

Conference Report

The International Conference on Jurisprudence of Minorities in the Light of the Objectives of Islamic Law (*Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*): Identity and Integration

The question of minorities in their different manifestations throughout the world has always been a sensitive one, bearing far-reaching social, cultural, economic, and political implications in human relations, nationally, regionally and internationally. This is more so in the case of Muslim minorities at a time when world politics and culture have been dominated by a secular-materialist paradigm, that is, to say the least, not favourable to people's assertion of their religious identities and struggle to abide by the requirements of their faith. With this in mind, the Muslim World League (MWL) and the International Islamic University Malaysia (through the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization and the Department of Fiqh and Usul al-Fiqh) conceived and organised the abovementioned conference. The conference was held on 9-11 November 2009 at the Renaissance Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.

The objectives of the conference consisted mainly in reconsidering the theoretical constructs and legal formulations of the question of minorities in the light of the higher objectives and fundamental principles of the *Sharī'ah* in order to formulate a sound theoretical framework and develop a realistic and dynamic Maqasid-based jurisprudence capable of generating viable solutions to the problems of minorities in the context of the modern nation-state system as well as international conventions and institutions that would enable them to strike a happy balance between the preservation of self-identity and integration in their respective countries.

For this purpose, the organisers invited over 50 scholars and experts from all the regions of the globe to address various aspects of the conference theme. They succeeded to secure the participation of 30 paper presenters from Malaysia, Thailand, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, Korea, Sri Lanka, Fiji Islands, India, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, France and Argentina. The submissions of those scholars and experts covered a wide range of topics pertaining to the life and dynamics of Muslim minorities. They included philosophical and theological issues, and legal and juristic matters dealing with the fundamental principles and universal spiritual and ethical values that constitute the core of the Islamic approach to the question of majority-minority relationships. They also included surveys of the history and conditions of some Muslim minorities (such as in Korea, Argentina, China and Sri Lanka), focusing on the problems they face with regard to education, family life and personal status, economic opportunities, political participation and representation, etc. Some of the paper presenters touched on issues of the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media and cultural productions in non-Muslim majority countries.

One key issue that ran through the different submissions concerns the proper approach and process that should be developed and adopted in the issuance of *fatwas* (legal Islamic verdicts) tackling the problems of Muslim minorities. That is, a more systematic and institutional framework is needed to address Muslim minority issues based on a comprehensive and well-informed approach dealing with such issues not as problems of isolated individuals but as part of the whole presence and dynamics of those minorities. Another important issue that was recurrent in the submissions and discussions throughout the conference sessions pertains to the ways in which Islamic international and organisations such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Muslim World League (MWL) as well as Muslim governments could and should discharge their duties in addressing effectively the problems of non-Muslim minorities internally within Muslim countries and of Muslim minorities externally in non-Muslim majority countries.

Attended by over 300 hundred people at the opening ceremony and not less than 150 participants throughout the 10 presentation

sessions, the conference was officiated by His Royal Highness the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Al-Musta'in Billah Ibn Al-Marhum Abu Bakar Ri'ayatuddin Al-Muadzam Shah, who graced the opening ceremony with an important speech in which he pointed out the significance and timeliness of the conference, and highlighted the crucial importance of its theme. He drew the participants' attention to the far-reaching implications of globalisation for all communities, especially Muslim minorities. The Sultan also expressed his appreciation of the League's special concern with such important issues such as the question of minorities.

Dr. Abdullah Bin Abdelmohsin Al-Turki, the Secretary General of the MWL, also addressed the Conference opening ceremony. In his speech, he expressed his high regard for Malaysia's progress and great achievements and thanked the Malaysian government for allowing the conference to be held on its soil. He also stressed the MWL's special concern with the issues relating to Muslim minorities who constitute an integral part of the Muslim *ummah*. Finally, the Secretary General reiterated the fact that dealing with the issues of minorities and helping to solve their problems is one of the MWL's top priorities.

On behalf of the conference organisers, Prof. Dr. Syed Arabi Iddid, Rector of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), gave a welcoming speech in which he lauded the efforts made by the MWL to promote the cause of Islam and Muslims in the world. He emphasised the importance of the conference theme about mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence between different peoples and nations not only for Muslims in Malaysia and around the world but also for everyone concerned. The Rector also thanked the MWL for its willingness to collaborate with the International Islamic University Malaysia on such an important topic and expressed his hope that the conference will pave the ground for more forms of cooperation between IIUM and the MWL.

The conference final statement, which was read during the closing ceremony conducted at IIUM main campus in Gombak, included recommendations that consisted of six main clauses including 36 items concerning different aspects on the question of minorities. One central idea running through the different recommendations

concerned the problem of follow-up in the spirit of the conference, and developing of the pertinent insights and positive thoughts that emerged in the presentations and discussions into applicable programmes and action plans.

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