

6 Imam training in Europe

Changes and challenges

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Abstract

This chapter examines the various religious trends in European Islam by identifying examples of leadership and highlighting areas where trends interact to construct a training agenda for imams. It highlights the schematized training spaces that intellectually nourish the individual beliefs of particular citizens of Muslim faith, who are considered sources of future Muslim discursive practices. These discursive practices, in turn, can be considered tools for future religious leaders who seek to reconstruct the dominant Islamic discourse in Europe. Several major intertwining elements are studied in this chapter: mosques, imams, space and identity dynamics, actors of Islam and the construction of leadership, the formation of authority in European Islam, and the training of imams in Europe.

Keywords: Muslim citizenship, *fiqh* of contextualities, *fiqh* of priorities, religious authority, fragmentation of authority

1 Introduction

What do imams preach in their sermons? How can we fight religious radicalization? How can we develop an environmentally friendly Islam of modernity that is in line with existing constitutions? How can we deal with Muslim countries without running the risk of political interference into the fabric of their faithful subjects? How can we achieve an *aggiornamento* of Islam for and by Muslims? (Arkoun, 2012). Each of these questions is likely to provoke different policies and inspire observers, institutional Muslims, and the stakeholders who are directly involved in the training of imams, to

weigh the political and sociological paradigms suggested for understanding European Islams and to plan the construction of a single Islamic agenda congruent with Western democracy (Abou El Fadl, 2004; Dassetto, 1996).

Viewed in all of its complexity, the Gordian knot of the debate about Islam in Europe remains an issue of philosophical, theological, and epistemological order. Training religious leaders in Europe is almost analogous to directly touching the construction of a semiotics of faith, which involves considering the selection of methodologies, the choice of scientific disciplines, and the filtering of theological currents. In other words, the project consists of a certain degree of interference into the religious mechanisms that (re)define the European representations of Islam's overall future function. It goes without saying that the persistent need of an urgent functional effect in the present implies that the various actors involved in the project of training imams are not always aware of the scope of their interference into the future. This blind spot merits serious reflection and indicates the need to implement a programme of religious training that can build a structural platform, religious reform, and the formation of what might be called an 'Islam of tomorrow' – a kind of training model corroborated by consequent analyses that commits to profiling a functional corporatism of imams recognized by such training (Filali-Ansary, 2003).

The bulk of the reflections that feed on existing experiences to foster types of religious studies in Europe has led to a complex stream of readings of mainstream policies, guidelines, methods, contents, and training pedagogies, including training professionals in functional religious matters. In this chapter I propose to develop an examination of the alternative religious trends in European Islam (Leveau, 1998; Roy, 1999), identifying examples of leadership and highlighting areas where these trends could interact to construct a training agenda for imams (Mahmood, 2006). In other words, I try to highlight the currently active, schematized training spaces that intellectually nourish the individual beliefs of particular citizens of the Muslim faith, and take them as sources of future Muslim discursive practices – as tools to shape further future religious leaders. I also explain how media tropes have been squarely remodelled, shifting attention from random religious practices within the local community to the rhetorical voices of religious leaders or counsellors (Oubrou, 1998). The focus of training entails not only a return to religious sources, but also an attempt to (re)construct a dominant Islamic discourse in Europe. The role of religious leaders is therefore not limited to a simple response to their own community's affairs. Rather, they are required to act as credible interfaces between a quickly

changing society and congruent religious affiliations in action. Individuals with this type of profile do exist; nonetheless, the drafting of projects that are structurally designed for this purpose intensifies the necessity of redesigning an effervescent context around Islam *per se* and leaving open the prospect of a particular European Islam in the making.

2 A mosque's spotlights

Delving into the reality of the cultural unconscious of European Islam, we cannot help coming to terms with a variety of religious experiences – itself a challenge to highlight an engineering management of training projects. Diversity involves national, cultural, religious, and linguistic aspects. On the one hand, the framework of ethnicity is very important and does impact the religious *habitus* within mosque premises. Discrepancies between European Muslim groups continue to play a role at the level of religious institutions within different cults, which is clearly manifest on large ethno-religious maps, prescribing trendy and diverse religious discourses. This diversity demands a wide typology of imams or religious leaders, including the leading figures from European Muslim associations. On the other hand, even the second and third generations of European Muslims have not produced many transnational Muslims who bridge different points of views, tendencies, and agendas. The debate over a common language and identity politics is also pending. Although language can bring together generations of converts and justify a coherent training programme, the inherent divergences are still powerful. Even if emerging actors of the religious fabric may seem to be effective at mediating the different sub-groups, a standard encounter remains a forlorn exception.

