

**Islam and Bioethics:
Concerns, Challenges, and Responses**

On 27-28 March 2006, Pennsylvania State University hosted an international conference on “Islam and Bioethics: Concerns, Challenges, and Responses.” Cosponsored by several academic units in the College of Liberal Arts, the conference brought in historians, health care professionals, theologians, and

social scientists from ten different countries. Twenty-four papers were presented, along with Maren Grainger-Monsen's documentary about an Afghani immigrant seeking cancer treatment in California.

After opening remarks by Susan Welch (dean, College of Liberal Arts) and Nancy Tuana (director, Rock Ethics Institute), panelists analyzed "Critical Perspectives on Islamic Medical Ethics." Hamada Hamid's (New York University Medical School) "Negotiating Autonomy and Religion in the Clinical Setting: Case Studies of American Muslim Doctors and Patients," showed that few doctors explore the role of religion in a patient's decision-making process. She suggested that they rethink this practice.

Hassan Bella (College of Medicine, King Faisal University, Dammam) spoke on "Islamic Medical Ethics: What and How to Teach." His survey, conducted in Saudi Arabia among medical practitioners, revealed that most practitioners approved of courses on Islamic ethics but did not know if such courses would improve the doctor-patient relationship. Sherine Hamdy's (Brown University) "Bodies That Belong to God: Organ Transplants and Muslim Ethics in Egypt" maintained that one cannot easily classify transplant patients' arguments as "religious" or "secular," for religious values are fused together with a patient's social, political, and/or economic concerns.

The second panel, "Ethical Decision-Making in Local and International Contexts," provoked a great deal of discussion. Susi Krehbiel (Brown University) led off with "'Women Do What They Want': Islam and Family Planning in Tanzania." This ethnographic study was followed by Abul Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim's (KwaZulu University, Durban) "Human Rights and Rights of the Unborn." Although Islamic law is commonly perceived as antagonistic to the UN's charter on human rights, Ebrahim argues that both may be used to protect those who can and cannot fight for their right to dignity, including the foetus. Thomas Eich (Bochum University) asserted in "The Process of Decision Making among Contemporary Muslim Religious Scholars in the Case of 'Surplus' Embryos" that decisions reached by international Muslim councils were heavily influenced by local politics and contentious decisions in such countries as Germany and Australia.

The afternoon panel, "The Fetus and the Value of Fetal Life," focused on specific issues raised by artificial reproductive technologies (ARTs). Vardit Rispler-Chaim (Haifa University) presented "Contemporary Muftis between Bioethics and Social Reality: Pre-Selection of the Sex of a Fetus as Paradigm." After summarizing social customs and religious literature from around the world, she claimed that muftis generally favor pre-selection techniques and suggested that their reasoning is guided by a general social pref-

erence in the absence of clear religious indications. Hamza Eskandarani's (King Faisal University, Dammam) "Ethical and Legal Implications in ARTs: Perspective Analysis of the GCC Countries" examined the effectiveness of government legislation in establishing guidelines for ARTs in the region. He proposed implementing clearer and more structured guidelines (following Islamic principles), thereby creating more uniform legislation.

The day's final panel, "Comparative Perspectives on the Nature of Islamic Ethics," featured Martin Goetz (Basel University) and Manfred Sing (Freiburg University), both of whom spoke on "The Structural Similarity of Islamic and Western Bioethical Discourses." They examined Islamic and western bioethical discourses, focusing on how each one defines and understands dilemmas, reaches consensus, and proposes legitimate solutions. While Islamic and western discourses differ in their language, use of authority, and political and juridical framework, they nevertheless share a common process of identifying legitimizing authority and building bridges between authorities and ethical problems.

The next two papers looked at end-of-life issues. Shabbir Alibhai (University of Toronto) and Michael Gordon (University of Toronto) presented "A Comparative Analysis of Islamic and Jewish End-of-life Ethics: A Case-Based Approach." They discovered many similarities on questions concerning illness and the end of life, including seeing the believer as a "responsible steward" of his/her body and upholding people's responsibility to reduce an individual's suffering. Stef van den Branden (Interdisciplinary Centre for Religious Studies, Leuven) discussed "Medication and God at Interplay: End of Life Decision Making in Moroccan Migrants Living in Antwerp, Flanders, Belgium," based on his interviews with thirty elderly Moroccan men living in Antwerp.

