Imams in Western Europe

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5 The European imam

A nationalized religious authority

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Abstract

This chapter argues that the position of the European imam is being nationalized and consequently rendered more dependent on both religious scholarship and political authority, and that the transmission of an ethicist message has become its major mission. First, this chapter briefly overviews the crisis of modern Islamic religious authority, situating the place of the imamate in Islamic scholarship to demonstrate that it is not an independent scholarly position but rather an administrator of the religious affairs of believers at the local level. Second, the chapter presents the model of the Moroccan imamate as a way of understanding the role that is expected of imams by modern political and religious authorities. Third, reference is made to the situation of the French imamate as an example of the situation of imams in Western Europe. The reflective closure of the chapter raises points about how the question of ethics is becoming central in the sermons and teachings of a growing number of imams, and how important it may be as a field for further research.

Keywords: Islam in Morocco, Moroccan imams, French imams, King Mohammed VI International Imam Training Center
1 Introduction

In the Sunni tradition, the study of the imams and imamate is a very recent phenomenon for two main reasons. First, simply paging through the tables of content of Islamic scholarly classics cannot direct you to chapters or clauses dedicated to the position of the imam and/or his roles. This is because neither the Quran nor the Sunna uses or emphasizes the term ‘imam’ as we know it today (i.e., ‘the leader of prayers and the mosque’). However, the term or its derivatives do appear in both. Second, this study originates in Western liberal societies whose state institutions have been unable to understand their Muslim minorities, or simply citizens of Muslim belief, since World War II. This confusion is partially a result of the fact that the Islamic religious authorities have not been able to agree on a modern reading of the tradition that would allow easier integration into modern state institutions and pluralist contexts where Muslims are a minority. Consequently, the imamate has emerged as a space in which authority – religious, political, or both – is negotiated. It has become a sign that shows the crises of governing authorities, and thus the space where they are reclaimed differently.

This chapter argues that the position of the European imam is being nationalized and consequently rendered more dependent on both religious scholarship and political authority, where his functions take place for the transmission of an ethicist message. Three major features distinguish this new position of the European imamate: (1) it is dependent on religious scholarship, and does not stand as an independent authority; (2) it is under the sovereignty and interests of the political regime within whose institutions and territories it functions; and (3) its major authority lies in direct contact with the community of believers, to whom it transmits an ethicist religious discourse. I illustrate this argument in three major steps. First, after a preliminary note on defining the imamate, this chapter provides a brief overview of the crisis of modern Islamic religious authority and its impact in Europe; it situates the place of the imamate in Islamic scholarship to

1 What has developed as a fiqh al-aqalliyāt (‘fiqh of minorities’) does not focalize the role of imams but the role of mosques, muftis, and scholars of Islam. This means that imams as an independent category or authority are considered only channels of scholarship, not its main thinkers or leaders. For example, the publications of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), founded in Dublin in 1997, do not devote clear space to the category of the imam and his functions. This chapter does not delve into the literature of the minority fiqh or of the ECFR. Rather, it examines the place of imams within broad Islamic scholarship and their newly focalized functions. For more on the state of the art of training imams in Europe, see Aslan and Windisch (2012); Drees and Van Koningsveld (2008); Ferreiro (2011); Husson (2007).
demonstrate that it (the imamate) is not an independent scholarly organization, but more of an administrative structure for the religious affairs of the community of believers at the local level. Second, the chapter presents the Moroccan imamate model to illustrate the role that modern political and religious authorities expect imams to fill. Finally, I refer to the situation of the French imamate according to recent anthropological-sociological studies.

2 The imam in Islamic religious authority: An overview

The word ‘imam’ literally means ‘the one who leads’, and in the Sunni Islamic tradition it indicates the male leader of the five daily prayers. Though rarely used in the Sunni tradition, the term ‘imamate’ means the function of carrying out such a task. In Shia Islam the ‘imamate’ takes on a totally different meaning: infallible leadership of the community or the umma. The ‘imam’ is then the infallible leader of such a community. Thus the Shia definition of ‘imam’ and ‘imamate’ are close to the Sunni meaning of ‘caliph’ and ‘caliphate’, although the latter is basically a political position empowered with theological roles, while the Shia version is a theological position empowered with political roles. Al-imāma al-kubrā (‘greater imamate’) is another name for the ‘the caliphate’, while al-imāma as-ṣughrā (‘lesser imamate’) means ‘leadership of prayers’. In this chapter, I use the term ‘imamate’ to mean the organizational duties of imams in the Sunni tradition.

