

## *Conference Reports*

# Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women

“Strengthening Our Voices” was a fitting topic for the most recent Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) conference held on September 13-15, 2002, at the Bank of Montreal Learning Institute, Markham, Ontario, Canada. This national organization, with chapters across Canada, was founded in 1982 when Muslim women from across Canada attended the founding conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba. This year’s conference celebrated 20 years of leadership and “working towards equity, equality, and empowerment.” Lila Falhman, a founding member and now 78 years old, was on hand to commemorate the event. Other founding members, current CCMW president Barbara Siddiqui, and many local chapter leaders also were present. The Bank of Montreal Learning Institute in Markham was the perfect venue, for it allowed almost 300 people to hear the keynote speakers. Tables were set up for silent auction and sales of the latest books by Farid Esack, Sadia Zaman, and Khaled Abou El Fadl.

The invited keynote speaker, Beverly Amina McCloud, professor at De Paul University, (Chicago, IL) unfortunately could not attend. Graciously taking her place, however, was Sheila McDonough, professor of religion at Concordia University (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) and author of the recently released *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates* (University of Toronto Press: 2002.) She engaged the audience in a lively discussion of the philosophical question “Can a Muslim Woman Think?” She logically argued that genetics are evenly distributed to offspring, so that women receive intellect from both parents; that children think as they learn; and that, in general, all *homo sapiens* are thinking creatures. She used several Qur’anic verses to demonstrate that God addresses women as a group separately from men and also stressed that everyone is responsible for his or her own actions on the Day of Judgment.

McDonough mentioned that popular culture leads people to believe that women are different from men in even the minutest things. She specifically mentioned that advertising leads women to believe that their feet and hair are different from men's, and therefore require special products and treatment. In terms of genetics, this is simply not true. While elaborating upon al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) ideas, she commented that he did not rely on the commentators, theologians, or imams of his time to prove God's existence. Rather, he found his own way to Islam and, through that struggle, revived Islam.

She asserted that it is a delusion and an illusion to believe that we can recreate the Prophet's environment. She argued that if we were to build a mosque today, we would use the available technology and materials, not return to the Prophet's time and literally follow his example. She encouraged her audience to read and learn more about Islam and understand the basic concepts within the Qur'an's teachings. She recommended Faisal Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.

The second speaker was Khaled Abou El Fadl, professor of law and jurist at the University of California–Los Angeles, who spoke on "Reforming within Islam: Focus on Women." He has been described as the most important and influential Islamic thinker in the modern age. An accomplished Islamic jurist, scholar, and professor of law, he is currently The Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Fellow in Islamic Law at the UCLA School of Law, where he teaches Islamic law, immigration, human rights, and international law. He holds degrees from Yale University, University of Pennsylvania Law School, and Princeton University, and received formal training in Islamic jurisprudence in Egypt and Kuwait. Prior to UCLA, Abou El Fadl taught Islamic law at the University of Texas at Austin Law School, Yale Law School, and Princeton University.

Abou El Fadl is a staunch advocate and defender of women's rights, and focuses much of his work on issues related to women. One of his recent books is *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2001). He asserted that contemporary Islam has a hierarchy and elitism that did not exist during the Prophet's time, and that Muslim women are being dismissed unfairly by their own Muslim brothers. Muslim men participate in the work force and seek higher education, both of which involve interacting with western women and ideas. Yet they feel free to dismiss their sisters as human beings and deny them access to the work force and higher education by perpetuating the "playboy mentality," which objects to women participating because of their sexuality.

Abou El Fadl reminded the conference participants that God commands them to testify honestly, even against themselves. However, contemporary Muslims have a problem with discourse and truth. He stated that Muslims do not take their heritage seriously and that piety has been cheapened by outward displays, particularly in how Muslim women are treated. He mentioned that those who seek to deny women their rights in an effort to reject westernization, based on the assumption that suppressed and hidden women somehow make the society more pious and religious, are mistaken. Abou El Fadl stated that intellect is the most complex part of God’s creation, and reminded the attendees that the Qur’an tells women to overcome the pathways that exclude them.

He also spoke about the lives and actions of the female Companions and the Prophet’s wives, who were not, as some would like us to believe, stereotypical paper dolls, and declared that there is a fine line between being protected and being patronized. Abou El Fadl gave the example of ‘A’ishah, who questioned those around her when she heard a hadith being interpreted incorrectly. Also brought up was the example of the false hadith that a person’s prayer is nullified if a woman or a dog passes in front of the person praying, to which ‘A’ishah responded: “Have you made women like dogs?” In addition, he reminded the audience that the Prophet accepted the pledges of allegiance and *shahadah* directly from women, and not through their husband’s or father’s mediation.

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