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Islam in Diaspora: Moroccan Imams in Europe and the Negotiation of Religious Authority

A Dissertation submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Doctorate Degree

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مقتضب

تعتبر هذه الأطروحة دراسة للسلطة الدينية والأئمة في غرب أوروبا، مع تركيز خاص على الأئمة من أصول مغربية، سواء المولودين في المغرب و يعملون في بلجيكا وهولندا، أو الذين ولدوا في المهجر. و تسعى الأطروحة إلى تجاوز التحليل التقليدي الذي يركز عادة على تدريب الأئمة، و البحث في المعرفة التي ينتجها الأئمة بشأن مفهوم الهوية الثقافية و الوطنية و الجندر، والعقيدة، والسياسة، والتطرف الديني بهدف فهم كيفية تأقلم الإسلام مع البيئة الأوروبية، ومن جهة أخرى يسلط البحث الضوء على محاولات كل من البلد الأصلي و البلد المضيف التأثير على خطاب الأئمة المغاربة في أوروبا.

و من حيث المنهج، تعتمد الدراسة على عملية الترميز (coding process) لاكتشاف الأنماط داخل البيانات وتنظيمها في موضوعات ذات دلالات. و لهذا تم كذلك الاستعانة بمفهوم "الخطابات في صراع" (discourses in conflict) لميشيل بيشو من أجل فحص أعمق للبيانات التي تم جمعها.

وتخلص نتائج الدراسة إلى وجود تناقص مضطرد لسيطرة الدول"المرسلة" على الممارسات الدينية لجالياتها في الشتات، وهذا راجع إلى تنوع و تعدد مصادر الخطاب الديني في أوروبا . بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن حرية وسلطة الإمام مرهونتان إلى حد كبير بسلطة لجنة إدارة المسجد و بشكل عام بالبيئة الأوروبية من حيث القوانين و الثقافات السائدة بها. ويبرز البحث جوانب الإمامة في أوروبا و التي غالبا ما يتم تجاهلها، مشددا على التحديات التي يواجهها الأئمة المغاربة في أوروبا حيث يجدون أنفسهم محاصرين بين توقعات متضاربة ومصالح وطنية متنافسة. تختم الدراسة بالتأكيد على ضرورة فهم المواقف الصعبة والمعضلات أو الإخفاقات المحتملة للأئمة ضمن سياق التأثيرات المعقدة للعولمة، بدلاً من المقاربة التي تعتبرأن الأئمة يشكلون مخاطر كبيرة على استقرار الحكومات الأوروبية.

الكلمات الرئيسية :السلطة الدينية، الأئمة المغاربة، الإسلام في بلجيكا وهولندا، الأئمة المهاجرون، الوطن الأصلي، تأميم الإسلام، الوطنية العابرة للحدود .

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the religious authority of Islam and imams in Western Europe, with a specific focus on Moroccan-born imams in Belgium and the Netherlands, as well those born in these countries. Moving beyond traditional analyses centered on imam training, the study investigates the knowledge imams generate regarding concepts such as cultural and national identity, gender, faith, politics, and radicalization. The goal is to comprehend how Islam adapts to the European environment. On another level, the research sheds light on the efforts of the homeland to influence the discourse of Moroccan Imams in the European diaspora.

Methodologically, the dissertation emplys "a coding process" to uncover underlying patterns within the data. Hence, Michel Pecheux's concept of "discourses in conflict" is deployed for a deeper examination of the collected data. The study's findings indicate a diminishing control of "sending" nations over the religious practices of their diasporic communities, due to the diversification of authority in the religious field. Furthermore, the freedom and authority of the imam are shown to be contingent upon that of the mosque committee as well as the general legal and cultural specificities of the European diaspora context. Highlighting the often-overlooked aspects of imamship in Europe, the research underscores the challenges faced by imams, caught between diverse expectations, challenges and competing national interests. The study concludes by emphasizing that the predicaments faced by the religious leader, or their perceived failures, should be contextualized within the broader complex effects of globalization. Imams should be seen as part of the intricate dynamics of globalization rather than posing significant risks to the stability of European governments.

***Keywords*:** Religious authority, Moroccan Imams, Islam in Belgium and the Netherlands, Immigrant Imams, homeland, Nationalizing Islam, transnationalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Overall aim

This research mainly deals with religious authority and focuses on the critical exploration of Islam and imams in Western Europe, with a particular emphasis on Moroccan-born imams and those of Moroccan descent born in Belgium and the Netherlands. This topic has become increasingly significant given the changing dynamics of Islamic religious leadership in Western Europe.

The research assumes critical importance in the current socio-political environment as it seeks to understand the discourses of imams within the contexts of the indigenization of Islamic religious leadership and the challenges posed by globalization. It strives to delve beneath the surface of the nuanced dynamics involving national and transnational aspects, and the interface of these elements with the contemporary forms of globalization.

The dissertation eschews departs from the prevailing trend in scholarship regarding imams in Western Europe, which often constrains analysis to the site of their training. Instead, this study seeks to elucidate what kind of knowledge these religious leaders generate surrounding their own identities, and those of their congregants, and how they discursively position themselves in relation to their country of origin and receiving countries. Through analyzing their produced knowledge, the first aim of this research is to investigate how national endeavors to contain Islam, whether they be Moroccan or European, affect these imams. In understanding these dynamics, we may gain insight into Islamic religious authority and leadership in Europe.

The second aim centers on understanding how the authority of sending nations over their diasporic religious practices is changing, as reflected in the discourses of imams of Moroccan descent born in Western Europe compared to those who immigrated from Morocco. An examination of the discursive differences between these two categories of imams seeks to shed light on the evolving dynamics of religious authority and influence within Muslim diasporic communities in Western Europe.

The third aim seeks to discern the actual extent of an imam's authority within their local Muslim communities in Belgium and the Netherlands and juxtapose this with the

disproportionate blame they often receive for integration challenges. By examining both the prevailing assumptions about their influence and their own perceptions of their roles, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities, this study seeks to provide an understanding of the challenges they face. The overarching intention is to inform policies and practices that alleviate undue stigma and better support these religious leaders and the communities they serve.

The final aim is to investigate the perspectives of imams of Moroccan descent in Europe on issues of identity, gender, belief, politics, and radicalization, and to analyze how their views contribute to the understanding of the indigenization of Islam in Europe.

The study of Moroccan imams in Belgium and the Netherlands holds significant historical demographic and and sociocultural relevance due to the substantial presence of Moroccan communities in these nations, a product of historical migration patterns. As these communities constitute a considerable portion of the population, their integration and development hold critical societal implications, warranting an exploration into Moroccan imams and diasporic Islam.

Additionally, the distinct state-religion relationships present in both countries offer intriguing contexts for this study. Belgium's policy, which officially recognizes and provides financial support to religions − including Islam − along with an established framework for appointing 'Heads of Cult', significantly contrasts with the approach in the Netherlands. The Dutch model affords equal legitimacy to all religions without mandating explicit recognition, registration, or formalized religious leadership roles. These divergent policies offer intriguing scenarios for studying the influence and operation of Moroccan imams within these unique contexts.

Such disparate policy environments offer intriguing scenarios to investigate the influence and operations of Moroccan imams. Furthermore, both Belgium and the Netherlands have endeavored to establish local imam training programs, albeit not without challenges. An understanding of Moroccan imams' roles and influences within these contexts could yield valuable insights for policy enhancement and the improvement of educational programs. Lastly, the opportunity to conduct a comparative analysis of the same community − the Moroccan diaspora − within differing national contexts provides a framework to unravel how diverging national policies, societal attitudes, and historical circumstances impact the role and influence of

Moroccan imams. Therefore, an inquiry into the workings of Moroccan imams in these countries holds considerable value.

Background

The evolution of the Muslim population in Belgium, initially comprising mostly migrant laborers, underwent a significant shift following the economic crisis of the 1970s. The cessation of economic migration and transition to family reunification resulted in a more visible Muslim demographic. Previously categorized as "foreign laborers" or "migrants," devoid of religious identifiers, they gradually came to be recognized as "Muslims". While the Belgian constitution maintains a stance of mutual independence between religion and state, it nonetheless provides legal recognition and support to the temporal aspects of religion. The 1974 Act, for instance, permitted Muslims to assert the rights it guarantees. The inaugural practical manifestation of the 1974 Act's acknowledgment of the Islamic faith was the incorporation of Islamic religious courses in the educational system, leading to the establishment of government-funded Islamic free schools.

On the other hand, the Dutch government departs from the Belgian model in its handling of religious recognition and registration. The Dutch constitution of 1983 validates all religious groups as equally legitimate. The societal landscape of the Netherlands was bifurcated into two confessional pillars, one Catholic and the other Protestant, from the 1920s to the 1960s. However, apart from the education system, this pillar structure had dissolved by the 1960s. Confessional schools, despite this transformation, continue to receive state funding equivalent to public schools. Since the late 1980s, a modest number of state-funded Islamic primary schools and a single secondary school have been established. A study commissioned by the Dutch government in 2003 underscored the need for local imam training programs to substitute for those based abroad.

Three academic institutions – Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), Leiden University, and Inholland University of Applied Sciences – have introduced imam training programs over the past fifteen years. These programs, however, have been either terminated or rebranded as religious studies programs due to insufficient enrolment and elevated attrition rates.

Transitioning from this context, it is crucial to observe Morocco's response to the evolving religious landscape. To combat the growth of domestic terrorism following the terrorist

attacks in Casablanca in 2003 and the radicalization of Moroccan youth abroad, Morocco has been engaged in a radical process of reforming and restructuring the religious field. The process has involved cutting ties with "foreign Islam", especially Saudi Wahhabism and Shiism and the production of, "a veritable doctrine of religious sovereignty" with spiritual modernizing and nationalizing religion in what has become known as, "Moroccan Islam" (Bruce, 2019, p. 65). The 2004 religious reforms stand on four pillars, the Maliki school of jurisprudence, al Asharia doctrine, Sunni Sufism, *imarat al muminin* (the pledge of allegiance to the commander of the faithful). The king's speech following these reforms associates religious unity, national identity, and territorial sovereignty (maroc.ma, 2004). Regional Councils of Ulama were created to nationalize the practice of Islam across the kingdom. Additionally, religious learned women were incorporated in these councils whereby Mohammed VI himself appointed 104 women as members. The reforms also allowed women to gather in mosques and receive guidance and counseling from *murshidat*, female spiritual guides.

Moreover, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has implemented a pedagogical program for the training of imams through a series of monthly seminars and workshops conducted by members of the Council of Ulama throughout the country. The Ministry of Religious Affairs published, in 2006, a manual (Dalil al Imam) to remind the preachers that they are after all state-employed officials and representatives of the king. In the Moroccan religious discourse of the post-Casablanca bombing, Islam and national identity are interlocked, and the particularity of the Moroccan model in Islam is recurrently foregrounded.

Belgium and the Netherlands host significant Moroccan diasporic communities. In an effort to oversee religious matters abroad, align them with its political objectives, and preserve the religious and national identity of its citizens in diaspora, the Moroccan state has established two official institutions: The Council of 'Ulama for the Moroccan Community in Europe (CUMCE) and the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad (HIIFMRA). Primarily, CUMCE is engaged in the training of Moroccan-European imams and murshidat. Concurrently, HIIFMRA undertakes the responsibility of providing Arabic education to Moroccan children living in Europe. In addition, it coordinates the deployment of imams, *mushffiun* (psalmoders), and *murshidat* to various European countries during the holy month of Ramadan.

Problem Statement, Questions, and Hypothesis

While post-WWII studies on Islam and Muslims in Western Europe have predominantly examined topics such as transnational Islamic groups, radicalization, and political Islam from socio-anthropological and security perspectives, the specific exploration of religious leadership, particularly imams, remains relatively uncharted. The significant shift in focus to the indigenization of Islamic religious leadership occurred only after the 9/11 attacks, and in response to the evolution of Muslim immigrants and their descendants into European citizens through family reunification.

However, there are critical debates within this emerging scholarship. Certain works have been critiqued for their disproportionate attention to imam training, often implicating imams as primary impediments to Muslim integration in Western Europe. Scholars such as Haddad & J. Balz (2008), Aslan and Windisch (2012), and Hashas *et. al* (2018) contend that this perspective is reductionist and overlooks the complex realities of Muslim immigrant populations, such as unemployment and marginalization. They contend that government measures aimed at regulating imams only present a superficial facade, neglecting to address the fundamental issues encountered by the Muslim diaspora.

Furthermore, these scholars posit that imams function within a bureaucratic structure where they represent one of the weakest links in the chain of religious organizations and discourses (Hashas *et. al*, 2018). State institutions form an important influence over the office of the imam, be it in Morocco or Western European countries. This is evidenced by Mohammed Hashas (2018), who points out the transformation of imamship in Morocco and France into a nationalized, institutionalized, and dependent function, where imams are assigned an ethical role unrelated to the political domain. This signals a shift in the understanding and expectations of imamship within Muslim communities.

Furthermore, the increasing nationalization of the Islamic religious field in both sending and receiving nations has consequences. There is a clash of perspectives on the Muslim diaspora in Western Europe between sending and receiving countries. It is important to scrutinize how imams are caught in this crossfire and how they respond to it.

At the same time, the advent of the Internet and modern media has complicated the religious sphere, allowing anyone to assume the role of an imam. Considering these multifaceted dynamics, this research problematizes the prevailing view of imams and aims to provide a more

nuanced understanding of diasporic religious authority. In an attempt to reach its aim, this research strives to answer the following questions:

1. How does the collision of perspectives between sending and receiving nations regarding the Muslim diaspora in Belgium and the Netherlands affect imams of Moroccan origin?
2. What are the perspectives of Western European imams of Moroccan descent on identity, gender, belief, politics, and radicalization, and what are the implications of these views on the indigenization of Islam in Europe?
3. How is the perceived changing authority of sending nations over the religion of their diaspora reflected in the difference between the discourses of Western European-born imams and migrant imams from Morocco?
4. How does the actual extent of an imam's authority within their community compare to the disproportionate blame they receive for integration challenges in the European context, and how do imams in Belgium and the Netherlands perceive their their roles and assess their connection to integration challenges?

The research hypothesis is framed through four critical components: The first component of the hypothesis stipulates that due to prevailing tensions and misconceptions regarding the role of imams in European societies, their actual authority within their local Muslim communities may be considerably diminished when contrasted with the authority externally ascribed to them. This portion of the hypothesis suggests that the sphere of influence wielded by imams is specifically confined within the ethical realm and is significantly undermined by the weak position of imams within the bureaucratic structure of religious authority and social media.

The second facet of the hypothesis posits that the public's misconceptions about the imam's role and authority could potentially lead to unfair attribution of blame to imams for integration challenges within their communities. This suggests that the level of scrutiny and responsibility imposed on imams for perceived integration failures may exceed their actual capacity to influence these issues. The discrepancy between socio-political expectations and the imam's actual role unveils a significant disparity that requires further exploration.

The third component predicts a transformation in the influence Morocco exerts over the religious practices and interpretations of its diasporic communities. This part of the hypothesis anticipates a discernible difference in the discourses articulated by both Europe-born and immigrant imams, reflecting the dynamic shift in the religious influences between nations of origin and their diaspora in Western Europe.

The fourth and final component underscores the vulnerability of imams, especially those born in Morocco, due to their precarious positioning at the intersection of conflicting national interests concerning the transmission of Islam to Europeans of Muslim descent. This component of the hypothesis highlights the complexity of the imams' position within this sociopolitical framework, bringing attention to their often-overlooked problematic status.

Methodology

This research employs a case study design to draw conclusions regarding the previously mentioned objective. It is exploratory in nature, aiming to pave the way for future research on the subject by posing pertinent questions and identifying key areas for investigation.

Primary data have been collected from pre-existing interviews and publicly recorded speeches of imams of Moroccan descent, active in the Netherlands and Belgium, available via various digital platforms. These platforms include but are not limited to, YouTube, Facebook, personal blogs, and other websites. The material for analysis was predominantly textual, visual, or audiovisual in format. After transcription, the data were translated from Arabic, French, and Dutch into English for thorough analysis.

In the analysis phase, the study adopted a coding process to discover patterns within the data and organized them into meaningful themes. This strategy, used in conjunction with extant theories and concepts on the topic, enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the various categories connected to the research questions.

The research subjects were grouped into two primary categories: imams born in Morocco and those of Moroccan descent born in Europe (Belgium and the Netherlands). This categorization facilitated a deeper exploration of the changing influence of “sending” nations outlined by scholars such as Sunier (2018) and Laurence (2018).

Furthermore, the study incorporated insights from discourses in conflict by Michel Pecheux to enhance the examination of the transcribed data (1975, trans. 1982, p. 112). This

multidisciplinary approach ensures a rigorous and comprehensive exploration of the research questions posed.

Argument

Through analyzing the perspectives on gender, radicalization, identity, and religious doctrine, there appears to be a marked diversity among European-born imams. This variation is noteworthy, signifying the changing landscape of Islam in Europe. Specifically, the absence of a cohesive, structured Islamic authority seems to foster this diversification. That been said, the study validates the evolving landscape where "sending" nations are experiencing a reduction in their control over the religious practices of their diasporic communities as a result of the diversification of authority in the religious field (Sunier, 2018). However, as highlighted by Mandaville, this transition does not suggest the emergence of a highly liberal European Islam that embraces individualism and democracy (2007, p. 102). The diversification of interpretations within religion does not necessarily lead to tolerance or open-mindedness.

Transitioning into the role of imams in the European context, it appears that some European nationals possess a misconstrued perception of the role of imams in the contemporary European and Muslim contexts. They often perceive it as a position of significant authority, disregarding the intricate bureaucratic structure in which this role is situated. This research contends that the authority of an imam is fundamentally contingent upon that of the mosque committee. By deviating from the conventional representation of an imam as an authoritative figure, this study brings to light the frequently neglected aspects of imamship in Europe. Such misrepresentations tend to burden imams with responsibilities that exceed their capabilities, a circumstance they often protest against. Imams have voiced concerns, suggesting that the expectations associated with their position are disproportionately high relative to the resources invested. They argue that their position, lacking a well-defined legal framework, renders them vulnerable. Imams are often scapegoated and held accountable for the perceived failures of integration policies. They vehemently challenge the flawed concept of a "super imam," who is supposedly capable of resolving all issues faced by European Muslims.

Imams in Europe often find themselves entangled amid conflicting national interests and diverse expectations whether they be from the Muslim community in Europe or other European nationals. A compelling example is Imam Toujgani, whose residency permit was revoked under

the accusation of being an agent for Moroccan intelligence in Belgium. This incident signals a shift in European states' approach to managing their national Islamic religious affairs. This sentiment is underscored by the actions of Sammy Mahdi, the Minister of Foreigners, who made the decision to revoke Imam Toujgani's residency, thus asserting greater control over national religious affairs.

This dissertation further contends that anthropological studies on globalization provide valuable insights for understanding the disruption often blamed on imams for issues concerning the integration of European Muslims. It is essential to recognize that the alleged failure of imams in fulfilling their roles does not constitute as great a risk to the stability of European governments as it is commonly held. Instead, these perceived failures should be viewed in the context of the destabilizing effects of globalization. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the impacts of globalization are not solely negative. Global shifts often yield inventive outcomes, despite the potential for unexpected and potentially unfavorable consequences.

Anna Tsing's metaphors of global movements offer an apt illustration of this concept: a wheel's mobility relies on its contact with the road's surface; merely spinning in the air accomplishes nothing. Similarly, a single stick remains just that − a stick; however, friction generated between two sticks can produce both heat and light (2011). In other words, global encounters are not always smooth but can be creative. These metaphorical insights can be found within the practices of imams Mustafa Kastit, Khalid Benhaddou, and Yassin Elfokrani. Their interests extend beyond the realm of religion. Kastit, for example, runs a reading group distributing books from humanities and social sciences to Belgian Muslims. Benhaddou incorporates insights from a variety of fields into his writings. Elfokrani, on the other hand, actively seeks to influence policy to foster Muslim integration in the Netherlands. Despite some of the negative effects of globalization such as the lack of integration, the active engagement of these imams exemplifies the creative impact as a result of these global movements.

Overview of the Chapters

My dissertation is divided into 7 chapters. The first chapter, titled "Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework," provides an extensive review of pertinent scholarly works on Islamic religious authority in Western Europe. It allows the positioning of this study in the larger academic discourse surrounding the subject. Additionally, the chapter explores key

concepts crucial to this research, including religious authority, transnationalism, diaspora, and the interplay of nationalism with religion. The final part of this chapter introduces a theoretical framework derived from the anthropology of globalization to aid in the subsequent analysis.

The next chapter 2 explicates the methodology of this research. The chapter elucidates the sociological case study design that underpins the research and details the data collection process from sources like YouTube and various documents. Subsequently, it discusses the dual use of critical discourse and thematic analyses in this research, explaining their functions and justifications for their inclusion.

In Chapter 3, "Moroccan Islam," the research outlines and positions the Moroccan model of Islam within its distinctive context.

Chapter 4, "Exporting Moroccan Islam to Europe," sheds light on the strategies adopted by the Moroccan state to disseminate Moroccan Islam abroad. Specifically, it investigates the establishment of the Council of Ulama for the Moroccan Community in Europe and the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad. The research scrutinizes the overseas operations of these institutions, with an emphasis on their cultural activities, including the deployment of imams and *murshidats* for preaching and spiritual guidance in Europe, and the conduct of educational programs, summer camps, and university workshops.

Chapter 5, "Islam in Belgium and the Netherlands," provides a contextual background for the institutionalization and historical development of Islam in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

Chapter 6, "Findings," initiates with the biographies of each imam under study, subsequently exploring their perspectives on identity, gender, and politics. Chapter 7, "Analytical Discussion," offers a synthesis of the findings through the lens of discourse analysis, culminating in the conclusion of the research.

CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Review of the Literature

Studies of Islam and Muslims in Western Europe following World War II often neglected to emphasize religious leadership, especially the role of imams. During that period, scholarly focus on Islam and Muslims in Europe was primarily directed toward transnational Islamic movements, radicalization, and political Islam. The examination of Muslim religious leadership in Europe, as a distinct topic of study, is a recent development. This review of the literature employs a chronological structure, emphasizing the central contention of each examined piece. The goal is to elucidate the methodological and research gap that persists following these studies and to delineate how this research endeavors to address it.

The first important work on imams in Western Europe was a book written by Franck Frégosi in 1998, titled *La Formation des Cadres Religieux Musulmans en France: Approches Sociojuridiques*. The objective of the work is to better define the contours, both theoretical and practical, of Muslim religious leaders in France and the difficulties raised by their formation outside of the Muslim world. The study was realized by the National Center of Sientific Reseach in France and more specifically the team working on the contemporary transformations of Islam in Europe. The project was conducted within the Department of Society, Law, and Religion, employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from the humanities, social sciences, and law.

The book engages in an exploration of the theological and theoretical distinctiveness of the Islamic conceptions of the imam's functions, with reference to the normative Islamic scriptural texts from within the *Shafi'ite* school. The second part of the book comprises papers on the practical aspects of religious leadership and Muslim staff in France. Later, the book reflects on the Muslim reality in France, drawing comparisons with the situation of French Judaism. It contends that, at the time of its writing (1998), Muslims were devoid of a unified, centralized representative structure of worship. Furthermore, it asserts that imams did not receive training that was tailored to everyday life in France. This has resulted in a misalignment between the

training and discourses of these imams, and the actual experiences of Muslims residing in the country.

After the 9/11 incident and the fact that Muslim immigrants and their descendants were turning into European citizens with the shift from economic migration to family reunification, the indigenization of Islamic religious leadership started gaining status as a topic of importance. As a consequence, scholarship began according it some consideration. In 2002, Gert Hekma published an essay article entitled "Imams and Homosexuality: A Post-gay Debate in The Netherlands." The essay investigates the denunciation of homosexuality by the Rotterdam-based Moroccan imam, Khalil El Moumni, in May 2001. It has also looked at how this discussion fits into the larger settings of modernity and postmodernity. It argues that the media's readiness to broadcast the Imam's stance on homosexuality, along with the avid discourse surrounding it by politicians and the general public, can largely be attributed to a deficiency in understanding about Moroccans and Muslims, coupled with sentiments of white supremacy against the Imam's perceived conservative expressions. However, the Imam's views, considered normative within the context of Islam, mirror comparable teachings within Christianity and Judaism and, as such, should not provoke astonishment.

A few years later, exactly in 2007, King Baudouin Foundation produced the first report on the training of imams in Europe entitled *Training imams in Europe: The current status King Baudouin Foundation*. This initiative results from the fact that there is a need for imams trained locally in Belgium. This lack has motivated scholars to research how the ministers of other religions are trained in Belgium and how the neighboring European countries deal with the issue. The study argues that there is an unavailability for adequate theological, linguistic, and civic training for religious leaders and concludes that since church-State relationship differs significantly from one country to another, the likelihood for promoting a local training of imams varies as well.

