

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Perils of Empire: Islamophobia, Religious Extremism, and the New Imperialism

The Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS) held its 36th annual conference at the University of Maryland from 26-28 October 2007. Co-sponsored by the university's Department of Government and Politics and featuring Dr. Charles E. Butterworth as its program chair, the presenters discussed the "Perils of Empire: Islamophobia, Religious Extremism, and the New Imperialism." In his opening remarks, Butterworth mentioned that he had been "somewhat taken aback" by the theme, but that after five months he found that the "topic is most just."

PANEL 1: FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT: ISLAMOPHOBIC DISCOURSES IN THE WEST. Alejandro Beutel (Minaret of Freedom Institute) opened the conference with how America's counterterrorism policies (e.g., torture during interrogations, racial profiling, the NSA domestic surveillance controversy, and the use of FBI National Security Letters) do more harm than good. Ahmet Tekelioglu (Boston University) challenged the traditional security studies approach, namely, the security of the state means the security of its citizens by mentioning other types of security: individual (human rights and the rule of law), individuals qua citizens, and that of humanity itself.

Jasmin Zine (Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada), Friday's keynote speaker, examined how post-9/11 Canada has "pathologized and criminalized" Islam and presented several disturbing examples (e.g., *wudu* is an obsessive/compulsive disorder and praying is talking to spirits).

PANEL 2: NEOCOLONIALISM AND MUSLIM REACTION. Robert Lawrence (Albertus Magnus College) analyzed a Pepsi advertising campaign promising that "the consumption of Americanism is safe and manageable within Arabian society." Abdullah al-Arian (Georgetown University) spoke on how colonialism galvanized religious social movements in Algeria, Egypt, and Indonesia. Adel Ait-Ghezala (American University) argued that tourism helps to recreate a colonial environment and thus debases local cultures and peoples.

PANEL 3: NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE IN DĀR AL-ISLĀM AND BEYOND. Maliha Chishti (University of Toronto, Canada) outlined how humanitarian work in Afghanistan has been affected by being externally (American and British) driven and by merging military, civilian, humanitarian, and development groups to pursue a “winning hearts and minds campaign.” Mazen Hashem (California State University) focused on the dynamics of Muslim minorities (viz., the Kurds, the Shi`ahs, and the Amazigh [Berbers]) within Muslim-majority countries. Muhammad Shafiq (Nazareth College) spoke on the need for Muslims to understand that interfaith dialogue is neither a Christian conspiracy to convert Muslims nor an attempt to recreate Akbar’s *Dini Ilahi*.

PANEL 4: INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA. Etin Anwar (Hobart and William Smith Colleges) examined the correlation between American Islamophobia and Islamic radicalism in Indonesia, how the Qur’an is used to justify Islamic radicalism, and how anti-Americanism affects religious tolerance. Dragos Stoica (Concordia University, Canada) discussed the Quebecois’ “existential angst” and self-admitted fear of a universalistic Islam that will cause their very restrictive and supposed “primordial” white/Catholic/Quebec identity to disappear. Saeed Khan (Wayne State University) gave a fascinating account of South Asian Muslim youths in Bradford, England, who can find no place for themselves in the community mosque or at home, because neither of these settings fit into their lived realities.

PANEL 5: THE DILEMMAS OF THE WAR ON TERROR AND THE TASK OF MODERATION. Christina Hellmich (St. Anthony’s College, Oxford University) contended that 9/11 took the West by surprise and that because quick answers were required, primary sources were not used, groups with different agendas were lumped together, and certain assumptions were taken for granted (e.g., al-Qaeda is based upon Wahhabism, despite the possibility that the Saud family might have hijacked `Abd al-Wahhab’s teachings for its own purposes). Abdul Karim Bangura (Howard University) discussed, among other things, why the Bush administration’s proposed AFRICOM should be scrapped, and Shanna Edwards (Tahirih Justice Center) asked how there can be real dialogue if the Bush administration’s preconditions are really demands for unconditional surrender with no guaranteed “rewards.”

PANEL 6: THE FEMINIST ENCOUNTER WITH ISLAM IN MUSLIM PRACTICE, IN THE WESTERN PRESS, AND IN THE NEOCOLONIAL DISCOURSE. Michelle Byng (Temple University) analyzed how the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported on events affecting Muslims in England and France during 2003-04. She mentioned that America has similar laws on the books that, in some instances, have been used for the same purpose. She posited that this

coverage was a subtle attempt to convince Americans that “it is common sense for Muslim women to remove their veils.” Itrath Syed (University of British Columbia, Canada) contended that Muslim feminists are excluded from almost all discourses and that being Muslim is seen as being outside modernity. Timothy Elhami Kaldas (Georgetown University) opined that a western “rescue” mission vis-à-vis Muslim women, whether in colonized Algeria or today, involves the need to identify a threat and/or victim, silence the victim, propose a solution, and then implement it. Shabana Mir (independent researcher and scholar) examined how campus [youth] culture inhibits/facilitates the construction of Muslim women’s identity.

