

# Islamic Studies in the ASEAN Region: History, Approaches, and Future Trends

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The College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, organized an international seminar on Islamic Studies in the ASEAN Region: History, Approaches, and Future Trends, between 25-28 June 1998 at the Pattani campus of the Prince of Songkla University. The seminar was sponsored by the Toyota Foundation (Japan) and the Center for IMT-GT Studies, and the Prince of Songkla University, Thailand. The opening ceremony was presided over by His Excellency Mr. Wan Muhammad Noor Matta (Speaker and President of the Thai Parliament). He was welcomed by Dr. Sunthorn Sotthibandhu (President, Prince of Songkla University). Dr. Hasan Madmarn (Director, College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University) presented a briefing, and Mr. Shiro Honda represented Japan's Toyota Foundation, the event's major sponsor.

In his speech, HE Mr. Wan Muhammad Noor Matta said that the tradition of Islamic studies has played, for several centuries, a significant role in building a spirit of fraternity and the development of education, economy, society, and politics in Southeast Asia. Pattani, he noted, had been an important center of this intellectual and social activity. Hence, this gathering of prominent contemporary scholars of Islamic studies recognized this legacy and contributed to the further development of Islamic studies in the region. Commenting upon the traditional and modern forms of the Islamic tradition present in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), he called upon scholars to address cooperatively the intellectual and social challenges facing the Southeast Asian Muslim communities for the larger benefit and progress of the ASEAN countries and the Muslim world.

The total number of participants in the seminar was 117, consisting of 45 delegates from outside Thailand and 72 delegates from academic institutions in various Thai provinces. A total of 33 research papers were pre-

sented during the 3-day seminar. Participants came from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, as well as from Japan, the United States, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Presenters and speakers at the seminar included such prominent scholars in the field of Islamic studies as Professor Dato' Osman Bakar (Vice-Chancellor [Academic Affairs], University of Malaya); Professor Dato' Dr. Hj. Mahmud Saedon Awang Othman (Islamic Legal Specialist, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Brunei); and Professor Mohd Kamal Hassan (Holder of Malaysia Chair on Islam in Southeast Asia, Georgetown University; he also serves as Vice-Rector [Academic Affairs] International Islamic University, Malaysia [on leave]). Among the distinguished personalities who participated and addressed the gathering were His Excellency Dr. Abdullah bin Salih al-Obaid (Secretary General, Rābiṭah al 'Ālam al Islāmī [The Muslim World League], Makkah, Saudi Arabia), and His Excellency Dr. Surin Pitsuwan Foreign Minister of Thailand).

The main theme of the first day was the history and current condition of Islamic studies in ASEAN nations. In the morning session, Associate Professor Ibrahim Abu Bakar (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia) presented his paper on the "History of Islamic Studies in Malaysia." He highlighted the different historical phases and changing character of Islamic studies in Malaysia from *pondok* (traditional Islamic school) to university. Professor Dato' Dr. Hj. Mahmud Saedon Awang Othman's "History of Islamic Studies in Brunei" focused on the relation between the study of Islamic theology and Islamic law in Brunei.

In the afternoon session, Professor Wadja K. Esmula (Dean, Institute of Islamic Studies, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, the Philippines) used his paper, "History of Islamic Studies in the Philippines," to highlight its growth and role in Philippine academia and its status as a university discipline. Dr. Zamakhsyari Dhofier's (Rector, Institute Agama Islam Negeri [IAIN], Walisongo, Indonesia) paper, "History of Islamic Studies in Indonesia," described the evolutionary role of Islamic studies in Indonesia in keeping with that country's socioeconomic demands. Dr. Hasan Madmarn's "History of Islamic Studies in Thailand" illustrated the history and characteristics of Islamic studies in Thailand and its current role and contribution to the Thai educational system. Dr. Hakimatullah Babu Sahib's (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapore [Singapore Muslim Religious Council]) paper, "Islamic Education in Singapore: Past Achievements, Present Dilemmas and Future Direction," talked of the contemporary challenges facing the discipline and the dynamic role demanded of Islamic educational programs and curriculum in Singapore. In the evening, His Excellency Dr. Abdullah bin Salih al-Obaid delivered a special address on "The Significance of Islamic Studies in the Age of Globalization."

