

IIS Seminar Series

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'Civil Society in Comparative Muslim Contexts' is an ambitious series of seminars hosted by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London, with leading scholars exploring issues ranging from human rights and engaged citizenship to the interplay of ethics, law, culture and information technology. The series will culminate in a volume of essays in 2002, aimed at contributing to a vital discourse in and about transitional societies as diverse as Tajikistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia and Malaysia.

At the inaugural seminar in this series last November, Professor Mohammed Arkoun asked about the relevance of discussing civil society in contexts where 'intellectual modernity' remains at best a Western import – quite aside from the creeping pace of democratization. Again, Dr Shirin Akiner wondered in her January presentation whether states freshly emerged from civil war and Soviet rule – like Tajikistan – have the luxury of discoursing on civic culture amidst new threats of religious radicalism and social decay.

One response to such scepticism, by Dr Olivier Roy in February, was to observe that 'networks of solidarity' are a pervasive feature of the new Central Asia – the more so because of the weakness of formal state structures. Whether derived from clan/village traditions (as with *mahalla* or neighbourhood groups) or from Soviet economic

planning (as with *kolkhoz* or farm collectives), these networks show the way ahead for fostering genuine civic engagement in these non-Western settings. Indeed, Roy argues that Western policy-makers and their local interlocutors ignore such indigenous networks at their peril, in favour of trendy new institutions of private enterprise and law.

In a different context, Dr Iftikhar Malik noted in his March seminar that the disruption of traditional networks as well as the thwarting of new ones in South Asia – which would empower civil society actors like women and minority groups – stems from the 'modern' assaults of colonial dominance, militarism and fundamentalism. In other words, the notion that civil society is strictly a contemporary phenomenon that challenges narrow 'primordial' bonds not based on common citizenship<sup>1</sup> is contested. Indeed, as IIS director Professor Azim Nanji noted in his subsequent talk on 'the Good Society', the ethical dimension of civic culture has premodern roots – which underscores the need to synthesize tradition and modernity in fostering democratic legitimacy.

Perhaps nowhere is that need more conspicuous than in the discourses on gender in post-revolutionary Iran, the subject of Dr Ziba Mir-Hosseini's session in June. In her now-famous interviews with a broad spectrum of Iranian clerics and intellectuals, as well as in her films that bring those discussions alive to publics abroad, Mir-Hosseini has shown that for many urban women and even for an influential modernist thinker like Abdolkarim Soroush, 'tradition' can be empowering. This is especially so in drawing upon sacred texts and the corpus of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) as legitimating claims of equity – even as ethical critiques are applied to readings of those sources.

However, to the extent that civil society is about the public sphere where (after Habermas) 'citizens want to have an influence on institutionalised opinion- and will-formation',<sup>2</sup> Mir-Hosseini argued that the constraints on feminist expression through magazines and other media are acute even in the 'liberalizing' Iran of President Mohammed Khatami. This was reinforced by the glimpse into the private sphere offered by an excerpt from her latest film, *Runaway*, in which the gap between personal aspiration and social reality seemed as oppressive as ever for a younger generation of reform-minded Iranian women.

Also at the June session, Professor Abdou Filali-Ansari (on the Maghreb) and Dr Norani Othman (on Southeast Asia) drew attention to the waxing and waning of 'autonomous' civic culture in the shadows of authoritarianism, often condoned by the prospect of fundamentalist encroachment – real or imagined. The correlation between the strength of civil society and that of the state also remains contested: both may be weak (Indonesia, Egypt, Algeria, even Turkey), or both may be robust (Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, United States). Indeed, Filali-Ansari was inclined to question whether the concept of civil society can

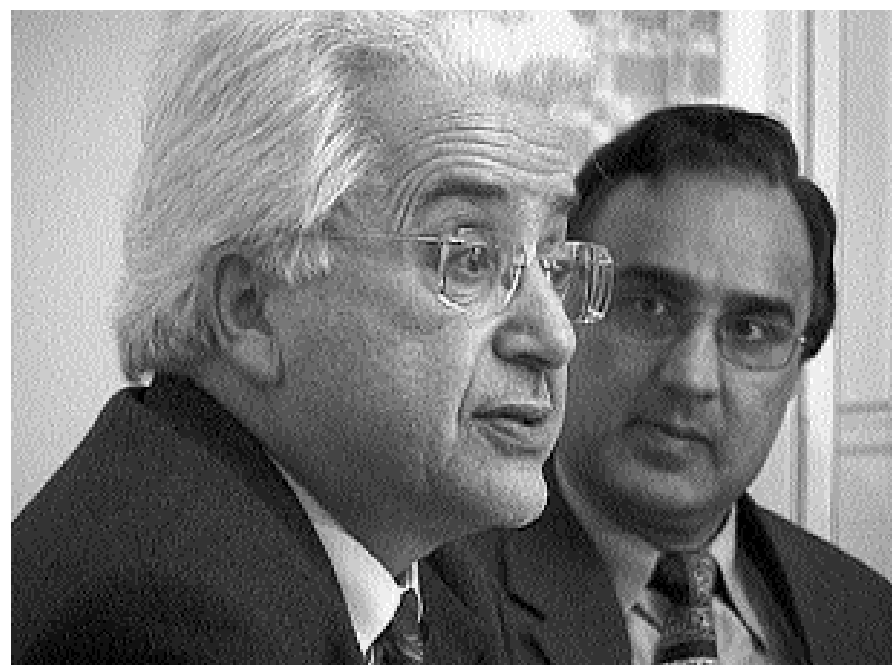


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usefully capture the complexities of particular cultural and historical contexts, or whether it is too arbitrary in the manifold uses to which it is put.

