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Islam, Authority, and Leadership

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Islam, Authority, and Leadership

NATHAL M. DESSING

The first meeting in the series of lectures and debates 'Islam, Authority, and Leadership', entitled 'Would the Muslim Intellectual Please Stand Up!', discussed the presence or perhaps absence of Dutch Muslim intellectuals in the wider public debate on issues such as health, education, and the environment. Nathal Dessing, the first speaker, argued that whereas Muslim voices can be heard in the Dutch national debate on multicultural

society, these voices represent only specific sections of the 'Muslim' community in the Netherlands. Particularly those who take a secularist, integrationist, and individualistic viewpoint, such as the lawyer Afshin Ellian and the writer Hafid Bouazza, take part in the debate and are well received in the Dutch media. However, for a more balanced picture of Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands, a broader variety of people should become involved in the public debate, from Islamist to atheist, from imam to secularist. Haci Karacaer and Saoud Khadje agreed, but added that after the 11 September 2001 attacks and ensuing controversies concerning some Muslims in the Dutch press, Muslims have become cautious in expressing their opinion in public and prefer to engage in discussions within the Muslim community. Fouad Laroui argued against the tendency of labelling someone a 'Muslim' on the basis of his or her name, whereas the person concerned might take a wholly secularist position.

Lonely planet guide

Tariq Ramadan and Abdulkader Tayob addressed the following questions in the second meeting, 'A Lonely Planet Guide for Muslims': What are authoritative sources for religious knowledge and how should they be used? What or whom should Muslims in Europe consult to learn more about Islam? Should they approach an imam or interpret the sources themselves? Tariq Ramadan argued that Muslims in Europe do not know how to handle authority: they lack experience in managing diversity. He

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The ISIM and Felix Meritis (European Centre for Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam) organized a series of lectures and debates on 'Islam, Authority, and Leadership' in 2002 and 2003. The series, consisting of five meetings, dealt with the presence of Muslim intellectuals in the media, views on how to live a Muslim life in Europe, the principle of separation of church and state, the position of Muslim women in the Netherlands, and Dutch integration policy.

emphasized the importance of an intra-Muslim dialogue, of religious independence, and of building an authoritative voice by educating people with both religious and contextual knowledge. No single person can embody these two aspects, and therefore religious bodies including experts in both fields, such as the European Council for Fatwa and Research, should be established. Abdulkader Tayob pointed to the historicity of

Islam and the diversity of Muslim practice. He stressed that everyone has the right to say what kind of Muslims he or she is.

Your constitution is not mine

In the third meeting, all speakers agreed that the idea of the constitutional state and the principle of the separation of church and state are multivocal concepts. Marc Hertogh, for example, argued that discussions about the constitutional state are often normative discussions, in which one group defines the constitutional state for another group, whereas they should be open discussions concerning people's ideas about the constitutional state. The constitutional state is, according to this line of thought, a contested concept. Integration policy should therefore concentrate on managing diversity through dialogue, instead of assuming uniformity. The dominant discourses in many Western European countries present Muslims as being opposed to the principle of the separation of church and state, Sadik Harchaoui argued. Muslims' struggle for basic civil rights is thus unjustly identified with rejection of this principle. Harchaoui emphasized that Muslims should try not to solve their problems outside the law of the state, but to incorporate protection against injustice in the existing laws: the state belongs to everyone, and not only to non-Muslims.

Rib of the man

'If only people could show half the solidarity with Muslim women that they have shown with Ayaan Hirsi Ali', Fenna Ulichki sighed in the fourth meeting of the series, 'The Rib of the Man'. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is the Dutch Liberal Party politician who stood up against the oppression of Muslim women by stating that Islam is a hindrance to emancipation. This and other statements about the supposed backwardness of Islam, the perversity of the Prophet, the incidence of forced marriages and marriage with a partner from the country of origin, and domestic violence all confirmed the views of many people in the Netherlands, but Muslims severely criticized her standpoints. Seyma Halici argued that wearing a headscarf and an ankle-length coat does not exclude emancipation and integration in Dutch society.

Concluding meeting

In the concluding meeting, Roger van Boxtel, Minister of Urban Policy and Integration of Ethnic Minorities from 1998 to 2002, emphasized the importance of transparency of policy, of dialogue, of institutional support through a national representative body of Muslims, of able Muslim spokespersons in the media, and of Dutch language proficiency. Integration policy has focused mainly on socio-economic inequalities, but cultural differences between Muslims and the autochthonous population have been neglected. Haci Karacaer said that dialogue is also self-criticism. In his view, Muslims cover up the truth if they differentiate between what Islam is and what Muslims do. Muslims should take people's behaviour as their starting point. Abdulkader Tayob argued that Muslims should welcome controversies, because uncomfortable standpoints can contain solutions to the community's problems: 'you can obtain understanding only through misunderstanding', to use his words.

PROGRAMME

- **'Would the Muslim Intellectual Please Stand Up!' (20 June 2002)**
Speakers: Nathal Dessing (ISIM), Haci Karacaer (director, Milli Görüş, the Netherlands), Saoud Khadje (Dar al-Ilm, Institute for Islam Studies), and Fouad Laroui (researcher and writer). *Moderator:* Ab Cherribi (entrepreneur).
- **'A Lonely Planet Guide for Muslims' (19 September 2002)**
Speakers: Tariq Ramadan (College of Geneva and Fribourg University, Switzerland) and Abdulkader Tayob (ISIM Chair, University of Nijmegen). *Moderator:* Peter van der Veer (ISIM co-director).
- **'Your Constitution is Not Mine!' (10 October 2002)**
Speakers: Famile Arslan (lawyer), Sadik Harchaoui (public prosecutor), and Marc Hertogh (associate professor of socio-legal studies, University of Tilburg). *Moderator:* Steve Austen (permanent fellow of Felix Meritis, cultural entrepreneur, publicist, and consultant).
- **'The Rib of the Man' (7 November 2002)**
Speakers: Gijs von der Fuhr (Amsterdam Centre for Foreigners), Seyma Halici (women's group, Milli Görüş), and Fenna Ulichki (Moroccan Women's Association in the Netherlands). *Moderator:* Steve Austen (see above).
- **Concluding Meeting (27 January 2003)**
Speakers: Roger van Boxtel (Minister of Urban Policy and Integration of Ethnic Minorities, the Netherlands, from 1998 to 2002), Famile Arslan (lawyer), Haci Karacaer (director, Milli Görüş, the Netherlands), Abdulkader Tayob (ISIM Chair, University of Nijmegen), and Fenna Ulichki (Moroccan Women's Association in the Netherlands). *Moderator:* Steve Austen (see above).