

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Revisioning Modernity: Challenges and Possibilities for Islam

The 33rd Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) was held on September 24-26, 2004, at George Mason University Law School in Arlington, Virginia. It was cosponsored by George Mason University, the Center for Global Studies (CGS), and the Islamic Studies Program. Under the seamless directorship of Peter Mandaville, program chair and CGS director, the timely subject of revisioning modernity for and by Muslims in a post-9/11, post-Afghanistan, and post-Iraq world was addressed in 10 panels. With the theme “Revisioning Modernity: Challenges and Possibilities for Islam,” these sessions focused primarily on identity formation, human rights, interfaith dialogue and peacemaking, institutional development, methodological reform, and knowledge paradigms. The conference featured a remarkable array of scholars and graduate students who raised thought-provoking questions and offered clear, yet nuanced, solutions based on studied field and academic research.

For example, Saadia Yacoob’s (Huntington Learning Center, VA) “Developing Identities: What Is Progressive Islam and Who Are Progressive Muslims?” elicited an impassioned and contentious reaction from the audience about this somewhat elusive term and whether it was a contradiction of terms or a logical redundancy. She identified five common elements of self-identified “progressive” Muslim: an anti-imperialist stance, a belief that action and faith must go hand in hand, a championing of the oppressed and poor, a return to core principles, and a belief in a pluralistic and humanistic society.

Kamran A. Bokahri (Howard University, DC) used his “Moderate Islam, Progressive Muslims, Democracy, and Post-Islamism” to discuss themes related to identity formation among moderate Islamists, traditional Muslims, liberal Muslims and regimes, all of which claim to represent

moderate Islam. He emphasized that “moderate” Muslim means accepting as a base line the clear rejection of indiscriminate violence. Saeed Khan (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, MI) endorsed the relevance of violent or nonviolent behavior as a criterion in considering what constitutes “moderate” or “progressive” Islam, and further argued that considering the possible causes for dysfunctionality (e.g., a lack of piety, racism, exploitation, and neocolonialism) must equally be a part of the “moderate” or “progressive” formulation.

Shabana Mir (Indiana University, IN), who presented “Norms and Practices of Women’s Dress,” spoke about the social stigma, harassment, and discrimination faced by female Muslim college students in the Washington, DC, area who dress modestly, and their attempts to resist the ensuing scrutiny and stereotyping. She also spoke about their creative and resilient approaches to assert their Islam and to defy the image of the veiled Muslim women as foreign, traditional, disempowered, victimized, and remote from modernity.

Jasmin Zine (University of Toronto, Canada) spoke about the Orientalist image of Muslim women, noting that their bodies and identities historically have been scripted in order to control them. She discussed how the rhetoric of Muslim women’s liberation is too often muted by the cacophony from ideological extremism, racism, and Islamophobia. Zine also described how developing “strategic solidarities” among diversely situated Muslim women engaged in “liberatory feminist practices” is focusing both secular feminists (“who have built transnational alliances connected to global anti-racist feminist and anti-fundamentalist movements”) and faith-centered Muslim women (“who have rooted their resistance within the space of religious reform”), despite their ideological differences, on their common ground of Islamic womanhood, human rights, and liberty.

To this end, Halil Ibrahim Yenigün (University of Virginia, VA) analyzed the common ground of citizenship and colonial subjugation not only between feminist and faith-centered women, but also between women and men as a more salient unifying factor in achieving women’s liberation and protecting their rights. He suggested that framing the issue in these terms necessarily frames the answer in terms of the West’s “de-westernization.” Such a transformation will provide at least a partial resolution to the longest symbol of Islam’s so-called oppression of women in “western” eyes.

A recurring theme across all panels was the idea that while dialogue between cultures is necessary and beneficial, sustaining democratic reform must be home-grown, based on a shared set of values legitimized by Islamic

tradition, and, perhaps equally, in both urban/rural and formal/informal organizing efforts. For example, Anisseh Van Engeland-Nourai (Institut d'Etudes Politiques, France) spoke about how an active and engaged civil society will primarily lead to a sufficient convergence between the principle of universal human rights and the Islamic–Iranian heritage.

Maliha Chishti (University of Toronto, Canada) stated that while many Afghan women may have benefited from international interventionist strategies (Afghanistan is the first Muslim country to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW] without reservations), the “agency and ownership of an indigenous Afghan women’s movement may have been compromised in the process.” She also mentioned how “western donor agendas and interests to recreate culture and religious practices and attitudes only exacerbated the fragmentation of women’s organizing.” She concluded that the “modern contemporary discourse concerning the resolution of modern ethical issues – such as human rights and democracy and Islamic ethical principles” – has failed. Bilal Ibrahim (University of Waterloo, Canada) suggested that this is mainly due to the “gap between Islamic legal theory and modern Muslim theorizing.” He finds support for his claim in the Hanafi school of thought, which successfully established a rationalist foundation for textual interpretation.

To this end (i.e., who is conducting modern Muslim theorizing?) or at least to the end of “who are the Muslim intellectuals to whom Muslims listen?” Karim H. Karim (Carleton University, Canada) discussed the findings of discussions and interviews from ongoing focus groups for a study being conducted by him and Dr. Peter Mandaville. This study is analyzing the impact of Muslim intellectuals on Muslim communities in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. The findings reveal a variety of individuals from academics and ulema to journalists and artists. Dilnawaz Siddiqui (Clarion University, PA) addressed the related topic of “what makes something knowledge” by offering a unique theoretical paradigm for deciphering wisdom, as opposed to knowledge, from information. He noted further that a search for a “meta-theory to determine the validity of contending paradigms of knowledge” must accompany the distillation of fact from fiction.

Similarly, Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad (Minaret of Freedom Institute, MD) spoke about the necessity to “disentangle cultural preferences and symbols from substantive human rights issues in the minds of both western advocates of progress and Muslim world opponents of westernization” and likewise, “cultural notions from religious or philosophical misconceptions,” in order to avoid equating liberalization with westernization. With the objective of

achieving a similar goal (i.e., peace and justice), Judith Rahima Jensen (Educational Solutions, OR) discussed a remarkable program and the educational resources that she developed to foster honest dialogue over the next 6 years on the similarities and differences between youth in western and Islamic societies through Internet-based technology.

Keynote speaker Tariq Ramadan addressed the audience via teleconference from Switzerland during the annual banquet. He focused on the critical dilemma of how to avoid subscribing to a defensive psychology in reaction to the West's post-9/11 posture, which views all Muslims, by definition, as a suspect group. He further discussed the need to denounce the indiscriminate violence allegedly committed by so-called Muslims in the name of Islam, even as Muslims strive for greater solidarity, and to engage in a constructive discourse with the West in order to educate it about Islam's true, peaceful, and harmonious teachings, including its respect for life, dignity, and freedom.

Another highlight was the viewing of "About Baghdad," the first independent film on Iraq after the American liberation/occupation in 2003, by Sinan Antoon, an exiled Iraqi writer and poet. This heart-rending yet fair film offered a balance of opinions about the war's aftermath. Finally, the three winners of the "AMSS Best Graduate Paper Awards" received their due recognition: Bilal Ibrahim (University of Waterloo, Canada), "The Rationalist School of Law: Roots of Reform in Traditional Islamic Law (first place); Ali Hassan Zaidi (York University, Canada), "Islam and Modernity and the Promise of a Dialogical Understanding" (second place); and Md. Saidul Islam (York University, Canada), "Knowledge/Power Regime: The Global Politics of Development and Governance" (third place).

Necva Solak
Attorney, Integrity and Legal Affairs Division
New York City Mayor's Office of Contract Services
New York, New York