ISIM Workshop: Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges

From 26-28 April 2000, twelve prominent Muslim thinkers from a wide range of regional backgrounds (Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Africa and the European diaspora) met at an ISIM workshop to discuss some of the major intellectual and political challenges facing the Muslim world at present. Each of them presented a paper on an important aspect of the encounter with modernity, to which he or she had been devoting much thought recently. Several of the papers explicitly addressed the question of compatibility between Islam and modernity (or rather, as several participants emphasized, interpretations of Islam and conceptions of modernity). Some engaged in such sensitive issues as minority rights, women’s rights and pluralism and called for the development of a contemporary religious discourse based on rights to balance the traditional emphasis on obligations or contributions to a theory of civil society. Others focused on (reformist revisions of) the relationship between the sacred texts, context and contemporary discourse.

The development of contemporary Muslim thought constitutes one of ISIM’s primary areas of research interest, and by providing a platform for discussions between leading thinkers from various parts of the Muslim world and for meetings between Muslim intellectuals and scholars studying the Muslim world, ISIM hopes to play a stimulating role in both intellectual worlds. The April 2000 workshop was intended in the first place as a forum for Muslim thinkers from different cultures to exchange ideas and experiences and to identify the most important themes for further debate. In order to allow the discussions to be as frank and unrestrained as possible, the workshop was not public and only a small number of scholars and students attended. (Edited versions of the papers and excerpts of the discussions will, however, soon be published on the ISIM website.) Parallel to the workshop were a number of public events involving the participants, including public lectures for academic and general audiences in the Netherlands and a panel discussion with an audience of generation-young Muslims living in the Netherlands (see the boxes).

The participants

The Islamic studies workshop represented the major regions of the Muslim world, from the Maghreb to Indonesia and South Africa, and a great diversity of views. All were invited because of their contributions to public debate in their own countries, and as had been hoped, their coming together gave rise to stimulating discussions. The participants and the titles of their contributions were as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Nurcholish Madjid (Jakarta): ‘Tensions between Islam and modernity: compatibility and values’.
- Khira Chibani, professor of philosophy at Zaytuna University, Tunis: ‘Civil society and the problematic of identity’.
- Jalaluddin Rakhmat, prominent Muslim engineer, Jalaluddin Rakhmat, Tariq Ramadan and Abdul Karim Soroush. The panel attracted a large and enthusiastic audience; the speakers’ thought-provoking comments gave rise to lively, and at certain moments heated, discussions.

Public lectures

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Other themes that surfaced at the workshop will be published on ISIM’s website. Additional contributions will be sought, and the participants will be requested to respond to each other’s contributions, so that the workshop finds a continuation on the website. A number of smaller meetings will be organized in the future so as to pursue in greater depth a number of the themes that surfaced at the workshop.

Follow-up