



Making Islam Work

*Islamic Authority among
Muslims in Western Europe*

Thijl Sunier

BRILL

Making Islam Work

Muslim Minorities

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By

Thijl Sunier



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For Linda, Anand and Leon



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Preface and Acknowledgement

In January 2009, just three weeks after my appointment as professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, I attended the first 'halal borrel', organised by the university's Islamic student association, Mashriq. In Dutch, a 'borrel' is an alcoholic drink, but the word commonly refers to drinks after a work meeting or at a reception. Halal is the theological concept denoting that which is permitted according to Islamic law. The seemingly contradictory messages brought together in 'halal borrel' attracted my attention. It is just a small but meaningful example of the fact that many young Muslims want to make sense of their religion and engage with society. The organisers did not intend to violate Islamic requirements, but they wanted to play with words and attract the attention of potential visitors to the event. However, some critical comments were made by Muslims who considered the combination of these words inappropriate.

I recalled this event when I was doing some preparatory work for this book because it was the kind of situation that I have become increasingly interested in over the past two decades. For whatever reasons, Muslims initiate something, or raise a pressing issue, and this may lead to discussions and reactions, both positive and negative. Sometimes 'experts' are asked by the media to explain and interpret 'what is going on'. Many such questions, including some that were addressed to me, deal with what I would now call issues of Islamic authority, such as the meaning of a controversial statement by a theologian, the reasons why young Muslims would leave the country to join Islamic State in Syria, why so many Muslims go to 'halal holiday resorts', or whether music is allowed in Islam. The implicit assumption behind many of these questions by journalists is that there must be only one 'authorised' answer, the 'rule according to Islam'.

When I was working on the book, I sometimes asked family, friends, students, and colleagues what associations and connotations the expression 'Islamic authority' had for them. For many of them, it was related to the position of an Islamic scholar, or what is written in Islamic sources. This is understandable as many introductions to Islam present it as a relatively autonomous and well-defined and unambiguous set of norms, values, and rules. 'Islam' refers to the written corpus of knowledge, the doctrine, and the institutional structure. The basic question that is then asked is: 'What does Islam say about ...?' The premise is that the doctrine is the source, the blueprint, for the social order from which we must understand and explain it. Such sources are considered to be the essence of the Islamic creed, and the vast majority of Muslims do indeed accept them as authoritative, acknowledge their importance and regard them as a moral compass, so it is not very surprising that many non-Muslims take

this at face value and think that these sources set out how Muslims think and act. One of my motives for writing this book was to engage with this taken-for-granted point of view.

But I am also motivated by the fact that, at the present time, Islam has increasingly come to be associated with war, terror, ‘waves of refugees’, and the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe. Many Muslims try, often in vain, to counter these distorted images about what they consider so essential in their own lives. As a non-Muslim ‘expert’ on Islam, I regard my role as being to engage in the discussion about these opposing views. In his latest book, Bryan Turner (2023, 152) addresses the issue of positionality, especially with regard to ‘outsider’ researchers such as me, and he asks the fundamental question, “Who has the authority to speak?” This is an issue I shall discuss extensively in Chapter 6 of this book, where I analyse Islam as an academic field, but a few preliminary reflections are necessary.

With regard to my own position as an academic working on Islam for almost four decades, I have always been aware of the delicate balance between acquiring a good position and being accepted as a researcher among my interlocutors, and simultaneously keeping sufficient distance as an analyst. I do critically engage with opinion leaders who articulate nonsense about Islam with the deliberate intention of bashing Islam and Muslims, but I also engage with questionable ‘scholarly’ depictions of Islam of whatever sort. I have written columns and popular introductions to Islam, and I have given numerous talks and courses for a general audience. I know that many Muslims appreciate my role and position in public debates, and I also know that I have been depicted in the media as a mouthpiece for Islam who is paid to say nice things.

To reiterate that this is not the case and that I regard myself as an independent academic is only partly effective, but it is essential to be aware of certain pitfalls that come with acting as a public intellectual.

As most academics will probably acknowledge, a research interest and a subsequent academic niche unfold by chance and gradually. My interest in issues of Islamic authority arose relatively recently, in 2006, when I was involved in a research project on the fragmentation of traditional Islamic authority among Muslims in Europe and the transformation of the organisational landscape. From the mid-1980s, I carried out research mainly on migration from Turkey to Europe. My doctoral research, which started at the end of the 1980s, dealt with Islam but, from the mid-1990s until the beginning of the 2000s, I worked on several topics and Islam was just one theme among many.

The 2006 research project began at a time when we were witnessing an increasing quest for religious guidance among young, relatively highly edu-

cated Muslims in Europe. The established organisational Islamic landscape still consisted of ethnically specific organisations with the mosque as the focal point of activity, set up in most cases by Islamic movements from the migrants' countries of origin. These organisations were managed by national umbrella organisations, administered predominantly by men. However, for a growing number of Muslims who had lived in Europe for most of their lives, the traditional imam of the local mosque, who hardly had any knowledge of Western society, let alone any idea about young Muslims' experience of life, had become increasingly obsolete.

The aim of the project was to analyse these developments and it was built on the proposition that a process of individualisation of religiosity was taking place among young Muslims, a process described by Grace Davie (1997) as "believing without belonging". Although Davie's dictum referred predominantly to Christianity, it was taken up by researchers working in the field of Islam (see e.g., Cesari 2003). I shall critically discuss the individualisation thesis and its relation to authority in more detail in the Introduction. Here it suffices to say that a quest for knowledge and a sometimes heated debate among young Muslims about religious authority, legitimate theological guidance, and alternative forms of associational life, was taking place. Many young Muslims discussed and explored novel ways of acquiring adequate religious knowledge that matched with their experience. Over time, the emergence of social media would intensify the discussion and sharpen the perception of what exactly religious knowledge entails.

A couple of years later, I received funding for research, together with my colleague Leon Buskens of the University of Leiden, to explore Islamic authority in the Netherlands. Shifting notions and modalities of authority ran like a red thread through the entire project. One of the outcomes was that authority was definitely broader and more multifaceted than the power vested in *ulama*, imams and other authority figures. We also saw that 'ordinary' Muslims (the non-professionals), especially women, were important agents in how authority comes about (Sunier and Buskens 2022). These findings will be discussed in this book.

Since then, I have been involved in other research projects that addressed issues of authority, legitimacy, and ethics, and I have also supervised several PhD-theses that explored Islamic authority and related phenomena. This was the time, around 2018, when the idea for a book about Islamic authority started to take root in me. The plan was to reread my own past research and to study research conducted by others in the field. This material would be the basis for the chapters in the book, with the aim of exploring how Islamic authority manifests itself.

It is an old anthropological axiom that 'objects of research' are not lying around out there to be picked up and gathered by researchers. The way in which I phrased my interest in Islamic authority, and how it became an object of research, may easily lead to the suggestion that Islamic authority really is something real 'out there' to be collected and stored by the researcher. But this is far from how I approach Islamic authority. On the contrary, realities and phenomena emerge before our eyes only after we have constructed and applied terms and concepts. In the pages to come, I shall engage with these epistemological and methodological issues. Here, I only want to state that, as an anthropologist, I am aware of the risks associated with drafting a book around a phenomenon that has both analytical dimensions and social significance. Therefore, this book is also meant to show 'work in progress'. Islamic authority is a rich field of inquiry and a crucial theme in the study of Islam, but it is also of great significance for Muslims. In my academic career, I have always tried to take these two aspects into consideration.

For the completion of this book, thanks are due first to my many interlocutors, both past and present. Some of the data on the basis of which this book has been written, were collected over three decades ago. Some of my interlocutors have become friends, others I still meet every now and then and they will hopefully read this book, and others I have lost track of over the years. As time permits, when I attend the numerous events organised by Muslims such as iftars, seminars, book presentations and other activities, I meet some of them and it is a real pleasure when they tell me that they appreciate my work. Some of my interlocutors wished to remain anonymous. When I refer to them, I use a capital letter instead of their name.

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript of this book for their valuable feedback and suggestions for improvement, as well as for their complimentary nice words of praise. Their comments have certainly contributed to the quality of the text. In addition, I have asked some of my close colleagues to read (parts of) the text and provide me with feedback. This has turned out to be extremely valuable; their sometimes very detailed suggestions gave tremendously crucial input for the revision of the manuscript. My thanks go to Schirin Amir-Moazami, Martijn de Koning, Linda Bolt, Peter Versteeg, Jamal Ahajjaj and Dominik Müller. Aleeha Ali, the PhD student, who wrote most of Chapter 5, also turned out to be an important reviewer when we discussed her chapter and how to relate her work in the book's general framework and argument. I thank Heleen van der Linden, who provided me with a text based on her ethnographic research data. I am happy that she was able to write the text, given the challenges in her personal life. Of course, I am entirely responsible for the final text.

There are many more colleagues and, not least, people ‘in the field’ who, over time, have given me suggestions for improvement or posed questions about issues I had overlooked, notably my colleagues at the Vrije Universiteit, the members of the editorial board of the *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, and my colleagues in the European research project Mediating Islam in the Digital Age (MIDA).

I thank the board of editors of Brill’s Muslim Minorities series, who thought the manuscript worthy enough to be published. I thank Nienke Brienemoolenaar, Associate Editor at Brill for her patience and the pleasant efficiency with which she guided me through the process from initial idea to final manuscript. I thank Carina van den Hoven, Production Manager at Brill, for her flexibility and guidance through the sometimes tedious work of proof reading the manuscript. I thank Nicolette van der Hoek, Senior Acquisition Editor at Brill, for her encouraging role in the process. We work together on the *Journal of Muslims in Europe* already for many years and this project was a logical extension of this cooperation. For the successful completion of this work thanks are certainly due to Carol Rowe, who efficiently and professionally edited and corrected the text and turned out to be a valuable reviewer as well.

Last but not least, I thank Linda Bolt, my partner, and our sons Anand and Leon for enduring once again a period of preoccupation and stress. To them I wholeheartedly dedicate this book.

Thijl Sunier

June 2023

Notes on Transliteration

Arabic and Urdu words are transliterated according to the instructions for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill). Diacritical marks for Arabic and Urdu words are not applied. For Turkish words and names the official Turkish alphabet is used. Words that appear in the Oxford Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster are not written in italics. Arabic, Urdu, and Turkish words that do not appear in the Oxford Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster, are written in italics only the first time. Most Arabic, Urdu and Turkish words are briefly explained in the glossary.

Introduction

1 Islamic Authority: Themes, Stakes, and Foci

What does a group of local elderly neighbourhood watchmen, or a group of Muslim women active in their neighbourhood, have to do with Islamic authority and who decides on it? How can we assess and understand discussions among young Shi'a Muslims about the question whether or not an online performance of the *majlis* ritual is still 'the real thing'? How are discussions about the question of whether or not a restaurant may use the label halal (allowed according to Islamic law), and what halal actually means, related to discussions about authority? Who decides about the curriculum of an imam-training program? Or how does a heated mediatised discussion about hand-shaking between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman relate to Islamic authority? To answer these and other questions is to disclose phenomena that can be understood as modalities of Islamic authority.

This book is about Islamic authority among Muslims in Europe who come from a migrant background.¹ Religious authority is persuasive power and deals with issues of truth, authenticity, legitimacy, trust, ethics, and imagination with reference to religious matters. It is a qualification commonly attributed to religious professionals with regard to institutional and knowledge-related competences and positions (see e.g., Chaves 2003, 38). However, I shall argue that Islamic authority is much more encompassing and versatile than the status of religious professionals and elites or of Islamic theological sources.²

The title of the book, *Making Islam Work*, unites the constituent elements of the overall argument that I shall unfold in the following pages.³ As an anthropologist of religion, I am interested in human agency with regard to religious

1 Most of my research has been conducted among these communities, predominantly in the more western parts of Europe. Muslim communities in the eastern and south-eastern part of the continent, most of which are indigenous people, are not included. However, I contend that much of what is said in this book about Islamic authority also bears relevance for them. When I use the generic term 'Europe', I refer to the more western parts of the continent.

2 Throughout the book, I use 'Islamic professional' and 'religious professional' as generic terms, a common denominator when I refer to ulama (Islamic scholars), imams and other religious professionals. I fully realise that lumping together these religious functionaries may give rise to discussion, but when I deal with the imam explicitly, I shall of course use the term 'imam'. In a number of cases, I also use the term 'religious expert', which in my view has a more attributive connotation. The question who an expert is and who is not, is ultimately a matter of legitimacy and authority.

3 I derive the phrase 'making Islam work' from name of the research project Making Islam Work

practices, landscapes, life worlds and the making of religious selves. What are the social and spiritual environments that people build and inhabit, what institutional environments and power relations come with them, and what imaginative practices do people of faith establish and expand? In other words, how do people make religion work for themselves and for others and what factors account for that?

I contend that Islamic authority does not self-evidently emanate from a decontextualised essential core, the 'Islam of the Book'. From friends and colleagues, experts in the field of Islamic law or working as imams, I have learned that the sources (and knowledge of them) are extremely crucial for being able to connect to people. It is these institutionalised sources of knowledge, education and learning that constitute the bedrock of Islamic authority and conceptualise religion and authority. But these colleagues also emphasise that it is the specific application of this knowledge that makes things tick.

Islamic authority should, furthermore, not be conflated with or reduced exclusively to the personal status of religious scholars, or to the status of theological bodies of knowledge. It can be attributed to institutions, to legal, ethical, and material matters, activities, and to events. Many good studies have been published about the authoritative status of Islamic scholars and their role in Islamic knowledge production.⁴ Islamic authority in the narrow sense of scriptural proficiency will, of course, be addressed in this book. However, if the reader expects to find an assessment of the theological scholarly debates about well-known and not so well-known matters in Islamic theology and their implications for Islam and Muslims in Europe, he or she will be disappointed.

Some readers would by now probably expect to hear what my definition of Islamic authority is, but they will be disappointed as well, as I will refrain from formulating a 'one-size-fits-all' definition that applies to everything that is addressed in this book, and for good reasons. Rather than reiterating mainstream conceptions of Islamic authority, I intend to show that it is a semantically diverse field with different connotations and adjacent phenomena. The aim of this book is to show what Muslims make of it and how diverse this can be. There is a risk in stretching concepts to the extent that they 'explain' everything and thus nothing, as they may deprive concepts of their explana-

in the Netherlands (MIWIN), that I conducted with my colleague Leon Buskens from 2013 to 2019, financed by the Dutch Research Council *NWO*.

4 See e.g., Antoun (1989); Zaman (2002); Birt (2006); Schulz (2006); Haddad and Balz (2008); Gräf and Skovgaard-Petersen (2009); Krämer (2010); Bano and Kalmbach (2012); Kloos and Künkler (2016); Noor (2018).

tory power.⁵ But a broad understanding of Islamic authority and showing the connections and similarities it has with adjacent concepts, enables us to understand the manifold ways in which Islam ‘is made to work’.

This book is about ‘Islamic’ authority, and this implies that I first have to take issue with the adjective ‘Islamic’. Some of my colleagues warned me that the adjective may create confusion about the focus of my book and the explanatory status of my conceptual tools. I fully understand their concern and I take this seriously.

Some authors use the adjective ‘Muslim’ instead of ‘Islamic’ in order to make a distinction between, on the one hand, that which is normatively and authoritatively considered ‘Islamic’ in the religious sense and, on the other, any activity performed by Muslims, people of faith. The question then arises of whether performing religious duties is as much lived Islam as a football team consisting of Muslims. And can we call an organisation founded by Muslims ‘Islamic’ by default? If so, why; if not, why not?

This is more than juggling with terms; it is an epistemological and methodological question, linked to what Muslims mean by ‘Islamic’ and also to the explanatory status of Islam as a constituent factor in complex historical, economic, political, and social fields. This is a puzzle with which scholars from various disciplines have grappled for quite some time, including anthropologists. In 1977, Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1977) posed the question of whether or not there is an anthropology of Islam. He concluded that, as there is a multiplicity of forms of Islam, Islam cannot be a category with explanatory power, and there can thus be no anthropology of Islam.

A couple of years later Talal Asad addressed the same issue. In his seminal paper ‘The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam’, he reacted to Michael Gilsenan’s proposition as an anthropologist not to exclude any form or idea of Islam, and he states:

The idea [Gilsenan] adopts from other anthropologists—that Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is—will not do, if only because there are everywhere Muslims who say that what other people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all. This paradox cannot be resolved simply by saying that the claim as to what is Islam will be admitted by the anthropologist only where it applies to the informant’s own beliefs and practices,

5 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) have made that convincingly clear with regard to the term ‘identity’, which is applied to virtually everything that pertains to culture and difference.

because it is generally impossible to define beliefs and practices in terms of an isolated subject. A Muslim's beliefs about the beliefs and practices of others are his own beliefs. And like all such beliefs, they animate and are sustained by his social relations with others. (Asad 1986, 2)

Again, some years later, Aziz Al-Azmeh, like el-Zein, expressed his doubts about the prominent explanatory status of orthodox scriptural Islam that, according to him, haunted the social sciences. In an attempt to explain social phenomena by referring to authoritative scriptural sources, an essentialised category of 'Islamic culture' is being constructed. But, according to Al-Azmeh: "There are as many Islams as there are situations to sustain it" (Al-Azmeh 1993, 1). Although he is right in emphasising this interpretative diversity of Islam as a tradition and source of knowledge, it still leaves us with the analytical question of how to make sense of the fact that Muslims, and not only established Islamic authorities, claim that there is just one Islam.

Some authors have tried to solve this semantic and methodological problem by applying the terms 'Islamdom' and 'Islamicate', as coined by Marshal Hodgson. Hodgson reserved the terms 'Islam' and 'Islamic' for matters pertaining exclusively to Islam as a cult and a religious dogma, and 'Islamicate' to things that "would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims" (Hodgson 1974, 59).⁶

I go along with this line of argumentation to a certain extent because it rightly suggests that we should not overemphasise the influence of Islam as a unified religious tradition. However, on what grounds do we delineate the "social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam" from strictly 'religious' and dogmatic elements? In other words, how to understand the societal relevance and constitutive force of Islam while at the same time be careful not to single out Islam as the ultimate cause for everything Muslims do and articulate? And conversely, is it possible to define a specific field of human activity that is called Islamic (Sunier 2018b)? When Asad states that "there are everywhere Muslims who say that what other people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all", this is in a nutshell the focus of this book, namely that what is taken to be Islamic is always contested. To debunk others' definitions of what

6 Thus, Dressler, Salvatore, and Wohrab-Sar (2019, 12) use the term 'Islamicate secularity' to denote "[...] forms of secularity that have developed in contexts where Islamic traditions have had a strong impact on society, culture, and politics". In historical studies about Muslim societies, one often comes across this adjective.

Islamic entails is as relevant as to abide by one's own convictions (see Schulz 2006; Fadil 2017; Sunier 2018b).

Rogers Brubaker shows how the term 'Muslim' has taken on a double function. As an 'analytical category', the term Muslim must explain certain phenomena, as a 'category of practice' the term Muslim is being used in public speech. Thus: "[...] the traffic between categories of analysis and categories of practice makes it important for scholars to adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards the categories we use" (Brubaker 2013, 1).⁷

I shall come back to this issue in more detail further on. Here, it suffices to state that I in no way intend in this book to solve this epistemological puzzle and to redefine the 'anthropology of Islam'. I use the adjective 'Islamic' to denote a specific category of authority, but not as a descriptive normative term, or as an analytical concept. 'Islamic' is an attributive adjective.

Islamic authority is a human-made attribute. Something or someone is authoritative in the eyes of the beholder and has persuasive and imaginative qualities to the extent that this quality is confirmed and legitimated by others. Islamic authority therefore must be understood as a principally relational concept. There are a multitude of opinions and interpretations of what proper Islamic authority entails. To call something 'Islamic' is a human activity of authentication, of attributing truth to religious sources, persons, and things, and revolves around questions of legitimacy and truthfulness, triggered by societal, political, and other circumstances and developments.

Islamic authority is principally contested and must constantly be reconfirmed. Consequently, Islamic authority is emphatically temporal and provisional, and it is embedded in ever-evolving societal dynamics and power configurations; it can wax and wane. Even if the authoritative status of a person is part of a religious institutional power structure such as the Catholic clergy or the official ulama in some countries, their authoritative status must be acknowledged by practitioners. Established authoritative positions can never be taken for granted.

In this book, I therefore use the term 'authority-making' to indicate its processual and attributive character. Authority-making is a social practice and principally contingent on relationships and interactions in a multiplicity of ways: top-down, horizontal, and bottom-up. Thus, the main focus of this book is not Islamic authority as such, but rather the making of authority and what factors contribute to that process. It should be emphasised that the authorita-

7 For an extensive discussion of the methodological implications of the term 'Muslim' for research, see Petersen and Ackfeldt (2023).

tive status quo is, of course, not always challenged. Many Muslims accept and submit to established authorities and follow them, but in such cases, we also have to ask why.

Islamic authority is also an elusive and ambiguous public phenomenon, widely referred to in public and political debates, implicitly or explicitly. This is an important reason why I prefer to stick to the adjective 'Islamic'. To label persons, acts, practices, objects, knowledge, or events as 'Islamic' is attributive and emblematic in the sense of claims-making or appropriation. It can have programmatic, paradigmatic, and political underpinnings. The general Islamic landscape in Europe is still predominantly male-centred, particularly when it concerns issues of authority. That is where power is located and that is where 'Islamic' is normatively defined. That is also where many observers and politicians, but also researchers usually look when issues of authority and representation are concerned. In this way, they also confer Islamic authority and contribute to the status quo.

The meaning and application of Islamic authority as a category of practice thus also concerns questions of governmentality. The issue of authority in Muslim communities has received particular attention in Europe since the 1990s. The growing attention to religious matters among Muslims with a migrant background, and the related processes of institutionalisation of Islam, resulted in requests for the recognition of 'Islamic practices' by governments at national and local levels. Several Muslim communities began to organise themselves into associations that claimed to represent Islam and were eager to enter into negotiations with governmental bodies. Somewhat later, individuals and associations founded institutions for the transmission of Islamic knowledge to Muslims, including several Islamic universities. This has happened in almost all countries in Europe with a sizable Muslim population, although in different arrangements according to the national legal provisions. Initially, only established scholars in Islamic Studies were consulted; only much later did Muslims become involved (Sunier and Buskens 2022).⁸

To conclude, developments that took place in Muslim communities in Europe from the late 1960s onwards made me convinced that much of what can be observed with regard to evolving Islamic landscapes in Europe boils down

8 In the Netherlands, for example, a debate took place about permission for girls to wear a headscarf in a school in a town. Various Dutch Arabists and scholars of Islam confronted each other in pronouncing views as to whether this was an 'Islamic practice' to be accepted by the local authorities in accordance with Dutch law (see Shadid and van Koningsveld 1990). Gradually, national, and local administrative bodies started to realise that they might better primarily address internal Islamic authorities.

to questions of authority, provided we broaden the definition of what Islamic authority entails and where it is located.

This brings me to the overall question that I shall address in this book: *What are the ways in which Islamic authority manifests itself among Muslims in Europe who come from a migrant background, and what factors, contexts and circumstances determine the process of authority-making?* Subsequent questions are: (a) *what do Muslims consider to be proper and legitimate Islamic authority*, (b) *what arguments do they have for that*, and (c) *why?* I am interested in 'inner-Islamic' discussions, but I also intend to explore how these discussions are embedded in broader societal contexts, circumstances, and developments in which the 'outside world' and non-Muslims also play a role.

2 Assessing Islamic Authority

When one embarks on a project such as this, one has to dwell on the general concept of authority for a moment, but without drowning in the vast body of literature that has been published from the early 20th century onwards, and even earlier. When perusing that body of literature, and even more when including adjacent topics and concepts, one becomes aware of the richness and multifaceted character of authority. Many studies deal with power, force, and hierarchies; coercion and political authority are almost identical concepts. Frank Fuerdi (2013) argues that authority deals with questions of power but in a very broad sense and as such it is as old as humanity. Much of the work on authority deals with political matters and the question of the legitimacy of rulers. Thomas Christiano (2020) traces this back to Plato, and to John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and David Hume in the 17th and 18th centuries, but the Arab historian Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Khaldun had already explicitly and extensively addressed the legitimacy of rulers and their authority in the 14th century in his much-acclaimed treatise *Muqaddima* on the history of civilisations (Ibn Khaldun 1967 [1377]).

Many historical studies on imperial reign show that the legitimacy of rulers was bestowed by divine power. The power of the Chinese emperors and their legitimacy to reign, was considered a 'mandate of Heaven' that was granted but could also be withdrawn. Even in such cases, ruling power was conditioned by circumstances and a certain public consent (Fairbank and Reischauer 1979; Chen 2014).

Hannah Arendt (1956, 403) argued that the thinking in Europe about the legitimacy of authoritative political formations coincided with the emergence of the European totalitarian regimes in the 1920s. In Arendt's work, authority

and resistance were always twin concepts, inextricably linked with the human condition and with issues of truthfulness and morality but also with responsibility and conditioning. Richard Sennet sees authority as an almost existential matter inherent in the human condition. Sennet ([1965] 1980) was mainly concerned with the question of how people experience authority and how resistance to authority in turn constitutes new forms of authority as an ongoing process.

In her fascinating and thought-provoking essay, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in the Age of Globalisation* (1996), Saskia Sassen argues that the pace and intensity with which processes of globalisation occur have engendered among many people anxieties and feelings of the loss of control over developments in their daily lives. The essay, written over 25 years ago, reads as a comment on the current wave of conspiracy theories and the political authority crisis. Thomas Blom Hansen and Fins Stepputat (2005) explored how political sovereignty and sovereign power were reconstituted under postcolonial conditions. The contributions to their edited volume clearly show that authority in the sense of righteous rule was the prime issue.

These are only a few of the relevant studies on authority that have shaped my thoughts on the theme. In my view, they make one thing very clear: issues of authority can only be studied properly in close connection with attempts to reflect on, debunk or even unmask the prevailing authoritative status quo. Or to put it less decisively, if there is authority, there are questions about its foundations, characteristics, and legitimacy.

To analyse Islamic authority as a socio-political and anthropological phenomenon is certainly not new in the study of Islam. Dale Eickelman (1985) wrote the biography of a judge in Morocco; Richard Antoun (1989) looked at the important figure of the preacher in Jordan; Brinkley Messick (1992) studied the practices of muftis and judges in Yemen, and John Bowen (1993) focused on debates about Islamic law in Indonesia. Studies on Islamic scholars at al-Azhar University in Cairo by Malika Zeghal (1996) and by Muhammad Qasim Zaman on Pakistan and India (2002), have provided crucial insight in how authority is constituted and discussed in history.

From the early 2000s, the concepts of Islamic authority and knowledge production appeared more regularly in publications, initially as descriptive terms denoting a specific theme or field of study. Some publications dealt with Muslims in Europe. In 2006, Frank Peter concluded that the study of Islamic authority among Muslims in Europe needs more systematic assessment (see also Peter and Arigita 2006; Arigita 2006). In 2005, a workshop was organised by the Dutch International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) titled 'Muslim Religious Authority in Europe', with the aim

of understanding the rapidly transforming Islamic landscapes in Europe from the perspective of Islamic authority and knowledge production. According to the convenors, much had been published about the settlement in Europe of migrants with an Islamic background with all its legal, institutional, and political ramifications. Most of these studies, however, did not deal with doctrinal issues and religious dynamics in Muslim communities. They were considered to be topics for theology and religious studies. In many theological studies, however, Islamic authority is still predominantly a taken-for-granted theological category that apparently needs no specific attention.

A couple of years later, Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi again concluded that there had been remarkably little theoretical reflection on the actual process of knowledge production and on the (re-)making of Islamic authority among Muslims in Europe (van Bruinessen and Allievi 2011). Research on Muslims in Europe who had a migrant background was and still is dominated by the rather limited 'accommodation and integration paradigm', which casts the rooting of Islam in Europe mainly as a negotiating process between collective actors such as governments and Muslim organisations (Sunier and Buskens 2022).⁹ This lack of attention is nonetheless remarkable, since the quickly transforming European Islamic landscape provides an abundance of critical cases and situations in which authority is the pivotal issue. Radicalisation among young Muslims, the training of imams and the alleged influence on mosques by foreign agencies are obvious examples, but the position of Muslim women, or a very topical discussion in mosques about vaccination against Covid, also touch on issues of Islamic authority as legitimisation.

A number of recent studies on Salafism have addressed the issue of Islamic authority. To study Salafism without addressing questions of authority seems to be almost impossible.¹⁰ However, in the vast number of studies on religious radicalisation that have been commissioned by European governments, Islamic authority is still taken as self-evident, and is often based on a rigid typology of political Islam.

The aim of this book is to critically engage with this often taken-for-granted narrow understanding of Islamic authority. What Islamic authority entails, how the making of Islamic authority evolves and what factors account for it, is an empirical question. I intend to unpack Islamic authority and to understand

9 See e.g., Rath et al. (2001); Fetzer and Soper (2005); Maussen (2006); Bader (2007); Rosenow-Williams (2012).

10 Wiktorowicz (2006); Meijer and Bakker (2012); Becker (2013); de Koning (2013); Pall and de Koning (2017).

what Muslims consider authoritative and why. I shall analyse various modalities of Islamic authority-making and explore their constituent sources and contexts.

3 Islamic Authority-Making: Processes, Actors, and Contexts

The book consists of six chapters, based on (ethnographic) research I have conducted or supervised, from roughly the mid-1980s until recently. In each of the six chapters, a case or a set of cases is analysed as a particular modality of authority-making. Shifting the analytical focus from Islamic authority as a descriptive normative category to authority-making as a productive force and a social practice, implies that we have to explore and compare its manifold characteristics and disguises. The most efficacious way to understand how Islamic authority is being constituted is to bring to the surface the specificities, settings, aims, agendas, and motivations of the various actors involved in specific fields of activity, and to dissect the various interlocking forces at work. In addition, each of the six modalities of authority-making constitutes a specific conceptual field with concomitant problem definitions, foci, questions, theoretical perspectives, and theoretical literature, which I shall also address.

However, the book in its entirety rests on five general theoretical and methodological propositions that need to be addressed first. They are, (1) the relevance of societal, political, and technical contexts and transformations, (2) Islam as a discursive tradition, (3) the relevance of bottom-up critical reflection by Muslims, (4) the relevance of aesthetics, and of performative and other persuasive skills, and (5) the location of Islamic authority.

3.1 *Societal, Political, and Technical Contexts and Transformations*

The dynamics of authority-making are always embedded in broader societal, political, historical, and technological contexts, but these dynamics are particularly salient under conditions of change and transformation, and in new and unprecedented circumstances. They generate reflection and discussion about Islamic sources of knowledge and their application in novel situations, and they sometimes lead to critical comments and new interpretations. We may think of political, social, and cultural developments, demographic changes, new political regimes, new power configurations, new hierarchies, new epistemes, and new languages. But technological innovations, engendering new forms of religious mediation, communication, and knowledge transfer, also affect processes of Islamic authority-making.

The fundamental societal changes that took place in the wake of the colonial subjugation of large parts of the Muslim world in the 19th and 20th centuries generated a vast body of literature by predominantly Western scholars on the implications of these changes, soon to be subsumed under the common denominator 'modernisation'. The modernity paradigm became the point of reference in many of the Western studies that have hitherto been published about Islam. It generated a set of questions and propositions about the characteristics of Islam as a tradition, its dogmatic underpinnings, and its social and political parameters.

There are two rather fundamental flaws in much of this Western scholarship and in the modernity paradigm: first, the assumption that, prior to the European invasion, the so-called 'Islamic world' was pre-modern, eternally fixed by unchangeable theological dogmas and inert ulama; second, the assumption that it was the European onslaught, often depicted as the encounter with Enlightenment as a unique force in history, that in fact activated thinking about reform and change among Muslims.

However, the history of Islam was already a history of change and development long before the colonial onslaught. The vast body of scholarly work by Islamic theologians produced over centuries predominantly deals with reflection and reasoning on societal and political transformations (Zaman 2012; Ahmed 2016). However, this continuous reflection by Muslims has largely been ignored or even denied by many Western scholars of Islam.

The depiction of post-ww II migration as a transition from 'traditional' rural societies to the 'modern liberal-secular' European societies is a contemporary variant of the modernisation paradigm. According to this line of thinking, one of the consequences of the encounter of Muslims from Asia, Africa and the Middle East with Europe's secular-liberal political and public culture was that the collective and normative frames that had shaped Islam and were brought by migrants to Europe would gradually dissolve to be replaced by something new. In scholarly work that deals with the development of Islam in Europe, the organisational life of Muslims and various forms of religiosity and religious self-making, we find two dominant perspectives, both of which start from the assumption that 'traditional Islam' will dissolve and ultimately disappear to be replaced either by a form of 'Euro-Islam' that is accordance with secular European values, or by a complete individualisation of religiosity (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, 52). The individualisation thesis and the 'Euro-Islam' approach have become the yardsticks by which developments with regard to religiosity among Muslims in Europe are being assessed and understood.¹¹ According to its proponents, the complete individualisation of

11 There are many publications based on this premise; see e.g., Cherribi (2000); Tietze (2001);

religion would make authoritative guidance obsolete. Politicians follow this line of reasoning to develop their policy programmes.

The relevance of change and transformation to Islamic authority-making entails, however, more than the quest for guidance by individual Muslims. The settlement of Muslim communities in European countries and the emergence and gradual transformation of the Islamic landscape also comprised an encounter with historically formed European political cultures based on specific modalities of the relation between the state and religion. Relevant to the problematic at hand are the particular forms of governance adopted by nation-states to 'nationalise' and to 'domesticate' religion (Sunier 2014b).¹²

A crucial element of domestication politics is the religious–secular dichotomy. There is a persistent assumption that the widespread secularisation after World War II is simply the retreat of religion from all spheres of society and from the lives of individuals; a secular society, in other words, is a society without religion. But, as Talal Asad rightly argues, secularism is not simply the generic separation of religion from state and politics, nor is it the outcome of the changing place of religion in the lives of individual citizens. Secularism is a political doctrine that presupposes new notions of religion (Asad 2003, 2).¹³ A specific understanding of the secular implicates a specific understanding of the religious (see also Mahmood 2016). Religion becomes an object of political concern and entails a specific definition of the religious field (Sunier 2020).¹⁴ Sherman Jackson (2017) coins the term 'the Islamic secular' to denote a specific domain that is not necessarily connected to Islamic sources, but which is nevertheless an important field of activity by Muslims.

Despite the various ways in which European states are actively involved in the organisation of religious life, European states are still generally depicted as 'secular neutral' and as treating religious communities equally. Although it

Phalet et al. (2002); Saint-Blancat (2002); Cesari (2003; 2004; 2013); Roy (2004); Tibi (2009; 2010); Jeldtoft (2011).

12 In Chapter two I shall discuss the concept of domestication of religion in more detail.

13 Asad also points to the importance of language and translation to grasp the impact of concepts such as 'secular' and 'religious'. As he states: "The attempt to discover how sentiments/concepts/attitudes articulate discourses in and about 'the secular' and 'the religious' in our contemporary life, has been best pursued through writing; through confronting the words one writes down, listening to them, being surprised—embarrassed or pleased" (Asad 2018, 1).

14 There is, of course, much more to say about this. In the next section, where I discuss Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, I shall address the discussion taking place among anthropologists about the various ways Muslims engage with secular-liberal political and public culture. Here, I contend that the domesticated context in which Muslims live is emphatically relevant for the making of Islamic authority.

is true that Muslims, like all other religious denominations, have the constitutional freedom to practise their faith publicly, this freedom should not be confused with state neutrality, or as indicating absolutely equal treatment of all religious denominations. There is a growing body of scholarly literature in which the idea of governance as neutral administrative statecraft is rejected, especially since Foucault coined the term governmentality (Hernández Aguilar 2018; Lemke 2019).

Authority-making is particularly salient, vibrant and, not least, visible under so-called frontier conditions where new encounters, new circumstances and unprecedented developments generate new possibilities. The idea of frontier has already been used by Edmund Leach in the late 1950s in his research in Myanmar, which he described as a “border zone through which cultures interpenetrate in a dynamic manner” (Leach 1960, 50). It refers to pre-defined, pre-categorised, and pre-organised social, political, or spatial realms and situations where things are not yet under control. Frontier zones are unprecedented and without a script.

David Chidester further developed the concept of ‘frontier’ to explore politics under colonial rule in Africa. The subjugation of peoples in Africa by colonial powers generated particular forms of governmentality (Meyer 2018). Before the complete colonial control, at the time when colonial powers entered the conquered areas, there was a situation where difference was not yet defined, articulated and governed. In Chidester’s own words:

I define a frontier zone as a zone of contact, rather than a line, a border, or a boundary. By this definition, a frontier is a region of intercultural relations between intrusive and indigenous people. Those cultural relations, however, are also power relations. A frontier zone opens with the contact between two or more previously distinct societies and remains open as long as power relations are unstable and contested, with no one group or coalition able to establish dominance. (Chidester, quoted in Meyer 2018, 61)

I agree with Birgit Meyer that Chidester’s concept of frontier is also very relevant for the study of religion in contemporary Western European societies and for making sense of the religious plurality we find in European cities. In Meyer’s words: “I understand Chidester’s notion of the frontier zone as an in-between space in this sense. It is a site where differences and distances are produced, negotiated, and affirmed in the framework of identity politics” (Meyer 2018, 69). She further argues that governance of religious diversity in European global cities is the result of a “simplifying endeavour to reduce complexity” (*ibid.*, 60).

Managing diversity is cognitive control and imposing a new epistemic regime over the bewildering complexity of the frontier zone. Managing (religious) diversity is not the management of pre-existing 'objective' forms of difference; it is a policy intervention based on a specific categorisation of diversity that is deemed relevant for governance.

In his study on the development of the halal-market in London, Johan Fischer (2011) uses the concept of frontier to denote the conditions that arose when Malaysian businessmen explored the possibilities of expanding and controlling the halal market and ventured into unexplored fields of commercial enterprise. As Fischer shows, the absence of regulations, relevant knowledge and political decision-making creates a situation of great opportunities.

As I shall explain in Chapter 1, the notion of frontier is particularly relevant in analysis of the early stages of Muslim migration to Europe and the emergence of so-called religious brokers in the late 1970s and 1980s, who were active among the first generation Muslim migrants. The idea of frontier also ties in with my understanding of religious domestication. The 1980s were the formative years of the forms of governmentality of religious difference that we can observe across Europe.

In addition to this governance-related understanding of frontier, I shall argue in this book that the notion of frontier as an 'in-between-zone' applies to any societal, political, or technological transformation, as it generates unstructured realms, where conditions are unsettled, messy, 'pre-legalised', formative and productive, creating unexpected possibilities that allow for 'imaginative practices' (Appadurai 1996, 31; see also Bhabha 1994).

It is commonly assumed that the emergence of modern mass media, especially the spread of the internet, has unsettled established forms of authority and 'democratised' religious communities, but the picture with regard to the implications of digital technology is, not very surprisingly, more complicated than that.¹⁵ Since the beginning of this century, a growing body of literature is emerging that addresses the impact of digital technology on Islam.¹⁶

15 Heidi Campbell and Giulia Evolvi (2020) provide an overview of the study of religion in the digital era. They also address the impact of digitisation on religious authority and argue that these new technologies of mediation may unsettle established forms of authority and create novel forms, but digitisation may also confirm the status quo in religious communities. See also Meyer (2011); Cheong (2015); Hoover (2016).

16 See e.g., van Bruinessen (2003); Eickelman and Anderson (2003); Salvatore (2004; 2006; 2007); Meyer and Moors (2006); Mandaville (2007); de Koning (2008); Masud et al. (2009); Becker (2010); Caeiro (2010); Piela (2012; 2017); Wheeler (2014); Evolvi (2017); Aydın et al. (2021); Ali (2022). All these authors implicitly or explicitly point to the contentious and provisional nature of Islamic authority. Modern mass media have thrown this temporality into sharp relief.

Against the background of the quest for religious guidance, modern mass media have made possible a tremendous increase in the number of voices in the public sphere and a diversification of audiences. This process has sometimes been referred to as the fragmentation of authority and knowledge production. Both established religious authorities and European governments have often expressed their worries about this fragmentation—that it would result in a loss of control, especially among young Muslims, who make extensive use of digital means and social media. This may be understandable from their perspective, but fragmentation does not make authority obsolete; it increases and sustains competition and thereby also increases the debates about what makes Islam work.

However, while the rapid increase in new forms of knowledge production and dissemination, the individual search for knowledge by Muslims in the wake of fundamental societal transformation, and the emergence of new technologies such as the internet and social media, may have contributed to the increase in claims to authority and the multiplication of knowledge production, this does not necessarily mean that the quest for guidance has faded or become irrelevant (Hoover 2016). On the contrary, the sheer overkill of knowledge platforms, chat and discussion sites, websites and self-appointed religious experts often causes ‘information stress’. This has made the need for spiritual guidance and the quest for truth felt stronger than ever before, but it has also made Islamic authority a contested issue more than ever before. Many studies that were published roughly from the mid-2000s onwards were premised on these insights.¹⁷

3.2 *Islam as a Discursive Tradition*

From the early stages of migration onwards, Muslims reflected on how to be Muslim under often entirely new circumstances (Abaaziz 2021). The introduction of social media and new centres of knowledge production may have given this quest a different approach, but reflection on the meaning of the central Islamic sources of knowledge, notably the Qur’an and Sunna, in new circumstances has been common practice from early on. Even though these sources constitute the prime guide and frame of reference for Muslims, they are often

17 See for example, Soares (2005); Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006); Schulz (2006); Boender (2007); Hefner and Zaman (2007); Volpi and Turner (2007); Bunt (2009); Gräf and Skovgaard-Petersen (2009); Masud et al. (2009); van Bruinessen and Allievi (2011); Caeiro (2011); Fischer (2011); Bano and Kalmbach (2012); Kloos (2013; 2019); Fibiger (2015); Kloos and Künkler (2016); Walker (2017); Bano (2018a; 2018b); Noor (2018); Hashas et al. (2018); Corboz (2019).

subject to heated debates and diverse interpretations. Also, leadership and the question of ‘who speaks for Islam’ and on what authoritative grounds, is subject of debate. This implies that we must broaden our analytical scope and develop an approach to authority that casts the dynamic relation between religious knowledge (production) and the theological custodians of that knowledge in a more comprehensive social and political discursive field of forces (Krämer and Schmidtke 2014). This implies interaction between people and the building of discursive communities and audiences.

George Husinger (1961) has reminded us that a theological statement becomes a theological discourse only when applied in concrete situations and contexts. Religious texts are mute unless they have an audience and are being applied and interpreted by actors. Religious authority and knowledge production are the result of what Michael Lambek (1990, 28) calls a “political economy of knowledge”: “How are we to characterize the order to which people submit? Where is the locus of power?” As Masooda Bano (2018, 31) argues, a discussion about Islamic authority is a discussion about the status of religious knowledge and the institutions that produce that knowledge, the “Islamic authority platforms”. Scholarly knowledge remains lofty and aloof if scholars are not able to engage with the realities of the time. Alexandre Caeiro (2010; 2011) has analysed theological work on Islamic law, particularly the production of fatwas focusing on Muslims living in a minority situation.

Talal Asad’s notion of Islam as a ‘discursive tradition’ is particularly relevant for my approach to Islamic authority. A religious tradition, he argues, has an authoritative status and it operates as an ethical guideline, not because it has timeless qualities, but because it has come about as a result of a historical process of authentication of Islamic sources.

A discursive tradition, according to Asad, is a dynamic process of both confirmation and critical reflection, of continuity and of renewal. If a discursive tradition is created by generations of Muslims debating the correct form of practice with a view to its past, present, and future, then acting Islamic is engaging with certain sources and themes and acting upon this discursive tradition. Religion and power are closely connected but: “[...] in the sense in which power constructs religious ideology, establishes the preconditions for distinctive kinds of religious personality, authorises specifiable religious practices and utterances, produces religiously defined knowledge” (Asad 1983, 237). As Asad states:

[An] Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Clearly, not

everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition. Nor is an Islamic tradition in this sense necessarily imitative of what was done in the past. (2012 [1986], 15)

There are good historical studies about Islamic authority that show the entanglement of theological reasoning and social engagement (see e.g., Kateman 2016). In his insightful historical analysis of the ulama in the Indian subcontinent, Muhammad Qasim Zaman has convincingly demonstrated that a focus on exclusively theological sources runs the risk of freezing 'tradition' into an unchangeable body of knowledge that would speak for itself. His argument ties in with Asad's notion of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' and he argues: "[...] it is the recurrent effort by Muslims to articulate authority and evaluate claims to such authority by positing and reaffirming a connectedness to the past" (Zaman 2002, 4; see also Ahmed 2016).¹⁸

The complex relationship between Islamic normative frames and traditions on the one hand, and the continuous (sometimes critical) engagement of Muslims with this tradition has been addressed by various scholars. Thus, according to Frederic Volpi and Bryan Turner:

[...] Muslim social and political actors around the world today are working hard to establish how, where when and why claims to authority expressed in an Islamic idiom do matter for the reorganisation of a global (Muslim) community in the 21st century. Thus, to talk about 'making Islamic authority matter' is to consider the social practices and processes that underpin or embody these claims to authority in a given political or social order. (Volpi and Turner 2007, 1)

John Bowen argues that contemporary approaches in the study of Islam must:

[...] start by taking seriously the idea that Islam is best seen as a set of interpretative resources and practices. The sense that Muslims participate in a long-term and worldwide tradition is grounded in certain resources viz. scriptures, ideas, and methods. The practices of worshiping, judging, and struggling that stem therefrom, result in a capacity to adapt, challenge, and diversify. So far so good but specific to what I am calling a 'new anthropology of Islam' is the insistence that the analysis

18 For a very informative historical anthropological analysis of religious authority in Christianity, see Feldt and Bremmer (2019).

begins with individuals' efforts to grapple with those resources and shape those practices in meaningful ways. (Bowen 2012, 3)

Several authors have criticised Asad's concept of discursive tradition, as it would not only be grounded in binaries such as Western/non-Western, secular/religious, but would also suggest that there is an 'internal' and 'external' sphere, the former pertaining to Islam and Muslims, the latter pertaining to everything outside that realm. Sindre Bangstad argues that Asad's concept of discursive tradition is ultimately about (Islamic) continuity. Asad would not sufficiently take into account how Muslim agency is linked to change and rupture (Bangstad 2009, 197). According to Bangstad:

An anthropology of the secular as a vernacular practice has to explore and understand the concepts and practices of secularism and the secular that these Muslims bring to the table—whether these concepts are based on notions of convergence or incommensurability between what is defined as 'Islamic', the secular and secularism. (ibid., 201)

Frank Peter (2006, 110) argues that Asad's concept of discursive tradition does not provide insights into how this is related to Islamic authority. Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec (2012, 6) argue that the concept of discursive tradition offers only a partial solution to the problem of how to connect the 'grand schemes' of Islamic traditions to the ambiguities that Muslims encounter in everyday life. Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osella (2009, 11) also argue that an overemphasis on Islamic traditions as the prime point of reference for Muslims ignores the fact that everyday religiosity is as much about moral self-improvement as about ambiguities, failures and incoherences that have to be addressed (see also Beeker and Kloos 2018). They use the term "Islam mondain" to denote the ways of being Muslim in secularising societies and spheres. "Muslims are making efforts to produce themselves as modern religious subjects within contexts of considerable political and economic uncertainty, as well as increased global interconnections" (Soares and Osella 2009, 11).

Although I fully agree with taking into consideration the fact that Muslims are not involved in pious activity 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and that the surrounding society sometimes poses a challenge to being a good Muslim, I do not see why this would make Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition less useful for analysing ways of being Muslim. Also, the rather tacit depiction of European societies as 'secular' is, in my view, no solution to this otherwise fundamental issue. Elsewhere I have argued that the very process of ethical

deliberation around failure, ambiguity and incoherence is not only constitutive of moral self-improvement but may also lead to discussions about the deeper meaning of Islamic principles (Sunier 2018b).

Many contemporary young Muslims' practices and initiatives involve reflection on the meaning of Islamic sources in novel ways but with reference to the past.¹⁹ Younger generations have become more involved in society as a result of upward mobility and better education, which also leads to greater religious literacy (cf. Melloni and Cadeddu 2019). This has intensified their engagement with all facets of society; however, it has also made them aware of mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, and racism with which they are confronted. This has shaped their experiences and generated reflections and discussions about what being Muslim entails, leading to a quest for religious guidance and a better understanding of Islam as an identity.

Schirin Amir-Moazami and Armando Salvatore argue that scholars who regard religion as ultimately an individual pursuit or a claim that the only viable future for Islam is to abandon traditions and embark on a completely new 'Europeanised' route, ignore the "potential of transformation and reform that originates from within Muslim traditions" (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, 53). They contend that many of Asad's critics mis-conceptualise tradition as an abstract compelling normative frame of reference. Instead, Amir-Moazami and Salvatore argue that, for Muslims, tradition plays a prominent part in their motivation to comment on and indeed reform this tradition. They refer to this engagement as 'internal interventions', which are sustained by an inherent search for coherence (*ibid.*, 55).²⁰

The relevance of Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition for processes of Islamic authority-making lies in its referential qualities. In many of the cases I address in this book, this tradition is the principal issue, the frame of reference around which discussion and reflection evolve. Rather than lofty theological reflections and comments, the input of Muslims who tap into their everyday experiences is crucial here. This brings me to the next proposition.

19 See e.g., Bracke (2008); Moors (2009); Beekers (2015); Noor (2018); Abaaziz (2021).

20 In a personal conversation I had with Abdulwahid van Bommel, a well-known Islamic theologian in the Netherlands, he pointed to the distinction between scriptural authority and religious authority. The first refers to the status of the principal sources of Islam, whereas the latter is closely connected to ways of communication between God and human beings. This requires a specific ability to understand the broader implications of sources such as the Qur'an (see also van Bommel 2005).

3.3 *Bottom-up Critical Reflection by Muslims*

If we assume that authority-making is contextual, it follows that religious reasoning cannot be separated from social critique by Muslims in everyday situations. There are many situations, especially in circumstances of societal change, in which Muslims engage with prevailing authoritative structures and prescriptions and (sometimes critical) reflection is taking place and has already taken place for a longer period than is often assumed. As indicated above, from the very beginning of their arrival in Europe, Muslims reflected on how to be a good Muslim in new circumstances. When subsequent generations became more involved in society, it led to a change in these reflections. This resulted, among other things, in an increasingly critical engagement with the established religious landscape.

Although the critical engagement with established Islamic normative frames by young Muslims is a clear sign of their integration into society, there seems to be a strange contradiction in the way society and politics perceive this development. On the one hand, governments express concerns about the established organisational landscape among Muslims on grounds that it would inhibit integration into the host society but, on the other, there are even more worries about young Muslims and their quest for new religious experiences. In that regard, governments seek cooperation with established authorities to keep critical young Muslims at bay. At the many public iftars that are organised around the end of Ramadan in the Netherlands, we can observe how this works. Established Muslim organisations that organise an iftar always manage to invite prominent members of the government to deliver a speech. Smaller iftars, organised by other, more critical organisations, manage at most to get someone from the opposition to attend their meeting (Sunier 2022).

In connection with this, there is a general tendency to regard the role of religious professionals as decisive in the making of Islamic authority and to discount the voices of 'ordinary Muslims', or to locate their statements and reflections outside the theological domain, and thus as having minimal relevance for authoritative decisions. In many studies that deal with doctrinal issues, the established institutional settings and scholars are still often the principal focus for research.

I use the adjective 'ordinary', although I admit that there are some semantic problems with the term. In the current securitisation discourse on Islam and Muslims and the suspicion in which new preachers and 'radical' movements are held, the term 'ordinary' is sometimes used to denote the 'average' Muslim, belonging to the 'silent majority', who corresponds to the desired image of the decent, law-abiding citizen. I use 'ordinary' generically to refer to Muslims who are not religious professionals, and to their quotidian activities, practices, ideas,

and experiences.²¹ To replace ‘ordinary’ with ‘lay’ is only a partial solution as religious professionals are also ‘ordinary’ Muslims. Furthermore, the distinction between ‘expert’ and ‘non-expert’ will not do. I use the term ‘expert’ as a term with attributive connotations. Muslims who do not have a solid knowledge of Islamic sources may still call themselves experts. And young Muslims who criticise imams for their lack of knowledge and experience in society are ‘experiential experts’ after all. In short, I shall use the term ‘ordinary’ but with these important considerations in mind.

As Maruta Herding (2013) rightly states, the various manifestations of Muslims youth cultures that we can observe in various European countries, will no doubt contribute to the shaping of Islam’s future in Europe. When we take seriously the role of ‘ordinary’ Muslims in the making of religious authority, two adjacent concepts need further attention: ‘everyday Islam’, and the so-called ‘ethical turn’. ‘Everyday Islam’, and ‘lived Islam’, are concepts related to the scholarly field in the study of religion that takes ‘everyday religion’ as the core concept, addressing the bottom-up experiences and religious practices of people of faith. The concept of ‘lived religion’ goes back to the 1980s and draws on the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), who developed a notion of the everyday as the domain where people confront the order and discipline of powerful institutions. In general, he defines the everyday as ways of operating and a particular set of practices (ibid., xiv). Relevant for my approach is his depiction of everyday practices as “cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolised [...]” (ibid., xvii).

The idea of everyday religion has been addressed extensively.²² With regard to Islam, we come across the everyday in some literature as a generic reference to ‘Muslim practices’, the things Muslims do as Muslims, which is juxtaposed to ‘official Islam’. In that regard, it is often a modern variant of the old distinction between ‘folk Islam’ (Islam of the people) and ‘orthodox Islam’ (Islam of the Book). The edited volume by Nathal Dessing et al. (2013) provides a more sophisticated understanding of the concept (see also Jeldtoft 2011). Mohammed Bamyeh (2019) focuses on the ‘pragmatics’ of Islam as the particular ways Muslims come to terms with and refer to Islam as a guiding principle for their everyday life.

There are roughly two different but overlapping lines of inquiry to be discerned with regard to what ‘lived Islam’ entails. One builds on de Certeau’s

21 In anthropological studies on ethics and morality, ‘ordinary’ is often used to distinguish philosophical and normative understandings of ethics from those that refer to everyday ethical dilemmas (see e.g., Lambek 2010).

22 See e.g., Hall (1997); Ammerman (2007); McGuire (2008); Vollebergh (2016).

notion of resistance and engagement (see e.g., Mahmood 2005; Bracke 2008; Göle 2017). Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec (2012) point to the ambiguity and unpredictability of everyday situations in which Muslims find themselves, and the confrontations they sometime have with non-Muslims. For Muslims, and for every human being for that matter, life consists of periods of relative stability and continuity, alternating with periods of change, development, and uncertainty. When unprecedented situations occur, particularly when they are difficult to reconcile with established traditions, frictions and ambiguities occur, and ordinary routines become dilemmas. There are many situations, especially in circumstances of societal change, in which ordinary Muslims engage with prevailing authoritative structures and prescriptions. In most instances and situations, Muslims comply with these normative and authoritative frames. However, when Muslims encounter changing or novel social conditions, their wish to live pious lives in accordance with established traditions may lead to frictions, ambiguities and dilemmas that manifest themselves in intense debates about 'how to live as a good Muslim'.

Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando question the assumptions that undergird the framing of certain phenomena as 'everyday/ordinary.' As they argue:

[...] this concept and its use in the anthropology of Islam seems to emphasise one side of the paradigmatic agency/power and unity/diversity debates within anthropology, reiterating human creativity against the weight of norms and highlighting the universally shared conditions of the human subject. (Fadil and Fernando 2015, 61)

By privileging 'everyday Islam' and framing it as the site where the faithful express his/her ambivalence toward orthodoxy, scholars not only exclude 'orthodox' Muslims, but also ignore the continuous interaction between norm and reflection.

The other line of inquiry focuses more on the ethical implications of individual reflection on dilemmas and ambiguities that Muslims encounter in everyday situations, and the acts of ethical improvement that often come with it. As Michael Lambek (2010, 7) argues, ethical reflection occurs at the: "conjunction or movement between explicit local pronouncements and implicit local practices and circumstances". And they occur in circumstances where ordinary situations and routine choices are problematised. Jarrett Zigon (2007, 137) calls this "an ethical moment". Ordinary ethics become explicit in situations where breaches are experienced, where decisions are contested, or where an elite is making attempts to rationalise and canonise ethics (Lambek 2010, 2).

The increasing attention to practices of moral self-improvement in anthropological studies has been referred to as the ‘ethical turn’ (Mattingly and Throop 2018). It has generated an intriguing discussion about the balance between morality as a truth regime and individual human agency (Fassin 2012). Cheryl Mattingly points to a paradox inherent in the relation between human agency as the capacity to scrutinise critically, and the social embeddedness of morals. She argues:

Thus, the recent discussion in this ethical turn raises a key dilemma. If one wants to reject, or at least problematize, modernity’s primary moral stances and its universalisms and continue to attend to local moralities but complicate an ‘unfreedom’ position, where might one turn, theoretically? Is there a conceptual direction that provides a starting point for attending to moralities as contextualized, as constituted by local and traditional practices, but also one that recognizes possibilities for moral scrutiny, reflection, and choice in cultivation of a moral self? Even, perhaps, for critique of the morally normative? (Mattingly 2012, 162)²³

The self-cultivation paradigm does indeed focus on the relationship between religious experience and the active choice of the disciplined (or undisciplined) subject. The strong emphasis on individual ethical self-improvement and subjectivation, however, runs the risk of neglecting normative frames and power dynamics. The widely held assumption that the growth of modern mass media has privatised religious practice and made religious authority obsolete altogether has resulted in a rather paradoxical argument that contemporary religious experience is an individual process. This is questionable and hardly substantiated by empirical evidence. As indicated above, modern mass media have transformed and relocated authority and thus reshaped the religious landscape, but this does not imply that authority and the quest for authority and guidance among Muslims disappears. On the contrary, the ambiguities of everyday life and the dilemmas contemporary Muslims experience, in combination with the multiplication of voices and the tremendous increase of the dissemination of religious knowledge caused by modern digital media, have made the quest for religious guidance all the more pressing.

23 Cheryl Mattingly and Jason Throop (2018) argue, in a very informative overview of the anthropology of ethics, that ethics is a vastly expanding field of anthropological enquiry to be distinguished from the classical philosophical approach to issues of ethical and moral reflection.

Individual reflection on everyday dilemmas and ambiguities by Muslims is essentially about ethics and issues of morality. They may remain individual reflections but, in many cases, they turn into debates and initiatives, and become conducive to a process of authentication of religious authority. To understand this, we have to focus on how Muslims articulate and signify ethics and how this leads to discussions about Islamic authority (Sunier 2018b). The backlash following the rise to prominence of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in the course of 2014, and the subsequent departure of many young Muslims from Europe to join its ranks, is a good example. These developments caused serious distress, especially among many young Muslims. All of a sudden, they began to be questioned by peers, colleagues, neighbours, fellow students, and teachers on their Islamic background and whether they would still adhere to 'such a horrible religion'. Also, fierce debates broke out among Muslims about the 'right' Islam, about ethical issues and about loyalty. Muslims who did not have a thorough knowledge of the relevant sources were tested and forced to take part in debates and to make choices. For many, these traumatic events have taken their toll and they still struggle with how to cope with the situation.

However, in less dramatic situations and based on their experiences, Muslims may well conclude that authoritative scripts are no longer self-evident, particularly if one shares these experiences with others, a process that has been altered tremendously by the use of modern media. Interventions by ordinary Muslims may have become more salient and overt in the digital era. Islamic authority-making is a constant dynamic, and it is not only an imposition of normative frames upon ordinary believers, but also a bottom-up critical reflection on these authoritative frames. Grace Davie (2006, 274) uses the word 'expert religion' to denote a specific domain of activity and reasoning, to be distinguished from the no less important religious activities of non-experts.

As I have argued, I prefer to use the term 'professional' rather than 'expert', as many Muslims who criticise established religious professionals also regard themselves as experts. Davie's argument is nonetheless well-taken. Authority-making is an ongoing process of legitimation and authentication, and it is based on the premise that theologies are not made exclusively in an official location by religious professionals, but at a multiplicity of places and on numerous occasions. Linda Woodhead (2013, 16) brings to the fore the distinction between "strategic religion" as the religion of experts and scholarly authorities who are "constantly engaged in operations to delimit and guard its sacred spaces", and "tactical religion" as a domain of reflection, ambiguity, creativity, and innovation. Both domains are in constant interaction and negotiation with one another. They are context-specific sites where religious knowledge is

made authoritative and where contestation deals with specific topics and takes on specific forms, but any authoritative judgement is the result of reflections, including those of ordinary Muslims, and debates about pressing issues. Different experiences lead to different interpretations of the same normative frames.

In many situations Muslims comply with normative rules and the authoritative status quo. However, truth claims made by established ulama, and also by new self-appointed religious experts, are also often subject to critique. Fatwas and theological interpretations are disputed, and critical reflection may generate inventiveness and renewal (see e.g., Bano and Kalmbach 2012; Hefner 2016; Ahmed 2016).

In short, 'ordinary' Muslims often have a pivotal role, and this unfolds roughly in two ways, as a critical quest for a reinterpretation of sources in order to come to terms with novel situations and dilemmas, or as a form of 'shopping' in the plethora of online and offline interpretations of sources to find something that fits a preferred lifestyle. Whatever form this takes on, it makes the argument that we should study religious authority-making not as a lofty discussion of religious elites, but as a socially embedded practice, all the more plausible. This requires specific skills on the part of all actors involved, which brings me to my next proposition.

3.4 *The Relevance of Aesthetics, and of Performative and Other Persuasive Skills*

In almost all the cases addressed in this book, performative and aesthetic forms and practices are vital elements. Authority is the capacity to convince, to motivate and to persuade people to act in a certain way, and to inculcate certain dispositions. In order to analyse this, performance and aesthetics are indispensable prerequisites that give authority-making its interactive character. David Morgan (2012) argues that interaction with images (and other material forms of beholding) is always and by definition multilateral, relational and dialogical. Aesthetic forms as essential elements in authority-making give this process its interactive qualities. But aesthetic and performative dimensions of authority-making also emphasise the importance of presence and immediacy (see e.g., Baffelli and Caple 2019).

If we want to understand how an imam in a local mosque delivers the Friday sermon (*khutba*) for example and how he relates to his audience, we have to look at the extent to which such a person is able to develop an attentive and receptive audience that considers the imam persuasive enough to listen to. This is not self-evidently related to the content of the sermon alone, but also depends on how that content is communicated and connected to the audience's experiences. As Michael Warner argues:

[...] a concrete audience [is] a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer on stage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. (Warner 2002, 50)

The speeches and sermons delivered by the American Muslim preacher Khalid Yasin are a good example of the ability to connect to an audience and draw them into a moral universe. In Europe, many young Muslims of Moroccan background attend his lectures. In one of these lectures, Yasin, in his witty and slightly ironic style, opens with a description of a day in a McDonald fast-food restaurant, no doubt frequented many times by the majority of his audience. By referring to the ways in which McDonald lures potential customers, including those with little money to spend, he connects to the life world of his audience. But even more importantly, Yasin, who is an African-American convert who grew up in a poor family in the Bronx, also connects to his audience by stressing that he is 'one of them' and that he is familiar with their experiences because he has had similar experiences. Connection and shared experience are crucial components in the way Yasin increases his legitimacy and his persuasive qualities as a religious person and builds his authoritative position.

The Swiss Muslim philosopher Tariq Ramadan, who is well-known for his publications and lectures about Islam and secularism and Muslims in Europe, attracts a large audience from among highly educated young European Muslims. His performative style is reminiscent of many public philosophers and his speeches and lectures are a combination of academic reflection and envisioning futures that would provide his audience with discursive skills and means to live as Muslims in Europe. He is also famous in Muslim majority countries. In lectures for a young Muslims audience in Morocco, for example, he emphasises the authenticity of their life worlds between established religious institutions and elites on the one hand, and francophone secular elites on the other. By pointing to the categories superimposed by the former colonial power, he provides these youngsters with an alternative perspective about their future lives (van de Bovenkamp 2017). Persuasion and legitimacy are essential elements in authority-making, and aesthetic and performative forms, skills, styles, and environments are crucial prerequisites in making persons, texts, material objects, institutional arrangements, and events authoritative and legitimate. As I shall show, especially in Chapter 4, aesthetics are also crucial prerequisites for various 'alternative' forms of authority-making.

The notion of authority-making as a relational and interactive process dates back to Antiquity, notably to the Aristotelian idea of excellence and virtue

(Müller 2018; see also Del Soldato 2020). It was also central in the writings of Max Weber, who explored the impact of societal modernisation and structural change on political processes. Weber distinguished three types of authority: traditional, bureaucratic, and charismatic, of which the last was based on emotional and devotional imagination. Rational, or bureaucratic authority refers to the legal domain of rules and governance; traditional authority refers to the domain of established (religious) positions: “[...] obedience is owed to the person of the chief who occupies the traditionally sanctioned position” (Weber in Eisenstadt 1968, 46).

Weber’s observation that charismatic authority emerges outside the realm of institutionalised and bureaucratic order and in situations of rapid change is also relevant in unpacking authority-making. Weber considered charismatic authority the most interesting because it provides the best starting point to study societal change, and he made three important observations. First, unlike the other two types of authority, charisma rests on the capacity to convince and to motivate without the use of force, or normative or bureaucratic power (Riesebrodt 1999). Second, charisma, more than bureaucratic and traditional authority, depends to a large extent on collective recognition. Charismatic figures have followers. Without that they simply do not exist. Third, Weber argued that societal modernisation rests on processes of bureaucratic routinisation. Charismatic figures emerge, according to Weber, in situations of rapid change, often as disruptive forces (Weber 1930). In addition, charisma is difficult, if not impossible to predict. There are circumstances in which charismatic figures may emerge beneficially, but when and how cannot be determined.²⁴ I consider these insights helpful in understanding the circumstances and conditions in which Islamic authority is produced.

For the making of religious authority, technologies of mediation are indispensable (Engelke 2004; Eisenlohr 2011). The performative and persuasive qualities of religious figures, bodies of religious knowledge and religious objects, as particular modes of mediation, are as important as the very messages that are being mediated.

The emergence of modern digitised mass media has made persuasive and performative qualities even more timely and close at hand. In contemporary media-saturated societies, leaders and spokespersons increasingly need to respond to the forms of auratic and charismatic power found in the mass

24 There is an abundance of books and websites on management with suggestions and strategies for how ‘to enhance your charisma’, most of which have little or nothing to do with Weber’s understanding of charisma.

media.²⁵ Through public performances and modern media, knowledge is disseminated, and communities and audiences are created in an unprecedented way. The authority on which religious public figures thrive has important aesthetic dimensions: their multisensory appeal—in media and performances—often plays a vital role in persuading people of religious truths and linking religious forms, knowledge, and followers. Followers are being captured on the basis of strong public presence and persuasive and convincing rhetoric, performance, and imagery. When old and established categories of authority erode, the capacity to disseminate specific understandings of religious practices and beliefs becomes increasingly based upon rhetoric, performance, and visual events (de Witte, de Koning, and Sunier 2015).²⁶

As a consequence, traditional institutional settings of religious learning are complemented and increasingly challenged by rival and alternative articulations of belief and practice that are addressing new publics mainly among young Muslims in urban centres. The status of their proponents as religious scholars is partly shaped by their public appearance. As a reaction to these developments, established centres of religious learning have extended their digital outreach (Bano 2018b). New forms of religious mediation attract and constitute new audiences, but these audiences consist of relatively unstable overlapping constituencies that have no institutional ties to leaders.²⁷ At the same time, digital technologies provide new environments in which religious knowledge is conveyed with new possibilities. As Gary Bunt argues:

[...] This electronic authority can influence political networking and activism by mobilising the immediacy of the internet to promote specific worldviews and agendas. [...] The utilisation of colloquial language and a recognition of specific identities (for example based on region, age group, social class, political perspectives, or religious identity) mean that nuanced interfaces have developed in order to reach out to specific audiences perhaps unserved by conventional expressions of Islam. (Bunt 2018, 65)

25 See e.g., Schulz (2006); Turner (2007); de Witte (2008); Hoover (2016).

26 Birgit Meyer (2016, 10) draws on Robert Marett's concept of 'awe' to capture the 'wow' effect in religious mediation: "[...] that is generated in the interplay between the material world and bodily sensations and explore its role in the politics and aesthetics of religious world-making".

27 In her research on charismatic Pentecostal preachers in Ghana, Marleen de Witte (2008) shows how these figures are more than public theologians delivering sermons and have become religious celebrities.

In the complexities of modern urban life in which the majority of young Muslims live, prominence, legitimacy and indeed authority are fugacious qualities, which require specific competences in order to address and persuade these new audiences.

Many studies on contemporary religious authority-making, especially in relation to modern digital media, point to the performative shift that can be observed in the ways religious leaders communicate their message. Contemporary religious leaders are preachers and at the same time they are opinion leaders, public figures who act in certain situations and events. Sometimes they emerge from within the ranks of established organisations and, while becoming publicly known, they tend to detach from their original organisational bedrock and become free-floating public figures. Some are only known in a relatively limited public realm, or they emerge and disappear after a short while. They deliver speeches, appear in the media to comment on events and, in some cases, they have become the centre of new devotional practices and beliefs. Sometimes they act from a great distance and count more as a source of inspiration than as a tangible figure in situ. Sometimes these figures are genuine celebrities who owe their public role and popularity to modern mass media. They have supporters and fans who attend their lectures and public performances, and they exercise persuasive qualities (see Schulz 2006; de Witte, de Koning, and Sunier 2015).

