

CIE

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Islam and Racism in Europe

The Centre for Islam in Europe (CIE) held its inaugural conference on 25 October 2000 in Ghent. The conference, held at Ghent University, was organized by the CIE in close collaboration with the Flemish Muslim association, VOEM (Association for the Education and Emancipation of Muslims). At the occasion, two new courses were jointly inaugurated: 'Islam in Europe's Secular States' and 'Racism and Representation'. They will be taught by two leading members of the CIE: Prof. Herman de Ley and Prof. Jan Blommaert, respectively.

The conference was chaired by Mrs Meryem Kanmaz, researcher at the CIE, and opened with a welcome address by Prof. Johnny Devreker, Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He stressed the innovation and uniqueness of both courses in Flanders. They confirm, in an exemplary fashion, the distinct social profile of Ghent University as a pluralistic institution that 'welcomes all students whatever their philosophical, political, cultural, and social background' (Charter of GU, Paragraph 1). Prof. Blommaert, in his inaugural lecture, spoke of 'racism as a perspective: on the ideological character of racism'. Racism must not be reduced to an individual attitude: the structuring and spreading of racist ideas are closely interwoven with existing social structures. As a consequence, racism is related to power systems. At the same time, it is not just a matter of ideas: there is a close link with behaviour as well. Besides being an ideology, though, racism should also be viewed as a kind of *episteme*: it is a structured way of producing 'facts' and 'knowledge' on social phenomena.

Prof. Blommaert was joined by Dr Thijl Sunier (head researcher at Erasmus Univer-

sity, Rotterdam), who had been invited as a guest speaker. The subject of his lecture was 'Muslims as a policy category and an object of research: The role of Islam in policies of integration in the Netherlands'. The lecture gave a critical review of the consecutive policies and debates in the Netherlands since the 1960s. The intervention by publicist Scheffers at the start of this year confirmed the definitive transition from the former tolerant policy of multiculturalism towards that of an enforced civic integration (*inburgering*) of minorities.

The second course was inaugurated by Prof. De Ley with a lecture entitled 'Muslims in the Belgian secular state: what secular state?' He introduced his lecture with a particular case, viz. the practical problems an inhabitant of Ghent had recently been confronted with in order to provide an Islamic burial for an Iraqi refugee killed in a traffic accident. Prof. De Ley stated that for too long Muslims living in Europe have been subjected to a debate on Islam and secularism as a kind of precondition to be granted the basic rights guaranteed by the European constitutions. When Muslims are refused a dignified burial in the name of 'secularism', European secularism itself has to be critically examined and updated. Many Muslim intellectuals, philosophers, and sociologists inside and outside the Western world offer interesting contributions to this debate that is vital to our democratic future.

The international guest speaker for this second course was Prof. Tariq Ramadan (Collège de Genève and Université de Fribourg), one of today's leading European intellectuals. In his lecture, entitled 'To be a

European Muslim', he forcefully pleaded for the right of Europe's Muslims to be recognized as fully qualified citizens, while preserving their Muslim identities. 'Not one political constitution in Europe requires Muslims to be less Muslim in order to be accepted as a citizen', he stated. Muslims, for their part, have to learn to differentiate between their religion and the cultural traditions that they brought to Europe as immigrants; at the same time, they have to appropriate Europe's cultural traditions. That way they will be able to construct a 'European Islam' while respecting the universal fundamentals of their faith.

The last speaker was Mr Youssef Souissi, president of the VOEM. In a short speech, he stressed the importance for Muslim citizens in European countries to be not only 'recognized' and 'known', but also to be 'seen'. This public visibility does not only apply to some dress codes (such as the headscarf), but also to religious practices such as the *adhân*, and architectural contributions to the urban environment – i.e. the building of real mosques instead of the presently-used old garages, supermarkets or factories.

The inaugural session was concluded with a festive gathering including a Moroccan tea ceremony, accompanied by a recital of oriental music and an exhibition of calligraphy by master Kakayi (living and working in Ghent).

The afternoon session was attended by several hundred people, not only students and academics, but also many Muslim and non-Muslim field workers and activists from all over Flanders, and from Brussels and the Netherlands. There was a conspicuous presence of a large number of young Muslims.

Thanks to the dedication of everyone involved, this inaugural conference earned outstanding academic, social and intercultural merit. ◆

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