

# **BEYOND THE DOMESTICATION OF ISLAM**

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On the 21st of January this year, just three weeks after my appointment at the VU, I attended the first 'halal borrel', organized by the Islamic student association Mashriq of this university. For non-Dutch speakers, a 'borrel' is an alcoholic drink, but the word commonly refers to drinks after a meeting or at a reception. Halal is a theological concept denoting that which is allowed according to Quranic law. The seemingly contradictory messages brought together in 'halal borrel' attracted my attention. It points at the way Islamic ethics are being applied creatively in novel situations. It is just a small but meaningful example of how many young Muslims want to make sense of their religion and how they want to engage with society. Unfortunately the playfulness of such an event stands in sharp contrast to the general image of Islam in European societies.

Within two decades Islam in European societies has developed from an issue of minor academic interest into one of the fastest growing research fields. The main cause for this is no doubt the necessity felt on the part of governments to take account of the presence of some 15 million Muslims in the European Union today.

As a consequence, the integration of Muslims into European societies has become a highly politicized central research focus. Research agendas on Islam in Europe increasingly follow the political priorities and goals formulated by national and local governments. Research tends to revolve around the question of how Muslims integrate into European societies and what challenges this entails for these societies.

Recent dramatic events since 9/11 have invigorated the urge to monitor everything that is done by Muslims. Many express a deep worry about, in their eyes, an uncontrollable force coming from outside. An increasing number of politicians consider security, containment, and control of Islam crucial tenets of political decision-making. The integration of Islam has been charged with strong normative underpinnings centering on the basic question of whether Islam fits within a European self-understanding and self-identification that is rooted in the Enlightenment. The 'quest for a European Islam', and whether this can exist at all, is one of the most sensitive and topical issues of the public debate today.

I call the political programs that emanate from the complex relationship between integration, and political priorities of security and national identity, the 'domestication of Islam'. Domestication is a process of governance, containment and pacification based on national identity politics. It is a process that is in the first place and self-evidently about integration of Islam into European societies. But in fact it is more explicitly about the alleged challenges that nation states face.

The proposal in Belgium in this year to ban Islamic headscarves on public schools is a good example of the domestication of Islam. It is a reaction to the fact that an increasing number of Muslim women enter the higher ranks of society. But it is first of all an unfruitful attempt to control and to regulate religious practices and to uphold the myth of public neutrality.

One of the effects of the spread of domestication policies across Europe is that research agendas on Islam in Europe tend to focus almost exclusively on the political priorities of integration and domestication. This has produced a paradoxical situation. Whereas Islam has become the common denominator for a wide range of phenomena, problems, attitudes and developments, as fields of research religious practices and the production of religious knowledge among Muslims have suffered from programmatic concealment and downright neglect. Despite some good studies in the field of anthropology and theology that deal with religious practices among Muslims in Europe, in most research the normative dimensions of Islam seem to be taken for granted.

It is tempting to attribute domestication policies, with its emphasis on governance, containment and security, predominantly to '9/11'. The roots of domestication, however, must be sought in the immigration policies of European countries of the early 1980s. In those years a gradual shift took place from an emphasis on the economic absorbing mechanisms of host societies to the cultural characteristics of the migrant populations. Migrants became increasingly visible on the streets and in neighborhoods where they settled with their families. They represented the growing cultural diversity in the public realm in European cities. Labor migrants were now called 'ethnic minorities', or 'cultural minorities'. In the course of the 1980s 'Muslim culture' emerged as separate explanatory category.

In the early 1990s most governments in Western Europe were becoming increasingly concerned about how to 'integrate' Muslims into their societies. This was of course not something new, but unmistakably new was the strong emphasis on the juxtaposition of the perceived liberal and secular foundations of West-European nation-states and the religious traditionalism that Muslim immigrants were said to carry with them.

