Urban Islam Rethinking the Familiar

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Rethinking the Familiar

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As curators of the exhibition, we experienced the challenge to communicate, in an encapsulated yet comprehensible form, our academic insights in the contexts in which Islam is lived and reproduced by ordinary Muslims. In addition, the making of the exhibition concurred with a heightening of the tensions surrounding Islam and Muslim cultures in Dutch society, which put considerable pressure on our project. We were faced with how to present a new perspective on Muslim religious life when public opinion and common knowledge of Islam were quite limitedly and negatively defined. Is it possible to make an exhibition that is neither pedantic nor apologetic?

Rethinking the familiar

Urban Islam intends to broaden and deepen visitors' views of Islam, to make them rethink their opinions about Islam as well as their relation to the available sources of information. In order to do so, *Urban Islam* presents the personal stories of young Muslims living in five modern cities around the globe; Amsterdam, Dakar, Istanbul, Marrakech, and Paramaribo. The personal views and stories represent a particular context specific for the society in which the young protagonists dwell. In this way, not only individual interpretations and personal perspectives on Islam are highlighted but also the different social, political and cultural contexts with which religious life interacts. For instance, secondary school teacher Ferhat from Istanbul explains what secularism in Turkey aspires for; and how deeply it has influenced his lifestyle. While he identifies himself as a real Kemalist, a secular Muslim and a westernized Turk, fragments of daily newspapers are displayed to point to the ongoing discussions in Turkey on the meanings of westernization, modernity, and place of Islam in public life. The newspaper headlines reflect the major divisions in society with respect to the headscarf—is it against secularism or not?—and the expression of religious identity in public space—should religion be confined to the private sphere?

Image from the exhibition *Urban Islam*

Ik ben westers en moslim?
"I'm Western and Muslim"

In December 2003 a new exhibition on Islam opened at the KIT Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. This comprehensive exhibition entitled *Urban Islam* is the first one of its kind in the Netherlands to explore the modern aspects of Islam in different parts of the world. *Urban Islam* aims to present a thought-provoking view on Islam by highlighting the complex and dynamic contexts that shape religious ideas and practices in Muslim societies.

come the protagonists. On a large screen several Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants of Amsterdam give their opinions on issues regarding the place of Islam in Dutch society. Visitors are challenged to share a glimpse of their own views by selecting one of the opinions expressed on the screen. In this way visitors encounter diverging ideas about Islam while forming their own by participating in a virtual discussion.

The Dutch public's knowledge of Islam is shaped by media images, discussions on Muslim minorities in the Netherlands, and representations of Islam in cultural institutes such as museums. In this context, *Urban Islam* can be considered as the makers' statement against discussions on Islam and Muslims in the West, and the Netherlands in particular. It argues to approach religion and society from a human perspective. By centring on personal stories and experiences in everyday life *Urban Islam* distances itself from a-historical and oversimplified representations of Islam. It sketches an image of Islamic practice in the context of social and political relations, of personal choices, economic difficulties, and globalization in modern urban areas.

During the exhibition period, the debate on Islam became more aggressive and one-sided. Several well-known Dutch opinion leaders who advocate a deliberate approach to Islam are reproached for being "politically correct" and too lenient on Muslims. While almost any incident involving Muslims causes a huge outcry in the Dutch media, the critical message of *Urban Islam* is largely ignored in public debate. Given the current political climate, it simply does not seem expedient to challenge the oversimplified portrayal of Islam in Dutch imagery. The experiences of *Urban Islam* reflect some of the difficulties of cultural institutions, like the KIT Tropenmuseum, to engage into the public debate on Islam in a political climate in which a more balanced approach is considered an unwanted deviation from the norm.

Islam gets discursively defined in a two-camped futile discussion in the Netherlands. This discussion is a process where non-Muslims and Muslims define themselves against each other while framing the notion of Islam. The current debate on Islam in the Netherlands is actually an essentialist discourse about what Islam "is." It attempts to make Islam meaningful for the Dutch context by trying to systematize, organize, and categorize a faith that is diversely practiced and interpreted in different parts of the world. The difficulty with this "disciplining" discussion, besides frustrating its participants, is that it can never completely cover Islam—or any other religion. A discursive definition of Islam does not always correspond with what is on the ground. This clash between theory and practice is perhaps an appropriate starting point for rethinking the idea of a "clash of civilizations."

Re-contextualizing Islam

Next to these four foreign cities where young individuals present their lives, *Urban Islam* also brings Islam to the Netherlands. Amsterdam is designed in a manner slightly different from the other cities. The display is an arena, a symbol for the often-passionate debate about Islam in the Netherlands. The arena serves as a multimedia platform in which the visitors themselves be-