PANEL 7: ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE ACADEMY AND COURTS OF LAW. Robert Crane (independent researcher and scholar) analyzed how 9/11 was both the result of Muslims’ demonizing the West and led to the West’s demonizing the Muslim world. According to him, one must “demonize what one fears in order to destroy it.” For the neocons, the driving force is the fear of oncoming global chaos. Judith Jensen (Educational Solutions) reported on her organization’s work among Israelis and Palestinians to find common ground through objectivity and personal contact. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad (Minaret of Freedom Institute) spoke on how the grand jury system has been abused in the service of Islamophobia as regards four cases: The “Paintball Eleven,” `Abd al-Halim Asghar, Sami al-Arian, and the Northern Virginia charities.

Before the eagerly anticipated keynote address, members of the newly elected AMSS Board of Directors were announced and Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad updated the audience on the Islamic Resource Bank. Charles Butterworth then presented the best paper awards: first place: Usamah Ansari (York University, Canada), “Naming ‘the Muslim’ through Citation in Bollywood’s Lucknow Muslim Social Films”; second place: Timothy Elhami Kaldas (Georgetown University), “French Feminists to the Rescue: A Centenary of Metropolitan Discourses on the Salvation of the ‘Distressed Muslim Women,’ 1900 and the Present”; and third place: Sarah Swick (American University): “Dubbing a Western Muslim Culture.”

Mahmood Mamdani (Herbert Lehman Professor of Government in the Departments of Anthropology, Political Science, and International and Public Affairs, Columbia University), the keynote speaker at Saturday’s banquet, expounded upon “Islamophobia, Blasphemy, and Bigotry.” He opined that the post-9/11 tone in America was set by Samuel Huntington (the “clash of civilizations” and Islam’s “bloody borders”) and Bernard Lewis (use “good” Muslims to quarantine/control “bad” Muslims). However, all cultures are historical and thus political thought and political Islam have historical contexts. Defining bigotry as an assault from the outside and blasphemy as an assault

from the inside, he asserted that the Danish cartoon was a sign of bigotry, not blasphemy. According to him, this event was the beginning of a “clash of civilizations” in Europe, for the movement from “freedom of speech” to “protection of civilization” was very rapid. He also showed how freedom of speech can be used to “set up a minority for target practice,” as in Rwanda. Both the European Right and Left have latched onto Islamophobia, which is becoming an “ideology of hate, part of the ‘war on terror’ and ‘clash of civilizations.’” He called upon Muslims to realize that Islamophobia is not “the issue”; rather, there are many other issues (e.g., pluralism) that Muslims should take up in order to open their ranks and find allies.

PANEL 8: CULTURAL POLITICS IN MUSLIM DIASPORAS IN THE WEST. Marvin Shaub (University of Tilburg, the Netherlands) spoke on how earlier immigrants came to terms with mainstream American society and how Muslim immigrants are faring. He suggested that many Muslims might find it hard to be truly bi-cultural citizens because they consider themselves “Muslim” first and then “American.” Sarah Swick (American University) discussed her research project on how young Muslim women in Britain create their own space within mainstream British culture.

PANEL 9: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: THE MUSLIM OTHER IN POLITICS AND CULTURE. Louay Safi (Islamic Society of North America) asserted that deliberate attempts to mystify the Middle East (e.g., “This is the Middle East, after all”) seek to provoke an immediate association between Islam and the Middle East with fear. The resulting refusal/inability of many to locate the conflict’s real sources leads only to self-delusion, self-fulfilling prophecies, and an ever-worsening situation. Usamah Ansari (York University, Canada) analyzed how Indian movies set in Lucknow use the city’s physical architecture and urbanity, as well as certain markers (e.g., flowery and poetic speech, supposed nostalgia, decadence, the use of Urdu instead of Hindi, clothing, and bodily comportment) to “otherize” Indian Muslims. This, he claimed, fits in well with the Hindu nationalists’ oft-repeated phrase to Muslims: “Go to Pakistan or go to your grave.” Junaid Ahmad (College of William and Mary) contended that a wide range of Muslim organizations have been lumped together under the inaccurate term *Islamofascism* and presented as successors to Nazism and communism to remind people of Hitler and Mussolini in order to generate widespread fear and, perhaps, acceptance of the “need” for a massive preemptive strike.

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