On the second day, the theme for the morning session was "Topical and Methodological Aspects of Islamic Studies in ASEAN." Professor Osman Bakar presented his paper "Towards a More Holistic, Synthetic, and Integrated Approach to Islamic Studies: The University of Malaya Experience." He called for a more comprehensive approach in Islamic studies in order to meet the challenges of inter-civilizational living and the urgent need for civilizational dialogue. Dr. Jihad Muhammad Abu Naja's (Islamic College of Yala, Yala, Thailand) "Teaching Islamic Studies in Thailand" highlighted the methods employed in teaching Islamic studies in Thailand's private institutions of Islamic studies. Professor Mitsuo Nakamura (Chiba University, Japan) talked on "Japanese Scholarship on Islam in Southeast Asia." He called upon Japanese academia to pay more attention to the Southeast Asian Islamic world. Dr. Wan Sabri (Department of Uşûl al Dīn and Comparative Religion, International Islamic University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia) presented "Some Reflections on the Historical Development of Qur'anic Exegesis in Southeast Asia" and dwelled upon the different stages in the exegetical history of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia.

Dr. H. Abdurachman Masud's (IAIN, Walisongo, Indonesia) "Why the Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) as a Centre of Islamic Studies Remains Unique and Stronger in Indonesia" showed the continuing relevance of this institution and its products in the progress, change, and advancement of Indonesia during its current reformation process. Dr. Ibrahim Zein (Department of Uşûl al Dīn and Comparative Religion, International Islamic University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia) in his paper, "Teaching Fiqh and Uşûl from an Islamic Revealed Knowledge Perspective," highlighted methodological challenges facing Islamic-oriented institutions of learning in Southeast Asia. Dr. Vivienne SM. Angeles' (La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA) "From the Outside Looking In: American Scholarship on Islam in Southeast Asia" said that American scholarship on Islam in Southeast Asia suffers from multiple marginalizations and thus overlooks the role of Islam in contemporary regional developments.

The afternoon session was devoted to "Cultural and Inter-Religious Dialogical Aspects of Islamic Studies in ASEAN Countries." Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed (Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Begawan, Brunei) presented his "Teaching Islamic Studies in the Institutions of Higher Learning in non-Arab World with or without Arabic: A Dilemma." He called for a review of Islamic studies curricula so that students are well-versed not only in local languages but also in Arabic and English. Dr. Johan Meuleman (The Indonesia-Netherlands Program in Islamic Studies; he also is associated with IAIN) delivered his

paper on "Tradition and Renewal within Islamic Studies in Southeast Asia: The Case of Indonesian IAINs." He remarked that as Indonesia's IAINs have become advanced centers of Islamic learning, there is a need to introduce and adopt nonexclusive and critical approaches and methods while studying Indonesian Islam. Associate Professor Mohd Nur Manuty (The Centre for Community Services and Continuing Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia) spoke on "Islamic Studies and Comparative Religion-Studies in ASEAN: The Case of Malaysia." He discussed the challenges facing the teaching of comparative religion in Malaysia due to the lack of qualified instructors and textbooks, and called for the study of comparative religion approaches developed by such recent Muslim scholars as Ismā'il al-Fārūqī, Fazlur Rahman, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

Dr. Muhammad Machasin's (IAIN, Yogyakarta, Indonesia) "Christian-Muslim Relations in Southeast Asia in the Point of View of the Journal *The Muslim World*" discussed the evolutionary trends in Christian scholarship on Islam in Southeast Asia from mission to dialogue. Dr. Ahmed M. Abol-Khayr (Faculty of Education, Dimayat University, Dimayat al Jadidah, Egypt) presented his research on "The Prospects of the Silk Road in Reviving Trade Relations between ASEAN and the Arab World."

