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ISIM Workshop: Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges
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Institutional Activities

MARTIN VAN BRUIJESSEN

From 26-28 April 2000, twelve prominent Muslim thinkers from a wide range of regional backgrounds (Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Africa and the European diaspora) met at an ISIM workshop to discuss some of the major intellectual and political challenges facing the Muslim world at present. Each of them presented a paper on an important aspect of the encounter with modernity, to which he or she had been devoting much thought recently. Several of the papers explicitly addressed the question of compatibility between Islam and modernity (or rather, as several participants emphasized, interpretations of Islam and conceptions of modernity). Some engaged in such sensitive issues as minority rights, women's rights and pluralism and called for the development of a contemporary religious discourse based on rights to balance the traditional emphasis on obligations or contributed to a theory of civil society. Others focused on (reformist revisions of) the relationship between the sacred texts, context and contemporary discourse.

The development of contemporary Muslim thought constitutes one of ISIM's primary areas of research interest, and by providing a platform for discussions between leading

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thinkers from various parts of the Muslim world and for meetings between Muslim intellectuals and scholars studying the Muslim world, ISIM hopes to play a stimulating role in both intellectual worlds. The April 2000 workshop was intended in the first place as a forum for Muslim thinkers from different cultures to exchange ideas and experiences and to identify the most important themes for further debate. In order to allow the discussions to be as frank and unrestrained as possible, the workshop was not public and only a small number of scholars and students attended. (Edited versions of the papers and excerpts of the discussions will, however, soon be pub-

lished on the ISIM website.) Parallel to the workshop were a number of public events involving the participants, including public lectures for academic and general audiences in the Netherlands and a panel discussion with an audience of second-generation young Muslims living in the Netherlands (see the boxes).

The participants

Those attending the workshop represented all the major regions of the Muslim world, from the Maghreb to Indonesia and South Africa, and a great diversity of views. All were invited because of their contributions to public debate in their own countries, and as had been hoped, their coming together gave rise to stimulating discussions. The participants and the titles of their contributions were as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh, a prominent representative of Iranian Islamic feminism, book-publisher and chief editor of the Iranian journal of women's studies *Farzaneh*, and an active participant in the present reform movement in Iran: 'Islamic feminism in Iran'.
- Saif Abdel Fatah, political scientist at Cairo University, previously affiliated with the International Institute of Islamic Thought, concerned with the question whether modern political concepts such as civil society have an authentic counterpart in the intellectual heritage of Islam: 'Umma institutions and civil society in Islamic thought and practice'.
- Nasr Abu Zayd, Egyptian Muslim thinker and professor of Arabic literature whose critical research on the sacred texts of Islam aroused so much controversy that in 1995 he had to leave his country for the Netherlands, where he is now affiliated with Leiden University: 'Codification of the Shari'ah in Egypt: a problem of power struggle'.
- Asghar Ali Engineer, prominent liberal Muslim thinker in India, concerned with the democratization of the Muslim community and known for his efforts to develop an Islamic theology of liberation: 'Islam and modernization: compatibility and values'.
- Khira Chibani, professor of philosophy at Zaytuna University, Tunis: 'Civil society and the problematics of identity'.
- Abdelmajid Charfi, professor of humanities and Islamic studies at the University of Manouba (Tunisia), presently at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin: 'Intellectual or psychological, sociological and cultural challenges?'.
- Nurcholish Madjid, the most prominent reformist Muslim thinker in Indonesia, who played an important role in the process of gradual democratization of that country: 'Reflections on the challenges and opportunities of Islam in the modern age: with special reference to Indonesia's current experimentation with democracy'.
- Ebrahim Moosa, South African Muslim reformist thinker, formerly active in the anti-apartheid movement in Cape Town; presently visiting professor of religious studies at Stanford University (USA): 'Islamic modernities revisited: a critique'.
- Farish A. Noor, Malaysian human rights activist, presently conducting research at the

Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin on the rise of the Islamist party PAS in Malaysia: 'From cultural authenticity to the politics of difference: Islamism's entry into Malaysian politics and its consequences'.

- Jalaluddin Rakhmat, prominent Muslim thinker, academic and educational reformer in Indonesia, who played an important role in introducing modern Shi'i thinkers such as Shari'ati and Mutahhari, and became a popular Sufi teacher in urban middle class circles: 'The revival of Sufism: Does it help? A Glance at the Modern Sufi Associations in Indonesia'.
- Tariq Ramadan, European-born Muslim intellectual of Egyptian origin, who now teaches at the University of Geneva, and who in his writings is particularly concerned with the issue of being a Muslim in Western secular society: 'Islam and Muslims in Europe. a silent revolution: towards rediscovery'.
- Abdul Karim Soroush, arguably the most influential contemporary Muslim thinker in Iran, often viewed as the successor of Ali Shari'ati but much more steeped in the philosophical and mystical tradition of the Iranian Shi'ah. Initially a supporter of the revolution, today his ideas play a significant role in the Iranian reform movement: 'Revised modernity versus revised Islam'.

Follow-up

It was agreed that edited versions of the papers and excerpts of the discussions first be published on ISIM's website. Additional contributions will be sought, and the participants will be requested to respond to each other's contributions, so that the workshop finds a continuation on the website. A number of smaller meetings will be organized in the future so as to pursue in greater depth a number of the themes that surfaced at the workshop. ♦

Public lectures

- Ebrahim Moosa (Cape Town, presently at Stanford University, California): 'Challenges to rethinking Islam', Leiden, Thursday, 27 April 2000.
- Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh (Tehran): 'Islamic feminism and its challenges: the Iranian experience', Amsterdam, Friday, 28 April 2000.
- Nurcholish Madjid (Jakarta): 'Tensions between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia: the present situation and prospects for the future', Amsterdam, Friday, 28 April 2000.

