

Conference Report

The Thirtieth Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS)

The Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) held its 30th annual conference with the collaboration of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) at the University of Michigan – Dearborn campus from October 26 – 28, 2001. Students, academicians, Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals and activists were among the guests at the conference cosponsored by the University of Michigan – Dearborn and its Center for Arab-American Studies, and Project MAPS: Muslims in the American Public Square, Georgetown University.

The conference theme *"Religion and Public Life in the Global Epoch"* echoed in the presentations given by eighty five panelists in twenty panels and seven roundtable discussions, including one workshop; two plenary sessions; and a keynote address at the annual banquet. The social issues outlined and defined by Muslims and non-Muslims in these sessions did not only encourage a stimulating and lively debate after the panel and roundtable presentations, but they also advanced the development of the academic forum fostered by the AMSS, since its inception, to analyze the application of an Islamic worldview on social issues in the larger world community.

In his opening statement, AMSS President Mumtaz Ahmad, who is also a political science professor at Hampton University, underscored the need for Muslim scholars and professionals to educate the public on Islam, and to work with people of different faith groups to influence the development of a global social order based on justice, morality and God-consciousness. His remarks drew attention to the importance of establishing a better understanding of Islam and creating an awareness of our common humanity. Professor Ahmad's opening remarks also set the tenor of the conference and established a theme based on peace and goodwill towards mankind that echoed throughout the three-day gathering.

In fact, the character of the conference was further established on the first day at the Conference Reception hosted by the University of Michigan at the Henry Ford Estate –Dearborn campus, when Dr. Ronald Stockton, Interim Director, Center for Arab-American Studies (CAAS), stated that

the AMSS conference theme "*Religion and Public Life in the Global Epoch*" highlighted "an outward looking program, focusing not only on issues of interest to Muslims, but issues of interest to all Americans." In his welcoming remarks, Dr. Robert L. Simpson, Provost, added that the University of Michigan "has a deep commitment to serving the community, as expressed by our recent establishment of the first Center for Arab-American Studies in the United States."

These welcoming remarks helped create the cordial ambiance and genial feelings experienced by the invited guests at the three-day conference. This atmosphere was further promoted at the reception when Congressman David Bonior referred to the Qur'anic verse that states "Oh, mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other." (Qur'an 49:13)

In light of the September attack on humanity, maintaining the original conference date was among the chief concerns of Dr. Louay Safi, AMSS Vice President and Program Chairman. In addition to ensuring the quality of the papers presented, his efforts coupled with those of the Conference Coordinator, Layla Sein, included promoting the conference during a difficult political climate, and finally assuring the invited guests of the measures taken to guarantee their security at the conference. Therefore, due to the difficulty experienced by participants in obtaining visas, maintaining and confirming travel plans, and dealing with conference participants' concern over air travel, keeping the conference on track became an AMSS objective in fighting terror and fear.

However, due to the favorable turnout and attendance of invited international and domestic guests at the AMSS annual conference, at a time when many conferences were being cancelled after the September 11 attack, this conference will be remembered for having successfully promoted the need to understand the role of religion and universal brotherhood of mankind in the global epoch.

It was within this cordial atmosphere that the following sub-themes identified in twenty panels were examined and challenged by the participants. Women and Muslim Family Law; Islamic Philosophy and Intellectual Traditions; Globalization and Civil Society; Communications and Media; Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue; Human Rights and Cross-Cultural Variations; Educational Reform; and Islam and Secularism. In addition to the foregoing sub-themes, as a cosponsor of the conference, the University of Michigan presented a panel on the "*Arab-American Community*," that focused primarily on issues of identity, political activism

and health in the Dearborn Michigan community. In this panel chaired by Kristine Ajrouch of Eastern Michigan University, a reflection on how the American society made an impact on the development of the Arab American community was highlighted.

The seven roundtables organized in this conference addressed concepts on interfaith dialogue, grant writing, Islamic contribution to civilizations, and issues pertaining to Afghanistan and its neighboring countries before and after the September 11 tragedy. As a conference cosponsor, Project MAPS: Muslims in American Public Square organized a roundtable on "*Muslims Share in the Interfaith Movement*" under the direction of the project's director, Dr. Zahid Bukhari. The future role of Muslims in interfaith dialogues and various institutional arrangements that have already been promoted through dialogue in different parts of the world were highlighted.

The roundtable on "*Islamic Contributions to Civilization*" as well as the panel on "*Islamic Philosophy and Intellectual Traditions*" were among the most inspiring presentations in the conference. The roundtable on civilization analyzed the contributions made by the following Muslim scholars from the 8th to the 14th centuries in the fields of politics, mathematics, medicine, science, philosophy and the arts. Al-Kindi (800 – 873 C.E.); al-Farabi (870 – 950 C.E.); al-Ghazali (1058 – 1128 C.E.); Ibn Rushd (1128 – 1198 C.E.); and Ibn Khaldun (1332 – 1395).

The panel on "*Islamic Philosophy and Intellectual Traditions*" examined the role that religion plays in mankind's spiritual and social development. In this panel, "Three Views of Science in the Islamic World" were defined as being ethical-puritanical, epistemological and the metaphysical, while the relationship between religion, culture and science was examined through an historical analysis of science in a presentation entitled the "Overview of Historiography on the Islamic Ottoman Experience." It was, however, in the presentation of "Intellectual Space for Muslim Intellectuals" that the concepts presented by thinkers like Iqbal, Qutb and Shariati actually shed light on issues of modernity and tradition.

