

# VISOR | VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society

**VISOR seminar on Islam in Europe**  
**27<sup>th</sup> of November 2009**  
**VU Amsterdam**  
**Conv. Thijl Sunier (FSW-SCA / VISOR)**

## ***Research on Islam in Europe***

In Europe there is a long tradition of research on Islam. The Netherlands that once ruled over the second most populous Muslim country of the world is renowned for its extensive archives and its world famous library of Islamic documents. Also in other European countries, particularly in France and the UK, there is an extensive academic infrastructure for the study of Islam in the world. The study of Islam *in* Europe has, not very surprisingly, long been a small and relatively marginal branch in this field. Indigenous Muslim populations in the Balkans and Spain, small numbers of Muslim colonial subjects prior to WW II, constituted a minor topic.

In most of the studies on the immigration of people with an Islamic background that were published in the 1960s and 1970s, culture, let alone religion, was hardly an issue. When Islam was a topic for research, it was mainly conducted by philologists and students of Arabic and Islamic theology who were familiar with the Islamic sources. Many considered Islam in Europe a simple extension of their work in the Islamic world proper. Only in the late 1970s the religious background of immigrants began to attract social scientists and historians, but it was only after the so-called Rushdie affair in 1989 that the study of Islam in 'the West' began to gain momentum and that the field emerged. One of the reasons was that the governments in most countries in Western Europe thought it necessary to develop policies to deal with religious diversity and to adapt religious newcomers to society. In the course of the 1990s integration and the governance of Muslim minorities in Western European nation-states became a dominant topic.

Gradually the integration of Islam developed into a theoretical and methodological paradigm with its own assumptions, research question, research agenda and mode of knowledge production. Integration into nation-states became an almost self-evident feature of studies on Islam in the West. It not only became the dominant mode of research, research grants more and more converged around issues of accommodation and governance with all the epistemological implications it entails. As a consequence many recent developments such as globalization and transnationalism, the emergence of new media, the merging of Islam with all kinds of popular culture, but also the spread of radical forms of political Islam and the shifts in the modes and styles of religious leadership are molded according to the integration paradigm.

Given the fact that research on Islam in Europe is presently growing at a considerable pace, it is necessary to reflect on this vastly expanding field, to discuss the outlines and assumptions that determine research agendas. Although reflections on the research field takes place continuously, a thorough methodological and epistemological discussion has

# VISOR | VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society

hardly been made explicit. By organizing this meeting, it is my aim to contribute to this academic reflection. I consider this not only a necessary activity, it is also highly relevant and urgent given the changes that take place both in the field and in the academic community that focuses on Islam in Europe.

## ***Outline of the seminar***

The seminar will be divided into three sessions. In each of the sessions a specific issue, that bears relevance to particular epistemological, methodological and thematic aspects of the study of Islam in Europe, will be addressed and discussed.

### *1. Islam in Europe or European Islam*

The discussion about the future of Islam in Europe often centers on the question whether or not a 'European Islam' will develop. Yet, the quest for a 'European Islam', that is supposed to be an Islam that fits within a European enlightened self-identity is one of the most sensitive and topical issues of the public debate in the past decades. Many experts on Islam seriously criticize this notion of Islam because it is too much charged with implicit assumptions on the characteristics of Islam in Europe. Moreover, European Islam refers to doctrinal and normative aspects. Other modes of expression and production of religiosity are generally ignored. This session will deal with the question how this highly important issue can be addressed in a multidisciplinary research agenda.

### *2. Integration, politics and nation-states*

The second session will deal with the question how research on Islam in Europe should relate to the political normative conditions of nation-states, particularly the integration policies. Should research agendas on Islam reflect important developments taking place with respect to these policies, or should research institutes develop their own agenda? What modes of knowledge do these different agendas produce? In other words, how can we transform the undeniably important question how Muslim communities relate to local, urban, national, European and global contexts and realms, without rendering one of these dimensions a more important or more natural status than the others?

### *3. The comparative dimension*

For a long time the study of Islam was considered as a field in its own right, firmly in the hands of experts on Islamic theology, Arabic and adjacent disciplines. Also social scientists have long treated Islam as unique field of inquiry that could hardly be compared to other religious traditions and practices. This is gradually changing. The question addressed in this session is how a genuine comparative approach can be attained and how a comparative research agenda should look like. What can, for example, be learned from studies on other religions? What are the methodological implications?

# VISOR | VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society

In each of these sessions, short statements of 10 minutes will be presented, followed by a discussion with the participants and the audience.

## Place of venue

VU University, Metropolitan building, room Z-009.  
Buitenveldertselaan 3, Amsterdam

## Chairs

**Birgit Meyer** (Professor of Anthropology, VU University Amsterdam)

t.b.a

## Schedule

9.00- 9.20	Welcome and coffee/tea
9.20- 9.30	Opening speech by <b>Martien Brinkman</b> (Professor of Theology, academic director of the VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society, VISOR)
9.30- 11.00	Session 1: <b><i>Islam in Europe or European Islam</i></b>  Statements by:  <b>Ruud Peters</b> (Endowed professor of Islamic law, University of Amsterdam)  <b>Annelies Moors</b> (Professor of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam)  <b>Nico Landman</b> (Associate professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Utrecht, Netherlands)  <b>Edien Bartels</b> (Assistant professor of Anthropology, VU University Amsterdam)  <b>Maurits Berger</b> (Professor of Islam in the West, University of Leiden, Netherlands)  Discussion
11.00- 11.15	Break
11.15- 12.30	Session 2: <b><i>Integration, politics and nation-states</i></b>  Statements by:  <b>Steve Vertovec</b> (Director of the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany)

# VISOR | VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society

**Stefano Allievi** (Professor of Sociology at the University of Padua, Italy)

**Ruba Salih** (Senior lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Exeter, UK)

**Markha Valenta** (Research fellow urban religion, University of Amsterdam)

Discussion

12.30- 13.30

Lunch

13.30 – 14.45

Session 3: ***The comparative dimension***

Statements by:

**Marjo Buitelaar** (Associate professor of contemporary Islam, University of Groningen, Netherlands)

**Nadi Fadil** (Research fellow, University of Leuven, Belgium)

**John Eade** (Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Roehampton University, London)

Additional participants:

**Martijn de Koning** (Research fellow, University of Nijmegen)

**Loubna el-Morabet** (Research fellow, University of Leiden)

**Lenie Brouwer** (Assistant professor of Anthropology, VU University Amsterdam)

**Stella van de Wetering** (Assistant professor of Islamic theology, VU/CIT Amsterdam)

Discussion with the participants and the audience.

15.45

Inaugural lecture **Thijl Sunier** (Professor of Islam in European Societies)  
Aula, main building VU University

Reception afterwards