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**Making and unmaking Muslim religious authority
in Western Europe**

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The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe

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Making and unmaking Muslim religious authority in Western Europe

Introduction

In this paper I wish to begin addressing a number of questions concerning Muslim religious authority, to which I do not have ready answers myself and which, I believe, have only incidentally been touched upon by earlier research. Given the fact that Islamic knowledge – by which I mean that which Muslims consider to be correct Islamic beliefs, values and practices — is inherently contested, how do certain forms of Islamic knowledge become authoritative among Muslims in Western Europe? There exists a range of would-be Muslim authorities, which are eager to define correct Islam for other Muslims as well as to represent it towards non-Muslims. There are also states as well as non-state actors in European societies that have a strong interest in favouring or rejecting certain interpretations of Islam. What are the strategies used by individuals and institutions to establish their authority or to delegitimise that of others? Why have some of these strategies

been successful or failed? To what extent does the European social, political and cultural context play a part in these strategies or in the forms of Islamic knowledge represented?

Whereas these questions concern what may be called the “supply” side of religious knowledge, there is a corresponding series of questions concerning the “demand” side: How do Muslims in Europe, especially second- and third-generation immigrant Muslims, acquire their knowledge of Islam? Whom do they seek out as teachers, counsellors or role models, and on what grounds? What is the impact of their linguistic competence on the type of knowledge demanded or acquired? To what extent does the life-world of young Muslims in Western Europe give rise to new questions, new values, new practices, new interpretations?

Qur’an and prayer

For the most basic forms of Islamic knowledge, concerning the technicalities of ritual purity, prayer and fasting, these seem at first sight non-controversial questions. This is the only area of expertise in which the authority of the mosque imam is not seriously questioned. Virtually all mosque organisations have Qur’an courses, where children are taught to recite and perhaps to read (though not to understand) sufficient verses and invocations for use in prayer and where they are taught the other essentials. Yalçın-Heckmann reports (1998: 171) that a surprisingly high percentage of the Turkish parents in Germany whom she interviewed acknowledged the need for such Qur’an courses. Those who actually sent their children to the courses in the neighbourhood were considerably fewer, however, though still more than half. The reasons given were either lack of time or, more significantly, the perception that religious organisations were involved in politics. Joly and Leveau (both in Gerholm and Lithman 1988) earlier reported

similar observations of Muslim parents' attitudes for Britain and France, respectively. This indicates that in at least some parents' perception the teaching of the basic ritual obligations cannot be separated from other dimensions of Muslim discourse and practice. (On the other hand, it is true that many children whose parents are not followers or sympathisers of the Süleymancı movement attend Süleymancı Qur'an courses, which are known for their thoroughness and strictness.)

There exist, of course, minor differences between the *madhâhib* concerning details of the movements to be made in *salât*, notably concerning the position of the hands, the time of the early morning and afternoon prayers, and the causes of ritual pollution. As long as most parents sent their children to a mosque of their own national background, these were not even confronted with the existence of such minor differences.

Moroccan mosques teach according to the Maliki, Turkish and Pakistani mosques according to the Hanifi *madhhab*. Most Kurds from Turkey are not Hanafis but Shafi`is, but this never caused problems until for political reasons some Kurds wished to organise separately and established an explicitly Kurdish Islamic organisation and mosques.[\[1\]](#) The differences between the Shafi`i and Hanafi *madhhab* were rather under-emphasised; Turkish and Kurdish Nurcus or Naqshbandis tended to feel much more strongly united by their common adherence to a particular school or Sufi order than they felt divided by the difference in *madhhab*.

Within communities of the same national origin there may, however, exist grave differences between traditionalists and the various reformist and Salafi movements, most striking perhaps among South Asians, where Deobandis and Ahl-e Hadith have different conceptions of proper ritual practice than the traditionalist (and inclusivist) Barêlwis. Since these 'sects' do not mix anyway, and most South Asians in Western Europe stay within the 'sect' to

which they originally belonged, there is relatively little contestation. Aggressive Salafi proselytising, especially among Muslims of North African origin, appears to be causing some dissension.^[2] A Salafi organisation in Amsterdam recently published a beautifully illustrated translation of a prayer manual by the Salafi heavyweight Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *Sifât salât al-nabî*.^[3] This book ‘corrects’ the way most Muslims pray and indicates a different position of the hands and different forms of supplication than the widely accepted ones as the only correct forms. Although there are only two Salafi mosques in the Netherlands and the number of conspicuous Salafis in other local communities is relatively small (but growing), the emphasis on different form of the *salât* is said to create much unease.

The case of this prayer manual exemplifies one possible strategy of establishing authority (and of delegitimatising that of others): a frontal attack on some established practice, supported by a barrage of arguments that most people cannot evaluate but that appear convincing because of the prestige attributed to *sahih* hadith, and which cannot easily be refuted by an equally simple and convincing counter-argument. This strategy is widely used by Salafis and has had a degree of success, perhaps due to its very simplicity and lack of sophistication. Salafis have focused strongly on precisely the basics of ritual and everyday behaviour and have stayed aloof from more intellectual issues (corresponding with their general abhorrence of philosophical and sociological thought).

Even the teaching of the most elementary aspects of religious practice, therefore, appears to be contested. It is not only Salafis who focus on the basics of worship; all *da`wa* movements, perceiving that most Muslims’ practice is deficient, expend much energy on improving the believers’ performance. (Most *da`wa* movements, however, enjoin people to live up to the established standard rather than

criticising, as the Salafis do, standard practices.) Surprisingly many Islamic websites in European languages, incidentally, also have prominent sections devoted to *salât* and other basics — it is not clear whether these are directed towards recent or prospective converts or to born Muslims.