So far, the reality of Islam in the European cultural landscape is the outcome of a three-step transformation. We have gone from Muslims as a temporary presence, resulting in the discovery of other peripheral transits, to the expectation of acculturation and political calls for social integration. The religious component of this socialization into European society was initially dominated by specific ethnic markers, but it has ultimately gone on to establish other identity markers,¹ entailing a degree of awareness of

¹ The first significant expressions were thus focused on exclusively ritual aspects, nested in imported cultural forms. Building up Islam in a new and largely non-Muslim context was, at the time of the arrival of Muslims in Europe, complicated by attachments to the particularities of immigrants' language, ethnic, or national origin and non-European cultures.

the existing Other² and hence legitimizing the final cohabitation between various religious dimensions and interpretations.

Viewed in this light, the outstanding visibility of Islam is further expressed through the explicit re-joining of nascent religious dimensions. Ultimately, rooting an Islamic epistemology in Europe requires the culmination of a long trajectory of social and political insertions. The latest trend discloses a complicit maturation of the inaugural presence and a more confirmed status of a novel self in Europe. We have thus tended to move from the study of a silenced Muslim presence to that of the manifest, voiced outburst of a religious movement, collectively and gradually organized around mosques, which seeks to develop a theological-canonical approach that will reflect a new Muslim semiosis in the European context. The slow process of growing a ritualized, normative, intellectual, and institutional presence has been constructed according to circumstantial conditions, reinforced by trial-and-error experimentation and a checks-and-balance positioning in the European context.

Changes in who represents Muslims in Europe on a given axis (e.g. foreign labour, immigration, social integration, citizenship, and the like) have fostered the (re)consideration of new centres of interest for the collective unconscious of an Islamic cross-border cause. Initial training platforms coincide, on the one hand, with the process tracing the roots of Muslim presence in the European context, thus breaking with the migration trajectory that would normally lead to the next step of citizenship, and, on the other hand, with the emergence of a Muslim youth that is in search of broader Islamic references. This swift change of perspective differs from religious transmission within the family and home, converging with intergenerational congruity and local community narratives (i.e., lectures, sermons, schooling, mentoring, and the like). Mosques, for example, were originally proclaimed to be functional spaces where identities pool in the search for religious observance, spiritual peace, reassurance, counselling, orientation, and a quest for self-assertion and self-preservation. This reading takes us back to the 1960s and 1970s, when we witnessed a statutorily unregulated population that was confronted, in an unprecedented way, with non-Muslim European communities and societies. At that time, the urgent need arose to adopt new strategies or principles and invoke new benchmarks to gradually

2 The visible presence of Muslims in Europe has actually been reinforced since the beginning of the 1960s through the migratory cycle of foreign labour, which helped in the reconstruction of post-war Europe. A young population from North African countries, the Balkans, Pakistan, and Turkey was the main population of Muslim origin in a number of European countries.

re-appropriate the European cultural mindset. To contend with this new process of integration, Muslims in Europe gathered vocational imams from villages and the countryside of their home countries, who were stuck in traditional roles and needed time to evolve. These imams were hampered by deeply inconsistent societal expectations, and in their isolation sought to play the role of guardians of the temple. Therefore, they could only take on the role of moral safeguards and proponents of the traditions upheld by the subconscious of generations of expatriates, feeding on their spiritual angst and perpetuating therapeutic kinds of religious healing and cultural rituals.

These 'ritual coaches' were originally young, single imams whose civic role started with monitoring the Muslim workers who were economic migrants, eventually becoming counsellors for migrant Muslim families. Mosques then became a space for family planning and, in the process, adopted a discourse that was highly identity-focused. There were structural instabilities in these new functions and integral dynamics of the professions of imams, as clearly highlighted in *Profession imam* by the French imam Tareq Oubrou (2009; see also Baylocq in Part II).

