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SEMINAR REPORT:

International Seminar on Religious Curricula in the Muslim World: Challenges and Prospects

International Islamic University Malaysia,
6-8 September 2005

Kazi Shahdat Kabir
Ph.D Candidate
Department of Political Science
International Islamic University Malaysia

The International Seminar on "Religious Curricula in the Muslim World: Challenges & Prospects" took place at the International Islamic University Malaysia on 6–8, September 2005. It was jointly organised by the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU) and Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia. The seminar attracted a large number of leading scholars and participants and most of them came from abroad, particularly from Middle Eastern countries.

The seminar was significant and timely expressed by majority of the speakers since it is in line with the current crisis looming over the Muslim world, talks on modifying academic religious curricula, demands to close religious schools or transform them into secular institutions and scrutiny directed at charitable organisations involved in the collection and distribution of Zakah, Sadaqah etc. There were 76 papers presented in the Seminar and most of them were in Arabic. The conference was officiated by Tan Sri Dato' Sri Sanusi Junid, President of International Islamic University Malaysia, who is also the Chairman, International Institute for Muslim Unity.

Prof. Dr. Mohd. Kamal Hassan, Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia gave the opening remarks.

In his opening speech, Prof. Kamal highlighted the point that in this age of globalisation and troubling circumstances this conference is very important. Prof. Kamal emphasised that Muslims' current situation needs to be examined in the spirit of the renewal and principles of moderation. He urges the Muslim scholars to show the way to the renewal and reform in line with realism and globalisation. Prof. Kamal also claimed that we (Muslims) believe in moderation, dialogue and peaceful coexistence. We want to live in peace and harmony, without sacrificing.

In his address, Tan Sri Sanusi Junid said, as the future of all Muslims very much depends on education, it is at such seminar or conferences as this that great importance should be placed by all Muslims, scholars and thinkers, to ensure that correct decisions are made as these decisions will determine the direction of the Ummah. A lot of papers covered a wide range of topics and Tan Sri Sanusi expected that something beneficial would come out of them. Unity among Muslims has been emphasised by Tan Sri. We must not allow ourselves to split up either by ourselves or by others. We must tolerate the differences that exist between us.

Tan Sri Sanusi further stated that with greater Western influences on Muslims, brought about by the greater military power of the west, Muslims must no be allowed to be unnecessarily anti monarchy, or obsessively for or against democracy or republicanism. We must be meticulous and calculative in everything we do. We recognise that democracy is about the best system of government that can be practiced in ways that does not contradict with Islam. According to Tan Sri Sanusi, we should teach all the additional relevant and progressive ideas in our schools. That is one can be a good or bad Monarch, a good or bad president or prime minister, with a good or a corrupted democracy. In Islam it is badness, measured by Islamic yardstick, which is regarded as un-Islamic.

On the first day apart from the keynote addresses the papers were discussed on the basis of two dimensions, which were the current status of the religious curricula in the Muslim world and

its effects on development and creativity. In the keynote address Prof. Dr. Irfan Abdul Hamid Fattah stressed that Muslims are facing a great challenge and danger, and if they are not ready to tackle the issue they will be eliminated from the world. Muslim must come up with a common ground to form Islamic teaching. The Muslim curriculum should be based on the revelations of Allah (s.w.t.) and *Sunnah* of the Prophet (s.a.w.). It has to be comprehensive and reflect the socio-cultural identity of the Ummah. We should protect our golden civilisation and Islamic Aqidah when we prepare any curriculum, Prof. Irfan added.

He said some people proposed to abandon the Islamic ideology and go with the west, but abandoning ideology simply means abandoning yourself and your civilisation and would lead to more destruction. Prof. Dr. Muhammad Abdul Allah Sharqawi emphasised the unity of Muslim scholars and avoidance of conflict based on Salafi, Mutaqaddi, etc. All interpretations should be based on established ideas of *Ulama*. Dr. Muhammad Jabir discussed the educational curricula in United Arab Emirates (UAE) and claimed that an UAE education curriculum is in line with the *Qurān* and *Sunnah*. He raised the question that if religious education produces extremists than why do the people who are known to be extremist not from religious schools? Are the scholars produced in the Arab world terrorists?

According to Dr. AbduRahman bin Jamil Qassas, the scarcity of Muslim scholars in the Arab world leads to the crisis of education. He sees the migration of Muslim scholars to the west and their western orientation as the main reason of this crisis. A similar concerned was echoed by Dr. Muhammad Saad Zeer on the second day of the seminar. According to him, there are 100,000 Muslim scholars staying in the west, which have contributed to their education. On the first day of lessons one and two, Prof. Yusuf b. Ali Thaqafi emphasised the need of supreme values of Islam such as Shura, Justice and equality needs to be included in the curricula of the Muslim world. Prof. Hasan Langgulung and Dr. Che Noraini discussed the religious curricula of Indonesia and Malaysia and the discussion centred on the historical setting starting from the Prophet (s.a.w.) to the

contemporary period. The speakers concluded that the aim of the Islamic educational system is worth universal attention due to its contribution and role in the history of education, and its universality and relevance in terms of integration of personality. Its functions should be upgraded in order to prepare the balance and integrate the Muslim personality. Tawfiq al Huri, from Lebanon, a multi-religious society informed the conference that in Lebanon every religion has its own curriculum, even the private sector has been given power to introduce their own curriculum as well.

