

Conference Report

The First Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (UK)

The first annual conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists of the United Kingdom took place on October 30–31, 1999, at the London School of Economics and Political Science in London, England. The attendees came from various British and continental European universities. There were also a few participants from outside the European continent. This conference was a follow-up to the December 1996 seminar at the Oxford Academy for Advanced Studies that led to the creation of the AMSS(UK) for the specific purpose of promoting Islamic perspectives in various academic disciplines. According to the conference program, the planners of the conference chose an “open theme,” inviting presenters to write on topics in their own field of expertise. Because of this open invitation to the participants, papers on philosophy, sociology, political science, economics, law, education, religious studies, literature, art, media, and ecology were presented at the conference.

On the opening day, Lord Ahmed of Rotherham (one of four Muslims sitting in the House of Lords) delivered the keynote address. He encouraged the Muslim scholars to study the Muslim experience in the British Isles and to contribute to the better understanding of the Muslim minority in British society. He underscored the persistence of racism and anti-Islamic sentiments in the country and urged his fellow believers to keep the faith and to maintain their vigilance against the detractors of Islam in the West. He argued for greater Muslim involvement in the political process in British society and urged the younger generation to do everything within their power to assert their rights as citizens and to maintain their Islamic identity.

Professor Sulayman S. Nyang, a former President of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists of the United States and Canada, addressed the meeting after Lord Ahmed’s keynote address. Invited purposely to share the experiences of the American AMSS with members of the British AMSS,

the Gambian-born American scholar gave a historical survey of the development of the American AMSS. He identified the stages in its evolution and its successes and setbacks of the last twenty-seven years. He credited American Muslim scholars like the late Ismail al-Faruqi of Temple University in Philadelphia for shepherding this social science group in its infancy and described how the AMSS successfully launched *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* in 1984/85. Professor Nyang urged the British Muslim scholars to persist in their efforts and to take full advantage of the social sciences in the defence and explanation of the Muslim experience in British society.

The first panel of the day, after the opening speeches, featured Professor Khurshid Ahmad, a Pakistani Muslim leader and the founder of the Islamic Foundation of Leicester, England. Speaking on "Contemporary Economic Challenges and the Islamic Alternative," Professor Ahmad revisited many points he had raised in his scholarly articles written over the last thirty years. He described the present state of the world economy and the manner in which certain trends are detrimental to the developing countries, especially the Muslim ones in the global economic system. He urged the Muslims to examine critically their economic conditions and to take the appropriate measures to bring back to their lives the Islamic economic prescriptions for success in this life. He presented statistical evidence to strengthen his argument on the exploitative nature of the present global economic system.

The second panel of session 2 featured Professor Maleiha Malik of King's College, London. Writing from a postmodernist perspective, the British-Arab scholar gave a sophisticated and engaging analysis of the task of social criticism. She examined the challenges facing Muslims and Islam in the modern world and argued for a Muslim response to its changing conditions. Her paper raised several issues over which Western Muslims will continue to differ. However, it should also be pointed out that her familiarity with the literature on deconstructionist and postmodern thought showed clearly the type of Muslim intellectual the British universities are beginning to produce. In my view, Professor Malik's voice is one that will continue to reverberate within British Muslim debates.

Session 3 was divided into three panels. The first was a presentation by Dr. Riad Nourallah of the University of Westminster. Speaking on "Islamic Diplomacy: The Need for a New Paradigm," the professor traced the development of Muslim diplomacy in the past and then identified the

forces and factors responsible for the changing diplomatic landscape of the Muslim countries. His analysis resembled much of what we learned from the limited works on Muslim diplomacy in the modern period.

Professor Yahya Michot of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies presented a paper on "The Islamic Faculties: Dreams and Realities," in the second panel of session 2. Taking a realistic view of the challenges facing the Muslim in the West, the professor looked at the recent history of Islamic faculties and warned the Muslims to be guardedly optimistic about the future. The third panel was a presentation by Dr. Sophie Gillat-Ray of Cardiff University. Writing on "Higher Education and Student Religious Identity," the British professor described how and why British students deal with the problems of religious identity in the modern and postmodern university. She located the Muslim student in this moral and cultural universe and showed how his/her life is affected by the changing times and conditions.

The fourth session consisted of four presentations. Professor T.J. Winter, a British Muslim convert teaching at the University of Cambridge, shared his research findings on cyberconverts. Profiling this group of Muslims who roam the internet through the analysis of questionnaires emailed to him by predominantly North American Muslim Sufis, the British professor revealed that these Western Sufis drew their knowledge from the different Sufi orders operating in the West. He identified many Sufi sites in the internet and shed much light on this new phenomenon. Islamic *da'is* in the West should read his paper with great interest. The second panel in this session was the presentation of Dr. Ahmed Mustafa. Because I was not able to attend this session I cannot give an account of his paper. The fourth presentation was by Dr. Zahraa Al Zeera from Bahrain. Writing on "Transformative Inquiry and the Production of Islamic Knowledge," the Bahraini Muslimah revisited the arguments about the Islamization of knowledge. She described the present predicament of the Muslim scholars in the modern world and argued for the formulations of Islamically inspired methodologies in the investigation of human problems. Her paper fits the pattern of scholarship generally identified with the writings of Professor Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, Ismail al-Faruqi and others from the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The last paper presented in session 4 was written by Dr. Haifa Jawad, a Muslim scholar of Iraqi descent now teaching at the University of Birmingham, on "Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the Study of Religion." Dr. Jawad gave a detailed analysis of the works

of one of the leading Muslim scholars in the West today. Her paper shed ample light on the intellectual roots of Nasr's writings and simultaneously helped locate him in the world of contemporary Muslim scholarship. She showed how Nasr's scholarly works have both celebrated and promoted the traditional approach to Islamic learning in a world where Islam is being presented in a different light.

