

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Fourth AMSS Regional Conference

Following three successful regional conferences since 2001, the Dallas chapter of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) hosted a gathering of domestic and foreign scholars called for the purpose of analyzing the Islamic intellectual tradition and its interaction with the West.

This one-day conference was held, in cooperation with the Muslim Students Association, at the University of Texas, Dallas, on June 4, 2005. Imam Yousuf Kavakci (president, AMSS southwestern regional chapter) opened it with a Qur'anic recitation, after which Basheer Ahmed (conference chair), Asad Rahman (MSA President), and Rafik Beekun (AMSS-National President) welcomed participants. Ali Mazrui (Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities and Executive Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University) formally opened the conference. All of these speakers stressed the need for closer interaction among scholars of various faiths and cultural backgrounds.

About 300 attendees, presenters, and session chairs belonging to the three Abrahamic faiths were present. The main thrust of all presentations was cross-cultural learning as regards Islamic learning from the past; the Islamic intellectual contribution to Europe's Renaissance and Reformation; and the decline and ways to restore the Islamic intellectual tradition.

The first panel started with Dilnawaz Siddiqui (Clarion University of Pennsylvania, retired), who referred to the Qur'anic command to learn from two readings: the universe in light of the Qur'an, and the Qur'an in view of one's observation of the universe. Stressing the unity of all humanity, Islam promotes common and equal access to learning regardless of gender, race, caste, or any other secondary consideration.

Ilai Alon (Tel Aviv University, currently at the University of Chicago) showed how Muslims acquired classical Greek learning, restored it to its rightful place in their own ummah-wide academy, and finally introduced it to Europe. He particularly dealt with the Muslims' acceptance of various aspects of Socrates' philosophy and its critique by Muslim scholars in light of Qur'anic values.

The second session featured Ghulam Aasi (American Muslim College, Chicago); Carol Bargeron (Texas State University at San Marcos); and Nazeer Ahmad, a member of NASA's Hubble Telescope scientific team. Aasi discussed al-Mas`udi's times and scholarly career. Al-Mas`udi, a tenth-century historian and geographer, drew and documented an Islamic empire guided by the Qur'an's universal principles of love, pluralism, and justice for all, and mapped the entire world known at that time.

Bargeron discussed the place of reasoned knowledge in al-Ghazali's philosophy and his recognition of the role of reason in acquiring valid knowledge. His main point was that sensory data are sometimes questionable, yet they can be rectified and improved through replicated studies of physical phenomena. Ahmad analyzed some of the erroneous assumptions made in recent times about Islamic history. He disagreed that the Mu'tazalites' departure resulted in the decline of the Muslims' scientific progress, as well as the idea that the "stupor" of Sufism caused the ummah's downfall. He offered many examples of scientific developments and breakthroughs that occurred long after these phenomena, and asserted that human progress owes a lot to essential dynamic and forward-looking Islamic values.

The luncheon keynote speaker, John Esposito (Institute of Christian and Muslim Understanding, Georgetown University) identified and analyzed several challenges facing the Muslim world today, especially in the post-9/11 context. Underscoring a need for internal reform and deciding which interpretation of Islam to follow, he urged Muslims to acknowledge and tackle the existence of extremism and terrorism in their midst.

The afternoon sessions featured three panels: 1) Ibrahim Syed (University of Kentucky) M. A. Khalid Lodhi (University of Texas–Lubbock); 2) Saeed Khan (Wayne State University) and Basheer Ahmed (University of Texas–Arlington, retired); and 3) all speakers, who answered questions from the floor and the co-panelists. Syed spoke on al-Khawarizmi (780–850), the grandfather of computer science and father of algebra. The word *algorithm* is an Anglicized form of his name. He laid the foundation of all mathematical sciences to meet the Muslims' need to know the precise prayer times and prayer direction; the beginning and ending of Islamic festivals; and to calculate the correct amounts for zakat, *sadaqah*, and inheritance. He concluded that algebra and algorithms enabled modern scientists and engineers to build computers and create encryption.

Lodhi dealt with the origins of the scientific method in the works of Ibn Haytham, the great Muslim scholar of optics. He challenged the common western belief that the credit for this work should go to Roger Bacon, argu-

ing that the work of this Basran shopkeeper has all of the ingredients of inductive logic. Khan discussed why the Islamic intellectual tradition declined and stated that the Islamic world is still behind the West, especially especially in science and technology, and sociocultural pluralism. Ahmed attributed the Muslims' earlier progress to their strong emphasis on rationalist traditions, freedom for the pursuit of knowledge, and encouragement of an open-minded intellectual discourse. Contemporary Muslims need to realize that there is no discord between religion, science, and philosophy.

Ali Mazrui delivered the banquet's keynote address: "Islam between Revivalism and Radicalism." He emphasized the dire need for *ijtihad* in interpreting Qur'anic injunctions in the context of time and place, and as a prerequisite for reviving Islam's greatness and dynamism. He distinguished between internal and external causes of Islamic radicalism, pointing out the misuse of American power for imperialistic purposes and its failure to act as honest broker of a just peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. He also blamed Muslim extremists for horrific acts of terrorism, such as 9/11.

The following chairs and guests were recognized: Imam Yusuf Zia Kavakci (Islamic Association of North Texas), Rev. Roy Harrel (vice president, Thanksgiving Square, Dallas), Robert Hant (professor, Southern Methodist University, Dallas), Rev. George Bithos (executive director, Texas Conference of Churches, Austin), Syed Ahsani (former ambassador of Pakistan), Pastor Elias Morkos (Harvesters Community, Dallas), Daryl Schmidt (professor, Texas Christian University), Rabbi Robert Haas (Temple Shalom, Dallas), and Harry Reeder (professor, University of Texas, Arlington).

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