The Quran makes at least five references to the term ‘imam’ and ‘imamate’ in the sense of a leader of prayers, or leader of the people, or leader of the people of the Book.2 The prophetic hadiths also use ‘imam’ to mean a leader in prayers, although in one example it is used for the leader of the army.3


3 Examples of hadiths include: idhā ‘amma aḥadukom al-nāsa fal yuḥaffif, fa inna fihim al-ṣaghir wa-l-kabir wa al-da’īf wa al-marīd, fa idhā ẓallā wahda-hu fal yuṣallī kayfa shā’ [When any one of you leads the people in prayer, he should be brief for among them are the young and the aged, the weak and the sick. But when one of you prays by himself, he may (prolong) as he likes]. Sahih Moslem 467 a, The Book of Prayers, 5, Hadith 208; in kānū thalathatan fal yaʿummahum aḥaduhum, wa aḥaqquhum bil imāmati ʿaqraʿu-hum [If they, believers, are three, one of them leads them in prayers, and the most suitable for the imamate is the one who has the Quran by heart most], Sahih Moslem, The Book of Who Merits the Imamate, 54, Hadith 1561; wa ʾinnamā lʾimāmu junnatun, yuqātalu min warāʾihī wa yuttaqā bihi [The imam is like a shield whose orders should be obeyed when they (the Muslims) fight, and where they should seek protection. If he enjoins fear of Allah and behaves justly, then he will be rewarded, but if he enjoin otherwise, then it will be a burden (of sin) on him], Sunan annasaʾi, The Book of al-Bay a, Book 35, Hadith 71, also available at: http://qaalarasulallah.com.
From the prophetic Sunna, some hadiths that use the word ‘imam’ or its roots or derivatives can be listed. Sunni medieval scholars rarely dedicated whole chapters to the functions of imams, which were instead covered as part of the ‘books’ or ‘clauses’ dedicated to rituals or prayers. In the Sahihs of Bukhari and Moslim, the two hadith collections that are considered the most authoritative written texts after the Quran, the word ‘imamate’ is used in the subtitles of ‘books’ or ‘clauses’.4

The question of Islamic authority and representation has been a topic of debate for nearly two centuries, since the start of the modern encounter between the two commonly used and abused entities ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’. On the one hand, the Orientalist view contends that Islam does not recognize the distinction between God and Caesar (i.e., between religion and state power), which renders it an outsider to the modern West that builds on the Christian tradition. The Islamic world, according to this view, is inherently incompatible with the separation of the powers of church and state required by the modern world.5 On the other hand stand the defenders of Islamic diversity and its potential to adapt to the modern secular age.6 Islamic religious authority has commonly been considered autonomous, or at least quasi-autonomous even when tamed, from the political powers. That was the general case in the medieval Islamic times of caliphates and empires. The encounter with the concept of the modern nation-state during the European colonial period, and the postcolonial attempts of intellectual-political elites to establish Arab-Islamic nation-states have combined the two traditions and caused, apparently, a deep theological-philosophical confusion of concepts.7

4 For example, in Sahih Bukhari, there is a clause entitled abwāb ṣalāt al jāmāʿa wa lʿimāma [Clauses on Collective Prayer and the Imamate], and a sub-clause entitled bāb ʿimāmat alʿaḥād wa l-mawāla [Clause on the Imamate of the Slave and the Freed]. In Sahih Muslem, one finds kitāb al masājid wa mawādiʿ al-ṣalāt [Clause on Mosques and Prayer Spaces], and beneath it a sub-title, among other entries, bāb man ḥaqqu bi lʿimāma [Clause on Who Deserves the Imamate Most]; here the imamate is used as a noun to mean the act of leading prayers. As to the imamate in its meaning of political leadership, or what is also known as the ‘great imamate’ or ‘caliphate’, it is referred to as imāra, as found in a subsequent Clause in Sahih Moslem, entitled kitāb al-ʿimāra [Book on Imaamah]. Following the same tradition, later scholars entitled some of their chapters or clauses using the word ‘imamate’. The Hanbali scholar Ibn Qudama (1147-1223), for example sub-titles his kitāb al-ṣalāt [Clause on Prayers] with bāb al-ʿimāma wa ṣalāt al jāmāʿa [Clause on the Imamate and Collective Prayers]. (Ibn Qudamah, al-Mughni [The Enricher] (10 vols.) (Beirut: Dār iḥyāʾ atturāth al ʿarabiyy, 1985).

5 Among the contemporary ‘Western’ scholars that support this line of thought there is Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Joseph Schacht, Ernest Gellner, Martin Kramer, and Patricia Crone.

6 John Esposito and John Voll, to name but two, represent this perspective.

The established Islamic view that religious scholarship (led by the ulama, be they jurists, muftis, or theologians) supports the just ruler of a just society has not been respected during all of Islamic history. Islamic empires and dynasties largely allowed the adoption of various madhhabs ('legal schools') even within a narrow territory or in the same big city, let alone in big territories. The waqf (pl. awqāf, 'endowments') enjoyed by the religious establishment and scholarship resulted in substantial independence and quasi-immunity from political interventions and dictates, especially regarding issues that were not political (Hallaq, 2013; Winter, 2009).