A considerable percentage of children of Muslim parents never attend Qur'an courses and many more do not practice regularly, but some of them turn to Islam, or to a different pattern of Islamic practice, later in life. These 'internal conversions' are a fascinating and significant development that has so far been little researched.^[4] The (re-) turn to Islam often involves more than just worship and other basic obligations but a more pervasive change in attitude and is often accompanied by external signs such as (specific forms of) *hijâb* for women, specific styles of facial hair, turban and *jubba* for men. The role of mosque imams in such 'internal conversions' is negligible; to understand them we have to look for different types of authority. Peer groups (student associations, informal youth groups) and the social pressure generated in them appear to play a considerable part.

Mosques, imams, mosque committees

The mosque is the most visible Muslim institution, and the imam officiating in the mosque the most easily visible Muslim authority in Western Europe. The real importance and influence of imams has been much exaggerated, especially in the perception of European authorities. Especially in my own country, with its tradition of moral leadership by church ministers, there has been a tendency to perceive the imams as Muslim ministers and to attribute to them pastoral functions that they never had in the countries of origin. They were often considered to be the most appropriate and representative spokespersons for their communities (or even for all Turks, all Moroccans, etc.), and became favourite targets for programs

aiming at the integration of Muslims. Interestingly, in neighbouring Belgium, where the Dutch protestant church tradition is absent, imams were never given the same importance and it was teachers of religion in schools who were given the central role (Boender and Kanmaz 2002).

The very fact that European governments and non-governmental institutions took the imams more seriously than their societies of origin do appears to have given the imams some extra leverage (Landman 1992; Buffin 1998; Reeber 2000). To the extent that they became middlemen in their own right and/or assumed pastoral functions — which very much depended on the individual imam's abilities — they gained some power vis-à-vis the board of the association that employed them.

Findings concerning the respect the imams enjoy in their own communities are contradictory. On the one hand, educated informants complain of the ignorance of most imams and the irrelevance of their *khutbas* to the life-world of Muslims in Europe (e.g., Canatan 2001, *passim*). The demand for a better imam education, more explicitly geared to European conditions, usually comes from these circles (and of course from European authorities, who believe that modern-educated imams are the keys to the social and cultural integration of Muslim communities in the wider society). On the other hand, there are also reports of men — in the Netherlands this often concerns Moroccan men — changing their behaviour and attitude under the influence of an imam.

Many Muslims clearly hold the imams here in low esteem, much like the position of the average imam in Muslim countries. This is reflected in the low salaries paid to mosque imams, and this in turn causes the position to be unattractive to educated young men. The organising committees of mosques and larger religious associations, who select and employ

imams, generally and understandably do not want too independent-minded imams serving their mosques. Often it is only persons educated in the country of origin who are willing to accept the conditions of employment offered.

This is partly why one early Dutch experiment with a more adequate imam training for boys of Turkish origin failed. It was attempted to combine Dutch and Turkish Islamic education in a school especially established for students of Turkish descent growing up in the Netherlands. Pious Turkish parents were known to send their children to religious-oriented schools in Turkey (state *imam-hatip* schools or institutions run by the Süleymancı or Nurcu movements). The Dutch imam school was set up in response to this pattern; it provided *imam-hatip* type education, with Dutch- and Turkish-medium instruction and with Dutch as well as Turkish teachers. The school was plagued by various difficulties, as was to be expected, but the major problem was that none of its graduates wanted to become an imam, they all had set their ambitions higher.^[5]

Given this low esteem for the position, it is surprising to hear that according to a recent survey of the mosques in Rotterdam, twenty out of thirty imams had academic degrees from faculties of theology in their home countries.^[6] The Islamic University of Rotterdam, a recent establishment that has not yet acquired official recognition, is not only teaching young people who may one day become imams but claims that several of its students are in fact imams who want to improve their knowledge and shore up their positions with an academic degree.^[7] This appears to confirm that both the imams themselves and the mosque communities expect more from an imam than his formal performance in worship and provision of basic Qur'anic education alone. Michel Reeber, who studied imams in France, notes that his questions about the necessary

qualities of an imam almost invariably yielded in answer the same list of five: “*la reserve par rapport à la vie profane, la connaissance du Coran et du tafsir, la disponibilité, la maîtrise de l’art de la prédication, le discernement juridique et spirituel*” (Reeber 2000: 197). An academic degree from a theological faculty clearly lends credibility to one’s claims to knowledge of the Qur’an and its exegesis as well as of Islamic legal and doctrinal thought. It is no guarantee, however, for insight in the dilemmas faced by young Western-educated Muslims nor for the ability to adapt Islamic thought to new and unknown conditions.

The real power in the mosque is not in the hands of the imam but of the organising committee or, if the mosque belongs to a larger association (such as Milli Görüş or Diyanet), the executive board of that association. The imam is supposed to have more specialised knowledge than the members of the board, but it is the latter who call the shots — as is clear in the case of conflict, when it is the imam who has to go.^[8] In the relatively rare cases where a mosque changed hands from one Islamic movement to another, this commonly meant that another imam was brought in. The governments of Turkey and Morocco attempt to keep control over their (ex-) subjects by keeping control over the appointment of imams, and they do this through mosque organisations.