The contested status of imams by the mosque structures, discrepancies between ethnic-community and moral duties, and the instability of the imams' contractual commitments are all parts of imams' functioning and malfunctioning. This precarious reality of spiritual leaders or coaches calls for the development of a system of rotation, in which imams could move from one mosque to another as requested by the representatives of a board of mosques where momentary modalities would be negotiated by a committee of imams. Religious trends, sermon content, preaching styles, relational affinities, involvement with the mosque's contributors, and wages were the main motivations behind the development of such a rotational system and the increased mobility of imams. Confined to their assigned mosque appointments, imams were likely to become more visible in their cities. Many Muslim advocates of district imams supported the requirement for imams to have strong cultural capital so as to be able to deal with the required level of internal and external duties.

Returning to the issue of transferring knowledge to the youth, considered the Achilles heel of serene religious transmission, I argue that religious schooling has to be first discussed in respect to the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural indicators of the host country. Then comes the task of searching for a cultural environment that can ensure the vitality of religious practices during successive immigration stages. New dynamics will eventually be developed by upcoming generations that will make religion a local form of self-assertion, both in the visibility of worship, ceremonies,

rituals, and practices and in the production of Islamic teachings that are reconsidered from within European cultural praxis.

The pioneering spaces of training, the intense mobility and low cost of Islamic sciences, and the ample investments and involvements of applicants for training programmes have resulted in structuring the admission requirements for religious education/knowledge in Europe. The highly skilled scholarship taught in these programmes, meant to empower the Islamic sciences, have been reinforced by organizational programmes, the management of educational, financial, and real estate institutions, teaching practicums, the mobility of teaching staff, and the selection criteria, moral pre-requisites, and expectations of the students themselves (El Asri, 2011a).

An analytical deconstruction of the content of the training practicums, assigned from the agreed curricula, should take time into account. Indeed, a short chronology of religious training in Europe indicates that each programme falls into distinct pathways that are dictated by current needs and trends (El Asri, 2006). The environment and development of training conditions strongly determine the nature and type of teaching experiences. We can, for example, set aside the proposals for Arabic curricula, which are traditionally open to the public, and instead favour proposals that promote functional training, which tends to match the expectations of potential students. It is now possible to detect an emerging market requesting customized Islamic vocational training in Europe. To support this tangible need for qualified professionals in religious training, the existing experimental programmes of Islamic schooling in Europe should be updated and maintained in response to the changing profiles of potential candidates (El Asri, 2015a).

3 Imams' timeline

Taking into account the migration trajectory foregrounds a number of changes in religious discourse and project reports with respect to the historicity of Islamic discourse and its symbolic manifestations. This retrospective reading allows us to understand which contents of Islam will work towards the implementation of Islamic education programmes in Europe and assessments of candidates for the chairs of Quranic schools and mosques. The early situations of Muslims in Europe indicate that their status, added to the remoteness of their country of origin, awakened in them an interest in religion and Arabic as a way to recapture a distorted and/or lost identity (El Asri, 2011b). This has increasingly reduced their

expectations from broad religious scholarship to mere utilitarian worship, family protectionism, and the dream of a reconstruction of a fading sense of national belonging to the country of origin. The double exposure to different cultures evokes an identity split resulting in a two-fold quest: to reconstruct the bits left there (in the country of origin) and reunite them with the others built here (in Europe). The pioneering Muslim generation thus projected a Europeanized Islam as an extension of the original Islam practiced back home, which they fear has experienced a certain shortness of breath in the conservation of traditional practices, especially during generational transitions.

The second stage concerns the socialization of Muslims in their endeavour to fulfil the citizenship requirements of their host countries (Maréchal and El Asri, 2012). The ‘masters’ of Islam are then ascribed the role of spokespersons who offer a renewable representation of an imagined Islam. The expected image is that of a sensible, pure Islam, rooted in national languages and perceived as a devout and intelligent creed that can defend Muslim subjects (to counter the controversial perception of Islam that has been distorted through biased media reports). This demand for representation explains the success of the ongoing conferences and the logic of identity assertion. Knowledge of elite authorship thus translates a close understanding of social realities, including the reorientation or rectification of popular culture. The dissemination of knowledge is thus filtered through a discursive dialogic of moral and pedagogical interfaces.

