

Conferences/Seminars

The Muslims of America Conference

Organized By:

The Arabic Club, the Department of History and The Near Eastern Studies Program, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

In the heart of seminaries and orientalist America, a conference on "The Muslims of America" was held on April 15 and 16, 1988 at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The purpose of the conference, according to its director, Professor Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "was to expand the scope of scholarly investigation about the Muslim community in the United States." The conference focused "on the manner in which Muslims in America adapt their institutions as they become increasingly an indigenous part of America." Twenty-seven speakers, including sixteen Muslim scholars, addressed a variety of topics dealing with the development and experience of the American Muslim community. Among the more than 150 participants were representatives from the International Institute of Islamic Thought, the Islamic Society of North America, the Muslim World League, the American Islamic College, the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, and various academic institutions and local Muslim communities from the United States and Canada.

The conference started on Friday, April 15, with a welcome speech by Murray Schwartz, Dean, Humanities and Fine Arts, University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Chaired by Roland Sarti, Chairman, Department of History at the University of Massachusetts, the first session focused on the demographics of the Muslims of America. Carol L. Stone of Indiana University presented her paper on the *Census of Muslims Living in America*. Carol presented statistics of various Muslim communities and explained the difficulties in collecting such data. She estimated the number of Muslims in America to be 4.7 million in 1986, a 24 percent increase over the 1980 estimates and projected that by the year 2000 this figure is likely to be doubled. Qutbi Ahmed of McGill University and former President of the Islamic Society of North America, discussed the nature, role and scope of various organizations in his paper on *Islamic Organizations in North America*. Abdul Aziz Sachedina of the University of Virginia presented his paper on *A Minority Within a Minority: The Case Study of the Shi'a in North America*. He focussed on the migration of the various Shi'i groups and their adjustment in the American environment. Sulayman Nyang of Howard University was the last speaker of the first session. The title of his paper was *Conversion and Diversion*

in an Emergent Community. He focused on three pertinent issues—the question of Muslim identity in North America, the emerging economic structure of the Muslim community and the issue of Muslim political involvement. He classified Muslims into three categories: Cultural Muslims, who identify themselves as American like any other American group; American Muslims, who are proud of being American but at the same time are very conscious of their Muslim identity; Simulationist Muslims, who would like to blend into American society but want to maintain some kind of Muslim identity. John A Petropulos, Professor of Middle Eastern History at Amherst College was the respondent for the first session. He tried to trace the impact of secular and nationalistic trends on the Muslims living in America and asserted that “whether, as a believer, one likes it or not, religion [Islam] has been reduced to or has been used to serve as a badge of national self identification rather than serving as an expression of universalistic faith.” He expressed concern about the exogeneous influence on Muslims and Islam in North America—that which comes from the global Muslim Ummah and that which hinders the assimilation of Muslims into American society. He suggested Muslims study the process of Americanization of other religious and cultural groups in order to find out where the American Muslims have been less successful in developing a pattern of their own American identity. The session ended with questions and answers.

Chaired by Elizabeth Brewer, Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, the second session started after a brief coffee break. Leila Ahmed, assistant Professor of the Women Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, presented her paper on *Perception of Muslim Women in Western Literature*. Leila Ahmed’s bold assertions surprised many: “By far the greater proportions of writing on Muslim women in the West, both scholarly and journalistic, continues to reiterate in more modern language the prejudices of the past.” She argued, by quoting extensively from the most recent western literature on Muslim women, that “malice and the deliberate villification of Islam is unfortunately very much at the heart of what has been said in the West about Islam including with respect to Islam and women.” In the second paper, Abubaker Al Shingiety of the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst focused on *Muslims As the “Other”: Representation and Self Image of the Muslims in North America*. Before critiquing the Muslims’ image and representation in the West, Shingiety presented the theory of representation in the framework of the Islamic concept of Tawḥeed. His thesis was that the politics of representation of Islam and Muslims in American political and cultural discourse reveals a dialectical relationship between representation and self-image. The “otherness” of Islam and Muslims serves two functions. It acts as a dynamic of identification by default for the Americans. Whatever Muslims

are, we are not that. They (Muslims) are bad, we (Americans) are good; they are backward, we are modern; they are terrorists, we are peace loving and so on. And, at the same time, it is appropriated as a form of self identification by the Muslims. Shingiety quoted from various grade school text books pointing out the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims and the ethnocentric treatment of Islam and the Muslim community by American scholars and the media. Apparently this was a great surprise to many Western scholars of Islam present in the session. The third paper, on *Perspective of the American Churches on Islam and the Muslim Community in North America*, was presented by Byron Haines, director, office of Christian-Muslim Relations, National Council of Churches. Haines talked about the "American Christian perspectives about Islam and Muslims in America. Haines pointed out the recognition of and awareness of Muslims' existence in North America, in recent times, is largely due to the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq-Iran war. In general, said Haines, "the American churches and the American Christian hold the same attitude which is reflected by the American media." But there have been some changes in the attitudes held by various churches in recent years. These changes are more positive and invite and urge cooperation. The response was presented by Anna Tsing, Professor of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Anna Tsing congratulated the panelists for presenting very informative and exciting papers.

