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## Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism

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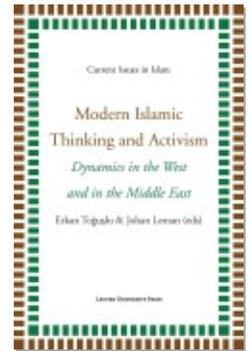
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## CHAPTER 3

# Tariq Ramadan and Abdullahi An-Na'im's Islamic Gender Reform in the Brussels Moroccan Community

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*Thierry Limpens*

### **Scholarship and followership: a different 'liberalizing'**

Over the past decades, grassroots emancipatory groups in Belgium have succeeded in setting the promotion of gender equality as an express state agenda. Liberal laws protecting women's rights were the first in the country to be voted (Ouali 2012: 101 ff.), and in 2003 same-sex marriage became legal.<sup>1</sup> This change confronts state recognized religions, resulting in Muslim scholars calling for reflection on the position of the Islamic community in the more and more secularized, non-religious Belgian society. The answers given by these scholars echo among both Muslims and non-Muslims. To the latter group Muslims' position is not clear, as it has issued out of three to four generations of peasant migrants since the 1950s, mainly Moroccans and Turks, who form an urbanized ethnic minority with a religion that is conceived in the Belgian non-Muslim mentality as 'imported', or even 'imposed'. Non-Muslims feel overwhelmed by the incoming Muslim culture that over the past decades has rapidly expanded in the major cities where Muslims constitute perhaps over 80 or 90 per cent of the population living together in concentrated zones, particularly in parts of a few central Brussels boroughs. These zones in the state capital are densely populated and young, implanted in 'Muslim halves' of districts of 100,000 habitants each that are known for their poverty, particularly of women (cf. Ouali 2012: 107-108; H'Madoun 2011; Bendadi 26-04-2010; [www.observatbru.be](http://www.observatbru.be)).

For many of the secularized majority of Belgians, including the small remaining number of Christians in these districts who over the past few decades have themselves become liberal-moderate, Muslims, and Moroccans in particular, are perceived as stagnating in religious conservatism, not least on gender norms. This opinion is often deduced from the number of Islamic projects that are set up, usually in mosques. For example, more than half of the mosques in the 19 Brussels districts are in three highly multicultural central boroughs with significant Moroccan dominated zones (cf. Maço & Kanmaz 2009: 36; Kanmaz e.a. 09-2004: 16). This evolution is seen by some non-Muslims as 'scary' and likely to 'Islamize' the whole of the Belgian state capital.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is witness to another situation. The 2007-2013 'emic', or 'Muslim inside', data we collected through participant observations and through nearly 90 interviews and talks in one of the Moroccan dominant zones in Brussels conclude about Muslims' developing an almost invisible, natural and not so profiled 'intermixing', in Eriksen's (2002: 40-44) terms 'ethnic categorical' networking, resulting in a varying 'liberalizing' of religious identities, which is easily overlooked by outsiders, such as whereas they call for more women's rights and gay-friendliness in the Muslim community. This complex, highly diffuse process is characterized by a series of combined aspects that go beyond knowing whether liberal Muslims on the research side form a minority or not. Practically speaking we can presume that from a religious point of view the conservative line is more against gay rights (LGBTQ) than against women's rights. Though, whatever the issue of rates, the utility of our qualitative research study lies in bringing into the picture in what settings 'liberalization' finds place.

A first 'categorical' aspect brings us to the intersection theory defining gender as about the totality of 'sections' composing our social relations, such as race, sexuality, social class, etc. (cf. Ferguson 2013). In other words, religion is just one aspect contributing to liberalization, even if it seemingly dominates in certain places. What is more, people can subscribe conservative religious ideas, but when it comes to putting them into practice in daily life, in order to remain in balance with other 'sections' in their lives, they re-translate them into liberal ones in such 'smart' ways that their conservative status is visibly never endangered.

A second feature has to do with the gradual and competition based mediation of change in the Islamic community with its impact on Muslim society. This facet makes us look at Clifford Geertz's (2001 [1966]: 62-68; 1979) standard conclusion about Moroccans functioning with Islam as a cultural complex of rules and ideas that are transmitted over generations and thought over by influential personalities.

In this context, we have on the research site observed a rivalry between, on the one side, patriarchal women-unfriendly norms and anti-gay machismo and, on the other side, women's and homosexuals' (LGBTQs)<sup>3</sup> emancipation wishes. These are ethnic belongings in which Islam has for many on both sides of the 'liberals-vs.-conservatives' dichotomy a mediatory role, but not only preaching in local mosques, and in recent years also by Youtube/Dailymotion, where important and other kinds of scholars upload their teachings. This mechanism can be called 'religious ethnicity' (Greeley, 1971: 42), referring to some Muslims' seeking from Islam answers to enable them to position themselves in society. In this context, on the research site we have observed Moroccan women talking about their evolution from conservative to more liberal and their looking after the liberalizing Islamic stances of the 'moderate' Tariq Ramadan, though these references tend to be overlooked by mainstream opinion if they are not reported in the media.<sup>4</sup> They are put in even more of a bad light if the scholar himself is pictured as a 'double-speaker', nicely hiding from the non-Muslim world his 'real fundamentalist' objectives (Fourest 2008; s.d., 'The doublespeak'; Favrot 2004).

