

1st Kalam Workshop on Ethics and Human Rights

The Islamic and Strategic Studies Institute (ISSI), Kalam Research & Media (KRM) and Centre for Human Rights Research and Advocacy (CENTHRA) held a joined workshop on ethics and human rights by scholars in that field on September 7, 2016. The workshop is also supported by the Islamic Religious Council of the Federal Territory (MAIWP). The workshop began after breakfast at 9.30 am in the working office of ISSI-KRM, with a welcoming note from Dr. Amran Muhammad, the Chief Executive of ISSI and Regional Director of KRM. Dr Amran's introductory remark was aimed at constructing a synthesis between Kalam, Ethics and Human Rights. To achieve this objective, Dr. Amran and the ISSI fellows function as a bridge between scholars of present-day knowledge such as science, history and psychology and those who are well-versed in the Kalam discourse that began in pre-Ghazalian time and continued till the present. He stated that the Ethics and Human Rights cluster is one of the Kalam transdisciplinary clusters whose members are now collaborating to present their findings and to publish them in a monograph as part of the Kalam Transdisciplinary series.

Four scholars presented their thoughts on ethics and human rights to a group of interested audience consisting of Kalam experts, government and non-governmental officials related to Islamic affairs, such as ISSI's Inter-Religious Study and Dialogue (IRSYAD) cluster representative, Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), and others.

From Classical Kalam to Ontological Foundation of Ethics

Dr Amilah Awang Abdul Rahman lectures in the Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion at the Faculty of Revealed Knowledge and Human Science of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). According to Dr. Amilah, ethics is an aspect of the Qur'an that is rarely discussed, and is only regarded as something that must be practiced. Ethics had been a subject of a highly philosophical discussion amongst the Greek scholars and past Muslim scholars. In fact the concept of ethics in the Qur'an can be developed into the concept of decision making and critical thinking. It's about giving man the choice to do good. In her research, Dr Amilah looks into contemporary cases where the specificity of law and ethics are dealt with in separate compartments instead of merging both. "There is such a situation where we apply law without ethics", she said. In her discussion she discussed the relevant discourse of the Jabariyyah and the Qadiriyyah in understanding the moderate approach that the Ash'ariyyah-Maturidiyyah has achieved based on their consideration of various perspectives on Kalam issues. She urged the audience to deepen their understanding and to consider all doctrines such as that of the Mu'tazilah in approaching new questions that face us today. This does not mean that we are adopting their views, but it is a necessary means of expanding our tools of engagement and instruments of thoughts in order to wrestle with contemporary challenges.

Western Thinking on Ethics & Human Rights

Dr Siti Nurani is a Director for the Centre for the Initiation of Talent and Industrial Training (CITra) in Universiti Malaya(UM). She offers a course on Ethics to both Muslim and Non-Muslim students in Universiti Malaya. Throwing challenging moral and ethical questions to her students often provide her with insights about her students' collective religio-cultural traditions be it Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or secular principles. Dr Siti Nurani reported that there is a vast corpus on ethics and human rights but much less on Islam and Western ethics. Most research on ethics are done by secular atheists, particularly the Georgetown school of ethics. Thus, she urged that Muslim Kalam scholars from the ethics and human rights transdisciplinary hub seize the opportunity to represent their niche research area, which will certainly get a favorable attention from the academic world.

Al-Jurj?n?'s Concept of al Husn wa la qubh and alqada' wa al-Qadar in Shahr al-Maw?qif

Dr Mohd Hamidi Ismail lectures at the Faculty of Leadership and Management of Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). He shared the situation that originally spurred his thoughts into this research question. It was the Jordanian scholar Sheikh Saeed Foudah who asked him if he was Asha'arite or Maturidite, to which he answered that he was Asha'arite. The renown Kalam scholar then highlighted how the great luminaries of the past did not reject one for the other; rather they criticized certain doctrinal aspects in order to penetrate deeply for answers to pertinent questions. Only through such critical analysis would the most potent argument comes to the fore. Similarly for Jurj?n?, he dealt with the doctrines of the Mu'tazilah in considering good and evil actions. Their concept of absolute powerlessness (majb?r mu?laq) was rejected by Jurj?n? due to their extreme thoughts in providing a human-centric defense of all of God's actions, especially those that results in detrimental effects to human lives and cause suffering on earth. Jurj?n? holds the opinion that God's action is beyond the grasp of human intellect. It goes without saying that this topic was discussed in a lively yet discursive atmosphere among the ISSI intellectuals.





Malaysian Constitution: Moral and Legal Philosophy

In the final presentation, Dr Shamrahayu Abdul Aziz who is a Principal Fellow at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) provided a historical understanding of the constitution. She stated that a constitution creates the three organs: Executive (Agong), Judiciary (Court) and Legislative (Parliament). A constitution had its precedent in the Code of Hammurabi even though it was not a constitution per se, unlike the Madinah Document (dust?r Mad?nah). The difference between a Western constitution and the Madinah Document lies in the fact that the former document requires a delegation of power to prevent the abuse of power, while the Madinah Document was determined through Divine Revelation (wahy?) up till the time of the Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khatt?b. What ensued were deeper discussion on the drafting of constitution – its process, its content - as to the rights conferred upon subjects as opposed to the obligations required from the subjects, and also the current approach to constitutions – be it a literalist or the purposive approach. What came to the fore is the extent of discussions that must follow today's workshop on ethics and human rights. Based on the discourse that was put forward today, it is apparent that Dr Amran's call for a Kalam approach towards ethics and human rights is an urgent necessity for continuous progress in civil engagement.