However, the modern nation-state seeks the centralization of authority, which means unifying the legal tradition(s) into statutory laws. Since its encounter with 'Euro-modernity' through the Napoleonic attempt to conquer Egypt (1798-1801) and the later successful attempts at colonialism, the Islamic world has entered a phase of hybridization, in which it tries to form modern states that still preserve the basic Islamic requirements. The so-called incomplete Arab-Islamic 'Renaissance' and the failures of Arab-nationalisms in the heartlands of Islam have contributed to the fragmentation of Islamic religious authority through its cooptation or domestication by the 'undemocratic' state. For example, since the era of Egypt’s former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Al-Azhar in Cairo has become a state institution, whose clerics are now salaried civil servants of the state. Likewise, the Grand Muftis of each modern Arab-Islamic state have become state-salaried, and nearly each state has created its own Council of Religious Scholars, often presided over by the monarch or president of the state. Each state has also adopted a single madhhab ('legal tradition'), and turned it into a pillar of the culture of the state (Hallaq, 2013; Lo and Haron, 2015; Maussen, Bader, and Moors 2012; Nasr, 2015). The postcolonial states in Islamic societies either refer to sharia as the source of their legislation, as in Egypt, or refer to Islam as the religion of the state – thereby appearing to give more space to legal interpretations and avoiding the statement that sharia is the source of legislation – as in Morocco.

The pre-colonial and postcolonial conditions of the imams have not raised serious challenges to society and state institutions through their profession, particularly because they are not listed as an authority in Islamic classical religious scholarship. While the imams of big mosques in big cities are usually appointed by the local state authorities, mosques of lower status and size are often led by imams who are either appointed by the local inhabitants who care about religious matters in their area, or are self-appointed in the sense that, since they have learnt (at least some of) the Quran by heart, they gradually win the status of a ṭālib ('seeker
of knowledge in the Islamic sciences’) or faqīh (‘learned in the Islamic sciences’) within their community. The self-appointed imam starts by leading prayers and maybe giving sermons on Fridays, and voluntarily durūs (‘teaching/preaching lessons’) on particular days, or gains respect during the month of Ramadan when the whole Quran is recited in the tarāwīḥ (‘night prayers’) each night after the evening prayers. Traditionally, such a religious position does not entitle the imam to payment, as it is first and foremost a service based on piety. Custom, however, requires that the community support the imam financially, either directly by handing out little amounts of money frequently and also on the occasion of marriages, funerals, circumcisions of baby boys, and other religious get-togethers, or indirectly by offering the imam a space on the outskirts of the mosque, which he can use for his own business and needs. If the mosque and its nearby endowments are big enough, the imam may also be given a house as a part of his ‘job’.

Both before and during the colonial period, learning (parts of) the Quran was part of the education most males received from their local mosques. Some would continue their religious education in nearby cities or bigger cities in the country, memorizing the whole Quran and learning the other sciences that complement its understanding, such as language, tafsīr, and hadith. Those who received some higher education but did not complete it and receive ijāzas (‘licenses’) of scholarship from the senior ulama, which would allow them to enter the club of scholars, could easily become imams in big mosques.

During the colonial era, the modern school was introduced. It was not welcomed by the masses, though graduates could find jobs in the administration of the colonial state or with the ally native authorities that continued to hold minimal power under colonial rule. In the early colonial period, the modern school was not appreciated for two main reasons: first, it was a school created by colonists, the boycotting of whom was a political statement; second, modern schools did not teach Arabic or Islam, or taught them only minimally, while the masses cared about the religious education of their children. Even when the modern school became part of the new postcolonial state institution, the tradition of national schools kept going: before going to school in the morning, for instance, kids were obliged to pass by the local school (called al-kuttāb or al-massīd in Morocco) to learn some of the Quran before going to the modern school. Now modern schools teach Arabic and Islam, including the Quran, so there is less need for extra religious education – but this need is very present among Muslims in the West, who seem to be reviving the process of parallel schooling (i.e. ‘religious/Islamic
schools’ in addition to ‘secular’ ones) because ‘secular schools’ do not teach, or only teach a little, about their religion.8

After the Second World War, Europe recruited guest workers/labourers mostly from the former colonies in the Islamic world. These immigrant-labourers travelled to the new secular and liberal space of Europe with the socio-political and religious background referred to above. In terms of the organization of religious institutions and administration of community affairs, the immigrants often found themselves functioning in modern new territories using traditional practices.

Practicing Muslims or Muslims that identify as such, whether practicing or not – the number of which has increased, especially with the second generation and the so-called resurgence of Islam beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s – would either choose a respected believer to become their leader in prayers or, later, sought to import an imam from their own village or city in their country of origin. Because religious education in the wider Islamic world was still in the making during the postcolonial era, these imported imams either had a conservative education and were therefore not open to modern state institutions or liberal multicultural society, or they were not trained as imams at all, but were laymen who had learnt the Quran, or part of it, by heart at madrasas rather than modern schools or universities. The latter untrained type of imams could only lead prayers as an extra responsibility given by the community or taken up willingly as a divine call. The irregular functioning of imams in Western Europe would bring challenges and changes to their traditional role in Muslim-majority societies.

