

***“There would be no novel religious discourse
without comprehensive political reform”***

**Paris declaration*
On Means of Renewing Religious Discourse**

At the invitation of the Cairo institute for Human Rights Studies, The Conferral Meeting On Practical Means Of Renewing Religious Discourse* was held in Paris from the 12th to the 13th of August 2003 gathering a distinguished group of thinkers, researchers and human rights advocates from 8 different nations within the Arab world (nearly thirty intellectual, researcher and jurist). Throughout Six sessions, working papers were submitted by the following authors: Ahmad Abd al-Mo'tti Hegazi, Dr.Al-Baqquer al-Affif, Jamal al-Banna, Salah al-Jorshi, Dr. Faisal Deraj, Dr.Nasr abu Zeid. The dialogue focused on the papers, taking the form of oral criticism at times and written form at another, in an atmosphere of sobriety, commitment and depth; a sincere feeling of responsibility prevailed among the thinkers and researchers whose participation expressed their individual intellectual standpoints and not representing any parties, organizations or any organized groups.

The working papers and dialogues were centered on the answer to a fundamental question: How can we reconcile between the modern world which attained a degree of technological, social, political, and cultural progress without losing cultural specificity or facing isolation from the world which is rapidly changing while we remain in our stationary condition.

_The primary conclusions of this meeting are summarized in the following points:

I. ‘The renewal of religious thought’ was a fundamental endeavor in the journey of Arab Islamic Culture ever since the dawn of Islam followed by al-Mutazala, Ibn Rushd (Averroës), Sufism, and al-Safa brotherhood, and other spheres of enlightenment, and in modernity, religious thought witnessed consecutive generations of intellectual contributions and progressive enterprises beginning from Hassan al- Attar, Riffa’a al-Tahtawi and Ibn Badis to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Mohamed Abdu and Kheir al-Din al-Tunsi, Shebli Shmayel and al-Taher al-Haddad and not lastly with, Taha Hussein, Ali Abdel-Razik and Khaled Mohamed Khaled and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, Hussein Muruwa and their recent disciples.

* This meeting was held within the framework of the programme: ‘Enhancing the role of the Civil Society in decision making in the Arab world’. A programme adopted by the CIHRS in co-ordination with the International Federation for Human Rights and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network and supported by the European Union (EU).

CIHRS is an international, regional and non-governmental organization which enjoys a special consultory status with the Economic-Social Council (ECOSOC) which is registered in Paris and Cairo and holds its conferences in Arab and non-arab capitals.

II. The renewal of religious discourse is of vital necessity advancing from the fact that this renewal is a central axial point in crossing over the wide chasm that separates the Arab and Islamic worlds from the advanced world.

III. Renewal of Islamic discourse is of deep, internal necessity (Arab- Islamic) originating from the Arab and Muslim refusal of their deteriorating condition in the world; it is a necessity unrelated to major nations despite some form of tangency occurring sometimes; it is a task which is not restricted to the efforts of enlightened men of religion rather it must be one of the primary tasks of thinkers, intellectuals and human rights organizations, advancing from the view which regards man as a central higher value; and the importance of arbitrating the mind (Logos) in the issues of life.

IV. Necessity of distinction between 'Islam' and 'History of the Muslims'. Thereupon, the political history of Muslims is a human history filled with what should be criticized and breached.

V. In spite of the diversity of the participants' views and their approaches regarding this renewal and its forms, they have agreed unanimously upon this fundamental truth: the renewal of religious discourse is a primary factor in the renewal of political, social lives within the Arab world, and so any renewal of religious discourse will not be achieved without any commencement of comprehensive political reform laying the foundations of a democratic state which believes in pluralism, protects public and individual freedom, and the individuals' rights to freedom of thought and choice. An indispensable right without which freedom of scientific research would not be available especially in the field of social studies.

VI. The renewal of religious discourse will not bear its desired fruit without cultural, societal reformation which advances from belief in the relativity of knowledge and human beings' right to speculate, and this entails the creation of comprehensive intellectual, social, and political conditions and to dissociate the correlation between despotic political powers and, haggard, backward and extremist religious thought.

VII. The greatest barrier facing the renewal of religious discourse in the Arab world is the political manipulation of religion by governments, extremist groups and a few political parties to serve their own goals. In addition to the prevailing claims of clash of civilizations in the Arab and western worlds. The deep rooted feelings of inequity and insecurity (as a result of languor of the majority of western governments to support the just causes of the Arab peoples' while taking hostile positions towards them especially in the Palestinian issue) plays a central role in strengthening and confirming the extremist religious discourse and in bestowing popularity upon it although it opposes the people's interest on the long run.