In addition to analyzing the impact of religion on philosophy, science and the arts, the role of Islam in addressing women's issues was evaluated in panels on "*Women and Muslim Family Law*" and the "*Status of Muslim Women Across the Muslim World.*" In the panel on "*Women and Muslims Family Law*" Qur'anic concepts of qiwama, daraja and nushuz were examined, while judicial interventions in Muslim family law disputes and issues on domestic violence and partner abuse against women were

analyzed. It was, however, in the panel on *"Muslim Women Across the Muslim World"* that Dr. Marcia Inhorn of the University of Michigan outlined Islamic perspectives towards infertility and In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) in Egypt. She stated that statistics show that on average, 10% of all couples in the Muslim world experience infertility. In fact, according to Dr. Inhorn, "In-Vitro Fertilization centers are rapidly expanding throughout the Arab world because Islamic religious opinion permits IVF among married couples. However, fear abounds regarding moral legitimacy of 'test-tube babies' due to the potential for 'sperm-mixing' which is a practice prohibited in Islam."

Although eighty five presentations highlighted this year's theme *"Religion and Public Life in the Global Epoch,"* the recent horrific events of September 11 added a somber and sober dimension to this conference by advancing the need to examine why religion is used to legitimate violence. In fact, the Islamic position vis-a-vis freedom, extremism and terrorism, and the importance of Muslim participation in the American political process were common themes that echoed primarily in the two plenary sessions and three roundtable discussions.

In their deliberations during both plenary sessions, Muslim social scientists condemned the September 11 attack as a heinous crime against humanity, and examined concepts that are needed to assess how Muslims and non-Muslims can effectively address social issues that are crippling human evolution. In the plenary session *"Islam in the American Public Sphere,"* both Dr. AbuSulayman, president of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), and Professor Sulayman Nyang of Howard University shared the concept of "civilizational renewal" introduced by Dr. Robert Crane of the Center for Policy Research, in his presentation *"Challenge of Islam: Rethinking America's Mission.* Dr. Crane defined his concept as being the opportunity that allows Muslims "to take the lead in promoting the shared concepts of order, justice and liberty that animated the leaders of classical America and the scholars of classical Islam."

In the Plenary Session on *"Secularism, Deseccularization and Religious Consciousness,"* the panelists analyzed the process of secularization and its impact on the moral, psychological and social aspects of the modern lifestyle. Farid Esack, a visiting professor at the Auburn Theological Seminary, Columbia University, made a distinction between modernist Islam and progressive Islam by arguing that modernist Islam "concentrates on issues of co-existence and pluralism and deals with the challenges of modernity, while progressive Islam goes beyond."

In analyzing secularism and the modern lifestyle, Professor Antony Sullivan, an associate at the University of Michigan, examined the work being done by the "Circle of Tradition and Progress, ... an association of Christian and Muslim (Islamist) intellectuals, founded in 1997 which is dedicated to combating what might be succinctly described as the 'dark side of enlightenment.' " As one of the co-founders of the association, Sullivan stated that the Circle's statement of purpose argues that "the modern project, derived substantially from the European Enlightenment, can rightly claim great achievements in the technical and socio-political realms. However, many people throughout the world have come to realize the destructive consequences occasioned by modernity: the triumph of materialism, the decline of morality ... the collapse of family and community, and the erosion of religious belief."

Mumtaz Ahmad, who served as AMSS president from October 1999 – October 2001, highlighted the fact that since American and Islamic visions differ substantially in their views on moral and social aspects of secularism, the validity of their visions need to be legitimated through practice not just theory. He also pointed out that although the American and/or western view of secularism accommodates the devaluation of religion in the public sphere, this is something that Islamic societies will not accommodate.

In the roundtables held on issues pertaining to the September 11 attack, all Muslim and non-Muslim social scientists condemned the attack as an attack on humanity and Islam. The roundtable entitled "*After the Attacks: Strategic, Cultural and Civilizational Predicament of Muslims*" analyzed the challenges that Muslims are facing in the public square in wake of the September 11 tragedy. The changing aspects of Muslims living in the West were also examined. In the roundtable "*Afghanistan and its Neighboring Countries: Before and After September 11*," the panelists examined the shifting balance of power and new alliances between the major actors of that region: Afghanistan, China, India, and the American coalition.

It was, however, in the roundtable on "*The role of Muslim Intellectuals in the Wake of Terrorist Attacks against the US: Combating Prejudice, Ignorance and Racism*," that the panelists examined the importance of Muslim participation in the American political process in wake of the bombing of Afghanistan. Dr. Safi, chairman of the roundtable, underscored the importance of having both scholars and activists debating Muslim participation in developing a vision to ensure world peace in which the possibilities of terrorism would be greatly diminished.

Another highlight in this year's conference was the keynote address delivered by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar at the annual banquet's *"Ismail al-Faruqi Memorial Lecture."* In speaking on the moral issues arising from the September 11 attack, Dr. Muzaffar, president, International Movement for a Just World, Malaysia, outlined how Islam, as a religion committed to peace and the sanctity of life, provides a key to social justice and human rights. With the theme of his address being "Morality in Public Life: The Challenge Before Religion," Dr. Muzaffar, who is committed to social justice, human dignity and interfaith dialogue, examined the process of globalization and its relation to Islam and morality. In so doing, he stated that globalization "could undermine some of the prevailing notions of individual mores, inter-gender relations and sexual morality" among Muslims.

In the final analysis, when Dr. Muzaffar stated in his concluding remarks, that "new attitudes and approaches should be adopted vis-a-vis religion so that it will emerge as the foundation of a collective moral ethic," he injected hope for the future development of the role of religion in public life during the global era. Since it is only through academic research on Islamic thought that the relationship between morality, identity and globalization in the Islamic world can be defined and understood, can AMSS and its sister organization, IIIT, promote the values and morals of religion as the sine qua non for the "foundation of a collective moral ethic" to be used as a guideline in the process of globalization in the 21st century?

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