

# Research Approaches and Thematic Profile

## *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World*

**The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern world (ISIM) promotes interdisciplinary scholarship on social and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities. It will coordinate and carry out research on Muslim responses to the various challenges and opportunities associated with modernity, modernization, and processes of globalization. The Institute recognizes the relevance of traditional scholarship on Islam (Arabic philology, textual studies of the Qur'an, *hadith* and other texts, religious studies, etc.) to the understanding of contemporary processes, and will make optimal use of the available expertise in these fields.**

The Institute's *raison d'être*, however, is the fact that developments of great intellectual, social and political importance in the Muslim world have remained seriously under-researched in the social sciences and humanities. The Institute's research approaches are to be expressly interdisciplinary: they are to be grounded in social and cultural science theory and methodology (which implicitly means a rejection of obsolete essentialist conceptions of Islam) but will attach great importance to solid knowledge of the languages concerned and integrate, where this is relevant, the methodologies and accumulated insights of such disciplines as philology, literary criticism, Islamic studies, religious studies, history, legal studies, etc. The approaches are to be informed by critiques of orientalism and of positivist social science, without dogmatically rejecting the contributions of traditional disciplines.

The Institute will not concentrate its research on any single geographical area in the world of Islam. In the regional specializations of its staff, North Africa and the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, as well as the Muslim communities of Europe/the West will be represented. Research programmes will be comparative in the sense that they will be concerned with more than one region.

### Thematic Profile

Some of the most remarkable recent developments in the Muslim world correspond to the worldwide Islamic resurgence, first noticeable in the wake of the 1967 Israeli-Arab War and increasingly vigorous since the Iranian revolution. Political radicalism in the name of Islam is only one aspect of this development and not necessarily the most interesting from scholarly points of view. Following a period of apparent secularization (which was long believed to be inherent to modernization processes), Islam returned to the public sphere in most Muslim societies with vigour. The public expression of Islam is no longer primarily associated with the more 'backward' segments of society but precisely with relatively well-educated, socially rising groups, who do not reject all modernity but who embrace at least its technological aspects along with various conceptions of democratization. Recent developments in the Muslim world seem to show that secularization is not a necessary, inevitable concomitant of modernization.

The appeal of radical Islam to the rapidly growing underclass of marginalized, unemployed or underemployed youth in many Third

World cities is more often asserted than actually demonstrated. It is true that numerous Muslim preachers and writers address these classes or speak in their name, but the underprivileged often prefer quietistic, mystical-magical varieties of Islam to the politically radical. Be this as it may, both this potential constituency and the Muslim discourse specifically addressing it are new to Islam. The concern of Muslim thinkers with increasing social inequality has given rise also to new forms of Muslim social thought.

### Intellectual Challenges

Much creative effort in the Muslim world is directed towards the formulation of Islamic answers to the social, political, economic and intellectual challenges faced by these rapidly changing societies. Due to dramatically improved communication, Muslims are regularly confronted with moral and intellectual alternatives to their own convictions and values (i.e. other religious and philosophical systems with comparable claims to universality), in some cases backed up by economic and military superiority. They have had to reflect on such civil concepts as human rights, minority group rights and women's rights, popular sovereignty, accountability, democracy, representation and self-determination; define their attitude towards free-market liberalism and international law; and work out Islamic ethics of modern technological phenomena such as gender change, in vitro fertilization or cloning.

This intellectual challenge is not new, and its beginnings of course long predate the recent Islamic resurgence. Contemporary Muslim thought, although experiencing a quickening and perhaps a qualitative change, builds on the work of several generations of predecessors. Islamic responses to modernization (which often means colonization and westernization) go back to the 18th century, and they emerged in a context of, though often in reaction to, a learned tradition.

### Islam and the State

One aspect of the resurgence is the intensified debate on the relationship between Islam and the State. Virtually all states in the Muslim world have institutions and legislation that ultimately derive from the West, either adopted in deliberate imitation of, or initially imposed by, colonial regimes and retained by the first generations of post-colonial politicians. Efforts to accommodate those foreign borrowings and Islam with its divine Law also have precedents dating back to the 18th century, but they have significantly intensified recently. Several states have declared themselves Islamic and have made efforts to properly develop Islamic alternatives to, or adaptations of, institutions and legislation. Other states have integrated more *shari'ah* into their secular legislation, while also intervening in the teaching and development of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), the practice of *ifta'* (issuing authoritative opinions on questions of Muslim law) or the codification of the *shari'ah*. Even secular regimes such as those of Turkey and Tunisia have to make new compromises with Islam. In states where Muslims are in a minority position,



such as India, the terms of the equation between Islam and the State are different, but elements of Muslim law have also entered the jurisprudence of secular courts.

