

## *Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports*

### **Voices of Islam in Europe and Southeast Asia**

This workshop, co-organized by the Regional Studies Program, Walailak University, Thailand, and the Department of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and conceived of early in 2005, took place a little over a week before the eruption of the “cartoon controversy,” which brought the issue of the relationship between Europe and the so-called “Muslim world” to the fore as never before. From January 20-22, 2006, a group of almost thirty Muslim and non-Muslim specialists working in Islamic studies and on the study of Muslim societies from fifteen countries in Europe and Southeast Asia gathered in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Thailand, to discuss the diverse “Voices of Islam” in these two regions. The workshop was held in southern Thailand, where, in the ethnic Malay-majority border provinces, a violent insurgency over the last two years has claimed over 1,000 lives and has heightened tensions between the local Muslim population and the Thai state. Some observers have explained the intensification of the conflict as being due to the infiltration of foreign Islamist militants and the influence of extremist Islamic discourses of struggle.

The workshop focused on two major themes: how events following the September 11 attacks have affected the nature of Islamic studies in Europe and Southeast Asia, and how changes in Islamic studies are impacting upon Muslims and their understanding of Islam in these two regions. While the workshop presentations were given mainly in English (with a small number of papers presented in Thai and Malay), a simultaneous interpreting service was available for local Thai Muslim (as well as non-Muslim) participants, who attended the workshop in significant numbers.

A wide variety of papers were presented. However, if one theme could summarize the tone of the three days, it is that 9/11 has engendered a changing paradigm in these regions’ Islamic studies programs, even though many of the changes may already have been underway prior to the attacks. In the case of Southeast Asia, governments and the media in the region have attributed the Muslim extremists’ ideology, at least partly, to the influence of

Islamic education institutions. This has resulted in increased official pressure, both from within the region and without, being placed on these institutions to demonstrate their “moderate Islam” credentials and their relevance to the nation’s development goals, in particular the degree to which they provide their students with the skills required by the job market. At the same time, the Islamic education institutions themselves are seeking to develop their material and academic resources to equip their students with knowledge that is relevant to the modern world.

The workshop highlighted the great variety in standards in Islamic education in Southeast Asia. Papers on Cambodia, southern Philippines, and southern Thailand – where Muslims are a minority – highlighted the relatively disadvantaged state of Islamic education there, particularly in the *madrasahs*, as compared to their counterparts in the Muslim-majority countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. In the latter, not only are there greater material resources available, but there is also a richer variety of approaches to the study of Islam. Moreover, in these countries the social sciences have been integrated with Islamic studies to a far greater degree.

A theme that numerous papers touched on was the relationship of Islamic education to identity. *Pondok* schools, for example, have a long history of playing a significant role in preserving traditional Malay identity in southern Thailand. The pressures to modernize traditional Islamic education thus directly impact upon the ability of these schools to maintain this role. In certain cases, decoupling Islamic education from traditional culture may have led to a greater emphasis on scripturalist interpretations of Islam that lack cultural contextualization.

This may also be a factor that has contributed to the so-called “Arabization” of Southeast Asian Islam, a phenomenon seen particularly in southern Thailand and Malaysia. Azyumardi Azra (rector, Indonesia’s State Islamic University) and Omar Farouk (Hiroshima City University, Japan), talked about the necessity of maintaining and developing a “Southeast Asian Islam,” even while modernizing traditional education. But what form of Southeast Asian Islam? For a number of the workshop participants from southern Thailand and Malaysia, the “Islamization of knowledge” still appears to be a desirable and viable project. But for Azra, “all knowledge is already Islamic”; what is required, rather, is to develop theories that take into account the particularities of Muslim “social and cultural realities.”

Even in Malaysia, materially the most modern of Southeast Asia’s Muslim-majority countries, the relationship between Islam and identity is never far away. Several presentations discussed *Islam Hadhari*, the Malay-

sian government's latest campaign to promote a modern Muslim identity for Malaysia's Malay population. Interestingly, in Indonesia the question of Islam and identity seems to be much less problematic than elsewhere.

Islam and identity was also the theme of a number of papers on Islam in Europe. One challenge posed to Islamic education in Europe today is that of catering, on the one hand, to Muslim migrants seeking to retain their (or their children's) Islamic identity in a culturally and religiously "foreign" environment, and, on the other, meeting the needs of a general non-Muslim public seeking to understand Islam at a time when religions – even "civilizations" – have become intensely politicized.

The area focus for much of the study of Islam in Europe, as Mathias Diederich (University of Khartoum, Sudan) pointed out, is the Middle East, not Southeast Asia. Yet links between the study of Islam in these two regions do exist. Dick van der Meij's (Indonesia Netherlands Islamic Studies Program [INIS]) paper showed how Indonesian Muslims studying Islam in universities in the Netherlands (particularly under INIS) are influencing Islamic studies in Indonesia – for example, in the training of staff and students at the State Institutes for the Study of Islam (IAIN), the State Islamic University of Indonesia (UIN), and the State Colleges for the Study of Islam (STAIN). This rich and mutually beneficial interaction between Islamic studies in Europe and Southeast Asia, and indeed between Muslims and non-Muslims, is but one example that refutes the unfortunately popular argument of the "clash of civilizations" between "Europe" / the West and Islam – and that deserves greater recognition.

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