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Qur'anic Studies on the Eve of the 21st Century

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Conference Report
Leiden
10 – 12 June 1998
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Qur'anic studies, ‘Ulum al-Qur'an, is a multi-disciplinary field of scholarship. Its development is necessarily governed by the progress achieved in social sciences in general and in linguistics, semantics and hermeneutics in particular. The assumption underlying the idea of the symposium is that the long history as well as the well-established tradition of Qur'anic studies in Islamic culture have been under the great influence of modern political and cultural changes in the Muslim world. The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of almost a new world order, which affected all fields of knowledge. As for the Muslim world it has been a century of external as well as internal conflict.

The modern confrontation with Europe, which started at the end of the eighteenth century, created an awareness of an independent identity, and Islam emerged as a protective weapon against European imperialism and cultural Westernization. This confrontation surely affected Qur'anic studies both in the East and the West in different ways. The awareness of Muslim identity, on the other hand, caused some internal political and cultural conflict between Islamism and Modernism, which increased after achieving political independence. This conflict further activated the fever of new interpretation and counter-interpretation of the Qur'an. Modern trends of social sciences, no matter how different they are, are implicitly or explicitly employed in these interpretations.

The purpose of the symposium ‘Qur'anic Studies on the Eve of the 21st Century’ was twofold: first, to investigate the actual development that occurred in the field of Qur'anic studies in the East and in the West during the twentieth century; and second, to anticipate the possibilities of further development in the coming century.

Qur'anic Studies on the Eve of the 21st Century

Twenty-three scholars from all over the world accepted the invitation and submitted outlines of their contributions. Some sent the text of their presentations in due time. Unfortunately, two of the participants, namely Prof. Al-Sharqawi (Egypt) and Dr Nettler (Oxford) were unable to attend though they did send their papers. The former was not present due to sudden illness and the latter for having been appointed Chairman of the Examination Committee.

The five sessions were as follows:

- Qur'anic disciplines (‘Ulum al-Qur'an)**
 - Dr H. Motzki (Nijmegen)
 - Professor Jane Dammen McAuliff (Toronto)
 - Prof. Dr Hassan Hanafi (Cairo)
 - Prof. G.R. Puin (Saarbrücken)
 - Dr H.C. Graf von Bothmer (Saarbrücken)
- Qur'anic Interpretation in a Modern Context**
 - Prof. Dr Stefan Wild (Bonn)
 - Prof. Dr Hussein Nassar (Cairo)
 - Prof. Dr Muhammad Shahrour (Damascus)
 - Dr Enes Karic (Sarajevo)
 - Dr Fred Leemhuis (Groningen)

- Textual Analysis**
 - Dr Abdulkader I. Tayob (South Africa)
 - Dr Amin Abdullah (Yogyakarta)
 - Prof. M. Shabstari (Iran)
- Literary Interpretation**
 - Dr Muhammad Mahmud (Sudan/USA)
 - Prof. Dr Andrew Rippen (Calgary)
 - Drs Mohammad Nur Kholis (Yogyakarta)
 - Dr Navid Kirmani (Cologne)
 - Prof. Dr Nasr Abu Zayd (Cairo/Leiden)

- Political Interpretation**
 - Dr Johannes J.G. Jansen (Leiden)
 - Dr Bari Azmi (New Delhi)
 - Dr Osman Tastan (Ankara)

At the final session a number of interesting observations were made. It was pointed out that in Qur'anic studies, the periphery of the Muslim world (especially South Africa, Indonesia, and Bosnia) does not closely follow the geographical centre, but largely goes its own way, taking in and digesting a broad spectrum of modern cultural and scholarly influences, without neglecting to consider the results and conclusions of traditional Qur'anic scholarship. Also, the very mixed group of scholars that came together for this occasion had no trouble communicating:

the old clichés of orientalist versus Muslims seem very much to be a thing of the past. In a way this is not surprising: orientalist, like most other nineteenth century scholars, believed that the end of religion – Islam not excepted – was at hand, and today we know better. Also, looking to the Qur'anic text from a literary and aesthetic point of view seems to be gaining importance amongst modern researchers in this field. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this approach may be the approach of the future.

The proceedings of the symposium are to be published in the form of a book as soon as the final texts are submitted at the end of September, and the negotiation with publishers is concluded. ♦

Dr Nasr Abu Zayd is visiting professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University.