Gilles Deleuze's (cf. 1990, 1986) observations on 'bodily affection' bring in a third, last aspect of liberal Muslims' categorical ethnicity. This refers to people's experience-based ability, through their affections of the 'body' (in its broadest sense), to find or not find the means to create daily wellbeing. In Deleuze's analysis, for the religious Muslim this searching for meaning is 'transcendentally immanent', or: one's longing for something 'more', 'higher' or 'central', while being unquestionably anchored in the proper contingent iterative context. In this setting, our data reveal that Islamic liberalism finds its way from inside Muslims' sometimes contradictory and often complex contexts. This is observed differently for scholarship and for followership, as we learn in this chapter from our analysis of the journeying of two gender reformative, liberalizing Islamic scholars, Tariq Ramadan and Abdullahi An-Na'im. Both reformers' scholarship has in common the idea that theories become more 'iterative' once they search for applications in often competitive fields. Agent followers, on their part, often yet more seek to reconcile local oppositions and collaborate with 'de-essentializing' Islamic bridging figures. In sum, 'bodily affection' is about the iterativeness of both an engaged scholarship and an agency followership, about people's relation to pluralism, to the possibilities that are created and the challenges that are met. This aspect of liberalism reveals a process of 'un-decidability', or not "... paralysis in the face of the power to decide ..." (Derrida 1999: 66), but our responsibility

towards two or more valuable options. Often without that we find support in procedures and programmes.

A first type of this ‘un-decidable’ liberalizing scholarship brings us to the worldwide influential Swiss-born Islamic scholar (cf. Esposito 2009: 85, 97), Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962). This scholar can be counted among the ‘liberal-conservative’ voices pleading for gender change in the Muslim community. Ramadan is liberal whereas he calls himself a ‘radical reformer’ (2008b), or a ‘deconstructionist’ (2008a: 67-68, 92-93), referring to his hermeneutics (2008b: 14, 111 ff., 173 ff., 279 ff.) that plead for iterative, time-bound translations of Qur’anic/traditional ‘higher objectives’ into more gender-friendly cultural principles. In his eyes, this is a ‘Muslim internal’ operation for which he provides the support of intercultural dialogue (2009, 2002b) and the help of modern science (2008b: 278), such as anthropology and other social sciences for a reinterpretation of society. In practice, these liberal hermeneutics make the ‘gender reformist’ scholar (2008a: 94 ff.; 2008b: 10, 201-203, 267-301) not only call for letting women make their own independent decisions and even developing Islamic leadership. As is less evident in today’s Islam, he (2008a: 30-32) calls for more tolerance towards homosexuals (LGBTQs).

Ramadan is also a conservative thinker, calling himself (2008b: 7-15; 2004: 24-30; 2002: 19-30) a ‘reformed Salafi’, meaning that he does not shrink from centering his ‘liberal un-decidability’ back on ‘classical’ Islamic norms, such as that religiously devoted Muslim women are supposed to wear an Islamic veil (*‘hijab’*) (2004b: 72-73) and that LGBTQs must not have gay sex (2008a: 30-32). For the scholar (LCP, ‘Audition’, 02-05-2012), this conservatism has its ‘Muslim internal’ justification as he believes that the theological debates in Islam must have their own autonomy as long as they broadly respect state law. In sum, Ramadan is ‘liberal-conservative’, whereas he pleads for letting Muslim internal/external ‘un-decidability’ result in liberal practical/theoretical tolerance and change in combination with a ‘centering back’ on conservative Islamic ideals.

According to some (cf. Zemni 2009: 89; Salvatore 2006: 99; Sunier 24-10-2001), Ramadan overlooks ‘Muslim meaning in the plural’, whereas he concentrates Islamic reform around his idealizing stances, this with the public he finds for it. This chapter builds on this critique while completing it by observing the scholar’s iterativeness when he exposes himself on TV and other platforms to oppositional debates, making him, for instance, slightly revise former opinions about the fact that women are supposed not to lead mixed-gender prayers (Ramadan, Interview by Mende 2009b; Neiryneck & Ramadan 1999: 118). What is more, the data reveal

an agency followership of the scholar that is even more than himself engaged into 'un-decidability'. This we conclude from both the 'liberal-conservative' mosque 'pole' and the 'liberal' women's and gay rights associations 'pole'.

The liberal-conservative Ramadan 'pole' of the research site, which we have observed in a Brussels district since May 2007, is described in the last section of this chapter. It is represented by a few 'Ramadan-inspired' mosques, and particularly by one 'mega-mosque' in which rivalry among Islamic currents makes agents engage in the 'pragmatic un-decidability' of working together on joint projects. This is that these initiatives cannot incorporate the identity of this or that current in particular, though they create space for Ramadan's call to have female Muslim leadership implemented. At this point, the 'mega-mosque' that also calls itself the Islamic centre is, in the light of its expansion as among the biggest in its kind in Belgium, the place par excellence for Muslim difference. Today (January 2014) it has prayer floors for up to 4,000 women and men, classes for its educational projects that every week attract almost 1,000 youngsters, and it regularly invites Ramadan among other scholars to give public talks.

