‘Civil Society in Comparative Muslim Contexts’ is an ambitious series of seminars hosted by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London, with leading scholars exploring the historical and contemporary role of civil society in Muslim societies. Dr Amyn B. Sajoo, a visiting fellow at the IIS, is a key figure in this series. The seminars aim to grapple with the concept of civil society in a globalized world, where tradition and modernity, the sacred and the profane, are very much at the forefront of civic debate.

At the inaugural seminar in this series last November, Professor Mohammad Arkoun asked about the relevance of discussing civil society in contexts where ‘intellectual modernity’ remains at best a Western import – quite aside from the creeping pace of democratisation. Again, Dr Shin Aiken wondered in her January presentation whether states freshly emerged from civil war can be living groups, as suggested by the new Central Asia – the more so because of the weakness of formal state structures. Whether derived from clan/ethnic lage traditions (as with mahulu or neighbour-bourhood groups) or from Soviet economic planning (as with kolkhoz or farm collectives), these networks show the way ahead for fostering genuine civil engagement in these non-Western settings. Indeed, Roy argues that Western policy-makers and their local interlocutors ignore such indigenous networks at their peril, in favour of state- new institutions of private enterprise and law.

In a different context, Dr Wiltiak Malik in his March seminar that the disruption of traditional networks as well as the twinning of new ones in South Asia – which would empower civil society actors like women and minority groups – stems from the modern assails of colonial domi- nation, militarism and modernity. In other words, the notion that civil society is strictly a contemporary phenomenon that challenges modernist bonds not based on common citizenship is contested. Indeed, as IIS director Professor Arkoun Malik noted in his subsequent talk on ‘The Good Society’, the ethical dimension of civic cul- ture has premodern roots – which under- scores the need to synthesize tradition and modernity in fostering democratic legiti- macy.

Perhaps nowhere is that need more con- spicuous than in the discourses on gender in post-revolutionary Iran, the subject of Dr Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s session in June. In her now-famous interviews with a broad spec- trum of Iranian women, she revealed, in favour of women as well as in her films that bring those discus- sions alive to publics abroad, Mir-Hosseini has shown that for many urban women and even for an influential modernist thinker like Abdolkarim Soroush, ‘tradition’ can be reconstructed. This is especially so in drawing upon sacred texts and the corpus of (jih- risprudence) as legitimating claims of equi- ty – even as ethical critiques are applied to readings of the Koran.

However, to the extent that civil society is about the public sphere where (after Haber- marc’s citizens) want to have an influence on institutionalised opinion- and will-forma- tion? Mir-Hosseini argued that the con- trasts on feminist expression through magazines and other media are acute even in the ‘liberalising’ Iran of President Moh- hammed Khatami. This was reinforced by the glimpse into the private sphere offered by an excerpt from her latest film, Runaway, in which the gap between personal aspira- tion and social reality is especially oppressive as ever for a younger generation of reform- minded Iranian women.

Also at the June session, Professor Abdol Filafi Ansari (on the Maghreb) and Dr No- rani Othman (on Southeast Asia) drew at- tention to the waning and waning of ‘au- tonomous’ civic culture in the shadows of autoritarianism, often condened by the prospect of fundamentalist encroachment – real or imagined. The correlation between the strength of civil society and that of the state also remains contested: both may be weak (Indonesia, Egypt, Algeria, even Turkmenistan) – or may be robust (Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, United States). In- deed, Filali-Ansari was inclined to question whether the concept of civil society can usefully capture the complexities of partic- ular cultural and historical contexts, or whether it is too arbitrary in the manifold uses to which it is put.

What’s in a square? In any case, from issues of equal treat- ment under the law to democratic account- ability and access to political power, there is more to the quest for civic engagement than can be captured by easy normative di- chotomies that tend to dominate debates about civil society. For some, this may re- reflect the fragmented mess of postmod- ernism that is our shared reality – magnified in a public sphere dominated by ‘new media’, fuelling what Gary Gunt calls the ‘digital uma’. For others, it may seem like the empire striking back, as postcolonial publics finds their voices to re-appropriate the most basic elements of democratic disc- course.

But whether postmodern or postcolonial, an aspect of this reality that Muslims are obliged to confront is: What kind of public space is civil society to be located in? If it must be secular, as many observers insist, then what would be the nature of secularity in a milieu whose religious tradition actively merges din, dunya and dawa (faith, world and state)? Muslim societies offer contrast- ing, and internally contested, responses to the nexus between secular /religious space and the prospects for civil society. Certainly this is an issue that the present- ers in the IIS series must grapple with in grounding the idea of civic culture, and in appealing actual socio-political realities.

In a plural and multicultural Muslim universe, the seminars seek to interrogate the concept of civic society in terms of its im- plications for politics and public squares where tradition and modernity, secular and sacred, are very much at the forefront of quotidian experience. Yet, no matter what the specific perspec- tives in a given Muslim context, civic dis- course will likely reflect ethical values that draw far more explicitly on ‘Islam’ than any comparable experience one can invoke in a Western society vis-à-vis Judeo-Christian ethics. There is nothing inherently nativist about this notion: on the contrary, an array of Muslim activists and intellectuals have drawn on Islamic pluralist and humanist impulses. Moreover, ethical norms are all the more critical in transitional societies and civic contexts where the rule of law is fragile.

Notes

Readers are invited to visit highlights of this series – including a forthcoming session on Turkey by Prof. Ersin Kalaycioglu – on the Institute’s website: www.iis.ac.uk

Dr Amyn B. Sajoo is a visiting fellow at the IIS, coordinator of the civil society series, and editor of the forthcoming volume of essays stemming from the series.

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Chair of Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World Professor Jan Just Witkam

The Board of Directors of Leiden University decided on 1 June 2001 to create a new chair for Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World (Handschriftenkunde van de Islamitische wereld). Dr Jan Just Witkam was appointed as its first holder. Jan Just Witkam (born in Leiden, 1945) studied Arabic, Persian and Middle Eastern History at Leiden University from 1964 to 1972, and attended the University of Tehran in 1970. Since 1974 he has been a curator at the Leiden University Library, and since 1980 he is the curator of Oriental Collections. In 1989 he obtained his Ph.D. in Leiden with a thesis on the life and work of the Egyptian physician and encyclopaedist, Ibn al-Af’ami (d. 1348). From 1991 to 1998 he served as president of Melcom International, the European Association of Middle East Librari- ans. The prestigious title of ‘interpretes Legati Waramijj’ was conferred upon him in 1992. Prof. Witkam has taught Middle East- ern paleography and codicology for over 20 years, using the Is- lamic manuscript treasures of the Leiden Library as illustrative ob- jects for his students.

Among Prof. Witkam’s best known publications in book from are the final volume of A.J. Winsen’s Conocendes et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane (Leiden 1988, with W. Raven), Seven Specimens of Arabic Manuscripts (Leiden 1978), and the Cata- logue of Arabic Manuscripts (ongoing project, since 1982). In 1998 he was co-author of the catalogue of Malay Manuscripts (with E. Wieringa). He published several volumes in the series, Manuscripta Indonesia, of which he is a co-founder. In 1986 he was co-author of Manuscripta Indonesica. In 1986 he founded the international journal, Manuscripts of the Middle East. He also serves on the editorial boards of Cahiers de Manuscrip- ti, a series of manuscript catalogues, and of Kline Publicacites, a series of exhibition catalogues, both published by Leiden Uni- versity Library. Presently he conducts research on the tech- niques and approaches of Muslim scholars, and more specifica- lly he is working on the analysis of readers’ protocols (jazamat, samarat) in Arabic manuscripts.