ISIM Annual Lecture
GUDRUN KRÄMER

On Difference and Understanding:
The Use and Abuse of the Study of Islam
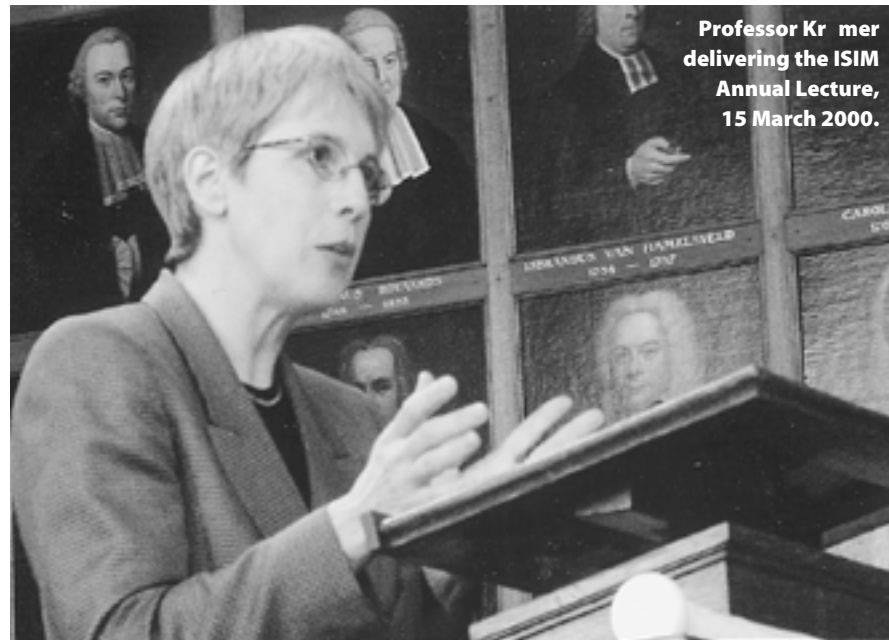
Why do we study Islam, and how should we do it? As usual, what appears like a simple question poses the most intricate problems. Compared to the 'how', the 'why' is relatively easy: culture is very much in fashion, and it has been so for a while. The 'cultural turn' is widely debated, not only in the humanities, but also in the social sciences. This includes the discipline I was first trained in and remain attached to: history. The cultural turn has made an impact on sociology and political science, and to a lesser extent on economics and law. Its strong appeal has certainly to do with politics, for there can be little doubt that the demise of the Soviet Empire and the intensification of ethnic conflict in many parts of the world have contributed towards giving so high a profile to matters of culture and identity. The fact that there should be a link to politics (and I hasten to emphasize that I do not subscribe to monocausal explanations) need not render the interest in culture and identity, variously and often ill-defined, suspect or illegitimate: I at least can see nothing intrinsically wrong with an approach that looks at politics, society, law and the economy with a greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural norms and aspirations. But there are disturbing aspects to this preoccupation with culture, if it is not an outright obsession; aggressive ethnic assertiveness on one hand, and the talk about a potential if not inescapable 'clash of civilizations' on the other, are among them. The latter in particular would not have found such fertile ground and reached so wide an audience, had it not been for the cultural turn in academic as well as in what is commonly considered to be 'real' life.

Professor Krämer delivering the ISIM Annual Lecture, 15 March 2000.

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The attraction of the cultural turn for the scholar is obvious: if culture is seen not as a separate compartment of life, let alone a system of its own, where literature, music and the arts belong (at least good literature and what in German is called serious music), but as a mobile configuration of patterns of perception, representation and conduct that guide and inspire the way we live our lives both individually and in communion with others, including society at large or any other community real or imagined, then much can be gained from a close scrutiny of these patterns and configurations: their making and unmaking, their complex interplay, their meaning to different people in different contexts, their ambiguities and contradictions, their variations over time and space, their adaptations and transformations. The risks involved in focusing on culture rather than the social order, power or the international system are equally obvious: there is a danger that economic reductionism as propagated not so much by Marx himself but by some of his more simpleminded adherents (or were they just simpleminded?) could be replaced by cultural determinism. There is a risk that intra-cultural choice, change and conflict be overlooked. This is difficult to avoid when culture is understood to be uniform, timeless and totalizing, creating discrete units that are fully integrated internally and sealed off by watertight boundaries against an outer world of equally distinct entities. But we could aspire to more sophistication. If the analogy of the personality that is sometimes used in this context was taken more seriously (for we used to hear much about the German or the Egyptian personality), the reductionist temptation could be resisted: no personality is fully integrated and free from contradictions, nor does it develop in splendid isolation. For the personality to grow it needs external stimuli. There is, to my mind, no way around taking culture seriously. It is a must for both the scholar and the politician. Culturalism, by contrast, is a trap studiously to be avoided.