Muslims also have their own curriculum based on Islamic values. He urged scholars and thinkers, instead of theorizing the issue to go for practical aspects based on the current environment. According to Prof. Dr. Abdul Hay Ahmad Sabhi, it is not the curriculum rather the understanding of the text from different aspects which lead to extremism. He said, it is from the same class that forms some of them as good, some bad and even some extremists. The paper presentations and discussions by prominent scholars from all over the world continued on the second and third day of the seminar. On the second day, the issue of globalisation was dominant in many presentations.

According to Dr. Kamar Oniah globalisation is the new era in human history, it is based on the concept of globalism. Muslim has to follow the trend, but not all aspects of globalism. She says Islam recognises plurality of religion, not pluralism. We believe that the only accepted religion is Islam but other religions can also be practiced. We have to be worried about the influence of globalism, since it affects economic, political, religious and cultural environments. A socio-cultural aspect is part of Islam. Prof. Ibrahim Fallatah tried to provide various definitions of curricula and related the issue of curricula with the concept of globalisation. He said we have to develop an interdisciplinary approach based on Iman, Ibadah, promote critical thinking as well as establish a link between theory and practice. He looked at globalisation based on modern technological developments such as the internet. Globalisation has a tremendous impact on the Muslim society. For instance, in the Arab society youths are too influenced by fundamental principle of globalisation that is 'consumerism,' which is against

Islamic values. We have been facing cultural and economic challenges from the west. We need to help our students to understand challenges. He suggested some practical steps to be taken to improve our education and create awareness among the teachers, particularly how to prepare students to face the cultural and economic challenges of globalization.

Dr. Aesh Ali Lababinah provided his own hypothesis about the situation of the Muslim world. He said if any nation is attacked by others, the Nation tries to reject others and create a cocoon around itself. It fears losing its land and culture. The condition of the Muslim Ummah falls into this category. As a result, Muslim has to develop the culture of opening up themselves.

Dr. 'Alaadin Rahal said that the west interestingly links Islam with terrorism, but there is no evidence for this. He suggested that we improve instead of change our curriculum. We have to develop our contents and methods. Those people involved in the 9/11 incident are not from religious schools, he added. Assoc. Prof. Musa Ahmad, Nurhidayah Muhd. Hashim and Salahudin Suyurno elaborately explained how University Technology Mara (UiTM) developed their Islamic curriculum since 1975 until the present. In the beginning, only Muslim students were required to take the papers. Later, the policy changed and was also applied to the non-Muslim students as well. Currently, the number of Islamic courses has increased to more than 50. At the same time, all the challenges and constrains have to be faced and solved accordingly. The authors believed that we must go forward to equip the students with Islamic knowledge in fulfilling the aspiration of the government to produce a quality and progressive society as stated in one of the Islam Hadhari's principles.

Dr. Morshed Khandoker discussed solutions through his unique paper, "How to Integrate Islamic Knowledge in the Studies of Human Inheritance." He looked at the Scientific Challenges of Religious Curricula based on four different dimensions: Lack of in-depth understanding of science; Over-appreciation of science, with zero knowledge of science; Lack of educators with a solid understanding of religion and other

branches of modern knowledge and the availability of a huge, misleading internet information on Islam and science. Dr. Muhammad Amanullah emphasised the spiritual and moral dimensions of education. He said in Islam seeking knowledge and teachings are so important that it is one of the three things which a Muslim would continuously receive reward from Allah (s.w.t.) after his death. The most important objective of teaching in Islam is to prepare righteous servants of Allah (s.w.t.), who would worship Him and follow His commands properly.

Dr. Sohirin Solihin made a critical examination of the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Mawdudi, attempted to reveal the causes of religious extremism as in many cases the tendencies of extremism are always linked with influences of *jihad* in the writings of the above two scholars and activists. Since it was inevitable that the writings of these two scholars would be very influential, there have been many accusations against their writings as a source of extremism. But Dr. Sohirin sees that both are of the view that *jihad* is prescribed for Muslims to gain the pleasure of God. Sayyid Qutb clearly mentions that *jihad* in the battle field is less important compared with the continuous struggle to propagate the religion and Mawdudi emphasises on the actualisation of faith in the daily of life, Dr. Sohirin added. He concluded by saying that the careful reading of the writings of both scholars, the writings of both scholars, we will see that has nothing to do with extremism to kill the innocence.

