

Congress Report  
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# Religious Freedom and the Neutrality of the State

## The Position of Islam in the European Union

The title of the international congress held in Leiden from 14 to 16 December 2000, 'Religious Freedom and the Neutrality of the State: The Position of Islam in the European Union', can be said to indicate a challenge. Although all member states of the European Union state the principles of religious freedom and non-discrimination in their constitutions, neutrality appears to be a paradoxical concept. A group of 35 scholars from 11 countries of the European Union discussed the recent developments regarding the position of Islam within the current national legislations, political structures and public discourses in the European Union.

Organized by Prof. Dr P.S. van Koningsveld and Prof. Dr W.A. Shadid, this congress was held under the auspices of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), the Leiden Centre for Asian, African and Amerindian Studies (CNWS), and the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission in Brussels, which made the conference financially possible.

In their presentations, participants pointed to a bias which often exists in the attitudes of states towards Islam. This is strongly influenced by historical traditions between state and religion, which differ from one country to another, as exposed by Moreras (Spain), Soares Loja (Portugal), Musseli (Italy), Ferrari (Italy, on the EU), Jonker (Germany) and Akgönül (France, on Greece). On the one hand, a general striving towards equality, non-discrimination and unbiased attitudes is clearly visible in the EU countries. A gradual adjustment of the 'new' Islamic religion into the legislation of predominantly Christian states can be observed and an increase in religious liberty for foreign and other minority groups has been apparent. Case studies as presented

by Maréchal (Belgium, on the EU) and Heine (Austria) on the integration of Islam and Islamic education in public schools served as examples of recent developments in this field. The contributions of Wiegers (The Netherlands) and Dessing (The Netherlands) analysed how life rituals such as circumcision and Muslim standpoints on organ donation are developing in a secular Dutch context. Jensen (Denmark) endeavoured to measure the attitudes of Muslim high school students towards their religion.

On the other hand, this process has not been without disturbances and setbacks, as Alwall pointed out for Sweden and Foblets and Overbeeke for Belgium. Perceptions of Islam play an important role in public and political discourses, as was shown in different ways by Von Kemnitz (Portugal), Shadid (The Netherlands), Zemni (Belgium) and Beck (The Netherlands). Deep sentiments of fear for Islam hinder an unbiased and impartial attitude of the state. Moreover, in discussions on a separation of church and state, secularism is often taken as neutral, while Muslims are considered to be in opposition to it, as De Ley (Belgium) pointed out. Baeck Simonsen (Denmark) critically expressed the urgent need for new legislation in Denmark in order to empower the Muslim minority to take advantage of the constitu-

tionally defined right to religious freedom in Denmark. Processes of emancipation among Muslims in the European Union were analysed in a considerable part of the contributions. Lewis (United Kingdom), Schmidt di Friedberg (Italy) and Kroissenbrunner (Austria) looked at the role and influence of Muslim leadership. Van Koningsveld (The Netherlands) and Mohsen-Finan (France) elaborated on the discourses of Muslim intellectuals. Sander and Larsson (Sweden) discussed new technologies such as the internet and Allievi (Italy) elaborated on the process of building transnational Muslim communities through Islamic networks and the use of (mass) media.

Dassetto (Belgium, on EU) and Nielsen (United Kingdom, on EU) presented a report to the European Commission on Islam in Europe, entitled 'La situation des musulmans en Europe – rapport de recherches réalisé pour la Cellule de Prospective de la Commission Européenne'. This report consisted of quantitative and qualitative data on infrastructural provisions and Muslim daily life in various countries of the EU. The study included a list of 1200 recent publications on Muslims in the EU.

The atmosphere of this congress was one of critical concern. Many questions raised in a specific national context appeared to be

similar in other countries, although debates may focus on different institutions or institutional figures, as exemplified by Boender and Kanmaz (The Netherlands and Belgium, respectively) who compared *imams* in the Netherlands and Islamic teachers in Flanders. The aim of this congress, the third of its kind in a series of international congresses on Islam in Europe organized by the University of Leiden (1991, 1995), was to bring together specialists for the exchange of knowledge and expertise concerning the latest developments in legislation, jurisprudence, administrative regulations and attitudes of officials and politicians with respect to Islam and the Muslim communities residing in these countries (Van Koningsveld and Shadid). Obviously scholars on Islam in Europe cannot act as neutral observers. However, the participants succeeded in their task of closely observing these developments and attitudes and alerting policy makers, both at the national and European levels. ◀

*The conference papers, edited by W.A. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld, are to be published in the summer of 2001.*

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