

Religious Authority in Western Europe

**FRANK PETER &
ELENA ARIGITA**

A workshop dedicated to the topic of Muslim Religious Authority in Western Europe took place from 30 September–1 October at the ISIM in Leiden. The aim of the workshop, which was convened by Frank Peter (ISIM/Free University of Berlin) and Elena Arigita (ISIM/University of Granada), was to bring together scholars working in what is arguably one of the most dynamic research fields in the study of European Islam, in order to stimulate exchange and reflection on current and future research agendas. 18 papers were presented before an audience of 40 persons, comprising academics, policy-makers, and journalists.

If the topic of Muslim religious authority has been high on the agenda of scholarship for the last decade or so, this can be partially attributed to the rapid institutionalization of Islam in Europe as well as the public and political interest in it. Undoubtedly, this context has strongly impacted the framing of current research, which is in some respects but a reflection of the preoccupations of national policy agendas. However, particularly in recent years, scholarly approaches and concerns have diversified considerably. Today, any attempt to bring into dialogue the different research traditions intermingling in the study of European Islam seems more than ever, both challenging and rewarding, and it is to this new situation that the workshop in Leiden aimed to respond.

The meeting was divided into six panels supplemented by two discussion panels. The papers and ensuing discussions addressed a variety of intersecting topics (see box for complete list of participants and titles). Several presentations engaged with state policies regarding the institutionalization of Islam, pointing in particular to their increasing proximity to variously defined policies of integration. The position of young Muslim women towards and inside religious hierarchies was a second focus of attention where questions of education, generational change, and organizational patterns were discussed in relation to more general reflections on concepts of authority. Not surprisingly, a sizeable number of participants analyzed specific types of authority, intellectuals, preachers, muftis, and imams. The impact of new media, mass education, and state policies on the scope and shape of authority was at the centre of discussions here. The study of Islamic movements and organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat al-Tabligh, and Minhaj ul-Quran, highlighted both distinct structures of organization and general patterns of configurations of religious authority.

The workshop highlighted the salience of connecting the study of Muslim religious authority to broader questions of power. It provided further evidence that the study of religious authority is inextricably bound in reciprocal relation to the analysis of the multi-sited process of defining religion. Finally, the discussions revealed the difficulty of conceptualizing “Islamic” in ways that do without the regularly voiced restrictions placed on the use of these concepts. From this perspective, the lively discussions around analytical approaches to Islam as a religious tradition were particularly appropriate and merit expansion.

A selection of presented papers will be published in a special issue of *Muslim World* in October 2006.

Frank Peter is Affiliated Fellow at ISIM. Email: f.peter@isim.nl

Elena Arigita is a member of the research group on contemporary Arab studies at the University Granada and was a post-doctoral fellow at ISIM from April 2004 till March 2006. Email: elenarigita@hotmail.com

PAPERS PRESENTED

- **Mohammed Amer**, ISIM
Dressing up for your Shaykh: the Minhajul Quran Movement in London
- **Schirin Amir-Moazami**, University of Frankfurt-Oder
Muslim Women in French and German Mosques: Pioneers for Transformations of Gender Conceptions and Religious Authority?
- **Elena Arigita**, ISIM / University of Granada
Muslim Leaders in Spain: Discourses about Representation and Authority after March 11
- **Jonathan Birt**, University of Oxford / Islamic Foundation
Muslim Religious Leaderships, Civic Religion and Paradigms of National Integration in Britain post-9/11
- **Welmoet Boender**, ISIM
From Periphery to Centre: Muslim Female Leadership in Milli Görüs in the Netherlands
- **Amel Boubekeur**, École des hautes études en sciences sociales Paris / École normale supérieure
Muslim Stars, Islamic Ethics, and Religious Authority in France
- **Alexandre Caeiro**, ISIM
The Functions of the Mufti in the West: Tradition & Change in the Practice of Ifta'
- **Nathal Dessing**, ISIM
Authority among Muslims in Europe: The Role of New Organizational Forms
- **Bettina Gräf**, Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin
Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in Cyberspace: Representing Translocal Authority
- **Dilwar Hussain**, Islamic Foundation, Leicester
Young Muslim Leaders and Shifting Boundaries in British Islam
- **Jeanette Jouili**, University of Frankfurt-Oder / École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris
Reflections on the Relationship between Pious Muslim Women and Religious Authority in Germany
- **Melanie Kamp**, Free University, Berlin
Fatwa-Councils, Muftis and their Fatwas—A Preliminary Study of Concepts, Institutions, and Actors of Islamic Legal Counselling in Germany
- **Moussa Khedimallah**, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris
Leadership and Legitimacy in the Jamaat Tabligh in France
- **Inge Liengaard**, University of Aarhus
Leading the Prayer in Denmark: A Variety of Mosques and Imams
- **Brigitte Maréchal**, Université Catholique de Louvain
The Muslim Brotherhood and Religious Authority in Western Europe
- **Ruth Mas**, University of Colorado-Boulder
Liminal Cases: Liberal Muslim Intellectuals in France
- **Frank Peter**, ISIM / Free University, Berlin
Islamic Reformism and Authority: A Study of Imam Khatibs in France
- **Levent Tezcan**, University of Bielefeld
State-Administered Religion in Cross-Cultural Communication: The Islam of Priests

