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Conference Reports

Report on the first International Conference on Islamic Spiritual Care: Conceptualising Spiritual Care Between Traditional Guidance and Modern Practices

Online via Zoom, 27 – 28 December 2021

Khairil Husaini Bin Jamil*

With the aim to explore concepts of spiritual care adopted or envisioned by Muslims in the modern time, the Department of Qur'an and Sunnah Studies at the International Islamic University Malaysia collaborated with the Islamic University of Applied Sciences, Rotterdam in organising the first ever international conference to address the subject of Islamic spiritual care. The online conference was attended by more than one hundred participants from several countries namely Malaysia, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Turkiye, United Kingdom, Denmark and the United States of America. The conference was preceded by an international pre-conference webinar several months earlier which was intended to spark the conversation and attract outstanding proposals for the actual conference. All proposals received went through a review process by two reviewers prior to being accepted. Approximately 50 proposals were shortlisted, of which 32 were accepted for presentation. During the conference, 21 papers were presented and all but one of them were published in the e-Proceedings of the conference. On the whole, the conference presented a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted concepts of Islamic spiritual care as well as the current interests and areas of emphasis among academics and practitioners of Islamic spiritual care.

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The conference featured two keynote and five main speakers from several regions and continents. The first day of the conference was vibrating with energy as the first keynote speaker, Professor Dr Recep Şentürk, the former rector of İbn Haldun Üniversitesi, Istanbul invited the attendees to consider the concept of the self, the multiplex human ontology, the concept of human action, the multiplex theory of human action, and the multiplex psychotherapy from the Islamic tradition. Şentürk argues that “by employing the multiplex conception of the self and theory of action, we can integrate psychology and Islam and bring them into dialogue.” The session continued with the main speech by the director of the conference, Arnold Yasin Mol of Islamic University of Applied Sciences, Rotterdam. Mol proposed a new concept of ‘urbanised theology’ as a framework to engage with issues and problems affecting contemporary society in the new urbanised context. In relation to this, Islamic spiritual care can be seen as a form of urbanised theology of care. Pursuing the narrative of care, the next main speaker, Dr. Khairil Husaini Bin Jamil highlighted the concept of *ri‘āyah* (care) in Prophetic traditions. He underlined the confused understanding and consequential neglect of care as the cause for increased relationship issues and pervasive individualism in postmodern societies. Bin Jamil proposed the concept of *naşīḥah* that encompasses any endeavours of Islamisation, Islamicisation, relevantisation and integration as the underlying philosophy for Islamic spiritual care.

The second day of the conference was graced by Dr Rania Awad, Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Stanford University School of Medicine and Director of the Muslim Mental Health Lab and Wellness Program. In her keynote speech, Awad alerted the attendees to the problem of suicide among Muslims in the West. Muslims reported higher suicide attempts compared to other faith groups (almost two times more than Protestants) and other Muslim majority countries regardless of their self-reported religiosity. In face of this situation, Awad and her team introduced an initiative called “Maristan” following the traditional Muslim idea of “Bimaristan,” the mental health centres in medieval Islamic civilisation. The attendees were also enthralled by the presentation of the other main speaker, Yunus Dudhwala who shared his experience as Head of Chaplaincy and Bereavement Services to Barts Health NHS Trust, United Kingdom. Dudhwala does not only engage with spiritual care among Muslims, but also successfully managed

multifaith chaplaincy. His sharing well exemplified the importance of integrating Islamic epistemological and ontological framework with empirical truths in psychology that is believed to lead to an integrative model of mental health care as expounded by the earlier main speaker, Dr Hooman Keshavarzi, the Executive Director/Founder of Khalil Centre, United States.

Managing an online conference that involves participants from several continents proved to be quite a challenge due to different time zones. Due to this, the speech by the Director of Darul Qasim Institute, Chicago, Mohammed Amin Kholwadia was rescheduled to the end of the first day of the conference. For the operational framework of spiritual care, Kholwadia suggested for Muslims to intimate Divine name theology and he gave the example of the divine names *al-Ra'ūf* and *al-Raḥīm* which reflect affection and compassion. Also, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the presentation on the master programme of Islamic spiritual care at IUASR was done by a representative. Other presentations, however, went extremely well and they touched on a wide range of subjects including exchanges between Islamic spiritual care and Christian spiritual care, spiritual care in Germany and Turkey, the spiritual journey of man, concepts such as justice, contentment and effort, death remembrance and death readiness quotient, spiritual care in hospitals and prisons, spiritual care during the time of pandemic, the pedagogy of spiritual care, Islamic art and the enhancement of spirituality, anger management in adult care centres, managing depression amongst young adults, and spiritual care for children with special needs.

As the first ever conference hosted not by a dedicated centre or association for Islamic spiritual care, the conference could be said to have achieved more than what it aimed for and received laudatory praises and reviews from several international institutions, particularly in Muslim majority countries. Some have also offered to sponsor the next conference on the subject. The conference concluded that the understanding of human ontology is crucial for an integrative model of Islamic spiritual care and that this concept is undeniably multifaceted. The conference has also proposed for the establishment of a research centre for Islamic spiritual care. There was also enthusiastic support to explore more avenues for exchanges between Islamic spiritual care and the global engagement with spirituality.

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