

Islam: Enduring Values for Daily Life

Chicago, IL - August 29 - September 1, 2003

The city of Chicago hosted ISNA's Fortieth Annual Convention, August 29 - September 1, 2003, at the huge McCormick Center. In attendance were the ISNA leadership, convention organizers, representatives from major Muslim community and professional organizations, and leaders of other faith groups.

"We need to be living Islam, but living Islam in the midst of people who may be hostile," said Ingrid Mattson (vice president, ISNA), addressing the session entitled "Morality, Decency and Benevolence: Values that Endure." This panel initiated the convention's theme of "Islam: Enduring Values for Daily Life," based on Qur'an 16:90. Muzammil Siddiqi (former ISNA president) added: "People will know the truth of Islam from the practices of the Muslims." Another theme, closer unity among the monotheistic faiths, was addressed by Talat Sultan (president, ICNA) and Bob Edgar (general secretary, National Council of Churches).

Abd Al-Hakim Jackson (professor of Islamic studies, University of Michigan), in the session “Muslims at the Crossroads,” stated that Muslims need to become indigenous, without sacrificing Islam, and relate to America as a political arrangement and not a culture. He advised the audience to learn from the African-Americans’ experiences. Merve Kavakci, a former Turkish Parliament member who was denied her position because of her hijab, reminded the attendees to practice what they preach, especially when “commanding good and forbidding evil.”

Azizah Ismail, founder of the Justice Party and wife of Anwar Ibrahim, the still-incarcerated former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, related her party’s experience, called for the need to eliminate injustice, and said that genuine patriotism is criticizing the country and helping to make it better, but in peaceful and legal ways.

The session on Islam among Latino Americans featured Benjamin Perez, a Native American Hispanic (Carlsbad, NM), who shared his personal experiences in discovering Islam. Juan Galvan, a Mexican American, who presented some striking statistics about Hispanic Muslims, said that Latino reversion to Islam is on the rise simply “because it is the truth.” Abdul-Samad Romero (founder, the Islamic Institute in Granada), talked about the state of Islam in Spain, and Umar Faruq Abdallah, speaking of his experience in Spain, encouraged all Muslims, especially Hispanics, to visit. For information about Islam among Latinos, visit www.hispanicmuslims.com and www.latinodawah.org.

In the session entitled, “The PATRIOT Act in Action,” Khurram Wahhid (attorney, CAIR) detailed the government’s controversial powers and how Muslims are finding it harder to enforce their rights. Joshua Salaam (CAIR) stressed the need to report any injustices, for each report gives the Muslim community more validity to discrimination claims. “A defining moment of Islam in America is approaching,” said Nihad Awad (executive director, CAIR). “We cannot surrender our future and our destiny to hate in this country.” Agha K. Saeed, head of the Muslim American Congress, led the crowd in the following chant: “I am an American, I am a Muslim, and I vote.”

Allison Weir (journalist), addressing the panel of “Islamic and Christian Perspectives on Middle East,” stressed the need for change in the American attitude toward Zionist atrocities by more accurate reporting and exposing what is really going on in that area. Expanding on these ideas, Mustafa Abu Sway stated that “not even in your wildest imagination would you know the steps they [Israelis] take to make life difficult for us.”

Another panel focused on “Kashmir: The Gateway to South Asian Peace and Prosperity.” Ayyub Thukkar (president, World Kashmiri Freedom Movement), related that the Kashmiri movement appears as a Hindu-Muslim struggle, but activists maintain that the issue of Kashmir is one of nationalism, not religion, since most Kashmiris, if given a choice, would choose total independence. Edward Hasbrouk, author of the *Practical Nomad* travel book series, explained that this does not make the Kashmiri struggle a secessionist movement, since it has never been part of an established nation.

The panel on “Building Islamic Schools in Your Community” attracted a record attendance. Abdalla Idris Ali, Yasmeen Qadri, Safaa Zarzour, and Yusuf Islam addressed issues related to Islamic education, such as that families in North America are turning to Islamic schools as an answer to their differences with public schools, the vital need to build and develop competitive Islamic schools to meet the demand, and to integrate regular subjects with Islamic studies.

The session “Is Our Character Development Curriculum Succeeding?” brought together Abdullah Idris Ali (member of the board of trustees, the Islamic Teaching Center and a keynote speaker), Yusuf Islam (head, the Islamic Board of Educational Research and Resources [www.iberr.com]), and Edriss Khamissa. Ali, who acknowledged deficiencies, stressed the necessity for improving the character development curriculum within the Islamic school system. Islam mentioned that many schools compete with others and isolate themselves. IBERR is striving to break these barriers and unite schools through the flow of ideas and development of textbooks. Issues of funding children’s education and raising children with the proper Islamic values also were discussed.

The panel on “Muslims in the Media,” brought together Tariq Jalil (producer, NBC), Rashid Gazi (founder of a sports entertainment agency), Michael Wolfe and Alex Kronemer (directors and producers of PBS’ “Mohammed: Legacy of a Prophet”), Geneive Abdo (religion reporter, *The Chicago Tribune*), and Rumana Hussain (reporter, *The Chicago Sun Times*). Hussain said that she feels a change coming to the newsroom, for some journalists are more knowledgeable about Islam. Each panelist encouraged the audience to get involved in the media. CAIR conducted a panel on “Setting Up a Media Watchdog” to help Muslims do just that.

Democratic presidential candidate Carol Moseley Braun, comparing the Muslim Americans’ civil liberties struggle to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, stated: “The Islamic community today is

faced with a new version of an old struggle. My late mother used to say it doesn't matter whether you came to this country on the Mayflower or on a slave ship, through Ellis Island or the Rio Grande. We're all in the same boat now." Another Democratic candidate Rep. Kucinich (D-OH) lambasted the Bush administration for the ill-conceived attack on Iraq.

Other sessions dealt with interfaith activities, entrepreneurship, health, Islam and democracy, youth issues, and similar concerns. Also featured was ISNA's Second Annual Film Festival, entertainment (namely, a comedian, hip-hop groups, spoken word poetry, and *à cappella* singing). This session brought up a lot of concerns from those who want to pursue arts and may feel that such activities are still unacceptable within the Muslim community.

Ahmad H. Sakr, who helped found the MSA (ISNA's precursor), received the Mahboob Khan Community Service Recognition Award at a luncheon hosted by the ISNA Development Foundation. The luncheon's keynote speaker, John Esposito (director, Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University) encouraged Muslims to become more active members of the Muslim community and of American society in general.

The dinner was addressed by Ingrid Mattson, Irfan Karem (Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago), Bob Edgar (executive director, National Council of Churches), Ron Goddard (former American ambassador to Guyana), and other faith group and civic leaders. All of them called for greater interaction between the different faith communities.

Convention Reporters' Committee
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