LIST OF DISCUSSANTS

- **Martin van Bruinessen**, ISIM / Utrecht University
- **Christine M. Jacobsen**, University of Bergen
- **Tina G. Jensen**, University of Copenhagen
- **Martijn de Koning**, ISIM / Free University, Amsterdam
- **Nico Landman**, Utrecht University
- **Lena Larsen**, Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo
- **Riem Spielhaus**, Humboldt University, Berlin
- **Thijl Sunier**, University of Amsterdam

Ethnobarometer: Europe's Muslim Communities

ISIM joined in mid 2005 a research project on current debates on Islam and integration in response to 9/11 and the murder of Van Gogh. The project is organized by the Ethnobarometer programme. This is a programme of concerned social scientists who provide independent and research-based reports on levels of racism, xenophobia, and ethnic conflict in selected countries of Europe (see: www.ethnobarometer.org). It aims to monitor events, highlight areas of tension and identify relevant topics for further research and inquiry. The current research project is carried out in the form of moderated and closely monitored focus group discussions in Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, the UK, and now the Netherlands. The focus groups are held in locations where there has been inter-ethnic or inter-religious tension or conflict, and their composition more or less represents the various groups involved.

Social Change and Identity in Muslim Societies

SEPHIS, in collaboration with ISIM, organized a training Workshop on Identity and Social Change in Muslim Societies at the Orient Institut, Beirut (7-14 December, 2005). Convened by Asef Bayat and Shamil Jeppie, the workshop drew in young scholars from around the world working on Muslim societies.

The workshop aimed at familiarizing the participants with some of the issues, which dominate current research on Muslim societies, and basic methodological approaches that are being (or can be) deployed in such research. The workshop pivoted principally around the location of individuals vis-à-vis the matrices of civil society and the state. In both respects, the issue of gender relations featured quite prominently in course of the ensuing discussions.

Shamil Jeppie, Asef Bayat, and Dick Douwes were the principal resource persons at the workshop for discussions on research methodology, which revolved around the notion of identity in the contemporary discourse on area studies. The thrust of such discussions was to underline the significance of historical contexts in which the notions of identity and the dynamics of social change evolve. In this respect, the twin discourses of "modernity" and "orientalism" were treated in some depth, and situated almost as sub-discourses within the larger discourse of "power." A caveat was issued, however, against the temptations of *essentialization* that characterizes a considerable part of the discourse of power, lest the wide-ranging diversities that have occasioned the emergence of the discipline of "area studies" be subsumed within the broader discourse of power. This came out best in discussions on the broader question of "pluralism" in modern states, which focused on the manner in which the category of *minorities* have tended to be constructed, and how the state of Lebanon handled the issue since its creation in the twentieth century.

Papers presented at the workshop could be classified into two types. Those that handled the nature of Muslim identities "as a whole," and those that dealt with women in Muslim societies. Comparison of experiences of Muslim societies from across the globe, suggested the clearly political character of *construction* of identities within the parameters of the modern state. Case studies indicated the convergence of political compulsions and reworking of the Islamic identities prompted by several factors—viz.

use of Islamic discourse as a legitimating tool for purposes of political reform (Cameroon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) or resistance (Iran, Malaysia); use of Islamic organizational networks either to complement (Nigeria) or supplement (Indonesia, South Africa) the state apparatus, etc. There was a general consensus that, leaving aside only the broadest confessional implications, the identity of a Muslim in the modern world was a product almost entirely of its local societal, political, cultural, and economic dynamics, and that it was almost entirely transmutable across time.

