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For The Editor
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Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

Islam and Civil Society in South Africa: Prospects for Tolerance and Conflict Resolution

27-29 *Safar 1415* / 5-7 August, 1994
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa

Somehow, apartheid brought with it unexpected benefits, such as the formation of an effective civil society. In addition to the fact that South Africa currently enjoys a preferential status in the international community, over the decades state-driven apartheid was resisted by a strong civil society and mass-based organizations. There may be some validity to the argument that since the inception of a peaceful transition to democracy, community-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and others have somewhat receded from the scene and, in so doing, have weakened civil society. Yet it would be incorrect to say that the new state dominates the postapartheid society.

It was to explore the dynamics of the Muslim role in civil society that the UNISA conference was convened. Several speakers reflected on the experience of civil society in the Muslim world (John Esposito), Sudan (John Voll), Tunisia (Rashid al-Ghanushi), and Africa in general (Ali Mazrui). All together, some twenty-three papers dealing with various aspects of South African civil society were presented. Issues related to gender discourse in Islam (Amina Wadud-Muhsin), culture and conflict (Richard Martin), and interpreting Islam in a postmodern world (Tamara Sonn) were also discussed.

The conference discussion was often lively, largely due to the attendance of more than two hundred people for three days. While this format facilitated general public participation, it also inhibited a

more intense engagement with the materials presented. One would have liked to have had the chance to challenge Ali Mazrui's aphoristic assertions that people in Iran are afraid of the state and not afraid of each other, whereas people in the United States are not afraid of the state but of each other, in terms of crime and violence. He asked whether it was possible to combine the good experiences of Iran and the United States and have something called theocentric democracy!

South African scholars demonstrated their versatility and variety. The end of apartheid surely inscribed Muslims into the history of this country. In the presentations of Jeppie, Mayet, and Dadoo, the Muslim contribution to the political struggle is put on record. At the same time, apartheid also forced Muslims to rethink their theological and legal assertions. Esack appealed for a rethinking of the term *kāfir*, a derogatory racist term (*kaffir*) under apartheid, especially when one has such a president as the humanist Nelson Mandela. Would contemporary Muslims also regard him as a *kāfir*? Given Muslim demands for the recognition of Muslim law in South Africa, Moosa tried to address a dilemma found in Muslim discourse: how can Muslims be committed to a modern bill of rights and simultaneously embrace historical interpretations of the Shari'ah, especially in the field of family law?

The theme of reinterpreting Muslim discourse surfaced throughout the conference, especially during debates on social justice, gender, and class (Wadud-Muhsin), the prospects for Muslim law being recognized in South Africa (Shuaib Omar), and Muslim participation in interfaith dialogues (Abdurrashid Omar).

There were also some excellent narratives of Islam in South Africa and informative papers of the Muslim heritage: Dangor's account of the role of Shaykh Yusuf, the eighteenth-century spiritual father of one source of South African Islam from southeast Asia, Davids' paper on the way in which nineteenth-century Cape imams dealt with conflict, and Tayob's critical evaluation of the role of the longstanding and influential sociopolitical movement—the Muslim Youth Movement—and its journey from Islamic exclusivism to inclusivism.

The underside of social history, which does not always enjoy a place of pride, was also in evidence. Zuleikha Mayat's paper gave a detailed account of the courageous political support provided by Muslim women to their menfolk in the political struggles of the Transvaal Indian Congress, while Zubeda Dangor focused on painful accounts of the abuse of women, a phenomenon that cuts across all sectors of Muslim society.

Rich accounts of different projects in civil society were also presented: the role of Muslim media (Haron), Muslim private schools (Khamissa), the failure to get Muslim family laws recognized thus far (Naude), and the effects of the laws curtailing the movement of Asian people during the previous century (Jaffer). The very different accounts and experiences of interfaith activities from the Jewish perspective (Auerbach), the Hindu view (Sooka), the Christian attitude (Lubbe), and accounts of Bushman religion (Kruger) provided useful insights.

Overall, the conference was a smorgasbord of Muslim South Africa and, indirectly, a microcosm of the contemporary Islamic world. South African Muslims in particular are confronted with a major challenge. In their wider social and political experience, they are empowered by a constitution in which justice and egalitarianism make up the main blocks of their emergent human rights culture. While that struggle in the broader South African context is far from over, there is a clear momentum and commitment to translate these ideals into such economic and moral realities as reconstruction, the redistribution of wealth, and, specifically, women's rights. These are the elements that make civil society a reality. On the other hand, the predominant religious discourse of local Muslims remains largely rooted in imageries of a medieval and monarchical Islam, characterized by the prevalence of authority and status, rather than the elements of contract and choice, which the human rights culture advocates. An indication of the distance between traditional Islam and other trends in South African Islam was captured by the observation of a conservative imam who attended at least two of the three-day event: "All this (conference) is to accommodate *kufr* (unbelief)," he said stridently.

As to whether tolerance and conflict resolution can be viewed as the Siamese twin of a vibrant civil society, there is every indication that this relationship needs to be cultivated among South African Muslims.

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