I take a critical stance towards the dominant conceptual grip in which much of the present-day research on Islam in Europe finds itself. Islam has become a highly politicized topic. It follows that research on Islam is politically relevant almost by definition. Yet, political relevance does not imply that researchers should blindly follow the political priorities of domestication. If we really want to understand how Islam evolves among Muslims in Europe, first of all we should demonstrate that all aspects and dimensions of Islam in Europe are relevant and not just the problematic issues that reach the press. Religion continues to be an active social force also in Western societies and this is something that must guide research agendas. The

common analytical tools to study religion, however, turn out to be insufficient and inadequate.

There are particularly three fields that in my view have suffered from academic neglect. The first field concerns everyday practices of Islam as we can observe them in local settings such as neighborhoods. The second field concerns religiousness among young Muslims in Europe, and the third field concerns styles of Islamic leadership and sources of religious authority.

Let me now take a closer look at these three fields as I consider them crucial for the development of my research agenda in the years to come.

### **1. Locality and the 'practice of everyday Islam**

When it turned out that Mohammed Bouyeri the murderer of filmmaker Theo van Gogh, had been an active member of the local community in his neighborhood in Amsterdam, many people were bewildered. How could a well integrated man who had spent almost his whole life in the Netherlands, turn into a vicious murderer inspired by radical Islamic ideologies? Or rather, how can a radical violent Muslim also be a member of the local community? One could easily explain this anomaly away by pointing at the changes Bouyeri went through when he came in contact with radical ideas and ideologies. His born-again radicalism was a second life. One can also suggest that Bouyeri wasn't really integrated in the local community, as proven by his flirtation with radical Islamic ideologies. And there are always people who are ready to testify that Bouyeri, like many other young Moroccans in the neighborhood, had always been 'a pain in the ass' rather than a decent community member.

But there is a more widespread explanation here. Older neighborhoods with a relatively high proportion of Muslim inhabitants in cities like Manchester, Amsterdam, Berlin or Paris are increasingly studied top-down, from the perspective of the social engineers of integration and national security. These neighborhoods are portrayed as arenas of contestation and struggle over scarce resources, where violent confrontations between groups of inhabitants are rule rather than exception, and where there is no social cohesion at all.

It is this image that stood behind the many analyses and explanations of the riots in some suburbs of Paris in 2005. The local population consists of a numb, poorly integrated and poorly educated majority, a rebellious and trouble-making youth, and a minority of 'indigenous' inhabitants that are the real victims of it all.

This helicopter view with its superimposed schemes of identity and coherence has profoundly influenced our perceptions of local communities. It dehumanizes the local population and reduces them to governmental policy categories and cultural caricatures. It does no justice to all kinds of local practices, strategies, coping mechanisms, initiatives and networks that are developed in order to reach out to fellow inhabitants and to build up the texture of the local community across ethnic

and religious dividing lines. There is much more local knowledge and agency available than municipal policy makers admit.

Muslims in local neighborhoods develop a sense of religion that reflect their local rootedness in diverse and fascinating ways, without cutting off links with their roots. In the 1990s I carried out research in local Islamic organizations in the city of Rotterdam. More often than not, it turned out that decisions taken by local leaders went against the grain of municipal policies, or against the agenda of the national headquarters of the Islamic organization. There was for example a continuous dispute about the location and the size of mosques. Both the municipality and the national headquarters opted for large scale project outside the residential areas. Local Muslims on the other hand considered a mosque an integral part of the local community. Without any insight into what local dynamics imply, in such cases it is easy to accuse local community leaders of obstruction and troublemaking.

The so-called 'Polder moskee' in Amsterdam is an example of an initiative that explicitly comments on the image of mosques according to the dominant integration discourse. The initiators of this mosque, where Dutch is the lingua franca, aim at providing a genuine Dutch Islamic institution. The way the project was framed was also a clear message to those who still consider Islam to be an outside intruder that has to be domesticated.