VIII. Three main currents were developed through sophisticated discussions:

The First Current: Which views that the Quran bears all the answers and that a sound, correct reading of religion will reveal the abundance in renewal, freedom and rationality, progress, justice and consultation and respect for the other. It is a belief and a code of life (*shariah*).

The Second Current: Proponents of such trend believe in the historicity of texts and the necessity of *ijtihad* on levels of reading the text. The meanings will not present themselves to the reader but they are inferred in light of historical experience whereas the Quranic text itself has employed historical language. Hence, every possible reading is contingent upon given history where it reveals the importance of subjugating bequeathed interpretation to criticism regarding it as a reading which reflects its own time and accordingly, places it in light of our current daily experience and the recent conditions of our lives.

This current also calls for a secular state which does not entail any negation of religion or its opposition. It rather releases the potentials of its inherent spirituality from the grip of temporal readings and confines the manipulative and political use of it and at the same time, the reference of political or legislative affairs becomes civil, non-religious.

The Third Current: Adherents to this Current call for the separation of ‘religion’ and ‘religious thought’, arguing that the former is holy, sacred and remains untainted. Whereas, the latter may err and is transformed through the flux of time and changing human needs.

This current divides into two branches:

One which views the renewal of Islamic *fiqh* and its foundations as advancing from the *Quran* alone as a reference while controlling *Hadith* and *al-Sunna* (Sayings and deeds of the Prophet) by the standards of the *Quran*.

Another branch views the renewal of religious thought by shedding light upon general texts and abiding by them while excluding particular texts relating to a certain temporal phase or a certain geographical region marked by a significant event of its own.

While the last branch opined that they believe in the importance of establishing a secular, Arab enterprise which requires the introduction of the public opinion to ‘Secularism’ in order to erase the ambiguity which overshadows this concept and to re-emphasize the fact that it does not contradict religion as such, yet it opposes the politicization of religion, while others expected that the winds of change shall be brought about through current interactions between Islam and Muslims in Europe, and European society, a phenomenon widely known as ‘European Islam’ by both European and Islamic academic circles distinguishing it from ‘Asian or Arabian Islam’.

IX. The Participants have reached a number of important recommendations addressing the governments, (regarded as dominating official religious institutions and transmission channels of the religious discourse and its mechanisms in the Arab world), civil society and, especially cultural, social and jural movements in the Arab world and hereby:

1. Call upon governments to review and develop the contents of religious discourse within religious or non-religious educational curriculums and to reinvigorate the curriculum with the ideas of religious innovators.

2. Urge the officials who are responsible for audio-visual media –owned by either governments or individuals-to review the contents of religious discourse and to develop them in order to tone with the dilemmas of the present age and not to obscure the efforts of classical or recent religious innovators.
3. Urge governments, cultural movements and historians and jurists to restore the democratic heritage and the former liberal period to its rightful place in the Arab world. A phase wish embraced a better atmosphere for innovative visions in religious thought.
4. Urge governments to consider the treatment of all religious beliefs with equality regarding programmes in the media and educational curriculums.
5. Collect and republish innovative religious works (old or recent) in book sequels or booklets.
6. Urge thinkers, academia and media reporters to approach the works of religious innovators with research, discussions, criticism using all means of publication and communications available.
7. Work toward using artistic, cultural and mediatic tools in renewing the religious discourse.
8. Facilitate obtaining current religious information using the internet, cassettes and video tapes, books and simplified booklets.
9. Organize special training courses on renewing religious discourse for mosque preachers, *imams* and editors of pages featuring religion in newspapers, scriptwriters and human rights activists.
10. Develop a website on the Internet in order to create a free forum for the discussions of issues pertaining to the renewal of religious discourse and establish a data bank intended exclusively for renewing religious discourse.
11. Importance of introducing *Sufi* thought and trends of popular religiosity.
12. Urge civil society's organization, jurists and intellectuals to embark upon long term strategic dialogue with the groups of political Islam on the issue of religion's role in the society and man's status within their discourse.
13. Incites Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and thinkers to understand the necessity of debating the theological foundations of violence, extremism and terrorism and not restricting themselves to the refutation and condemnation of crimes based upon them.
14. Call upon Islamic scholars and thinkers to halt the blind use of religion's holiness in order to instigate confiscation of thought, literature, and exertion of the mind. Religious and moral commitment obliges them to hear the questions raised by the society on the basis of

differentiating between Islam as a religion and *fiqh* as information produced by faqihs and researchers (essentially human) and what is needed in order to reconcile between Islamic thought and requisites of physical, societal and moral advancement in the modern age.