Two important remarks should be added here. First, authority in the digital age is more complex and sophisticated than how many 'likes' one receives on Facebook, how many followers one has on X (Twitter), or how many participants a YouTube channel has. There is still a tendency to confine research on digital media to algorithmic calculations. Proper research into these media necessitates a methodology that considers online and offline practices as dimensions of the same mechanisms (Becker 2013). Second, research into the emergence and growth of digital media still demonstrates a rather one-sided assumption that digitisation is liberating, democratising and inclusive and engenders new possibilities and better access to sources and resources. There is an abundance of research that shows how digitisation also produces new forms of conditioning, monitoring, disciplining and even coercion.

3.5 *The Location of Islamic Authority*

Where to find Islamic authority? This is more than a trivial practical question; it is a fundamental epistemological, methodological, and sometimes even deeply political matter. As I have argued, the making of Islamic authority is a dynamic process that manifests itself in different shapes and modes, and entails different requirements, depending on the context and circumstances.

If Islamic authority rests on a broader foundation than the scriptural proficiency of (male) religious scholars and is more than a qualification attributed to certain individuals, then authority-making has to be explored in sometimes unexpected settings and situations and not only in the obvious places.

Not only is this good advice for researchers, but it also touches on the crucial question of what we mean by Islamic authority. The question arises of whether our conceptual tools are adequate and whether we do not run the risk of ignoring crucial developments, because we unreflectively take over definitions, frames, and implicit assumptions about what and how we investigate. To 'look in the right places' is indeed an essential requirement and the question of where to find authority should even prompt us to reconsider that very concept. Without engaging too deeply with this fascinating and rich debate, let me briefly reflect on my own research methodology when I was doing research for my dissertation, and the issues I bluntly overlooked in my research.

In Chapter 1, I address the role of so-called 'religious brokers' as they emerged in the 1980s. In my doctoral research in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were manifest on several occasions and situations and I wrote about them, albeit implicitly (see Sunier 1996). I did not explicitly address the question of the factors on which their influential position was based. Many readers would probably not notice this in my dissertation but, as I said before, when rereading my files and data (all on paper and cassettes and in shoeboxes), I discovered intriguing situations involving my interlocutors and statements made by them that I would now classify as processes of authority-making. The role of women was also one of my blind spots. Although women were certainly not at the forefront of negotiations with the municipality and did not have central positions in mosque organisation, they contributed significantly to the negotiations about issues of religious accommodation and community-building.

This bears on the dominant epistemological assumptions behind research aims and questions. Female Islamic authority often resides elsewhere than in commonsensical locations, and precisely for that reason it is often ignored. In his work on female religious scholars in Indonesia and Malaysia, David Kloos poses the question "where to find Islamic authority and are we looking at the right places?" As he states:

[...] the literature does seem to take for granted that female Islamic authority is something unique or remarkable, and yet it can be useful to know in what kind of situations, settings, and contexts, or under what circumstances or conditions, gender is—and is not—a salient factor in the lives and activities of female religious leaders. When does gender become an 'issue', something that creates constraints, opportunities or determin-

ation and therefore needs to be ‘taken into account’? When does it not? (2016, 535; see also Kloos 2019)

Gender in questions of Islamic authority is particularly salient because, until recently, the role of women in the making of Islamic authority was generally ignored or marginalised in academic writings. We should not only look for female agency in such matters, but also ask the fundamental question as to what we mean by Islamic authority, and whether or not we just look at instances where women do what men are normally and normatively supposed to do: leading a prayer, managing a mosque, advising Muslims in religious matters.

As Jeanette Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami (2006) argue, the role of women in the production of knowledge and in issues of religious authority is hardly addressed. They point to the intricate connection between authority and knowledge production and argue on the basis of research in Germany and France that this connection prompts us to divert from the dominant notion of authority as (male) leadership to a more sophisticated understanding of the various dimensions of authority, and to include other social and cultural fields.

Since 2006, when they published their findings, the situation has not changed very significantly. In most studies that deal with Islamic authority, the centrality and prominence of male figures is still taken as self-evident, and often not even questioned. Female Islamic authority, particularly in situations where female agency is important, is often hard to find, or downright ignored as irrelevant.²⁸ In her seminal study *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), Leila Ahmed argues that calls by many contemporary Islamic thinkers and ideologists to authenticate Islam by restoring the ‘past’, the ‘original’, reflect the Western dominant view that women in Islam are victims. Ahmed (1992, 237) calls for a genuine reflection on Islamic sources in relation to contemporary society and contemporary challenges. This is what Amina Wadud (2006) has also persistently argued.

The neglect of female perspectives and practices in much of the academic literature on Islam is not only a matter of academic ignorance and lack of interest, but also a problem of perspective and ‘looking in the right place’. In a fascinating study on women in medieval Europe, Janina Ramirez (2022) asks why women of that era were written out of history. That they were invisible in

28 There are some rare early exceptions. In 1985, Valerie Hoffman painted an intriguing picture of a female activist in Egypt and in 2001, Miriam Cook published *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, in which she shows how female authors and novelists in the Middle East used Islam in their writings as a means of empowerment.

historical accounts is commonly known but, by addressing the question of why this was the case, Ramirez provides a fresh and intriguing picture of women's agency. By acting in different social, economic, and political fields, they also managed to play a part in male-dominated environments and power structures.

Only recently, a number of thorough studies on female Islamic authority have been published that deal with Islam in Europe. These studies, however diverse in scope, approach and research focus, all build in one way or another on Ahmed's propositions, in that they show that the perspective of women, rather than being a struggle with male counterparts, ventures into alternative social fields, addressing other issues than those commonly addressed by male scholars.

Gerdien Jonker (2003), in research among Muslim women in Germany, argues that women are in a difficult position with regard to the production of Islamic knowledge that is relevant for their experiences and position in society. The Islamic knowledge produced by male scholars in sermons, texts and speeches is largely regarded as having general validity concerning all Muslims. Attempts by women to critically take issue with this situation are still hardly noticed. Yafa Shanneik (2013) comes to similar conclusions in her research on Shi'a women in Ireland.

In 2012, Masooda Bano and Hillary Kalmbach published an edited volume on female Islamic authority that included a number of contributions about countries in Europe. The articles deal with the unavoidable but often neglected fact that women are increasingly exploring other ways of contributing to Islam as a discursive tradition, to paraphrase Asad. The articles also show that, despite resistance from all sides, women are very active in creating environments in line with their experiences.

In 2013, Juliane Hammer and Riem Spielhaus published an insightful special issue of *The Muslim World* titled 'Muslim Women and the Challenge of Authority'. The contributions deal with a wide variety of issues related to Islam, gender, and authority in settings across the globe. Islamic authority is taken very broadly and, by doing so, the authors are able to include practices and initiatives that would otherwise be ignored in studies on Islamic authority.

In an article on legal changes in Morocco in 2004 that stipulated the possibility of the establishment of female preachers, Sara Borrillo (2018) reflects on the situation among Moroccan Muslims in Europe and the prospects for female religious authorities there. She shows that attempts by Muslim women to create female religious spaces are being challenged more by the hegemonic secular order of the public sphere than by male Islamic elites.

The cases tie in with a classical debate in gender studies; when women take issue with prevailing male-dominated power configurations, do they intend to

simply replace men, or should they develop non-hegemonic fields of activity? And if they do so, would they not reconfirm male-dominated power configurations? And what about women developing 'alternative' practices without the intention of engaging critically with male power?

How can even more complex situations be dealt with in which a secular public order presents itself as an alternative for Muslim women against male religious authorities, but without acknowledging world views and practices developed by Muslim women themselves? Two themes come up regularly in studies: female empowerment, and the creation of alternative (female) landscapes and environments. To explore modes and forms of female agency in relation to religious reasoning and against the background of male dominated power structures, we have to explore and unpack situations where Muslim women take issue with domination, oppression, and discursive closure. This may mean Muslim women confronting the dominant secular public sphere and concomitant assumptions about which women's voices are legitimate and which are not (see e.g., Bracke 2008; Bracke and Fadil 2008; van Es 2019).

The other theme that we come across in studies on female Islamic authority is the creation of alternative (female) landscapes and spaces (see e.g., Noor 2018; Petersen 2022). As I shall elaborate in more detail in Chapter 4, Muslim women in various situations and in very diverse ways take issue, either deliberately or by implication, with what is considered 'properly Islamic' by the powers that be. These environments range from sporting activities for Muslim women as a spiritual act, to establishing mosques run and used by women.

In a number of cases I analyse in this book, men play a central and powerful public role. Thus, the cases I describe in Chapters 1 and 2, religious brokerage and the politics of imam training, are obviously situations where men are not only the most visible but also the most powerful actors. The (re)production of male-dominated positions is what these cases show. Debates in which Muslim women participate about how imam training should be organised are often confined to critical engagement with already established arrangements, rather than agenda-setting initiatives.

But the question is whether this is an adequate way to assess these issues because it implicitly starts from the proposition that this is what women, or any other rival actors are aiming at: to have a position in male-dominated structures and networks. In Chapter 1, I address the case of a group of women who were struggling for better facilities for children. These women took issue not only with the blind spots in the plans of the municipality, but also with the dominant role the board members of local mosques played in negotiations and how they defined the situation and the needs of their constituencies. This is a case that one would not immediately associate with religious authority, and initially

I also overlooked its relevance. But when I reread research material, it turned out to be more relevant than I had thought. These women had no intention of challenging the authoritative positions of the representatives of Muslim communities, but one of the results of their action was that these positions were discussed more seriously.

In Chapter 4, I shall address situations where women develop initiatives and take issue in ways markedly different from those developed by men. As Heleen van der Linden argues, there are three levels or perspectives from which we can look at issues of religious authority: a formal institutional level, a societal level, and the level of every-day practices and initiatives. In most cases, only the institutional level, that of Islamic law and official institutions is addressed.²⁹ However, when we take as the starting point of our research method the level of the everyday, where Muslims take issue with Islamic normativity, we broaden the field of inquiry significantly.

These activities bear on the perception of boundaries as contentious issues, but they also bring to the fore a complex matter in the analysis of Islamic authority, namely that of purpose, perspective, and orientation. Earlier, I have argued that an analysis of Islamic authority cannot be disconnected from attempts to unmask and debunk the prevailing authoritative status quo of persons, bodies of knowledge, events, and institutions. I reiterate the relevance of this analytical approach and the inherently contentious character of authority-making, but there is a risk in depicting all alternative practices and initiatives that Muslims develop, as rival practices as reflecting dominant and hegemonic situations and conditions. Some of the cases addressed in this book are indeed counter-practices, but others are not at all developed with the aim of countering or taking issue with something. Discussions only arose afterwards and, in many cases, as unintended consequences.

This argument can even be taken a step further. Authority-making is not just an externally oriented act to either questioning authorities 'out there' with the aim of changing or replacing them, or to challenge their power; it can also be oriented inwardly, towards oneself. Fabio Vicini (2017) refers to this as 'interiority' or 'articulations of the self'. Moral improvement, either as an individual act or as a collective endeavour, is not just an act of obedience, compliance, and reverence to an external force; it is also self-confirmation.³⁰

29 The argument is taken from van der Linden's mid-term report on her PhD research at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In Chapter 4, I shall discuss her research results in more detail.

30 It should be emphasised that acts of moral improvement are, of course, ultimately referring to God. What I mean here is obeying religious elites.

This may take on the form of empowerment. Even if empowerment is not explicitly oriented towards undermining prevailing power configurations, it can be taken as a mode of authority-making because it concerns initiatives that critically engage with prevailing interpretations of Islamic sources. The undeniable process of fragmentation of Islamic authority I have referred to above can be taken as a goal in itself. This is what can be observed in many informal groups and networks that we come across among Muslims everywhere. When a group of young Muslims decide to come together to read and to discuss things pertaining to Islam, or when they simply want to chat and chill with likeminded people in their own 'bubble', this is, I would argue, also a mode of authority-making. A discursive community, or a 'bubble' for that matter, of Muslims *as* Muslims is attributive and authenticates certain practices as Islamic, but not necessarily with the aim of taking issue with dominant power configurations or ousting established religious authorities. In that respect, authority-making also increases religious pluralism. Discursive communities that authenticate their activities as an alternative understanding of 'Islamic', diversify the Islamic landscape.

However, as we can read in many reports by politicians and administrative authorities, but also in numerous studies on Islam and Muslims in Europe, there is a persistent assumption that fragmentation of the Islamic landscape is problematic and thus undesirable. According to administrative authorities, Muslims should speak with one voice in religious matters. In numerous dramatic situations in past years, governments have wanted to know who speaks for Islam. Who articulates properly what Islam 'says' about certain developments and events; what does this 'authority' think about alternative or rival voices; and how to curb them? Governments have had other reasons to know this and joining Islamic State in Syria is not the same as setting up a discussion club to exchange views on Islam. But the assumption that fragmentation is problematic is at the heart of this attitude, and many representatives of Muslim communities support this idea. Let me relate two examples to elucidate this.

In 2009, Annelies Moors conducted research among a group of Dutch Muslim women wearing niqab with the aim of gaining insight into their motives and the ways in which they participate in society. The research was commissioned by the Dutch government; they considered face veiling in public problematic because it would demonstrate that obedience to religious authorities and complete submission to 'radical' variants of Islam was considered more important for these women than participating 'normally' in society. Their dress choices would represent a 'bad' version of Islam and would 'prove' that these women rejected Dutch society.

However, as the research demonstrated, the motivations of these women were not a public rejection of social conventions but acts of moral self-improvement. One wears a face-veil in public out of conviction and not necessarily to make a statement against those who have other opinions. These very personal choices by individual Muslim women are, however, not taken as individual choices or as acts of the much-acclaimed individuality, but as normative group pressure, or as a political statement.

A couple of years ago, I had a conversation with a small group of Muslim students at my university. They would come together to study together but also to speak about things that had to do with their being Muslims. It was a group, in other words, that came together as Muslims and felt at ease in such a setting and wanted to exchange experiences. However, this occurred at the time when Islamic State in Syria and Iraq was rising to prominence. The students received very negative reactions, not only from fellow students but also from the authorities at the university, who were not very happy with such 'acts of self-isolation'. The participants were compelled to take issue with the assumptions articulated by other students and university officials.

These two cases make two things clear. First, not everything Muslims do or say is intended to reject the social order or to politicise Islam by deliberately forming 'parallel' groups and thereby undermining the general student community. The issue at the university gained political significance and became an issue in a debate because of the way in which this student initiative was framed by the university authorities. Second, the cases show an intriguing interplay between acts that reside outside the public gaze, and acts that only resonate when they occur in public. The different dynamics in both types of acting generate different modes of authority-making.

The theoretical propositions discussed above are relevant for all processes of authority-making. However, as I shall demonstrate in each of the cases, a particular interplay of general conditions coalesces with specific contextual, temporal, and situational factors, and determines the specific mode of authority-making. Each of the six chapters focuses on a specific field of activities, initiatives, and issues. In each case, authority-making resides in specific locations and contexts and has specific implications. Consequently, Islamic authority becomes manifest differently.

4 Chapters and Cases

Again, a social scientific approach to Islamic authority is not new and it is certainly not my intention to claim entirely new theoretical ground with regard to

the making of Islamic authority. I do contend, however, that, although much has been said about the concept of Islamic authority, little systematic ethnographic research has been done to understand authority-making. And as long as politicians, policymakers, journalists and even researchers take Islamic authority for granted, ethnographic evidence is needed to show the complexities of the process of authority-making among Muslims.

Chapter 1, titled: 'The Religious Broker: Networks, Reciprocity and Intermediary Power', deals with the emergence and subsequent dissolution of a specific type of authority figure among Muslims with a migrant background in Europe, roughly between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s. Although many of these figures were not religious professionals, they acquired an authoritative position among Muslims as religious experts and co-shaped the organisational Islamic landscape in those years. In the course of the 1990s, as a result of several developments, these religious brokers lost their powerful position in the community and gradually disappeared from the scene. The emergence of these religious brokers was enabled by the governmental policies of integration, in conjunction with specific local and temporal circumstances and developments.

Chapter 2, titled: 'The Politics of Imam Training: The Domestication of Islam in Europe', deals with the training of imams working for Muslim communities with a migrant background living in Europe. Imams are considered the prime actors in the communication of Islamic knowledge, and the training of these figureheads is a crucial issue with many implications. Imam training is a particular aspect the broader multifaceted process of the production and transmission, and not least the reception and interpretation, of Islamic knowledge. Imam training, particularly when European governments intend to play a more active role in developing training programmes, is part of the much broader issue of the position of Islam and Muslims in Europe. Thus, the 'politics of imam training', as I call the ongoing debates, negotiations, and initiatives in which different stakeholders participate, implies more than educational logistics. The debates and negotiations unfold against a background of ongoing 'domestication', 'bureaucratisation' and 'encapsulation' of Islam by nation states in Europe; it concerns issues of authority and is ultimately a question of who is entitled to produce, transmit and not least teach Islamic knowledge, and who is accepted by Muslim communities.

Chapter 3, titled: 'Authoritative Pedagogics: The Sohbet', deals with the educational and devotional practices of the Dutch branch of the Gülen-movement, a transnational Muslim organisation with Turkish roots, better known among its followers as Hizmet. These practices are designed with the aim of initiating apprentices or novices into the central principals, creeds, texts, and rituals of Hizmet and integrating them into the movement. The pedagogical programme

centres on ethical formation and moral improvement and is intended to inculcate certain attitudes, religious sensitivities, and moral dispositions, and to build a religious community that reflects the ideal envisioned by the founder and current leader Fethullah Gülen. I shall concentrate on the pedagogical programme, of which the so-called *sohbet* is the most central. This is a partly ritualised conversation between followers where important sources are being discussed. But the *sohbet* is also an important ritual, spiritual, devotional, and not least emotional event that is designed to imbue in the participants a sense of collective religious experience.

Chapter 4, titled: 'Alternative Authorities: Authority-making from below' addresses various modalities of authority-making that are largely 'unrecognised', 'unnoticed', or have to do with alternative, decentred, divergent, or rival activities. These modalities have a threefold common denominator. First, many activities and initiatives that will be addressed deal with what I have called 'bottom-up critical reflection', denoting the crucial role of 'ordinary', non-professional Muslims in processes of ('decentred') authority-making. Second, the chapter focuses on processes of authority-making that often occur 'under the radar', beyond the public gaze. In that respect, many of the situations addressed in this chapter stand in sharp contrast to the cases in Chapter 6, where the public gaze and digital media are essential and indispensable constituent elements. Third, in many cases in this chapter, actors take issue with the prevailing power configurations and could be described as counter-hegemonic.

Chapter 5, titled: 'Seeking Authentic Listening Experiences in Shi'ism: Online and Offline Intersections of Majlis Practices', considers the majlis sermon, a central ritual in Shi'a Islam. It particularly focuses on the online growth of this practice, mostly as videos. The issues addressed in this chapter deal with authentication, authentic experience, and truthfulness, but the chapter also shows authority as an enticing, captivating, and connective force.

Digitisation and especially the Covid pandemic have led to a tremendous increase in online events during the month of Muharram. Practitioners seek experiences of authentication in majalis—meaningful, truthful, and emotional experiences. Majlis orators aim to create experiences of authentication. However, the growth of online practices poses challenges for majlis orators and audiences and has elicited a discussion among practitioners about the question whether an online majlis is still an authentic majlis. The first author of this chapter is Aleeha Ali, a PhD student who did research among Shi'a Muslims in Europe under my supervision.

Chapter 6, titled: 'Branding Islam: Imagination and Claims-Making', deals with various public practices, situations, and material objects that public actors or initiators (Muslim or non-Muslim) consider 'Islamic', and around which

heated debates often take place. The relevance for Islamic authority-making lies in the attributive aspects of the activities that are discussed and the claims that are made. The words 'Islam' or 'Islamic' offer a surplus of visibility and connotation to those who deal with them and open up universes of imagination and activity. Islamic branding and the branding of Islam are thus active processes of claim-making with programmatic, paradigmatic, and epistemological underpinnings, as well as authoritative truth claims.

As the reader will notice, a considerable number of cases in this book are situated in the Netherlands. Chapter 1 is based on my research in the city of Rotterdam in the 1980s and 1990s, Chapter 3 and 5 are also based on research in the Netherlands, and other chapters include various Dutch cases next to data collected elsewhere in Europe. Although this is not necessarily a book on Islamic authority in the Netherlands, some might wonder what these cases do tell us about the situation elsewhere in Europe. I agree that the Dutch context cannot, of course, be generalised to other countries and contexts, but the significance and the implications of individual cases and what they tell us about other contexts depend largely on the aim of research. Cases, in all their particularities, intricacies and complexities, are windows through which larger issues can be captured and understood, but they are not mere illustrations of general processes, as some critics tend to state. As Thomas Scheffer (2007, 167) rightly argues, "the ethnographer is in search for appropriate spatiotemporal frames in correspondence with the occurrences in the field".

According to Bent Flyvbjerg, there is still a dominant perception that generalisation is the ultimate aim of social sciences. Flyvbjerg debunks five alleged shortcomings of case-study methodology, namely that it is supposed to be: (1) too context-dependent, (2) not generalisable, (3) suitable for preparatory explorative research, but not for elaborate research agendas, (4) unable to be tested for veracity, (5) useless for general process analysis. For the average anthropologist, this criticism is well-known, but the tendency to produce general statements that have a universal validity with regard to processes is still very dominant, including in the study of religion. Many researchers still feel the need to defend their methodology against allegations mainly from quantitative researchers.

Case study methods concentrate on the 'proximity of reality' and are designed to scrutinise mechanisms at work. Unpacking a particular case means to unpack the complexities and contradictions of life, but it also contains a substantial element of narrative. As Flyvbjerg (2006, 237) states, such narratives may be difficult or impossible to summarise into neat scientific formulae, general propositions, and theories. They have to be told in their entirety. This is

indeed my aim. Islamic authority-making is a complex process that cannot possibly be squeezed into general formats and causal relations. In addition, most of the research I conducted was part of larger international comparative projects in which individual cases were embedded in comparative problem definitions.

But the cases have wider implications. Following Sally Moore, case-study method is 'processual ethnography'. She argues that the study of cases, if carried out properly and elaborately, is not a momentary snapshot of larger processes whose outcome we already know; cases reveal 'change-in-the-making'. "The normality of continuity is not assumed. Sameness being repeated is seen as the product of effort. Conjectures about the future thus become an implicit part of the understanding of the present" (Moore 1987, 727). Moore coins the term 'diagnostic event' to denote the unpredictability of how events evolve and what they tell us about the future (*ibid.*, 730).

The cases addressed in this book are to a large extent 'diagnostic events' because they show that authority-making is often unpredictable and hard to capture in models that have a general validity. Authority-making as a field of activity shapes my perceptions on issues, situations and indeed cases throughout this book, and the cases feed into the concept of authority-making and confer on it a certain tangibility.

The Religious Broker: Networks, Reciprocity, and Intermediary Power

1 Introduction

When we negotiate with the municipality, we constantly have to draw the attention of the politicians and civil servants to the fact that the majority of Muslims in the city come from rural areas. These people are not well educated and have a conservative outlook typical of village people. What many people seem to forget is that the vast majority of the community are migrants with hardly any education, who work hard to support their families. Many of them also send money back home to support relatives who even have less to spend.

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[...] The current negotiations about a mosque policy and the location of mosques after the urban renovation is not something many Muslims are concerned with; at least they simply do not follow the developments very closely. We organise meetings in our mosque every now and then to inform them about SPIOR, housing and all that.¹ You cannot expect them to be able to fully understand what is going on here with regard to their position and what their interests are. They simply ask for religious accommodation. We on our side have to be careful not to move too fast and stay in constant contact with the Muslim population. I sometimes meet people who are active in the community, and they want to organise. They want to initiate all kinds of very interesting things, but also forget about the background of our rank-and-file. They do not have the time, interest capacity to take part in experiments. They come to the mosque to do their religious duties and meet fellow countrymen. That's it.

¹ SPIOR means 'Stichting Platform Islamitische Organisaties Rijnmond' (Platform of Islamic Organisations Rijnmond), an advisory body of regional mosque associations.

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[...] Every time it strikes me how little they actually know about Islam at the town hall. There are a few civil servants working for the municipality who are Muslim, but even they are hardly able to inform politicians and civil servants properly. We have to do that continuously and sometimes I get the feeling that you are unable to get things across. Politicians have fixed ideas about Muslims and their needs.²

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When I started fieldwork in Rotterdam as part of my PhD research, one of the first interlocutors I interviewed in 1989 and later in 1992, was what I now would call a 'religious broker'. Let's call him Erhan. He had arrived in the Netherlands in 1967 as a young man of about twenty years of age. He had made the journey on his own when he heard that European factories needed workers to rebuild European economies after WW II. At the time when he left his country, the systematic and massive labour recruitment by European companies had yet to start. Before his departure, he had had an office job in the town close to his village. In the Netherlands, after about a year of unskilled work in a factory, he found a job as an administrative assistant in one of the harbour companies in the city of Rotterdam. After a number of years, in which he learned the language and took several courses, he was able to get a better job and to improve his position.

He had always been a practising Muslim but, in his early years in the Netherlands, he was not very concerned with his faith and became even less so when he met and married his Dutch wife two years later. Towards the end of the 1970s, Erhan was approached by someone from his home region asking him if he would be willing to help him and his associates to find a good place for a mosque. Before long, he became involved in the financial and administrative negotiations for the plan and, when the small mosque was opened in his neighbourhood in 1982, he started to work as a volunteer there, handling

2 Excerpt from interviews in 1989 and 1992 with the local representative of a mosque association in which he emphasised the weak and isolated position of the average Muslim in the city and reiterated the importance of intermediaries and spokespersons as well as the challenges they face.

administrative work. He had acquired an adequate command of Dutch and so he also became the mosque spokesperson in occasional communications with the municipality. As politicians and administrators were hardly interested in the activities of Muslims at that time, these contacts were limited to paperwork and arranging licences for the mosque.

Regular consultations with local government did take place, however, and, in a number of cities, there were so-called 'migration councils', consisting of people of various national background. They talked about the situation in the boarding houses, the cheap and poorly maintained houses where increasing numbers of families settled, working conditions and, somewhat later, education for children. Religion and cultural issues were not at stake as these were considered internal community affairs (Rath and Sunier 1994).

In the course of the 1980s, the situation started to change when the Rotterdam municipality invited representatives from Muslim communities to talks, and this constituted the beginning of a policy change. In the meantime, Erhan had become increasingly involved in negotiations and consultations. He became first a member and later the chair of the mosque board. In this position, he regularly met members of other mosque boards, and he participated in the first consultations between the Rotterdam administration and a delegation representing mosque associations. A couple of years before I met him, he had become a board member of the national umbrella organisation to which his mosque belonged. As a result of the extensive network of contacts in Rotterdam and other Dutch cities that he had built up, he was for a short period active in the local branch of the Dutch Social Democrat Party (PvdA). When I met him in 1989, he was one of the central figures on the Islamic scene in Rotterdam.

Professor of anthropology Andre Köbben of the University of Leiden would probably call Erhan a *zaakwaarnemer*, a word that is difficult to translate into English, but it comes close to meaning 'agent' or 'voluntary advocate', somebody who takes care of other people's business. Köbben introduced the term in his inaugural lecture in 1983, arguing that the role of the *zaakwaarnemer* is generally underestimated in situations where (conflicting) interests are at stake, or where the people concerned are not able to articulate their wishes. He emphasised the relatively autonomous and volatile role of such figures and their complicated agency. Köbben gave the example of Dutch volunteers who would write grant applications for so-called guest-worker organisations, and he argued that politicians and researchers would tend to overestimate the ability of these organisations to articulate their interests, so they asked for the help of Dutch *zaakwaarnemers*. He did not condemn the activities of such figures, but nevertheless used the term "pious fraud", well-intended but slightly inappropriate initiatives, to denote the gap between the desires of the people con-

cerned and the instrumentality of the *zaakwaarnemer*. I go along with Köbben's observations to an extent, but I disagree with his assumption that *zaakwaarnemers* were in many cases free-floating individuals who were detached from the people on whose behalf they acted. In addition, Köbben ignored the agency of migrant organisations and had doubts about the usefulness of so-called 'self-organisations' of migrant workers at a time when the Dutch government was developing its integration policies in which he himself played a central role.³ Although Köbben also applied the term to people with a migrant background, Erhan was not, in my view, a *zaakwaarnemer* as Köbben understood the term; that is, somebody who may have been in the vanguard, but at the same time was firmly rooted in the community he represented.

This chapter deals with religious brokers, a specific type of authoritative figure among Muslims from a migrant background in Europe, who emerged roughly at the end of the 1970s. They were leaders, mediators and representatives and belonged to the earliest cohort of migrants from Turkey, Morocco, Pakistan, and other countries of origin. They generally had a relatively good status, knew the host country, and spoke the language, and they had social and financial capital and networks, both in the country of origin and in the host country. They operated in the gap between the newly arrived migrants and the host society. A number of early converts to Islam also acted as religious brokers at that time. Their specific position as both Muslim and indigenous residents enabled them to act as cultural intermediaries between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Religious brokers are not exclusively a product of that particular era; we can also find them today. However, as I shall argue, the type of religious brokers I address in this chapter were a product of the specific circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s. Their position was based on markedly different premises than those of today. In addition, I argue that we may define their function as much broader (mediator, representative, leader, spokesperson) than religious authorities in the theological sense, and propose that they were crucially important in the shaping of the Islamic landscape at that time and the particular forms of Islamic authority that it generated.

In a number of cases, religious brokers were able to tap financial resources, or to put issues on the political agenda of governments and municipalities.

3 My reflections are also based on his inaugural lecture at Leiden University in 1980, *Het heilig vuur: over moeilijkheden en mogelijkheden bij onderzoek inzake minderheden*, and on his public and academic reflections on the position of researchers in minority studies (see Köbben 1991).

Many of them had influential positions in boards of Muslim organisations and also formulated policies in religious and spiritual matters. By doing so, they co-shaped the Islamic landscape of the time. Even though many religious brokers were not religious professionals, they acquired an authoritative position among Muslims by being able to understand the situation of Muslim migrants both where they came from and where they would find themselves. They were able to grasp not only specific religious needs, but also what the religiosity of those Muslim migrants would entail. They even had, as Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (2014, 1) state: “[a considerable ability] to define correct belief and practice, or orthodoxy and orthopraxy, respectively; to shape and influence the views and conduct of others, accordingly; to identify, marginalize, punish, or exclude deviance, heresy and apostasy and their agents and advocates”. In the course of the 1990s, as a result of profound developments among Muslims, such religious brokers lost their powerful position in the community.

Although religious brokers could be found across Europe, the specific power dynamics and political opportunities that enabled their emergence are contextual and historically specific. Some emerged from among the ranks of the strong ethnic (often regional) networks that existed in all migrant communities. Some had already assumed a powerful position in their community from very early on (LAKAF 1980; Nielsen 1992; Martiniello 1993; Bousetta 2000; Body-Gendrot and Martiniello 2000; Abadan-Unat 2011).⁴ Others, like Erhan, had followed a more individual trajectory.

The emergence of religious brokers was in most circumstances and situations enabled by governmental policies on integration, in conjunction with specific legal arrangements and local and temporal circumstances and developments. I shall focus on a particular case, namely the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, a city with a relatively large Muslim community. In the 1980s and 1990s, an extensive and thorough urban development programme took place. This was also the time when many Muslims migrated to Europe with their families and this confluence of circumstances worked as a catalyst for the municipal authorities to develop the first comprehensive policy with regard to religious accommodation for Muslims in the Netherlands. These developments, in conjunction with other factors, constituted a fertile ground for the

4 There is an extensive body of political science literature dealing with ethnic mobilisation and studies on social movements have also extensively addressed issues of mobilisation on the basis of cultural, ethnic, and religious markers (see e.g., Goodwin and Jasper 2009). In my dissertation, I made use of various social movement perspectives (see Sunier 1996).

emergence of religious brokers. The case is based on fieldwork I conducted for my dissertation in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁵

The overall question I intend to address in this chapter is what the characteristics of religious brokers are, and what explains their emergence and their authoritative status? I shall first elaborate the theoretical and conceptual strands of this chapter and discuss relevant literature and position myself in this field. Then, I shall unpack the case in detail in order to show the intricacies of the process of authority-making, after which I set the case in a broader perspective.

2 What Is a Religious Broker?

What is a religious broker and how does this role relate to the making of Islamic authority? I apply the term 'brokerage' or 'religious brokerage' to refer to the activities of these figures, instead of the often-used concept of 'patronage', as it better captures the diverse mechanisms and dynamics at work. However, as patronage and brokerage are related concepts, I shall start with a brief discussion of the literature on patronage.

The logic of patronage involves the (re)distribution of services, power, and resources. Most literature on patronage deals with societies that are considered 'traditional', 'less developed', or 'non-Western'. In Raymond Firth's (1936) classic monograph on the Tikopea, the term patronage is hardly used but the entire account revolves around the power of patron-like figures who shape social interactions. In some of the older literature, we can observe an implicit normative undertone that sets these types of societies apart from 'developed' Western societies and deems patronage an undesirable, disturbing practice that 'we should get rid of'.

Much of the studies on patronage deal with specific political systems, especially in situations where a strong central state is absent or beyond reach for certain sections of the population. There is a considerable overlap with studies on corruption, especially in literature dealing with societies in transition and an extensive body of literature in the social sciences and humanities deals with patronage. I shall approach patronage mainly from an anthropological perspective, notably the transactionalism school of thought that emerged in the

5 For this chapter, I am also indebted to one of my early interlocutors in the city, Ahmet Akbulut, who published an autobiographic account of his life as the son of migrant workers who came to Europe in the early 1960s (Akbulut 2016). His book and the talks I had with him helped me a lot when rereading my own ethnographic data.

1950s. Patronage is a structural mechanism generating asymmetric personal transactions and loyalty between persons or groups (Barth 1969; Blok 1969; see also Firth 1965; Baily 1969).

Alex Weingrod (1968, 379–380) defines patronage as a type of social relationship and describes the study of patronage from this perspective as the “[...] analysis of how persons of unequal authority, yet linked through ties of interest and friendship, manipulate their relationships in order to attain their ends”. Thus, according to Weingrod, patrons basically operate in informal circumstances and situations.

In contemporary publications on Muslims in Europe, one comes across accounts in which certain practices and social relations are explained by reference to imported cultural traits that continue to function in the countries of residence, often in conjunction with the notion of so-called ‘parallel societies’ (see e.g., Ellian 2018). There is a considerable body of literature dealing with leadership among migrants in Europe, in which the social hierarchies and cultural dynamics that were operative in the period I refer to are treated as modalities of patronage, or patron/client relationships. Patronage relations among migrants (not exclusively Muslims) were considered to be crucial for an understanding of the existing power dynamics in the early stages of migration (see e.g., Khan 1979). In much of the older literature on migration, the inequality that is characteristic of patronage relations is also often attributed to specific cultural traits of brought in from migrants’ countries of origin (see e.g., Anwar 1977; Oakley 1979). In more recent work, specific networks of loyalty and affiliation among migrants are sometimes still considered constitutive of patronage relations (see e.g., Akthar 2015).

However, most contemporary studies dealing with ‘non-Western’ contexts question the essentialist and culturalist approach to patronage (see e.g., Nieswand 2013; Ranta 2017; Koster and Leynseele 2018). Moreover, in a study on audit culture in companies in the West, Cris Shore has convincingly demonstrated that patronage and corruption are decisively not found exclusively in so-called ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘non-Western’ countries with weak states and powerful self-serving elites (Shore 2021; see also Shore and Wright 2000).

Although patronage and brokerage generally belong to the same conceptual field, there are crucial differences. Brokerage as a concept has been applied in anthropological analyses since the 1950s as a tool to understand the dynamics between individuals, social strata, and societies. Jeremy Boissevain was one of the first to formulate the difference between a patron and a broker very rigorously. Patrons control so-called “first order resources”, e.g., land, money, work; brokers control “second order resources”, notably strategic contacts with other people (Boissevain 1969, 380). Boissevain argued that a broker occupies

a strategic position at a crossroad of information flows and communication channels and emphasised the importance of reciprocity in effective brokerage.

Brokers, according to Anton Blok (1969) are middlemen, mediators who function in societies characterised by a segmented structure and limited connection between segments. There is a strong state, but some sections of the population cannot get access to resources. Mediators or brokers provide links and bridge gaps, but they also thrive upon the maintenance of gaps. This implies that brokers act as buffers between parties. Brokers in the field of law, economics and commerce are actors with usually only professional interests (see e.g., Stovel and Shaw 2012).

According to Philip Havik, the concept of brokerage provides a useful starting point for understanding the dynamic encounters typical of post-colonial societies, without resorting to commonsensical dichotomies such as traditional/modern, domination/exploitation, underdeveloped/developed, marginal/central. Havik (2013, 97) argues that post-colonial studies “[...] progressively moved towards an understanding of the colonial period as a dynamic ‘encounter’ involving a great diversity of actors and outcomes”. The work of Eric Wolf is particularly important here as he has shown that cultural and political brokerage was indispensable for the integration of communities in larger state formations (Wolf 1956; Wolf and Silverman 2001). As Havik (2013, 100) argues: “[...] although brokers exhibit traits that distinguish them from the social spaces they connect (with), their capacity to simultaneously blend in makes allows them to become part of and be adopted by their surroundings”. Effective brokers integrate social spheres rather than keeping them apart and they need to have sufficient trust among the sections of society they seek to connect.

In a special issue of *Ethnos*, on brokerage, Martijn Koster and Yves van Leynseele (2018, 803) argue that anthropological research on brokerage should reconsider its analytical focus “most notably in relation to recent neoliberal societal transformations and governance transitions”. They regard brokers, who act in situations of rapid societal change, as “Janus-faced figures whose distinct faces are recognised and addressed by different actors and whose performances align with different logics and rationales” (ibid: 804; see also Sunier 2022b). This ‘double recognisability’ is indeed a crucial element in the position of the religious brokers I address in this chapter, particularly in situations of rapid change, where recognisability, even familiarity, are powerful qualities.

Thomas Faist raises another important argument with respect to mechanisms of brokerage. He argues that network and social capital as analytical tools

and the influence of structural features of migration processes—perspectives that are commonly applied in migration studies—often fail to consider the agency of a ‘third party’ in this process, notably the broker (Faist 2014, 38). Networks and social capital are only effective when applied in concrete contexts and circumstances by human actors (*ibid.*, 39). Cross-border migration is such a context with in-built social, economic, and legal inequalities. Brokers are important intermediaries in the migration process, forging access to resources, and, according to Faist, the ‘third party’ may as well be formal state institutions or political actors.

Although I go along with his argument that the function of brokers as intermediaries is broader than individual entrepreneurship, and that negotiations with formal parties may lead to formal arrangements, I nevertheless regard the unpredictability, volatility, and resourcefulness of brokers, and thus their individual agency, as crucial for understanding their effectiveness. This implies that ‘brokerage’ and ‘broker’ are slightly different concepts. Brokerage refers to the specific, often unstructured, and ambiguous, circumstances and opportunities in which the broker operates. Koster and Leynseele (2018, 804) approach brokers as assemblers, “connective agents who actively bring together the different elements of the development assemblages they operate in and are targeted by”.

Anna Tuckett (2018) brings to the fore an adjacent aspect of brokerage. She conducted research among “self-styled immigration advisers” in Italy who have a migration background themselves and guide newly arrived migrants through the bureaucracy of the Italian immigration authorities. In most anthropological theory on brokerage, she argues, there are two types of explanation; one focuses on a particular political economy in which the broker fills the gap between the state and society; the other focuses on the qualities of individual brokers and the extent to which they are able to “circumvent the system”. Tuckett proposes an approach that emphasises the social embeddedness of brokers and calls them “community brokers” (*ibid.*, 253). Her analysis provides useful insights for my case. The ‘community broker’ is not a paid civil servant working in the bureaucratic state apparatus, but somebody more situated in the community, or closer to the community, than to the state bureaucracy. It is precisely this subtle position that lends the broker credibility. In other words, the broker very likely has a relatively good position in society, but his or her role as broker cannot be accredited exclusively to that position.

Some good early studies were carried out among minority organisations in Europe that focus explicitly on leadership (see especially Werbner and Anwar 1991). In more recent studies, culture, and religion in relation to leadership have been addressed in various contexts. Many of these deal with the role of cultural

brokers in cultural translation and mediation between two separate cultural realms (see e.g., Montanyola and Fernandez 2019). The effect of these intermediary practices is predominantly confirmative and reproductive, especially when brokers have a keen interest in maintaining the status quo on which their position as broker is based.

Although these reproductive mechanisms are important and should not be overlooked, the transformative effects of brokerage should not be ignored either. Fredrik Barth, in his research among Pathans in the Swat valley in Pakistan back in the 1950s, explicitly posed the question of what sources account for the considerable influence and authority of Sufi saints, beyond their traditional religious status. He argued that their influence and power should be attributed to a combination of their position as landowners, their reputation as spiritual leaders and their strong position as mediators in political issues, through which they considerably transformed the religious landscape in the region (Bart 1959, 92; see also Ewing 1997). These studies provide important leads to the issues I seek to unpack in this chapter. They show that leadership is intricately entangled with cultural and religious features. However, I contend that, while leadership is a vital aspect of religious brokerage, the two should not be conflated.

To fully capture the relevance of the theoretical account above of the religious brokers operating in the 1980s among Muslims in Europe, I shall unfold the historical and contextual factors that contributed to their position. Brokerage has a power logic involving the (re)distribution of services and resources, but it is also broader and takes on board the reciprocity in social relations and the intermediary cultural position of brokers. Brokerage, as I understand it, may result in unequal power relations and dependency typical of patron/client relations, but it may also lead to greater access to resources and to the integration of isolated groups, and improve their position. Moreover, the culturalist and essentialist connotation often attached to patronage as a cultural relic of the past, introduced by migrants into 'modern' Western societies, ignores the active role of governments in host societies in creating the circumstances and opportunities that have led to their emergence.

A concept that captures the conditions in which religious brokers emerge is what Doug McAdam (1982) has called "political opportunity structure". McAdam was interested the conditions under which collective action would emerge and what changes and 'openings' in the political system would allow for that to happen. With this concept, McAdam critically engaged with approaches in social movement theory that perceived political structures as almost impenetrable for collective actors seeking change. This elite approach argued that the population has virtually no access to political decision-making structures and

is therefore completely dependent on its leaders. However, power structures can in fact be influenced and this is precisely where the key lies to understanding social movements (*ibid.*, 41–43).

The ‘environment’ within which Islamic organisations operated in the 1980s can be seen as a structure of political possibilities and obstacles, power relations and ideological representations. The success or failure of organisational activity—that is, the achievement of objectives and the promotion of articulated interests—reflects and is largely determined by that structure. In my dissertation, I argued that, in many studies about the position of Muslims in society, relatively much attention is paid to the structural, political, and ideological obstacles that Muslims encounter in defending their interests at the expense of the possibilities and opportunities that were available to them (Sunier 1996; see also Sunier 2022b).

I contend that political opportunities in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s were essential prerequisites for the success of these religious brokers, and I do not go along with those who argue that McAdam’s explanation was too focused on structural characteristics at the expense of discursive and ideational underpinnings. In the Introduction to this book, I have discussed a number of conceptual strands that I consider crucial for Islamic authority in general. Some of them are particularly relevant for the case to be tackled in this chapter and can be regarded as opportunities or resources for religious brokers.

The first is temporality and historical juncture. By this, I refer to the relatively unpredicted simultaneous occurrence of developments. The emergence and subsequent dissolution of religious brokers as influential actors among Muslims in the 1980s and early 1990s clearly shows the temporality not only of this type of authoritative figure but also of the features of the mode of Islamic authority they acquired. Islamic brokers operated in many European countries during this period, but the specific social and political conditions and opportunities, and the specific characteristics of religious brokers and their position in the religious landscape, can only be assessed by considering the unique historical juncture of events and developments at that time.

Religious brokers in the 1980s, whatever their particular function, made use of their influence and were able to extend it, but their legitimacy was not at all self-evident or lasting. It was the result of specific developments and opportunities that were non-existent a decade earlier or a decade later. Not only did circumstances change in subsequent years, but also new discourses emerged, and new actors acquired legitimacy and authority on different grounds. When circumstances changed, the basis for brokerage changed too.

Second, the dynamics of authority-making are particularly salient under conditions of change and transformation and in unprecedented or novel cir-

cumstances. As I argued in the Introduction, societal, political, or technological transformations generate unstructured realms, where conditions are unsettled, messy, 'pre-legalised', formative and productive, creating unexpected opportunities. The notion of a frontier zone as a 'site of bewildering complexity' is especially apt because, in many respects, it perfectly captures the situation in the 1980s.⁶

Governments had only just started to develop policies with regard to Islam and Muslims, and the Islamic organisational landscape was quickly expanding but still largely unstructured (Sunier 1996). There was an enormous lack of knowledge on the part of governments, and they had no clue about whom to address with questions regarding the background of Muslim migrant communities. This made circumstances largely unsettled and messy, and provided unexpected possibilities and opportunities, not least because, for the newly arrived migrants too, everything was emphatically new. Whether they came from former colonies, as in France and the UK, or as labour migrants, as in the Netherlands and Germany, they arrived in countries that were unknown to them, and the Islamic infrastructure was still in its earliest stage. Migrants from former colonies were slightly more familiar with the situation and often did not experience language barriers as was the case in the Netherlands and Germany.⁷ But the overall picture in European immigration countries was basically similar.

As a consequence, information and knowledge management emerged as crucial prerequisites for religious brokers in this period. Religious authority is closely intertwined with knowledge production and the power to deploy knowledge, and this does not only mean theological knowledge. The single most important powerful asset of religious brokers was information management, or to put it differently, their advantage lay in the specific information gap that existed, both on the part of the migrants and on the part of the administrative authorities. They acted as gatekeepers and purveyors of information, towards migrants about the host society and towards the host society, policymakers, and media about the situation in which Muslims lived.

These opportunities and circumstances on the one hand invigorated inequalities, hierarchies, and dependencies of Muslim communities, and would

6 See the Introduction to this book for a more detailed discussion of the concept of frontier.

7 In his study on the Pakistani religious movement Minhajul-Qur'an in the UK and the Netherlands, Mohammad Morgahi (2018) demonstrates how the different circumstances and conditions and the different migration histories in the two countries generated different patterns of organisational development.

strengthen the powerful position of religious brokers but, on the other, they provided the community with access to important sources of knowledge. However, the circumstances and specific context in which religious brokers operated cannot be fully understood by considering only entrepreneurial opportunities. In most instances, religious brokers, were volunteers and, more importantly, they were Muslims. Although they may have also been entrepreneurs pursuing their personal interests, they were ultimately part of the Muslim community in which they operated and which they represented.

I use the term 'religious broker' to denote the more personal and intimate position these people had within their community. But the relationship with administrative authorities was also often personal rather than formal. They were seen as approachable guys with whom it was easy to do business.

3 Religious Brokerage in the City of Rotterdam. A Historical Case

As said, in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, I conducted fieldwork for my dissertation in the city of Rotterdam, a city with a relatively large number of Muslims, a greater part of whom were from a Turkish background. My initial plan was to map the city's mosques and their activities and plans, to assess the municipal policy on Islam, and to make a comparison with a German and British city. In this way, I intended to explore similarities and differences in actual policy measures beyond and below the national political context. However, after a couple of months of fieldwork in Rotterdam, I discovered two issues that had seemingly little to do with one another but turned out to be closely connected and essential for subsequent developments.

First, I discovered that the general image of the average Muslim in the city at that time—an introverted elderly man, busy maintaining his family and performing his religious duties—did not correspond with what I observed. This depiction of Muslims in the Netherlands is what appeared in much of the literature (see e.g., Samuels and Gransbergen 1975; van den Berg 1979; de Graaf 1983). I noticed that, in a number of cases, the boards of mosques also included younger people, and they were intensively negotiating with the municipality about all kinds of future developments.

Second, I discovered that many of these negotiations took place against the backdrop of the far-reaching urban renewal of the southern part of the city that started in the 1980s and continues to this day. Many neighbourhoods there were being demolished and new houses were to be built. This urban renewal was motivated by the desire on the part of the municipality to improve living conditions and to get rid of the 'impoverished' image of the city as a whole.

Although the general situation in Rotterdam was probably not very different from that in other major centres of immigration in Europe, the extensive urban renewal added an extra dimension to the situation and provided fertile ground for religious brokers.

In order to ensure that this operation would evolve smoothly and effectively, a firm and effective line of communication with the local population was indispensable for the Rotterdam administration. Previous urban renewal projects had partly failed because of the absence of good and regular contacts with people in the neighbourhood and because their demands and wishes were largely ignored.

At the time when the urban development programme started in the mid-1980s, a majority of the local population were from migrant background. The large numbers of so-called guest workers who arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s, mainly from Turkey and to a lesser extent from Morocco and Pakistan, settled in so-called 'guest worker-houses', which were privately owned by people who made good money by housing as many migrants as possible in one building. In some areas, the number of inhabitants increased exponentially, causing serious tensions with the indigenous population. In 1972, violent protests broke out against the growth of migrant 'guest houses' for migrants. These 'Turk-riots', as they were branded, left a mark on the local population, and determined the image of the area for years to come. With the arrival of families in the late 1970s and 1980s, migrants would move to normal houses in the same area. Not very surprisingly, the homes in which families lived were in bad shape and thus cheap. It was precisely these old houses that would be demolished to be replaced by new (and often more expensive) houses (Sunier 1996).

In roughly the same period, and as a side effect of the settlement of migrant families, there was a growing demand for religious facilities, which resulted in the rapid increase of small makeshift neighbourhood mosques. Most of these mosques were in normal houses and the living-room would function as a prayer room. After some time, some of these mosques moved to bigger premises such as former shops, garages, and in some cases former church buildings. They would develop into community centres where migrants would come together, drink tea and chat with fellow-migrants. Many of these mosques were not only ethnically specific but were also often frequented by people from the same district or even sub-district in the country of origin, and they acquired an important local function for Muslim neighbourhood residents.

From the mid-1970s until the late 1980s, their number increased more than tenfold. This 'mushrooming' of religious facilities, as it was called, was of course related to the growth of the Muslim population, but it was also the result of

fierce competition between Islamic movements from the countries of origin.⁸ This competition was particularly strong among Turkish Muslims and is well illustrated by an event that took place in the autumn of 1977, when an ideological conflict emerged between two groups of Turkish Muslims in Rotterdam. The conflict reached its height when a church, situated in a neighbourhood where a relatively large proportion of Turkish immigrants lived, put its building at the disposal of Turkish Muslims during the month of Ramadan.

Two imams were invited from Turkey to lead the ceremonies, one belonging to the Süleymanlı movement, which had been active among Turkish Muslims in Europe for many years. The other was sent by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the department of the Turkish state that regulates religious life in Turkey. The Diyanet feared that the Süleymanlı movement would gain too much influence among Turkish Muslims at a time when the development of the religious infrastructure was gaining momentum. Both organisations claimed to speak on behalf of the majority of Turkish Muslims, so it was decided to let the attendees decide which of the two imams would lead the ceremonies, and the majority chose the Diyanet imam (Sunier 1996). The Dutch authorities did not interfere and left this to the Turkish community.

In other European countries, similar conflicts emerged about representation and leadership.⁹ Soon after this event, Diyanet supporters founded an organisation with the aim to provide religious guidance, and to maintain contact with the Diyanet in Turkey. In 1982 the Hollanda Diyanet Vakfi (Dutch Islamic Foundation) was founded, the Dutch branch of the Turkish Diyanet. Similar organisations were founded in other European countries. Diyanet in Turkey, through its local branches, would not only provide imams for Turkish mosques in Europe, but also issue religious material, organise the pilgrimage to Mecca, and provide a whole range of other services for Muslims in Europe.

Around 1983, the Diyanet made agreements with a number of European governments to send imams for a designated period. The Turkish government paid the Diyanet imams' salaries. The need for trained religious personnel among the quickly growing Turkish migrant community was one of the most pressing issues of the time. Although regular labour immigration had already come to a stop for a number of years, these imams were exempt from the gen-

8 For a detailed description of the various Turkish Islamic movements active at that time, see Landman (1992), Sunier (1992; 1996; 1998), Sunier and Landman (2015). See also Butter and van Oordt (2017).

9 See e.g., Gerholm and Lithman (1988); Jenkins (1988); Schiffauer (2000; 2010); Sunier et al. (2011); Rosenow-Williams (2012); Peter and Ortega (2014); Sunier and Landman (2015).

eral immigration restrictions because of their special functions. After serving for a number of years, they would be replaced by new ones (Sunier and Landman 2015).

By investing in the institutionalisation of Islam in Europe and supporting local initiatives of mosque communities, the Diyanet and the Turkish government made a very clever strategic move. The majority of Muslims in Europe still maintained strong ties with their country of origin and were relatively poor. The decision to provide financial support for the establishment of the religious infrastructure for Muslims in Europe gave the Diyanet a very strong bargaining position against rival movements, which had to organise religious services at their own expense (Sunier et al. 2011).

Moroccan Muslims were in the same position as Turkish Muslims, and similar struggles took place in that time, mainly about the influence of the Moroccan regime on Moroccan migrants in Europe. However, although the Moroccan government maintained a firm grip on the religious life of its subjects abroad, and there were national umbrella organisations for Moroccan mosques, the level of organisation was much lower than that seen among Turkish Muslims (Landman 1992). Whether this organisational difference is the reason why we find fewer religious brokers of Moroccan descent is difficult to say with certainty, but I contend that the organisational strength among Turkish Muslims constituted an important factor for the prominence of religious brokers of Turkish background.

Islam increasingly became an essential basis for organisation. Apart from these strategic motives, an overall essential building block of Muslim organisations, as well as for strengthening loyalty, was the strong emotional tie of the migrant population to their countries of origin. In Muslims' everyday reality, adherence to Islam was inextricably linked with other allegiances such as to family, the local village, and the region of origin. Religion is a broad register that links emotion, affect and senses of belonging, and binds individuals to the political and cultural projects of collective actors and states (Levitt 1998; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003; Werbner 2002; Sunier et al. 2016).

Financial and political backing from countries of origin and good contacts with European governments created a beneficial situation for organisations such as the Diyanet, but the downside of this arrangement was that imams sent from 'home' may have been theological professionals, but often had hardly any connection with the local community, despite their solid theological proficiency.

This provided one of the 'opportunities' for religious brokers, not least because it coincided with the urban renewal works. The Rotterdam municipal authorities not only needed to be able to deal with spokespersons in the

Muslim community regarding the urban renewal plans, but also had concerns about the rapid increase in the number of local makeshift mosques, many of which were fire hazards. However, it was not just the dangerous conditions of mosques that motivated the municipality to seek contact with the various Muslim communities in the city.

A few years earlier, a gradual shift in thinking in municipal circles had already taken place. In 1981, the municipality's Department of Migration wrote an internal memorandum, in which they questioned the municipality's reticence to deal with Muslims and their religious needs (Municipality of Rotterdam 1981). The number of Muslims had increased sharply as a result of family reunion and the number of organisations was also growing relatively rapidly. The memorandum noted that, while it was good to give consideration to influences from political movements operating among migrants, the constant stigmatisation of these movements could backfire and was often also a deliberate tactic by those who had an interest in the marginalisation of Muslims and their organisations (*ibid.*, 4). According to the memorandum, the municipality justified its reticent and unwillingness to intervene by its desire strictly to observe the separation of church and state (*ibid.*, 3), but the memorandum also pointed to the need for the municipality to develop policy with regard to the rapidly growing number of mosques in Rotterdam. The authors of the memorandum noted that the municipality should "let go of its jealous restraint towards the organisational development among the migrants" on the basis of their faith and become more involved with mosques (*ibid.*).

Initially, the municipal council and the city administration were taken aback by the memorandum's demand, but other departments within the municipality, especially those responsible for the management of religious facilities, stated that they were in favour of the suggestions. In a 1982 memorandum from the Department of Urban Development, these suggestions were reiterated, particularly those that spoke of the exaggerated fear of, and the excessive attention given to right-wing extremist migrant groups and conflating them with Muslim organisations (Municipality of Rotterdam 1982, 12–13).

Up to this point, any change had mainly taken place at the level of the municipality's various services and departments. There was hardly any discussion in political circles (Rath et al. 2001, 90–91). The strong growth in the number of mosques and other Islamic organisations, which continued unabated in the years that followed, the weak socio-economic position of the Muslim population, the isolation in which most mosques found themselves, the implementation of the minority policy formulated by the government and, not least, the relentless pressure from the Department of Migration, where two Muslims had meanwhile strengthened the ranks, changed the situation in mid-1983. The

city's alderman of Social Affairs visited a number of mosques and spoke to representatives. This was an unprecedented event that even reached the press in Turkey.

The 'Islam symposium' that was organised in Rotterdam in 1982 was also a significant event. Here, administrators and civil servants came into direct contact with mosque representatives (Rath et al. 2001, 91). An important result of these developments was that, in another memorandum, the municipality now recognised Islamic organisations' desire for recognition and support (Municipality of Rotterdam 1983, 4). The municipality had been passive for too long, for which the authors pointed to three causes. The first was the excessive emphasis on the separation of church and state. The second was the misconception that Islamic organisations were against the integration of Muslims in Dutch society. It was noted that a growing number of mosque boards were adopting a very cooperative attitude and were willing to work together with the municipality in this regard. As a third reason for the reticence, the authors referred to the monopolistic influence of left-wing organisations, which, according to the authors, had not only always, and wrongly, dominated consultations with the authorities despite having hardly any supporters, but had also systematically claimed that mosques were breeding grounds for fascism (*ibid.*, 2–3).

The authors further stated that Islamic organisations could make an important contribution to the development of a multicultural society through the role of their representatives. Thus: "We can no longer ignore the mosques, even if we wanted to" (*ibid.*, 3). It was proposed that mosque organisations should be regarded as important organisations of migrants and should therefore in principle be eligible for subsidies for courses, training and the like. According to the authors of the memorandum, this was the only way to break through their isolation, which would promote integration.

From 1984 onwards, meetings with imams were held at regular intervals. They were invited to the town hall to speak about the situation in the dilapidated buildings where the mosques were often housed, and about the municipality's plans. Imams were seen as more than religious pastors; they were promoted as community leaders and their function was extended far beyond their religious tasks. As many of them had only scant knowledge of the society in which they worked and were not competent in the language, they were often accompanied by people who acted as representatives of the mosque association where they were employed: the religious brokers. Between 1984 and 1985, four 'critical dialogues' were held on a number of issues important to Muslims (Sunier 1996).

In an official public policy document published in 1985 titled 'Minority Policy in a Changed Situation', the policy shift was clearly formulated. Given

their 'authentic' character, mosque organisations had to be given the same rights as any other so-called 'self-organisation' (Municipality of Rotterdam 1985).¹⁰ It was believed that, once provided with a trained cadre, they could increase their significance in integration activities. The fact that these organisations operated on a religious basis should not be an obstacle to accepting them as interlocutors in municipal policies (*ibid.*, 32).

With the ratification of this policy brief by the council, the municipality had initiated a new policy that assigned self-organisations an important role in local migration policy. Particularly significant was the fact that Islamic organisations were now regarded as the most important forms of self-organisation among Turkish and Moroccan migrants and the municipality expressed its willingness to sit down with Muslim representatives. This was particularly important because it made Muslim migrants able to gain influence in municipal political decision-making.

In short, several interlocking developments came together and shaped the Rotterdam municipality's policies. Creating proper channels with the local residents by which to communicate the urban renewal plans was, of course, an urgent policy priority that also concerned residents with a migrant background, but the change in the perception of Muslim organisations instigated by the municipality's Department of Migration in the early 1980s was equally crucial. Probably the most pressing issue, however, was the municipality's desire to develop a comprehensive 'mosque policy'. The municipality wanted to close down the local makeshift mosques and would in turn facilitate the building of a new mosque, just outside the immediate residential area (Municipality of Rotterdam 1992; Sunier 1996). Although many Muslim representatives were in favour of such an eye-catching mosque, they also preferred the small local mosques 'around the corner' for daily use because they would not only strengthen the local community, but also ensure the continuation of existing power relations.

An important result of the turning tide in the municipality and the intensified negotiations with mosque associations and their representatives in the 1980s, was the opening in 1988 of an advisory body of mosques associations in Rotterdam and the neighbouring region, called the Platform of Islamic Organisations Rijnmond (SPIOR), which was founded with a subsidy from the municipality. This was the result of long negotiations by the representatives of mosque associations, but recognition and finance by the local government

10 'Self-organisation' was a Dutch term used in those years and referred to organisations founded by migrants. Self-organisations played a crucial role as representative bodies in the typical Dutch consultation structure.

was of course motivated by the urgent need felt by the municipal authorities to have good interlocutors with the Muslim population in the areas that were included in the urban renewal plans and the development of a comprehensive mosque policy.

SPIOR became the official representative of the majority of the mosques in the region in consultations with politicians and civil servants, but in fact it became the spokesperson for the Muslim population. One of the consequences of this development was that the existing council of 'guest workers' (Stichting Buitenlandse Werknemers Rijnmond, SBWR), which had until then conducted negotiations with the municipality about all kinds of issues related to migrants, was side-tracked, and lost its position as the only official representative body.

While the staff in the local mosques were volunteers, the SPIOR staff consisted of well-educated Muslims who were paid a salary. At a time when the majority of Muslims were first-generation migrants with a weak social position who hardly spoke Dutch, representational organisations such as SPIOR were crucial for building up a religious infrastructure and sustainable contacts with Dutch authorities. This was particularly crucial when there was an ethnically and ideologically divided organisational landscape. And the interest was mutual; the municipality wanted to get rid of the makeshift mosques in the process of urban renewal and needed effective lines of communication lines, while the Muslims acquired a channel to the government. In 1991, Rotterdam was the first municipality in the Netherlands to formulate an integrated mosque policy with the 'big purpose-built mosque' as the main pivot, but it would not be till 2010 that this mosque actually opened its doors.

Despite the strategic considerations based on the increasing number of Muslims and mosques in these areas, the policy change was more than a pragmatic decision; it also implied a shift in policy principles: migrants 'turned' into Muslims, to be represented by Muslim organisations.

The period from the end of the 1980s until well into the 1990s witnessed two seemingly contradictory developments. On the one hand, the ethnically and ideologically divided organisational landscape among Muslims represented by SPIOR provided civil servants and policymakers in the city with an effective instrument for their urban renewal plans. As a result, organisations of Muslims became firmly entrenched in the neighbourhood, thereby expanding and intensifying their networks and contacts with relevant persons and institutions in the neighbourhood and beyond. Imams, local mosque spokespersons and board members, and representatives of SPIOR all became important intermediaries between the Muslim communities and the society, a role that was fostered by the Rotterdam municipality's policy shift.

The gradual integration of this specific organisational field into the municipal administrative structures, together with the extension and intensification of contacts, interactions and cooperation with politicians, civil servants, and other municipal institutions, however, produced an intriguing side-effect. Within Muslims organisations, many of them still firmly connected to their countries of origin, a discussion emerged about future strategies and priorities. Most of the first-generation members clearly prioritised a continuous orientation towards their country of origin over a stronger orientation towards the Netherlands. They were first and foremost Turkish or Moroccan Muslims, not Dutch ones. For the boards of the associations, these ties were also crucial for maintaining their position in the community.

4 The Emergence of Religious Brokers

When I was rereading research material that I collected in the late 1980s and 1990s, for the present book, I noticed that, in my analysis for my dissertation, I had somehow discarded the role of the religious brokers, although they were clearly present in my material. To enter into my research field and to get acquainted with the Islamic landscape in Rotterdam, I had made use of their network and contacts. To get in contact with Muslim organisations around the turn of the decade had been particularly challenging because of the backlash of the so-called Rushdie Affair, which had caused a crisis and seriously hampered the negotiation process.¹¹ As I did not yet have many publications to 'prove' that I was not a journalist in search of mishap and turmoil and that I could be trusted, getting access had been a real challenge. So, my contacts with religious brokers had been very beneficial in the initial stages of my research. I had made use of their contacts but without navigating exclusively on their network. And precisely here I had somehow overlooked the agency of the religious brokers.¹²

11 In 1989 the Iranian leader ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in which he condemned the British-Indian author Salman Rushdie to death because of his book *The Satanic Verses*. Muslims across the world demonstrated against Rushdie and supported Khomeini's fatwa, also in Europe. This has become known as the 'Rushdie Affair'.

12 In hindsight, this is an interesting methodological lesson to learn. Anthropologists in general warn against 'gatekeepers' in the field, people who provide the researcher with valuable contacts and information, but also 'lead' them in a specific direction and try to manage information as much as possible. In this case, I was probably too busy with guarding my independence instead of minutely registering what were in fact the trajectories that these gatekeepers suggested (see also Orsi 1999).

Many of these religious brokers introduced me to mosque associations, not realising how crucial their position was in those days. In the developments I have described above they were essential to keep things going and to bring parties together to the table that would otherwise never meet one another. I have analysed my dissertation material theoretically, taking a social movement approach and this has provided me with the necessary conceptual tools to make sense of the developments I have briefly sketched.

The developments in the city of Rotterdam took place roughly between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. However, the role of religious brokers can only be fully understood when we include the formative years in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the wider political and historical context in which the Islamic landscape developed across Europe. There were migrants with strong familial ties back home, their religious practices were rooted firmly in their countries of origin, and mosques were run by Muslim organisations that also had their origins in the home countries, often controlled by headquarters there. Political and doctrinal dividing lines followed a similar pattern and religious authority was firmly in the hands of traditional ulama, often sent from home countries. Islamic observance and religious life revolved around the mosque and was practised in familial and communal networks based on common origin.

Until the late 1970s, governments defined migrants primarily in terms of ethnic origin, but this had no political consequences. Migrants were seen as members of a temporary labour force who would return to their countries of origin and policies across Europe were based on this idea of temporariness. The creation of religious facilities was therefore seen to be something that should be left solely to private initiatives. No special policies were needed; it was believed to be a self-regulating process (Nielsen 1992; Sunier 1996; Rath et al. 2001).

Towards the end of the 1970s, important developments took place. The number of immigrants increased considerably, mainly through family reunion. These families settled in the old quarters of main town centres and altered the urban landscape considerably. Although returning to their country of origin was still the intention of the vast majority of Muslims, their actual return was postponed—many migrants could not afford to return home. As a consequence, the need for religious facilities increased, especially the need for qualified religious personnel (Landman 1992; Abadan-Unat 2011). Towards the beginning of the 1980s, European governments acknowledged that the majority of the migrants were set to stay in Europe permanently. In some countries, this resulted in elaborate programmes to integrate them; in other, it was basically through general legislation that integration was to take place. The gradual transformation from migrants to settlers also resulted in a stronger emphasis

on the cultural backgrounds of these new settlers. Governments realised that migrants brought with them their cultural and religious baggage.

Developments in the Muslim world, such as the revolution in Iran in 1979 and the assassination of the Egypt's President Sadat in 1987, resulted in the 'Islamisation' of migrants: the over-emphasis on the religious background of migrants as an explanation for their moods and motivations. The customs of migrants with completely different backgrounds were lumped together under the heading of 'Muslim culture'. Although the position of migrants was the result of a complex interplay of economic, social, political, and ideological factors, the assumed particular nature of Islam became a dominant explanatory factor in the course of the 1980s. This discursive shift was observed across Europe.¹³

The 'Islamisation' of policy discourses and the perception of migrants primarily as people with a specific religious background had several consequences. One was that emerging Islamic organisations were increasingly perceived as organisations of migrants with a 'foreign religion'. In my account of the developments in Rotterdam, I have stated that the policy shifts that took place in the 1980s prioritised Muslim organisations over other organisations. These shifts were, of course, motivated by the local developments I have described, but they were undergirded by this discursive shift and changing perception. Cultural and religious specificities were considered a crucial feature of these migrant associations, which determined to a large extent what they did and why.

Rogers Brubaker has observed a massive shift in the image of Islam and Muslims in Europe in the past decade. Although this discursive shift received enormous impetus from the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001, it started much earlier. Brubaker makes an important observation, relevant for the way religious brokers operate.

This massive shift in public representations has profoundly altered the discursive and institutional landscape in which populations of immigrant origin formulate their own self-understandings and identifications. [...] they respond more generally to the experience of being cast, categorized, counted, queried, and held accountable as Muslims in public discourse and private interaction. They respond to the experience of being called upon to account not only for themselves as Muslims, but also for what others say or do as Muslims. [...] The interplay between self-identification

13 There is a considerable body of literature that addresses this discursive transformation from different perspectives. See e.g., Rath and Sunier (1994); Sunier (1996); Göle (2002); Bowen (2004); Brubaker (2013); Mattes (2018); Amir-Moazami (2022).

and other-identification is not simply an interplay between Muslims and non-Muslims; it is also an interplay among Muslims themselves. Muslims are identified and held accountable as Muslims not only by non-Muslims, but also, and just as importantly, by other Muslims. (Brubaker 2013, 3)

The self-understanding of Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s may have not been as multifaceted and complex as it is today, and it was predominantly articulated by religious brokers, but the discursive mechanisms Brubaker describes were basically similar. The religious brokers increasingly took part in societal discussions about the position of migrants; as opinion leaders and representatives they influenced the 'definition of the situation' and articulated the needs of Muslims and what it means to be a Muslim migrant in a non-Islamic society. By stressing the 'foreign' aspect of Islam as part of the cultural heritage of a specific group of migrants, they were able to persuade policymakers that certain facilities were necessary.

This depiction of Islam as a foreign religion has long been, and partly still is, the dominant image of Muslims today. The depiction of Muslim residents as people whose loyalties and orientations were primarily to their country of origin and their fellow countrymen would also lead to remarkable situations. From 1984 onwards, regular information sessions would be organised by the Rotterdam municipality to inform residents about developments in urban renovation and renewal activities. During these meetings, religious brokers would play a leading role and would repeatedly emphasise the importance of religious facilities as the main concern of Muslim residents. Between 1991 and 1994, I attended several of these meetings and observed a group of female residents of Turkish and Moroccan origin, who attended regularly. They kept raising the issue of the standard of the living conditions in their neighbourhoods, the lack of facilities for children and for women.

