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Reflections on Muslim Intellectual History

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Citation

El-Morabet, L. (2007). Reflections on Muslim Intellectual History. *Isim Review*, 19(1), 49-49. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17123>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17123>

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

ISIM/Conference

Reflections on Muslim Intellectual History

On 10 November 2006, ISIM organized a conference to honour Abdulkader Tayob's research and teaching activities as ISIM Chair at the Radboud University Nijmegen from 2002 to 2006. The conference brought together prominent scholars working on intellectual trends in the Muslim world.

In his own paper, Abdulkader Tayob reflected on the meaning of religion in Islamic states. By comparing the works of Ali Abd al-Raziq and Muhammed Rashid Rida, he illustrated how Muslim intellectuals have rethought the relation between religion and politics in modernity. This was followed by a presentation of Abdou Filali-Ansary (Aga Khan University), who argued that too narrow a focus on specific founding moments of Islam forms an obstacle for a serious rethinking of the faith and its implications for our time. He urged Muslims to take history seriously because this is vital in redefining and revitalizing Islam. Michiel Leezenberg (University of Amsterdam) presented a paper on the nineteenth century reception of Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldun. He argued that the rediscovery of both intellectuals should not be seen as a mere copying of colonial powers. In the nineteenth century, a new public sphere emerged in which academic works became part of a corpus of Arabic literature and thus a part of the Arabic heritage. Changes in language and relations between intellectuals show the gradual emergence of a public sphere along national lines.

Mona Abaza (American University in Cairo) discussed changes in the tanwir (enlightenment) discourse in Egypt, noting that tanwir is being appropriated by a multitude of actors, among whom are included the state and Islamists. Although the term was initially promoted to sell the idea of democracy, the overuse of tanwir has completely emptied the term of content. Muhammad Khalil Masud (Council of Islamic Ideol-

ogy in Pakistan), in his presentation, focused on debates surrounding the hudud ordinance in contemporary Pakistan which show that traditional thought can produce its own locally contextualized "modernity." In this debate, the arguments of Javer Ahmad Ghamidi, a prominent writer and media personality whose criticisms of hudud ordinances are particularly effective because he has the same traditionalist background as the proponents. Moving to the Indonesian context, Martin van Bruinessen (ISIM/Utrecht University) compared two prominent intellectuals of liberal Muslim thought. Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid, notwithstanding their different background, both emphasised the importance of religious freedom including minorities and defended cultural Islam. Their heritage is still present in the various NGO's despite the conservative turn in Islam in Indonesia.

The discussion by Roel Meijer (ISIM/Radboud University Nijmegen) shifted the discussion in a rather different direction. Focusing on the Saudi jihadist and self-made intellectual and Yusuf al-Ayiri, Meijer showed that action-oriented philosophies may have more currency among certain population groups than the more ephemeral ideas of most philosophers, and this is an aspect that rarely addressed in studies of al-Qaida. In the concluding presentation, Asef Bayat (ISIM/Leiden University) reflected on the notion of post-Islamism and the ways this concept applies to intellectual trends in Iran. Although parallels were detected between Iran and other areas of the Muslim world, the significant diversity precludes an all-fitting forecast as to the direction in which Muslim societies are moving.

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