State interference in the religious affairs of the immigrant communities was also present. The sending postcolonial states of South Asia and the broad Middle East and North Africa established their own versions of ‘Embassy Islam’ to ascertain the religious identity ties between the diaspora abroad and the homeland, and to secure economic benefits through remittances. ‘Embassy Islam’ also attempted to combat transnational Islam, or ‘Political Islam’, which engendered the legitimacy of the political authority of these countries back home (Laurence, 2012; see also Laurence, Part I).

At the time, European states were not interested in the religious question. The immigrants were guest workers that had to go back after the expiration of their work contracts. For this reason, the European state found it more convenient to generally ‘outsource’ the care of the religious needs of the immigrants to the governments of the sending countries and

8 More on the Moroccan kuttāb, or madrasa, in Eickelman (2010, pp. 131-148). For an insider’s look into the madrasa in modern times, see Moosa (2015).
petrodollar-rich Gulf states (Laurence, 2006). Employing companies would often provide prayer rooms for the workers to avoid their demands for better work conditions and higher salaries, and workers would then appoint their own imam to lead prayers and do the needed rituals. Friday sermons were often prepared by Islamist groups, when the imam of the sending government and the hosting state was absent or was not provided (Kepel, 1987).

Especially after the terrorist events of 11 September 2001, European states adopted laws to tighten the surveillance of radical movements and preachers whose discourses could endanger public security or the public good, and some values of liberty and equality. In the process of ‘taming imams’, France, for example, deported twelve imams in 2004, some because they did not condemn polygamy or the practice of husbands beating their wives. After the 7 July London bombings in 2005, Britain listed some 50 imams for deportation because of statements that endangered public security. Since this was against the European Union treaty forbidding the deportation of suspected criminals to countries where domestic security and intelligence services employ torture, the British government signed contracts with some Middle East governments pledging that the detainees would be humanely treated upon repatriation (Haddad and Balz, 2010). In 2007, a report requested by the European Commission (DG-Justice, Freedom and Security) and prepared by experts at King’s College reported that ‘radical imams’ were no longer the magnates of radicalism, and underlined the emergence of new Islamist recruiting militant groups that especially operate through Internet recruitment. The new media of the Internet, has ‘opened up new spaces of religious contestation where traditional sources of authority could be challenged by the wider public’ (Mandaville, 1999). This is even so when this religious authority is challenged by religionists in a diaspora position, as is the case with (especially young) Muslims in the ‘West’, particularly in Europe where Islam and its traditions are being re-interpreted and imbued with new meanings (Mandaville, 2001). While a good number of sociological, anthropological, and theoretical works read such challenges to classical Islamic authority from progressive perspectives, giving them meanings that defend the idea of Europeanization of Islam and that Islam is inlandish [i.e. at home in Europe] (Allievi, 2003), some tragic events inside and around Europe indicate a new regressive appropriation of religious authority. In other words, if traditional religious authority can be given different meanings, one can be radically violent. This is manifest in the formation of the bloodthirsty Islamic State in June 2014, to which a good number of foreign fighters have joined from all over the world, including Europe. Out of some 11,000 foreign fighters, statistics note 1,500 European Muslims, including women, adolescents, born Muslims, and converts (Byman and Shapiro, 2014).
Violent incidents like the 24 May 2014 killing of four people in the Jewish Museum in Brussels by Mehdi Nemmouche, a French citizen who had spent a year fighting in Syria, and the 7 January 2015 massacre of Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris by the brothers Kouachi, who belong to the Al-Qaeda network in Yemen, exemplify the possible orientations the new meanings of religion can take in the age of ‘digital Islam’. To face this challenge, globally recognized religious scholars have come together to condemn violence in the name of religion, Islam here; some 125 Muslim scholars have come together to condemn the birth of the ‘Islamic State’ as not only non-Islamic, but also anti-Islamic.9 Muslim religious leaders at the international, national and local levels have spoken out against such atrocities (Kuruvilla and Blumberg, 2015). Imams themselves have also come out to ‘reclaim the Internet’ from violent jihadists (Wyatt, 2015). Female leaders have come out to challenge not only violent jihadists, but also the moderately conservative religious authorities that do not allow women to lead prayers (El Fadl, 2015; McLaughlin, 2005, 2012; Taylor, 2015). Another challenge emerges from gay imams, who try to provide what they describe as the spiritual needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Muslims that the broad community of believers fails to meet (Jama, 2015; Khan and Waheed, 2013).