### Muslim Diasporas

The emergence of significant Muslim diasporas in the West as well as throughout the Muslim world itself is another recent development. Labour migration, study abroad, civil wars and political conflicts have caused tens of millions to spend parts of their lives, voluntarily or involuntarily, far away from their native lands. Muslim expatriate communities are not a new phenomenon as such; Arab and Persian Muslim trading communities have existed throughout Asia since the first centuries of Islam and have played a central role in the spread of Islam on that continent. Since the 1960s, however, there has been unprecedented growth of labour migrant communities. Students and political refugees have done much to organize and provide leadership to these communities, and improved communication techniques (air travel, phone and fax links, satellite television, computer networks) now link these communities with their home countries as well as with similar communities elsewhere. Dispersed expatriate communities have thus become integrated into diasporas that are increasingly transnationally organized. Islam has been an important factor in the process of diaspora formation (the mosque is perhaps the diasporas' most prominent institution), and it has in turn become more important in the lives of the communities. Debates and developments within Islam in the home countries have an impact on the diasporas and may generate freer and more creative debate there because of, for instance, less restricted freedom of expression. In return, developments in the diaspora may greatly affect the home country.

Diasporas have inherently ambivalent relations with both their host countries and their countries of origin. Both states perceive these diasporas as potential threats and make efforts to bring them under control. Members of the diaspora may lay claims to civil rights in both countries but often feel rejected by both as well. Diasporas may, on the other hand, also serve as interfaces and channels of communication between the two countries and their cultures. Insofar as the diasporas are increasingly transnational, new orientations may be emerging, more diffuse than those to home and host country. These developments are of great theoretical and political importance, and of direct relevance to the ongoing debates in the Netherlands and other European countries on 'multicultural society' and on 'social cohesion'.

Increasing mobility and improved communications have not only resulted in the formation of significant Muslim minorities throughout

the non-Muslim world (and new immigrant communities, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in all Muslim countries). They have also brought ethnic and religious minority communities in the Muslim world (e.g. Alevi in Turkey, Ahmadi and Shi'is in Pakistan) into closer and more regular contact with the surrounding majorities, which has resulted in various forms of accommodation, adaptation, or conflict.

### Transnational Islam

Related to the above is the great increase in the flow of people and ideas across the globe and the multiplication of centres from which Islamic ideas are disseminated. Traditional Muslim education always used to involve a certain amount of travel to different teachers and schools, and confrontation with different environments; but in this respect, too, there has been a qualitative change. Mass literacy and the new media are reaching much wider audiences than were ever touched by traditional Muslim education. The same media convey also other than Islamic messages, which forces Muslims of all levels of education to formulate their beliefs and values in contrast to alternatives.

A whole range of Muslim international and transnational institutions has come into existence, from inter-governmental forums to Islamic investment banks and international Islamic universities. Some institutions, such as the Muslim World League and the World Association of Muslim Youth, have extensive international bureaucracies and are largely deterritorialized. Others, such as the Muslim Foundation or the Institute for Muslim Minority Affairs, are based in the West, which has contributed to their detachment from specific national or regional ties. Muslim diasporas, though not renouncing ethnic/national ties to their home countries, are also playing key roles in the establishment of transnational (or non-national) Muslim institutions in the 'guest countries'.

Modern *da'wa* movements were once 'national' in that they concentrated their activities mostly in one country, but there are now a growing number of transnational *da'wa* movements. Local forms of Islam no longer are contrasted primarily with a privileged (and highly idealized) Arabian Islam as the source of inspiration for reformers. New transnational forms of Islam offer themselves as the models to be emulated. The originally Indian movement, Tablighi Jama'ah, has grown into a multinational network of *da'is* ('missionaries') stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The thought and organization of Egypt's Muslim Brothers are not only emulated in other Arab states but have had a significant impact in countries as Turkey and Indonesia. Iranian shi'i thinkers have, since the Islamic Revolution, exerted a considerable influence on Muslim discourse in many Sunni countries. A branch of Turkey's Nurcu movement has established an impressive network of schools in the Central Asian republics. Muslim thinkers based in European and North American universities contribute significantly to new Muslim discourses that are less nationally grounded. ◆