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The First International Conference of Muslim Women — 14-18 December 1981

THOMAS J. O'SHAUGHNESSY, S.J.

Two hundred women gathered at the Philippine International Convention Center on 14 December 1981 to open the First International Conference of Muslim Women in Some Asian and Middle Eastern Countries. One hundred fifty came from various parts of the Philippines and fifty from fifteen other countries of Asia and North Africa. Sponsored by the year old Association of Philippine Muslim Women Leaders and Professionals (APMWLP), the five-day Conference had the full support of the Ministry of Muslim Affairs and the Autonomous Governments of Regions IX and XII.

The importance of this meeting is thrown into relief by a controversy that arose in Pakistan three months later—in March 1982. There a leading Muslim scholar, Dr. Israr Ahmad, suggested in his religious T.V. program that all working women should be pensioned off and made to sit at home. The professional and business women of Pakistan reacted quickly. The champion of female rights, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, herself summoned a special meeting of the All Pakistan Women's Association. With the support of eighteen other women's organizations they claimed that Islam gives complete freedom to women to engage in economic activity within and outside the home. They then held a demonstration, in which the wife of the governor of Sind took part, outside the offending T.V. station. An opposing group of Muslim women of the orthodox right counterattacked, accusing the professional women of being "westernized" and against Islam. The answer of the professionals was a signature campaign in support of Begum Liaquat Ali Khan. Their signed joint statement criticized the oppression that Muslim women feel they have suffered for generations and demanded an end to discrimination and injustice (*Impact* 17 [June 1982]: 190-91).

Proximate preparations for the meet began on 6 December when the College of Public Administration of the University of the Philippines held a one-day dialogue to prepare the rapporteurs and facilitators of the conference. As a result, a preparatory press conference was held on 11 December at which reporters from the local and international media raised questions on topics like polygyny, divorce, the wearing of the veil, and the Muslim-Christian conflict. A panel of Muslim women led by Dra. Roqaiya Virgie Maglangit, President of the APMWLP, clarified these and other issues in a four-hour session, repudiating polygyny as outdated, defending divorce as a last resort, and explaining the Muslim-Christian conflict in the Philippines by Spanish colonial policies. The panel emphasized that fact that modern developments have changed Muslim women throughout the world. Education today is transforming passive partners into active participants in national affairs. While refusing to claim for the conference any role in the women's liberation movement, the panel nevertheless anticipated a change of attitudes among Muslim males in regard to their women-folk.

On the morning of the opening day, 14 December, two keynote speakers set the tone of the conference. The first, Dr. Inamullah Khan of Pakistan, Secretary General of the World Muslim 'Congress,'¹ likened the natural interdependence of the sexes to that of the wings of a bird. He urged women to acquire an education in order to involve themselves in development and in the promotion of a durable peace based on justice. The second speaker, President Ferdinand E. Marcos, began by announcing the intention of the Philippine government to implement the Tripoli Agreement. He went on to say that Islam has always been a religion of peace. In fact, he continued, if Muslims had used force in spreading Islam, the Christian religion would today be a minority group. These times of reconciliation and reconstruction require the cooperation of women in promoting development.

In the afternoon, Hadji Potri Zorayda A. Tamano, Executive Vice-President of the APMWLP, introduced the theme of the

1. The World Muslim Congress was founded in 1926 at Mecca. Current president is Dr. Maruf al-Dawalibi, former Prime Minister of Syria. Most of its activities have now been taken over by another organization, the Muslim World League.

conference, recognition of the potentials and contributions of Muslim women of the eighties to nation building.

On 15 December, Atty. Florida Ruth Romero, Director, Law Center, University of the Philippines, delivered a paper on "Women as Potential Partners in Development." She briefly sketched the history of women's emancipation and then discussed women's rights in their relation to national development, mentioning significant contributions of women in economic and political areas. The second speaker, Professor Ahmad M. Hassoubah of Mindanao State University, Marawi City, spoke on the "Status of Women in Islam: Asia and the Middle East." After contrasting the condition of women before and after the rise of Islam in the 600s, he carefully distinguished a number of non-Islam values and practices from those that are authentically Islamic.

During the conference, the participants broke up into five workshops of thirty-six members each. Group A had Dra. Letecia de Guzman as resource speaker on the subject, "Muslim Women as Decision Makers: At Home and in the Community." Group B had Dra. Ligaya Perez on "The Muslim Women in a Changing World." Group C discussed the paper of resource speaker Bai Hadja Fatima Matabay Plang entitled "The Dilemma of Muslim Women: Their Constraints and Limitations as Contributors to Development." Group D heard Dr. Ledivina V. Cariño on the topic "Muslim Women: How to Advance to Meet the Goals of National Development." Group E had Hon. Ulbert Ulama Tugung as resource speaker on "Attitudes towards Muslim Working Women."

On 16 December, Justice Mama Busran of the Court of Appeals, Manila, spoke on "Status of Women in the Social Structure of Islam: Laws Relating to Personal and Family Relations," an exposition of Islamic teaching on personal status, especially regarding citizenship, marriage, parental authority, and rules of inheritance. The actual participation of Muslim women in private and government projects for national development was the topic of a paper by Honorable Albina Manalo Dans, Civil Service Commissioner, titled "Muslim Women's Involvement in Government and Private Sectors: Their Problems and Potentials." The commissioner closed his address with a number of valuable suggestions on how to increase this participation.

On the following day, the Philippine Minister of Social Services and Development, Sylvia Montes, spoke on "Implications of Scientific and Technological Development on the Situation of Muslim Women and Their Integration in Development." She showed how Muslim women, without losing their Muslim identity, can adapt to changes brought about by science and technology, for example, in areas like family planning, industrial labor and automation. The second speaker, Dr. Ahmad D. Alonto, in his address, "The Destiny of Muslim Women Based on Current Trends and Prospects," set forth some attitudes, desirable in Muslim women, towards contemporary demands for intellectual competence, precision, and tolerance under psychological stress.

With Hadja Saphia M. Al-Raschid, Former Commissioner on Integration as moderator, the delegates spent Friday morning in finalizing the reports of the five workshops. The chairpersons of each group then presented the reports on Friday afternoon. Dra. Emily M. Marohombsar, Professor at Mindanao State University and Conference Moderator, later recapitulated the results of the Conference.

A large number of background articles and addresses on social and religious topics were mimeographed and distributed during the working sessions of the conference. Several of them expressed dissent from measures advanced by the conference to better the condition of Muslim women. Some also seemed opposed to the changes that modern life must bring to their condition. One of these changes taken by itself, viz, the rapid increase in literacy among Muslim women since World War II, brings with it many effects which are unacceptable to ultra-conservative Muslims. An undertone of anxiety about the future of Islam in its present form and a feeling, most often expressed indirectly, that the Islamic community is today endangered by areligious influences, ran through much of this background material. This same undertone entered even into some of the discussions of the conference. Concern in this matter seems well grounded, but the danger would seem to stem especially from the failure of many Muslim religious leaders to distinguish between secularization and secularism. The latter is a this-worldly philosophy and a form of naturalism which no religious minded person can accept. On the other hand secular-

ization in the sense accepted by the Church is simply a recognition, long overdue, of the relative autonomy of earthly values.

Among these temporal values the Second Vatican Council puts a woman's "right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men." It then continues, "If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values. . . , then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. . . . For earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God" (*The Church Today*, nos. 29 and 36). Some of the apprehensions today voiced by ultra-conservatives in Islam would be allayed by this recognition, although many of them fear its further consequences.