As local residents they would bring up on every occasion the municipality's negligence in this regard, but they also took issue with the implicit assumption in municipal circles, and reiterated by religious brokers, that, for Muslims, religious facilities were the most important, if not the only, concern. The constant emphasis by many religious brokers that Islam was a religion from abroad reinforced the perception that Muslims were predominantly oriented towards their countries of origin, and thus not very concerned with their current local neighbourhood. As the adage went: 'When you have stacked your suitcases on top of the closet, ready to return home whenever possible, you do not care much for living conditions.'

The idea that a liveable neighbourhood was also in the interest of Muslim residents and that they were in fact putting down roots locally, may today sound

self-evident, and may not at first sight seem relevant to the making of Islamic authority, but I contend that it is. What these women in fact did was to comment on super-imposed notions of what being Muslim entails. By doing so they were reconsidering senses of belonging, senses of place and notions of what it means to be Muslim.

5 The Dissolution of Religious Brokers

In the course of the 1990s, it became increasingly clear that the strategy of the 'enclavisation' of culture and religion, and the almost complete conflation of religion and migrant culture that made Islam a 'foreign' element and Muslims primarily outsiders who lived relatively isolated from mainstream society, had become obsolete. This was an effective strategy as long as the majority of Muslims did in fact fit this image but, in the early 1990s, the image was increasingly questioned.

The societal foundations on which the position of this type of religious broker was based gradually eroded. This had several causes, the most important of which were the increasing upward mobility of young Muslims, and the gradual transformation of Muslims from migrants to permanent residents in European societies. A new generation of collective actors was demanding a place in society as Muslim citizens. They had to convince society that there is no fundamental contradiction between being a Muslim and being a European citizen.

This also had a considerable effect on authority relations in Muslim communities. Young Muslims who had spent most of their lives in Europe felt increasingly discontented with the Islam that was preached by the established ulama, who had absolutely no idea about life in Europe. Notions of religiosity and religious belonging are rooted in current experiences of believers rather than in the conventional exegesis of religious texts. Traditional forms of religious knowledge production and religious teaching no longer matched European life-worlds. Young Muslims in Europe felt more than ever, and increasingly, the need to reflect on the origins of their religion and reconcile them with their own experience. The complexities of modern urban life in which the majority of young Muslims were living, required new competences by both professionals and ordinary Muslims.

In the course of the 1990s, an increasing number of first-generation board members of Muslim organisations and mosque associations were replaced by younger people who had lived in Europe for most of their lives. Many of them were in favour of a stronger orientation towards the country of residence and

investing in better relations its society. Many of my interlocutors during my research in Rotterdam saw opportunities in the new municipal policies for a more sustainable and stable future for Islam in the city.

The 1990s were transitional in this regard and an example from my fieldwork may elucidate this. Some 30 years ago, I witnessed a discussion in a Turkish mosque in the city of Rotterdam about a pressing issue emerging at that time. The chairman of the mosque board, a young man who was a very active resident in the local neighbourhood, proposed organising a small event in the mosque around the iftar at the end of the holy month of Ramadan. He suggested opening up the ritual by inviting a limited number of (non-Muslim) people and a number of key players in the neighbourhood to attend and to join in the subsequent meal in the mosque. The motive behind this initiative was to create more understanding about Muslim rituals and norms, but also to emphasise that the mosque and Muslims in general were an integral and cooperative part of the neighbourhood. In his view, all these activities were in complete accordance with Islam.

Despite the developments in the 1980s, relations between Muslim and non-Muslim residents in the neighbourhoods were far from positive and there was minimal contact. The new urban planning policy developed by the municipality provided mosque organisations with opportunities to improve their position in the neighbourhood by strengthening their network. Some local mosque associations were thinking about how to accomplish this, and this particular Turkish mosque was one of them, but inviting non-Muslims to this very intimate ritual moment was a daring initiative. Today, these kinds of meeting are common practice in many mosques in Europe, but in those days, it was a novelty.

Those who were against the idea of inviting non-Muslims to the ritual end of the month of Ramadan argued that Ramadan is a renewed engagement with the ethical underpinnings of Islam. Introspection and ethical reflection emanating from the physical impositions of the food regime generate ethical sensibilities that tend to wane under ordinary everyday conditions. Some of the participants in the discussion referred to Ramadan as an ethical realm that should, by definition, remain exclusive and extraordinary. One of the participants said:

[...] we have to teach our children what the important aspects of Islam are.
[...] How can they appreciate that when we consider everything accessible for everyone? You take part in Ramadan when you want to become a good Muslim, not because it is an obligation.¹⁴

14 From my fieldnotes (1993).

Those who initially came up with the plan admitted that it took considerable time, passing through doubt and uncertainty, before they arrived at the conclusion that it was neither a breach of Islamic principles, nor a compromise with requirements of the non-Muslim environment, as some opponents would argue. It was, in their words, an ethical choice completely in accordance with the “true meaning of Islam”. At some point, the discussion turned to the question of timing. The transition from the end of Ramadan to the beginning of Eid (*Id al-fitr*) constitutes a clear moment of passage. During Ramadan, Muslims go through a period of contemplation, introspection, and sometimes physical endurance. The beginning of Eid marks the end of this period of effort and is an explicitly festive and joyful event. It is an occasion for inviting friends and family, preparing an abundance of good food and looking forward to the coming year. To share this joy with people outside the Muslim community has now become a regular practice.

For a short period, the issue was exacerbated when the national umbrella organisation to which the local mosque belonged got involved in the discussion after being informed by the members who rejected the plan.¹⁵ In this case, a kind of practical solution was created by organising a public iftar a couple of days before the actual end of Ramadan.

Today, this has become common practice everywhere. Relevant to the problematic at hand is that the discussion not only demonstrated the changing orientations of young Muslims, but also touched on principal religious issues around the question of whether or not such an initiative would be Islamically permissible. Two groups of Muslims interpreted Islamic sources differently and those in favour of inviting non-Muslims added themes that were novel, certainly in that period, to the iftar and to being Muslim.¹⁶

Despite the tremendous transformations that occurred among Muslims in Europe in the course of the 1990s, the legacy of the religious brokers and the specific characteristics of the Islamic landscape that had emerged in the 1980s continued to play a significant role, especially among European policymakers. In the ongoing negotiations about the organisation of imam training facilities in Europe, which I shall address in the next chapter, this is clearly observable.

15 For a more detailed discussion of this case and the circumstances under which it emerged, see Sunier (2018b).

16 In the wake of the tremendous growth in public iftars across the globe that focus on certain themes, such as food and health, the environment, racism and discrimination, Islamic scholars have taken up the issue of the ‘true’ spiritual underpinnings of fasting and the collective breaking of the fast and reformulated them to connect with contemporary circumstances and developments (see e.g., Clot-Garell et al. 2022).

But this legacy and the persistent depiction of Muslims and their organisational infrastructure as a challenge to host societies became manifest in subsequent years. The steady embedding of Muslim organisations into the texture of society as a result of the policy shifts generated not only new opportunities but also challenges. At a time when political empowerment evolved mainly through access in established political parties, some brokers entered into mainstream politics. This caused concerns among politicians that it might lead to competition and debates about the composition of constituencies and their motives for voting for a particular party (see van Heelsum, Fennema and Tillie 2004; Tillie 2006). Let me give two examples. The first is a case about local elections and mobilisation strategies; the second example is broader than voting behaviour and deals with questions of loyalty.

In 1994, municipal elections took place in the Netherlands, in which people who were not holders of a Dutch passport but who had lived in the country for a minimum number of years had the right to vote. At that time, the city of Rotterdam also had a borough system (so-called 'sub-municipalities') that clustered several neighbourhoods where separate elections could be held. These boroughs had an administration and a council in which political parties were represented.¹⁷ Many of these councils had a large proportion of delegates from parties that existed only in that borough and worked with a very specific local programme. In some boroughs, especially those with a considerable number of residents from a migrant background, right-wing parties were often firmly represented. With their anti-immigration and anti-Islam agenda, they claimed to stand up for the so-called 'autochthonous' ('indigenous') population. On the other hand, there were also left-wing parties that developed programmes with a strong emphasis on anti-discrimination, inclusion, and equal rights.

During the local election in 1994, an extreme right-wing party had good prospects of becoming the largest party in the borough of Feijenoord in the southern part of Rotterdam. Left-wing parties were working hard to neutralise the growing influence of this party and, as one of the members of the board of a local mosque, a typical transition figure, had a strong position and an extended network in local politics, he was contacted by the Green Left Party, who asked if he would be willing to use his influence among the migrant population to motivate them to vote. In general, among migrants, especially elderly people, there was a low turnout during elections. In return, the board member was given a very high place on the party's candidate list.

17 In 2014, the Dutch electoral system for sub-municipalities was abolished.

This decision caused considerable unrest and friction within the party. Those opposing the plan argued that such acts of 'political patronage' did not belong in a leftist party. Those in favour of the plan argued that extraordinary circumstances needed extraordinary strategies. The issue was settled with a compromise. The board member, who had been member of the party for quite some time, which gave him some credit, had his name moved a few places down the list. After the elections, it became apparent that the strategy had been successful. A relatively high number of people from a migrant background cast their votes and the right-wing party only managed to win a very small number of seats. However, this did not settle the issue as it led to a discussion about the loyalties and orientations of migrants and the role Muslim organisations would allegedly play in creating 'parallel societal structures' (Sunier and Landman 2014; see also Schiffauer 2008).

The second example also shows the consistent obsession politicians have with 'parallel structures' and took place in 1995. A meeting was organised in Rotterdam about voluntary work in mosques and neighbourhood participation. During the meeting, a politician raised concerns on the alleged existence of parallel societal structures among Muslims, and expressed his worries that many Muslims (for him meaning people with a migration background) continued hardly to participate in mainstream society but instead live almost exclusively in networks, associations and societal structures that functioned relatively independently from society and were controlled by community leaders, religious figures and organisational structures that were for a large part beyond state control. The more services and support these networks provided to their constituency, the more dependent individual Muslims would become on these structures, and the more isolated they would tend to be from the rest of society. Not only would this kind of dependency hinder individuals from exercising their agency in societal matters and making their own decisions, so the politician argued, but it would also make their integration into society increasingly difficult.

According to the politician, local Muslim associations might publicly express their willingness to participate in mainstream society, but in fact they spent most of their energy and time in religious activities for their own community. Instead of encouraging young people to socialise with non-Muslims, take part in society, and develop their own opinions, they locked them up in a closed community. This, according to the politician, was the side effect of the policies that had been developed in the 1980s and the stronger position Muslim organisations had acquired as a result.

A representative of a Muslim organisation tried to explain that the politician had failed to differentiate between active members of Muslim organisa-

tions and Muslim communities in general. The developments in the 1980s that had led to more negotiations and closer cooperation and the founding of SPIOR were major steps, but it would be unrealistic to assume that they would immediately result in the majority of Muslims embracing new worldviews. For them to consider themselves Dutch Muslims would take much more time and, according to the representative, expecting quick results was utterly unrealistic.

This argument completely failed to impress the politician, because he believed that activities developed by Islamic organisations were still mainly of a religious nature and not oriented toward integration into society. He thought they engaged mainly with fellow Muslims and were predominantly inwardly oriented (Sunier 2019).

It could be argued to a certain extent that the networks and social relations that religious brokers built up in the 1980s were indeed examples of parallelism. The socio-organisational dimension of a parallel society concerns networks, connections, informal structures and organisational forms. It refers to the relative autonomy and internal dynamics of social connections and networks and to the stratification of society on the basis of socio-economic, spatial, institutional, and functional differences. The relationship between socio-economic factors and (ethnic or religious) community-building is complicated. What begins as a complex of personal networks built up during migration to Europe may develop into the basis for ethnic or religious organisation. This is what could be observed in the 1980s (see also Werbner and Anwar 1991).

However, despite the fact that the circumstances in which these mechanisms evolved are fundamentally different from present-day circumstances, it transpires that concerns on the part of European governments about 'parallel structures', inward orientations, and outward loyalties among Muslims, continue to be very tenacious even today. There is a persistent assumption that the main cause for this situation is often attributable to the 'continuous influence of traditional culture' and the 'bad' influence of countries of origin, which combine to hamper integration.

The term 'parallel community' became prominent around the beginning of the twenty-first century and appeared in the opinion pages of newspapers and weeklies, in policy notes and public debates, and later on social media. In these comments, concerns are articulated about Muslim communities and the allegedly undesirable practices of their organisations and leaders. While 'parallel community' is seldom clearly defined, it usually refers to supposedly closed communities that isolate themselves from society, use their own networks and channels and apply their own values and norms, which are allegedly at odds with those of mainstream society (Schiffauer 2008; Ceylan 2010). In the debate, the term has often replaced the older term 'segregation', but with

the same implications and assumed effects. Muslims are generally depicted as 'internally oriented' (see e.g., SCP 2012). The logic is that the stronger these parallel communities are, the more they will hinder integration.

6 Conclusions

The case I have analysed in this chapter covers a relatively limited period of time, roughly from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, and deals with a specific type of figures, which I have called the religious broker. The case reveals that temporal circumstances, factors, and developments that seemingly had little or nothing to do with Islam played a vital role. On the one hand, religious brokers operated under frontier conditions (see the Introduction) and made use of the opportunities and circumstances. There was a lack of knowledge on all sides, there was hardly any policy or legislation on Islam and Muslims, and the development of the Islamic landscape was in its initial stage. Muslims were perceived as a relatively isolated category of people with certain needs and desires but without the proper social, political, and cultural capital to realise them. This created specific patterns of redistribution of resources, and specific hierarchies, which generated specific forms of leadership and power configurations. But on the other hand, religious brokers actively maintained and reproduced the status quo, and played a crucial role in building up the Islamic infrastructure and putting Muslims and Islam on the political agenda.

It would, however, be too simple to characterise the role of religious brokers only in terms of entrepreneurship and instrumentality, or to regard them simply as community leaders. It is important to take into consideration that religious brokers had an affinity with Islam, if only because they were themselves Muslims. Their position was grounded in the specific ways in which religious knowledge was deployed and proliferated. A number of the religious brokers were employed by Islamic organisations, others were volunteers and their activities for Muslim communities went alongside with a regular job elsewhere. It is thus important to emphasise the reciprocal character of the relations between the religious brokers and Muslim populations, in which trust was an essential element.

In addition to the personal positioning of religious brokers in Muslim communities, it is important to look at their role in the making of Islamic authority. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the centre of gravity with regard to Islamic authority and knowledge production was the Islamic movements that originated in the countries of origin. These movements had built up an organisational infrastructure in Europe, but Islam in the country of origin was Muslims' main point

of reference. Transnational networks, together with the strong familial, financial, and affective ties with the country or region of origin on the part of the majority of the Muslim population, constituted the bedrock of the position of imams, and that of mosque associations. Being Muslim was inextricably linked up with homeland loyalties and the Islamic traditions and practices that were familiar in countries of origin. These links and normative frames were emphatically underlined in khutba's, the weekly Friday sermons, and some religious brokers, especially those with a good knowledge of Islamic sources, also endorsed this connection. The main duty for a Muslim in Europe was to keep that tie alive and governments in the countries of origin also played an important role (Sunier et al. 2016). This was, in short, how Islam at that time was 'made to work'.

The Politics of Imam Training: The Domestication of Islam in Europe

1 Introduction

Look ... to really master the content of sources, understand them and make sense of them, is of course the most crucial requirement in order to be able to do your work as an imam or counsellor properly. But after that the most important skill is to be able to apply these sources to contemporary situations. And again, of course you have probably heard that a lot of times and you will find it in every standard textbook about the role of an imam or an *alim*.¹ But it is only then that the really hard part begins. Here, I see many students and young preachers making mistakes. Not just because they do not yet have enough experience, but because they begin at the very end of a source: this is what it says, period. But applying sources properly means that you have to find out how the final message, the commandment, the recommendation has become what it is. What is the intention behind a commandment of God, or from an alim? That is not handbook instruction; that is years of hard work and building up experience, making mistakes, trying again. If people ask me for advice on how to acquire that skill, frankly I do not have an answer. Look around you, use your ears, eyes, and brains. Talk to people as much as possible, be in your community, in your bubble, but also outside that. Many imams who come from abroad still misjudge the complexity of the job.²



In this chapter, I address a politically delicate issue that has kept European governments, and Muslims, busy for almost four decades: the training of imams

1 'Alim', meaning religious scholar, is the singular of 'ulama'.

2 Quote from an interview with imam Jamal Ahajjaj (March 2022).

for mosques in Europe.³ I shall demonstrate that the training of imams for the European ‘market’ is a highly politicised issue involving many different parties and stakeholders, often with clashing interests. The ‘politics of imam training’, as I call it, is ultimately about religious authority. It not only provides an abundance of evidence about different stakeholders’ often opposing views on the legitimacy and quality of religious professionals, but also lays bare the power dynamics and the different issues at stake regarding the fundamental question of who decides what it means to be a ‘good’ imam (see Birt 2006).

The increasing involvement of European governments in the training of imams is part of their attempts to control and ‘domesticate’ Islam. Domestication in this sense concerns not only the organisation of training arrangements, but also intervention in the content of the curriculum, and ultimately the interference of European governments in Qur’anic hermeneutics. Luis Hernández Aguilar and Zubair Ahmed (2020, 88) refer to this as “policing the Qur’an”. They write: “[...] textual governmentality seeking to discipline deviant readings by legitimising state-approved interventions into the Qur’anic text.” Thus, the question of who is in charge of imam training programmes ultimately revolves around issues of Islamic authority and it demonstrates the active involvement of stakeholders far beyond the confines of internal Islamic circles.

One way of addressing the making of Islamic authority is in fact to focus on the status of imams and their position in the community. Islamic authority in this case is mainly associated with Islamic theological expertise and scriptural proficiency, but negotiations about the training of imams have important implications for more than the question of what it means to be a ‘good imam’ in strictly theological terms. As I shall demonstrate, from a Muslim perspective the key requirement for Islamic authority is legitimacy. This is broader than the quality of the training curriculum and concerns the question of whether local Muslim communities accept a particular imam. The quotation with which I started this chapter is from an interview I held in March 2022 with an imam who was born and raised in the Netherlands and had worked for over twenty years, especially with young people. In a nutshell, he argued throughout the interview that being an imam entails more than being familiar with sources of knowledge and having some additional institutional training as a pastoral worker; it is practical experience gained through years of work that gives an imam the legitimacy to act as an imam.

3 Parts of this chapter have been published as an article, but with a different overall question and with a different approach (Sunier 2021b).

As I have argued in the introduction to this book, authority-making is particularly salient under conditions of change and transformation, and in unprecedented circumstances. More generally, to understand the complexities, ramifications, and intricacies of the process of authority-making, contextual factors are of absolute importance. The migration of Muslims to Europe after WW II was such a change, and it made a considerable impact in people's lives. The migrants arrived in a new and unknown society, and they soon realised that living in the new environment had implications for issues of faith. From the early stages of migration onwards, Muslims reflected on how to deal with these new circumstances (Abaaziz 2021). Despite the relatively isolated position of early Muslim migrants in Europe, they were in need of guidance and answers to questions implied by living in this new environment.

From early on, religious authorities in their countries of origin issued fatwas about Muslims' situations and the questions that were prompted by living in new and unfamiliar circumstances (Shadid and van Koningsveld 2002; Caeiro 2010; 2011). As early as the mid-1960s, the Turkish High Council of Religious Affairs published a booklet with answers to questions raised by Turkish Muslims in Europe (den Exter 1990). Imams who started to work among Muslims in Europe were also confronted with sometimes unprecedented circumstances. An imam is primarily the leader of the ritual prayer, and in principle, any Muslim may be allowed to act as leader of the prayer without having thorough knowledge of the sources. In most cases, however, the imam is somebody who has an adequate knowledge of the sources.

The function and tasks of imams in Muslim majority countries and in Europe are basically similar, namely, to act as a pastor for the community and to advise on issues related to Islam. In practice, however, there are important differences with regard to their tasks, their level of knowledge and not least with regard to their status (Haddad and Lumis 1987; Shadid and van Koningsveld 2002; Boender 2007). In the experience of many imams in Europe, their role and function in the community are much more extended and demanding than in many Muslim majority countries. Imams in Europe combine several tasks that are usually separate in Muslim majority countries. Apart from ritual and pastoral responsibilities, they are often important actors in the communication and application of Islamic knowledge; and they often act as figureheads and spokespersons for Islam. Their tasks are multifaceted and volatile and there is less 'routine' to rely on. Specialised knowledge and experience are very important.

With regard to the Muslim community they serve, they must often work out for themselves the theological underpinnings of the decisions they make in sometimes unprecedented situations, and the guidance they give to the com-

munity. Theological centres, which usually provide such theological input in Muslim majority countries, are still scarce in Europe, or they are contested and involved in mutual competition and struggle (Bano 2018b). This implies that imams either continue to rely on institutions in their countries of origin or look for alternative sources. As one of my interlocutors, an imam himself, stated:

An imam must be a pastor and an alim at the same time; he has to find answers in the sources all by himself. Some imams are of course alims and they have more knowledge of the sources than an average imam, but many have only very general knowledge, not enough to answer sometimes difficult and complex questions. This is time consuming and thus an extra burden, but a very important one. I am sure that there are well-qualified imams here who also struggle with this, not least when they are not very familiar with the situation here. When people approach you with questions and you say that this is not your task, people look for answers elsewhere. I like this work and I like to figure things out, but I assure you that that is not how all imams do their job. Let me give you an example. When a young Muslim student comes to me and asks if it is okay for him to go to a coffee shop with fellow students, what he or she is in fact asking for is legitimation based on the sources, not to hide behind them, but to understand how to act. Well ..., that is not an easy question.⁴

European policy makers regard imams as the key to getting access to various Muslim populations in their country and as being instrumental in preventing radicalisation and streamlining the integration process. Consequently, imams are saddled with many predominantly 'external' tasks and their role extends far beyond their own local community. In addition, imams are very often compelled to take part in public debates in the media to explain thorny issues (Boender and de Ruiter 2018). These different, often contradictory requirements, make their position complex and delicate. As Hansjörg Schmid (2020, 66) rightly asks: "What is the situation of imams at the interface of a multitude of stakeholder interests?"

Instead of discussing the position of the imam as an authority figure in general, I shall focus on the discussions, negotiations, arrangements, and opportunities around the training of imams set to be appointed in mosques in Europe. Conflicting requirements and expectations in particular have turned the training of imams into a pivotal issue. One of the main reasons for this is

4 From an interview with imam Rafik Dahman (February 2019).

that, despite the extensive educational infrastructures provided by knowledge centres abroad and the many initiatives taken by various stakeholders to set up educational programmes in Europe, the training of imams is still an unstructured and untrodden field, or at least one that is under construction. As I shall show, the training of imams provides an excellent focus by which to unravel the process of Islamic authority-making and the role that various stakeholders, not least European governments, play in this process.

I shall first provide a historical account of the quest for imams in Europe and an overview of the initiatives to set up educational facilities for their training and explain how this quest is related to the evolving Islamic religious landscape in Europe and the interests of various stakeholders. I shall then give an account of existing and intended initiatives to train imams in various European countries. I shall pay special attention to the role of European states, as their involvement in training activities is increasing. Opportunities, discussions, and legal and financial arrangements differ considerably from country to country. In some, the government is hardly or not at all actively involved; in others, the government is planning to set up state-sponsored training infrastructures.

This will be followed by a discussion of the various, often opposing, perspectives on this theme that can be found in the literature and I shall then set out my own approach to the politics of imam training. I do this later in the chapter because the analytical concepts I use and the argument I unfold can be better understood after the overview of initiatives, stakeholders, and developments in the Islamic landscape.

The training of imams is still largely organised by state institutions in the countries of origin, or by Muslims communities themselves. From the time European governments realised that most Muslim migrants would become permanent residents, they developed a keen interest in monitoring their activities. Initially the motivations for this were very diverse and not overly urgent, but the urgency was exacerbated after 9/11 and particularly since 2015, when radical young Muslims travelled off to Islamic State dominated territory. In addition, the growing numbers of online preachers and the dissemination of Islamic knowledge on the internet further strengthened the urgency felt by administrative authorities to monitor the work of imams (Geaves 2008; Peter 2018).

The political interests of European governments are obvious and often explicitly articulated. In November 2020, shortly after the terrorist attacks in Vienna, the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, called for the creation of a European institute to train imams as a means to curb hate speech and prevent terrorism. As Michel stated:

It is important to be firm about this. I think, for example, that we should have debates at the European level in connection with the idea that was raised some time ago of setting up a European institute for the training of imams, to ensure that this message of tolerance and openness can be conveyed at the European level. (von der Burchard and Momtaz 2020)⁵

This involvement of stakeholders goes further than educational logistics and arrangements, quality assessment of training and the professionalisation of religious personnel; it also involves attempts to control the curriculum and the organisation of training with the aim of exerting influence on Muslim communities. The figure of the imam, provided he is trained in the ‘proper’ way, according to the various stakeholders, epitomises the figurehead who guides the Muslim community in the desired direction and is qualified to act as a religious authority figure. As Farid el-Asri (2018, 102) argues: “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 choices of scientific disciplines, and the filtering of theological currents.” This aspect of the European involvement is still rarely addressed systematically in academic literature.

2 The Quest for Imams

Initially, imams were only brought in from countries of origin to officiate on special occasions such as Ramadan. In Rotterdam, where I conducted research, discord in the early 1980s about the choice of an imam for Ramadan started fierce competition between various Turkish Islamic movements operating in Europe. With the opening of mosques, a more permanent supply of imams was needed.

As I have argued in Chapter 1, the allegiance of first-generation migrants to religious authorities was inextricably entangled with loyalty to their country of origin and with familiar conventional routines and events. Insofar as they needed religious advice about new situations, they made use of religious authority facilities in the country of origin or other Muslim majority coun-

5 In 2009 a heated debate broke out in the Netherlands about the newly appointed army chaplain for Muslims. The candidate had been publicly rather critical of the Dutch government and the way in which Muslims were treated. Despite the much-invoked separation of religion and state, right-wing politicians demanded that the Ministry of Defense withdraw the candidate (*NRC*, April 10, 2009).

tries. Questions were of a general nature, not very different from those they would have asked back home. For this first generation, interaction with the surrounding society was superficial and incidental. Muslim communities lived relatively isolated lives and consisted predominantly of men (Sunier et al. 2016). The local mosque was a place to perform religious duties, but also a place with a strong local function, where Muslims from the same ethnic or regional background would meet.

By the early 1980s, several European governments were negotiating with governments in the countries of origin about imams for mosques in Europe in order to meet the growing need for qualified guidance in religious matters. Countries of origin such as Turkey and Morocco had a well-organised and qualified training infrastructure. In particular, agreements were made with Diyanet for certified imams, who had considerable knowledge of Islamic sources, to be sent to Europe (Sunier et al. 2011). European governments hoped that these 'imported' imams would function as intermediaries between Muslim communities and the new society. Moreover, they were supposed to be allies in the pursuit of spreading a 'moderate brand' of Islam (Rath et al. 2001; Sunier et al. 2011; Hernández Aguilar 2018).

2.1 *Initial Years*

Initially, it looked as if the task and functions of imams were largely similar to those in the countries of origin and would be confined to the mosque, but that soon turned out not to be the case. Their activities would be extended far beyond the walls of the mosque as leaders of the local Muslim community. They became the first and often only point of contact between their congregations and local authorities. Local mosques became community centres where migrants would meet fellow countrymen (Sunier 1996), unlike in their countries of origin, where this social function of imams and mosques did not exist, or at least not to such an extent.

This exposes an intriguing phenomenon. In countries of origin and especially in small communities, the imam was traditionally a member of the local community, someone who knows his community more than simply on the basis of his function as imam, and this is still the case in many respects. In Turkey, however, imams in local mosques are appointed by the Diyanet and receive a salary from the state. Imams who were recruited often came from distant regions in order to ensure that they had enough separation from the local community. In addition, the republican regime intended to strictly define roles and functions. Imams were to carry out purely ritual tasks and the khutba was written by the Diyanet. As a result, functions and activities that traditionally came together in the mosque were pulled apart and the mosque was to be only

a place of worship. In this way, the regime also wanted to weaken the attraction of the mosque as a place where critics of the republic could meet. To achieve this, the regime worked together closely with the Islamic elite in the cities to promote an orthodox version of Islam (Gözaydın 2009; Bruce 2019). In other countries, such as in Morocco, similar frictions can be observed and tensions between official religious authorities and local imams have existed for a long time (Eickelman 1985; Sunier et al. 2016; Bovenkamp 2017; Abaaziz 2021).

In Europe, mosques increasingly became real community centres, but for reasons different from those that pertained in the village mosques that had been left behind. In order to preserve a sense of home and a notion of belonging, mosques became places where people, often from the same region, gathered for all kinds of additional activities and services. In the case of Turkish mosques, the functions that had been forcibly separated by the republican regime came together again in the circumstances of migration.

Reflecting the European experience, the Diyanet launched a so-called pilot project in 2009 to open libraries, internet centres, classrooms, tea shops and multi-purpose rooms in 200 mosques across Turkey—activities, and facilities that had by then already existed for many years in most mosques in Europe. In addition, the Diyanet installed new technological facilities in these mosques to provide online religious services, websites were created for several mosques and the construction of mosques was adapted to enable women and disabled people to attend more easily. The staff of these pilot mosques were educated in public relations and new technologies were used to ensure that religious information and even Qur'an courses would be available through the internet. In this way, groups that found it difficult to attend (such as the elderly and disabled), or who were not sufficiently contacted by traditional outreach methods (particular groups of young Muslims) could now be included.

These plans were heavily criticised by secularists, who argued that mosques would become Ottoman *külliyes*, complexes of buildings with a variety of religious and social functions and that this initiative would undo the 'separation of religion and society' and weaken the strict boundaries between the mosque and the outside world. It was interpreted as a threat to the secular foundations of the republic because all kinds of recreational, educational, and social activities would be brought under the control of a religious institution (Sunier et al. 2011, 67). The boards of mosques in Europe reacted to the plans with some amusement. For a long time, they had tried to convince Diyanet in Turkey that a mosque is more than just a room for prayer and sermon, and now they had become the 'good practice'.

This case is instructive as the questions of what the function of a mosque entails, and what the tasks of imams are, are not just a matter of religious

logistics and normative obligations; various dimensions of religious practice converge, and this influences how the position of imams is perceived.

In the 1990s, it became increasingly clear that, although the imams imported from the countries of origin may have been effective in the 1980s for the first generation of migrants, but they were not very appealing to the younger generation. These imams may have been well-versed in Islamic theology, but they had hardly any knowledge about the country where they would be employed—knowledge that would become increasingly important for keeping in touch with the next generation. The routines and practices that served the first generation were much less useful and adequate for younger Muslims who had spent most of their lives in Europe. Young Muslims want religious guidance from professionals who have a background and experiences similar to their own. I have addressed this dilemma in the previous chapter.

A related issue that bears relevance to the changing position in society and the authoritative status of imams among Muslims concerns the role of imams as counsellors in family affairs and in property matters. Activities such as mediation, reconciliation and (marital) counselling in family disputes belong to the regular tasks of an imam, often assisted by Islamic scholars. Like all the functions of imams, these too have become much more complicated in Europe. Problems related to property and the legal status of Muslims, in the changing circumstances in which Muslims live and the many demands and constantly evolving mediation roles they present, pose a considerable challenge for practising imams. Many Muslims who wish to solve their problems according to Islamic norms and Islamic law, often turn to an imam when there is a personal crisis. The religious authority and knowledge of an imam, in combination with his role as a trusted mediator, can guarantee a certain intimacy and closeness of family life and a shielding from the outside world. The imam is said to be able to get to the heart of the matter fairly quickly, without disputants having to make their shortcomings explicitly public, and thereby run the risk of losing their reputation and good name or permanently damaging family ties (Muradin 2022).

In many countries in Europe, there is hardly any coordinated activity or attempt to use the existing though scattered knowledge about the experiences of imams in these matters and to make use of jurisprudence. Thus, as Mahmoud Jaraba shows, in Germany, the registration of Islamic marriages, including the aim of building up a jurisprudence and formalising legal issues, is still very rare. To avoid unnecessary problems and protracted disputes, Jaraba (2022, 315) proposes the professionalisation of “[...] *nikah* practices and setting up sound mosque administrations and professionally run archives”.

In some other countries, there have been initiatives to formalise divorce according to Islamic law. Secular law in European countries does not recog-

nise Islamic marriages as formal legal marriages. A marriage is only recognised under the law of the country when it is registered as such, and Islamic marriages are considered completely private. However, when a couple want to divorce according to Islamic law, the issue must be settled properly.

There is an increasing number of studies dealing with the legal opportunities Muslim communities have in matters of family law within the legal systems of different West-European countries.⁶ These studies show not only how complex and broad this field is, but also its very sensitive and contested nature. In contrast, some authors have made allegations that counselling practices are in fact 'hidden sharia courts' that try to replace secular law with Islamic law (see e.g., Zee 2016). When Susan Rutten, in her inaugural speech at the University of Maastricht, Netherlands, argued that Dutch law provides enough space to include some sections of Islamic law, without in any way undermining its secular basis, she was heavily attacked by critics in politics and the media (see Rutten 2017).

2.2 *New Developments, New Requirements*

These and related issues concerning the place of Islamic law and its application in European societies have no doubt become all the more urgent in situations of profound societal transformation. The issue involves more than the coordination of local-level practices and touches on the broader area of how the position of Islam in Europe is connected to fundamental legal issues. In this, the politics of imam training is a crucial part.

The emergence of a vocal and highly educated generation of pious young Muslims, born and raised in Europe, also calls for radically different forms and application of religious knowledge. They have a fundamentally different position in society than early migrants; their engagement, as residents, students, and employees, with the non-Islamic environment is complex and multifaceted and generates unprecedented ambiguities. They are not in need of guidance in a world they do not know, as was the case for the first generation; rather, they have questions about moral dilemmas engendered by their close engagement with society. Today, ethical issues and dilemmas are being expressed and explored much more explicitly.⁷ As Martijn de Koning (2008) has shown, many young Muslims want to do away with the cultural practices, routines, and beliefs that their parents brought with them from their country of origin,

6 See e.g., Rohe (2007); Hanshaw (2010); Ahdar and Aroney (2011); Büchler (2011); Berger (2012); Griffith-Jones (2013); Rutten, Deogratias, and Kruiniger (2019).

7 See e.g., Ramadan (1999); Bracke (2008); Schielke and Debevec (2012); Janmohamed (2016); Beekers and Kloos (2018); Sunier (2018b); Kesvani (2019); Beekers (2021).

and which they ‘erroneously’ considered Islamic (see also Abaaziz 2021). The quest for a ‘pure’ Islam is their answer to a growing mismatch between experience and guidance. This has shaken up the Islamic landscape and undermined established institutional and authoritative structures. The ‘traditional’ imam was simply no longer equipped to handle these dilemmas adequately. In the early 1990s, young Muslims were already taking initiatives to look for alternative guidance.

The established centres of Islamic learning in Muslim-majority countries were hardly able to respond effectively to changing circumstances and to what it means to live as a religious minority. To address ethical questions adequately, several initiatives on the part of Muslim actors emerged to guide ‘European Muslims’ and a discussion arose about Islamic jurisprudence for minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyat*). One of the earlier initiatives is the Dublin-based European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), founded in 1997 to develop a centre for religious guidance for Muslims in Europe. But there were many more of such initiatives, competing with each other for audiences. Many of them also issue fatwas regularly.⁸

Parallel to these issues, and related to post-migration developments, new technologies and modes of religious communication became increasingly salient in the 1990s. A new phenomenon emerged: the Muslim television preacher, reminiscent of the Christian preachers in the United States. The late Qatar-based Islamic scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi rose to prominence in the mid-1990s, when he presented a religious programme on Al-Jazeera, called ‘Sharia and Life’ (Gräf and Skovgaard-Petersen 2009, 2). Al-Qaradawi gained enormous popularity and authority worldwide, because he met the needs of many young Muslims including those in Europe (Caeiro and al-Saify 2009, 112). In his programme, he discussed topical issues, answered questions and commented on events in the world. In this way, he involved young Muslim throughout the world in a novel sense of community. His format would later become the reference point for other public Islamic scholars. Al-Qaradawi was also one of the first to use the internet to spread his message.

Digitisation and the spread of online knowledge platforms, which really took off in the 2000s, was the next step in the development of communication technologies. The spread of new media has tremendously increased the supply of Islamic knowledge and the number of voices that can be heard, but it has also affected modes of engagement between preachers and audiences

8 As this issue falls partly outside the scope of this chapter, I refer to the extended body of literature about this topic. See e.g., Bunt (2000); Hallaq (2009); Caeiro (2010; 2013; 2019); van Bruinessen and Allievi (2011); Zaman (2012); Bano (2018a; 2018b).

and challenged 'traditional' imams (Mandaville 2007; Turner 2007; Bunt 2018). As Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson (2003, xii) state: "[...] new media expand to shape the public sphere increasingly as a marketplace of ideas, identities, and discourses". Subsequent research has corroborated this trend (see e.g., Calderini 2008; Becker 2010; 2013; Kesvani 2019).

It has often been claimed that the development of new media has rendered the need for religious guidance obsolete among young Muslims, because they can find answers to their questions online. The 'individualisation thesis' predicted a transformation of religiosity among Muslims in Europe, implying that the collective and normative Islamic traditions brought to Europe by migrants would dissolve, to be replaced by privatised forms of religiosity.⁹

This proposition can be refuted on several grounds. The increase of online knowledge platforms, often operating on a global scale, has created a new challenge. In 'traditional' communicative settings, no alternative sources of knowledge were available, or at least they were not known to most Muslims. Knowledge transmission occurred in personal and routinised settings in which imams were commonly considered as trustworthy persons. In a situation in which there is an abundance, even overkill of knowledge providers, the question arises of where to find authentic knowledge, how to be sure that suppliers can be trusted and have the 'right' knowledge, and whom to ask. Thus, the quest among Muslims for truthful and trustworthy knowledge and guidance has become all the more urgent (Sunier 2021a; 2021b).

Recent research shows that young Muslims often use several different platforms, but simultaneously rely on the 'local' imam for guidance. Digital communication technologies do not replace 'real-life' leaders; they have simply diversified the field and personal interaction remains a crucial element. As one of my interlocutors argued: "[...] Basically three qualities are crucial and indispensable: knowledge of sources is self-evident, but without life experience and trust among your constituency, your knowledge remains book knowledge."¹⁰ This is indicative of new emergent modalities of user practices and ethics of usage and interaction (cf. Meyer 2006).

Thus, an important task for contemporary imams is to remain connected to the constantly changing Muslim population and to engage with their life worlds in a relevant and meaningful way. So, apart from the popularity of 'cyber imams', the demand for 'real life' imams who are trained in Europe and live there, has recently become stronger. In all European countries, one can observe

9 For a more detailed discussion of the 'individualisation thesis', see the Introduction.

10 Interview with imam C. in the city of Groningen (December 2021).

young popular imams born and raised there, who often act as public figures and appear in the media (see e.g., Boender and de Ruiter 2018). In short, personal religious guidance continues to be important and this makes the training of imams all the more urgent and topical.¹¹

2.3 *Training as the Political Pivot*

Muslim stakeholders, and organisers and providers of Islamic knowledge have their own motives for staying involved and maintaining their networks. For established Muslim organisations, well-trained imams and religious teachers constitute a crucial means of exerting influence among the quickly changing Muslim communities in Europe. They are often ambivalent about the active interference of governments and consider the recruitment and training of imams an internal affair. 'Traditional' providers of Islamic knowledge, such as Al-Azhar, the Diyanet, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Deobandis, have stepped up their efforts to cater for growing global demand, and new platforms have emerged.¹²

As I have stated above, European governments, too, consider the training of imams for the domestic market a crucial tool for monitoring developments in Muslim communities. Involvement in the development of an educational infrastructure is the logical strategy. How should we understand the longstanding interest of European governments in the production, dissemination and teaching of Islamic knowledge and the training of imams? The training of imams must be analysed within the broader political and historical context of the place of Islam in European societies. There are basically three motives for European governments' interest in the training of imams: to align religious activity with the secular-liberal state project; to actively involve imams in the government's integration goals; and to prevent the radicalisation of young Muslims.

Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2007) link the Western concern with religious education to anxieties about radicalisation among Muslims, and trace this back to the moment the Taliban entered Kabul in 1996. However, during the 1980s, concerns were already being expressed by European govern-

11 A quick internet search yields a considerable number of sites that address issues of Muslim leadership and guidance. Many of them use the language customary in much contemporary leadership discourse.

12 See e.g., Gräf and Skøvgaard-Petersen (2009); van Bruinessen and Allievi (2011); Meijer and Bakker (2012); Bano (2018a; 2018b). Masooda Bano explores these developments and argues that, rather than a decrease in centres of knowledge production, we see a tremendous increase and diversification.

ments about the role of imams, although worries about radicalisation were much less prominent at that time (see Shadid and van Koningsveld 1991; 2002; Sunier et al. 2011). Before then, in the 1970s and early 1980s, European governments hardly bothered about the activities of Muslims in this regard, because the latter were expected to either return to their countries of origin or assimilate into the host society. The training, recruitment and employment of imams was considered an internal affair and was entirely left to the Muslim communities and their organisations.

In the 1980s, when it became clear that most of the migrants, who had by then brought their families to Europe, would stay there permanently, government interest in the quality of imams became stronger. The idea of a 'European' Islam was not yet very prominent at that time, but the desire on the part of European governments to have imams who would play a constructive part in the integration of migrants became increasingly manifest. In the course of the 1980s, the role of imams in the integration of Muslims became an important political issue and the recruitment, quality and opinions of imams became a focal point in integration policies.¹³

In the 1990s, European governments stepped up their efforts to play an active role in the training of imams (Nielsen 1999; Hashas et al. 2018; Duderija and Rane 2019). A side effect of this increased involvement was that the role and function of the imam was 'stretched' and adapted to evolving circumstances and policy goals. In policy documents, the imam, as a theological expert, spiritual and ethical guide, and community leader, was being 'reinvented' and modelled after the municipal civil servant, instrumental in fostering integration into the host society (Jouanneau 2018; Schmid 2020).

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001, the prevention of radicalisation among young Muslims in Europe and countering extremism have become priority issues on the political agendas of European governments and imams have become their desired primary tool (Haddad and Balz 2008). Attempts to initiate new training programmes commissioned by European governments are part of this agenda, though no concrete schemes have been developed and, since the early 2000s, several plans have been formulated for how to use imams for that goal. This is because, among other reasons, the accommodation and organisation of religion is one of the policy areas in which EU-member states demand absolute national autonomy. At a national level, numerous initiatives have actually been taken by several governments

13 See e.g., Rath et al. (2001); Boender (2007); Rosenow-Williams (2012); Sunier et al. (2016); Hashas et al. (2018); Hernández Aguilar (2018); Bruce (2019); Sözeri (2021).

across Europe with the aim of becoming involved in the educational institution infrastructure for imams that has been set up by Muslims in past decades.¹⁴

According to Yahya Birt (2006, 688), in the eyes of British policy makers, the post-9/11 'good imam' embodies "civic virtues, interfaith tolerance, professional managerial and pastoral skills, possibly become involved in inner city regeneration, work as an agent of national integration (most importantly on behalf of his young unruly flock), and wage a jihad against extremism."

A persistent misconception is propounded by the media and politicians that imams in Europe are only concerned to prevent radicalisation because they are put under pressure by European administrative authorities. However, these allegations can easily be refuted. Public speeches delivered by theologians and spokespersons of Muslim organisations on many occasions have repeatedly emphasised that the prevention of radicalisation is not just a matter of content but also of connection to young Muslims. Many imams expressed their worries in 2015 about the group of young Muslims who joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, but they also had to admit that they did not have the tools and skills they needed to connect with those young people. Nevertheless, there is an apparent urgency on the part of European governments to turn imams in a desired direction.

Established imams in regular mosques face constant challenges in this regard. Over recent decades, I have had numerous talks with imams who had built up strong relations with young Muslims. They all emphasised that the 'traditional' up-front way to educate young Muslims is not always successful. As one of my interlocutors stated:

Rather than assuming that there is just one correct interpretation of the sources that should be taught the same way under all circumstances, you have to start with building a relationship with your audience. That takes time and implies more than what is being done in up-frontal teaching settings in an hour or so.¹⁵

However, as many of them stated, administrative authorities at the local and national levels are apparently not very concerned with the intricacies of the pastoral work of imams unless it is directly related to their agenda.

14 For an overview, see e.g., Fregosi (1998); Nielsen (1999); Husson (2007); Drees, and van Koningsveld (2008); Hussain, and Tuck (2010); Aslan and Windish (2012); Hashas et al. (2018); Boender and de Ruiter (2018); Valdemar Vinding, and Chib (2020).

15 From an interview with imam Rafik Dahman (February 2019).

One of the consequences of the stronger emphasis on radicalisation prevention has been that the involvement of countries of origin and other countries in the Islamic world in the supply and training of imams has been met with increasing suspicion by European politicians. It was thought that their involvement would not only foster ongoing connections with countries of origin and thus thwart integration efforts but would also constitute an effective means for foreign governments to exert influence on Muslims in Europe. One of the most sensitive issues in this regard is the financial support provided by foreign funding agencies (Bayraklı and Hafez 2017). This has made the control of imam training even more urgent.

3 Training Initiatives in Europe

In European countries with sizable populations of Muslims with a migrant background, most imams are still at least trained abroad (predominantly in countries of origin) and many of them actually come from abroad in order to take up their positions. The number of 'home-grown' imams in the countries of residence continues to be relatively low but is clearly on the rise. In practically all countries, there are initiatives by Muslim stakeholders to extend training facilities. There are a considerable number of imams in mosques in Europe about whom hardly information is available to administrative authorities with regard to their background and training. Many Muslim organisations and Islamic movements working in Europe have their own standards for quality and training programmes. Imams who have been educated in these organisations usually work for their own community and are in most cases not accepted in other circles. These educational activities are hard for the state to monitor and so are often regarded with suspicion.

In all EU member states, freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, which implies that Muslims are in principle free to worship, organise themselves, open mosques and hire imams and, generally speaking, private parties are free to organise educational activities. In some countries, official recognition as a religious denomination is possible, provided legal administrative conditions are met.¹⁶ Despite these general legislative principles, the situation

16 For a more detailed description see the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* (Racius et al. 2021). The Brill series *Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe* is also a useful source of reference. For each European country, a volume has been published, or will be published in the near future, that provides an overview of legal issues pertaining to Islam and Muslims.

on the ground differs considerably between countries. Differences between countries with regard to historically developed state–religion relations and the structure of the educational system determine to a large extent the possibilities for organising imam training. Furthermore, the actual position regarding the training of imams in each country is also the result of political decision-making, the image of Islam and Muslims, and negotiation and struggle.

In all the European countries that have a sizable Muslim migrant population, there are private community-based activities for training and Islamic education (Groeninck and Boender 2020).¹⁷ In the UK, most of these activities are organised by Muslim seminaries (*Dar-al-ulum*) funded by the Muslim community.

In the Netherlands, as a result of its ‘pillarised’ school system, a legacy of its pillarised history, private educational institutes are entitled to ask for official recognition in the form of accreditation and financial support by the state, based on article 23 of the Constitution (Sunier 2004). Thus, the ‘Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam’ is currently in an attempt, unsuccessful till now, to get official accreditation as a university (Valdemar Vinding and Chbib 2020). The IUASR works closely together with Diyanet. They already have an accredited programme for Islamic spiritual care.

In the Netherlands, only the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (a confessional university within the Dutch educational system) has an academic BA and MA programme in Islamic theology, coordinated by the Centre for Islamic Theology, which is part of the faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. This can be supplemented by an additional training in spiritual care. A couple of years ago, the faculty launched a programme called Professionalisation of Imams in the Netherlands. It was set up in cooperation with the Dutch Council of Muslims (CMO) and was supported by state-subsidy. The programme was designed for community-based imams, female religious leaders and mosque committee members. Its initiators regarded the programme as an example of shared ownership of the curriculum and trainee recruitment, and shared responsibility for the Muslim community and the public educational institution (Boender 2021).

In 2006, Leiden University opened a similar programme, and the Amsterdam University for Applied Science started a programme in close coopera-

17 As this field is in constant development, any state-of-the-art overview runs the risk of being obsolete at the time of publication. As the aim of this chapter is not to report the latest developments, but to understand how the politics of imam training and authority-making are interlocked, I shall only very generally sketch initiatives, opportunities, and legal contexts.

tion with the CMO. A couple of years later these two programmes were closed for lack of students (Ghaly 2011; Boender 2014).

The Dutch government funded these programmes on the basis that this was the best strategy to accomplish a fully-fledged state-controlled imam training programme as a tool within their integration policy. It is probably this government that is the most active in setting up state-commissioned training facilities for imams. Their interest goes back to the mid-1990s when advice was sought by the Ministry of Education (Landman 1996), followed by further advice in 2003 (Commissie de Ruiter 2003), and their involvement goes far beyond facilitating private initiatives, no doubt based on the Dutch history of religious pluralism in the first half of the twentieth century. The Christian-Democratic Party, which had a dominant position in consecutive Dutch governments from the 1920s until well into the 1990s, has always been in favour of state-funded religious education. An intriguing argument that has always undergirded these initiatives was the condition that any state-funded training programme should have majority support among the relevant religious community; internal ideological contradictions should be subordinate. But the current involvement should also be traced back to the Dutch government's complex integration programmes.

In 2018, the Islamic Faculty Amsterdam opened its doors as a university of applied science. The initiators criticised the lack of transparency in government decisions and ad hoc plans and decided to set up a theological faculty with the aim of teaching theology in and for the twenty-first century. They offer BA and MA programmes in Islamic theology, and additional courses. As in most cases, these provisions produce Islamic theologians, not imams per se. Whether or not graduates from this university can be employed as imams is a matter of their legitimacy, that is whether or not graduates are accepted as imams by the community.¹⁸

In Germany, apart from some local initiatives, most training facilities are organised by Muslim organisations that train their own personnel. The biggest organisation is the Turkish state-backed local branch of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) in Germany (DITIB) (Sunier and Landman 2015). Regular universities are also involved in Islamic education programmes, either directly or indirectly. Following a recommendation of the Academic Council in 2010, seven German university chairs in Islamic theology have been set up with a total budget of around 45 million euros (Füllung 2019; Valdemar Vinding and Chbib 2020). Graduates in Islamic theology at these universities are, however, not considered trained as imams. Since 2006, the Deutsche Islam

18 <https://www.i-ua.nl/> (accessed August 2022).

Konferenz (DIK, German Islam Conference), a state-organised project to regulate and monitor Islam, is an important and dominant actor in the governance of Islam in Germany.¹⁹ As Hernández Aguilar (2018, 19–29) shows, the DIK is involved in numerous initiatives to institutionalise Islam in line with the cultural and legal framework of the German state.

The various ways in which European states are involved in the organisation and incorporation of Islam and how they seek to monitor and control this process, may vary considerably from state to state, but it is clear that all governments regard the training of imams as a crucial instrument in the governance of Islam.

The shortage of training facilities in Europe has resulted in the organisation of special courses in countries of origin for imams raised in Europe who know the country where they will be employed (Sunier et al. 2011; Bruce 2019). The DITIB set up a programme for around 50 high school graduates to study at theological faculties in Turkey and, in 2020, almost all of them were employed in German mosques. Also, in Germany, the Diyanet has organised courses for German residents to become imams or do pastoral and community work²⁰ and similar private initiatives set up by Muslim actors can be found across Europe.

The extent to which national legislation facilitates training activities or their accreditation differs from country to country. To acquire accreditation, stakeholders have to deal with national educational legislation and the educational structure in general. Overall, recognition, accreditation and funding are considered the most challenging obstacles to acquiring embedded imam trainings (Valdemar Vinding and Chbib 2020). In France, there are hardly any provisions in the educational system, so imam training is basically a private affair with no state involvement. There is legislation concerning the conditions for private education, but it is limited. As a result, imam training is almost entirely left to private Muslim stakeholders (Fornerod 2016). In the past several recommendations have been made by state-commissions for the state to take a more active role in religious educational affairs, but without success (Husson 2007; Hussain and Tuck 2014).

In Denmark, the situation is comparable to that in France in that there are no legal options for private (religious) educational programmes to acquire accredited status. The training of imams is thus completely private (Valdemar Vinding 2018).

19 'Der Imam in der Muslimischen Gemeinde' (Deutsche Islam Konferenz) <http://www.deutsche-islam-konferenz.de/DIK/DE/Magazin/Gemeindeleben/FunktionImam/funktion-imam-node.html> (accessed May 2023).

20 Personal communication with Professor Jörn Thielmann (Erlangen/EZIRE). See also <http://ditib.de/detail.php?id=689&lang=de> (accessed August 2022).

In several European countries Islamic theologians are actively involved in discussions about the development of an Islamic theology and an interpretation of Islamic sources in accordance with 'European values'. Especially in Germany several initiatives have been taken to develop 'new didactics' for Qur'anic teaching (see e.g., Özsoy 2014). However, many of these initiatives comply with the requirements of the German government, but largely ignore views and ideas among ordinary Muslims, as a result of which many of such initiatives remain lofty and detached.

4 Assessing Imam Training in Europe: What Is at Stake?

The role of imams and the production and teaching of Islamic knowledge is a booming topic of academic inquiry to be found in virtually every book on Islam in Europe. The relevant literature covers a wide variety of themes and topics about the debates, negotiations, arrangements, activities, and initiatives, and about the ramifications of the institutionalisation and bureaucratic incorporation of training programmes in various countries. Sometimes explicit cross-national comparison is made, to show how different political and national contexts produce different outcomes and possibilities. Reports, as well as a number of academic publications typically address the current situation and also add policy-oriented recommendations for the future.

Several studies deal with the organisational, ethnic, ideological and doctrinal diversity of the Islamic landscape in Europe, and pay explicit attention to the dissemination of Islamic knowledge among Muslims in Europe and the position of imams.²¹ In recent years, a number of reports have been published that provide an overview of training activities in various countries²² and others analyse the production of Islamic knowledge and training activities more explicitly.²³ A growing body of literature deals with new forms of online preach-

21 See e.g., Rath et al. (2001); Shadid and van Koningsveld (2002); Haddad (2002); Allievi and Nielsen (2003); Maussen (2009); Laurence (2012); Nielsen (2012); Rosenow-Williams (2012); Yükleyn (2012); Corboz (2015; 2019); Chbib (2017); Peucker and Ceylan (2017); Bruce (2019).

22 See e.g., Husson (2007); Aslan and Windish (2012); Halm et al. (2012); Valdemar Vinding and Chib (2020); Groeninck and Boender (2020). In all countries with a sizable Muslim migrant population, reports have been published in the national language, most of them with an explicitly policy-oriented aim.

23 See e.g., Hallaq (2009); Caeiro (2010; 2013; 2019); van Bruinessen and Allievi (2011); Zaman (2012); Meijer and Bakker (2012); Bano (2018a; 2018b); Sözeri (2021).

ing and online knowledge platforms,²⁴ and there are monographs and articles that focusing explicitly on the figure of the imam and the Muslim intellectual in a specific political context,²⁵ as well as studies that concentrate more specifically on the governance and monitoring of Islam by European governments, including the increasing securitisation of Muslims.²⁶ And there is also a steadily growing body of literature of a more conceptual and analytical nature about the making of Islamic authority, addressing the figure of the imam.²⁷

A systematic look at the reviewed literature reveals that most of it is descriptive rather than analytical, while containing a number of perspectives and problem definitions, with underlying assumptions and approaches. The first and most common perspective in most of the literature is the political context of the nation state with its secular-liberal polity and concomitant civil culture, in which the production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge is embedded, or into which it is supposed to integrate. The imagined net result of this process is that imam training becomes 'adapted' to the national political context. This reveals the prevailing political opportunity structure in these national contexts, and its limits and possibilities. As I shall argue in what follows, the active role of nation states is of crucial importance to understand the broader political and cultural context in which the training of imams is embedded, creating challenges and dilemmas, and which shapes political decision-making.

In much of the literature on the training of imams, it has been argued that the programmes commissioned by governments in many European countries are the result of cooperation between Muslim stakeholders and these governments (see e.g., Husson 2007; Rosenow-Williams 2012; Groeninck and Boender 2020). This is the only viable way to set up a training programme that is sufficiently independent of influences from Islamic movements and government agendas. However, 'what do we mean by independent imam training'? This question is raised by Martijn de Koning's (2022) discussion of the several initiatives that have been taken in the Netherlands to set up a professional and

24 See e.g., Eickelman and Anderson (2003); Becker (2013); Hjarvard (2016); Bunt (2018).

25 See e.g., Dasseto and Bastenier (1984); Klausen (2005); Birt (2006); Gilliat-Ray (2006); Boender (2007); Geaves (2008); Gräf and Skøvgard-Petersen (2009); Bovenkamp (2017); Hashas et al. (2018); Peter (2018); Sözeri et al. (2018); Schmid and Trucco (2019); Schmid (2020); Groeninck and Boender (2020).

26 See e.g., Haddad and Balz (2008); Hernández Aguilar (2018); Hernández Aguilar and Ahmad (2020); de Koning et al. (2020). In many countries, imams and imam training are a topic frequently addressed by security services in the pursuit of the prevention of radicalisation.

27 See e.g., Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006; 2008); Volpi and Turner (2007); Bano and Kalmbach (2012); Krämer and Schmidtke (2014).

broadly recognised educational facility to educate imams for the Dutch market. Although these programmes may be the result of thorough negotiations, questions arise: (1) are these programmes as independent and free of power plays as is claimed? and (2) how has the selection of stakeholders been made; in other words, who was invited and who was not?

The arrangements and agreements clearly reflect the government's ultimate goal of controlling these programmes (*ibid.*). Consequently, the Muslim stakeholders who are selected are compelled to either subscribe to the government agenda, or not be accepted. The expanding bureaucratic incorporation of Islam and its institutions in European countries has generated an increasingly sharp dividing line between stakeholders considered 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' according to government criteria (Sunier 2022).

We can find joint initiatives such as this one in many European countries and descriptions of these arrangements have one thing in common: they all focus almost exclusively on the quality of the programmes, producers, providers, and organisers of training facilities, and on the institutional settings and educational and organisational logistics in which imams operate—that is, the 'supply side'. This is an essential perspective no doubt, but so is the 'consumer side'. A rigorous assessment of the reception and digesting of Islamic knowledge is equally essential as it reveals how the imams who are trained are received and judged by Muslims. Many of the commissioned reports on the prevention of radicalisation, and the financial and ideological influence from abroad, focus almost exclusively on attempts and strategies to gain influence among Muslims in Europe, while ignoring the extent to which Muslim audiences in Europe are impressionable, receptive, and susceptible to those influences. Furthermore, this question is hardly raised in publications on training arrangements, and in any case is inadequately addressed.

The one-sided focus on the supply side, ignores the wider field of forces at work here and underestimates, in my view, the crucial question of what makes an imam legitimate and authoritative among ordinary practitioners? Semiha Sözeri, Hülya Koşar Altınyelken, and Monique Volman (2018) address the question of why state-funded Islamic theology and imam-training programmes in the Netherlands have failed. They argue that lack of trust in the organisers is one of the main reasons and their observations and conclusions are one of the very few assessments of the legitimacy of educational programmes among recipients.

4.1 *The Domestication of Islam: The State as a Cultural Agent*

In much of the academic literature, the building up of an Islamic infrastructure, including the training of imams, has been referred to as the 'institutionalisation

of Islam'.²⁸ Most studies deal with the absorption of Islam into the legal and bureaucratic structures of the state, and the concomitant negotiation process. In all European countries, one can indeed observe the ongoing 'bureaucratic incorporation of Islam', a process inherently connected to nation-building. Despite constant developments, changes and dramatic events, there seems to be a striking stability with regard to legal and institutional absorption and the bureaucratic encapsulation of Islam in European states (Sunier 2022).

Bureaucratisation of religion, in this case Islam, entails a lot of 'business as usual' that does not reach the media but is an important aspect of the evolving Islamic landscapes in Europe. Bureaucratisation formalises processes of governance and makes changes protracted and complex, but it also makes the formal legal place of Islam in European countries resilient to political turmoil, media hypes and continuous efforts to problematise Islam and set it apart as a "problem space" (de Koning 2022, 1).

Bureaucratisation is certainly not limited to Western European countries with a population of Muslims with a migration background, or exclusively to Islam for that matter. The bureaucratisation of Islam is also clearly observable in Muslim-majority countries, such as Turkey, Albania, and Azerbaijan; and the bureaucratisation of Catholicism in France is not fundamentally different from that of Islam.²⁹ Bureaucratisation, and in general the ongoing sophistication of statecraft and the exercise of bureaucratic state power with regard to religion, including Islam, manifest themselves primarily as an increasingly depoliticised technical state intervention. There may be examples of specific legislation pertaining to Islam but, in all cases, Islam is also embedded in general legislation. Bureaucratisation give state measures a non-political administrative character and turns the state into a seemingly neutral apparatus.

Thus, Jonathan Laurence (2012) has argued that the net results of the negotiation process between various stakeholders in many Western European countries that have a sizable Muslim population has shown that Muslims, far from being a threat to liberal democracy, are being absorbed successfully into society by the active involvement of governments in facilitating representative bodies and, by doing so, incorporating Muslim communities into the fabric of European democracy and under the aegis of a bureaucratic state apparatus. Although Laurence's analysis is thorough and comprehensive, covering a large number of countries, it falls short of analysing the active role of the state in pro-

28 See e.g., Landman (1992); Rath et al. (2001); Marechal, Allievi, and Nielsen (2003); Maussen (2009); Bruce (2009; 2019); Rosenow-Williams (2012); Çitak (2018).

29 See Bauberot (2004; 2017).

moting some forms of Islam at the expense of others. The migration of Muslims to Europe, the gradual incorporation of Islam and, not least, the post-9/11 developments have no doubt resulted in a reemphasis by nation states on their role as active cultural and social agents.

In much of the academic literature that deals with the institutionalisation and bureaucratic incorporation of Islam in European societies, the analysis seems to focus predominantly on logistics and legal arrangements, and on concerns over radicalisation of young Muslims, in which the state is depicted as a neutral actor, operating within the legal conditions of secular liberalism (el Asri 2018; Sözeri, Altınyelken, and Volman 2018; Schmid and Trucco 2019). The institutionalisation paradigm has been already criticised for quite some time precisely where it ignores the cultural agenda of states. As Karl-Heinz Ladeur and Ino Augsberg (2007) argue, the neutral state is a myth because it assumes the combination of irreconcilable legal principles.

The interest of European governments in training facilities for imams should be embedded in the broader issue of the active role of states as 'cultural agents'. Over three decades ago, Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller had already pointed to the blind spot in much of the academic political literature with regard to the cultural agency of states. "It is in this discursive field that 'the state' itself emerges as a historically variable linguistic device for conceptualizing and articulating ways of ruling" (Rose and Miller 1992, 177; see also Brubaker 1992; van der Veer and Lehmann 1999; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). Most nation states in Europe have reemphasised their role as a powerful force in cultural processes and a meaningful source of legitimacy at a time when the very legitimacy of nation states as providers of political meaning is under pressure (Geschiere 2009; Verkaaik 2010). Richard Jenkins (1994) argues that states have always been active creators of ethnic and religious identities through the systematic categorisation of groups. State categorisation has been dominant at the expense of processes of self-identification by minorities. Nation states are cultural projects that present themselves through particular narratives in particular situations. The 'culturalization of citizenship', denoting the definition of citizenship in cultural rather than legal terms, can be observed everywhere in Europe and is both the result of and the format for national cultural projects (Duyvendak, Tonkens, and Hurenkamp 2010).

In many instances, this process takes place through legal interventions. Good examples are the current rapid spread of mandatory citizenship lessons at schools (see e.g., Gilliam and Markom 2024), and legislation that expresses certain national values, such as the much-acclaimed separation of religion and state. In other cases, it is accomplished by articulating specific national narratives, concepts of citizenship and models of integration as ideals to be emulated.

Instead of communicating simplistic messages of patriotism or nationalism, as happened in the past, states' civic and political messages have become far more subtle and sophisticated, concerned with seemingly universal values of democratic participation, supra national inclusiveness, and the peaceful resolution of all conflicts (Baumann 2004).

The complex entanglement of legal and cultural governance tools always gives concrete policy measures a provisional and ad hoc character, with an argumentation that serves prevailing interests. Thus, in an article about the process of 'de-pillarisation' in the Netherlands and the discussion about the relation between state and religion, Sarah Bracke rejects the widely held view that Muslims started to build up a religious infrastructure when the break-down of religious pillarisation was almost complete. It was argued that Muslims were simply too late and any reference to a 'Muslim pillar' would be obsolete and outdated since religion was no longer an issue in the country. Bracke instead shows that the breakdown of pillars actually gained momentum when Muslims were in the midst of a process of building up a religious infrastructure. The various encounters in different sections of society between Muslim actors and administrative authorities exhibited active state involvement in religious affairs. Thus:

[...] in terms of state-regulatory features, and more precisely particular ways of approaching, framing, and governing (religious) difference, a more significant transformation of the Dutch secular arrangement occurred in relation to 'the multicultural debate' and the question of Islam in the Netherlands. (Bracke 2013, 225)

It is often argued that the involvement of European governments in religious matters such as imam training should be understood in the context of the dominant secular-liberal state ideologies and the particular nationally-specific features that come with them (see e.g., Caeiro 2019; Boender 2021). Mohammed Hashas refers to the European imam as a nationalised religious authority who is expected to disseminate a depoliticised ethical message that fits the principles of the secular liberal state and its integration goals. He elaborates on the French situation to substantiate this (Hashas 2018a, 97).

Although secular liberalism as a political project does to some extent constitute a relevant point of reference for understanding pro-active state agendas, it does not account for the considerable differences that exist between European modes of governance, or the striking paradox between state neutrality and active involvement in religious issues while secular liberalism is simultaneously promoted as the foundational political model. The state as the 'guardian of sec-

ularism', mostly formulated as the 'separation between religion and state', does not adequately capture the active role of state institutions in religious issues. For one thing, it tends to overlook active measures and state interventions that violate this separation, and the flexibility with which the separation of religion and state as a policy principle is applied.

Following Talal Asad (2003) and Saba Mahmood (2016), I consider the 'secular' to be as much a cultural element of European statecraft as any other. The active involvement of European states in religious issues calls for a more sophisticated approach than positing neutrality, as articulated in the institutionalisation paradigm. The initiatives and activities found in a number of European countries sketched out above, demonstrate the efforts of European governments to 'nationalise' Islam, and the politics of imam training is a prism through which the active role of the state as a cultural agent becomes manifest.

I have substantiated this by elaborating on the concept of 'religious domestication' (Sunier 2014b). The logic of the domestication of religion is inherent in nation states, and an important device for the symbolic reproduction of the dominant national imaginary. Domestication thus implies a particular epistemic regime for actively organising and governing religious life by national states (Sunier 2014b; 2022; see also Navaro-Yashin 2002; Bowen 2004; Hernández Aguilar 2018). Domestication, as I understand it, refers to the state as a cultural agent (see also Braginskaia 2012).

The domestication of religion is part of a more general process of nation-building, towards organising religious activities and religious communities according to the political format of the nation state (see also Mahmood 2016). Although the 'domestication' of religion is an inherent logic of nation states in general, the particular features and measures of domestication are based on the assumed characteristics of specific religions. Domestication as a mode of governance is a broad and complex disciplining intervention that controls, but also creates, appropriate subjectivities and objects of governance. I have referred to the domestication of Islam as:

a process of containment, pacification and legitimization based on a national imaginary. It is about the place of Islam in European societies and the challenges they face, against the backdrop of a particular conception of national identity. Different nation states have historically grown nationally specific modes of dealing with religious difference, sometimes informed by colonial practices, experiences and histories, so the domestication of Islam takes on nationally specific features and outlooks. (Sunier 2014b, 1142)

Egdunas Raciū, in his study on Islam in post-communist Europe, suggests a useful angle from which to assess the case of imam training as a mode of the domestication of Islam. To analyse the process by which Islam has been integrated into various countries in Eastern Europe since the early 1990s, he uses the concept of the ‘churchification of Islam’ to denote the process by which Islam is turned into a church-like structure, and in fact theologically into a “[...] Christian-like system of religious beliefs and rituals [...]” (Raciū 2020, 2). One of the underlying agendas in this process is the active favouring of ‘appropriate’ forms of Islam by the state and the facilitation of one representative religious body for Muslims, in so doing antagonising, even delegitimising others. The stronger emphasis on security in recent decades has its own governing dynamic, but I regard the securitisation of Islam as an inherent element of domestication. In that respect, the training of imams who propagate state priorities and agendas, notably its security measures, is part and parcel of the same programmatic focus.

5 The Politics of Imam Training: Conclusions

In Chapter 1, I have argued that the position of religious brokers in the 1980s ultimately depended on their ongoing connectedness both to Muslims, and to the surrounding society. The legitimacy of imams, dealt with in this chapter, depends on their theological proficiency and on their ability to connect to their community. Legitimacy is not simply a matter of good training, qualified teachers, and proper religious sources, or, for that matter, vested traditional authority; the crucial question is whether an imam is accepted by the community he is to serve. If one of these qualities is deficient or absent, they are powerless and ineffective.

The ‘politics of imam training’ is ultimately about the question of who is entitled to produce, transmit and, not least, teach Islamic knowledge to Muslims in Europe with a migrant background, and who is accepted by Muslim communities. The developments sketched above constitute the background to the ongoing controversies, discussions, negotiations and struggles about who is in charge of the production, dissemination, and teaching of Islamic knowledge and who organises the training of imams for the European market.

As I have argued, and, looking at the discussions and the extensive body of publications, reports, and policy recommendations on the issue of imam training, it seems that this is primarily a ‘supply side’ issue, a discussion about the producers, providers and organisers of training programmes. Sometimes refer-

ence is made to the 'rank-and-file' of imams, but I have not found a thorough assessment of the relationship between imams and the communities they are supposed to serve.

