



Mysticism and Ethics in Islam: Inspiring talks by prominent speakers from around the world

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Office of Communications, communications@aub.edu.lb

The Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Chair for Islamic and Arab Studies held a two-day conference on Mysticism and Ethics in Islam at AUB, with the aim to give the wider audience a deeper understanding on the meaning of ethics and mysticism in relation to Islam. The conference was organized by Professors Bilal Orfali (</fas/arabic/Pages/Bilal-Orfali-Par.aspx>), Mohammed Rustom (<http://www.mohammedrustom.com/>) and Radwan Sayyid (</fas/arabic/Pages/Radwan-Al-Sayyed-Par.aspx>).

This initiative formed a unique opportunity to explore different insights on how we perceive Islam and Sufism. "New perspectives have been put forward since the dawn of the twenty-first century, in all areas of Islamic studies," said Sayyid. "The vision or visions of young Islamic scholars are intertwined and not in dispute, they are very pluralistic and vital in the fields of culture and sciences," he added.

The conference, which marked the 100th anniversary of the late Sheikh Zayed's birth, tackled the different aspects of spirituality through important medieval Sufi ideas and expressions such as grief and patience. Speakers outlined the different genres and writings styles that have preserved a range of Sufi literary tropes, motifs, and images. The panels covered as well the classical Sufi tradition and how it was received and refigured by some of the most important nineteenth and twentieth century Sufi personalities in regions as diverse as West Africa and Russia.

"The Sufis have developed a very complicated and involved understanding of the various stations (*maqāmāt*) along the Sufi path. These so-called Sufi stations correspond to what we would normally refer to as the 'virtues,' which explains why some modern scholars of Sufism speak of Sufi virtue ethics," explained Orfali, chairperson of

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the Arabic (/fas/arabic)department. He added, "this conference aims to push the field (of Sufism) forward by bringing together various voices which seek to address the precise connection between mysticism and ethics in pre-modern, early modern, and contemporary Islam."

In his turn, Rustom highlighted the structure of the conference. "The various panels focused on coming to terms with the parameters and boundaries," he said. "Sufism is of course not only a historical tradition but one that also has shaped and continues to shape the texture of ethical and spiritual discourse in the modern world."

Based in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (/fas/Pages/default.aspx), the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Chair for Islamic and Arab Studies traces its roots to a \$150,000 gift that Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan made to AUB to establish a chair for Islamic studies in 1972. Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan made a second gift of \$1 million to AUB in 1976, just four years later, to establish an endowed fund to ensure that there would always be a Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Chair at AUB.

Dean Nadia El Cheikh (/fas/Pages/dean-elcheikh.aspx) said in her opening remarks during the conference, "almost 50 years later and as we dedicate this conference to mark the 100th anniversary of the late Sheikh Zayed's birth, we express our commitment to continue the mission of the Chair in providing an international and regional platform for Islamic and Arabic studies, and to identify potential schemes to innovate and reconstruct the discipline in this day and age."

The Sheikh Zayed Endowment has funded over 150 graduate assistantships for students pursuing master's degrees in Middle Eastern studies and Islamic studies (/fas/cames/Pages/default.aspx). The income that the endowed fund generated has allowed AUB to recruit a number of eminent scholars to the university enabling it to expand its programmatic offerings and raise its profile in this prestigious discipline.

"AUB remains the ideal environment for contemporary and interdisciplinary dialogue on Islamic studies—as a major hub for researchers, scholars, and students to share knowledge within this field," El Cheikh added.

The conference's organizers hope to publish the proceedings which would help in documenting the findings and branching out into other areas, such as Sufism and ethics in China and South East Asia.

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