

Research Programme

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The ISIM is setting up a research programme on 'The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe', coordinated by Professor Martin van Bruinissen in cooperation with Dr Nico Landman of Utrecht University. The ISIM has organized a series of lectures (summer 2001 and forthcoming in autumn 2001) on the state of the art in this research area – to be published either in the *ISIM Newsletter* or separately as ISIM Papers. An annotated bibliography prepared through the concerted efforts of the ISIM, CNRS-Strasbourg, the University of Louvain-la-Neuve and other institutions, will soon be made available online.

In order to develop comparative research on the production of Islamic knowledge, cooperation with other research institutes in Europe is actively being sought. The *ISIM Newsletter* and website are made available for communication between researchers in this field. The ISIM especially invites applications for Ph.D. and post-doctoral research grants that fit within the programme. Applications are reviewed by the selection committee in October and March (see the website for further details).

#### Local versus 'universal' Islam

In all parts of the globe where it has taken root, Islam has developed local forms. This is not uniquely due to the retention of local pre-Islamic practices, which may gradually be purged by reform movements. Different regions may have their distinctive practices, the various Islamic institutions may play different roles, education and adjudication may be organized differently, and the interaction between the *ulama* and the state may proceed according to different patterns. Even within 'scripturalist' Islam, there is an undeniable regional variation, notwithstanding the claims of certain Western scholars as well as Muslim fundamentalists.

The Muslim communities of Western Europe constitute – with the exception of a relatively small number of European converts – diasporic communities, maintaining various types of links with their countries of origin and with similar communities in other countries. The social, economic and political situation of these communities differs significantly from that of co-religionists in their home countries. In daily life they encounter a whole range of new and different problems that demand an Islamic answer. The various 'host' countries provide different constraints and possibilities for the development of Muslim institutions, Islamic thought and Islamic practices. Inevitably European forms of Islam will develop, grounded in locally acquired knowledge of Islam.

Initially the sources for most of this knowledge were located elsewhere, either in the home countries of the Muslim immigrant communities or in other Muslim countries or transnational networks claiming to represent a purer, universal interpretation of Islam. Among the mediators we find imams, teachers and preachers visiting Western Europe, and *ulama*, intellectuals and journalists in the 'home' countries reaching out to the immigrant communities by mail and through print and electronic media. Second- and third-generation immigrants, however, tend to understand the language of the country of residence better than the languages of their parents or grandparents. The gradual shift from Turkish, Arabic, Urdu,

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or Malay to English and other European languages as vehicles of Islamic discourse is likely to be reflected in changing patterns of religious authority as well as considerable changes in the discourses themselves.

During the last few decades, Muslims in Europe have produced a considerable amount of material on Islam in the forms of media (from newsletters to the internet). There is a multiplicity of voices, not only due to a variety of origins (different home countries as well as different currents within, for example, Turkish Islam) and variations in the legal and cultural contexts in the countries of residence, but also to complex patterns of social interaction. Although Turkish, Moroccan and Pakistani Muslims interact for the most part with Muslims of the same national origins, there is an increasing number of Muslim spokespersons and thinkers whose authority transcends ethnic and national boundaries. Terms such as 'Turkish Islam' or 'Moroccan Islam' do as little justice to the complexity of the developing discourses as 'Dutch Islam' or 'French Islam'.

#### The production of local knowledge

There are several interesting aspects to the processes under consideration that call for serious study. One of these concerns the production of local knowledge – a process that inevitably occurred wherever Islam was established outside its original heartlands. Islam emerged in a specific cultural and historical context of Arabia. When it spread to other societies and cultures, it underwent a dual process of *universalization* and *localization*. In order to adapt it to local contexts, the producers (and brokers) of Islamic knowledge had to first decide which elements of Islam as it existed in the original context were specifically Arabian and could be discarded, while retaining those elements that were considered essential and non-negotiable. This could be called the process of *universalization*, the separation of what was considered universal in the Islamic message from what was contingent. The second step, that of *localization*, meant adapting the universalized message to local customs and needs. This process of production of local Islamic knowledge continues as local traditions of Islamic knowledge develop.

The Muslim migrants who came to Western Europe brought Islam with them in many different local forms, including localized popular religious practices and localized references to scriptural authority. They too have to decide which aspects are negotiable and which have to be retained intact. Islamic knowledge in Western Europe is produced on the basis of 'universalized' versions of the local Islamic knowledge of the home countries and other prestigious centres. It is this process of abstraction as well as the process of adaptation of discourse to local conditions that constitute the focus of the present research programme.

