

(Singapore: PN, 2003); idem, "The Iranian Presence in the Indian Ocean Rim: A Report on a 17th-Century Safavid Embassy to Siam (Thailand)," *Islamic Culture* 77, no. 2 (2003), 57-98; idem, "Iranians, *Shaykh al-Islams* and *Chularajmontris*: Genesis and Development of an Institution and its Introduction to Siam," *Journal of Asian History* 37, no. 2 (2003), 59-76; and idem, "'Holier than Thou': Buddhism and the Thai People in Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's 17th-Century Travel Account *Safineh-yi Sulaymani*," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (Germany), vol. 156, no. 2 (2006): 407-419. See also various relevant entries by this writer in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/>

**'Second International Conference on Islam and Higher Education:
The Empowerment of Muslim
Communities in Private Higher Education'**

(Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia, 14-16 November 2011)

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For a civilisation that rests squarely on knowledge, the primacy of education throughout the Islamic world is given its due throughout history chiefly by private individuals and groups. Notwithstanding state patronage of scholarship, the bulk of literature is often produced by independent scholars. But this historical reality came under serious challenge with the advent of the modern expansionist state, whose centrality in the public sphere gave birth to its dialectical Other, the private sector. Responding to this challenge, IAIS Malaysia organised the Second International Conference on Islam and Higher Education in collaboration with the Yayasan Pahang (Pahang State Foundation), IKIP International College, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) East Asia and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). The theme of the conference, "Empowering Muslim Communities in Private Higher Education", was carefully worded to reflect at once many different concerns – knowledge as a means of empowerment, education realised at the collective level (in communities) and the movement into the private sector, especially in higher education (sometimes called tertiary education). The theme is also indicative of a negotiation with prevailing realities, for concepts like public-private dichotomy, higher education and so on are but innovative ideas grafted onto the body of traditional discourse bearing distinctive assumptions that are themselves unique to contemporary experiences. Collectively taken they justify the need for such a conference as a follow-up from a similar initiative the previous year.

The keynote address was delivered by His Excellency Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), while the official closing speech was by the Menteri Besar of Pahang, YAB Dato' Seri diRaja

(Dr) Haji Adnan bin Haji Yaakob. More than 20 papers were presented by scholars, policymakers and researchers from all over the world. This alone testifies to the global dimension of the issues being addressed thus demanding a global response and solution, as Osman Bakar, Deputy CEO of IAIS Malaysia and Conference Organising Chairman, noted in his welcoming speech. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Founding Chairman and CEO of IAIS Malaysia, observed in his welcoming speech that the centres of scholastic knowledge in Islamic civilisation have always been the schools of thought (*madhahib*), which were named after scholars, not institutions, and thus with commercial encroachments into education, the risk of subjugating it to commercialisation and the profit motive is there. This problem – balancing objective scholarship with the profit agenda – was in fact a crucial leitmotif throughout the conference. The proliferation of private higher education institutions (PHEI) is a welcome development but is not without criticism from many quarters—for instance, those who censure the profit-motive that might underlie such initiatives (and its probable crippling effect on objective research and scholarship, producing a sort of ‘scholars for dollars’ mentality), and the financial scarcity to entertain such ventures in the long run. During the three-day conference, questions like these were seriously debated and discussed, both practically and even more profoundly as theoretical-philosophical issues over the meaning, purpose and content of education, as well as the legitimacy of the public-private divide.

One major discussion point was the low Muslim share in private higher education. According to Ismail Mohd Rashid (Malaysia) in his presentation, less than half of PHEIs in Malaysia are Muslim-owned, a strange fact since many Muslim countries, especially the Gulf States, have plentiful resources that would justify entry into private education, but sadly this is not being done. Various other factors were highlighted by Sultan Abu-Orabi (Jordan), including brain-drain, lack of infrastructure and low investment in scientific education and research.

Concerning financing, a prominent discussion was the rehabilitation and refinement of *waqf* (charitable endowment) as a way of funding private educational initiatives, and offering a possible avoidance of the profit motive. Indeed, this possibility is especially critical when governments are less than friendly towards Islamic religious education, such as in the Balkans as we learned from Mesut Idriz’s presentation. In such situations, these endowments can fund independent religious faculties (for instance in Sarajevo, Skopje, and Prishtina) even without formal state-accredited universities. Beyond this, greater solidarity in the Muslim world has been called for, so that collaboration and sharing of resources can help less privileged societies and institutions. These include partnerships between public and private institutions, a greater role taken by local and international NGOs (like FUIW), and established universities setting up branches or campuses in areas where the local communities (especially in Muslim minority countries) lack the resources for their own institutions.

Yet another challenge that was addressed was the very purpose of education, for education should produce a good human being, not merely a good ‘citizen’ or ‘employee’ (a theme that was explored even in the First Conference). The current focus on producing employable graduates rather than fine human beings is thoroughly misplaced because the truth is that the former follows from the latter, not the other way around. This presumed distinctive feature of Islamic education is what ultimately shapes the nature and characteristic of Islamic education – at the micro level in the form of Islamic studies faculties and syllabus, as well as at the macro level in the form of an Islamic university.

This last component is critical because we currently witness a number of Islamic university initiatives, like the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI). Similar initiatives are being done in Kazakhstan (paper by Mesut Yilmaz, Kazakhstan) and indeed, in Malaysia, a number of university colleges also have applied such philosophy institutionally, such as Insaniah University College (Jamil Osman, Malaysia), Kolej Universiti Islam Selangor (KUIS) (Aziuddin Ahmad, Malaysia) and the newly-proposed (Royal) Islamic University of Malaysia, outlined by Monir Hj Yaakob (Malaysia). Part of what they share in common is the need to integrate what has been conventionally divided into the religious and intellectual sciences. Their curricula have sought to reflect this harmony.

As part of this Islamic educational philosophy, epistemological considerations shape the way the syllabus, course and curriculum are designed. One example is in the inclusion of non-academic components, such as the cultivation of *adab*, as part of this holistic education. KUIS has been implementing the *ta’dīb* model (formulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas) for some time to produce a knowledge-base culture in the college that is concurrently intellectual, ethical and spiritual. Another example can be seen in the knowledge content of education, meaning that we have to be critical in the reception of knowledge from a diversity of sources. In case study presented by Eric Winkel (Malaysia), the development of the ‘new sciences’ (quantum physics, quantum mechanics, etc.) shows that the dominant scientific paradigms (e.g. the heliocentric universe) have offered only a partial (if not wrong) picture of the cosmos, whose totality would have been better grasped had there been fidelity to the Islamic intellectual tradition as seen, say in Sufism. All these should be taken into account in formulating appropriate Islamic educational content. Likewise, the ethical dimension offers a global prospect for Islamic education transcending the Muslim community. The approach should be inclusive and universal, as Anis Ahmad (Pakistan) argued. The pivot and basis of Islamic education, he proposed, should be Islamic global ethics, informed by what he called the *maqāṣid al-insān* (objectives of humanity).