

**Towards a Contemporary Muslim Theology of World Religions**  
**Report on Meeting in Ifrane, Morocco, May 27-31,2007**  
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### **Background**

The Elijah Interfaith Institute received a 3 year grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for the project "Towards a Contemporary Muslim Theology of World Religions". The Ifrane meeting was the first major activity to take place under this grant. The present report will describe the meeting, evaluate its successes and weaknesses and address the next steps in the multi-year project.

### **Concept and Purpose**

The present project was planned at a meeting held in Washington D.C. in March 2006. The first stage of the work called for a broad conference in which the vision, goals and conceptual breakdown developed by the steering committee in the Washington meeting would be shared by a broader community of scholars. The goals of the Ifrane meeting were, accordingly:

1. To create a community of scholars devoted to the project.
2. To test out, refine and add detail to the conceptual thematic breakdown, developed in the Washington meeting. (for the sake of convenience, the nine thematic areas identified in the Washington meeting, and spelled out in the original proposal to the RBF, are listed in Appendix A.)
3. To establish working groups, that would work on the individual conceptual themes, identified in the Washington meeting and to create a working plan for the project.

### **Participants**

The meeting was attended by around 20 participants from all over the Muslim world. The geographical breakdown is as significant as the number of participants. Participants came from Egypt, Malaysia, Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, UK, Cameroon, Iran, Iraq and the US. This allowed the discussion to take on a truly international character, offering a balanced and representative view of Islam, seen in a truly global perspective. A list of participants, as well as of personalities who had been invited and who see themselves as part of the ongoing project, is found in Appendix B.

### **The Significance of the Meeting: A Preliminary Note**

Several participants made the comment that the meeting was so important to them as to justify their taking the risk of coming, even though it could, in theory, risk their lives. I was rather struck at this expression, especially as it was heard more than once during the meeting. Apparently, involvement in this project was seen as a major event and one that has much potential for the Muslim world. At the same time, participants also recognized the novelty and danger associated with the project. This fact bears stating inasmuch as neither myself, nor, I imagine, the RBF, could assess from the outset the degree of vision and commitment, as well as potential danger, that this project entails.

### **Accomplishments**

Overall, it is fair to state the meeting was a huge success. The three goals that were set for the meeting were successfully met. The concluding session provided an opportunity for an internal group assessment of the project. Based on participants' comments and future engagement, one can conclude the goals were successfully met.

1. A broad community of scholars was created, to carry forth the project. There was a sense of excitement, enthusiasm, novelty and great importance attached to this project. Participants in the conference constituted themselves as a community of research and reflection, ready to take the project forward.

2. The nine thematic areas identified in the Washington meeting were well received. Overall, the conceptual framework developed at the planning meeting was received and remains the working basis for the project. No alterations were suggested to the thematic breakdown, and they remain the focus for future activities.

In addition, the meeting allowed initial exploration of conceptual approaches to tackling each of the nine topics. While the fruits of this initial exploration will await further development by the working groups, it is worth noting that all participants felt that they had been enriched by the contents of the discussion and that the discussion had moved the process along in significant ways. The conceptual achievements of the meeting will be summarized in a separate paper, to be prepared by Prof.

Vincent Cornell, of Emory University. The paper should be ready in July 2007. It will serve as the official record of the meeting and will be shared with scholars who wish to join the project, as well as with other bodies and agencies that have expressed an interest to follow or join the project.

3. Creating working groups. According to the original proposal, three working groups will be created over the coming three years. The Ifrane meeting identified the core participants of the three working groups for the 2007/8 cycle on the themes:

- a. Reason and Scripture
- b. Inclusivity and Exclusivity (Universalism and Particularism)
- c. Providence and Free-Choice.

For each of these themes two co-moderators were identified, as well as a third working group member. Based on this core group, other participants will be invited to join the working groups, according to their interests and availability. The working groups will be open to participants in the Ifrane meeting who have not yet been assigned a working group, as well as to scholars who were invited to the Ifrane meeting, and who expressed their strong interest to take part in the project, despite their inability to attend the Ifrane meeting.

### **Glitches and Hitches**

Alongside the great success of the meeting, one should also note some of the difficulties we faced in organizing it and some of the things that went awry.

