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Editorial

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The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) conducts and promotes interdisciplinary research on social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities. The ISIM has been established by the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University, Utrecht University, and the University of Nijmegen in response to a need for further research on contemporary developments of great social, political and cultural importance in the Muslim world from social science and humanities perspectives. The ISIM's research approaches are expressly interdisciplinary and comparative, covering a large geographic range which includes North Africa, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, South and South East Asia, and Muslim communities in the West. Broad in scope, the ISIM brings together all areas of disciplinary expertise in anthropology, sociology, religious studies, political science, and cultural studies.

During a recent visit to Tunis the French president Jacques Chirac explained the notion of *laïcité* (secularism) in a meeting with students of the local Lycée Français. He pointed out that the French, given their tradition of secularism, feel harassed by the assertion of ostentatious markers of religiosity. Therefore, in the eyes of the French, the wearing of veils in public schools is conceived as a hostile act and, as such, is unacceptable. But he expressed his conviction that Islam is compatible with French secularism, even though certain readings of Islam may be problematic. He explained, for instance, that if a Muslim woman refuses to be treated by a male medical doctor she is, in fact, contesting national regulations that are rooted in French civilization and this is not to be tolerated. According to Chirac the French are not so much prone to impose their values on others, rather they refuse to have their own culture contested. The French president was speaking to a sympathetic audience of Tunisian, French and other international students, but his message was also aimed at the home public on the eve of the publication of a report dealing with the *mode d'emploi de la laïcité* in the context of the proliferation of religious, mainly Islamic, signs in the public domain.

In Western Europe the increased presence of Islam is the subject of heated debate in which Islam is often seen as being incompatible with European culture. The national context of the debate varies and in some countries, like France, the government is more interventionist than elsewhere (Peter, p.20).

But the debates in Europe are becoming remarkably similar in content, particularly after 9/11 when questions increasingly concentrate on issues regarding 'real' and 'good' Islam as opposed to supposedly less constructive readings of Islam (Bonnefoy, p.22). Today, members of government and parliament in France and elsewhere are actively engaged in defining the 'proper' behaviour of Muslim citizens and with some regularity they transgress the sacred boundaries of separation between state and religion.

The debate coincides with the state-sponsored formation of representative Muslim councils in several countries. Representatives of Sunni mosque and welfare organizations tend to dominate these new bodies. It remains to be seen to what extent these new councils represent Muslim communities because many Muslims in Europe have little or no dealings with these more formal organizations, and quite a number of them have developed their own informal groups, such as those on the internet.

Beyond doubt it is the veil, whether the face-veil or headscarf, that represents the principle 'ostentatious' religious marker. Continuous incidents around veiling have put this practice at the centre of public apprehension. Apart from what veiling may reveal about gender relations, issues of veiling and measures introduced to discourage or ban (certain types of) veiling touch upon a number of other concerns, such as access to education and individual liberties, integration and cultural authenticity (See Herrera and Moors, p. 16 and Fazila-Yacoobali, p. 63 on the recent debates). Veiling is clearly not only a contentious issue in Europe; it is being debated in many Muslim countries where degrees of veiling are being negotiated and states implement policies that both impose and discourage veiling. The politics of veiling are highly complex, as was demonstrated during the Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi's recent visit to Europe. By her unveiled appearance at a Paris press conference in conjunction with her emphasis on her Muslim identity, she '... subtly implied that religious identity is a social construction, and that every member of the community has the right to participate in its definition. She is, therefore, pushing for a more inclusive and pluralistic definition of what it means to be Muslim and implying that the definition of religious identity cannot be monopolized by a government or the religious establishment.' (Shahrokni, p. 6). In an interview with a Dutch daily Ebadi expressed her concern about debates on the veil in Europe, commenting that forbidding veiling is no less problematic than prescribing it.

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