This also raises the question of what is meant by Islamic knowledge. As Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi (2011, 1) argue, not only do Muslims disagree on what proper Islamic knowledge is, but also that Islamic knowledge is broader and more encompassing than the generally accepted standards of orthodoxy. Following Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition, they contend that Islamic knowledge is co-constituted by contextual, historical, cultural, and political circumstances. This discursive tradition is a constantly evolving and transforming dynamic. In addition, Islamic knowledge is not only the inculcation of normative doctrinal canons into ordinary believers, but also bottom-up critical reflection on those established authoritative canons. Islamic knowledge thus includes religious reasoning, social critique, and critical reflection on the part of Muslims who are not religious experts, so that the experiences of Muslims in everyday situations make up the body of knowledge.

To apply this insight to the problematic at hand: the knowledge imams must have at their disposal is in constant flux and must venture in new and sometimes unprecedented directions. Not only does this require a much more sophisticated form of knowledge than what is offered in training programmes, but it also shows that imams must constantly work under frontier conditions. The quotation with which I opened this chapter about the status of Islamic knowledge clearly demonstrates that an imam who takes seriously his relationship with the community must be able to work with Islamic sources in a resourceful and innovative way.

The 'politics of imam training' is a contentious, ever-evolving field in which a wide array of actors and stakeholders operate.³⁰ The relevant actors in this field are not confined to (foreign and domestic) governments with policy agendas, or to established (foreign and domestic) Muslim organisations with vested interests and positions. To fully grasp the field dynamics, consideration must be given to existing power configurations and mechanisms at work in the politics of imam training, demands and prospects of the constantly transforming

30 I borrow the concept of 'field' from the work of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) and more recently Cinalli (2016), to denote a realm of power-laden activity with various political actors, specific issues, conflicting interests, and problem definitions (see also Ancelovici 2021). McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001, 7) distinguish two categories of contentious politics: contained and transgressive. In the former, only established actors participate, and outcomes are more predictable and scripted; in the latter, actors and issues are much less prefabricated and outcomes are less predictable. I see the politics of imam training as an exemplar of transgressive contentious politics.

Muslim communities in Europe, new (online and offline) preachers and producers of Islamic knowledge who challenge established organisations and institutions, and other relevant stakeholders.

The principal issue in this contentious field is the legitimacy of religious professionals to speak authoritatively about Islam, which is thus based on much more than a command of ‘proper’ Islamic sources and qualified training. The crucial question is who has an audience and who is accepted by local communities. As I have stated in the introduction, Islamic authority is by definition a relational concept. Authority must always be conferred by others, and a proper education, scriptural proficiency and an established institutional position can in no way automatically produce an authoritative position.

Niels Valdemar Vinding (2018, 232) distinguishes two types of authority vested in imams in Europe: (1) institutional authority, which is vested in imams within a certain institutional setting, and (2) epistemic authority, denoting knowledge-based proficiency. He argues that the articulation of these types of authority takes on specific forms, depending on the background of the position of an imam in a Muslim community. Although I go along with this typology, the two types refer only to bureaucratic and cognitive modalities of authority. There is another type of authority that is more difficult to grasp, but the grasp of which is essential to understand the position of imams.

This modality of authority centres on three qualities: trust, the particular engagement of an imam with Islamic knowledge, and the position of an imam in the local community. This might be called ‘experiential authority’. Neither knowledge of the society in which imams operate, nor the fact that an imam is born and raised in the country, is in itself enough to acquire a position of trust in the community. Even if the theological and didactic qualities of an imam are uncontested by a Muslim community, they do not automatically generate an acceptance of his legitimacy. Imams must also be trustworthy guides and be able to teach and guide through their Islamic knowledge rather than about that knowledge (Sunier 2021b).

In situations of relative stability, Muslims mostly rely on prevailing normative and authoritative frameworks. In those situations, the two types of authority that Valdemar Vinding distinguishes may suffice to engage effectively with the local community. However, when Muslims find themselves in changing social conditions and wish to live pious lives in accordance with established traditions—as in the case of Muslims from a migrant background—frictions, ambiguities and dilemmas emerge, and Islamic authority becomes a subject of discussion and reflection. It is precisely in these circumstances that the imam as a trustworthy, reliable guide and pastor becomes utterly important. I shall address this in more detail in Chapter 4.

To conclude, the position of an imam is ultimately the result of the dynamics of the contentious field I have described and this shapes to a large extent the evolving Islamic landscapes in Europe. But how this will develop and the paths it will follow are unpredictable and contingent on many different factors. The manifold reflections and future prospects discussed in the literature on the idea of a 'European Islam' are often a shot in the dark.

Authoritative Pedagogics: The Sohbet

1 Introduction

Taking part in a sohbet, a partly ritualised group conversation, and a core activity of Hizmet, requires the participants to make thorough preparations, both physical and mental. In addition to the regular *wudu*, the ritual cleansing of the body before the *salat*, participants are supposed to wash their entire body, brush their teeth, and get rid of body odour. Products with a strong fragrance should be avoided, so as not to distract other participants in the sohbet. It is said that products such as deodorants, after-shave and hair styling products are detrimental to the spiritual atmosphere and the concentration of the participants. Dress is another important aspect of the preparations. Clothing should generally be modest and express a humble attitude. Extravagant styles and sportswear are undesirable and strongly discouraged because they are thought to exhibit an 'outward'-oriented worldly attitude, giving the impression that the participants are not fully ready to immerse themselves in the gathering.

In addition, participants should prepare mentally and morally, and purify themselves spiritually. In this way, they seek to overcome hesitation, doubt, and even reluctance to take part in the sohbet. A good preparation starts half an hour prior to leaving home for the event, with individual meditation. Participants are encouraged to listen to poems by the leader of the Hizmet movement Fethullah Gülen, and to reflect on their privileged status close to God. These spiritual preparations are what Charles Hirschkind (2001, 624) calls 'moral attunement', techniques that foster sensibilities that enable one to become a better Muslim.



This chapter deals with the educational and devotional practices of the European branches of the Gülen-movement,¹ a transnational Muslim organisation with Turkish roots, better known among its followers as Hizmet.² The short description that opens this chapter shows the preparatory activities of a novice of the movement before he would take part in a *sohbet*—a partly ritualised conversation between followers, with a moderator, where important sources, including those written by the current leader of the movement, Fethullah Gülen, are discussed.

The aim of a Hizmet *sohbet*, however, is much broader than just improving textual proficiency and correct methodology. The *sohbet* and other related activities are designed with the aim of initiating apprentices or novices into the central principals, creeds, texts, and rituals of Hizmet and integrating them into the movement. These activities that are designed to evoke all-sensory experiences that provide the participants with the necessary capabilities and competences to be in the world as confident Muslims.

This is done through a pedagogical programme that uses well-organised and well-orchestrated pedagogical techniques and includes spiritual and devotional practices that are intended to convey knowledge, inculcate religious sensitivity and certain moral dispositions, and build a religious community

1 This chapter is entirely based on the research of a former PhD-student whom I have supervised, together with my colleague Peter Versteeg, until he decided to stop for personal reasons. He has conducted research among followers of the Gülen-movement, focussing particularly on their internal activities. As someone who had close contacts with the movement, he was able to attend meetings held exclusively for associates, which he did after clearly and openly stating his position as researcher and his aims, and with the participants' consent. At the same time, as an academic, he kept sufficiently detached in order to report objectively as possible. I consider the ethnographic research and the rich data he collected so valuable that I asked him if we could use his material and write this chapter together. As he prefers to remain anonymous, we agreed that I would write the text without mentioning his name. I wish to emphasise that I greatly admire the thoroughness and depth of his research, and I am grateful for his generosity in allowing me to use his material.

2 In this chapter, the name Hizmet is used to refer to the Gülen-movement. Within the movement various terms are used to denote the movement's associates and inner circles. In Turkish, they are often called '*hizmetçi*' by outsiders, but the term has a strong political connotation. Sometimes they are called 'disciples', a term rooted in Sufi traditions, notably the followers of Said-i-Nursi. 'Followers' is also used regularly, but this relates more to their relationship to Fethullah Gülen. The term 'members' is appropriate for more formal organisations and is less suitable for Hizmet people. In Hizmet circles, they often refer to themselves as an active network of volunteers or sympathisers. For want of an adequate term, I shall refer to Hizmet people as 'associates' as much as possible. For the internal educational and spiritual activities with which this chapter mainly deals, I shall use the term 'student', or the generic term 'participant', or 'practitioner'.

that reflects the ideals envisioned by Fethullah Gülen. I shall demonstrate that this programme constitutes an intriguing example of how a particular mode of Muslim agency is produced and maintained, with concomitant modalities of authority.

Authority here refers, of course, to the emulation of Fethullah Gülen and to the study of his writings, but it is at the same time broader than that. In many of his writings, Gülen refers to what he calls the global and universal principle of Islam to reach out to others. Thus, “[the ideal Muslim] is sensitive to the dignity and honour of other people as they are their own. They do not eat, they feed others. They do not live for themselves; they live to enable others to live” (Gülen 2010a, 89). This is a particular moral-self that must be acquired in order to raise a generation of Muslims better known as the ‘Golden Generation’ and is an idealised image of the perfect Muslim engaging with Islamic traditions and modernity in a new way (Kuru 2003; Sunier 2014a).

Central to the pedagogical programme is the *sohbet*, which is the most intensive and demanding of its activities, and the most explicit setting in which the modalities of authority are produced. The proceedings and constituent elements of a *sohbet* are informative for several reasons. Although the central written sources of the movement play a crucial role in creating a discursive community that subscribes to Gülen’s views and principles, the way the *sohbet* is set up shows that this cannot be accomplished by simply disciplining and ‘brainwashing’ the participants, as is often suggested by the movement’s critics. The intricate intertwining of disciplinary techniques, devotional practices, and spiritual performative action and interaction, in combination with personal development training and societal activities, constitutes the core of the programme.³

The *sohbet* is particularly intriguing because it brings together cognitive, affective, bodily, and aesthetic dimensions into one ‘sensational form’. Birgit Meyer (2006, 10) considers religion a practice of mediation: “[...] In the context of religious traditions and in the praxis of religious organisations, objectifications of the transcendental are being more or less fixed, rendered reachable and repeatable across time (and possibly space), and determined to be handled in particular ways.” For the making of religious authority, technologies of mediation are thus crucial (see Engelke 2004; Eisenlohr 2011).

Before I address the constituent elements of the *sohbet* and the other parts of the pedagogical programme, I shall first provide some necessary background

3 Some authors have addressed participants’ experiences (see e.g., Jassal 2013; 2019; Dohrn 2017), but it should be emphasised that the net effect of the programme for individual students clearly cannot be predicted.

information about the Hizmet to explain the historical, political, and religious context in which the movement emerged.⁴

2 Hizmet

Since the end of the 1970s, Hizmet has built a worldwide network of educational, media, and business activities in more than 140 countries. The Turkish branch operated as the capital of this global network. Hizmet followers had a strong position in governmental and non-governmental institutions in Turkey, but this ended abruptly after the attempted coup on the 15th of July 2016. The Turkish government suspected the movement of being behind the attempt and immediately dismissed tens of thousands of soldiers, police officers, teachers, and civil servants who were active followers of Hizmet. Since then, the movement has been in a precarious position and is reorienting and reinventing itself as a movement 'in exile' (see Balcı 2018; Watmough and Öztürk 2018; Taş 2022; Martin 2022). However, in these new circumstances, they have not fundamentally changed their original goal of setting up and extending their world-wide network of educational activities.

These activities mainly consist of public/private schools, homework assistance classes, and university preparation courses, combining secular and religious teaching (Agai 2003a; 2003b; 2007). In addition, followers develop various business activities, using Hizmet's global infrastructure and networks. At a local level, communities are developed for mutual help and assistance. Partners collect money from various sources, such as donations from companies, for local educational and media activities (Ebaugh 2010).

Local representatives and associates of the movement are encouraged to build up professional networks with prominent educational, political, financial, media, and religious institutions, and they organise meetings with religious leaders, politicians, businessmen, academics, and journalists. In various

4 Most of the empirical data on which this chapter is based were collected before the failed coup in Turkey in July 2016, which was followed by a crack-down on the movement and its followers in Turkey. This had a tremendous impact on the movement worldwide. In Turkey, the movement's institutions were closed down and followers were persecuted. Many fled the country. Although the events in Turkey did not have the same impact on branches of Hizmet elsewhere, they led to internal debates about the movement's future (see also Vicini 2019). The aim of this chapter, however, is not to give an update on the current situation, but to understand the mechanisms at work within the movement that constitute certain modes of authority-making.

parts of the world, but especially in Europe and North America, the associates regularly organise conferences aimed at presenting the movement's views and insights to the general public. Hizmet covers all the participants' financial costs (van Bruinessen 2010). During these conferences, often organised together with academic or private partners, the movement's peace-building and charitable activities are particularly highlighted, and these themes are also regularly discussed in the books, articles, and pamphlets they publish (Yükleyen 2012; Khan and Khan 2018).

Hizmet can to a certain extent be considered an intriguing product of the Turkish version of the separation of religion and state, established after the revolution and the subsequent foundation of the Turkish republic in 1923 by its leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Apart from authoritarian measures with regard to religious activities, an important goal of the Kemalist regime and its party the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP, Republican People's Party) was the development of an image for the new republic. The revolution was depicted as a 'total social and cultural' metamorphosis, an image that would soon be taken up by Western scholars. In the literature, the Kemalist take-over had gained an almost mythical status, constituting a complete break with the past (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Findley 2010).⁵

The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic empire based on Islamic legislation in which the institution of the *Şeyhülislam* had a dominant position; in contrast, in the Turkish republic, the state controls Islam and all its institutions and practices. The measures taken in the early years of the republic were primarily designed to reorganise the central institutions of society and bring religious affairs together under the responsibility of one state bureaucracy. This was called *laiklik*, sometimes translated as the 'Turkish brand of secularism' (Kinzer 2001). These reforms were indeed far reaching, the net effect being a reorganisation of the relation, rather than a separation, between religion and the Turkish state.

In the republican rhetoric, two worldviews were juxtaposed as the mirror image of each other and found their way into political, educational, and cultural programmes. Islam, with all its institutions, principles, and practices, represented obscurantism, while the Kemalist state model represented progress and modernisation. The emerging resistance to the rigorous and highly symbolic reforms initiated by the Kemalist government was explained as a struggle between traditional backwardness and modernisation, old and new, progress

5 See e.g., Stirling (1958); Kinross (1964); Lewis (1968); Shaw and Shaw (1977); Pope and Pope (1997).

and reactionary forces. Islam as a possible progressive modernising force was inconceivable in those early years (Sunier and Landman 2015).

Sufi groups (*tarikāt* in Turkish) in particular, which had considerable influence and a dominant position mainly among the rural population through their networks of age-old brotherhoods and their extensive educational activities, constituted a target for the Kemalist rulers (Silverstein 2011; Azak 2015).⁶ In order to bring about a modern and Westernised society, the Kemalists banned all Sufi orders in Turkey in 1925 (Yavuz 2003). The political establishment depicted Sufi networks as anti-logical and anti-rational forces that would obstruct modernisation. They were considered morally decadent and politically dangerous (Corbett 2016).

Besides these secular modernist considerations, there were political and strategic reasons for banning the politically and financially strong Sufi orders. Much of the early resistance to the new regime was initiated by Sufi groups. In 1925, the prominent Kurdish religious leader Sheikh Said started a rebellion against the measures implemented by the regime (Olson 1989; Sunier and Landman 2015). It should be noted that the dividing line between ‘secular modern’ and ‘traditional religious’ coincided with the dividing line between the cities and the countryside, which gave the contrast between ‘enlightenment’ and ‘obscurantism’ extra potency.

The aim of the republican rulers was to control and ‘domesticate’ Islam and to adapt it to Kemalist principles and governmental regulations. The most radical measure was the closing down in 1924 of the institution of the *Şeyhülislam*, which had functioned as the head of religious affairs in the Ottoman Empire. It was replaced by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) (Zengin 2013). In the same year, training facilities for religious professionals were opened (Özgür 2015) and, in 1931, all mosques were brought under the control of the Directorate General for Religious Foundations, a branch of the Diyanet (Sunier and Landman 2015). Critical imams were expelled from the mosques and replaced by imams loyal to the state and the Diyanet was the only institution that was allowed to produce and distribute religious material (Açıkgöz 2014). Through the Diyanet, the state was now in full control of all Islam-related activities—much like the French Bureau Central des Cultes, part of the French republican central administration (Gözaydın 2008, 218).

A crucial action taken by the Kemalist regime that is relevant to the subject of this chapter was its attempts to undermine the role of ulama and Sufi

6 Sufi order or Sufi group is a western generic denominator denoting mystical orders in Islam. I use it only for practical reasons because it is the most common and well-known term in English literature.

leaders in educational activities in rural areas by setting up training institutes for regular primary school teachers. So-called 'village institutes' were also opened, primarily intended to teach the rural population the principles of Kemalism, although they also played a crucial role in the regime's literacy campaign (Karaömerlioğlu 1998; Arayıcı 1999).

Whether these measures had the desired effect remains questionable, not least because the educational infrastructure provided by the state was far from adequate, especially in the eastern regions of the country. The overly ambitious agenda to completely separate religious instruction and knowledge production from regular education, and the taking over of all these activities by new state institutions in a very short period of time was bound to fail. In the major urban regions, an official orthodox Islam was installed, completely subordinated to Kemalist principles and subject to strict state control. Imams who had not been trained in the official institutions had to rely on the smaller mosques—that is, if they had not been dismissed. Religious education in schools was completely abolished and, in general, knowledge of Islam among the population declined.

An important and far-reaching consequence was that, among parts of the urban population, the role of Islam, including in private life, became increasingly marginal, while in the countryside, because of the lack of religious professionals who had received the official training, the population had to rely on informal and partly clandestine forms of religious knowledge communication (van Bruinessen 1982, 177). Only traditional scribes and Sufi leaders could meet the religious needs of the rural population, which meant, among other things, that their influence increased rather than declined as the government intended. While the role of orthodox Islam in politics and its influence on the state and population thus weakened, local Islamic institutions flourished (Sunar and Toprak 1983, 426; Çarmıklı 2011).

The influence of local Islamic networks also emanated from the traditional involvement of religious leaders in social, political, and administrative affairs. They were only superficially affected by the measures taken by the new regime, not least because administrative and economic reforms hardly reached the rural areas, while the circumstances of the rural population deteriorated. This had unintended consequences.

The absence in practice of the republican state beyond the major urban centres, as a result of which the rural population did not have access to crucial resources, meant that local religious and informal networks, leaders, and organisational structures filled the gap, and this strengthened their position. As a result, local religious organisations were able to continue and even extend their activities, despite being banned in 1925 (Çarmıklı 2011).

2.1 *New Developments*

Many of these informal activities remained low profile and very local and did not change very much from what they had offered a couple of decades earlier, but some religious actors revised their religious-ideological orientation and their strategies. They widened their scope and enlarged their audience by questioning the official state doctrine that religion and religious education would oppose societal progress. Rather than withdrawing from the rapidly changing society and turning inward, as some Sufi orders did, they actively engaged with the changing circumstances.

One of the more successful movements that undertook this was the Nurcu-movement, founded by the charismatic Islamic theologian Said-i-Nursi (1873–1960). Nursi was of Kurdish origin and born in the eastern Turkish city of Bitlis. After being trained in a local madrasa (high school for religious education) a number of years, Nursi moved to the city of Mardin in southern Turkey. He soon became well-known for his extensive knowledge of Islamic sources, and he attracted a group of followers who would call him *Bediüzzaman* (glory of his time) (Dumont 1986; Yavuz 2009; Tee and Shankland 2014). Nursi produced a series of commentaries on Islamic sources and a collection of treatises in which he put special emphasis on the sources' mystical dimension. He contended that these divine sources contained 'hidden layers' of knowledge that could only be accessed after long and disciplined study.

Nursi's main and best-known work was the *Risale-i-Nur* (Message of Light). Light here refers to a verso the Qur'anic verses (Surat al-Nur; Q 24:35), in which God is depicted as light. Nursi's disciples therefore referred to themselves as 'followers of the Light' (*nurcu* in Turkish) (Mardin 1989; van Bruinessen 2010, 9). Disciples and students have sometimes referred to Nursi as the 'Spinoza of the Islamic world' because of the striking parallels in the theologies of the two thinkers (Çelik 2010, 125–133). Like Spinoza, Nursi encouraged his followers to understand God's creation by studying it. 'The Machinery of Nature', according to Nursi, is one of the great mysteries of God's creation (Mardin 1989, 214). Only through continuous study are human beings able to remain connected with God's creation (Turner and Horkuç 2009, 60).

Although Nursi considered himself an ordinary Islamic scholar, the roots of the Nurcu-movement are to be found in the mystical traditions of Islam, notably the Nakşibendi-order, founded in Central Asia. One of the relevant features of the order is the central role of religious text, but Nursi also distanced himself from those scholars who only focused on legal issues and *fiqh*. Nursi proposed a proper balance between the textual and rational dimensions of religious reasoning and knowledge production on the one hand, and the emotional relationship with God on the other (Turner and Horkuç 2009, 90). In addition, Nursi argued that modern knowledge production in science, medicine, and law

does not contradict religious sources, and that secular and religious education should be combined (Miller 2013).

Nursi devoted most of his time to educational activities with the aim of training a generation of pious Muslims who would be able to modernise society without discarding the spiritual dimensions of life (Mardin 1992; Atasoy 2005). After his death in 1960, the movement split into different branches, but his ideas continued to inspire subsequent generations of Islamic scholars. One of them was Fethullah Gülen.

Gülen was born in 1941 in a village in the eastern province of Erzurum. He received religious instruction in the Sufi environment typical of that part of the country and it was there that he became acquainted with Nursi's teachings. Gülen had a thorough knowledge of Nursi's work, but he did not belong to Nursi's intimate community. He developed Nursi's balance between mysticism and rationalism into a specific pedagogical trajectory and also took up Nursi's idea that one could only acquire the necessary knowledge and capacity to engage with the outside world outside through disciplined and intensive study.

In 1962, he was appointed as an imam in the western city of Edirne and became the director of a school for religious education. Later, he was appointed as an imam in the city of Izmir, and he then organised summer camps, lecture series, and courses for all age groups and backgrounds with the aim of raising a new generation of Muslims. This new generation would study Islamic sources, and at the same time follow regular education, and become active associates of society, but they would also build a community of like-minded people. In the course of the 1970s, Gülen founded educational institutions called *dersane* (residential study centres), where he would teach his students (Yavuz 2013).

Although Gülen was not engaged in politics, he developed good relations with the prevailing regimes in Turkey to protect his activities from state interference and so that he could extend them across the country. The radically new economic policy introduced by the Anavatan Partisi (ANAP, Motherland Party) in the 1980s resulted in the emergence of a new conservative educated middle class who wanted to change what they saw as the inward-looking economic policies of the Kemalists (Yavuz 2009, 77). Rapid economic development, the opening of Turkey to the outside world, and the emergence of a new generation of educated Muslims laid the foundation for the gradual changes that Hizmet would undergo from the late 1980s onwards. These changes became particularly evident in the 1990s.

This decade was very crucial for the movement in many respects. Gülen emerged as a prominent preacher and was given the honorary title of *hocaefendi*, which granted him special religious authority as well as a prominent public role (Yavuz 2013, 40). Hizmet enlarged the number of its educational

institutions not only in Turkey but increasingly also abroad, notably in Central Asia and Europe. Many parents, including some who were not followers of Gülen, enrolled their children in these schools because they offered a comparatively good level of education.

Economic development and the emergence of a prosperous middle class made it possible to build up a commercial empire with banks and media, including the newspaper *Zaman* and the TV station *Samanyolu*. A generation of young followers was employed in key sectors of society, politics, and industry. The movement was funded by entrepreneurs who were sympathetic to *Hizmet* and willing to invest in the movement's projects and *Hizmet* was eventually no longer dependent on charitable donations (van Bruinessen 2010; Ebaugh 2010).

Gülen argued that a strong civil society and an open inclusive public sphere were crucial for Turkey's future, and particularly for Muslims. According to him, the relentless positioning of Islam and progress as being opposed to each other could only be overcome by building up a strong network of civil associations. A sound and stable political culture could only be realised when citizens were able to talk and participate fully in political debates and processes. He particularly criticised the dominant regulatory role of the state, characteristic of Turkish political culture and he also believed that the persistent involvement of the army in politics was counterproductive.

In the 1990s, the foundation was laid for a 'politics of engagement'. This would imply, among other things, the liberalisation and opening up of the public sphere (Turam 2007, 10). This transition has also been depicted as the 'conservative democratic turn' (Hendrick 2013). The term 'dialogue' that appears in many of Gülen's writings occupies a central place in his doctrine. It is based on the idea that Muslims should accept that society is composed of a multitude of beliefs, religions, and worldviews. Instead of fighting diversity, people should encounter each other in a continuous dialogue, including with prevailing political regimes.

The political turmoil following the 'silent' army coup of 1997 against the Islamist government of Necmettin Erbakan, and the measures subsequently taken against Islamic activities in general, made Gülen to decide to move to the United States in 1999 (officially for medical reasons), where he settled in Pennsylvania. This constituted a major turning point for *Hizmet*. The Turkish nationalism that was part and parcel of Gülen's ideas well into the 1990s receded further and further into the background, not least because the number of non-Turkish followers increased and because Gülen, while being in the US, became increasingly convinced that the American political 'model' of managing religious diversity would fit much better with his ideas and with a movement operating on the world stage. To the outside world, *Hizmet* transformed

from an educational institution and an esoteric mystical movement into a typical NGO, and Gülen became a genuinely global figure who would meet the 'greats of the earth' (Agai 2007; Doğan 2020).

In 2003, when the Adalet Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) formed a government after its landslide victory in 2002 under the leadership of Tayyip Erdoğan, the ties between the latter and Gülen became stronger. In subsequent elections, Gülen's followers made a major contribution to the victory of the AKP, but from 2011 onwards they became increasingly critical of Erdoğan's policies. In 2013, Gülen supporters were accused of infiltrating government institutions and developing a 'parallel state', backed by foreign intelligence. Hizmet was also accused of instigating the so-called 'Ergenekon-affair', in which senior military leaders were suspected of planning a coup against the Erdoğan government (Sunier and Landman 2015). The clash culminated in the failed coup in 2016, the aftermath of which brought the movement into an extremely precarious position (Watmough and Öztürk 2018).

2.2 *The Dutch Branch of Hizmet*

The research on which this chapter is based was conducted among followers of Hizmet in the Netherlands. The organisational structure of Hizmet branches in Europe is markedly different from that of other Islamic movements. From the beginning, Hizmet focused on educational activities for a relatively well-educated young target group. In the early 1980s, they set up an educational centre in the city of Rotterdam, where the educational activities had a pioneer function and attracted the attention of Turkish immigrants in search of ways to guide their children during their school years (Yükleyen 2012). The educational centre provided homework assistance for pupils in primary and secondary education (van Bruinessen 2010).

A considerable number of parents considered that the Dutch educational system was aiming too much at assimilation without regard for their religious identity and they were especially concerned that their daughters and sons would abandon traditional Turkish-Muslim values. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, it was quite common for Turkish parents to send their daughters and sons to Turkey to learn basic religious values, and they often stayed in the boarding houses of religious groups (ibid.). The educational activities of Hizmet offered a very beneficial alternative because of the combination of education at regular Dutch schools with and religious education in the student houses.

In the late 1980s, a group of active associates of Hizmet opened the first *yurt* (boarding house) in Rotterdam for young pupils who were in secondary education. In subsequent years, more were opened in other Dutch cities.

Students follow an intensive programme of homework assistance, reading sessions, and religious activities and teaching. Initially, there were insufficient qualified senior associates who could guide the young pupils and teach them basic religious and ideological principles, so Hizmet brought in a group of advanced students from Turkey to solve this problem.

In the 1990s, the number of students enrolled in the Hizmet programme grew and students in higher levels of education were included. When the quality of the programme improved, increasing numbers of families decided to enrol their children and, over the years, active students associated with Hizmet built a strong network of enrolled students who would do voluntary work. In this way, the organisational strength of Hizmet increased.

In order to expand the network among Turkish students at universities and high schools, student hostels were opened in cities where the educational establishments were located. Students lived there in exchange for a small financial contribution, and, in the case of poor families, residence was free of charge, with the students paying their contribution when they finished their studies, either financially or by doing voluntary work in the movement.

In the course of the 1990s, the number of students enrolled in the hostels rose considerably and a sufficient number of alumni were skilful enough to work for Hizmet in other places. The volunteers sometimes worked as remedial teachers in pupils' homes when there were serious problems at school and, over the years, the education centres became places where Turkish parents could consult experts about their children's education. Hizmet established a reputation for giving reliable advice in educational matters and, in these ways, gained considerable goodwill and trust also among people who were not attached to the movement, thus enlarging their potential rank-and-file. Around the mid-2000s, Hizmet in the Netherlands was running around 80 student houses with separate houses for male and female students, as well as around 30 educational centres providing homework assistance at weekends.

Hizmet had a network of hundreds of volunteers in different cities, who engaged in a wide variety of activities, including involvement in the organisation of public activities for a broader audience. Most of these activities had a general character and included conferences, lectures, and discussion meetings with politicians, academics, and various professional groups, mostly in the field of public service, education, and welfare. Religious issues were regarded as belonging to the private domain (van Bruinessen 2010).

One of these activities was the organisation of the 'Cultural Olympiad', where children from different countries came together in the Netherlands for a variety of cultural and recreational activities. The foundation Citizen of the World (Cosmicus), an independent network involved in the manage-

ment of nine primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands, was one of the co-organisers of the annual Olympiad of Environment attended by pupils and scholars from around the globe. They organised various projects about how to solve environmental problems. Dutch scientists and journalists supported these activities as members of the advisory board or otherwise. The Netherlands-Turkey Friendship Foundation (NTFF) was another organisation with links to Hizmet, organising debates and lectures dealing with historical, political, and financial issues related to Turkey and the Netherlands (Sunier and Landman 2014).

For a number of years, Hizmet thrived, not least because in Turkey they worked closely together with Erdoğan's government. Among Turkish people, Hizmet was often seen as role model for integration into society without losing cultural and religious values. In addition, politicians and administrative authorities had established relatively good contacts with Hizmet associates on a local level and various forms of cooperation came into being. This situation changed in 2008, when Dutch television broadcast an item about the alleged lack of transparency in the movement and the extensive social control exerted over the participants.

A rather challenging period started for spokespersons, leaders, and representatives of the movement in the Netherlands. They wanted to emphasise that the various organisations that were set up in the early-2000s really were independent and not controlled by Hizmet in any way, and they also argued that the Dutch branch of Hizmet was no more than a loosely organised group of volunteers involved in various activities. The ways in which the student hostels and educational centres were run was an issue that was regularly brought up in the media and, more generally, the alleged double face of the movement and the persistent denial that links existed with Hizmet, gave rise to all kinds of conspiracy theories.

Hizmet's strategy to counter these allegations also worked counterproductively for administrative authorities. Hizmet was and still is perceived as an ordinary Muslim organisation. The most important differences from other organisations are their activities and their organisational structure. Local and national administrative authorities want spokespersons to represent the organisation, but Hizmet was not structured in a way that had a place for such spokespersons. Even though there were no indications that Hizmet had a hidden agenda, it was regarded with suspicion right from the start.

Over the years, and as a result of the constant stream of allegations, negative newspaper articles, and ongoing discussions about Hizmet among politicians and journalists, its positive standing crumbled. The Dutch parliament asked for research to be conducted into Hizmet and its intentions and methods to estab-

lish whether its activities would threaten the integration of Turkish migrants in the Netherlands. This study was conducted by Martin van Bruinessen and was published in 2010. It concluded that Hizmet's activities did not constitute an obstruction to Dutch integration policies and that, although it might be somewhat inward-looking, there was no reason to assume that a conservative lifestyle was incompatible with educational success. According to the report, Hizmet is a successful conservative Muslim movement that organises various educational and charitable activities aimed at emancipating Turkish Muslims (van Bruinessen 2010). Despite these findings, Hizmet continued to be viewed with suspicion.

Hizmet's precarious position reached its nadir after the failed coup in Turkey in 2016, which Hizmet was accused of instigating. But even before that, the negative and conspiratorial atmosphere that surrounded it put strong pressure on Hizmet activities, especially those in the student hostels and educational centres. However, as several active associates of Hizmet consistently argued, the precarious situation also strengthened their internal solidarity, and made them even more aware of the importance of being clear and transparent about their goals and activities.

2.3 *Gülen's Outreach Activities*

Gülen's message has always primarily presented a spiritual rather than a political-ideological or legalistic method of interpreting Islamic sources. The central tenets of Gülen's teachings are 'peaceful coexistence' and 'dialogue' (with people who have different convictions and backgrounds), 'service' (*hizmet* in Turkish) to humankind, and 'responsibility and civility' (Sunier 2014a). Although these concepts belong to the standard rhetorical repertoire of many global organisations such as Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the World Peace Forum, Gülen integrates them into his theological worldview and explains them as Islamic principles. It is the duty of every Muslim to train him- or herself to develop an attitude of responsibility and put it into practice it towards non-Muslims. Gülen emphasises the crucial role of education in this process: "[...] As ignorance is the most serious problem, it must be opposed with education, [...] Now that we live in a global village, education is the best way to serve humanity and to establish a dialogue with other civilisations" (Gülen 2010, 198).

The central creeds of Hizmet are connected to one another through *hizmet*, which implies civility and dedication in one's work and in society, and service to humankind. Gülen expects Muslims to submit to God, to pray and to carry out the daily Islamic obligations but following these normative and ritual obligations without understanding their implications will not lead to a growing

awareness and sensitivity to the world around us. It will certainly not be enough to inspire acting responsibly towards others and recognising the diversity in the world, and, consequently, it will not lead to individual moral improvement.

Hizmet's followers, as well as sympathetic academics, often refer to Gülen's Islamic doctrine as 'civil Islam', denoting an ethical code of conduct that goes beyond the strictly theological understanding of Islamic ethics and requires an active engagement with the society, and a notion of global connectedness and moral responsibility towards an increasingly diverse world and its inhabitants. The transformation of Hizmet into a global religious movement with a strong outwardly oriented message has resulted in a considerable body of literature about its ideals, activities, outreach, international networks, and knowledge production, and the world envisioned by Hizmet and its leader.⁷ Most of Gülen's own work also deals with these aspects.⁸

In order to achieve this orientation, a particular consciousness, civic responsibility, and relevant competences are required. An important concept in this respect is *zuhd* (Arabic for asceticism; Gülay 2007, 51). Adopting an austere and moderate lifestyle is considered essential for a life of service in this world. Here the Weberian concept of *Innerweltliche Askese* ('this-worldly asceticism') is applicable (see Weber 1930), denoting the need to serve and be responsible to God by making the world better through active engagement rather than withdrawal (Özdalga 2000; Esposito and Yilmaz 2010).

The aim of the educational centres that the movement has founded around the world is not only to spread Gülen's ideas, but also to raise a new generation of young Muslims, the so-called *Altın Nesil* (Golden Generation), that is capable of acting responsibly and reflectively in today's complex world (Yilmaz 2005). As Fabio Vicini (2007, 435) argues, Gülen aims to teach his disciples a specific combination of religious sensitivity and cognitive agility as two inseparable elements. Armed with the tools of science and religion, this Golden Generation is expected to solve the dilemmas faced by society. These people will furthermore shape other individuals' inner ethics and will definitively transform society into a paradise, according to Gülen.

In the centres, programmes are being developed that focus on knowledge acquisition, personality development and mental training (Turam 2007). Students who have chosen a life as a disciple of Gülen have to submit to a strict pedagogical regime (van Bruinessen 2010).

7 See Carroll (2007); Hunt and Aslandoğan (2007); Yilmaz (2007); Çelik (2010); Ebaugh (2010); Esposito and Yilmaz (2010); Khan and Khan (2018); Alam (2019).

8 See e.g., Gülen (1994; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2010a; 2010b).

This has brought to light an intriguing development in the way Hizmet is perceived. According to some observers and academics, Gülen's ever widening and inclusive message to the world stands in stark contrast to its closed, esoteric, and allegedly secretive character, and to the movement's internal discipline. This contradiction has often been depicted as Gülen's double face and the esoteric practices he espouses as some sort of 'cover up'. The younger associates of Hizmet have become visible in society and the more they are actively engaged in it, the more this double image is depicted as a way to distract attention from Gülen's 'Islamist agenda' (see e.g., Sharon-Krespin 2009). Although such allegations often lack evidence, the absence of a transparent organisational structure feeds the suspicions. In Europe, this has given the movement a negative and unwanted image. Regular mosque organisations have a board, associates, and spokespersons; in Hizmet, these are often absent, which makes 'normal' communication difficult in the view of politicians and civil servants (Sunier, and Landman 2015).

Several authors have criticised the allegation that Hizmet speaks with 'a forked tongue' and has a 'hidden agenda'. They regard external outreach and internal discipline not as irreconcilable strategies, but as two interlocking dimensions of the movement's general goal (Kurtz 2005; Hendrick 2013; Sunier 2014a). According to Elisabeth Özdalga (2007) it is necessary to acquire and live out a particular attitude in order to show commitment and engagement with the world. Because it is relatively difficult for outsiders to get access to internal activities that are run for associates and followers, they have rarely been addressed by researchers until recently. Only a few researchers have addressed the pedagogical activities in boarding houses and associations attached to Hizmet.⁹

3 Sohbet as 'Sensational Form' and a Site of Devotional Practice

Sohbet is the term used by Hizmet to denote the partly ritualised sessions that regularly take place in local branches of the movement. The term 'sohbet' means 'conversation' in Turkish, but often refers to religious conversations and settings where Islamic sources are taught and discussed. As the sohbet is the central activity of Hizmet's pedagogical programme, the aim of the remaining part of this chapter is to unpack the ritual and analyse its constituent elements.

9 See e.g., van Bruinessen (2010); Ahmed (2013); Vicini (2013; 2019; 2020); Dohrn (2017); Göktürk (2018); Geier et al. (2019).

The particular way Hizmet uses the term 'sohbet' is rooted in Nakşibendi traditions in which the *dhikr* (silent group meditation), the recitation of Sura 112 collectively, and the explanation of the mystical dimensions of Islam to the community come together. The sohbet as it is practised by Hizmet associates is built on these traditions, but with a stronger emphasis on the communication of knowledge and the shared formulation of opinions and views. In that regard, the sohbet in Hizmet bears a resemblance to the 'Socratic conversation', a communal conversation in which participants develop ideas about sources of knowledge and personal experiences and discuss them with a moderator. Rather than an occasion where only knowledge is exchanged and discussed, the aim is to deepen the conversation and to arrive together at a higher level of wisdom (Boghossian 2006).

The intended aim of these kinds of sessions is the acquisition of knowledge and the building of discursive communities through learning. A sohbet should improve a participant's knowledge and understanding of Islamic sources and relate them to the world outside, so that the participant becomes a better person. In madrasas and other Islamic educational institutes, one finds numerous reading groups where students discuss texts in this way.¹⁰ Historically, this type of meeting goes back to the times of the Prophet, who regularly organised gatherings where disciples could ask questions with regard to faith and other matters. In some instances, such meetings are meant to teach what in Sunni Islam is known as *manhaj*, or *tafsir* methodology, meaning the proper ways to interpret texts with the aim of understanding their meaning and considering their applicability in concrete situations (Duderija 2008; Hussin and Solihin 2013).

It would, however, be too limited to describe the Hizmet sohbet as just a setting for the communication of religious knowledge, the acquisition of proper methods of interpreting religious texts, or just a sophisticated religious conversation. The sohbet is primarily a devotional practice, a spiritual event with strong aesthetic features, that is meant to induce moral dispositions and religious experiences in participants.

Fabio Vicini, who conducted extensive research on Hizmet's educational programmes and activities, argues that exclusive concentration on the cognitive and textual elements of the learning process would ignore and underestimate the crucial role of affection and embodiment. According to him, in education generally, there is often too much emphasis on the learners and too

10 See e.g., Hefner and Zaman (2007); Kloos (2010); Işık (2011); Morgahi (2011; 2018); Fikri (2020); Meyrasyawati (2022).

little on the active role of the educators. Emulation and guidance and specific pedagogical interventions by educators are essential elements in the Hizmet programme (Vicini 2013, 388; 2020).

Unlike an educational programme or a ritual that one attends and then goes back home, the aim is to create an environment of continuous learning through techniques reminiscent of socialisation in a family. “A good follower [of Hizmet] is a 24/7 follower”, as one of the interlocutors said. Seniors and apprentices or students live together in boarding houses in a quasi-family setting and, in addition to their regular education, they are immersed in a daily routine of religious socialisation. They learn how to speak properly and behave modestly. They perform their prayers and are subject to the various parts of the pedagogical regime, which I shall address below. They receive personal guidance from a mentor, and they have to reflect on their own behaviour, their accomplishment and mishaps and other personal aspects.

As Vicini (2013, 387) shows, life in the houses is not confined to formal religious obligations and personal reflection; communal activities, leisure time activities, and general activities that we would find in ordinary family households and in other boarding houses, are essential elements. They are meant to create a sense of comradeship and solidarity. Vicini uses the term “pedagogies of affection” to denote the entire setting: the pedagogical programme and

the particular pedagogical modality that shapes the relationship between university students and younger high-school students (*talebeler* in Turkish) in the community’s student houses. Pedagogies of affection refers to Fethullah Gülen’s pedagogical discourse and to the specific rules of interaction between leaders and students. (ibid., 381)

The atmosphere or ambiance and the activities that characterise the life in the houses are meant to teach residents techniques to enable moral introspection as a means to become a better person. This is what Michel Foucault (1987, 204) has called “hermeneutics of the self”, or “techniques oriented toward the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself”. The specific bodily disciplinary practices Foucault refers to are relevant for unpacking the constituent elements of Hizmet’s pedagogical programme, as is the intricate relation Foucault points to between power, truth, and embodiment. As he writes:

[...] What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act on the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its beha-

viour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. [...] Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies. [...] A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. (Foucault 1977, 132)

Elsewhere, Foucault introduced the concept of 'biopolitics' to further unpack the process of embodiment. Biopolitics refers to practices "[...] to discipline the body, optimise its capabilities, extort its forces, increase its usefulness and docility, integrate it into systems ..." (Foucault 1978, 139). The embodiment of particular sensory regimes shapes the receptiveness of the body and mind for particular religious experiences. Foucault considered 'biopolitics' a crucial prerequisite of governmentality. In studying 'techniques of domination' and modes of governmentality, Foucault showed how power becomes effective not just through external coercion, but also through 'self-technology' and embodiment.

Furthermore, Foucault makes a distinction between "technologies of domination", "technologies of production", "technologies of communication", and "technologies of self". The modern world requires "an active and individualist self" that

permits individuals to affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988, 18)

"Hermeneutics of the self", or "techniques oriented toward the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself", are techniques to locate oneself within a particular truth regime (Foucault 1993, 204). Thus

the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are not nevertheless something that the subject invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture, and which are proposed, suggested, and imposed on him by his culture, his society, and his social group. (Foucault 1987, 11)

Foucault's work is often associated with domination and coercion, but as Claire Blencowe (2011) rightly argues, biopolitics, disciplining, and self-technology are also about affective investment, structures of experience, self-fashioning, cultivation, motivation, and, not least, virtue. In his later work, Foucault argued

that truth games involve not simply coercive practices but rather practices of self-formation. Discipline and ascetic practice are techniques of self-realisation: “an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform oneself and to attain a certain mode of being” (Foucault, quoted in Rabinow 1994, 282; see also Besley 2005).

Foucault has traced ‘hermeneutics of the self’ back to the Christian practice of confession, but his interlocutors applied Foucault’s insights to religious subjectivation and truth-seeking. Thus, the notion of ‘ascetic practice’ has been taken up by Talal Asad. In his study on medieval Christian rituals, he shows how bodily pain and truth seeking are inextricably linked (Asad 1993).

In her study on female Muslims in Cairo, Saba Mahmood (2005) points to the seemingly paradoxical relation between subordination and agency among a group of women embodying Islamic virtues. She builds on important insights developed by Foucault and Asad about the crucial connection between truth seeking and disciplining practices, focussing on the trajectories to moral improvement and the ways in which the right attitude comes about.

She conducted research among a group of pious Muslim women in Cairo and showed how affect and embodiment are crucial prerequisites of these techniques that aim to develop a particular religious subjectivity. She critically engages with Western feminist notions of freedom and self-realisation, arguing that “in order for an individual to be free, her actions must be the consequence of her ‘own will’ rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion” (Mahmood 2005, 11). Mahmood shows how these women’s various devotional and disciplining practices were designed to attain a desired level of piety, and to increase spiritual sensibilities and receptiveness. This “also entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason as sites of discipline” (Mahmood 2001a, 212).

Mahmood (2003, 851) refers to the pedagogical process by which a moral character is acquired as “ethical formation”. She makes an important remark with regard to this process. Moral habitus and virtuous self do not emerge naturally but require training and work. Only in this way are registers of ethical and virtuous conduct embodied and become more than external superimposed rules that one must obey. Mahmood engages with the old and well-known discussion in the anthropology of ritual in which a juxtaposition is formulated between prescribed and scripted forms of acting—for example, in ritual and in daily life. The ritual is understood as a setting where emotion and spontaneity are controlled and channelled. Mahmood instead focuses on how conventional or formal actions, such as in rituals, are connected with intentions, spontaneous emotions, and bodily capacities in different contexts of power and truth. Thus:

[...] a conscious process by which the mosque participants induced sentiments and desires in themselves, in accordance with a moral-ethical program, simultaneously problematises the 'naturalness' of emotions as well as the 'conventionality' of ritual action, calling into question any a priori distinction between formal (conventional) behaviour and spontaneous (intentional) conduct. (Mahmood 2001b, 828)

Charles Hirschkind has demonstrated how listening to recorded sermons is a disciplinary exercise that creates sensibilities and modes of moral receptiveness aimed at moral self-improvement. He conducted research in Egypt among people listening to sermons recorded on cassettes. According to Hirschkind (2006, 2), listening to the cassettes "animates and sustains the substrate of sensory knowledge and embodied aptitudes". Through rehearsed listening, the listener gradually achieves a mood and a sensibility that enables him not just to consume but also to experience the meaning of the sermon. In this way, listening is a 'technology of the self' and becomes a "gestural modality of bodily experience". It develops a "sensorium as an object of pedagogy and ethical attunement" (*ibid.*, 73). Listening becomes "an ethical therapy on the listener", "relaxing the body", and "enhancing the listener's capacity for discernment in the face of moral danger" (*ibid.*).

In their study about the pedagogical regime in British Muslim schools, Glenn Hardaker and Aishah Sabki (2015) also point to the importance of 'biopolitics' as a crucial element in the educational programme. They show that the pedagogical setting, consisting of activities such as memorisation of the Qur'an and learning the basic values of Islam, is embedded in a social and spiritual environment that enables the students to internalise and embody knowledge.

In her study about religious ethical formation among Muslim women in Berlin, Synnøve Bendixsen (2013) argues that the self is crafted in the social reality of the surrounding society in which these women live. The moral self is shaped and developed in relation to social desires, ambitions, motivations, conditions, and discourses. The formation of the self is an active process, in which dealing with contradictory desires and expectations plays a central role and is consistently related to a search for divine truth and authentic religious experience.

These insights constitute an important point of departure from which to address the sohbet, but I seek to take the analysis a step further and explore how disciplinary practices such as those discussed above are linked to processes of authority-making. In my view, authority-making unfolds in two ways. Intensive participation takes on the form of an initiation into an esoteric, sacrosanct body of authorised knowledge and of the ideas of the movement's

leader Fethullah Gülen. But authority-making also takes on the form of authentication of the pedagogical and ritual process itself as the only and true way to accomplish aims.

Some authors have addressed Hizmet's devotional practices by referring to the concept of 'collective effervescence' coined by Emile Durkheim ([1912] 2001). This concept, which constituted the backbone of Durkheim's theory on religion, refers to strong excitement and emotion generated by collectively taking part in a ritual. It is a shared affective state, a peak experience for participants (see also Draper 2014). Although the dispositions and emotional experiences Durkheim described have some relevance to the experiences of sohbet participants, there is a caveat that makes the concept of collective effervescence less applicable for the workings of the sohbet. Durkheim's 'functional inclination' put the focus on how a ritual was experienced by the participants collectively, but hardly on how this would shape the relationship to the transcendental or to divine persons and objects.

A crucial aspect of religious authority is the capacity to convince and to persuade people to act in a certain way, to inculcate certain dispositions, to motivate and connect people, and to forge discursive communities. This can be accomplished through disciplined training and exercise, as the authors cited above demonstrate. But persuasive qualities can also be generated through what Birgit Meyer calls 'sensational forms' (2009; 2013). A sohbet is meant to bridge the distance between the participant and the transcendental or spiritual force that cannot be known in itself. As a form of religious mediation, the sohbet is supposed not only to mediate but even to induce transcendental experiences. "Sensational forms can best be understood as a condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure religious experiences" (Meyer 2009, 11–13). I regard a sohbet as a 'sensational form'.

4 Sohbet in Practice

With these conceptual and theoretical considerations in mind, I shall now zoom in on the sohbet and the activities around it as the constituent elements of a sensational form, or in Meyer's words, as a condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure religious experiences. I shall unpack and discuss the sohbet in order to grasp this condensation. Although I consider the sohbet itself crucial for understanding the mechanisms of authority-making that are at work, the social and spiritual environment in which practitioners live and the disciplinary and attuning activities before, after, and around the sohbet, are crucial for inculcating the proper spiritual dispositions

and for the full event to be effectively absorbed. I shall therefore discuss the setting, the role of moderators and participants, and the actual course of a sohbet.

4.1 *The Setting*

A sohbet is organised on a weekly basis for men and women separately, and is led by an elderly associate of Hizmet, known as *abi* (elderly brother) for men and *abla* (elderly sister) for women. Here I shall refer to them as moderators. The number of participants varies between ten and fifteen, although there is no strict rule in this regard, and a sohbet lasts between one and three hours. Some parts of the meeting are fixed, but the event may evolve in any direction. Meetings usually open with some Qur'an recitations by the moderator, after which additional comments are made, or questions are posed. During the meeting, important texts are discussed and explained, and the moderator plays an important role in this. The circulation of knowledge in a sohbet should evolve in such a way that the interaction between the moderator, the more experienced and elderly participants, and the rest of the participants, both reconfirms positions but at the same time constitutes new modes of exchange. There are also shared prayers and meditative moments. Sometimes a sohbet is organised for educational or professional groups, not only to instruct but also to exchange specific experiences.

The setting and ambiance of the place or venue are essential elements. A sohbet can be held anywhere as long as it complies with certain conditions and preparations have been carried out properly. The home of a moderator has a special significance as a venue because it not only shows the host's dedication, but it also brings spiritual qualities to the house, and this has a cumulative effect. The host of the sohbet has to prepare the venue meticulously for the meeting, not only by cleaning and providing the necessities for the wudu, but also by carrying out ritual purifications.

Seating, mostly in half circles, should be organised in such a way that it not only guarantees optimal interaction between participants, but also expresses the hierarchical relation between them and the prominent and central position of the moderator. The youngest participants usually sit on the ground. This arrangement is partly reminiscent of dhikr meetings in Sufi orders. The place where the sohbet is to take place should be arranged so as to minimise references to the normal functions of the room.

Photos and other reminders of family life should be removed, audio-visual equipment should be switched off completely, and newspapers and non-religious books should be replaced by religious books, with the Qur'an and the principal works of Hizmet in central place. When the physical aspects are

deployed in such a way that the room displays a subtle combination of the privacy of a home and the necessary requirements for a sohbet, this enhances the status of the convenor as it shows that her/his private life and life as a disciple are not strictly separated.

Light and sound may be used to give the place a more intimate and special atmosphere. Sometimes candles are used, as long as there is sufficient light for reading and the setting does not become too cosy and informal. In the spatial arrangements, the host should strike a delicate balance between the venue as both an adequate 'lecture room' and a spiritual environment that facilitates the 'moral attunement' of the participants. Sometimes hosts play a recorded sermon by Gülen to dispel possible evil spirits from the room. Some also open the meeting with a recorded sermon to create a special atmosphere.

4.2 *The Moderator*

As Vicini (2019) argues, the role of the moderator as coach, spiritual leader, and educator is often underestimated. His or her performance and operational method is crucial. The setting of a sohbet is clearly hierarchical. The abi or abla who leads the sohbet is not only senior with respect to her/his position in the movement and knowledge of the relevant sources but should also confirm this hierarchy by behaving appropriately. At the beginning of the sohbet, the moderator briefly explains the programme and opens with the recitation of Qur'anic verses, followed by some personal remarks. After that, a chosen selection of readings is discussed. This should be done in such a way that participants are gradually 'drawn' into the meaning of the texts. Sometimes more experienced participants can help here to guide younger participants.

An experienced moderator is able not only to provide regular text exegesis, but also to connect this to the particular ways in which Gülen himself understands these sources of knowledge. Discussion and differences of opinion are not avoided, but the moderator should ensure that this leads to a shared understanding. The moderator is regarded as someone who is able to understand the meaning of certain bodies of knowledge and Gülen's insights, and to address dilemmas in life and connect them to theological insights. The authority of a moderator is an ascribed status, but this status should be repeatedly reconfirmed during subsequent sohbet. At first sight, hierarchies and status seem to be fixed but, in practice, the authority of a moderator is contingent on his or her ability to persuade the audience and to fulfil the other tasks of a guide, mentor, and leader.

This is a complex endeavour and requires specific abilities. If the moderator of a sohbet regularly fails to 'translate' spiritual knowledge into concrete guid-

ance for action, or to connect it convincingly to the everyday experiences of the participants without issues being neglected or left out, his or her position will eventually be weakened.

4.3 *Individual Participants*

As the vignette with which I opened this chapter shows, participants in a sohbet are expected to thoroughly prepare themselves both physically and mentally before the actual gathering. Participants are primarily expected to display the quality of humility. Although many of the recommendations and obligations with regard to dress and performance are not uncommon in other religions, the explicit, almost ritualised and individualised, way of preparing is essential for a sohbet. Each participant can do this on their own preferred way, but the most common preparation consists of listening to Gülen's sermons, reciting parts of the Qur'an, or meditation alone at home.

These preparatory activities are considered individual acts of mental and spiritual purification, and of self-reflection, but they are also meant to draw the participant into a particular mood, which enables them to immerse themselves in the collective ritualised parts of the sohbet. These parts are considered the most difficult for novices and less experienced participants because they require not only knowledge and experience but also the ability to attune one's body to immersion.

4.4 *A Sohbet in Practice*

I describe below a regular first part of a sohbet for male practitioners, in which important texts are read and discussed.¹¹ The texts that are chosen by the moderator Hasan in this case, depend on the topic of the sohbet. In addition to the written sources, a sohbet also explicitly draws on others, of which the knowledge and experience of the moderator are the most important. The second source of knowledge is provided by the more senior experienced followers. Apart from the leading position of the moderator, the hierarchy and levels of seniority are not clearly defined; they are predominantly based on familiarity within the local community. Senior participants may disagree and start a discussion with the moderator, as long as his authority is respected.

Theological and experiential knowledge are separate but closely connected dimensions and the best participants are those who are able to combine the two adequately and convincingly. To some extent, experiential knowledge serves as a form of collective memory within the local Hizmet community. As

11 The data were collected by the (anonymous) researcher.

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues, collective memory connects members of a group and manifests itself through images, narratives, anecdotes, and other personal accounts that together constitute a collective body of knowledge, binding associates together. This is an important binding mechanism in a local *sohbet* community.

The last source of knowledge is that of new recruits. Their ignorance and curiosity motivate them to ask specific questions that the moderator and the senior participants would probably overlook. The moderator should motivate the recruits to ask questions and overcome their hesitancy, and he should create an atmosphere in which asking questions is stimulated. However, the strictly observed hierarchy in the gathering often prevents such boldness.

The course of the first part of a *sohbet* more or less follows a script, and positions are largely prescribed, but there is still considerable room for interpretation and improvisation. The more experienced participants who have attended many *sohbets* are better able to make use of the space between scripts and rules.

A regular *sohbet* often starts with a casual friendly conversation. In the case of the *sohbet* described here, the topic is the cold weather, health, and precautions to prevent illness, because one participant has been ill for some time. The conversation soon includes references to statements by Fethullah Gülen about this, or quotations from other Islamic sources. Hasan wraps up the conversation by reminding the participants that God is the only owner of weather and seasonal changes. God creates specific sicknesses in every season in order to warn people that they should never forget this.

After this short conversation, Hasan asks everyone to be silent so that he can start with the reading. This time he opens the chapter 'The Words' in the *Risale-i-Nur* by Said-i-Nursi and announces that he will read the sixth chapter, consisting of five pages. He takes the book out of his black leather bag and puts it on the small reading table in front of him. Hasan is seated at the end of two benches so he can see all the participants and have eye contact with them.

The text is about how to overcome worldly and bodily desires. When reading, Hasan looks directly at all followers, warning them that "many of us do not understand how God asks us to live as true Muslims". To serve God properly, worldly desires and interests are the biggest obstacle in the personal life of Muslims. After this, he continues to expand on this issue for a while, including experiences of senior participants and questions from recruits.

When Hasan reads, he repeats some parts of the text and tells the followers to appreciate its importance and significance. After reading two pages, he stops and asks: "How can we pay the high price of paradise in the hereafter?" Halil, one of the participants, suggests that it might be better if Hasan himself would

first share his valuable answer to this question. Other followers approve this suggestion and Hasan then states that going to paradise is not very difficult if one follows God's word, upon which one of the senior participants states that Gülen himself has always emphasised that there are always difficulties on the way to paradise.

Hasan replies by stating that difficulties in the way Gülen understands them are ordinary seductions and illicit activities. Halil quickly gives in and promises never to forget this. Hasan explains that many Muslims are inclined to see paradise as something that cannot be achieved because of God's high expectations. He calls on the participants never to forget that God makes the life of a Muslim easier by endless grace. A senior participant supports Hasan by stating that it is not God's aim to cause setbacks in the personal life of Muslims for no reason, but that they belong to what God want for us.

After a while, the discussion shifts to the relation between Islamic knowledge and scientific knowledge. Devran, one of the senior participants who has a PhD in physics, states that many clever people ultimately convert to Islam because they use their mind and think rationally. One of the younger participants asks why then people always regard Islam and science as incompatible. Devran replies that really clever people ultimately see that humans have a Godly ordained mission to fulfil on this planet. That is way, Devran says, scientists like Edison, Pasteur, Einstein, and Newton actually converted to Islam by using the exceptional intellectual abilities. Devran argues that it is not a matter of formal conversion in front of an imam, but conversion here ultimately lies in the way we use our intellectual abilities.

Hasan agrees with this argument and adds that this is why missionary activity (*dawa*) is not necessary because all people will ultimately acknowledge God's divine power. It is indeed true, Hasan explains, that some Western scientists converted to Islam in the last stage of their life on earth. The most significant aspect of Islam, according to Hasan, is that it does not discourage or exclude rational thinking about natural processes. On the contrary, Islam is the inspirational source for much scientific thinking. Islam has inspired thousands of Muslim and non-Muslim scientists to explore the natural world.

Ekrem, a younger participant, expresses some doubts about this and asks why then there are many scientists in the world who do not believe in God, why atheists and communists have a dominant position in the current scientific world, and why more of them do not convert to Islam. Ekrem phrases his slightly critical remark in a question to prevent strong reactions by Devran. Hasan responds to Ekrem by saying that he argues too much out of emotions rather than using rational argumentation. Hasan advises Ekrem to be patient. Only God is able to look inside the heart and mind of all people. Many people do

not know that they have an exceptional link with God. It is absolutely wrong to label the majority of scientists as a group of atheists. Ekrem is somewhat taken aback and remains silent. After a little while, Hasan asks whether “brother Ekrem” is a little disappointed by his answer and advises him to understand his comments as a positive message to enable him to see the broader picture.

After a while, Hasan continues reading and then he summarises the core of the day’s readings. After that he whispers, “in the name of God”, and drinks some water in a way that is in accord with Prophetic tradition, saying, “Thanks be to God.” Then he rises to repeat the ritual cleansing. All the followers immediately stop their discussion, only to resume after his return, as a sign of their respect for the moderator. Reference to the way in which a moderator should be addressed causes a return to a discussion they had a week before about sincerity and hypocrisy. When are these gestures and good manners only superficial gestures to please someone and how can we discern that? Hasan concludes this short discussion by stating that only God knows the difference between ‘real’ Muslims and ‘would-be’ Muslims.

Towards the end of the reading and discussion session and before the collective prayer with which the first part of the sohbet ends, there is some discussion between two younger participants about the correct orientation of prayer towards and how to position the prayer rug. A compass is brought in to see who is right. Hasan allows this discussion to continue for a while and then explains that making a slight mistake about the direction is not a very big problem. He adds that the Prophet and all his Companions did not have a compass, intending to guide the discussion away from trivialities to essential matters.

Hasan leads the prayer and sits in front of the group. The order in which the others take their places is again scripted. Directly behind Hasan are the senior participants and behind them the recruits. At each meeting, one of the participants is asked to do the recitation of Qur’anic verses; this time it is Bekir’s turn. Bekir recites and also refers to Gülen and to the moderator and asks God to help all the brothers and sisters to remain on the right path established by these two “valuable”. Bekir reconfirms their authority, and the other participants confirm this by saying *amin* (affirmation at the end of a prayer/blessing).

Hasan concludes the first part of the session by giving some information about a conflict between two associates of the local branch of Hizmet. He has received anonymous letters about this conflict and, without going into detail, he takes the opportunity to emphasise how important it is to be careful not to condemn somebody all too quickly and always to look for positive elements in a person’s character, even if there are serious issue to tackle. After that, he closes the first part of the sohbet and the prayer, and after a short break opens the second part.

4.5 *The Weeping Sermon*

In the first part of the sohbet, the emphasis is on cognitive knowledge exchange. The second part is mainly devoted to ritual performance. The so-called ‘weeping sermon’ is a recurring and central ritual part of the sohbet.¹² The core of the weeping sermon is engagement with ‘the way of God’ by emulating the leader of the movement and by the participants’ mentally and physically immersing themselves in a collective act of emotional outcry.

The weeping session always starts with watching a recording of one of Gülen’s sermons, which ends with intense weeping, first by Gülen and then by a growing group of participants. In these sermons, Gülen discusses a chosen topic and provides insight and background to his theological explanation of the issue and how it should be applied in daily situations. After a while, the tone and phrasing of the sermon generates an emotional atmosphere in which Gülen frequently weeps and begs his followers to act responsibly. Gülen asserts that it is a divine impulse that makes him weep. It is a divine inspiration, he asserts, that lays bare the human deficiencies in our (often difficult and fruitless) attempts to serve God. After Gülen starts crying, at some point in the sermon, the participants follow suit.

The weeping sermon in the sohbet is led by the moderator, who also takes the lead in crying, followed by senior participants and later by (some of the) junior participants. After a while, a diversification can be observed between followers in the way they participate in the sermon and in the intensity with which they perform. Some followers scream and whine intensively; others are more contained and collected. New recruits do not at first participate in the weeping session, but they learn to weep and embody the proper gestures through weekly repetition and training. Spontaneity and embodiment come together clearly here; the more a novice learns about the deeper meaning of the divine sources of emotion, the more ritual gestures become embodied, the more emotion and ritual rules and codes merge and lose their external superficiality. Through this learning process, the authoritative qualities of the leadership within the movement are enhanced.

Sometimes, the moderator spontaneously reads a poem in order to announce that they will begin the weeping part of the sohbet. This poem is usually a poetic statement to the participants that the weeping session is about to start, and it conveys a message of duties that lie ahead with phrases such as: “it is the time”, “it is your moment”, “it depends on the voice of your heart”, “your

12 For an elaborate description and analysis of the ‘Weeping sermon’, see Sunier and Şahin (2015).

turn to show the mirror of your soul”, and “the only way to reach Allah”. The order of activities is clearly designed to build up tension and to arrive at an apotheosis.

At this moment, experienced participants suddenly become alert and the recording of Gülen's sermon begins. It is common practice to turn off the lights at this stage so every participant can weep freely. An atmosphere emerges in which participants feel comfortable and at ease. They are less distracted and concentrate completely on the moment of weeping. According to some participants, the rationale behind this creation of a relaxed atmosphere is that it forestalls unnecessary interactions between practitioners and prevents them from only acting strategically. Being dedicated and fully immersed in the act is good, but overacting can be perceived as hypocrisy, which must be avoided at all costs.

Gülen's sermons cover a variety of religious and social themes, but equally important are his bodily gestures and the intensity of his emotions. There is no specific time for him to begin to weep, but it is certain that he will do so at some point during the sermon. The transition becomes apparent through a change in his tone and facial expressions and through the words he uses. During the weeping, he becomes a kind of partner in a conversation by addressing the audience directly while continuing his sermon. The weeping lasts a few minutes and is repeated several times during a sermon. It mostly takes place when he speaks about important matters in the movement and duties of followers. He gives instructions and comments on current issues within the movement and, while addressing his followers, he invokes God.

Followers start weeping spontaneously when the leader's voice trembles. Sometimes, experienced participants start crying as soon as they see the image of the leader on the screen. In the movement, they have a special status, because it is assumed that they understand the deeper layers of the leader's message better than anyone else. It is an indication that they have achieved a higher level of knowledge and spirituality and are more pious. During the weeping session, the participants slightly bend their heads. They are quiet and focus on the weeping only. The weeping of the followers does not stop when the leader stops and continues preaching.

Weeping sessions can be very noisy and emotional, especially if some followers start shouting. For new participants the weeping sessions are sometimes rather awkward or unsettling and it takes time to grow into the sense of collective experience and participation. It should be emphasised that taking part in a weeping sermon is not obligatory. Here an intriguing combination of collective spiritual immersion and individual performance can be observed. Both are strongly encouraged. Since it is an emotional event, laden with moral implica-

tions and with expectations of a proper performance, participation is demanding, and some followers are even hesitant to take part.

5 Hizmet as a 'Way of Life'

Being a follower of Fethullah Gülen, an associate of Hizmet, is a 'way of life' and permeates all aspects of one's personal everyday life. The process of 'ethical formation' that the pedagogical programme is intended to generate also applies to the lives and daily activities of practitioners outside the sohbet. Parents send their children to Hizmet activities and schools not only because of their assumed quality, but also because they regard the institutional setting and the intensive guidance in the boarding houses as essential for their upbringing as good Muslims. Many adult followers ideally spend a considerable amount of time in Hizmet activities every week.¹³

I shall provide a brief description of the other elements of the pedagogical programme, the yurt (boarding house), the *okuma kampı* (reading camp), *şahsi konuşma* (personal conversation or consultation), and the *çalışma grubu* (working group).

Until recently, the yurt was used extensively as a training place for young people whose parents were associates of Hizmet. Pupils between the age of 12 and 18 lived in a yurt throughout their time at secondary school. Except for the time when they attended ordinary schools, they had hardly regular contact with the outside world. Their relationship with their parents was also restricted to telephone conversations and visits during holidays and religious celebrations. In the yurt they followed an intensive educational trajectory consisting of religious training and homework assistance. Within the yurt, small groups of four to five pupils lived under the personal guidance of a *belletmen* (mentor). During the years in the yurt, the residents were expected not only to immerse themselves in the pedagogical environment that was created, but also to become an intimate community.¹⁴

13 According to some of the interlocutors, the life of a dedicated associate of Hizmet is at times demanding. Some, especially those who were sent to boarding houses by their parents, left Hizmet when they were able to decide for themselves. Others continue to participate as long as it does not impact on their lives too much. In that respect, Hizmet does not differ very much from other religious communities.

14 In Europe, the number of boarding houses operating in this intensive way has fallen considerably in recent years, not only because circumstances changed rather fundamentally after the failed coup in 2016, but also because educational authorities in several coun-

The second pedagogical activity is the *okuma kampı* (reading camp). These are gatherings lasting a couple of days during holidays or weekends. Participants read and discuss works of Nursi and Gülen under the guidance of a senior associate. These camps are also organised as a way for the participants to spend their leisure time usefully. The programmes are mainly designed to give the participants reading proficiency in a relatively short time. This gives participants in a *sohbet* an advantage and many parents prefer these kinds of training activities over boarding houses.

Individual students who follow the training programme are expected to regularly organise a personal consultation meeting with their mentor, known as *şahsi konuşma* (personal conversation). During the conversation, theological issues may be discussed, but the main purpose is to discuss the personal development of the student and to coach him or her. An important tool for these individual coaching activities is the so-called *çetele* (personal diary), in which all of a student's activities are noted. For the student, this is intended to make personal development and ethical improvement visible, but the *çetele* also serves as a monitoring device for mentors.

The fourth activity is the *çalışma grubu* (working group), which is a rather different activity from the others. Working groups are organised with the aim of discussing how people who work or study in different fields and in different places can improve their engagement with the world around them. The working groups also discuss practical matters such as financial issues, but they are first and foremost crucial intermediaries between the esoteric internal training practices and life in the outside world. There are discussions and deliberations about best practices, good and bad experiences and how the associates can optimise their engagement with the surrounding society and undergird motivations with religious reasoning.

An important element in these discussions and consultations is the interaction between younger and older, more experienced people. Elderly participants are encouraged to advise younger ones on their engagement with the surrounding society and to share their experiences. Working groups also serve as settings where the recruitment of new associates is discussed. The working groups are particularly important for enhancing solidarity and cooperation between participants, but they also function as a professional network and improve participants' social capital. In this regard, they do not differ very much from typical alumni networks.

tries were worried about the closed nature of the boarding houses and the strict regime to which they were subjected. Today, training, and educational programmes are increasingly provided for youngsters who live with their parents.

