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INTRODUCTION

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Beyond 'radical' versus 'moderate'? New perspectives on the politics of moderation in Muslim majority and Muslim minority settings

Margaretha A. van Es[a], Nina ter Laan[a,b] and Erik Meinema[a]

[a]Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands; [b]Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany

ABSTRACT

Muslims are increasingly conceived through a binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate'. In this thematic issue, we critically explore how the dichotomy of 'radical' versus 'moderate' is constructed and mobilized in different Muslim majority and Muslim minority settings across the world, and we examine the active role played by Muslims in upholding, appropriating, and/or subverting this binary frame. How do Muslims present themselves, their religion, and other Muslim groups amidst growing concerns about the dangers of 'radical' Islam – not only through texts, but also through a wide variety of aesthetic practices? And how do discourses about national sovereignty, loyalty, and belonging feed into these representations? This issue brings together scholars from various disciplines, who analyze how the 'politics of moderation' play out in Kenya, Norway, Russia, Morocco, Indonesia, and Egypt. We also call for the development of new pathways of thinking about Islam and Muslims in the contemporary world.

Violent extremism[1] among Muslims has become a key security issue across the world, especially since the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Subsequent atrocities committed by jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, and ISIS have further contributed to this development. More than ever before, Muslims are conceived through a binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate' – not only in counter-terrorism policy programs, but also in Western news media and in academia. 'Radical' Muslims are construed as dogmatic, intolerant, and prone to violence, while 'moderate' Muslims are seen as open-minded, tolerant, and non-violent. Along the same line, an oppositional distinction is commonly made between 'moderate' and 'radical' Islam. 'Moderate' (or 'good') Islam is then conceived as a-political and compatible with liberal values, while 'radical' (or 'bad') Islam is conceived as a violent and totalitarian ideology that poses a threat to democratic societies. Hence, 'moderate' Muslims are increasingly urged to counteract 'radical' Islam (cf. Muqtedar Khan 2007; Benkin 2017).

CONTACT Margaretha A. van Es ✉ m.a.vanes@uu.nl
[1]Words such as 'violent extremism', 'jihadism' and 'terrorism' are not neutral analytical terms, but political concepts with a particular history and particular consequences. As such, these terms deserve a critical analysis in themselves. However, we use these terms now and then for the sake of readability, and in the absence of better terms.

With this thematic issue, we aim to make a critical intervention by studying how the dichotomy of 'radical' versus 'moderate' is constructed and mobilized in different geographical contexts across the world, and by examining the active role played by Muslims in upholding, appropriating, and/or subverting this binary frame. Paying attention to both Muslim majority and Muslim minority settings, we ask: how and to what extent do Muslims engage with this binary frame? How do they present themselves, their religion, and other Muslim groups amidst growing concerns about the dangers of 'radical' Islam – not only through texts, but also through a wide variety of aesthetic practices?[2] And how do discourses about national sovereignty, loyalty, and belonging feed into these representations?

A number of scholars, most notably Kundnani (2014), have critically addressed the binary of 'moderate' versus 'radical'. It flattens out the complex, multiple differences between Muslims, and effectively reduces diversity among Muslims to the extent to which they pose a security threat. As such, this dichotomy is not only inadequate to describe religious experiences and social realities,[3] but it also has serious political consequences for Muslims themselves. Growing scholarly attention is being paid to how policy programs against violent extremism contribute to the marginalization of Muslims, in categorizing Muslims as a potential security threat and implying that even 'moderate' Muslims always remain susceptible to radicalization (Mamdani 2004; Brown 2010; Kundnani 2014; Rytter and Holm Pedersen 2014; Rashid 2016; Saeed 2016; Fadil, de Koning, and Ragazzi 2019).

However, few scholars have studied how Muslims position themselves in relation to this dichotomy (Maira 2009; Riley 2009; Scharbrodt 2011; Wijsen 2013; Corbett 2017; Morsi 2017; de Koning 2019). Moreover, almost all of the aforementioned works concentrate on Muslim minorities in secular Western states, with a strong focus on English-speaking countries. So far, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the construction of the 'moderate' versus 'radical' dichotomy in other parts of the world; whether in Muslim majority countries or in countries with significant Muslim minority populations. This hiatus is noteworthy, since many of these countries have become involved in military operations against militant Muslim groups, as well as in various soft power strategies to promote a 'moderate' Islam as part of the US led 'Global War on Terror' (Mahmood 2006; Hurd 2015).[4]

We argue that in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social, political, and religious dynamics surrounding the binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate', it is of fundamental importance to explore the experiences, narratives, and practices of Muslims in different geographical contexts. Therefore, this thematic issue brings together scholars from various disciplines, who explore how these 'politics of moderation' play out

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[2]By 'self-representations', we mean any explicit or implicit statement that people make about themselves and/or the group they claim belonging to – whether in the form of texts, images, or embodied practices (van Es 2016).