1. Setting the date for the meeting. After negotiations with Malaysian partners, we finally decided to hold the meeting in Morocco. Several partnership options were explored and Al Akhawayn University was chosen as the venue. It is unfortunate that several months elapsed between the time the decision was made in principle to hold the meeting there and our receiving a clear date, when the meeting could be held, according to the university's schedule. 3-4 months, I believe, were lost in the process of communication around this issue. The consequences of delays in communication were that we announced the meeting to participants only in February/March, rather than in November, as we had hoped to. This had twofold consequences:

A. A number of the potential participants we contacted were already committed for this time period. Many of them, however, expressed strong interest in remaining involved with the project.

B. The short time to prepare the meeting led to a redefinition of the role of opening talks. According to the original proposal, these talks were envisioned as broad encompassing presentations, that would frame the issues and that could stand alone as an intellectual contribution of this stage of the work. We had originally envisioned a publication of the talks given at this conference. Due to time constraints, we had to modify the assignment to speakers. Rather than a state-of-the-art presentation on each of these topics, we asked participants to introduce the

discussion with some key points that would engender further discussion. The format of the meeting was such that 75% of the time was spent in group discussion, rather than in reading papers. This format was well suited to the tasks of the meeting and underlies its success. However, at the end of the meeting we do not possess a collection of papers that is worthy of publication in and of itself. Publication will thus have to await the next stage of the project, where concept papers will be developed by the individual working groups.

2. Cancellations. We received cancellations during the weeks that led up to the meeting, that brought down the overall number of participants by about 30%. While this was not completely unforeseen, we had not expected as many cancellations. I believe the cancellations do not reflect on the interest, significance or commitment to the project. Several participants canceled due to political conditions in their countries (Lebanon, Turkey) and their commitments; a couple of health related cancellations and then a couple of over-commitment cancellations. Participants who canceled nevertheless affirmed their interest in remaining involved in the project as it unfolds.

3. Technical difficulties. One of the participants was going to deliver a presentation through video-conference, as he was engaged in running another project at the same time in Malaysia (again, a difficulty stemming from late announcement of our conference). Despite extensive preparations on the Malay and the Moroccan side, the technical side failed us and we had to resort to a back-up presentation he had prepared, that was delivered by one of the other participants.

4. Formal difficulties. See next section.

### **Local Impact and Media**

Underlying the concept of a peripatetic series of conferences was the recognition that we ought to impact various communities within the Muslim world, and to not keep the meetings limited to one location. Accordingly, we attempted to draw in a number of Muslim thinkers from Morocco.

We enjoyed the participation of three Muslim intellectuals. Two, in particular, are of high caliber and have the potential to spread the project to many others. One is Ahmed Abbadi, who directs the national research center that is the umbrella organization for all Muslim religious scholars in Morocco. The other is Faouzi Skali, who created the Fez festival of world music and has recently launched the international and very successful Festival of Sufi Culture.

In addition, we were in contact with the minister of religious affairs of Morocco. While he was not able to attend the meeting personally, he received a delegation following the meeting. The delegation shared with him the project and its import, and offered a summary of the proceedings. He has asked to remain in touch with our work and awaits the conceptual report, based upon which he will examine the possibility of ongoing involvement with our project. In addition, several professors from Al Akhawayn University took part in the discussions. They are not listed in the list of participants, as they are not considered part of the long term project.

One other important body with whom we had communicated in conjunction with this conference is ISESCO, the League of Muslim Nation's equivalent of UNESCO. I had met with the director general in March, in preparation for the project. They expressed great interest and support for the project in principle. However, their active participation was contingent, due to their guidelines, on official governmental support for the meeting. A further glitch was discovered in that Al Akhawayn University had not sought governmental permission for the project early enough in the process, even though ISESCO's demands were communicated to them. As a private university, they do not require governmental permission to hold such a program, and they did not appreciate the importance of obtaining permission for the project.

Despite not having ISESCO on board for the Ifrane meeting, the above-mentioned delegation met with the chief of staff of the director general, and provided an update on the meeting, sharing its importance and the role they hoped ISESCO could play in the project's future. ISESCO also awaits

the written report of the proceedings of the conference. Following their review of the summary of the meeting, we hope to obtain their partnership in the long-term project. This partnership is important for the long term acceptance and recognition of the project. Having an international Muslim body such as ISESCO endorse our project will lend it further credibility and make dissemination of our work more effective.