The next day began with a fascinating panel on "Ethical Decisions in Historical Context." Samar Farage's (Pennsylvania State University) "Medical Ethics and the Pulse in the Galenic-Islamic Medieval Tradition" asserted that modern scientific medicine has so distanced itself from the Galenic-Islamic tradition of an elaborate and intimate doctor-patient relationship that today's norm is one of minimal contact and almost nonexistent personal trust. Justin Stearns (Middlebury College) presented "Enduring the Plague: Ethical Behaviour in the Fatwas of an 8th/14th-Century Mufti and Theologian," in which he compared Ibn al-Khatib's and Ibn Lubb's commentaries on Islamic ethics during a widespread outbreak of the bubonic plague.

The next two panels analyzed clinical issues. First, Hassan Shanawani (University of Michigan) and Mohammed Hassan Khalil (University of

Michigan) examined “Reporting on ‘Islamic Bioethics’ in the Medical Literature: Where Are the Experts?” Their survey of articles available on MEDLINE revealed that scholars usually look for one monolithic view to represent Islam, thereby ignoring the complex debate within the Islamic tradition itself and the varying (at times contentious) viewpoints of Islamic legal scholars. Tahareh Mosavi’s (Concordia University, Montréal) “Disability and Bioethics in Iran: The Religious Beliefs of the Parents and Their Decision To Continue or Stop Treatment of the Children with Cerebral Palsy” presented the results of her research in Iran. Abd al-Hakim Bishawi (Harvard Medical School, Dubai) spoke on “Medical Ethics: Health Science Librarians Are Involved as Well,” arguing that while new communication technologies allow communities access to a plethora of information, they can also potentially restrict our access to the same.

After lunch, the panel continued with Imran Rafi Ahmed Punekar’s (Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, UAE University) “The Necessity and Obligations of Cultural Competency in the Physician’s Relationship with the Muslim Patient: Effects on Quality of Health Care, and Methods of Implementation.” He said that doctors must be culturally competent when providing patient care. Faiz Khan (Pennsylvania State College of Medicine) analyzed “Faith and Care of the Patient: An Islamic Perspective on Critical Illness and Death,” opining that focusing only on a patient’s physical well being is driven by the modern perspective of “patient-centered practice,” which imposes boundaries between care givers and receivers. He suggested that doctors be trained to accommodate a patient’s spiritual and religious needs. Shabbir Alibhai closed the session with “Artificial Nutrition and Hydration in Advanced Dementia: Scientific Challenges and a Proposed Islamic Ethical Response.” In such cases, he said that the tube must be used even if it does not change the patient’s status, since feeding another person is an Islamic duty. It should be withheld only if it would harm the patient or cause the disease to worsen.

The conference’s final panel, “Muslim Body, Muslim Person,” engaged controversial topics. Omar Sultan Haque (Harvard Medical School) spoke on “The End of Life and the Problem of ‘Brain Death’ in Islamic Bioethics: Implications and Redefinitions of Muslim Personhood.” Stating that science has shown the body/soul duality to be untenable, he explored the implications of a materialist conception of personhood for Islamic medical ethics. Iqbal Jaffer (University of Queensland) and Shabbir Alibhai spoke on “A Discussion on the Permissibility of Organ Donation, Palliative Care, and Autopsy: Comparing Orthodox Judaism and Shi’ah Islam.” They noted that

Shi'i imams seem to be more supportive of organ donation programs than Sunni scholars, which brings them closer to the opinions of Orthodox Judaism.

The final paper, Debra Budiani's (University of Pennsylvania) and Othman Shibly's (University of Buffalo) "Islam, Organ Transplants, and Organ Trafficking in the Islamic World," said that the Shari'ah forbids transplants from corpses. This has caused ethical dilemmas for both parties in the Muslim community, as illustrated in the case of an Egyptian donor and recipient who chose this route to help overcome economic difficulties.

Farhat Moazam (Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture, Karachi) opened the final plenary session by asserting that the event's key contribution lay in its ability to amalgamate the varying perspectives of ethicists, academics, medical practitioners, and philosophers and to allow for ideological exchange. Further, it revealed the complex and decidedly non-monolithic ideological perspectives within Islam itself. Most papers, she said, referred in detail to arguments based on the Qur'an and the hadiths, but only a few examined how Muslims actually practice their faiths and live these philosophies on a daily basis. In the future, researchers might want to examine how Muslims actually practice their faith and negotiate these philosophies.

Frederick Denny's (University of Colorado) remarks focused more on assimilating Islamic perspectives into the bioethical discourse. He observed that the West's current discourse on bioethics virtually excludes the Islamic perspective, although practitioners are aware that religion and culture play an integral role in doctor-patient relationships. He challenged those present to integrate Islamic views into this discourse and place Muslims and Muslim views in the vanguard of solving bioethical dilemmas.

Most of the papers are being prepared for publication. The entire proceedings are online at http://rockethics.psu.edu/islam_bioethics/.

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