

# **The production of Islamic knowledge in Western Europe**

**Discussion paper for a panel at the 4th Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Robert Schuman Centre**

*Local versus “universal” Islam, and the emergence of local Islams in Europe*

In all parts of the globe where it has taken root, Islam has developed its local forms. This is not only due to the retention of pre-Islamic local practices, which may gradually be purged by reform movements. Different regions may have their distinctive practices, e.g. Sufi ways, the various Islamic institutions may play different roles, education and adjudication may be organised differently, interaction between the ulama and the state proceeds according to different patterns. Even within “scripturalist” Islam, there is an undeniable regional variation — notwithstanding the claims of certain Western scholars as well as Muslim fundamentalists.

The Muslim communities of Western Europe constitute — with the exception of a relatively small number of European converts — diasporic communities, maintaining various types of links with their countries of origin and with similar communities in other countries. The social, economic and political situation of these communities differs significantly from that of co-religionists in their home countries. In daily life they encounter a whole range of new, different problems demanding Islamic answers. The various “host” countries provide different constraints and possibilities for the development of Muslim institutions, Islamic thought and Islamic practices. Inevitably, European forms of Islam will develop, grounded in locally acquired knowledge of Islam.

Initially, the sources for most of this knowledge were located elsewhere, either in the home countries of these Muslim immigrant communities or in other Muslim countries or transnational networks claiming to represent a purer, universal interpretation of Islam. Among the mediators we find imams, teachers and preachers visiting Western Europe, as well as

ulama, intellectuals and journalists in the “home” countries reaching out to the immigrant communities by mail and through print and electronic media. Second- and third-generation immigrants, however, tend to understand the language of the country of residence better than their parents’ or grandparents’ languages. The gradual shift from Turkish, Arabic, Urdu, Malay, etc. to English and other European languages as vehicle of Islamic discourse is likely to be reflected in changing patterns of religious authority as well as considerable changes in the discourses themselves.

During the last few decades, Muslims in Europe have themselves produced a considerable amount of material on Islam in the form of books, magazines, newsletters, cassettes, radio and television presentation and lately on Internet. There is a multiplicity of voices, due not only to a variety of origins (different home countries as well as different currents within e. g. Turkish Islam, etc.) and variations in the legal and cultural contexts in the countries of residence, but also to complex patterns of social interaction. Although Turkish, Moroccan and Pakistani Muslims interact for the most part with Muslims of the same national origins, there is an increasing number of Muslim spokespersons and thinkers whose authority transcends ethnic and national boundaries. Neither such terms as “Turkish Islam”, “Moroccan Islam”, etc., nor “Dutch Islam”, “French Islam”, etc. do justice to the complexity of the discourses developing.

### *The production of local knowledge*

There are several interesting aspects to the processes under consideration, which call for serious study. One of these aspects concerns the production of local knowledge — a process that inevitable happened wherever Islam became established outside its original heartlands. Islam emerged in a specific cultural and historical context of Arabia. When it spread to other societies and cultures, it underwent a dual process of *universalisation* and *localisation*. In order to adopt it to local contexts, the producers [and brokers] of Islamic knowledge had to first decide which elements of Islam as it existed in the original context were specifically Arabian and could be discarded, while retaining those elements that were considered as essential and non-negotiable. This could be called the process of *universalisation*,

the separation of what was considered as universal in the Islamic message from what was contingent. The second step was that of *localisation*, adapting the universalised message to local customs and needs. This process of production of local Islamic knowledge has continued, and local traditions of Islamic knowledge go on developing.

The Muslim migrants who came to western Europe brought with them Islam in many different local forms, including localised popular religious practices and localised references to scriptural authority. They too have to decide which aspects are negotiable and which have to be retained intact because they are essential and universal. Islamic knowledge in western Europe is produced on the basis of “universalised” versions of the local Islamic knowledge of the home countries and other prestigious centres. It is this process of abstraction as well as the process of adaptation of discourse to local conditions that constitutes the focus of this workshop. Contributions could deal with one of more of the following aspects:

### *1. The development of European Muslim discourses*

Research may range from an analysis of sermons or of *fatwas* specifically issued at the request of Muslims in Europe, to debates in Muslim media or public controversies concerning Islam.

