

## *Conference Reports*

# Islam and Society in the Twenty-First Century

The Twenty-Ninth Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists took place October 13-15 at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. The event was titled *Islam and Society in the Twenty-First Century* and was cosponsored by John Esposito's Center for Muslim Christian Understanding.

Most members of this organization, old and new, considered this AMSS conference among the most successful for several reasons. It scored the best attendance record in years and the presence of a new generation of both male and female Muslim academics. Participants commented positively on the high quality of papers. The quality and quantity of the presenters and audience members confirmed that the presence of Muslims in western academic institutions is growing.

The conference was an international collection of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars with eighty academic papers and over ninety participants presenting throughout the three-day event in panel sessions and roundtables. Running parallel to the academic session were community issues panels that drew in those who were interested in policy-related matters pertinent to the Muslim community. The academic participants of the conference reflected upon topics that ranged from conceptual and theoretical issues to area and strategic studies. Some of the themes explored were gender, global warming, globalization, Islamic law, Muslims in the West, cross-cultural communication, family and society, political theory, economics, Islamic philosophy and strategic studies panels on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The conference featured two plenary sessions that provided seminal scholars an opportunity to reflect upon issues facing Muslims in the new millennium. *Islam, Pluralism, and Democracy*, moderated by Kamal Hassan (Rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia), featured Murad Hofmann, Abdel-Karim Soroush (Director of Institute of Epistemological Research, Tehran), John Voll (Georgetown University), and Mumtaz Ahmad (President of AMSS). The session encouraged academic scholars to have a reflective rather than apologetic approach regarding Islam and to deflect questions from how Islam is compatible with democracy to what type of democracy is compatible with Islam.

The second plenary session Islam and Globalism was moderated by AbdulHamed AbuSulayman (president of IIIT). It included Kamal Hassan, Akbar Ahmad (Princeton Univeristy) and S. Abdullah Schliefer (director of Al-Adham Center for Media Studies, University of Cairo). Participants reflected upon how globalization affects Muslim society and the cultural milieu of Muslims in addition to compromising the very meanings of Islam and essence of religious experience. The dominant theme of the session was the role of western popular culture and the global media in transmitting symbols of globalization to the Muslim world. Some of the audience members counteracted the presenter's assumptions that globalization is a threat to Muslims, pointing out that Islam in its very nature is a globalizing force and Muslims can appropriate globalization for their own benefit.

Akbar Ahmad provided the keynote address. In his address, appropriately titled "Islam and Society in the 21st Century," Ahmad asserted that Muslims in the West have a new responsibility to uphold the essence of tolerance and justice highlighted in Islam, arguing that Muslims in the United States have both political and cultural freedom to strive for justice and morality. But Muslims must deal with the intellectual challenges posed to them so that they understand better the causes and conditions of modernity and distinctive processes of globalization.

He provided the audience with two models of an Islamic response to this challenge. The first is the model of Osama bin Laden who has a naïve understanding of the West and assumes a reactive position against modernity by encouraging violence and intolerance against the West in the name of Islam. Ahmad felt this model is counterproductive and does not reflect the spirit of Islam nor the intelligence of Muslims. He considered the Islamic phase of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's life, the founder of Pakistan, as the second model which in his view embodies tolerance, democracy, and a productive Islamic response to contemporary realities in the world. Ahmed indicated that younger scholars such as the ones in the audience are instrumental in formulating a "new response to modernity" and promoting Universal human values in the West. Akbar Ahmed reiterated these points during the closing session of the conference which was a screening of the movie *Jinnah and the Making of Pakistan*.

The 29th Annual AMSS Conference introduced AMSS and Islamic scholarship to a new generation of Muslim scholars while building upon the hard work of the AMSS founders. AMSS's new challenge lies in accepting the opportunities that open up to provide Muslim academics a forum to reflect and implement new theoretical perspectives.