The imam owes his authority not only to his formal studies and knowledge of Islam (the extent of which cannot usually be judged by the *jamâ`at*) but also to endorsement by the mosque committee or association. He can, however, considerably improve his position vis-à-vis the committee if he succeeds in establishing a good rapport with the *jamâ`a* and convincing them of his knowledge and wisdom. Delivering remarkable *khutbas* is no doubt one of the best ways of doing this, but

only few imams appear to be capable of doing so. Initiating or participating in other activities in and around the mosque can be another way of strengthening the bond between the *jamâ`a* and the mosque and thereby increasing his influence and authority.

Kadir Canatan's research on mosques in Rotterdam showed that around half of the mosques organise social and cultural activities that are not purely religious.^[9] These mosques generally succeed much better in attracting youth than those that do not. According to him it is not the imams who make the difference but the mosque committees — there is a strong correlation between the ethnic background and age composition of the committees and the willingness to organise non-religious activities. Moroccan mosques are controlled by committees consisting of first-generation migrants, who reject the idea of organising any other than strictly religious activities, the daily and weekly prayers and Qur'an education. Most Turkish mosque committees, on the other hand, are now controlled by second-generation youth of pious family background.^[10] Süleymanlı mosques restrict themselves to purely religious activities; they are also less transparent than the other Turkish mosques and the entire Süleymanlı structure is more hierarchically organised. Not surprisingly, younger men do not play an important role here. The other mosque committees organise a whole range of activities in order to draw the younger generation to the mosque.^[11] Pakistani mosques resemble the Turkish mosques in this respect, the mosques of Surinamese and smaller national communities are more like the conservative Moroccan ones.

Canatan perceives yet another contrast between the Moroccan and Turkish mosques in Rotterdam, that concerns the position of the imam. In both, the imam is in an intermediary position

between the mosque committee and the *jamâ`a* and subject to pressures and demands from both, so that he needs considerable balancing skills to exert influence independently. In the Turkish mosques, it commonly is the mosque committee that takes initiatives and attempts to reach the community through (and with legitimatisation by) the imam. In the Moroccan mosques, led by authoritarian and conservative committees, members of the *jamâ`a* do not communicate directly with the committee but try to use the imam's services if they have a demand or proposal to put to it.

Developments in mosques specific to the European setting

Many of the minor mosques distinguish themselves only from neighbourhood mosques in the countries of origin by the absence of distinctive architectural features, not by activities in and around it. The larger mosques, however, have become much more the heart of a community than is presently the case in the home countries. There are teashops, barber shops, stalls or shops selling books, cassettes, perfume, bric-à-brac, *halal* food. Youth associations and women's associations affiliated with the mosque may meet here outside prayer time. The former may also organise sports and other activities that have nothing to do with religion.

Because there is no strict surveillance of the Friday sermons as in most countries of origin, one may hear things in European mosques that one would never hear in major mosques in Turkey or Morocco. Secularism in the sense of a true separation between the state and the religious sphere, democracy and civil rights, and a certain tolerance of (or indifference towards) other cultures have resulted in a situation many immigrants experience as freer than at home. As one of Sunier's key informants, a young man active in a *Milli Görüş*

mosque said,

“... The imam here tells entirely different things than the imams in Turkey. You learn here much more about Islam and the Muslim world [...] In Western countries there is more freedom than in Muslim countries, [the Dutch Constitution says] that belief is free.” (Sunier 1996: 195)

Imams of *Diyanet*-affiliated mosques, incidentally, tend to avoid political and social topics just as carefully as those in Turkey’s state-controlled mosques, and the same is true of many Moroccan imams.

This greater freedom of speech in Dutch mosques may soon be severely curtailed, however, following a number of sensational television broadcasts of clandestinely filmed Arabic *khutbas* by radical Moroccan and Egyptian imams. Selections taken out of context and suggestively translated created the impression of great and potentially aggressive hostility to European culture and values. In the post-September 11 atmosphere and coupled with a widespread disenchantment with multicultural experiments, political pressure for closer surveillance of mosques built up rapidly.

Efforts by community leaders to improve relations with the Dutch authorities and to overcome negative attitudes of neighbours and suspicions of what goes on in the mosques have led to a number of new practices that have been rapidly adopted by numerous mosques. In the early 1990s, or perhaps as early as the late 1980s, a few mosque committees began inviting city officials and people from the neighbourhood to the mosque to take part in an *iftâr* meal, the sunset breaking of the fast during Ramadan.^[12] Within a few years, this practice spread to many other mosques. Although inviting non-Muslims to the mosque to take part in an activity with

religious connotations appears a real innovation, it does not appear to have given rise to much protest or religious argument. It was the mosque organisers who took the initiative, and the imams quietly acquiesced.

The chief *Milli Görü*• mosque in Amsterdam went a step further. In 2001, it organised for the first time a public debate following the *iftâr* meal, with prominent Dutch intellectuals debating issues of Islam, integration and multiculturalism; this was repeated in 2002. *Iftâr* and panel discussion took place — unlike the practice in other mosques — in the main prayer hall, into which rows of tables and chairs had been placed. The carpet had been covered with plastic foil, so that the guests could keep their shoes on. Again, these activities could be initiated without much debate; it was just the director of the *Milli Görü*• federation in the Northern Netherlands who pushed this through, supported by young mosque committee members. There was some protest from the women's wing, which thought that the Dutch guests should at least take off their shoes when entering the mosque, but they were overruled. None of the *Milli Görü*• imams protested or showed signs of disaffection; the *mufti* (who is the most highly educated of the imams and also acts as a co-ordinator among them) was present in the deliberations but did not consider it as a serious issue needing an explicit opinion.^[13] He and other imams showed their consent by being present at the *iftâr* and discussion, as did some board members of the European *Milli Görü*• federation.