The study of Islam serves to illustrate the point: dealing with Islam cannot but involve dealing with culture or civilization, and with the role of religion in defining the parameters of Islamic culture(s) or civilization(s), regardless of whether we put them in the singular or in the plural. Unlike Chinese, Indian or African studies, it does not really constitute an area study, for Islam is global and not restricted to any particular territory. Though it may sound offensive to say so, Islam has centres and peripheries, but the Middle East is no longer its only centre, at least not in intellectual terms, not to mention demography. The closest parallel to Islamic studies, I would argue, is Jewish studies. It is all the more regrettable that there should be so little comparative work, if any, examining the evolution, methods and organization of the two fields. One need not have to be of a deconstructivist bent to find particular interest in the kind of questions they ask and those they eschew, or exclude as taboo. The comparison would yield revealing insights into both disciplines.

Orientalism reconsidered

In Islamic studies, and here I use the term in the widest possible sense to include various area studies such as Turkish, Iranian or Indonesian studies in as far as they touch on Islam, the dangers of culturalism have been discussed at great length, only in this case culturalism has become known as orientalism, and orientalism is a very bad thing indeed. It is awkward enough to be addressed as an 'Islamist' rather than an 'Islamicist', as it frequently happens among the uninitiate, for there is after all a distinction between the practitioner of political Islam and the researcher studying the phenomenon. But as a self-respecting scholar, one would not nowadays want to be called an orientalist, much less so in Arabic where *mustashriq* (orientalist) comes perilously close to *mushrik* (pagan, heretic) – although it must be said that the connection is seldom explicitly made.

Orientalism, as we have learned, is a project that presents, or as many would say 'constructs' or 'represents', Islam as a distinct, homogeneous and timeless entity that is essentially defined by its normative texts, i.e. the Qur'an as divine word and the Sunna, or tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. For the unreformed orientalist, Muslims are sufficiently defined by their being Muslim. Little does it matter whether they live in Kuala Lumpur, Cairo or Karachi. They are over-determined by Islam. This is, of course, vintage culturalism. But orientalism, its critics continue, does not stop here: it 'constructs' Islam as the ultimate Other, using it as a negative foil against which the achievements of Western civilization, resting on the triple foundation of ancient Judaism, ancient Greece and the Christian faith, appear all the more glorious. Islam, by contrast, lacks the notion of liberty, a sense of responsibility both individual and civic, a spirit of scientific inquiry, an independent middle class, any kind of recognized community except the *umma*, etc., etc. If one adopts this logic, Islam is little but a 'cluster of absences' (Bryan S. Turner, who, to avoid any misunderstanding, does not share this view). There is little point in going into this list of 'what we have and Islam has not', though it would not be difficult to paint a much more nuanced picture. Our subject here is orientalism and its critique. To judge by their 'cluster of deficiencies', die-hard orientalists reveal not only an appalling lack of sense and sensibility. They pursue a political project that is intimately linked to colonialism past and present, and all the more powerful for its stark simplicity. Simplicity does not always equal innocence after all.

But the same is true for the critique of orientalism, or for that matter, the study of Islam if done by 'outsiders' more generally. It would come as a relief and a great encouragement to all those interested in Islam if orientalist-bashing were slowly to go out of fashion – inside the Muslim world as well as outside of it. Rather than pointing accusing fingers at certain scholars dead or alive, some of them eminent and others less so, it could prove useful and refreshing to take more notice of what is currently being done in the field, and not only in the English language. Much of it is based on rigorous self-examination that would do a puritan proud, or a strictly observant Sufi. The way out of the dilemma of taking culture seriously without making it the prime mover of history is, I think, not so much to join in the ritual denunciations of orientalism. Nor does it solve the problem to put the difficult terms in quotations marks, and therefore write 'Islam' rather than Islam, 'Islamic culture' rather than Islamic culture, and 'difference' rather than difference, or always to use the plural and so to consistently write Islam*s* or, to be entirely on the safe side, 'Islams'. That still leaves the possibility that there *is* something that could legitimately be referred to as Islam, or culture, or difference. And how can you have something in the plural anyway that does not exist in the singular, at least not for the scholar?