[3]Scholars from different disciplines, most notably Islamic studies and the anthropology of Islam, have pointed to the complex diversity of political opinions and religious affinities among Muslims for a long time.

[4]In many cases, anti-terror legislation has eroded standards of human rights protection, as state authorities have utilized the international concern with terrorism as an excuse to tighten controls on society and clamp down on dissent. Though not addressed in this thematic issue, perhaps the most extreme example is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the North West of China. The Chinese government has imprisoned an estimated one million Uyghurs in 're-education camps' without trial, on charges of being 'sensitive to religious extremism and separatist ideologies' (Clarke 2010; *BBC News*, 17 June 2019; *The Guardian*, 27 July 2019).

among Muslim minority populations in Kenya, Norway, and Russia, and in the Muslim majority settings of Morocco and Indonesia, as well as in three major Sunni theological institutions based in Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia. The individual contributions are based on a wide variety of material: from public speeches to Facebook memes, and from musical performances to interfaith dialogue meetings. This reveals forms of resistance and compliance that otherwise remain unnoticed, especially in contexts where there is little room for open debate.

This thematic issue is also a call for the development of new pathways of thinking about Islam and Muslims in the contemporary world. The current struggle of many Muslims to move beyond the binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate' is also shared by us as scholars who aim to deconstruct this dichotomy. Firstly, this binary frame, which has emanated from counterterrorism policies, has become so dominant in mainstream public discourses across the world that it is hard to critically study its use and impact without falling back into this very frame. Secondly, the words 'radical' and 'moderate' are often mobilized in relation to horrendous acts of violence committed against ordinary citizens. These acts of violence, as well as the religious discourses that legitimize them, cannot be overlooked and require a critical analysis. As scholars, we are confronted with the question of how to formulate such a critical analysis without reproducing the limiting and stigmatizing discourses through which Muslims are continuously framed. At the same time, we also face another challenge, namely to develop new vocabularies that do justice to the diversity of political opinions and religious affinities among Muslims, surpassing the question of 'how dangerous they are'. These two challenges cannot be met with one-size-fits-all solutions, but require a variety of approaches and perspectives that are to be developed in direct relation to the specific issues and geographical contexts that are being studied.

The Global War on Terror and the securitization of Islam

We analyze the binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate' as something that is part and parcel of the 'governance of Islam': the various forms of political steering – located on a continuum between public authority and societal self-regulation – that together shape the opportunities for Muslims to practice their faith in a particular context (Maussen, Bader, and Moors 2011). Stereotypical representations of Islam as a religion of violence, as well as simplistic distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims are centuries old and date back at least to the European colonial endeavor (Fadil, de Koning, and Ragazzi 2019).

These schemes have been revived in the context of the Global War on Terror. The counter-terrorism policies that were developed in the US and Europe after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 tended to frame acts of terrorism committed by Muslims as a theological problem, as if such violence directly resulted from an extremist interpretation of Islam. Although many of these policy programs have become somewhat more sophisticated over the past two decades by taking into account a broader set of 'root causes' of terrorism, the War on Terror has triggered a worldwide 'securitization of Islam' and an 'Islamization of security'. Almost everyone and everything related to Islam has become a matter of security, and debates about security are often reduced to Islam. This supposedly legitimizes extraordinary forms of surveillance and state interference in religious affairs

(Haddad and Golson 2007; Cesari 2012; Kundnani 2014; Fadil, de Koning, and Ragazzi 2019).

However, Muslims are not passive victims of a problematic Western frame. All contributions to this thematic issue reveal the creativity with which Muslim individuals, governments, and religious institutions engage with the binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical'. Several articles demonstrate how the dichotomy has been appropriated in different ways by state authorities in many Muslim-majority countries, and by several prominent institutions for Islamic theology. Here, we see how the Global War on Terror intersects with local pragmatic interests. Other contributions bring attention to the struggle of Muslims who try to move beyond the 'moderate' versus 'radical' dichotomy in one way or another, whether through open resistance or more subtle forms of 'dissonance'.[5] These case studies also show the extreme difficulty for Muslims to completely escape this dichotomy.