Within walking distance from the observed 'mega-mosque', there are a series of women's emancipation centres, and a bit further on a Muslim LGBTQ rights association that is also active. These form the 'liberal pole' in which Ramadan finds another, specific gender reformative agency and public. This pole was followed for the study from February 2011 through participant observations in the gender emancipatory programmes that annually reach up to several hundred participants, mainly local Muslim women. Agents there are inspired not only by Ramadan, but also by a few leading scholars within the so-called international 'liberal Muslim movement' (cf. Moosa 2007: 115-118). They believe that Islamic scholars from different liberalizing ideological backgrounds must be put forward with the aim of letting them form a bridge between the liberal and conservative adherents in the local community. In this position, as liberals they show themselves to be close also to the type of far driven 'un-decidability' scholarship we find represented by the U.S. based Sudanese born human rights scholar, Abdullahi An-Na'im (b. 1946).<sup>6</sup> This reformer (2008, 1996) pleads for women's rights in Islam, for coming up for freedom of opinion and for a deconstructionist, or a de-essentializing and democratizing (Baderin 2010: xxxvii-xxxviii), declaring that as long as Muslims submit to the principle of international human rights standards, none of them, whether liberal or conservative, must be discriminated against, in either the Islamic community or society at large. An-Na'im (idem; 2010, 1999, 1990) is 'Muslim un-decidable' in a protagonistic way, calling himself

‘visionary heretical’<sup>7</sup>, as he considers that Muslims actually do not and principally cannot take the lead in the higher international human rights ideal, though at the same time he declares that Islamic fundamentals are not at all strangers to it. These highly ‘un-decidable’ stances are taken over by local gender agents, though they are able to soften them down in order to reconcile the differences of their target public.

### The ‘liberal pole’: creating separated Islamic free-zones

A first ‘pole’ of gender reformation brings us to the so-called ‘liberal Muslim movement’. This movement has in recent years been known for endeavouring, mainly from outside the U.S., to create separate gay-friendly, mixed-gender and women-imam mosques (cf. Taylor 23-06-2007; Safi 02-05-2006) and, also in Europe, of other ‘free-zones’ such as women’s emancipatory centres and gay-rights associations. On our Brussels research site there has so far been no network of these new mosques, but what we see developing are (i) ad hoc, very occasional and discrete liberal Muslim prayer gatherings, (ii) pro-gay Muslim associations, and (iii) women’s emancipatory groups. These are the sites that we will discuss in this chapter. The evolution in these sites is highly iterative and close to the type of An-Na’im’s de-centrist ‘un-decidability’.

*A new promoting of ‘de-centrist un-decidability’* – In August 2007, ‘Muslims for Progressive Values’ (MPV) was created by Ani Zonneveld and Pamela Taylor to build a network of new-style mosques based on gay and women imams, on gender-mixing, as well as to call for socio-economic justice. This is an expanding movement in which imam Daayiee Abdullah of the Washington D.C. chapter is internationally one of the leading personalities, but also in which, just before its creation, the well-known Northern American Islamic scholar, Amina Wadud, played a crucial role with her public support and protagonism (Taylor 23-06-2007, 18-03-2006). In 2005-2006, Wadud ‘shocked’ half of the Muslim world when she led mixed-gender prayers and preached at the same occasion, first inside a church and later in a mosque. Many mainstream Muslim intellectuals, also on the research site, were critical of the act. The liberal An-Na’im (Bartlett, 08-08-2005) considered it sensational instead of persuasive and a possible hindrance to the defenders of women’s rights in Muslim majority countries.

Since this episode, an evolution in networking has been observed. Giving a few examples relating to An-Na'im, we stay first with 'Muslims for Progressive Values'. Looking at the group's website, it can be noted that on the 2011 version An-Na'im's works and also those of Ramadan were largely recommended (retrieved 02-02-2011). More recently, greater space has been given to An-Na'im and less to Ramadan, but the latter is referred to as an important Islamic reformer and as a militant against the death penalty.<sup>8</sup> In the context of MPV's gay rights position, this explicit reference to Ramadan may look strange, particularly after the scholar was criticized by some in the movement. The scholar's (2008a: 30-32) call for a kind of tolerance towards homosexuals (LGBTQs), whom he considers Islamically sinful, and his plea not to create 'separate gay mosques' are conceived by some as too passive and not de-stigmatizing enough ('Response', s.d.). Others believe that the scholar's position is a step in the right direction.

A second liberal 'un-decidable' network to which An-Na'im's name is formally linked is the 'American Islamic Fellowship' (AIF) of which the scholar is an advisory member. AIF was created in October 2007 in Atlanta in the U.S., where An-Na'im is based at Emory University, as a 'spiritual awakening movement' open to all, Muslims and non-Muslims, connected with a liberal Islam<sup>9</sup>, as is explained on its website:

"The fellowship believes that all people regardless of age, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, culture, language, social status, religious or philosophical affiliation, or education have the ability to be valuable contributory members to the fellowship."<sup>11</sup>

Since 2011, AIF has become 'Muslims for Progressive Values Atlanta' and is centered more on Muslims' longing to find a place and modality of gathering that can stand for a 'liberal mosque'. This 'Muslim centering' may be misleading, as MPV's approach enabling it to attract participating non-Muslims must not be ignored. Comparing our field data in contrast to this expanding U.S. network of 'visible mosques', the Brussels 'liberal Muslim movement' shows a much more discrete and ad hoc approach to endeavouring to use inclusive Muslim prayers. Nonetheless, the two movements are otherwise similar in 'un-decidability' as far as the gender 'liberationist' objectives they foster towards their target group are concerned.

