

## *Conference Reports*

### AMSS Regional Conference: The Place of Islam in America

On April 12, 2003, the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), in collaboration with the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) of the University of Utah, held its first regional conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. The day-long conference, "The Place of Islam in America," included panel discussions and workshops. The first panel dealt with "Images and Perceptions of Islam in America," and the second panel focused on "The Emerging Muslim Community: Opportunities and Challenges." Toward the end of the program, both the panelists and the audience participated in three workshops: "Challenges of Raising a Muslim Child," "Examining the Utah Muslim Community," and "Muslim Youths Dealing with Temptations and Peer Pressure." Louay Safi (president, AMSS) and Sayyid M. Syeed (general secretary, ISNA) gave the two keynote addresses.

At the beginning of the conference, Abdul-Qayum Mohmand, program coordinator, welcomed the panelists and the guests and stated that: "Since the Muslim community is part of the social and political construct of this society and contributes to the build up of this society in many aspects, it is vital for them to find out where they are placed in this society."

In his opening remarks, Safi talked about the importance of the Muslims' political and social positioning in the United States and pointed out that "American Muslims have a great opportunity to develop Islamic thought and institutions for modern-day society." He stressed that "faced with new social challenges stemming from modernist trends, American Muslims possess all the ingredients they need to develop solutions with far-reaching impact on improving the quality of life both in the U.S. and throughout the Muslim world." He expressed confidence that the conference deliberations are part of the Muslim American struggle to better the human condition.

In the first panel, James Toronto (associate professor of Islamic studies, Brigham Young University, Utah) focused on the challenges and responsibilities of the American Muslim community. Calling upon its members to

adjust themselves to new technological and economic developments and explain their faith more effectively, he proclaimed the need to produce a coherent vision for Islam's place in modern society, a unified Muslim voice, and a reconciliation between the traditional Islamic worldview and that of the prevailing modern secular worldview. "In a nutshell, the problem is how to adopt the beneficial aspects of western technology without being harmed spiritually by the corrosive effects of western culture."

Hakan Yavuz (assistant professor of political science, University of Utah), talked about how Islam has been politicized and its spiritual aspects are being ignored both here and abroad. "Islam has become an ideology to consolidate the state system and a means of nation building." He also argued that Islam's negative image in America is the result of the Iranian Revolution and the 9/11 tragedy. America's Muslim community will overcome these difficulties only when it redefines some of its basic principles according to America's existing social realities.

Ibrahim Kalin (assistant professor of Islamic studies, College of the Holy Cross, MA) emphasized the importance of the American Muslim community as a religio-cultural bridge between America and the Muslim world. This community can work to create conditions for religious tolerance and cultural accommodation. At the same time, it can work "to expose the limits of modernity and Eurocentric notions of religious pluralism," thereby building a bridge between the two societies and "eventually bring about a rapprochement between Islam and the West."

Bernard Weiss (professor of Islamic studies and political science, University of Utah), first speaker of the second panel, talked about how the Abrahamic link between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam "creates all sorts of opportunities for common theological reflection." In addition to giving Muslims an opportunity to initiate a dialogue and reflect on common historical figures, it gives the American Muslim community a chance to create a dialogue among the different ethnic groups that make up the Muslim community itself. He also called upon Muslims in America to reject fatalism and an attitude of "coping" with America by embracing their citizenship and working to realize this country's highest ideals.

Syed talked about ISNA's activities and vital role, and urged Muslims to be politically active, fulfill their religious and civic duties, and work for a better future. While America and the Muslim world do not trust each other due to American foreign policy decisions, he said: "The new alliances that are emerging in America have a potential for creating a new millennial spirit and to leave behind the unpleasant experience of the last millennium."

Joana Odencrantz (department of political science, University of Utah; member of the University of Utah's MSA chapter) talked about the role and challenges faced by Muslim women in America, saying that "Muslims in general in the United States have a propensity to discard particularistic cultural practices." Therefore, Muslim women are engaged to understand their rights and duties and remove negative cultural innovations. She argued that Islam is not gender neutral, but has specific rights and duties regarding societal and family relations. Even though both men and women are equally entitled to seek knowledge and participate in society, "societal effects are considered different in effect." Furthermore, treating "women as the same as men has resulted in distortions of justice almost as egregious as that of the Plessey decision ... Is gender neutral[ity] useful as an approach to maintaining women's rights? Is it even possible? From an Islamic perspective, we would have to say 'no' to both questions."

Toward the end of the program, workshop members presented their findings. In his closing remarks, Mohmand concluded that if the American Muslim community wants to find its place in this country, it must understand the existing political institutions. As America's liberal and democratic institutions give Muslims an opportunity to advance their cause and bring their concerns to the authorities' attention, they must understand the country's political constructs so that they can promote their agenda and make themselves a visible political and religious force.

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