Panel discussions of this type have become even more institutionalised, though not in the prayer hall but in an adjoining seminar room, in the mosque led by the remarkable Larbi Kechat in the rue d'Alger in Paris, with which Valérie Amiraux' contribution to this workshop deals. These panels are usually encounters between Muslim scholars approaching a

problem from the point of view of Islamic legal thought and European scholars with a more sociological approach; the audience is mixed but largely Muslim. In the Milli Görüş panels, now also held outside Ramadan, Dutch speakers are invited to provocatively introduce ongoing public debates into the mosque.

Another recent development in the Netherlands concerns the animals slaughtered at the Feast of Sacrifice. In the first years of migration, there was much debate as to how and where Muslims were allowed to slaughter their own animals. Compromises between traditional practices, Islamic rules and European law had to be found, [14] in most cases resulting in a practice where people delegated the buying and slaughtering of the animals to the mosque organisation and receiving the meat after slaughter in the abattoir. In more recent years it has become common to add one or two chains to the delegation process: money for sacrificial animals is collected among Muslims in Europe and sent to Muslim countries, preferably to disaster-stricken areas, where animals are bought and ritually slaughtered at the appointed time, after which the meat is distributed among the poor — a form of Islamic relief work. (Some informants spoke in fact of ‘development aid’, a well-known concept in the Netherlands.) This is a practice that in the past four or five years has become so widely adopted that it appears to be completely replacing the original way of celebrating the feast. Among the Turks in the Netherlands, the new practice started with a mosque chairman collecting *kurban* money from the community and taking it personally to Eastern Turkey. Presently this has become a very large-scale operation. The European Milli Görüş federation co-ordinates it for all affiliated mosques and organises the slaughter of around 40,000 animals annually, sending the collected money to over 40 different countries. The person who contributes money for

an animal can indicate to which country or region he wants it to be sent, e.g. to Chechnya or Palestine.[\[15\]](#)

This gradual transformation of sacrifice came about without any great debate or controversy and apparently did not need a *fatwa* from respected ulama. No authority can be recognised who initiated or legitimatised it; it developed as a social practice without ever being seriously questioned. There were similar developments in countries like Pakistan and Turkey, where it has become quite common for certain foundations to organise the entire slaughter: one pays the price of an animal and receives the meat.[\[16\]](#) The practice of sending the meat to the poor abroad probably had its base in debates in the Muslim World League, as early as the 1960s, on what to do with the animals slaughtered near Mecca during the hajj, which result in too much meat to be locally consumed. It has become practice to pack the meat and send it to poor Muslim countries for distribution.[\[17\]](#) The practical idea of not sending the meat but the money to those countries was apparently not felt to be a major change. One wonders what the next step in this transformation will be. The money is still used to buy animals, which are slaughtered on the Day of Sacrifice; each individual or family contributes either the money for an entire animal (sheep, cow or camel), if they can afford it, or nothing at all. But people can jointly buy an animal. It is conceivable that an entire mosque community will decide to jointly buy a certain number of animals to be sent to a needy community abroad; or perhaps even that part of the money collected may be used to buy other needed goods, thereby further generalising the meaning of ‘sacrifice’.

The surprising thing about the various developments sketched in this section is how little controversy they generated. Although they concern not just social practices but relate to religious meanings, they did not come about as a result of

religious debate. Imams or higher religious authorities did not play a conspicuous role (although their silent endorsement may have been critical); where decision-makers can be identified, these were the managers and organisers of the mosques or associations.

Muftis and fatwas

Religious authority is expressed most clearly and explicitly in the relationship between *mustafti* and *mufti*, the questioner and giver of *fatwas*, opinions or counsel on matters of religious importance.

Although it is possible for a *mufti* to issue a *fatwa* at his own initiative, in most cases the *fatwa* is issued in response to a request. The very fact of asking someone for a *fatwa* is the most explicit recognition of that person's religious authority. Authority does not exist in a vacuum but is an aspect of a relationship between at least two persons or institutions; the relationship is made visible in the process of demanding and giving counsel.

In Muslim countries, muftis are state-appointed, and there is often, besides local and provincial muftis, one Grand Mufti or a supreme office for delivering fatwas, such as Egypt's Dar al-Iftâ or the Fatwa office of Turkey's Diyanet ••leri Ba•kanlı•ı.[\[18\]](#) These official muftis, obviously, are not the only experts that enjoy popular recognition. Religio-political movements competing with state Islam usually have their own experts, whose opinions hold greater authority for the movements' followers than those of the state muftis.

In Western Europe, there are obviously no state-appointed muftis (although of all countries, it is precisely in the most radically secular one, France, that we find two authorities whose position comes quite close to it: the 'rector' of the Mosque of Paris, Dalil Boubakeur, and the 'mufti' of Marseilles, Soheib Bencheikh).[\[19\]](#) Muslims in Europe can and do address a wide range of authorities when in need of an answer to a pressing question of a religious

nature.^[20] Whom they address depends on the level of their own degree of religious education and the nature of the question. Often a mosque imam is the nearest and most likely person to ask for an opinion. Most imams are not learned enough to derive their own *fatwas*, but for many purposes they can find satisfactory answers in the literature at their disposal, which may contain published collections of *fatwas* by great scholars of the past or more recent rulings by contemporary authorities as published in journals. Newspapers and journals, and to a limited extent the Arabic program for Moroccans in Dutch state radio, also had rubrics discussing questions on matters of religion.