3 The Moroccan imam: Submitted, depoliticized, and ethicist

Amidst the predicament of who speaks for Islam, models seem a requisite. Morocco, a centuries old monarchy that enjoys religious legitimacy, appears to be confident of its model of ‘moderate Islam’, in which it has started to invest heavily in the last decade through, for example, the recently founded King Mohammed VI International Imam Training Center.10 Countries like Mali, Tunisia, and France have requested that Morocco provides training for their imams, and Belgium has also shown an interest (Alaoui, 2015).11

The Moroccan model is institutionalizing the religious training of imams to avoid the potential that it could become a tool in the hands of political movements that may radicalize or show political dissent, a model that appeals to European institutions. Since 2010, the European Council of Moroccan Ulema (CEOM), based in Brussels, has used this model. Among other aims, the council organizes scholarly seminars on religious issues and offers training and guidance for imams throughout Western Europe (CEOM, n.d.). This model also guides the Mohamed VI Foundation of African Ulema, founded on 13 July 2015 to maintain Morocco’s historical ties with (especially sub-Saharan) African Islam.12

Among the state institutions and Islamic councils that have voiced concerns about the structure of Islamic authority, the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, led by Dr. Ahmed Toufiq since 2002, has clearly underlined the vital religious and political role of imams. This declaration was made during Toufiq’s speech to the fifth conference of World Religious Leaders in Astana, Kazakhstan, in June 2015. His speech, which merits careful consideration here, can be divided into two major arguments, the first indicates the place of imams in society and their role therein, and the second describes a model for training imams to meet socio-cultural, religious, and political needs.

Toufiq opened the speech by saying that while religious institutions, leaders of religious sects and movements, and religious scholars may be the first that come to mind when it comes to religious authority, the imams that are present in every city, village, and district, and that are thus the closest to the people, have the greatest opportunity to make an impact on the community. While other religious leaders make decisions at the top level, where contact with the people is at a minimum, imams’ tasks bring them close to the society: leading the prayers five times a day; offering durūs (courses on religious teachings); giving Friday sermons; and being the community’s religious reference during marriage arrangements and consultations, weddings, marriage reconciliations, funerals, circumcision festivities, and the like. Toufiq then underlines the role of imams in encouraging peace at various levels, both local and global:

Henceforth, it is obvious that the imam should be taken into consideration if religious leaders at the top level want to invest religious teachings and their energizing powers and incentives for the sake of serving peace, the

spreading of virtuous values and ethics among people, and the rectification of many a disequilibrium that the world suffers from. (Toufiq, 2015)

With the imam primarily entrusted with spreading such an ethical perspective, Toufiq moves on to his second major point: how to train imams to uphold such messages and consequently clarify their role in society and within religious and political authority. This training model has been tested in Morocco, and is being implemented in 50,000 mosques throughout the country, according to Toufiq. He outlines his training model in eleven points, summarized as follows (Toufiq, 2015):

1. Modernize the organization of ulama (‘religious scholars’) to allow the cālim (‘scholar’) to be faithful to the nation’s historical choices of creed, madhhāb, and customs.

2. Organize the fatwas on public affairs within state scientific institutions, and consider any fatwa that comes from outside these channels a mere personal opinion, which is respected but does not guide the collective religious conscience of believers – itself based on a political choice for the preservation of the public good and the avoidance of fitna (‘rebellion’) and dogma.

3. Connect and harmonize what the ulama and the imams say about the references that make the identity of the nation.

4. Consider the state’s laws legitimate for public good, as long as they do not contradict a clear ḥukm qaṭī (‘clear religious jurisprudential inscription’).

5. Circulate a guidebook among imams to remind them of the prophetic manners of communication and proselytization, to avoid that imams attribute their statements to fake names or to personalities outside the tradition.

6. Provide extra training to young imams who are graduates from universities with distinction and learners of the Quran, and appoint them to tutor other imams in various mosques.

7. Integrate social sciences into the training programmes for young imams.

8. Provide equal training for murshidāt (‘women religious guides’), who provide guidance to women believers.

9. Organize continuous training programmes for already-working imams.

10. The ulama and imams should take the responsibility of not only training and preaching, but also practicing lived ethics that are based on ease and hope, to be close to the common human condition.

13 The translation from Arabic is mine.
Consider religion a good for all and avoid bringing political disputes into religious affairs. This means politically neutralizing mosques and upholding the values of mercy, justice, and universal compassion in religious discourse.

Three major points from Toufiq’s speech summarize the Moroccan project of training and forming imams according to the Sunni Maliki legal madhhаб and Ash’ari theology, imbued with a Sufi orientation.

First, imams remain a dependent religious authority. They follow religious scholarship, led by the ulama, and cannot compose a new or independent body of authority, however important their role becomes. This is the classic definition of the place of the imam within religious hierarchy and scholarship. Imams enjoy liberty in their sermons; views that might go against the established stream are considered personal views that are not binding to the community – views for which the imam may be held accountable by the state and its religious authority.

