

Muslims in the United States: Influence and Innovation

This event, co-sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the International Institute of Islamic Thought on May 11, 2005, was convened to determine which American Muslim scholars are influential in the Muslim world.

The first panel, "Assessing the Current Influence of American Islamic Thinkers on Islamic Thinkers in Asia and the Arab World," featured Osman Bakar (Georgetown University), Tamara Sonn (College of William and Mary), and Joseph Lumbard (Special Advisor to his Majesty the King for Interfaith Affairs, Jordan). Bakar, in his "Competing Visions of Islam in Southeast Asia: American Muslim Scholarship as a Major Shaping Factor," dealt with Indonesia and Malaysia and said that the main question was how much of the contemporary world should be incorporated into the Islamic system, and how much tradition should be preserved. He also elaborated upon the phases of western and Middle Eastern Muslim scholars in Indonesia.

In her "The Declining Influence of American Muslim Scholars in Pakistan," Sonn stated that whereas Isma`il al-Faruqi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Fazlur Rahman had been popular in Pakistan during the 1980s, by 2003 this was no longer the case due to the current realities. She discussed the importance of cassette recordings, which focus on "us vs. them," the suffering poor vs. the wasteful elite, human rights, and believers vs. non-believing conspirators (e.g., Jews, Hindus, Ahmadis, Washington, and [maybe soon] the Isma`ilis), among the largely illiterate masses. What needs to be done is to spread literacy so that more Pakistanis can read their own scholars, such as Iqbal. In addition, popular discourse needs to be taken seriously.

As Lumbard could not attend, panel moderator Philippa Sturm (Woodrow Wilson Center) read the abstract of his "The Influence of American Muslim Intellectuals in Muslim Intellectuals in the Arab World." In it, he mentioned that fewer books each year are translated into Arabic than into Spanish for Spain. As a result, there is an intellectual disconnect and a limited range. He mentioned that Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Khalid Abou El Fadl, and Hamza Yusuf were the best-known American Muslim authors.

The second panel, "Assessing the Current Influence of American Islamic Thinkers on Islamic Thinkers in Iran, Turkey, and Africa," featured Gholamreza Aavani (Iranian Institute of Philosophy), Ibrahim Kalin (College of the Holy Cross), and Suleyman Nyang (Howard University." Aavani, in his "The

Continuity of the Philosophical Tradition as Evidenced by the Works and Personality of Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” stated that Nasr is very popular in Iran and that the works of al-Faruqi and Rahman have not really been translated. After discussing Iran’s long philosophical tradition, which he claimed Nasr had made known to the outside world, he praised Nasr for helping people understand the “spirit of a culture.” He also mentioned that his paper detailed Nasr’s role as a thinker and philosopher, his critique of modernity, his understanding of modern science and technology and how they relate to the perennial philosophy, his joining of reason and revelation, the ecological crisis and its relevance to Islam, and the concept of sanctity.

In his “The Sun Rising from the West: The Influence of English-Speaking Muslim Thinkers on Turkish Intellectual life,” Kalin said that the influence of American Muslims is a new phenomenon in Turkey. He cited four main sources: 1) Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, as well as Muhammad Ali, Abdul Karim Jabbar, and other Muslim sports figures, on the level of popular culture; 2) Isma’il al-Faruqi, especially in the areas of Islamic thought in the contemporary world and Palestine (He was eclipsed in the 1990s by Nasr); 3) Fazlur Rahman, whose concept of a “living tradition” was very controversial because it stripped the Prophet of any authority; and 4) Nasr, whose books began to be translated in the 1980s. He closed by wondering how their American identity has influenced their thought.

Nyang, who discussed “The Impact of American Islamic Thinkers in Africa,” stated that American Muslims began to appear in Africa in the late 1970s. Among the most influential thinkers were Malcolm X, defined by Nyang as a “public intellectual” because he dealt with ideas, and Nasr, Rahman, and al-Faruqi. Focusing on Nigeria, Nyang said that a person’s influence could be measured by his/her degree of influence among the educated class and references to his/her work in popular literature, college and university textbooks, and in bookstores catering to the general public. He also mentioned several other people, such as Amina Wadud, who has influenced African feminists, and that al-Faruqi is becoming better known because his work is being translated into Hausa. Rahman came to attention via professors and students who had studied in North America and Europe and is popular among some modernists (e.g., feminists and secularists), while Nasr is popular among some Sufis.