Many Muslims living in Europe continued to address authorities in their home countries with questions concerning problems encountered in everyday life in Western Europe. The *Diyanet ••leri Ba•kanlı•ı* in Ankara keeps a large archive of such handwritten questions and the answers sent back. So far, to my knowledge, only Jak den Exter has had limited access to this archive and published on the *fatwas* for Turks in Europe (1990, 1991). It is very likely that other official bodies and individual ulama in the home countries have served as spiritual guides for Muslim migrants, but little or nothing concrete is known about this. More is known of the *fatwas* by some highly respected ulama whose authority transcends national boundaries, such as the late shaykh of al-Azhar, Jâd al-Haq, whose *fatwas* for Muslims in the West exist in a printed collection,^[21] and the ubiquitous Yusuf al-Qaradawi, about whom more below.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when large Muslim organisations emerged, these also presented themselves as channels for requesting *fatwas*. The Süleymançıs have the most ‘vertical’ organisation, with a well-defined hierarchy of ulama, but the process is not very transparent. The *Diyanet* organisation answers questions at various levels, from the mosque imam to the central office in Jakarta. *Milli Görü•* established its own European fatwa commission, based in Germany. The *Milli Görü•* organisation of the Northern Netherlands has its own mufti, M. Hulusi Ün̄ye, who also is a

member of the organisation's European fatwa commission. Ünye was an official (*Diyanet*) mufti in Turkey and acts here primarily as the regional organisation's head imam. He does not often appear to issue many fatwas but with his authority, based on peer recognition by the other imams, endorses the organisation's activities and standpoints.[\[22\]](#) Little appears to be known of how the issuance of fatwas is organised in Moroccan, Pakistani or other ethnic associations.[\[23\]](#)

'Supranational' fatwa bodies and *fiqh al-aqalliyât*

The idea that the situation of Muslim minorities in the West is *sui generis* and demands a special adaptation of Islamic law, perhaps even a distinct methodology for deriving fatwas, and not just imitation of the Muslim-majority world was first formulated explicitly by the North American Fiqh Council. The development of a corresponding jurisprudence of minorities, *fiqh al-aqalliyât*, is closely associated with the names of the chairman and secretary of the Council, Taha Jabir al-Alwani and Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo (see DeLorenzo 2000, Masud 2002). The very idea that such a distinct *fiqh* can and should be developed was from the beginning controversial and provoked angry responses from both traditionalists and Salafis. It proved very attractive to especially better-educated Muslims in North America and, somewhat later, in Europe as well.

Al-Alwani, born in Iraq and Azhar-educated, had taught in Saudi Arabia and, after settling in the United States, acquired renown as the founder of the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT), the driving force behind the 'Islamisation of sciences' effort (Stenberg 1996). He was a founding member of the Fiqh Council in 1988.

A European institution with similar objectives and embodying the concept of *fiqh al-aqalliyât*, was established in 1997 by the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE): the European Council for Fatwa and Research (*al-majlis al-ûrubbi li'l-*

iftâ wa'l-buhûth). Again we find al-Alwani playing a role, though only as a member of the council. The chairman is Yusuf al-Qaradawi, arguably the most widely respected and most influential Muslim scholar in the world. Based in Qatar, Qaradawi has established his reputation throughout the Muslim world initially through his numerous books and fatwas, which have been translated in many languages and are read from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, later through his skilful use of the new media. Satellite television (Qaradawi has a weekly program on al-Jazeera) and the Internet (his sermons and fatwas can be found on various websites) have made him the most visible of muftis. Qaradawi's collected fatwas (three volumes) contain many that concern Muslims in the West; more recently he has published a book explicitly addressing problems of Muslims in non-Muslim societies (to appear in English translation as *Fiqh of Muslim minorities*). His counsels show sensitivity to context and pragmatism, which is why many consider him as a liberal (and why he is intensely disliked by Salafis).

Qaradawi's deputy in the Council, Faysal al-Mawlawi, is the leading Sunni scholar in Lebanon. He has frequently visited France and lectured to Muslim audiences, especially on the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Most of the other 30 members of the council are based in European countries. Besides the muftis of Bosnia and Albania, none of them has a reputation to match those of Qaradawi, Mawlawi and Alwani. The council meets annually to discuss a number of questions and deliver collective fatwas.^[24] The deliberations are in Arabic, and the fatwas are made public in Arabic; some are also available in (not always perfect) English translation. Although the Council sticks mostly to the four orthodox schools of *fiqh*, several of its fatwas have given rise to controversies.

As an example, consider this fatwa, concerning a well-known dilemma faced by Muslim girls in European schools:

Question: Is a Muslim woman allowed to uncover her private parts in the presence of non-Muslim women and go to a swimming pool

where no men can see her?

Answer: There is nothing wrong with going to swimming pool where no men can see her. The private parts of Muslim woman in the presence of non-Muslim woman are like the private parts of a man in the presence of another man, namely from the navel to the knees. The Hanafi School and some scholars of the other three schools hold this opinion. The Council recommends the sisters to lower their gaze and should have one of the sisters to train them. As it is clear that the non-Muslim women who go to such a swimming pool do not want to intermingle with men, the Muslim women should call them to Islam.

Note that the answer, though it may sound conservative, emphasises what is allowed, not what is forbidden, and that it refers to (the most permissive) opinions of the *fiqh* schools. As long as women keep the part of the body from the navel to the knees covered, there is no problem engaging in swimming (or other sports) in an all-women non-Muslim setting.

The Council's fatwa gains perspective when we compare it with a Salafi fatwa on a related subject. The leading Salafi scholar, Nasir al-Din al-Albani, answered a much more cautious question about uncovering in a much more restrictive sense:

Question: Is it allowed for a Muslim woman to uncover her hair in front of a woman of the People of the Book, e.g. a maidservant?