Prior to the meeting, a decision was taken by the steering committee and the university to not publicize it in the media. There had been three bombings in Casablanca, associated with Muslim extremists, and the university did not wish to draw unnecessary attention. One of the issues that came up at the meeting concerned media and the group's policy regarding publicizing our project. It was unanimously decided that at this stage of the work it is better for the work to go on, without drawing undue attention. When the position papers are published will be the time to bring our work to the attention of the public at large, as part of dissemination. Immature announcements will only hamper our work.

### **Next Steps**

As mentioned, one of the accomplishments of the meeting was the setting in place of a work plan for the coming year, identifying the members of the three working groups, their themes, etc.

Our next important step will therefore consist in bringing these groups together and in having these small groups develop position papers on the respective themes. These papers will constitute the basis for the discussions of the next plenary gathering of scholars.

Scholars who could not take part in the Ifrane meeting but who expressed their desire to be part of the process will be invited to take part in these working groups.

Our original proposal calls for one such preparatory meeting. Several participants urged us to consider holding two preparatory meetings per working group (or some of the groups) in the interest of producing a better product. On a substantive level there is no reason not to follow this suggestion, and the matter is purely a financial one. Given the fact that this initial stage of the project cost less than the original budget anticipated, it seems likely that some or all of the groups may meet twice, rather than once.

We have received an invitation from the Iqbal Institute in Lahore, Pakistan to host the next meeting in Pakistan. As it happens, Pakistan turned out to be a very relevant resource for our discussions. Many of the issues our group grappled with had been thought through by Pakistani religious intellectuals, with interesting solutions proposed. Pakistan thus emerges as an interesting venue for our next meeting. The main drawback, assuming security and visa issues are taken care of, is the relation of weather and timing. Holding the next meeting in Pakistan would mean waiting till the fall of 08 for the next general meeting, while we had hoped to hold the meeting next June, in order to allow working groups to meet in the fall. This issue of timing is related to the previous point, regarding one or two small group meetings. Both will be determined in conversations between group members in the coming weeks.

Finally, a suggestion was put forth to share our work with religious leaders, as part of an ongoing dialogue we, as scholars, should have with them (of course, some of our scholars are religious leaders in their own context). We may consider holding a small meeting in which a delegation from our project briefs an important group of Muslim religious leaders regarding our project, and receives their feedback, endorsement, etc.

## Financial Report

As noted, the costs of the meeting were significantly less than anticipated in the original proposal. This is part due to the venue and the relative costs of holding the meeting there, and in part due to the reduced number of participants.

Breakdown of expenses is as follows:

Airfare:	23,647.29
Payment to Al Akhawayn University Including: accommodations in Ifrane and Casablanca, meals, refreshments, Hall rental, ground transportation, communication, overhead	15,000
Meeting coordinator (Ahmed Moussawi)	10,000
Local student coordinator	500
Bank transfers	30
Hotel costs for participant who missed connecting flight to Morocco	200
<b>Total costs for meeting:</b>	<b>49,377.29</b>

These costs are half of the anticipated cost of 99,000. This provides us with greater flexibility in implementing the next stage of the work.

## Appendix A: Thematic breakdown of Ifrane Meeting

The following nine issues, broken down to pairs, seem crucial areas for further theological reflection, and will need to be addressed in the context of an emerging Muslim theology of world religions.

### 1. Reason and Scripture

This issue holds the key to a new hermeneutics. Can reason be the middle ground in interpretation, considering God's word and that of the Prophet. It also holds an important key to the acceptance of the religious legitimacy of the other, and to the other's ability to access truth. Much of Shari'a discourse has been dominated by the suppression of reason, unlike what we find in the Quran. The balance of reason and revelation touches upon the very sources and legitimacy of religious authority. The crucial question of the place of *ishtihad* is related to this issue. The role of practice as bridging Reason and Scripture.