Contrasting with Frégosi's *La Formation des Cadres Religieux Musulmans en France: Approches Sociojuridiques* (1998) and the King Baudouin Foundation's *Training Imams in Europe: The Current Status* (2007), the article "Taming the Imams: European Governments and Islamic Preachers since 9/11" (2008) by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Michael J. Balz provides a nuanced perspective on the necessity of adequately training imams within the European context. Haddad and Balz posit that, in the aftermath of the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van

Gogh in (2004) and the Madrid (2004) and the London (2005) bombings, European countries have been implemented stricter measures aimed at mitigating and potentially transforming "extremist" Islam. The article scrutinizes the policy shifts precipitated by these incidents and their subsequent effects on imams across different European countries, with a particular focus on domestic surveillance, immigration policy, and educational programs in France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. It thus becomes apparent that despite Europe's secular tenets, the role of the imam is inherently intertwined with national governance.

Expanding on its central thesis, the article contends that much like the global war on terrorism, numerous mechanisms established by European governments to regulate imams are more "cosmetic" than substantive solutions. Imam training initiatives are exceedingly limited, and even long-standing ones such as France's IEHS, with over two decades in operation, fail to yield the anticipated outcomes. These programs grapple with significant hurdles in securing funding, recruiting educators, and devising a curriculum palatable to both Islamic communities and the state. Furthermore, even under the assumption of these programs operating flawlessly, there persist reservations concerning their perceived authenticity among Muslims and the demand for their services. Quick-fix solutions proffered by governments fall short of addressing the core issues plaguing Muslim immigrant communities in Europe, including unemployment, substandard living conditions, and political and social marginalization. It is suggested that such governmental intrusions may stymie the organic evolution of European-Muslim relations. Instead of eliciting the collaboration of Euro-Muslims in countering radicalism, these policies may inadvertently elicit a defensive stance against perceived government intimidation. The article critically examines the idealistic sentiments echoed in studies advocating for the establishment of local European imam training programs when there is a lack of a nuanced understanding of European Muslims and imams.

The next important work on imams in Europe saw the light in 2008. It is a book edited by Willem B. Drees and Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld entitled *The Study of Religion and the Training of Muslim Clergy in Europe*. The book is divided into two parts. The initial segment encapsulates the diverse works that strive to illustrate the interplay between rational thought and religion, and their subsequent impact on the scholastic sphere. The latter section collates research focusing on the scholarly training of imams and religious educators across Europe. Among these studies, one of particular interest is conducted by Mohammed M. Ghaly, titled "The Academic

Training of Imams: Recent Discussions and Initiatives in the Netherlands." It tackles the issue of imam training within the Netherlands. The paper posits that the local Muslim population and the government exhibit divergent perspectives on imam training. Despite the shared aspiration for imams to be conversant in Dutch, and to narrow the cultural divide between religious leaders and the "secular' society", as well as the emerging generations of Dutch Muslims, the Dutch government and the Muslim population harbor differing objectives. The government envisages the imams as agents of integration and as advocates of a 'Dutch Islam,' whereas the Dutch Muslims seek imams capable of harmonizing traditional responsibilities within a non-Islamic environment. The study provides insight of significance into the factors that can lead to the downfall of imam training programs. The driving forces behind these programs exhibit a contrast between the perspectives of Dutch Muslims and the government. This suggests that academic inquiries should engage more profoundly with the apprehensions of the Muslim communities in Europe, as well as their religious leaders, given that integration is a dynamic bidirectional process of mutual adaptation involving both the immigrant populace and the residents of the Member States.

Subsequent to this body of work, *The Training of Imams and Teachers for Islamic Education in Europe* was published in 2012, an edited work by Ednan Aslan and Zsofia Windisch. In the aftermath of the events of September 11 and the escalation of religiously sanctioned violence within Islamic nations, public discourse increasingly emphasized imams and religious educators as proponents of Muslim isolation and resistance to integration. As a consequence, imams emerged as critical figures in debates surrounding Islam. In an atmosphere charged with fervor, politicians began to assign blame to them for what was perceived as a failed integration of Muslims within Europe. The proposal was put forth that imams, trained within the confines of Europe, would bolster Muslim integration, mitigate violence, reconcile disparities between societal norms and Muslim practices, and encourage Islamic enlightenment.

In pursuit of this objective, efforts were concentrated on, firstly, reinvigorating existing institutions responsible for imam training in the Balkan states, and secondly, on the establishment of new educational institutions within European universities aimed at cultivating imams compliant with European societal expectations. Given the pivotal role they play in the daily lives of Muslims, the education and training of imams and religious teachers is accorded a central role in the process of Muslim integration. This edited book underscores the extensive

responsibility bestowed upon imams. Such responsibility does not align with their roles as mere employees functioning within a bureaucratic framework. Western Europe posits significant demands on its imams.

In 2014, “Imams in Flanders: A Research Note” was published by the scholars, Patrick Loobuyck and Petra Meier. As a pioneering exploratory mixed-method research study, this work aims to unearth the sociodemographic, ethnical, and functional profiles, as well as aspirations, of imams serving in Flanders, a region in Belgium. This piece is celebrated for its groundbreaking insight into a subject matter which, up until its inception, had remained largely uncharted. The field's pre-existing studies were primarily focused on descriptive work and institutionalization of Islam in the region. A void existed in empirical research that deal with the individual identities of imams, their belief systems, their occupational activities, and self-perceptions in the context of their Flanders locale. To bridge this knowledge gap, Loobuyck and Meier utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

The quantitative aspect of the study was intended to render a broad and encompassing portrayal of the imams active in Flanders. The study's findings offer multiple intriguing perspectives. One of the main conclusions drawn was the heightened workload experienced by the imams, surpassing that of traditional imams. This increase in workload can be attributed to a surge in novel responsibilities or the sheer quantum of tasks they are required to handle.

In an era of growing inquiries about the integration of Muslims into Western secular societies, one of the emergent responsibilities of the imams is to guide their congregants on this particular matter. The study further revealed that many imams acknowledged the lack of proficiency in the host language and understanding of European societies as a major impediment in addressing their followers' concerns effectively.

An important yet disconcerting finding is the pervasive mistrust and suspicion the imams hold towards state intervention. The research indicates that imams perceive the society they inhabit to be predominantly hostile towards Islam and Muslims. This breakthrough study by Loobuyck and Meier hence adds an invaluable dimension to the understanding of Islam and Muslims in Western Europe.

Their exploratory study served as a crucial impetus for the research undertaken in this dissertation. It spotlighted the conspicuous absence of an in-depth examination of the discourse propagated by imams. Undertaking such a study is integral as it addresses a significant void in

research that has been predominantly centered around the training of imams. While it is undeniable that the training imams receive can exert substantial influence over their discourse, it is not the sole determinant that shapes their beliefs and preaching patterns.

This realization emphasizes the necessity of extending research boundaries beyond the confines of training environments. It necessitates the observation of imams in their natural settings where their discourses naturally evolve and manifest—for instance, during their sermons at the mosque. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive and authentic understanding of the multifaceted influences that shape the discourse of imams. Therefore, this dissertation is significantly inspired by, and intends to build upon, the pioneering work of Loobuyck and Meier.

In the year, 2014, Cora Alexa Døving introduced a compelling article titled, "Position and Self-Understanding of Sunni Muslim Imams in Norway." This piece brings attention to the complex dynamics of religious leadership within a secular society like Norway, where religious leaders often find their influence confined primarily to their respective religious communities. Interestingly, in spite of such societal secularism, public discourse continues to uphold the perception that imams wield significant influence. They are often charged with exerting disproportionate influence and allegedly using it as a barrier against the assimilation of Muslims into the broader Norwegian culture.

Døving's article provides a rich understanding of this contentious issue by examining the roles, duties, conditions, and self-perceived influence of imams in Norway. The analysis does not aim to interconnect the disparate data types; instead, it gleans insight from the unique characteristics of each set of data—from interviews, media, and fieldwork—on their own merits.

These varying sources serve to illuminate the imam's position within Norwegian society more comprehensively, rather than attempting to reconcile or contrast the data. An important revelation from this pilot study concerns the transformative influence of the Internet on the religious landscape. With online platforms enabling a more widespread dispersion of religious advice and discussions, traditional authorities, such as imams within mosques, face significant challenges to their established roles. This digital expansion suggests that the future legitimacy of imams may become increasingly confined to performing ritual leadership, underscoring a potential shift in religious dynamics.

As a conclusion to the discussion on Døving's study on imams in Norway, it is worth noting its significant influence on the direction of this dissertation. Methodologically and in

terms of scope, it breaks away from traditional studies that emphasize imam training as the primary force shaping European imams. The focus on imams' self-perceptions in this study serves to challenge prevailing stereotypes concerning their assumed influence. Moreover, It indicates that paying close attention to the imams' own discourses reveals deeper, more nuanced dynamics within European Muslim communities.

In 2016, Valentina Fedele published “Training Imams of France A Socio-Islamological Approach.” The study examines the history and training programs of the main institutes for imams in France, highlighting their key limitations, opportunities, and concerns, using a methodology that combines an islamological analysis with certain notions from phenomenological sociology. The study concludes that, in light of the Muslim community's new religious needs in France, imams appear to be in short supply, mainly untrained, with limited or no knowledge of French, underpaid or unpaid, and, as a result, culturally and economically firmly attached to their countries of origin.

The text suggests a strong link between Muslim countries and the French imamate, which shapes the choice of teachers, teachings, and theological approaches. However, this connection may lead to an overemphasis on a singular interpretation of Islam, potentially leading to conflicts within an increasingly heterogeneous Muslim community in France. The strong link between Muslim countries and the French imamate, while historically significant, may limit theological diversity. Encouraging a more pluralistic approach in training could accommodate the heterogeneous Muslim community in France and reduce potential conflicts arising from rigid adherence to a single interpretation of Islam.

The investigation further incorporates insights gathered from interviews with young French Muslims. A notable finding from these conversations is the expressed inclination among these youth for an interpretation of Islam that is germane to their societal context, rather than one that merely reflects imported foreign traditions. These observations encapsulate the aspirational demand among European Muslims for imams whose training equips them to engage effectively with the contemporary challenges faced by their congregations. There is a strong preference for religious leadership that does not conflate cultural heritage with religious practice but focuses on the distinctive needs and experiences of European Muslims.

This discernment paves the way for significant academic contemplation. Given that European Muslims demonstrate disfavor towards the transposition of cultural traditions from

their ancestral lands into the practice of Islam in their host nations, it provokes an exploration into the perception and reaction of imams towards this issue. Specifically, it invites a comparative analysis of how imams born in Europe and those originating from Morocco differ in their approach to navigating this cultural-religious intersection.

Transitioning from the previous discussion, it is worth highlighting a significant 2018 publication by Mohammed Hashas, Jan Jaap de Ruiter, and Niels Valdemar Vinding, in collaboration with Khalid Hajji, entitled *Imams in Western Europe: Developments, Transformations, and Institutional Challenges*. This compiled work investigates various topics relating to religious leadership and the process of institutionalizing Islam within a European context.

The collection offers a comprehensive exploration into the roles, functions, and status of imams in Western Europe, while also scrutinizing the implications of the imamate within the sphere of religious-institutional authority. The volume is bifurcated into two distinct sections: the former places an emphasis on theoretical considerations, exploring subjects like religious authority, theology, and its manifestation within the contemporary Western Europe milieu, while the latter primarily comprises fieldwork-based case studies specific to individual countries.

Thijl Sunier, in his noteworthy contribution to the work entitled “The Making of Islamic Authority in Europe”, underscores the pivotal role of ordinary Muslims in determining how religious authority and leadership are enacted. He posits that Islamic religious authority has become increasingly diversified and unpredictable. Such diversity and unpredictability, according to Sunier, are a result of intersecting socio-political, economic, and media influences that collectively shape the contemporary Islamic authority landscape.

This burgeoning number of religious figures, accompanied by their respective followers, has fostered a competitive marketplace for religious leaders, both seasoned and nascent. These leaders are striving to navigate and position themselves within the media landscape that amplifies their performances and discourse on a global scale. New media outlets, in particular, pose a distinct challenge to traditional forms of religious authority.

Modern educational institutions, utilizing contemporary technologies to disseminate pluralistic and reformed religious discourses and interpretations of religious rules, now stand in opposition to traditional Islamic learning centers. The same conventions are lived and practiced

in different ways across generations and even within the same generation but in disparate areas, be they peripheral or mainstream.

Furthermore, once crucial in the establishment of organized Islam among migrant communities in Europe, nations of origin have seen their influence wane dramatically in the face of this diversification of Islamic religious authorities. The current panorama of European Islam must be understood as a complex, multi-polar, and multi-directional field in which modern mass media plays a vital role.

This plurality of theological interpretations poses significant challenges for nation-states attempting to domesticate Islam and regulate the public behavior of Muslims, an endeavor that risks infringing on the neutrality that secular states are expected to uphold. In this complex landscape of diasporic Islamic religious authority, both media and socio-economic processes play significant roles.

Sunier posits that the diminishing influence from states of origin on the religious landscape of their diaspora communities can be attributed to the diversification of religious figures within Islam, a phenomenon catalyzed by the advent of new media. This dissertation extends that inquiry, examining whether this dynamic also manifests among formal Muslim leadership within Belgium and the Netherlands. Specifically, it seeks to evaluate and compare the discourses of imams born in Morocco with those born in Western European countries and see how they agree or disagree with the Moroccan national form of Islam.

In addition to Sunier, Jonathan Laurence contributes another significant perspective to the book. By drawing a parallel between the experiences of Roman Catholics in nineteenth-century America and Muslims in contemporary Europe, he posits that European Muslims are navigating a similar historical phase of establishment, institutionalization, and professionalization in response to novel circumstances. During the early nineteenth century, American Catholics found themselves without churches, dioceses, professionally-trained priests, and colleges. By the mid-century, the Roman Catholic Church found it necessary to establish an 'American College' in Rome to cultivate competent Catholic priests, with similar institutions being founded elsewhere in Europe to fulfill the need for professionalization and places of worship.

Using this comparison, Laurence suggests that European Muslims are not lagging in their institutional development. Echoing the situation of earlier American Catholics, they initially lacked professional training, places of worship, and educational institutions, but these have been

progressively established in recent decades. He attributes this development to continued engagement with Muslims' countries of origin and influential cities such as Rabat, Algiers, and Ankara.

Laurence postulates that the political, administrative, and legal control exerted by the countries of origin over their diasporas is fading. However, a form of "spiritual fatherhood" or "spiritual leadership" will endure, maintaining a link between the cities that train imams and religious leaders for Europe and their diaspora. In Laurence's view, this evolution should not be construed as a political setback for the countries of origin, but rather as a shifting of authority to the Muslims who are striving to establish themselves in their new European homeland. Consequently, distinct local manifestations of Islam, such as French Islam, German Islam, and British Islam, have begun to take shape. Nevertheless, he contends that this European Islam is not fundamentally detached from the previous Islamic centers of sending countries that gave birth to it and helped it thrive.

While Lawrence draws significant findings from his historical analogy, it must be noted that Islam in Europe and Catholicism in the United States are different. Islam, unlike Catholicism, does not have a centralized religious authority equivalent to the Vatican. Moreover, each country mentioned (Morocco, Algeria, Turkey) has distinct cultural and historical contexts that shape the way Islam is practiced and understood. Therefore, the relationship between these countries and their diasporas may not evolve in exactly the same way as the Vatican and Catholic diaspora.

This dissertation, however, builds on Laurence's argument and hopes to enrich it. While Laurence Deploys a top-down analysis to figure out what is happening in the Islamic religious field in Western Europe, this study tries to see what is going on at the micro level. It tries to delve into the experiences of imams to see how the spiritual presence of the sending countries is expressed from the perspectives of imams. In other words, the dissertation tries to follow closely the localization process of Islam in the Netherlands and Belgium by analyzing the discourses of imams.

It is within this context of understanding the dynamics of religious localization that Mohammed Hashas' insightful contribution to this collection, "The European Imam: A Nationalized Religious Authority," comes into play. He posits that the imamship, emerging as a fresh area of study and policy concentration in Islamic academia and contemporary nation-state

structures, is evolving into a nationalized religious authority. This authority is increasingly under the purview of state institutions, representing a significant shift from earlier times when local communities enjoyed the autonomy to choose their imams.

Hashas exemplifies this transition by examining the role of imams as delineated by Morocco's Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. This position necessitates a range of duties and obligations that bring the imam under the jurisdiction of state institutions. The focus of the role is on propagating Islamic ethics, with a clear demarcation barring involvement in political discourse. Further, Hashas extends his analysis to the situation of imams in France, illustrating the nationalization of this religious role through state oversight. He emphasizes that the religious influence exerted by the imam is primarily ethical-spiritual in nature.

These case studies shed light on the transformation of a religious function, which has gained significant attention and popularity in recent years. It depicts a shift towards nationalization, institutionalization, and dependency on an alternate form of authority, in this case governmental, with a clearly articulated role centered on ethical instruction and explicit distancing from political matters.

Drawing upon Hashas' argument, the allegation that imams leverage their authority to impede the integration of European Muslims is effectively challenged. This dissertation extends this line of argument to probe the effects of the nationalization of such authority on the discourses of imams. These imams exist at the intersection of two or more nationalized Islamic realities due to their native origins and current European national affiliations.

Jouanneau's contribution to this collection of essays, originally composed in French, draws from her six-year extensive research on imams in France, as comprehensively portrayed in her book *Les Imams en France* (2013). Her work delineates a typology of French imams, charting their presence since World War I, their progressive institutionalization stages, and the challenges encountered along the way.

During her half a dozen years of fieldwork in France, Jouanneau interviewed approximately thirty imams and about fifteen high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Her research also involved a thorough consultation of state archives. Jouanneau critically examines the 1905 French Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State, highlighting the government's propensity to sidestep it when dealing with Islamic issues such as imam selection.

Her exploration delineates how both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have interfered in the imam selection process since the 1990s. Techniques utilized include leveraging diplomatic contacts and consular networks from sending nations to appoint “consular imams”; scrutinizing imam-training programs, their recommended practices, and “legitimate beliefs” via the residence permit cards for which they apply. This level of surveillance aims to ensure that only “good imams” demonstrating proper conduct can secure residence in France.

Jouanneau, however, critiques this intervention, arguing that it potentially backfires. She asserts that state-controlled imams and programs run the risk of losing credibility and authority within Muslim communities due to this excessive governmental influence. Her study highlights an important aspect of the localization of Islam in Western Europe. It illuminates a crucial facet of the process of Islam's localization in Western Europe − a facet that may be seen as a reaction to these securitization measures. The significance of this doctoral study lies in its capacity to provide insights into the ways imams respond to such securitization and how these reactions are manifested in their discourses.

The chapter by Welmoet Boender and Jan Jaap de Ruiter, within the same collection, titled “The Imam as an Organic Public Intellectual: The Case of Yassin Elforkani in The Netherlands,” scrutinizes the role of Yassin Elforkani, a Dutch Imam, in navigating the multifaceted demands and challenges confronting imams in Western Europe. The authors elucidate how Elforkani skillfully utilizes a diverse array of arguments, both theological and secular, to contest skepticism within Dutch society as well as opposition from very conservative religious counterparts. They ultimately conclude that this Muslim religious leader has emerged as a significant public figure in debates surrounding the role of Islam—and religion more broadly—in society, by intentionally championing a counter-narrative. Through strategic efforts to influence public sentiment and policymakers' views on the controversial subjects of integration and radicalization, Elforkani fulfills Heynders' definition of a “public intellectual,” someone who engages in public discourse from a committed and contentious position. Elforkani's presence in public arenas is highly noticeable; he communicates with non-specialist audiences through regular interviews in print and broadcast media, as well as via the Internet.

This chapter provides an intriguing examination of a distinct facet of imamship in Western Europe. The person of the imam encounters criticism from both Muslim and non-

Muslim audiences and is consequently compelled to address diverse demands of varying natures. His responsibilities extend beyond the religious sphere and into the secular domain. The unique context of Europe has catalyzed the emergence of imams such as Elforkani, for whom traditional theological knowledge alone is insufficient for successfully navigating this novel environment. This doctoral dissertation further examines the case of Elforkani and tries to analyze his discourse to enrich this discussion.

Navigating into the digital sphere, Claudia Carvalho explores the dynamics of religious authority's application and scrutiny. In this arena, Muslim women and adolescents, who have found neither themselves nor their perspectives reflected in traditional venues of worship (e.g., mosques) or through established forms of religious authority such as imams, have unearthed a newfound avenue for exerting influence—the Internet. Their online discourses mirror the individualization of religious knowledge. Carvalho's depiction of these "potential jihadists" illuminates their endorsement of the Islamic State, their aspirations of membership, and their utilization of classical concepts like hijra ("migration") and da'wa ("proselytizing") as recruitment strategies. Her insights are based on an online ethnographic study tracing the conversations of 50 Muslim women, either of Moroccan origin or converts, in Catalonia, Spain, throughout 2013-2014. Drawing her piece to a close, Carvalho quotes a female religious scholar asserting that this personalized form of digital jihadism does not symbolize the community or Islamic knowledge.

This ethnographic investigation substantiates the notion that imams are not the sole disseminators of religious knowledge. Alternative channels, such as the Internet, facilitate the circulation of such knowledge. This reality underscores the fact that an Imam's authority is limited to the spaces in which they are actively engaged. Consequently, it is misplaced to attribute the challenges of European Muslims' integration solely to imams. The rise of the Internet has enabled ordinary individuals to assume roles akin to those of imams, at times wielding more significant influence than the official religious leaders themselves.

Within the same edited work, "Towards a typology of imams of the West", the chapter by Niels Valdemar Vinding, proposes a typology of imams based on variations of institutional authority – that is, the significant dimensions of institutionally embedded authority available in the West – and what has been named epistemic authority, which emphasizes the primacy of knowledge-based authority in Islam, to better understand the relevant and significant differences

between imams in the West. The typology expresses the cross-tabulation between the varied institutional frameworks in the West and Islamic knowledge embodied, focusing notably on Islamic authority and presenting pertinent instances of imams who represent power. However, Vinding does not address why a typology of imams is needed in the first place. Although this is the first typology to explicitly address the significance of the imam's job or institutional network, Vinding does not explain why we need to distinguish between being "in authority" and "an authority" (El-Yousfi, 2019). Is it possible to interpret the function of the imam by contrasting their positionality with their capacities or qualifications, or it merely helps place the imam in the wider field of Muslim leadership in the West?

Finally, the book by Hashas *et. al*. presents the following thesis: Firstly, it asserts that the subject of imam education is irrevocably intertwined with intricate issues such as Islam's encounter with modernity, and the phenomenon of migration in an era characterized by globalization. It argues that focusing singularly on the training of imams as a solution to the challenges of integration and Islamic extremism is an oversimplified redirection. The book emphasizes that the imam, contrary to popular belief, represents one of the most vulnerable links within the hierarchy of religious organizations and discourses. An imam is not a divinely ordained leader but rather a functionary, guided by the directives of his employers — whether that be the community of believers, the state, or a combination of the two. Hence, advancing imams' legal position is as crucial as enhancing their training.

The book's second argument posits that the tension threatening to disrupt the cohesion of European societies should not be primarily attributed to the perceived failures of imams. Instead, it asserts that these tensions arise from the vulnerabilities precipitated by the pervasive reach of globalization − a phenomenon reshaping all societies irrespective of their wealth, development level, or lack thereof. Consequently, this state of affairs compels a reassessment of Islam's position within Europe's cultural and societal landscape.

A growing narrative among various European leaders, as highlighted in the book, is that multiculturalism no longer serves as a reliable mechanism for seamlessly uniting the diverse constituents of European citizens. Within this frame of reference, the issues concerning imams may appear to be simply the most noticeable part of a larger, more complex problem.

In addressing the potential fallout from the deterioration of multiculturalism − a deterioration the book doesn't claim as an established fact, contrary to certain political views − it

advocates for continued efforts to incorporate Islam into the broader socio-cultural and institutional scope of Europe. This integration, the book argues, should find equilibrium among three critical aspects: (1) Respecting Islamic traditions to ensure that Europe's Muslim communities do not feel discriminated against; (2) Upholding the sovereignty of European nations, encouraging Muslims in Europe to reconcile their cultural heritage with their new environment, and differentiating between the cultural practices of the Arab-Islamic world and the core of the religion aligned with contemporary sensibilities; and (3) Allowing European cultures to evolve organically towards a fresh historical harmony where citizens of varied faiths and beliefs can assemble into a more cohesive multitude.

In Amin El-Yousfi's 2019 critique of the book by Hashas *et al*., he draws attention to an overemphasis within the book on imams as the primary conduit for Islamic religious authority in Western Europe. Despite acknowledging that imams represent a vulnerable link within the religious framework, not divinely appointed but employees serving at the discretion of their communities or the state, the book devotes a significant portion of its discussions to imam training. El-Yousfi notes this disproportionate focus reflects broader political and media narratives concerning imams' roles in Western Europe.

In examining the complex dynamics of religious authority and individualization among the younger generation, El-Yousfi posits that the book's approach appears influenced by a politicized integration model. He cautions that this perspective may overshadow the nuanced realities at the grassroots level. While the book does not deny the relevance of these issues at the level of individuals, the overarching top-down objective to institutionalize the 'profession' of imams may eclipse more profound reflections on Western imams' realities.

