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NOCRIME Promoting the Non-Exceptionalism of Islam in the West
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NOCRIME

Promoting the Non-Exceptionalism of Islam in the West

When studying Muslims in Europe, one cannot escape the relationships of domination that tend to impose a reference framework that permanently places Islam and the West in opposition to one another. For more than any other religion today, the forms of identifying oneself as a Muslim are profoundly influenced by a narrative (active from the local to the international level) that puts into circulation a whole series of images and stereotypes, which make Islam seem religiously, culturally, and politically foreign, strange, and exceptional.

Research on Islam in Europe has not always managed to avoid the snare of exceptionalism. In particular, scholars of Islam and political scientists of the Arab world, as well as certain sociologists and anthropologists, are often criticized for emphasizing the role of Islam itself, as a system of norms and values, in the process of integration of Muslims in Western societies. Such a culturalist approach indeed runs the risk of becoming essentialist and a-historical, a fact that has been underscored by researchers working in the tradition of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

One way to avoid such a dead end is to take into account the modes of interaction between Muslim groups and different segments of Western societies. This implies refusing to essentialize *both* the minority and the dominant culture, and understanding the social construction of Muslim communities within the dialectic formed between surroundings (secular ideology/nationalism/Islamophobia) and group resources. Such is the approach developed by the Network of Comparative Research on Islam and Muslims in Europe (NOCRIME). NOCRIME is composed of nine scholars from seven countries: France (Valerie Amiraux, Jocelyne Cesari), Germany (Gerdien Jonker), the United Kingdom (Sean Macloughin), the Netherlands (Nico Landman), Sweden (Jonas Otterbeck), Italy (Ottavia Shmidt di Friedberg, Chantal Saint Blancat), and Spain (Gema Martin-Munoz). Although they come from various disciplinary backgrounds – sociology, anthropology, political science, religious studies, and history – they share an

interest in research from a grassroots perspective, fluency in interdisciplinary research methods, and privileged connections with major Muslim organizations in their respective countries.

Amongst the relevant dimensions of NOCRIME's research agenda are the following:

- the variety of religious practices and social interactions related to Islamic affiliation;
- internal differentiation within Muslim groups (secular Muslims versus observant believers, gender differences, Sufi religiosity, the case of Islamic converts);
- typologies of interactions with non-Muslims (adaptations to context, what kind of dialogue and with which segments of European societies: religious groups, representatives of social and political institutions, etc.); and
- Muslim organizations, activism, and forms of leadership.

The goal of NOCRIME's approach is to examine the gap between the racialization of national discourses, the meta-discourse on Islam as an enemy, and the diversity and fluid nature of Muslims' attitudes. In other words, studying the way that Muslims respond to a reference framework that has been imposed on them and that is based on a relationship of domination, does not mean that Muslims are prisoners of this framework, nor does it mean that they model themselves according to the identity that has been assigned to them. Although often considered as an 'exceptional case', Muslims are not always such an exception.

*For recent publications by members of NOCRIME, see Revue Cemoti, 'Musulmans d'Europe', no. 33, Paris, September–December 2002.
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