

Workshop on Religion, Culture and Identity.

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The Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI) hosted the first workshop on Religion, Culture and Identity at the University of Cape Town (UCT) on Saturday, the 25th of November 2000. The workshop is part of the South Africa Netherlands Research Project on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), and will be running for the next three years. Professor Abdulkader Tayob of UCT convenes the project. This venture aims to map the linkage between Islam, culture and identity in South Africa and intends to be as interactive and participatory as possible.

The Muslim self-image is the central focus of research and some of the main concerns revolve around how Muslims express this in their activities, institutions and relationships. The project aspires to present the opportunities that exist for Muslims in a democracy. Given the fact that being South African is an essential ingredient of the make-up of every citizen, this project is of crucial importance to the Muslim minority of South Africa. In the past, much emphasis has been laid on the limitations of being Muslim in a democracy. This project thus represents a significant shift in orientation for Muslim minorities in general.

The workshop was designed to facilitate broad-based participation and over 50 delegates from various sectors of the community were invited. These included laypersons as well as members of Religious Bodies, social workers, teachers, and academics. Tayob initiated

the programme with a brief presentation in which he introduced the project to the participants. This was followed by the three main presentations, which were spread over the course of the day. Participants broke up into five small discussion groups after each session to deliberate over the views expressed. Facilitators were appointed to each group to ensure maximum participation of all members and to record opinions expressed.

Zubeida Jaffer, a correspondent for Independent Newspapers, made the first presentation in which she spoke on Muslims and political development. She focused on key personalities in the Muslim community and the roles they played in society and politics. Jaffer pointed out that the status of religion in national life has been transformed considerably since the '94 elections. There has been a decisive move towards effecting changes that reflect the plurality of belief-systems in South African society. She suggested that this could be attributed to the roles that various religious leaders played in bringing about change. However, Jaffer was at pains to point out that at the present juncture the Muslim community faces two dangers that could serve to damage its reputation as an important player in the transformation process. The threats of what she termed 'rightwing violence' and uncertain leadership have the potential to reverse all the gains made by the community thus far. Jaffer concluded by asserting that the community was at a defining moment in its history. It could either continue to forge political progress or fall victim to political regression. In her opinion Muslims have the ability to continue progressing but they seem to lack the will or desire to do so.

Discussions in response to Jaffer's paper revolved mainly around the issues of Islamic and political identity, leadership and unity. Some participants argued that Islamic identity had been forfeited in favour of a purely political identity. This was attributed to the lack of an overt Muslim presence in the presiding government. While there were many Muslim parliamentarians, there was not a single party representing Muslims. Some felt that the various Muslim individuals within the other parties could not adequately address Muslim interests. The inability of Muslims to gather around a single party was interpreted as a clear reflection of Muslim disunity. This in turn was attributed to a lack of decisive leadership. In general, most participants agreed with Jaffer that political regression would be inevitable unless there was an emergence of strong leadership within the Muslim community. However, many felt that the sacrifice of Muslim identity for the sake of political progress was perhaps far too high a price to pay.

The second presentation was by Shaykh Seraj Hendricks of Azzavia. He spoke on the split in the Muslim community around the Eid festival. Opposing views surrounding the birth of the moon, which forms the basis of the lunar calendar, lead to the split. The community was divided into three groups. One group advocated following Makkah, the second advocated following local sightings, while the third group opted for a system based on astronomical calculations. Hendricks however contended that the issue was not a question of jurisprudence but rather of politics. He contended that in the current South African context conflict of *'Ulama* organisations has displaced *Madhahib* (sectarian)

conflicts. The debate over a universal lunar calendar, he asserted, has been lost in the crosscurrents of exercising political power.

In general, participants agreed with Hendricks that the universal lunar calendar issue was a pretext for inherent power struggles for leadership. It was felt that community aspirations for unity were not being fairly represented by the *'Ulama* bodies. Rather, it was suggested that the *'Ulama* should set aside their individual differences in favour of benefiting the community. Participants felt that the community did not have much say in the issue at hand because they were not regarded as competent in matters pertaining to the *Shari'ah*. A significant question raised asked who should be able to determine what was in the public's interest: the community itself or the *'Ulama*?

Fatima Seedat of the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) delivered the final presentation. She focused on Muslim Personal Law in South Africa, and concentrated on the power dynamics inherent in Muslim marriages. She presented a case study of a Muslim marriage that broke down and the problems that ensued. This formed the background for debate around issues of equality in the marriage relationship. Seedat argued that the absence of government involvement in regulating MPL left its implementation in the hands of the patriarchal *'Ulama* bodies. She described the State's laxity as a "collusion of patriarchy."

The theme of patriarchy permeated the breakaway discussions. Patriarchy was perceived as male domination and exploitation in the marital relationship. A central issue raised was

that of educating individuals engaging in marriage. Some participants felt that women should be informed of their right to stipulate preconditions in their marital contracts. A call was made for the *'Ulama* to support the empowerment of women through initiating such initiatives. Others felt that the State should determine the stipulations in the contract in such a way as to ensure the utmost benefit to both parties in the relationship. Although it was argued that the State did not have the power to stop individuals from conducting 'Muslim marriages' it was felt that it should be obligated to provide mechanisms for the protection of both parties. Participants felt that the State should legislate laws that must be able to override any personal cessation of rights on the part of any person or group.

In the final session, the various breakaway groups presented the main concerns arising from the discussions. Tayob then opened the floor for general comments and criticisms. His invitation was met with enthusiastic participation. One participant lauded the project and expressed his satisfaction at having been given the opportunity to theorise about what constructs our identity. Another raised the question of how Muslims see themselves within a broader democracy. With specific regard to MPL, it was suggested that we turn the question on its head: we should be asking what is unislamic about the current system of civil legislation when debating MPL and not necessarily what an Islamic system needs to look like. This proved to be an important insight into all issues facing our Muslim minority community. Not only does it give one the opportunity to explore the diversity of ones own tradition, but it also affords the opportunity to explore the richness and substance of other traditions.

Even though there were two women presenters and a significant percentage of women delegates, there was still a call made for greater participation by women. The final issue raised centred on the question of research. How could the broader community be involved in such a project? Tayob closed the workshop by inviting suggestions around this question. He also pointed out that similar workshops were planned for other parts of the country. This should place the project team in good stead to gauge Muslim self-perceptions at the end of its three-year tenure. Tayob also pointed out that there were various mechanisms being set in place to disseminate the project's findings.