

## *Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports*

# **Theologies and Ethics of Justice: New Directions for Islamic Thought in the 21st Century**

The Summer Institute for Scholars 2017, held at the IIIT headquarters in Herndon, VA, from July 26-29, brought together a group of scholars to address “Theologies and Ethics of Justice: New Directions for Islamic Thought in the 21st Century.” To present as many of their ideas as possible, the wide-ranging and thought-provoking comments of the chairs and discussants are not recounted

The event began with welcoming remarks by Ermin Sinanović (program director and director of research, IIIT), Abubaker al-Shingieti (executive director, IIIT) and Hisham Altalib (president, IIIT). The participating scholars, students, and special guests were introduced and viewed a film on IIIT.

The special panel on “Justice in Islamic Thought” was addressed by Ramon Harvey (Ebrahim College, London) and Jonathan A.C. Brown (Georgetown University; via Skype). Ramon Harvey’s paper, “The Qur’an and the Just Society: An Enquiry into Scriptural Theology, Ethics, and Hermeneutics,” introduced the theoretical framework of his forthcoming book, *The Qur’an and the Just Society*. He presented the basic underlying enquiry: the search for the meaning of societal justice within the Qur’anic worldview. His argument proceeded in three steps: (1) justice in the Qur’an must be situated within the broader “moral narrative” about the spiritual journey of souls and societies and from which an implicit moral theology can be detected; (2) that it is possible to build on such Qur’anic indications to articulate a theological and ethical system that models it; and (3) that such a system gives a meaningful epistemological foundation for a hermeneutics to discover the Qur’an’s basic principles of justice when contextualized within the initial Muslim community led by Prophet Muhammad.

Jonathan A.C. Brown, in his “Justice in Islamic Legal and Political Thought and History,” contended that the Qur’an offers itself as a reference for justice, stressing that humans need to turn to God’s revelation in order to

avoid indulging their own unjust whims. Yet both the Qur'an and the Sharia tradition built on it also acknowledge human beings' own appreciable sense of justice and equity. What happens when the laws derived from the Qur'an, Sunna, and early Muslim practice (*fiqh*) seem to conflict with Muslim notions of justice? His paper discussed how Muslims have theorized this question and tried to provide solutions. Al-Shingieti moderated.

Paper Session 1 featured Jamila Davey (University of Texas at Austin) and Said F. Hassan (al-Azhar University). Davis, who spoke on "Theorizing the Human Dimension of Interpretation: Literature, Gender, and Ethical Agency," stated that the twentieth century saw a wave of Muslim scholars re-conceptualize the relationship of the Qur'an narrative tradition to society. Acknowledging the significance of the cultural and temporal gap between the Qur'an's original audience and the contemporary reader, she discussed the issues raised by Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Abu Zayd, and Kecia Ali as well as how the Hadith has been subject to political manipulation, the exigencies of transmission, and the transmitters' historical biases.

Part 1 traced a trajectory in contemporary Muslim thought, wherein the search for a method for deriving the objective truth of the Qur'an gives way to a position that sees interpretation itself as a locus of moral-ethical agency. Part 2 analyzed the works of Assia Djebar and Fatima Mernissi that revisit scenes from early Islamic history. Davey theorized these modes of engagement as strategies by which modern Muslim women interrogate the truth claims of received discourses on women and gender and displace narratives that have normalized and naturalized those positions in the Islamic imaginary.

Said F. Hassan's "Doctrine of *al-walā' wa al-barā'*: "The Formation of Paraolel Spaces of Belief and Humanity – the Normative Discourse" maintained that *al-walā' wa al-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal) has become one of the main contesting concepts in modern Islamic thought and legal discourse. Before examining this concept's normative structure, he provided a historical overview of it in order to frame the current discussion in its historical setting. The paper examined these normative texts through the lens of classical and modern interpreters of the Qur'an, such as Tabari, Zamakhshari, Qurtubi, Tabataba'i, and Sa'di, to see to what extent their interpretations, as representing the source of information of the significance of these verses, may yield or challenge the Salafi interpretation.

