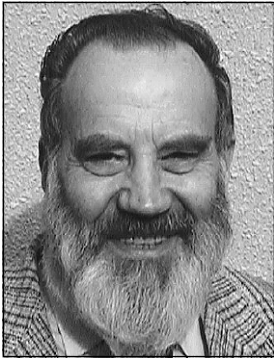


## Jacques Waardenburg

# Interpreting Islam



Born in 1930 in Haarlem, I studied at the Universities of Amsterdam (law, theology, science of religions, 1948–54) and Leiden (Arabic and Islam, 1954–55). In 1961, I obtained my doctorate (Amsterdam) with an analysis of the work of five “classical” scholars of Islam. If I look back, my life has been that of a “flying Dutchman”. *Research* in Paris (1956, 1957–59), Montreal (1962–63), the Middle East (1959–60, 1963–64), NIAS in Wassenaar (1974–75), and Wiko (2000–01). *Teaching* at UCLA in Los Angeles (1964–68) and the Universities of Utrecht (1968–87) and Lausanne (1987–95). Much *travel*. Since my retirement from the University of Lausanne, I concentrate on writing. Relevant publications: *L’Islam dans le miroir de l’Occident* (The Hague and Paris, 1961), *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (The Hague and Paris 1973/74), *Religionen und Religion* (Berlin, 1986), *Islam et sciences des religions* (Paris, 1998), *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (ed., New York and Oxford, 1999), *Islam: Historical, Social and Political Perspectives* (Berlin and New York, 2002). – Address: Avenue de Cour 155, 1007 Lausanne, Switzerland.

My project concerned present-day relations between Muslims and Christians, specifically in some Asian and African countries.

Some Christian communities living in Muslim-majority countries have a very long history while others are recent. They differ widely in their history, context, and self-understanding. When they speak about Islam, the term does not mean the same thing to them all and they deliver very different judgments about it. Relations between Muslims and Christians in Muslim-majority countries should be seen first of all within the framework of the recent social history of these countries and their socio-political structures. Situations in Africa

south of the Sahara, Arab countries, Turkey and Iran, South Asia, and Southeast Asia are totally distinct.

In each case Muslims and Christians should be studied as living in the same social context, even if the Christian communities and certain Muslim communities as well tend to stress their separateness. The history, anthropology, and sociology of religions can further contribute to arriving at a scholarly and impartial approach with its own theoretical starting points.

My research shows that relations between Christian minorities and Muslim majorities are sensitive to crisis situations. One thinks of wars (e.g. Sudan), tensions with incidental violence (e.g. Northern Nigeria), abuse of power in a failing legal system (e.g. Pakistan), a serious regional conflict with repercussions for the internal situation of the countries of the region (e.g. Middle East), tensions between a centralized order imposed from above and rising centrifugal forces (e.g. Indonesia), incidental activities of *jihād* fighters and the responses of their governments.

Such relations turn out to be strongly conditioned by particular factors and forces. Some examples are: 1. the geopolitical context, in particular the hegemonic situation of the West and opposition against it in the countries concerned; 2. Christian missionary efforts from the West and Islamic missionary efforts coming from states like Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pakistan, and Libya; 3. the rise of important "Islamist" and activist movements working for the further Islamization of Muslim societies; 4. the negative influence of official ideology, regime, and political control in these countries as well as various kinds of social and political pressure hampering free expression and open exchange of views between people; 5. the positive influence of forces working for human rights, a more civil society, and greater democracy; 6. relevant distinctions among Christian minorities in regard to entertaining direct contacts with Muslims, participating in national projects or social causes, developing militant attitudes towards Islam, or conscious cooperation with Muslims with subsequent reflection on their identity and their practice of Christianity.

During my Wiko year, I collected a rich documentation about developments in relationships between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and other countries with sizable Christian minorities. At the beginning of March 2001, I presented the first results of this work at a Tuesday Colloquium.

An unforeseen addition to the project was my participation in two conferences in Germany that dealt with the reverse problem of

Muslim minorities in present-day Western Europe. At a conference in Berlin (February 2001), I was asked to present the outlines of the main legal and political frameworks within which the integration of Muslim immigrants in Europe should take place. I called attention here to the mutual image-formation of Europeans and Muslim immigrants as one indicator of socio-cultural nearness or distance. At a conference in Erfurt (March 2001), I explored diversity and unity of Muslims in Europe on various levels. Moreover, at a conference held in Birmingham at the beginning of September, I compared the situation of Christian minorities in the Middle East with that of Muslim minorities in Western Europe. Some interesting questions can be raised in both cases, such as how people belonging to such minorities view and identify themselves, in what ways they articulate their religion that distinguishes them from the majority, and what they do with their religion in actual social practice.

The Wiko year allowed me to work out my own approach in the study of the ways in which people in particular contexts and situations construct and interpret not only other people's but also their own religion, and how they "apply" elements of their religion in various ways. We should not only ask which interests are served by these constructs and interpretations and analyze how religions are manipulated for non-religious purposes. In fact, to do justice to the people concerned, we should also ask what intentions express themselves through people's religious constructs. Existing studies of relations between Muslims and Christians largely neglect important theoretical issues such as the meanings that particular elements of Christianity and Islam have for the people concerned. The "clash" between the two religions, as perceived from different sides, is not so much one of facts but of the meanings attributed to them.

Moreover, an unexpected task was added to the program. A publishing house suggested to me during my Wiko year that I prepare *Selected Papers* for publication. I put them together under the three headings of "Islam", "Muslims and Others", and "Studying Islam and Religion". The realization of this task would not have been possible without the generous support of Wiko's *Fellowdienste*, including American-English correcting work. I could never have finished this job if I had not been at the Wissenschaftskolleg with its technical facilities and human assistance. In fact, I left on August 14th rather than July 31st in order to bring my work to a good end.

In many respects, the broad intercultural composition of this year's Fellows was a blessing for the project. Meeting colleagues from different parts of the world at work here stimulated my own work. It underlined the universality of the ideal of science and scholarship, which exists even in the sensitive area of the scholarly study of religions. And it encouraged me from time to time to break through the walls of my xeroxes, seeing some rays of light in the mind.