### 2. Sovereignty and loyalty

The sources of authority of the state play into broader issues of recognition of the other and of participation of Muslims in other forms of culture and governance. Issues of authority in relation to other religious groups appeal to notions of sovereignty. The question of divine vs. human sovereignty affects our attitude to state bodies. The question of the ideal and just state plays into the very goals of religion and the ability to practice it, again having implications for how Islam interacts with forms of government, in the Muslim world and outside it. Is the state living up to its obligations to religious minorities and does it corrupt the view of other religions. Issues of status of minority groups within Islamic regime. Status of Dhimmi. Religious relevance of Muslim state.

### 3. Providence and free choice

Providing a sense of history and understanding the vicissitudes of Muslim history. Accounting for the place offered to other religious communities within the broader scheme of history.

### 4. Law and rights

Ways in which the Law has become the end all and be all of religion. Methods of legislation in relation to other groups. Broad range of law-related issues that are impacting Islam in general. Notion of rights of different groups within Muslim society and of Muslims within non-Muslim societies. Including right to dissent and right for religious dissent, both within Islam and beyond it.

### 5. Justice and power

Assessment of situation of contemporary Islam in terms of power and of justice. Justice as a yardstick for judging other traditions. Also conditions many contemporary situation in which Muslims embroiled in conflict with others. Relations between communities based on power or on universal laws. Viewing Islam in colonial and post-colonial setting. Impacts upon Islam of sense of new wave of hegemony, as manifested in a variety of contemporary political situations. Understanding past and present Muslim history in terms of theodicy and justice. Justice and power are the praxis issues related to the theoretical attitude of Islam to others. Also related are issues of oppression within Muslim world, limitations on media, etc.

### 6. Universalism and particularism

How far is the Umma universal and how far within it sectarian groups. Also discussion of recognition of same God by other religions. Status of non Muslims in Muslim society. Is Islam part of broader phenomenon of religion and does it share roots with others, or is it isolated and unique. The nature of universal vs. Islamic knowledge.

7. Spirituality and morality

Can spirituality and morality provide grounds for recognition of others. Do they help us go beyond the range of religions classically understood by Islam. Can they serve as yardsticks for critiquing contemporary forms of Islam? Are these aspects of our tradition that can be exported to others? Does a heightened sense of spirituality lead to greater acceptance of others.

8. Self image and image of other

Problem of proper knowledge of others. Distortion in image of Muslims in world.

9. Education and attitudes to others

Education within Muslim society. Knowledge of earlier sources. Recovery of older positions that have been lost. Dealing with harmful and problematic attitudes.

## Appendix B: List of Participants

1. Dr. Adamou Ndam Njoya
2. Dr. Hassan Hanafi
3. Dr. Mohammad Azadpur
4. Dr. Basit Koshul
5. Dr. Osman Bakar
6. Dr. Vincent Cornell
7. Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein
8. Dr. Ahmed Abbadi
9. Dr. Mona Siddiqui
10. Prof. Rkia Elaroui Cornell
11. Dr. Timothy Gianotti
12. Dr. Suheyl Umar
13. Dr. Joseph Lombard
14. Dr. Ghanem Jawad
15. Dr. Sheikh Mohammed Mohammed Ali
16. Ahmed Musawi
17. Dr. Mahmut Kilic
18. Dr. Daoud Stephen Casewit
19. Dr. Faouzi Skali

### Further information on group members, participants and invitees

No	Name	Comments
1	Dr. Adamou Ndam Njoya	Attended with Mrs. Njoya. Presented reflections on Justice and Power
2	Dr. Hassan Hanafi	Attended. Presented reflections on Reason and Scripture.
3	Dr. Mohammad Azadpur	Attended. Presented reflections on Providence and Free Choice
4	Dr. Basit Koshul	Attended. Presented reflections on Universalism and Particularism
5	Dr. Osman Bakar	Attended. Presented reflections on Education and Attitude Towards the Other
6	Dr. Mohammad Hashim Kamali	Member of steering committee. Could not attend due to prior commitments
7	Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf	member of steering committee. Could not attend due to prior commitments. Was supposed to present his reflections on Sovereignty and Loyalty via Video Conference, that failed for technical reasons. Back up paper presented by Dr. Cornell.