Second, imams, as part of religious leadership, are banned from political activities. Imam training follows the overall religious interpretation of the country’s ulama for the public good, as ensured by the bay’a (‘pact’) that bonds the monarchy, ulama, and society at large; in other words, the religious authority and the imams that follow it have no (direct) political role to play. While religion is an important part of the political legitimacy of the state and monarchy, there is now a clear depoliticization of religious actors, backed by a royal decree issued in July 2014 that banned religious leaders from participating in any form of political activity.

Third, the major role of imams is to bring ethical sharia into the daily life of the believers. Since imams are neither a leading religious authority nor political agents, they are focused on applying the dominant view of Islam as conceived by the ulama and endorsed and influenced by the political powers. Imams are preachers of ethics, justice, and compassion, as Toufiq described, and transmitters of moderate Islam. Such transmission may not be led by the imams – since they are themselves led by the ulama and political authorities – but they play a big role in its accomplishment. Because they are the “closest” to the believers, imams

14 ‘Morocco Prevents Religious Leaders from Participating in Politics’, Al Arabiya News, 3 July 2014. http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/03/Morocco-prevents-religious-leaders-from-participating-in-politics.html. It should however be noted that while the State forbids religious leaders and imams from politicizing their religious positions, it alone enjoys such a right, for example through Friday sermons that it controls and through public TV religious festivities.
are supposed to know how to relay the proper interpretation of religious messages according to believers’ levels of understanding. A lot of the ‘ethicization’, ‘localization’, or ‘nationalization’ of sharia takes place at this level. To examine some aspects of the roles of imams in a minority context, within a secular-liberal society, the next section considers the example of France.

4 The French imam: Dependent, controlled, and conciliatory

Two major sociological-anthropological works were published in 2013, each a result of six years of fieldwork: Romain Sèze's *Être imam en France* and Solenne Jouanneau’s *Les Imams en France* (Jouanneau, 2013; Sèze, 2013; see Jouanneau, Part I, and Sèze, Part II). Their findings describe the changing status of the imam, and depict the transformation of his religious position, or newly growing religious authority. Three major themes of this book can be summarized as follows:

1 Imams’ lower levels of education and socio-economic status contribute to making them dependent on the ulama’s scholarship. Eight out of the 30 imams that Sèze interviews make the category of what he refers to as an ‘imam-labourer’, with very low levels of education or none at all (Sèze, 2013, p. 39). This kind of imam is requested by his community of workers to lead prayers because he is pious, knows some of the Quran by heart, or provides some answers to the social needs of the community. The ‘imam-labourer’ in Sèze’s work is close to Jouanneau’s typology of the ‘indigenous-invisible imam’, though their typologies differ because Sèze focalizes imams while Jouanneau focalizes the imamate and its chronological development in France (Jouanneau, 2013, p. 25). Eighteen out of 30 imams interviewed by Sèze had a background in religious education, which they studied in their country of origin in the Islamic world. These imams did not travel to Europe with the intention of becoming an imam, but found themselves making a living out of it because they had no other choices. They are often more confident, charismatic, and knowledgeable than ‘imam-labourers’, and thus gain more respect in their communities; with time, they may find their way to being imams in bigger mosques, in big cities. This type of imam is close to what Jouanneau terms an ‘imam of the district’ (2013, p. 69). Finally, only one out of the 30 interviewed imams had received a diploma from training as an imam in France (Sèze, 2013, p. 75).
Imams are not state-funded and do not receive salaries from the state. Because they depend on their countries of origin and community associations for a living, imams are often in a bad economic condition; a lot of them do not enjoy health coverage. This impacts their social standing: no one wants to be trained as an imam only to find themselves jobless or badly paid (Sèze, 2013, p. 88) – including the students enrolled in the imam-training programme the state has recently tried to offer in cooperation with universities like the one in Strasbourg. This also explains the lack of imam-chaplains in the military, prisons, and hospitals (Sèze, 2013, p. 122). The dire economic situation of imams is especially noticeable among those of Moroccan origins because they usually did not enter France intending to become an imam, but end up doing it anyway because of the circumstances they find themselves in. This is very different from their Turkish and Algerian counterparts, who are often legal and living in better conditions because of the state’s (France) conventions on importing imams from Turkey and Algeria (Jouanneau, 2013, pp. 296, 310, 315; Sèze, 2013, p. 47). Overall, imams’ lower general education, or non-religious profound education, and socio-economic condition contribute to making them dependent on ulama scholars – a position that imams have held historically.