Thirdly, An-Na'im says, in a 2008 interview (cf. Jones 2008: 136), that he has set up in his home town a de-centrist 'alternative religious Muslim network' outside

the traditional Islamic associations that he considers ‘superficial’, ‘partisan’ and ‘narrow’. About this network he remains vague in that one is not sure whether he is talking of AIF or either of the local poles of the ‘Republican movement’ that was founded decades ago in Khartoum by the late Sudanese sheikh, Mahmoud Taha (1909-1985), or whether he sees in Atlanta these two groups linked to each other. The fact is that the ‘Republicans’, of whom An-Na’im is a notable life member, met in January 2009 round the ‘100 years of progressive Islam conference’ that was organized at Ohio State University in the U.S. by the scholar and by other academics in the movement<sup>12</sup>. In January 2010, they gathered in Khartoum in Sudan for the inauguration of the Mahmoud Taha Cultural Centre in the sheik’s family house under the direction of his daughter, Asma Taha. This happened after 25 years of Diaspora since the reformer’s hanging for ‘heresy’. Taha told us on that occasion (Interview 18-01-2010), at which we were present in Khartoum, that the Republican movement is an informal network that is open to all, Muslims and others, who share her father’s message of peace. We had the chance to attend the inaugural meetings and discovered the ‘Republicans’ operating by way of platforms for open discussions on Muslims’ need to liberalize (Islamic) practices. During the sessions, all who wanted to address the delegates on either spiritual or societal-cultural topics relating to the discussion were free to come forward and to speak, for as long as they wished, about their chosen angle. To compare, in Brussels, in the observed emancipation centre, we have found similar kinds of platforms, for instance, at women-only tea gatherings that regularly take place. These create moments of free exchange of opinion around a chosen topic, while the ‘liberal’, ‘non-centered’ place that is given to Islam – to the extent that religion enters into the discussion – creates margins for reform-minded religious and for secular Muslims feeling at ease together.

In the same context of setting up platforms for open discussion, but more at an intellectual level, a fourth, ad hoc and scholarly de-centrist, ‘un-decidable’ networking in which An-Na’im is involved as one of the initiative takers is linked to the 2008 ‘Muslim Heretics Conference’ in Atlanta in the U.S., also known as ‘A Celebration of Heresy Conference: Critical Thinking for Islamic Reform’. The conference gathered, beyond divergences of opinion, liberal intellectuals and scholars<sup>13</sup>, Muslims and non-Muslims, some of whom An-Na’im has closer academic contact with<sup>14</sup>. It believed that “... it is the Muslims that need reform not Islam ...”, and, hence, pleaded for having more ‘un-decidable’, de-centrist debates.<sup>15</sup> In this model, we recognize the observed emancipation centre’s organization of



*Local women like to be informed on societal issues. Here, they are returning from a group visit to the bank.*

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debate evenings with keynote speakers from different ideological backgrounds, as this approach corresponds to the Belgian socio-cultural state-funding requiring a sufficient level of discursive pluralism. This setting is not perfect, as the observed centre coordinator points out that in Belgium 'openness towards different directions' after all remains a wishful ideal. She experiences secularism being too much state imposed and hindering Muslims' internal and external reflections from going hand in hand. Whereas Islam is discussed, secularized Westerners are less likely to join the debates, except where the 'Muslim organizers' choose the card of religious liberalization for which state funds can easily be found. Meanwhile, in the latter case, the dominantly conservative Muslim public of the research site remains visibly more absent.

*'Un-decidable' free-zones in 'core-Islamic' Brussels* – For some years, the de-centrist 'un-decidability' approach of women's emancipation centres on the research site has attracted the attention of a local Muslim gay rights association trying to mediate a wider 'liberalization' there. This objective is not evident towards the often highly 'conservative' attendees at the women's centres on the site. Witness

of it gives a state subsidised meeting on gender justice that was organized by the end of 2011 with the support of the Moroccan female coordinator of the centre who was closely observed for the study.

Discussions we had with both organizers of the meeting made clear that the LGBTQ coordinator, herself a woman, was encouraged to come to the emancipation centre as she believed that it could positively change the opinions of the women there. Despite this conviction, in the centre it was only the coordinator who explicitly engaged in the debate. This has reasons beyond a good part of these women's personal 'not so open' ideology, relating to the fact that in the eyes of many local 'conservative' Muslims, particularly of men, gay rights activists are conceived as being like 'heretics'. As a consequence, for the women it is clear that endeavouring to attain their own so far delicate rights must not be endangered by their willingly or unwillingly joining the homosexuals battle. Their situation is today not at the level of the past evolution in Belgium of women emancipating first from the society's dominant catholic patriarchalism and then, openly or not, supporting the LGBTQs' liberation wishes.

With the 2011 meeting it was LGBTQ Muslims who sought 'ethnic incorporation' in Brussels by means of a local women's emancipating centre. The latter's coordinator felt that it would have been better to work with the more moderate Ramadan instead of with the so-called 'pink Imam' from South Africa, Mushin Hendricks, who was invited to the meeting. In the group of women, Hendricks was perceived as too 'centrist' because of his wanting to prove what is not necessarily accepted by all Muslim LGBTQ activists (cf. interview 21-11-2010); this is that the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition must be seen as 'gay neutral'.

The women of the centre did not join Hendricks' lessons that were open to a larger public attracting many non-Muslims. They gathered around Amina Wadud, who was also invited. This scholar showed understanding as she did not confront the women with her support of the day before on her Belgian tour, in more 'internal liberal circles', for the creation of 'gay-friendly mosques'. Instead, she shared her experiences with Malaysian Muslim women, with whom she organizes discussions about gender-friendly interpretations in Islam. This general topic was supposed to be recognizable by the Moroccan women because of its 'un-decidability', giving space to reflection and open discussion. Nevertheless, the women's quasi silence contrasted with their eagerness to seek advice from a Moroccan female keynote speaker some months later in a meeting in the local 'mega-mosque'. According to the coordinator, the interventions of the day were

Islamically too ideological and they did not advise mothers on what to do when they themselves had an LGBTQ daughter or son.

