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Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Religion and Modernity

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### Citation

Herrera, L. (2005). Religion and Modernity. *Isim Review*, 15(1), 53-53. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16985>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16985>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Religion and Modernity

Rarely does one get the opportunity to hear three celebrated yet highly diverse speakers interact on a subject of such immense importance as religion and modernity. This full-day conference featured lively debates from the three recipients of the 2004 Erasmus Prize, Abdulkarim Soroush, Iranian historian and

philosopher of science and Islamic mysticism dubbed the "Erasmus of Islam," Sadik Al-Azm, Syrian retired professor of Modern European Philosophy and writer on Arab politics, and Fatema Mernissi, Moroccan scholar of political science and advocate of women's rights. All three awardees, in addition to their considerable scholarly contributions, are well known for their roles as public intellectuals. Throughout the conference they ventured into the three general thematic areas: the relationship between Islam and democracy, the impact of the satellite and Internet culture on Islamic identities, and the relationship between secularization and modernity. While their focus was to a large degree on Muslim majority societies in the Middle East, they also raised questions about the position of Muslim and other religious minorities in Europe and the US.

An illustration of the thought-provoking diversity of approaches to religion and modernity can be found in the topic of secularism. Sadik Al-Azm addressed secularism through an analysis of political systems and nation-states. In his discussion of democratization in the Middle East, for example, he pointed out the need for political reform in Arab states and noted that Turkey was the most successful model of a secular, democratic, and "reasonably free" state in the Muslim Middle East. He further underlined that by being granted EU-membership, Turkey would have the necessary support to further develop and mature. Soroush, on the other hand, took a philosophy-centred approach to secularism and social change. He argued that with the demise of rational philosophy in early Islam, Islamic civilization has leaned disproportion-

**On the occasion of the 2004 Erasmus Prize, the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation organized a one-day conference on Religion and Modernity in coordination with the ISIM and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development. The conference was held on 3 November in Park Plaza, Amsterdam.**

ately towards law, and has consequently lost its balance. He stressed the need for Muslims to accommodate new theories and ideas and to be flexible in their use of intellectual tools since, "tools are not holy or sacred." Politics and philosophy respectively constituted the paths to democratic social reform.

In her exposition on the potentials of new communication technologies, Fatema Mernissi drew attention to yet other means of democratization. She pointed out how Arab satellite television and the Internet are providing not only an increasingly wider platform for public debate, but setting higher professional standards. She also drew attention to the paradox of how new media in the Arab world serves to forge an Arab identity on the one hand, yet contributes to a more universal or globalized identity on the other.

The conference took an unexpected turn when Sadik Al-Azm, in the spirit of finding solutions to conflicts among Muslims, called for Sunni religious leaderships to apologize to the Shi'a for "that mother of all crimes," the murder of the Prophet's grandson Husayn in Karbala in year 61 (of the Muslim calendar). The distinguished Sunni discussant on his panel, Egyptian professor Nasr Hamid Abou Zayd, turned to his fellow panellist Soroush, a Shi'a, and bowed in apology as they shook hands warmly. If only past wrongs could always be put right with such gracious lightheartedness.

LINDA HERRERA



PHOTO BY INEKE OOSTVEEN, 2004

**Abdulkarim Soroush, Sadik Al-Azm, Fatema Mernissi, Amsterdam**

## ISIM EVENTS

18–19 February 2005

**Workshop:**  
"The Making of Muslim Youths:  
Youths Politics and Cultures in Muslim  
Societies and Communities"

Venue: Leiden University  
Organizers: ISIM and IIAS  
Convenor: Asef Bayat

25 February 2005

**ISIM/ IMES Lecture**  
"Young Muslims in the Netherlands:  
The Search for a True Islam"

Lecture by *Martijn de Koning (ISIM)*  
Discussant: Thijl Sunier (University of  
Amsterdam / IMES)  
Chair: Lenie Brouwer (Free University  
Amsterdam)  
Venue: University of Amsterdam  
Time: 15:00-17:00 hrs

2–3 April 2005

**Editorial Board Meeting of ISIM/  
Rights at Home Project**

Venue: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Convenor: Abdulkader Tayob

15–16 April 2005

**Workshop**  
"Muslim Fashions - Fashionable Muslims"

Venue: University of Amsterdam  
Convenor: Annelies Moors

26 April 2005

**Inaugural Lecture**  
Prof. Asef Bayat (ISIM Academic Director  
and ISIM Chair at Leiden University)

Venue: Academieggebouw, Leiden University  
Time: 16:00 hrs

27–28 April 2005

**Conference**  
"Iran on the Move: Social Transformation  
in the Islamic Republic"

Venue: Leiden University  
Organizers: ISIM, Oxford University, & University  
of Swansea  
Convenor: Asef Bayat

16 June 2005

**Workshop**  
"Islam as Religion in African Public  
Spheres"

Venue: Leiden University  
Convenor: Abdulkader Tayob

7–9 July 2005

**Conference**  
"Dissemination of Religious Authority  
in Indonesia"

Venue: Bogor, Indonesia  
Organizers: IIAS & ISIM  
Convenor: Martin van Bruinessen  
and Nico Kaptein

For more information on ISIM events see  
[www.isim.nl](http://www.isim.nl)

## ISIM/AUP BOOK SERIES

**ISIM Series at AUP on  
Contemporary Muslim Societies and Communities**

The ISIM has launched a refereed monograph series with Amsterdam University Press (AUP, see [www.aup.nl](http://www.aup.nl)) on social, cultural, and political trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities. The ISIM Editors invite authors to submit book proposals based on empirical research informed by theories and methodologies from the social sciences and humanities. Guidelines for preparing a book proposal and manuscript are available on [www.isim.nl](http://www.isim.nl) under Publications.

For further information contact the Editors at [review@isim.nl](mailto:review@isim.nl).

## MARY BAKKER LEAVES ISIM

Mary Bakker will sadly leave the ISIM in March 2005. She has worked for the ISIM from the very start of the institute in 1998 as administrative coordinator, taking care of a wide range of organizational affairs. Mary Bakker studied Indonesian languages and cultures at Leiden University and coordinated the Indonesian-Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies (INIS) before joining the ISIM. Her input has been vital in matters of personnel and budgets, but above all in receiving the many fellows and guests of the ISIM. Her keen sense of detail and warm collegiality will surely be missed. From March onwards Mary Bakker will run *Chambres d'Hôtes* in France (see [www.laroseaiefrance.com](http://www.laroseaiefrance.com)).