

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

IIIT Panels at the 2015 ICNA Convention

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) hosted two consecutive panels at the annual Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) convention on May 24, 2015.

Ermin Sinanović (director, Research and Academic Programs) opened panel 1, “Imam & Community Education,” by explaining that IIIT is committed to continuous professional development for imams and community leaders so that they can be effective in the United States. As opposed to the societies from which they come, here they are expected to perform many non-traditional roles, such as Islamic instruction, interfaith participation, counseling, dealing with a pluralistic community, and catering to the community’s needs. All of these expectations and the difficulties that imams face in trying to fulfill them, he remarked, “explains the high turnover we have at mosques.”

Several years ago, IIIT and Hartford Seminary designed a joint Graduate Certificate in Imam and Muslim Community Leadership program to train imams in the necessary skills. To “bring the Muslim component to the conversation and instill self-respect and confidence in their students,” IIIT helped Hartford Seminary hire Muslim instructors. Each applicant for this 24-hour credit eight-course program must already possess a BA. The certification provides practical training for counseling in hospitals, prisons, and other settings.

Zahid Bukhari (former president, ICNA) acknowledged the huge variation among imams, especially those “imported imams” who have sound knowledge of Islam but cannot relate to American culture and youth and thus end up essentially leading disconnected lives “in an icloud type atmosphere.” He recommended periodic recertification of imams and community leaders so that they can improve their ability to handle contemporary challenges, and expressed enthusiasm for the ICNA-IIIT partnership.

Timur Yuskaev (director, Graduate Certificate Program in Imam and Muslim Community Leadership, Hartford Seminary) commented that many ad-

vertisements for imams include the ambiguous phrase “and other responsibilities.” In an attempt to explain what this phrase really means, he cited Andrea Elliott’s Pulitzer Prize-winning series that chronicled a Brooklyn imam’s life for a few months – he collapsed in the midst of it. Yuskaev stated: “If we don’t train the people, they will keep collapsing.” This joint certification program trains imams and community leaders, both men and women, in effective inter-faith work and professional development. “We cannot train imams from scratch, but we can help them learn to do what they do better,” he said, highlighting the fact that the coursework falls under “continuing education.”

Program graduate Joshua Salaam (youth director, ADAMS Center) stressed the pressing issue of pastoral care. According to him, the community fails to address its congregants’ basic emotional and human needs. Those in leadership positions, who often forget the human factor, must learn how to listen and then offer empathetic and sympathetic advice. He related examples from Prophet Muhammad’s life to show that the Prophet was always cognizant of pastoral care. He also shared stories of individuals who have approached him about converting to Christianity or committing suicide. After explaining how this program enabled him to deal with such cases, he concluded by saying that he had gained “a little bit more knowledge, and a lot more wisdom.”

Sinanović ended the session by reminding the audience that imams are not superhuman and that communities should consider hiring a team to more fully address their congregants’ needs. A Q&A session followed that touched on important aspects, such as the imam’s usually low salary and lack of benefits as well as the imam’s need to understand the concept of servant-leader in the American context.

For panel 2, “Contemporary Approaches to Understanding the Sunnah,” Sinanović set the tone by stressing the Sunnah’s importance as an essential source of Islamic knowledge while inviting the audience to think about how it can be used to understand Islam’s message today : “Do we accept hadith methodology uncritically and apply it fully, or do we develop new methodologies in how we can authenticate the hadith and understand them?” He then mentioned that Muslim scholars do not know exactly when the events or statements recorded in the Hadith corpus took place: during Islam’s initial stages or once it had already become established. Lastly, he raised question of looking at hadith as data points by asking whether we give the same weight to individual and aggregate hadiths.

Emad Hamdeh (assistant professor, Arabic and Islamic studies, Embry Riddle University) spoke about Albani’s brand of Salafism, a contemporary attempt to understanding the Sunnah that opposes the traditional approach.

After outlining the very strict *madhhab* traditionalism environment that characterized his era, Hamdeh remarked that Albani developed his own *anti-madhhab* methodology as a reaction to it. By rejecting the traditional scholar-student relationship, he educated himself and ultimately adopted a very uncompromising text-based outlook that had no room for the scholarly views based on centuries of context, layers of text, varying interpretations, and nuance. Sinanović opined that Albani eventually came to resemble a fifth *madhhab*, for he is also a scholar with followers.

Jonathan Brown (Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization; associate professor, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University), author of *Misquoting Muhammad*, distinguished between hadith (a piece of information) and Sunnah (general authoritative precedent). He then spoke about two approaches: the Sunnah as a fixed lens through which Muslims understand the Qur'an, so much so that the former becomes an infallible application of the latter, and the Sunnah as a moving frontier of communal practice that changes according to time and circumstance. Declaring that the Qu'ran-only movement is unprecedented and that one cannot read the Qur'an without the hadith, he clarified that the Sunnah is diverse and provides licenses that "can become tools for addressing contemporary issues."

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