Politics and state construction of the ‘good imam’. Jouanneau’s work with about 30 imams and mosques in the East and South of France reaches two main conclusions. First, through her access to numerous state archives, statements, and municipal police documents, she found out that French authorities have tried to intervene in the internal affairs of the Muslim community. For instance, the French state has tried to play a role in the selection of imams that would be sent to its territories, following the conventions signed with the Turkish and Algerian authorities. Imams chosen in this way are what Jouanneau refers to as the ‘consular imam’, or what documents from the French authorities refer to as the ‘good imam’ (Jouanneau, 2013, p. 307). The French authorities also intervened in the signing of conventions with two state universities to train imams (on non-religious/theological issues, since the 1905 law does not allow that) – an initiative that has had few results, because the training programmes were either boycotted or not trusted by the Muslim community and Muslim representative bodies; some of these programmes were soon closed, allegedly because of a shortage of finances (Jouanneau, 2013, pp. 296, 310, 315). The French authorities, then, do not enjoy having an established religious scholarship, or ulama, but do depend on Arab-Islamic authorities for the importation of ‘good
imams’ who understand the apolitical position required of them in a secular-liberal society.

Imams’ role as an identity marker for the community of believers in a multicultural-liberal society. Based on the fieldwork by Sèze and Jouanneau, it seems that imams have three separate but related roles in Muslim communities in France. Institutionally, the imam co-administers the community of believers and is a symbol of its identity; socially, he interacts with and is close to the community; and theologically, he is an eclectic-ethicist. First, institutionally, the imam does not lead the community alone; instead, he co-administers it with the rector or director of the mosque, or with the head of the Islamic cultural association that is in charge of the prayer hall. Since most imams come from Muslim-majority countries, and some from small communities enjoy modest educational levels and/or speak little to none of the language of the majority society, they are often unable to stand as the spokesperson of the community – with the French authorities for legal issues, with other religious denominations for religious dialogue and civil society activities, or with the media that seeks religious authorities for feedback on certain issues concerning Muslims and the rest of society. An ‘indigenous-invisible imam’, in Jouanneau’s words, or ‘imam-labourer’ in Sèze’s, is unable to play the role of the communicator for the community, often because of his educational level. Instead, it is the rector of the mosque or the director of the association who is often highly educated and carries out the tasks of external communications.

More importantly, the imam becomes the cultural symbol of the community. He leads prayers, gives Friday sermons, the two ‘id (‘feast’) sermons, and presides over funerals. He plays the role of a matchmaker, in the sense that he knows the community and helps the believers find partners for marriage; he intervenes in solving family conflicts or cases of divorce. The imam also acquires new roles that are related to identity, possibly more than roles that are related to the core creed of Islam. One example is marriage ceremonies. A number of families hold part of the wedding ceremony in the mosque, in the presence of the imam, who reads the fātiha Quranic verse and blesses the marriage after it has gone through civil legal authorization and authentication. Traditionally, Islamic marriages are civil and do not require the presence of an imam, but only the presence of a legal authority/notary (Sèze, 2013, pp. 115-119). Socially, the educated imam interacts constantly with the community of believers. After having spent time observing an imam in Assalam (anonymous) Mosque, Jouanneau notes that there is interaction in his
work; he does not dictate opinions on certain issues the community raises. For example, when asked about the permissibility of adopting children or listening to music in Islam, the imam gives the mainstream and classical Islamic view, and cites the permissibility expressed by other Islamic classical scholars, but his interlocutors make their own choices in the end, and sometimes make choices *a priori*. One of the women still defends the idea of adoption, and another listens to music anyway – though the latter tries to explain her choice by saying that she actually watches the Star Academy show featuring talented Arab young singers, which is visual; since music is only secondary in this TV show, according to her, it is permissible. In other words, she emphasizes watching instead of listening as a way of allowing herself to watch the musical programme Star Academy (Jouanneau, 2013, p. 454).

A second example of an interaction between an imam and his community was when an imam refused to put a dividing line in the mosque to separate women and men, but the community elders and the administrators of the mosque erected the divider anyway (Jouanneau, 2013, p. 471). A final example concerns a woman, a teacher, who, after being on parental leave for some years, was considering returning to her job after the French ban of the veil. She planned to consult the imam of the mosque, but stated in advance that she may not consider what he says, if he were to say that a majority of scholars consider the veil mandatory for women – an answer she seemed ready to oppose *a priori* (Jouanneau, 2013, p. 430).

Theologically, for various reasons, the imam finds himself eclectic and ethicist. The imam is in a secular-liberal society, and his discourse has to adjust to both the law of the country and the level of religiosity of the believers he talks to. Only three out of the 30 imams interviewed by Sèze had a license to pronounce fatwas; of these, two were issued and recognized by Turkish authorities, and the other was a Shiite imam who had a scholarly reputation in Lebanon, and had received a PhD from Sorbonne University. This Shiite imam was able to issue fatwas and divorce certificates recognized by Lebanese authorities due to his religious scholarship and reputation (Sèze, 2013, p. 141). These imam-muftis, as well as other imams like the public figures Tareq Oubrou and Hassan Iquioussen, speak of the necessity of an eclectic approach that is rooted in tradition but comes from different legal theories – theories that, if followed completely, might not accommodate the wide range

