

## Muslim Identities: Shifting Boundaries and Dialogues

The AMSS 35th Annual Conference, held from 27-29 October 2006 and cosponsored by Hartford Seminary's Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, analyzed "Muslim Identities: Shifting Boundaries and Dialogues." Welcoming and introductory remarks were presented by Seminary President Dr. Heidi Hadsell, Program Chair Dr. Jane I. Smith (co-director, Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations), and AMSS President Dr. Rafik Beekun. Many regular participants mentioned how they look forward to the collegial atmosphere. In fact, as the majority of presenters were Ph.D. candidates, Program Chair Smith stated that "often at academic meetings like this one, younger scholars listen while the more experienced ones dominate the conversation. ... This conference displayed a seriousness of interchange among the participants and an appreciation of the contributions of everyone."

Friday's three panel sessions explored the engagement of Muslim discourses and institutions with democracy and political transitions in Iran, Sudan, and Indonesia, as well as educational reform in Tunisia and the status of Muslim citizenship in Canada. The first panel, "Islam and Politics," featured Louis J. Cantori's (University of Maryland) "Republican Islam in the Islamic Republic of Iran." Mahdi Tourage's (Colgate University, NY) very controversial paper, "Negotiating Shi'i Identities in the Messianic Age," also focused on Iran. It elicited much debate and critical exchange as he explained how the "eschatological anticipation of the eventual victory of Shi'i Muslims at the end of time is the dominant narrative that shapes contemporary Shi'i political and trans-historical consciousness."

Saturday began with panel 4, "Islamism and Revivalism." Omar H. Altalib (Minaret of Freedom Institute, MD) explained how terrorists misuse Islam and its principles in their recruitment propaganda and how insurgent groups in Iraq and al-Qaeda followers "cloak their acts of murder and destruction in Islamic garb." Another fascinating presentation was Junaid S. Ahmad's (College of William and Mary, VA) analysis of what it means to be "moderate Muslims" in today's xenophobic world.

A dynamic question and answer session followed the fifth panel session, "Issues of Islamic Identity." Fahd Ahmad (CUNY School of Law, NY) made a parallel between Palestine and Mexico by talking about the barrier being constructed in Palestine and the new border fence approved for construction along the American-Mexican border. In his "Construction through Islamic Education: A Comparative Approach," Ermin Sinanovic (Syracuse University, NY) examined Islamic and liberal notions of education and argued that the fundamental difference between them is what it means to be a good person. Zainab Alwani (International Islamic University Malaysia) presented the main factors that contribute to the shortcomings experienced in the academic development of Middle Eastern studies programs in American universities: opposition to Islam in the Christian West, the Crusades, and the Spanish Inquisition. A lively debate ensued.

In panel 6, "Methodological Approaches," Zareena Grewal (Yale University, CT) examined if an anthropologist can escape the Orientalist discourse. Younis Mirza (Georgetown University, Washington, DC) argued how the Wahhabis have misrepresented Ibn Taymiyyah's criticisms of particular Sufi beliefs as a condemnation of Sufism in general.

Panel 7, "Gender Issues in the Indian Subcontinent and Iran" (a parallel session), was enthusiastic. Amina Jamal (Concordia University, Canada) stated that the issue for Jamaat-e-Islami women in Pakistan was not Islam vs. modernization, but rather the meaning of modernity. Almas Zakiuddin (University of British Columbia, Canada) examined the absence of religion in Bangladesh's development paradigms, thereby demonstrating the contradictions between development, gender, and religion. Roja Fazaeli (National University of Ireland, Galway) argued that Iranian Islamic feminism takes shape in the context of the Iranian revolution and is closely connected to the global human rights discourse.

One of my favorite sessions was panel 8: "Justice and Human Rights." Maliha Chishti (University of Toronto, Canada) examined the assistance or aid-intervention programs in Muslim so-

cieties by focusing on “the unequal power relations between recipients and donors.” Judith Rahima Jensen (Educational Solutions, OR) spoke on how videoconferencing in the university pilot programs developed by her company on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict help students understand controversial issues dividing communities.

Panel 9, “Identity Politics and Boundaries” (another fascinating parallel session), featured Scott Morrison’s (Columbia University, NY) analysis of Sayyid Qutb’s twenty-two months in the United States (1948-50) and assessment that this period provides greater insight into his personal identity as a Muslim than do his writings in Egypt. Judd Daniel King (Georgetown University, DC) explained how the AK Party created a neo-Ottoman identity in Turkey.

The annual banquet featured Professor Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’s (co-director, Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary) keynote address: “Shaping of Muslim Identities after 9/11 in the Context of Globalization and Justice.” He examined how 9/11 is defining contemporary Muslim identities and how globalization is affecting socioeconomic issues, as well as American Muslim social scientists’ responses to these changes. The second highlight consisted of the winners of the AMSS 6th Annual Best Graduate Paper Awards: Itrath Syed (first place, University of British Columbia, Canada), Judd Daniel King (second place), and Roja Fazaeli (third place).

Sunday began with panel 10: “Text and Context.” Imad ad-Dean Ahmad (Minaret of Freedom Institute, MD) argued that “Jihad may be the premiere example of a textual term taken out of scriptural context in order to serve human purposes.” Michelle D. Byng (Temple University, PA) examined how Muslim Americans were represented in American newspapers after 9/11. Norbani Binit Ismail (International Islamic University, Malaysia) compared the translations of Surah Maryam by five British Orientalists to those produced by profound Muslim scholars. Dragos Stoica (Concordia University, Canada) analyzed a controversial shift in Muslim identity in light of the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet. His presentation, “From the World as Text to the World as Image: A Possible Paradigm Shift,” was thought-provoking and rather disturbing, as it explored the “progressive dissolution of the textual universe, the last genuinely Muslim identification matrix.”

The final session, panel 11, “Islam in America,” featured presentations on the role of the press in covering American foreign policy, Islamic development in the United States, and the Nation of Islam. Among the highlights were Mazen Hashem’s (California State University, CA) presentation on the *khutbah* (Friday sermon) as the public discourse of practicing Muslims in the United States and Mucahit Bilici’s (University of Michigan, MI) analysis on how the emerging American-Muslim public sphere intersects with the larger American public sphere.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Emeritus Louis Cantori provided food for thought on Muslim identities. In his analysis of the difference between western and Islamic paradigms for democracy, he suggested that developing a *civilizational paradigm construction* in non-western societies should be “reflective of [their] own philosophical and cultural traditions.”

This year’s panels were followed by noticeably better question and answer sessions, characterized by lively debates and critical exchanges, due, in part, to the addition of a “Discussant” who made sure enough time was allocated. This modification adds to AMSS’ development as an international academic organization.

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