Individual research projects within the programme may concentrate on the following aspects:

– *The development of European Muslim discourses*: projects may range from an analysis

of sermons or fatwas specifically issued at the request of Muslims in Europe, to debates in Muslim media or public controversies concerning Islam.

– *The contexts within which Islamic knowledge is being produced*: comparative analysis of the ways in which local contexts condition the production of Islamic knowledge. European countries have different policies concerning Islamic education, the admission of imams and preachers, Muslim media, associations of Muslims, etc., and different conceptions of the degree to which Muslim immigrants are expected to integrate and assimilate themselves.

– *Islamic institutions*: a third important perspective is that of the institutions in and by which Islamic knowledge is being produced or reproduced. These obviously include the mosque and Qur'an courses and institutes of formal or informal Islamic education, but also state schools. Muslim associations, broadcasting corporations and other media, and embassies of Muslim countries are to be considered. Since *istifta*, the requesting of an authoritative opinion, is such a central process in the development of Islamic knowledge everywhere, special attention should be paid to the various institutions that issue fatwas (including the electronic media).

– *The establishment of religious authority*: Who are considered as authorities whose counsel is heeded, and why? How do they establish their authority, and what are the means by which they attempt to consolidate it? Is a shift occurring from dependence on authorities in the countries of origin to reliance on authorities based in Western Europe? Mosque imams appear to be far more influential in the diaspora than in the home countries, at least in part because of the pastoral role and authority attributed to them by local governments and other institutions, and in part because of the different functions the mosque fulfils in the diaspora. What strategies are used to establish or to de-legitimize the authority of certain imams? How and by whom can their authority be overruled? How authoritative are the Muslim thinkers who publish books and articles in European languages, and how influential are their writings?

– *Transnationalism*: another important perspective is the transnational dimension of the processes concerned. It is useful to distinguish the transnational relations of migrant communities and their homeland from those amongst migrants of the same cultural background living in various European countries, and even from the relations transcending ethnic or national boundaries as well as state boundaries.

States such as Turkey and Morocco are making great efforts to keep their (former) subjects under control, and they are actively promoting their respective official versions of Islam among the European Muslim communities. Oppositional religious movements from these countries use the relative freedom of Western Europe to spread dissenting messages among the migrant communities in various European countries in the hope of using these as a stepping stone for political action at home. A wide variety of *da'wa*

movements, from the puritan and fundamentalist to the *tasawwuf* oriented, are propagating rival versions of allegedly universal Islamic messages to audiences irrespective of ethnicity and nationality.

– *The ethnic dimension*: the major fault lines cutting through the Muslim communities in Western Europe are those of country of origin and ethnicity. (These two factors should not be superimposed, as the examples of Turkish-Kurdish relations and Arab-Berber relations indicate.) One would expect these factors to gradually decline in importance. Associations, networks and authority figures that attract members and followers across ethnic and national boundaries deserve special attention, for this is where European forms of Islam are likely to emerge.

– *The new media*: these and some of the 'older' media as well play a crucial part in the production of Islamic knowledge in Europe. Due attention should therefore be paid to the role of print and electronic media in producing Islamic knowledge. It is also important to discover to what extent the new media usher in new types and modalities of communication, and what this means for the contents of communication. Materials to be studied include fatwas and sermons (in all forms of media), discussion lists, chat boxes and websites on the internet, films or television programmes with religious themes, popular novels, soap operas and documentaries.

– *Production, reception and reproduction of Islamic knowledge in Western Europe*: the production of new Islamic discourses is only relevant insofar as these discourses also find acceptance by the Muslim communities in Europe. The reception of Islamic knowledge is a subject deserving serious research in itself. What does the second generation of Muslim immigrants learn about Islam, and what do the European converts learn? Where and how do they seek knowledge, which questions do they ask, and what answers do they find?

– *Islam as the living praxis of Muslims*: inevitably new practices are developing among Muslims in Western Europe in the fields of marriage and the family, economic enterprise, inter-religious relations, political empowerment, social security, and the relations with the state. Insofar as those concerned believe that these practices are in some sense Islamic or part of a Muslim culture with which they identify, they represent a practical knowledge of Islam, even though some of these practices may be at odds with scripturalist Islam as defined by the *ulama*.

This issue of the *ISIM Newsletter* contains a special section, 'Features', which deals specifically with the production of Islamic knowledge in Western Europe. Bava (p.7), Jonker (p.8) and Kehl (p.9) offer additional insight into this dynamic field of research.

For further information, please contact the ISIM secretariat or consult the ISIM website:  
<http://www.isim.nl/isim/research/programmes/islamknowledge.htm>