El-Yousfi's critique calls for a reorientation of the discourse surrounding local Muslim leadership, urging a shift away from imams as the sole or primary focus. He proposes this is a necessary step towards developing a more thorough and nuanced understanding of these religious dynamics. The critique presents a valid concern as over fifty percent of the articles encapsulated in the edition emphasize the theme of imam training and their religious authority. Recognizing this limitation, this dissertation endeavors to transcend this narrow focus through the implementation of a bottom-up research approach. Prioritizing the narratives and experiences of imams active in Europe can serve as a substantial step towards mitigating this structural bias and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

Transitioning from the critique of an overemphasis on imam training, it becomes vital to consider other influences shaping an imam's authority. In his profound work, "Conflicting Paradigms of Religious and Bureaucratic Authority in a British Mosque," Amin El-Yousfi addresses one such influence: the bureaucratization of mosque authority. He posits that an imam's authority has become contingent upon that of the mosque committee, suggesting an emerging bureaucracy within the mosque's structural hierarchy.

El-Yousfi's insights reveal a gap in the study of Islamic authority systems, specifically the paucity of examination of how intra-Muslim dynamics contribute to their formation. In agreement with Peter (2006), El-Yousfi underscores the need to ground any study on the individualization of Islam in a comprehensive understanding of its institutionalization.

Yet, the transformations occurring within mosque authorities should not be misinterpreted as a decline of the imam's religious authority. Rather, these changes occur within the wider context of a fragmentation process of religious authority, driven by factors such as the competitive religious market, the use of new media, and the bureaucratization of mosques. Despite these challenges, El-Yousfi maintains that the authority of the imam remains intact. However, its operation and influence are subject to these broader dynamics.

In light of our previous exploration of the issues surrounding imam training in Europe, the 2019 paper "Training Imams in the Netherlands: The Failure of a Post-Secular Endeavour," offers a compelling case study. Authored by Semiha Sözeri, Hülya Kosar Altinyelken, and Monique Volman, the study scrutinizes the reasons behind the unsuccessful execution of Islamic theology and imam training programs at Dutch universities.

The investigation employs a blend of semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis to derive insights from various key stakeholders. This diverse cohort includes academics instructing within the programs, practicing imams, Qur'an instructors, leaders of dominant Islamic organizations, and representatives from the Dutch government and local official bodies. This diverse composition affords a comprehensive overview of the perceived impediments within these programs.

The research uncovers that the failure of the programs can be attributed to several interconnected factors. These range from a pervasive mistrust in the Dutch government's motivations behind program funding, skepticism concerning the expertise of non-Muslim

academics teaching Islamic subjects, and the reluctance of the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to engage collaboratively with universities in the initiation of such programs.

The authors contend that for future iterations of Islamic theology programs in Dutch universities to succeed, there is a pressing need to cultivate deeper alliances with the grassroots of the Dutch Muslim community. This study hence underscores the importance of adopting a bottom-up approach to understanding and addressing the complexities of religious education in a multicultural and post-secular society.

Many of the studies that focus on imam training tend to reiterate well-known realities. Imams in Western Europe predominantly reflect historical migration patterns, which began with the influx of often uneducated guest workers from the Islamic world. As the focus shifted from worker recruitment to family reunification, the institutionalization of Islam became an inherent aspect of European reality. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the older generation of imams, unprepared for the European context and unfamiliar with local languages, fell short of the evolving expectations.

An excessive focus on imams thus risks creating an unrealistic image of the "super imam"—a central authority capable of seamlessly integrating European Muslim communities within the broader societal context. This idealized notion not only overlooks the complex realities but also potentially obscures the broader challenges that need to be addressed for successful integration

In reviewing the vast body of literature pertaining to imams in Western Europe, it is apparent that there exists a consistent emphasis on the conjunction of the term "imam" and "training". This pairing not only signifies a prevalent thematic focus in recent research—centered largely around imam training—but also begs a critical reflection on its implications. There exists a set of scholarly works (Haddad & J. Balz, 2008; Aslan and Windisch, 2012; Hashas *et. al*, 2018) that offer a critical perspective on this overwhelming focus.

This critique stems from discontentment with both political discourses and academic research that attribute the perceived "failure" of Muslim integration in Western Europe predominantly to the role of imams. Haddad and J. Balz (2008) argue that the blame assigned to imams and the corresponding regulatory measures instituted by governments may merely serve as superficial remedies rather than substantive solutions. Building on this, critics like Aslan and

Windisch (2012) believe that placing undue emphasis on imams and their training may unintentionally make them political scapegoats.

The contention of these scholars is that these responses are quick, reactionary measures enacted by governments, which fail to address the fundamental issues impacting immigrant Muslim populations in Western Europe, such as unemployment and societal marginalization. Thus, it is argued, such a focus may potentially distract from the more profound socioeconomic issues that require our attention and remediation.

More recent research on imams explores the challenges faced by European programs designed for Imam training. For instance, the 2019 study by Semiha Sözeri and Hülya Kosar Altinyelken titled "Training Imams in the Netherlands: The Failure of a Post-Secular Endeavour" illuminates these points of failure. To improve the chances of success for future Islamic theology programs at Dutch universities, the authors underline the imperative need to forge more profound connections with the grassroots of the Dutch Muslim community.

This review also brings to the fore a range of studies that provide a comprehensive examination of the precarious circumstances faced by imams in Western Europe. A prime example is the study by Døving (2014) which prioritizes the first-hand accounts of imams, shedding light on their unique experiences, perspectives, and challenges. Of particular interest is the decreasing authority of imams. Imams acknowledge the shifts in their authority, especially in the face of online religious authorities and the rapid circulation of information in today's hyper-globalized society.

Regrettably, few studies offer an in-depth exploration of the perspectives and concerns of imams themselves. Another exception is the insightful work of Welmoet Boender and Jan Jaap de Ruiter (2018) in "The Imam as an Organic Public Intellectual: The Case of Yassin Elforkani in the Netherlands." Their study dismantles the often-stereotyped image of imams in Western Europe and offers an intricate portrayal of an imam's complex role. The researchers argue that the presence of Yassin Elforkani embodies Heynders' concept of a "public intellectual," challenging the oversimplified categorization of imams as Salafi, radical, or Wahhabi. Such nuanced studies highlight the intricacy of imams' roles and encourage a more sophisticated understanding that transcends conventional labels.

The foundational premises of my study arise from a critical review of the existing literature. Concentrating solely on the training of imams represents a reductive and politically-

motivated trend within research on Western European imams. A bottom-up examination of imams' discourses could facilitate the dismantling of reductionist representations and stereotypes about Muslim religious leadership in Western Europe. Furthermore, irrespective of whether it occurs in sending or receiving nations, the Islamic religious field is experiencing a process of nationalization; however, this nationalized religious authority faces formidable challenges. A resistance that is first initiated by the discord in perspectives between sending countries and recipient ones regarding the Muslim diaspora in Western Europe. It is further exacerbated by the internet and new media, which diversified religious leadership by allowing anyone to assume the role of an imam.

My research offers two significant contributions to the expanding field of studies on imams in Western Europe. Primarily, it moves beyond merely categorizing imams based on their training backgrounds to a deeper exploration of their thoughts and the messages they communicate in their sermons. Secondly, it seeks to investigate how a nationalized form of Islam (as exemplified by Moroccan Islam) is transported to Western Europe, where it confronts a new reality: a realm in which the imamate itself is undergoing a process of nationalization. This is achieved by privileging the perspectives of the imams themselves.

1.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Discussion

This dissertation incorporates a pivotal theoretical framework prominent in migration studies: transnationalism. The usefulness of this approach lies in its refusal to confine imams as actors within one nation-state. Instead, it emphasizes the cross-national dimensions.

Transnationalism deviates from methodological nationalism, which predominantly confines social processes within the borders of nation-states. Instead, it examines how immigrant communities maintain social relations with their home countries, forging social fields that connect their societies of origin and settlement (Schiller et al., 1992). Basch and colleagues (1994) articulate this, defining transnationalism as processes by which immigrants develop and sustain multi-stranded social relations traversing geographical, cultural, and political borders.

Nevertheless, this concept of transnationalism is critiqued by Alejandro Portes, who argues that not all migrant groups should be categorized as transnational. Portes posits three criteria for transnationalism: 1) considerable involvement of immigrants and their home country counterparts; 2) stability and resilience of these activities over time; and 3) uniqueness of these

activities that cannot be encapsulated by pre-existing concepts, thereby necessitating the creation of a new term. The position of the imam in Western Europe satisfies these conditions and is transnational par excellence.

These religious leaders, often originating from immigrant backgrounds, maintain strong and persistent ties with their countries of origin. They serve as pivotal cultural and religious links, navigating the complex socio-cultural, religious, and political landscapes of their host countries while preserving connections to their homelands. Their role has evolved into a unique form of leadership that defies traditional definitions in a manner distinct to the challenges and realities of the European Muslim diaspora.

Portes further categorizes transnationalism into "transnationalism from above" and "transnationalism from below." The former refers to the activities of governments and multinational corporations, whereas the latter pertains to grassroots efforts to establish enduring economic and other links across national borders (Portes, 2003).

The theoretical underpinning of transnationalism enriches this study, suggesting that the study of Islam in Europe cannot be divorced from the transnational processes that continually mold it. The factors involved extend beyond the national borders of the country under study. Additionally, the division between bottom-up and top-down transnationalisms is significant, highlighting the multi-dimensionality of the phenomena under study.

This perspective advocates a comprehensive outlook, examining both macro-structural elements and individual-level dynamics. While the study of imams in Western Europe necessitates the examination of structural elements − a perspective adopted in many reviewed studies − it is equally important to consider the individual level and the process of "transnationalism from below." For this reason, this study leverages qualitative research methods to delve into the experiences of Moroccan-descendant imams within Western Europe.

While the term diaspora is sometimes confused with transnationalism, it is important to understand the difference between the two. In migration studies, theories, and methodologies the concept of diaspora has become fundamental. The word diaspora has entered dictionaries only recently (diaspora is not included in *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* of 1989); the term was initially restricted to the exile of Jews then the meaning extended to include other ethnicities who have experienced dislocation from their homeland (Kenny, 2014, p. 1).

To understand diaspora, it would be useful here to refer to Thomas Faist's distinction between diaspora and transnationalism approaches. He explains that:

> Although both terms refer to cross-border processes, diaspora has been often used to denote religious or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas *transnationalism* is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations (Bauböck and Faist, 2010, p. 9).

In summary, diaspora is a more community and identity-focused concept dealing with connections to a homeland, whereas transnationalism is a broader political principle concerning cooperation and shared interests between nations.

Steven Vertovec discusses the issue of religion in the context of migration arguing that faith develops distinctively within immigrant communities (2008). Vertovec mentions the essay, "The Importance of Diasporas", in which Ninian Smart argues that scrutinizing immigrant communities allows an understanding of (a) the changing religious patterns; (b) the localization of religion in the new context that might affect the homeland's beliefs (1987). In the immigration context, the religious identity goes through modification and the rituals and practices are continuously refashioned. New generations are more affected and become engaged in a "self-conscious exploration of the religion which was not relevant to the first generation" (Knott & Khokher, 1993, p. 596). These theoretical insights enrich the discussion on imams from a transnational point of view as both the homeland and receiving country are strongly involved in this form of religious authority. In fact, nationalism makes these transnational dynamics more salient and controversial.

Transitioning to the concept of nationalism, it is defined by Gellner (1983, p. 1) as "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." A construct that unifies people through common culture, nationalism extends beyond secular phenomena emerging from the decline of religion. Gellner's insight into nationalism and Islam posits Islam as potentially becoming a "functional equivalent of nationalism" (Arnason, 2009, p. 50), even in the absence of industrialization and secularization. Building upon this, Brubaker's contribution accentuates that religion's intersection with nationalism is not merely historical but continues to influence the modern manifestation of nationalism. He examines how "religious

motifs, narratives, and symbols were transposed into the political domain and used to construct the first recognizably nationalist (or at least proto-nationalist) claims" (Brubaker, 2011, p. 6).

In the Western European context, imams play an integral role in this transnational evolution of faith. They stand at the intersection of being both contributors to and recipients of the indigenization of Islam in Europe. Consequently, their perspective offers crucial insights into the processes related to sovereignty, authority, and national belonging, which underscores the importance of studying them in this context.

Transitioning from the intricate interplay between religion and nationalism, it becomes essential to deepen the analysis by dissecting the concept of religious authority, which transcends mere leadership and extends into the realm of theological legitimacy and persuasive prowess. Chaves' elucidation of religious authority offers a nuanced perspective:

> A social structure that attempts to enforce its order and reach its ends by controlling the access of individuals to some desired goods, where the legitimation of that control includes some supernatural component, however weak (pp. 755-756).

This definition emphasizes the broader dimensions of religious authority, where negotiation and power act as central constituting processes. Within this framework, not only are tensions discerned but also innovations within Muslim communities, reflecting a dynamic and multifaceted interplay of beliefs and practices (Volpi and Turner, 2007). Such a conceptualization resonates with Foucault's perception of power, expressed succinctly in his statement, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). In this light, a top-down approach to power appears reductive, failing to encapsulate the complex dynamics at play. Individuals are not merely passive recipients of power or authority; they become both "subjects to" and "subjects of" this authority. Foucault's insights challenge a monolithic understanding of religious authority, suggesting a more intricate scenario where power does not solely impose and normalize. Instead, it invites negotiation and critical reflection, lending a dynamic characteristic to the realm of religious authority. This approach to authority thus illuminates the multifarious negotiations and critical reflections evident within the

religious authority of imams, particularly in the Western European context especially with the diversity of actors who can assume the authority position within Islam.

Shifting away from the discussion on religious authority and transnationalism and why the above-mentioned approaches are important for this research, the discussion continues with the theories that flow out of research on imams in Western Europe.

In the pioneering studies of Imams in Western Europe, a prevailing observation is the absence of training tailored to the nuances of daily life. This has culminated in a dissonance between the pedagogies and narratives propounded by the imams and the lived experiences of Muslims in the European context (Franck Frégosi, 1998; King Baudouin, 2007). Such observations underscore the imperative for local European training for imams.

Concomitantly, these analyses rest on the presupposition that imams serve as integral vectors for the assimilation of Muslims in Europe. As observed by Aslan and Windisch, the post-September 11 climate accentuated the discourse on imams and religious educators, often portraying them as catalysts of Muslim insularity and barriers to integration (2012). Subsequently, imams ascended to a pivotal status in dialogues concerning Islam in Europe. Amidst this heightened scrutiny, policymakers began attributing to them the perceived shortcomings in the integration of the Muslim diaspora. Advocacy emerged for European-grounded imam training, posited as a strategy to facilitate Muslim integration, mitigate extremist tendencies, bridge sociocultural disjunctions, and instigate Islamic renaissance. This is all very idealistic for the person of the imam. Aslan and Windisch stress the disproportionality of the responsibilities heaped upon imams, challenging their traditionally conceived roles as mere functionaries within a structured apparatus.

A disjunction is evident between the expectations accorded to imams in public discourse and the practical ambit of their authority. Døving (2014) points to the digital realm as a disruptive force, wherein online platforms have diluted the conventional authority of religious figures like imams. Sunier (2018) further elucidates Døving's argument, emphasizing the centrality of common Muslims in shaping the nature and dynamics of religious authority. This dispersion of religious influence, catalyzed by the digital age, has engendered a competitive milieu for religious leadership. Within this landscape, leaders, both established and emerging, are vying for a position, bolstered by media platforms that globalize their outreach. The advent of new media particularly presents an existential challenge to time-honored religious hierarchies.

Echoing Sunier, Carvalho's research examines the rise of digital spaces which empower ordinary individuals, often bestowing upon them an influence rivaling, if not surpassing, traditional religious leaders (2018). This underscores the diminishing hegemony of traditional imams. El-Yousfi further interrogates this dynamic, positing the authority of an imam as being increasingly tethered to the mosque's governing committee (2019).

The postulation that imams are paramount to integration has incited several European nations to perceive the role of imams within the ambit of national governance. This has in turn provoked deliberations on the essence of secularism (Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Michael J. Balz, 2008). Yazbeck and Balz suggest that while the establishment of local European training programs might appear as constructive solutions, they are often superficial, neglecting to address foundational challenges confronting Muslim immigrant communities in Europe. These encompass employment disparities, compromised living conditions, and broader socio-political ostracization. Paradoxically, such governmental interventions could inadvertently engender counter-responses, with communities adopting defensive postures against perceived state overreach. Loobuyck and Meier (2014) offer an empirical testament to this apprehension, elucidating imams' burgeoning suspicion of state interventionalist tendencies and their perception of the prevailing societal disposition as largely antagonistic to Islam.

Jouanneau illuminates the nuanced ways in which the French government has, at times, breached the 1905 French Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State, particularly concerning the appointment of imams. Since the 1990s, the confluence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has manifested in their overt involvement in imam selection processes. Strategies span from harnessing diplomatic channels from origin nations for the commissioning of “consular imams” to rigorous evaluations of imam training programs and their attendant ideologies during their residence permit application processes. The overarching intent is to curate an imamship that aligns with state-sanctioned standards of propriety. However, Jouanneau proffers a critique, positing that such heavy-handed interventions might be self-defeating, potentially diminishing the credibility of imams within their communities due to perceived state encroachment.

From this, one may extrapolate that the hyper-focus on imams as conduits of integration could be misplaced and, in certain instances, counterproductive. It underscores the disproportionate scrutiny that Islam endures in the European context. Gert Hekma (2001)

provides a compelling critique, highlighting the lopsided perceptions of Islam and its clergy in Western Europe relative to other faith traditions. He observes a pervasive lack of nuanced understanding of Moroccans and Muslims at large, juxtaposed with entrenched biases against imams, especially when they articulate conservative doctrinal stances. Drawing from an illustrative episode where an Imam's characterization of homosexuality was deemed controversial, Hekma underscores that such views, while situated within Islamic orthodoxy, find resonance in teachings within Christianity and Judaism, challenging the singularity of the outrage they provoke.

Recent scholarship highlights the perceptual divergence regarding desired outcomes from imam training, as construed by the government and European Muslims respectively (Ghaly, 2008). Governmental institutions often conceptualize imams as emissaries of integration, promoting a localized interpretation of "Dutch Islam." In stark contrast, Dutch Muslims predominantly seek imams adept at juxtaposing traditional duties within predominantly non-Islamic socio-cultural matrices. Such disparate visions might render these training programs ineffective, exacerbating tensions between Muslim constituencies and the political establishment.

A subsequent investigation by Sözeri, Kosar Altinyelken, and Volman (2019) lends empirical depth to this contention. Their findings elucidate that the shortcomings in imam training are multivariate, encompassing widespread skepticism towards the Dutch government's programmatic motivations, and reservations regarding the pedagogical authority of non-Muslim academicians teaching Islamic studies. They argue for the exigency of fostering substantive engagements with Dutch Muslim community grassroots for any prospective Islamic theology initiatives in Dutch higher education institutions to gain traction.

Moving away from Imam training, a salient evolution in the contemporary position of the imam landscape in Western Europe is its trend towards nationalization. Hashas (2018) asserts that imamship is undergoing a transformation into a nationalized religious authority. Distinctly, this implies a migration of oversight from local community governance to state apparatuses – a paradigmatic departure from historical precedents that accorded communities the agency in imam selections. This trajectory underscores a move towards institutionalization, and a pronounced dependency on alternative (in this context, governmental) authority structures. Contemporary imams are envisioned primarily as moral educators with an explicit non-partisan, apolitical ethos.

Such a nationalizing trajectory, however, is not without its complexities, especially when navigating the transnational networks linking European-based imams to their countries of origin. Fedele (2016) accentuates the precarious positioning of imams within Europe, noting their socio-cultural and economic anchors in their native lands. Such ties risk accentuating a monolithic rendition of Islam, which may stir discord within the diversifying Muslim diaspora in France. The emergent narrative among European Muslim youth indicates a propensity towards an Islam that resonates with their immediate socio-cultural milieu, rather than one echoing exogenous tradition. Encapsulated within these insights is a clear mandate for imam training that holistically addresses the contemporary challenges of their congregations, emphasizing a delineation between cultural inheritance and religious praxis, while concentrating on the unique challenges and aspirations of European Muslims.

Amid the burgeoning diversification of religious agency, the seminal role of nations of origin, once seen as the quintessential bedrock of religious authority, demands reevaluation. In the European landscape, these nations were instrumental in anchoring organized Islam within migrant communities. However, the ascendancy of digital platforms, predominantly the internet, has precipitated an unparalleled pluralization of religious authority, attenuating the influence traditionally wielded by these nations (Sunier, 2018). Such a multiplicity of theological exegesis presents a conundrum for nation-states striving to adapt Islam to domestic contexts and calibrate Muslim public comportment—a venture teetering on the precipice of compromising the cherished secular neutrality.

As descendants from Muslim-majority countries transition into European nationals, the erstwhile political and administrative power of their countries of origin undergoes an inevitable metamorphosis. This evolution manifests as a pivot towards leveraging religious authority as a form of soft power (Laurence, 2018). Laurence's projections intimate that the indigenization of Islam in Europe will be inextricably intertwined with its historical origins. Whilst distinct Europeanized manifestations of Islam—epitomized by phenomena like French, German, or British Islam—are emerging, the nexus between these evolutions and their countries of origin remains salient.

An analysis of various academic sources centered on the role of imams in Western Europe yields salient insights. Traversing this multifaceted domain underscores that prevalent policy interventions often verge on the reactionary and superficial, eschewing the core challenges

that beleaguer immigrant Muslim communities, ranging from unemployment to societal ostracization and overarching socioeconomic disparities. Some scholars caution against the disproportionate focal point placed upon imam training, suggesting such a stance inadvertently transmutes them into political lightning rods. Within the religious organizational fabric, the imam—contrary to predominant perceptions—emerges not as an infallible spiritual luminary but as an operative delineated by directives from varied stakeholders, spanning congregations to state entities. therefore, elevating the legal standing of imams emerges as imperative, paralleling the urgency to refine their pedagogical pathways.

A pervasive focus on imams carries the risk of fostering a monolithic archetype, that of the "super imam"— an imagined fulcrum capable of orchestrating a seamless integration of European Muslim communities into broader societal frameworks. While this idealization may be alluring, it poses the danger of obscuring the intricate dynamics at play and potentially sidelines the spectrum of challenges that require attention in the pursuit of harmonious integration.

The factors underpinning societal cohesion in Europe should not be reductively associated with the conjectured inadequacies of imams. Such a perspective fundamentally misconstrues the broader canvas upon which these tensions are delineated. A more astute analysis suggests that the vulnerabilities exacerbating these tensions are intrinsically tied to the profound ramifications of globalization—a pervasive force reframing the socio-cultural and economic landscapes of societies, regardless of their developmental trajectories or affluence. This necessitates a critical reevaluation of the positioning and perception of Islam within the cultural tapestry of Europe. A brief study of the prevailing theories on globalization will elucidate this nexus.

Religion, within the current globalized framework, is not a static entity; rather, it morphs and adapts in response to intricate global dynamisms. The magnitude of these dynamisms is vast and often elusive, but certain vectors—specifically the ebb and flow of human migration, the dissemination of information, and the inevitable interface of these elements with novel contexts—emerge as pivotal in shaping religious evolution. Such interactions are enriched with Anna Tsing's (2011) metaphorical construct of global flows, likening them to the interplay between a wheel and the road it traverses—an engagement spawning movement, and in the case of global flows engenders novel cultural and power configurations.

Tsing critically deconstructs the pervasive notion that global interactions are invariably harmonious and foreseeable, noting, "In counterpoint to the prevailing zeal for formulaic global prognostications, I underscore the unpredictable and transitory facets of global interplay." The synthesis of Islam within a predominantly Western milieu can germinate both challenges and innovative paradigms. The latter is exemplified in the scholarly exploration by Welmoet Boender of the imam Yassin Elforkani. The distinctive European milieu has fostered the rise of imams like Elforkani, who discern that canonical theological paradigms are inadequate in isolation to adeptly engage with this uncharted territory. Consequently, Elforkani amalgamates philosophical and sociological tenets into his theological discourse, fostering a more reflexive and nuanced religious perspective.

Scholarly examinations of imams within the West European milieu frequently elucidate the propensity to designate them as emblematic harbingers of discord, creating a chasm between Muslim communities and their broader European contexts. The theoretical construct of 'deterritorialization' provides a nuanced lens through which the complexities of such integrative dilemmas, emergent in our globalized epoch, can be dissected—belying the simplistic attribution of culpability to imams. In his seminal work, "Disjuncture and Difference" (1990), Arjun Appadurai delineates the transformative prowess of media, facilitating an expansive reach, concurrently engendering a potential alienation of certain communities from their immediate cultural milieu.

Through the prism of deterritorialization, Appadurai sheds light on the paradoxical nature of globalization: whilst enabling unprecedented mobility, it may inadvertently engender integrative impediments. This tension, he contends, is a crucible for various manifestations of fundamentalism observing, “Deterritorialization, whether of Hindus, Sikhs, Palestinians, or Ukrainians, is now at the core of a variety of global fundamentalisms, including Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism” (1990, p. 301). Such deterritorialized landscapes potentiate a kaleidoscope of interpretative narratives—those pertaining to Islam, indigenous roots, and the conception of the “other.” An “other” that, albeit proximate geographically, metamorphoses into an ideological adversary, an evolution sculpted by the selective consumption of these myriad narratives.