Wadud's presentation was attended by a male representative of the local 'Ramadan-friendly' 'mega-mosque'. He pointed out that what the scholar proposed had already been achieved in his institute. His remark led to a discussion afterwards between him and the centre coordinator. The latter was of the opinion that mosques, even those inspired by Ramadan, still have a long way to go before becoming fully gay- and women-friendly. On the other hand, she complained about the difficulty in her association of obtaining state subsidies for 'liberal-conservative' Islamic thinkers like Ramadan. She argued that in this setting conservative local Muslim women attending her centre did not feel sufficiently state supported to create the emancipatory 'free zones' they wished for. They viewed the inviting of liberal scholars with the use of state money as an external interference from the dominant non-Muslim society. Other women in the group themselves evolved from conservative to liberal. Or they were just liberal 'by nature' and they had sympathy for Ramadan and for other reformative thinkers, but in the context of the tense religious environment in which they lived they preferred not to be associated with the most liberal ones. Because of these feelings in the women's group, the coordinator suggested in the end that there should be a 'counter' reconciliatory meeting. She hoped to be able to invite Ramadan for that occasion.

### **The 'liberal-conservative' pole: inculturalizing reformed Salafism**

The 'liberal-conservative' Ramadan (2008b: 7-15; 2004: 24-30; 2002: 19-30) calls himself a 'reformed Salafi' as regards his belief in a constant 'opening' reinterpreting, or 'liberalizing', of classical 'conservative-centrist' Islamic sources. His promoting of these legacies has its greatest impact in mainstream Muslim circles. As is observed by Dassetto (2011: 229, 257-259) in the Brussels context and pointed out by Ramadan himself (2008a: 11, 14-15, 38-39), the scholar stands opposed to the 'hermetic centrism' of those whom he calls 'literalist Salafis' wanting to apply textually 7<sup>th</sup> century Islamic prescriptions. We will see in this section that over and above this binary rivalry there is room for competition among a wider variety of Salafi currents that end up in 'pragmatic un-decidability' once they engage in joint projects and mediate or even give occasion to common Muslims' higher level of iterativeness. In this sense, our data reveal that

Ramadan's definition of 'Salafi literalists' is best adjusted to draw a distinction, among other possible nuances, between moderate or 'harmonizing literalists' and radical or 'conflicting' ones. Finally, the 'classical pole' is, apart from the agency of Ramadan's own created civil society organizations, not so much involved in the scholar's call for more gay-friendliness. The pole's Ramadan-friendly agency must be sought in the scholar's plea for giving women a better place in the Muslim community.

*'Open centrism': connecting gender reformative Islam to civil society* – Ramadan is a brilliant networker in both 'Islamic' and 'secular' civil society, setting up direct collaborations everywhere and reaching out to large numbers of people. His agency is 'open to the Western condition', a fact which has in the past few years given him assignments as an advisor to the European Union, to the British Government, to the Rotterdam municipality in the Netherlands and to the French parliament, all relating to Muslims, in the scholar's (2008a, 96-104) own words, 'post-integration' of which, in the end, he says that the theological debates are 'Muslim internal' matters (Shavit 2014: 166; LCP, 'Audition' 02-05-2012; Baum 2009: 16; Ramadan 30-04-2008). In Belgium, Ramadan is not connected to politics, but some of his public talks attract nationwide media attention (cf. 'Foire musulmane' 29-09-2012; Vanlommel 03-02-2012). On the research site, he mainly joins the 'Muslim-internal' settings in which his 'liberal-conservative' reform proposals find a public. In this position, he happens to express critiques on 'classical' Islamic institutions (interview by Widmann 2008), as he (2002: 14 ff.) observes them competing with each other and not seeking to understand Muslims' modern life condition.

Ramadan's first international organization, the collective 'Muslim Presence' (MP), was set up by the end of the 1990s positively to incorporate reformative Muslims' position inside the faith community and society at large. MP's aim is to network towards 'Muslim citizenship', or the idea of Muslims contributing to the larger society and their reflecting about what Islamic spirituality encourages them to do to that end. This it does by creating 'small sized platforms for dialogue and exchange', leading to gender advocacy against forced marriage and honour killing, against discrimination against LGBTQs' and their punishment by the state (Seniguer & Sambe 21-07-2013), as well as in defence of women's rights to make decisions for themselves, such as on whether or not to wear an Islamic headscarf (Diallo 12-03-2013).<sup>16</sup>

In the past few years, MP's expansion looks as though it has slowed down. Whereas in 2011 the movement still mentioned on its website local poles in Belgium, France and Canada, today it seems to have limited its activities to the last country, more particularly to Montréal and Ottawa, and to CIMEF or its biannual African colloquium<sup>17</sup>. The Belgian (Brussels) branch that was active on the research site succeeded for almost a decade in gathering young Muslim women and men from different social and educational backgrounds. Since about 2008, the group has stopped its activities after most of its leading members themselves became busy personalities, some still in new projects in collaboration with Ramadan, or, more independently, in Ramadan-inspired initiatives inside the local 'mega-mosque' or elsewhere. Others suffered from external pressure to stop or reduce their advocacy for marginalized Muslims.