I call this 'the practice of everyday Islam', denoting practices and outlooks that connect everyday experiences, networks and interactions with Islamic reasoning and Islamic aesthetics. A thorough analysis of the dynamics of locality provides us with crucial insights into the making of everyday Islam. These insights are extremely relevant for a better understanding of how Islam takes shape in European societies. Locality, it should be emphasized here, is a relational concept, not a scalar one. Local does not imply social closure per se. This is a misinterpretation of the complexities of local networks and their relations with the wider society. The local neighborhood, not necessarily the administrative area with official boundaries, is a site of everyday practices that link global processes with the fabric of daily human experience. The production of locality is about how to make national and global flows and pressures into meaningful local experiences and packages of knowledge. Everyday Islam should be explored through detailed ethnographic research on daily practices of community building, rituals, personal life histories, ego documents and collective memory accounts of Muslims in Europe.

Research into practices of everyday Islam will also help to overcome the misleading, yet understandable distinction that is being made between so-called indigenous Muslims in the Balkans and Eastern-Europe on the one hand, and Muslim migrants in Western Europe on the other. Islam has already been an integral part of Europe for centuries, but as we all know, Islam and Europe are currently depicted as opposing worlds. Islam is depicted as a force from outside. Yet if we take a closer look at

several parts of Europe, we come across accounts and experiences that may well go against the dominant one-dimensional image of Islam as a foe. We cannot understand the development of Europe as a socio-cultural realm unless we take into account the very diverse encounters with Islam throughout Europe. To explore the place of Islam in Europe in all its dimensions, we need a much more sophisticated frame of analysis than the integration paradigm.

## **2. Youth, politics, religion and popular culture**

Consider the following two cases!

The first slide gives an impression of the so-called 'National Iftar', a novelty meeting set up as a reception at the end of the holy month of Ramadan. It is organized as part of the yearly 'Ramadan festival' and one of the final events of the four weeks of activities that revolve around the Islamic fasting period. There are public lectures, music, Islamic fashion events, film, cooking competitions, commodity fairs for halal products, all very much designed to provide this Islamic obligation with a flavour of modern spirituality fitting to the social environment in which young Muslims in Europe function. It is also organized as a message to Dutch society at large that Muslims constitute an integral part of that society. The whole scene bears a striking resemblance to the average New Year's reception. This is actually how it has been organized.

On this slide we see Samir A., one of the protagonists of the Hofstad group, a network of alleged Muslim terrorists in the Netherlands that had been arrested by the police in late 2004, following the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Samir performs a video testimony. This has become a well-known means by which suicide bombers announce their intended attacks. Here Samir A. first addresses his parents warning them to obey God and to follow the Quran. He then gives a warning to the Dutch audience. The careful composition of the video-testimony and the specific rhetorical build-up reveals a thorough understanding and application of particular figures of performative style and figures of speech that make sense in the 'West'.

The common sense explanation of these two contrasting cases would be that they exhibit the two sides of integration. Samir A. represents the world of a small number of young Muslims who have almost completely divorced themselves from mainstream society. The organizers and participants of the National Iftar during the Ramadan festival on the other hand, are well on the way to turning their 'problematic' religion into a cultural relic comparable to Christmas or Easter.

However, the two cases have much more in common than is assumed. They are both examples of religious aesthetics and the contemporary making of religious selves among Muslim youth in Western Europe. They are both examples of new modes of Islamic visibility, style and performative acting. And they are both pursuits of truthfulness. An exploration of the religious practices and convictions of young

Muslims is only successful when seemingly contradictory cases such as the two just described become part of the same analytical framework. Common parameters, with which religiousness is being measured, such as mosque attendance, are insufficient to capture new modes of religiousness. Meaningful and productive research on Islam among young people should go beyond mere discursive dimensions of religious engagement and include the following four conceptual clusters.

These are: (1) performance and self-styling, commoditization and popular culture, (2) discipline, embodiment and techniques of the self, (3) authenticity, truth and authority, (4) identity politics, the public sphere and the competences to act publicly. I intend to set up research that brings together these clusters. Let me further elaborate them.

Performance and self styling, commoditization of religion, and popular culture refer to the obvious fact that religious engagement and religious expression are by definition public acts. Religion exists by virtue of its practicing, its acting-out, and its performance. Only then does it render social meaning. Style, performance and aesthetics are central concepts in the understanding of the reproduction of Islam among young people in Europe. An exploration of the enormous diversity in the modes of religiosity among young Muslims convincingly demonstrates that common parameters of religiosity such as mosque attendance are inadequate. We are only beginning to grasp how new modes and new forms work.

