

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Crossing Boundaries: Mobilizing Faith, Diversity, and Dialogue

On 24-25 October 2008, the thirty-seventh annual conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS) was held at the Harvard Divinity School, thanks to the efforts of the late Dr. Louis Cantori (an AMSS board member) and the gracious support of Dean William Graham. Given the expanding role of religion in American foreign policy and public life, the conference's seven panels were structured around finding common ground in a religiously pluralistic world, healing inter-religious and intra-religious rifts, and using religion to promote (or at least mitigate) international conflicts.

Ali A. Mazrui (Binghamton University, and AMSS President) welcomed the audience and spoke of how America, the world's "first and only universal country," has not always welcomed non-Anglo/non-Christian immigrants. He contended that the country might be in the process of accommodating Islam, as witnessed by the Clinton administration's hosting of iftar dinners and the Bush administration's extension of Ramadan greetings to the Muslim American community.

Panel 1, "Religious Pluralism in Islam: Early and Current Discourses," featured Mun'im Sirry (University of Chicago), who spoke on how Nur-cholish Madjid (Indonesia), Asghar Ali Engineer (India), and Abdulaziz Sachedina (United States) interpreted Qur'an 5:48 within the current reality of religious pluralism. Mahbubur Rahman (York College of the City University of New York) observed how the traditional Islamic concept of *dhimmi* was fundamentally at odds with current understandings of full citizenship and human rights. Muhammad Ali (University of California, Riverside) stressed the need to understand both the text and the context when dealing with religious pluralism and focused on the ideas of Abdurrahman Wahid (Indonesia) and Ashgar Ali Engineer (India).

This was followed by Mohammed Ayoob's (Michigan State University) luncheon keynote address, entitled "Taming Political Islam: Promoting Dissent, Democracy, and Dialogue." He stated that western hegemony gave rise

to Islamist groups (the “new third worldism”) and that they would follow the natural course of political parties when faced with the task of competing for votes, personality contests, factionalization, and the need for compromise and pragmatism as they become more involved in the governing process.

Panel 2, “Religious Traditions of Dialogue,” consisted of Marcia Hermansen (Loyola University), Aisha Y. Musa (Florida International University), and Vincent F. Biondo III (California State University, Fresno). Hermansen, basing her paper upon American Protestant theologian H. R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, analyzed four different Muslim approaches to the dominant American culture: “Islam first,” “cultural” Muslims, “progressive” Muslims, and “traditionalist” Muslims. Musa, deploring how the western media often takes Qur’anic verses (either in part or in whole) out of context, used the principle of “explaining the Qur’an by the Qur’an” to reveal its envisioned path, in cooperation with other religious communities, toward achieving social justice. Biondo, who concentrated upon his experiences in the area of interfaith dialogue, stressed the need to train participants, be civil and hospitable, learn some foreign words, and leave all biases at the door.

Panel 3, “The Media’s Role in Promoting or Hindering Interreligious Dialogue & International Relations,” featured Shahnaz Khan (Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario), Alka Kurian (University of Sunderland, UK), and Alia Dakroury (Carleton University, Ottawa). Khan examined “Fanaa,” a Bollywood blockbuster that conformed to film stereotypes of Indian Muslims. She was followed by Kurian, who presented video clips of Rakesh Sharma’s “Final Solution” (a documentary on the 2002 tragedy in Gujarat and the role played by militant Hindu nationalism), and Dakroury, who, also through video clips, discussed the role of humor in Canada’s “Little Mosque on the Prairie” and America’s “Aliens in America” in portraying Muslims as regular people.

Panel 4, “Can Religion Contribute to Peacebuilding? Past and Current Examples,” consisted of Robert W. Lawrence (Albertus Magnus College), Mohammed Nimer (American University), and D. Jason Berggren. Lawrence argued that the traditional understandings of St. Francis’ 1219 visit to the sultan of Egypt are mistaken; what he really wanted was martyrdom, and his failure to achieve this forced Roman Catholics to change their idea of Islam. Nimer talked on how Islam values tranquility and harmony, prescribes non-aggression and reconciliation, and does not see war as an endless condition. Berggren compared the “JFK model” of the absolute separation of state and religion with Jimmy Carter’s counter-model/alternative vision of how religion can play a role in foreign policy. Particularly fascinating was his account of Carter’s scripture-based approach to the Israeli/Palestinian problem.