Unity / diversity

A more promising way to distance ourselves from primitive orientalism, as indeed we must, is to pay yet more attention to the dynamic and plural nature of Islam, and here it does not seem to matter much whether we use the singular or the plural. This corresponds to a marked tendency in the humanities and the social sciences to focus on actors rather than on systems, and therefore to concentrate on agency, practice and processes mediating between structures, or systems, on one hand and actors on the other. 'Negotiation' is the catchword here, taking us straight to the marketplace. I will come back to that. Scholars now insist on the openness of historical processes that are neither linear nor homogeneous ('contingency' is the word to be known here), focusing on countervailing forces to megatrends such as industrialization, modernization or globalization. They highlight intra-cultural variation rather than uniformity, intra-societal conflict rather than harmony, fragmentation rather than coherence. Gender studies have contributed much to this shift of emphasis and perspective. Historians have learned from anthropologists, and vice versa. Deconstructivists have spoken about the 'cacophony' of discourse(s) that characterizes any given situation. In our context, we should perhaps rather refer to a 'polyphony' of Muslim voices, for even though they are numerous the sound need not grate on the ear, as a cacophony does.

Yet even when we focus on plurality, polyphony and variation, major challenges remain, and they do so on several levels. Islamicists may insist on the plurality of Islam(s), they may use inverted commas to express their discomfort with essentializing terms, they may even deny that there is such a thing as Islam, or Islamic law, art or architecture. They may choose to talk about

discourses on Islamic history rather than Islamic history proper, suggesting that history proper does not exist, no matter whether Islamic or other: there still remains the fact that for ever so many Muslims, Islam is precisely the timeless, homogeneous and unique whole, the sum total of divinely ordained norms, values and aspirations Islamicists spend so much time and energy on 'deconstructing'. That they often do so in order to defend Islam (no inverted commas here) and the Muslims against those critics who seem unable to distinguish between the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a mullah in Cologne and the teachings of the Prophet as understood by Muslim communities in the Netherlands, adds to the irony of the situation. How then should the student of Islam deal with the firm convictions of the Muslim believer (that is to say: not just any Muslim regardless of his or her personal views)? For it will hardly do to summarily dismiss them as evidence of false consciousness.

Culture in the market-place

One way to reconcile the demands of intellectual integrity with the recognition of strong beliefs among those who are after all the principal partners of the students of Islam, and not just the object of their research, is to look at Islam as a repertory of references, textual, visual and other, that can be variously transmitted, but which under all circumstances require interpretation if they are to acquire force, and have done so from the very beginning of Islamic history (I do not hesitate to use the term). Interpretation is done by active minds, or to put it in current scientific jargon: it is premised on agency. To speak of a repertory of references that are continually re-interpreted, and re-defined, and frequently contested, without losing their status of norma-tivity for those involved, has a liberating effect. Among other things it frees students of Islam from the necessity to declare themselves on the highly sensitive issue of whether the Qur'an is actually God's word, and whether Muhammad was truly God's prophet, or indeed the last and final one in a long line of messengers that had been sent to humankind for God's will to be known. What matters is that Muslim believers view and revere them as such. Considering the explosive nature of the issue particularly in our times, this is an advantage not to be underestimated.

To put it bluntly then, it is not the task of those who study Islam to define Islam for the Muslim believer, to delimit its boundaries and to measure transgression. I would maintain that in spite of the current fascination with negotiated space, shifting boundaries and imagined communities, boundaries exist that cannot all be negotiated. The very notion of a repertory suggests that it is limited (or should I say 'bounded'?), and that it can be exhausted. To speak of negotiated space does not mean that 'anything goes'. Islam, Sayyid Qutb is said to have remarked, is flexible but not fluid. But it is not for the scholar to fix those boundaries. It is our task to unravel how in a given context the available (normative) references are selected, used and combined, and by whom, to what purpose and to what effect. In doing so we should perhaps be more careful when employing the market metaphor: shopping around for suitable references to uphold specific views and to further particular interests has not always been an option and may not always be one today. It is precisely more interesting to find out what references are available to specific people in specific situations. In many cases, the choice could turn out to be more restricted than it might appear to the scholar with full access to all kinds of ideas, sources and resources. At the same time I would be more cautious when speaking about inside and outside views, for in many situations the divide is by no means as clear as some seem to think. I see, at any rate, no reason why the 'understanding' of an urban middle-class academic of Muslim faith should by definition be more authoritative, and insightful, than the 'interpretation' of an urban middle-class academic of Hindu, Christian or uncertain leanings; otherwise European medievalists would not face the methodological problems that they do in trying to understand medieval history.

