

## International Seminar on Islamic Thought

“Islamic thought” has received a great deal of attention since the 9/11 tragedy and the American-led invasion of Iraq. As a result, the conference organizers considered it timely to invite selected individuals to discuss this topic at the International Seminar on Islamic Thought, which was held at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) on 7-9 December 2004.

The conference attracted a sizeable number of participants from within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region and beyond. The large contingent of presenters (100+) was placed on thematic panels designed to cover the following topics: ethics, psychology, education, the environment and technology, theology, philosophy, the Shari`ah, gender, social development, economics, civilization, and Qur’anic studies. The organizers divided the panels into specific time-slots. The languages of presentation were Bahasa Melayu, English, and Arabic.

Given the large number of presenters, it is difficult to highlight all aspects of this conference. Therefore, interested readers are advised to get hold of the CD that contains all of the papers that were presented or sent for inclusion. These papers were edited by Ahmad S. Long, Jaffary Awang, and Kamaruddin Salleh, and the digital publication was titled *Islam: Past, Present, and Future*.

Prior to the seminar, the organizers invited Minister of Higher Education Dato Shafi’ to give his input and support. This was then followed by contributions from the dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies, which is an integral part of UKM, and two of the organizers. The seminar was officially opened with an important public forum on “Islam and Globalization,” chaired by Abu Bakr Ibrahim, who is a member of the Department of Usul-ud-Din (UKM). This forum was addressed by the two keynote speakers: Irfan Abdul-Hamid Fattah, who hails from Iraq and is attached to the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), and Azizan Baharuddin, director of the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue at the University of Malaya (UM).

Fattah argued for replacing *globalization* with *universalism*, which he considered to be more suitable because the latter term is not beset with problems and has no negative connotations. Azizan addressed the issues of science and technology, as well as economics in relation to globalization.

She emphasized the importance of acquiring *fard kifayah* (collective duty) knowledge as opposed to *fard `ayn* (individual duty) knowledge.

The first day featured six parallel sessions. I attended the panel on Islamic thought. Abdul-Fattah Haron Ibrahim (UKM) discussed *Kitab Siyar as-Salikin* by Abdul Salam al-Falimbani Megelirukan. He questioned the authorship and debated the type of scholarship and the nature of the work. His critical remarks came under heavy attack from Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady (IIUM). Idris Zakaria (UKM), in his co-authored paper, defined *kajian masa hadapan* (future studies) and connected this to issues of uncertainty about the future. He then focused on Muslim scholarship and the necessity to address future studies, referring to Ziauddin Sardar's and Kalim Siddiqi's writings in support of his views. The last speaker, Nik Rahimin Nik Wajis (Brunei University), summarized his ideas on "Jihad vs. Violence in the Islamic Perspective." He defined jihad and terrorism and demonstrated the prophetic understanding of jihad and the non-aggressive stance adopted by Muslims in situations of conflict.

In a parallel panel on ethics, Mohsein Javadi, an Iranian scholar, looked at Mu`tazilite rationalism and `Ash`arite voluntarism. Afaf Abdul Hamid (Kolej University Islam Malaysia [KUIM]) spoke on the ethical foundations of work in Islam, and Kyoichiro Sugimoto (IIUM) discussed "The Variance of Muslim Attitudes towards Western Modernity: A Worldview Discourse." He introduced the "worldview" framework, which explains the enduring social phenomenon in general and the relationship between Islam and the West in particular.

On the second day, the participants discussed the following themes: social issues, the economy, education and language, information and communications technology (ICT) and science, and theology and Sufism. I attended the latter one. Ali Asghar Bayani (Azad Islamic University, Iran) undertook a comparative study of al-Ghazali's and Mowlavi Rumi's views regarding God's existence and knowledge were compared and interrogated as a way of understanding and appreciating the different viewpoints. El-Muhammady (IIUM) presented "The Concept of the Muhammadan Light in the Malay-Islamic Discourse in the Context of Sunni Sacred Narrative: An Early Observation," in which he explored the texts of Shaykh Nur-ud-Din Ar-Raniri (d. 1657) to demonstrate how he and others understood the concept. He was acutely aware of the fact that Salafi theologians have considered these thoughts to be deviationist in nature. As expected, members of the audience voiced their disagreements.

The next session concentrated on Islamic law and jurisprudence, Islamic thought, psychology, management, and gender and human rights. The last-mentioned panel addressed gender issues in Muslim societies, women in Achenese society, the interdependence of human rights and human development (a comparative study of Indonesia and Malaysia), and religion and gender. M. Hasbi Amiruddin (Institut Agama Islam Negeri Raniry, Aceh, Indonesia) gave a fascinating historical account of Achenese women's positive role. This insightful sketch contradicts many feminists who believe that Muslim women have always been – and remain – oppressed in Muslim societies. Al-Haq examined the concepts of human rights and human development from both the secular and the Islamic perspective, and argued that they are inseparable, based on how they are practiced in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The afternoon sessions dealt with the Shari`ah, history and politics, civilization and politics, and the Muslim world, among other themes. Adil M. A. Al-Kurayni (KUIM) addressed Israel's influential role in Arab–African relations. Ayman Saleh (Brunei University) concentrated on important legal issues that need constant scrutiny in the light of social change. Muhammed Haron (University of Botswana) critically assessed South African Muslim thought by comparing a representative from the conservative group of theologians with a representative from the progressive voices within the theological fraternities.

The third day of the conference concluded with a plenary discussion on the conference's shortcomings and strengths. The CD containing all of the papers presented and sent for inclusion was a welcome addition. The papers were divided into two categories: those that were written in Arabic were placed in one file, and those that were penned in Bahasa Melayu and English were placed in another. It would have been helpful if the editors had arranged them under specific themes or headings in order to make it more user-friendly. For example, one needs to go through the list of 123 papers that appear in the two Latin-scripted languages before finding the desired article. Another minor criticism is that the page numbers on the content page do not tally with the actual location of the papers.

Muhammed Haron  
Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Botswana  
Gaborone, Botswana