Another event that may explain the disappearance of a 'Muslim Presence' in Belgium is that in 2007-2008 Ramadan, together with some of MP's key members, created the 'European Muslim Network' (EMN). EMN is a Muslim advocatory think tank having its seat in Brussels and Muslim spokespersons in 15 European countries. On its website, Malika Hamida, the EMN director, is the main author of opinion texts discussing issues of gender justice. The network is militant against female genital mutilation and against the stigmatization of homosexuals<sup>18</sup>, for which, in its Brussels agency, it works together with Ramadan-friendly Muslim civil society organizations, with some of them being active on the research site.

*The mosque: centrist competitions, 'pragmatic un-decidability'* – Ramadan is regularly present in a few of the Belgian 'mega-mosques', and, on the research site, in a particular one that calls itself 'Islamic centre'. These are 'Muslim only', highly 'internal' places where we find different 'Salafi currents' competing over having space and Islamic influence. Specific in this rivalry is that while these groups each have their own theoretical centrism, they become 'un-decidable' once they engage in joint projects in which their divergences are never really defined openly and in which they cannot one-sidedly impose their own Islamic current.

In the 'Ramadan-inspired' Islamic centre mosque where we made our participant observations, the daily direction does not judge specific currents, except extreme liberal and fundamentalist ones. Like when its highly influential sheikh preached on a Friday at the beginning of 2011 to a public of up to 4,000 women and men against



*Women and men after Eid pray together for a street feast in front of the ‘mega-mosque’. Social media photo.*

“... separated Salafis who think to know Islam better than their parents and even their imam, after they have read only a few Islamic works”.

In the sheikh’s ‘mega-mosque’, two ‘Salafi currents’ are most represented: (i) the ‘liberalizing’, or ‘reformed’ ‘Ramadan-type’, and (ii) the one slightly more ‘conservative’, or ‘moderate, harmonizing literalist’, as e.g. linked to the scholar’s brother, Hani Ramadan.<sup>19</sup> If compared to the criticized ‘separatists’, the two groups are ‘mainstream Salafis’. Inside the mosque, they can easily be distinguished. For instance, the ‘Ramadan-liberal’ women, who do not hide their admiration for the scholar, are dressed in fancy, ‘blinkingly coloured’ head covers (*‘hijab’*), and, a few of them are even without. The latter are more usually present on the scholar’s 500,000 fan-rich Facebook pages and on his personal website<sup>20</sup>, but it is clear that women need courage to appear without a *‘hijab’* in the mosque, where this dress

is highly recommended. These 'Ramadan-Salafi' women also shake hands with men and they are easily found working in mixed-gender mosque offices, often together with their fellow male 'Ramadan followers' in the institute. In contrast to them, the more 'conservative Salafi' women are dressed in dark coloured veils covering the whole body. They stay only on the side of the separate 'women's mosque' and do not shake hands with men to whom they avoid or even refuse to address themselves verbally.

It is not clear which group of these two 'mainstream Salafi' women is more present and active in the Islamic centre mosque, but both are certainly not always involved in the same projects. The degree holding women of the 'Ramadan type' do not often attend the prayers and activities of the so-called 'women's mosque', separated from men, where the less educated and even analphabets are more represented and where at times alphabetization courses are organized. In projects in which the 'Ramadan liberal-conservatives' are involved, women like putting themselves at the same level as men. This challenges the official line of the exclusively *male* general direction board of the Islamic centre mosque, despite the fact that we have observed in recent years the projects of that institute also following Ramadan's call for letting mainstream Islam be more gender equal. For instance, its school for compulsory state education that was opened in 2007 is today directed by the only woman to whom is given a significant leadership position inside the institute. She is one of Ramadan's Islamic feminist fans in the place. Among the teachers working for her, who are mostly women, there are different Ramadan followers, but also others who are ideologically closer to the conservative 'moderate-literalists'. Because of this divergence, this civil society project, just like others in the Islamic centre mosque, finds it difficult to develop a fixed Islamic identity, though once it becomes state subsidized, as this is part of the Belgian agreement with religion, the secular contracts in which it is engaged will have occasion to develop wider gender reformative standards that appear to be closer to the 'liberal-conservative' 'Ramadan line'.

*'Anti-hudûd' agency: practical and theoretical 'un-decidability'* – Ramadan's gender reformation echoes in the 'liberal-conservative pole' of the research site through his setting up of field campaigns, such as that relating to what the scholar (2008a, 92-93) defines as cultural deconstruction, or the release of Islam from unauthentic, patriarchal malpractices. As such, there is his (2008a: 93; cf. 2008b: 294 n.1) international 2007-2008 campaign against forced marriage, against female excision and honour crimes. This campaign was supported by

the 'European Muslim Network' (EMN) and by some other connected Muslim organizations, also on the research site. It found large support, as according to our data, today there is the practically 'centrist' opinion that these customs have no place in Islam. Forced marriage seems to have disappeared and female excision is not really a Belgian-Moroccan practice. Only common Muslims are more 'un-decidable', whereas they often do not find theological arguments to defend this customary change. This brings in new 'practical un-decidability'. For instance, in the choice of a marriage partner the parents' interference is still significant, and even more dramatic can be the case of a Muslim Moroccan woman wanting to marry a non-Muslim man. We have ourselves witnessed a young single mother who was a divorcee from her first, Moroccan husband. When she started dating a non-Muslim Belgian, her brothers got to know about it, and before her father was informed, one of them decided to threaten to kill her boyfriend. She then hid herself for a while in the house of one of her sisters while her boyfriend thought about converting to Islam. Other quite common issues of genderized 'honour pressure' among Moroccans we find are that girls must be virgins on the day of marriage and that their husbands may ask them to start wearing an Islamic headscarf.

