

Interpretation and Authority

On 21 April, 2007, the Orient-Institut Beirut, with the cooperation of the Lebanese American University (Humanities Division) hosted an international conference entitled "Interpretation and Authority." The conference, which was attended by an audience that filled and exceeded the main reading hall of the Institute, centered on the historical and contemporary use of religious ideas by secular authority. Unfortunately, the keynote speaker of the conference, Dr. Din Syamsuddin (Professor at Jakarta University, Chair of the Muhammadiyah Party, Indonesia), was unable to attend due to extraordinary circumstances in Indonesia. However, in his place a panel discussion was held, involving the presenters and the audience, that lasted over an hour and led to a candid reflection on social and religious developments in the Islamic world.

The morning session of the conference, which was conducted in English, was opened by Tarif Khalidi (American University of Beirut), who presented a critical reading of the book *al-Shakhsīyya al-Muḥammadiyya* by the Iraqi poet Maruf al-Rusafi, a book published over fifty years after the author's death. He was followed by Arzina Lalani (The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London) who presented abstracts from her book on the vocabulary related to leadership (*imāma*) in the Qur'ān and *tafsīr*. Thereafter Jon Hoover (Near East School of Theology, Beirut) spoke on the Hanbalī scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's analysis of whether hell-fire is eternal or temporary, demonstrating that the question was not taken for granted by medieval theologians. Finally, Joseph el-Agha (Lebanese American University) addressed contemporary developments of Shī'ī political doctrine (in particular the question of *niyāyat al-faqīh*) in both the Iranian and Lebanese contexts.

After a communal lunch the conference continued with the afternoon session, conducted in Arabic. The first speaker thereof was Ridwan as-Sayyid (Lebanese University), whose lecture (الفقيه: سلطته مرجعيته في الأزمنة المعاصرة) focused on the rise and fall of the *faqīh* as an authoritative figure in Islamic society. Thereafter Sami Makarim (American University of Beirut) presented a lecture (التقية والحفاظ على السلطة في الإسلام) in which he argued that the concept of *taqiyya* ("dissimulation"), traditionally associated only with Shī'ī tradition, is pervasive in Islamic tradition. Finally Samir Khalil Samir (Université St. Joseph, Beirut) offered a concluding lecture (تفشي ظاهرة الفتاوى في مصر) in which he illustrated the multiplication of *fatwas* in contemporary Islamic society and analyzed the causes of this phenomenon.

The event was brought to an end with a concluding statement by the Director of the Institute, Prof. Manfred Kropp, and a public reception in the Institute's garden

(Gabriel S. Reynolds)