The existing analyses of successful ‘merchants of knowledge’ who market services or products based on Islamic scholarship to European Muslim masses show that demand is gradually shrinking due to a growing pragmatism of cultural practices and socio-religious issues that cross into the everyday worries and anxieties of Muslims (El Asri, 2012). We can concur that the expectation a synthesis between ‘how to be a Muslim’ *per se* and ‘how to be a European Muslim’ remains a temporal rather than spatial semiosis of intent. These moments of desire for a strong identity and nostalgic therapy continue to dominate the transcultural landscape, despite the growing unconditional knowledge acquisitions within specific lifestyles and realities. Spaces of reflection and production of theologies, disconnected from social anchors, are still perceived as a luxury. Therefore, a number of sites of theological reflection are being sacrificed on the altar of eschatological preaching and ordinary community services like marriage, divorce, and disputes over property ownership. The current bestsellers in ‘Islamic libraries’ deal mostly with these issues. The social value of Islamic knowledge can therefore only contribute to its pragmatic appeal.

The question worth asking at this stage is how to deterritorialize these new mind-sets via ascending critical perspectives. In other words, can we afford a fundamental epistemological deconstruction of Islamic knowledge through the critical construction of a hybrid Muslim identity?

4 Space and identity dynamics

If we consider the question of training youth in Islam, we cannot help but discard the issue of European space and the evolution of its definition through a complicit religious discourse and Muslim representations (Sellam, 1998; Turki, 1998). The peculiarity of the Muslim presence in Europe requires a particular legal expertise and provides the key to a dialogical understanding that can create a viable standpoint for Muslims. The stakeholders involved in the development of Islamic training should take different perspectives into account, as well as the legal-canonical context. Again, different religious paradigms have integrated to form an untested 'archaeology of faith.' From an Islamic point of view, a schematized Europe would allow the application of jurisprudential accounts and the legitimization of fatwas prescribed by a legal view of European reality. A classification of areas of knowledge, each prescribed according to specific contexts, should be developed in their contemporaneity and integrated into the historicity of European scholarship. We talk about a *fiqh al-wāqī'* ('fiqh of contextualities'), *fiqh al-awlāwiyyāt* ('fiqh of priorities'), and *fiqh al-aqaliyyāt* ('fiqh of minorities') – all independent of the dominant sharia matrix – to propose deductive, practical, and applied legal provisions in contexts in which Muslims are considered to be minorities (Al-Alwani, 2007). The concept of 'minority' can be further criticized as a factor in psychosocial ghettoization, provided that these urban extensions, which serve as a way to understand a multi-layered context, function mostly as healing management tools. Religious annotations are used to draw on legal exceptions in the past to develop viable fatwas for European Muslims. The context and newly introduced facts, such as the headscarf ban, bank credit, and marriage with non-Muslims, put the flexibility of Islamic law to the test just as much as the resources deconstructing traditional hindrances do.³

3 As early as 1970, Zaki Badawi, one of the leading figures of British Islam, initiated debate on the practical management of the experiences of Islam, focusing particularly on the issue of inheritance and women's testimony. Imam Tareq Oubrou describes a denser relationship between the theological sources and the secular context of France, outlining a theory of the contraction of sharia into secularization through the concept of 'sharia of minorities' (Oubrou, 1998).

Besides the dominance of highly codified Islamic knowledge, in practice interpretative literature focusing on metonymic readings or allegorical meanings has emerged. The questioning of the compartmentalization of disciplinary boundaries is becoming more common and invokes a multidisciplinary approach. At the same time, deconstructionist and epistemological questioning tends to favour empirical readings of the Muslim world. The critical works of Mohamed Arkoun (d. 2010) and Nasr Abu Zayd (d. 2010) fall within this trend. Thus, the question of the overflow of the legal framework, which ensures the viability of the institutions and practices of Islam, proclaims the exit of the permissible and the forbidden and opens up debate on the concept of *maṣāliḥ* ('advantages') – equivalent to the logic of a common homogeneity or grammar of the 'forms of thought', as defined by Kenneth Burke (1969) – which overlooks the closed readings of the *fuqahā* ('Muslim jurists') and conventional imams. The crisis of Islamic discursivity in Europe testifies to the palpable tension between mainstream narratives and the expectations of the new Muslim readership. While no call for the reinvention of the core Islamic legacies has yet been made, a post-identity approach could make new theological prospects possible in this new context. The particularity of European Muslim mainstream theology allows for irregularities in religious scholarship. How can we perceive of Islamic training in such a context? Should we consider dialogized training in the legal concept of minority, for example? Or, on the contrary, should we privilege approaches that encourage historical-critical readings?