Answer: It is not allowed for a Muslim woman to appear in front of a disbelieving woman, whether she is of the People of the Book or otherwise, unless she is covered the way she would be in front of a strange man. This is because when Allaah allows the women to uncover themselves in front of various categories of people, He says, "... or their women" (Noor 24:31). Their women indicates Muslim women only.[\[25\]](#)

In the Salafi view, the development of a *fiqh al-aqalliyât* as represented by the efforts of Qaradawi and his associates is of a pernicious permissiveness that threatens Islam. (Qaradawi's

widely read book, *The forbidden and permitted in Islam*, is mockingly referred to by Salafis as *The permitted and permitted*.) Salafis represent the view that Islamic law is the same for all times and all places and that Muslims cannot compromise with non-Muslim values and ways of life. Probably in order to counter the possible impact of *fiqh al-aqalliyât*, a collection of very conservative fatwas for Muslims in the West by the leading lights of the Saudi religious establishment was published in English and widely distributed. [\[26\]](#)

It is difficult to assess the real influence of the European Council for Fatwa and Research and even more so for that of its Salafi detractors. Because its communications are in Arabic, most Muslims in Europe have no direct access to them and at best become aware of its fatwas through intermediaries: imams, certain Muslim intellectuals, journals in vernacular languages, websites or email discussion lists that report on or respond to them. Qaradawi and Mawlawi have a long-standing relation with the Union of Islamic Organisations in France (UOIF) and its cadre-training institute, the Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines (Frégosi 1998). The major supporting network, the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe, is based in Germany and appears to consist mostly of Muslim Brotherhood-influenced associations. The most charismatic spokesman for a European Islam, Tariq Ramadan (on whom see Frégosi 2000), is closely associated with the same networks. He is by far the most effective communicator of the brand of Islam represented by these circles to young audiences, especially in francophone Europe.

Another major council that claims to speak on behalf of Muslims of all national origins is the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland (Spuler-Stegemann 1998: 115-8). Most of its leading members have a relation with the Muslim World

League, and the affiliated organisations belong to the ‘fundamentalist’ or Salafi end of the spectrum.^[27] The Zentralrat focuses less on fatwas but attempts to define Islam for German Muslims through the development of a syllabus for Muslim religious education in German schools. Since there is less competition in this arena — the only major competitor is the Institut für Internationale Pädagogik, affiliated with Milli Görü• (Mohr 2002) — the Zentralrat clearly hopes thus to acquire an influence well beyond its own constituency. Whether they will succeed will probably depend more on the attitude of the German educational establishment than on the Zentralrat’s ability to mobilise popular support.

So far, the actual influence exerted by these ‘supranational’ Muslim bodies over the average practising Muslim in Europe still appears far less than that channelled through ‘national’ associations — especially the Turkish ones. A high proportion of young Muslims growing up in Europe remains outside the influence of both and, when seeking more Islamic knowledge at a later age, mostly does so through a process of self- and peer education, often without identifiable authority.^[28] Computer technology and the Internet seem to offer everyone who is computer literate the promise of becoming his own mufti and thereby seriously blurring the traditional structures of authority.

Young Muslims, authority, and the Internet

In France, Leïla Babès and Farhad Khosrokhavar have written on the emergence of a young generation of Muslims who take their Islam seriously but demand an autonomous space for themselves, outside the sphere of the mosques as well as that of the state. They have little formal education in Islamic knowledge but absorb some from their peers. Students from Arab countries have often helped the locally born young

Muslims setting up associations and acted as mediators of Islamic knowledge; Babès believes that this explains the influence of reformist and Salafi interpretations of Islam among this generation (Babès 1997: 131).

In the Netherlands too, student and youth associations, most of them at best very loosely associated with a mosque, constitute perhaps the major arena where Islamic knowledge is transmitted. To some extent, this does not take place in a vertical relationship between the more and less knowledgeable but in the form of discussion in which both are active participants. The easy availability of other sources of information — through the press, satellite television and the Internet — makes the discussion partners in a sense equals. The relatively knowledgeable and the less knowledgeable acquire their knowledge in quite similar ways, through the eclectic perusal of quite diverse sources. The difference between them appears to be due to degree of their curiosity and commitment rather than to a different process of disciplining. I do not see a clear line differentiating Muslim intellectuals from the ‘*lumpen intelligentsia*’ that Roy perceives (Roy 1990, 1992: 72-6). It may be useful to construct these as ideal types but in real life they inhabit the same networks.

The most ‘authoritative’ young Muslims, who are regularly invited by local youth associations to come and deliver talks and engage in discussion, are also self-taught men. Those whom I asked who their chief authority was typically gave me titles of books, or names of authors whom they had not met in person. They too had learned much through discussion, through reading, through meeting with Muslim intellectuals visiting from Muslim-majority countries, and through Muslim websites in the Internet. Their authority among peers derived more from their non-religious education than from their superior knowledge of Islam; they found that the latter was more often contested. One of them told me of an incident that illustrates the limits to the possibility of spreading unfamiliar views — and, in fact, the limits to free speech:

I was speaking in one of these local associations, and in the discussion a woman asks me, “since you are a doctor [he is a pharmacist] you understand these things: is the use of a diaphragm as a contraceptive permitted for Muslims?” I answered that medically the diaphragm is harmless and that it does not cause infertility, so that there is no reason why a married couple, in mutual agreement, should not use it. Before I had completed speaking, one of the organisers grabbed the microphone from my hands and said “*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim!* You’d better check your sources first before you answer, brother! Many great ulama have said the opposite!”, and with a few sentences he ended the meeting. And this was an ignorant, traditional man; I am sure he didn’t even know what a diaphragm is... And he is not very learned in religion either...[\[29\]](#)

The speaker belongs to the more open-minded and rational young Muslim activists and is a voracious reader. In discussions, however, the intellectual quality of the argument only rarely counts. In the case mentioned, the opposition was traditional, but the same speaker finds discussions with Salafis even more frustrating. Especially to half-educated people, the simple logic of Salafis and other literalists appears more convincing than a sophisticated argument. On the other hand, the few real Salafi groups keep the door for exchange open, he repeatedly receives invitations to speak there.

