emerged within the context of an imperial legitimacy crisis during the second half of the nineteenth century. Richard Cohen (UVA) discussed Sufism and its syncretic elements, especially in early Indo-Islamic literature. He cited Maulana Da'ud's *Chandayan* as an example. His study traces a variety of influences and cross-cultural borrowings in South Asian Sufism as well as the Chishti family of Sufi sheikhs, while presenting a brief history of its development in South Asia. Mazen Hashem (University of Southern California) served as discussant.

Panel 7, "Public Role of Muslim Women" and chaired by Katherine Bullock (University of Toronto), began with a joint presentation by Noor Mohammad Osmani (International Islamic University-Malaysia [IIU-M]), Abu Umar Faruq Ahmad (Sule College), and Md. Yousus Ali (IIU-M). Addressing the issue of whether women can hold high offices in their nation, they asked why many Muslim scholars believe this is forbidden, even though the Qur'an praises the Queen of Sheba for her just rule. In addition, they pointed out that many contemporary Muslim women are fulfilling this very function, regardless of their supposed "inability" to do so. They were followed by Juliane Hammer (GMU), who analyzed American Muslim women's challenges of traditional forms of exegetical authority and practice in their pursuit of what they perceive as gender justice or gender equality. The

panel ended with Norbani Binti Ismail's (IIU-M) paper on female preachers in Malaysia. She addressed what issues they focus on, the challenges facing them, perceptions of discrimination, why they engage in such work, and who listens to them. Hanadi Al-Samman (UVC) served as discussant.

Keynote Speaker Aminah B. McCloud (director, Islamic World Studies Program, DePaul University), gave the Ismail Raji al-Faruqi Memorial Lecture, "Studying Muslims in the 21st Century," during the annual banquet. She opened by relating stories of her personal acquaintance with al-Faruqi and how he and his wife were involved in the lives of the area's Muslim community, equally embracing black Muslims, and how this had a lasting influence on her. She then moved on to the negative impacts of some gestures made by Muslims in this country to gain more recognition of the long-term prospects for the study of Islam and Muslims in this country. After citing our ineffectual use of western methods and tools, our inability to derive our own approach from the Islamic worldview, and several other particular concerns and factors as the reasons for our inhibition, she invited the audience to engage in preemptive action to respond to events both here and abroad, to transcend local concerns, and to lead the study of Islam instead of letting non-Muslims define it.

Her critique of American Muslims extended to socio-political issues as well, including how they are handling charges of terrorism, when assertive/authoritative people turn into fearful ones, and when these same people turn a blind eye to American history by claiming that this country has – and still is – a wonderful secular one. Among her many penetrating remarks was the following: "If Muslims have a mandate of social justice, we haven't done it in our country. We are either paralyzed with fear or we are not telling them what our social projects are."

At the annual banquet, the new AMSS officers were announced: Ali Mazrui (president), Mahmoud Ayoub (vice president), Jasmin Zine (secretary), and Hasan Kosebalaban (treasurer). Members-at-Large are Michelle Byng, Peter Mandaville, Juliane Hammer, and Zakyi Ibrahim (the editor of AJISS serves on the board as a Member at Large, as per AMSS bylaws).

The First Prize winner for the Best Graduate Paper awards was Carrie Konold, who presented "Shari`ah and the Secular State in Senegal: Understanding Citizen Preferences for Islamic Family Law." Her prize was a certificate signed by President Mazrui and a \$500 check.

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