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15 Sèze (2013, p. 114) could not access the women’s side, but says they organize their activities under the tutelage of men.
of individual cases and questions that imams receive from believers (Sèze, 2013, pp. 188-189, 217).
The use of eclecticism indicates that one (legal) school of thought does not have harmonious or adequate answers for the issues faced by believers of various races, genders, ages, and geopolitical belongings. To stay rooted in the tradition while adapting to the new secular-liberal context, the imam needs to emphasize the aspects of the tradition that he considers more basic at the expense of others that the context renders obsolete or not applicable, and thus not essential. This is why when asked about homosexuality, for example, most of the interviewed imams stressed the idea that it is religiously unacceptable, but still emphasized the importance of human respect and the rule of law (Sèze, 2013, pp. 192-193). Sharia law is therefore ethicized (Sèze, 2013, pp. 164, 183, 212), in the sense that it is considered an ethical responsibility targeting the individual and his or her internal communication with God, family care and protection, and the environment or outside world with which the believer has to be engaged ethically and responsibly in defence of social justice (Sèze, 2013, pp. 168-171). Values like respect, forgiveness, and dedication at work are emphasized as fundamentally Islamic (Sèze, 2013, pp. 48, 170). However, this is not the case with all imams. Some ambiguities remain for those who do not straightforwardly preach gender equality, or who speak derogatively about homosexuality and abortion (Sèze, 2013, p. 164). Broadly, the tone that appears to dominate the studied sermons (25 out of 30) is conciliatory, in the sense that it invokes eschatological arguments and the world of judgment and punishment (al-tarhib), while also invoking the importance of the here-and-now through ethical engagement (al-targhib) (Sèze, 2013, p. 168).

5 Reflective closure

This chapter shows some of the challenges that Islamic religious authority is experiencing in modern times, with a focus on the figure of the imam in European secular-liberal societies. I argue that the imam is a dependent figure that adheres to the Islamic religious authority of a particular (political) trend and/or madhhab, and to the political institutions governing where he functions. The Moroccan model of the imamate is presented by the political-religious institution of the country as a way to illustrate the roles expected of the imam, especially in times of socio-political instability and tension, and the restraints his position entails. I also examine these roles
and constraints through some recent socio-anthropological work on the French imamate. One of the main aspects of an imam’s agency, within the religious-political powers that have influence over him, is the transmission of an ethicist message that preserves what he considers to be the core of the tradition and avoids going against the overall context in which he works, though cases of antagonism and incompatibility continue to be expressed by some imams on issues like female leadership and equality.

This argument suggests three main points that require further research. First, the imamate is not an independent or organized religious authority that can change the discourse on Islam in Europe, and on European Islam, unless it is nurtured and influenced by religious-political powers. This in no way belittles its fundamental role in the transmission of messages to the community of believers with which it is in direct contact, or to the community of non-believers when some imams participate in inter-religious dialogue initiatives or in the media as representatives of their community and religion. Because the imamate is not an independent religious authority, the authorities that influence it should be examined – especially in Europe, where the state authorities seem to be more organized and powerful than the Islamic religious authorities. That is, the neutrality of the modern secular state should be examined to see how far it is influencing the internal dynamics of religion and religious actors. At the same time, the religious authority that the imam clings to or that influences his thought and work has to be examined as well, to understand its sources, be they intellectual or financial. This can help scholars understand the dynamics of religion in modern contexts, including state institutions, bilateral agreements between European and Arab-Islamic countries, and transnational movements.

Second, the message of ethics also needs more examination. Ethics appears to have become an important discourse among theologians, philosophers, and engaged scholars trained in traditional seminaries and modern universities. The fact that the European imam, as a possible new agent in religious authority, seems to be adopting this ethicist discourse may gradually herald a paradigm shift in the ‘episteme’ of European Islam (Hashas, 2014, pp. 14-49). Put otherwise, is this ethicist message an approach that is rooted in the tradition itself while being re-appropriated, or it is a new development required by text and context? Who influences this new direction: the religious authorities in Europe, the ones ‘back home’ outside Europe, state interference, or all of these factors? Are imams transforming Islamic theology and law in a bottom-up approach, or are they mere transmitters of its modern internal dynamics? And what is the place of female leader-imams?
Third, the role of imams and their ethicist messages intertwine with the issues of integration (especially of Muslim youth) and the construction of new meanings of being European. Religion in this sense becomes a way to fuse various identities together for a better feeling of citizenship. But can the imam in his mosque and community do that alone? What about the school and curricula, the media, and the mainstream European externalization of Islam? Has the imam failed to transmit his ethicist message to the European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq? Or, as a dependent authority, does he find himself unable to do much? These issues remain to be studied, and can shed light on the profound and at times invisible roles a minor religious authority can or cannot play, and through which that authority either increases or decreases. Imams act within a local and national geography in which other factors and agents intervene.

References


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