Session 5 consisted of two panels. The first featured Professor Jabal Muhammad Buaben of CSIC, University of Birmingham. The African-born scholar gave a paper on "Faith, Commitment, and Academic Integrity: Are They Incompatible? An Inquiry from a Muslim Point of View." He revisited many issues that scholars and intellectuals have debated about the role and place of religion in the field of scholarship. As a Muslim currently teaching in a Western university, the professor handled the issues with great sensitivity and understanding. He correctly identified the disagreements in this field of scholarly endeavor and argued that Muslims could participate in scholarly research without compromising their faith in Islam.

On the second day of the conference the participants had the choice of attending one of four workshops, namely, the media workshop, the politics workshop, the education workshop, and the general workshop. These workshops were followed by the final session. The Media workshop had four presenters. Sameera Mian of the University of Leicester addressed the question of "Media Representations of Islam and Muslims and Muslim Identity," pointing to the negative coverage of Muslims in the Western media. Fuad Nahdi of Q-News International presented a paper on "The Stick of Moses: Media and the Muslim World." He offered a critical analysis of the Western media's coverage of the Muslim experience in the West and urged the Muslims not only to increase their vigilance but to engage in counter-penetrating acts of journalism. It was indeed in this context that the analogy with Moses in Pharoanic Egypt is used in this paper. The line of argument pursued in the first two papers was echoed in the presentation of Dr. Anas S. al-Shaikh-Ali's "Facts, Fiction or Faction." This paper dealt with a device increasingly being employed by authors of modern mass-consumer (mainly missionary) oriented publications to distort Islam and vilify Muslims. Involving the use of a potent mixture of fact and fiction, this thinly disguised method of "creative writing" contrives to dramatize and personalize purported "fact-based realities" in an effort to add legitimacy to negative images of Islam and thereby pose serious obstacles to the opening

of viable avenues of dialog with the West. The last paper in this workshop written by Imam Mohammed Imam of al-Sharq al-Awsat. Writing on "The Muslim Media in the West," the Imam discussed how news is covered by these Muslims newspapers and magazines in the West. He pointed to the strengths and weaknesses of these news outlets.

The Politics Workshop consisted of six papers. The first paper, written by Dr. Abdelwahab El-Affendi of the University of Westminster, dealt with "Democratization and the Muslim World." The second was a presentation on "Kosovo, the End of History and the Last Man," by Ismail Ibrahim of the University of Leicester. The third paper was written by Fadi Ismail of the Middle East Broadcasting Centre, London. He discussed the problematic relations between the political and the religious in the Ottoman Sultanate. The fourth paper, written by Mehmet Asutay of the University of Leicester, dealt with "Political Economics: Existing Questions, New Answers." The fifth paper, written by Dr. Suleman Dangor of the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa, looked at "Global Issues Challenging Muslims in the 21st Century." The sixth and last paper of this workshop was Dr. Bustami Khir's "Al-Juwayni's View on the Governance of the Scholars." The common tread that runs through these papers is the authors' preoccupation with the perennial issues of human governance and political stability in a world of human greed and violence. Dr. El-Affendi identified several obstacles to the lack of democratic rule in the contemporary Muslim World. Dr. Ibrahim, on the other hand, focused on the plight of the Kosovo people and the need for democratic rule through the assertion of the Kosovo Albanian right to self-determination. Professor Dangor wrote about the challenges facing Muslims in the coming century and warned of the dangers of Muslim exploitation under the new guise of globalization. Dr. Khir, however, reminded his fellow conferees that Muslim political scientists can still benefit from the analysis and wisdom of the medieval Muslim thinker, al-Juwayni. He argued that Imam Khomeini's idea of *villayat al-faqih* was to a certain degree influenced by al-Juwayni.

The Education Workshop had four presenters. The first paper, written by Dr. Imran Alawiye of the Oxford Academy for Advanced Studies, carried the title "British Muslim Schools Today: Striking the Balance Between the Barbie and the Burqa." The author described the problem facing Muslim schools in a multireligious and multicultural society where Muslims are a small minority. He shed light on the points of convergence and divergence between the Muslim interest and the larger society. The second paper, deal-

ing with "A Gestalt for British Muslim Schools of the New Millennium," was written by Dr. Nasim Butt of King Fahad Academy, London. Drawing from his personal experiences as a Muslim educator in England, the author shared with the participants the findings of his research. The third paper, titled "Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child: A Quranic Perspective," was written by Dr. Mohammed Mukadam of the University of Birmingham. This paper gave an interesting and informative perspective on the spiritual problems and challenges facing British and Western Muslims in Europe. The last paper in this workshop focused on "Muslim Children in British Schools." The author described the current situation facing young Muslims in the British Isles and offered his suggestions on how Muslims can deal with these new realities.