The third session, Chaired by Anwar Syed, Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, focused on the characteristics of various Muslim communities across the United States. Najwa Denny, a researcher from Boston, presented her paper on the *Muslim Communities of Boston and Quincy, Massachusetts*. Mohammad Okdie's paper on *Arab Muslim Communities of Dearborn, Michigan and Toledo, Ohio* was presented by Helen Atwell. Barbara Bilge of Wayne State University focused on *Early Turkish Settlement in Detroit* and the voluntary institutions that were developed there. George Sabagh of the University of California at Los Angeles presented the findings of his study of the Iranian community in Los Angeles. Jonathan Lipman, Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College was the respondent in this session. He emphasized the need to make such studies more specific rather than very general. His remarks that "the fact that these people are Muslims does not necessarily give them anything in common and that it does not make a whole lot of difference (from the point of view of an academic study) that these people are Muslims," generated some controversy and the chairman of the session had to allow a Muslim woman to come to the podium and respond. The remarks by Jonathan Lipman also reflect either a lack of understanding or a deliberate ignorance of the nature of the religion of Islam to which Muslims adhere. The fourth session, chaired by Walter Denny, Professor of Art History at the University of Massachusetts, was devoted

to the study of three Muslim scholars and their contributions to the development of Islamic thought in America. John Esposito of the College of Holy Cross discussed *The Life and Thought of Late Professor Isma'īl al Fārūqī*. Esposito traced the journey of Isma'īl al Fārūqī from Arabism as the reference point of Islamic resurgence to Pan-Islam to the point where he was convinced that without the Islamization of Knowledge it would not be possible to integrate the "Islamic" and the "modern" into one whole. "Fārūqī was a scholar, activist, thinker and philosopher and the last ten years of his life was a proof of his vision and vigour," said Esposito. Jane Smith of the Iliff School of Theology analyzed the thought of *Seyyed Hossein Nasr*. Jane reviewed the works of Hossein Nasr and the influence of sufi thought on Nasr's writing. While appreciative of Nasr's style, scholarship and versatility of work, Jane pointed out that "the present situation of Islam in the world context and perhaps especially of Muslims in America does not dictate that a scholar like Hossein Nasr remain unnecessarily locked into a cycle of defense and introspection." Fredrick Denny of the University of Colorado examined Fazlur Rahman's contribution to the development of Islamic thought in America. According to Fazlur Rahman, said Denny, "the split between theology and philosophy was tragic for the development of both the Ummah and Islamic thought." In Denny's opinion, no other Islamic thinker has had a more profound and challenging view of the Qur'ān and Sunnah as has Fazlur Rahman. As a Muslim intellectual, said Denny, "Fazlur Rahman can never stand still. His mind changes and his positions revolve but his essential coordinate is always the Qur'ān." David Kerr, Director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, presented his response after the three presentations. He evaluated and analyzed the impact of Western culture, thought and environment on the three Islamic thinkers. He raised the question of "What is the self identity of Islam in Western society?" and "To what extent have these three scholars helped improve this identity?" and "Do they, (the three scholars) and if they do, how do they, engage themselves with the intellectual traditions of the West?" David Kerr was concerned, as a true orientalist, with the challenges that the intellectual thought of these thinkers might present to Western thought more than with the contributions of these thinkers to the development of Islamic thought in the West. Kerr expressed his anxiety by saying, "All the three scholars discussed today are elite figures. "Religious thought," according to Kerr, "arises from the people. I question, how far any of these thinkers were or are involved with the life of Muslim communities at Quincy, Dearborn and other places where real Ijtihad is taking place." However Kerr acknowledged that, in his own judgment, Fazlur Rahman will prove to be the most influential of the three thinkers and stands as a contemporary Qur'ān interpreter.