#### What's in a square?

In any case, from issues of equal treatment under the law to democratic accountability and access to political power, there is more to the quest for civic engagement than can be captured by easy normative dichotomies that tend to dominate debates about civil society. For some, this may reflect the fragmented mess of postmodernism that is our shared reality – magnified in a public sphere dominated by 'new media', fuelling what Gary Bunt calls the 'digital umma'.<sup>3</sup> For others, it may seem like the empire striking back, as postcolonial publics find their voices to re-appropriate the most basic elements of democratic discourse.

But whether postmodern or postcolonial, an aspect of this reality that Muslims are obliged to confront is: What kind of public space is civil society to be located in? If it must be secular, as many observers insist, then what would be the nature of secularity in a milieu whose religious tradition actively merges *din*, *duniya* and *dawla* (faith, world and state)? Muslim societies offer contrasting, and internally contested, responses to the nexus between secular/religious space and the prospects for civil society.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly this is an issue that the presenters in the IIS series must grapple with in grounding the idea of civic culture, and in appraising actual socio-political realities.

In a pluri-cultural and multivocal Muslim universe, the seminars seek to interrogate the concept of civil society in terms of its implications for politics and public squares where tradition and modernity, secular and sacred, are very much at the forefront of quotidian experience.

Yet, no matter what the specific perspectives in a given Muslim context, civic discourse will likely reflect ethical values that draw far more explicitly on 'Islam' than any comparable experience one can invoke in a Western society *vis-à-vis* Judeo-Christian

ethics. There is nothing inherently nativist about this notion: on the contrary, an array of Muslim activists and intellectuals have drawn attention to its pluralist and humanist impulses.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, ethical norms are all the more critical in transitional societies and civic contexts where the rule of law is fragile.

#### Notes

1. As claimed notably by Ernest Gellner (1994), *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, London. Cf. Ellis Goldberg's imaginative probing into rich veins of civic culture in pre-modern Islam: 'Private Goods, Public Wrongs, and Civil Society in Some Medieval Arab Theory and Practice', in Goldberg, Ellis (1993) *Kasaba, Resat and Migdal*, Joel S. (eds.), *Rules and Rights in the Middle East*, London, p. 248.
2. Habermas, Jürgen (1996), *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg, Cambridge, UK, p. 367.
3. Bunt, Gary (2000), *Virtually Islamic*, Cardiff, p. 17.
4. See, *inter alia*, Filali-Ansari, Abdou (1996), 'The Challenge of Secularisation', *Journal of Democracy*, 76; and Arkoun, Mohammed (1994), *Rethinking Islam*, Oxford, esp. at pp. 18-26.
5. See generally Cooper, John, Ronald Nettle and Mahmoud, Mohamed (eds.) (1998), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, London; Ibrahim, Saad Eddin (1995), 'Civil Society and Prospects for Democratization in the Arab World', *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. 1, Leiden, pp. 27-54; and Sajoo, Aryn B. (1995), 'The Islamic ethos and the spirit of humanism', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, New York, p. 579.

Readers are invited to view highlights of this series – including a forthcoming session on Turkey by Prof. Ersin Kalaycioglu – on the Institute's website: [www.iis.ac.uk](http://www.iis.ac.uk)

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#### Appointment

## Chair of Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World Professor Jan Just Witkam

The Board of Directors of Leiden University decided on 1 June 2001 to create a new chair for Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World (*Handschriftenkunde van de islamitische wereld*). Dr Jan Just Witkam was appointed as its first holder.

Jan Just Witkam (born in Leiden, 1945) studied Arabic, Persian and Middle Eastern History at Leiden University from 1964 to 1972, and attended the University of Teheran in 1970. Since 1974 he has been a curator at the Leiden University Library, and since 1980 he is the curator of Oriental Collections. In 1989 he obtained his Ph.D. in Leiden with a thesis on the life and work of the Egyptian physician and encyclopaedist, Ibn al-Akfi (d. 1348). From 1991 to 1998 he served as president of Melcom International, the European Association of Middle East Librarians. The prestigious title of 'Interpres Legati Warneriani' was conferred to him in 1992. Prof. Witkam has taught Middle Eastern paleography and codicology for over 20 years, using the Islamic manuscript treasures of the Leiden Library as illustrative objects for his students.

Among Prof. Witkam's best known publications in book form are the final volume of A.J. Wensinck's *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Leiden 1988, with W. Raven); *Seven Specimens of Arabic Manuscripts* (Leiden 1978); and the *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts* (ongoing project, since 1982). In 1998 he was co-author of the *Catalogue of Malay Manuscripts* (with E. Wieringa). He published several volumes in the series, *Manuscripta Indonesica*, of which he is a co-founder. In 1986 he founded the international journal, *Manuscripts of the Middle East*. He also serves on the editorial boards of *Codices Manuscripti*, a series of manuscript catalogues, and of *Kleine Publicaties*, a series of exhibition catalogues, both published by Leiden University Library. Presently he conducts research on the techniques and approaches of Muslim scholars, and more specifically he is working on the analysis of readers' protocols (*ijazat, sama'at*) in Arabic manuscripts.