

Conference Report

International conference on Islam in Asia and Oceania: Historical, cultural and global perspectives

What is the socio-political and cultural impact of Islam in Asia and Oceania? What are the historical legacies of Islam in these parts of the world? What are the global perspectives through which the current Islamic socio-cultural and intellectual traditions in Asia and Oceania can be examined? What are the lessons that can be gleaned from the experiences of the past as the Muslim *ummah* faces challenges from within and without? These are the questions which the international conference on “Islam in Asia and Oceania” raised and tried to answer. This conference was convened by the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in collaboration with Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World (FUIW), and the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM). It was held at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, from 9th to 11th October, 2012. With the theme “International Conference on Islam in Asia and Oceania: Historical, Cultural and Global Perspectives”, the conference drew renowned scholars, researchers and students of Islamic history and intellectual traditions from different parts of the world. Papers presented at the conference were rich in analysis and intellectually stimulating, covering various aspects of Islamic intellectual, cultural, political, and social heritages in Asia and Oceania.

Y.B. Major General Dato’ Seri Jamil Khir Bin Haji Baharom, Minister in the Malaysian Prime Minister’s Department, presided over the opening ceremony. In his speech, the Minister recalled the enormous challenges that face the Muslim world in this age. He pointed to the objectives of the conference, the most important of which was to promote

the spirit of understanding, cooperation and tolerance among Muslims. Other speeches, including those by Y.Bhg. Datuk Nik Mustapha bin Nik Hassan, the Director General of IKIM, and Prof. Dato' Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin, the Rector of IIUM, and the representative of ISESCO at the inaugural ceremony echoed these views. In his message to the Conference, Professor Waleed F. Faris, the Chairman of the Conference Organizing Committee, pointed out that the aim of the conference was to provide a platform for scholars, researchers, and students of Islam in general to dwell at length on the values of tolerance, moderation as well as understanding and to consider solutions to challenges facing the Muslims and Islam in this century.

The proceedings of the conference were conducted in parallel sessions in both Arabic and English languages over a period of three days. The first two days of the conference opened with plenary sessions in which some of the most respected scholars presented their papers. Professor Gudrun Kramer of the Institute of Islamic Studies of Free University of Berlin set the tone of the conference with her paper entitled "Educating Active Muslims: Reform and Renewal among Muslims in Asia" delivered in the first plenary session. She noted that reform and renewal have been part of the Islamic intellectual legacy from long before Islam's encounter with the West. Adopting a more comprehensive view of reform and renewal than the narrower conceptions that characterized the terms in most Western literature, Prof. Kramer described them as transcendental meant at recreating the Muslim ummah in its pristine form. She, however, noted the need for moderation and a strong rational tradition in the new reform and renewal efforts being championed in the ummah. After a round table discussion on the theme "Muslims and Issues Related to Economics and Finance in Asia and Oceania," three parallel sessions were conducted. Two of these parallel sessions were conducted in Arabic language and explored the spread of Islam in Asia and Oceania. In all, seventeen papers were presented in those sessions.

During the second day's plenary session, Dr. Mahjoob Zweiri, Dr. Mohsen Mohamed Saleh, and Professor Mohammad Kamal Hassan explored from different angles the challenges facing the Muslim ummah in Asia. In "The Era of Turbulence and the Challenges to the Islamic Moderation Tradition in the Asia-Pacific Region," Professor Kamal highlighted the fact that moderation and toleration in Asia and in Malaysia are based on the concept of *wasatiyyah*. He concluded by underscoring

the need for what he called “alliance of civilizations” to build bridges of understanding and tolerance between the Muslim ummah and the West. This, he pointed out, is the only way to global peace and harmony. The remaining sessions of the day dwelt on such sub-themes as Islamic politics and the judicial and education, the socio-economic, cultural and global dimensions of Islam in Asia and Oceania; Islamic studies curricular in Asian and Oceania schools and universities; and Islam and film in Asia: challenges and opportunity. A total of thirty three papers were presented touching on various aspects of Islam within these sub-themes.

On the third day, there were two parallel sessions in which thirty three papers were presented on Sufi institutions and their religious, social and political roles in Asia; and Dialogue between Islam and other religions and cultures in the Asian-oceanic context. The presenters raised important points including the failure of reform and renewal in Islamic countries as is evidenced in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the need for a dialectical approach towards evolving a mutually acceptable common intellectual discourse for world religions. The day was crowned with two important events. The first was the visit to IKIM where participants were informed of the institute and some of its activities. The second was the dinner organized as part of the closing ceremony during which the resolutions of the conference were presented. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Haji Ahmed Badawi presided over the closing ceremony. While noting the success of the conference, in his speech he emphasized the need to re-echo the general position of the conference. This is the recognition that, as it stands today, Islam faces various challenges including ignorance and extremism of its adherents as well as the pervasive Islamophobia of the adherents of other religions.

The need to address these challenges through promoting values of moderation, tolerance, cooperation, and dialogue was unanimously recognized by all participants. One thing noteworthy is the fact that conference resolutions in themselves, no matter how novel, would have no impact if the ummah itself is unwilling to take the necessary and bold steps towards reforming itself through the tradition of moderation. The immediate challenge, therefore, is to design workable strategies through which the resolutions adopted by the conference can be realized.

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