Crucially, this othering is not a unilateral phenomenon but is multidimensional, a byproduct of our universally networked media era. This nexus can often culminate in a self-

perpetuating cycle of animosity and derogatory representations. Marshall's exploration of Nigerian Pentecostalism (1998, p. 311) epitomizes this dynamic, postulating that such global narrative constructions invariably ensnare communities within cyclical conflictual paradigms. Within these cycles, the Muslim 'other' is vilified, with even overarching state structures being associated with corruption, potentially kindling expansive violence. Analogously, certain radicalized Muslim factions and their narratives can perpetuate a demonized European 'other,' an echo mirrored in certain European extremist factions targeting Muslims and vilifying them. Contrary to linear notions of progress within globalization, the plethora of circulating narratives is subjected to selective processes, potentially igniting what Marshall terms “an escalating spiral of violence” (1998, p. 311).

This theoretical discussion has profoundly enriched this doctoral research. The investigations into imams within the Belgian and Dutch contexts, and the subsequent methodological framework employed, were profoundly influenced by these scholarly insights and empirical revelations.

Chapter 2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The selected research design for examining the intricate dynamics of Islam and religious authority in Western Europe is the case study. As defined by Hancock and Algozzine (2006), a case study is an empirical inquiry that delves into a contemporary phenomenon within its authentic context, drawing from an array of evidence sources (p. 15). Distinguished by its exploratory nature rather than its confirmatory inclinations, the case study methodology can elucidate, probe, or chronicle social phenomena within their inherent contexts.

The methodology's design for this inquiry endeavors to pioneer paths for subsequent research on this subject matter by surfacing emergent questions for exploration (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006, p. 33). This case study assumes a socio-anthropological orientation, placing its lens at the crossroads of religion and politics, striving to interweave these elements with societal structures and affiliated institutions (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006, p. 32).

The intrinsic design was the chosen framework for this case study, a choice rooted in the intent to explore the nuances of a particular individual, group, or entity (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006, p. 32). Given that the primary ambition of this study is not the generalization of findings across diverse populations, but rather a profound understanding of the specified context, the intrinsic design is deemed most fitting.

2.2 Research Approach

Content analysis is a widely utilized research approach, characterizing a spectrum of methodologies rather than a monolithic method. Viewed as a multifaceted instrument for evaluating textual data, its adoption varies across research contexts (Cavanagh, 1997). At its core, content analysis encompasses an array of techniques spanning from intuitive interpretive analyses to stringent systematic textual reviews (Rosengren, 1981). The choice of a specific content analysis strategy is often influenced by the researcher's theoretical inclinations and the nature of the research question (Weber, 1990).

Historically, content analysis oscillated between its applications as either a qualitative or quantitative tool (Berelson, 1952). Its evolution favored a predominantly quantitative orientation, wherein textual data was compartmentalized into distinct categories, subsequently quantified through statistical measures—a procedure termed "quantitative analysis of qualitative data" (Morgan, 1993). However, the recent resurgence of content analysis highlights its potency as a qualitative analytical instrument, reflecting a broader shift in its academic reception (Nandy & Sarvela, 1997).

In the context of this study, where the focus is a meticulous exploration of speeches, sermons, interviews, and discourses of imams in Belgium and the Netherlands, the qualitative paradigm becomes indispensable. As such, the subsequent section elucidates the rationale and mechanics behind employing qualitative content analysis to decode the research data. This analytical approach accentuates the nuances of language as a communicative medium, concentrating on the symbiotic relationship between content and contextual meaning (Hsieh & E. Shannon, 2005). The vast terrain of text data—spanning written, vocal, or digital domains—originates from diverse sources including interviews, narrative responses, focus groups, or literary materials (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). Qualitative content analysis transcends mere lexical quantification. It embodies a meticulous method of systematic coding, theme identification, and subjective evaluation to decipher textual content's inherent meaning (Hsieh & E. Shannon, 2005).

Qualitative content analysis is a multifaceted approach, with methodologies tailored according to the researcher's theoretical inclinations, methodological preferences, and the subject in question. Broadly, these methodologies bifurcate into two dominant paradigms. The inductive approach is apt when prior research on the phenomenon is sparse or disjointed. Conversely, a deductive approach is adequate for reaffirming existing hypotheses in novel contexts or contrasting categories temporally (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Given that the current research navigates a terrain already traversed, inductive reasoning becomes redundant. Hence, the selected methodology is directed content analysis—a deductive variant.

Distinct from conventional content analysis, the directed approach follows a regimented procedure (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). Grounded in extant theory and preceding research, researchers earmark primary constructs or variables as foundational coding categories (Potter &

Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). These theoretical constructs then translate into operational category definitions.

Initiating the coding process bifurcates into two strategies contingent on the research's objectives (Hsieh & E. Shannon, 2005). One approach commences by identifying all instances of a specified phenomenon, such as emotional reactions. Researchers scan transcripts, earmarking potential instances. Subsequently, predefined codes are applied to the earmarked sections, with new codes allocated for unanticipated content. Alternatively, the second approach dives straight into coding with pre-established codes, subsequently revisiting uncoded segments to discern if they embody new categories or existing subcategories.

The choice between these strategies hinges on the data type and the researcher's intent. Emphasizing text recognition before coding can enhance the credibility of research, especially when capturing all instances of a phenomenon is paramount. Conversely, immediate coding is preferred when preliminary categorizations are unlikely to bias emergent content discernment. As research progresses, specific categories, depending on their scope, might necessitate further subcategorization. A salient advantage of the directed approach is its capacity to buttress and refine extant theories (Hsieh & E. Shannon, 2005). For this study, immediate coding was deemed useful due to the clarity of codes derived from prior theories and research.

2.3 Applying Methods

Primary data were sourced from pre-existing interviews and speeches of imams of Moroccan descent in Belgium and the Netherlands accessible on digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and personal blogs. The materials, primarily in text, visual, or audiovisual formats, were translated from, French, Dutch or Arabic to English post-transcription.

Supplementary data were acquired from online documents, predominantly from the Moroccan official website (www.maroc.ma) and digital newspapers. Such data offered contextual insights into the contours of Islamic religious authority in Western Europe and the manner in which the Moroccan state shapes and disseminates religious discourse.

The inaugural phase in data collation entailed pinpointing the specific imams for this study. The pivotal criterion was their Moroccan origin, given the dissertation's focus on Morocco's nationalized Islam and its European manifestations. Literature reviews assisted in refining the selection. As elucidated by Thijl Sunier (2018), while sending nations previously

catalyzed organized Islamic establishment amongst European migrants, the diversification in religious authority has since diluted their influence.

To probe how the diversification of religious authority and interpretation influences Moroccan Islam in Belgium and the Netherlands, the selection criteria incorporated another dimension: whether the imam was a Moroccan-born immigrant or of Moroccan descent born in Europe. For this explorative study, six prominent imams, recognized within the Western European Islamic milieu, were chosen. These imams, with substantial followings and pronounced social media presence, were:

- Moroccan-born Immigrants:

Mohamed Toujgani (Belgium) and El Khammar Al Bakkali (Netherlands) — both emblematic figures of Moroccan Islam in their respective locales, conservative but moderate in their religious outlook.

- European-born of Moroccan Descent:

Rachid Haddach and Mustafa Kastit (Brussels) — Haddach, despite his European birth, upholds a rigorous conservative stance on European Muslims' lifestyle, while Kastit adopts a moderate stance, endeavoring to integrate Islam within the European milieu.

Khalid Benhaddou (Ghent, Flanders) and Yassin Elforkani (Heerhugowaard, Netherlands) — Both are very flexible imams, with Elforkani currently serving in Amsterdam's Blue Mosque.

The dissertation employs a coding methodology to discern data patterns and cluster them into coherent themes. This technique, when synthesized with established theories, facilitates an intricate comprehension of the intended categories in alignment with the research questions.

In the preliminary investigation, a digital inquiry was conducted to identify Imams of Moroccan descent who are active in Belgium and the Netherlands. To facilitate this search, the names of identified imams, transcribed in both Latin and Arabic scripts, were entered into YouTube's search engine. Notably, Rachid Haddach maintains an official YouTube channel, a repository for his sermons and interactive Q&A sessions. Mohamed Toujgani's digital footprint is evident through multiple interviews hosted by the Belgian Moroccan digital broadcasting entity, MaghrebTV. A significant portion of data about Toujgani was gathered by means of these dialogues.

Facebook also emerged as a pivotal platform for data extraction. Kastit, for instance, utilizes his Facebook profile to disseminate his Q&A sessions. Khalid Benhaddou has a website, elucidating his perspectives on religion and the nuances of European Islam. Several digital magazines quote these imams, with a substantial volume of data on Elforkani gleaned from these sources. Furthermore, academic theses that incorporated interviews with these imams provided valuable insights.

The transcription process was selective. Guided by literature on the topic, prominent themes delineated within the transcripts included: identity and belonging, reference to the sending and receiving countries, imam training methodologies, faith paradigms, gender discourses, tendencies towards radicalism and extremism, and the imams' political inclinations. Transcriptions spanned languages – French, Arabic, and Dutch – and were subsequently rendered into English. The thematic analysis distilled these sub-themes into three overarching themes.

Utilizing the six-phase framework for thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the following approach was adopted:

1. **Familiarization with Data:** This phase necessitated an intensive review of the transcribed data through multiple readings to fully immerse oneself in the details.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** In this phase, data segments were identified and labeled with initial codes. Given that this research is not purely inductive and is influenced by existing theories, only text portions relevant to the research questions were coded. Initial codes encompassed: identity and belonging, imam training, modes of belief, gender dynamics, radical extremism, and political involvement.
3. **Searching for Themes:** According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are no stringent criteria for theme creation. Hence, discernable patterns within the codes were probed to form prospective themes.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** This entailed consolidation of the tentative themes and collecting all corresponding data. Discrepancies, if any, within themes were rectified by bifurcating themes, dismissing irrelevant ones, or introducing new themes. Three predominant themes emerged, with nuanced sub-themes contingent

on the specific imam and his circumstances: Identity, Gender, and Politics & Radicalization.

5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Themes were meticulously delineated and aptly named for clarity:

- Identity: This encapsulates imams' perceptions of religious doctrines and practices and identity formation vis-à-vis their native and adoptive lands. It delves into the interplay between nationalism and religion in a transnational context and the balancing act between loyalties to home and host nations.
- Gender: This theme incorporates imams' stances on contentious topics such as polygamy, same-sex marriage, premarital relations, queer identities, and the potential of women assuming religious leadership roles.
- Politics: This theme assembles imams' interpretations of jihad, responses to terrorist incidents, engagement in Western politics, and their perspectives on the West's interventions in the Middle East.

6. **Writing Up:** The culmination of the thematic analysis dovetails into the structuring of the dissertation, adhering to standard academic writing conventions.

To understand the methods used to analyze the transcribed data, it is essential to comprehend the concept of discourse. Discourse – with dialogue as its primary component – is inherently social. The context of a message and its interconnected elements determine its meaning (Macdonell, 1986, p. 1). As articulated by Volosinov, "Any utterance is to a degree an agreement or a negation of something" (1930; trans.1973, p .80). Recent discourse studies have shifted from understanding meaning variations based on social contexts to focusing on discourse hierarchies (Macdonell, 1986, p. 2). Discourses have a relational nature and are not isolated (Macdonell, 1986, p. 3). Essentially, discourse is a negotiation domain where concepts formed within one discourse can be reinterpreted in another. Meaning extends beyond mere writing and speech; it permeates all signs, verbal or otherwise.

Discourse analysis as a field has its roots in structuralism. Saussure posited that in language, meanings are relative to one another and do not stand alone; in other words, "meanings

are constructed in a language and do not preexist it" (1916, trans. 1974, p. 116). However, there's criticism that Saussure's approach overly homogenized society, neglecting conflicts among various societal facets and, by extension, discourses (Macdonell, 1986, p. 11). Discourse diverges from such an approach, contending that language is not a homogenized meaning system. Instead, the system manifests within discursive formations linked to institutions. Sign meanings, as Pecheux notes exist in "a system of relationships of substitution, paraphrases, synonymies, etc., which operate between linguistic elements — 'signifiers' — in a given discursive formation" (1975, trans. 1982, p. 112). The interpretations of signs, then, are mutable based on their origin and context.

In the aftermath of 1968, Louis Althusser's book, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, emerged as a watershed moment in the evolution of Marxist ideological theory. Althusser shifted the focus onto educational institutions like schools and universities, elucidating their roles as state apparatuses that bolster capitalism. The uprisings in May 1968 in France precipitated a profound introspection regarding the efficacy of overarching theories in truly capturing the nuances of contemporary events and phenomena. The emphasis then pivoted towards the privileging of discourses that empower subjects to articulate their lived experiences. As Deleuze notes, "Only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf" (Deleuze 1972, trans. 1977, p. 209). This perspective becomes instrumental for this research, which seeks to comprehend the narratives of imams about their circumstances. Theoretical constructs should not be mistaken as substitutes for practical endeavors; rather, they engage in a dynamic interplay with real-world practices. As Hindess and Hirst succinctly state, theories are not surrogates for in-depth analysis, but rather instruments making such analysis possible (1975, p. 9).

Pecheux's assertion, "Words, expressions, propositions, etc.; change their meaning according to the positions held by those who use them" (1975, trans. 1982, p. 111), underscores the fluidity and politics inherent in meaning-making processes. This perspective, deeply influenced by Althusser's revolutionary insights in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, recognizes that ideologies are not mere abstractions but have tangible manifestations in state entities like family, religion, education, law, politics, and more. Moving beyond the notion that ideologies are products of consciousness, Althusser postulates that they are materially existent and shape consciousness. His ideas dovetail with Gramsci's notion of hegemony, suggesting the

state employs both coercion and consent generation via its apparatuses to perpetuate capitalist production relationships (Gramsci, 1979, p. 32). Taking cues from Althusser's arguments regarding the multifaceted and at times conflicting ideologies within state apparatuses, Pecheux in *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (1982) posits that discourses exist in relations marked by contestations. Meanings, for Pecheux, are forged amidst struggles and oppositions, never in isolation. Pecheux's contribution is salient as he accentuates the intrinsically contentious nature of discourse, more so than Foucault, emphasizing its constant dialogue and antagonism with diverse viewpoints (Mills, 2004, p. 12). Drawing from Pecheux's oeuvre, we are prompted to ponder how individuals can navigate towards a state of disidentification. Such a state allows us not just to identify based on predetermined norms but also to envisage and cultivate potentially more emancipatory ways of being (Mills, 2004, p. 13).

Foucault's perspective on discourse, encapsulated in the quote “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49), offers a potent critique of both humanism and structuralism. His assertion emphasizes the significance of understanding discourse beyond the confines of the textual. This implies that a myopic focus on a text, detached from its institutional context or exclusive reliance on linguistic components, does not suffice for a comprehensive analysis of discourse. Eschewing the notion of truth as a transcendental entity, Foucault contends that truth is a by-product of discourses (Foucault, 1979, p. 46). His delineation of power challenges conventional perceptions of it being purely repressive. Instead, Foucault elucidates that power permeates social interactions, engendering both acceptable and restricted behaviors (Mills, 2004, p. 17). In this vein, discourse, for Foucault, emerges as “A form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance and ways of creating knowledge” (Diamond and Quinby, 1988, p. 185).

In feminist scholarly endeavors, there has been a deliberate move to recalibrate Foucault's model of discourse. Notably, feminist theorists have pivoted towards examining discourses in relation to each other, rather than in isolation (Mills, 2004, p.89). Sara Mills' work exemplifies this approach, as she endeavored to juxtapose nineteenth-century discourses on femininity with those on feminism and colonialism (Mills, 1991). This lens reveals that female travel writers of the era felt an implicit compulsion to foreground their “appropriate” feminine behaviors in their writings. Such a portrayal was deemed necessary to cultivate a perception of credibility amongst

their readers. However, the undertones of nineteenth-century feminist discourse also exerted an influence, compelling these writers to delineate their stances on myriad issues even when their primary narrative was seemingly divergent. Additionally, the overarching narrative of imperialism necessitated these female authors to craft an image of themselves as assertive, proficient, and authoritative. This occasionally was in discord with prevailing discourses on femininity. Hence, Mills (2004, p. 4) underscores that texts are not mere reflections of a singular discourse; they are often the nexus of multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses. Sara Mills' exploration of discourse serves as a valuable blueprint for operationalizing Pecheux's theoretical constructs to analyze a text, particularly by acknowledging and interrogating the inherent discursive tensions within. This nuanced approach to discourse analysis has profoundly influenced the trajectory of this dissertation, especially in discerning the multifaceted discourses within which Moroccan-descended imams navigate and articulate their perspectives. The discourses of imams are not perceived as a monolithic entity; rather, they are seen as contesting arguments reflective of the intricate context in which immigrant Imams operate.

Emerging from the intellectual pursuits of Norman Fairclough, the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) delves into the complex interplay between language and power. Drawing significant inspiration from the works of Michel Foucault and Michel Pecheux, Fairclough postulates that the core of discourse analysis revolves around understanding how language crafts meaning and molds ideas, thus influencing the actions and beliefs of individuals.

Rather than initiating from the text itself, CDA's point of departure is societal issues (Fairclough, 2001, p. 26). This analytical approach transcends a mere structural breakdown of linguistic elements within a communicative act; it seeks to situate and elucidate these discursive structures within broader socio-political landscapes. In the context of this study, the discourses of Imams will be examined through the lens of their endorsement or contestation of the religious authority stemming from their countries of origin or receiving ones, coupled with their identification with both.

In their collaborative discourse, Fairclough and Wodak (1997: pp. 271-280) delineate eight foundational principles integral to CDA, serving as essential touchpoints for practitioners:

1. Discursive selections inherently possess socio-political ramifications, mirrored in linguistic structures.

2. Language becomes a theater for power dynamics and negotiations.

3. Through discourse, societal norms and cultural tenets are perpetuated.

4. Besides its communicative function, discourse wields an ideological role, encapsulating the power hierarchies within societies.

5. Discourse is intertextual, embedded within a web of other discourses.

6. CDA elucidates the nexus between textual content and socio-cultural frameworks.

7. Rather than being purely descriptive, CDA adopts an interpretative and explanatory stance, rendering it susceptible to diverse interpretations across contexts.

8. CDA stands as a form of social critique, unveiling the machinations of power within discourse.

Such guiding tenets are invaluable for textual analysts. On a practical note, Thomas Huckin's manual for CDA, crafted in 2002, offers tangible techniques for textual critique. Huckin posits that a preliminary step for any critical discourse analyst is to don the persona of a text's intended audience, immersing oneself into their psyche to gauge potential manipulation. This requires an informed estimation of the target demographic's shared knowledge and the overt objectives of the text. Post this immersive experience, the analyst transitions to a critical evaluation phase.

Huckin underscores that (CDA) is inherently non-prescriptive. Rather than dictating that readers must uncover power dynamics within a text, it empowers them to clarify and affirm their innate perceptions of power. Initial exposure to a text often yields a visceral recognition of these dynamics, but subsequent readings—augmented by Huckin's prescribed concepts—hones one's capacity to articulate and contextualize these initial instincts, thereby rendering them intellectual. In his endeavor to equip analysts, Huckin enumerates several conceptual tools adaptable to myriad analytical depths, ranging from the overarching context to specific linguistic choices within the text.

Higher-level concepts in discourse analysis encompass broad contextual components that demand an analyst's attention towards the ideologies a text seeks to propagate. It is imperative to discern how the text employs the notion of "common interests" as a tool to assimilate or even neutralize potential opposition. One enlightening avenue for analysts lies in detecting the overt interests of the text's producers.

Transitioning from the broader context to the actual textual structure, it becomes vital to engage with the techniques of foregrounding and backgrounding. Such an exercise necessitates examining which segments of the text are accentuated, either by their strategic positioning at the outset or through their extended elaboration. Conversely, it is equally pivotal to observe which portions might be diminished through limited space or sheer omission.

Delving deeper into the intricate details of the text, the sentence-level analysis invites a profound exploration into the realm of intertextuality. This involves a meticulous examination of instances where a text may borrow words, phrases, or even entire sentences from other sources.

The aforementioned concepts, as illuminated by Huckin, form the analytical bedrock upon which this study is constructed to interpret the accumulated data. However, it is crucial to emphasize that these concepts are not prescriptive but are to be judiciously and selectively applied. While the linguistic component of discourse is certainly vital, this dissertation primarily accentuates its relational dimension. Fairclough observes that a narrow view of intertextuality, confined merely to textual practices, falls short in grasping how societal structures circumscribe its subjects (Mills, 2004, p. 137). Thus, any profound analysis of the intertextual must invariably spotlight the interplay of power dynamics.

The efficacy of critical discourse analysis appears to be contingent not just upon the adherence to specified guidelines but also heavily upon the analyst's own discerning capabilities. In our contemporary information-saturated epoch, there is an ever-present danger of our cognitive faculties becoming overwhelmed. This can often relegate our critical analytical processing to the background, as we default to more passive, peripheral modes of comprehension (Huckin, 2002, p. 11).

It falls upon the critical discourse analyst to awaken and reorient societal attention to latent narratives and ideologies that might have been subconsciously assimilated and, perhaps, even normalized. Such an analytical approach resonates profoundly with the research objectives of this dissertation. It empowers the researcher to critically dissect the authority vested in discourses propounded by imams of Moroccan origin in Western Europe. This act of deconstruction is instrumental in unraveling the complexities surrounding religious authority dynamics within the Islamic community in Western Europe.

Chapter 3 MOROCCAN ISLAM

3.1 Reforming the Religious Field

Religious terrorism visited Morocco on May 16, 2003, when Casablanca, the country's economic capital, was hit by a series of suicide bombings. The perpetrators, all from the shanty town of Sidi Moumen carried out five suicide bombings targeting two restaurants, a hotel, and two Jewish sites, killing 33 people, nine of them Europeans, in addition to the 12 attackers. The attackers claimed affiliation to the Salafiya Jihadiyya. It is a branch of al-Qaeda and draws its spiritual doctrine from Wahhabism, the dominant religion-state doctrine in Saudi Arabia.

Some of the Wahhabi doctrines endorse a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and many of the Wahhabi groups are inspired by a jihadist ideology with a tendency to *takfirism*, the excommunication of Muslims who differ in their religious practice from Wahhabi interpretation.

According to Mohammed Darif, Wahhabism was introduced in Morocco in the 19th century and was encouraged by the Moroccan State as a reaction to the Iranian Khoumayni revolution in 1979 because Morocco considered Wahhabism a doctrine that would prevent the spread of Shiism in the country. Later on, Wahhabism was also seen as a deterrent against the rise of political Islam. “The Iranian revolution,” says Darif, “led the state to rethink its mechanisms to face political Islam. Wahhabism delegitimates both [political Islam] and Shiites” (Rachidi, 2003). Thus, Saudi Wahhabism became very active in Morocco. Many students received scholarships to study in religious schools in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabi religious literature (books and audio types) was widely spread in Morocco, and Wahhabi ulama frequently gave talks to Moroccan audiences.

The involvement of religious extremists in the tragic attacks of Casablanca prompted the Moroccan state to radically revise its religious policy. This became clear in the appointment of Ahmed Toufiq as the Minister of Religious Affairs instead of Abdelkebir Alaoui Mdaghri. Unlike the conservative Mdaghri, considered an ally to Wahhabi theorists, Toufiq is an adept of the Boutchichiya order, a Moroccan spiritual Sufi tariqa.

This shift is conspicuously expressed in a speech given by King Mohammed VI in front of the Supreme and Regional Councils of ulama on 30 April 2004:

> While difference is an aspect of the nature of managing general worldly affairs, which is one of the manifestations of democracy, and pluralism of opinions to achieve the common good, religious affairs, on the contrary, requires clinging to the one historical reference to the Sunni Maliki doctrine […] considering our religious commitment to its doctrinal unity, as our constitutional commitment to the territorial and national unity of the nation, encouraging pertinent ijtihad (creative interpretation of religious laws from their sources), to keep up with contemporary developments […] an integrated, comprehensive, multidimensional, based on three pillars, to rehabilitate and renew the religious field, to protect Morocco from the impulses of extremism and terrorism, and to preserve its distinct identity characterized with moderation, middleness, and tolerance (maroc.ma, 2004).

What is important in this speech is the idea of reforming and renewing the religious field by emphasizing doctrinal unity based on the Maliki school and rooting it in historical heritage while encouraging modernization of religion through pertinent *ijtihad*, creative interpretation, and the values of moderation and tolerance. The objectives of the reform of religion are outlined below:

> Our aim from all of this, is not only to equip our country with a coherent strategy, capable of qualifying it to meet all challenges, in the field of the religious field, […] but also with the rational and purposeful contribution to correct the image of Islam from vile distortions and fierce campaigns by the extremism of the stray and the ignorant, and the terrorism of the aggressors, who have no homeland and no religion (maroc.ma, 2004).

Stress is placed on a restructuration of the religious field in such a way as to combat religious extremism and correct the image of Islam from distortion and safeguard it from fanatic interpretations as stated in the following quote:

> You will find the first servant of Morocco, at the frontline of those who combat destructive currents, and those which are alien to our society, and attentive to the

> purity and the middleness (*wassatiya*) of Islam, for all Moroccans, including our loyal subjects residing abroad, […] and to the mission of Islam which brought the dawn of a tolerant Islamic civilization (maroc.ma, 2004).

