Seeking the Individual in the Mediterranean Muslim World

This past July, Istanbul’s Topkapı Palace welcomed the second plenary gathering of the international research programme, Individual and Society in the Mediterranean Muslim World (ISMM). Funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF) programme headquartered in Strasbourg, initiated and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France), ISMM represents a four-year (1996–99) research programme whose major objective is to study pre-defined aspects of the individual within the Mediterranean Muslim context.

The overall intellectual framework for the research was initially articulated largely around the Islamic lens, a perspective shared among others, that the process of individualization allowed a person to differentiate himself or herself from others, presupposing a certain liberty in ideological, religious, political and economic choice which only began to rise on a large scale during the Islamic and Enlightenment era. Yet, this liberty of choice, which purportedly made possible the prevalent appearance of unique individuals, was simultaneously tempered by unconscious and conscious communal, societal and political influences exerted upon the individual. Taking this supposition as its theoretical point of departure, the programme founders and participants theorized whether the process of individualization in the Mediterranean Muslim milieu is comparable to that of the European experience. Despite the oft-repeated concept in the West that the very essence of Islam persifies a unique community of humans intimately and inextricably associated with one another in the pursuit of religiously oriented objectives, research in this programme (and elsewhere) as based upon the abundant and highly diverse primary sources dating from the early centuries of Islam to the present day, has shown that although in the four centuries of existence, the Islamic world has fostered a society of differentiated individuals who perceive themselves in their own personal itineraries as well as taking part in their immediate and larger environments. In order to uncover and define the individual in the Mediterranean Muslim context, not only mainstream members of society—men, women and children alike—but also marginal and non-conformists, empathy was repeatedly put upon micro-historical and case study approaches.

Nearly 100 papers were presented at the July plenary by participants coming from all over Western Europe as well as Eastern Europe (in particular, from Poland), Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa. Editor Board and Steering Committee meetings prefaced and concluded the Istanbul plenary. Similar to the previous plenary held in Greece in May 1996, which officially opened our programme’s activities, the July 1998 Istanbul plenary provided the opportunity for research gathering for researchers who have been working, for the past three years, within the framework of the separate seven research teams:

Team 1: Forms of belonging and modes of social integration, team led by Novartis, Vienna, Vienna, University, Freiburg, University, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France), is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Team 2: Migration in contemporary Western Europe, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France). The team is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Team 3: Muslim in contemporary Western Europe, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France). The team is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Team 4: Mediterranean Muslim World, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France). The team is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Team 5: Medieval Mediterranean, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France). The team is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Team 6: Religion, activity and experiences, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France). The team is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Team 7: Islamic heritage in contemporary Western Europe, team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France). The team is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Although ISMM’s scientific events are scheduled to formally conclude at the end of this year, the intellectual life of the themes studied within the programme will certainly outlast the four years allocated to it through the formal and informal networks which have been newly created and which, beyond the close of the programme end of 1999, is to further identify and deepen the analysis of transversal themes which cross through the work of the different groups. A special brainstorming session is being organized (see below) the end of 1999 for this specific purpose whereby programme participants will meet with invited scholars who are currently working on one or more of these themes. One such theme which has particularly emerged from the team’s research concerns the role of the individual Mediterranean Muslim woman in the cultural, social, religious, political and economic spheres from medieval Andalusian to contemporary Europe as well as modern Middle East and North Africa. This very theme was the leitmotiv of the Istanbul plenary session where speakers, including two Turkish female professors from Bosphorus University, Yevrim Arat and Binnur Toprak, developed this issue in relation to contemporary Turkey.

Research on the European level regarding the individual’s place and role in society within the Mediterranean Muslim world is vital to the understanding of this most highly complex multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual region. Many of the most advanced projects, in the forefront of current humanities research in Europe, the focus of the ISMM programme, investigates not only the question of creativity, which is of primary importance to the research coming from team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, and chaired by Robert Libert, professor at the University of Provence and founder-director of the IREMAM (Institut de Recherches sur les Méditerranéennes des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France), is responsible for organizing the two plenary meetings, selecting the final papers and putting the final edition of the newsletter together. The team is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

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