An important observation in this thematic issue is that whether we look at Muslim minority or Muslim majority settings, contemporary concerns about Muslim violent extremism are always closely intertwined with concerns about national sovereignty, loyalty, and belonging. For example, in Norway (and elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe), 'home-grown terrorism' is commonly perceived as an extreme outcome of the 'failed' integration of Muslims into Norwegian society and culture, and more broadly, their refusal to adopt secular Western values. In Russia, Indonesia, and Morocco, 'native, traditional' forms of Islam are juxtaposed with a 'radical, non-traditional, and foreign' Islam. In Kenya, Muslim-led civil society organizations and the political establishment explicitly promote national unity and peaceful interfaith coexistence as part of their efforts to counter violent extremism. In one way or another, Muslim 'radicalism' is associated with bad citizenship. This makes the question of how Muslims engage with the binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate' all the more urgent.

The contributions to this thematic issue

Margaretha van Es explores how Norwegian Muslims uphold or subvert the binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical' while making explicit statements against acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam. Her article takes up three case studies of public events organized by Muslims in the city center of Oslo, Norway: (1) a torchlight march against terrorism in 2004, (2) a protest march against ISIS in 2014, and (3) a human 'Ring of Peace' around the Oslo synagogue in 2015. Based on participant observation, qualitative interviews with the organizers, and a large collection of news reports and opinion pieces, she demonstrates that these statements can be seen as a 'multiple critique': against terrorism, against stereotypical representations of Muslims and Islam, and (in some cases) also against the 'radical/moderate' dichotomy. Van Es critically addresses the pressure on Muslims to prove that they are peaceful and loyal citizens, and examines how Norwegian debates about the incompatibility between Islam and Western values feed into contestations among Muslims about 'true' Islam.

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[5]The term 'dissonance' is coined as an analytical concept by Nina ter Laan in her individual contribution to this thematic issue.

Serafettin Pektas explores how three major Sunni theological institutions actively uphold the 'moderate' versus 'radical' dichotomy by presenting themselves as peaceful and moderate voices of 'true Islam', namely al-Azhar al-Sharif of Egypt, al-Rabiṭa al-Muḥammadiyya lil-'Ulama of Morocco, and Nahḍatul 'Ulama of Indonesia. All three of them have a privileged relationship with the state and represent the official Islam of their respective countries. Pektas provides a critical, comparative analysis of their theological discourses and strategies in developing an 'exceptional' and 'moderate' Sunni response to jihadist militancy, particularly after the emergence of the so-called 'Islamic State' in Syria and Iraq (IS).

Nina ter Laan delves deeper into the case of Morocco, and calls attention to the sonic. She analyzes how in this country, a dichotomy of 'moderate' versus 'radical' Islam is constructed through music and sound. In the wake of 9/11 and after the Casablanca terrorist attacks in 2003, Morocco has, next to the implementations of strict security measures, actively been reshaping its image through musical activities, and most importantly, large-scale international music festivals, which are designed to send out a message about the country's tolerance and religious moderation. In her article, she specifically focuses on the experiences of vocal performers of Islam-inspired music, which broadly consists of two domains; Sufi music and *anashid* music. As Sufism has officially been forwarded by the Moroccan state as the emblem of a 'moderate' Islam, performers of Sufi music are given ample room in national media platforms and on prestigious festival stages. Their counterparts, performers of *anashid* (Islamic a-capella chants), are however predominantly presented as Muslim fanatics. For them, there is little space on state-supported stages. Instead, they have their own parallel networks for the production and staging of their music. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork among vocal performers of *anashid* and Sufi music, Ter Laan analyzes how the Moroccan response to the War on Terror, and concomitant perceptions of 'radical' versus 'moderate' Islam, affect their music and the ways in which they present themselves. She proposes the notion of 'dissonance' to analyze how the artists' musical practices converge with, yet simultaneously rub against state discourses on 'moderate' Islam.

Leonie Schmidt further investigates the case of Indonesia. She discusses the emergence of an Islamic 'counter-terror culture' in Indonesia based on the concept of *Islam Nusantara*: a syncretic, 'moderate' and 'typically Indonesian' form of Islam. The Islamic organization Nahḍat al-'Ulama (NU), which also appears in the article by Pektas, takes a leading role in the promotion of such a 'counter-terror culture'. Schmidt analyzes two NU counter-terror initiatives: (1) the 2015 documentary *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam), which challenges 'radical' interpretations of the Quran, and (2) the 'cyber warrior initiative', in which volunteers contest Islamic 'radicalism' on social media with memes, hashtags, and short videos. She demonstrates how these initiatives uphold a binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate' Islam, and present Islam Nusantara as an antidote against 'radicalism'. The article proposes that both initiatives are marked by an aesthetics of authority, which constructs traditional figures of Islamic authority as contemporary role models who can help protect the country against violent extremism.

