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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Ali Engineer, Asghar
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Download date	2026-11-11 22:55:26
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/182656

MUSLIM REFORMISTS' CONFERENCE AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Asghar Ali Engineer

A conference was organized at Oxford University, U.K. from 11-13 June 2010 by Deen Research Foundation, Netherland in collaboration with Islamic Reform, USA and Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford in which more than 35 Islamic scholars from Europe, USA, Canada, South Africa, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Bosnia, Turkey, U.K., Saudi Arabia, Syria, and other countries participated. The participants were all scholars of repute in their own rights. I was invioted from India as one of the keynote speakers.

A noted Turkish scholar Adip Yuksel who now lives in USA and Arnold Yasin Mol of Netherland and Taj Hargey of MECO were main organizers. Besides Islamic scholars there were some activists and students from Oxford who also participated. It was quite encouraging that so many Islamic scholars from various countries who want reform and change within Islamic frame-work came together to discuss various issues pertaining to Islamic societies and contemporary challenges.

The main theme of the conference was "Critical Thinkers for Islamic Reform – The Way Forward" and it began with Friday prayer on 11th June and in keeping with reformist approach which includes equal rights for Muslim women, the prayer was led by a lady Islamic scholar from Canada Mrs. Raheel Raza who also delivered Friday khutba. Media was present in full strength as in U.K. it was for the first time that a Muslim lady was leading Friday prayer. Raheel's khutba was also on the theme of reform and change.

Most important thing for a reformer is that he or she should have deep conviction in the faith one seeks to reform. And all those scholars who were participating in the conference were, though of diverse cultures, speaking different languages and diverse ethnic stocks, had one thing in common – their pride in being Muslim. However, they were also convinced that Islamic laws as developed during medieval ages need urgent change and Qur'an needs to be reinterpreted in keeping with new challenges emerging around us in the globalized world.

Edip Yuksel was once an orthodox alim from Turkey and had written extensively in Turkish from conservative point of view at one time. However, over a period of time his views changed and he became convinced that critical thinking on various Islamic issues is a must and he had a fresh look at the Qur'anic text. He concluded that earlier translations by eminent Muslim commentators (mufassirs), however, scholarly, are not satisfactory and he, along with two other scholars Layth Saleh al-Shaiban and Martha Schule Nafeh attempted fresh translation and has been published as *Quran – A reformist Translation*. It is worth studying as these three scholars have gone into the roots of crucial Arabic words used in the Qur'an to capture real spirit of the holy text to rid it of superstitious approach on many issues.

Some of the subjects discussed at the conference were “The Paradigm of Islamic Reforms – History and Heritage”, “Theological and Philosophical Imperatives for Islamic Reform”, “New Qur’anic Hermeneutics, Muslim Law and Islamic Reformation, “Islam Science, Culture and Freedom _Towards a Muslim Renaissance”, Gender, “Sexuality and Human Rights in Islamic Discourse’ and “Media, War on Terror and Western Foreign Policy”.

It is interesting to note that all discussions were Qur’an-centric as against hadith centric in conventional Islam. Some scholars were of the opinion that hadith-centric Islam cannot admit reform and change and Qur’an is after all totally divine and there is absolutely no difference of opinion about it. Ahadith are not only controversial but also based on Arab culture, customs and traditions. Qur’an, on the other hand, being of divine origin goes beyond any geographical area and is not restricted by any time period. It is, in other words, beyond space and time.

However, some other scholars felt though many ahadith are controversial there are many which are in conformity with the Qur’an and normative in nature (apart from those which are contextual) and can serve a useful purpose even for re-understanding Qur’anic text and for reform. Despite some such differences on these issues all participants were united in their approach to reform.

The participants also felt that values and principles are immutable, not laws based on these values and principles. Laws must remain dynamic and change with social needs. It is values which provide moral base and stability to society and five values are most fundamental in the Qur’an: Truth (Haq), justice (Adl), benevolence (Ihsan), Compassion (Rahmah) and Wisdom (Hikmah).

No Islamic law should violate these fundamental values and any law framed to serve the then social needs must change to uphold these values. All reforms to be attempted should be with a view to strengthen these values as for application of values law serves as a tool. Law is not the end but a means to achieve implementation of these values. Also, any change and reform must keep *maqasid* objectives) and *masalih* (interests and welfare) of society. The conference concluded on this note.

Centre for Study of Society and Secularism
Mumbai