The keynote address was given by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In his “Some Thoughts on Muslim Scholars in America in Relation to the Islamic World,” he called upon Muslim scholars to reflect the “Abrahamic dialogue” in the Muslim world; show concern for the environment, which is at

the root of spiritual and religious ethics, and bioethics; analyze the religion–science relationship; develop a *fiqh* for Muslim and non-Muslim minorities wherever they live; pay attention to the West’s experimentation with the family; consider Sufism a possible way to overcome extremism if it remains rooted in Islam; warn Muslim scholars not to compromise their integrity, either in actuality or appearance; and ensure that the transient is not absolutized, as is now taking place in American society.

Amira el-Azhary Sonbol (Georgetown University), Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons (University of Florida), Ali Asani (Harvard University), and Jane Smith (Hartford Seminary) made up the third panel: “New Thinking about Islam.” Speaking on “Finding Gender Freedoms in Forgotten Laws: History and Activism,” Sonbol dealt with how history impacts women today, how the lack of knowledge equals powerlessness, and how the British actually made things worse for Egyptian women. She also pointed out that the Shari`ah has been understood in different ways in different circumstances, and that far from being a “permanent body of law defined by God,” it is flexible and dynamic.

Simmons, in her “Muslim Women’s Experience as a Basis for Theological Interpretation in Islam,” presented a personalized account of her life as a Muslim woman trying to function in the public space despite perceived male hostility. She wondered why male converts so readily adopted this patriarchal attitude and why female converts so readily accepted it, even though it was against their original cultures. According to her, stereotypes about women’s appropriate roles, child-bearing and pregnancy, and emotions have led to an ideology of separate spheres. Thus, women have been excluded from any role in defining gender roles, making laws and religious rulings, and having a say on many other matters that affect their lives. She called for a reinterpretation of the hadiths upon which such views and practices are based and for women’s experience to be included in determining God’s will for creation.

Asani, in his “On Muslims Knowing the Muslim Other,” discussed how his Muslim identity is often called into question, given that he is an Isma`ili. He focused upon how Muslim rulers have sometimes made the state “an agent of intimidation to ensure conformity” and to preserve their rule. He also mentioned that interpretations are influenced by existing realities, which means that they should be contextual, not textual. He closed by saying that intra-communal dialogue among Muslims is almost non-existent, that Muslims need to understand Muslims who hold different viewpoints, and that the United States is the perfect place for such a dialogue.

Smith, in her “Does Islam Encourage Pluralism? American Muslims Engage the Debate,” said that many Muslims are puzzled by the very concept of pluralism. She divided those Muslim authors dealing with pluralism into three groups: pluralism as modernity (i.e., law and democracy), pluralism as justice (i.e., gender and racial-ethnic inclusion), and pluralism as a Qur’anic vision. According to her, the groundwork was laid down by Abdul Aziz Sachedina in his *The Democratic Roots of Islamic Pluralism* (Oxford University Press: 2000). Other Muslim authors in this field are Khaled Abou El Fadl, Omid Safi, Amri Hussain, Muhammad Fathi Osman, and Ali Asani, all of whom say that pluralism is inherent in Islam. She cited such Qur’anic verses as “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256) and “if God had so willed, he would have made you one nation” (5:48) to make this point.

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National Advisory Council on South Asian Affairs

On May 19-20, 2005, at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., the National Advisory Council on South Asian Affairs (NACSAA) held its first bi-annual seminar to discuss democracy in South Asia. Given the large number of speakers, I mention only those that dealt with Muslim countries.

Abdul Momen (University of Massachusetts) stated that the outlook for democracy in Bangladesh is promising, because it has achieved multiparty democracy after military rule, has had positive growth rates since it became democratic, is self-sufficient in food, and is no longer a global basket case. However, the current government is facing major social problems, the flight of multinational corporations, increased political and religious violence, the growing influence of madrassahs, corruption, and non-enforcement of the rule of law. However, the government is very careful not to involve the army in such things.