An Islamic fashion show, a religious entertainment evening, a 'halal reception', a public speech, a religious hip hop concert, an Islamic stand-up comedian, media training sessions for Muslims, a training session for Muslim women to learn how to act publicly, an Islamic healing session aimed at strengthening self confidence, the public appearance of women in *nikaab* or *chadori*, the production of video-testimonies, all pertain to the religious realm. For the people involved in these kinds of activities, they are utterly relevant in the making of the religious self and the constitution of a religious community.

Style is not simply 'having ideas' and expressing them. It is an embodied practice that is durable and assumes cultivation and discipline. It assumes an achieved competence in performing a certain style. We cannot fully understand the religious implications of the hijab when we ignore its symbolic significance, its normative underpinnings and not least the embodied moral disposition that comes with it. Style, it should again be emphasized, is not a kind of free of choice self-making activity. Donning the hijab is as much a 'body technique' invested with passion and emotion, as a religious symbolic act that enacts a certain relation towards a discursive tradition. It is a way to deepen one's convictions.

Authenticity, truth and authority are crucial to understand religious engagement among young Muslims in Europe. One of the fallacies of the privatization and individualization thesis of religion that we come across in many of the present-day publications on Islam in Europe is the idea that religious authority becomes obsolete and that ethics only reside in the individual. Young Muslims do,

however, not just construct their own Islam out of nothing. Religious engagement is a process of community building, subjectivation and the development of ethics. The religious self develops in a context of discursive traditions and regimes of truth.

If we take performance, style and public appearance as inherent elements of modern religiosity and religious practice, it follows that religious engagement with the public sphere is almost by definition identity politics, and this requires certain competences to act publicly. When Muslims act publicly they comment on the characteristics of the public sphere and contribute to its transformation. The numerous so-called headscarf-affairs that regularly occur throughout Europe, and also the public reactions that both public and political activities of Muslims arouse, are indications of the profoundly contentious character of the presence of Muslims in Europe. Young people who were born and raised in Europe argue that they do not want to be treated as guests who have to earn their place in society. They are already a part of that society whether some people like that or not.

### **3. Styles of Islamic leadership and sources of religious authority**

The general observer of the organizational landscape among Muslims in Europe about two decades ago would probably conclude that the picture was clear and simple. There were Muslims with strong familial ties back home, their religious practices were rooted firmly in the countries of origin, and mosques were run by Muslim organizations that had their origins also in the home countries, often controlled by headquarters there. Leadership and sources of religious authority were considered to self-evidently emanate from religious doctrine.

When we, however, look at the present-day Islamic landscape in Europe, the picture is blurred. Islamic leaders legitimized by conventional means of religious conveyance are complemented and challenged by rival and alternative articulations of belief and practice.

New technologies of communication circumvent traditional centres of learning. This has resulted in an unsettling of religious authority altogether. As a consequence, Islamic leadership has undergone profound transformations. Next to the imams and the spokespersons of Muslims organizations, there are new types and new forms and styles of religious leadership that do not fit into the traditional picture of an Islamic leader.

An increasing number of leaders operate on the intersection of media-stardom, public-opinion (political) leadership and religious innovator. New media technologies are not only instrumental in the emergence of these new religious expressions, these new leaders are themselves part of a process of religious renewal. Their number is increasing rapidly. 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. In all countries of Europe they play an essential role in the public debate on Islam.

Sometimes they act from a great distance and count more as a source of inspiration than as a tangible figure in situ. Sometimes these leaders are genuine celebrities

who owe their public role and popularity to modern mass media. They have supporters, fans, who attend their lectures and public performances and they dispose of persuasive qualities. The most well known and controversial celebrity at this moment is undoubtedly the Swiss Muslim philosopher Tariq Ramadan who worked for the Rotterdam municipality and the Rotterdam University, but Ramadan was sacked lately because of his alleged links with the Iranian government. Ramadan is at once immensely popular among well-educated young Muslims in Europe, and highly suspected by European governments. The same is true for the American Khalid Yasin, who visits Europe regularly.

