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Muslim Minorities and European Identities

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International Workshop
EKKEHARD RUDOLPH

Muslim minorities, having been part of European societies for generations, are currently going through a profound process of transformation and differentiation. At the same time Europe is confronted with the rapid process of political and economic integration, which raises urgent questions on the state of cultural and social cohesion. In this context the role of Muslim immigrants within outwardly secular-defined societies is increasingly reflected in public as well as in academic discourse. The international workshop on 'Muslim Minority Societies in Europe', convened from 2-3 March 2001 at the University of Erfurt, was inspired by this dynamic European debate.

As Jamal Malik, initiator of the workshop, pointed out, Islam is constantly being shaped and constructed by Muslims as actors. This means that one has to deal with controversial manifestations of Islam in Europe, a reality more or less neglected in the public debate. The workshop emphasized the notion of societies insofar as they are able to set norms and to participate in the hegemonic discourse. The workshop also looked at Europe as a geo-political and cultural space characterized by an ongoing discussion about its identity and its boundaries.

Of the three panels, the first was devoted to the process of institutionalization within Muslim minorities in Europe. The second panel paid attention to the interaction between Muslims and their societies of residence in the social, political and legal spheres. In the third panel participants discussed the ways Muslims of different backgrounds, generation and gender understand, use and transform public spaces.

Ziauddin Sardar, British-Pakistani scholar and critic (London), raised thought-provoking questions. He stated that Muslims often perceive their history to be somewhat

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'frozen in time'. Both Muslims and native Europeans are dependent on such 'frozen images', which cause acute problems of identities. To him a solution would require synthesis, meaning appreciation of the integral role of Islam in the shaping of Europe's past, present and future; and acknowledgement that Muslims must transcend their 'frozen' history and reformulate Islam as a contemporary global worldview. The development of a new Muslim identity then is intimately connected to the development of a new European identity.

Ataullah Siddiqui (Islamic Foundation, Leicester) also pointed to the identity problem when analysing the situation of the Muslim youth in Britain. According to him, Europe has a large number of 'Muslims without Islam', which belong to a silent majority. This was contrasted to the media's mostly 'noisy picture of Islam'.

Some participants highlighted the ambivalent role of written tradition in the community-building process. P.S. van Koningsveld (Leiden University) emphasized the value of texts distributed, for example, in a great number of Muslim periodicals. He proposed that these sources should be preserved and analysed in the framework of a European research project.

Stefano Allievi (University of Padova) pointed to the role of global networks and

mass media to demonstrate that new communication technology helps create new transnational Muslim communities.

Gerdien Jonker (Philipps University Marburg), whose research was based on the Islamic Cultural Centres in Europe (Süleyman-cilar), demonstrated the ability of an influential Turkish-Muslim organization to find a successful balance between continuity and change in its religious ideas and structures. Günter Seufert (Istanbul Institute of the German Oriental Society) dealt with the Turkish state's reactions to institutionalized Islam in the European Union. Pnina Werbner (Keele University) spoke on Sufi networks in Britain, based on empirical research in the area of Manchester which underlined the flexibility and transnational perspectives of British-Pakistani immigrants in the UK.

Referring to the influence of satellite TV on Muslim immigrants in Sweden, Anne-Sofie Roald (University of Malmö) showed the ambivalent relationship of Muslim communities to their countries of residence. She questioned whether media consumption had an integrating or segregating effect.

Paul Weller (University of Derby), in his contribution on the prestigious Discrimination project supported by the British Home Office, explained that Britain's state law against religious discrimination is highly debated. Jocelyne Cesari (Columbia University,

New York) asked whether pluralism offered a means for common agreement on cultural, political and religious values within European societies or whether we are unable to move beyond shallow civility. Mathias Rohe (University of Erlangen) dealt with the issue of adjusting the *shari'a* to the situation of Muslim believers in a non-Muslim context. Finally, Valérie Amiraux (European University Institute, Florence) reminded the participants of the inconvenient but necessary task of a critical evaluation of scientific production.

One of the results of the workshop in Erfurt is the awareness that concepts such as diversity or pluralism of cultures do not sufficiently meet the concern and self-understanding of Muslim minorities in their interaction with majority societies in Europe. In the course of the debate it became clear that 'transnationality' or 'translocality' offer more suitable conceptual frames for future inter-cultural studies.

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