

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies

III Tolentine Hall, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085

Dhū al Qa'dah 3-4, 1411/May 17-18, 1991

The eighth annual meeting of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies was held at Villanova University on May 17-18, 1991. The meeting featured a number of important sessions, ranging in theme from the Islamization of Knowledge to women and the Gulf war.

The session on the Islamization of Knowledge was chaired by Charles Butterworth of the University of Maryland, and included the following: 1) Mona Abul-Fadl of the International Institute of Islamic Thought in Herndon, VA, who spoke on "The Islamization of Knowledge Interpreted: A Muslim Intellectual Response to Modernity"; 2) Tamara Sonn of St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY, who addressed the theme of "Islamic Historicism in Context"; and 3) Theodore P. Wright, Jr., of SUNY, Albany, NY, who discussed "The Islamization of Knowledge in Pakistan." Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' of Hartford Seminary in Hartford, CT, was the discussant.

Abul-Fadl started the session by discussing some of the salient features of the Islamization of Knowledge—its history, major themes, and its relationship to modernity. She observed that there is no inherent contradiction between the Enlightenment and Modernity project and the Islamization of Knowledge plan. In a sense, the Islamization of Knowledge is essentially philosophical in nature and, as such, it can sum the substantial achievements of Islamic civilization as well as the contributions of the Western world. Moreover, she stressed the need for developing a sound methodology that accounts for the intellectual achievements of humanity. As such, the Islamization of Knowledge

is not a mere translation of ideas from one language to another, but a high-quality work based on the commitment and engagement of those individuals who understand both East and West.

Sonn, on the other hand, elaborated on what she perceived as a distinction between Islamic historicism and the Islamization of Knowledge. She argued that the Islamization of Knowledge project should be seen as part of the general Islamic revival in the twentieth century, with the basic features of traditionalism, religiosity, and social activism. She went on to say that the proponents of the Islamization of Knowledge believed that knowledge devoid of religion is “self-contradictory and unconnected to eternal truths.”

Though historicism as a comprehensive system of thought is basically Western, Sonn maintained that it has deep Islamic roots. Islamic historicism calls for “a critical assessment of the intellectual legacy of Islam with a view to: 1) understanding how it happened to assume the form in which we have inherited it; 2) distinguishing in the process between essential Islamic principles and their particular formulation as a result of specific needs; and 3) determining how best to apply the essential principles of Islam in the contemporary context.” Of the Muslim historicists in the modern period, Sonn picks Muḥammad Arkoun, ‘Abdallah Laroui, Muḥammad ‘Abīd al Jābirī, and the late Fazlur Rahman. Muslim historicists believe that the Islamizers of knowledge need a critical perspective—a missing feature in the project of Islamization.

Wright discussed the need for a comparative political analysis carried out by both Western political scientists and Muslim social scientists. His basic thesis is that one has “to undertake a critique of the concepts and value assumptions of the existing literature in the academic field of comparative politics in the hopes of revealing the built-in European (Judaean-Christian or secular-humanist) biases. Among the unconscious biases of Western comparative politics are: 1) secularism; 2) materialism; 3) analysis which distinguishes subcategories but often fails to integrate them in a holistic manner; 4) unilinear development according to a European historical model; 5) liberal individualism which values freedom and democracy over order and community; 6) quantification instead of qualitative criteria; 7) egalitarianism; 8) empiricism; and 9) pragmatism.

On the basis of the above approach, Wright suggests the creation of an empirical framework of analysis which takes into account the following areas of investigation which, to his mind, have been the distinguishing marks of the Muslim world in the modern era: 1) a preponderance of military over civilian rule; 2) a non-Western (nondemocratic) mode of succession to rulership; 3) the lack of separation between state and religion; 4) the gender-differentiated reality of Muslim societies; 5) official and state-enforced puritanism; 6) the Muslim practice of class equality; 7) transnational loyalties;

