

STUDYING THE “OTHER,” UNDERSTANDING THE “SELF”: SCRIPTURE, REASON, AND THE CONTEMPORARY ISLAM-WEST ENCOUNTER

A conference was held at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut on April 2, 2005. The theme of the conference was *“Studying the “Other,” Understanding the “Self”— Scripture, Reason, and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter”*. The theme was selected with the intention of addressing a topic that has received a great deal of attention recently, the contemporary encounter between Islam and the West. This topic had been addressed at a wide variety of forums largely in response to current events and the “clash of civilization” thesis. Many of these discussions have made valuable contributions by challenging the “clash of civilization” thesis that posits that “Islam” and the “West” are two completely alien entities tragically destined to be at odds with each other into the indefinite future. In spite of these valuable contributions, a shortcoming could be noticed in the dynamics of the discourse. In almost all of these deliberations Muslim and non-Muslim/Western scholars engaged in discussions in which the “self” attempted to make itself better understood by directly communicating with the “other.” Or alternately, Muslims and non-Muslims/Westerners studied the “other” in order to better understand the “other.” The ethos shaping the conference held at Hartford Seminary in Hartford differed from these standard approaches on two counts. Firstly, it was consciously informed by the question: How can a critical but empathetic study of the alien “other” lead to a better understanding of the “self”? Secondly, it consciously considered Revealed Scripture, alongside the tools of critical academic inquiry, as a valid and valuable resource in the effort to address the issue at hand. In short this conference was a “scripturally reasoned” contribution to the discussion on the contemporary encounter between Islam and the West.

The format of the conference was the following. In the first session (April 2nd— Afternoon) Basit Koshul (Concordia College) presented a paper

arguing that an honest and candid understanding of the Muslim “self” in modern times will be enriched by a critical but empathetic study of the Western “other”. This was followed by 3 responses of 25-30 minutes each, by Prof. Vincent Cornell, Yamine Mermer and Muhammad Suheyl Umar. In the second session (April 2nd— Evening) Prof. Steven Kepnes (Colgate University) presented a paper on the contribution that a study of the Muslim “other” can make to a better understanding of the modern Western “self”. This was followed by 3 responses of 25-30 minutes each, by Nick Adams, Martin Kavka and Ian Markham. Sessions were moderated by Kelton Cobb, Professor of Theology and Ethics, Hartford Seminary. Detailed program and selected papers are given in the following pages. Here we present the rationale of the conference as articulated by its Convener, Dr. Basit Koshul.

Studying the “Other,” Understanding the “Self”

Scripture, Reason, and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter

Statement of Problem: A thesis that has gained wide currency in recent years is that “Islam” and the “West” are two entities that are completely and fundamentally alien to each other— sharing no common roots and/or ideals whatsoever. If this thesis is indeed true, then perpetual conflict between the two alienated entities appears to be a given and a shared peaceful future between the two is logically ruled out. Since this thesis has gained wide currency in academic circles, it has invariably shaped the attitudes and policies of the “West” towards “Islam”— which in turn has shaped the attitude of “Islam” towards the “West.” This has created the proverbial vicious circle of attitudes shaping reality, and reality affirming held attitudes. The viability of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence between “Islam” and the “West” in the global village requires a change in the attitude towards the alien other, taking into account the facts of history and empirical reality. It is obvious that the balance of power between “Islam” and the “West” in terms of the production of ideas and images is greatly skewed in favor of the “West.” Consequently, both logic and ethics demand that the “West” invest more resources in the critical evaluation of a thesis that simultaneously posits, justifies and promotes irreconcilable and perpetual conflict between “Islam” and the “West.”

The Conference: The conference held on Saturday, April 3rd consisted of two sessions. In the first sessions the a group of Muslim scholars discussed the necessity of Muslims studying modern Western philosophy, history and theology with a view to identifying the possible benefits of such study for enhancing modern Islam's self-understanding and capacity for self-expression. In the second session a group of non-Muslim scholars discussed the need for Westerners to study Islamic philosophy and intellectual history with a view to identifying the possible benefits of such study for enhancing the modern West's self-understanding and capacity for self-expression.

Rationale: There are a number of discussion groups engaged in interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue. Many of these groups have made valuable contributions by challenging the thesis that "Islam" and the "West" are two completely alien entities tragically destined to be at odds with each into the indefinite future. This conference tried to build on the work that has already been done but, in addition, it was significantly different from the existing efforts. In almost all of the existing projects Muslim and non-Muslim scholars engage in discussion in which the "self" attempts to make itself better understood by directly communicating with the "other." Or alternately Muslims and non-Muslims study the "other" in order to better understand the "other." The ethos shaping the present project will differ from both of these standard approaches and be consciously informed by the question: How can a critical but empathetic study of the alien "other" lead to a better understanding of the alienated "self"? The presupposition implicit in this question is that the "self" can enhance the depth of its own self-understanding and capacity for self-expression if it is able to critically but empathetically dialogue with the alien "other." Just as significantly, scripture will be used as a tool, along with other tools of scholarly inquiry to guide, inform and sharpen the discussion of the topic at hand. Given the distinct character of the ethos informing this conference, it is reasonable to assume that such an event will offer new insights and open up new avenues of advancing the dialogue between "Islam" and the "West."