The other set of papers challenged the very notion of any Muslim identity "as a whole" (within, however, localized a space), by breaking most of such identities down in terms of their gender attributes. Focus on the position of women in widely divergent societies (India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania) revealed a widely prevalent (although not necessarily Islamic) tendency to subsume the identity of women underneath the shibboleth of a heavily patriarchal construct of the Muslim "self." Most of the papers of this category pertained to how women negotiated with those who wield power (societal and political) in contemporary Muslim societies in order to assert their own existence. Strategies of negotiation that were highlighted ranged between deriving benefits of confessional conformism (Sri Lanka, Iran, Saudi Arabia) and tacit resistance by interrogating the limits of traditionally acceptable behaviour in the realms of society (Iran, Tanzania) or polity (India). Admittedly the fortunes of such negotiating strategies have been far from uniform, not least because they are in different stages of progression. Far more importantly, something like a consensus evolved in the workshop to suggest that hitherto differential outcomes were not the result of different strategies, but rather that divergent strategies of negotiation were owing to the divergences of the social, cultural, and institutional setting of the polities within which the negotiations were being worked out—no uniformly applicable panacea was suggested.

Participants in the workshop were, further, familiarized with some of the dynamics operating in modern Lebanon, especially with reference to the situation evolving after the decade long civil war that came to an end in the 1990s. Interactions with local journalists and social activists helped the participants to understand the complex "history" of a country that came into being in the twentieth century and only then began to "remember" its past(s)—a process that, among other material considerations, serves to keep Lebanon dangerously poised between civil war and peace. Resource persons from the host, the Orient Institut, took the participants on guided tours—Ralph Bodenstien around the city of Beirut and Stefan Weber in Tripoli and Byblos—which told the history of Lebanon through the prism of urban architecture. This was a particularly instructive way of getting across Lebanon's character as a cultural mosaic, because Tripoli (Trablus in Arabic) is a city (going back to the Umayyad rule, seventh century) overwhelmingly Muslim in its social composition; Byblos is overwhelmingly Christian (dating back to the Roman times); and despite the persuasively thorough architectural reordering of Beirut in the past decade, the scars of the civil war are quite obvious in the sectarian character of the various localities of the city.

KINGSHUK CHATTERJEE

The objective of the Ethnobarometer research is to assess the consequences of the various responses to 11 September and the murder of Van Gogh in November 2004 for both the Muslim communities and European societies at large and, in particular, the relations between Muslim communities and the rest of the population. We decided to start with a small number of focus groups in Gouda, a middle-sized town of 70,000 inhabitants in the western part of the Netherlands (at equal distances from Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht), which is in many respects representative for many such towns—a Dutch "Middletown." Almost 10 per cent of the population has a Muslim background: Moroccans with 6,000 constituting the largest group, Turks a distant second with 400; there has been a history of conflict in several districts of the city. Right wing and xenophobic populists have a certain following in Gouda, though they are less prominent than in Rotterdam. We made an effort to form focus groups that were broadly representative of the population in terms of age, political attitude, and ethnicity. To this end, we recruited participants through appeals communicated in a range of media: an interview in a widely read regional newspaper, appeals placed on various Dutch and Moroccan internet discussion lists, direct invitations to people who attended a "multicultural" day in one of the neighbourhood centres, and through street interviews. The overall report of the Ethnobarometer project will appear by the end of 2006.

RESEARCH TEAM

- *Ethnobarometer supervisor at ISIM:* Martin van Bruinessen
- *Researcher:* Martijn de Koning
Email: m.koning@isim.nl
- *Research-Assistant:* Shanti Tuinstra
- *Interns:* Birgül Özmen, Nora Asrami, Talita Groenendijk and Bea Hekhuis

Kingshuk Chatterjee teaches History at Scottish Church College, Calcutta. He is working on the intellectual origins of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, 1979 for his Ph.D. from the Department of History, Calcutta University.