Martijn: Back in his student days, the young Martijn De Koning worked his summer holidays in a factory in order to finance his travel to the Middle East. On one of his journeys in Syria, while travelling from Aleppo to Abu Kamal, he met on the bus a dealer in used car parts who invited him to his house in Salamiyya, a rural town to the southeast of Hama.

Martijn: There, you found out that this man, as most of the inhabitants, was an Ismaili whose grandparents had migrated from the coastal mountains to the inland plains in the last nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Dick: Yes, he was not a religious man and was often dressed like the Arab nomads with whom he traded spare car parts. As an M.A. student I was primarily interested in the migration to and re-cultivation of the areas adjacent to the Syrian steppe. In the process I happened to stumble on the curious history of the recognition of the Bombay-based Aga Khan by a part of the Syrian Ismaili community at the end of the nineteenth century. The problems ensuing from that recognition, including the trial for treason of their religious shaikhs, caught my attention.

My later Ph.D. research assisted at examining the non-mainstream Muslim communities in the closing decades of Ottoman Syria, but during my research in the Syrian National Archives I discovered unique material on the rural crisis of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and decided then to elaborate on that topic.

Martijn: Coincidence may have played its part in your career but the Ismailis (and later the Alawis), Lebanon, and Syria remain important themes in your research interests. Why direct your gaze at the marginal?

Dick: I am concerned with the—so to speak—"multicultural drama" accompanying the demise of the Ottoman Commonwealth; how ethnic, linguistic, and religious plurality became increasingly tested by forces of colonialism and post-colonialism, by the market, and, most of all, by various brands of nationalism. Differences in ways of life, religious convictions appeared to have been less problematic in the early modern era, certainly when compared to more recent conditions in the successor national states. What interests me is the process in which traditions and ways of interaction between people become problematized and politicized through the discourses of colonialism, nationalism and, more recently, Islamism. As a consequence some people feel less at home than they used to. In some way this is related to what we witness now globally, in debates about identity, conduct, and visibility of minority communities. It is not at all restricted to the Middle East but one can find it in Europe, and in particular, the Netherlands. It is the majority that critically evaluates the conduct of others with their own principles and ideals—and not necessarily their actual behaviour—as is the case in the Netherlands, the result is that an individual Muslim it is difficult to feel at ease and to express oneself freely.

Martijn: Your work is mostly historical. Do we need the historical perspective in order to understand current developments?

Dick: It is useful to reconceive earlier experiences as well as uses of the past. For instance, when one works with a historical perspective one immediately sees the rapid changes in the public debate; in the Netherlands, the initial positive approach of multiculturalism was faded out by severe criticism within the span of only a few years. A historical perspective is, in my opinion, also important for ISIM to keep in mind, because every group acts and develops action based on historical experiences, at the least generational but often spanning longer cycles. Moreover, the use of the past offers rich avenues for research. Within religion it is often habitual to refer to historic precedent. This is also true for Islam. For example, a century ago the paradigm of the prophet Muhammad evolved primarily around ritual and pious behaviour, aspects that have remained of great concern for practising Muslims. However, within that century he has assumed an ever more political role and his quality as a man of state has gained considerable strength.

From Newsletter to Review

Martijn: Apart from your involvement with organizational matters, your main contribution to the ISIM enterprise was as editor of the ISIM Newsletter/Review. What shaped the ISIM Newsletter?

Dick: The first ISIM Newsletter was the combined effort of a very small team that had to deliver a product in only three months to accompany the formal opening of the Institute. The opening was in October 1998 but I was actually involved, with others, in the bringing about of the institute from 1996 onwards. The ISIM Newsletter has continued to rely on the exceptional skills and commitment of people like Gabrielle Constant in the early days and later on also Noel Lambert, Linda Herrera and, of course, Dennis Janssen. ISIM and the ISIM Newsletter were always meant as a platform to stimulate a more diverse scientific discourse on research in social, political, and religious processes. First of all we wanted to demonstrate through the articles in the Newsletter that a religious life is actually a very normal life; when looking at religion, religious movements, religious conduct, one al-
ways has to look at the contexts in which religion plays a role, such as family, schooling, work, politics etc. When, why, where, and how does religion play a role? Some Islamologists present Muslims as living in a habitat defined by Quran, hadith, and Sharia, in other words, as religious creatures living in a—according to their view—obscurantist world. In a sense, they are not that far removed from the type of Islamist activism that claims that the Sharia alone defines and brings about comfort and prosperity. The idea that “Islam” explains everything, something in which both Salafists and some of their critics find their common denominator, is certainly challenged by ISIM. Conversely, we have had articles dealing with more secular concerns and with issues that may be seen as challenging dominant religious views, such as the recent “Queer Jihad” (ISIM Review 16). We also wanted to show that Islam does not only manifest itself in the Middle East but that the majority of Muslims live elsewhere, primarily in South and Southeast Asia, but also in Africa and in unexpected places like, for example, Poland where a few villages of Tatar Muslims survive. We have always paid attention to details of local forms of Islam. In this and other ways we try to turn away from the more dominant perspectives on Islam and Muslim, not only among non-Muslims but, also, among Muslims.

Martijn: By focusing on specific authentic approaches to Muslim societies and Muslim communities ISIM took a different stand compared to those of certain participants in the Islam-debate. Can you tell us something about the responses to ISIM?

Dick: ISIM was criticized for this approach; allegedly we were too distant from scriptural Islam, if not religion for that matter, and too much informed by social sciences in our understanding of Muslim societies and communities at the expense of philological and theological readings. I disagree with this critique; when one looks at the past and current work of the ISIM Chairs religion is very much present, also in its more formal appearances. I have always found it odd to hear that ISIM was not fully qualified for its tasks because it lacked an input of knowledge based on readings of religious texts contrasting the fact that from the very start Martin van Bruijnsen was involved in the project and that Muhammad Khalid Masud acted as its first Academic Director. What was striking for the Newsletter/Review is the lack of critical reactions. We do get occasional letters to the editor, but most of them very positive. There was this one reaction, curious, about the cover article of the first Newsletter. A known US professor praised us for having a Muslim on the cover page. When I pointed out that the author, Sami Zubiada, was not of Muslim background, the person was quite embarrassed about his remark. It may be that political correctness or in-correctness cannot always be avoided but I think that ISIM avoided it for most of the time. The highest instance of negative reactions was regarding the article “Between Pipes and Esposito.” Most of these reactions were not about Pipes, as some might expect, but about the fact that the author was deemed to be too critical of Esposito. It was only then that Pipes contacted the ISIM secretariat asking for a subscription for the Newsletter. It seems that people who would publicly disagree with us, may sometimes read us but usually, just ignore us. Many others read us and feel at home. One of the questions for the future of the Review is if, and how, the Review would like to be a platform for debate? The articles of the Review are now more academic compared to those of earlier issues and this affects the different types of audiences you aim at. In my view ISIM and the ISIM Review should also develop into a platform for debate and it should be no problem if there are, occasionally, articles included with which the editors disagree, as long as the matter concerns a sound text.

Alternate approaches

Martijn: The intention of showing the other side and offering alternate readings to the dominant culture, was that present from the start?

Dick: Yes, and I think that the international success of ISIM is partly rooted in that attitude because it gave expression to a broadly felt need for alternate approaches. The tendency within ISIM to keep a certain distance from the dominant groups and to view things from the op-