Erik Meinema analyzes concerns about Muslim violent extremism in the religiously and ethnically diverse coastal town of Malindi in Kenya. He focuses on two Muslim-led civil society organizations that receive U.K. government funds to 'counter violent extremism' in relation to concerns about Al-Shabaab activity in coastal Kenya. Meinema analyzes

how Muslim leaders, NGO staff, and participating community members relate to British notions of 'moderate' versus 'radical' Islam. They simultaneously engage with local perceptions of violent extremism as something that is so immoral that it cannot be truly religious. Meinema demonstrates how the two civil society organizations aim to uphold an image of Islam as an essentially peaceful religion, which means that they constantly aim to avoid stigmatizing links between Islam and terrorism. His article concludes with a discussion of three strategies of the Muslim-led organizations in Malindi to navigate and challenge binary distinctions between 'moderate' versus 'radical', namely: (1) avoiding discussions about violent extremism, (2) broadening discussions about peace and security beyond Islam, and (3) tapping into wider moral concerns about youth, which cut across religious divides and do not exclusively focus on Muslim youth.

Kaarina Aitamurto examines the patriotic discourses of Muslim leaders (*muftis*) in contemporary Russia. Islam has a long history in Russia and is officially named as one of the four 'traditional religions' of the country. Nevertheless, since 9/11, suspicion towards Islam has increased in society, and Muslim leaders easily become accused of extremism. Aitamurto analyzes recent media debates about Islam, and demonstrates how the discursive boundary between 'radical, non-traditional' and 'moderate, traditional' Islam is being negotiated. She argues that the pressure on Muslims to display loyalty to the nation-state has narrowed the scope of what is considered acceptable behavior for Muslim leaders. Yet at the same time, these Muslim leaders cleverly adopt arguments and popular catchwords from the rhetoric of the political elite in order to emphasize the role of Islam in Russian society and tradition. In doing so, they seek to influence public discourse about Russian identity and defend the position of Muslims in the country.

In her afterword to this thematic issue, Nadia Fadil raises crucial questions about the ethical possibilities and critical potentialities of a politics of moderation within Islam. She observes that the overwhelming eagerness among Muslims across the world to condemn 'radicalism' is profoundly entangled with various hard and soft power measures that are part of the Global War on Terror, but cannot be reduced to that. The urge to denounce 'radical' movements such as ISIS also emerges from Muslims' own ethical commitment to the Islamic tradition, and from a desire to guide and educate fellow Muslims onto the right path. Thus, Fadil argues, there are multiple ethical regimes at stake. As a future focus, she suggests to explore how categorizations of 'radical' versus 'moderate' emerge from within the religious tradition of Islam, and to analyze the ethical self-making practices that are entailed in the rejection of terrorism. Such a point of departure might offer one of the ways out of the impasse of the binary frame of 'radical' versus 'moderate'.

Funding

Notes on contributors

Margaretha A. van Es works as an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. She has conducted research on Islamophobia in Europe for many years, focusing especially on the various ways in which Muslims respond to stereotypes and other expressions of anti-Muslim racism. Her monograph *Stereotypes and Self-Representations of Women with a Muslim Background: The Stigma of Being Oppressed* was published with Palgrave Macmillan in 2016. She has also published articles in international journals such as *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, *Religions*, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, and *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*. Her current research focuses on trendy alcohol-free halal restaurants in Rotterdam through the lens of cosmopolitanism and belonging as part of the research program Religious Matters in an Entangled World.

Nina ter Laan is a cultural anthropologist with a thematic expertise in Islam, aesthetic practices, politics of belonging, and migration. Her regional expertise centers on Morocco. Her PhD dissertation, which she defended in 2016 at Radboud University in Nijmegen, examined the political usages of Islam-inspired music in Morocco. During her PhD, she was a lecturer at the Departments of Cultural Anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies at Leiden University. Between 2016 and 2020 she was a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of Utrecht University. There, as a member of the research program Religious Matters in an Entangled World, she studied home making practices and belonging among Dutch and Flemish Muslim converts who emigrated to Morocco. Currently, she is a guest researcher at Utrecht University and works as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cologne and the Collaborative Research Center Media of Cooperation (CRC) on a project focusing on Digital Public Spheres and Social Transformation in Morocco.

Erik Meinema is a PhD candidate in religious studies, who has received funding from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) to investigate modalities of religious co-existence on the Kenyan Coast. He is also member of the research program 'Religious Matters in an Entangled World' led by Birgit Meyer. He has earlier published in the journal *Africa*, and has recently organized an international conference entitled '*The Things of Conflict*' together with Lucien van Liere, which focused on analyzing material dimensions of religion-related conflicts and violence.

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