Panel 5, “Alterative Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue and Peace-building,” featured Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad (Minaret of Freedom Institute), Maliha

Chishti (University of Toronto), and Robert D. Crane (independent scholar). Ahmad spoke of his personal involvement in interfaith dialogue and presented al-Biruni's book on Hinduism as a good example of actual interfaith dialogue, for al-Biruni had gone to India and talked with Hindus. Chishti analyzed how foreign- and male-driven aid programs, which are increasingly becoming associated with a "highly militarized, western politico-ideological agenda," are negatively impacting Afghan women. Crane focused on the upsurge of interfaith and intra-faith efforts in the aftermath of Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech (2005), the open letter to the Pope (2006), and "A Common Word between Us and You" (2007) and the Christian response later that year: "Loving God and Neighbor Together."

Panel 6, "Women as Agents of Change and Peace within Nations," presented Fatma Tutuncu (Abant Izzet Baysal University, Turkey), Amina Jamal (Ryerson University, Toronto), and Etin Anwar (Hobart and William Smith Colleges). Tutuncu described how Turkey's female preachers and deputy muftis have fared vis-à-vis secularism, traditionalism, patriarchalism, and the state's attempt to control religion. Jamal analyzed the notion of moral guidance and community disciplining. Anwar discussed how interreligious conflicts and violence, usually traceable to men, affect women and children and how Indonesian women were moving from the private sphere into "a more formal and strategic patterned interaction in the public sphere."

Panel 7, "Crossing Boundaries: Muslim Integration in the West," featured Wendy Cadge (Brandeis University) and Lance D. Laird (Boston University), Shabana Mir (Oklahoma State University), and Christopher Cutting (University of Waterloo, Ontario). Cadge and Laird spoke on how Muslims engage in charitable activities (e.g., the Umma Clinic in Los Angeles) out of the Qur'anic obligation to give charity, to serve the underserved, and to give back to the community. Mir analyzed how female Muslim college students deal with peer pressure on campus, are expected to "educate" their white follow students and adapt to white culture, and how they are not encouraged to "seek out their own." Cutting discussed how Ontario's Arbitration Act allows couples to have their family disputes mediated through private and religious arbitration.

Mazrui and Bullock gave the closing remarks. Mazrui thanked the participants for their contributions to better understanding the dynamics of inter- and intra-faith conflict. Bullock pointed out that for the first time, the AMSS conference programme was put together by an all-woman Program Committee (herself, Drs. Shireen Hunter [Georgetown], Jasmin Zine [Wilfred Laurier University], and Michelle Byng [Temple University], and skillfully organized by AMSS Conference Coordinator Layla Sein. She commended AMSS for being open to such an evolution in female leadership in Muslim organizations.

Before the annual banquet's keynote address, the late Dr. Louis Cantori was eulogized by Mazrui and Roy Mottahedeh (Harvard University), Mazrui spoke of Cantori's creative participation in interfaith dialogue, and commitment to cultivating mutual respect among Muslims, Christians and Jews through an enriched understanding of religious pluralism. The late Dr. Mona Abul-Fadl was also remembered.

This was followed by the eighth consecutive Best Graduate Paper Awards ceremony, with awards for best paper going to Maliha Chishti (first place), Mun'im Sirry (second place), and Christopher Cutting (third place).

Mahmoud Ayoub (Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary) then presented the annual banquet's Ismail Raji al-Farqui Memorial Lecture: "Religious Pluralism in the Qur'an: A Challenge to Today's Muslims and non-Muslims." In this tour de force, he spoke of the "human quest for the divine and the divine quest for humanity," how Islamic civilization was made by Muslims and non-Muslims, how Muslims participated in the making of western civilization during the Scholastic era and the Renaissance. He also mentioned, among many other things, that there is no "clash" between civilizations (the source of which is religion); rather, they influence each other.

The critiques and commentaries after each panel by such seasoned scholars as Professors Mazrui, Ayoub, Hunter, Uthup and Ayoob opened the floor to lively, engaging, and sometimes controversial Q & A sessions; and the tightly-organised sessions, with a mix of senior and junior panelists turned the conference into an inspirational, concentrated, high-quality event.

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