

CONFERENCE REPORT

The First Islamic Studies Seminar at the University of Queensland

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The School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics (HPRC) of the University of Queensland has recently appointed two new lecturers in Islamic Studies: Dr. Renée Worringer, an Ottomanist, appointed in History and myself, an Islamicist, appointed in Studies in Religion. To mark the occasion and the forthcoming introduction of an Islamic Studies Program (starting in 2004), the School of HPRC held its first Islamic Studies Seminar on Saturday, October 25, 2003. The one day seminar brought together academics and postgraduates from Griffith University, Queensland University of Technology, The University of New England, and The University of Queensland. Academics and postgraduates presented research topics that covered Islamic Law, Qur'anic interpretation, contemporary reformist and Islamist discourses, sociology of Muslim communities, science in the Islamic world, and Islam in Australia, in France and in Indonesia. The sheer variety of topics is a testimony to the richness of the present and the potential future Islamic Studies research in Queensland.

Each sessions brought together an academic and a postgraduate student in order to provide postgraduates with an opportunity to engage with the academic community, present their research, receive feedback from academics, and benefit from the many constructive comments that were provided by the audience, a number of whom were from the Muslim community. Postgraduates all found the experience enriching and the academic environment quite stimulating.

Postgraduate research included the following topics. **Nicky Jones** (Language and Comparative Cultural Studies and T.C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland) presented a paper entitled "Oppression and Expression: The Cases of Muslim Women, the Islamic Headscarf and Religious Discrimination in France" that eloquently illustrated the impact Muslims have on the ways in which western societies define themselves in increasingly multicultural societies. She analyzed the on-going debate over the nature of the French state sparked by the 1989 expulsion of two Muslim girls from school for insisting on their right to wear the Islamic headscarf in France's constitutionally secular public school system, by focusing on the judgment of the French *Conseil d'État* and the cultural and legal issues which were raised in subsequent cases during the 1990s. **Nicole Stirling** (School of Humanities, Griffith University) presented a paper on the "Challenges for Muslim Women in Brisbane." Her paper addressed the important issues of religious and ethnic identity, beliefs and practices of Iranian and Turkish Muslims migrant women. These issues are crucial for the understanding of the

factors that will shape tomorrow's multicultural and increasingly diverse Australia. She also discussed how the recent events of 11 September 2001, the Bali bombings, the Iraqi war and Australia's involvement are affecting these migrants' ethnic and religious identity and practice. **Dr. Nahid Kabir**, a recent PhD, and **Dr. Clive Moore** (School of HPRC, The University of Queensland) presented a paper on "International Terrorism and its Impact on Muslims in Australia, 1991-2002." **Dr. Kabir** highlighted the increased stereotyping of Muslims as a result of criminal acts (gang rape), the arrival the Afghan asylum seekers (*MV Tampa*), the 11 September 2001 and 12 October 2002 terrorist attacks in New York and Bali and tried to provide various racial and cultural explanations for their underprivileged position (1.5 % of Australia's population with 25 % unemployment) that includes the "negative" impact of Australians' perception of Muslims as "terrorists" or "fundamentalists." **Toni Tidswell** (The School of Classics, History and Religion, The University of New England) presented a paper entitled "Overcome by Desire: Aziz's Wife and Yusuf," in which she presented the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha found in the Qur'an (chapter 12). While Muslim commentators focus on Yusuf as the key character of this story, she read the story from Zulaykha's point of view, by applying literary criticism to the Qur'an. **Muhamad Abdalla** (Science Policy Research Center, Faculty of Science, Griffith University) presented the results of his research in a paper on the "Social Misconstruction of Reality: The Myth of the Decline of Islamic Science," in which he outlined the accomplishment, importance and originality of science between the ninth and sixteenth centuries in the Islamic world and argued that the "decline theory" from the 11th century onwards, because of opposition by religious authorities, Islamic Law or the absence of a capitalistic economy, is a social misconstruction of reality.

Papers delivered by academics consisted of the following. **Professor Philip Almond** (School of HPRC, The University of Queensland) discussed the West's encounter with the Islamic tradition in his paper on "Western Imaginings of Islam." He examined the nature of the changes and the causes that led to the presentation of new images of Muhammad (18th / 19th c.), accompanied by new attitudes towards Islam. He suggested that the development of a secular view of history led to the construction of Islam as an authentic expression of religion and Muhammad as a sincere and pious believer. **Dr. Hossein Adibi** (Centre for Social Change Research, Queensland University of Technology) presented a paper on "Islamic Philosophy and the Contributions of Iranian Scholars" and drew upon the contributions of Iranian scholars, philosophers and scientists, focusing more specifically on Ibn Sina's views on logic, psychology and metaphysics. **Dr. Julia D. Howell** (School of International Business & Asian Studies, Griffith University), in her "Seeking Sufism in the Global City: Indonesia's Cosmopolitan Muslims and Depth Spirituality," showed how cosmopolitan Muslims rediscover their Sufi heritage, usually associated by Modernists with rural backwaters and authoritarian leaders. She illustrated how a number of university-style Islamic education institutions in Jakarta serve as nodes in networks linking providers of textual and academic studies with Sufi spiritual groups and guides, insisting that the rational-critical approach to textual understanding fostered by the new-style

Islamic education institutions can actually facilitate “spiritual seeking” in a personally responsible and self-directed mode very much at odds with conventional stereotypes of Sufi institutions as hierarchical and authoritarian. **Dr. Ann Black** (T. C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland) presented a paper on the “Islamization of Law and Legal Institutions: A Case Study on Brunei Darussalam,” a country that defines itself as a Malay Muslim Sultanate that promotes Malay culture, the religion of Islam, and the retention of an absolute Monarch through its national ideology, *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) which includes in its aims the Islamization of laws and the legal system. She showed how Islamization has necessitated both a reconstruction of the colonial legal institutions and a revision of the laws that govern Muslims in the Sultanate with examples from family law and the law of evidence. **Dr. Renée Worringer** (School of HPRC, The University of Queensland) presented a paper entitled “The Roots of Islamic Pan-Asianism: Abdürresid Ibrahim's Early Discussions of East and West in *Al-Tilmidh*” in which she analyzed the complex issues of modernization and reforms (late 19th / early 20th c.) in the Muslim world via the works of a Tatar Muslim activist and writer Abdürresid Ibrahim (1857-1944) who resisted the political hegemony and influence of Western powers over the Islamic world. She showed how Ibrahim strove to create solidarity among Muslims (pan-Islamism; pan-Turkism) and Asians with his anti-imperialist and Islamic pan-Asian ideology. **And I** presented a paper on “The New Faces of Tradition: Al-Qaradaw_ on Women” in which I illustrated how Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradari, a graduate of the Sunni Al-Azhar University in Cairo and a popular media figure, presents views on women’s political and social roles that share affinities with the positions of reformists of the beginning of the century, while his arguments remain within the bounds of tradition, showing how some of his views signal some type of accommodation.

Although a number of participants were disappointed by the end of the seminar that they had been unable to attend all sessions (three parallel sessions), this is, in fact, indicative of the interest in the many facets of the Islamic world generated. With more promotional work, the seminar could have attracted an even greater crowd. On the whole, the seminar provided a window onto the richness and the diversity of Islam(s) and its interpretations, highlighting the importance of understanding the varied expressions of the Islamic tradition. The Islamic Studies Seminar proved quite successful in bringing together academics and postgraduates who, otherwise, would not have met colleagues who share an interest in Islam. The tangible outcome of the seminar is the momentum it provided for the planning of a National Islamic Studies Conference for 2004.