On difference and modesty

If the concept of 'understanding' culture(s), no matter whether it is done from the inside or the outside, is so problematic and Islam so elusive, why should we make the effort in the first place? There are, of course, practical reasons: the presence of growing numbers of Muslims in Western societies, not as migrants and visitors, but as integral parts of these societies; the rise of political Islam; the call for an application of the Sharia, for an Islamization of knowledge, etc. As is well known, these practical concerns are all too often tied to some sense of threat coming from Islam, or at least of a challenge to be faced. But there is another dimension that has little if anything to do with fear or confrontation: it involves curiosity, be it intellectual or of a seemingly less elevated nature. Curiosity presupposes difference, which in anthropology and oriental studies more specifically has fallen into such disrepute that many dare not use the word without visible signs of distaste. My initial motivation to study Islam was precisely the assumption that it was somehow different from the life I was familiar with. I wanted to know to what extent that was true and in which way – if it was true at all. There was incidentally little romanticism involved: orien-talist painting held no attraction for me, nor did I feel any desire to go native in the desert. My interest had to do with the possibility that there might be alternative ways of living and of thinking and of organizing society, and I assume that many of our students feel the same (unless, of course, they are looking for their roots…).

We are constantly faced with questions which are not predicated on a sense of distance or superiority that is so often associated with the notion of difference, or not necessarily so. If Muslims believe that there is such a thing as Islamic values, what are they? If Islamists advocate an 'Islamic order', what is so specific or possibly unique about it? Unlike many Islamists, I do not think that it has to be unique in order to merit attention. If the critics of modernization theory (simplified, unilinear modernization theory) consider the possibility that there might be several paths towards modernity, or that we should think in terms of plural modernities that transcend the Western model (of which, again, there are several), what exactly does this plurality exist of? Is it possible to distinguish a stable core of Islam, constituting its essence and foundation, from its more malleable elements that can adapt to the most diverse circumstances in order to make Islam, as the well-known formula has it, relevant to all times and places? And how does this correspond to the familiar claim that whereas techniques can be freely adopted from non-Islamic sources, Islamic values must by all means be preserved intact? It is certainly important to analyse the function of these claims and convictions. However, I do not think we should stop there, but look at content as well. Human rights, good governance or social justice provide excellent examples of what is at stake.

These are big questions, and they must be approached with modesty. But then, if I may be allowed a moral note at the end of my remarks, modesty may be a crucial prerequisite if we are to continue the study of Islam in all its rich diversity without falling into the trap of culturalism. This particular modesty code does not apply to women only, nor is it restricted to non-Muslims. The study of Islam is a joint venture. We all share the risks and the benefits – and the doubts. ◆

V A C A N C I E S

A consortium of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), The Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) and the Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies (CNWS) has initiated a project on *'The Dissemination of Religious Authority in 20th Century Indonesia'.* The project is part of the programme of the Netherlands-Indonesian Co-operation, funded by the Netherlands Minister of Education, Culture and Sciences.

The research project will deal with the study of four major themes:
(a) Traditional religious authority: *ulama* and *fatwa*;
(b) Mystical associations (*tarekat*) in urban communities;
(c) *Dakwa* (Muslim propagation) activities in urban communities; and
(d) Education and the dissemination of religious authority.

The project seeks:

4 Part-time Post-docs (each 0.5 fte)

to do research in one of the four themes
(a combination of two themes in 1.0 fte is negotiable).

Requirements:

Applicants should:
¶ hold a PhD degree in Islamic studies, the social sciences or another relevant discipline;
¶ have a solid disciplinary background which guarantees competent research on the subject;
¶ be familiar with Islam in Indonesia;
¶ have a good command of Indonesian.

Appointments:
¶ As soon as possible;
¶ Salaries will be according to Dutch faculty regulations;
¶ Appointments will be for a maximum of four years

Further information on these positions can be obtained from Professor Dr W.A.L. Stokhof (phone: +31-71-527 22 27; e-mail: iias@rullet.leidenuniv.nl).

Applications (including a curriculum vitae) should be sent before 1 August, 2000, to Professor Dr W.A.L. Stokhof, Director IIAS, P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.