5 Profiling actors of Islam

In any social group, and more specifically in any religious system, leadership is crucial for guiding the development of the community in question (El Asri, 2009). Religious leadership performs various functions: improving social cohesion, promoting resources, managing social relations with the divinity, producing knowledge, and transmitting religion to the next generation.

As it is organized in Europe, Islam seems to be associated with appointing leaders first, then other intermediary actors and groups, and finally through considering new influences. The fact that Muslim leaders, trained in Muslim countries that are at the forefront of pure Islam, come on stage through socio-cultural praxis also presupposes the appearance of new figures, new leaders – a fact that introduces into Europe the concerns of Muslim countries, including their own vision of the present state of things and claims that European society is not considered particularly functional or appropriate to their needs.

Similarly, we have lately begun to note the return of members of the second generation of immigrants after studying the Islamic sciences in Muslim countries, all of whom are aware that their studies cannot be continued in Europe. This return with an Islamic background that cannot easily be adapted for the new socio-cultural environment in which they find themselves is even more important because extremist Salafi groups could easily influence it. In other words, European Islam continues to be affected by the dynamics of a global Islam, in this case the global tributaries of Islams (Cesari, 2014). Nevertheless, European Islam is not only imported, but also imprinted by actors born in European territory (Dassetto, 1996).

The internal organization of European Islam is never finalized; leaders are few, and the board of scholars is constantly being reconstituted. Populations are not yet ready to take full possession of their rights in the European public space of their host countries, and a large number of Muslim citizens remain hampered by daily difficulties and incessant feelings of insecurity. The political drive to develop a training practicum of imams, chaplains in prisons, and creed consorts spells out the priorities of the government, which does not guarantee a healthy construction of self-projection in the near future (El Asri, 2015b).

Steps towards grasping the paradigms of Islamic practice are schematized by the social recession and other urgent matters. Though the process of precipitation might sometimes offer interesting creative outcomes, the result is generally much more complex. European, and especially French, Islam, for example, gains momentum from a politically correct narrative; if the issue of Islam is submitted to the heat of unfriendly news lobbies, it is likewise too often tampered with based on election agendas.

6 Muslim leadership in construction

Compared to other religions like Roman Catholicism, European Islam does not have a rigid structure with a monopoly on legitimate power. In Muslim societies there are clear-cut authorities that derive their legitimacy from acquired religious scholarship (the *ulama*), or whose legitimacy is delegated to them by a public authority (Muslim jurists, even if some of them are also regarded as scholars). These include the *murshids* ('guides') or Sufi masters, who are legitimized by their spirituality. These leaders exert their power *de facto* and cannot claim to be part of a monopoly with respect to a hierarchy or more legitimate religious authority.

The development of a school syllabus with an educational agenda, coupled with empowering mass communication systems such as satellite transmissions and social media, have significantly changed how leadership is developed in Muslim countries. New leaders appear on the boards of traditional structures of Islamic universities and in other public arenas of the brotherhood networks. In their transfer to the European context, a large number of these religious leaders have become popular public figures, such as Larbi Kechat in Paris, Tahar Toujgani in Antwerp, and Adnan Ibrahim in Vienna. Each of these leaders was trained in Islamic sciences and only afterwards introduced to European cultural models. They may be known as the isolated leaders of immigrants, or might be recognized by Islamic organizations. Other leaders are members of international Islamic agencies within their home countries, whose agenda they represent and implement in Europe; the work of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Europe is a major example of this. In most cases, these leaders exercise a certain degree of bureaucratic authority, bolstering their efficiency through their relationship with the structure that has mandated their role, and are sometimes supported by European state agencies (like the Muslim World League and the Turkish Diyanet, the Directorate of Religious Affairs). Some leaders are part of the political fraternities of students who complete graduate studies in Europe, but upon returning home resort to Islamic activities (whether as their main activity or a separate professional project). While some are self-taught, others have received hasty and intensive Islamic training. All claim to be, often more or less, experts in disciplines like medicine, economics, sociology, agriculture, and information technology, to name but a few.