Discussants were Monir Birouk (Mohammed V University, Rabat) and Daniel Tutt (Marymount University). Sinanović moderated.

Khaled Abou El Fadl (Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Professor of Law, UCLA) delivered the keynote lecture, "Shari'ah and Epistemology for a Humanitarian Ethics," via Skype.

Paper Session 2 featured Ramon Harvey (Ebrahim College, London) and Xiaofei Tu (Appalachian State University). Harvey's "Whose Justice? When Maturidi Meets MacIntyre," proposes that Alasdair MacIntyre's metatheory of tradition-constituted enquiry can be used as a method for staging ethical debate about the nature of justice between Islamic and liberal worldviews. Based upon a wide selection of MacIntyre's publications, Harvey assessed his claim to be able to provide a potential resolution to incommensurable ethical stances between traditions and analyzed his characterization of liberal theories of justice and their underlying form of rationality. He then presents his own neo-Maturidi theory of justice based on a rereading of the school tradition inaugurated by the Muslim theologian. He concluded by making a preliminary attempt to use the resources afforded by neo-Mturidism to engage the liberal perspective.

Xiaofei Tu's "Okawa Shumei's and Izutsu Toshihiko's Islamic Studies and Their Implications for Understanding Justice" reminded the audience that when talking about Islamic theology and its global significance, it is important to include perspectives from East Asia and other traditionally non-Islamic regions. He discussed the contributions to Islamic thought and Islamic studies made by two Japanese scholars: Okawa Shumei (d. 1957) and Izutsu Toshihiko (d. 1993). The two scholars distinguished themselves by their knowledge of original Islamic (including, but not limited to, Arabic) sources and their unique insights into Islamic history, societies, and cultures. As early as the 1940s, Okawa argued against the biases of Western orientalists in portraying Islam as a religion of sword by highlighting its peaceful spread in China and Southeast Asia. He also noted that Islam brought a clear vision of justice to Asia and that it advocates a just society with a theologically sophisticated theodicy. More recently, Izutsu attempted to understand the concept of justice in Islam by delving into traditional Islamic semantics and mysticism.

The discussants were Said F. Hassan (al-Azhar University) and Samaneh Oladi (Virginia Commonwealth University). Darakshan Khan (IIIT) moderated.

Paper Session 3 consisted of Monir Birouk (Mohammed V University, Rabat), Daniel Tutt (Marymount University), and Samaneh Oladi (Virginia Commonwealth University).

Monir Birouk spoke on "Taha Abderrahmane's Ethics of Ihsan: A Lopsided Conception of Justice and Citizenship in the Post-Arab Spring." His paper argued that Abderrahmane's Islamic philosophical critique of secular ethics in both its liberal and communitarian representations is compromised

by his detached account of ethics, which underscores the spiritual experience and the moral duties of the individual at the expense of a thorough account of social and political justice. After outlining his moral-cum-spiritual critique of liberal citizenship, Birouk analyzed his critique of John Rawls' liberal theory of justice. He sought to understand the sources of Abderrahmane's historically and politically detached understanding of ethics.

Daniel Tutt spoke on "The Collapse of the Political Center and the Role of Muslim Counterpublics," which applied and critiqued the conceptual framework of social theorist Salman Sayyid, founder of the new disciplines of Decolonial Studies and Critical Muslim Studies, by looking specifically at the relation between the ethical and the political in contemporary Muslim political action. Beginning with an analysis of Sayyid's reading and incorporation of western political thought, he then discussed the key differences in Sayyid's thought from these western lineages from which his thought is largely grounded. The key conceptual difference in this regard is that Sayyid posits an "Islamicate identity formation" as a final ontological ground for the realization of justice and ethics – a ground that he envisions in the caliphate, albeit a caliphate that is no longer tied to territory or to the nation-state. His theory of ethics necessitates a communal break with the existing social framework and one such option of this break is in the form of a "counterpublic" that establishes an ethical sphere of living based on a wider cultural transformation. He concluded by saying that a conceptual framework such as the counterpublic provides a useful practical tool for political and Muslim identity-based experimentation outside of the nation-state model.

