

IIIT Intellectual Panels

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) held a series of panels at the 42st annual convention of the Islamic Circle of North America-Muslim American Society (ICNA-MAS) in Baltimore, MD, on Saturday, April 15, 2017. This year, the convention's theme was "The Quest for True Success: The Divine Message of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad."

IIIT's intellectual panels dealt with a variety of topics. The first session, "The Concept of Madrasa: Context and Reform," revolved around Ebrahim Moosa's *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Moosa (professor, Islamic studies, University of Notre Dame) reminisced about his time as a madrasa student in India, stating: "The way I came into India was in a very pietistic orientation, that Islam was all about

piety. India and the madrasas taught me that Islam is about thinking ... piety ... goodness ... making a contribution to the world.” However, he continued, the “madrasas have done a good job in preserving the identity of traditional Islam, but it’s unable to make that identity actually work in the real world. ... and that modern knowledge has been closed off from the lived experience of Muslims.”

Ammarah Decuir, a prominent leader and trainer in the field of Islamic education leadership, largely agreed and suggested that the leadership’s permanent structure – “a weakness from the angle of human resources” – is the main problem, and that current policies and practices are rooted in these institutions’ original establishment, which has enabled them to continue like this for generations. Moderator Ahmed Alwani (vice president, IIIT) noted that “you have a curriculum that represents more or less an identity to the students ... it is actually a part of who [they] are.” He introduced IIIT’s new focus, reforming education in Muslim societies with an emphasis on integrating knowledge: “In general, it is to deal with this problem of having classical Islamic education, that ... is part of our identity, is something that we cherish and we certainly want to preserve and build on. But in the meantime, [we need] to go beyond the past and be able to deal with our own life and living conditions and our own world as it exists right now.” The panelists emphasized the need for reform and offered suggestions to both madrasa leaders and policymakers.

The second panel, “Parent-Child Relations: Challenges and Strategies,” revolved around *Parent-Child Relations: A Guide to Raising Children*, by Hisham Altalib (a founding member and current president of IIIT), Abdul-Hamid AbuSulayman (former president, IIIT), and Omar Altalib, a sociologist by training. The panel presented ideas from the book, which is a comprehensive guide focused on providing parenting techniques and powerful tips based on the latest research on child development and parenting techniques. Hisham Altalib identified and provided advice about how children test their parents, parenting styles both in the East and the West, the importance of spending time with children, the existence of a parenting gap due to generational differences, the need for mutual respect, and other challenges. He reminded parents that children observe and listen to them and can spot lies and hypocrisy, as well as to be active participants in their children’s life to counteract negative external influences. In short, parenting is a long-term investment that requires a high level of commitment, respect, engagement, and time.

Suzy Ismail (visiting professor, DeVry University; curriculum developer and lead instructor, Center for Muslim Life) disclosed that *Parent-Child Re-*

lations has been a great help to her as a counselor and worker with parents and children. She reminded the audience: “When we raise our children, our end goal must be clear, so that path we take in raising our children, consistently leads to that end goal, the raising of our children, our *tarbiyah* of our children, is another avenue towards that worship. It starts with following the guidance that we have been given in the Qur’an and Sunnah.” She then walked the audience through the stages of “Tarbiyah,” a framework that describes the stages of a child’s development and helps parents better understand them and their concerns. The stages described are 0-7 years old (children feel the need to be connected with their parents and to feel secure), 8-14 years old (the age of discipline [e.g., boundaries and moderation]), and 15-21 years old (children are ready to be a part of the conversation).

Decuir, who also moderated the session, spoke of her experience as an educator in both schools and Islamic schools and as a mother. She highly recommended *Parent-Child Relations*, for it serves as “an excellent starting point for effective conversation on how [families] want to organize their relationships in their home.” After elaborating upon the stages introduced by Ismail, she described the differences that she has noticed as both a teacher and a mother and reflected upon parenting a generation that has experienced things that she never did. Decuir decided to talk with other parents, gather as much information as she could, and asserted that there must be a “village” of mutual support, which includes suspending judgment and maintaining confidentiality. Co-author Omar Altalib agreed with the other panelists and suggested that the mosque should become more family friendly and that the community should help it become so. Doing so, he contended, would improve family life in the community as well.

The third and final panel, “Islamic Education and Imam Training,” explored the essence, scope, methods, and challenges of educating imams and community leaders to serve within the contemporary American context. The panelists discussed the importance of developing basic competencies and standards for educating and training of imams and community members, the imam’s roles as counselor to the community and ambassador to the media, as well as engaging the interfaith community and civil society in general. Ermin Sinanović (director, Research and Academic Programs, IIIT), who also moderated the panel, then introduced IIIT’s contribution as regards Islamic education and imam training and emphasized the imam’s many non-mosque-related responsibilities (e.g., serving as religious leaders, instructors, motivational speakers, counselors, and conflict resolvers) and the community’s expectations. Thus, “there’s this disparity between our expectations and

realities, ... between the ways our Islamic centers and mosques are set up and ... how we perceive professional work in the *masjid*. And then there's this perception that imams or anyone working in the *masjid* is basically a superman or a superwoman."

Abubaker Al-Shingieti (executive director, IIIT) introduced IIIT's mission and commitment to creating programs that encourage professional development for both imams and Muslim community leaders and noted several other responsibilities of a community leader, including "the legal contexts, the political environment, social-cultural factors and variables, these are important elements that in many ways influence, if not determine, the educational needs for our imams and community leaders, in the American context." Stating that one of the institute's new core objective is to create a core curriculum for a training program that will meet all of these requirements, he then introduced the Graduate Certificate in Imam and Muslim Community Leadership program, a joint IIIT-Hartford Seminary undertaking to better prepare Muslim leaders and bridge the current gap in imam and Muslim leadership in the community.

Sinanović cited another challenge: fully qualified imported imams who cannot relate to American culture and its pluralistic society, and potential domestic imams who have the cultural expertise but not the relevant academic background. Moosa discussed the "mismatch" between what the community wants and really knows about itself, and the difficulty in recruiting imams who know Islam and culture, who can deal with a multi-ethnic congregation, as well as with the mental, gender, and all other issues that madrasas do not address. In short, we need imams "who are open-minded, equipped to deal with the challenges," and unafraid to look for answers.

Zahid Bukhari (former national president, ICNA; director, American Muslim Studies Program; fellow, Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University) spoke about the pressures of keeping up with other religious leadership systems, looking at the mosque's overall management and the types of imams required, and training imams and community leaders to communicate competently on generational, gender, ethnic, and all other issues. He concluded by recommending courses specifically designed to manage mosques, prepare imams to deal with American realities, and seek the support and participation of community leaders.

The final panelist, Joshua Salaam (graduate, Certificate Program in Imam and Muslim Community Leadership, Hartford Seminary; youth director, ADAMS Center, Sterling, VA) shared how, during this program, he learned "about a tradition from the early Jewish community. They had three distinct

groups of religious people,” each of which had a distinct role in society and brought their expertise to the community. He commented: “I realized [that] in the Muslim community we just package it all together. Not only do religious leaders expect it, but they believe they can do it.” He had high praise for the program: “I do not believe I could achieve and obtain what I have gotten from Hartford seminary from anywhere else. I have sat with righteous Jewish people, and extremely righteous Christian people, who are leaders in their own church, and we are sitting in the same classroom studying theology together, under Christian scholars and under Muslim scholars and the conversation is one you can’t have in an only Muslim institution. ... I am very appreciative of what IIIT is trying to do.”

The IIIT panels attracted a large diverse and robust crowd. All three lectures were followed by an engaging Q&A session.

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