Another type of leader, like Tareq Oubrou in Bordeaux, consists of individuals who have been able to cross into European territory through mixed marriages since the 1980s. Immigration through marriage and family reunion has become a common strategy to access Europe. Some of these leaders acquired their socialization in religious studies in their country of origin in the 1980s; after marriage, the newlyweds transferred their knowledge and religious expertise into their European lifestyle. While certain leaders have even been born, bred, and immersed in European culture, immigrants have had their own leaders since the moment Islam arrived in post-World War II Europe. It was the older generation of immigrants (often retirees, sometimes victims of work accidents and social security recipients) who received more Quranic training from an early age and undertook organizational tasks in Europe, including the role of imam in the prime prayer rooms. Starting in the mid-1990s, the younger generation from immigrant families, but who

were educated or even born in a European country, began to play a more important role on the European Islamic scene. Some examples of leaders from this second generation are Yacob Mahi, Rachid Haddach, and Mustafa Kastit in Brussels. These new leaders were so successful that a generational conflict seems to have divided the 'founding fathers' and other pioneer immigrants who still exercised authority from the younger generation, whose leaders wished to invest in a future European Islam.

Thanks to study grants and research partnerships, some of these young Muslims were able to finance their studies and training in Muslim countries, where courses are offered in traditional Islamic universities (Zeytouna in Tunis, Al-Azhar in Cairo, Al-Qarawiyyine in Fez), as well as in Turkish universities, in Saudi universities, and in the madrasas of Pakistan. Some were also able to undertake internships with Muslim NGOs and state institutions. After their studies, some of these young Muslims returned to Europe and began to play an active role in European Islam.

Another category of leaders consists of European converts to Islam like Franck Amin Hensch in Verviers or Dawud van Beveren in Brussels. Apart from the well-known public figures in politics, cinema, sports, and music, a large number of common men and women, often young, are attracted by Islamic teachings and choose conversion. Of course, these new converts to Islam do not all aspire to be leaders. For many of them, the conversion is desirable for mystical or spiritual reasons involving no public action whatsoever. Others still adhere to a spirit of intellectual, organizational, and political leadership that lead them, in their dual positioning, to undertake great responsibilities in the European settlement of Muslim populations, particularly with respect to leading the scholarship on how to bridge Islamic creed and embrace public activism.

7 The construction of a religious authority for European Islam

The current political predicaments that have brought the crisis of Islam to a global scale raise the sensitive issue of authority. The new presence of Islam in Europe addresses this issue as a small, original case, but it can indicate the reflexive tracks that can be applied to a larger scale. We consider this reflection on the authority and training agenda in Europe to be a potentially malleable experience, rather than an isolated concern confined by its sociological and geographic specificity. The legitimacy of Muslim intellectual authority in Europe is assessed above all based on scholarly training. This legitimacy varies according to the scholar's degree of connection to the

Muslim reality and the depth of their scriptural lineage. The conventional transmission of knowledge from master to disciple and credentials from traditional universities retain strong symbolic capital in the assignment of authority. Places of seniority and the direct transfer of Islamic sciences to others by the Islamic scholars remain the symbols of authenticity from which a genealogy of authority has developed.

The relocation of young Muslim Berliners or Londoners to places of knowledge in Islamic lands is therefore explained by the lack of local supply, but also by an inappropriate natural breeding-ground for what will make up authority. A case in point is a bachelor's degree in theology from the university in the collective mind-set of Muslims. The relentless reasoning that continues to forge Muslim representation is that authority must be sought outside of Europe. This is true despite major political turmoil across the Arab world, which has given birth to a good number of so-called natural, in the sense of non-organized, religious authorities through the *ijāza* ('license') system offered by a known scholar or sheikh to new graduates. Many of them are newly perceived as seraglio authorities in perpetual loss of credibility and legitimacy. The interweaving of Islam and politics has tinged the credentials of muftis in Egypt, sheikhs in Syria, scholars from the Gulf countries, and popular media preachers, tainting their reputation through their audience's mistrust (El Asri, 2012).