The General Workshop consisted of eight papers. The first, written by Dr. Heba Aziz of Roehampton Institute, London, looked into tourism and its impact on the Muslim World. Drawing on the literature on tourism throughout the developing world, Dr. Aziz shed ample light on the problems facing Muslim countries whose economies have over the last decades become very much dependent on the tourist trade. She discussed the moral and social problems in tourist-oriented Muslim countries and how these governments are trying to cope with the challenges. Drawing on her own research of the Egyptian tourist trade, she underscored the threat posed by religious conflict in that country and warned of the consequences for economic development. The second paper, written by Tarek El Diwany of Kreatoc Ltd., London, dealt with "Fractional Reserve Banking and the Interest-Based Money Supply." The author educated his audience on this poorly understood field of finance while pointing to the intricacies of Islamic economics and finance. The third paper focused on "Islamic Insurance." Written by Dr. Abdelkader Chachi of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester. This author treated his listeners to a regurgitation of the familiar literature on Islamic finance and economics as discussed in the writings of Maulana Maududi and others in the Islamic movement.

The fourth paper, written by Sohail Nakhoda of the University of Nottingham, looked at "Trends in Quranic Hermeneutics." His discussion can be described as a metaphorical guided tour of contemporary Muslim attempts to interpret the Quranic texts in terms of modern and postmodern challenges. The fifth paper, written by Dr. Abdul Rahim Hassan of Birkbeck College, London, dealt with "Philosophy East and West: Reflections on Studying Philosophy at the University of London and in

Muslim Universities." He showed the similarities and dissimilarities in approaches and curricula in the teaching of philosophy in the two regions of the world. The sixth paper, addressing the issues of interfaith dialogue, was written by Wolf Ahmed Aries of the Islamic Council of Germany. It sheds much light on the nature of the problem in Christian-Muslim relations in Germany.

The seventh paper, written by Sarah Joseph of Kings College, London, dealt with "Paradigm Shifts and the Creation of a New Academic Tradition." The author recognized the challenges facing Muslim and non-Muslim scholars living in an increasingly multicultural and multireligious world. The last and eighth paper focused on "Construction of a National Imagery and Imparting Civil Culture in Europe: Ethnic Minorities and the Muslim Citizens of Europe." This last paper described in vivid terms the most formidable problems facing the Muslims in the New Europe. Coming from the Centre for Islamic Studies, Istanbul, Turkey, Dr. Talip Kucukcan brought to his task the particular experiences of the Turkish people in the West.

The last session consisted of three papers. The first, written by Professor Ahmet Davutoglu of Beykent University in Turkey, dealt with "Methodology of History and Reinterpretation of the Civilizational Tradition." The author looked at the contending arguments on civilization studies and offered some very creative ways of dealing with such issues. The second paper, written by Professor Mawil Izzi Dien of the University of Wales, Lampeter, brought to our attention the Islamic legal institutions that deal with environmental conservation. Drawing upon the growing literature on Islam and the environment, the author clarified several issues that modern Muslim environmentalists must know if they are to be effective in this age of globalization. The last paper, written by Professor Bobby Sayyid of the University of Manchester, explored the issues surrounding "Islamism and Muslims in a Global Age." In this paper, the author identified the problems and challenges Muslims must deal with if they are to find their place in the new global order.

In concluding this report five points need to be made. First, this maiden conference of the AMSS of the United Kingdom was a significant step forward in the sense that the number of quality papers presented set a high standard for future participants. Second, the diversity at the conference made it categorically clear that from now on Muslim social scientists would have to continue the emerging tradition of being a microsm of the Muslim

community in the West. Third, the frank and civil manner in which Muslims argued their points during the conference left a deep impression on many participants. The fourth point is that, though the organizers of the conference made every effort to include women in the panels, there was still the feeling by some women scholars that women were not given representation in the governing council of this new body. Last but not least, I should say that the first AMSS(UK) conference provided a platform not only for British Muslims but for Muslims from elsewhere in Europe and beyond. American Muslim social scientists will benefit immeasurably if they have the funds and the time to join their colleagues at the next annual meeting in Britain.

Immediately after the Annual Conference, the general membership elected the following four members to the Executive Committee: Anas S. al-Shaikh-Ali (Chairman), Fadi Ismail, Hussain Hassan, and Sohail Nakhoda (Secretary). The five member organizations who cooperated to establish the AMSS(UK) nominated the five following members to the Executive Committee: Zaki Badawi, Bassam Saeh, Yusuf al Khoei, M. Abd al Aziz, and Yasmine Choudhry. During its first meeting the Executive Committee coopted two additional members: Bobby Sayeed and Fauzia Ahmad.

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