Zillur Khan (University of Wisconsin–Oskosh) spoke about identity and balance in Bangladesh vis-à-vis development and democracy. He stated that the root of Bangladesh is secular, not Islamist. In fact, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) rose against Pakistan (then West Pakistan) due to its desire for freedom, tolerance, equity, and justice, not Islam. He then traced the struggle of a majority of Bangladeshis to prevent the government from turning their country into an Islamic state.

Vijay Sazawal (The Indo-American Kashmir Forum) stated that the outsiders who have entered Kashmir are not really open to the Kashmiris, who want a people-centered, as opposed to a land-centered, solution. According to him, the four pillars of any just and lasting solution are peaceful co-existence, democratic values, economic justice, and meeting the people's needs. Since 2004, there has been a change in the policy mindset. He claimed that economic justice is the biggest issue in both parts of Kashmir, that the leadership on both sides is totally corrupt and wedded to slogans, and that the real problem is the between the haves and the have-nots.

Ambassador Teresita Schaefer (Center for Strategic and International Studies) talked about Washington's promotion of democracy in South Asia, noting that it has been fairly selective and not really a priority. The emphasis now is on Iraq and the Near East, western Europe, and Australia. There has been some interest in South Asia, especially India and Sri Lanka. Surprisingly, she stated that it is not in Washington's interest to have true democracy in Pakistan.

Faruq Ahmad (political counselor, Embassy of Pakistan) said that democracy and development are important in Pakistan. His upbeat presentation portrayed a Pakistan that gets along with India, Afghanistan, and its other South Asian neighbors, as well as being engaged in a "more realistic" dialogue with India over Kashmir. It is a "popular misconception" that Islamabad is renegeing on its commitment to democracy; rather, it is following the existing roadmap. There is a lot of debate in Parliament – a "rowdy democracy" – but with few results. But this is a good sign, for people can talk and criticize the government. According to him, Pakistan has recognized the weakness in its educational system and Musharraf is trying to correct this by reforming the madrassah system. More importantly, there is now a fundamental consensus of what the problems are and how to solve them.

Ambassador Robin Raphael (former assistant secretary of state for South Asia) encouraged South Asians, both here and abroad, to explain the region to the United States, which knows very little about its progress. Right now, she claimed, Washington is concentrating on the Middle East (especially Iraq), which is moving in a democratic direction – an "alignment of forces" – that allows Washington to push for democracy there. While there are some policy contradictions, Washington no longer has an either/or policy or feels that it has to sacrifice democracy to realize its strategic interests.

Syed Akhter (Marquette University) spoke on ethnic diversity and its effect upon a nation's economic development. He said that it works in some cases (e.g., Canada and the United States), but not in others (e.g., Africa).

Japan, which has no ethnic diversity, underwent great economic growth and development in the 1970s; however, since 1990 it has stagnated. India has tried to accommodate ethnic diversity, with some success. In Pakistan, the army controls 40 percent of the economy and has economic, political, and street power. So, how can market forces prevail? The result: Pakistan is lower in the human development indices than both Bangladesh and India; its policies have not worked; it has low marks in health, education, and access to life's amenities; and it has very little trade (there is more trade between Bangladesh and India). He suggested that South Asia's borders be opened, that mutual trade be increased, and that transparency be implemented to lessen bureaucratic corruption.

Bishnu Poudel (council member) said that NACSAA representatives regularly visit South Asian capitals to acquaint American ambassadors with their activities in the United States (since 1979); meet with foreign ministers for the same reason; meet with some think tank people in the capital to share ideas; and have a country advisor in each capital to keep both sides informed each other's concerns. He urged South Asians to forget about their particular identities and look at the region as American citizens, for such an example might help South Asia solve some of its problems.

During their presentations and the lively question-and-answer sessions, the speakers raised questions that could be a seminar in themselves: Does the majority political party, elected democratically, have the right to disenfranchise the minority communities, as happened in Sri Lanka? Why did democracy survive in India, yet never become rooted in Pakistan? Based on the recent history of Russia, China, and India, is democracy always the best option? Should democratic parties be allowed to appeal to religious sentiments, as in India, to promote their own agendas? What is the difference in democratic practice in a nation that became democratic through education and its own efforts (Nepal), one that inherited it (Sri Lanka) from the former colonial master, and one that has given it only lip service (Pakistan)?

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