Words such as modernity, rationality, tolerance, moderation, religious middleness, national unity, and national identity have become common terms in Moroccan official religious discourse. Moroccan Islam promotes religious unity, grants spiritual security and political stability, and unites nation and monarchy.

The restructuring and renewal of the religious field in Morocco has involved four fundamental areas:

1. Redefining the pillars of Moroccan Islam
2. State hegemony on religion
3. Gender issue
4. Nationalizing Islam and Islamizing nationalism

3.1.1 Redefining the Pillars of Moroccan Islam

Moving away from Wahhabi Salafism, Morocco defines four pillars of Moroccan Islam:

1. Al Ash'ari doctrine
2. Maliki religious law
3. Sunni Sufism
4. Imarat al Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful)

3.1.1.a Al Ash'aria

Al Ash'aria is a theological school of Sunni Islam founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ashʿari (873–935). Unlike the Mu'tazila who believed that a Muslim who commits a serious sin was neither believer nor unbeliever, al-Ash'ari argues that a Muslim remains a believer but would be punished on the day of judgment. In this respect, Ashʿariya does not agree with the zealous tendency of the clergy and the adherents of Wahhabism toward *takfir* of Muslim sinners.

In his address to the United Nations Security Council, entitled "The Kingdom of Morocco's Experience to Counter Terrorism," the Minister of Religious Affairs, Ahmed Toufiq, attributes Morocco's adherence to the "Ash'ari doctrine to the fact that it does not

excommunicate people, nor does it accept death sentences for transgressing the Divine Decrees" (Toufiq, 2014). Explaining Morocco's option for the Ash'ari doctrine Benjamin Bruce writes:

> Ashʿarism holds the potential for a renewal of Islamic thought due to the relevance of rationalism and reason to its understanding of faith, which is in direct opposition to the "strict adherence to the literal outward (*zahir*) meanings of the sacred texts," as promoted by […] the Wahhabi and Salafi movements. Ashʿarism can thus be ideologically used by Morocco to shore up its counterterror policy by affirming its "moderate approach that values human reason" (Bruce, 2019, p. 67).

3.1.1.b The Maliki Religious Law

The Maliki school is founded in the 8th century by imam Malik ibn Anas (711–795), a jurist and theologian who lived in the Madina shortly after the death of the Prophet. Malik's doctrine is outlined in his book *Al Muwatta.* Maliki doctrine is based on the Qur'an, the Hadith, *ijma'* (consensus), and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning). For Malik, the concept of *ijma* refers to the consensus of the people of Madina during the life of the Prophet, which Malik describes as the "living *sunnah.*" Hence, the reference to the Maliki doctrine as "the school of the Madinites."

Another Maliki concept is *ra'y* (opinion) of the Islamic scholars in matters of law when a case has no explicit indication in the sources. There are also the concepts of *istislah*, "to seek good" and *maslaha*, "public interest." For Malik, juristic laws have to be based on achieving with regard to these concepts of *istislah* and *maslaha*.

For all these tolerant concepts, Morocco has opted for Maliki jurisprudence. In his speech king Mohamed VI recommends the Malik doctrine:

> Adherence to the unique historical reference of the Sunni Maliki doctrine, which the nation has unanimously adhered to, and which we are entrusted to protect, considering our religious commitment to its doctrinal unity, the same as our constitutional commitment to the territorial and national unity (maroc.ma, 2004).

What is also interesting in the king's speech is the association between religious unity, national identity, and territorial sovereignty.

In his statement to the United Nations Security Council, Ahmed Toufiq justifies the Moroccan choice of the Maliki doctrine of its three distinctive features:

1. Its rich variety of methods to derive rulings from their sources;
2. Its flexibility in integrating local cultural practices within the sphere of Islamic Law;
3. The importance is given to public interest, which in our age confers legitimacy upon the laws that serve interest without contradicting Islamic Law. (Toufiq, 2014)

Evidently, Moroccan Islam has eclectically embraced theological doctrines characterized by moderation, tolerance, and flexibility.

3.1.1.c Sunni Sufism:

In addition to Al Ash'aria doctrine and the Maliki school, the State turned to Sufism, making it one of the major defining elements of what is called "Moroccan Islam." The choice of Sufism is significant. Historically, Morocco was the birth place for several influential Sufi orders, the Shadiliya and its multiple offshoots (Darqawiya, Issawiya, Wazzaniya, etc.) and the Tijaniya, and the Moroccan Qadiriya. So, Morocco is keen to return to this spiritual heritage as a form of Moroccan Islamic identity and given "its deeply rooted history in Moroccan religious practice and politics" (Bruce, 2019, p. 66). And while there is a tendency in Salafism towards politics, doctrinally, Sufism tends to emphasize the spiritual rather than the political.

King Mohammed VI appointed Ahmed Taoufiq, a professor of history and member of the Sufi Qādiriyya Boutchichiyya order, Minister of Religious Affairs. He replaces Addelkebir M'daghri, who was, "known for his more accommodating views towards Wahabism" (El-Katiri, 2013, p. 57). Toufiq has remained in this position for almost two decades. As Bruce notes, "Toufiq has remained the only constant in a succession of governments over the last years" (Bruce, 2019, p. 62). This is due to the continuous State commitment to Sufism.

Mohammed VI openly praises Sufism as a form of Islam that "advocates co-operation and joint action to support fellow humans, to show them love, fraternity, and compassion"

(Habboush, 2009). In a letter addressed to the general meeting of the Tijaniya order on 27 July 2007, the King says that throughout history, Morocco:

> remained a patron of the Sunni Sufi orders, which distances itself from heresy, sorcery, and religious extremism. History testifies that the Moroccans, Sufi, scholars, and righteous people, have combined Sharia, Tariqa, and Truth in balance, harmony, integrity, and cohesion […] Islam has spread in Africa thanks to the sheikhs of the Sufi orders and the pious Moroccan Muslim merchants who preached wisely for high morals (pncl.gov.ma, 2007).

In praise of the tariqa Tijaniyya, he states that it is "among Sufi orders, which are based on the commitment to follow Sharia, and the Prophetic Sunna, and spiritual education and the purification of the soul" (pncl.gov.ma, 2007). The royal letter goes on to say that:

> The Tijaniya sheikhs and followers spread […] the virtues of Islam concerning educational purity and discipline, adherence to the prescribed obligations, diligence in occupying time with dikr, and commitment to the community... quenching of hostilities and forbearance, and vying for acts of righteousness and solidification of the bonds of religious brotherhood (pncl.gov.ma, 2007).

In the king's speech, Sufism emerges as an Islamic tradition that emphasizes tolerance and ensures social unity, cultural cohesion, spiritual love, and political stability. The Minister of Religious Affairs, Ahmed Toufiq, explains in his address to the United Nations Security Council Morocco's return to Sufism:

> The third fundamental or choice after aqida (creed) and madhab (school of jurisprudence) is the preservation of the spiritual dimension of Islam known for its mysticism (Sufism) because it rests on the principle of calling the soul to account as a means to reach ethical perfection that is required in every transaction or coexistence among people. Sufism is also a method to raise the awareness of the sanctity of the Other; it curbs unhealthy enthusiasm for racial and tribal belonging

and sets up institutions that provide assistance, protection, education, and development (Toufiq, 2014).

3.1.1.d Imarat al Mu'minin

Imarat al-mu'minin is an expression that means that the monarch is the "Commandership of the Faithful," or the leader of the believers. The monarch, therefore, has the role of the guarantor and the protector of the faith. In the constitution, the King's religious authority is defined in the following articles:

> Article 41: The King, Commander of the Faithful [Amir Al Mouminine], sees to the respect for Islam. He is the Guarantor of the free exercise of beliefs... He presides over the Superior Council of the Ulema… The Council is the sole instance enabled to comment on the religious consultations (Fatwas)…. The King exercises by Dahirs the religious prerogatives inherent in the institution of the Emirate of the Faithful [Imarat Al Mouminine]
> Article 46: The person of the King is inviolable, and respect is due Him. (Morocco's constitution, pp. 13-14)

The religious symbols from which the Moroccan monarchy derives its spiritual authority are summarized by Mohamed Daadaoui in his article, "A Symbol Kind of Monarch":

- his role as *amir al-mu'minin* (commander of the faithful),
- his *baraka* (the monarch's perceived "blessedness"),
- his *sharifian* lineage (descent from the prophet Muhammad),
- the *bay'a* ceremony (Daadaoui, 2012).

There is also the role of the king as the "custodian of Islam." On this issue, Ahmed Toufiq says in a Hassaniya lecture on 1 June 2014 entitled "Protection of Faith (*millat*) and Religion and Its Mechanisms in the Kingdom of Morocco:"

> Throughout its Islamic history, the political system in the Kingdom of Morocco has been based on the pledge of allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful, and the written pledges have stated that the Commander of the Faithful is the guardian of faith and religion, and this task comes at the head of the major principles known to religious jurists as the comprehensive of Sharia (*kulliyat sharaa*), which are the protection of religion, of the soul, the mind, money, and honor (Toufiq, 2014).

3.1.2 State Hegemony on Religion

The restructuring of the religious field has aimed at unifying Islam and presenting it as Morocco's national religion, rooted in history and national identity. The king is defined by the constitution as the protector of religion. Therefore, the reform of Islam is accompanied by State efforts to bring the discourse of religion under control and prevent other actors from interfering with it.

3.1.2.a Supreme and Regional Councils of Ulama

First of all, Morocco has invigorated the role of the Supreme Council of the Ulama. King Mohamed VI, the head of the Council, explains that this institution should aim to, "contribute to strengthening the nation's spiritual security, ensuring the preservation of the religious doctrine, which draws on tolerant Sunni Islam" (pncl.gov.ma, 2008). It is the sole religious body that can issue fatwa. A symbolic and significant reform to the Supreme Council of Ulama is the appointment of a woman as a member, for the first time in history.

In addition to the Supreme Council, regional Councils of Ulama have been created in each municipality and giving an exclusive authority as the only legitimate body to give fatwas or religious rules. King Mohammed VI says on the establishment of regional Ulama Councils:

> In keeping with our approach to adopting decentralization, we decided to review the map of the local Councils of Ulama. Thus, it will be generalized so that every town hall has its Council of Ulama, to realize what we insist on, in taking into consideration the particularities and traditions of the people of each region and responding to their religious questions (pncl.gov.ma, 2008).

Eighty-two regional councils have been established to cover the entire territory of Morocco. The King explains the formation of these councils and his expectations from their role:

> Our majesty being aware that this foundational pillar can only be upright by effective training, we have placed our sharifian seal, on the decrees appointing members of Councils of Ulama, in its new composition, entrusting our Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs to install it throughout the national territories, so that they can closely manage the religious issue, and that they consist of scholars known for their loyalty to the foundations of the umma, and its sacred creeds, and by combining the jurisprudence of religion and openness to contemporary issues, urging them to listen to citizens, especially young people, in a manner that protects their faith and minds from the fallen and misleading (maroc.ma, 2004).

The King goes on to convey his eagerness for the incorporation of "the religiously learned woman" in these Councils, "to do justice to her, and equal her with her male counterpart" as part of his vision of gender equality in the religious field. He also insists that to protect Islam and Muslims, the Councils have to be dynamic, close to the community, and a meeting place for an enlightened Islam:

> And to protect the religious field from the interference of some Kharijites outside the legal legitimate institution, we have assigned to the Supreme Council of Ulama to propose the fatwa to our Majesty, as the Commander of the Faithful and Chairman of this Council, with regard to religious issues, to safeguard against subterfuges and suppress disorder and confusion, stressing that our expansion and reformation of the Councils of Ulama, is equaled by our concern that they should not turn into islands abandoned by their members…but we want it to be a meeting place for all enlightened scholars (maroc.ma, 2004).

The King expects the regional Councils of Ulama to effectively implement Moroccan State's religious version of Islam and policies, to work closely with their communities, and

engage with women and youth. And to protect youth and the public at large from alien influences and radical ideologies, the fatwa is not available to independent religious scholars but the prerogative of the Councils of Ulama and in accordance with the State's religious constants and guidelines. In this way, Morocco has completely institutionalized and monopolized the production of religious discourse.

3.1.2.b Guidelines for Imams

Another move to monopolize the discourse of religion is that the Ministry of Religious Affairs has total control over all mosques and places of worship in the country, thereby suppressing the proliferation of unofficial Islam. The appointment of imams and Friday preachers is supervised by the Ministry. Additionally, the Ministry has implemented a pedagogical program for the training of imams and preachers, encouraging them to promote the country's approach to Islam.

In order to control the production of religious opinion the Ministry of Religious Affairs published in 2006 a manual *Dalil al Imam, wa al Waaid wa al Murshid*, outlining guidelines for Imams to follow in their Friday sermons. The *Dalil* reminds the preacher that he is after all a state-employed official and a representative of the king. He is, therefore, requested to implement the official religion and religious policy. The imam, the *Dalil* repeatedly explains, is, "a deputy of the Commander of the Faithful, and it is his duty to preserve the nation's spiritual security and respect its choices" (Dalil, 2006).

The spiritual guide and the preacher have to abide by the religious, political, and cultural choices of the nation and safeguard the nation's spiritual security. These national choices are outlined for the spiritual guide and preachers in the *Dalil*:[1]

> 1. The Moroccans have adhered to the Maliki school, which they have approached with a broader vision, deriving from it both doctrinal tenets and practical fiqh issues.
> 2. The Moroccans have opted for the Ash'ari school because it preserves the essence of the faith, and has a tendency for moderation (*wassatiya*) which transcends the literal interpretation of the scriptures.

[1] A number of Friday preachers who did not abide by these guidelines have been fired. The list

3. Sufism has enormous educational energy which infuses the hearts with love and thereby it refines the general religious behavior, in such a way as to grant the individual spiritual security, integrates him socially, and strengthens his nationalism.
4. The *bayaa*, pledge of allegiance to the sovereign. In its legal significance within the history of Morocco, the *bayaa* is a powerful characteristic of the Moroccan national identity. Therefore, spiritual guides and preachers have to defend it.

Along with these fundamental pillars of Moroccan Islam, the *Dalil* talks about the need of the preacher to adhere to the ideals of human rights, women's rights, the right of religious minorities, religious tolerance, (rejection of religious hatred), and endorse the country's international agreements.

In addition to the *Dalil*, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has created a special program for the training of the country's imams by means of a series of monthly seminars and workshops conducted by members of the Council of Ulama throughout the country. And to guarantee their loyalty and support for the State's religious orientations, as Bruce has noted, the Ministry has increased substantially the stipend of the "religious personnel and their families" (2019, p. 63). Bruce concludes, "Greater control over religious actors also means greater control over religious content" (Bruce, 2019, p. 63). While other critics have characterized Morocco's reform of religion as, "bureaucratizing Islam" (Wainscott, 2019).

3.2 Gendering Religion

One of the significant aspects of modernizing and renewing Moroccan Islam and reforming the religious institution is allowing women ample opportunities to participate actively in the production of religious discourse and knowledge. On 5 November 2003, a few months after the Casablanca suicide bombings, Rajae Najji Mekaoui, a university law professor, became the first woman in Morocco to give a lecture in the prestigious televised Ramadan Hassania Lectures at the Royal Palace. Her participation was highly significant. This was followed by the creation of the position of an *Alima* (woman religious scholar) and *murshida* (a woman spiritual guide), something unprecedented in an Islamic country (El Haitami, 2012; Borrillo, 2018).

3.2.1 The Alimat

An important aspect in the restructuration of the Supreme Council of Ulama has involved the acceptance of female membership. In 2005, Mohammed VI appointed 104 women as members in religious councils: 68 at the local, 35 at the regional, and one at the national level, (J. Rausch, 2012, p. 64). On the participation of women scholars in the religious field, King Mohamed VI says:

> We have worked to integrate the woman Alima in the context of theology and theologians (al ilm wa al ulamaa). We have opened the door for her to participate in the Supreme Council of Ulama and local councils of Ulama, as a full member of these institutions. In parallel, we have opened the door for her to participate in the Ramadan Hassania Lectures, alongside male scholars. And she has demonstrated scholarly competence (Habous, 2009).

Elsewhere he explains the reasons for incorporating women in the religious sphere:

> In the midst of the broad reform of the religious field, we attach special importance to the great role of the woman Alima, and the various enriching possibilities she can contribute to it, especially in the issue of reforming family life, the world of women, enlightening the minds of girls, cultivating them on the love of the nation and cherishing its sacred pillars, in clinging deeply to the tolerant values of Islam and its eternal principles (pncl.gov.ma, 2009).

Benjamin Bruce describes this gender reformation stating that “This last measure was portrayed in media sources as a veritable “revolution,” given that Morocco became one of the only Muslim countries in the world to have an official title that confers religious authority on women within the state religious administration” (2019, p. 63).

3.2.2 Murshidat

Mosques have always been a male sphere. Now women can also meet in mosques and receive guidance and counseling by female spiritual guides, called *murshida*, plural *murshidat*.

In 2006 Morocco launched a program for the training of murshidat. Fifty murshidat graduated that year. The number extended to a hundred in 2015. The program consists of twelve months of intensive and modern training on the commitment to the Maliki school, doctrine, and state policy. It also includes several other areas such as the Qur'an, jurisprudence, Sunna, research methodology, Sufism, geography, psychology, sociology, IT, law, Arabic, and foreign languages (Mis'ad, 2007).

The activities of the *murshidat* are not only in mosques, but also in orphanages, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, and rural villages, therefore reaching out directly to a portion of women previously overlooked by the official religious discourse. Their activities include religious counseling, illiteracy, memorizing the Koran, and family (relationship with husband and children), and social issues.

Margaret J. Rausch observes that:

> Although the women serving on the High Council of Ulema have a superior official ranking within the religious hierarchy, the *murshidat* enjoy wider visibility and greater proximity to the recipients of their services... this proximity and visibility expand their potential for reshaping individual interpretations of Islam and local understandings of women's right to exercise religious authority (2012, p. 60).

Ahmed Toufiq, the Minister of Religious Affairs, stated at the graduation ceremony of the first cohort of *murshidat* that the aim of the program "is to prevent intrusion by foreign agents trying to violate our values and traditions" (BBC, 2006). And in an interview, he said that:

> *mourchidates* are part of the State's strategy for the moral protection of citizens. This is an attempt to revive Sufi, Islam's tolerance and moderation in Morocco. It is this Islam that prevailed in North Africa between the 7th and the 13th centuries (Eddouada, 2009).

In a letter to the first meeting of the *Alimat* and *murshidat* on 27 July 2009, King Mohammed VI explains the significance of the entry of women in the religious field, affirming that the aim of the gender reformation of religion is

> To see the emergence of a new model for the female religious jurist (*al faqiha al Alima*), which combines the old and the new. An enlightened faqiha who contributes to [...] resurrecting a balanced Islam, within the framework of the Sunni Maliki school [...] From this standpoint, you are called upon today to contribute actively to fighting backwardness and exclusion, enlightening minds [...] from the tendencies of extremism and seclusion [...] and to fuel the torch of religious and national patriotism in hearts and feelings. All this in firm attachment to the nation's constants and national identity, and a full commitment to its doctrinal specificities. (pncl.gov.ma, 2009)

The gendered reform of the religious sphere is thus meant to promote Morocco's idea of modern, moderate, and tolerant Islam, enhance and deepen Moroccan national and religious identity as well as combat foreign religious influences and extremism.

3.3 Nationalizing Islam and Islamizing Nationalism

In the Moroccan religious discourse of post-Casablanca bombing, Islam and national identity are seen as being interlocked in a symbiotic relationship. Religious discourse in Morocco repeatedly talks of the particularity (*khussussiya*) of the Moroccan character and the authenticity of Moroccan Islam.

In his speech to the nation on the occasion of the 16th throne anniversary, on 30 July 2015, King Mohamed VI urges Moroccans:

> Do not allow anyone from abroad to give you lessons on your religion. And don't accept the invitation of anyone to follow any doctrine or method (manhaj), whether coming from the east or the west or the north or the south (maroc.ma, 2015).

He concludes his speech by reminding his subjects

> to preserve the precious trust which we have inherited from our ancestors, which is the authentic Moroccan identity, of which others envy us for. It is your patriotic and religious duty to preserve your identity, and to adhere to the Sunni Maliki doctrine that the Moroccans have accepted father from grandfather (maroc.ma, 2015).

The *Dalil* (2006) asserts that the ultimate aim of the religious guidance is to combine, "spiritual development with national development," and "to deepen national integration, by inciting on the infusion in the larger national family". The *Dalil* talks of the Moroccanization of the Maliki doctrine and the creation of national identity. "The Maliki school has become a social culture in Morocco [...] the Maliki doctrine, in Morocco, has a special specificity which distinguishes even from the Maliki school in the Orient". Moroccanness is also conspicuously foregrounded in the discourse of Sufism. The *Dalil* states in this respect, "Sufism [...] contributed effectively throughout history in the formation of the Moroccan religious conscience and national social behavior".

The Emirate of the Believers, with its religious significance, as it was historically achieved in Morocco, was based on a pledge that merged the right of God and the right of *rahim* (womb, kinship). The *Dalil* goes on to explain how the marriage between Mawlay Idriss I and the Amazigh Kanza, has shaped the political and spiritual foundations of the Moroccan society and formed the concept of, "the national family". Emirate of the Believers is a source of national unity and coherence and, "one of the most extraordinary specificities of the religious component of the Moroccan society", affirms the *Dalil* (2006).

Thus, the concept of Moroccan nationhood in the *Dalil* and indeed in Moroccan official religious discourse, in general, is established on four pillars: The Maliki rite, the Ash'ariya theology, the Sufi spirituality, and the God-given Commandership of the Faithful. Interestingly, the uniqueness of the Moroccan national identity is imagined within the contours of the religious discourse. Thus, in the Moroccan discourse, Islam and nationalism completely merge into each other.

Chapter 4 EXPORTING MOROCCAN ISLAM TO EUROPE

The previous part dealt with the official definition of Moroccan Islam and the means deployed by the State to promote it at the national level. This chapter focuses on Moroccan religious presence in Europe and the mechanisms used by the Moroccan State to export and manage Moroccan Islam to the Moroccan diaspora communities in Europe.

4.1 Moroccan European Diaspora

A substantial number of Moroccans live abroad, mainly in Europe, Canada, and the United States. During the first and second World Wars, the French colonial protectorate sent thousands of Moroccans to Europe to fight against Germany and after World War II again thousands of Moroccans were sent to work in France. The immigrations of Moroccans accelerated in the 60s and 70s and especially with the "family reunification" program in the 1970s and 1980s (De Haas, 2005). The following chart explains the rapid increase in immigrant numbers.

The number of Moroccans living abroad continues to increase substantially. In 2012, it was estimated that about 4.5 million Moroccans were living abroad, representing 15% of its total Moroccan population *(The Global Innovation Index* 2014; Collyer 2014). They contribute, "roughly 7% of the country's total gross domestic product through their remittances" (de Haas, 2007).

Country	Number	Year
France	1,514,000	2016
Spain	840,000	2011
Belgium	430,000	2011
Italy	420,650	2017
Holland	391,088	2017
Britain	200,000	
Germany	180,000	2009

Denmark	11,273	
Switzerland	10,270	2016
Sweden	9,945	2018
Norway	9,111	

Figure 1 Number of Moroccans living in Europe (*Wikipedia, 2021) accesed at https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Moroccan_diaspora&oldid=1028941182*.

In the 1970s, most Moroccan migrants in Europe were illiterate, low-skilled workers who kept their families in their home country, lived on the margin of the political and intellectual of their host countries and worked hard to make money and return home. In the recent decades, Moroccan immigrants went from temporary immigrants to permanent residents, many of them became naturalized citizens. The profile of Moroccan migrants is also changing: they tend to be highly educated, hold prestigious jobs, and are actively involved in the politics of their host countries.

Reference can be made for instance, to Rachida Dati, a French Moroccan Algerian origin woman who served as justice minister in Sarkozy's government. In 2012, Najat Vallaud Belkacem, a French woman of Moroccan origins, has been appointed Minister of the Rights of Women and spokesperson for the French government. And in 2015, Moroccan-born Myriam El Khmori was appointed France's Minister of Labour.

On 26 May 2019, six Belgian nationals of Moroccan origin were elected to the House of Representatives in Belgium during the federal, regional, and European elections. Additionally, twenty-one Belgian-Moroccan deputies have also won seats in regional parliaments (North Africa Post, 2019).

In the Netherlands, Ahmed Aboutaleb, a politician of the Labour Party and journalist, was elected Mayor of Rotterdam in January 2009. Khadija Arib, a politician of the Labour Party, has been serving as Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands since 12 December 2015. And Ahmed Marcouch, a politician of the Labour Party, police officer, civil servant, and educator, is the Mayor of Arnhem since 2017 and a member of the House of Representatives from 17 June 2010 to 23 March 2017 (Wikipedia, 2021).

In addition to politicians, the list of high-profile Moroccans in the European diaspora includes a great number of footballers, singers, models, actors, comedians, businessmen, doctors, engineers, university professors, intellectuals, artists, and writers. This significant change in immigration patterns and the status and profile of Moroccan emigrants from guest workers to permanent residents with a wide range of occupations has entailed a profound change from the 1970s and 1980s label "al Ummal al maghariba bil kharij" (Moroccan Workers Abroad) to new appellations: "Al Maghariba al mukimin bil kharij," (Moroccan Residents Abroad).

