

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

The Thirty-fourth AMSS Annual Conference

This conference, held from Sept. 30 – Oct. 2, 2005 and co-sponsored by Temple University (Philadelphia), represented a homecoming for the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), for its source of inspiration, Dr. Isma`il al-Faruqi, taught religion there from 1968-1986. Eleven panels addressed the theme, “Muslims and Islam in the Chaotic Modern World: Relations of Muslims among Themselves and with Others,” by covering a wide range of topics, from Muslim minority groups, mutual understanding, and women, to modernity, family law, legal theory, education, and just war. Due to space constraints, only a few of them will be covered here.

After the welcoming and introductory remarks by Program Chair Khalid Blankinship (Temple University) and Rafik Beekun (University of Nevada), Abdul Mutualo (American University in Cairo) began the proceedings by discussing the history of Islam as an “imported” religion in his native Mozambique. Heol Choul Kim (Temple University) spoke on Korean Muslims’ problems due to cultural traditions (e.g., ancestor worship) and the lack of an indigenous Muslim community. Robert Riggs (University of Pennsylvania) discussed how the White Fathers gave Algeria’s Kabyle Berbers a sense of national self-consciousness and how many of them, living in small Christian communities, left Algeria after independence.

The banquet’s keynote speaker, Abdullah Schleifer (American University in Cairo), reflected on his many years as a news reporter and producer in the Middle East. His talk received such an enthusiastic response that we have included it in our “Forum” section. The winners of the AMSS Best Graduate Paper Awards were also announced: Zareena Grewal (first place), Maleeha Aslam (second place), and Kamran Hashimi (third place).

Panel 4A featured, among others, Helena J. Kaler (George Washington University), who revealed, probably to the surprise of many, commonalities between Ayman al-Zawahiri’s and Farid Esack’s responses to modernity. She said that while al-Zawahiri bases his worldview on grievances, Esack

bases his on the Qur'an, the Hadith, and universal values. Zahra Boussalah (Noor-Ul-Iman School, NJ) discussed Malik Bennabi's theory of civilization: it "cannot be purchased from the outside" and that it consists of humanity plus the soul (ownership/blood of the land) plus time (using it constructively). She echoed Bennabi's belief that Muslims had made themselves colonizable due to their attitude of psychological defeat.

Panel 5A was quite interesting. One presenter, Havaa G. Guney-Ruebenacker (Harvard Law School, MA) gave an in-depth analysis of whether a woman can lead a mixed prayer, as Amina Wudud did several months ago (and which the speaker attended). After this session, the audience was treated to "Me and the Mosque," which traces a woman's attempt to find out why mosque leaders are so focused on erasing women's physical presence from the mosque. She interviewed pro- and anti-segregationists as well as Asra Nomani, author of the controversial *Standing Alone in Makkah* (HarperSanFrancisco: 2005). The movie also stated that such partitions were unknown in the Prophet's day and resembled Israel's "Apartheid Wall."

Panel 6B, "Women in Muslim Countries of the Middle East and South and Central Asia," was, for me, the conference's highlight. Maleeha Aslam (Cambridge University, UK), presented a fascinating – and ultimately depressing – paper on how Pakistani men of different generations perceive women as "moral" or "immoral." Roksana Bahramitash (Independent Researcher, Canada) analyzed how feminist literature portrays Muslim women as "victims" who must be "saved by their white sisters." Her research revealed, rather surprisingly, that the Muslim world has the highest rate of women employed outside the home. Florian Pohl (Temple University) discussed how Indonesian *pesentrens* (religious schools) train people in reconciliation, interfaith activities, empowering women, and other skills, and stated that they are closely connected to the national education system, civil society, and NGO networks. Nilgun Anadolu Okur (Temple University) spoke on Turkish women in the context of Anatolia's ancient Goddess worship and how the gods came and, defeating the Goddess, rendered women "silent, but not submissive." She said that Ottoman culture was gradually influenced by Byzantine and Iranian cultural practices, but that in the 1830s, women began to emancipate themselves.

Panel 7 was rather technical: What constitutes a just or an unjust war? Is jihad actually *qital*? Khalid Blankinship raised other questions: Who determines if one's martyrdom is acceptable? Why was Europe's expansion "good" and the Muslim world's "bad"? What about American "Manifest Destiny" and its associated notions of (religious) triumphalism and mes-

sianic nature? Jim Guirard (TrueSpeak Institute, VA) wondered why Washington tolerated, during the cold war, such abuses of language as “people’s democracies” (dictatorships) and “satellite states” (colonies). He said Washington should counter such al-Qaeda untruths as calling Jews and Christians “infidels,” since the Qur’an calls them “People of the Book.” Gerald J. Beyer (St. Joseph’s University, PA) outlined the major historical proponents of Christianity’s just war theory, discussed its contemporary version’s principles and problematic areas, and compared it with its Islamic counterpart. He also mentioned such problems as how to identify civilians in a guerilla war, and how to define success, military targets, and collateral damage. Ansar M. Haroun (Superior Court of California, San Diego) provided a humorous account of his job: using psychiatric evaluations to formulate a profile of suspected terrorists. According to him, this is impossible.

The final panel, Panel 9, featured, among others, Zareena Grewal (University of Michigan), who discussed how Muslim converts try to connect with the traditional Islamic world through travel and illusion/fantasy. Shabana Mir (Indiana University) dealt with the touchy issue of how Muslim young people rationalize their breaking of traditional gender taboos. Nadia Roumani (University of Southern California) presented a very informative paper on how some mosques are stemming the flight of alienated young Muslims.

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