6 Gender

Hizmet's pedagogical programme, the student houses and all other internal activities are organised on the basis of strict gender separation. The researcher who collected the ethnographic data on which this chapter is based was only able to attend sohbet and visit student houses for male participants. He had a number of interviews with female participants to form an idea about the experiences of women taking part in Hizmet activities, but these conversations can in no way be compared with the in-depth quality of the ethnographic data collected among male participants.¹⁵

The interviews with female associates of Hizmet revealed that the format of the sohbet for men and for women is generally similar, but the topics are gender-specific. Individual preparations and the course of the sohbet follow the same script as those for men and the daily schedule and structure of guidance in student houses does not differ from that in male houses. The interlocutors indicated that considerable time (apparently more than in male settings) was spent discussing gender-specific issues of morality and the distinctive tasks of men and women. Male and female training programmes differ in that they are intended to produce different gender-specific subjectivities, dispositions, and styles in accordance with Islamic normativity as taught within Hizmet.

According to Ibrahim Karatop (2011), Hizmet applies an explicit gender regime culminating in a specific type of masculinity epitomised by the figure and role of the *abi* and the 'Golden Generation' as the model of masculine subjectivity. Although I go along with this modality of religious subjectivation, as a male researcher Karatop was also biased, and his data cannot be generalised. In her study on female participants in Hizmet sohbet in Turkey, Smita Jassal (2019) saw that the experiences Muslim women have during the sessions were also empowering, creating bonds of solidarity. She provides ample discussion about female solidarity and sisterhood.

7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analysed the pedagogical programme designed by Hizmet with the aim of raising a generation of active followers who embody the

15 As of now, hardly any systematic research has been conducted among female associates of Hizmet. Smita Jassal (2019) addresses experiences of women in the sohbet. Most other empirical research is biased in the sense that it concentrates predominantly on the experiences of male practitioners.

ideal image of the perfect Muslim, able to engage with Islamic traditions and modernity in a specific way. Just as in the two previous chapters, authority-making in the current case revolves around a particular type of authority figure, in combination with various modalities of knowledge-production. However, the mechanisms that constitute Islamic authority are markedly different. Authority-making in the cases in Chapters 1 and 2 is predominantly constituted through political process and concerns various modes of community-building and organisational development. Authority-making primarily shapes Islamic landscapes and power configurations.

In this chapter, Islamic authority-making deals with knowledge-production, knowledge-communication, devotion, emulation, immersion, and embodiment as the essential constitutive elements. Islamic authority is constituted by processes of ethical formation. While the processes analysed in the two previous chapters unfold mainly on a more collective level, in the current case collective processes are subservient to processes of individual moral improvement and subjectivation with elements of ethical self-fashioning.

The activities I have described are considered to be necessary for reaching the deeper layers of meaning in sources of religious knowledge and connecting spiritually with the transcendental. To accomplish that, practitioners must pursue a long trajectory of disciplined training and learning. The *sohbet*, as a spellbinding, captivating, enchanting or awe-inspiring event, is the focal point and central locus of these processes.

A relevant question to be addressed is to what extent and in what way Hizmet's pedagogical programme does in fact yield the expected results. The question is relevant not only for an assessment of the quality and effectiveness of Hizmet's pedagogical regime, but also to understand Islamic subjectivity and ethical formation in all their dimensions and manifestations. An issue that is often raised in this regard is the genuineness and the sincerity of religious convictions and modes of religiosity. This is particularly relevant with respect to the performative aspects of religiosity. Some of the activities, particularly the weeping sermon described in this chapter, are examples of what Saba Mahmood (2001a) has called 'rehearsed spontaneity' to describe the emotions that arise during the *salat*. She takes issue with the assumption that emotions are natural feelings that cannot be staged. Emotions evoked during ritual practices are also the result of training and disciplining and need to be learned, but that does not make them less sincere or devout.

But the analysis of the Hizmet training programme and the processes of ethical formation are also relevant to another issue that arises several times in this book and in public and scholarly discussions, and that is closely connected to questions of sincerity and truthfulness. The discussion revolves around what is

sometimes called 'ethical or pious self-fashioning'. Ethical self-fashioning concerns (performative) actions, especially by young Muslims, to display religious convictions in highly visible ways. Shelina Janmohamed (2016) refers to these Muslims as "generation M". The term sometimes has a derogatory connotation as these actions are considered too superficial and too detached from 'genuine' ethical formation. This discussion also deals with boundaries between what is considered 'religious' and what is not. In Chapters 4 and 6, I shall address this in more detail.

Alternative Authorities: Authority-Making from Below

1 Introduction

When we decided to really start exercising more seriously, we just wanted to ask advice from our imam about clothing. When we asked, he immediately said: “No, Muslim women should not do these kinds of sports and exercise and certainly not dressed in the way other women do. That is not allowed in Islam. Others will be able to see your body. It is good to do sports but only indoors with other Muslim women.” At first, we were a bit taken aback by this advice, and disappointed. We talked with other women who were also thinking about jogging. Someone then suggested asking other people about this and looking elsewhere for more information about sport and Islam. That sounded as a good plan. [...] Do not misunderstand me, we were in no way suggesting that our imam was wrong, and we do not have the proper knowledge about these issues. [...] Initially we were confused because we found so many different opinions about the issue, some of them completely opposing each other. It turned out that it is a matter of how you look at it. [...] We sort of concluded that we did nothing wrong when we would do outdoor training, provided we are careful enough about what we wear.¹



In his much-acclaimed book *What Is Islam?* Shahab Ahmed not only presents a thorough historical account of Islam as a field of scholarly interest, but also addresses the utterly complex question of what Islam is in the eyes of its practitioners, Muslims. As a prelude to how his account unfolds, Ahmed starts with the following significant and suggestive statement:

¹ From an interview recorded by Heleen van der Linden, Rotterdam 2019.

In conceptualising Islam as a human and historical phenomenon, I am not seeking to tell the reader what Islam is as a matter of Divine Command, and thus I am not seeking to prescribe how Islam should be followed as a means to existential salvation. Rather, I seek to tell the reader what Islam has actually been as a matter of human fact in history, and thus am suggesting how Islam should be conceptualised as a means to a more meaningful understanding both of Islam in the human experience, and thus of the human experience at large. (Ahmed 2016, 6)

Ahmed then goes on to make consistently clear how utterly complex and multifaceted this human experience and historical fact actually are, and how difficult it is to capture them in their entirety. Nevertheless, towards the end of the book, Ahmed attempts to summarise his approach by arguing that something is 'Islamic' to the extent that it is made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement with the Revelation (*ibid.*, 405).

In fact, Ahmed's treatise constitutes an essential backbone of the argument of my entire book, but it is especially relevant for the cases I shall address below. In this chapter I bring together a number of cases that display various modalities of authority-making, that are largely 'unrecognised', 'unnoticed', or 'marginalised'.² I call them 'alternative authorities'.³ As I have argued in the Introduction, the making of Islamic authority is a fundamentally relational and interactive process. The strong focus on Islamic authority as primarily a matter of established religious scholars and professionals, neglects the manifold engagements by ordinary Muslims with Islamic sources. Although these engagements are evenly relevant, they are ignored as they occur in situations that have seemingly little to do with Islamic authority, but it is there that the relational and interactive characteristics of Islamic authority-making can especially be found.

2 Some of the data on which this chapter is based were collected for the research project 'Making Islam work in the Netherlands', which ran from 2013 until 2019 and was funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO. Some of the cases are based on earlier research, or that of other people with whom I worked. When I address these cases I shall refer to their work in more detail. Parts of this chapter appeared in an earlier publication (Sunier 2021a), but with a different focus and addressing a different overall question.

3 Colleagues have indicated that the term 'alternative', which I use in the title and in many places in this chapter, is probably less suitable as a common denominator of the otherwise very diverse cases I address. 'Alternative' would implicitly suggest that 'established', 'hegemonic' or 'mainstream' forms of Islamic authority-making constitute the 'normal', normative and most relevant direction. This is, of course, not my intention. However, I decided to stick with 'alternative' as it is the only adjective in my view that brings together the diverse ways of engaging with prevailing Islamic normativity and developing alternative ways.

However, this prompts us how to distinguish between activities of Muslims, and activities that are considered 'Islamic'. Certain activities of Muslims obviously do not pertain to religion or piety, and others are commonsensically categorised as religious or pious acts, such as the salat or fasting. But some activities are Islamic because they are considered virtuous by those who perform them, even though they are not considered normatively Islamic. This indicates the various connotations of the adjective 'Islamic'.

A couple of years ago I interviewed a young man in a mosque. He argued that the set of ritual movements Muslims perform during the salat can only be called salat when they are performed out of sincerity and with the proper intention. In other words, they should be a deliberate action, otherwise the gestures remain empty and meaningless. Conversely, he continued, a football match may be considered a pious and virtuous action when the players and the organisers perceive it as such, and ethically underpin their practices as religiously virtuous. The agency of Muslims and the particular ways in which they clothe certain actions with religious meaning, are thus crucial elements of the analysis (Sunier 2018b).

These alternative engagements have a fourfold common denominator. First, many activities and initiatives that will be addressed deal with what I have called 'bottom-up critical reflection' denoting the crucial role of 'ordinary', non-professional Muslims in processes of authority-making. An important aspect that marks this process is ethical reflection. Muslims reflect on what it means to be a good Muslim and what the requirements are. By doing so, they actually engage with normative frames, by either submitting to or questioning them.

Second, these engagements and reflections explicitly disclose the interplay between authority figures and ordinary Muslims, especially when reflections lead to critical questions. Interaction between authority figures, texts, and situations on the one hand, and ordinary Muslims on the other, is, of course always, essential but it remains implicit when Muslims comply with prevailing normativity. Ordinary Muslims sometimes question dominant perspectives, vested powers, and taken-for-granted assumptions very deliberately but, in many other cases, confrontation with authorities is not deliberately intended but emerges unintentionally. Sometimes, authority-making is a competitive struggle for an authoritative position or the 'most veritable' body of knowledge, which sometimes culminates in a fierce power struggle or in continuous polemical debates. However, the overall picture that emerges from many cases presented in this chapter is that the making of Islamic authority is often a process of (collective) 'self-confirmation' with the intention of making being Muslim meaningful. This, I contend, constitutes authority-making as much as does contentious struggle about interpretations, truth, legitimacy, and power.

The relation between Islam and music may serve as an example of this. As Jonas Otterbeck (2012, 228) argues, there is no unambiguous answer to the question of whether, according to Islamic sources, music is halal or haram. Muslims listen to music or make music themselves because they like it, not necessarily because they want to make a case against the ulama or imams who consider that music does not belong in Islam.

One of my interlocutors, a free-lance imam who works mainly with young Muslims, told me that he is frequently asked directly whether or it is allowed to listen to music just as a leisure-time activity. He said:

If I would answer that sources are not very conclusive about this, which is indeed the case, I do not help these youngsters very much. But it would also not be very helpful if I would say no, forbidden, or yes, allowed. We have to realise that such a question does not come up out of the blue. They have friends, they socialise, and of course, most of them listen to music. Should they then say: I quit, I walk away from this situation, from my friends? No, of course not. That is the dilemma. What one should do in such situations is encourage young people to think about these issues and teach them to see how important it is to ask the question why this rule or that rule. There is always a rationale behind it all. Take that always into consideration. I know that some of my colleagues fiercely disagree with me, but this is how I tackle it.⁴

When an imam, in response to a question from an individual Muslim, forbids certain practices by referring to Islamic sources, the Muslim might obey or might say: provide me with proof about this, or I am going in search of an alternative counsellor. This is where authority and authoritative decisions become an issue of reflection and debate. In some situations, it clearly is a matter of ambiguity with regard to the sources.

Third, and in connection with the second point, processes of authority-making often occur 'under the radar', beyond the public gaze. In that respect, many of the situations addressed in this chapter stand in sharp contrast to the cases in Chapter 6, where the public gaze and media exposure are essential and indispensable constituent elements.

Fourth, physical, cultural, and spiritual spaces are important sites where like-minded people interact, and alternative modalities of authority-making emerge and take shape.

⁴ From an interview with imam A. (October 2021).

In this chapter, I focus on collective initiatives and actions, and not on individual acts of self-making and moral improvement, or individual questions about religious matters that Muslims address to religious authorities. Although these individual acts are essential building blocks of collective activity, I focus on cases where reflection culminates in initiatives by groups of Muslims. They are examples of how authority comes about as the result of a multiplicity of voices, opinions, and interactions, between Muslims among themselves, and with the world around them. This occurs against the background of constitutional freedom of religion and under democratic conditions in European countries. But it also occurs in circumstances where Muslims are increasingly faced with hatred and exclusion. These hostile conditions implicitly or explicitly shape reflections on being a Muslim and alternative modalities of authority-making.

2 Authority-Making from Below, Ethics, Senses of Space and the Production of Locality

Three theoretical strands come together in this chapter: (1) bottom-up critical reflection, (2) senses of space, and (3) local knowledge and the production of locality. The first strand is discussed extensively in the introduction to this book. The other strands overlap on important points but, analytically, they deal with different dynamics.

The second theoretical strand concerns the spatial dimensions of authority-making, or rather the spiritual dimensions of space. By 'space', we usually refer to a physical place—the mosque as the proverbial Islamic space. However, the notion of space has important spiritual underpinnings, and this is a crucial but under-researched and often overlooked field. This is somewhat odd, as spatiality is a very fundamental aspect of religious reasoning. There are numerous references in Islamic theology to the spiritual significance of direction, space, and movement. Some of the most central ritual acts and principles in Islam, notably the salat, the hajj and the *umma* have explicitly spatial dimensions. Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt (2003), in their research among Latin-American migrants in the US, emphasise the importance of religious space-making as a spiritual act, beyond the relocation of religious infrastructure and people.

Kim Knott (2010) argues that the spatial turn in the study of religion has brought together hitherto rather separated fields of inquiry to understand space as a processual multifaceted concept that goes beyond the normative and phenomenological, as well as sociological, understandings of space. Vásquez

and Knott (2014, 327) distinguish three dimensions of religious space-making: embodied performance, the spatial management of difference and belonging, and multiple embedding across networked spaces. Thus: “[...] religion provides the resources through which people craft moral—and affectively charged—maps that not only reflect and buttress the logic of spatial regimes, but may also offer tools to challenge them, to introduce heterogeneity by building alternative utopias”.

In his encompassing processual theory of religion, Thomas Tweed puts spatiality at the heart of his conceptual toolkit. According to Tweed, spatiality in religion is about social action that unfolds within religious traditions, how religious traditions formulate notions of space, place, realm, home, and territory, the inside and the outside, but it is also about how movement, transgression and direction are understood. Religious acting and reasoning consist of two basic sets of acting: crossing and dwelling. A fundamental element of religious practice throughout history is boundary-making and boundary-crossing, fixing, and flowing. As Tweed (2006, 59) argues: “[They] signal that religion is about finding a place and moving across space, [indicating] that religions are not reified substances, but complex processes.” Crossing then unfolds terrestrially, corporeally, and cosmically. Corporeal crossing refers to life cycles and modes of temporality, but also to embodied limits and constraints in life and the concomitant registers of meaning provided by religion to confront them. Cosmic crossing refers to transcendental dynamics of boundaries, and the crossing of those boundaries.

Dwelling, the other basic dimension of religious acting, according to Tweed, is a three-fold process of designing, building, and inhabiting. Mapping and building are in many cases power-laden processes with relatively orderly prospects and procedures; inhabiting is by definition messy, unpredictable, and often counter-intuitive. But mapping (and building) also refers to future perspectives and visions and is a productive work of space-making. Dwelling may thus be contentious and may create tensions and frictions, but it also engenders new forms of community and space.

Tweed’s processual approach to religion offers a useful conceptual frame for the kind of activities addressed in this chapter. The settling process of Muslims in Europe and the building up of a religious infrastructure with mosques, shrines, schools, and cemeteries is obviously building and inhabiting spaces. This is often conceived of as acts of emancipation and political empowerment. Places of worship, especially when they are purpose-built, ‘objectify’ religious presence.

Historically, places of worship constitute the most symbolically laden and contentious arenas with respect to religious emancipation. They are the prime

signifiers of the process of the rooting of religious newcomers. Negotiations about places of worship have always triggered debates about the character of public spaces, in which authenticity, historicity and visual representation are key elements.

While political empowerment, networking, organisational activity and building religious accommodation are signs of the presence of religious communities and constitute crucial landmarks in their emancipation, space-making by Muslims should not be confined to institutional dimensions of presence. Pnina Werbner pointed at the symbolic significance of places of worship and called this “stamping the earth with the name of Allah” (Werbner 1996, 323). Oskar Verkaaik (2012) points to the symbolic and aesthetic significance of design that is essential in the building of mosques.

A good example of the mosque as a public spiritual space beyond the common ritual function is the Cambridge Central Mosque, also known as the Green Mosque, in Cambridge, UK, which was opened in 2019. It is the first purpose-built eco-mosque in Europe and has a zero environmental footprint. As its website states: “The mosque, with its forest-like interior, pays homage to Islam’s emphasis on the sanctity of the natural world and the commandment to avoid waste and extravagance.”⁵ Space should thus be understood more broadly as a spiritual or moral realm.

The concept of inhabiting also refers to spiritual acts of living by imagined life worlds. The spiritual underpinnings of space are acts of spiritual home-making. By putting doctrinal obligations and principles into practice, the practitioner embarks on an experiential journey to end up in a new home, an ‘alternative utopia’, and to turn Muslim spaces into Islamic spaces. Ultimately, this reshapes the notion of community and the senses of belonging, rootedness, and home-making.⁶

Mohammad Morgahi (2018), in his study on activities of Minhajul-Qur’an in the Netherlands and the UK, applies the concept of *akhlaq* to point to the ways in which members of the movement create a moral environment not by building boundaries between them and the rest of society, but instead by exploring ways to live and live together with others as practising Muslims and as citizens. Members of the movement have set up several organisations and taken several initiatives to put this idea into practice, such as the student association Mashriq, and the organisation ‘Wij Blijven Hier’ (We will stay here). In the first

5 <https://cambridgecentralmosque.org/faq/> (accessed December 2022).

6 A controversial example is the call to Muslims by Islamic State around 2015. This was an invitation not just to migrate to the caliphate as a geographically bounded area, but also to subscribe to the discursive and spiritual boundaries of this realm and to inhabit it.

half of the 2000s, these organisations took issue with the growing Islamophobia in society by offering activities for a broad audience.

One of these activities was the ‘halal borrel’, organised by Mashriq at some Dutch universities. The Dutch word ‘*borrel*’ means an alcoholic drink, but it commonly refers to drinks after a meeting or at a reception. Drinking alcohol is considered impermissible in Islamic law. The seemingly contradictory messages brought together in ‘halal borrel’ is an example of how Islamic ethics are being applied creatively in novel situations and this playful initiative attracted the attention of an audience of Muslims and non-Muslims for some time. In most cases, the ‘halal borrel’ was organised around a topic related to Islam and Muslims in society, sometimes with speakers, but the main goal of the organisers was to create an alternative common space. It showed that many young Muslims want to make sense of their religion and that they want to engage with society.

A number of studies address the activities of Muslim women from a spatial perspective. Gazi Falah and Caroline Nagel (2005) have argued that women often circumvent male authoritative gaze and control by creating and populating their own spaces. While almost all articles in their volume deal with countries outside Europe that have a Muslim majority population, the issues raised bear relevance to the situation of Muslim women in Europe in that they deal with alternatives to male-dominated environments and spaces. As Anna Piela (2013, 390) argues, such activities are not only an alternative to dominant environments and activities, but they are often also empowering and give women agency to call for an alternative *ijtihad* that provides them with alternative authority.

In an article on self-organised study groups of Muslim women in the UK, Fazila Bhimji argues that:

the religious spaces within which the women participate, allow them to assert various identities, as well as agency, as they collectively search to comprehend Islam. [...] In traversing these religious spheres, women transform them from male dominated sites to spaces wherein feminine, political, and cosmopolitan identities are expressed. (Bhimji 2009, 365)

Sahar Noor (2018) shows how pious Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium create spaces of Islamic knowledge production by consistently taking issue with daily encounters in the social, political, and cultural environments in which they live. Jasmijn Rana (2022a; 2022b) has carried out research among Muslim women who kickbox. The place where they train is a ‘women only’ location, but this is not the ‘typical Islamic gender segregation’, as critics

would have it. These examples bear relevance to issues of (contested) authority in several ways. The term 'Muslim spaces' is a generic term, denoting spatial activities of Muslims. Whether or not they conceive of them as Islamic is an empirical question and an issue of attribution and appropriation, and of self-confirmation. The making of moral selves need not necessarily take place in established places such as the mosque. In this way, established notions of Islamic spatiality are also critically challenged and new spiritual environments are constructed.

This brings me to the third theoretical strand, the production of locality. As a concept, I borrow the 'production of locality' from Arjun Appadurai (1996; see also Latour 2017). He argues that locality is not just a matter of scale; it is also about producing recognisable and reliable environments and subjects. Locality is a fragile social condition that must be constantly reproduced and re-established. Bottom-up locality-production by city dwellers implies a number of crucial conditions. In most cases, it is a counter-hegemonic practice against the prevailing power configurations and the political, social and, not least, religious order. But more importantly, bottom-up locality-production is about the creation of recognisable spaces to live in and live by. A central notion in Appadurai's (1996, 181) approach is reliability, the production of reliable locals and the building of trust (see also Sunier 2021a).

In political sciences, trust mainly refers to the relation between citizens and the nation state (see Putnam 1994; Tonkiss et al. 2000; Engler 2003). My understanding of trust is close to the way Appadurai addresses locality. The quest for trust is an answer to processes such as globalisation and digitisation, to top-down epistemic and political domination by states and, in the case at hand, to the uprooting effects of migration. In his study on witchcraft, Peter Geschiere (2013) points to the close relation between trust and intimacy and argues that trust is never an ontological certainty but is an emphatically situational and contingent quality. The changing nature of communal trust is one of the crucial conditions of particular modalities of authority-making, shaping the ongoing processes of rooting and belonging.

Locality could easily be understood as the counter-narrative to globalisation and to the digitisation of all spheres of life, but this interpretation would reduce locality-production to a reactionary conservative endeavour. Furthermore, the growth of modern digital media, the digitisation of all spheres of life and the emerging transnational networks among Muslims, should not be conceived of as the opposite of local rooting. On the contrary, the 'local' is a site of everyday practices that links global processes with the fabric of daily human experience. Globalisation and digitisation have given locality-production a new and unprecedented meaning and salience.

As I shall show, local leaders and collective actors play a decisive role in the production of locality, and they must have a sufficient amount of trust and authority in order to effectively build cohesive local communities. They strongly depend on personal, local, and informal networks, and interaction and exchange are indispensable. In many studies on the institutionalisation of Islam, leaders are perceived only as representatives of formal organisations, or as official religious professionals. There is hardly any insight into their persuasive qualities (or the lack thereof) and their role in the reconfiguration of local communities in informal settings. I contend that these local-level informal activities are crucial in understanding the socio-religious texture of the community and consequently how religious authority is perceived and shaped. This works in two separate but related ways.

The first concerns particular notions of community and belonging. Gerd Baumann (1996), who studied a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in London, has shown how top-down definitions and categories of group and community do often not match with how the population identifies itself. By bringing together experience, belonging and locality into one analytical framework, Baumann shows that the ways in which people develop senses of belonging, and how and with whom they identify themselves, is not fixed and does not necessarily coincide with governmental categories; identificatory practices change according to circumstances and situations.

The group of Muslim women in Rotterdam, described in Chapter 1, who took issue with the municipality's assumptions about the orientations of different (ethnic or religious) groups of inhabitants in the neighbourhood, is a good example of what Baumann called a "demotic discourse" (*ibid.*, 10), the locally used vernacular of belonging that denies the idea, used in official governmental documents, that culture (or religion for that matter) and community are congruent categories.

The second way in which the production of locality unfolds, and authority is constituted has to do with modalities of knowledge-management and the position of local leaders. Effective urban leaders have what Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik (2009, 13) call "urban charisma". Thus, charismatic figures:

[...] emerge on the basis of their capacity to interpret, manage, and master the opacity of the city. The specificity of the urban can neither be understood through the city's functions nor the dynamics of its social networks. The urban is also a way of being in the world and must be understood as a dense and complex cultural repertoire of imagination, fear, and desire. We propose to understand the urban and its charismatic potential through three registers: the sensory regimes of the city; the specific forms of urban

knowledge and intelligibility; and the specific forms of power, connectivity, and possibility which we call urban infra-power. (Ibid., 5–8)

Charisma here is understood in a broader sense than the very specific extraordinary qualities of the individuals that Weber has described. Thus, “charisma in the city rests on special forms of knowledge, networks, connectedness, courage and daring that enable some individuals to assume leadership” (ibid., 9).

The authors also link charisma to specific modes of knowledge, and this brings two relevant concepts to mind. The first is what James Scott (1998, 311) coins as *metis*. *Metis* is slightly reminiscent of Clifford Geertz’s (1983, 168) concept of ‘local knowledge’, or ‘culture in practice’. Scott juxtaposes standardised abstract scientific knowledge deployed by state agencies with forms of knowledge that are embedded in local experience. The ancient Greek term *metis* can be translated as practical knowledge, according to Scott, but it would be too simple to confine the implications of the term to skills, or cunning intelligence, or as referring to the actual application of rules and principles. *Metis* is experiential knowledge that is effective only in a specific local context or situation (Scott 1998, 323).

I regard the notion of *metis* as extremely relevant for the analysis of authority-making at a local level, not least because in Scott’s words: “The relation between scientific knowledge and practical knowledge is [...] part of a political struggle for institutional hegemony by experts and their institutions” (ibid., 311). Scott provides an insightful account of the work of the famous American activist Jane Jacobs, who, in the 1950s and 1960s struggled against the plans to completely rebuild America’s inner cities on the basis of the ‘hypermodern’ ideas of urban planners. Scott points to Jacobs’s notion of the “microsociology of public order”, denoting the importance of local-level initiatives to make residential areas liveable (ibid., 136).

“Outsiders have consistently mistaken the vitality and heterogeneity of city streets for disorderliness, neglecting the ways that these streets are spaces of an indigenous moral watchfulness and order.” This quotation from Robert Orsi (1999, 49) about religious practice in American cities, perfectly captures the urban landscapes addressed in this chapter. Orsi argues that cityscapes should not be understood as anomic and anonymous entities, but as a multitude of moral and spiritual pathways, mental maps that city-dwellers walk (ibid., 52). In other words, the urban experience, and the ways in which the city is perceived by inhabitants, depend on the complex networks in which a person lives and in which local leaders play a crucial role.

Hansen and Verkaaik’s notion of ‘urban charisma’ is particularly relevant with regard to the role of women and female leaders. In official forums and

organisational structures, women still have a disadvantaged position. Essential for the process of authority-making is the issue of leadership. Fauzia Erfan Ahmed (2011, 507) makes a highly relevant distinction between two analytical female leadership models or strategies to be observed among Muslim women in post-9/11 America, a “spiritual colleague model” and a “bridge-builder model”—the first denoting collective self-definition through Qur’anic interpretation, the second denoting the creation of solidarity across religious boundaries. She explicitly uses abstract models instead of personal qualities of individual leaders, as is often done, to show that certain circumstances and options generate the likelihood of one alternative over the other. These two options appear in several situations to which I shall now turn.

3 Cases

In what follows I shall set out three clusters of cases, each of which deals with ‘alternative’ modalities of Islamic authority-making. The first cluster, called ‘Muslim women take issue: female leadership and authority’, deals with various initiatives by Muslim women to critically take issue with the established religious status quo and the physical and discursive spaces and boundaries laid down by male religious elite. The second cluster is called ‘Street-level authority and the production of locality’ and deals with religious and community leaders operating at a local level. It shows the important part local knowledge (*metis*) plays both in establishing the authoritative positions of religious figures and, conversely, in questioning those positions. The third cluster is called ‘Halal-scapes’ and deals with particular senses of space and with local initiatives set up by Muslims in various fields such as physical exercise and sports, Islamic counselling, and other initiatives that are often grouped together as ‘halal’ lifestyles.

3.1 *Muslim Women Take Issue: Female Leadership and Authority*

An important activity that bears relevance to issues of authority is the creation of alternative (female) landscapes, spaces and environments, and activities, initiatives and positions in which women play an important role. Muslim women in various situations and in vastly different ways take issue with what the powers that be consider properly Islamic. Mosque buildings include separate spaces for women, with boundaries and functions clearly demarcated and laid down by prevailing religious notions of space. In addition, the tasks of imams and other religious professionals are clearly fixed and sanctioned by prevailing Islamic normativity in which the core functions are performed

by men. Mosques and their religious-spatial order therefore constitute a crucial site where notions of space and function, and concomitant modalities of authority, are contested.

In Chapter 7, 'Stories from the Trenches', in Amina Wadud's book *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, she states:

In the battle for gender parity, those who stand guard at the gateposts of Muslim status quo have sometimes reacted vehemently against claims for justice. The trenches are deep and the fighting often unfair, but the motivation for my entry into the struggle is non-negotiable. (Wadud 2006, 217)

Wadud, a scholar of Islam in the United States, became known to the public and was subsequently heavily criticised by established Islamic (male) scholars in 2005, when she led the Friday prayer and preached the sermon for a mixed audience in a mosque in New York. She was very likely one of the first to do this in an existing mosque and announce it publicly. She considered this action an important way of stating that nowhere in Islamic sources are women forbidden to lead the prayer. Her book provides an account of her experiences in her struggle for equal justice for women in Islam, or to put it more precisely, her struggle against the established Islamic landscape. To those who argue that inequality between men and women is inherent in Islamic sources, Wadud wants to show that this understanding arises not from the sources, but from a male-biased interpretation of them (see also Webb 2000).

In Europe, there are several examples of women playing a more prominent role in the organisation of mosques and places for prayer. Examples are the considerable number of so-called 'pop-up mosques', the temporary conversion of a room—such as a living room, an office lobby, or a church—into a place for ritual and prayer, after which the place returns to its usual function. Many of these pop-up places arise because there is a lack of space for prayer in certain areas. In that respect, they are comparable to the situation in the early stages of migration but, as Jesper Petersen (2019, 179) argues: "today, pop-up mosques primarily play a role for marginalised segments of Muslim communities that do not have their own mosques, such as Islamic feminists and LGBTQ-Muslims".

Such initiatives can be found in many countries in Europe. They are often ignored because they fall outside the mainstream provision of accommodation in mosques, but they regularly reach the press and some of these pop-up initiatives become permanent mosques. This is important, as a permanent place strengthens the position of the initiative and its founders, while a more visible

place, especially with the help of digital media, at the same time results in discussions about authority. In this, I go along with Petersen when he argues that it is the intentions and the activities that are relevant.

In *The Making of a Mosque with Female Imams* (2022), Petersen analyses the founding of the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen by Sherin Khankan. The project started as a pop-up mosque but acquired a more permanent character in the course of time. It is a women-only-mosque, but rather than being the result of a pre-formulated plan, each stage in the birth of the mosque emerged more or less by chance. In the course of this process, various agencies and structural and discursive contexts contributed to the project and imbued it with particular meaning. Throughout the book, he shows that the role of the non-Muslim environment is essential for understanding how the mosque came about. The unpredictability and the processual character of the development of such projects are elements that are often neglected in many overviews of the institutionalisation of Islam. Even projects that have been designed on the drawing board and in the offices of administrative authorities often follow an unpredicted and unexpected course. The Wester Moskee in Amsterdam is a case in point (Sunier 2010; see also Lindo 1999).

The Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, as a women-only-mosque, is interesting for several reasons. One is that it is a good example of what I would call 'self-confirmative' authority-making. The initiators may have intended to make a statement in the way Wadud did in New York, but the project is primarily meant to create a spiritual space for Muslim women that they regard as truthful according to Islamic sources, and also a place 'of their own'—not a 'backyard' activity for women in the usual male-dominated premises. But the prominence of the Miriam Mosque project and the consistent efforts by Khankan to raise the question of whether female imams are legitimate have brought about a debate that resonates widely across Europe.

The contributions to *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, edited by Masooda Bano and Hillary Kalmbach (2012) discuss various cases where the Islamic authority of women is at issue around the globe. Some of the contributions deal with countries in Europe. However diverse in scope and theme, all the contributions deal with initiatives developed by Muslim women that in some cases explicitly question hegemonic orders and assumptions, but at the same time concentrate on activities that the founders consider important and worth pursuing. The contributions to the book also clearly demonstrate that women face considerable challenges of various sorts when developing ideas. The assumption that this should be easier in Europe under 'democratic secular' conditions than in China, for example, where Muslims are in a difficult situation, is only very partly true. Muslim

women in Europe are generally expected to be emancipated in line with Western secular notions of freedom and democracy.

In 1982, Al Nisa was founded by a group of female converts to Islam in the Netherlands. Most of them were married to Muslims. Women organised informal meetings where they could exchange experiences and practical information about religious and cultural differences at a time when hardly any material was available in Dutch. These meetings became very popular, and some decided to formalise the activities and founded Al Nisa. Over the years, they developed into a national organisation with meetings in various cities. They published a magazine and later set up a website. In time, the focus of Al Nisa changed. Women who were born Muslims could also join and, as more information about Islam appeared in Dutch, Al Nisa also focused more on deepening that knowledge. The position of women in Islam became an increasingly debated issue about which lectures, debates and public campaigns were organised. Al Nisa has also come to focus more on empowerment activities and organises leadership courses.⁷ A recurring event is the annual 'women's iftar', which has a specific theme.

Apart from that, there are quite a number of local groups in the Netherlands, organised by Muslim women. As Nathal Dessing shows, most of these groups have a very specific aim, namely, to discuss issues not only of faith but also of authority that are relevant for Muslim women in the Netherlands. However, according to Dessing these groups should not be depicted as initiatives to discuss alternative interpretations of the sources. Most of the women in these groups tend to attribute religious authority and proper knowledge of the sources to religious experts as they themselves do not have enough theological knowledge (Dessing 2016, 218). The same has been found by researchers among such groups in other European countries. Although I agree to a large extent and accept that lack of knowledge is a motivation for abiding by prevailing interpretations, I would not make such a sharp distinction between following authoritative interpretations by experts and *ijtihad* by practitioners with little knowledge. Bottom-up critical reflection by non-professionals is often the entry point for more theological reflection.

In the early 2000s, a Turkish mosque in the city of Geleen appointed Leyla Çakır as the first female chair of the board and she soon became a figurehead and an example for many Muslim women. In 2007, she became the director of Al Nisa and wrote several books and articles about the position of women in Islam. Çakır is one of the people who put the position of women in Islam firmly

7 <https://www.alnisa.nl/> (accessed September 2022).

on the agenda, but without arguing that emancipation of Muslim women can only be accomplished by denouncing Islam.⁸

Soon afterwards, in 2008, a new experiment emerged in Amsterdam, the Polder Moskee. *Polder* in Dutch means reclaimed land from the sea, but the term is also used to refer to the Dutch way of negotiating, by talking as long as necessary to reach an agreement that is acceptable for everyone. There had been several earlier attempts to set up a 'Dutch mosque' that would sever ties with immigrants' countries of origin, break away from the ethnically divided Islamic landscape, and the use of Dutch for the khutba. It was also a statement directed to established Islamic authorities who wanted to cling to the idea that Muslims should turn to Muslim-majority countries for spiritual guidance. The founders emphasised that the initiative was an attempt to 'Dutchify' Muslim spaces. The chair of the board was a Muslim woman who also wanted to take issue with the practice of separating men and women during the ritual prayer.

The initiators were young volunteers who wanted to venture in new directions, and they came up with all sorts of plans and initiatives that could be organised in the mosque, such as lectures and discussions about religious and social issues. They were able to hire a former office building and soon began their activities, in which the daily prayers and the weekly khutba were central. Young Muslims were initially enthusiastic because the Polder Moskee offered something that the established mosques did not and elderly Muslims, mainly of Moroccan origin, were happy that there was in mosque in their neighbourhood. But there were also complaints, especially about the khutba being in Dutch, so, after about a year, the board decided to provide it in Arabic too.

But the biggest challenges had to do with time, money, and controversies. The volunteers were busy in work or school, and several attempts were made to apply for funding from the Amsterdam municipality. The municipality initially supported the mosque, but there were also internal issues. Some of the people who were invited to speak and lead the prayer were controversial and were often targeted as 'false authorities' (by some Salafi groups), or 'Salafist Muslims' (by some politicians). There was also criticism from established Muslim organisations, who were not at all happy with the Polder Moskee as a potential challenger to their position. Despite the fact that the Amsterdam municipality claimed to be in favour of such experiments, they chose to listen to their regular interlocutors and after a while stopped the financial support.

8 Interview with Leyla Çakır (2014).

Just two years after its opening, the Polder Moskee had to close its doors. According to the chair of the board during those years, Yasmine Ksaihi, there were a number of reasons why the experiment failed.

I still think we did a good job, and we accomplished many things, but managing such a project with just volunteers is hardly possible. If the municipality had supported us in some of the practical things, we would have been able to make the Polder Moskee into an interesting innovative place, attractive to young Muslims. You see what happens to churches as well. Young people do not attend a mosque anymore because what happens there does not correspond to how they experience Islam and what being Muslim means for them. Of course, some of these young people gradually abandon Islam, but there are many for whom faith continues to be important, just as with Christians. But I have to admit that we also made some mistakes. We were too ambitious, the project was too big, and we wanted to do too many things at the same time. And then you realise how slowly things change, how tough bureaucracy is, and how great the resistance still is among established Muslim organisations. This is what I have heard from the people of the Blue Mosque in Amsterdam.⁹ When you are located in an area where many Muslim families live you also attract elderly people and there comes a moment when they start complaining. Maybe we should have started with what they call pop-up mosques, small activities, and work from there. Maybe pop-up is the future in this regard.

On the other hand, several times during the interview she rejected the argument that the plans and the board were too far-fetched and did not reflect the moods among the Muslim population: “What a nonsense! Too far-fetched for whom? Should we only follow the conservative majority among Muslims? In that way nothing will change.”¹⁰

Women—particularly when they work in powerful established organisations—also take issue with the prevailing ideas about theological proficiency and competence and how they lead to the allocation of functions. Dominik Müller (2022) provides an account of a female theologian, Q, who works for the Swiss branch of an umbrella organisation. Her experiences within the male-dominated environment (“I am not here to serve tea”), as well as her involvement in digital media, provide a good example of the struggle women have for

9 The Blue Mosque is an experiment similar to the Polder Moskee that started two years later.

10 From an interview with Yasmine Ksaihi. (February 2022).

recognition as competent theologians. Q obtained a degree in Islamic theology and soon turned out to be very engaged and full of ideas, especially about how to reach young Muslims.

Her critical engagement with the status quo met with reservations from the board of the umbrella organisation but, nevertheless, not long after she was appointed as a preacher in mosques affiliated to the organisation. In this position, she started to organise religious lectures and sohbet in various mosques. The sohbet became increasingly popular and attracted more young women who had not previously been part of the mosque community. Q was able to address issues that were pressing for Muslim women living in Europe in a recognisable and concrete way. Soon after, she decided to set up the so-called Sohbet 2.0, a version of her sohbet that combines online and offline activities. Her online activities have been generally well received, as is reflected in the increasing number of followers on her social media profile. This also makes her messages accessible to people outside her sohbet groups and increases her visibility in the competitive landscape of Islamic authority figures online.

As Müller rightly argues, much attention has been paid in the scholarly literature to internationally renowned preachers who make use of digital media, but much less is given to digital media used by religious professionals like Q, who work at a local level. She is not just an ordinary local theologian, but neither is she a global preacher working almost exclusively with digital media. As Müller states: “Online and offline life worlds are increasingly merging, thus blending temporal, spatial, but also gendered boundaries in religious education, Islamic knowledge production and the (re)production of authority” (Müller 2022, 204).

This case is instructive because it shows that online and offline activities really cannot be separated analytically. It also shows that Covid has intensified the discussion about what online forms of religious activity add to or change about religious experience. In Chapter 5, the impact of the Covid pandemic will also be addressed because it has sparked an intriguing discussion about the authenticity of rituals.

The case of Q is also instructive because it reveals the strategies of religious professionals who critically engage with the dominant modes of knowledge communication, and with the lack of ideas about how to reach out to new generations. As some authors have argued, women often circumvent male authority by creating and populating their own spaces and creating their own activities. In doing so, they challenge the prevailing status quo, although without intending to defeat it. But I argue that this is not at all a confirmatory activity that leaves the order of things as it is. On the contrary, creating alternative spaces and activities is as transformative as public confrontation.

Common challenges in all these projects and initiatives seem to be not only resistance on the part of established Muslim elites, but also lack of support from administrative authorities. Governments and municipalities often resort to the adage of separation of religion and state or allege ‘Salafi influence’ when they decline a request for financial aid, but civil servants and policymakers are also often anxious not to jeopardise their relations with their usual Muslim interlocutors and stakeholders. As many of these initiatives are set up precisely to organise alternative activities that are not approved by vested elites, they remain in a marginal position.

Many initiatives, such as the Polder Moskee in Amsterdam, are short-lived but a quick round of consultation with my interlocutors and with colleagues working in the same field, revealed that there is a continuous flow of new initiatives across Europe in which women play an increasingly prominent role.

3.2 *Street-Level Authority and the Production of Locality*

In this section, I address the position of local imams, religious professionals, and community leaders whose authority status is particularly dependent on their position in the local community. Authority-making in this case is completely intertwined with the building up of local Muslim spaces and putting down local roots. As I have argued above, the authority of some of them is based on their ability to combine their theological knowledge with ‘local knowledge’ to connect effectively with the community, while others are not religious professionals with theological training, but have intimate connections with the local Muslim community. Although such authority figures are indispensable for strengthening the fabric of the local community, they are often seen by municipalities and politicians as a challenge rather than as an important constituent factor. In other cases, their work goes often unnoticed.

Many of the religious leaders I have met in recent years in various European cities are active not only as preachers but also as leaders who are involved in a multitude of ‘typical’ inner-city issues and challenges, ranging from problems with young people, racism, lack of resources, bad housing conditions and, more recently, Covid. Their authority status at a local level is based on their strong position in the local community but is enhanced because they get involved in problems of all sorts explicitly in their role as religious professionals.

Some authors have referred to the concept of communitarianism and the work of Amitai Etzioni (1968) to analyse local-level community work. Etzioni states that:

[...] communitarians examine the ways shared conceptions of the good (values) are formed, transmitted, justified, and enforced. Hence their

interest in communities (and moral dialogues within them), historically transmitted values and mores, and the societal units that transmit and enforce values such as the family, schools, and voluntary associations (social clubs, churches, and so forth), which are all parts of communities. (Etzioni 2003, 1)

Although there are certain parallels with the social texture in present-day inner-city neighbourhoods, communitarianism in Etzioni's understanding is too often depicted as an almost autonomous force that rests on the premise that society generates its own networks and social structures grounded in the natural inclinations of people, thereby ignoring the embedded and contextualised aspects of community building, and the role of the state.

As Willem Schinkel and Friso van Houdt argue, the modern neoliberal state has developed a citizenship model and a governmental strategy that combines neoliberal individualism with assimilation (of immigrants and culturally divergent groups). They call this "neo-liberal communitarianism", denoting "a way of governing subpopulations through differentiated forms of community and responsibility, which find their expression in newly emerging conceptualizations of citizenship" (Schinkel and van Houdt 2010, 698). The political context in which religious and community leaders, who are our subject here, operate, consists of a combination of absence of the state and of regulatory interventions in some fields, and deep and pervasive interference in other fields, in accordance with neoliberal communitarian governmental strategies and prevailing notions of citizenship. The attempts by municipalities to use local authority figures in their so-called 'de-radicalisation' programmes has partly failed because the administrative authorities have ignored crucial features of the fabric of local Muslim communities and networks, and the local authority positions. In other words, administrative authorities ignore *metis*.

Most of the work in neighbourhoods is done by volunteers. The combination of religious activity and social voluntary work has been widely addressed. A comprehensive discussion about Muslims, Islam and voluntary work is provided in *Muslim Volunteering in the West*, edited by Mario Peucker and Merve Kayıkcı (2019). The authors address the theological and spiritual underpinnings and inner motivations of voluntary work and also address the sensitive and often politically laden atmosphere surrounding charity work by Muslims.

Running a mosque is done by volunteers. Muslim organisations often cast their voluntary work in a religious language of spiritual engagement. In his research into societal engagement among Muslims in Amsterdam, Hasan Yar (2018) shows how active volunteers in mosque associations legitimise and motivate their engagement by referring to an Islamic ethical framework. He

introduces the concept of “Islamic social reasoning” and argues that this reasoning implicates an ongoing reflection based on daily experiences. Besides the more legalist language of duties and obligations that operates in Islam, in which a concept such as *maslaha* refers to the notion of public interest, or *sadaqa* which is connected to *zakat*, there are several other principles such as *ihsan* (referring to an inner spiritual motivation) or *niyya* (the principle that charity should come from the heart) that deal with the ethical underpinnings of being with and in the world. Jonathan Benthall (2015, 365) understands giving and charity as “acts of devotion”, by which he refers to the space between an inner moral drive and outer moral obligations set out in rules.

An intriguing way of phrasing the inner drive towards doing outreach activities and voluntary work is provided by the Productive Muslim Company on their website.

Like the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), the serious volunteer is someone who has little time to waste. They want to be able to fit in as much time as possible doing work for the sake of Allah, whether it be raising money for the orphans and needy children or helping at their local mosque. They realise that the more organised and efficient they are, the more time they can spend raising money and not just concentrating on themselves. They can't afford to leave things to the last minute. They need to have things planned, schedules in place, deadlines met so that they can maximize the number of those precious hours for the sake of Allah. [...] It is only when you open the doors to constructive criticism, that you are able to make changes that allow you to be the best volunteer you can possibly be and make changes that benefit others. [...] There's nothing like friendly competition to encourage people. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) knew this and utilised it himself to great effect in the battle of Hunain and during other occasions throughout his life. We should encourage Muslims to compete with each other in a way that encourages excellence whilst still fostering brotherhood. Each institution and each person must be motivated to do better, work harder, and sleep less so that they can be at the forefront of helping others. [...] We must continually remind ourselves that we have a goal, and that goal is achievable and a necessity if the Ummah is going to become united once more. It is the vision that keeps us awake when others sleep, that keeps us going when others stop and that keeps us together when others fall apart. To be truly productive, we must make our every movement, decision, and step in accordance with achieving the vision. And when we get this right, the barakah of Allah pours forth like the

heavy rain on a barren plain. [...] In conclusion, the best way to become a truly productive Muslim is to work continually for the creation of a productive (and united) Muslim Ummah. May Allah grant us this and His pleasure.¹¹

The text uses contemporary language typical of modern young activists. Motivation is expressed in an individualised discourse of personal drive and an understanding of subjectivity and moral fulfilment and service to God. Through volunteers' work as active citizens, they learn about the conditions of really needy people, and this triggers their moral sensitivity. Normative religious principles are formulated as referential categories, or as moral registers that make acting meaningful. A rather artificial separation of religious and inner motives by referring to sincerity and genuineness falls short of understanding the field in which actors operate.

In a neighbourhood in the city of The Hague in 2017, I attended a remarkable event in a well-known mosque founded by Salafi Muslims. The neighbourhood appeared in the media several times after the publication of an article in a Dutch newspaper in which a part of the area was branded as a 'sharia-triangle', meaning that Salafists actually governed that part of the neighbourhood.¹² Although the story was what we today would call 'fake news' or a hoax, and the newspaper had to rectify it, harm had already been done. Many media had taken over the stigmatising depiction of the neighbourhood, arguing that, even if only a small part of it was true, there would still be a problem. The leader of the extreme right-wing Freedom Party, Geert Wilders, organised so-called 'sharia jungle tours' in the neighbourhood calling it 'a little caliphate'.

It was in this atmosphere that the event took place. A couple of months before the meeting, the mosque received an anonymous letter accompanied by a toy truck. The letter was a warning that a truck would soon hit Muslims visiting the mosque. This was a reference to the Nice and Berlin attacks in 2016. Many people sent emails to the mosque board expressing their support and sympathy, among them a well-known Amsterdam orthodox rabbi. The mosque's imam decided to invite the rabbi to talk and exchange views. In the following weeks, they had several conversations and then decided to plan a meeting, which they called: 'Let's not to be seized by fear'.

¹¹ <https://productivemuslim.com/> (accessed November 2022).

¹² Perdiep Ramesar. "Haagse buurt domein orthodoxe moslims", *Trouw*, 13th of April 2013.

For a long time, the mosque had been dominated by an imam who regularly issued controversial statements on many topics, and especially family morals and responsibilities, the position of women and homosexuality, and he urged Muslims to interact with non-Muslims as little as possible. These were issues that would usually stir up trouble and generate substantial media attention, so he was frequently invited to appear on late-night shows because his performance would guarantee animated debates. Public figures such as this imam are products of the mediatised and polarised political atmosphere that emerged in recent decades.

Around 2015, the mosque made a rather fundamental change under new leadership and in changing local circumstances. The mosque still belongs to the broader category of 'Salafi' but, in contrast to the negative image of Salafism, they have issued very strong statements against violence and radicalisation and prioritised good relations with the local police, politicians, law courts and other religious communities in the neighbourhood. The new imam distanced himself from his predecessor and built up a strong relationship with young people in the area and beyond. He had authority and was a respected and well-known resident.

Several weeks before the meeting, the imam and the rabbi decided to plan joint visits to schools, both in the neighbourhood of the mosque in The Hague, and in the Amsterdam neighbourhood where the rabbi was active, to present their views and to teach young children not to hate each other because of religion. The message was: stop competing over victimhood and start teaching your own community to consider their own role.

Both religious leaders were well aware of the non-committal character these kinds of statements often have, but this particular case was different because they both made explicit use of their religious authority and their respected position in the local communities to reach out to different populations. They did so not by playing down religious differences or tensions and controversies, but instead by calling on their own communities to go beyond victimhood and to see what needed to be done to improve the quality of living together. A very important strategy they used was to work 'under the radar' as much as possible. So, instead of seeking media attention for their initiative, they did their work silently, without the gaze of journalists and politicians, only to make it public afterwards.

The impact of the initiative lay in its very local character. Both religious leaders know the local neighbourhood; they have extensive personal networks, and they know how to use them. They possess real 'urban charisma'. The way they positioned themselves was an essential factor. Rather than downplaying animosities and religious controversies, they took them seriously by arguing that it

was not religious differences as such that were the source of animosity but the distorted depictions and lack of knowledge of religious traditions, which could easily be exploited (see also Vellenga and Wieggers 2023).¹³

The meeting at the mosque, which was the culmination of their series of visits to schools, was attended by representatives of the municipality, the police, political parties, local welfare organisations, various religious communities, and neighbourhood residents. In a joint statement, the imam and the rabbi said that, rather than competing over which community was the more victimised, they should take care of each other.

One of my interlocutors, imam Jamal Ahajjaj, pointed to the importance of fully deploying your theological knowledge and ‘translating’ it to concrete situations.

[...] If you do not have a thorough knowledge of the sources nothing works. That is in my view what comes first. I have often seen young people who have a certain appeal, speak eloquently, and know how to attract the attention of their audience, but have hardly any knowledge of the sources or know how to apply that knowledge. But the first thing I focus on here in the neighbourhood is building good relations with all residents. During the Covid pandemic, I have used my authority as an imam that I have built up in other settings, to convince people that they should take the vaccine. I often referred to Islamic sources to persuade people. In a considerable number of cases, it worked. Also, with regard to the prevention of radicalisation, it is important not just to behave as a nice guy from the neighbourhood, but to use your knowledge. It often strikes me how little knowledge these so-called radicals have. You sometimes get the impression that they have only read *Islam for Dummies*.¹⁴

The next case, which could be called ‘building bridges’, features the former director of SPIOR, the umbrella organisation of mosques in the south-western parts of the Netherlands. In Chapter 1, I have described SPIOR in detail from its inception in 1988 up to roughly the mid-1990s. The period I refer to here is more than twenty years later in a fundamentally different time and social–

13 The rabbi had already developed similar initiatives in Amsterdam for many years together with a former doorman of Moroccan descent in the city’s nightlife. On their website it says: “Relationships look different when you sit down with people and listen to stories from their own mouths.” <https://www.saidenlody.nl/> (accessed May 2023).

14 From an interview with imam Jamal Ahajjaj (November 2018).

political climate. The city of Rotterdam experienced turbulent developments after the assassination in 2002 of the public intellectual Pim Fortuyn, who had an explicit Islamophobic agenda. He was a resident of Rotterdam and just shortly before his death he founded a political party. The party enjoyed a landslide victory during the elections that followed and his political allies in Rotterdam also had success with an anti-immigration and anti-Islam programme. From a city that was the first to have an official consultative body for Islamic organisations and a comprehensive mosque policy, Rotterdam developed into a city with a strong and vested anti-Islam political constituency. But in the meantime, SPIOR acquired a firm position in the city, which now had a mayor of Moroccan background who is a practising Muslim.

In September 2019, a meeting was organised in Rotterdam on the occasion of the departure of the director of SPIOR, Marianne Vorthoren, a Dutch convert to Islam, born and raised in Rotterdam, who has studied business and management. She had worked in the organisation for over seventeen years, seven of which as the director and the principal figurehead. During the farewell-reception, she was praised for her ability to connect people and build bridges. While this may sound like common praise in any farewell speech, the description in her case precisely matched her *modus operandi* during her years in SPIOR.

During her time with SPIOR, she transformed the organisation from a representative board of local mosque organisations and an interlocutor with the municipal authorities into an agenda-setting platform that engages with the thorny and controversial issues that dominate the discussion about the position of Islam and Muslims in the city. Thus, issues such as forced religious marriages, radicalisation, domestic violence, poverty, healthcare, the position of elderly Muslims, homophobia, growing intolerance, and discrimination have been addressed in past years. In many instances, SPIOR has managed to go beyond the scope of 'limited' Muslim interests and include other religious communities.

The founding of (H)echt Verbonden (real wedlock) in 2018 is a good example of the delicate and sensitive nature of the moral management of the city. During a public meeting, a covenant was signed between the municipality and a large number of religious organisations to show that religious affiliation was not the source but the solution to forced marriage. SPIOR was one of them. As Vorthoren stated:

Broad participation prevents the stigmatisation of a specific religious group. Moreover, cooperation between various religious and philosophical communities has proven that we can learn from each other and come

to new insights through exchange and getting to know each other. As far as I'm concerned, that's the biggest benefit of this project.¹⁵

Even so, several politicians and anti-Islam organisations managed to create controversy in the wake of the presentation, but Vorthoren managed to keep all the parties on board.

As director of SPIOR, she positioned herself explicitly as a city-dweller who happened to be a Muslim and not vice versa. She called on the political parties that continue to problematise the Muslim presence to face the undeniable reality that Muslims have become an integral part of the urban community. So, instead of emphasising legal rights, a strategy that may have been effective in earlier decades, SPIOR embarked under her leadership on a strategy that took this new reality as its point of departure. Muslims do not need to claim space in the city since their presence in the urban landscape is a fact. However, they have an important responsibility to contribute to a shared social environment and the common good. So, precisely as in the previous case, the challenge is to go beyond victimhood and equal rights discourse, but also to be aware of the pitfalls of the neoliberal communitarianism of the local administration. The strength of Vorthoren's position and her good reputation among municipal servants, and among Muslim communities, was based on her thorough knowledge of the city and, in addition, her presentational talents and the explicit deployment of her embodiment of a Dutch Muslim convert made her a very effective director of SPIOR.

However, her intermediate position as convert, woman and manager in an organisation that operates on behalf of Muslims was also sometimes challenging, as she stated several times:

It was sometimes difficult to maintain the trust of mosque organisations because they might see me as an intermediary who was closer to the government side than to them. [...] It is about how well you build a relationship with all parties. Many people don't know what SPIOR exactly does, but everyone has their own image and expectation of it. Many thought it was a religious organisation, like a mosque. I always said SPIOR is a societal organisation, with a religious identity – that is decidedly different. So, you have to be very clear about that. [...] Some Muslims, especially the old generation, do not really make a distinction between the role and capacities as manager of an organisation and your identity of being a Muslim.

15 From an interview with Vorthoren (March 2022).

They do not differentiate between professionalism for let's say planning a budget and other managerial tasks, and religious identity. Their focus is on whether someone behaves like a good Muslim, and not so much on whether someone has the capacities to manage an organisation like SPIOR. Younger people who have been born and raised here, do make that distinction. On the other hand, the fact that I am a Muslim, a woman, and a convert does play a role – it is intrinsically linked with how you are perceived in this position. If I had behaved badly as a Muslim, it would certainly have affected my position in the community in a negative way. [...] Civil servants, politicians and journalists sometimes asked me questions about the meaning of certain Islamic principles. In such cases you have to be very careful not to act as an alim – since you are not! You can only refer to collective knowledge and consensus which is gathered within such an organisation. Credibility and reputation were essential in my position. This was one of the reasons why it was a demanding job.¹⁶

In many European cities, spontaneous or organised networks of elderly residents can be found who function as watchmen in neighbourhoods, often known as 'neighbourhood fathers'.¹⁷ Neighbourhood fathers are from Moroccan, Turkish or other ethnic backgrounds, and are well-known figures in neighbourhoods that are often branded as disadvantaged, with a complex combination of social problems and a relatively high proportion of inhabitants with a migrant background. They observe, talk with people, and address young people when they behave badly. In most cases, these networks emerged spontaneously.

These men exercise a certain level of social control by explicitly utilising their status and authority as respected elderly men in the local Muslim community—an extension of the domestic parental role vis-à-vis youngsters who make trouble in the neighbourhood. Others would emphasise the importance of ethical behaviour not by referring to abstract Islamic normativity, but by developing a moral imperative to be a responsible Muslim vis-à-vis the rest of society and to develop an ethical frame of reference in everyday situations and encounters with the entire local community. Neighbourhood fathers are effective at the neighbourhood level to the extent that they are themselves an inherent part of the local social fabric. Neighbourhood fathers do indeed have metis, practical local knowledge; they know the problems and challenges many families face, they are familiar recognisable members of the local community,

16 From an interview with Vorthoren (March 2022).

17 <https://openrotterdam.nl/buurtvaders-vormen-ogen-en-oren-van-coolhaven/> (accessed March 2023).

and they possess a certain level of fatherly authority. Good neighbourhood fathers are 'reliable locals', to paraphrase Arjun Appadurai.¹⁸

This is a role that has existed for quite some time in the Netherlands, but municipal authorities have only recently started to acknowledge the crucial part they play as an addition to the much less effective role of the police. In some cities, these low-profile local initiatives have been incorporated into 'urban projects', sometimes with a small budget, because they were regarded as contributing to social cohesion. Thus, the neighbourhood father project Al-Wasl in The Hague in the Netherlands:

[...] works on improving the quality of life and safety in the neighbourhood and on communication with and between neighbourhood residents. The project has a bridging function between parents and young people and motivates young people to work on a good future perspective. [...] By walking in groups, it should be clear to the residents after a short time that the neighbourhood fathers are walking in the neighbourhood to stimulate quality of life and safety. By consistently being present in the area every evening, a clear structure must be created in the streetscape. [...] Neighbourhood fathers must make their goals known to the residents. This can be done very easily by greeting local residents in the first instance and then starting a conversation. This lays the foundation for knowing and being known. [...] Over time, the fathers have a kind of network. The work that the neighbourhood fathers do also provides insight into the social map of The Hague. Neighbourhood fathers can use these experiences to refer residents to the right administrative authorities. Think of the young person who is looking for work. The neighbourhood father can show this young person the way to the relevant institutions. Or a mother of a single-parent family who has problems raising her teenage daughter.¹⁹

Neighbourhood fathers, whether or not they are officially recognised by municipalities, have specific knowledge that is not accessible to the police or other monitoring institutions. The relative autonomy of neighbourhood fathers is recognised as a useful addition to the official monitoring role of the authorities. It is acknowledged as a contemporary form of social control that has

18 In most big cities in Europe, we come across similar initiatives and although different in setting and organisation, the basic idea is similar.

19 <https://haagsevaders.nl/projecten/de-buurtvaders/> (accessed January 2023).

been lost as a result of the individualisation of social relations. But their relative autonomy has sometimes also created disputes about the question of who is ultimately in charge: the municipal authorities or neighbourhood fathers.

More generally, municipalities and governments often tend to dismiss the importance of local knowledge and local networks not only for neighbourhoods' liveability and social cohesion, but also for the prevention of radicalisation. As Jamal Ahajjaj argues, to trace and to identify radical tendencies, abstract expert knowledge is often not enough, or may even obfuscate the process. What is needed is a good picture of the situation and a good relationship with the people in the community. In addition, there is a huge gap between the depiction of radicalisation in the media, and what is actually going on (Ahajjaj 2015). A project in the city of Amsterdam in 2017, in which the municipality sought cooperation with local figures to identify radicalisation among youngsters, failed because the parties involved disagreed as to who was in charge of the project, and because the administrative authorities ignored crucial aspects of the fabric of local Muslim communities and networks.

In the early 2020s, some women, Muslims and non-Muslims, residents of an older Amsterdam neighbourhood, decided to join forces and to set up a volunteer organisation, primarily for local women, but in fact for the entire neighbourhood community, called *Dappere Dames* (Brave Ladies).²⁰ They organise several activities such as training in digital skills, information about municipal bureaucracy, language courses, activities for children, individual assistance with red tape, and preparing meals for less fortunate people, all of which are regular activities that we could find anywhere. But the core of the activities is the use of a building that is open on three days a week. As one of the founders explains:

[...] Brave Ladies is a network of female volunteers in this multicultural neighbourhood. We develop a number of activities. On a number of days weekly, women come together to drink coffee, to chat, but also to exchange experiences and information. Having such a place for women that you organise yourself on your own terms is so extremely important. And what you see happening is that all these categories neatly formulated by civil servants on the basis of ethnicity, religion and class are

20 <https://www.dapperedames.amsterdam/> (accessed April 2022).

broken down entirely when we are there together. [...] We chose this name because we all know from experience that organising something at a local level without using the institutionalised channels and carried out by local women is not at all easy. You get a lot of criticism, even sometimes hatred, but it has really improved the neighbourhood and strengthened the cohesion and mutual understanding between the residents.²¹

Fatima Elatik, one of the founders of Brave Ladies, was in municipal politics for many years but left almost a decade ago. She still has an impressive network that she uses for Brave Ladies and uses the typical jargon of civil servants we often come across in policy documents. But she is also well aware of the constant institutional racism present in all ranks of the municipal enterprise. As a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, and a politician, she has experienced that, when Muslim women come closer to centres of power, alarm bells start ringing. As Margaretha van Es (2019) argues, when Muslim women try to break down the 'oppressed woman' stereotypes, they encounter more than a simple lack of information on the part of many non-Muslims; the idea that Muslim women may empower themselves and challenge many things is often not appreciated at all.

3.3 *Halal-Scapes*

The last cluster of cases is called 'halal-scapes', a term I have borrowed from Sümeyye Sametoğlu's article about the activities of young Muslim women in Germany and France. The term refers to activities of space-making which the author defines as:

[...] the boundaries drawn for balancing religious exigencies and desire for fun. The creation and legitimisation of halal-scapes [...] will illustrate [the women's] resisting, accommodating, and empowering strategies within these new alternative spaces. I am using the term space as a constitution of social relations and material social practices, which define politics of inclusion and exclusion, power relations, real, imagined, symbolic spatialities and temporalities. (Sametoğlu 2015, 144)

As we saw in the sohbet settings (Chapter 3), the physical space is important, but its physical nature is subservient to its spiritual qualities, which generate a 'mental environment'. A well-prepared and carefully designed space enables and facilitates the ritual.

21 From an interview with Fatima Elatik (April 2022).

In general, the mental environment of the *sohbet* is a requirement to be found in all *dhikrs*, but my take on *halal-scapes* is broader. I include modalities of space beyond mainstream Islamic ritual settings, and I also broaden Sametoğlu's take on space by including other types of (temporary) spatiality that prompt a specific engagement with religious exigencies.

In some instances, the physical place is the starting point for activities and doing things there turns the place into spiritual space. In other situations, no physical space is involved, but the very activity performed in public by the participants engenders a spiritual realm that disappears the moment they stop performing. In some instances, there is a slight resemblance to so-called 'flash mobs', sudden short performative acts often recorded and published on social media platforms. The resemblance to the creation of spiritual space lies in the spatial significance of a collective activity of like-minded people.

It is impossible to provide a general overview of activities that I categorise as *halal-scapes*, but they all in one way or another refer to modalities of collective religious self-making. As I have argued, my take on *halal-scapes* is broader than exclusively leisure and fun activities, but the spiritual underpinnings of leisure activities are nevertheless an important aspect.

Islam and leisure is a quickly expanding field of academic interest.²² Most studies focus either on the commercialisation of products for a Muslim market, or on questions about the normative frames within which leisure activities take place. Relatively few studies address the spiritual dimensions of leisure activities. Some of my interlocutors, who occasionally make use of so-called 'halal tourist resorts', argue that they enjoy the experience of being in such a resort not just because of the (halal) food, the observance of desired standards of decency, or even because of being 'among your own people'. As one of them stated: "[...] I find it thrilling to experience this place where you do not have to relate to an outside world, but to be in this uhh ... Islamic bubble ha, ha, ha ... Not for always but for a limited period."

There is a clear difference between the many fast-food take-away restaurants with a *halal* sign on the window to show that the meat is produced according to Islamic requirements, and some 'halal restaurants' one would find in areas with a considerable number of Muslim inhabitants. The restaurant room is designed to provide an almost spiritual ambiance with meticulously chosen furniture and illumination that is meant to represent a 'Muslim style' of leisure time activity. Such an ambiance is certainly more than what is typical of

22 A quick scan of the internet yields an abundance of publications on the matter. See e.g., Sehlikoglu and Karakaş (2016); Yousa (2023).

the ‘family room’ one would find in some restaurants in Muslim-majority countries, where women alone or with families can sit.

An intriguing development in this regard is the emergence of so-called ‘light-communities’, a term used by Heleen van der Linden in her research on commercial and other Muslim activities. The term refers to activities/spaces where, in various ways, people come together and bring their social interaction into line with religious rules and prescriptions. One of the significant aspects of these light-communities is that the participants know each other not from ‘traditional’ networks, but through leisure-time activities. Not only do these communities reflect the increasing diversity of the social life of Muslims, but also that the participants want to distance themselves from what is, in their eyes, stereotypical representation along ethnic dividing lines.

During her work as a volunteer for a community centre and a neighbourhood newspaper in the ethnically diverse Oude Westen (Old West) neighbourhood of Rotterdam, Heleen van der Linden, conducted research, and observed some local trends and initiatives, and she interviewed people or groups that were pioneers and role models.

One example of such a local initiative is Habibi. Until it moved to another part of the city in 2020, Habibi was a popular small restaurant that also organised cooking workshops, using only halal ingredients. In addition, it was a popular meeting place for local women from diverse backgrounds. A striking billboard outside the building stated: “Men and dogs are not allowed inside.” The banning of dogs is inspired by Islamic rules, but the banning of men was meant as a local joke. Just around the corner there was a world-famous trendy barber, called Schorem, where women and dogs were not allowed, but for other reasons. The ladies of Habibi reacted with a similar statement, which would only be understood by locals and which they called ‘halal humour’.

Besides being an Islamic regulation, halal became a catchword for being funny—making fun of themselves—trendy and healthy. There were many examples of trendy ‘hang-out places’ or meeting places, where mostly younger, higher educated Muslims, as well as other people, would gather. Another example was The Burger House, a restaurant that profiled itself as ‘innovative’ and the “first halal hamburger restaurant in the Netherlands”. They offered not only halal, but also vegan and gluten free food.

A similar example is Halal Fried Chicken, a very popular halal response to the American fast food chain KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken). Another place, that unfortunately became a victim of its own success, was Espresso Dates (‘date’ referring to both the fruit and a meeting). This trendy lunchroom, whose staff were all female and Muslim, was founded in 2014 by a prominent young Dutch Muslim woman (Alia Azzouzi) and functioned as a local meeting place, pro-

moting a healthy lifestyle, and providing ‘a place of their own’. On the outside, there was nothing that made explicit reference to Islam, but the place was well-known and like-minded people would find each other here, mostly by word of mouth. Espresso Dates was closed in 2019, because the female owners could not combine running it with their regular jobs and activities.

Besides these physical places, there are also many virtual spaces where people would meet, and light-communities were created. A popular initiative is Halal Foodies, the halal version of the superfoods trend we find everywhere. These social networks and platforms are mostly initiated by younger, higher educated women. They provide recipes, tips, and advice about a healthy, but at the same time halal lifestyle, thereby referring to official sources. Their success and popularity have made some of these women authorities in their particular niche.

3.3.1 Sport

Although an increasing number of Muslim men are active in various sports, and many famous sport professionals are practising Muslims, with regard to women there is a constant discussion about the relation between Islamic normativity, the female body, and the admissibility of sport activities. The burgeoning body of scholarly literature on Islam and sport deals with issues of social integration, health and, indeed, about women doing sport and Islamic norms. Especially among the older generation of Muslim women, obesity, diabetes, and vitamin D deficiency are widespread, mostly because their daily routines lead to a lack of sunlight and exercise. However, according to Islamic rules, taking good care of one’s body is important.²³

A growing number of Muslim women are interested in sport and exercise for a variety of reasons. According to Islamic sources, taking good care of one’s body is important. The classical phrase ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’ also exists in Turkish and Arabic, but Muslim women are confronted with questions, restrictions, and challenges when they decide to take up a sport. Women should cover their bodies adequately and refrain from movements that might be seductive. In addition, they are not allowed to exercise in premises such as swimming pools when men are present. Commercial companies have responded to some of these exigencies by producing ‘correct’ attire such as the sporting hijab and the burkini.