4.2 Moroccan Imams and Mosques in Europe

Moroccan religious presence in Europe is manifest in the number of mosques where religious activities are led by imams of Moroccan origin, 150 in 2007 (Fhiipmre, 2007, p. 189). For instance, the impressive Essalam Mosque in Rotterdam, the largest mosque in the Netherlands, was opened in 2010 by Ahmed Aboutaleb, the Mayor of Rotterdam. All its successive imams were of Moroccan origin. Imam Yassin Elforkani and subsequently Imam Azzedine Karrat were active and influential imams. Said Bouharrou, a spokesman for the Council of Moroccan Mosques in the Netherlands, who believes in the role of social media in combating radicalization, praises these two imams for their positive use of social media nowadays.

Abdul Adhim Kamouss, imam of al-Nur mosque in Berlin is very popular among his congregation. Synnøve Bendixsen (2017, p.139) explains that "One of the reasons why youth from all over Berlin visited this mosque [...] was the presence of Abdul Adhim Kamouss, a charismatic imam of Moroccan origin".

In 2020, "Athens' first formal mosque since Ottoman rule" was inaugurated. The committee nominated the Moroccan-born Zaki Mohammed to act as its imam. 50-year-old Zaki holds Greek citizenship, obtained after moving to Greece 25 years ago, and is fluent in Arabic, Greek, and French. Expressing his gratitude to the Greek government and people Imam Mohammed Zaki said:

> The best person for Allah is the one who offers something to humanity. We thank the Greek people for accepting us as Greek citizens and Muslims, and I thank the

Greek state for helping us set up this space (Sydney McCourt, 2019; Morocco World News, 2020).

The Moroccan state certainly considers Moroccan imams leading European mosques as a means of reaching out to the Moroccan diaspora community. However, often the state does not have control over these imams, especially independent imams. And sometimes imams may behave contrary to the homeland religion policies and approaches. For instance, the charismatic imam, Abdullah Al-Dahdouh. Born in Tangier, from a Sunni family, Al-Dahdouh traveled to Qom after the Islamic Revolution in 1980 where he embraced Shi'ism and continued his religious education. He moved to Brussels where he established the Islamic Center of Imam Reza and preached Shiism and succeeded to convert many Sunnis to Shiism, a form of Islam that Morocco considers a serious threat to its Sunni Islam. In 2012, Al-Dahdouh died in an arson set by Salafist to the Center. Another Moroccan Shiite leader in Belgium, Ezzedine Laghmeish, a graduate of the Moroccan University, is currently the cultural official of the Reza Mosque (The Reference, 2019). The number of Shiites in Belgium is estimated at 30,000 Shiites, about 20,000 of them of Moroccan origin (The Reference, 2019).



Figure 2 Street march in Brussels to pay tribute to imam Al-Dahdouh, with his painted portrait and Belgian flags (Rtbf, 2014).

Said Abarkan, preaches in a white Moroccan djellaba and head cap, succeeded as imam of the Easalam mosque, but the mosque board fired him for a Salafist statement he had made some

years earlier that Muslims belong in an only Islamic country and tha, “Even if you have a Dutch passport: the Netherlands is not our country” (Pieters, 2019).

In June 2018, the Spanish police called for the deportation of Mohamed Attaouil, a naturalized Moroccan, President of the Imam Malik Islamic Cultural Center in Salt (Girona), accusing him of posing, “a significant and concrete risk to public safety” and suspected of terrorist activities and of preaching jihadist ideology (Kern, 2019). Attaouil is considered to be “a benchmark” for Muslims in Catalonia and the “leader of the Salafi movement” in the region (Kern, 2019).

So, from this brief survey, and the list below, we can conclude that while some imams were leading mosques successfully others were involved or accused of being involved in activities that are not accepted by the host countries and in conflict with home vision of Islam.

Name of Imam	**Imam of**	**Date, action against him, and reason**
Houssam Din Rouzak	at the Islamic Cultural Association of Vercelli, a city near Milan	March 2019 deported, propagating extremist interpretations of Qur’anic precepts during his sermons. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/04/270866/italian-police-moroccan-italian-extremists
Abdelbaki Es Satty,	imam in Ripoll	Died 16 August 2017 in an accidental explosion, suspected of having masterminded the Barcelona attacks. https://www.letemps.ch/monde/europe/abdelbaki-es-satty-maitre-explosifs-manipulation (Accessed: [28/09/2023]).
Ahmed Hilali	Mosque of Gonesse, France	October 2019, call to expel him, Accused of being radical inciting religious hatred. His congregation supported him. Available at: https://www.bfmtv.com/police-justice/attaque-a-la-prefecture-l-imam-soupconne-de-radicalisme-ecarte-de-la-mosquee-de-gonesse_AN-201910110082.html
Mohamed Attaouil	Salt mosque in Girona, Spain	June 2018, he “is considered as a threat to national security” (Kern, 2019).
Said Abarkan	Essalam	September 2019, fired for a Salafi statement that Muslims belong

	mosque, Rotterdam, Netherlands	only in an Islamic country and that "Even if you have a Dutch passport: the Netherlands is not our country". (Pieters, 2019).

Figure 3 List of Problematic Moroccan Imams in Europe

4.3 Morocco's Management of Religion and Nationalism in Europe

In order to manage the matter of faith abroad and regulate it to be in harmony with its political orientations, as well as maintain the religious and national identity of its citizens in diaspora, the Moroccan State has created two official institutions: The Council of 'Ulama for the Moroccan Community in Europe (CUMCE) and Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad (HIIFMRA). CUMCE's main activity is to Moroccan European train imams and murshidat, while HIIFMRA is active in teaching Arabic to Moroccan children living in Europe and coordinating sending imams, *Mushffiun* (psalmoders), and *murshidat* to European countries during the month of Ramadan.

4.3.1 Council of Ulama for the Moroccan Community in Europe

In 2007, the Council of 'Ulama for the Moroccan Community in Europe was established by royal decree. It comprises 18 religious scholars from Europe and is based in Brussels because, as the creation documents explain, the city is the capital of Europe and the seat of the European parliament and its flexible laws (CUMCE, 2021). The king appointed Tahar Tijkani, the Rector of Khalil Mosque in Brussels, as the president of the Council. The Council includes four female members: Naima Umadour, Wafaa Bulaish, Najia Hader Al-Bojdini, and Khadija Al-Qaiti.

The Royal decree states the objectives of the CUMCE:

1. To ensure the proper performance of religious ordinances, to perform the rituals of Islam, and to preserve their sacredness in an atmosphere of peace and spiritual security for all Moroccans residing in Europe, men and women, and in conformity with the Ash'ari doctrine and Maliki school
2. Contribute to any open dialogue between all faiths, in order to highlight the moral values shared by the three monotheistic religions by rejecting all forms of exclusion of the other or discrimination

3. Deepening the awareness of the Moroccan Muslim community residing in Europe on the ideal values of Islam, based on tolerance, moderation, cooperation, righteousness and piety, renunciation of sin and aggression, and working to issue fatwas on the basis of the provisions of the Qur'an and Sunna that nurture the unity of the Maliki school

4. Providing assistance to the Moroccan Muslim community, especially young people, to enable them to properly understand Islam, its meanings and principles, as well as building bridges between Muslim youth and the original sources of their faith and their cultural heritage in a framework of coexistence and homogeneity between the values of authenticity and modernity

5. Promote the social education of Moroccan women residing in Europe, by enabling them to acquire religious knowledge within the framework of the Sunni Maliki school of thought, as well as achieving their optimal integration within the environment in which they live;

6. Supervising the functioning of the mosques run by Moroccans residing in Europe, coordinating their activities, and issuing directives aimed at rationalizing the role entrusted to them in framing the religious life of the Moroccan community residing in Europe;

7. Practical engagement with the concept of citizenship and associated progressive values (Habous, 2021).

What is noticed is that while the Ash'ari doctrine and Maliki School are mentioned, no reference is made to Sufism, one of the cornerstones of Moroccan Islam. Also, while national identity is referred to through promoting youth's discovery and attachment to "the original sources of their faith and their cultural heritage," the concept of *Imarat al mumimin*, allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful through the *bayaa* is not mentioned.

However, this last point is implied in the speech of the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Ulama who states that the mission of CUMCE is to

> enlighten the minds of the Moroccan community residing in Europe and protect them from all dangers that threaten their religious and national identity, and to constantly sensitize them that they have an ancient homeland, with a glorious

> history, an immortal civilization, an enormous scientific and cultural heritage, and a lofty throne rooted in the depth of time (Hespress, 2019).

Most of the activities organized by the Council consist of a series of religious-cultural activities in various parts of Europe. On 11-12 February 2012, the Council organized in Stockholm in partnership with the Moroccan Islamic Council in Scandinavia a training workshop for imams and preachers under the title "The Renaissance of the Maliki School in Europe". On 20 December 2012, the Council organized a workshop on the topic of "The Friday Sermon in the European Context: An Educational Edifice and a Civilized Message", for the benefit of imams and preachers in Brussels, Belgium.

On 18 September 2017, in partnership with the Academy of the Supreme Council for Muslims in Germany the Council organized a training workshop for preaching imam under the title "The Friday Sermon in the European Context", in Dusseldorf, Germany. On 23 May 2017, a similar training workshop took place in Brussels. On 26 September 2017, a meeting was held in Frankfurt to evaluate the results of the project of language and cultural training and the rehabilitation of Moroccan imams in the German Land of Hessen. The meeting was organized by the CUMCE and the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad. The program trained 40 imams, mostly Moroccans, working in Hessen. Within this two-year rehabilitation project program, 2015-2017, workshops for imams were conducted in partnership with Goethe Institute focusing on, "cultural communication and Muslim youth in Germany, as well as preventive work, collective action, politics and law" (CCME, 2017). For Abdelkader Rafoud, dialogue spokesperson and migration officer at Central Council of Moroccans in Germany (ZMaD):

> It is important that the imams are familiar with both cultures and speak both languages, Arabic and German. Similarly, preaching in the mosques should be carried out in both languages. This could help to promote international understanding. "Theological training is important, but it is no longer enough to just be a prayer leader," explains Rafoud. Increasingly, the imam must also take on the role of a counsellor within the community, helping members of his congregation with marriage problems and family conflicts and also getting

> involved in youth work. It is therefore important that the imam is familiar with German culture and with German laws (DIK, 2021).

In his speech Abdallah Boussouf, the Secretary-General of the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME, 2017), referred to terrorist attacks in Barcelona and of a self-proclaimed Moroccan Imam as being the source of terrorist indoctrination, then, "called the imams who participated in the language project to communicate with the community and answer to any question and an extremism attributed to the religion", and that imams have, "to play a role in coherence with society and consider that there is no contradiction between Islam and the values of Western societies". The Secretary-General of the European Council of Moroccan Ulama, too, insisted that preaching imams should, "take advantage of the religious system which is characterized by moderation, tolerance, and respect for the Other in conformity with the European environment" (CCME, 2017).

In 2019, the Council organized a series of training workshops for imams and murshidat in various European cities on the theme of coexistence: in Madrid on 6 February 2019; in Leiden in the Netherlands, on 26 March 2019; in Milan, Italy, on 14 November 2019, attended by about 115 imams, guides and murshidat, who came from various cities of Italy; on 20 November 2019, in the city of Évry-Courcouronnes, in the suburbs of Paris, attended by about 60 imams and murshidat from various cities of France.

On January 26, 2019, the Council organized a cultural event for young people in Figueres, Catalonia, Spain, under the title "Young People, Social Networks, and the Dangers of Digital Religiosity". The event was attended by more than 100 young men and women from the Catalonia region as well as some imams. Another meeting of Muslim youth in Europe was held in Florence, Italy, on 26-27-28 April 2019, under the title "Muslim Youth and Digital Religion: Risks and Challenges". The meeting tried to tackle the following questions: Does the addiction of Muslim youths to digital religion undermine the aesthetic value of religion and spiritual uplifting? Does digital religiosity inhibit a deeper understanding of the moral philosophy of Islam? Does a fatwa in social media have the same meaning and value as a digital fatwa?



Figure 4 Female Attendance of the Florence, on "Muslim Youth and Digital Religion: Risks and Challenges" (Ceomeurope, 2020).

Thus, the activities that CUMCE has organized have taken place mainly in France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Norway, Denmark, Britain, and Austria, countries of Eastern Europe, such as Romania, have not benefited from the activities of the Council. The events targeted to a large extent the imams: how to preach a moderate Islam in the context of Europe, and how to promote the values of coexistence. Because imams are in contact with a great number of people during the Friday sermon, the Moroccan state is hoping to influence them through the trained imams in the values of Moroccan Islam and keep them attached through faith to their homeland and national identity.

4.3.2 Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad

Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad (HIIF) was established by royal decree on 13 July 1990. It is a, "non-profit institution with a social vocation, endowed with a moral personality and financial autonomy" (Dahir, 1990) whose ultimate mission is the promotion and protection of the Moroccan community abroad. The founding document defines the following aims of the Foundation:

1. Maintaining the fundamental links between the Moroccans living abroad and their homeland

2. teaching the Arabic language, national culture, and religious instruction to the Moroccans living abroad, in particular to their children;

3. building or acquiring and equipping, if necessary, schools and socio-cultural and holiday centers for Moroccans living abroad and their families;

4. organizing summer camps and trips to Morocco for the children of Moroccans living abroad;

5. providing financial assistance to needy Moroccans living abroad who do not have social security coverage;

6. organizing and financing cultural, artistic, and sporting events for Moroccans living abroad;

7. participating in the improvement of reception conditions for Moroccans living abroad who are back on vacation in Morocco (Dahir, 1990).

The European activities of Hassan II Foundation are more strongly felt in the program of teaching or Arabic to Moroccan children residing abroad and sending Imams abroad to preach in European mosques during the month of Ramadan.

4.3.3 Teaching Arabic Abroard

In the 1980s, Morocco endeavored to enhance the nationalism of its citizens abroad by means of the teaching of the Arabic language and Moroccan culture to its diaspora community. Morocco signed a series of bilateral agreements with many European countries to this effect: with Spain in 1980, the Netherlands and France in 1983, Belgium in 1986, and Germany in 1991 (Bruce, 2019, p. 97).

The aim of the Arabic and Moroccan culture program is, “the preservation of fundamental links [Moroccan residents abroad] maintain with their fatherland and to help them to overcome difficulties that they encounter due to their emigration” (de Haas, 2007, p.24). Hassan II Foundation was assigned the implementation of the program in coordination with the Ministry of Education. Despite problems and criticism from some European media, the program has continued to the present day, and recently, in 2019, Morocco recruited 148 primary school teachers to teach in Europe for a period of four years (gov.ma, 2019):

Country	Number of teachers
France	71
Belgium	45
Spain	32
Total	148

Figure 5 Teachers sent to European counties in 2019-2020 (fh2mre, 2019)

Year	Number of teachers
2001	50
2004	179
2005	85
2008	42
2010	86
2013	The mission of 144 teachers ended 140 new appointments
2014	The mission of 144 teachers ended 146 new appointments
2015	The mission of 199 teachers ended 213 new appointments
2018	The mission of 122 teachers terminated the appointment of 188 in 2019

Figure 6 The evolution of the number Moroccan Arabic teachers in Europe (fh2mre, 2019)

Country	**Percentage**
France	65 %
Spain	16%
Belgium	12%
Germany	3%

Netherlands	2%
Britain	-1 %
Denmark	-1 %

Figure 7 Geographical distribution of Moroccan Arabic teachers in Europe (fh2mre, 2019)

More recently the Foundation has created a website for online teaching of Arabic for Moroccan pupils aboard.[2]

4.3.4 Summer Camps and University Workshops

In 1991, HIIFMA launched its program of summer camps for Moroccan children in diaspora. In 2000, two summer camps were organized, one in Agadir and the second in Bouznika. About 1000 children participated. Each camp lasted for two weeks. The selection of the children is restricted to those who were involved in Arabic courses in their country of residence.

In 2010, the HIIFMA organized a summer university cultural workshop for the benefit of Moroccan university students residing abroad with the aim, "to increase exchange amongst university students and raise awareness on salient political and social issues in Morocco" (Üstübici, 2015, p. 245). Another aim was:

> To facilitate communication with third- and fourth-generations born and raised in destination countries and to re-establish their cultural connections to Morocco by providing knowledge on the country and, in a sense, by reminding them of their perpetual allegiance to Morocco (Üstübici, 2015, p. 245).

The Arabic language and culture classes, the summer camps, and the summer university for Moroccan university students are activities that are intended to develop and deepen the sense of national identity of the Moroccan children and youth residing abroad, acquaint them with

[2] See www.e-madrassa.ma.

Moroccan cultural heritage, and inspire and develop their cultural and emotional attachment to their homeland.

4.4 Exporting Imams and Murshidat to Europe

The program of sending Moroccan imams abroad started in 1989 and was maintained continuously ever since. Their mission is to offer religious education to the Moroccan diaspora communities, give sermons, religious counseling, and tarawih prayers in mosques and prayer places. The ultimate objective is, "to unite the ranks of the Moroccan diaspora community and defend and protect Moroccan mosques from fanaticism and extremism" (Alislah, 2019).

In Ramadan of 2019, at least 800 Moroccan religious personnel were sent to Europe. The Ministry of Religious Affairs sent 422 Mourshidin and Murshidat, Hasan II Foundation sent 253 imams while associations in Europe invited independently 100 imams (Benadad, 2019).

The appointment of the imams is done first by the Regional Council of the Ulama, which proposes candidates to the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council of Ulema. The final selection of the imams is made by this institution. The program is done in coordination with religious associations in the host countries. In France, for example, it is the Union des Mosques de France, which submits requests for specific assignments to Moroccan authorities (Daily Morocco, 2019).

The main duties of the religious personnel are to lead prayers, animate conferences, and manage religious vigils in mosques and places of worship, and provide religious guidance to the faithful about the practice of fasting and other religious issues.

The religious personnel have to sign a charter of good conduct. They are asked to respect the laws of the host countries, not to discuss political issues, or get involved in polemics. Their mission is purely spiritual, emphasizes Mohamed Rafiq, the official accompanying the religious delegation (Benadad, 2019). Each religious employee receives remuneration of 1000 dirhams per day, 30,000 dirhams per month. The flight is also covered.

It is worth noting that the number of imams continued to rise, and female murshidats became involved. The following charts aim to provide an insight into these trends: [3]

[3] The ministry states that it sends religious personal only to the countries that have official organizations representing the Moroccan religious field that can guarantee the reception of the Moroccan

Country	Mushffia (Psalmoders)	Preacher	Murshida	Total
France	137	10	09	156
Italy	40	04	04	48
Spain	40	05	04	49
Belgium	33	03	03	39
Germany	20	02	02	24
Netherlands	17	02	01	20
Sweden	06	01	-	07
Denmark	05	01	02	08
Total	298	28	25	351

Figure 8 Geographical distribution of Religious Personnel in Europe, 2017

Country	Mushffia (Psalmoders)	Preacher	Murshida	Total
France	143	09	12	163
Italy	48	03	03	54
Spain	40	05	05	50
Belgium	37	03	03	43
Germany	21	02	02	25
Netherlands	20	02	02	24
Denmark	06	01	02	09
Sweden	05	01	--	06
Total	320	26	29	375

Figure 9 Geographical distribution of Religious Personnel in Europe, 2018

delegation. This is why countries such as Portugal, Switzerland, Romania do not benefit from the programme.

Country	Mushffia (Psalmoders)	Preacher	Murshida	Total
France	145	08	11	164
Italy	52	05	05	62
Spain	45	05	06	56
Belgium	42	04	03	49
Germany	22	02	02	26
Netherlands	20	02	02	24
Denmark	06	01	02	09
Sweden	05	01	-	06
Total	337	28	31	396

Figure* 10 *Geographical distribution of Religious Personnel in Europe, 2019 (http://www.habous.gov.ma, 2019)

The purpose is to help the Moroccan diaspora community in the observance of their religious rituals, especially the tarawih prayers and to link them spiritually with their roots and homeland.

4.5 Monarchy and Religious Politics of Distant Nationalism

4.5.1 Hassan II: no to the Assimilation and Integration of Moroccan Residents

Many studies on Morocco's interest in its diaspora community have cynically attributed this interest to the remittances sent to the homeland. In fact, remittances are only one of the reasons for this interest (Brand, 2006). There are other reasons, including the diplomatic role Moroccan immigrants play in furthering Moroccan international interests, promoting a positive image about Morocco, preventing political opposition abroad, protecting Moroccan immigrants from religious radicalization or conversion to *Shi'ism* and the danger they pose to Moroccan

Islam homeland security, as well as the prestige of the Moroccan monarchy having loyal subjects abroad within a broader imaginative geography.

Hence, King Hassan II was always hostile to the naturalization of the Moroccan diaspora citizens and their integration in European countries. He considered it a betrayal of the homeland and Moroccan nationalism. Thus, when foreign residents were granted the right to vote in the Dutch elections in 1986, King Hassan II did not hide his "displeasure." Three years later, in 1989, he considered the participation in French elections "a betrayal of one's origins." He says in an interview with the weekly French magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur,* 12-18 January, 1989:

> Because the vote is attached to the land where one is born one is not attached to the country where one is only passing, where one is in a forced and temporary exile with the idea of return. It is a matter of roots. If you choose to take root somewhere and forever, it's something else. The right to vote is a sacred right to participate in the sovereignty of a community. We must not desecrate it. It would be a way of increasing the uprooting which constitutes the real misfortune of immigrants. In any case, I cannot admit it for Moroccans […] If a Moroccan remains truly Moroccan in his traditions and in his behaviour, there are things that cut him off from fellow citizens in the same city and make him understand that he cannot be a stranger to a community and share the privilege of sovereignty. In a certain sense, it is a way of betraying one's origins (*Nouvel Observateur*, 1989).

In the same year of 1989, Morocco started sending imams to Europe during Ramadan, in what might be read as a royal reaction against some European countries to integrate immigrants. The following year, in 1990, a ministry for Moroccans residing abroad was created. In a throne speech of the same year, Hassan II announced:

> Since We are linked by the act of allegiance to Our subjects living overseas in the same way as to their brothers living in Morocco We feel a religious, moral and paternal responsibility towards them. Our subjects living overseas deserve much greater attention than their co-citizens living in Morocco, whose needs are examined morning and night. We charge you with the needs of these sons, who

> are Ours […] The objective of this task is to ensure the connections and the act of allegiance (Ministère de l'Information, in Collyer 1990).

This royal paternalistic attitude is more clearly expressed in a speech Hassan II gave in Paris on 7 May, 1996, to the representatives of the Moroccan community abroad. The King addresses Moroccan residents abroad as "my dear sons," and prays for them invoking, he says, "the prayers of the parents, addressing their children: 'May God surround you with his blessing.'" He further strengthens the filial ties with his diaspora subject by appointing his elder daughter, Princess Lalla Meryem, president of the Foundation for Moroccan Residents Abroad, and thus, King Hassan, says:

> our ties will not only be those of allegiance, but also ties of kinship, since you will be like my sons and daughters [...] I am extremely happy, much more than I can express it, with our meeting today. As you know, visiting relatives is one of the duties of our religion […] To show you, my children living in France, how great is our affection and how close our ties are, We have decided to entrust, upon our return, by the grace of God, the presidency of the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Residing Abroad, to Our devoted daughter, Lalla Meryem. Thus, our bonds will not only be bonds of allegiance, but also bonds of kinship since you will be as my sons and my daughters (bladi.net, 1998).

King Hassan II also announces that he has dedicated part of his property in Marnes-La- Coquette in the western suburbs of Paris for the construction of a mosque:

> I would like this Mosque to be a model Mosque, representing Islam as the Moroccans understand it, a Sunni Islam, healthy, pure, an Islam of cohesion and brotherhood, an open Islam and not a rigid Islam, an Islam of the civilization and progress, so that a scientist versed in space sciences who teaches here in Paris, can go there to perform the five daily prayers and the Friday prayer. I advise you to remain attached to the Holy Book. I am not saying that your children must memorize all the verses of the Holy Quran, but they must at least memorize one or two "hizb" to be able to perform their prayers, invoke God during Ramadan

> and thus maintain spiritual ties with their Creator, because nothing equals the Holy Book to perpetuate these links (bladi.net, 1998).

It is interesting how the speech concludes by urging Moroccan to dedicate themselves to the Holy Book because that would "maintain spiritual ties with their Creator" as well as strengthen their filial attachment to their sovereign. The religious vocabulary is abundant in the King's speech: Mosque, the five daily prayers, the Friday prayer, Holy Book, Holy Quran, hizb, God, Ramadan etc. The speech sounds like a religious sermon. It is a sermon which fuses Islam with nationalism. Hassan II advocates for his diaspora subjects a nationalized Islam, "Islam as the Moroccans understand it, a Sunni Islam, healthy, pure, an Islam of cohesion and brotherhood, an open Islam and not a rigid Islam, an Islam of the civilization and progress." Thus, as Rogers Brubaker argues, "nationalism may be formulated in religious vocabulary and the existence" (Brubaker, 2011).

