

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Dialogue vs. Conflict: Islam at the Age of Globalization

The “Second International Conference on Islam,” held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on 24-25 April 2006, focused on the broad theme of Islam and globalization through the lens of dialogue and conflict. There were four keynote speakers and more than thirty presentations on a wide range of topics related to Islam and the experiences of Muslims throughout history as well as in the contemporary world. The conference was marked by its multidisciplinary diversity and strong emphasis on constructive intellectual exchange among scholars.

The four keynote speakers, Jocelyne Cesari (Harvard University), Thomas Michel, S.J. (Georgetown University), Scott Alexander (Catholic Theological Union), and Kemal Karpat (University of Wisconsin-Madison), touched upon various aspects of Islam at the age of globalization. Cesari’s talk, entitled “Global Islam between Fundamentalism and Cosmopolitanism,” presented a typology of three forms of Islamic identity that are emerging in the global age, namely, diasporic, pan-Islamic, and cosmopolitan. In her words, diasporic refers to the localized relationships of Muslims who choose to maintain strong ties with their country or city of origin, pan-Islamic emphasizes the effectiveness of the ummah concept in today’s world, and cosmopolitan refers to a worldview that is reflexive, in a sense defined by the status of being “other.”

In his speech, “Confrontation and Dialogue: A History of Catholic-Muslim Relations,” Alexander outlined the history of this relationship since the advent of Islam, pointing to elements of dialogue and confrontation. Kemal Karpat discussed a most current topic in his speech, “Turkey and the EU: The End of a Millennium of Confrontation?” and analyzed the positive consequences of Turkey’s membership in the European Union (EU).

The first panel, “Global Islam and the West,” accommodated papers exemplifying the responses and contributions of Muslims to globalization.

In his paper, “The Anti-Globalization and Islamic Reformism of Chandra Muzaffar: The Malaysian Contribution to a Religious Global Ethic,” David Johnston (Yale University) analyzed “how Muzaffar leverages central aspects of Muslim theology in order to construct an inter-faith vision of the unity of humankind and its implications for the confronting and transforming of the current western-led forces of globalization.” On the other hand, Hayal Akarsu (Sabanci University, Turkey) presented “Ramadanization of the World: Religious and National Identifications in the Multiculturalism and Globalization Discourses,” a cultural study of a television program broadcasting local Ramadan practices from around the world.

In the “Muslims, Integration, and the European Union” panel, Ahmed Yukleyen (Boston University) presented “Redefining Islam and Europe in Turkey’s EU Membership Process,” in which he discussed the mutual transformation of Turkish Islam and the cultural context of Europe. He argued that since Turkish Islam is not monolithic, but rather encompasses divergent groups with even opposing commitments, the essentialist arguments of those who oppose Turkey’s EU membership are unwarranted. He concluded that “arguments pro and con Turkey’s EU membership use the Turkish Muslim immigrant experience in Europe selectively to support their political positions.”

Egemen Ozalp (Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Spain) discussed the prospects for Turkey’s EU membership in his “Bridging Civilizations? Turkey’s EU Bid: New Risks and Opportunities.” Ozalp pointed out the benefits of Turkey’s membership to the EU and argued that “interaction of civilizations, and reduction of political and social differences to a favorable level are vital for three reasons: to increase ‘civic participation’ for a more feasible democracy, to eliminate the current democracy deficit and maintain legitimacy for actors and institutions in the policy-making process, and to avoid long-term citizen dissatisfaction by ‘removing its causes and controlling its effects.’”

In the panel “Negotiating Religious and National Identities,” Reem Hilal (University of Wisconsin, Madison) presented “African Muslim Slave Writings and Muslims in America: Identities in Transition,” in which she analyzed the writings of two nineteenth-century African Muslim slaves, namely, Umar ibn Said and Bilali Muhammad. Hilal discussed the religious discourse and the traces of identity negotiation in these writings that have been overlooked in previous studies. Eren Tatari’s (Indiana University, Bloomington) paper, “Theories of State Accommodation of Muslim Religious Practices in Western Europe,” analyzed the four dominant theories employed by scholars to explain the cross-national variation in the state’s accommodation of

Muslim religious practices in western Europe. She discussed their merits and shortcomings when used to understand the cases of Muslim minorities in western Europe and proposed a dynamic compound hypothesis that outlined the causal mechanisms of the policy process. Mustafa Gokcek (University of Wisconsin, Madison), who presented “Introducing Modern Education among Muslims of Russia: Jadidism and the Gulen Movement,” compared and contrasted these two Islamic movements and argued that “both movements emerged as a result of a need for adapting Muslims to the changing circumstances of the rapidly modernizing and globalizing world.”

The “Islamic Movements in a Globalized World” panel hosted papers analyzing Islamic religious, social, and political movements in different parts of the world. In his “Islamic Movements and Globalization: Integration vs. Conflict in Turkey,” Ahmet Kuru (University of Washington) asked “Why do certain Islamic movements support globalization and others oppose it?” He proposed two variables, opportunity structures and the given movement’s normative framework, to explain the variation in their attitudes. Etga Ugur (University of Utah) presented “Civic Islam in the Public Sphere: The Gulen Movement, Civil Society, and Social Capital in Turkey,” and Marcia Hermansen (Loyola University) presented “Global Sufism: Theirs and Ours.”

The panel on “Muslim Women in the Public Sphere” featured two papers: Mino Derayeh’s (York University, Toronto) “The Dialogue on Ifsha-i Qanun: Iranian Women Revealing the Shariah” and Derya (Senol) Iner’s (University of Wisconsin, Madison) “Invisible Women’s Visibility versus Visible Women’s Invisibility.” Iner questioned the status of modern Turkish and Ottoman women who choose/chose to wear the headscarf. Her findings revealed that the fundamentalist secularism of modern Turkey renders women invisible, whereas Ottoman women who wore the headscarf were more visible and active agents in Ottoman society.

Overall, this enriching and intellectually stimulating conference provided an opportunity for all participants to exchange cutting-edge research on many topics concerning Islam and Muslims. One of the essential methodological issues that emerged was the need for rigorous works to provide analytical insight into the dilemma of employing Islam vs. Muslims as actor(s), participants, and institutions. Research, taking a complex and sophisticated approach to how Islam is referenced by Muslims and the mechanisms of Islam’s personal-faith framework, is waiting to be undertaken.

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