### *2. The contexts within which Islamic knowledge is being produced*

Comparative analysis of the ways in which local contexts condition the production of Islamic knowledge. European countries have different policies concerning Islamic education, the admission of imams and preachers, Muslim media, associations of Muslims, etc. and different conceptions of the degree to which Muslim immigrants are expected to integrate and assimilate themselves.

### *3. Islamic institutions*

A third important perspective is that of the institutions in and by which Islamic knowledge is being produced or reproduced. These obviously include the mosque and Qur'an courses and

institutes of formal or informal Islamic education but also state schools (to the extent that Islam or religion in general is part of the school curriculum). Muslim associations, broadcasting corporations and other media, but also embassies of Muslim countries are to be considered. Since *istifta*, the requesting of an authoritative opinion, is such a central process in the development of Islamic knowledge everywhere, special attention should be paid to the various institutions that issue *fatwas* (including the electronic media).

#### *4. The establishment of religious authority*

A major question is that of religious authority. Who are considered as authorities whose counsel is heeded, and why? How did they establish their authority, and what are the means by which they attempt to consolidate it? Is a shift occurring from dependence on authorities in the countries of origin to reliance on authorities based in Western Europe? Mosque imams appear to be far more influential in the diaspora than in the home countries, at least in part because of the pastoral role and authority attributed to them by local governments and other institutions, and in part because the different functions the mosque fulfils in the diaspora. What strategies are used to establish or to delegitimise the authority of certain imams over others? How and by whom can their authority be overruled? How authoritative are the Muslim thinkers who publish books and articles in European languages, and how influential are their writings?

#### *5. Transnationalism*

Another important perspective is the transnational dimension of the processes concerned. It is useful to distinguish the transnational relations between migrant communities and their homeland (state, society, relatives) on the one hand, from relations between migrants of the same cultural background living in various European countries on the other, or relations transcending ethnic or national boundaries as well as state boundaries in the third place. In the initial stages of migration, the first type of transnational relations obviously was dominant, but one may presume that the second and third categories are gradually gaining importance. Such states as Turkey and Morocco are making great efforts to keep their (former) subjects

under control, and they are actively promoting their respective official versions of Islam among the European Muslim communities. Oppositional religious movements from these countries use the relative freedom of Western Europe to spread dissenting messages among the migrant communities in various European countries, in the hope of using these as a stepping-stone for political action at home. A wide variety of *da`wa* movements, from the puritan and fundamentalist to the *tasawwuf*-oriented, are propagating rival versions of allegedly universal Islamic messages to audiences irrespective of ethnicity and nationality.

### *6. The ethnic dimension*

The major fault lines cutting through the Muslim communities in Western Europe are those of country of origin and ethnicity. (These two factors should not be identified with one another, as the examples of Turkish-Kurdish relations and Arab-Berber relations indicate.) One would expect these factors to gradually decline in importance. Associations, networks and authority figures that attract members and followers across ethnic and national boundaries deserve special attention, for this is where European forms of Islam are likely to emerge.

### *7. The new media*

The new media — but some of the old ones as well — play a crucial part in the production of Islamic knowledge in Europe. Due attention should therefore be paid to the role of the print and electronic media in producing Islamic knowledge. It is also important to discover to what extent the new media usher in new types and modalities of communication, and what this means for the contents of communication. Materials to be studied include *fatwas* in the press or on radio, television or the internet; sermons on radio and television, audio and video cassettes; discussion lists, chat boxes and websites on the Internet; films or television programs with religious themes; popular novels, soap operas and documentaries.

### *8. Production, reception and reproduction of Islamic knowledge in Western Europe*

The production of new Islamic discourses is only relevant

insofar as these discourses also find acceptance by the Muslim communities in Europe. The reception of Islamic knowledge is a subject deserving serious research in itself. What does the second generation of Muslim immigrants learn about Islam, and what the European converts? Where and how do they seek knowledge, which are the questions they ask, and what the answers they find?

### *9. Islam as the living praxis of Muslims*

Inevitably new practices are developing among Muslims living in Western Europe, in the fields of marriage and the family, economic enterprise, inter-religious relations, political empowerment, social security, and the relations with the state. Insofar as the people concerned believe that these practices are in some sense Islamic or part of a Muslim culture with which they identify themselves, they represent a practical knowledge of Islam, even though some of these practices may be at odds with scripturalist Islam as defined by the ulama.

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