4.5.2 Mohammed VI: Transnational Subjects

Hassan II's successor, Mohamed VI, too, stresses the bonds between monarchy and Moroccan residents abroad. In his first address to the nation after his succession to the throne on July 23, 1999. On his first speech to the nation on 30 July, 1990, the sovereign expressed his royal attention to the Moroccan community abroad:

> Among the matters that we shall pay our special attention to are the issues of our community living abroad, and serious thought in overcoming the obstacles it meets on its path, and working to solve its problems and strengthening the bonds of belonging to the motherland (fm5.ma, 1999).

He says in throne the speech of 30 July, 2002:

> We cannot fail to express our joy and pride in the attachment of our loyal subjects residing abroad to their homeland and their attachment to the bonds of eternal pledge of allegiance (bayaa), authentic civilized identity, and their devotion to family and kinship, renewing our deep appreciation for their active contribution to

> the efforts of economic development, international radiance of Morocco, and our resolve that they should have what they deserve from a balanced presence and active participation in all areas of national life, as we would like to assure them that our utmost care is being attached to their conditions outside and inside the country (habous.gov.ma, 2002).

Unlike his father, Mohammed VI is not opposed to Moroccans naturalizing and integrating in their host countries, yet, by law they are still considered to be Moroccans. Moroccan nationality is transmitted by birth in Morocco or by filiations, born from a Moroccan father or mother, in the case of mixed marriages. Moroccan citizenship is not annulled by naturalization. Therefore, even when one acquires a foreign citizenship one is still considered a subject of the King of Morocco in accordance with the principle of perpetual allegiance. As Haans observes:

> Moroccan citizenship is constitutionally inalienable. This means that Moroccans obtaining citizenship of their country of settlement cannot relinquish their Moroccan nationality, so that they automatically acquire double citizenship. … In order to stress their "Marocanité", all migrants including their descendants—whether first, second or third generation—are officially called MRE: Marocains Résidant à l'Étranger (Moroccan Residents Abroad) and, hence, subjects of the King (de Haas, 2007).

The king devoted almost his entire speech on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Green Marsh on 6 November, 2005, to the Moroccan community abroad. He especially intended to involve it in the home political life:

> to ensure an effective and credible participation of our immigrant citizens in all institutions and areas of public affairs, we have taken four important and integrated decisions: first: Enabling the Moroccans residing abroad to be represented … in the House of Representatives, in an appropriate, realistic and rational manner. As for the second decision… it relates to the necessity of creating

> electoral legislative districts abroad, in order for our expatriate citizens to choose their representatives in the first chamber of Parliament, bearing in mind that they enjoy, on an equal footing, political and civil rights, which the law accords to all Moroccans, to be voters or elected in the homeland. Our third decision, enabling the new generations of our dear community, to vote and stand for election, like their parents, is an embodiment of the principle of equality in citizenship [….] Our goal will remain further than that, in response to the great aspiration of our citizens residing abroad, by opening up for them all spaces and modes of participation. Hence our fourth decision, to create a higher Council for the Moroccan Community Abroad, headed by our Majesty, to be formed in a democratic and transparent manner, which guarantees him all guarantees of credibility, efficacy and true representativeness. [….] Morocco is a source, destination and destination for migration. And given that our country is considered a source of immigration, we have never ceased giving particular attention to our community abroad, and to its positive interaction with the countries of residence, and its active involvement in the reforms and the great workshops which we are leading (sahara.gov.ma, 2005).

The speech constructs Moroccan immigrants in a variety of linguistic expressions "Moroccan Community Abroad" and "the Moroccans residing abroad" but more often "our" is used to invoke them as his loyal subjects and connect them to the sovereign and to their homeland: "our immigrant citizens," "our expatriate citizens," "our dear community," "our citizens residing abroad," and "our community abroad." The relationship of the diaspora community with home and host countries is described in interesting terms: "its positive interaction with the countries of residence, and its active involvement in the reforms and the great workshops which we are leading."

Transnational identification and integration in the host countries and loyalty to home and monarchy are not seen as contradictory but are rather complementary and mutually reinforcing. And after all immigrants are the king's faithful subjects. They are "our immigrant citizens," "our expatriate citizens," "our dear community," "our citizens residing abroad." They are perpetually tied to home through nationalism and religion. The throne and monarchy cannot abandon its

subjects even when they reside in foreign countries and these exiled subjects are perpetually loyal to the trilogy of God, Country, and King. That is how Moroccan diaspora community is represented the official Moroccan discourse of immigration.

And to prove this attachment and consolidate it further, the king decided to involve this community in the political process by granting it the right to vote and be elected in the parliamentary elections. These three rights as well as the creation of the Council for Moroccan Residents Abroad, are enshrined in the articles of 2011 constitution:

> Article 16 The Kingdom of Morocco works for the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of the Moroccan citizens [feminine] and citizens [masculine] resident abroad, within respect for international law and for the laws in force in the host countries. It is committed to the maintenance and to the development of their human ties, notably cultural, with the Kingdom, and the preservation of their national identity. It sees to the reinforcement of their contribution to the development of their homeland [patrie], Morocco, and to the strengthening [resesserrement] of ties of amity and of cooperation between the governments and the societies of the countries where they reside, and of which they are citizens.
>
> Article 17 The Moroccans residents abroad enjoy the full rights of citizenship, including the right to be electors and eligible. They can be candidates to the elections at the level of lists and of local, regional and national electoral circumscriptions. The law establishes the specific criteria of eligibility and of incompatibility. It determines, as well, the conditions and the modalities of the effective exercise of the right to vote and of candidature from the countries of residence.
>
> Article 18 The public powers work to assure a participation as extensive as possible to Moroccans resident abroad, in the consultative institutions and [institutions] of good governance created by the Constitution or by the law (Morocco's Constitution of 2011)

The constitution puts a lot of emphasis on the fact that Morocco is "committed to the maintenance and to the development of their human ties, notably cultural, with the Kingdom, and the preservation of their national identity."

The Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad was created by Royal Decree in December 2007, and was made constitutional in article 163 of the constitution of 2011:

> The Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad [Conseil de la communaute marocaine a l'etranger] is charged [….] notably [….] to give its opinion on the orientations of public policies permitting assurance to the Moroccans resident abroad [of] the maintenance of close ties [liens etoits] with their Moroccan identity, to guarantee their rights, to preserve their interests, [so as] to contribute to the human and lasting development of their Country, Morocco, and to its progress.

The fundamental role of the CMCA is "the maintenance of close ties [liens etoits] with their Moroccan identity."

4.5.3 The Moroccan Dutch Conflict over Double Citizenship

Moroccan immigrants may be assimilated into European societies, yet their Moroccan nationality remains attached to them. The sovereignty of the Commander of the Faithful over his subjects extends beyond the borders of Morocco. Sometimes this perpetual allegiance causes tensions. In 2005, the Netherlands terminated the Moroccan program of teaching of native language and culture because it accused it of reinforcing native identity and therefore a hindrance to the full integration of Dutch of Moroccan descent (Bouras, 2013). With the rise of populism and nationalism in the Netherlands, cultural, political and economic transnationalism has been discouraged. "Migrants and their descendants," affirms Nadia Bouras, an expert in the field of the migration and integration of Moroccans in the Netherlands, "were expected to be loyal to Dutch society, and this meant they had to break all ties with their countries of origin." She goes on to explain in the case of Moroccan Dutch:

> Particularly, Moroccans scored very low in integration statistics. Their weak position in society was linked to their strong cultural attachments and orientation to their country of origin. As a result, migrants' ties with their countries of origin were no longer institutionalized by Dutch policies, but from this time forth were contested and discouraged. Moreover, the Dutch government pointed out the dangers of failed integration for the national sovereignty. Migrants' culture and religion, most notably Islam, was believed to be incompatible with western values and formed a threat to the western world (Bouras, 2013).

The Dutch government not only stopped the teaching of Arabic and Moroccan culture, it requested Morocco to stop the transfer of citizenship to the third generation of Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands. Morocco refused this request (Belguendouz, 1999).

In 2016, King Mohammed VI made a private touristic visit the Netherlands. He visited the cities of Amsterdam and Herengracht. By day and night, crowds of Moroccan Dutch citizens gathered at the entrance of the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Herengracht, where the king stayed for five days, 25-30 March, to get a glimpse at their king. They cheered excitedly and eagerly "Long Live the King!" and "Mohammed VI is our King." Some spectators wore traditional Moroccan clothes and others waved the Moroccan flag. Others blow the long *nafar* trumpets, some women ululated (Archive Network, 2018)[4]. The king's waiters, wearing the Moroccan red hat, gave the spectators tea and Moroccan pastries. Some broke chanting the national anthem, loudly repeating the last phrase expressing commitment to allegiance to "God, Country, and King." "For days on end, there were rows of people trying to get a glimpse of the king," wrote a Dutch media (Smit, 2016).

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDX8GAR09Tc



Figure 11 King Mohammed VI Outside Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Herengracht, 25-30 *March, 2016 accessed at: https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/waldorf-astoria-zegt-sorry-voor-overlast-marokkaanse-koning~b673e304e/?referrer=https://www.google.com/.*



Figure 12 The King's Waiters Distributing Tea and Moroccan Pastries to Moroccan Dutch Spectators *accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHmvkklIsNo*

Dressed in a djellaba or colorful clothes, the king toured the Dutch cities and stopped to shake hands or pose for cellphone photos with Moroccan Dutch. The king's visit and the

enthusiastic interaction with Moroccan Dutch seem to be a symbolic means of expressing his transnational ties with the Moroccan community in the Netherlands.



Figure 13 The King Poses for Pictures with Dutch Moroccans

accessed at https://northafricapost.com/11558-morocco-king-mohamed-vi-donates-e30000-build-mosque-amsterdam.html



Figure 14 The King Poses for Photos with Moroccan Dutch Youth *accessed at: https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/waldorf-astoria-zegt-sorry-voor-overlast-marokkaanse-koning~b673e304e/?referrer=https://www.google.com/*

Interesting also is that king donated 30,000 Euros as contribution to the building of a new Al Ihsane mosque in Amsterdam. The architect Gerard Rijnsdorp, who designed the mosque, decided to use yellow bricks for the outer walls to invoke the architecture of the Moroccan Kasbah (hetparool, 2016).

The mosque board thanked the sovereign on the mosque website in these terms:

> God bless you, Oh His Majesty, King Mohammed VI, and may he accept from you and reward you with a thousand good for this charity and all your good deeds. …May God grant us success so as we can be the best ambassadors of our religion and our beloved Morocco, from its north to its Sahara, and from its west to its east, and thereby make you and Morocco proud of us in this country (Moskee Al-Ihsane, 2016).

Interestingly, the statement combines religion with nationalism. The members of the mosque's board promise to act as ambassadors with the duty of championing "our religion," with the connotation of "our Moroccan religion," and "our beloved Morocco," whose geographical borders are clearly demarcated. What is equally striking is that the board members crave from their religiously political mission not so much heavenly reward as the satisfaction of the monarch and of their native country. While the name of the country of origin is repeated twice, the country of residence is merely referred to as "this country."

After its completion, two Moroccan Imams Ahmad Ezzekri and Imam Abu Khaoula were appointed to be in charge of leading prayer in Al Ihsan mosque. It would be interesting to mention that some worshippers protested against one of the imams for allegedly preaching negatively in a sermon about the Al Housseima uprisings (maghress.com, 2017).



Figure 15 Al Ihsane Mosque in Amsterdam

accessed at https://rijnsdorp.nl/moskee-al-ihsane-geuzenveld/

Tensions between Morocco and the Netherlands continued over dual citizenship, especially during the Riff uprising. Moreover, on September 24, 2019, a group of Moroccan Dutch, signed a manifesto, renouncing their Moroccan nationality and calling for the Dutch (Ennaji, 2019).

More recently, during the corona pandemic, a diplomatic conflict between the Netherlands and Morocco over the latter's refusal to allow the repatriation of Dutch tourists stranded in Morocco because of the lockdown. In a declaration in the House of Parliament, Nasser Bourita, Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans Abroad, accused the Netherlands of discriminatory attitudes against Moroccans who hold dual nationality. He said that the Netherlands operated 36 flights, 25 of which benefitted only Dutch nationals. "It was only after around thirty flights to repatriate Dutch people that the Netherlands began to take an interest in Moroccans with dual nationality based in the north of the Kingdom," he said. Another point of contention is that the Netherlands wanted to repatriate Moroccan Dutch citizens from the airports of Al Husseima, Nador, and Tangier. Morocco considers this as another manifestation of the Netherlands' support for the Riff protests since the suggested airports are in Riffian territories, origin of many Moroccan Dutch. Hence the Minister accused the Netherlands of "political opportunism" (Diplomatie.ma, 2020).

Chapter 5 ISLAM IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

5.1 The institutionalization of Islam in Belgium

The Muslim community in Belgium was initially made up primarily of migrant laborers recruited from the Mediterranean regions in the 1960s to work in the Belgian steel and mining sectors. In comparison to France or the United Kingdom, Belgium had no colonial engagement with Muslims. Since the 1960s, Muslim migrant workers have settled in Belgium under bilateral agreements, particularly with the governments of Turkey and Morocco. This planned and coordinated migration came to an end in 1974, when the 1970s economic crisis reduced the need for foreign employees. However, a second, less organized wave of immigration from North Africa and Turkey followed, when family reunion and tourist visas made it possible for more Muslim immigrants to enter.

As a result of family reunion, Muslims became more visible. Initially, they were referred to as "foreign laborers," then "migrants," with no religious implications; it was only later that they were referred to as "Muslim" (Vandemeulebroecke, 1997). Interestingly, the shift in rhetoric toward stigmatization coincided with the procedures of institutionalizing and officially recognizing Islam as a religion in Belgium.The constitutional foundations of free speech and religious freedom underpin Belgium's secularization and religious attitude. The relationship between religion and state is defined by the constitution as one of mutual independence, especially in the articles 19 and 20:

> Article 19: Freedom of worship, its public practice and freedom to demonstrate one’s opinions on all matters are guaranteed, but offences committed when this freedom is used may be punished. Article 20: No one can be obliged to contribute in any way whatsoever to the acts and ceremonies of a religion or to observe its days of rest (The Belgian Constitution, 2021).

This does not imply a complete separation of religion and state, as represented by the French idea of Laicité. A distinction is made between the temporal and spiritual parts of religion under an 1870 legislation; only the temporal or “worldly” aspects of a religion are legally acknowledged and hence financed by the state (Kanmaz, 2002). If a religious organisation

receives this form of recognition, it can petition the government to pay the minister's or religious leader's salary, as well as other types of material support. Islam, along with Catholicism, Anglicanism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Orthodoxy, has been one of Belgium's six recognized faiths since 1974 (Kanmaz, 2002). The 1974 legislation amends the 1870 law about the temporal features of religions, allowing Muslims to seek the rights provided by Article 177 of the Constitution regarding remuneration for religious workers (imams of mosques) as well as various other material benefits (Kanmaz, 2002).

Initially, the ICC, Islamic and Cultural Centre: an organization run by embassies of Islamic countries such as Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, was the most important Islamic voice and representative. It held authority over mosque organization, the training and appointment of Islamic clerics, and the appointment of Islamic education instructors (Strijp, 1997). Later, the Belgian government sought to appoint a different body to represent and educate Muslims in Belgium as its opposition to the ICC and its role in the nomination of Muslim teachers increased (Kanmaz, 2002, pp. 104). As a consequence, the Belgian government formed the Provisional Council of Elders (VRW) in June 1996 to exert greater control over Muslim community leaders. This VRW, on the other hand, was not recognized or accepted in Muslim societies because it lacked genuine religious authority. With the foundation of the VRW, the government is interfering in religion, blurring the line between church and state.

In 1997, the Provisional Executive requested that the Ministry of Justice authorize the required procedures to prepare for the elections for the 'Head of Cult.' The elections were intended to form a Constitutive Assembly comprising 68 Muslim community members. Following the election, the government stepped in to screen the candidates. The Muslim Executive of Belgium (EMB) was then established by royal order on May 3, 1999, and its 16 members recognized by a royal decree the following day. This process of institutionalization and recognition of Islam as a Belgian religion, in which the Head of Cult was elected, occurred concurrently with prevailing perceptions of Muslims as fundamentalists. The introduction of a supervising panel reveals a narrative dominated by a fear of fundamentalism in these elections (Kanmaz, 2002). The screening continued until February 2016, when the institution was reorganized by royal decree. The EMB Benefits from Belgian public funding and subsidies from the federal entities (Sagesser, 2020). In the Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels regions, the first mosques were recognized in 2007. In Belgium, Islamic religious ministers are compensated by

the state's Federal Authority. They must, however, be nominated by Islamic communities recognized by their Regions (Sagesser, 2020, p. 43). The remuneration of Islamic ministers is equivalent to those of other cults. As a result, they are equivalent to the salary paid to Protestant pastors (Sagesser, 2020, p. 44).

With regards to imam training, in the first Muslim communities established in Europe in the 20th century, the role of imam was frequently held by older or more educated members of the community. Gradually, the function became "professionalized" and was entrusted to imams from abroad, where they had been trained. Various foreign states – including the main countries of origin of Muslims in Belgium, Morocco, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia – have sent imams to the communities of the Muslim diaspora. The focus on the problem of religious radicalization has changed the situation. Belgian public authorities gradually paid more attention to the training of Islamic religious ministers. The first step was to train existing imams in Belgium. The EMB has organized training for imams, primarily on secular subjects such as Belgian legislation, in order to familiarize these religious ministers with the reality of the country in which they work. Regional funding has even been granted to the EMB in the Brussels Region for this purpose.

In the French Community, the Institut de Promotion des Formations sur l'Islam (IPFI) was established in October 2017. The press announced in late 2019 the start of the first course to train Dutch speaking imams at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KULeuven) in Februaury 2020, and the start of the first French course at UCLouvain in September 2020. One of the classes at UCLouvain is "religious discourse analysis on the internet." Theological training will be dispensed by the AFOR. its headquarters are in the Cinquantenaire Mosque. The announced training programs are relatively long in duration. While waiting for the first graduates, Belgian mosques will continue to rely on foreign-born imams.

Furthermore, the appointment of these Belgian-trained imams and their recognition by mosques cannot be guaranteed. It is, in fact, constitutionally impossible for the state to impose such a diplomatic condition on religious ministers. It will thus be imperative for the EMB to prioritize the nomination of these imams; it will also be necessary for the various Islamic communities to accept these candidates. A similar experience has taken place in the Netherlands but fizzled out; it is true that the lack of public funding and a representative Dutch body made the experience more difficult to implement. In the Belgian context, the success of the experience is predicated first and foremost on the authority of the EMB (Sagesser, 2020, p. 44). The

announcement of new formations has already elicited a negative reaction from antagonized mosques, who believe that the organization of the training in collaboration with the EMB indicates that it will be subject to foreign influence (Antwerpse Televisi, 2019).

The establishment of an Islamic religious course was the first tangible result of the recognition of the Islamic cult in 1974. At the level of public education, and due to the lack of recognized training for teaching Islamic religion in Belgium until recently, the French Community has been satisfied with the certificate issued by the EMB. And in 2016, The Flemish government's minister of education signed an agreement with the EMB to ensure the training of future Islamic religious educators in a university or higher education setting (Sagesser, 2020, p. 59). Islamic religious courses are the most attended by primary and secondary education students after Catholic courses in Belgium (Sagesser, 2020, p. 60). Concerning Islamic free schools, to date, the French community subsidizes four Islamic primary schools and one secondary school, all located in the Brussels Region. They are totally independent of the EMB, with which they have no connection. In the Flemish Community, there is currently no subsidized Islamic school. The Minister of Education of the Flemish government refused to approve the Selam School at the end of August 2019.

After comparing the case of Islam in Belgium with other European countries, Sagesser contends that in the context of Church/State relations in Europe, theological education is the responsibility of religious authorities. These religious authorities, however, are not always present or are not very legitimate. Furthermore, secular imam training, also known as citizenship education, can be easily organized by public authorities. However, as demonstrated by the Dutch case, public authorities cannot compel imams to attend this training, nor Islamic communities to recruit imams who have graduated from a designated institute.

This discussion becomes especially salient when considering the sizeable Muslim presence in Belgium. In 2009, Belgium's Muslim demographic was estimated to comprise between 410,000 and 450,000 individuals, constituting approximately 4% of the nation's populace. A more recent projection by Hertogen in 2017 estimated the number at 859,223, equating to 7.6% of the population (cited in Husson, 2013). However, some scholars contend that these figures may be inflated. A significant proportion of the Belgian Muslim population has roots in Morocco and Turkey, accounting for 80% of the total, as posited by Nielsen *et al*.

(2009). Hertogen (2013) further delineates these proportions, suggesting that 46.4% are of Moroccan descent, while 25.8% trace their heritage to Turkey.

The robust representation of individuals with Moroccan heritage is palpably evident in the religious infrastructure of Belgium. There are, to date, a minimum of 333 mosques and prayer facilities distributed across the nation: 167 in Flanders, 89 in Wallonia, and 77 in the Brussels Region. It is noteworthy that nearly half of these establishments are frequented and governed by individuals of Moroccan origin. Kanmaz (2002) posits a critical perspective on the policies governing the recognition of Islam in Belgium, suggesting that they appear to be aimed at its regulation, stemming from perceptions of the religion as a potential threat. Such policies seemingly blur the demarcation between religion and state, showcasing a pronounced state intervention in religious matters.

5.2 The Dutch Case

Up until the late 1970s, the cultural and religious identities of migrants in the Dutch context were largely peripheral in deliberations regarding their societal integration. Migrant classification was primarily predicated upon ethnic distinctions, devoid of consequential political undertones. Dominant perceptions framed migrants as ephemeral members of the labor force, anticipated to repatriate. Consequently, policies manifested from a paradigm emphasizing their provisional status. Given this perspective, the establishment of religious infrastructures was considered a matter for private endeavors, obviating the requirement for specialized policy frameworks.

A paradigm shift emerged towards the close of the 1970s. Immigration rates witnessed a marked surge, predominantly driven by familial reunifications. Concurrently, there arose an amplified demand for religious infrastructures and proficient religious personnel (Landman, 1992). The landscape of Islam within Dutch societal contours is shaped by three pivotal elements. Foremost is the 1983 Dutch constitution, which enshrines the parity of all religious denominations. While the bedrock of religious egalitarianism can be traced to the 1848 constitution, its reaffirmation in 1983 severed fiscal and other affiliations between religious institutions and the state. Crucially, this principle diverges from practices in nations like Belgium or Germany, as the Dutch governance abstains from policies of religious recognition and registry (Sunier, 2010). Notwithstanding the discernible disparities between entrenched religions and

emergent ones like Islam, this ethos of equality furnishes Islamic representatives with a credible foundation to advocate for equitable treatment (Sunier, 2010, p. 117).

The second component dates from the 1920s through the 1960s, when Dutch society was organized along confessional lines. The political scene in the Netherlands was controlled by so-called "pillars," corporate religious groups or blocs. There were two confessional pillars, one Catholic and the other Protestant. There was also a Socialist movement and a so-called Liberal sphere. More over half of the Dutch people belonged to one of the two confessional pillars, which cut across all socioeconomic strata (Sunier, 2010, p. 118). They operated their own political parties, trade unions, schools, colleges, media, and other organizations.

Churches were instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of these pillars. The Socialist movement, while not conventionally categorized as a pillar, mirrored its structural characteristics, grounding its political roots predominantly in the working class. These entities, hierarchically organized, exerted substantial influence within their respective domains. The governing echelons of the Liberal domain were economically dominant within society; however, they displayed relative fragility in terms of their social organizational structure. A salient characteristic of this system was its pronounced emphasis on the sovereignty of the pillars. Specifically, the two confessional pillars insisted on minimal state intervention in matters that touched upon the day-to-day lives of their constituents.

By the advent of the 1960s, the system's foundational relevance had diminished, leading to the disintegration of the pillar structure in numerous societal segments. While the social apparatuses that buttressed the era of pillarization have been largely eclipsed by the unifying forces of the modern welfare state, vestiges of this system persistently influence key domains. Foremost among these is the Dutch educational landscape, which still exhibits a strong imprint of pillarization, most notably through the presence of confessional schools. These institutions receive equivalent state funding as their public counterparts and retain a significant degree of autonomy pivotal in shaping educational policies.

In the context of these legal provisions, Muslims have capitalized upon the opportunities presented. From the late 1980s onward, there has been the establishment of just over thirty state-funded Islamic primary educational institutions, along with a singular secondary school. What bears even more significance than these tangible and legislative remnants from the era of pillarization is their profound resonance within a quintessentially Dutch narrative. This narrative,

perhaps even a cultural mythos, centers on a paradigm of tolerance and mutual respect between diverse religious and cultural factions within society. Such a framework largely illuminates the tendency to define minorities in religious terms and the prevailing notion that followers from various religious denominations inherently align into communities, reminiscent of the pillars in Dutch historical context (Sunier, 2010).

The third facet aspect revolves around the Dutch strategies for integration. Muslims are conventionally perceived through the migrant lens. Consequently, they fall within the purview of specific targets and ambitions articulated in the Dutch integration programs, which have been in continuous evolution since the early 1980s. These policy trajectories underscore the narrative through which Islam has been domesticated within the Dutch milieu. Islam, in this discourse, is delineated as an "immigrant religion," with its characteristics and essence being construed as inherent to the cultural fabric of immigrants—individuals originating beyond the Dutch nation-state boundaries (Sunier, 2010).