23 A somewhat older but thorough discussion of the theme is provided by Patricia Vertinsky and Jennifer Hargreaves (2006).

Just like healthy food, sport is also an activity where 'light-communities' promote a healthy, active lifestyle but in accordance with religious rules or interpretations of official sources. On their platforms, women who are active in sport, especially outdoor (public) sports like running, often refer to official Islamic sources but, just as in the case of food advice, initiators acquire an authoritative status with a growing audience. On social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and in online magazines, discussions take place, as a result of which innovations, agreements and even new standards are created.

An interesting example are the so-called Healthy Sisters. Rachida and Najima, two young Muslim women of Moroccan descent living in the Netherlands, call themselves the Healthy Sisters. They started in an attempt to lose weight themselves by running some years ago. When others saw that, they wanted to join and before long running for Muslim women became popular in their neighbourhood. In their city of residence Helmond (a relatively poor and ethnically diverse town in the south of the Netherlands), they had never seen a woman running with a hijab and they asked why. They started a website and became active on social media with the aim of stimulating Muslim women (and men for that matter) to take care of their physical well-being by doing exercise and eating healthy food. They issue a magazine, publish a regular podcast, sell products and give advice. They explicitly present themselves as Muslim women and implicitly take issue with the sensitivities around the issue on the part of Muslim males.

For the June 2017 issue of the *Runner's World* magazine, Heleen van der Linden did an interview with Najima. The following excerpt is illustrative:

Our parents had to get used to 'that whole healthy show'. Green smoothies, running in rainy weather and so on, but now as the novelty has gone and they see how much good it does to us, they are very proud. They never really discouraged us, by the way. Our dad suffers from diabetes and his general practitioner always advises him to exercise. They know the importance of a healthy lifestyle. From the point of view of Islam, it is allowed as well. Taking good care of your body is important in Islam. There is even a hadith about it. At the same time, there are many stories about women who are not allowed to do outdoor running. Fortunately, we notice that a good example creates followers. If a woman notices that one of her female neighbours also runs, it works as a stimulator. In our running groups, we have ladies who are very religious and are practicing their faith seriously. Therefore, at first, they did not approve outdoor sports. But now, one of them is the most fanatical and even contests her husband. We have a lady with diabetes in our running group. She had to go to her general

practitioner for a check-up and there she was asked what she had been doing lately, because the results were fantastic. Such a story spreads like wildfire. Especially because diabetes is a serious problem among Moroccan people. (*Runner's World*, June 2017, 57–58)

In most of the literature, scant attention is yet to be paid to the spatial dimensions of sport. I argue that these dimensions are particularly relevant with regard to Muslim women. Kathrine van den Bogert (2018) has conducted research among young women with a 'migration background' who play football. She shows that public sporting venues are gendered and racialised and describes how Moroccan-Dutch Muslim girls navigate these spaces. Public football fields, according to van den Bogert, are constructed as normative masculine spaces. She uses the concept of 'space invasion' to refer to the activities of women who contest these dominant gendered constructions. Although she refers to the religious identity of these young women several times in her account, she mainly focuses on the contestation of the gendered and racialised constructions of space.

Jasmijn Rana, in her research among young Muslim women who kickbox, argues that contrary to what is generally assumed, participation in sport by Muslim women is not the final stage in a complete renouncement of their faith. As Rana states:

[...] through their gendered agency, young Muslim women who kickbox disrupt western European parameters of secularity and religiosity. Their secluded, recreational activity is liberating, but not in the ways outlined by government-sponsored women-empowerment programs or as reported in the media. They approach the sport not as a quest for cultural integration or emancipation from their Muslim communities, but as a way of practicing both religious and secular forms of self-realisation. (Rana 2022a, 192)

Thus, Rana shows that these secluded activities should in no way be depicted as superimposed norms about the relation between men and women, or against the superimposed governmental agendas of integration, but as a form of performative empowerment. In addition, Rana's interlocutors state that kickboxing in this 'women-only' place also has strong spiritual dimensions and is closely connected to making pious selves and growing up as Muslim in a dominantly secular environment. As Rana states: "[...] The site of the kickboxing gym provides a space to perform alternative femininities that counter a hegemonic white femininity and simultaneously enables a pious femininity" (*ibid.*, 200).

In another research project on Muslim women doing recreational running, Rana shows that, unlike secluded kickboxing, running is predominantly an individual activity undertaken in public places such as parks. The notion of space emerges in an intriguing way, especially when women run together with others. Thus,

[...] The physical characteristics of women's bodies alone do not result in a difference in the running experiences of men and women. Their sensuous engagements with their surroundings, which are shaped by social expectations about bodies in public space, also play an important role. (Rana 2022b, 299)

3.3.2 Therapy

A field of activities among Muslims in Europe that has existed for quite some time is counselling in matters of family or financial disputes. Activities such as mediation, reconciliation and (marital) counselling in family disputes belong to the regular tasks of an imam, often assisted by Islamic scholars. Muslims who wish to solve their problems in conformity with Islamic norms and Islamic law often turn to an imam when there is a personal crisis. His religious authority and knowledge in combination with his role as a trusted mediator, guarantee the preservation of a certain privacy of family life vis-à-vis the outside world. Like all the tasks of imams, these too have become much more complicated in Europe, often due to unaccustomed circumstances (Muradin 2011; 2022).

Many of these tasks could be labelled 'traditional guidance' by religious professionals, as those who turn to an imam for counselling are motivated by the desire to 'remain within the boundaries of the local Muslim community'. However, in addition to these regular forms of counselling, we see recently the emergence of novel forms of counselling—in cases of psychological distress, for example. Today we find a multitude of organisations focusing on a potential Muslim clientele and offering counselling sessions in cases of personal loss or illness, marital problems, or problems with children.

Most of these counselling activities are similar to those performed both by religious professionals and also by regular non-Muslim counselling institutes. However, the distinctive characteristic of these organisations lies precisely in their 'in-between' position, providing an environment of like-minded people where it is easier and less confrontational to talk about personal problems and experiences.

There are also organisations with a more explicitly religious focus; their activities bear striking resemblance to those of contemporary New Age groups,

self-help groups and the quickly increasing number of meditation and mindfulness courses. As in the case of counselling activities, these initiatives operate in an intriguing ‘in-between’ space, in this case between traditional dhikr sessions and self-help activities.²⁴

There are two constitutive elements in these kinds of activities. One is what Charles Guignon (2005) has called the ‘inward turn of authenticity’, the quest for the inner self in a postmodern globalised world. The other has to do with the understanding of religion and religious practice as coping devices in times of distress. Coping means dealing with and making sense of experiences such as sadness, suffering, meaninglessness, and finiteness. Although religious coping has always been, in an ‘age of authenticity’ it acquires a dynamic of its own, which stems from the strong desire for what is called ‘subjective well-being’.

This moral framework of ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ entails an important reconfiguration of religion. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2009) argue that religiosity among youngsters in the US is predominantly a pursuit of feeling good, happiness, security, and peace of mind. Johan Roeland (2009) has analysed how young Christians in Europe combine modern techniques of self-realisation with Christian notions of ‘being in the world’. Martijn de Koning (2008) has explored similar developments among Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youths who find support, comfort, and friendship with God.

Daan Beekers (2015) shows that there is also a strong element of ‘purification’ present among both Christians and Muslims in Europe, seen in the idealisation of the early years of Christianity and Islam, the prioritising of inner, affective faith over traditions and institutions, and attention to individual well-being. This process of purification does not lead to an uncommitted, strictly personal, and ephemeral religiosity. On the contrary: one’s personal relationship with God defines every aspect of one’s life, and every aspect of one’s life should be fully devoted and dedicated to God—which, actually, is the exclusive condition for personal well-being. The ‘living reality’ of God, and the quest for a concrete and actual experience of a God that has particular traits, desires, and ideas about pious life as it should be lived, is ultimately a collective endeavour, something one does with like-minded people.

‘Taking one’s faith seriously’, which is, after all, asked of the individual believer, is accompanied by a strong emphasis on techniques and hermeneutics of the self (cf. Foucault in Rabinow 1994) with the aim of ‘equipping’ the individual believer to live his or her faith in everyday circumstances and, con-

24 See for example the Fahm Institute in the Netherlands: <https://fahminstituut.nl/on/> (accessed March 2023).

versely, to regard his or her belief as a meaningful resource for coping with life and being in the world. Many of these techniques are meant to maintain an enthusiastic, lively and intimate relationship with God. In most cases, these techniques are framed in terms of authenticity and well-being, rather than in a language of conformity and self-discipline (see also Beekers and Kloos 2018).

3.3.3 Eco-Islam

In 2022, I was invited to an iftar-meeting in Rotterdam, organised by students at the university there, where a relatively large proportion of the students have a Muslim background. The theme of the small seminar that was organised around the iftar was Islam and environmentalism. During the seminar, a discussion ensued between two Muslims about the significance of Ramadan and particularly of the iftar. One argued that the iftar, especially the last one at the end of the month of Ramadan, often turns into a bacchanal with a lot of food being wasted and thrown away. This habit is not only at variance with some very essential Islamic principles, but it also ignores the contemporary urgency with regard to climate change. Instead of producing too much food to no benefit, Muslims should make iftar into a moment of reflection and sobriety. In this way, Muslims could create an environment not only globally but also intimately. The speaker, a member of the Dutch organisation Groene Moslims (Green Muslims), referred to Sura 7:31, which explicitly disapproves of waste and excess.

The other Muslim argued that hospitality and generosity are the most essential principle of the iftar. This implies that there must always been enough food for possible guests to come. Environmental concerns are very important, but they cannot overrule this crucial principle in Islam. He argued that having enough to eat for visitors and family is not motivated by the desire to show your wealth, but by the principle of caring for the needy.

The discussion was informative in that it demonstrated how Muslims reflect differently on how to understand various seemingly opposing ethical principles and guidelines and how to apply them in concrete circumstances. The discussion did not end in a conclusive statement in favour of either one of these principles and was intriguing because both discussants referred to a specific notion of spiritual space that the various principles undergird and sustain. They both pictured the iftar according to what they considered essential to the event and to the particular sense of place and belonging that they envisioned. The setting in which Muslims break the fast with family, relatives, or community members, represents a temporary spiritual space, constituted by people who share an understanding of the significance of the event, and made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement with the Revelation. The 'like-mindedness' of

the participants expresses these particular meanings, being true to your social environment, or to the natural environment, or to both.

The choice for sustainability as a theme for an iftar is not unexpected. Today, all kinds of organisations and institutions, such as ministries, universities, schools, hospitals, prisons, and administrative services, organise an iftar for their clientele and their employees. These public iftars have increasingly come to be organised around a certain theme, such as diversity and inclusion, peace and solidarity, religious harmony, or communal cohesion. More recently, we can observe the emergence of ‘counter’ iftars: for example, iftars for women, to make a case against the marginalisation of women, and to draw attention to societal problems that are being ignored by male elites and politicians, or iftars against racism. ‘Eco iftars’ such as the one above, are meant to make a case against wasting food and the climate crisis and in favour of sustainability.

Eco iftars are manifestations of the quickly expanding environmental awareness among predominantly young Muslims. The relation between Islamic principles and the natural environment is very old. Although in many treatises written centuries ago by Islamic scholars, explicit reference to the relation between Muslims and the natural environment has been addressed extensively, many scholars still consider environmental concerns as part of a broader concern for social justice (see Khalid and O’Brien 1992; Foltz 2003; Jenkins 2005; Abdul-Matin 2010; Hancock 2019) and some Islamic scholars apparently do not see the need specifically to discuss as a distinct theme the embeddedness of concern for environmental issues and the relation between humanity and the natural environment in broader theological, ethical and social principles.

As Arthur Saniotis (2012, 155) argues: “While Islam provides detailed ethical principles on the environment, the majority of Muslim majority countries show an apparent indifference to environmental issues”. Today, however, many Muslims, especially young ones, argue that environmentalism is not just a matter of theological reasoning about the divine connection between humans and our planet. The current climate crisis is a relatively new development that needs more elaborate thinking and, not least, action. Thus, as Dina Abdelzaher, Amr Kotb and Akrum Helfaya (2019, 624) argue, environmentalism from an Islamic perspective should advance conceptually and methodologically “[...] from the *belief* (*why* and *what*) level of Islamic teachings about the environment to the *action* level by addressing questions such as: *how* can we take our belief in ‘Eco-Islam’ to actually guide behaviours and outcomes?”.

Climate activists show that the climate crisis is thoroughly entangled with issues of poverty and overconsumption. Many ‘green Muslims’ argue that the

fact that countries with a Muslim-majority population are hit relatively hard by global warming and other effects of climate change should motivate Muslims to take action.

Organisations such as Green Muslims are emerging rapidly, not least in countries that will be affected more severely by global warming. They generally insist on going beyond simply referring to Islamic ethical principles, and in fact take action and also build alternative communities within the broader Muslim population. On the many websites of organisations of 'eco-Muslims', the initiators emphasise that, even if general Islamic ethics stipulate the importance of care for the natural environment, additional reflection, interpretation of sources and action is necessary.

This is strikingly reminiscent of the argument made by women in socialist movements in the twentieth century. Although there were some radical socialist movements in the early twentieth century that explicitly addressed the subordinate position of women in the family and society, most parties and movements argued that, with the establishment of a true socialist or communist society, women would automatically become equal to men. Many feminists strongly criticised this position and argued that additional action was needed.

A considerable number of the activities of Muslim environmentalists focus on notions of space and community-building as important means to create environmental awareness. In his research among active Muslim women in their neighbourhoods in the city of Semarang in Indonesia, Ibnu Fikri (2020) shows that they organise activities to make their residential areas more sustainable, envisioning a space that stands out from other areas around them.

The Dutch organisation Green Muslims, to which I referred above, organises various activities such as meetings to plant new trees together, monthly walks in nature, meet-ups about initiatives to make living conditions more sustainable, 'green iftars', and a project called Janna (heaven) to learn to grow food and create areas for sustainable food production. In all these projects, which are open to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, there is an explicit reference to Islamic ethical principles.²⁵

4 Conclusions

This chapter is titled 'Alternative Authorities', by which I refer to activities that diverge from the established mainstream Islamic landscape. There are many

25 <https://www.groenemoslims.nl/> (accessed January 2023).

more initiatives, such as ‘queer Muslims’ to mention just one, that could be included here. They deserve more attention than just a few pages in a book chapter, and I did not in any way want to suggest that my selection is exhaustive. However, the cases I have addressed in this chapter do have a number of commonalities.

First, Islamic authority-making is dependent on the practitioners and hence always contingent on relationships in multiple senses—between authorised leaders/preachers, or authoritative texts, between authorised leaders and ordinary Muslims, and between Muslims and non-Muslims. These interactions are often real personal discussions and reflections, but they may also take the form of ‘imagined’ interactions between assumed normative interpretations or positions and possible alternatives.

Second, all the cases exist at a local level, in small scale settings, and with real people. Organisations may have websites to reach out beyond the local level, but the notion of space and locality are recurring elements. In literature on the concept of the ‘urban commons’, there are some relevant leads for the issues I have discussed. Those who apply the concept point not only to its spatial underpinnings but also to the activities of local people beyond and independent of the state and the market. They also point to connectivity and networks that sustain all kinds of activities. Nevertheless, the concept falls short in my view because of its generalising tendency. Just like globalisation some decades ago, ‘urban commons’ is also often applied as a completely novel concept, bringing together separate conceptual fields and approaches, and yielding completely new insights. In reviewing a number of works on the concept of ‘urban commons’, Amanda Huron (2017) points out important omissions or blind spots, notably the growing ethnic and religious diversity in cities, the scant attention given to local-level dynamics, and not least the lack of focus on gender-specific activities.

This brings me to the third commonality, namely the crucial role that women do play in most of the activities. I shall return more extensively to the role of women and gender in the making of Islamic authority in the concluding chapter. Here I just want to point at the fact that, in the cases I have analysed, gender ‘works’ in two ways. On the one hand, activities, especially those initiated by Muslim women, often give rise to reactions and discussions about their legitimacy. On the other hand, alternative spaces and activities are where we find more women than men. As Jasmijn Rana states with regard to kickboxing for women:

[...] The popularity of kickboxing among Muslim women in the Netherlands, as in other European countries, is an important social change for

women that breaks stereotypes of submissiveness on the one hand, and of secularity on the other. Religious self-cultivation takes place in unexpected moments, and its rationale transcends sport practice as such. (Rana 2022a, 200)

In other words, to be Muslim on their own terms necessitates a quest for alternative spaces and activities.

The fourth commonality concerns the transient and temporary character of many, though not all, activities. As I have argued, the relevance of such initiatives is still often underrated in the literature, as well as by stakeholders and administrative authorities. 'Current results do not guarantee success for the future', as investment companies are accustomed to say. Enthusiastic volunteers at some point reach their limits, opposing forces are strong and persistent, and established arrangements and vested interests are hard to open up. So, it is fairly easy to dismiss initiatives as irrelevant. However, there is in my view no reason to discard temporary, marginal, or alternative activities. As Carol Kersten and Susanne Olsson (2013) argue, the centre of gravity of many alternative Islamic discourses and initiatives is no longer in the so-called 'heartlands of Islam', the Middle East, but in the 'periphery', in Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States.

As there continues to be an ingrained tendency among scholars of Islam to consider these 'heartlands of Islam' where some of the most sacred Islamic sites are located, as the ultimate point of reference for making sense of Islam and Muslims, developments that take place outside that area still do not attract the attention they deserve. Thus, in Indonesia there is growing resistance to what is called 'the Arabisation of Islam' and a development towards an Islam that is rooted in and engrafted upon local traditions and practices, often referred to as Islam nusantara (Islam from the soil). This development falls outside the scope of this book, but during lectures in Indonesia and discussions with colleagues, I have become aware of its striking similarities with developments among Muslims in Europe. In addition, 'heartlands' can easily be replaced by 'established infrastructures', 'mainstream institutions', 'prevailing power configuration' or 'the majority of Muslims'. Thus, rather than being ignored, 'alternative' activities should be taken more seriously.

Seeking Authentic Listening Experiences in Shi'ism: Online and Offline Intersections of Majlis Practices

Aleeha Zahra Ali and Thijl Sunier

1 Introduction

... its sort of a slippery slope, because then it becomes very difficult to create distinctions about who is allowed to talk, (and) who isn't. Who you should platform, who you shouldn't platform ... there is some value to putting some sort of conditions (on that). (Talha—Amsterdam, 2022)



Talha is passionate, almost agitated, as he expresses feeling critical about a speaker who has been invited to address a Shi'a youth group. The event was an iftar gathering in Utrecht, planned during Ramadan, where people would break their fast together and then listen to a lecture through the course of a lively evening.¹ The event was announced on a WhatsApp group called Young Shia Holland, and received mixed responses. A heated discussion began around the credentials of the invited speaker—and the criteria that different attendees were applying. The orator in question was a young Dutch² man, an accountant turned self-taught religious speaker.

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- 1 Most transliterations in this text are from Urdu, which was the primary language the research was conducted in.
 - 2 Interlocutors describe themselves as Dutch in addition to any other affiliation by way of heritage, and this is the premise for using Dutch as a descriptor in this text. Dutch here refers to people who have lived in the Netherlands for most if not all of their life, speak Dutch as their primary language, and participate in society, regardless of other ethnic, religious, national or cultural affiliations.

Talha was at the centre of this argument.³ A young Dutch man of Iraqi descent, dark-haired, fast-talking and animated, he is active in a few multicultural youth groups, where his fluency in Dutch, Arabic and English is an asset. His manner of interaction, though, is often critical and in his own words, “provocative”, especially in online discussions. In the quotation at the top of this chapter, Talha was telling me about the WhatsApp argument that erupted when he questioned the speaker’s authority.

“Who is this man? I googled him and all I found was that he is as accountant”, wrote Talha. “He has extensive online *hawza* (seminary) training”, explained an organiser. “If I google it, 9 out of 10 *prekers* (Dutch for preachers) have never even entered a *hawza*”, came a scornful reply, “This is a really pessimistic view of the Shi’a community in the NL. There really is potential for high quality-speakers in the Netherlands. Even an accountant can say something interesting about Islam, if he has enough knowledge”, typed a young woman. The argument continued, illustrating the extent of dissent, debate and opinion in an online space, as well as the importance of the role of a speaker in Shi’ism, and that communities of listeners are active and critical in their reception of a lecture.

Speakers in Shi’ism present and perform a variety of lectures, and their platformers here, as Talha says in the opening quotation, are everyday practising Shi’a Muslims, who make up lecture audiences and thus lend speakers a platform. The reasons behind how a speaker’s credentials and performances are evaluated and discussed will be explored later⁴ in this chapter⁵ to examine the following questions: Whose voice is most prominent during a *majlis*? Who is speaking? Who listens? And what are they listening for? What implications does this dynamic have for Shi’a religious practices? In this chapter, we explore the possible criteria applied in this speaker–listener continuum with a focus on processes of digitisation, and through the practice of Shi’a *majalis* (plural of *majlis*). The *sohbet*, dealt with in Chapter 3, and the *majlis* addressed in this chapter can be connected under the heading of *dhikr*.

3 All the names in this text are pseudonyms, aside from that of Sayed Ammar Nakshawani and Shaykh Azher Nasser.

4 See section: *Who sits at the minbar? Ulama, zakirin*, public speakers.

5 The first author of this chapter is Aleeha Zahra Ali, who is preparing a dissertation about Shi’a *majalis* and digitisation. The ethnographic data on which this chapter is based were collected by Ali between 2019 and 2022 among Shi’a Muslims in the Netherlands. The text is slightly adapted by Sunier in order to fit within the argumentational structure of the book, but most of the content is written by Ali.

The majlis sermon is a central practice in Shi'a Islam during the month of Muharram. There are other forms of oratory in Shi'ism, such as the Friday khutba, and lectures like the one described above. However, the most prominent ritual and discursive practice are the commemorative *majlis-e-aza* (majlis of lament), which will be the focus of this chapter. The majlis takes a distinctive approach to pedagogy and discourse, where religious learning takes place through storytelling, narrating history and theology, and ritualised bodily practices. Here we shall look at the practice of majalis through a more intersubjective lens, focusing on how individuals in various positions co-produce authentic experiences during the sermons.

The word majlis has multiple meanings in Arabic, Urdu and Persian. In the Shi'i context, drawing from these multiple linguistic heritages, the term majlis is often short for majlis-e-aza, where majlis means a gathering and *aza* means mourning/lament. So a majlis-e-aza is a mourning gathering held by the Shi'a. In Urdu, a language fused from Hindustani, Persian, Turkish and Arabic, the word *sohbat* means company, companionship or an assembly. This is likely derived from the Arabic *suhba* (companionship) and is linked to the Turkish *sohbet*, meaning a dialogue or conversation. These etymological links and similar meanings of the words majlis and *sohbet* reveal parallels in the ritual practices that carry their name: they are both primarily community gatherings, with certain moods and atmospheres.

Although both the *sohbet* and the majlis contain elements of embodied expression, movement, emotion and especially ritualised weeping, this comes about in different ways and for different reasons. In a Shi'ia majlis-e-aza,⁶ weeping is a form of collective, ritualised lamentation specifically as commemoration, although of course the lament becomes charged with multiple layers of meaning as it unfolds. The majlis has a long history going back about thirteen centuries as a ritual that has existed across multiple cultural contexts and languages. The structure of a majlis places a greater emphasis on remembrance and re-articulation rather than arriving at new forms and ideas through discussion. Majalis include myth and storytelling to communicate religious information, and are therefore less explicitly pedagogical than a *sohbet*. Much like the *sohbet*, a majlis is led by one speaker (an imam, alim or *zakir*), who acts as a leader and facilitator, using oratory as a medium for communication, teaching and emotional arousal. However, the proceedings of the majlis are co-created together with the listening, attuned, sensing bodies of the congregation members alongside the *khatib*. A closer analysis of majalis, as this chapter explores,

⁶ Hereafter referred to as majlis.

reveals the processual and nuanced nature of authority in the ritual. In this chapter, the examination of self-fashioning technologies is extended somewhat literally to look at the physical conditions and the influences of digitisation on the majlis, thus considering what a change in the medium/materiality of a practice may entail for the process of authority-making that happens within it.

During a majlis, practitioners often value and seek authentic devotional experiences—meaningful, truthful, and emotional experiences. Majlis orators aim to curate and guide these experiences and thereby also position themselves as authority figures, by way of their religious knowledge, oratorical performance and public perception. Usually, orators and participants come together in an imambargah or any space specifically prepared for majalis, where the sermon is performed.

This has long been the dominant established format, although majalis have, over the past few decades, frequently been adapted using cassette tapes, television, radio and the internet. As new technologies emerge and become accessible to certain publics, they are co-opted into all spheres of life, including religious rituals. In Shi'ism as well, a religion dense with mediated and material practice, the growth of digital technologies has had a considerable impact on the organisation of rituals, extending to majalis. Digitisation and especially the Covid pandemic have led to a tremendous increase in online events, and a variety of responses towards these events. Are online practices the real thing? Are they just as meaningful, moving, powerful and impactful as gatherings in person? Is a comparison fair? The essential question is: how do we begin to make sense of Shi'i practices in their multi-faceted and diversely-mediated iterations?

The growth of online sermons poses challenges for majlis orators and audiences. With the onset of the Covid pandemic, where digital majalis often became the necessary norm rather than a supplementary practice, consideration of the emotional and affective impact of these majalis has become important. In this chapter we shall analyse the religious experiences of the majlis through sensory experience, especially in and through audio-visual media, sonic performance and aural reception. We consider these experiences through online and offline events in terms of sensations, affect, authentication and embodiment, and also explore the implications of the online extension of the majlis for relevant authority figures, such as religious scholars and ulama and modes of knowledge production. We consider listening as part of conferring or denying authentication during the majlis ritual. Authentication is a concept drawn from Mattijs van de Port's (2004) and Aleeha Ali's (2022) work. It is an approach to understanding authority-making during religious

practices, where authentication refers to perceiving something as powerful, meaningful, true and legitimate. Authentication is an ongoing process, invoked through various modes of perception, such as the senses and discursive engagement.

The ever-increasing spate of digital content regarding Shi'a practices, including thousands of majlis videos circulated online, has elicited a discussion among practitioners about the form and impact of the majlis and its persuasive qualities, and whether or not an online majlis is still an 'authentic' majlis. The argument we seek to elaborate is threefold. First, we contend that the authentication of a majlis sermon is a mode of authority-making. Second, this authority-making constantly responds and adapts according to context, medium and reception. In this case, we look at processes of authentication through listening, and thus authority-making, as they intersect with the challenges and opportunities of digitisation. Third, we argue that aesthetics and performative skills are crucial prerequisites in these modes of authority-making, and we take the bottom-up experiences and critical reflection by majlis participants about the sermon as our point of departure.

Majlis khitabat (plural of khatib) respond to digital technologies in a myriad of ways in order to create and retain their positions as reputed authorities and public figures. They do this by adjusting the content and performance of their sermons, trying to engage audiences and create and elicit experiences of authentication. We explore this first through a look at the overall structure of authority in Shi'ism, and later by expanding to examples of various public figures currently active in the Shi'a majlis scene, especially those who deliberately utilise digital media. In particular, we focus on the digital presence of the alim Sayed Ammar Nakshwani. We also take a bottom-up approach by looking at how these efforts and adjustments are received by these orators' audiences, drawing from ethnographic research. We focus on singular cases and accounts of authority figures, using their perceptions as individuals as a starting point to examine authority-making. The modes of mediation, the technologies that are applied and especially the effects they create, are issues that are discussed widely and seriously among practitioners. Majalis listeners across all mediums respond to oratorical performances by casually but critically talking about the sermons, including elements they find to be authentic or not and what makes them perceive a khatib to be good, impressive, trustworthy and legitimate.

Seeking authentic experience and reflecting on what is "incontestably real" and what is artificial (van de Port 2004, 14) is in itself a mode of authority-making as it deals with issues of legitimacy and truthfulness, with captivating experiences and feelings of connection. As has been argued in the introduction

to this book, authority can be conferred not only to/through persons or bodies of knowledge, but also in relation to events and objects. When a ritual is able to establish experiences of immediacy, transcendence and devotional affect and emotion in participants, it will be judged as a real and authentic, and thus an authoritative, event.

It is through this that the role of religious leaders, moderators and orators can become manifest. Dorothea Schulz (2013), in her work on Malian religious figures and their role in religious events, argues that these figures can improve their status and influence in the community when they can demonstrate their crucial role in inducing religious experience in practitioners during those events. This implies more than tricks and strategies of clever religious entrepreneurs, and harks back to the seminal discussion between Talal Asad and Clifford Geertz about the latter's definition of religion. Asad argued that Geertz attributed to (external) symbols -or rituals in our case—the ability to produce (internal) dispositions in practitioners, thereby ignoring context and the important connection between knowledge and power (Asad 1983).

The role of religious professionals in accomplishing this, should be neither underestimated nor overestimated, and must be considered together with contextual factors in an analysis of authentication and experience. The research on which this chapter is based has been conducted among people with a migration background. Their perspective on digital practices is embedded in the wider socio-political context of migration, diaspora, transnational connections and their double minority position as Shi'a Muslims and as residents of European countries. In this regard, participation in a majlis—including *where* one participates, *who* one listens to, and *how* one listens to them—gives the event special significance and is indicative of processes of authentication. In addition, digital technology enables organisers to enlarge their potential audience, but this has thrown into stark relief the fundamental question of how to connect with that audience. We shall explore the perspectives of majlis orators, as well as discussions and conversations among everyday Shi'a practitioners, that is people who do not necessarily have theological expertise but consider majlis participation important as an aspect of their Shi'a identity and to develop a sense of belonging.

In order to contextualise the practice of majlis and to give necessary background information for readers less familiar with the topic, we provide with some background information about Shi'a Islam, and a brief descriptions of majlis rituals. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical literature used for the case, and a discussion of relevant concepts. The last part of the chapter consists of the analysis of a case study that follows a Shi'a scholar who has gained online popularity, alongside explorations of how various interlocutors

regard his work. These examples illustrate how Shi'a khitabat present and profile themselves using the internet, and how this translates to audiences who listen to them online.

2 Shi'a Muslims, Mobility and the Story of Karbala

2.1 *A Historical Overview*

Twelver Shi'a communities live in many parts of the world. Outside of Muslim-majority countries, there are Shi'as in North America and in many European countries, most notably the United Kingdom. These Shi'a communities are diverse, shaped by different histories and contexts of heritage, ethnicity, migration/mobility and nationality.

Shi'ism is the second largest denomination in Islam after Sunnism, making up between 10% and 20% of all Muslims globally, that is about 150–200 million people. Shi'ism has plural factions within its umbrella, including groups such as the Ismailis and the Ithna Asharis or Twelvers, and it is the latter who are studied in this chapter. Most Shi'a populations—around 60%–80%—are concentrated in Iran, Iraq, India and Pakistan (PEW 2009).⁷ There are also notable populations across some Central Asian countries. The Shi'a presence in Europe is diffuse, made up of migrants from these countries. However, it is important to understand Shi'a groups not just where they have strength in numbers but also where they form minorities, for in that position are located the unique iterations, politics, practices and negotiations that form the backbone of Shi'ism. In Shi'i⁸ faith, there is an underlying sense of being the underdog, of rebellion towards established power structures, and of strength in the face of oppression, which shows up in questions related to Shi'a identity (Dabashi 2011; Kheshti 2015). This is because Shi'ism has mostly been a minority religion through its history, and often at odds with many dominant power structures, such as other Islamic schools of thought, governments, political parties, etc. Even in countries with some of the largest populations of Shi'as, such as India and Pakistan, they remain a minority compared with other religious groups, such as Sunni Muslims. This has imbued Shi'ism with a strong sense of identity rooted in a conviction of righteousness and steadfastness in the ap-

7 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> (accessed May 2023).

8 Shi'a and Shi'i are used interchangeably in this text, to reflect the Urdu spoken with interlocutors and the English/academic term.

proach to faith and community (Sachedina 1994; Scharbrodt 2019; Scharbrodt and Shanneik 2020).

The spirit of Shi'ism stems from its history, which is deeply political, spiritual, kin-aligned and emotional. The differences between Shi'ism and Sunnism can be traced back to the early days of the *khilafa* (caliphate) and the succession to the Prophet Muhammad in 11/632. According to Sunni tradition, after the Prophet Muhammad, the political and spiritual leadership of the Muslim umma was conferred on a democratically selected *khalifa* (caliph), the first of whom was Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet and highly respected in Sunni Islam. However, a faction of Muslims disagreed, contending that Muhammad had appointed Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor before his death and had publicly announced this in his last khutba to the Muslim umma. This group saw Ali as the first rightful khalifa and, more importantly, as the spiritual leader (*wali*) of Muslims after the Prophet.

Shi'a Muslims, especially the Ithna-Asharis or Twelvers, consider spiritual guidance to be located in the institution of the *Imamat* (Imamate). The Imamate passes from Ali and Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, who is another central figure in Shi'ism, through their patrilineal line, down to the next twelve generations. The third Imam was Hussain and the last will be the Mahdi.⁹ Twelver Shi'ism is therefore named after the importance of acknowledging and revering the twelve imams. During the reigns of the first Islamic caliphs, the Shi'a emerged from those who rallied around the descendants of the Prophet. His family and immediate descendants are known as the *Ahl al-Bayt* (literally, people of the house in Arabic).

Twelver Shi'ism is characterised by deep devotion (*aqeedat*) towards the Ahl al-Bayt and the twelve imams. Historically, the imamate continued to exist alongside Sunni caliphates,¹⁰ and the imams were often seen as a political or spiritual threat to dominant rulers, as they provided an alternate source of leadership that was not legitimised by political or economic might, but by divine right and descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, Shi'ism has always taken a critical stance towards the establishment, a focus on its theological beliefs, esotericism, the importance of community, networks of trust and practice, and a need to identify, differentiate and sustain a distinctly Shi'a identity.

This continues to be apparent in modern Shi'ism, especially in Shi'a communities in the global West. Here, Shi'a people live in large numbers, negotiat-

9 The twelfth Shi'i imam. For both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, the promised messiah whose arrival will mark the end of times and the Day of Judgement.

10 Shi'i caliphates, notably the Fatimids (amongst many), followed centuries later.

ing their identities and practice through a layered and intersectional minority identity: as Muslims, as Shi'a Muslims and as having migrant backgrounds. Scholars exploring Shi'ism in the West have described it as being an experience of a "minority within a minority" (Sachedina 1994). However, this notion is challenged and extended by understanding Shi'a communities as having intersectional and complex identities beyond a double-minority, as the concept of minority remains confined to national lines (Scharbrodt 2019). Shi'a groups are interconnected in different ways: often heterogenous even within the same city, and sometimes interconnected across continents (Scharbrodt and Shanneik 2020). Therefore, each group must be placed within a particular social, cultural and networked context to understand how community is formed, identity is negotiated and ritual practices are conducted. This inevitably also informs processes of authority-making.

2.2 *Shi'ism in Europe*

This chapter focuses on the majlis ritual amongst Shi'a Muslims in Europe. The majlis has travelled to Europe over the course of the past century, with the Shi'a Muslim communities that began to settle there through waves of migration. The largest populations of Shi'a people in Europe live in Germany and the United Kingdom, with smaller groups spread across France, Sweden and the Netherlands.¹¹ Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular have had a historical presence in Europe, especially through a small number of settlers from the Maghreb entering Andalusian Spain. This Muslim presence eventually dwindled, and in North-Western Europe came about again through migration facilitated by large-scale transnational processes: colonialism, wars, industrialisation, and political upheaval.

The contemporary Shi'a Muslim presence in Europe is therefore largely migration-backed, motivated specifically by educational, economic and political situations in the wake of a variety of international developments (Shanneik, Heinhold, and Ali 2017). Shi'ism in Europe is also rooted in established institutions and components of Shi'a faith, such as the *marja'yya*, clerical networks, pilgrimages to sacred sites, and hawza seminaries that have long facilitated mobility and intercultural interaction, enabling and encouraging certain transnational networks (van den Bos 2012).

The variations found within Shi'a communities have led scholars to study transnational networks and patterns within Shi'ism (van den Bos 2012; Fuchs 2019; Scharbrodt 2019). Shi'a community in Europe has generally been stud-

11 <http://shianumbers.com/shias-in-asia--europe.html> (accessed May 2023).

ied through how people organise themselves, as summarised by Matthijs van den Bos (2020) in a review article. This community organisation is mostly considered in relation to “generation and authority, ritual and emotion, gender and occupation” (ibid., 1) with less emphasis on where the nodes and boundaries of networks intersect and what that might generate. There is also little focus on mediation and practice in relation to community. We plan to examine network dynamics through deeply interconnected processes and themes of authority and ritual, by focusing on the majlis and various actors and relationships involved in the practice.

2.3 *Dutch Shi'ism*

According to one estimate by a Shi'a website, there are roughly 200,000 Shi'a Muslims in the Netherlands.¹² Exact numbers are hard to find as the Dutch authorities do not record religious affiliation in statistical overviews, let alone ask the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Consisting of groups that mostly have migrant roots, these Shi'a communities have a mix of Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani, Afghan and Lebanese backgrounds. Most have been born and raised in the Netherlands and speak Dutch as their first language, although many retain a linguistic connection with their family background, which is reflected in their second or third spoken language. These communities usually organise along two lines: either ethno-nationally, or as multicultural youth groups. Ethno-national groups in this case prefer to stay within their own community and to practise rituals in their regional languages such as Urdu, Persian or Arabic. They are often dominated by a few families who take charge of community administration and the organisation of religious gatherings.

In contrast, the youth groups are more “communities of practice” (Langer and Weineck 2017). The members of these groups are from mixed backgrounds, mostly young Iraqis and Afghans, although sometimes there are people from other backgrounds, as well as Dutch converts. They come together to practise rituals in Dutch and have a distinct sense of Shi'a group identity that is based on how they prefer to practise and how they position themselves in Dutch society. These groups are community-organised, with a range of teams under a few board members. They value participating in both the Shi'a religious community and Dutch society at large: they write *nauhay* and religious poetry in Dutch, elect community leaders from amongst themselves, preach sermons in Dutch and organise social events such as picnics, youth-meetups and lec-

12 <http://shianumbers.com/shias-in-asia--europe.html> (accessed May 2023).

tures. They also have an increasing digital footprint, as they actively run online Qur'an courses, YouTube channels, and Instagram pages. The content they produce and upload online is in Dutch.

Both types of group organise events during Muharram, especially majalis and members of both groups also engage with a variety of religious content online and offline, usually by listening to their local Shi'a group but also to whomever they prefer online. Local options for listening to majalis in the Netherlands are limited, simply as a result of the small size of the community. Furthermore, local communities cannot always afford the fees paid to the most popular and in-demand speakers, unlike larger, well-established communities worldwide, such as in Karachi, Lucknow, London or Toronto, where people have greater access to a variety of majlis gatherings and speakers. For Dutch Shi'as, therefore, the internet offers a conveniently accessible plethora of speakers. However, these options are accessed differently within the Dutch community, taking into account multiple factors such as language, religious motivation/engagement, political affiliation and the intersubjective/sensory aspects of majalis—and, of course, individual preferences.

In this chapter, we map the tensions arising from choosing who to listen to, and how listening to different people—together community engagement—creates critical listeners. The unit of organisation considered here will be local communities, specifically Shi'i groups in the Netherlands, but the research is also based on religious public figures, notably a UK-based scholar who has a transnational and online presence. Data was gathered from fieldwork and interviews were all conducted with Shi'as in the Netherlands between 2019 and 2022. The research draws from an ongoing digital ethnography that involves online and offline participant observation. Many sections in this chapter will contain ethnographic vignettes, meant as an observational record of Dutch Shi'ism and as illustrative towards the arguments being made regarding listening and authority.

2.4 *The Story of Karbala*

The historical context of Shi'ism sets the foundation for taking a closer look at the central nexus of majlis sermons, that is the story of the Battle of Karbala. In Shi'ism, narratives of the past are often storied and these stories represent and convey a collective memory that Shi'a communities can relate to and live by. Collective memory can be understood through Paul Connerton's work (1989): a memory shared among a group of people provides common grounds for understanding the past and ways of being in the present. This social memory is continuously maintained, shaped by and reflected in people's practices, at both the group and individual level. Such ways of remembering and recreating memory

through rituals can be seen in the practices of Shi'a groups, through the powerful narrative of Karbala (Shanneik 2015).

The Battle of Karbala, where Hussain ibn Ali led a small number of the Ahl al-Bayt and his companions against an army of the caliph Yazid I, is one of the most prominent clashes in Shi'i history. Reflecting the schism over succession that had occurred after the Prophet's death, this conflict was between an Ummayyad caliph, Yazid I, and a son of Ali. They both claimed leadership of the Muslim umma but on different grounds: Hussain an Imam and grandson of Muhammad, Yazid as caliph and the son of Muawiya I, who preceded him a caliph. On 10 Muharram, the battle of Karbala took place between Hussain's small band of 72 men and Yazid's army of thousands.

After a harrowing defeat, Hussain's entire force was slain or taken prisoner, and the tragedies surrounding this battle are meticulously recorded and commemorated in Shi'a tradition, usually by way of a *Maqatal-al-Husayn*, that are early written texts detailing the events of the Battle of Karbala. One such example of a manuscript is *Lohoof* (sighs of sorrow) by the twelfth-century Shi'a scholar Sayyid ibn Tawus (2015).¹³ Modern-day majalis rely heavily on these early accounts as their source canon, though layers of oral and cultural storytelling embellish the many renditions of the Karbala story today.

In the aftermath of Karbala, the loyalty of Hussain's followers intensified towards him and then to his descendants. They considered that Hussain's father Ali was the rightful successor to Muhammad instead of the caliphs that followed and this group formed the Shi'a (literally, the faction, or followers). For the Shi'a, Hussain and his martyrdom came to represent an ideological and philosophical stand that is considered the height of piety and sacrifice. Michael Fischer terms this the "Karbala paradigm": a framework that can be used to understand the story of Karbala almost ontologically in that the story provides a background and model for how Shi'a people perceive the world and themselves in it (Fischer 2003). The Battle of Karbala, the figures within it and the events and dialogues attributed to them are all deeply symbolic, drawing from ideas of the nature of God, reality, existence, morality, justice and sacrifice. The Karbala paradigm expands the story of Karbala to "history, cosmology, and all of life's problems" (ibid., 27). According to Fischer, Karbala's influence ripples into the worldview and everyday life of many Shi'a people, influencing not only how they experience the world but also how they interact with it.

13 <https://www.al-islam.org/lohoof-sighs-sorrow-sayyid-ibn-tawus>. Accessed through an online archive, dated 2015.

Vernon Schubel (1991) calls this a “metahistorical” understanding of Shi’a piety, where the Karbala story becomes an ideal that is emulated and evoked in people’s lived experiences. This foundation for experiencing the world serves practical purposes as well: it is a model for ritual practice, and its values become guidelines on how to comport oneself in everyday life. The narrative thus provides a model and archetype for being in the world as a Shi’a Muslim.

Beyond its explanatory value, however, Fischer’s Karbala paradigm goes on to consider Shi’a religious rituals and symbols rather simplistically as binary opposites that are either traditional or modern, salvific or revolutionary. Edith Szanto (2013, 79) challenges this view, arguing for understanding the Karbala paradigm beyond political outcomes and models of emulation, and in terms of affect, everyday life, and repeated practice where Karbala influences, impresses and can also arouse, excite, and rally people. The work of these scholars indicates the importance of the ideas, values, morals and emotions associated with Karbala and Hussain for Shi’a Muslims today. To see the story of Karbala as a paradigm is indeed indicative of the multiple layers of importance this narrative has in Shi’ism. However, one must resist seeing the Karbala paradigm as a single overarching narrative and worldview or as the primary explanation for how Shi’a people perceive and are in the world. It would be reductive to assume that it is only this story and related rituals that inform attitudes across the wide spectrum of Shi’ism. Many other dynamic factors make a contribution, such as community structures, local political and social contexts, and individual perceptions. However, it is clear that the Karbala story plays a major role in Shi’ism, as does its constant (re)articulation during majalis.

Karbala is a memory fraught with emotion, and that emotion extends beyond commemorative rituals into how Shi’a people engage with the world. In dialogue with Paul Connerton’s (1989) work on how groups sustain memories through commemorative rituals and bodily practices, Yafa Shanneik (2015) argues that the Karbala story resides in what can be called a collective memory of Shi’ism as the backbone of a master narrative shared between people. The story of Karbala provides the basis for highly complex, emotional and embodied commemorative rituals in Shi’ism. Through ritual, the Karbala narrative is re-enacted, and it reinterprets the past to include contextual elements (Thurfjell 2012). Through the majlis, a collective memory becomes manifest: the Karbala story is remembered, communicated and expressed through bodily practices, sermons and shared experience.

Paul Connerton (1989) argues that what the body experiences and learns through collective memory and rituals is not only about the past but is also carried on into how people experience and act in their present. According to Rainer Brunner (2009, 15) the event and memory of Karbala signifies an emo-

tional way of being and belonging for Shi'a people, creating an "intense culture of repentance and mourning" that is entwined with ritual, influences people's emotional lives, and is also reflected in political attitudes. Karbala has indeed become a referential point for Shi'a politics, and particularly attitudes towards martyrdom, and activism (Saramifar 2020). This indicates how commemoration and ritual translate into other social processes, and a deeper understanding of the ritual is valuable in exploring cross-sections of social processes. In summary, the story of Karbala brings into Shi'a faith layers of history, ideology, faith, metaphor and emotion that have persisted through time and are very much part of Shi'a people's everyday lives.

In the Dutch context, there is space for sensory, immersive and storytelling rituals, whether they are residues of a Christian past now secularised, or whether they be budding spiritual practices introduced by mobility and migration. Take, for instance, the parallels between certain Shi'i and Christian rituals. The similarities between the meaning of the narrative of Hussain's martyrdom for the Shi'a and that of the Crucifixion of Jesus for Christians are striking: both are considered pure souls who suffered in their mortal bodies for the divine purpose of protecting their faith. The New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the story of the Crucifixion from different perspectives. All the gospels relate stories of betrayal, sacrifice, hope, despair, loyalty and faith, not just as elements of the Crucifixion narrative but as elements in the human condition. The story of the Crucifixion was re-enacted with the aim of enhance the congregation's religious sensibility. The way performance and music is invoked bears similarity to the Persian *ta'ziye*, which are dramatic reenactments of parts of the Karbala story (Pettys 2005). Unlike *ta'ziye* attendees, for most listeners to the oratorios, the religious significance is no longer important but the dramatic and affective atmosphere that the music and the texts evoke is emotional and, in that regard, it is a sensational experience. For a number of years, a popular version of the Crucifixion narrative has been performed in the Netherlands, with popular music and well-known artists, and broadcast live on television. Every year, the event has a special theme and message that is intended to appeal to a wide audience. The show is watched by over two million people and its popularity is striking in a country that considers itself emphatically secular.

According to Ernst van den Hemel and Irene Stengs (2023, 194), the idea that the popularity of the event is because it is the re-enactment of a "universal story of connectedness" insufficiently explains its success in drawing large and diverse audiences. They use the notion of "pre-enactment" to denote the organisers' active attempts to invoke and control the Passion's public image and meaning, and to touch its audience. "[While re-enactment] places the

emphasis on repeating what has been done before, pre-enactment highlights the importance of selection and control in an orchestrated attempt to ensure that the audience's emotional reaction meets the organisers' expectations". This insight is certainly relevant for capturing the effect of the majlis, and for understanding how embodied knowledge (as pre-enactment) forms critically engaged listeners.

3 Majlis: Sermon and Ritual

Razia's living room is a small cube. Through the course of the afternoon around 30 women and their lolling children will navigate crossed legs, unruly elbows, strewn handbags, and snack wrappers to find a spot to sit. The living room's furniture has been removed: black and white patterned cloths conceal and pad the floor, readying it for a majlis audience. Razia's daughter's have taped up red banners on the walls that proclaim: Ya Hussain. A fan hums in the corner; it is a day of heatwave in Dutch summer. Hania, Razia's older daughter, is handing out ice water as the attendees walk in. The room fills with women in black, sweating and perfumed. The children litter the space with salt and sugar crumbs, the snacks meant to satiate them as their mothers and sisters will listen to the majlis.

Once the gathering is largely settled, a *zakira* moves to sit on a chair draped in black—a makeshift *minbar*. This *zakira* is a well-known figure in the community. Her many daughters and their families are fixtures in the Amsterdam majlis circuit: they arrange and organise many of the events. The *zakira* is the only woman in the community who performs majalis, and over the course of her three decades of performance has developed a distinct style. Razia knows her well, as these Shi'a women form the majority of each other's social circles and friendships, and the *zakira*'s participation has made this majlis held at home possible. Otherwise, in Amsterdam, Razia would have struggled to find a local female speaker for ladies' majlis.

The *zakira* begins to recite verses from the Qur'an, in softly lilting Arabic. She then switches to Urdu, and begins addressing the audience with concerns that—I am later told—she feels male speakers overlook: fathers should be more involved in family life. She talks about men's role in caring for their children, and how this duty should not rest solely on mothers. She makes it a point to ask newly-married women to pay attention to this. Her argument is accentuated by the unruly and playful chatter of the younger members of the audience.

Having spoken about this for a while, the *zakira* moves on to praise the Ahl-al-Bayt. Since she regularly performs for this same group of women, the

zakira self-references, continuing points and arguments from previous talks. Her speech expounds upon the virtues of members of the Ahl-al-Bayt, and how the trials of the Battle of Karbala were a testament to that: she described the patience of Hussain's young daughter Sakina in the face of three days of thirst, in the high heat of a desert valley.

The room in Amsterdam is musty and packed, and the heat in the room is a conduit to the imagination. Women's voices begin to break and crack into sobs. The zakira invokes this sensation, "We here have cold water to drink. What did Sakina have?"—and the room throbs with grief, Sakina's thirst answered by the audience's tears. The children watch, unfazed, as the women begin to beat their palms against their chests and thighs. The zakira's voice mixes with the sound of fabric-muffled thumps and keening wails, as the audience begins to mourn through their bodies—listening and feeling deeply. This embodied lament is *matam*. Heat is heat and thirst is thirst, whether 1400 years ago in Iraq or in Amsterdam of 2021. And Karbala, the zakira reminds us, is always Karbala—it not a place, or a time, it is ceaseless and unbound and omnipresent.

As *matam* begins to slow down, we say a communal prayer: we pray for mercy on those community members that have recently died; we pray for Razia and her family; we pray for the improvement of conditions in Pakistan. Crumpled tissues littering the floor are cleaned up, and some women are still sighing and brushing away the wetness from their eyes as the majlis winds to an end.

This vignette is from a women's majlis held in Amsterdam. It shows community dynamics, and offers a glimpse into the majlis ritual. The story of Karbala lives on today through Shi'a commemorative practices. At the turn of every Islamic year as the month of Muharram begins, so do Shi'a practices of collectively remembering and lamenting Hussain and the events of Karbala. This commemoration is marked by Shi'a people dressed in mourning black, participating in processions (*jalus*), and congregating for sung lamentations (*marsiyyeh*), embodied mourning (*latmiyya/matam*) and majalis sermons (Blomfield 2010). In Shi'ism, the word majlis refers to a gathering to commemorate Hussain and his people's suffering at Karbala, where a sermon is delivered and other mourning practices take place. Majlis can mean both the gathering and the sermon itself. We refer to the speech within this ritual as the majlis, as it is known in South Asian contexts, so for instance when ulama give a majlis, they are performing a sermon.

The majlis is a practice and sermon with certain structured elements that have some consistency/similarity across all cultural and linguistic iterations of the practice. It draws on and communicates a body of knowledge that combines Shi'a history, theology, text and storytelling. A congregation gathers in a

specifically designated and prepared space to listen to iterations of the same stories, as well as scholarly takes on Islamic texts and contemporary issues.

The suffering of Hussain and the tragedy of Karbala is the backdrop of Shi'a mourning. The emotional experience of people lamenting during a majlis has a complexity beyond the story itself and its remembrance. During a majlis, people's own sorrows, sensations, troubles and fears mingle with those of the Ahl al-Bayt. Majlis orators invoke this by encouraging listeners to imagine the Ahl al-Bayt as members of their family, or by imagining physical sufferings as though they were in their own bodies. These powerful evocations are not only about relating to the past but may also allow people to mirror, express and channel emotions. The majlis thus narrates past events, reinforces beliefs and combines contemporary subjects to pass on religious values and practices against the backdrop of a deeply embodied ritual (Rizwan 2011).

4 Theorising the Majlis

The previous section engaged with some of the relevant literature for this chapter. The following section explores the theoretical underpinnings behind the ethnographic work that this chapter elaborates. First, we consider the majlis as ritual through Birgit Meyer's and Saba Mahmood's work and frame it as a practice that includes homiletics as well as embodiment to form religious dispositions—that is, how the practice of sermon oration and preaching, its reception and the role of embodiment contribute to people's modes of perceiving and experiencing aspects of religion. In her material and phenomenological approach to the study of religion, Meyer (2009) uses the term “sensational form” to indicate the tangible, sensational and communicable aspects of religion that are structured in repetitive ways, with repetition (re)creating feelings and actions. Sensational forms are modes of organising and transmitting religious experiences and enhancing how they are received by people (Meyer 2006). In other words, sensational forms—and by form Meyer means the methods of communicating content—enable, reinforce and embody religious experiences.

These sensational forms are socially constructed and produced, often sanctioned by authorities, but they are experienced at an individual level and in local settings, thereby straddling different layers of complexity. Collective rituals are an example of a sensational form. The majlis is a collective ritual, performed by a group of Shi'a people usually in a shared physical space, although this conception of space/congregation is now expanding and challenged by virtual space. Majlis follow a structure that is recognisable in Shi'a communities

despite variations across times, settings, regional backgrounds and languages. They all commemorate Hussain and the Battle of Karbala, revere the Ahl al-Bayt, and contain sonic, oratorical and bodily performances (Saade 2019). These similarities and recognisable rhythms in the forms of majalis render them a ritual/ritualistic character. David Thurfjell (2012) describes how, in majalis sermons, many discourses are present: khitabat talk about politics, stories and sorrows from the lives of the Ahl al-Bayt, religious teachings and contemporary events. However, individuals experience all this in combination with internal factors such as their personal religious motives, emotional lives and current circumstances (*ibid.*).

The majlis ritual arouses passionate emotions such as sorrow and love (Blomfield 2010). In an individual's experience of a majlis, are these emotions induced through a fixed structure, or spontaneously created and experienced? Mahmood (2001b) holds that ritual can produce states of embodiment and affect that are a result of a conscious and systematic cultivation of certain knowledge and bodily dispositions that then allow for seemingly spontaneous expression of emotion, elicited often in collective settings. She understands emotional and bodily comportment as a complex process; an individual body interacts with discourse, doctrine and authority to purposefully and intentionally co-cultivate a religious way of being. According to Mahmood, people actively re-engage in rituals and patterned behaviours in order to constantly re-create and re-learn bodily comportments, cultivating ways of being that draw from the structure of the ritual and their personal motives.

So, rituals become ways of both rehearsing or predisposing emotions and allowing them spontaneously to emerge (*ibid.*). The majlis in Shi'ism is both the learning ground of religious stories and emotions, and the site of performing that knowledge in an embodied manner. Thijl Sunier and Mehmet Şahin (2015) have shown how emotions and performance are entangled in the case of the so-called 'weeping sermons' of the Hizmet movement. As explored in Chapter 3, these sohbet bear remarkable resemblance to the laments characterising Shi'a majalis. The parallels between sohbet and majlis, as explored earlier in this chapter, are immediate: they engage affect, embodiment and rehearsed spontaneity (Mahmood 2001b), and both fit Meyer's concept of sensational forms.

However, these two practices engage affect and embodiment slightly differently and towards different outcomes. The sohbet can be understood as a great illustration of Mahmood's rehearsed spontaneity, as can the majlis. However, in looking at majalis here, the focus is on the process of rehearsing (as sermon oratory), and the authenticity of the spontaneity (how instinctive/real/moving does the lament feel?). It is the processual and continuous nature of authenticating that occurs within a ritual/sensational form and that

gives them a sensational form that we wish to elaborate on. Another aspect to note is where and how the ethical cultivation of oneself and the subsequent expression are located. In the cases of Mahmood's work in Egyptian mosques and the communities of the Hizmet movement that live together, this dispositioning occurs over time and together with communities. This is quite similar in majalis.

These theoretical insights are important as they provide a framework for understanding the majlis as a ritual that has both socially produced and repetitive elements that interact with individual experiences; both discursive form and content influence and are expressed through bodily comportment. The majlis ceremony and sermon, then, is a ritual experience that plays a role in shaping the aesthetics of Shi'ism by inducing, predisposing and expressing affective states and embodied practices. The use of the term aesthetics here can be understood through Meyer's (2006; 2009) concept of aesthetics, where aesthetics encapsulates how we experience the world with all our sensory faculties and the sensory knowledge we derive from this.

Meyer argues for studying religious experience through its various sensory, bodily and material dimensions to understand the overall aesthetic of a religious experience or phenomenon (*ibid.*). Thus, the majlis can be conceptualised as a sensational form where individual, embodied experience and structural, discursive practices interact, with both exerting influence on each other. Furthermore, precisely this interaction between subjective and intersubjective experience, discourse and embodiment is considered to be the crux of where authority is made, re-made—and undone. This nebulous process can be understood as authentication (van de Port 2004; Deeb 2005; Ali 2022), where meaning and legitimacy are conferred through an active process of participation and critical reception.

Religious forms and rituals change and adapt to retain their position in a milieu of modes of understanding, being and believing. Much of the literature reviewed so far supports the proposition that ritual practices such as the majlis produce a Shi'a way of seeing and being in the world (Fischer 2003; Brunner 2009; Szanto 2013). Ritual, sensational forms, discourses and corporeal practices all produce both collective and subjective aesthetics and perspectives of religion (Mahmood 2001b; Meyer 2009; Thurfjell 2012).

Here, the point of interest is where religious sensational forms interact with contexts, particularly with new processes of mediation. The historical evolution of Shi'a ritual shows that the 'traditional' has always been constructed within a time-bound religio-political setting (Hussain 2005). Tradition here is not to be conflated with history in the colloquial sense, in that tradition refers to the past and moves in a linear manner from traditional to modern. Rather,

traditions are constantly made, critiqued and re-made. In line with Lara Deeb (2005) and other thinkers' perspectives on religion (Meyer 2009; Rizvi 2018), we contend that traditional and modern ways of practice cannot be separated; in fact, we need to understand how rituals and religiosity become 'traditional' in the sense that they are considered outdated, and 'modern' in their evolution, sustained contemporary presence and new ways of mediation. This understanding can be developed by looking closer at religious practices, processes and exchanges of knowledge across various media.

5 Digitisation and Shi'ism

According to Gary Bunt's (2003) overview of Shi'a media online, the internet is used for different religious purposes, such as connecting religious practitioners and authorities and disseminating religious rulings. Shi'a websites are often multilingual, meant to be accessed by different Shi'a communities, and used by clerics and seminaries to disseminate information and maintain public profiles. They carry videos, images and digitised and translated versions of Islamic texts such as Qur'anic suras, Shi'a prayers, and hadith. Alongside being archival and informational, online Shi'a platforms are also often instructional, outlining how to conduct rituals, practices and prayers. Bunt's article, however, overlooks social media, the presence of Shi'a rituals online and their performative elements. These are aspects of the internet that are interactive and can contribute towards different sensational forms and religious experiences both online and offline. Shi'a media online contains a large amount of content that is about lamentation and Muharram. There are images of processions and ritual practices, recordings of nauhay, and videos of majalis. While some of this content is confined to specific Shi'a websites, much of it is present and shared on prominent social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Michael Warner describes how religions adapt to and incorporate technology and media as "culturally mediated", holding that media (much like religion) do not exist outside a social, political and historical context (Warner 2002, cited in Larkin 2009, 120). Brian Larkin (2009) discusses a perspective on religious media and publics, where the relationship between media and religion is a two-way negotiation, with technology enabling certain forms of religious communication but also being influenced by how religion approaches and adapts to it. Charles Hirschkind's (2012) study of the YouTube khutba in Egypt provides an example: a religious sermon's presence on the internet enables new modes of interaction and knowledge. While the structure of the internet can

be manipulated to produce certain religious sensibilities, people's existing attitudes and the choices they make also influence how these sermons are heard online.

5.1 *Shi'a Ritual Online*

There is a well-developed body of literature about the intersection of media and religion, including Islam, on the internet (see e.g., Bunt 2003; Meyer and Moors 2005; Campbell 2012; Bekkering 2019). The internet is increasingly being used by Muslim communities, including Shi'as, to communicate religious content (Mandaville 2001; Kalinock 2006). The study of digital religious practices is gaining traction in Shi'a studies, notably through the works of Babak Rahimi (2011) on social media usage; with Mohsen Amin (Rahimi and Amin 2020) on digital pilgrimage; and the work of Rhys Sparey (2022) on digital mourning through a television show where audiences called in during the Covid pandemic.

Previous works on Shi'ism online have demonstrated the importance of studying ritual as it manifests in internet spaces, as knowledge and information online can influence how people practise religion both online and offline, as well as sensory and affective experiences. Sabine Kalinock (2006) in a Shi'a context and Vit Sisler (2011) in a Sunni one both argue that religious presence on the internet reflects increased individualisation and mobility amongst believers. Yafa Shanneik's (2015) study of Iraqi Shi'a women in diaspora speaks about cyberspaces allowing people greater access to multiple religious traditions, with these increased possible choices resulting in people exercising more agency and challenging traditional forms of authority. In another study, Shanneik (2013) highlights the transformed spatiality of the internet, where it quite literally transcends the geographical borders of a Husayniyya. This dissipation of borders allows greater freedom of choice and also facilitates transnational exchange. Charles Hirschkind (2012) however, points out that religious spaces online are characterised by their collective nature, fostering a sense of gathering, with shared values shaping how people interact with and consume content.

Both these perspectives have their merits, and provide a well-rounded understanding of how online ritual should take into account both the collective and individual modes of religious engagement that the internet allows. As Kalinock (2006, 17) observes, "[...] the Internet is characterised by religious pluralism". When looking at Shi'ism, this includes multiple sources of content, political perspectives, national representations and authorities. Thinking of the internet as completely free, democratising and individualising can be a fallacy. Kristin Sands's (2010) analysis of how Muslims use the internet pro-

duces an important insight: the gelatinous, ever-expanding architecture of the internet, while allowing certain forms of alterity to appear, still contains and reproduces restrictions and imbalances, thereby replicating and re-articulating certain 'real-world' power dynamics. There are types of discourse that the internet fosters, and styles and spaces that it enables. There are specific images, sounds, networks and languages that make up the internet, and the ability to access and understand these makes certain actors better able to navigate the internet's possibilities. Within this context, it is worthwhile to examine what is happening to Shi'a rituals.

If one searches the word 'majlis' on YouTube, it yields a list of thumbnails of preachers dressed in black, with most video titles also containing the word Muharram. Most videos of majalis on YouTube are uploaded about and during Muharram and focus on the majlis sermon, although there are many videos dealing with other lamentation practices as well, such as *zaakir* and *marsiyya*. *Nauhay* and *marsiyya* are both oratorical forms of lamentations in which verses of poetry are sung out loud, arousing powerful emotion and often providing a rhythm for bodily mourning practices such as *latmiyya*. In offline majalis, these practices occur together with the majlis sermon. However, in videos of majalis online, *zaakir* and *marsiyya* are often not included, being uploaded as separate video clips. As a result, majlis videos online focus mostly on the one primary orator who gives the sermon.

These videos are about an hour long, corresponding to the usual length of a sermon. The video frames usually only focus on one speaker; most are men, many are women. Often no more than the upper half of the speaker's body can be seen, and occasionally there are shots of an audience sitting cross-legged on the floor, clad in black. The colour palette of the videos is similar: black interspersed with red, green and gold. These videos are uploaded by a variety of channels: some only ever upload a video or two; some upload a variety of Shi'a content, and some are linked to Shi'a organisations.

At first glance, the videos seem like simple recordings of an offline practice. However, the growing frequency at which these videos are uploaded, especially since Covid, the catchy titles of the videos, and the question of who their producers and audience are, hint at a far more plausible scenario: this online activity is a moment. It is a moment of new types of record-keeping and traditional practices reorienting to new media technology, and it is a moment holding implications. One of these strands of implications is through online majalis and their effect on authority, particularly through how online listening practices shape the authority of majlis orators.

6 Authority and Authentication

The focus of this chapter concerns the issue of authority, notably the implications of the online extension of the majlis for relevant authority figures, such as ulama, and for the modes of knowledge production, especially among Shi'a migrant communities. But the authoritative effect of participation in such a ritual as part of an act of ethical formation, and indeed the ritual as sensational form, is equally relevant. In this text, authority is understood as an ongoing process of establishing the authenticity of phenomena (Sunier 2018a), where not only individual leaders but also groups, institutions, communication practices and rituals may be involved.

In Shi'ism, authority can be understood by imagining a wheel. The hub of the wheel is the concept of the Imamate, from which the crux of authority emanates (Gleave 2007; Mavani 2011). The many connected spokes emanating from that hub comprise: the *maraji' al-taqlid* that are highly venerated religious scholars (Walbridge 2001), the *hawzay*, ayatollahs, *mujtahids* (jurists), preachers and local leaders and speakers. According to Sabrina Mervin (2010), the *hawza* and the *marja'iyya* are the two most important institutionalised channels of authority in Shi'ism. Scholars and authority figures in Shi'ism also often derive their legitimacy from institutional affiliations such as with a *hawza*, and use their training and networks to facilitate their communication with Shi'a people. *Hawzay* can provide insight into how a Shi'a community is structured, how authority flows, and how knowledge production occurs. For instance, they are international centres of learning, bringing together senior-most Shi'a scholars and clerics and Shi's students from all over the world. *Hawzay* are also transnationally connected, sending their alumni into various Shi'a communities and sustaining a web of clerical networks.

In many studies, however, the authoritative status of the clergy and institutional arrangements is taken for granted as self-evidently emanating from tradition, or their proximity to canonical sources. We start from the proposition that religious authority must be constantly reconfirmed and stretches far beyond the limited confines of Islamic scholarly circles, doctrinal reflections and debates, and bureaucratic and institutional settings. Talal Asad (1983) has addressed the dynamics of religious traditions extensively. Tradition, he argues, has an authoritative status and it operates as an ethical guideline, not because it has timeless qualities, but because it has come about as a result of a historical process of continuous authentication of Islamic sources. A number of works have dealt with the embeddedness, contextuality and dynamic nature of Islamic authority, particularly in the context of Islam in Europe (Peter and Arigita 2006; Fibiger 2015; Ahmed 2016).

The making of Islamic authority has been deeply influenced by the digitisation of all spheres of life. As was argued in the introduction to this book, the emergence of modern mass media has had a tremendous influence on established forms of Islamic authority (Mandaville 2007; Salvatore 2007; Turner 2007). The main reason for this is the increase in the number of voices in the public sphere and the diversification of audiences (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Meyer and Moors 2005). The usual hypothesis emerging from this perspective is that this leads to a democratisation of knowledge, levelling the playing field (or screen) between religious authorities and the everyday practitioner.

We contend, however, that the gap between religious authorities and the 'ordinary' Muslim is not so pronounced in the first place. The distinctions between who is considered an authority and who is considered a practitioner is blurred. For instance, in Shi'ism, religious public figure cannot emerge until they are exceptional practitioners—including their knowledge and networking abilities. They must then be recognised as such by a listening, observing public. The public perception of their character is important, and lends validation to their authoritative position. Furthermore, the making of a 'good' practitioner, orator or alim is a complex and dialogical process, with authority being constantly recognised and reified. We argue that how this authority is made partially lies in deeply embodied ritual practices and we explore this by applying the concept of authentication to majalis.

7 Transnational Authority

Authority in Shi'ism has historically maintained trans-local and transnational dimensions (Corboz 2015; Rizvi 2018; Scharbrodt and Shanneik 2020). For instance, hawzay host and train international scholars who later disperse and participate in religious dissemination in different places (Sindawi 2007). Examples of these intersections emerge constantly in the fieldwork: an alima (female form of alim) who studied at a hawza in Qum and now works across Europe; a scholar who trained in Najaf before settling in the UK; a Pakistani zakir who trained in oratory across the UK and now works in the Netherlands. Scholars and authority figures in Shi'ism also often derive their legitimacy from institutional affiliations such as with a hawza and use their training and networks in the way they communicate with Shi'a people. Hawzay can provide insight into how a Shi'a community is structured, how authority flows and how communication occurs. The flowing process of authority, however, also continues into rituals and practices such as majalis.

The powers at play in the majlis are the orators, ulama, traditions of knowledge, politics and, equally importantly, the congregation, the audience, Shi'a publics and communities. When an orator speaks, he derive authority from various sources: for example, a zakira might invoke the authenticating capacities of the Qur'an, the Imams and *maraji* to substantiate her speeches. This is how one zakira by the name of Syeda described her preparation process before giving a sermon: she read the Qur'an and books of hadith; she listened to previous speeches; and she took note of current issues.¹⁴ What were people worried about? What did people care about? I interviewed Syeda when Covid lockdowns were still in place in Amsterdam and the United Kingdom. During a zoom call, she told me: "The first thing when I start thinking about [majlis] topics is how to bring change ... I start with hadith of why we sit together. Always my majlis is like that. Why are we sitting here? Why we commemorating?"

Syeda also constructed and conveyed her sermon lectures and her own position according to how her audience perceived her. She spoke at length about the feedback she received from her audience, and how she took note when someone told her that a part of the speech was beautiful or moving, or made them cry, or made them think. So, alongside textual and canonical sources, Syeda took great store by her listeners' perception and responses. This process is nuanced and can frequently be observed with different speakers in majalis. The process of digitisation adds yet another layer to this process, for if a sermon is broadcast it receives new listeners and a new public (often geographically heterogenous) and becomes open to a new set of responses to the speaker and their performance.