In the evening session, participants joined three parallel group workshop sessions on the following topics. Group Workshop I: Islamic Studies and the IMT-GT Program; Group Workshop II: Research Priorities and Issues in Islamic Studies; and Group III: Networking Islamic Studies in ASEAN. The purpose of the workshops was to brainstorm on issues pertaining to the study, research and benefits of Islamic studies to the ASEAN region, and to establish links of cooperation between institutions concerned with Islamic studies.

During the final morning of the seminar, participants discussed "Law, Politics, and Islamic Studies in ASEAN." Six papers were presented. Dr. H. M. Atho Mudzhar (Rector, IAIN, Yogyakarta, Indonesia) presented his paper on "The Study of Islamic Law in Indonesian Islamic Universities," which highlighted the history of the study of Islamic law in Indonesia and the contributions of Indonesia scholars. Dr. Arong Suthasasna's (Institute of Middle East and Muslim World Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand) "Teaching Muslim World Studies Courses in Thai Universities: Problems and Approach" discussed the intellectual problems and hurdles faced in teaching courses relating to the Muslim world. These are largely due to disinformation about Islam and sole dependence on mass-media information.

Mr. Phu Van Han's (Samach) (Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) paper on "The Islamic Community in Vietnam:

History and Participation in Vietnamese Social Communication—Developing Trends towards the Twenty-first Century” focussed on the history of the development of Islamic-state relations in Vietnam. Professor Robert B. Albritton’s (Northern Illinois University) “Studying Political Diversity among Muslims of Southern Thailand” illustrated the changing role of the Thai Muslim community on the Thai political stage. Dr. Yusny Saby (IAIN, Ar-Raniry, Ache, Indonesia) presented a paper on “The Role of Religious Leaders in Combating the Colonial Occupation: The Case of Ache, Sumatra.” Professor Lik Arifin Masurnoor (Department of History, University of Brunei, Brunei) discussed “Islamic Education, State, and Society in Brunei” and dwelled on the development of Islamic identity in Brunei. He remarked that currently the people of Brunei need to expand and excel in such different areas of education and life as economics, which means that the educational system must be upgraded.

The afternoon session was devoted to the future of Islamic studies in ASEAN. Professor John Voll (Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding, Georgetown University) spoke on “Islamic Studies: After Orientalism and Area Studies,” and stressed that in view of the broader changes in the areas of information, disciplines, and knowledge, the future of Islamic studies has to be *glocal* (i.e., global-local). Dr. Isma-ae Alee (College of Islamic Studies, Pattani, Thailand) presented his paper on “The Future of Islamic Studies in ASEAN” and focused on the state of Islamic studies in Thailand. He also called for developing new courses in philosophy and sociology in order to make the discipline relevant to the general changes taking place in the country and the world of learning at large.

Professor Mohd Kamal Hassan’s paper, “The Study of Islam in the Contemporary Malay-Indonesian Archipelago: Some General Observations,” noted the need for modernizing such subjects as Islamic jurisprudence, *uṣūl al dīn* (principles of religion), and Islamic *da’wah* by incorporating the study of social sciences. He also called for establishing institutional linkages and networks of Southeast Asian centers of Islamic studies. H. E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan’s “Islamic Studies and the Challenge of the Twenty-first Century” appealed to Islamic studies scholars to be realistic, moderate, and practical so that the discipline can address the new demands, emerging needs, and challenges facing Southeast Asian Muslim communities as they move toward the twenty-first century.

The seminar covered a vast academic space related to the study and research of Islam and Muslim societies in Southeast Asia. It was the first of its kind for Thailand, and thus reflected the potential of Thai Muslims in the areas of education and discourse. The seminar’s sponsorship by the Toyota Foundation was acknowledged and appreciated by the distin-

guished guests, paper presenters, organizers, participants, and observers. They commended the Toyota Foundation for its interest in establishing links with institutions and scholars of Islam, and for its recognition of Islamic culture and learning in ASEAN. The seminar has become a landmark event in the history and future of Islamic studies in ASEAN.

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