15. Refuse the confiscation of any book or publication. Instant action must be taken by human rights organizations to republish any book confiscated by any security agency or authority or religious institution in any Arab country.

16. Consideration of the Declaration of Human Rights in Islam and to criticize it as a model of unnecessary bonds imposed by political regimes and social forces upon practicing basic and indispensable rights and freedoms. A discussion of the declaration's status as related to the system of human rights and the extent of its compatibility with international standards and the aspirations of Islam.

17. Importance of the dialogue's continuity among researchers, thinkers and jurists in order that this meeting becomes a lasting intellectual, cultural, jural forum for renewing religious discourse.

18. Necessity of extending dialogue to encompass different sects. The reform is not limited to men of religion but encompasses the entire society especially sectors of creativity (writers and artists), media, education, parties, syndicates, organizations of civil society and university professors, women apart from religious preachers and scientists.

19. Necessity of taking certain groups into special consideration such as women, youth, children and the poor, the marginalized and other elements deprived of any means of power.

20. Importance of discussing in the upcoming meetings: the issues of freedom of thought, belief and scientific research, artistic and literary creation and the status of women and children.

21. Publication of the papers and deliberations of this meeting in a special booklet.

The List of the Participants in the conferral meeting on Practical Means of Renewing Religious Discourse

No.	Name	Occupation	Country of Birth/Residence
1	Ahmad Abdel-Mo'tti Hejazi	Poet and Writer in al-Ahram newspaper	Egypt
2	Idris al-Yazmi	Trustee of the international federation for human rights	Morocco/France
3	Dr.Anwar Mog'ith	Professor of Philosophy at Helwan University	Egypt
4	Dr.Ussama Khalil	Islamic Writer	Egypt/France
5	Al-Baqquer al-Affif	Islamic Thinker	Sudan/UK

6	Bahey al-din Hassan	Director of Cairo institute for Human Rights Studies	Egypt
7	Jamal al-Banna	Islamic thinker	Egypt
8	Helmi Salim	Poet (coordinator of Meeting)	Egypt
9	Dr.Haydar Ibrahim	Academian and Political thinker	Sudan
10	Khamees Qosaila	Trustee of	Tunisia/France
11	Khamees Shemari	Jural expert and consultant	Tunisia/France
12	Darwish al-Haluji	Writer and Translator	Egypt/France
13	Suliman Bushwaighar	Jural Expert	Libya/Switzerland
14	Salah al-din al-Jorshi	Islamic thinker-Vice president of	Tunisia
15	Zeinab Radwan	Dean of the faculty of sciences (Dar al-Oloum)	Egypt
16	Dr.Atef Ahmad	Researcher specialized in Islamic Thought	Egypt
17	Dr.Abdel Hussein Sha'ban	President of the Iraqi Network for Development and Proliferation of Human Rights Culture	Iraq/U.K
18	Dr.Abdel Salam Hassan	Jural Expert and Legal consultant	Sudan/U.K
19	Dr.Ghanim Gawad	Al-Imam al Khuni charity institution	Iraq/U.K
20	Fabiola Badawi	Journalist	Egypt/France
21	Dr.Faisal Deraj	Writer and Literary Critic	Palestine/Jordan
22	Karim Mururwa	Thinker and Politician	Lebanon
23	Kamal al-Gandoubi	Vice president of the Euro-Mediterranean network for human rights	Tunisia/France
24	Dr.Magdi Abdel Hafiz	Philosophy Professor at Helwan University	Egypt
25	Dr.Mohamed Barada	Writer and Literary Critic	Morocco/France
26	Dr.Mahmoud Ishmael	Professor Of Islamic History	Egypt
27	Dr.Mustafa al-Tawati	University Professor	Tunisia
28	Dr.Nasr Abu Zeid	Professor of Islamic Studies	Egypt/ The Netherlands
29	Dr. Yuhanna Qulta	Deputy of Patriarch of Egyptian Catholics	Egypt