The atmosphere in student groups is often freer and more open. Most of those in the Netherlands have — like the youth associations in general — primarily members of the same national background, and there is a marked difference in orientation between Moroccan and Turkish student associations. The latter tend to be oriented towards debates taking place in Turkey and relatively uninterested in such matters as *fiqh al-aqalliyât* and the activities of English-language Western Muslim groups. In Moroccan associations, Dutch is the dominant language (few young Moroccans speak Arabic) and the orientation is more towards transnational than to Moroccan Islam. Salafi ideas make more easily inroads among them.

The Internet has rapidly become an essential source of information and extension of face-to-face discussion groups for many Muslim students and activists. The numbers and quality of websites increase so rapidly that each publication is obsolete by the time it appears. The lasting importance and impact are, however, difficult to assess. They clearly cannot be studied by studying the websites and mailing lists only but by doing more systematic research on users than has been done so far. Bunt (2000) and Mandaville (2000) are very upbeat about the revolutionary potential of the medium. I tend to be slightly more sceptical.

It is of course attractive to speculate about the impact of the digital revolution and compare it with the rise of print capitalism and its revolutionary role in European history. For a significant part of the immigrant Muslim community, the literacy revolution and the cyber revolution are in fact conflated, with potentially even more dramatic effects for the structures of authority. If the protestant revolution made every literate Christian his own priest, will the availability of hadith collections, tafsir, and fatwa databases on CD-ROM or on-line be able to turn every computer literate Muslim into his own mufti? There is no doubt that for the scholar these new media open unprecedented new vistas. But there will remain an enormous gap between the scholar and the non-initiate — if only in the ability to understand bits of text in their original context and to apply them meaningfully in a contemporary context.

The potentialities and limitations of these new media are perhaps more evident in a place with a ‘small’ language like the Netherlands. Of the various immigrant nationalities, the Moroccans appear to be most active on the Internet. (Turks probably have more recourse to sites in Turkish, and Pakistanis to English-language sites, but young Moroccans don’t know Arabic and are illiterate in their native Berber, so they use Dutch.) The anonymity of the Internet — almost everyone uses a nickname and carefully hides her identity — allows for the expression of questions and ideas that one could previously never utter, but even so there appears to be some pressure towards conformity. One site

experimented with a cyber imam giving on-line fatwas in answer to questions sent by email. This hardly undermined the authority of traditional imams, for the cyber imam was one of them himself, who simply saw his influence buttressed by the new medium. (For preliminary studies of these websites and discussion lists, see Brouwer 2001, 2002).

Shifts of authority?

Many Muslims in the West complain of the lack of Islamic knowledge among their communities, partly due to the virtual absence of scholars with sufficient command of the learned tradition of Islam. There is an acknowledged need for religious education at all levels (cf. Barazangi 1998, 2000; Woodward 1996; Yalçın-Heckmann 1998) and, especially among the educated, much disaffection with the average imam, whose knowledge is perceived to be irrelevant to the needs of modern Muslim communities in secular non-Muslim societies. Various would-be authorities are presenting themselves on the supply side, at least some of them supported politically and/or financially by European or Muslim states (which makes them suspect in the eyes of many Muslims): the secularist muftis of Paris and Marseille, Salafis with an unchanging message rejecting compromise with Western values, moderate Islamists like Qaradawi and his associates. None of them appear to have made great inroads among large groups of youth, nor have they effected major changes in the existing structures of religious authority, which appear to be primarily defined by the larger religio-national associations.

The potentially subversive effects of the Internet on established religious authorities are not much in evidence yet. The most significant development, in terms of religious authority, is the rise of a generation of western-educated Muslims intellectuals, who are largely self-taught in religion and who are quite eclectic in their use of (written) source materials. They do refer to established authorities too but selectively so and may take the liberty of personal *ijtihâd*. Among the less well-educated youth, among

whom peer learning is the dominant mode of acquiring Islamic knowledge, these young intellectuals may turn out to be more influential than more established authorities, but much will depend on their rhetorical strategies and organising skills. They will have to compete with increasingly vocal Salafi spokesmen, whose simple message may be compelling, and whose ready-made answers are easily conveyed through cyberspace.

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[1] The reference is to the PKK-affiliated Union of Religious-minded Persons and the Union of Patriotic Imams, led by Abdurrahman Durre, which controls one mosque in Berlin and possibly a number of others elsewhere in Germany. In the Nurcu movement in Turkey, Kurds have become alienated from the Turkish mainstream and several separate Kurdish Nurcu groups have emerged (see Atacan 2001); I do not know to what extent this split has been reproduced in Western Europe.

[2] The term 'Salafi' is loosely used for all types of reformers who reject the *madhâhib* and classical scholarship and who pretend to base themselves exclusively on the Qur'an and Sunna. It often applies specifically to the groups and movements that are supported by the Saudis or otherwise associated with Wahhabism, and it is the term by which the Wahhabis prefer to refer to themselves (besides simply 'Muslims', implying that only they are entitled to that name). It is confusing that the term also used to be applied to such modernist thinkers as Muhammad `Abdu, who favoured rational interpretation. I follow current usage and reserve it for the anti-rational, literalist, Wahhabi-type puritans. More about them will follow below.

