

Muslims and Islam in the Twenty-first Century: Image and Reality

The Muslim world remains embroiled in a whole host of religious, social, political, economic, and cultural disputes. Without any real international influence, despite the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference, great wealth, and large numbers, Muslims are mere spectators in world politics; Islam is synonymous with extremism; and Muslims are often labeled as terrorists. Such issues, as well as questions of media bias, the validity of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, Islamophobia, and realistic Muslim responses led to the above conference, initiated by the Department of Psychology, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur.

Held at the Putra World Trade Center and hosted by IIUM on August 4-6, 2004, this conference attempted to highlight and devise solutions to some of these burning issues. Distinguished scholars presented 120 selected papers, in addition to several panel discussions and keynote speeches. About 400 delegates from over 30 countries participated, and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi gave the inaugural speech.

After an “Introduction to the Conference” by Amber Haque, chairman of the Organizing Committee, the morning session started with keynote speeches from Ibrahim Abu Rabi’ (“Globalization and Social Change”), Lawrence Pintak (“The Communication Gap between America and the World’s Muslims”), and Jamal Badawi (“Muslim–Non-Muslim Relations: An Integrated Approach”). These papers were followed by a panel discussion on “Internal Conflicts in Muslim Societies.” M. Nejatullah Siddiqui, Jamal Badawi, Syed Shahabuddin, Anis Ahmad, Ismail Nawwab, Ziauddin Sardar, and Zafar Ishaq Ansari were the participants, while Chandra Muzaffar was the moderator. These scholars seemed to agree that while Muslims must examine and resolve the ummah’s internal problems, they should not ignore the problems’ external sources. This panel session was

followed by four parallel paper sessions on “Muslims and Modernity,” “Islam, Democracy and Politics,” “Terrorism and Islam,” and “Unity and Conflict.”

During the afternoon session’s inauguration ceremony, Kamal Hassan (IIUM rector) and Sanusi Bin Junid (IIUM president) gave the welcoming remarks. Both pointed out that while 9/11 heightened the Muslims’ powerlessness, they must face the twenty-first century’s growing challenges and correct the distorted image of Muslims and Islam. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi then stated that this negative image is due to western propaganda and the lack of Muslim unity. He focused on the importance of education, eradicating poverty, and providing political/civil rights to women in Muslim countries. In addition, he asserted that many problems are the result of centuries of colonialism, self-neglect, and poor governance, and emphasized the need to build trust, confidence, bridges of cooperation and understanding, as well as to implement *ijtihad* and pursue “capacity building” and religious tolerance.

The second day started with four parallel paper sessions on “Conflicts and Violence in the Muslim World,” “Muslims as Minority Groups,” “Islam and Muslims in the International Media,” and “Islam and Human Rights,” followed by keynote lectures from K. Helmut Reich, Ziauddin Sardar, and Abdullah Omar Naseef. Reich, a Swiss psychologist, spoke on overcoming conflicts through rational and contextual thinking. Sardar discussed why people hate America, and Naseef emphasized that Muslims will succeed if they truly understand and follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah. During the afternoon session panel on “Muslims and Islam in the West Post-9/11: Problems and Solutions,” moderated by Ziauddin Sardar, the ambassadors (or representatives) of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, and the USA shared their views on perceptions of Muslims in America after 9/11, in Australia after the Bali bombing, and the French ban on hijab in schools, together with the role and responsibilities of Muslims as minorities and the respective governments. The last session consisted of parallel paper presentations on “Psychosocial Issues,” “Education in the Muslim Society,” “Islam and Human Rights,” and “Islam and Violence.”

Day three started with parallel sessions on “Muslim Identity,” “Islam, Democracy, and Politics,” “Open Session/Free Papers,” and “Education and Creativity,” followed by a panel discussion on “Contemporary Image of Muslims in the West.” Participants were Robert Hefner, Tayyiba Taylor, K. Helmut Reich, John Calvert, Muzaffar Iqbal, Paul White, and Ibrahim Abu Rabi`. As this session took place on Friday, the participants were taken

to Masjid Wilayah for Friday prayers and then to the IIUM campus for the closing session. After a brief multimedia presentation, the chairman of the Organizing Committee presented the conference report prepared by a special committee. The IIUM president then made the closing remarks.

The Conference Report Committee called upon all sectors of the ummah to cultivate tolerance so that *ijtihad* can be undertaken successfully; emphasize “capacity building” by promoting quality education, human resource development, economic growth, creativity, innovation, infrastructure, research and development, and advancement in science and technology; and cooperate in resolving intra-Muslim conflicts, especially in regards to international affairs; promote inter-civilization, interfaith, and intercultural dialogues. It also called upon the western media to report facts objectively with compassion, justice, and professionalism; and to practice responsible journalism and guarantee freedom of expression. Western governments were asked to refrain from profiling, stereotyping, and dominating the politico-economic situation in the Muslim world; protect and uphold the Muslim world’s dignity and promote human rights and democratic institutions and processes; and establish centers and institutes to study other civilizations, cultures, and major world religions. IIUM was called upon to establish a committee to follow up on the conference’s deliberations and recommendations and create an infrastructure (e.g., a website, an e-mail databank, and future conferences) to help conference participants and others pursue the conference’s goals and ideals.

In his closing remarks, the conference chair thanked all conference participants and sponsors and reminded them that the establishment of IIUM was in itself a great achievement, as recommendations given at the Makkah Education Conference of 1977 were soon translated into a reality by the Malaysian government. With its mission of integration, Islamization, internationalization, and comprehensive excellence, IIUM is striving to prove its worth. This university can now play a major role in spearheading efforts toward fulfilling the above recommendations. The conference chair urged the participants to form an international network to work on these recommendations and to hold a follow-up conference in four years.

Amber Haque
Department of Psychology
International Islamic University Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia