“French and U.S. Approaches to Understanding Islam”

A Conference Organized by the

France-Stanford Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

by

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On September 12-14, 2004, the France-Stanford Center for Interdisciplinary Studies held a Conference at Stanford University entitled “French and U.S. Approaches to Understanding Islam.” The presenters included 7 scholars from France and 8 from the U.S. Several scholars from the U.S. served as session commentators. Per suggestions made by the FSCIS Executive Committee, presenters included several younger French scholars, and attendees included a number of graduate students then studying at Stanford who had an interest in the Conference topic.

In line with decisions made by the Conference Organizing Committee, the Conference was divided into five sessions. The opening session was entitled “Traditions of French and U.S. Scholarly Approaches to Understanding Islam.” The idea here was to lay out some of the traditional approaches to studying Islam that have prevailed in France and the U.S. as a prelude to examining contemporary approaches and new intellectual directions that might be called for by recent developments. Presenters here included Terry Burke who spoke on the classical sociology of Islam, Ahmad Dallal who discussed the persistence of Orientalist paradigms in American scholarship on Islam, and Gilles Kepel who discussed tensions in French scholarship between viewing Islam as “self” and as “other.”

Two subsequent sessions were devoted to consideration of the sociological diversity of Islam in contemporary society, especially at the community level, in both France and the U.S. One session examined diasporic histories and hybrid cultures of Muslim communities in France, and the other explored similar histories and cultures in the U.S. In the U.S. session, presenters shed light on the specificities of Muslim communities in Chicago and Detroit, and on South Asian Muslim immigrants in America. In the French session, speakers explored topics such as Muslim prisoners in France and French Muslim youth of Maghreb origin. Presenters in these two sessions included Louise Cainkar, Karen Leonard, and Andrew Shyrock on U.S. Muslim communities, and Farhad Khosrokhaver, Nancy Venel, Jocelyne Cesari, and John Bowen on French Muslim communities.
The remaining two conference sessions explored contemporary Islam at the more macro-social levels of the nation state and the globe as a whole. One was devoted to “Islam and Politics.” In it, considerable attention was given to discussing both the multiple meanings of the contested phrase “political Islam” and the multiple sources of movements often viewed as manifestations of that concept. Presenters included Joel Beinen, who offered a poltical-economic analysis of Islamic social movements in Egypt and Turkey, Riva Kastoryano, who discussed the movement from a politics of recognition in Europe to a transnational Islamic ‘nation,’ and Donald Emmerson who explored the playing out of the session theme in the case of Indonesia.

The second macro-social perspective session, and, appropriately, the concluding session of the Conference, was entitled “Islam and Globalization.” In it, presenters shed light on several strands of globalization in relation to Islam. François Burgat elaborated the emerging globalization of Islamic resistance to a world order increasing viewed (by resisters) as illegitimate, Vincent Geisser analyzed critically the international phenomenon of “Islamophobia,” and Paul Lubeck explored the persistence of Muslim “globality.”

Anecdotal evidence and post-conference communication strongly suggested that the participants found the Conference intellectually stimulating. Moreover, in spite of a number of provocative views put forward with considerable vigor, the conference maintained an ambience of civility throughout. Some articles based on Conference presentations have already been published in scholarly journals or incorporated in books. Finally, in the view of this writer, this conference successfully exemplified one of the main rationales for the FSCIS. The Center has from the start sought to bring together combinations of scholars from quite different disciplines to consider phenomena of interest to both France and the U.S., phenomena that do not fall within the purview of any single discipline. The third FSCIS international conference brought together a superb mix of leading historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and Arabists to exchange views on a topic as critical to the futures of France and the U.S. as it is timely.