A similar theoretical/practical 'un-decidability' we find when looking at the field relevance of Ramadan's earlier 2005 campaign entitled 'An International call for Moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty in the Islamic World'. The official text of this call (05-04-2005) challenges Muslims in favour of 'classical' Islamic corporal punishments (*'budûd'*) like stoning to death. The initiative touches Ramadan's (2008a, 92-93) prediction of 'scriptural deconstruction' or critically looking at normative religious traditions. According to the scholar (*idem*), this deconstruction cannot be isolated from the cultural debate in which Islamic norms find their translation into state laws.

Ramadan (2008b: 356 ff.) does not agree with '*'budûd'* in Muslim dominant countries being imposed almost exclusively on women and on the poor. Nonetheless, he (28-04-2005) believes (i) that their Qur'anic tradition must be somehow respected, for instance with regard to the 'higher objective' of the necessity of 'Divine forgiveness' (cf. Neyrinck & Ramadan 1999: 109), but also (ii) that their interpretation is difficult, and above all (iii) that there are no fulfilled conditions to apply to them today. As regards this combined 'un-decidability', Ramadan (2008b: 356 ff.) defends himself against Western critiques that he is not as clear as liberal reformists, like Abdullahi An-Na'im (2005), calling for a complete abolition and not for 'only' a moratorium. The

scholar replies preferring the 'pragmatic-centrist', steadfast position of wanting to save lives while Islamic legal scholars can take their 'un-decidable' time to resolve the issue at a decisive judicial level. Ramadan compares the issue to what happens in the U.S., where calling for the abolition of the death penalty so far has never been successful. Finally, it is clear that his most *personal* opinion is outspokenly 'anti-*hudûd*' whereas he calls the punishments 'un-Islamic', as he did in following interview:

"I consider stoning, the death penalty and corporal punishment un-Islamic. There are a number of prominent Muslims who see that the same way" (Interview by Widmann 2008).

Unlike Islamic critiques of the campaign in Muslim dominant countries, particularly Egypt (cf. Ramadan 29-04-2005b, 29-04-2005a, 28-04-2005, 10-05-2005), on the research site 'common' Muslims, not at least Ramadan followers, are clear that a harsh penalizing state has no *practical* place in today's (Western) society. In contrast, some remain *theoretically* 'un-decidable' effectively calling for the abolition or even a moratorium of '*hudûd*' punishments that help them remember about 'higher' Islamic objectives relating to the idea of the 'just society'. This leads to conservative idiomatic interpretations among (but not uniquely) impoverished Muslims and among first generation migrant ones. For instance, as regards the rule of stoning to death for adultery and for fornication, the ideal can mean that chastity and respect for each other's sexual dignity must be promoted and that adultery and 'public sex' ('cheap one') are to be considered damaging to one's 'purity of the soul'. This is sometimes interpreted differently by men and women. Some men, not so much the Ramadan followers, use the idea of '*hudûd*' as a patriarchal threat against women, fostering female seclusion and other mobility restrictions, as explained by one of our female informants:

"If a woman, not a man, has sex outside marriage, the result is a figurative death sentence. No wonder that there are so many abortions among Moroccan Muslim girls here. Many young girls leave, in a manner of speaking, their father's house for the first time on the day of their marriage, and, after that, without the accompaniment of their husband, they will never travel outside their village or town (Interview 27-09-2010)."

Women, particularly those who are ‘Ramadan-inspired’, have their own idiomatic interpretations insisting on gender equality, on men being prohibited from sexually abusing women in both a wide and a strict sense; if not ‘divine forgiveness’ through ‘punishment’ must be sought. This does not literally mean ‘stoning’, but the cruelty of this ancient punishment must make the faith seeker remember about the holiness of Islamic prescriptions and seek correction of behaviour. This feminine gender standard is today co-promoted by the male Ramadan entourage of the site. The more classical sheikh in the Ramadan-inspired ‘mega-mosque’ is likely to follow this position, though with this difference: that he is tempted to propose male polygamy as a solution for some men’s difficulties in meeting the ideal of chastity. Another leading imam in this mosque follows Ramadan’s line (cf. Neiryneck & Ramadan 1999: 87, 99), and one of the scholar’s female followers, when he pleads for not speaking today in favour of male polygamy, this based on the idea that Islam promotes monogamy in the first place.

Some women in the observed ‘liberalizing’ emancipation centre complain about a few very ‘hostile’ male ‘literalist *budûd* promoters’ in their neighbourhood. Because of their emancipation wishes they are pictured by the latter as ‘weak’, as ‘easily influenced’ (‘unguided’, or: heretical) and as sensitive to accepting men’s seduction. The centre coordinator says that on occasions she is herself personally intimidated by women and men who sometimes come to create disorder in the centre’s gatherings or who aggressively address her when they pass in the street. This is the work of those whom Ramadan (2008a: 11, 14-15, 38-39) calls ‘radical Salafi literalists’, the ones who are also hostile to him. They consider ‘*budûd*’ a fundamental part of ‘Shari`a’ that must be applied once the Muslim community reaches out to the level of ‘Islamic society’. They feel themselves obliged to prepare the Muslim community for this. As a reason they give for this highly ‘centrist’ position, they refer to their belief in the classical idea that, for instance, it is through stoning that the sinner is forgiven by God and, hence, again allowed to enter the after-life paradise. In this conception, for these ‘radical Salafi literalists’, God’s mercy as a ‘higher objective’ depends on the state application of ‘eternal’ (unchangeable) and ‘divine laws’. In sum, as ‘non-deconstructionists’ they call for not making a distinction between state law and religious norms.

