

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

The Fifth Annual Duke-UNC Graduate Islamic Studies Conference

The annual Duke-University of North Carolina (UNC) Graduate Islamic Studies Conference for 2008, “Practice and Embodiment in Islam,” sought to provide an interlocutory space for engaging the somewhat nascent turn to the body. Held on 5-6 April 2008, this event focused on the theme of practice and embodiment in Islamic texts and contexts. Of late, the theorization of the body has been a sustained topic of research in the humanities and the social sciences.

In his opening remarks, Omid Safi (UNC-Chapel Hill) highlighted the significance of inculcating a “culture of generosity,” since academic circles can often generate feelings of estrangement. “The real challenge for us,” he emphasized, “is to step out of the comfort zones of our community.” Safi then introduced the keynote speaker: Shahzad Bashir (Stanford University).

Bashir’s *tour de force* of fourteenth-fifteenth century Persianate hagiography revealed how the body, as an analytic category and interpretive lens, enables quite sophisticated and unprecedented readings and insights into Sufi hagiographies of this period. After claiming that such texts describe the outward appearance and movements of Sufi shaykhs’ bodies in great detail, he suggested the accompanying miracle stories were usually, if not always, invoked to preserve, heal, feed, or discipline the bodies of others, particularly those on the Sufi path. Bashir said that a majority of the miracles thus had to do with corporeal integrity and continuity. While historians usually see the preponderance of such miracles in hagiographies as unhelpful sources, Bashir argued that these texts constitute an argument for sainthood and that careful analysis of the patterns found therein represent one of our best windows into classical Sufism’s socio-intellectual world.

While using perspectives from theoretical discussions of embodiment to unlock hagiography’s potential as a historical source, he stated that we need to remain aware that the “body” as an analytical venue is our lens into the material, rather than a form of privileged access to the actual social contexts in question. Thus he is skeptical of any claim that the recent focus on embod-

iment in the humanities and the social sciences can form the basis for a new academic humanism. The first panel, “Closely Reading the Body: Textual Analysis of Islamic Sources on Embodiment,” opened with Wesley Williams’ (University of Michigan) “A Body Unlike Bodies: Transcendent Anthropomorphism, Divine Embodiment, and Early Sunnism.” Positing that the conception of God’s body during Islam’s formative years is more similar to Semitic than Hellenistic thought, he mentioned that relying on the latter school of thought caused the *kalamic* articulation of the divine body to be overly influenced by God’s transcendence and thus bypass an articulation of God’s immanence. In his “‘What Their Hands Have Sent Forward’: Performatives of the Hand as Described in Qur’anic Exegesis and Hadith Literature,” Ali Altaf Mian (Duke University) explored possible reworkings of theorizing the performative (from John Austin and Jacques Derrida to Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler) using examples from Qur’anic verses and hadiths. Professor Carl Ernst (UNC-Chapel Hill) responded with insightful comments and useful textual resources.

The second panel, “Embodying Belief: Ethnographic Studies of Contemporary Identity Formations among Muslims,” began with Mashal Saif’s (Duke University) “Fatwa-Issuance as Site of Discourse: Deobandi Juristic Appropriation of the State.” In presenting her ethnography regarding fatwa practices of two Pakistani Deobandi *madrasas*, she argued for a context-centered approach to fatwa analysis that highlights non-theological motives for issuing a fatwa. Sam Harris (Georgetown University) drew upon ethnographic research on the Cairo-based Life Makers group to explore how its participants define agency and the successful pious agent in his “‘Development through Faith’: `Amr Khaled’s Life Makers and the Conceptualization of the (Successful) Pious Agent.” In the panel’s final paper, “The Tablighi Jama`at in Southwestern Ontario: Making Muslim Identities and Networks in Canadian Urban Spaces,” Rory Dickson (Waterloo-Laurier Joint Ph.D. program) argued that Tablighi groups operate as networks of associations that provide blueprints for individual and social self-performance. In her response, Katherine P. Ewing (Duke University) shed light on further implications of the ethnographic methodologies and critical topoi invoked by the presenters.