Regarding the curricula in the Muslim World, Dr. Muhammad Saad Zeer pointed out that the curricula in the Muslim world is not adequate. It is far away from other sciences, and is the main obstacle of the development of Ummah. In the Muslim world, teachers always depend on books only and do not go beyond this. Muslim scholars fail to respond to the practical problems, Muhammad Saad added. He blamed Sufism and the closing of the door to *Ijtihad* for this stagnation. According to Muhammad Saad, most of the curricula of the Muslim world kept students away from practical issues, since a majority of the people who prepare the curricula are not trained or qualified to do so. Like many other presenters, he also claimed that the people who are getting knowledge from other than Muslim countries are terrorists. He emphasised the

teachings of Islamic education at the family level. According to Prof. Amanullah, it is not the curriculum rather the method of teaching leads to conservatism and extremism. Many teachers that teaches such a way that leads to hatred towards Muslims. He promotes the idea of peaceful coexistence with the west. He suggested that the development of curricula may be based on the resolutions passed by OIC on the curriculum issue.

Prof. Sano Koutoub says the goal of all curricula should be the same that is religious. But style and method needs to be changed based on time and space. Our objectives would be to reach the goal, but social and political situation needs to be taken into consideration. Not all the curricula in the Muslim world are positive. In order to improve the curricula, Prof. Sano emphasised the importance of dialogues with west, pluralism of opinion and improving creativity among the Muslims. The activities of the third and final day was added with remarks by Prof. Sano Koutoub Moustapha, presentation of the reference report by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Azmi Omar, Chairman of the steering Committee and the closing remarks by Tan Sri Dato' Seri Sanusi Bin Junid.

Resolutions of the Seminar:

1. Call upon sincere and dedicated researchers and research centres in the Muslim world to undertake serious studies to reform the religious curricula in the Muslim world, so as to achieve a comprehensive reform of the religious education.

2. Call upon educational institutions in the Muslim world to seriously review the religious curricula in the schools, colleges, higher institutes and universities in the Muslim world in order to improve the quality of objectives, contents and methods to meet the challenges of the contemporary world.

3. Call upon governments and policy-makers in the Muslim world to abolish the concept of duality in the educational

system and replace it with a balanced and integrated educational system. This proposed system should be based on a conducive and comprehensive integration and marriage between religious knowledge and science and between science and values.

4. Call upon governments and private institutions in the Muslim world to protect the contents and methods of the teaching of religious teaching from all elements of extremisms, fanaticism, terrorism, as these acts and all forms of violence are considered as un-Islamic and very inhuman in nature.

5. The contents and methods of teaching religious curricula should always be subject to improvement, reforms, evaluations and comprehensive review in light of the changes in the world.

6. The primary sources of Islam such as the *Qurān* and *Sunnah* of the Prophet should be well catered for at all levels of teachings, and there should be no focus on the differences of ideological and jurisprudential schools in the religious curricula.

7. Relentless efforts and continued campaigns through conferences, symposia and workshops must be exerted to correct the incorrect assumptions that claim necessary correlations between religious curricula and international terrorism in the world. Thus, the true teachings of Islam condemn all forms of violence and hatred among members of the world community.

8. Call upon educational institutions in the Muslim world to exclude from the curricula all contents and methods that lead to disunity and disharmony among Muslims.

9. Call upon institutions of learning and education in the world to exclude the methods of teaching the religious curricula from all methods that reject followers of other

faiths and religions, oppose the freedom of expression, promote hatred and divisions and acts of violence and terrorism against innocents, properties.

10. Methods of teaching the religious curricula should be based on promoting and respecting freedoms of opinion and religion, freedoms of expression and right of disagreement, right of others to leave in peace and security, with their faiths and styles.

11. The contents of the religious curricula should include new concepts and issues such as human development, human rights, women's rights, civilisational dialogue, freedom of express, freedom of religion and freedom of thinking positively.

12. There is a need to support all scientific and practical means leading to the closing of gaps among contents of the religious curricula in the Muslim world so as to achieve a unified understanding and look at the basic issues of the Ummah.

13. Muslim countries should share and emulate the experiences of sister countries that have successfully undertaken positive changes and reforms in their religious curricula.

14. All organisations and institutions engaged in the field of education or in attempts to spread the spirit of moderation, tolerance, cooperation, dialogue and acceptance of the other, must be supported and encouraged.

15. Educational institutions in the Muslim countries must make use of information and communication technology to assist in the diffusion of the spirit of moderation and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and the rest of the world.

16. There is a need to strengthen the status of the *Qurānic* language in the religious curricula in order to equip the students with stronger and better understanding of the primary sources of Islam and its essences.

17. The scientific miracles of the *Qurān* and *Sunnah* of the Prophet must be taught in order to show the strong relationship between scientific discoveries and contents of the Holy *Qurān* as this will encourage learning all branches of science.

18. Call upon religious educations institutions to teach modern languages to the students in order to enable better cooperation and communication between the Muslim world and other worlds as well as the challenges and prospects of Globlisation, Modernity, and Post-Modernity.

19. Call upon Educational Institutions to have positive utilisation of modern and advanced technology for teaching and imparting religious knowledge.

20. The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) should hold an international conference on the issue of religious education.

21. The proceedings and resolutions of this Seminar must be circulated to all educational institutions in the Muslim world for further improvement and reform of the religious curricula.