## Conclusion

In the highly multicultural Belgian state capital, Brussels, Moroccan gender agents on women's and gay rights find conditions and modalities enabling them to mediate Islamic liberalization. From inside their ethnic community they are directly or indirectly connected with the reformative legacies of both the 'liberal-conservative' scholar, Tariq Ramadan, and the liberal one, Abdullahi An-Na'im. This does not just bring them closer to the Belgian gender liberal state agenda. From inside mosques and state subsidised centres, they also respond to the emancipatory wishes of local Muslims. Agents in such centres are close to An-Na'im's outspoken iterative and open gender model calling for more women's and gay rights. They are also directly inspired by Ramadan whom they see as a bridging figure between the more conservative belongings of the local environment. Ramadan is more for women's rights and less for LGBTQs' ones, though he calls for tolerance towards the latter. This line fits the 'liberal-conservative' Ramadan-inspired mosques.

Both engaged scholars and agents understand through the projects they set up or coordinate that local Muslims seek guidance to the plurality of their environment and society at large. This condition is not evident as it demands mutual adaptation in which all parties try to find their own ways, try to work out their own answers and take positions. Despite this common perception, in this setting agents and local Muslims are slightly more than engaged scholars in their discursiveness, and in their self-styled projects hold by the need to mediate local differences.

## Notes

- 1 Belgium legalized same-sex marriage on 01-06-2003 as the second country worldwide after the Netherlands did the same on 01-04-2001 (Lee, 2010: 18-20).
- 2 See the following popularizing writings about the so-called Islamic fundamentalism of the Belgian Muslim community and particularly the Moroccan one that was observed for this study: Benyaich 2013, Calluy 2012; van Rooy & van Rooy 2010; Dedecker 2009; Dewinter 2009; Van Amerongen 2008; Fraihi 2006).
- 3 LGBTQ meaning: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer; or extended to LGBTQIA: adding Intersex and Asexual.
- 4 On the rise of 'Islamophobia' see Zemni's (2011) critique denouncing the negative role of the Belgian regular media.

- 5 Many definitions exist about 'conservative' Islamic currents that are linked to Salafism, such as relating to their connection or not to modernity (cf. Zemni 2006). In this chapter we do not go further in this academic debate, but we build on our Muslim-internal ('emic') data that we have centered around Ramadan's defining of Salafism as a sometimes more 'liberal-conservative', or 'reformative' (for himself), and sometimes more dominantly 'conservative', or the 'classical' current, the latter what in its extreme form is called 'Salafi literalism' by the scholar (Ramadan 2008a: 11, 14-15, 38-39) (cf. *infra*).
- 6 During our observations we did not find Moroccan agents referring to An-Na'im, in what may be due to the language difference (An-Na'im not publishing in French). Nevertheless, some of them collaborate with 'liberal' Islamic scholars who are part of An-Na'im's circle. Apart from this, in Belgium 'the scholar's' 'direct followers' are found among the handful of Belgian-Sudanese Muslims who belong, just like him, to the Sufi inspired so-called 'Republican movement' of the late sheikh Mahmoud Taha (1909-1985) (cf. Mahmoud 2007; An-Na'im 2008: 108-109 ff.). An-Na'im also has contacts in a group of militants of the Altermondialist movement, like e.g. Samir Amin (cf. 2000), who are linked with the World Social Forum founder and Taha admirer, the Belgian François Houtart (cf. 2002). Finally, his theories are internationally reflected on among academic human rights defenders, such as the promoters of his 2009 honorary doctorate at the universities of Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium (cf. Flobets 2010).
- 7 See: <http://www.youtube.com/user/muslimheretics> (retrieved 13-02-2013).
- 8 See: <http://mpvusa.org/portfolio/ijtihad> (retrieved 27-03-2013).
- 9 See Ramadan's intervention in the TV debate 'Hondelatte Dimanche «Homosexuel et bon musulman»' (16/05/2013) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O2J6DtKhU8>, uploaded by Tariq Ramadan on 03-06-2013; retrieved 20-06-2013).
- 10 See: <http://www.americanislamicfellowship.org> (retrieved 13-04-2011).
- 11 See: <http://mpvatlanta.org/faq> (retrieved 06-04-2011).
- 12 See: <http://www.african.ohio.edu/Conferences/index.html> (retrieved 19-05-2011).
- 13 See: <http://www.youtube.com/user/muslimheretics> (retrieved 13-02-2013).
- 14 See An-Na'im's academic websites at Emory University: <http://www.law.emory.edu/aannaim> and some other places (retrieved 02-03-2013).
- 15 See: <http://tabari.com/blog1/about> (retrieved 05-05-2011).
- 16 See: <http://muslimpresence.com> (retrieved 01-04-2011, 02-03-2013).
- 17 See: <http://www.cimef.net> (retrieved 12-09-2013).
- 18 See: <http://www.euro-muslims.eu> (retrieved 16-02-2013).
- 19 Of Hani Ramadan it is reported his defending, 'on Western ground', Islamic corporal punishments (cf. Widmann 2008). Whatever the truth of the case, our data reveal that the

scholar stands today in the observed mosque/Islamic centre for a less 'liberal' and a more 'literalist' Salafi line, as the two brothers are often compared to each other there.

20 See: <http://www.tariqramadan.com> (retrieved 15-02-2013).

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