It is important to note that Shi'a ulama or influential public figures, at almost every level, are often transnational figures themselves. Starting from the *marja'iyya*, where all Shi'as, regardless of cultural, linguistic or social backgrounds, must follow a *marja*. Since the maraji are mostly in Iran and Iraq, this creates a link between, say, the everyday Pakistani Shi'a practitioner who speaks Urdu and the uppermost Arabic or Persian-speaking echelons of Shi'a clergy.

However, this relationship between institutions and individuals contains tensions. Previous literature has looked at 'new' migrant Muslim communities and their entangled relationship with authority. In such spaces, Shi'a practices derived from different sources can come into conflict over how to practice, for example, or which marja' to follow (Dogra 2017; 2019). This is fuelled by the

14 Also described in a previous article by Ali (2022).

idea that there is a disconnect between the rulings of maraji from the Middle East and the lived reality of Muslims in the West (Tajri 2016). In some ways, migrant communities are better positioned to challenge traditional authority and introduce alternative forms. Studies attribute this to the greater agency that comes from people moving from established local contexts to new ones and gaining access to multiple traditions (Shanneik, Heinhold and Ali 2017). Annemeik Schlatmann's (2017) ethnography of Dutch Shi'a youth and Kathryn Spellman-Poots's (2012) work in the UK describe young Shi'as organising themselves in transnational groups, using their native languages (Dutch and English respectively) for religious communication.

This process is quite complex, as the authority that being reacted to is not static; it is a process seeking to affirm itself. This can be observed in the literature on how Shi'a authority mediates and adapts. For example, popular maraji, such as Ayatollah Sistani, have their own websites with fatwas available in multiple languages and email options for people to contact them. This changed access influences how people select a marja to emulate (Cappucci 2015). Gary Bunt (2003) looked at popular Shi'a websites, observing how they facilitate exchanges between Shi'a scholars and practitioners whilst also filling leadership vacuums in some local communities. Sabine Kalinock (2006) describes Iranian clerics using the internet for religious communication and dissemination, and believers using forums and online information to circumvent religious authority and connect with co-believers. Digital means of connection can also be used to validate the authority of lay local organisations by affiliating them to established maraji (Spellman-Poots 2012). So, the digital landscape where online majalis are present already has implications for authority: the question now is what observing the digitisation of majalis can represent.

These examples make clear that traditional authority in Shi'a Islam has been affected by these global, political and technological developments. Shia authority figures are adapting to contemporary circumstances, encouraged by the transnational nature of Shi'a institutions and the impact of digital media in general; practitioners are exploring new forms of moral attunement and spirituality with digital means (see Hirschkind 2006). However, the influence on authority of ritual practices such as the majlis has until now not received sufficient attention, or such attention has rarely been directed at authority-making as a process located within and during the practice of majalis, as is the goal of this chapter.

8 Listening as a Practice of Authentication

A man in black takes a deep, audible breath and bellows: “Naaaaaraaa-”. The note continues for an impressive duration, reverberating across a room full of men, bouncing through tinny electric speakers, bouncing into the women’s section where I sit. The room listens in silence, the khatib pausing his speech. “Naaaaaraaaaa-ey”—inhale “Haidery!”—exhale. “Ya Ali!”, respond tens of voices, in a fierce rumble.

This *naray-bazi*, or collective chanting of slogans, is a feature of the soundscape of majalis gatherings. There are many types of *naray*, such as the one described here. “*Nara-e-Haidery*” invokes a cry in praise of Ali, and “*Ya Ali*” is a pledge in response. The vocalisations act as a response between khatib and audience. When a khatib says something particularly rousing, a member of the audience might respond by invoking a *naara* (chant). A *naara* is only complete when the audience members chant back, the force and enthusiasm of their voices revealing their response to the khatib and the proceedings. In this way, the audience becomes bodily grounded in the moment, their attention tethered, and they also participate in an exchange with the khatib. Such vocalisations can be seen as examples of authentication, through a mix of sensory engagement and vocal and discursive expression.

The concept of authentication has been explored to discuss how majalis listeners come to determine something as authentic, meaningful and truthful (Ali 2022). The concept is elaborated as registers of authentication, referring to modes of perception that can elicit a sense of something being convincing, authentic or real (*ibid.*). These modes of perception are: sensory, so located in a practitioner’s body and sensory faculties; discursive, and thus elicited through text, performance and discourse. This includes elements of the majlis practice that are deeply embodied, such as physically-engaging lamentation practices and the content of the sermon as they are performed by an orator.

Our focus in this text is on listening as a practice of embodied and critical engagement and authentication. Listening can be considered part of discourse, where what one listens to can be either accepted or disregarded in terms of authentication. “Audiences can react to discourse in a myriad of ways beyond agreement, conviction and certainty: with contestation, doubt, curiosity and questioning, all of which are important in an experience of authentication” (*ibid.*, 7).

Listening as a practice of ethical self-fashioning—and thereby self-engaging—has been explored by scholars such as Charles Hirschkind (2001), particularly in urban Islamic contexts. Hirschkind describes listening to Islamic

cassettes in contemporary Egypt as a “cultural practice” that contributes to perception. He argues that listening techniques such as repeated listening create certain “bodily dispositions” that contribute to how one receives moral and religious messages, thus contributing to ethical self-construction. Through curated and rehearsed listening, the listener’s experiencing body engages in a “technology of the self”. This recalls Saba Mahmood’s (2001b) notion of ethical formation, where listening can be considered an embodied, disciplinary and pious practice, and an example of creating a certain ethical self.

Lara Deeb (2005) traced the changes in the style of majlis in contemporary Lebanon in the wake of political transformation and religious reformation. Over three decades, the majlis shifted from traditional styles that emphasised graphic rhetoric meant to elicit the most intense grief to an authenticated style that attempts make the story of Karbala increasingly relevant to the present, pose religious figures as role models, and adapt to political landscapes. Shi’a people are continuously engaged in this process of making and deciding what is traditional or authentic. Deeb terms the process by which majalis practices are judged to be traditional or accepted, or dismissed and not adapted, as authenticating (*ibid.*).

During the majlis, what is said is as important as what is done. According to Bashir Saade’s analysis of Muharram majalis, “oration fuses reasoning and affect in a powerful mix” (Saade 2019, 396). Saade highlights how an orator can weave moral values, religious history and political attitudes into the story of Karbala to cultivate ideas of Shi’a identity and community. To understand the role of the orator and discourse in creating modes of morality, we look at Hirschkind’s work on cassette-sermons in Egypt more closely. According to Hirschkind (2001, 637–639), moral dispositions contribute to the pre-condition of how people listen to and are affected by a sermon, and these moral/ethical dispositions are created through the body. The way bodies develop ethical attunement is a mixture of sensory engagement with disciplined understanding; for example, weeping when listening to a sermon is a bodily engagement that is underlined by how one understands and relates to the content, in terms of not only what is being said in the moment but also a deeper understanding of its significance.

The orators play a role in this, and they aim for the emotion of a sermon to supersede momentary performance: the goal is for people to develop knowledge and an ethical way of being that extends beyond ritual participation and which they will apply in their everyday lives (*ibid.*, 631). Understanding the discourse in a majlis can highlight the role of authority figures such as the orators might play in creating ethical dispositions, and how bodily engagements co-produce these dispositions. This flow of influence between authority-ritual-

listener-body is not unidirectional but rather circular, once again highlighting the processual and continuous nature of authentication within ritual practices.

Essentially, the criteria for what makes a sermon good or bad are contained within and communicated through the sermon practice itself. In this case, we can imagine authentication to be contained not only in the spoken words of the sermon, but also in the performance of that discourse by the listener together with the collective and individual perceptions of the audience. The reactions of the audiences determine what people respond to and what is deemed good or bad. The sermon, including the knowledge and performance of the speaker, plays a role in what people find inspiring, moving or powerful.

In a study of Turkish Shi'i practices of recitation, Stephan Williamson Fa (2022, 629) shows how "[...] the combination of sonic, discursive, affective, material, and semiotic qualities in the recitation holds important affordances that draw listeners and reciters into closer relation to the Family of the Prophet as co-listeners, co-present in the moment of recitation." This study highlights how vocal practices create a sense of intimacy and connection between humans and beyond-human entities, corresponding to the concept of authentication, or how things come to be felt as real through sensory, affective engagement. Williamson Fa also highlights how changing technologies are constantly adapted into practices of listening and recitation.

Similarly, Fouad Marei's (2020) nuanced insights into Shi'i ritual lamentation in Lebanon show how multiple temporalities are transcended and complex emotions evoked through sonic ritual, in particular through the performance of majlis orators. Through his work with Shi'as in Berlin, Peter McMurray (2021) outlines the concept of sonic remediation to explore how, during Muharram rituals, Shi'a people use soundscapes to inhabit, re-shape and mediate urban spaces. McMurray shows how processions on the roads of Berlin liminally become spiritual spaces through loud speaker audios, chanting and recitations. These works highlight the role of sound in Shi'a ritual, particularly through the intertwined soundscapes of ritual that contain performances by audiences and orators, and multi-modal mediation (technological; online/offline).

9 Who Sits at the Minbar? Ulama, Zakirin, Public Speakers

Who gets to speak at Shi'a public events? What is the role of the orator in a majlis? How important is the discourse itself in majlis practice? These questions are not only raised by academics, but are frequently expressed by those who have perhaps most at stake here: majlis listeners. As demonstrated by Talha's attitude in the anecdote that opened this chapter, listeners to Shi'a lec-

tures care about who is addressing them from a position of authority. They take into consideration the religious education and even the character of public speakers, thus being a critically engaged public.

A majlis can be orated by anyone, but it is customary that someone who has knowledge of the history and events of Karbala will usually sit in the minbar. In the mixed Dutch and South-Asian context of my interlocutors, majalis orators fall into two broad categories: ulama and zakirin. An alim is someone who usually has some sort of from religious education, including in Qur'anic exegesis, history, Arabic and/or Persian and oratory skills. Ulama can be trained at hawzay or at a madrasa but they are usually mentored by a senior alim. As they advance in their study and research, they may earn titles such as Shaykh, Allamah or Ayatollah. Ayatollah is the highest religious ranking in Shi'ism, achieved after decades of study and public service and characterised by the ability to issue fatwas.

Zakirin are not much different: they too try to gain religious knowledge, learning elocutionary skills by practice, and gaining knowledge by practice and oral traditions rather than through a close reading of textual sources. There are no formal hierarchies of knowledge amongst zakirin, although mentorship and group dynamics do exist. A lack of formal degrees of education, however, should not undermine the vast embodied, carefully collected, locally-grounded and experience-based knowledge that zakirin possess and disseminate during their performances. One becomes a zakir simply by doing *zikr* (dhikr), a term encompassing all forms of mention, remembering, commemorating—one can understand *zikr* as all forms of articulation towards the divine. Zakirin usually perform only at the community level, whereas popular ulama often gain international renown and travel between countries/communities to perform. Ulama also lecture outside of majalis, for instance for purely educational purposes, while the primary activities of zakirin involve Muharram mourning practices. Due to the more accessible and community-based nature of becoming a zakir, many of them are women. Women can, of course, also train to be an alima but the institutions remain male-dominated, excluding women by design. In this research, the ulama were all men but zakirin were both men and women.¹⁵ Both ulama and zakirin are highly subject to public opinion. The way their majalis sermons are received can either cause controversy or public dissent or skyrocket their popularity and bring crowds flocking to their lectures.

Both ulama and zakirin are featured heavily in online majalis. However, certain ulama are more strategic with their online presence, structuring and titling

15 Many ulama are also women.

their lectures in more cohesive ways by, for example, having a lecture series of interlinked sermons during Muharram. Zakirin perform lectures in much the same way, but their online representation is less organised than that of ulama and so ulama have a more prominent presence in the digital domain. When examining majalis in the Netherlands, it was observed that most performers were locally-based zakirin. Occasionally, a popular alim would be invited to perform a majlis. However, ulama are often booked far in advance and charge higher fees than zakirin, therefore limiting the access of small community-funded Shi'a groups. The Muharram practices of interlocutors reflected this: in local community gatherings, people most often heard an accessible zakir perform. One Shi'a group had both a woman and man performing majalis at different times throughout the day. To supplement these majalis with different types of opinions, knowledge and performance styles, many people would listen to online majalis by ulama that they liked, personally curating their listening experience.

There is a third category that is gaining popularity in North America and Europe, which is closely associated with digitisation: that of the Islamic public speaker. While by no means a new category, it has grown through access to religious knowledge on the internet and platforms where anybody can access and create an audience base. Public speakers often begin as hobbyists or part-time speakers, testing the waters of religious oratory performance. Such was the case of a Netherlands-based Pakistani public speaker called Sayed Farhan. An avid Shi'a practitioner, he enjoyed learning more about Shi'ism online and found himself beginning to take religious courses online from the University of Tehran. He would often engage in religious debates with friends, and soon enough somebody was impressed enough to suggest that he should perform a majlis. He had not considered this before but decided to give it a try. Farhan's first majlis was recited in English, to a small Pakistani Shi'a community in a British town.

Now, Sayed Farhan is based in the Netherlands as a full-time religious lecturer and calls himself a public speaker, performing for multicultural audiences in English. His work as a religious orator has grown beyond the majlis-e-aza: he now has a YouTube and Instagram presence where he uploads short motivational videos presented from a Shi'a perspective, finding an audience in the Netherlands even beyond Pakistani Shi'as. Sayed Farhan is a good example of someone who has created their own category in the Shi'a public sphere specifically by utilising digital means. From his education to his performance, he has built his presence as a Shi'a speaker primarily online.

Farhan described to me how he pre-recorded Muharram lectures at home, and had prepared a camera set-up and backdrop in a room in his house. Inter-

estingly, I had found out about Sayed Farhan through an Afghan woman I met in passing at an iftar gathering of young Dutch Shi'as. When she learnt that I was Pakistani, she told me she wanted to show me something. A few seconds later she had pulled up a short clip by Sayed Farhan. "He is Pakistani, like you! But he speaks in English, so I can listen. His stuff is very, very nice", she shared. Within a few seconds she had been whisked away into another conversation, but I made a note to look up this speaker.

Let us return to the account that opened this chapter, where Talha was critical about a speaker at an upcoming Shi'a event. The speaker was chosen by a youth organisation for an event held in Ramadan, about the life of Imam Hassan,¹⁶ titled *De onderschatte imam* (the underestimated/overlooked imam). The speaker, however, was not a formally trained religious expert, presumably being self-taught at religious public speaking. Talha was trying to understand why this man had been chosen to give this lecture. Talha's questioning sparked a debate on WhatsApp, where the event organisers defended their choice by saying that the speaker had been heard at other events and performed well, but more importantly: that he was also one of the few available. Someone responded with, "So what is he, an accountant?" Talha countered by asking what qualifications the speaker held to speak about any imam at all. As this discussion continued, other members of the group ventured that it was rude to even raise questions about the speaker's validity. One person wrote: "You can just choose not to listen if you want." Talha explained that choosing not to attend the lecture would come at the cost of him missing out on community engagement.

I sort of care if the speakers that they invite have expertise. That they know what they are talking about. Besides, it's the closest Islamic centre to where I live, so I sort of have the right to ask about the expertise of the speaker and be critical about this.¹⁷

Similarly, other interlocutors have been analytical when describing majalis speakers: they highlight parts of the speech that they enjoy, and express disagreement or even disapproval at others. In fact, it is customary to discuss the majlis afterwards, and analyse what was heard in the sermon. Even during the sermon, whenever people are moved by a point made by the orator, they cry out a naara in praise and say "Wah, wah!" in appreciation. At the end of the majlis,

16 The second Shi'a imam. He was the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatima, and the elder brother of Hussain.

17 Quote from an interview with Talha.

as people spill out, they immediately begin discussing the lecture and how it made them feel, especially if they experienced it as good or powerful. However, if something is perceived as incorrect, problematic or debatable, listeners are equally expressive, discussing with one another. This is an example of critically engaged listening, where discussing and analysing the contents of a majlis sermon are a process of authentication, conferring judgements such as whether elements of the sermon were authentic, powerful, moving—or not.

10 The Scholar and the Listeners: Case Study

From the research on which this chapter is based, a case study emerges: Sayed Ammar Nakshawani is a prominent Shi'a scholar who has mastered digital presence, beginning with the majlis, and expanding now to a personal website, social media pages and a reality-television show. The case study is a character profile of this public figure to illustrate how he has built a personal brand, and how this is received by the Shi'a practitioners who listen to his work. The profile derives from a close listening to his lectures online, digital ethnography of his online presence, and opinions expressed by a variety of interlocutors about his work.

The detailed case study of Nakshawani has a purpose: to show that many factors come together to build internet popularity, that being a Shi'a public figure is attached to certain criteria, and that all of this is highly dependent on public opinion. Public opinion, in the Shi'a case, rests on perceiving a speaker to be legitimate, and how that legitimacy/authenticity is conferred will be examined through a character sketch of Sayed Ammar Nakshawani. Through this case study, we shall also look closely at how a majlis is structured and performed, and how these performances are discussed by listeners.

10.1 *Performing the Modern Online Alim: Sayed Ammar Nakshawani*

Nakshawani's posture is proud: straight back, proud neck, one arm usually placed along his side in a confident hook—often the arm with the tattoo, curls of ink spilling from his sleeves onto the back of one hand. His dark hair is cut in a clean fade and his beard is styled in the close-cropped way of many young Shi'a men. Nakshawani's gaze, beady under heavy arched eyebrows, is fixed beyond the camera lens, towards an off-screen audience that we—those viewing him on screen—do not see. He wears a black *thawb*, the customary garment for many Shi'a ulama.

Even through a screen, Sayed Ammar Nakshawani is a compelling presence on the minbar. He begins his majlis sermons—which he often calls lectures—

with soft Arabic recitations, and then moves on to English elocution. He is stirring and impassioned as he speaks, his crisp enunciation accented by undulations of voice: raised and ringing to drive home an argument, stress on certain words, and liquidity in song towards the ending lament.

Nakshawani's is the name most frequently mentioned by my¹⁸ interlocutors when we speak about majlis orators. One interlocutor described him as "the perfect representation of a Muslim, especially to the West". This not simply for the obvious reasons: that he is a young scholar of Iraqi descent, raised and based in the UK; educated between the UK and Iran, he represents a balance between the traditional-historical heritage of Shi'ism and the modern cosmopolitan Muslim; the content of his lectures is relatable to people in the diaspora, as he speaks about the unique experiences of Shi'as in Europe from his own lived experience. At the same time, he is well-read in Islamic theology, referencing his work in the tradition of Shi'a ulama. Nakshawani's appeal can be attributed to more than just his positionality and experience: it is also due to how he presents himself and performs his knowledge. His public persona is carefully crafted and in constant dialogue with his primary audience: young people living primarily in North American/European countries, English-speaking, children of diaspora, straddling multiple cultures, and finding a balance between *deen* and *dunya* (religion and worldliness).

As a scholar and public figure, Nakshawani has built his reputation through a curated and sustained media presence. He has an eponymous YouTube channel, is a mainstay of YouTube majlis transmissions from UK-based organisations and also makes regular appearances on Imam Hussain TV (describe) and gives interviews. Although in many ways a product of charisma and popular appeal, Nakshawani is also a figure who has faced much controversy. Comments are often disabled on his majlis videos, to avoid negative comments from internet trolls. His videos inspire responses from other orators, who will often respond by uploading their own video response opposing Nakshawani. In online Shi'a chat forums, people discuss what they think of him. In the Shia chat forum on Reddit, for instance, there are multiple sub-reddit pages asking for why Ammar Nakshawani is disliked, or what people think of him. Take this comment left on the Reddit page "What has been causing the increased hate on Ammar Nakshawani recently?"¹⁹

18 The first person refers here to Aleeha Ali, who was the ethnographer behind this primary source material.

19 https://www.reddit.com/r/shia/comments/12hv8sh/what_has_been_causing_the_increased_hate_on_ammар/ (accessed May 2023).

His credentials as a historian have to be acknowledged. But when he starts speaking personal opinion and possibly agenda he has caused controversy. The British Shiism lecture is the recent example when he had to come out and apologise. He also went on for a few years where his lectures were very sectarian against Sunnis. Although he publically denies it he may also have links to Shirazi who again is a controversial figure. There is also the issue of the money he charges for his speeches and openly displaying tattoos which some people have issue with. (mnrnibsfish, April 2023, Reddit)

This comment summarises much of the allegations against Nakshawani: that his views are too blunt, that his political affiliations may be questionable, that he is an expensive and sought after speaker, and of course that his tattoos clash with the typically somber image of a Muslim cleric.

In many of his lectures, Nakshawani addresses such allegations made against him, explaining and defending himself. For instance, he has vocally responded to the lecture on British Shi'ism mentioned in the comment above. This approach makes sense, as he has a reputation to sustain. His reputation contributes to his credibility as a majlis orator, and this concretely translates into his personal brand. This brand is in the form of a social media celebrity/influencer, as Nakshawani has personal pages on social media platforms. Aside from a successful YouTube channel, Nakshawani has recently launched a personal website²⁰ that includes a paid subscription model to access content. It has lectures, courses, and exclusive material that only paid members can access. Nakshawani's profitable personal brand indicates a modern day alim who understands and utilises the capacities and of internet, as well as the way audiences both online and offline perceive his work.

10.2 *A Dialogue Interlude on Shi'a Media and Everyday Critique*

The following vignette was collected from my fieldnotes during Muharram 2022, on the way to a ladies' majlis organised at a family home. What at first reads as casual conversation is an expression of opinions regarding listening to majalis, and responses to Shi'a public figures—still peppered within casual observation. The conversation turns to Nakshawani, and his latest endeavor as a reality-tv host. Through presenting the conversation as a dialogue, I illustrate the conversational cadence through which majlis listeners express their opinions.

20 <https://www.sayeddammar.com/> (accessed May 2023).



We sit together in the grey metal rectangles of a noisy metro, four women dressed in black shalwar kameez. We are on our way to a majlis and chatting along the way. Amsterdam flashes by in a haze of green and brown and yellow—it is a rare sunny day.

“Did you manage to do anything fun over the summer?”, I ask. “We went to see our aunt in the UK, for the filming of *The Shi’a Voice!*”, Hania says. She is the older of the two sisters. Their mother, Razia, has just finished telling me about her recent trip to Pakistan. Hania, in contrast, begins describing a visit to *The Shi’a Voice* studio in the UK. Her younger sister Zaynah chimes in as well, the girls’ voices bubbling, telling me that it was a great deal of fun. Like them, many people came with their families to enjoy an event both religiously-coded but also meant exclusively for entertainment. *The Shi’a Voice* is an American Idol-esque elimination-style online reality show, where young Shi’a men compete to see who can perform Shi’a laments and oratory best, to ultimately win the title of the best Shi’a voice and a cash prize. The programme is hosted by Ammar Nakshawani, in collaboration with Imam Hussain TV.

I am reminded of something I recently heard online concerning the show. “Did you hear Ammar Nakshawani’s majalis this year? In one lecture, he was asking for funding for season 2 of *The Shi’a Voice*.” “Was he now?”, says Razia. “I don’t listen to him so much. I prefer the ladies’ majalis in Urdu.” She gestures vaguely in the direction the metro is moving in, to Amsterdam East.

“I haven’t heard his (Nakshawani’s) majalis this year because I found a new maulana—Shaykh Azher Nasser—have you heard of him?”, says Hania “He’s really good as well, I’ve been listening to him online”.

“I haven’t actually”, I say, and I pull up my phone so Hania can type his name into it. “Nakshawani had some controversial topics this time, didn’t he?”, I ask.

“He always does, but that is why I like about him. He’s so bold. He’s so ...” Hania casts for the word, looking at me and gesturing with her hand, as though summoning a thought. “He just says it like it is. He isn’t afraid to say things.”



This section of dialogue is rich in observation about how people engage in—and of course, talk about—listening practices as well as Shi’a media programmes and public figures. Razia, the oldest of the group, valued being physically present in community majalis. She migrated to the Netherlands after her marriage and was a homemaker, getting very little opportunity to socialise outside the majalis networks constructed by the women in the local community.

Her social interactions, friendships, and sense of community were grounded in the living rooms of other Shi'a women—living rooms that were often reserved for local majalis. As two different generation, Razia and her daughters listened to majalis differently. Her daughters, while similarly connected to the community, had full and rich social lives outside of the Shi'a community too. They had grown up with Dutch friends, and connected with Sunni girls with migration backgrounds.

Hania and Zaynah also had a different relationship to technology, growing up with personal computers and smartphones, and finding it more natural to engage with religious content in digital spaces—as much of social engagement took place in a combination of digital and non-digital space anyway. The girls sought religious perspectives that spoke to their experiences of growing up Muslim and Shi'a in the West, and so enjoyed expanding their majlis listening practices online. Nakshwani, as a popular, English-speaking, and digitally-present figure was easily accessible for them, and therefore they engaged with and spoke about his content.

The dialogue also indicates an increasingly popular direction for Shi'a online media beyond the majalis and Muharram practices: there is now an increasing amount of infotainment, documentaries, reality programmes. Media producers recognise that a Shi'a audience may be utilised beyond a few months of annual practice, and are producing content in a way that precedes demand. Nakshawani is a proponent of this. In the dialogue above, it is mentioned that during a lecture he advocated for community funding for shows such as the Shi'a Voice, so that the community could produce its own entertainment for the times outside of Muharram, and so remaining religiously engaged outside of the days of lamentation and majlis practice. I remember Nakshawani saying in an online lecture, "We are allowed to smile, you know. It doesn't have to be all crying." Later in the same lecture, he appealed for community funding for The Shi'a Voice. Deftly, Nakshawani leveraged the audience—especially the online listeners—listening to his Muharram majalis and directed them towards this new show, making a case for its importance. It is also interesting here to note the programme's name: *The Shi'a Voice*. The programme is not simply looking to find the next alim, or the next performer, but quite specifically the next orator. The premise of the show indicates the importance of listening within Shi'a practices, and this is bolstered by the show's popularity.

In our conversation, Hania mentioned another popular scholar: Shaykh Azher Nasser, an interesting example of a young scholar whose career has a similar trajectory to Nakshawani's. The young shaykh is American, holds an anthropology degree and later trained at the hawza of Najaf, therefore combining a Western, humanities-based education with traditional religious train-

ing. He has become popular online in the past few years, performing majalis in English to North American audiences. Much like Nakshawani, Nasser is well-represented in online spheres with his majalis being regularly uploaded online. As Hania's example of listening to him shows, Nasser can be heard wherever English-speaking audiences have internet access, such as the Netherlands. These scholars represent, what is at first glance, the contemporary popular Shi'a alim online: combining secular and traditional religious educations, media-savvy, and English-speaking.

However, they also show a acutely conscious understanding of what it takes to become popular beyond these attributes, particularly in the nature of the content they produce and how they choose to present it online. They understand how reputations are build, sustained and threatened online, especially with online audiences that can express their opinions through likes, dislikes, comments, critique, and perhaps most importantly: disengagement, simply by clicking away. In this manner, modern ulama articulate and present themselves with an awareness of the diversity and reach of their audience.

11 Conclusions

This chapter takes the practice of majalis as a phenomenon to explore how authority is built from bottom-up, including the perception of religious orators and the experiences of majlis listeners. The majlis demonstrates authority as processual, continuous, fluid and intersubjective. This happens through the process of authentication, where majalis practitioners critically listen and engage with majalis performers, using a variety of criteria to form opinions about the orators and their practices. However, this is a circular process.

This perception and feedback are anticipated by majlis orators, who tailor their performances and public persons towards their core audiences. Taking the case study of Ammar Nakshawani and the examples of other orators, such as female zakireen, we can see that they do this in a number of ways: from developing oratory skills to finding online platforms and using content creation strategies together with an earnest desire to perform majalis authentically, with the intention to elicit affect and disseminate Shi'i religious knowledge. By establishing themselves as sources of knowledge, majlis orators also position themselves as authority figures worth listening to. Shi'a people, as critically listening and bodily engaged publics, are part of the ritual process, making it what it is and lending it its powerful and authenticating capacities through their participation and engagement. This perfectly demonstrates the relational character of Islamic authority-making. Rather than an either top-down imposi-

tion of content and form, or simple objections by ordinary practitioners, authentication as a modality of authority-making is an interactive process.

As explored in previous chapters in this book, rituals are powerful sensational forms that keep the cycle of authentication and authority turning. The discussion of the *sohbet* in Chapter 3 provides interesting parallels and divergences when considered together with the *majlis*, showing that seemingly similar rituals are utilised by different actors in different ways to produce various outcomes. Both the *sohbet* and *majalis* produce critically engaged and bodily implicated listeners, and both contain exchanges between an audience and moderator, albeit in different ways. The case of *majalis*, however, explores this effect heterogeneously by looking at offline and online cases and also considers the intersections of various communities and speakers, such as Dutch youth listening to British scholars.

The *majlis* can be theoretically understood as a sensational form, and a site where active processes of authentication occur. The focus on digitisation expands and challenges the process of authentication within *majalis*, particularly by introducing new possibilities and challenges to accessibility of content, sensory perception, and intersubjective and/or collective experience.

Branding Islam: Imagination and Claims-Making

1 Introduction

In the United States a few years ago a commercial circulated on some television channels. It pictures a Muslim woman—a mother, wife, and owner of a flower shop. She and her family live in a typical American middle-class suburb and the commercial starts in the morning when the husband goes to work, and the mother gets the children ready for school. Then the woman puts on her hijab, goes out, and opens her shop. In the afternoon, she returns home to have lunch with her children, after which she meets some female friends, Muslims and non-Muslims, in a coffee shop. In the last scene, we see the husband coming home from work in the evening where he is welcomed by his wife and some friends for a surprise party on the occasion of his birthday. The woman is serving halal food and snacks made by the firm that made the commercial, and she states: “As an American Muslim I only buy food of xxx”. The appearance of the somewhat cheesy commercial does not differ much from similar commercials for a general clientele, but what strikes me is the particular way in which ‘American Muslim’ is branded and what connotations come with it.

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In 2010, I was in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and watched an intriguing programme on one of the tv channels, called Imam Muda (Young imam). The programme was a contest between ten young (male) imam trainees from various theological institutes in the country, and consisted of a sequence of episodes, set up according to the format of the programme *Idols*, which was very popular at that time. Each episode consisted of a number of regular activities and duties of an imam that had to be performed by the ten candidates and, in each episode, one of them had to leave the contest, until the last remaining contestant emerged as the winner and was given the title ‘best young imam of Malaysia’. The programme turned out to be a big hit in the country and went through a number of series

in consecutive years. Its most striking and intriguing feature was the strong emphasis on personal performance. Every good imam is supposed to be able to carry out the duties allotted to him, but the makers of the programme and the jury clearly focussed on the candidates' performance skills and their level of 'coolness' and appeal. Also important, of course, was the public vote. The programme was meant to be entertainment and was commercially motivated, but the producers were able to get official approval from the country's highest religious authorities and this gave the programme and the way in which the image of the best young imam of Malaysia was projected an extra dimension.

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In 2005, the Dutch Islam critic of Somali origin, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, visited a primary school. It was at a time when she was already well-known for her very critical statements about Islam, and it was one year after filmmaker Theo van Gogh had been assassinated by a Muslim in Amsterdam. Hirsi Ali had worked together with van Gogh to make a short and very controversial movie about Islam and women. During the visit and in front of the camera, Hirsi Ali asked one of the Muslim pupils what was more important for her, the Qur'an, or the Constitution. The pupil looked a bit confused and answered that the Qur'an was most important. Hirsi Ali regarded this as proof of the problem the country faces with the presence of Muslims who cling to their faith.

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The three vignettes with which I open this chapter, however different in their aim and set-up, share a common feature, namely that they occur under the public gaze, in the media spotlight, on internet and on social media platforms. Or to formulate this more precisely, the messages that are conveyed only exist by virtue of publicity. In the first example, where a commercial message advertises a product, this is self-evident. However, the other two cases also show typical ways of branding Islam.

The cases I shall address in this chapter are about branding Islam. The branding of Islam is sometimes an unintended side effect, but in other instances it is

a deliberate strategy. Reaching out, making public statements or claims, or performing publicly to address an audience and create a discursive community, is the actors' explicit intention.

The word 'branding' is often primarily associated with the commercial promotion of products in order to sell them. However, it is not only salespersons in commercial markets whose aim is to sell; also, opinion-makers, politicians, journalists, and activists, who make public statements also sell opinions, and by doing so, they make claims. Branding Islam, then, refers to claims and forms of appropriation with the epithet 'Islamic', used by stakeholders, administrative authorities, religious authorities, representatives, and adversaries to make public statements about Islam.

Actors make claims about what 'real' Islam is, or what Islam actually entails. Islamic branding is the metonymic, emblematic use of adjective 'Islamic' to make categorical, causal, authoritative, or qualitative claims about Islam. Islamic branding and the branding of Islam are thus active processes of intentional claim-making with programmatic, paradigmatic, and epistemological underpinnings, and with the aim of 'selling and legitimising' textual or visual images and opinions to potential 'consumers'. This is not at all a new phenomenon. In his thought-provoking book *Brand Luther* (2015), Andrew Pettegree argues that print technology and the translation of the Bible by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century not only contributed to the Reformation, the fundamental transformation of religious conviction and practice in Christianity, but also turned Luther into what we today would call a celebrity. Luther worked deliberately on his public relations and so co-created his image as the most important religious authority of his time.¹

If we consider religion a mediation practice (see Meyer 2009), branding is an inherent part of it and is as old as religion itself, but the emergence and rapid growth of digital media have made branding all the more compelling and imminent. Through branding with the use of digital means and achieving a global spread, events are incorporated into completely new contexts, and sometimes become uncontrollable.

In our contemporary media-saturated world, Islam has become a brand, and as such a shorthand for building successful political constituencies and movements; for building diplomatic networks; for generating a world stage for political action and contention; for promoting alternative lifestyles and building careers; and, not least, for generating money flows of all sorts (see Eickelman

1 The subtitle of Pettegree's book is well-chosen: "How an unheralded monk turned his small town into a centre of publishing, made himself the most famous man in Europe, and started the Protestant Reformation".

and Anderson 2003). Ideological or political movements often organise their activities in almost the same way as a commercial business enterprise. In short, there is no fundamental difference between commercial branding and other modes of branding, but the intentions and outcomes are diverse and multifaceted.

Through branding, Islam becomes a trope, a simplified pattern of recognisable connotations and meanings with communicative qualities. Branding sharpens definitions and discursive boundaries and seeks to erase ambiguity and nuance. Effective branding statements are typically soundbites with a clear unequivocal message.

In some cases, branding becomes categorisation, or framing, which can ultimately culminate in stigmatisation. The infamous 'Cartoon Affair' in Denmark in 2005 is a classic example of branding in which opposing parties fought one another with the juxtaposition of particular views and opinions about Islam, freedom of speech, civilisation, and the meaning of visual imaginary. To this day, the cartoons still circulate around the world and are used mainly by extreme right-wing groups.

The branding of Islam then becomes a tool in the hands of xenophobic and Islamophobic public actors to make public statements against Islam or against certain persons who allegedly represent Islam. The notorious case of the former right-wing Dutch minister of Integration Rita Verdonk illustrates this. On Verdonk's official visit to a mosque in 2006, an imam refused to shake hands with her, explaining that, according to his faith, this was not proper and not respectful towards women. And not shaking hands with somebody of the other sex is indeed a usual practice among part of the Muslim population. However, the incident was recorded and later broadcast on television. In the media attention following the incident, the imam was depicted as a religious zealot who did not belong in the country unless he would fully comply with 'our values'. Thus, a minor incident that occurs widely on a daily basis, was used by Verdonk and other politicians to demonstrate how misogynistic Muslims are and to promote her zero-tolerance policy on Islam.

But the incident was not a one-off event; in subsequent years, hand-shaking became a trope and a topic of heated debate in the media about various orientations and interpretations in Islam, the distinction between 'liberal' and 'conservative' Muslims, and 'universal values', and resonated in other European countries, too.² Engendered by the Covid pandemic, a discussion arose about

2 Organisations against discrimination against Muslims and other religious communities across Europe have reported several instances where Muslim job applicants were rejected because they refused to shake hands.

ways of greeting in general, in which some people argued that contactless ways of greeting are preferable. The difference between this and the public discussion about Islam and handshaking is significant.

Another relevant example is the foundation in the Netherlands in 2007 of the so-called Central Committee for Ex-Muslims by Ehsan Jami, an Iran-born man who publicly announced that he had abandoned Islam. Although dozens of people abandon Islam on a daily basis, Jami intended to question the Islamic punishment for apostasy and called for freedom of religion and conscience. As a consequence of his public announcement and the media-hype that followed, Jami became a central public figure in Islamophobic circles in the country. His provocative statements about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad were regularly taken up by the press, whereupon he was threatened by Muslims and publicly defended by well-known Islam-critics. Similar initiatives were developed in other European countries, such as the German Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime.

A Dutch television interview with Abdul Jabbar van de Ven in 2004 caused similar uproar. Van de Ven, a Dutch convert branded as a Salafist, was asked whether he would be happy “deep inside” if Geert Wilders died within two years. When van de Ven answered in the affirmative, a public discussion erupted about Islam and the use of violence, dominated by well-known Islam critics, and van de Ven had to go into hiding. Thus, an important element in branding activities is the way in which incidental events take on a more general character and enter into already existing discourses and audiences. As Michael Warner argues:

[...] Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public. Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after, one must postulate some kind of link. And the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time, but a context of interaction. (Warner 2002, 62)

The previous examples bring to the fore an important aspect of branding, namely the role of non-Muslim actors. In general, non-Muslims, such as politicians, journalists, and academics, are relevant actors in the making of Islamic authority. In sensitive and contentious situations in the European neoliberal political context, non-Muslims do play a crucial role, not only with regard to socio-political issues, but also concerning how discourses of non-Muslims impact on Muslims’ self-perceptions. Jesper Petersen and Anders Ackfeldt coin the term “non-Muslim Islam” and argue that:

Anyone can produce Islam, irrespective of religious identity, and it is the job of researchers to investigate the processes of such productions, even if they are produced by non-Muslims. [Thus,] we theorize a new concept non-Muslim Islam and define the related phenomena non-Muslim traditions of Islam interpretation and non-Muslim Islamic authority. (Petersen and Ackfeldt 2023, 243)

I go along to a large extent with their argument that widening the scope of research into Islam to include discourses of non-Muslims is necessary and the much-debated ‘insider/outsider perspective’ should be part of the analysis. In that regard, the issue ties in with what Rogers Brubaker (2013) calls a Muslim “category of practice”.³ It is also relevant because it prompts us to ask the provocative question of whether Islamic authority can exist without Muslims? We should, however, be careful not to elevate critique of Islam, or mere bigotry by non-Muslims, as just another form of Islam.

The branding of religion, including of Islam, has been a rapidly expanding field of academic enquiry for quite some time, and it is impossible to discuss this body of literature exhaustively. I confine myself to a few general observations.

Much of the literature focuses on strictly commercial and business strategies to sell products that have a religious connotation, or that are aimed at an exclusively religious community, such as make-up, fashions, and food, or to tap into new markets (see e.g., Shirazi 2016). In the last ten to fifteen years, increasing numbers of studies have been published that have a broader understanding of religious branding, its combination with elements of issues such as self-expression, ethical improvement, and spiritual development, but also (anti-)religious propaganda, and that investigate how branding operates in contentious politics.⁴

The complex entanglement of religious authority-making with branding is evident, but often hidden in a more general analysis of religious digitisation and the use of modern media. I contend that branding refers to acts of deliberate public attribution and making truth claims, and that this should be analytically distinguished from public appearance and public visibility in general. The hand-shaking controversy described above started with the recording of the event by journalists; it only became an act of branding when the footage was deliberately used for political purposes.

³ See the Introduction.

⁴ See e.g., Einstein (2008); Ahmad (2009); Fischer (2012); Gauthier and Martikainen (2013); Usunier and Stolz (2014); Cutright, Erdem, and Fitzsimons (2014); Hoover (2016); Andreini,

Islamic branding serves as a means to access particular audiences and markets, and gaining access is indeed the theme most often addressed in literature on religious branding. However, perhaps more important than accessing markets and audiences, branding is also an active process of constituting audiences and markets, and orienting them towards particular notions of piety, towards relevant sources of knowledge, towards truth and authenticity claims, and towards forms of moral and spiritual guidance. This becomes particularly relevant in the current neoliberal conditions, where Muslims are compelled to engage with a plethora of conflicting worldviews. As Pauline Cheong (2016, 82) rightly states: “The agency of spiritual leaders to gain significance in the public sphere through the provision of moral guidance and symbolic content [is essential] to maintain an active and secure presence in civil society.” Bettina Gräf and Jakob Skøvgaard-Petersen (2009) have described extensively how Yusuf al-Qaradawi not only used modern media to get access to his audience, but also how he created his audience around particular themes.

In many cases, the branding of Islam aims to question established and authorised definitions, practices, and power configurations, and to replace them. Branding Islam then is a form of ‘contentious politics’ (see Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Many of the activities that I categorise as Islamic branding are found where religious power and authority are negotiated and contested. In such cases, quite uncontroversial acts of theological reasoning and authorisation can transform into acts of branding. The example of the reactions to the declaration of Islamic State by leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 may elucidate this.

A few months after al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph, 126 leading ulama from around the world published an open letter entitled: “Open Letter to Dr Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri alias ‘Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’”, in which they refuted the theological underpinnings of the declaration of IS. In this longish document, the authors addressed the claims of IS on 24 points. They condemned the use of violence, the killing of non-Muslims, the extermination of minorities and the practice of slavery, substantiating their arguments by referring mainly to verses from the Qur’an. Their main point was that IS interpreted the Qur’an and other sources wrongly. In addition, the authors argued that declaring a caliphate, issuing a fatwa, or applying Islamic law cannot be done by just anyone.⁵ The content of the letter was in itself a normal theological argu-

Rinaldo, and Pedeliento (2017); Liu and Minton (2018); Stolz and Usunier (2019); Sorgenfrei (2022).

5 “Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias ‘Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’, and to the fighters and followers of the self-declared ‘Islamic State.’” https://rissc.jo/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Letter_to_Baghdadi-EN.pdf (accessed March 2023).

ment, but the publication of the letter transformed it into a political statement and thus a form of Islamic branding.

But in less dramatic situations, too, regular activities and choices can culminate in contentious acts of branding. Branding Islam may be just a toolkit for individual ethical self-fashioning, or for collective initiatives. However, varieties of hijab styles, or activities pertaining to halal, are sometimes deliberately deployed to elicit a discussion about the question of which forms of expression and activity are considered ‘truly religious’ and which are not. Normal authoritative deliberation and reflection then, in specific circumstances or for specific reasons, transform into branding. For example, to describe a product as halal according to Islamic normativity is an age-old practice of authentication in order to authorise its halal status. It is based on trust in the knowledge of those who decide what is halal and what is not. However, in specific circumstances, the traditional practice of halal authorisation can turn into a public contentious issue. This is what I refer to as ‘halalification’. Donning the hijab can change from a religious prescription or act of piety into branding, when the hijab becomes a symbol used to stigmatise and exclude Muslim women or, conversely, used by Muslim women to make a case against stigmatisation.

Aesthetics and imagination are essential elements of branding and, in the branding of Islam, images and iconographic and visual practices are essential elements and necessary prerequisites for authority-making. Aesthetics are sometimes just additional helpful tools used to reassert and reinforce statements and events, but they can also have independent agency. Thus, emphasising the importance of iconic images in public discourses and debates, Werner Binder and Bernadette Jaworsky ask why the image of the little Syrian boy Alan Kurdi, lying drowned on a Turkish beach, became iconic, unlike other pictures of suffering? Images become iconic images by transcending their particular context. In doing so “they turn into motifs and memes for the production of other images” (Binder and Jaworsky 2018, 7). The authors refer to the term ‘instant news icon’, coined by Mette Mortensen (2016) to capture the transient nature of contemporary iconicity. Stefka Hristova (2013) made similar observations with regard to the infamous thumbs-up pictures of American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. The pace and intensity with which (iconic) images circulate and add to textual comments and discussions is an inherent aspect of branding.

The attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 is an event about which people around the world over 30 years of age still have an overwhelming almost tangible memory. Pictures and videoclips of the planes entering the towers, the subsequent collapse of the two buildings, the heaps of rubble

with pieces of iron pointing into the air, and even the empty space that was left after the remains of the buildings were removed, together produced a very specific iconography. Debbie Lisle has argued that the ‘gazing at Ground Zero’ and the massive numbers of spectators that visited the place in the first half of 2002 cannot be explained only by referring to mourning or banal touristic voyeurism. After all, there was nothing more to see at ground zero than a huge ordinary building site. Apart from the reconfirmation of American nationalist sentiments, it is also to a certain extent ‘the touching of a reality’ at a site that is aesthetically and discursively replete with powerful images and stories. As Lisle (2004, 16) remarks, “[...] we are seduced by a discourse of authenticity that convinces us it is actually possible to access the real”.

Back in 2004, Lisle referred to the immediate aftermath of the attacks and the particular commemorative effect and sense of place Ground Zero took on but, in subsequent years, the imaginary of 9/11 has transcended time and place. The 9/11 iconography has become the visual symbol of ‘Islamic terrorism’. Over the years, a 9/11 ‘culture of memory’ has developed with a particular aesthetic. Numerous documentaries have been produced about a plethora of topics and from very diverse perspectives in which the absolute incomparable uniqueness of the attacks is emphasised. Together with the hundreds of thousands of pictures and, somewhat later, memes on social media, 9/11 was lifted from its original political and social context and transformed into an archetypal story of horror, anguish, heroism, perseverance, courage, and fortitude, but also exclusion and branding with an almost spiritual character. As Webb Keane (2003) argues, the ‘objectification’ of events in social life is not a matter of materiality and words as two separate entities; it is the entanglement in public performances of both dimensions and the binding effect of semiotic ideologies that make events ‘meaningful’.

A currently very rapidly developing field of Islamic branding relevant for the making of Islamic authority concerns the discussions about the production of Islam-inspired forms of art, architecture, and entertainment. The building of mosques in European countries has been a contentious issue since very early on. Most studies tend to focus exclusively on the building of mosques as a sign of political-religious representation and the presence of Islam in Europe, regardless of what a mosque looks like. According to Oskar Verkaaik (2012), shape, design, size and, not least, place have been crucial elements in the ongoing discussion about the mosque as a ‘new home’, and as a contested space.⁶

6 See Chapter 4 for a discussion about space and place.

The ban on minarets in Switzerland in 2009 was prompted by the argument that such buildings are not part of the country's historical physical environment and should therefore be removed. At the same time, the typical design of many Turkish mosques in Europe, with only a few exceptions, is based on the well-known style of the Ottoman architect Sinan (1489–1588). The argument of initiators of such mosque projects is that it provides Muslims with a sense of home and familiarity in an otherwise strange environment. But there are numerous examples where designers attempt to reconcile these aesthetic controversies. The design of the 'Wester moskee' a project in Amsterdam, is a combination of Sinan features with architectural principles of the 'Amsterdam architectural school'. With this design the founders wanted to express the rootedness of Islam in 'both worlds' (see also Lindo 1999). The 'Green Mosque' in Cambridge, UK, is another example of the use of specific design as a spiritual expression, and home-making. Rather than linking up with 'tradition' and 'origin', the founders intended to 'look ahead' and connect with new aesthetics and contemporary social issues.

In a research project, Ernst van den Hemel uses the term "imagineering religion" to denote new immersive, all-sensory ways of public imagination of religion. By studying religious theme-parks in various countries across the globe, he intends to lay bare novel ways in which modern media techniques are used to bring about imagined communities. Religious theme-parks, in his view, should not only be perceived as ordinary entertainment parks, but also as parks that offer meaningful and immersive experiences and intend to orchestrate public images of religion.⁷ Such parks are good examples of religious branding, and may, deliberately or unintentionally, become instrumental in promoting certain understandings of religion.

The intentions behind acts of branding are not always unequivocal, and this particularly applies to arts and entertainment. Whenever and wherever there have been artistic expressions in Muslim history, there have been sometimes heated debates among Islamic scholars as whether music and visual and performative arts are permitted. As long as they could only be performed, attended, and consumed in physical places with a real audience, it was relatively clear how to deal with the matter, but the emergence, first of television, radio and analogous carriers of image and sound and, more recently, of digital media and online platforms, has made control difficult and has thrown the discussion into stark relief. Modern media make possible an enormous spread of arts and entertainment, including those produced and consumed by Muslims.

⁷ For this research van den Hemel was awarded an ERC Consolidator Grant in 2023.

Arts and entertainment have also become important channels for articulating alternative forms of religiosity and meanings of being Muslim, and for questioning established normativity. A few examples from the entertainment industry may elucidate this. The first is about the controversies around the publication of the book *Taqwacore* by Michael Muhammad Knight in 2004. It is a fictional story of a group of young Muslims in New York State, who were combining their Muslim identity with elements of youth counter-culture current at that time. For Knight, the book was an exploration of what it means to be Muslim and at the same time a member of your generation, but it was also meant to criticise mainstream Muslim conservatism, and the stereotyping of Muslims as fanatics by non-Muslims (McDowell 2014, 255).

The book resonated well among young Muslims in the US because the stories were reminiscent of their own lives and, before long, it

[...] gave shape and coherence to a growing movement that ties punk, straight-edge hardcore, feminism, rebellion, and Islamic faith in a vibrant subculture called *Taqwacore*—a combination of the Arabic word *taqwa* for piety, and core for varying versions of hardcore punk. (Dougherty 2017, 204)

In 2009 a documentary was made and published on YouTube, about the quickly growing ‘punk Islam scene’.⁸ For a number of years, there was a lively discussion on internet forums about *Taqwacore* and the implications of the subculture as it emerged around 2010, but in subsequent years it gradually faded away.

In the literature, such phenomena are often mainly analysed in terms of ‘hybrid subcultures’ consisting of opposing elements, starting from the assumption that, in this case, punk and Islam are irreconcilable cultural traits (Fiscella 2012). Most of these studies use methods of discourse analysis to map these traits and quickly come to the conclusion that the differences are too great for such a development to be taken seriously and so it is discarded as a short-lived hype. In the case of *Taqwacore*, only a few have started from the perspective of the involved youth. Knight himself has described the *Taqwacore* movement as a genuine attempt by young American Muslims to develop an Islam that is rooted in the US and in doing so addresses issues of Islamic authority in a compelling way.

A recent, more mainstream entertainment-like follow-up to *Taqwacore* is the sitcom *We Are Ladyparts*, released in 2021, about an all-female Muslim punk

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMw-Aoco6Ig> (accessed October 2022).

band and has been broadcast by mainstream media around the world. The message is basically similar to that of Taqwacore, namely, to make a case for a more diverse understanding of Muslim identity. The iconic juxtaposition of a traditional understanding of Islam with a punk subculture which has been a rather outspoken genre even in Western popular music, is a typical tool in branding practices, and no doubt has commercial motives.

The last example is Ajmal Hussain's discussion of the Hubb, an 'alternative Muslim-led arts space' in the inner city of Birmingham, UK. Hussain (2015, 177) has analysed various forms of cultural production by Muslims and argues that "[...] it is possible to sense how Muslim identity is assembled through a range of affective dispositions—in this case invoked through art". The Hubb may not be classified as an Islamic institution, or a 'proper' Islamic activity by the outside world and according to the dominant categorisations in society, but, according to Hussain, that is not how the founders perceive it. The Hubb at one and the same time encapsulates and goes beyond hegemonic representations of being Muslim. After the 'old' Hubb had to close down because the building was subject to a compulsory purchase a few years ago, it was restarted with money from a crowdfunding campaign. This was successful not least because of its high-profile visibility in the media, and a very explicit and deliberate positioning of the centre within a broader discussion about the position of Muslims in the city.⁹

In what follows, I shall analyse a number of cases that shed light on the complex and multifaceted character of branding Islam, and the way it influences processes of authority-making. I have three clusters of cases. The first deals with the ways in which the hijab has been transformed into a brand, a symbol that generates a multitude of images about Islam, and particularly the position of women. The second cluster is about 'halalification' and 'Islamisation' as two interconnected branding practices that emerge in many discussions about Islam and Muslims in Europe. The third cluster deals with two seemingly distinct issues, the question 'who speaks for Islam', and the ongoing discussion about Islam as an academic discipline.

9 <https://www.soulcityarts.com/project/the-hubb/> (accessed March 2023).

2 Cases

2.1 *Branding Hijab*

In 2016, a heated discussion broke out when a female teacher at a primary school in a relatively prosperous region of the Netherlands appeared at her work wearing a hijab.¹⁰ The school and the parents were informed beforehand, and the teacher made clear that this was an act of purely personal conviction and would in no way affect her teaching method. Notwithstanding the careful way in which the case was handled, the incident reached the press, where a picture appeared showing the teacher standing in front of a class writing on a blackboard. The media attention probably had to do with the fact that many of the parents were prominent figures and had good connections with the media, and they disagreed with a practising Muslim teaching their children.

This was of course not the first or the last discussion about the wearing of a hijab in public places. In France, this is not allowed, but in most other countries there is no general rule, and it is mostly left to the school or relevant institution to develop its own policy; and in all European countries, there have been heated debates about the issue. However, the case of the woman in the Netherlands is also instructive because her picture went viral; it became an iconic image used by supporters and opponents of the hijab and generated a multitude of reactions about Islam, religious neutrality, and the correct approach to teaching. Whether the picture was of that specific teacher or of some other Muslim woman in front of a class is not very relevant. What matters is the way in which the composition of the picture, combining specific attributes, became part of the 'Muslima' iconography.

The high-profile debates about wearing the hijab, particularly in public places and institutions, have transformed this religious garment into a brand with layers of meaning that are constantly transforming and being added to. There is probably no other topic that has generated so much attention in the media and produced such a burgeoning body of literature. It is not my intention to discuss this media-coverage or the academic work in detail. What I shall do is give an account of the development of this public debate since roughly the early 1990s to explain how the 'hijab-in-public-places' trope unfolded.

In France so-called 'headscarf affairs' actually emerged in 1989 in the town of Creil, where three Muslim girls were denied access to their school because they

¹⁰ This section is partly based on research I conducted in the second half of the 1990s for a project on nation-building and religion in Europe, and partly on more recent research for the MIWIN project (see the Introduction).

insisted on wearing the hijab. After some deliberation about this unprecedented incident, the girls were to be allowed to wear a headscarf in the school but not in the classroom. But the compromise did not work. The girls continued to wear their scarves in the classrooms and there were plans to remove them from school altogether, whereupon the parents of the girls decided to engage a lawyer. The school board, for their part, sent a petition to the then Secretary of Education, Lionel Jospin of the Socialist Party, asking him for a clear statement on the conflict and he stated in the National Assembly that schools should not expel girls simply because they wore a hijab.

In the course of months, what had started as a local conflict was mushrooming into a nationwide controversy about the compatibility of Islam with French republicanism (Hargreaves 1995; Göle 1996; Collet 2004). Those who were in favour of a ban on the hijab in schools, among them prominent French intellectuals, argued that religious symbols would violate *laïcité*, the secular foundation of the republic: “[...] pupils should have the possibility to forget their community of descent and to think of something else than what they are, in order to learn to think in an autonomous way”.¹¹

The hijab controversy resuscitated debate in both leftist and rightist political parties on immigration and integration issues. In anti-racist organisations, serious rifts emerged about the relative importance of discrimination, gender equality, religious freedom, emancipation, and the right to education. Muslim organisations demanded the right to wear the hijab. Over the years, the hijab became symbol in a fundamental debate about the republican foundations of France, in which republican values were invoked by both sides (Sunier 2000, 322). With the publication of the *Stasi Report* in France in 2003 and the subsequent law on ‘conspicuous religious signs’ in schools passed by the National Assembly in 2004, the French republic has reaffirmed its secular self-image.¹²

Polemical discourse about the hijab in public places also arose in other European countries, but mainly along different, less clear-cut lines of argument than those used in France. However, both legislation and the debates surrounding decisions by administrative authorities were formulated around freedom of religion and the neutrality of the state. Muslim organisations and their spokespersons also used constitutional principles to articulate their demands and emphasised that wearing the hijab was an Islamic obligation. As Hilal Elver (2014) argues, particularly after 9/11, the exclusion of pious Muslim women from the public sphere is advocated in the name of secularism, democracy, liberalism, and women’s rights.

11 *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 2, 1989.

12 <https://www.wshein.com/media/samples/12876.pdf> (accessed March 2023).

In short, from the late 1980s until well into the 2000s, the hijab was branded first and foremost as a symbol in debates about the legal foundations of European secular nation states, exploiting particular notions of women's emancipation, enabled and secured by secular principles (see e.g., Bowen 2007).

Muslim women wearing the hijab became the centre, the pivot, in a debate, that took place predominantly about, but without them. It was a debate about principles, legislation and (branded) symbols and it was apparently thought unnecessary to include the voices of Muslim women (Piela 2012). This brings to mind what Nancy Fraser (1992, 117) calls "bracketing social status". She argues that the typical liberal (Habermasian) logic of the (secular) public sphere stipulates that discourses, statements and positions are to be assessed and deliberated irrespective of those who articulate them, which implies an almost complete eradication of visual diversity, and in fact of agency, from the public sphere and an exclusive focus on discursive content.

According to Fraser, agreements and common decisions in a debate appear to be the outcomes of a power-free exchange of opinions in a neutral arena, rather than the outcome of a particular power struggle (*ibid.*, 119–120). The case of the hijab debate and the position of Muslim women in the late 1990s has laid bare an intriguing paradox. The backgrounds and biographies of Muslim women who publicly denounced Islam were explicitly used and framed as constituting a universalising emancipation discourse, whereas the opinion of Muslim women in favour of the hijab was discarded as an illegitimate particularistic position. Thus, in this context, Annelies Moors raises the question "[of] how some succeed in presenting their particular interests as universal, as entailing the common good, that is, how they succeed in not being seen as in the public, but rather as the public" (Moors 2009, 3).

Over some years, and with the emergence of a vocal generation of young Muslim women, the hijab increasingly became the symbol in the struggle against discrimination and the exclusion of Muslim women from the labour market. Increasing numbers of Muslim women wearing the hijab were highly educated and wanted jobs in the public sector, such as in the legal profession, the police and public administration, for which they had the required qualifications. But despite the constitutional right to wear a hijab, Muslim women still face exclusion legitimised by the argument that public civil servants should be neutral and hide their religious convictions.¹³

13 See e.g., Ramirez (2015); Ali, Yamada, and Mahmood (2015); Weichselbaumer (2019); Yeste et al. (2020).

Around 2009, an organisation was set up by a group of Muslim women in the Netherlands called the Poldermoslima Hoofddoekbrigade (Hijab Brigade of Muslimas from the Polder). They organised a public meeting in a local mosque in Amsterdam, which was attended by large numbers of people and where the organisers took issue with the still existing discrimination in the labour market experienced by women wearing a hijab. The organisers rejected the idea that the emancipation of Muslim women can only be achieved when they take off their hijab. Instead, they argued that accepting women with a hijab in any job is a significant step towards emancipation and equal rights for Muslim women.

In this case, as in others, the hijab was branded by female Muslim activists as the symbol of resistance against discrimination on the basis of religion, but also in order to reject the claim by women in Europe that feminism was an exclusively Western invention, whose parameters were supposed to be universal. Emerging Muslim feminism was aimed at challenging narrow Western definitions and the hijab was reappropriated as a symbol of resistance. Muslim women questioned the depiction of them as victims who need to be saved (Abu-Lughod 2013; van Es 2019).

A considerable body of academic literature has addressed this issue (see e.g., Hamidi 2023). Most authors argue that, however we define feminism, definitions should overcome the narrow understanding that characterised the first and second waves of feminism.¹⁴ Thus, Sherin Saadallah argues that the third wave of feminism crosses boundaries by deconstructing prevailing binaries. It provides Muslim women with space to develop their own understanding of feminism. She avoids the term 'Islamic feminism' as it has been appropriated by conservative Islamic movements to refer to their female rank-and-file. Instead, she uses the term 'Muslim feminism':

Muslim feminism refers to a feminist movement which emerges from Islam, both as a religion and as a belief structure which is historically and culturally reinforced. Muslim feminism should be based on the notion of empowerment and a rights-based approach, one which refutes the criticism that it is only culturally relativist manifestation. This will accentuate its power as a movement responding to the contemporary political and socio-economic realities in the majority of post-fundamentalist Muslim societies. (Saadallah 2004, 217)

14 See e.g., Barlas (2002); El Guindi (2005); Mahmood (2005); Wadud (2006); Badran (2008); Kynsilehto (2008); Salem (2013).

Fadwa El Guindi (2005) considers feminism an ongoing process that takes on different shapes and manifestations in changing circumstances and contexts, raising different issues. It should in no way be fixed in time and space and made into an ahistorical abstract principle, but rather should be seen as a programmatic direction for struggle. Sara Salem also criticises the exclusionary practices of many feminists towards religious women. At the heart of the debate are questions of choice and who makes a judgement on certain choices. This is a matter of power. Salem (2013, 12) calls for a stronger focus on intersectionality and argues: “[...] In order to address the complexity of feminist research, a focus on the lived experiences of women themselves may provide a way forward. Focusing on lived experiences makes intersectionality a useful approach in the study of women and religion”. In her recently published book *Islamic Feminism* (2020), Lana Sirri argues that the perspective of Muslim women and forms of feminism among Muslim women are often marginalised, both in mainstream Islamic discourses and studies, and in feminist ones. She provides an account of the manifold activities of Muslim feminists, and, like most other scholars, she makes experience an important source of knowledge at the centre of her argument.

The branding of the hijab around notions of secularism, neutrality, and emancipation, and later around exclusion and Islamic feminism, continues to shape debates today and is often based on extensive misrepresentations of Muslim women (Ahmad 2009). The growth of digital media, the emergence of a young vocal generation of Muslims in the 2000s, and the quest for defining individual lives in the age of globalisation, coined ‘new individualism’ by Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert (2009), has added a new layer of meanings to the hijab. Muslim women have not only become more visible in society, but they also increasingly demand being in society and being visible on their own terms. As Emma Tarlo (2010, 9) argues, the huge diversity of visibly Muslim dress practices, among other things, has clearly demonstrated that these women reject the dominant assumption that the hijab makes women invisible. They argue that wearing the hijab, rather than being just a religious obligation, or a symbol of male oppression, should also be seen as a personal choice. The hijab thus manifests the individual agency of women, who decide for themselves about their attire. In *Generation M: Young Muslims Changing the World* (2016), Shelina Janmohamed provides an intriguing account of the manifold activities and fields in which young Muslims can be found. By doing what they do, they debunk and transcend prevailing boundaries and categories.

An important driving force behind this broad array of activities is the framing of the hijab and Islamic dress as a matter of fashion, and the rapid growth of ‘Islamic fashion’ as a commercial product. Fashionable clothing that com-

plies with Islamic dress codes is not new and its emergence coincided largely with the rise of a more prosperous generation of urban dwellers in Muslim-majority countries, but the growth of digital media, and especially social media, has given enormous impetus to Islamic fashion, making it not just a commercial success worldwide, but also an empowering force that brings to the fore the agency of Muslim women. Many studies on Islamic dress and fashion show that, behind the hijab as an Islamic obligation, there is a burgeoning diversity in style, performance, and motivation.¹⁵

Probably more than anything else, the hijab has become an object of Islamic branding in Europe in recent decades, thus becoming the cause, and the vehicle, for discussions about the position in Europe of Muslims, not only women, and the place Islam in Europe. At the same time, the hijab, as the expression of a particular style and way of life, became the pivotal instrument in Muslim women's struggle for recognition vis-à-vis both established Islamic authorities and European secular powers. In this way, the hijab has become a crucial constitutive element in the making of Islamic authority and in shaping Islamic landscapes.

2.2 *Halal, Halalification and Islamisation*

The second cluster of cases deals with the various ways in which halal as an Islamic principle has turned into a brand. Halal is a central concept in Islamic normativity and jurisprudence and refers to what is permitted according to Islamic law. It is the opposite of haram, that which is forbidden according to Islamic law.

The most obvious aspect of this branding process is what many would think of as the commercialisation of products defined as Islamic or halal, and the development of a market strategy to sell them. Many still tend to think of halal only as a religious principle that specifically regulates food production, such as the ritual slaughtering of animals, but halal today covers a much wider range of products. This has to do with the growth of mechanically processed foods with additives, which has made the quest for halal food a challenge for individual Muslims. The emergence of global markets and of new and complex technologies of food production has made 'halal certification' into a business in its own right (Fischer 2016).

But the field is far more extensive than this. A Google search with 'branding' and 'Islam' as search terms yields an abundance of examples of commer-

15 See e.g., Moors (2009); Tarlo (2010); Unal and Moors (2012); Ajala (2017); Riswan (2021); Meyrasyawati (2022).

cial activities for a religious market in fields such as fashion, cosmetics, lifestyle products and activities, Islamic banking, the rapidly expanding number of tourist resorts for Muslims, and other kinds of commercial activities directed towards an Islamic clientele.

In the past three decades, research into Muslim consumerism and the vastly expanding international market for halal products has grown tremendously and generated a genuine 'halal-industry'. Much of the academic work in this field has developed as a sub-branch of economic studies in which the interplay between a globally growing, relatively wealthy, Muslim middle-class, and expanding markets are a central theme (Manan, Abd Rahman, and Sahri 2017). Interest-free banking services have expanded into specific codes for investment and are today often called 'halal banking', merging in some cases with calls for more ethical banking strategies to fight climate change and worldwide poverty. Some banking companies in countries in the Gulf region and in Turkey have developed a marketing strategy to tap into clientele from among these circles and portray the Islamic ban on interest as an ethical banking strategy for everybody.

There is a vast body of literature that analyses commercial activities for a potential Muslim consumer market of 1.8 billion people. This is why some observers and economic actors regard it as a global opportunity that is already producing consultancy services for marketers who wants to address this population, which is increasingly interrelated as a result of globalisation, migration and the ties and connections between Muslim diasporas throughout the world.¹⁶

The branding of Islam is more than a name, term, design, or symbol referring to a product that can be bought. A brand co-shapes identities and processes of self-making. It is part of, and it summarises, the personality that identifies a product or a company, which means it is associated with feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Campbell 1987). In this way it becomes a practice of 'ethical self-fashioning'. Ayang Yakin and Louis Christians (2021) analyse how the continuously evolving relationship between economics and Islamic normativity produces new and unprecedented activities and ignites debates, not least about Islamic authority.

In Chapter 4, I have given an account of several activities under the common denominator of 'halal scapes' to indicate the spatial dimensions of halal. In this

16 Only the halal market is worth, following some estimations, 1500 billion dollars in 2023 (<https://www.thebusinessresearchcompany.com/report/halal-food-global-market-report#:~:text=The%20global%20halal%20of%20food%20market,least%20in%20the%20short%20term> (accessed March 2023)).

chapter, the emphasis is on how halal becomes a trope to be used in public debates, and also in visual acts of ethical self-fashioning. From a religious principle, halal becomes a way of 'being in the world', a moral point of reference for a multitude of activities. This is what Faegheh Shirazi (2016) calls the "the commodification of piety". In my view, the commodification of piety and the making of halal life worlds work in two directions. In a way, these processes can be perceived as clever marketing strategies directed towards an increasingly purchasing clientele. The commodification of Islam is then shaped by and conforming to capitalist principles; it is a way to show and sell Islam that fits consumerist desires. But on the other hand, the commodification of Islam has become a powerful tool in the process of the diversification of Muslim life worlds and challenging unidimensional truth claims made both by Islamic elites and European politicians.

The rapidly expanding field of halal products, especially in Europe, has aroused criticism among those who considered expanding halal markets and activities, sometimes referred to as 'halalification' (see e.g., Khan and Callanan 2017), as counterproductive to the desired privatisation of Islam. Thus, the French anthropologist Florence Bergeaud (2017), who advocates this position, refers to this expanding field of activities as an "invention of tradition", suggesting that market forces and peer pressure have generated an ever-expanding supply of and demand for products and services that traditionally do not belong the realm of halal. She asks why halal has expanded from simple ritual slaughter to a global halal market including tourism, medicine, and fashion.

Bergeaud frames this expanding market as a confrontation between 'Islamic fundamentalism' and 'neoliberalism', and she elaborates on this confrontation by arguing that market forces have pushed this 'new invented tradition' into directions that have little to do with Islam. According to Bergeaud, it is the extension of the halal market that has given rise to public contention and controversy in French society about ritual slaughter and animal welfare, halal meals in public institutions and businesses, the headscarf and the burkini, and many more issues.

Bergeaud's understanding of halal as referring exclusively to ritual slaughter is questionable, as the vast body of Islamic jurisprudence about it clearly shows. Furthermore, by regarding halal practices as based on a tradition from the past, rather than as a continuously unfolding dynamic, one essentialises Islam into a fixed set of prescriptions. The making of halal is an active practice that contributes to the ever-evolving Islamic discursive tradition (see Asad 2012). In addition, framing the burgeoning market for halal products and activities as a clash between tradition and secularism, and the ways in which Bergeaud unwraps and analyses the problematic at issue, are typical of the French obses-

sion with the principles of the secular republic and the way they deal with the presence of Islam and Muslims (see also Schiffauer et al. 2004; Bowen 2007).

Behind these considerations about the alleged invention of a tradition and the alleged widening scope of Muslim activity in Europe, a much more polemical and problematic development has been observable since the beginning of the 2000s in which the 'halalification' of products, life worlds and spaces is understood as a modality of the broader process of 'Islamisation', the allegedly growing influence of Islam in, but especially on, European societies. In other words, the term 'halalification' has been appropriated by scholars, journalists, and politicians to warn of the alleged motivations of Muslims that lie behind their wish to extend halal life worlds.