In addition to the religious training curriculum necessary in European Islam, religious authority draws on community experiences. The authority of theologians or Muslim intellectuals in Europe is a social construction prompted by mediators and faith managers. It is the outcome of individuals' interpretations and readings, ranging from the modes and production of concrete holy texts to their pragmatic earthly use. The leaders produce ideas in communion with the community's customized needs as well as for public consumption more broadly. They interact with reality and may gradually gain recognition from the public. Since the 1990s, the construction of the status of Muslim scholars and intellectuals has changed. These are now intellectuals who weigh political, economic, and religious affiliations at the crossroads of valuable formal training. The training programmes led by public institutions or formed by Muslim organizations are channels that fuel the emergence of well-trained religious figures and intellectuals from Muslim backgrounds. The teaching of Islamic and social sciences initiated in 2015 by the *Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique* (Council of Muslims in Belgium) and the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Leuven is one example of work in this direction.

In examining the sociological reality of Muslim leaders in Europe one soon realizes that the process of fragmentation and proliferation of religious authority is inherited from Islam's various contexts (Gaborieau and Zeghal, 2004). A theological contest has been launched between 'traditional Islam' and 'modern Islam', extending most particularly to the divide between the intellectual and traditional ulama. However, there is the possibility of challenging the authority of each of these groups based on the legitimacy of their training, thus ensuring the continued internal criticism of scriptural sources and Islamic teachings.

The Muslim religious landscape shows significant fragmentation of religious authority, resulting in a segmentation of public audiences. The process of individualization of Muslims arises in this cacophonous situation (Roy, 1999). The entry of Islam into secularized European cultural space, which is specifically tailored towards the importance of individual choices, reveals poignant differences of religious orientation. This individualization is caused by the gradual breakdown of ethno-religious referents to imagined sources. One of the major intellectual challenges is to rethink the multiplicity of forms of membership, their relative autonomy, and the profound unity of the Muslim community. The *umma-egocentres* operate in the religious field through the trial of identities, where new dictates of the self are (re) constructed. This growing individualization that leads to an Islamic text in the first person causes the impact of authority to erode; leaders become mediators between the difficulty of accessing sources (including language barriers) and the choice of individual orientations. New converts draw on a variety of religious offerings, including a blurred typology of Islamic leaders. They have a plethora of choices between the conservatives, school mentors, secularists, liberals, radicals, 'new thinkers', literalists, and so on.

This trend still demonstrates a shared intellectual reality between the in-house authors, who produce an extension of the hermeneutics of religious texts, and the advocates of an unconditional hermeneutics dictated by interpretative purity. This approach to theological literature and the required hermeneutical efforts have yielded stringent problems within Islam in Europe. It is worth asking, then, whether it is better to develop a training practicum that grants participants a single choice, or one that allows them to adopt different approaches.

In light of this question, we should note that there is a category of theologians who advocate a hybrid curriculum, inspired as much from theology as from the social sciences (El Asri, 2015a). They propose new ways of understanding religious texts beyond the conventional interpretative pamphlets. These voices stand out as proponents of exceptional profiles,

which are increasingly solicited by Muslim trainees, and whose teaching portfolios attract certain training projects related to applied theology. This issue of profiles and guidelines emphasizes the ultimate end of the training beyond oratorical advances of the urgent fight against radicalization.

Muslim audiences are looking for a relatively easy way to meet their needs provided by leaders with multidisciplinary profiles. This analysis is based on our follow-up of the continuous training offered at the Catholic University of Leuven from 2007 to 2017 in a course entitled 'Social and religious sciences: Islam in the modern world'. Some 500 students that have gone through this training believe that the allocation of religious authority must now reflect a mastery of the complexities of related issues. We are far from the imprints of the first trends installed in Europe, which have been in rupture or which were subjected to a repositioning against Islamist ideologies of the 1960s, and closer to an overflow of the historicized and contextualized interpretation of texts for religious purposes. The progressive decline of judicial and normative approaches to Islamic authority implies the necessity of moving away from religious formalism. More objectivist approaches and multidisciplinary methods of reading Islam are gaining ground in the implementation of an Islamic discursivity, despite the surge in literalist readings that is clearly visible in some Muslim groups and associations.