Samaneh Oladi's "Gender Justice in Islamic Jurisprudence: Possibilities and Limits" examined female religious authority and activism in Iran and how their scholarship produces, replicates, or challenges patriarchal interpretations of sacred sources. In Iran, female activists have resorted to various strands of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in an effort to interpret religious doctrines. There are currently two predominant types of jurisprudential traditions in practice that affect women's legal status: "traditional jurisprudence" (*fiqh-e taqlīdī*), which continues to advocate conventional precepts and enjoys majority support from traditionalist ulama, and the "renaissance" approach (*fiqh-e tajdīdī*), which is traditional in nature but attempts to revive the tradition's legal pluralism. In addition to highlighting several factors that distinguish the reformists' approach to gender justice from their traditionalist counterparts, she also argues that women's participation in the production of Islamic knowledge must be assessed within the context of the jurisprudential

tradition they propagate. She concluded by exploring the possibilities and limits of achieving gender justice within an Islamic framework and contended that female activists have contributed to creating religious knowledge that is bridging the gap between Islamic jurisprudence and gender justice.

Discussants were Ramon Harvey (Ebrahim College), Xiaofei Tu (Appalachian State University), and Jamila Davey (University of Texas at Austin). Ovamir Anjum (University of Toledo) moderated.

The Reform of Education Panel addressed the issue of “Why Reform of Education and What Is IIIT’s Role?” Featured were Amr Abdalla (director, Assessment and Evaluation, IIIT) and Amaarah Decuir (president, Paragon Education Consulting). In his “REMS: Innovative Approaches,” Abdalla related how the reform of education in Muslim societies (REMS) is becoming IIIT’s anchor area of focus. Its vision is to “advance and mature institutions of higher education in order to shape and develop individuals and communities of moral character to serve humanity as good stewards of the planet,” and its mission is to “identify, develop, recommend, and promote philosophy, concepts, initiatives, and programs at significantly enhancing the quality and transformative capabilities of education in Muslim societies.”

In their IIIT-published book *Rethinking Reform in Higher Education from Islamization to Integration of Knowledge*, Ziauddin Sardar and Jeremy Henzell-Thomas (2017) specifically called for conducting research that would capture the challenges and successes of educational models that have aspired to implement reforms.

Within such a vision, it is expected that REMS will expand the knowledge-generation through multiple approaches, including a dedicated journal, policy briefs, and an annual conference. In addition, REMS will explore new frontiers using innovative approaches such as a Best Practices Project and a Higher Education Ranking System tailored to address the educational needs and aspirations of Muslim societies. The innovative approaches are intended to enrich the discourse of the reform of education by sharing promising examples of education in the Muslim world, and by setting relevant and ambitious – yet achievable – standards of excellence in education.

In her “Culturally Relevant School Leadership: K-12 Schools,” Amaarah Decuir, stated that reforming education is a complex, multi-faceted concept that centers on transformative leadership capacity. With the changing demographics of American schools and globalization’s impact worldwide, K-12 schools require effective leadership that mobilizes each school to meet its students’ dynamic needs. In shifting political contexts, through technological advancements and under conditions of mounting accountability,

school leaders must embody those transformative leadership practices that increase a school's potential for success. Culturally relevant school leadership provides a framework for understanding, implementing, and evaluating effective leadership behaviors. Her presentation briefly described the current conditions in K-12 schools that demand reform and leadership practices that can meet these challenges, contributing to the development of the next generation of global citizens.

The session was moderated by Ahmed Alwani, and the concluding session was moderated by Ermin Sinanović.

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