Proper research on styles of Islamic leadership should take into account three interlocking dimensions: (1) modes of information management, (2) leadership aesthetics, (3) events and rituals.

One obvious but important aspect of the changes in styles of leadership concerns the modes of information management. At the time when most Muslims in Europe were strangers in their host countries, community leaders had a very powerful position because of their strategic position as intermediaries between Muslims and the host society. The authority of imams was predominantly based on their traditional position in the community. Today, new leaders do not speak on behalf of preconceived communities anymore. They address a public and must convince rather than represent. The conveyance of religious knowledge has become much more complicated than two decades ago.

It is also crucial to take into consideration how messages are put across, how speakers relate to audiences and to circumstances in which they operate. Their styles of arguing, their rhetoric strategy, and the specific settings in which they operate, as well as their media-image are as important, probably even more important, than sheer content. This has two important implications. First, religious knowledge comes into being as the result of representation and mediation of normative sources. Second, Islamic leadership can only be properly understood when we take its aesthetic dimensions as our point of departure. In other words the appropriate message for the particular situation is a matter of competence of the religious leader. As such modern religious leadership itself transforms religion and the Islamic leader becomes part of the religious experience.

There is yet another related aspect of new styles of Islamic leadership that has to be taken into consideration. Traditional representative leadership was to a certain extent independent from events. Today we see a different pattern of interaction. Leadership and publics are much more connected to specific events, often with a ritualized character. Events can be controversial and highly political. They can be hypes, or ritualized moments in long-lasting cases. But we should also think of gatherings and meetings with a much more ritualized character. The well-known Dutch hand shake incident is illustrative here.

A couple of years ago there was an incident in the Netherlands about an imam who refused to shake hands with a female minister. The incident reached the press and a debate ensued about the interplay of religious obligations, theological doctrines

and notions of Dutch civility. The debate was enhanced by the images of the incident that were shown on television over and over again. To fully understand the case in all its dimensions, it is not very productive to formally separate between statements by official imams and other sources of information, or between Muslims and non-Muslims, because it is the multiplicity of voices and images and the way in which these direct the course of the event that is relevant here. This touches on the changing ethics of public performance, an issue that has hardly been addressed with respect to Islam in Europe.

The most well-known example in my view of the ritualization of events, is no doubt the famous 'I-have-a-dream' speech of Martin Luther King in 1963. It started as a regular political speech against racism, but through the qualities of the performance, the use of Biblical phrases and the way in which the public was drawn into the event, King created a moral imperative with a highly religious character. A similar effect was produced by some of the election speeches of Barack Obama in 2008.

I consider research on new styles of Islamic leadership as they emerge throughout Europe indispensable for the understanding of how Islam is taking shape in European societies today. Future research on this issue should take leadership as part of a new religious experience much more seriously, not least because this is the only effective way to understand how Islamic constituencies are produced. It is my intention to elaborate my preliminary findings on Islamic leadership into a research program based on the theoretical reflections I have mapped out.

### **To CONCLUDE**

Islam in European societies is a subject of great academic relevance. This is not because of the problematic nature of some events and actions of Muslims, but simply because Muslims are here to stay. Within less than a decade from now the vast majority will have been born and raised here. For a number of them the significance of Islam will wane, but for others it constitutes an integral element of their life-worlds. As a consequence Muslims will leave their mark on European societies. The ways in which this will occur will display an increasingly diversified picture. The rooting of Muslims in Europe starts from the actual fact that Muslims constitute an integral part of European societies, but at the same time modern mass media and modern means of communication enable Muslims to build networks and communities across borders. This is very much in evidence. Instead of evaluating these practices as integration issues, as researchers we must develop new ways and new approaches that do justice to new realities.

The interdisciplinary VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society (VISOR) under which my chair is subsumed, offers a perfect academic environment in which to develop a genuine future research agenda on Islam in European societies. With VISOR as my institutional basis I intend to further explore the

aforementioned fields of inquiry and develop research programs and research plans in national and international cooperation with colleagues across Europe.