8 Towards a scrutiny of Islamic training projects in Europe

Support for the spiritual and rational credentials of religious scholarship has, to different degrees, affected local communities in Europe. Drafted for and adapted to changing circumstances, and gradually legitimized through progressive academic and institutional programmes, religious training packages show a curve of nascent trends, as well as projections of a new Islam. Apart from sermons and religious preaching at mosques, there are three basic configurations of religious training: (1) within private circles in Europe; (2) expatriation to a Muslim context; and (3) in-between, i.e. anywhere where training is (or was) done in Europe, including cases where certification was acquired through an internship-based immersion in a religious authority (El Asri, 2006).

Private circles are informal, sometimes spontaneous, and often of a nuclear nature. Seminar circles called *ḥalaqāt*, which are similar to types of Sufi gatherings, are one example. They provide an outline of structured lessons, with a specific needs-analysis of daily expectations. These *ḥalaqāt* cover a variety of subject areas, including mysticism, religious norms, and

patterns and ethical standards. Eventually, it is from these structured religious commitments that the dynamics of future training sessions are adapted.

Starting from the second generation of immigrants to Europe and with the gradual conversions to Islam, new departures and imam-training programmes developed in Muslim countries to provide further studies. The potential return to Europe after a few months or years of training in either academic or traditional teachings has created a new profile for the leading figures of local Islam. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Morocco are the target countries for Muslim youth in search of such knowledge. The general guidelines, readings, and quality of the training are variable and depend on the orientation of the religious organization that provides the training and its stream of thought.

Finally, the tradition of *ijāza* (literally, 'authorization/permission to preach') is a middle path that has been appropriated for pedagogical and ideological purposes. It consists of a set of skills and tools used to assess a teacher's ability to control learners' acquisition of religious material. In an Islamic context, a religious authority or individual with disciplinary jurisdiction in the Islamic sciences performs this comprehensive competency assessment. It seeks to evaluate the transmission of knowledge from master to disciple, reminiscent of the teachings of the prophet in early Islam. *Ijāza* can extend from reading from the Quran to a minute critique of classical reference books, a discipline, or a whole school. Upon graduation, the right to convey the referenced knowledge for which the *ijāza* is delivered is conferred onto the graduate. This title and the accompanying teaching certification have traditionally been highly valued and authoritative. Its holders are given maximum respect in some countries (by virtue of the rigor attributed to their receipt of the title), though they may also be subject to doubt in others.⁴ The status of the *ijāza* is unlikely to be compromised, but it is still not safe from scrutiny and criticism. This process is contested more so in Europe, where religious authorities offer either all or part of the traditional certifications in religious curricula (Roussillon, 2005). More traditional training institutions are also being set up, such as the Islamic University of Rotterdam. Their activism is indicative of the quietist presence of Islam, which is dominated by the language of the country of origin.

The structural transformation of Islamic training environments coincides with the projection of Islamic life into the European context, over more

4 Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, are sometimes known for how easy it is to receive *ijāza* there, which brings the credibility of the title into question.

than a decade at least. Austrian jurists, for instance, have allowed the establishment of a school to train religious counsellors. However, for 25 years we have mostly seen attempts to transplant models, mainly Arabic- or Turkish-speaking ones, into Europe. These models mostly attract students from Muslim countries (El Asri, 2006).

The linguistic transition to European languages has been imposed by the scarcity of individuals with the ability to cope with both the requirements of the original language and the need to adapt to new demands of the Muslim community. Over the last fifteen years, we have witnessed a growing demand for training from French-speaking, English-speaking, and Spanish-speaking candidates, among others. There are now more than 100 hundred training projects dotted across European countries (El Asri, 2006). Initiatives include more than one hundred enrolled, leading to better and diverse training pathways.

Over at least the last five years, serious initiatives have been taken up in various European contexts to train imams within the context in which they have to function. Still, European Muslims have suffered from a severe lack of new training experiences. Those that are already on track, for example, at the junction of the research of official recognition on the part of the political, academic, national institutions or universities in Muslim countries, as well as public authorities' contributions, are all eager to build up a certain Islamic narrative. Thus, in addition to market demands, public recognition, academic conventions, and institutional partnerships, the result will be an efficient training practicum that meets the expectations of the public sector.

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