[3] Nasir al-Din al-Albani, based in Jordan, wrote mostly books on simple matters of belief or worship and has distinguished himself by his uncompromising rejection of much established Muslim practice that he found lacking in solid *hadith* support. Fiercely opposed to all forms of contextualisation and adaptation to local circumstances as well as to contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims, he is one of the most prominent and influential Salafi `ulama. For a sample of his ideas, see his website, www.albani.org/ or a collection of his answers to questions from Muslim students in America at www.uh.edu/campus/msa/articles/tape_.html. Understandably, al-Albani has been a source of many controversies and the object of equally fierce criticism, for which see e.g. www.sunnah.org/history/Innovators/al_albani.htm and www.ummah.net/Al_adaab/albintro.html, where his book on prayer is also attacked.

[4] Some work is presently being done on such 'internal conversions' in prison. There is some earlier work on the turn to Islam in the context of popular youth culture (Khosrokhavar 1997; Khedimellah 2002).

[5] There was a more fundamental reason for the failure of the experiment; the school's founders had taken it for granted that the Diyanet bureaucracy would employ its graduates preferentially to send them back to the Netherlands as imams, but there was no guarantee that this would actually happen.

[6] Research carried out by Kadir Canatan and others in 2002 on behalf of the city council of Rotterdam; personal communication from Canatan.

[7] Personal communication from Prof. Ahmet Akgündüz, rector of the Islamic University of Rotterdam.

[8] Several cases of such conflicts are mentioned in Landman 1992.

[9] At the time of writing, the results of this research have not yet been published; the following paragraphs are based on personal communication from Canatan. Earlier observations on the importance of non-religious activities around the *Milli Görüş* and *Diyanet* mosques in Rotterdam are made in Sunier 1996.

[10] More correctly perhaps not second generation in the strict sense but the in-between generation, who received (part of) their secondary education still in Turkey, in many cases in an *imam-hatip* school, and who came to the Netherlands to join parent already working there.

[11] Similar observations in Sunier 1996: 178-90, where a comparison between the three major streams of Turkish Sunni Islam (*Milli Görüş*, *Diyanet* and *Süleymanî*) is made.

[12] Sunier mentions such *iftâr* meals in Rotterdam for the early nineties and suggests they had been started a few years before (1996: 120). Hacı Karacaer, director of Milli Görüş – Northern Netherlands, claims that the MG mosque in Amsterdam was the pioneer in this respect. Most mosque committees hold these *iftârs* in a space beside the mosque's prayer hall or, if that is not available, in a nearby restaurant.

[13] Hacı Karacaer, personal communication.

[14] Traditional practices: it was common to keep the animal in or near the house for some time before slaughter, make it beautiful with paint and ribbons, and develop an attachment to it, so that slaughter would result in a feeling of loss. On some of the debates and compromises, see Shadid and van Koningsveld 1992.

[15] Hacı Karacaer, personal communication.

[16] In Turkey, this is done by the Türk Hava Kurumu, a foundation belonging to the Turkish Air Force. One of the foundation's major sources of income had long been its government-granted monopoly on collecting the skins of sacrificial animals. From there it was a small step to organising the entire process of sacrifice. Strong government support no doubt smoothed the introduction of this practice.

[17] Muhammad Khalid Masud, personal communication.

[18] On the functioning of the office in Egypt, see Skovgaard-Pedersen 1997. See also Masud et al. 1996.

[19] The rector of the Mosque of Paris owes his special status to a treaty between France and Algeria. Bencheikh, the author of a book that proclaims the compatibility of Islam with French secularism (1998), apparently was appointed as the mufti of Marseilles by a French Minister of the Interior (Bowen 2001: 22), it is not clear to me on what grounds nor what official competence it implies. Neither appears to enjoy great authority among the Muslims in France.

[20] A survey of the various authorities delivering fatwas for Muslims in Europe is given by van Koningsveld 2001. Cf. Waardenburg's summary overview of relevant authorities (2000: 63-66).

[21] These fatwas were analysed in a MA thesis by Muhammad Umar Hashem under van Koningsveld's supervision (Leiden, 1997).

[22] Hacı Karacaer and Hulusi Ünye, personal communication.

[23] One well-known Moroccan imam in Rotterdam, Khalil al-Moumni, has published a collection of his fatwas, which appears to be used among Moroccans not only in the Netherlands but elsewhere in Europe as well. Van Koningsveld is preparing a translation of these fatwas.

[24] The website of the FIOE and the European Council for Fatwa and Research (<http://www.fioe.org/>) is presently not operational but some of its fatwas can be accessed at the website of the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), http://www.wamy.co.uk/fatwas/fatwa_template.html, where there is also a possibility for submitting questions.

[25] "Some points from a question-and-answer session with Shaikh Muhammad Naasir ad-Deen al-Albaani", http://www.uh.edu/campus/msa/articles/tape_.html#uncover.

[26] Bin Baz and Muthaymeen 1998; cf. Masud's comments (2002).

[27] The other large umbrella organisation with similar claims, the Islamrat der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, appears to be entirely Turkish and strongly dominated by Milli Görü• (Spuler-Stegemann 1998: 113-5).

[28] Cf. Leïla Babès' observations on Muslim youth in France and their 'auto-socialisation' (Babès 1997: 115-146; see also Khosrokhavar 1997).

[29] Hasan Barzizaoua, personal communication.