On April 16, the first session, chaired by Robert Haddad, Professor of History at Smith College, concentrated on the issue of *Islamic Education in the United States*. Nimat Hafez Barazangi of Cornell University presented the findings of her research on the *Perceptions of the Islamic Belief Systems Among Muslims of North America*. Asad Husain of the American Islamic College presented his paper on the *Prospects of Muslim Higher Educational Institutions in America*. He noted that there is a concerted effort to organize Muslim schools. In his paper Dr. Husain investigated the ideological contents of education and some of the ways in which it is being carried out. Kamal Ali of Westfield State College discussed the *Issues Facing Islamic Education in the United States*. Finally John Sullivan, a psychiatric social worker from Greenwood, Indiana, presented his analysis of Islamic education in the Prisons in America. The session ended with the response by W. Barnett Pearce, Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts.

The second session of the second day, chaired by Allen D. Austin, professor of History at Springfield College, was devoted to the analysis of Islamic activity in the United States. The first presentation, by Larry Poston of Northwestern University was on the *Da'wah in the West*. Larry Poston presented his perception of Dawah activities based on his doctoral work on the same topic at Northwestern University. He analyzed various Dawah groups and classified them into activists and passivists. Steve Johnson of Indiana University examined the *Political Involvement of American Muslims* in the past, their current activity, and possible future course. Kathleen Moore of the University of Massachusetts presented an analysis of the *American Judicial System* and its understanding of the American Muslims. She discussed a number of court rulings and treatment of Islamic laws by American judges.

The next session, chaired by Adnan Haydar, Director, Near Eastern Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, focused on *Muslim Women in Intercultural Perspective*. Beverly McCloud of Temple University presented her perceptions of the *African-American Muslim Women*. She focused on the role of Islam in the lives of African-American women converts. Louis Cainker of Northwestern University presented her paper on *Being American and Being Muslim: Contradictions in the Female Experience*. She presented her analysis of the various aspects of female Palestinian experience of the Muslim Palestinian community of Chicago. Marcia Hermansen of San Diego State University presented the findings of her research on American women who convert to Islam and marry immigrant Muslims. Aziza Al-Hibri, attorney at law in New York City, talked about the pressures Muslim women feel in the United States. She analyzed the American feminist movement and pointed towards its shallowness and lack of concern towards issues which concern Muslim women of the United States. As an activist in the American feminist movement, Aziza criticized the feminist movement for its lack of understanding of the Muslim

way of life. She suggested that Muslim women in the United States should have frequent and adequate channels of communication and a national forum to develop Muslim women's identity which is both modern and at the same time Muslim. Barbara Aswad, Professor of Anthropology, Wayne State University, was the respondent in this session.

The last session, chaired by Robert Griffith, Professor of American History at the University of Massachusetts, focused on the *American Muslims and the Question of Identity*. John O. Voll of the University of New Hampshire attempted to place the identity of the American Muslims in the context of classical definitions of Islamic minorities, the modern attempts to define the role of such minorities and the definition of American Muslims themselves. He drew analogies from his previous work on Muslims in China and the Soviet Union. Salahuddin Malik of the State University of New York presented the activities of the Pakistani Muslim community in Rochester area. Although a very well written paper, it would have best be presented in the panel which analyzed various Muslim communities in the United States. Yvonne Haddad of the University of Massachusetts presented her paper on *American Foreign Policy and Its Impact on the Identity of American Muslims in the United States*. Yvonne examined American policies in the Middle East and their impact on the Muslims living in the United States. She asserted that the administration policy can best be described as a policy of non-concern toward Muslims and their issues. She also presented the difference in the nature of interaction with the United States government by various types of Muslim groups which live in the United States.

The conference, which ended on a note of thanks by the conference director, Professor Yvonne Haddad, provided an occasion for interaction between Muslim scholars their non-Muslim counterparts. The difference in approach and perspective was evident in many deliberations but the openness of the environment provided for rich and valuable exchange of thoughts. The conference emphasized the significance of Islam and Islamic institutions as an integral part of the American experience.

Conclusion

It seems that the increasing number of Muslims in America has caused concern in many Christian and Jewish circles. The surge of articles on Islam in major U.S. newspapers and magazines and many recently published books, distorting Islam and Muslim's image, reflect the same concern and anxiety. This conference provided an opportunity to gauge the "preparedness" of the Muslim community in general and their intellectuals in particular. The

organizers were able to obtain first hand information on social, political, educational, and community based activities of Muslims in America. This may have certainly provided a basis for their future strategies to undermine Islam and Muslims in America. The organizers have promised to publish the proceedings of the conference. One would certainly like to see the book of proceedings for detailed deliberations of this very important conference on Muslims of America.

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*Against them make ready your strength to the
utmost of your power.*