8	Dr. Vincent Cornell	<b>Attended. Provided overall leadership for the project. Explained the goals during the opening ceremony. Presented reflections on Law and Rights and covered for Imam Feisal on Sovereignty and Loyalty when the Video Conference was cancelled.</b>
9	Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein	<b>Attended. Welcomed everyone during the opening ceremony. Took minutes during all sessions. Set exercises in final session.</b>
10	Dr. Maria Dakake	<b>Could not attend due to late stage of pregnancy but expressed great desire to join the project when she returns to work after birth.</b>
11	Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr	<b>Could not attend due to ill health</b>
12	Dr. Ibrahim Kalin	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance but then cancelled due to the political situation in Turkey. Expressed desire to be involved in the project.</b>
13	Dr. Fikret Karcic	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance but then cancelled due to other commitments. Expressed desire to be involved in the project.</b>
14	Dr. Minoo Moallem	<b>Could not attend due to prior commitments but has expressed desire to join the project in the future.</b>
15	Dr. Nasrollah Pourjavadi	<b>Responded to our invitation only 10 days before the meeting date. Said that he was interested. We hope to involve him in next stage.</b>
16	Dr. Ahmed Abbadi	<b>Attended.</b>
17	Dr. Mehmet Aydin	<b>Minister in Turkish government. Supports our project and will consider taking part following elections.</b>
18	Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina	<b>Could not attend as he is tied up in Iran at present</b>
19	Dr. Paul Ballanfat	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance but had to cancel for health reasons.</b>
20	Dr. Mona Siddiqui	<b>Attended. Presented reflections on Self Image and Image of the Other.</b>
21	Prof. Rkia Elaroui Cornell	<b>Attended</b>
23	Dr. Timothy Gionotti	<b>Attended</b>
24	Dr. Suheyl Umar	<b>Attended</b>

25	Dr. Aminah Beverly McCloud	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance. Ticket purchased, hotel booked and transfer arranged. But on the eve of the meeting due to a burglary at her house in which her husband was injured. Expressed desire to stay part of the project and requested to be informed about the outcome of the Ifrane meeting.</b>
26	Dr. Joseph Lumbard	<b>Attended</b>
28	Dr. Umar F. Abdallah	Could not attend due to prior commitments
29	Dr. Ayman Shehade	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance but then cancelled due to commitments at his University.</b>
30	Dr. Saadiya Sheikh	<b>Could not attend due to prior commitments. Expressed desire to join the project in the future.</b>
31	Dr. Azim Nanji	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance along with his wife. But then cancelled citing urgent commitments.</b>
32	Dr. Azra Azyumardi	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance but then cancelled due to a government assignment around the same dates. Expressed desire to be involved in the project.</b>
33	Dr. Ahmet Karamustafa	<b>Could not attend due to prior commitments. Expressed desire to join the project in the future.</b>
34		
35	Dr. Ibrahim Al- Ati	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance. Ticket issued but then cancelled due to health reasons.</b>
36	Dr. Ghanem Jawad	<b>Attended</b>
37	Dr. Tawfiq Al- Saif	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance. Also wanted to bring along some colleagues. But then cancelled due to other work commitments.</b>
38	Dr. Saud Al- Maula	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance. Hotel booked and transfer arranged. But then cancelled on 25-05 due to the political situation in Lebanon. Expressed desire to stay part of the project and requested to be informed about the outcome of the Ifrane meeting.</b>
39	Dr. Sheikh Mohammed Mohammed Ali	<b>Attended</b>

40	Sayyed Jawad Al-Khoei	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance but then cancelled due to ongoing work commitments in Iraq. Vice director of one the organizations sponsoring the meeting.</b>
41	Ahmed Musawi	<b>Attended</b>
42	Dr. Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad	<b>Could not attend due to prior commitments.</b>
43	Dr. Mahmut Kilic	<b>Attended</b>
44	Dr. Daoud Stephen Casewit	<b>Attended</b>
45	Dr. Faouzi Skali	<b>Attended. Presented reflections on Spirituality and Morality</b>
46	Sayyed Wissam Hassan Tarhini	<b>Had accepted the invitation and confirmed attendance. But then cancelled due to other work commitments.</b>