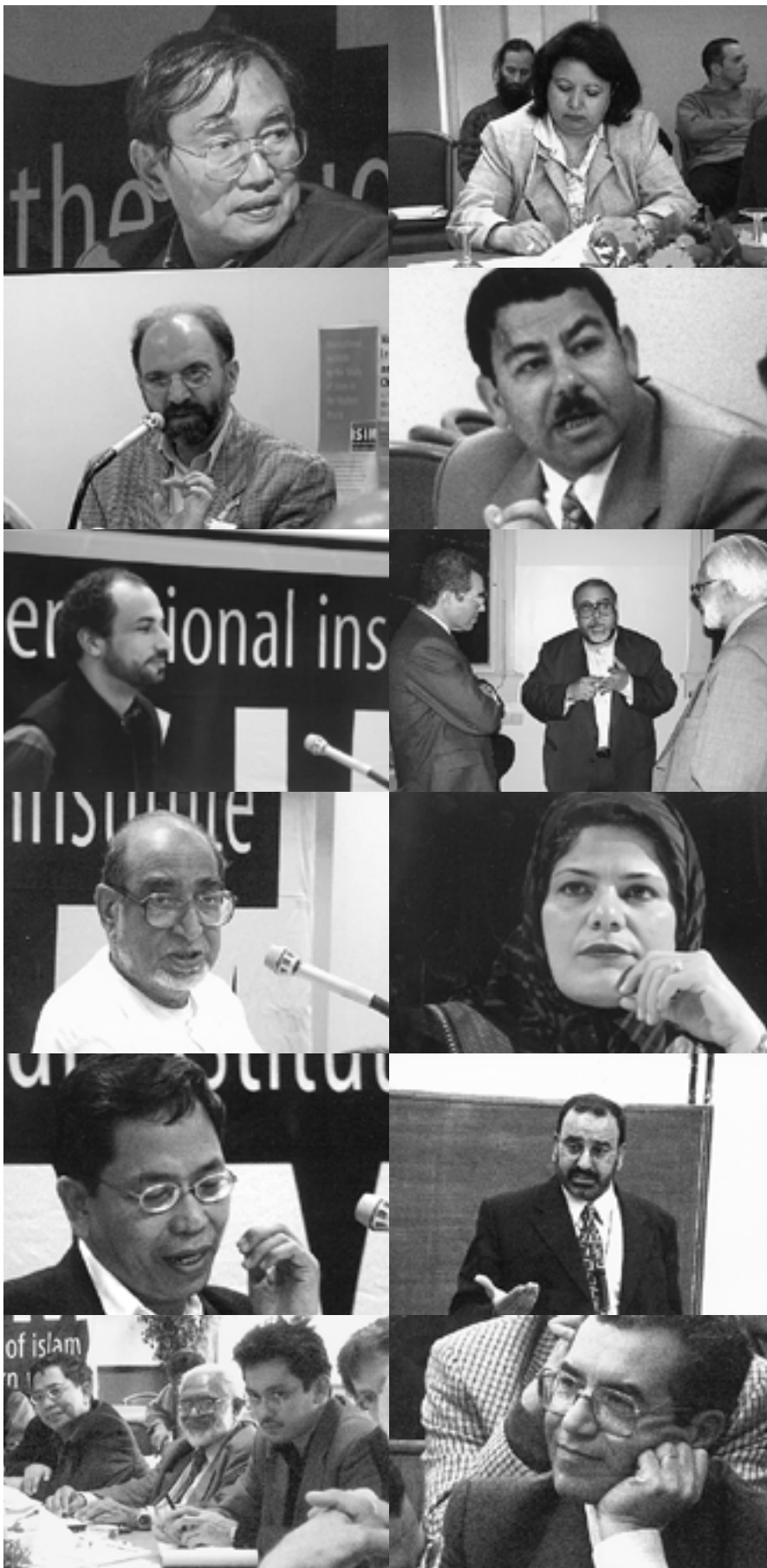
Panel Discussion

Utrecht, Wednesday 26 April 2000

In cooperation with a local Muslim counterpart, the Foundation for Higher Islamic Education, ISIM organized a meeting between young educated Muslims living in the Netherlands and four of the workshop participants, Asghar Ali Engineer, Jalaluddin Rakhmat, Tariq Ramadan and Abdul Karim Soroush. The panel attracted a large and enthusiastic audience; the speakers' thought-provoking comments gave rise to lively, and at certain moments heated, discussions.

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- ▶ Nurcholish Madjid
- ▶ ▶ Khira Chibani
- ▶ Abdul Karim Soroush
- ▶ ▶ Saif Abdel Fatah
- ▶ Tariq Ramadan
- ▶ ▶ Fltr: Abdelmajid Charfi, Nasr Abu Zayd, Muhammad Khalid Masud
- ▶ Asghar Ali Engineer
- ▶ ▶ Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh
- ▶ Jalaluddin Rakhmat
- ▶ ▶ Ebrahim Moosa
- ▶ Fltr: Nurcholish Madjid, Muhammad Khalid Masud, Farish A. Noor
- ▶ ▶ Abdelmajid Charfi



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