This conference seeks to focus mainly on the possible contribution of Western-based Muslim intellectuals to Islamic religious reform, assessing their claims and examining the historical evidence. The proposed conference will bring together a select group of prominent Western Muslim intellectuals currently at the forefront of reform activism, and a number of other key scholars, experts and activists observing and commenting on the scene with the hope of presenting a candid assessment of both the current state of the religious reform endeavour and the possible and desired contribution of Western Muslim intellectuals to it.

The debate on Islamic religious reform has intensified in recent years (Binder, 1988; an-Na’im, 1990; AbuSulayman (1993); Kurzman, 1998; El-Affendi, 2001 and 2003; Browers and Kurzman, 2004; Al-Alwani, 2005 and 2006; Abu Zayd, 2006; Ramadan, 2009). However, with some particular exceptions, such as in Indonesia, most of that debate has been undertaken in the West. In addition, there is a perception that the debate has been driven more by Western concerns for ‘taming’ Islam in the post-9/11 era than with inherent Muslim visions, needs and concerns. No less significantly, the debate has been dominated by Western Muslim intellectuals, or intellectuals who have moved to the West, some as exiles after their ideas faced rejection at home. This configuration of the ‘reform’ discourse has raised a number of significant points, including whether the West is the right arena for such a debate given the current tension between Muslim regions and key Western governments, and whether Western-based Muslim intellectuals are the right people to lead the debate?
For a number of Muslim thinkers from inside and outside the West, the answer to both questions is a resoundingly positive one. The Malaysian scholar Osman Bakar went so far as to argue in 2001 that America was about to become the ‘second Mecca’ for Muslims where a vibrant exchange of Islamic ideas and activities can take place between people originating from many parts of the world’. Bakar added: "The United States is the freest country in the world. Historically, Islam flourishes in a society where there’s freedom" (Bakar, 2003). A leading European Muslim thinker, the German-born Murad Wilfried Hofmann, made a similar argument in favour of the West as a whole, where he argued that Islam was witnessing an unprecedented renaissance, and where “much more intellectual Islamic work was being produced than in traditional Muslim centres of scholarship” (Tammam, 2004).

Others argue that, while these claims raise some serious points, they are somewhat exaggerated and they tend to miss the point about the nature of the required (or possible) religious reform in general, and not only Islamic religious reform (El-Affendi, 2009). For viable religious reform can only result from the internal dynamics of the community of believers, and is usually driven by zealous, even fanatical, impulses at its inception. In this regard, the urbane, usually secular, Muslim intellectual living in exile cannot be the tool of such a reform.

These claims fall into two interrelated categories. Primarily, the concern is for ‘autonomy’, for developing a specifically “Western” version of Islam, or “Euro-Islam”, which would be more congenial and appropriate for Muslim minorities living in secular and pluralist non-Muslim democracies. For its proponents, this is a survival strategy; Muslims in Europe must incorporate the ideals of modernity, cultural pluralism, secularism and tolerance or risk permanent alienation and marginalisation in Europe (Tibi, 2002). As Tariq Ramadan puts it, Muslims have to overcome their “double inferiority complex” vis-à-vis the West on the one hand and the wider Muslim world on the other.

However, it is precisely due to the complexity involved in meeting this challenge that their endeavour would enable them to “play a decisive role in the evolution of Islam worldwide”, the concern of the second category. The engagement of Western Muslims with the challenges of integration into secular democracies is the same challenge facing Muslims at large in coming to terms with modernity (Ramadan, 2004). Moreover, it is difficult to see how one can be achieved without impacting the other. Both claims raise serious issues.

There is no doubt that the contribution of indigenous European Muslims, like the British MARMADUKE WILLIAM PICKTHALL (1875-1936), and the Austrian-born MUHAMMAD ASAD (1900-1992), remains significant to this day. Asad inaugurated the dominant “neo-traditionalist” trend among Western converts to Islam (El-Affendi, 2009; Bakar, 2005a). The influence of subsequent generations is less assured. Their input has become the focus of attention in the media and within Western and Muslim intellectual circles, largely due to the glare of publicity these contributions generated in the post-9/11 climate. In this “post-Islamist” era, characterised by disillusionment about Islamic revitalism and its promises (Bayat, 2007), their role has been enhanced by the clamouring for “reform” in official (and semi-official) policy circles both in the West and in major Muslim countries. Both Western and Muslim governments have made the promotion of a more “moderate” Islam a priority to counter various forms of radicalism. There is, in addition, a genuine grass roots demand for alternative visions of Islam to replace the discredited extremist or ideological schemas now being shunned by an increasing number of disillusioned individuals and sectors.

It is a discussion of all of these issues and actors involved in the Islamic religious reform agenda that will provide the focus of this one day conference.

Selected Bibliography
Abu Suleyman, Abul Hamid (1993) Crisis in the Muslim Mind, USA: IIIT.
______ (1994) Towards An Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought, USA: IIIT.
Al-Wani, Taha (2005) Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought, UK: IIIT.