Faegheh Shirazi argues that one important factor contributing to the growth of a halal market is the increase in Islamophobia after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. Thus, "[...] this political backlash has pushed many Muslims, including secular Muslims, to find security by identifying with anything and everything Islamic or halal" (Shirazi 2016, 18). I can go along with this line of argumentation to a certain degree. But I would certainly not attribute the growth of halal markets to Islamophobia alone. Creating halal life worlds is not primarily a defensive action. It is about ideas about the 'good life', having a good time and meeting likeminded people.

I would rather invert the argument and consider expanding halal activities and markets as one of the factors that have provided Islamophobic voices with an argument to fuel their claims against Islam. I use the term 'Islamisation' as an umbrella term for this process. It is often used to denote the growth in the number of Muslims, or the institutional spread of Islam, but the term is also used to point to the alleged existential threat to 'our way of life' that the presence of Muslims might imply. Historically, the term has been used to describe the spread of Islam from the Middle East to other parts of the world. Some self-proclaimed Islam critics build on this historical understanding of Islamisation and focus on the alleged motives behind the extension of territory and influence by Muslims. Muslims have a plan—namely, to make the whole world an Islamic realm (Berger 2013, 126; Hafez 2014).

One of the earliest proponents of this conspiracy theory was the Orientalist Bernard Lewis, who published *The Roots of Muslim Rage* in 1991. In 2002, he published *What Went Wrong?*, a post-9/11 elaboration of the argument that became a point of reference for many journalists who want to understand 'the Muslim mind', and a much-cited work by subsequent scholars. The aim of this book is to explain the motivation behind terrorist attacks on Western targets,

but Lewis depicts the encounter between Islam and Europe as a sequence of waves. The first was the confrontation during the crusades from the eleventh century onwards, the second the conquest of large parts of Europe by the Ottoman armies in the seventeenth century, and the third was the immigration of people from Muslim-majority countries from the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁷

The link between these waves must be sought in what Lewis regards as the ‘basic features of Islam’, one of which is the urge to confront the Christian world in the North and the West in the belief that it is a major threat to Islamic civilisation—the Christian world has become a real challenge to Islamic hegemony (Lewis 2002). According to Lewis, Muslim grievances should be attributed to ‘something deep’ that accounts for feelings of mistrust and anger among so many of them (*ibid.*, 22). The key to understanding this deeper resentment is the combination of an absolute necessity felt by Muslims to be ruled by Muslims and not by infidels, and a “keen awareness” of the weakness, poverty and backwardness of the Islamic world as compared with the advancing West. According to Lewis, this has led to initial emulation and admiration of Western accomplishments being replaced by hostility and rejection (*ibid.*, 24). Instead of facing the inevitable truth and accepting their defeat, Muslims turn their frustration against the evidently superior West.

Lewis assumes that Islam has an inbuilt equivocal nature and that a ‘thin crust’ of dignity and civilisation is typical of Islamic humankind. While the West has managed to make this crust thick enough to withstand the lure of the ‘wild side’, Muslims not only easily fall back into barbarism, but have also made rage and anger an inherent ingredient in their religious practice. And so real violence towards others is just a small step away. The warning behind this analysis is that Islam poses a constant threat unless we are able to thoroughly pacify its adherents. ‘Muslim rage’ has become the essential trope in the media to refer to acts of violence committed by Muslims, visualised on internet by pictures of bearded Muslim men gone berserk (Sunier 2007). Lewis’s analysis is somewhat reminiscent of Samuel Huntington’s (1996) ‘clash of civilisations’. However, while Huntington uses broad and abstract categories of civilisation and is less concerned with historical process, Lewis marks his confrontational account with concrete historical events.

The German-Syrian scholar of Islam Bassam Tibi is a well-known proponent of Lewis, but also diverts from his historical continuity in several ways. Tibi

17 For an elaborate discussion of this argument, see Carr (2006); Bangstad (2013); Berger (2013).

argues that the migration of Muslims to Europe in the twentieth century has not only engendered a massive demographic shift on the continent, but also posed a serious challenge to Europe's secular identity, because, Tibi argues, Muslims and their representatives do not accept the separation of religion and state. He predicts anger, plunder, bloody street battles and even the Islamisation of Europe if European governments hesitate to act energetically. According to Tibi (2010), the only way to prevent this is by imposing the European *Leitkultur* on the Muslim population of Europe. He calls on 'moderate' Muslims in Europe to come to terms with European civilisation and also criticises European politicians, journalists and scholars and their self-censorship, whether in acquiescence to political correctness, or to out of concern for alleged 'Muslim sensitivity'. Tibi frequently refers to the Muslim populations in Europe as a 'diaspora community', thereby totally ignoring the fact that the current generations are born and raised in Europe.

Liz Fekete argues that the various mass murders committed by extreme right-wing terrorists such as Breivik in 2011 in Norway were motivated by a conspiracy theory about the secret Islamisation of Europe. As Fekete states:

Although the conspiracy draws on older forms of racism, it also incorporates new frameworks: the clash of civilisations, Islamofascism, the new anti-Semitism and Eurabia. This Muslim conspiracy bears many of the hallmarks of the 'Jewish conspiracy theory', yet, ironically, its adherents, some of whom were formerly linked to anti-Semitic traditions, have now, because of their fear of Islam and Arab countries, become staunch defenders of Israel and Zionism. (Fekete 2011, 40)

Subsequent authors have taken up Lewis's line of argument to analyse 'Islamisation' and they often build on the conspiracy theory around it. A very radical proponent of the 'Islamisation' thesis is the British author Bat Ye'or, who rose to prominence in anti-Islam circles with her book *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (2005), in which she argues that Islam, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism hold sway over European culture and politics as a result of collaboration between radical Muslims elements on one hand, and European leftist political elements on the other. In her book, she uses the word 'dhimmitude' to denote a subservient state of mind on the part of the conquered arising from the acceptance of humiliation. The term has been used by various Islam critics in Europe to explain the 'benign' attitude of governments and politicians towards an encroaching Islam.

The conservative American journalist Christopher Caldwell published a book with the ominous title: *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Can Europe*

Be the Same with Different People in It? Caldwell blames European countries for being too indecisive in the face of a growing ‘Muslim problem’. Instead of taking the massive immigration seriously and forcing Muslims to assimilate, European governments look away and ignore the problem (Caldwell 2009, 248; see Sunier 2020). Caldwell argues that a silent revolution is taking place that will change the face of Europe decisively.

These ‘reflections’ accord well with novel applications of biopolitics as governmental strategies through which the ‘Muslim Question’ is racialised and translated into a demographic future challenge. As Sarah Bracke and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar (2020, 681) argue: “Discourses on ‘waves’ or ‘floods’ of migration as well as on high birth and fertility rates among ‘migrant’ populations have gained considerable traction all over Europe in the past decades and provide fertile ground for the ‘fear of replacement.’”

The argument that the ‘white Christian’ European population will soon be outnumbered by Muslims and that European civilisation will be replaced by Muslim civilisation, is known as the “grand replacement theory”, an expression coined by Renaud Camus (2011). The idea partly originates in Oswald Spengler’s ([1918] 2016) early-twentieth-century reflections on the demise of European civilisation. Several journalists and self-proclaimed Islam critics have recently used the ‘grand replacement theory’ to address the future prospects of the presence of Muslims.¹⁸

A well-known advocate of the ‘Islamisation thesis’ was the Dutch politician and public intellectual Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated in 2002. He wrote several books for a broad audience explicitly referring to the alleged danger of Islamisation (Fortuyn 1997). His prominence as an Islam critic stretched far beyond the Dutch borders and the enormous media attention, he generated with his statements made the fact that he was assassinated by an animal-rights activist completely irrelevant. His assassination was framed as the result of his consistent struggle against Islamisation.

Machteld Zee (2016) also has a message for European governments. She did research on sharia councils in the UK and states that their growth in Europe is the result of emerging “Islamic fundamentalism” among Muslims, facilitated by the multicultural policies of European governments. Sharia councils are rapidly growing in numbers, according to Zee, and operate in a parallel quasi-legal system without much control that prevents Muslims, especially women, from benefiting from secular state legislation. The hidden aim of the increasing influence of these courts among Muslims in Europe, says Zee, is to bring them under

18 See Bracke and Hernández Aguilar (2020) for a discussion of this body of literature.

the jurisdiction of a Sharia State, which she envisions in Europe if this development does not come to a halt. There are also conservative Christian authors who call for a 're-Christianisation' of Europe to confront Islam (see e.g., Bublikov 2013).

From a form of branding of Islam as a source of inspiration for Muslims intended to create life worlds and lifestyles, whether or not with commodified products, 'halalification' has been appropriated by scholars, journalists and politicians who are critical about Islam to refer to an aspect of 'Islamisation' that implies the 'dangerous encroachment' of Islam in Europe. Both understandings of 'halalification' are relevant for the making of Islamic authority as they point to (opposing) imaginaries of the Islamic landscape in Europe.

2.3 *Whose Islam? Representation, Claims-Making, Knowledge Production and Academic Branding*

The last cluster of cases in this chapter deals with two separate but interrelated modalities of branding Islam. The first is about representation and claims made by public actors in the name of Islam, or against Islam for that matter. The second brings me close to my own professional habitat, the academic community of experts on Islam and Muslims, and deals with the parameters of Islam as a field of academic inquiry.

In their book *Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (2007), John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed analyse the outcomes of a Gallup survey carried out between 2001 and 2006 among a representative sample of Muslims across the globe. Although the Gallup poll only provides a statistical snapshot of opinions in a certain period, there is no reason to assume that the situation today is different from that of 2006. The authors selected a number of 'hot topics' that do indeed dominate most of the debates around Islam and Muslims: democracy, radicalisation, position of women and clash of cultures. In the subsequent chapters, they systematically address these issues and show that there is a rather huge gap between public statements made by opinion leaders as they appear in the media, and the opinions of ordinary Muslims as expressed in the Gallup poll.

The views and opinions of the participants in the poll do, of course, go in many different directions and provide no decisive answers, but precisely this multiplicity of voices and perspectives undergirds the authors' main argument. Even though the principle of umma does constitute an important point of reference, Muslims do not necessarily speak with one voice in social, economic, and political matters. And there are also different opinions and worldviews with regard to religious issues. This is not a new insight; there is an abundance of academic work that addresses diversity among Muslims, and diversity is, after

all, the core theme that runs through this entire book.¹⁹ However, the point Esposito and Mogahed intend to raise is relevant because voices of ordinary Muslims are generally ignored in situations of crisis, when sensitive issues tend to turn into media hypes.

Much of what is generically called ‘representation of Islam’ or ‘speaking on behalf of Muslims’, takes place in relatively ‘normal’ circumstances. The principal actors in negotiations about imam training, for instance, or the site for a mosque or a cemetery, or in consultations about radicalisation, and in regular meetings with administrative authorities, are formally selected representatives. This is part of the ongoing bureaucratisation of Islam (Sunier 2022). The platform SPIOR in Rotterdam, addressed in Chapters 1 and 4, is an example of such a formalised representative body. Positions on the many national consultative bodies, such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), or the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland (ZMD) are also generally uncontested, and even if there is a contest for such positions, it would fall within the parameters of the prevailing competition and negotiation context, and representation is predominantly taken for granted. In addition, negotiations hardly touch on religious matters, but deal with financial, legal and other practical issues.

This is markedly different, however, when sensitive issues are at stake, or in media-saturated high-profile situations of contention and crisis. In these situations, the difference from ordinary debates about political representation and negotiation is that there is an additional religious meaning. It involves morality and it concerns the basic question about the difference between the adjectives Islamic and Muslim. Under such high-profile conditions, ‘Islamic’ becomes a branding device. Two issues are at stake here. One is the ethical question about the ‘right’ Islam and who is entitled to determine what is right and what is not. The other is loyalty and on whose behalf activists or leaders act. In situations of crisis, these dimensions interact vigorously.

Esposito and Mogahed (2007, X) call for a “democratisation of the debate”. They want to give the “silenced majority of Muslims” in the world a voice, deliberately and subtly changing the common expression ‘silent majority’ to ‘silenced majority’ to argue that, in the heated debates following the terrorist attacks in New York and subsequent dramatic events in the world, the voices of ordinary Muslims were marginalised, even stifled. But at the same time, Muslims were held accountable for what happened in the world in the name of Islam and were almost compelled to take sides. President George Bush’s state-

19 See e.g., Sedgwick (2006); Calderini (2008); Hirji (2009); Manger (2013); Schaefer (2021).

ment (“either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”) pronounced in Congress ten days after 9/11, was not only meant to seek international consent for the ‘war on terror’ but was also a warning to Muslims around the world to pick their allies and enemies carefully.²⁰ Many of my interlocutors told me that Bush’s dictum felt like a clear warning to take sides.

The same tactic was used by spokespersons of al-Qaida. The attacks were carried out in the name of Islam and Muslims worldwide. Those who rejected the attacks were often branded as apostates (*takfir*). The emergence of Islamic State and the public executions of their enemies on YouTube around 2015 gave a new impetus to this ‘catch 22’ situation. In the aftermath of the 2015 events, a whole series of books and pamphlets were published, resurrecting old conspiracy theories, and inventing new ones about the ‘real intentions’ of Islam. Many of these books could comfortably make use of the public statements and worldviews of terrorist groups and their leaders. Not very surprisingly, digitisation and the tremendous growth of social media have made these modes of branding even more compelling and insistent.

A remarkable additional contributory factor is the recurring pressure on Muslims from administrative authorities to ‘speak with one voice’. This is understandable from the perspective of the logical government need for transparent and unequivocal representation, but it is remarkable because the oversimplified branding of a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ Islam requires diversification and a clear juxtaposition of categories, instead of lumping all Muslims together on two heaps. And the net effect is that powerful voices largely dominate the political scene and public platforms.

As a consequence, ordinary Muslims often find themselves in an awkward situation. Many reject the claims of both sides. In the wake of the success of IS, demonstrations were held by Muslims throughout the world in which they expressed their disgust at the atrocities carried out in the name of ‘their’ religion. On a personal level, many Muslims have consistently and repeatedly emphasised that they denounce violence and that terrorists do not speak on their behalf. Margaretha van Es (2018), in an analysis of statements by Dutch Muslims about violence and Islam, shows that violent extremism and public debates affected not only self-representations by Muslims, but also how they perceive and present their religion to the outside world.

The consequences are often far reaching. Self-identification by Muslims and identification by others intersect in public contexts (Brubaker 2013; see also

20 <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (accessed March 2023).

Mattes 2018). Being a Muslim in public is not a matter of following Islamic prescriptions. On the contrary, sometimes following your convictions is counter-productive, as it can be depicted as a deliberate rejection of social conventions, or worse as implicit agreement with radical views and terrorism (Edmunds 2012).

Many Muslims tend to juxtapose the image of Islam as an inherently violent religion with the image of Islam as a 'religion of peace' in which there is 'no place for violence'. As van Es (2018, 165) states:

[...] Such statements were provoked by at least equally essentialist representations of Islam in Dutch public debate as a violent religion and were further encouraged by the need for short and clear statements in mainstream news media and the often-repeated call on Muslims to "excommunicate" terrorists from Islam.

Van Es uses the term "performative performance" (ibid., 164) to denote explicit public self-representation as an answer to the heated and media-saturated debates. She further argues that these public self-representations should not be all too easily discarded as only strategic forms of defence or attempts to be accepted in society; notions of non-violence become part of the self and are thus forms of moral subjectivation.

However, not every Muslim, especially among the young, is able to cope with these very complex situations in such a pro-active way. A number of Muslims I have spoken with at several universities and higher education institutes told me about the traumatic impact of the shocking events of 2015 and the subsequent heated discussions. Not only IS atrocities but also the feeling of being cornered and not able to counter the media-storm, have taken their toll and they still struggle with the consequences.

For public opinion leaders, politicians and journalists, the rapidly evolving events were almost a gift from heaven and provided them with a public platform to communicate and substantiate their policy measures. Political actors easily build on the reputation Islam has, be it good or bad. This is a form of branding that involves categories developed and applied by administrative authorities and secret services.

This is what happens in relation to the much-debated phenomenon of the 'radicalisation' of young Muslims in Europe, which has become a central referential trope in European politics. 'Radicalisation' has become the all-encompassing and ultimate process undergirding the burgeoning urgency in recent decades on the part of European governments vis à vis the securitisation of Islam. Controlling mechanisms have been scaled up as a result of the

deteriorating political climate and the ongoing problematisation and racialisation of Muslims. Schirin Amir-Moazami (2022) refers to this obsession as the ‘interrogation of Muslims’. Within a couple of years, an enormous number of publications from very diverse disciplines have been produced that address radicalisation among Muslims and seek to expound upon the phenomenon (Hafez and Mullins 2015).

The widespread and drastic measures taken across Europe in recent decades to prevent radicalisation and to ‘de-radicalise’ young Muslims have led to the marginalisation of many imams and other religious leaders who possessed sufficient knowledge and authority among Muslim communities, but who were also critical of government agendas. Instead, governments appointed their own mouthpieces, spokespersons, and private research institutes. This has created a huge knowledge gap and provided opportunities for self-appointed religious leaders without the necessary religious knowledge to gain influence among young Muslims, thus creating precisely the situation that governments intended to avoid.

The question of what radicalisation entails, what a radical Muslim is supposed to be, how many there are, and what causes there are for radicalisation, have kept researchers busy for over two decades. A review of the swiftly expanding body of scientific literature on topic makes it clear that the question of what a particular author means by radicalisation depends on the ideological perspective from which the issue is addressed, on the methodology that is applied, and not least on the aim of the research and the author’s positionality. Authors come from very different disciplinary niches but often apply the same generic definition of ‘radicalisation’ (Schmid 2013). As Ayhan Kaya (2020) argues, to categorise those who are willing to resort to violence as radical is relatively easy, but between this category and the much bigger category of young people who are critical of mainstream interpretations of Islam, there is a huge gap.

The ongoing debate about causes, terminology and the manifold understandings of and approaches to the phenomenon is, of course, common in all academic work and debates but, in this case, radicalisation and adjacent terms such as ‘jihadism’, ‘Salafism’ and others denoting “what goes on before the bomb goes off” (Sedgwick 2010, 479), and unfounded assumptions about the direct link between certain Islamic ideas and the use of violence can be found in many contemporary studies (de Koning, Becker, and Roex 2020). They appear in policy reports, political programmes, and government agendas; they are used by journalists, and they are topics for public discussions. Consequently, these ‘public definitions’ develop their own dynamic in which publicly circulating notions of radicalisation are added to the category (Aha-jjaj 2015).

This is more problematic than it seems. As Mark Sedgwick (2010, 479) argues:

[...] The term is also used in three different contexts: the security context, the integration context, and the foreign-policy context. Since each of these contexts has a different agenda, each uses the term 'radical' to mean something different. The use of one term to denote three different concepts risks even more serious confusion, which is compounded by the fact that each of these three contexts has at least two levels: an analytic and official level, and a public and political level. The public and political level in Western Europe is especially important as a result of the impact of what has been called 'neo-nationalism.' Other agendas can also intervene, adding to the confusion.

As a result of civil servants' and policymakers' demands for clear-cut definitions and frames of action, some researchers take up these policy categories and carry out research on that basis.²¹ In addition, there has been an enormous increase in the number of 'experts' on radicalisation. They frequently appear in the media and are hired by policy makers because they take over and build on the political and public assumptions about radicalisation. As a result, analytical criteria feed into public images and vice versa.

In short, securitisation or—more precisely, the surrounding phenomena on which securitisation measures are based—needs branding. Luca Mavelli (2013) argues that the legitimisation of security measures with regard to Muslims rests on 'exceptionalism', on logics of political normalisation and exception in which Islam is perceived as the deviant force in comparison with the historical privatisation trajectory of Christianity. Holger Stritzel (2011, 345) points to the discursive strategies of administrative authorities, called "translation", and coins the concept of "consolidated discursive realm" to refer to developments that existed long before dramatic events such as 9/11, and which could be made productive in new situations using recognisable language and discourses (Mavelli 2013).

In my view, this strategy necessitates the branding of concepts around which the securitisation of Islam revolves radicalisation, threat, and security. 'Radicalisation' has become a mode of branding in which processes are simplified and reduced to unidimensional causes in simple wording. Most definitions are functionalist and define radical behaviour as deviant behaviour, thereby implicitly arguing that any Muslim who questions some of the basic principles

21 see e.g., Buijs et al. (2007); Doosje and Loseman (2013).

of secular society is potentially radicalised. Other definitions overemphasise the ideological and theological causes of radicalisation. Often, several definitions are used simultaneously, ignoring their inherent contradictions. Rather than acknowledging and explaining the complexity and multifaceted character of processes of radicalisation, many scientists provide policymakers with clear-cut unambiguous definitions and concrete lists of causes and solutions. Researchers use the same terminology and criteria to apply for research grants; alternative explanations stand little to no chance.

The quick rise to public prominence of radicalisation and the prevention of it as policy categories has presented a challenge for imams and other religious leaders. As Jamal Ahajjaj (2015, 167) argues: “[...] It is important [for imams] not to use the image that media present about Muslim-radicalisation, because the number of Muslims who actually radicalise is neglectable compared to the vast majority that want to be Muslim in a normal way.”

Developments such as those described above and especially the role of researchers and scientists in shaping authoritative and scientifically sanctioned notions of Islam, brings me to the question of Islam as a field of study. I include Islam as a field of study in an analysis of modalities of branding for a number of reasons. Disciplinary boundaries (and their transgression), problem definitions, conceptual approaches, fields of enquiry and academic knowledge production imply far more than normal scholarly activity, certainly in the case of Islam. Academic branding resides in the public arena, as much as other forms of branding, and changes an ‘ordinary’ theological or socio-scientific debate about Islam into a high-profile mediated event.

Causes for complex developments are reduced by politicians and journalists to simple digestible scripts for a broad audience, and conversely, some academics tend to phrase their findings in such a way as to raise the chances of being invited to talk show tables.²² Particularly in the last two to three decades, the study of Islam has been tremendously politicised and has become an extremely sensitive and contentious subject.

Academic work serves as a public platform for claiming expertise (and delegitimising the expertise of others), or for setting out what the ultimate and only viable causes of certain developments are, and who is entitled to address

22 I and many of my colleagues often observe hesitation on the part of programme makers when we are invited to explain and shed light on events, and we argue that the issue is ‘more complicated than is often assumed’. They prefer straight, simple explanations. To write for a broad audience is important work and it should be done as much as possible, but experts should also emphasise repeatedly that there are not always simple answers to complex problems.

the matter. This often takes place in public environments where academics act as public intellectuals. Branding then includes the definition of the field and object of study, the use of certain definitions and discussion about what types of knowledge are required to tackle a problem or to become an expert, or rather to be branded as expert.

Branding also includes the increasingly important work that has to be put into applying for research grants and efforts to make one's work visible and attractive to a potential audience. The increasing entanglement of research and policy development, and the pressure to 'valorise' research results, are important constitutive elements for academic branding. It is as much about doing scholarly work as about building careers and reputations.

The constitutive role of Western academia in shaping Islam as a field of study, and the appropriation of knowledge with its concomitant assumptions, analytical tools and a legitimate academic community for various political purposes has a long history. William Montgomery Watt (1968) argued that 'propaganda wars', with Islam as the focus for certain military or political aims, go back to medieval times. In *Orientalism*, published in 1978, Edward Said argued that the depiction of 'the Islamic World' or 'the Orient' as a stagnant world was a European invention to serve colonial interests. His book instigated a heated discussion because Said accused orientalist scholars of allying with colonial authorities and legitimising the colonial status quo by providing an academic underpinning. Two decades later, Said analysed how experts and the media have constructed an image of Islam (Said 1997).

This debate went way beyond orientalist historiography and largely shaped the outlines of the study of Islam in later years. Through the work of orientalists such as Gustav von Grunebaum, Hamilton Alexander Gibb, Albert Hourani and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Islam came to be depicted as a clearly bounded religious normative body of knowledge and traditions that could be studied almost without addressing social, political, and economic contexts—in other words as a timeless tradition that totally shapes Muslims' lives. The question of whether a 'Muslim society' actually exists, would be considered by most of these scholars as awkwardly self-evident. Western non-Muslim orientalists' claim to be the only authoritative experts in this field resonated until well into the 1970s and laid the foundation for the idea of Islam as "Europe's Other" (Fadil 2019, 119) that we find in many contemporary studies on Islam in Europe and elsewhere in the world (Masud, Salvatore, and van Bruinessen 2009; Raja 2009).

Ideas about what Islam entails and how we should understand its followers were also taken up by journalists who travelled extensively in the 'Muslim world'. Some of them had a Muslim background and provided an 'inside story'. At a time when only a few people would be able to travel to distant and 'dan-

gerous' regions, these journalists assumed the role of 'eyewitness' and obtained an authoritative position in the eyes of their readers. Thus, the French-German journalist Peter Scholl-Latour wrote many popular books on Islam and politics in the Middle East and contributed to the public image of Islam in Germany for many years. The Trinidadian writer and journalist of Indian origin V.S. Naipul wrote several travelogues about his journeys in Muslim countries in which he presented a rather negative image of Islam (1981; 1997).

Academic branding is not an open and equal level playing field in which viewpoints, theoretical positions and theoretical approaches are equally valued and assessed. It is a power-laden arena with strong programmatic, academic and political interests at play. In her thought-provoking book *Whose Islam?* about the academic culture at Indonesian universities, Megan Brankley Abbas asks:

[...] who gets to count as an academic scholar of Islam and for what reasons? How have Western universities shaped Islamic politics and modern Islamic thought since the mid-twentieth century? What would a more ethical relationship between Western universities and Muslim intellectuals, whether in Indonesia or elsewhere, even look like? (Abbas 2021, 3)

In my contacts with colleagues at Indonesian universities, I have had similar experiences. When academics in Indonesia (or any other region outside the Western world) try to publish in prominent international journals, they often encounter difficulties that have less to do with the quality of their writing than with vested interests and authoritative positions in academia. Knowledge and power are deeply entangled in the study of contemporary Islam (Barras, Selby, and Adrian 2022).

The academic branding of Islam in the European context has a number of crucial dimensions. The first is epistemological and concerns the questions: what is the broader academic field in which the study of Islam resides, what should be researched, what are the most pressing and urgent issues, and how are problem statements formulated? In several places in the previous chapters, I have demonstrated how the study of Islam among migrants in Western Europe has developed from a side topic into a phenomenon of central concern. In the 1980s and 1990s, most research concentrated on the integration of migrants with a Muslim background into host societies. In general, hardly any public attention was given to this type of research, but the growing concern about the alleged relation between religion and certain types of undesirable behaviour made the study of Islam and Muslims a field in which researchers occupied positions and academic debates transformed into political polemics.

The second dimension concerns the positionality of researchers. More than in other fields of study, positionality is a sensitive and politicised issue in the study of contemporary Islam (Barras, Selby, and Adrian 2022). In the course of the 1980s an increasing number of scholars with a Muslim background started to do research among Muslims and to take part in academic debates. Initially this was perceived as a welcoming new development at a time when experience and perspective became relevant sources of scientific knowledge. These researchers often questioned the vested assumptions that were made in the study of Islam, predominantly by white male non-Muslim researchers. The ‘insider perspective’ that these researchers were assumed to have was seen as an important asset, as they could observe and understand aspects overlooked by ‘outsiders’.

But there is a downside to this positionality. In the best case, Muslim researchers are considered ‘biased’. Many of my students and PhD candidates with a Muslim background have experienced reserve, even doubt about their ability to do research among their ‘own people’ without becoming an ambassador. But sometimes the very fact that a researcher has a ‘Muslim name’ and is at the same time critical of government policies regarding Islam, can easily produce a highly politicised polemical situation.

The Austrian scholar Farid Hafez is a case in point. As a public intellectual, Hafez has been very critical of the rising anti-Islamic measures put in place by the right-wing Austrian government of Sebastian Kurtz. Hafez (2014) argues that Islamophobia has become a successful tool for right-wing and populist political parties to use in building electoral support. He founded the *European Islamophobia Report*, an annually updated report on Islamophobia in various countries.

In 2020, he was accused of being a leading figure in a ‘terrorist’ organisation. His house was raided during the night, his bank accounts were blocked, and his scientific output was branded as ‘Islamist’. Only beginning of 2023 did the court rescind the charges because the accusations turned out to be completely unfounded.²³ Researchers elsewhere in Europe also frequently experience more suspicion about their work than do critical non-Muslim researchers.

The ‘insider’ perspective, however, may take a completely different course in the case of people with a Muslim background who are critical about Islam. Experience then becomes an authoritative and legitimate tool with which to criticise Islam ‘from within’. The Somali-born Dutch-American publicist Ayaan Hirsi Ali rose to prominence in Europe and in the rest of the Western world

23 <https://dekkanttekening.nl/nieuws/vrijpraak-voor-moslimacademicus-die-twee-jaar-van-terreure-werd-verdacht-in-oostenrijk/> (accessed March 2023).

for her uncompromising critique of Islam. Although she was not particularly knowledgeable about Islam, her background alone gave her an authoritative status as a public intellectual.

The third dimension of the academic branding of Islam is its readership. There is a general image of academic output as relatively detached from public moods and the nitty gritty of policymaking. Authors of academic work often tend to state that they 'simply provide facts and information' without any specific aim or audience in mind. That may be true in some cases, but authors and readers are part of an already existing and constantly evolving discursive community in which modern mass media play a decisive role (de Koning and Sunier 2021). Academics tend to publish their work in journals with a potentially interested audience. In addition, a text must appeal to and capture an existing concern and propose new explanations, especially when it is meant to inform a broader public. Messages must resonate, they must refer to recognisable situations and be linked to an explanatory discourse and, as Lester Olson (2007) argues, authors are also incorporated in a wider process of power and knowledge construction.

A good illustration of this process of entanglement of academic expertise and political agendas is the controversy surrounding the American Muslim Brotherhood 'expert' Lorenzo Vidino, who coordinates the 'Muslim extremism' programme at the George Washington University in Washington DC. Several European governments used Vidino's advice about 'foreign influence'. Although Vidino claims to be an independent researcher, leaked documents of Alp Services, a Swiss private intelligence company, have revealed that Vidino was paid by this company to 'scientifically' substantiate allegations about the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe. Hackers captured more than 17 gigabytes of Alp Services emails, telephone conversations, photos and internal reports and the information fell into the hands of the French research platform Mediapart, which sent the data to several newspapers. Alp Services specialises in so-called 'dark pr'. By setting up fake accounts of non-existent individuals and by spreading false information Alp Services damaged the reputation of prominent Muslims in Europe. For this 'Muslim Brotherhood operation', the company was paid by the Emirates (UAE) to set up a smear campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and its alleged supporter Qatar.²⁴

Not only public rhetoric, but also academic text must be built on existing discourses and connect to audiences' concerns, but at the same time present a new angle, or new information. According to Alan Finlayson (2012, 759), the

24 NRC, July 8, 10, 15, 2023.

persuasive quality of a text depends on the extent to which it contains the right mix of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. *Logos* refers to the author's authority based on proof and evidence to be found, for example, in scientific text. *Pathos* refers to the quality of being able to affect the reader emotionally, and to tap into his or her concerns. *Ethos* refers to the authoritative status of the author in general terms.

One text does not, of course, create an addressable public or a new audience; nor can it instantly change the dominant direction of thinking. However, text and readership are mutually constitutive. Producers of texts and messages do not only give voice to an already existing public concern; a discursive community is also actually being (re)constituted (de Koning and Sunier 2021). A very effective strategy by which a discursive community is shaped is to constitute itself as a 'counterpublic'. "[...] A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one" (Warner 2002, 86). For an academic text to become a prominent point of reference, it must be presented in the media as scholarly work 'against the grain'. An effective author raises a pressing issue that is allegedly ignored by many academics and mainstream (read: dominant) media and sets out to break through mainstream paradigms, assumptions, and outlines of an ongoing debate.

Public and political representation and academic expertise are separate but overlapping matters. They boil down to the question of who speaks for Islam and who claims the appropriate positionality. The branding of Islam in various modes and disguises is a crucial element in claiming positions and appropriating knowledge, particularly when it concerns sensitive topics.

As the cases in this last cluster make clear, the question 'who speaks for Islam?', whether in doctrinal, political, or scientific matters, is ultimately a question of authoritative rhetoric. For putting things across successfully, acquiring an attentive audience, and, not least, gaining prominence and to build a career, branding practices are indispensable tools.

3 Conclusions

Regular processes of authority-making occur within the limits of professional and social realms, and often under the radar, beyond the public gaze. Branding, by contrast, is branding by virtue of being publicly visible, audible, sensible. The two rather contrasting processes are, however, closely linked. As the cases in this chapter make sufficiently clear, the making of Islamic authority 'under

the radar' is significantly affected by the hypervisibility of branding practices, by public figures (Muslims or non-Muslims) who declare themselves secular and/or liberal and who are recognised by the state as well as by public opinion as adequate spokespersons, or as 'guardians' of adequate knowledge.

As the cases make clear, branding practices require specific qualifications and conditions in order to generate a successful dynamic. Let me sum up a few considerations and observations. Branding is simplifying in that complex issues and nuanced depictions and descriptions are reduced and simplified so that images become memes and complex analyses become tropes. Branding becomes effective when the form and the content of messages coalesce. This often requires the implicit but more often explicit creation of mirroring representations, in which seemingly opposing principles are pitted against one another, and meanings are appropriated and frozen into one-dimensional definitions. In the discussion after the cartoon affair in Denmark and the Charly Hebdo attacks in Paris, the utterly complex history of iconography in Islam was reduced to the question of whether or not it is permissible to produce an image of the Prophet Muhammad. In such a heated debate, nuance disappears as it is ineffective. The utterly diverse hijab practices we find among Muslim women across the globe are reduced to a meme that is pitted against an evenly simplified notion of emancipation and freedom for women in the 'free Western world'.

However, it is too simple to discard branding as a completely reductionist and caricaturing act that has little to do with the real world out there, except for selling products and reach potential clients. Simplifications, caricatures, and memes are necessary tools for struggle. Branding and polarisation are not just exaggerations but also important to set the record straight. Actions against discrimination against Muslim women need catchy features, as much as the building of academic careers needs simplified tropes about the core business of an academic discipline or field of study. The books written by self-proclaimed Islam critics receive a lot of attention because their simplified messages are more easily digestible by a broad readership than lengthy 'boring' studies.

The relevance of branding for the making of Islamic authority seems at first sight obvious. Branding is claims-making and appropriation with regard to Islam. Actors make claims about what 'real' Islam is, or what Islam actually entails. Islamic branding is the metonymic use of the epitheton 'Islamic' to make categorical, causal, or qualitative claims about Islam, with programmatic, paradigmatic, and epistemological underpinnings, and truth claims.

In general, the relation between branding and the agency of actors is complex. As the discussions on Twitter (X) around the hashtags 'NotinmynameINT' and 'MyJihad Inc' have shown, Muslims who use the platform to fight exclusion

and hatred have to observe the delicate balance between sufficient nuance in messages and sufficient branding rhetoric. Actors do have only limited control how messages that are put across are received, understood, and interpreted by audiences and by the public in general. This requires performative agency, and sufficient craft and cunning to make branding effective.

A way to assess the issue of agency can be found in the work of Judith Butler (2010), who applies the concept of “performative agency” to understand how utterances lead to acting and so bear on processes of categorisation and self-constitution. Butler derives her understanding of performativity from the work of John Austin in literary studies. Performativity, she argues, questions positivist notions of stable ‘objective’ structural categories in society such as ‘gender’, ‘state’, ‘economy’ (and ‘religion’ for that matter). In social sciences, according to Butler, performativity has become a way to think about effects and results, and to present alternatives to causal frameworks. Thus:

[...] performativity seeks to counter a certain kind of positivism according to which we might begin with already delimited understandings of what gender, the state, and the economy are. Secondly, performativity works, when it works, to counter a certain metaphysical presumption about culturally constructed categories and to draw our attention to the diverse mechanisms of that construction. Thirdly, performativity starts to describe a set of processes that produce ontological effects, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities or, fourthly, that lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences. (Butler 2010, 147)

In his research on halal certification in Europe, John Bowen (2018) argues that, throughout most of Islamic history, the question of whether meat was ritually slaughtered, and halal was a matter of trust, but globalisation and sophisticated food processing technologies have made it necessary to look for ways to ‘brand’ something as halal. In his research on halal certification, he has used the term ‘performativity’ to analyse the decision-making process towards a halal certificate. His understanding has some similarities with Butler’s, but he places stronger emphasis on the entire trajectory from utterances of theologians and food technicians to legal decisions. I consider the sophisticated way Butler and Bowen understand ‘performativity’ to be the key link between branding and the making of Islamic authority, as it puts agency at the heart of process.

Conclusions

1 Reprise

This book is about some of the multiple ways in which Islamic authority manifests itself. The overall argument that ran throughout is that Islamic authority does not self-evidently emanate from a decontextualised essential core, the ‘Islam of the Book’, and that it is much more encompassing and versatile than the status of religious scholars, or that of bodies of theological knowledge. It can be attributed to institutions, to legal, ethical, and material matters, to activities and to events. Something or someone has legitimate, persuasive and imaginative qualities and is authoritative in the eyes of the beholder and to the extent that those qualities are accepted and confirmed. Islamic authority must therefore be understood as a principally relational concept.

The overall question I have addressed in this book is: *What are the ways in which Islamic authority manifests itself among Muslims in Europe who come from a migrant background, and what factors, contexts and circumstances determine the process of authority-making?* Subsequent questions were: (a) *What do Muslims consider to be proper and legitimate Islamic authority,* (b) *What arguments do they have for that,* and (c) *Why?*

The cases in the book are predominantly based on ethnographic research, carried out by me and by a number of PhD students I have supervised. Primary ethnographic data were supplemented by a bibliographical review of research carried out by others.

Conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically, the book is to a large degree a treatise of an ‘anthropology of Islamic authority’. Islamic authority is a human-made attribute, and my aim was to explore how Islam is ‘made to work’, how Muslims (and non-Muslims) (co-)shape religious world views and life worlds, and how they inhabit these worlds. I have focused on Islamic authority ‘in the making’, on the dynamics of Islamic authority as a continuously evolving field. My approach comes close to what Joao Biehl and Peter Locke (2010, 335), in their research on the urban poor in Brazil and Bosnia, term ‘anthropology of becoming’. They call for an ethnography that addresses “immanent fields that people, in all their ambiguity, invent and live by”. This calls into question an understanding of Islamic authority as an ontological reality that exists anterior to social relations.

I take seriously the criticism of cultural and methodological relativism raised by proponents of the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology (see e.g., Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; see also Vigh and Sausdal 2014). And I agree with Mat-

tijds van de Port (2004, 8) when he argues that we should focus on the act of believing itself rather than emphasising the made-up-ness of the life worlds we study. However, at the same time I want to point at the making of Islamic authority as a fundamentally interactive social practice that unfolds in common social political realms. Actors participate in those realms each with their own realities and life-worlds. Thus, the very diverse forms of Islamic authority-making among Muslims in Western Europe, convincingly demonstrate what Robert Hefner calls the “plurality in mind” of Muslims. As he argues: “[Muslims engage] diversity in society by devising a ‘plurality in mind’ that is still recognizably Islamic in method and message but accommodating of a higher degree of social diversity than was typical of earlier Islamic ethical discourses” (Hefner 2014, 132).

Commonality does not in any way mean ‘commonly shared’, or ‘commonly accepted’ as if participants agree a priori on the premises and conditions of such common realms. It only means that participants are part of them or have to engage with them. As I have argued, the secular-liberal political and public culture, and the democratic and legal provisions in European societies, provide Muslims certain political leverage, but not more than that (see Fraser 1992). Important for now, however, is to conclude that this social and political context generates a plurality of what are indeed ‘Islamic authorities’. Or, to put it slightly differently, the making of Islamic authority culminates not in one ‘average’, ‘shared’, ‘hegemonic’ Islamic authority, but in a multitude of forms and interpretations. This implies that we should also critically take issue with the often-heard assumption that the diversity in Islam is a diversity on a continuum from ‘liberal’, even ‘secular’, to ‘strict’, ‘orthodox’, or ‘Salafist’. Diversity or plurality is about different forms and interpretations, not about ‘more or less’.

From this it follows that I refrained from formulating a generic definition of Islamic authority because my aim was really to explore the broad field of what Muslims (and non-Muslims) understand by authority and why. Not only does a pre-fabricated abstract definition necessarily rule out some views on Islamic authority, but it also ignores the semantic and associational dynamic and the nature of Islamic authority as a process ‘under continuous construction’. But this does not at all mean that it would be impossible to draw some general conclusions from the cases that have been discussed and to explore how they relate to one another. Before I do that, let me first briefly summarise the conclusions of each of the six ethnographic chapters separately.

Five theoretical and methodological propositions run through the entire book: (1) the relevance of context and change, (2) the approach to Islam as a discursive tradition, (3) the relevance of bottom-up critical reflection by Muslims, (4) the relevance of aesthetics and performativity, and (5) the methodological

relevance of the location of Islamic authority. Each chapter dealt with a particular modality of authority-making. For each case specific factors turn out to be particularly salient and, together with case-specific factors, they constitute the context of the various modalities of authority-making.

Chapter 1 dealt with the religious broker, community leaders with an authoritative position among Muslims, active in the initial stages of migration. They contributed to a large extent to the way in which Muslim communities were perceived in host societies, and to the development of the early Islamic landscape. They were to be found across Europe, but the specific conditions under which they emerged, their position, their 'modus operandi', and the characteristics of their networks, differed from country to country and context to context. In the case I have analysed, the extensive renovation of old neighbourhoods in the city of Rotterdam and political changes regarding a specific 'Islam and mosque policy' were particularly crucial for the emergence of religious brokers in that region in that period. Their authoritative position was grounded not only in their entrepreneurial activities as community leaders, but also in the specific ways in which religious knowledge was deployed and proliferated. They determined not only how the rest of society perceived Islam and Muslims, but to a large extent also how the self-understanding of Muslims was shaped in those years.

Chapter 2 dealt with the ongoing controversies, discussions, negotiations and struggles about who is in charge of the production, dissemination, and teaching of Islamic knowledge and who organises the training of imams for the European market. I have shown that this is a highly politicised issue involving many different parties and stakeholders, often with clashing interests. The 'politics of imam training' lays bare a particular power dynamic and is ultimately about the question of who is entitled to produce, transmit and, not least, teach Islamic knowledge to Muslims in Europe, and who is accepted by Muslim communities.

Chapter 3 dealt with the educational and devotional practices of the European branches of the Hizmet-movement. I have shown that the *sohbet*, together with other related activities, is part of the pedagogical programme of the movement, designed to evoke all-sensory experiences with the aim of initiating apprentices or novices into the central principals, creeds, texts, and rituals of Hizmet and integrating them into the movement. The programme is intended to provide the participants with the necessary capabilities and competences to be in the world as confident Muslims. The main relevance for the making of Islamic authority lies, in my view, in the way discursive communities are being constituted through the pedagogical programme around specific notions of Muslimness.

In Chapter 4, I brought together a number of cases that display various modalities of authority-making, that are largely 'unrecognised', 'unnoticed', or 'marginalised', but often counter-hegemonic to the official authoritative status quo. I have called them 'alternative authorities'. I have analysed three clusters of cases: (1) female leadership and authority, (2) street-level authority and the production of locality, dealing with religious and community leaders operating at a local level, and (3) halal-scapes, about particular senses of space and local initiatives set up by Muslims in various fields. The cases reveal a number of intriguing insights. First, Islamic authority-making is emphatically relational and interactive, and hence always contingent on relationships in multiple ways. Second, all the cases exist at a local level, in small-scale settings, and with real people. Organisations may have websites to reach out beyond the local level, but the notion of space and locality are recurring elements. Third, women do play a crucial role in most of the activities I have analysed. Gender 'works' in two ways. On the one hand, activities, especially those initiated by Muslim women, often give rise to reactions and discussions about their legitimacy. On the other, alternative spaces and activities are where we find more women than men. Fourth, most initiatives often have a transient and temporary character.

Chapter 5 dealt with the majlis sermon, a central ritual in Shi'a Islam, particularly the growth of online practices, and the challenges they pose for majlis orators and audiences. In this chapter, an analysis was presented about the discussions among practitioners of the question whether an online majlis is still an authentic majlis. Probably more than in other cases, the authentication of a majlis sermon as the outcome of reflection and discussion shows how authority-making constantly responds and adapts according to context, medium and reception. The case also shows that aesthetics and performative skills are crucial prerequisites in these processes of authority-making, particularly because the online versions reach and create a much wider (international) audience. The issue at stake in online versions is how to balance between engagement with the concerns and experiences of local practitioners, and messages that apply to a globally dispersed audience.

Chapter 6 dealt with various practices and situations with the 'branding of Islam' as the common denominator. Branding Islam refers to claims and forms of appropriation with the emblematic epitheton 'Islamic' that are used by stakeholders, administrative authorities, religious authorities, representatives, and adversaries to make public statements about Islam. I have argued that branding refers to acts of deliberate public attribution and making truth claims, which should analytically be distinguished from unintended public appearance and public visibility. The relevance of branding for the making of

Islamic authority is rather obvious; actors make claims about what 'real' Islam is, or what Islam actually entails. However, precisely because of the explicitly public character of branding practices, actors have only limited control over how messages that are put across are received, understood, and interpreted by audiences and by the public in general. This requires performative agency, and sufficient craft and cunning to make branding effective.

2 Cross-Overs, Connections, Entanglements, and Conceptual Threads

What can be said about Islamic authority on a slightly higher conceptual plane, and what does that tell us? With regard to the role of religious brokers in the making of Islamic authority in the 1980s, the various policy agendas regarding the training of imams in Europe, especially after 9/11, and the specific notions of Islamic authority as they were taught and inculcated in the pedagogical programme of Hizmet, top-down, institutionalised imposition of normative power and authority, are rather central. Established authorities, mostly represented by Islamic movements from countries of origin, play a decisive role in the process. To the extent that there are alternative, critical, or rival voices, they are incidental and indeed marginal.

In Chapter 1 and 2, I have shown that European governments and the surrounding society are essential actors in the field of forces in which authority-making takes place. I have assessed the 'politics of imam training' as part of the domestication of Islam in Europe, a particular modality of governance to build religious order and to nationalise Islam. It shows how deeply European governments interfere, even in strictly theological matters. But the active role of governments in the early stages of migration, notably in the transformation of migrants with a Muslim background into Muslim minorities with their particular characteristics, outlooks, and desires, is also a form of domestication. Domestication is a historically and contextually specific process that engenders continuously changing processes of authority-making.

The various cases of the making of 'alternative authorities' set out in Chapter 4, and the lively discussions among participants in the majlis rituals addressed in Chapter 5, are important instances where bottom-up critical reflection of established authoritative frames becomes evident. Also, many actors discussed in Chapter 6, critically reflect on established authorities. Actors sometimes question dominant perspectives and taken-for-granted assumptions very deliberately. In other cases, however, critique is not the main goal but emerges in negotiations and efforts to put issues and desires across, or to

get things done. In this way, discussions, exchange of views or critical conversation with the religious establishment or the surrounding society, sometimes amount to taking issue with vested norms and propounding alternative interpretations and viewpoints.

In some of the cases, we were able to observe how entirely new initiatives came into being, such as the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, the Polder Moskee in Amsterdam, the 'Sohbet 2.0' meetings in Switzerland or the various activities I have categorised as 'halal-scapes'. In other cases, 'alternative' initiatives originated in the context of already existing settings and situations, such as in the case of the transformation of the SPIOR platform in Rotterdam, the activities developed by local imams and community leaders and, not least, the online/offline dynamics in the majlis sermons. The differences in setting and context may look trivial but different settings obviously generate different dynamics in the making of Islamic authority.

The efficacy of aesthetics and imagination is particularly evident in the cases in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. All four chapters deal with contemporary issues, and the use of modern means of communication and digital technology is crucial in the making of Islamic authority. But the particular forms of publicity engendered by modern media obviously work differently in different situations and contexts. Thus, while many of the 'alternative' activities and situations that I have addressed in Chapter 4 especially thrive when they take place low-profile, outside the limelight of the media, and the branding activities analysed in Chapter 6, by contrast, take place in the public arena by definition, the two are more related to one another than at first appears.

Working low-profile and working deliberately in the public gaze are mutually constitutive processes. The actors in Chapter 4 act in the way they do because they are well aware of the effect of public attention and interference. They may seek publicity at some point, but they more often avoid it because they are well aware of the possible implications. The initiative of the imam and rabbi in The Hague illustrated that. Conversely, many acts that are deliberately staged as media events are statements either on behalf of or against a putative 'silent majority'.

The religious brokers in Chapter 1 operated on behalf of Muslims who at that time were generally depicted as voiceless people who were unable to articulate their needs and desires because they did not have the necessary competences. The religious brokers expressed these needs on their behalf. Actors who, by contrast, speak against a putative silent majority do so because that majority would silently consent to the status quo and the order of things, simply would not have the courage to speak out, or would turn a blind eye to alleged inequality and injustice. In particular, but not exclusively, self-proclaimed Islam critics (both

Muslim and non-Muslim) tend to use this strategy. The controversies around the time when Islamic State rose to prominence and the ways in which ordinary Muslims were cornered is a good example.

There is yet another intriguing aspect that has to do with publicity strategies. Self-proclaimed Islam critics often resort to the allegation that Muslim leaders tend to speak with a 'double tongue'. In public they allegedly articulate a completely different discourse from the one they adopt internally. Politicians and secret services frequently accuse Muslims of deluding their interlocutors by having a 'double agenda', deliberately presenting things differently, and applying *taqiyya*.¹ Caroline Fourest published a book about the Swiss-Egyptian scholar Tariq Ramadan with the title *Brother Tariq: The Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan* (2008), in which this idea was elaborated. Similar accusations are regularly expressed against the Hizmet-movement. For the targets, it is very difficult to refute these allegations as they can be applied to anything they say to counter the accusations made against them.

In the Introduction, I pointed out that Islamic authority-making is particularly salient, vibrant, and visible under so-called frontier conditions where new encounters, new circumstances and new developments generate new possibilities. 'Frontier' refers to pre-defined, pre-categorised and pre-organised social, political, or spatial realms and situations, where things are not yet settled and under control. Frontier-zone conditions are unprecedented and without a script. Now it could be argued that the continuously evolving Islamic landscape in Europe constantly creates unprecedented situations and new contexts, so the concept could be applied to all cases addressed in this book. However, a comparison between the actors in Chapter 1, the religious brokers, and the various initiators of alternative initiatives discussed in Chapter 4, brings to the fore intriguing parallels and similarities.

For actors operating under frontier conditions, agility, dexterity and indeed 'performative agency' are essential prerequisites for creating new realms of activity, new interpretations and worldviews, and new discourses and agendas. They do so vis-à-vis established institutions and normative political frames, which are in turn the result of earlier historical processes and the sedimentation of prevailing power configurations. In the early stages of migration, one should think of nation state formation in countries of origin and in host countries with concomitant civil cultures and legal systems, but also Muslim organ-

1 The term *taqiyya* has traditionally referred to the admissibility for Muslims to hide their faith in situations where they were at risk, but the term has more recently been appropriated by right-wing politicians to denote deliberate strategies by Muslims to mislead (see e.g., AIVD 2004; Tweede Kamer 2010; 2018).

isations in countries of origin, which shifted their activities to Europe in the early years of migration, as part of the prevailing power configurations. Frontier conditions emerged precisely where these historically-grown power configurations coalesced. As I have demonstrated this generated new and unprecedented circumstances and new opportunities. Another example of actors operating in such frontier conditions were the founders of the first Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands in 1988. Although these schools were established entirely according to Dutch constitutional principles, the founders operated in a completely unprecedented and unknown situation which provided them with both opportunities but also drawbacks and objections (Taşpinar and Bouimj 2023).

Frontiers also emerge when actors venture in new directions or propose new initiatives in situations with an established political order and with an organisational landscape firmly entrenched in that order. These actors initiate new plans and activities and come up with new idea against the grain and thus confront routines and vested patterns. In Chapter 4, I have discussed several cases where such frontier conditions emerged, but the discussion in a mosque in Rotterdam in the early 1990s about a possible iftar with non-Muslim invitees, which I have referred to in Chapter 1, is also a good example. By taking issue with prevailing norms, the initiators ventured into unfamiliar territory.

A last issue that needs to be addressed is the implicit distinction I have made between the making of Islamic authority as a process that supports, reaffirms, sustains, and endorses prevailing power configurations and authoritative status quos, and as a process that questions, challenges and even undermines hegemonic interpretations of Islamic authority. At this point, I need to nuance this distinction. In all processes of Islamic authority-making I have discussed, we simultaneously find elements of support and legitimation but also challenge. This is certainly not a disclaimer for the sometimes firm statements I have made in this regard, but it is meant to reiterate once more the emphatically dynamic, situational, and provisional nature of Islamic authority.

I recall a chat I had a year ago with somebody, a convert to Islam, whom I hadn't seen at least twenty years. By coincidence, we bumped into each other at the presentation of a policy report. In the early 2000s, he was one of the most critical persons I had met. He considered that any involvement by Muslims in policy development and government advisory boards was unacceptable. The reason he attended the presentation was because he had been a member of the commission that had written the report. He told me how he had been navigating in the last decades between a total rejection of any government interference

in Muslim affairs and finding ways to contribute to the improvement of the position of Muslims in Europe.

He told me that, if you want resources, if you want to participate in negotiations with administrative authorities, you have constantly to reassess your strategy. Sometimes, in some circumstances, you have to play the government's power game. If you refuse to do so, you are dismissed as a 'problem'. Some of his fellow negotiators had learned to speak the language of the government, but they had also taken on government definitions of radicalisation and Salafism, for example, and government policy priorities. He said that if, as in his case, you have great difficulty in complying unconditionally with the government agenda, you are faced with a dilemma. If you comply it may strengthen your negotiating position, but very likely at the expense of the goals and priorities of your community. This requires specific discursive and performative competences and, no less importantly, it implies deliberate strategic choices for acting publicly. I think his observations and reflections can apply to many of my interlocutors and other people who appear in this book.

To conclude, and it cannot be repeated enough, the cases I have addressed in this book should in no way be taken as a kind of comprehensive 'one-size-fits-all' picture of authority-making among Muslims in Europe, if indeed such a picture exists, but they give insight into some of the multiple ways in which Islamic authority manifests itself and is constituted. Pre-fabricated bounded definitions obfuscate research rather than help in assessing Islamic authority. What does help, however, is to understand Islamic authority-making as a semantic field with a plethora of associations and connotations, and as a social practice, as something that takes shape in human interaction.

3 Reflections

When my students at the university arrive at the conclusions of their master or doctoral thesis, I am accustomed to advising them that, after presenting a brief summary of aims of the work, the overall argument, research questions and the results, they should sit back and reflect on their work and ask: What have I learned? What may my readers have learned? What observations and analyses in my work particularly stand out? What are the limitations, shortcomings, and caveats of my work, but also what insights and lessons has it brought and what implications does it have? Let me, by way of discussing a number of themes, reflect on my book.

3.1 *Power and the Ulama?*

Does the whole process of Islamic authority-making after all and ultimately culminate in the reconfirmation of the power of established ulama? And how relevant are the cases, particularly those in Chapters 4 and 5, for coming to terms with Islamic authority? I expect some readers to reach a sceptical conclusion when we explore the current Islamic landscape in Europe and elsewhere. Some of my colleagues often tend to say: 'wait and see' when I talk about some intriguing new initiatives by Muslims. 'Interesting but do they withstand against the vested power of the religious elite?' I used to parry such remarks by stating that it is true indeed that many cases I have addressed in this book turned out to be temporary and transient, not to speak of the numerous other initiatives that did not even go beyond the paper on which they were formulated.

But does that mean that they are less relevant in social terms, or not very useful in analytical terms? In my view, the answer is no. To state that Islamic authority ultimately boils down to the authority of established theologians and doctrinal standards would implicitly assume that it is all about numbers and majorities. However, having a powerful position in the Islamic landscape does not mean that small alternative initiatives are not relevant for research, or more importantly meaningless for the self-understanding of Muslims who live in European countries. Many cases presented in this book show that the making of Islamic authority is often a process of (collective) 'self-confirmation' with the intention of making Muslim lives meaningful. This, I contend, constitutes authority-making as much as does contentious struggle about interpretations, truth, legitimacy, and power.

3.2 *Women*

When going through the collected ethnographic data and rereading old material, but especially in the process of writing this book, I increasingly realised how crucial the role and agency of Muslim women is in the making of Islamic authority. Some readers probably say: "yes, what else did you expect?" One answer would be that, as a male researcher, I was confronted with my own implicit assumptions and blind spots. But in analytical terms, the relevance of female agency in shaping Islamic authority cannot be overstated. Precisely because women often confront prevailing power configurations, they must be inventive and resourceful, and this makes their role in authority-making visible. This should make researchers much more alert to discover their own blind spots.

In many situations, women are the pioneers, and this has become all the more significant in recent years. I remember a meeting over twenty years ago

convened by a Muslim organisation with only men behind the table on the stage. At some point during the meeting, a woman in the audience reached for the microphone and straightforwardly asked why there were no women at the table because it was, after all, about an issue that concerned women as well. One of the spokespersons behind the table stammered that they would certainly take women into consideration, but the woman in the audience persevered, soon to be joined by other women. Unfortunately, such all-male events still take place, but much less than back in the 1990s. Some of my female interlocutors told me about the sometimes fierce debates ‘behind the scenes’ about issues of representation. It continues to be relevant and important to critically engage with certain practices and to propose alternatives.

3.3 *Reconsidering the Secular*

Writing this book has no doubt sharpened my perspective on the active role of European states in religious matters. During my career, I have addressed the issue of state–religion relations, and the impact of the ‘politics of neoliberal secularism’ as a political programme, many times and in different ways. In most cases, it was about how political arrangements come about in negotiations between state actors and Muslim actors. The way I addressed the issue in the context of this book made me aware of how deeply involved the so-called ‘secular liberal states’ in Europe in fact are, despite their incessant emphasis on neutrality and non-intervention in religious matters.

In his critical engagement with Jose Casanova’s approach to ‘secularity’, Armando Salvatore (2006) points to the tension and ambivalence in the separation of politics and religion that is inherent in European political culture. He argues that, according to Casanova,

the positive public potential of religious traditions can only be brought to fruition as part of the secular democratic game, so laying a premium on the capacity to mobilize and persuade without threatening the state’s monopoly of the institutional instruments of coercion and consensus-building and without impinging on citizens’ freedom of conscience (Salvatore 2006, 552). [Thus,] religious trace [that] cannot be adequately ‘churchified’ according to the codified mechanisms of an ordered and consensual deal between states and churches, is then considered a potential sectarian challenge. (ibid., 554)

Salvatore in fact argues that the neutrality claims of secular-liberal statecraft can only be accomplished not by a neutral *laissez-faire*, but rather by intervening in religious issues and moulding religious structures and practices.

European states even intervene in religio-ethical issues and set out to mould Muslim self-understanding. This is why many politicians, as well as many academics, argue that young Muslims will in the end not be able to withstand secular pressure.

I, however, doubt that. What my research has shown for one thing is that Muslims of course have to operate under the conditions of a secular political cultural regime, but this is not a struggle between conflicting or contradictory ways of being in the world. Just as Islam is 'made to work', so also secularity is 'made to work'. How 'the secular' is understood and engaged with has become an integral part of what it means to be Muslim, and this is not a matter of either rejecting or complying with a superimposed format. Discussions about whether there is something like a 'European Islam' (see e.g., Cesari 2015; Hashas 2018b) are pointless as long as the political and scientific agendas behind the concept are not made explicit.

As Maurits Berger (2013) argues, from a demographic perspective there was a European Islam from the moment Muslims settled in Europe, and this was long before the arrival of labour migrants after the Second World War. In that respect, Islam has always been an inherent part of European history, even though many politicians hotly deny it. In legal terms, there is a European Islam simply because Muslims have constitutional rights to practise their faith. However, what many self-proclaimed critics of Islam mean by a European Islam is one that complies with precisely the secular-liberal format of European states (see e.g., Tibi 2010; Yıldız and Verkuyten 2012).

3.4 *What Is Not Islamic Authority?*

The last issue I want to raise is the question 'what is NOT Islamic authority'? In the Introduction, I stated that, in my view, much of what can be observed with regard to evolving Islamic landscapes in Europe boils down to questions of authority. In discussions with colleagues, I sometimes wonder whether or not I give the impression that I consider everything pertaining to Islam as authority-making. I also realised this when I was rereading old ethnographic material I collected decades ago, through the conceptual lens of Islamic authority. It is like when a guide in a museum makes you aware of aspects in a painting you had not observed before, but after the guiding you suddenly 'see' these aspects in all of the painter's work and it becomes difficult to ignore them. One sees more when told where to look. This can be helpful but also confusing.

My short answer to the question about the scope and the usefulness of the concept of Islamic authority and indeed what the limitations of such a concept are, is what I have just stated: it is a prominent phenomenon that permeates

public discussions about Islam, and it is also a conceptual lens through which certain processes unfold. In this way, it points to certain aspects and raises certain questions. Rather than sharply delineating one particular field of activity as pertaining (or not pertaining) to authority-making, we must explore aspects of authority-making in many particular fields of activity. That is what I intended to do in this book.

4 What Else?

To approach the making of Islamic authority as a conceptual lens is also a constituent element in a possible future research agenda, and thus an invitation to colleagues in this field to initiate new research along these lines. I dare, slightly boldly, to say that my book offers sufficient leads and starting points for further research. In several places in the book, I alluded to this. The rooting of Islam and Muslims in European societies is an ongoing process that ceaselessly generates new situations and challenges. In all these situations, the question emerges of what this implies for Islamic authority, or better how Islamic authority manifests itself, both in ethical and in social-political terms.

This book is about the making of Islamic authority among Muslims in Europe who come from a migrant background. As I have emphasised in several places, this socio-political, historical context is utterly crucial for unpacking the making of Islamic authority. The question that logically follows is whether and in what way my approach to Islamic authority-making is also relevant for Muslims in other social and political contexts in other countries. The answer is, yes, it is. As I have indicated, research has been carried out about historical and contemporary forms of Islamic authority in regions where Muslims constitute the majority of the population. There is no reason to assume that authority-making is less multifaceted, dynamic, and contentious there than among Muslims in Europe. In that regard, I am increasingly unsatisfied with the persistent essentialising distinction that is often made between 'Muslim-majority' and 'Muslim-minority' countries and contexts. Circumstances and conditions may differ considerably, but that has little to do with numbers and demographics, or political and religious cultures.

To conclude, to observe and engage with the evolving Islamic landscape in Europe (or elsewhere in the world for that matter) is scientifically relevant, but not only that. When we take the presence of Muslims in Europe seriously, it is important to consider them partners and to engage with what they do in and contribute to society and learn what their future prospects are.

Glossary

Language between brackets T: Turkish, A: Arabic, U: Urdu

Abi (T) Elderly brother. In Hizmet pedagogics male mentor in the inner circles of the movement.

Abla (T) Elderly sister. Female form of Abi.

Ahl al-Bayt (A) Literally, people of the house of the family. Refers to the family of the Prophet Muhammad.

Akhlaq (A) Islamic ethics, moral virtue.

Altın Nesil (T) Golden Generation. Hizmet terminology for the idealised image of the perfect Muslim engaging with Islamic traditions and modernity in a new way.

Alim (A) Islamic scholar, somebody with scriptural proficiency (plural: ulama, female form: alima).

Aqeedat (U) Deep devotion, affection. Creed in Arabic (aqidah).

Belletmen (T) Personal mentor of a novice in the Hizmet movement.

Çalışma grubu (T) Working group in the Hizmet movement. A network of Hizmet followers who work or study in different fields and in different places who come together regularly with the aim to discuss and improve their engagement with the world around them.

Çetele (T) Personal diary of a novice in the pedagogical programme of the Hizmet movement.

Dar-al-ulum/ al-ilm (A) Private Muslim seminaries.

Dawa (A) Missionary activity by Muslims (literally: invitation).

Dersane (T) Residential study centre in the Hizmet movement.

Dhikr (A) Silent group meditation to commemorate God.

Fatwa (A) Authoritative opinion /decision by an Islamic scholar.

Fiqh (A) Islamic jurisprudence on the basis of the Sharia.

Fiqh al-aqalliyat (A) Islamic jurisprudence for Muslim minorities.

Hadith (A) Sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.

Hajj (A) Pilgrimage to Mecca. One of the five pillars of Islam.

Halal (A) Allowed according to Islamic law.

Haram (A) Forbidden according to Islamic law.

Hawza (pl. Hawzay) (U) Seminary.

Hijab (A) Generic term for headscarf for Muslim women.

Hizmet (T) Service to God and to the community in Hizmet terminology. Also, the name of the Gülen-movement.

Id al-fitr (A) Holiday to celebrate the end of the fasting period during the month of Ramadan.

- Iftar** (A) Breaking of the fast after sunset.
- Ihsan** (A) Responsibility and inner spiritual motivation for Muslims to obtain perfection, or excellence, in worship.
- Ijtihad** (A) Independent reasoning by an expert in Islamic law.
- Imamat** (A/U) Institution of the Imamate, or lineage of imams in Shi'ism.
- Jalus** (U) Procession, part of Shi'i Muharram rituals.
- Kemalism** State ideology and political programme of the Turkish Republican Party founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.
- Khalifa** (A/U) Caliph.
- Khilafat** (U) Caliphate.
- Khatib** (pl. *khitabat*) (U) Orator, preacher.
- Khutba** (A) Friday sermon in the mosque or online.
- Külliye** (T) Complex of buildings with a variety of religious and social functions in Ottoman times.
- Laiklik** (T) Term derived from the French *laïcité*, denoting the relation between state and religion, sometimes referred to as the Turkish version of the separation of religion and state.
- Madrasa** (A) High school for religious education.
- Mahdi** (U) In Islamic eschatology, a leader appearing before the day of judgement. In Shi'ism considered to be 12th Imam.
- Majlis** (pl. *majalis*) (A/U) Gathering, council, assembly. In South Asian Shi'ism, the term refers to *majlis-e-aza*.
- Majlis-e-aza** (U) Majlis of lament, commemorating the martyrdom of Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was killed during the Battle of Karbala.
- Manhaj** (A) Proper ways to interpret texts with the aim of understanding their meaning and considering their applicability in concrete situations.
- Maqatal-al-Husayn** (U) Written record in manuscript form chronicling the assassination of Hussain and the events of the Battle of Karbala
- Maraji' al-taqlid** (U) Sources of emulation, high-ranking clerics that are used as reference points.
- Marja'** (U) Religious cleric who is a source of emulation and religious authority.
- Marja'iyya** (U) Clerical networks.
- Marsiyya** (U) Poetic eulogy commemorating the events of, and figures present at the Battle of Karbala.
- Maslaha** (A) Methodological principle based on the sharia and referring to issues of public interest for the community of believers.
- Matam** (U) Embodied lament, a form of self-flagellation in varying degrees. Part of Shi'i rituals.
- Minbar** (A) Pulpit in the mosque.

- Muharram (A)** The first month of the Islamic calendar.
- Mujtahid (A)** Jurist.
- Naray-bazi (U)** Collective chanting of slogans (nara means slogan).
- Nauhay (U)** Sung lamentation.
- Niyya (A)** Intentions when acting deliberately as Muslim. Principle that charity should come from the heart.
- Okuma kampı (T)** Reading camp. Part of the pedagogical programme of the Hizmet movement.
- Ramadan (A)** The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, also known as the month of fasting.
- Sadaqa (A)** Islamic charity, connected to zakat, alms-giving, one of the five pillars of faith.
- Şahsi konuşma (T)** Personal conversation or consultation with the mentor in Hizmet terminology. Part of the pedagogical programme of the movement.
- Salafiyya (A)** Those who follow the ideas and practices of the righteous ancestors (al-salaf al-salih) and seek to return to the Qur'an and the Sunna (tradition) as the authentic basis for Muslim life. Today the term has a pejorative meaning among Islam critics as the most strict and violent application of the sources.
- Salafism** Common denominator for views and ideologies of Salafiyya Muslims. In political debates the term has become a politically loaded epitheton.
- Salat (A)** Ritual prayer to be performed five times a day. One of the five pillars of faith.
- Şeyhülislam (T)** Highest authority in religious affairs in the Ottoman empire. Closed down by the Turkish republican government in 1924.
- Sharia (A)** Umbrella term denoting all aspects of Islamic law.
- Shi'ism** Second largest denomination in Islam after Sunnism, making up between 10% and 20% of all Muslims.
- Sohbet (T)** Conversation. Religious conversation in the Hizmet-movement.
- Sufi (order)** Western term denoting mystical order in Islam (in Arabic tariqa, in Turkish tarikat).
- Sunnism** Largest denomination in Islam, comprising more than 80% of all Muslims.
- Ta'ziye (U)** Dramatic re-enactments of parts of the Karbala story in Iran. In South Asia, the same word refers to relics and replicas of relics used during ritual practices.
- Tafsir (A)** Written explanation or interpretation of Islamic sources such as the Qur'an.
- Umma (A)** Community of believers.
- Wali (A/U)** Spiritual leader.
- Yurt (T)** Boarding house in the Hizmet movement.

Zakat (A) Alms, religious tax.

Zakir (pl. **zakirin**) (U) Preacher, orator of majlis sermons. Literally: one who does zikr (dhikr).

Zakira (U) Female orator.

Zuhd (A) Asceticism.

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The development of Islamic landscapes in Europe, is first and foremost related to Islamic authority. Religious authority relies on persuasiveness and deals with issues of truth, authenticity, legitimacy, trust, and ethics with reference to religious matters. This study argues that Islamic authority-making among European Muslims is a social and relational practice that is much broader and versatile than theological proficiency and personal status. It can also be conferred to objects, activities, and events. The book explores various ways in which Islamic authority is being constituted among Muslims in Western Europe with a particular focus on the role of 'ordinary' Muslims.

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