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Voices of Islam in Europe and Southeast Asia

The 'central and most dangerous dimension of the emerging global politics' revolves around 'civilizational identities', warned political scientist and former US State Department adviser Samuel Huntington in his seminal article in *Foreign Affairs*. 'The fault lines between civilisations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flashpoints for crisis and bloodshed.'



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Cynthia Chou and Patrick Jory

International conflict in the post-September 11 world seemed to confirm this forecast and fuelled western anxieties of the Muslim world, giving currency to theories rooting conflict in the polarisation of Muslims and the West. The workshop 'Voices of Islam in Europe and Southeast Asia' aimed to dispute unitary characterisations of Islam's civilisational identity; to address Islam beyond the Middle Eastern domain; and to hear the myriad voices of Islam to deepen our understanding of the Muslim world's diversity.

Particularly outside the Islamic world, September 11th 2001 sparked unprecedented interest in Muslims, Islam and Islamic studies. In Europe it intensified the attention to Islam resulting from an increasingly large Muslim population. Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh's murder, after the summer 2004 airing of his film *Submission* on Dutch television, spawned debates on Islam and accommodating Muslim immigrants. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, an Islamic revivalist movement dating back to the 1970s, and separatist movements whose ideologies are expressed in Islamic terms, extolled Islam's contemporary importance. In Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Islam in politics and society has effloresced three decades after the downfall of General Suharto and his New Order regime.

Fittingly, the workshop was held in southern Thailand, where a violent insurgency in the ethnic Malay majority border provinces has claimed over a thousand lives over the last two years, heightening tensions between the Muslim population and the Thai state. Some observers believe the conflict's intensification stems from the infiltration of foreign Islamists and their extremist discourses. It was a fitting milieu in which to address the urgency of Islamic studies.

Education and citizenship

What resonated throughout the workshop was how Islam and being Muslim have dominated public debates over education, citizenship, community and political orientation. The workshop opened with presentations on the conceptualisation, definition and interpretation of what constitutes Islamic studies and education. In Southeast Asia, governments and media have traced Muslim extremist ideology to Islamic educational institutions and pressured

them to demonstrate their 'moderate' Islamic credentials and relevance to national development goals, especially how they provide their students with employable skills.

Islamic education in Europe is no less controversial. It must cater to Muslim migrants seeking to retain their Islamic identity in a 'foreign' environment, home to a generally non-Muslim public seeking to understand Islam in an era when religions – even 'civilisations' – are intensely politicized. The need to dispel the unitary characterisation of Islam in Islamic studies in Europe is crucial, and while many Islamic studies and education programmes exist in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, these tend to focus on the Middle East and pay little attention to Muslims in Europe or Southeast Asia.

Workshop presentations by scholars of Islamic studies and education in Southeast Asia dismissed the view of the region as a potential hotbed of Islamist terrorism or battleground for a 'war of ideas'. Such criticism is far too general, researchers argued, because it overlooks Islamic education's varying role, content and standards from country to country. Muslim-minority areas of Cambodia, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand have a relatively disadvantaged state of Islamic education, particularly in *madrasahs*, compared to their counterparts in the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. The latter possess greater material resources and a richer variety of approaches to studying Islam, and have integrated the social sciences with Islamic studies to a much greater degree.

Islamic education has played a significant role in preserving ethnic identity, such as the Malay identity in southern Thailand. However, the far too generalized perception that extremist views are circulated via Islamic studies and education has pressured Southeast Asian Islamic institutions to reform their 'traditional' Islamic education. This reduces their ability to preserve ethnic identities, as the decoupling of Islamic education from traditional culture sometimes leads to scripturalist interpretations lacking cultural contextualisation, and may also contribute to the so-called 'Arabisation' of Southeast Asian Islam, particularly in southern Thailand and Malaysia. Workshop speakers emphasised the need to develop a 'Southeast Asian Islam' while reforming traditional

education. But what form of Southeast Asian Islam? Workshop participants from southern Thailand and Malaysia saw the 'Islamisation of knowledge' as a desirable project, while others argued that 'all knowledge is already Islamic'. New theories are required that account for the particularities of Muslim 'social and cultural realities'.

Transnational Islam?

To show the Muslim world's complexity, some presentations hinged on 'Transnational Islam and Muslims'. Until about two decades ago, the transnational character of Islam and migrant Muslim populations received minimal attention. Today, European governments, politicians and media debate policies of accommodation, or more likely restriction, of migrant Muslims whose voices go unheard because of language barriers or the lack of participatory public forums.

Workshop researchers identified gaps in studies on transnational Islam and Muslims. Questions raised included: 'How does movement through migration, exile and tourism ramify arguments concerning socio-cultural life and identity?' 'What are the challenges faced by migrant Muslims in Denmark, Germany or the Netherlands with respect to the interpretation of Islam in a new social cultural milieu?' 'What hurdles do they encounter with respect to the perceptions of Muslims in a non-Muslim society?' 'What are the challenges of religious pluralism versus the idea of a Muslim society?'

Does the transnational movement of Muslims transform them into a single globalised community? The answer is an emphatic no. Rejecting a totalising view of transnationalism, workshop participants were drawn to the imaginings of the individual in the large-scale cross-border flow of people, images and cultural forces. For economic or political reasons, transnational Muslims might live in one nation-state yet engage in more than one national agenda. The everyday lives of transnational Muslims reflect great diversity. They adopt life-

styles and express religious affiliations in all sorts of ways.

While they cannot be accurately perceived as a single world-wide community, transnational Muslims are inevitably bound together within the wider public landscape. In Europe, transnational Muslims are not perceived as apolitical cultural images. Negotiating cultural meanings, Muslims and non-Muslims alike vex over questions like, 'What does it mean to be Muslim in Europe?' or 'How much does one have to accommodate Muslim symbols in the public arena?' Transnational movement sometimes offers Muslims new resources to construct new identities; it can also increase tensions between different social orders. Transnational Islam and Muslims offer theoretical and empirical insight to the emerging multiple modernities of Islam and being Muslim.

The mutually beneficial interaction between Islamic Studies in Europe and Southeast Asia, and indeed between workshop Muslims and non-Muslims, refutes the popular argument of a 'clash of civilisations' between 'Europe/the West and Islam'. Such interaction demands greater recognition. One week after the workshop, the cartoon controversy erupted in Denmark, spread to Asia and mushroomed into a transnational issue, demonstrating that the 'Voices of Islam in Europe and Southeast Asia' must be heard here and now. ◀

Note

1. Huntington, Samuel P. 1993. 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* 72, p.29.

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