The first day concluded with Bruce B. Lawrence’s (Duke University) remark that talking of Islam without Muslims disembodies Islam and thus severs it from the concreteness of history and community. He discussed how two monographs, Shahzad Bashir’s *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis* and Scott Kugle’s *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and*

Sacred Power in Islam, draw our attention to embodiment. He praised Kugle for his nimble use of poetry to illustrate the metonymic function of bodily parts as expressions of divine presence in the created order. Kugle's study has blazed new directions for the engagement of Muslims with a nuanced sense of the body and the divine. Lawrence demurred, however, from his wholesale critique of Wahhabi thought, which seemed to rest on a "rigid dichotomy" that better fits Saudi polemical tracts than living Saudis. Lawrence himself has encountered Sufi-minded Wahhabis who reflect a healthy ambiguity about the distancing of Islamic ideals and practice from Sufi experience as well as its literary legacy.

The next day, "Body and Spirit in Islamate Literary Imaginations," featured Momina Cheema (Harvard University), who compared and contrasted Muhammad Iqbal's thoughts on the body and spirit with those of Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Jean-Paul Sartre. She did not, however, look at possible historical or philosophical critiques of Iqbal's thought. In his "Approaching God in a Medieval Sufi Romance: Embodying the Other, Transforming the Self," Elliott Bazzano (University of California-Santa Barbara) focused on how some Sufi poets' (e.g., `Abd al-Rahman Jami, `Attar, and Rumi) appropriation of the story of Joseph and Zelikah (Zulaikha) makes it possible to argue that Qur'anic narratives were adopted for didactic purposes to transform the self by embodying the other.

The panel concluded with Rose Aslan's (American University in Cairo) detailed discussion of al-Busayri's "Qasidat al-Burdah." She said that this poem has reached a multitude of people not only because of its successful language and devotional style, but also because reciting it resembles donning the Prophet's *burdah* (cloak). Anna Bigelow (North Carolina State University) suggested that Cheema consider practice theory, that Bazzano explore notions of dialogical inter-textuality in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and such philosophers as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, and that Aslan incorporate local appropriations of the poem in contexts other than al-Busayri's milieu and consult theories of dream interpretation.

The conference's final panel, "Believer, Subject, Citizen: Examinations of Politics and Religion," examined the socio-political instances of embodying Islam. In her "Pilgrimage, Jihad, and the State: A Conflict of Obligations in the Islamic West," Jocelyn Hendrickson (Emory University) explored the implications of eleventh-century Maliki fatwas that preferred jihad to hajj. She highlighted how such fatwas reflect historical moments in which individual and communal performance of rituals conflicted with state mandates. Khanum Shaikh's (UCLA) "Religious Reform and the Crafting of New

Religious Subjects: Pakistani Women in the Al-Huda Academy” examined new expressions of religiosity among members of this reformist movement by focusing on women’s corporeal practices and performances. Shameela Zaman (York University, Canada), the final presenter, used her “Communalism, Nationalism, and the Gujarat Riots” to describe vividly the recent and largely unnoticed genocide of Gujurati Muslims, especially the mutilation of Muslim women’s bodies. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas of biopolitics, she contended that the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism “others” the bodies of Muslims and sees them as sites of revenge and vengeance. Lorraine Aragon (UNC-Chapel Hill) provided constructive comments to each speaker based on her knowledge of anthropological studies that paralleled these papers.

Ebrahim Moosa’s (Duke University) concluding remarks ranged from highlighting the ethical and juristic dilemmas presented by technological reconfigurations and resuscitations of Muslim bodies in contemporary times to problematizing normative usages and mobilizations of *ijtihad* in response to the crucial challenges that (post)modern social imaginaries pose for Islam and Muslims. Participants benefited from his dazzling discussion of these issues, for very rarely do we hear the names of such Muslim traditionalists as Indian jurist Anwar Shah Kashmiri and Pakistani Mufti Muhammad Shafi` mentioned along with such western philosophers as Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt.

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