Within the Dutch milieu, imams bear a significant responsibility in facilitating the assimilation of Muslim communities into the broader tapestry of Dutch society. Expected to epitomize exemplary conduct for their communities, they undertake multifaceted roles, from orchestrating initiatives that bridge the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, to acting as youth liaisons addressing issues pertinent to Muslim young adults (Oueslati 2014). A government-sanctioned report focusing on the imperative of imam-training in the Netherlands clearly articulated the need for imams, especially those hailing from foreign lands, to tailor their discourses in alignment with the core principles germane to the Dutch context. Consequently, the state has exhibited a pronounced emphasis on the formulation of imam-training programs that resonate with Dutch societal norms (2003, as referenced in Sözeri et al., 2019 p. 436). This governmental stance underscores the impetus for the inception of state-sponsored Islamic theology and imam-training curriculums within the country. In the past decade and a half, three notable initiatives in this regard were introduced at institutions such as Vrije University Amsterdam (VU), Leiden University, and Inholland University of Applied Sciences. Regrettably, these programs encountered challenges, manifesting in dwindling enrollment and elevated attrition rates, leading to their eventual cessation or transformation into broader religious studies programs.

Chapter 6 FINDINGS

The findings chapter is subdivided into six subchapters, each dedicated to representing one imam. The Moroccan-born imams first, followed by the European-born imams of Moroccan descent. Each subchapter begins with a biography of the imam, followed by an exploration of his perspectives on identity, gender, and finally his views on politics and radicalization.

6.1 Imam Mohamed Toujgani

6.1.1 Biography

Mohamed Toujgani immigrated to Europe from Morocco in 1984. He is the main *Imam* at Al Khalil Mosque in Brussels, Belgium. The mosque is located in the Molenbeek district, a poor neighborhood and breeding ground of Moroccan radical Islam. He is the cousin of Tahar Toujgani, *Imam* in Anvers and president of the Council of Moroccan *Ulama* in Europe. He preaches in Arabic because he does not speak French. Toujgani has a great influence on Muslim youth in Brussels and on many *Imams* such as Rachid Haddach, Adil al-Jattari Jattari, Imam at Muttakin in Brussels (Maréchal, 2008, p.73).

Imam Toujgani is active in lecturing in various mosques in Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and other European countries. He also participates in conferences and imam training workshops activities organized by the Council of Moroccan *Ulama* in Europe. He participates in interviews with various media outlets such as Maghreb TV channel and Moroccan national television channels.

At first, he opposed the participation of immigrants in Belgian politics but has recently changed his opinion (MaghrebTVchannel, 2014). Noureddine Smaïli considers Toujgani to be, “the main obstacle to the reform and promotion of a European Islam” (Mertens and Torton, 2019, p. 15).

The Belgium's Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Sammy Mahdi, received a State Security report labeling imam Mohamed Toujgani as a threat to national security. Based on the security report, Mahdi informed the Chamber that Toujgani posed "a current, real and serious danger to national security" due to "extremism and interference". Consequently, Toujgani, who had resided in Belgium for nearly 40 years, was issued an expulsion order and a 10-year ban on re-entry. This decision was primarily influenced by an old video wherein Toujgani prayed against

"Zionist oppressors". Mahdi interpreted this as advocating for the harm of Jews. Toujgani later apologized in 2019, mentioning the geopolitical situation at that time, specifically referencing the Israeli war on Gaza in 2009, which had significant international reactions.

The issue of 'belonging' inherently intersects with the construct of national religious authority, particularly when viewed through the lens of immigrant imams and their theological perceptions. Delving into this intricate nexus requires understanding the sentiments of individuals like Toujgani concerning both Morocco and Belgium. Primarily, Toujgani's articulated identity is overwhelmingly Moroccan, underscoring an unwavering allegiance to his ancestral land. As he eloquently affirms, “I am Moroccan, and I do not deny my identity. And I am committed to my principles.” Yet, his narrative does not remain uni-dimensional. He seamlessly integrates a duality in his identity, acknowledging his affiliations with Belgium, asserting, “And this does not prevent me from considering Belgium my country” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2022).

The contextual backdrop of this discourse is paramount for an accurate discourse analysis. It is essential to note that Toujgani articulated these sentiments during a virtual interview with MaghrebTV, a situation exacerbated by a ten-year prohibition from entering Belgium and the Schengen region. This restriction was predicated on various allegations, notably the insinuation of his association with Moroccan intelligence agencies. The defensive undertone of this dialogue, where Toujgani was arguably vindicating himself, necessitates caution. Drawing definitive conclusions regarding Toujgani's sense of belonging based solely on this interaction could be an oversimplification. Consequently, a comprehensive examination of diverse instances might yield a more intricate and nuanced understanding of his sense of allegiance and identity.

Toujgani’s claimed double belonging undeniably resonates with the jurisprudential perspective endorsed by the Moroccan state. Such a viewpoint strategically bolsters his claim of affiliating with Belgium. He elucidates, “Because in our jurisprudence if someone resides in a country for three to four years, they attain the status of a citizen” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2022). Toujgani's discourse reveals an absence of discordance in identifying as a Belgian Muslim, indicating a harmonious blend of national and religious identity. He posits that Islam's characterization as extrinsic to Europe is antiquated. Given the burgeoning Muslim populace

possessing European citizenship, Islam, he contends, can no longer be considered alien to Europe. Illustrating this, he states, “Muslims are citizens, and also some of the European descent converted to Islam” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

While Toujgani argues that Islam has firmly rooted itself within the European milieu, he concurrently acknowledges the intricate challenges inherent in navigating one's religious faith within such a diasporic environment—especially the endeavor to reconcile Islamic tenets with Europe. Nonetheless, his position remains unwavering: the universality of Islam renders it amenable to diverse sociocultural landscapes. In instances where Muslim individuals grapple with integration, Toujgani asserts that the religion of Islam should not bear the brunt of culpability. Expounding upon this, he contends, “The Islamic religion came for humans, we live amongst people. If one cannot live with people because of their religion, it means that they are a failure, or that they are intrinsically bad [...] The problem is when someone is unable to do it [communicate and live with non-Muslims] they blame the others who can rather than acknowledging their inability” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

Toujgani's belief that Islam has become intertwined with European culture leads him to assert that accommodations for Islamic traditions, such as Eid al-Adha, should be facilitated by European authorities. However, the realities on the ground seem to deviate from his aspirations. Highlighting this divergence, Moroccan-Belgian journalist Mohammed Tijjini commented on the challenges surrounding the practice of Eid al-Adha, noting that politicians grapple with logistical concerns: “Oh virtuous sheikh, you know politicians here consider Eid al-Adha as a big problem; they say that now we need to find a place for you to slaughter the sheep and to throw garbage. There are even some Belgians who think that in the Islamic religion, it is possible to give alms instead of slaughtering the sheep” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

Reacting to such perspectives with a mix of humor and indignation, especially to the idea of non-Muslims giving religious directives, Toujgani quips, “We still have not reached the time when we will be taking fatwas from non-Muslims. We take it from scholars. In fact, municipalities here demonstrate an understanding of the Muslims’ situation. They make it easier for them. But Muslims should be positive and abide by the general order” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012). He goes on to suggest that acknowledging the Islamic Maliki tradition, which provides a three-day window for slaughtering the sheep (with other traditions allowing up to four days), could offer a more flexible approach to celebrating the feast.

However, when it comes to the method of slaughtering, Toujgani holds a strong opinion against sedating the sheep, asserting that traditional Islamic methods are the most humane, even by contemporary scientific standards. He firmly states, “On that, we resort to modern science, our religion is clear and says that if the animal is not slaughtered we cannot eat the meat. And if it is sedated, it is not normal anymore. But even from the point of view of modern science, slaughtering the animal is easier for it than killing it or sedating it” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

It merits attention that Toujgani underscores the suitability of the Maliki jurisprudential school, espoused by Morocco, especially when contextualizing the feast of the sacrifice within the Belgian milieu, directed chiefly at a Belgian Moroccan audience during his MaghrebTV interview. Indeed, Toujgani harbors profound reverence for the Maliki tradition, accentuating its temporal and spatial consonance with European ethos. He interweaves European multiculturalism with the doctrinal underpinnings of the Maliki school. Articulating this alignment, he notes, “This society is multicultural and our Islamic culture, particularly the Moroccan dimension, is anchored in the Maliki tradition rooted in Imam Malik’s teachings.” Providing a historical backdrop, he elucidates, “Imam Malik grew up in Europe. So, the closer *fiqh* (jurisprudence) to the European reality is the Maliki one since most of its scholars came from Europe and all the Islamic Maghreb then followed this doctrine” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

Toujgani also highlights the religious harmony and cultural interplay that exists within Morocco, emphasizing its relevance to the broader European context. "It has flexibility, and although most of our society in Morocco is Muslim, there are other cultures, namely the Christian and the Jewish, and everybody lives as neighbors and gives each other gifts," he notes. He then draws a parallel to Belgium, observing, “We consider this society a multicultural one and everybody is free to display what they have” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012). In delineating to a Maghrebin audience that the Maliki jurisprudential school holds unparalleled pertinence to Europe, Toujgani's assertions directly relate to the question of national religious authority and Morocco’s extended spiritual influence within Europe. In this context, Toujgani emerges as a pivotal conduit, reinforcing the continuum of Morocco’s religious authority vis-à-vis its diasporic constituents.

Furthermore, Toujgani exhibits endorsement for the Moroccan religious establishments operating within Europe. His commendation for the European Council of Moroccan Ulama is

discernible, although it is not without its stipulations. He sees the council's potential and advocates for a clearer, more influential role. He states, “The European Council of Moroccan Ulama is a good initiative that we support. However, the missions that it should carry out should not copy what other associations are already doing." Elaborating on the council's prominence, he emphasizes, "It has a big status, and what they do there should match that. They must establish a science institute relied upon by officials in this country, in the capital of Europe." In a broader context pertaining to the council's objectives, Toujgani adds, “They should also establish a cultural center to preserve moderation, the reason for which it was made” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013)."

Toujgani argues that the European Council of Moroccan Ulama should recalibrate its strategies to center primarily on the younger cohort of Moroccan Muslims residing in Belgium. Such a strategic pivot is envisaged as a mechanism to further ingrain both cultural and religious ethos within subsequent generations of Moroccans in Belgium. Reflecting upon the Council’s initiatives, particularly in relation to commemorating the Prophet’s birth, he offers a nuanced assessment:

> The initiative that the Council has taken is commendable. However, I believe the spotlight should have been on the youth. Older generations have their faith deeply ingrained in them. Our aim should be to engrain this memory in subsequent generations, linking them to their religious milestones, leaders, and prophet. Presently, our children have a bond with Jesus, owing to the widespread celebrations. Our goal is to help them find equilibrium in their beliefs (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

This proclamation underscores Toujgani’s fervent commitment to ensuring the transmission of Moroccan religious traditions to subsequent generations, particularly in light of external influences.

Given Toujgani’s evident inclination to impart religious wisdom to the emergent generation of Moroccan Muslims in Belgium, one might naturally infer his unequivocal endorsement of acquiring European local languages, especially when many of these youths are non-Arabic speakers. Paradoxically, his narrative doesn't strongly champion the mastery of

European languages. Although Toujgani emphasizes the importance for imams to be proficient in the vernacular of their adopted nations, he prioritizes religious erudition above linguistic skills. Addressing the subject of Arabic instruction for young Belgian Muslims, he posits that sermons in Arabic should not present an obstacle. He expounds,

> It's a common misconception to criticize imams, many of whom are scholars well-versed in the Quran, just because they may not be fluent in the host country's language. Don't representatives of their respective countries often rely on interpreters? It's only logical to expect those attending our mosques to understand the language of the sermon. Granted, there might be a handful who require translations, especially the youth or recent converts unfamiliar with Arabic. However, a majority has been educated in mosque-affiliated schools and have a basic understanding of Arabic (Euromagreb, 2020).

In dissecting this perspective, it is evident that a rudimentary grasp of Arabic may not suffice to comprehend sermons, with the potential risk of spawning misinterpretations. Nevertheless, Toujgani remains steadfast, positing religious insight above linguistic mastery. He asserts, “If one masters the language but lacks religious knowledge, what insight can they offer? While we do encourage both young and older imams to familiarize themselves with the host country's language, it is crucial that we respect and value every imam graced with the knowledge of the Quran” (Euromagreb, 2020).

While many might point to language barriers, he underscores the significance of the preacher's intention, al-niya, in the transmission of religious messages from the imam to the congregation. He elaborates:

> There is a mismatch, when the congregation leaves the mosque and you ask them, you find that their responsiveness is not on the same level. some understood the sermon and some did not know what it was about altogether. That is why when the preacher goes to preach, they should do it with the intention of communicating a message rather than just doing a job (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

Turning now to the religious needs of the European Muslims, Toujgani emphasizes their Changing needs. According to him, they necessitate a religious infrastructure that resonates with their contemporary realities. Drawing from his observations, he notes, "The role of imams of my generation is almost over because we understand our generation. But the new generations need different imams, those who can articulate the religious discourse in a way that matches the European reality where there are different cultures, religions, and ethnicities" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

In delving into the pedagogical philosophy of Imam training, Toujgani's stance appears to be harmoniously aligned with the contemporary needs of European Muslims. Demonstrating an avant-garde perspective on the sources of learning for imams, he professes, "The Prophet peace be upon him has learned from the experiences of Persians who worshiped fire [...] Our master Omar in writing registers has learned from Romans who are not Muslims. Originally, the Muslim is open and ready for knowledge but at the same time, they filter what they take" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

Such a forward-looking viewpoint seemingly renders him an advocate for Imam training programs in Belgium, which proffer a blend of religious and modern scientific curricula. However, he differentiates between the reverence due to the seasoned imams and the evolving educational demands of the newer generation. He elucidates, "We want students who are getting trained to be imams to learn religious matters as well as modern social sciences. We hope that in the future we will have imams who can combine the traditional and the modern to match their time. As for those, like me, who came before and undertook the responsibility of the imam and served in mosques [...] We cannot deny the role they played as it means destroying all imams and Muslims there are. Completing the needs that current imams have does not lower their esteem but increases it" (Euromagreb, 2020).

Navigating the intersection of academic and religious realms, Toujgani accentuates the inviolable premise that religious doctrine should remain within the purview of erudite imams. He reserves modern scientific pedagogy to the Belgian academia. Articulating his concerns over the sanctity of religious tenets, he states:

> I was invited to Leuven University to discuss Imam's training and the focus was on scientific matters. For religious matters, imams should be trained by competent

> academic scholars in the religious field, and this cannot be done by anyone. There are knowledgeable imams on these matters who can train. On what concerns human and social sciences, Belgian, and European matters, the university can take care of that as they have experts in these fields [...] I stress that religious matters should be taught by their people and some imams can do that. We are afraid of changing religious concepts in the name of training imams. This is unacceptable (Euromagreb, 2020).

Within the matrix of the transnational paradigm, Toujgani's outlook converges seamlessly with Morocco's national vision of restructuring the religious domain. The contemporary pedagogical framework, amalgamating religious instruction with modern scientific disciplines, mirrors Morocco's adopted methodology for cultivating its religious leaders. Toujgani, while discussing the Belgian context, seems to channel the Moroccan ethos, asserting:

> Now in Morocco, there are centers to train imams. They train them in religious knowledge and different languages as well as in the sciences scholars need to talk to people. Now, it isn't possible to speak from a religious point of view only. Imams should harmonize between this and the science of reality to be able to access the minds and souls of people [...] [in Belgium] the discourses of imams should be developed by the institutions [...] Imams must be aware of what happens in their neighborhood, municipality, city, the country where they live, the continent, and the world. Now the world, as they say, has become one issue with few differences (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

For Toujgani, an Imam should not isolate himself from European society as it is a sign of weakness and fearfulness. He says, “Imams who live in isolation will never be able to thrive. But if someone is afraid for their religion and cannot rub shoulders with society can be labeled as fearful; it is not a problem but they should not slander those who are able to communicate” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

Moreover, Toujgani accentuates the pivotal role of the preceding generation of Moroccan imams situated in Belgium. While he remains progressive in advocating updated instructional

techniques, he is unwavering in his conviction that religious edification should be the preserve of the older imams. In a tone underscored by respect for tradition and adaptability, he notes,

> For the training, we cannot do without the old imams. We must benefit from them and help them complete what they lack to carry out their job. At the same time, they are an added value to train the imams of the future. We want the new imams to match their epoch and be able to solve the problems of the society around them, and for this, they need to have knowledge in religious matters and modern sciences, also the language of the country (Euromagreb, 2020).

Here as well he stresses that local language knowledge is not a must saying that "The language is very important but it is not the prerequisite for Imamship, but religious knowledge is. the language is only a medium for communication [...] If they lack it, translation could be used" (Euromagreb, 2020).

The programs that teach a blend of modern sciences and religious education might be a source of discomfort to the older generation of imams who could see it as an initiation of their eventual dispensability. Toujgani comforts these imams by telling them that in the Moroccan tradition, to have the position of the imam, one has to memorize the Quran and this is why these imams are irreplaceable. He says:

> You must know, God bless you, that the Lord has given you this position as you have memorized his holy book. Imams, in the Moroccan tradition especially, cannot have this position unless they have memorized the Quran. And one cannot be a preacher unless they are familiar with religious precepts. This is an axiom between all Muslim audiences who go to mosques. So it is not possible to supplant these imams (Euromagreb, 2020).

Toujgani's perspectives on Imam training distinctly align with the Moroccan ethos of religious education. This unwavering affinity and defense of Moroccan principles, however, might be construed by Belgian authorities as a potential extraterritorial influence, challenging their sovereignty and raising concerns about the interplay between foreign religious dictates and

domestic governance. Such an allegiance to external religious tenets could be perceived by some as an incongruence within the Belgian socio-cultural fabric, potentially leading to apprehensions of foreign encroachment on national affairs.

In Toujgani's discourse, there emerges a sense of the precariousness that immigrant imams grapple with in the milieu of Western Europe. This sense of vulnerability is not just abstract speculation but is anchored in tangible experiences. A case in point is Toujgani's own experience of being prohibited from entering the European Union for a ten-year span.

Toujgani paints a poignant picture of the challenges faced by imams in Europe, both on emotional and material planes. They operate within constraints, tethered by the oversight of mosque committees predominantly composed of an older generation, whose well-intentioned but sometimes myopic visions can hinder progress. Toujgani observes:

> The situation of imams in Belgium and Europe is not comfortable neither psychologically nor materially. They usually live under pressure and do not have freedom in the mosque where they work. It is usually the committee that runs the mosque and its vision is usually limited. Their intention is good, may God accept their work because they are genuine but sometimes their limited vision halts the development. Most of them are from the 1st generation" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

Beyond the emotional strain, the financial precarity faced by imams further underscores their challenging position. They are often remunerated through a framework reminiscent of Christian priesthood, which, given the celibate nature of priests, does not adequately cater to the familial responsibilities of imams. Toujgani articulates this disparity by noting the state-recognized imams, although they get paid better than those associated only with mosques, are still remunerated less than what their responsibilities entail, especially when juxtaposed with priests. He elaborates, "Unfortunately, the recognized imams adhere to the laws of priests in churches. They do not marry so they do not have to provide for their wife and children. The pay is enough for them but not for the imam [...] However, the imam should be paid more than the priest considering the expenses" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013).

6.1.2 Views on Gender

Toujgani's perspectives on gender, when dissected, reveal a nuanced interplay between his religious beliefs and his respect for the legal boundaries of the nations he engages with. The interview conducted by Mohammed Tijjini for MaghrebTV brings to light some of these intricacies.

When questioned about the allegations of misogyny and gender inequality that played a role in his 10-year ban from the Schengen area, Toujgani posits a perspective that underscores mutual respect for both genders. He articulates, “first of all, God has created men and women. The one who despises women despises men as well because the woman is the mother, the wife, the sister, and the daughter of the man. The one who despises one despises the other.” This statement underscores a belief in the intertwined destinies of both genders, emphasizing that devaluing one inherently means devaluing the other.

On the controversial topic of polygamy, Toujgani adopts a dual stance that recognizes the permission within Islamic tenets while also respecting the legal confines of Belgium. While he personally practices polygamy in his homeland, Morocco, he is careful to abide by Belgian laws. His statement, “as a Muslim, if I am asked about polygamy in my religion, I will say that my religion allows it with conditions. Nevertheless, if the law forbids that, one must consider it... I am married in Morocco, but in Belgium, I have one wife. This is a religious matter, but if the law forbids it, I do not encourage this practice” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2022), highlights the intricacy of navigating religious beliefs within different national contexts. This duality, practicing one facet of his beliefs in Morocco and another in Belgium, exemplifies the complexities of transnational belonging.

Regarding women's participation in the workforce, Toujgani adopts a straightforward stance, underscoring that both his sons and daughters are gainfully employed. This endorsement contradicts some stereotypical notions that might categorize him as overly conservative.

The concluding interaction with the journalist captures the core of Toujgani's struggles in Europe. His assertion is “Yes. When we talk about human dignity, it is something different. But when we talk about religious precepts, I say what my religion says” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2022), encapsulates the tension between adhering to religious principles and negotiating societal expectations in Europe.

6.1.3 Views on Politics and Radicalization

Toujgani's words highlight the essentiality of mutual respect, understanding, and coexistence between migrants and host nations. Firstly, Toujgani acknowledges and appreciates the liberal stance of Belgium. His remark, "Here we live in Belgium, and it has its own rules, laws, and constitution that give us a certain amount of freedom to practice our religion which we have to use for our own benefit," underscores the fact that Belgium, in his view, offers a conducive environment for Muslims to practice their faith. Yet, the term "use for our own benefit" emphasizes a constructive engagement with this freedom rather than its misuse. This proactive engagement can be seen in his suggestion that differences of opinion or potential conflicts should be settled through dialogue, "And for things that could cause problems because of different convictions, we can sit together and discuss them and whoever has the strongest argument is right" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012). This is a clear endorsement of peaceful conflict resolution and discourse over confrontation.

Secondly, his stance on residence and citizenship provides a clear perspective on how immigrants should perceive their roles in the host country. By likening residency and citizenship to a contract, he stresses the obligation of immigrants to uphold the peace, respect laws, and positively engage with the host society. His words, "On a Friday sermon, I told the congregation that anyone who is a resident, citizen, or has an entry visa, already signed a peace contract between himself and this country. I do not have citizenship but I am committed to this contract since I have a residence. But if someone has citizenship it means that they became a component of this society" indicate that he sees migration not merely as a right but as a pact of mutual respect and understanding (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

Toujgani articulates a nuanced position on the integration of Muslims in Belgian society, emphasizing both the need for adherence to local laws and the legitimate request for revising certain statutes that appear to circumscribe Islamic practices. He contends that defending the rights of the Muslim populace is not merely an obligation resting upon Muslim representatives, but is, in essence, a broader civic duty incumbent upon all elected officials, considering the integral citizenship status of the Muslim community.

Further elucidating on the challenges of radicalization, Toujgani underscores the imperative of granting media access to erudite Islamic scholars. He posits that a communication void exists, and asserts that the Islamic community remains both ready and receptive to engage

dialogically, particularly with those attempting to hurt both citizens and Muslims in the guise of Islam.

Toujgani critiques two distinct sectors: firstly, those who extrapolate a monolithic narrative about Islam based on isolated acts of individual adherents, and secondly, Muslims who resort to extreme reactions when faced with perceived provocations. His reference to the Molenbeek incident, where police interactions with a burka-clad woman spiraled into violent confrontations, serves as a testament to these intricate dynamics.

Furthermore, Toujgani advances to his Muslim audience the proposition that proselytizing religious beliefs should be anchored in reasoned discourse rather than resorting to violent means. To illustrate his tenure in Belgium and the selective narratives about Muslim integration, he notes:

> It has been almost 30 years that I live in Belgium, why don't they bring examples of people who lived here for 40 years and more? They only bring individual examples to talk about a whole religion, which itself disowns such individuals. If a Belgian commits a crime, will they say that all Belgians are criminals? or if an African does it, should they say that all Africans are criminals? It is inadequate [...] we cannot generalize [...] even if the woman was treated wrongly by policemen, what we can do is take the case to court and support the woman with a lawyer and make a peaceful demonstration. Vandalizing public property and harming people and insulting them is not in line with what God says in the Quran [...] If you want to convince someone to join your religion, you do not do it with vengeance and threat but with an argument (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

Toujgani stresses that the repercussions of extremist actions adversely affect the entire Belgian society, as Muslims too are integral constituents of this social fabric. He argues, "They do not only harm Belgians but the whole society and we are also part of it, so it is wrong to put all Muslims in one box" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

He proffers that Belgium's evaluation of its Muslim population should be based on the practices and attitudes of its majority. Highlighting the harmonious integration of the earliest Moroccan migrants, Toujgani underscores their lack of challenges, attributing this to their

upbringing embedded in the cultural and moral frameworks of Islamic society in Morocco. This pioneering wave of immigrants, he emphasizes, not only contributed significantly to the nation's development via labor but also played an essential role in preserving its security.

Toujgani delineates a generational perspective to understand the variances in integration and behavior. While he perceives the first generation of immigrants as largely trouble-free due to their native socio-cultural conditioning, he suggests the second generation was still significantly influenced by their parents' traditional norms. However, he points out a discernible shift with the 3rd and 4th generations. To truly grasp the issues these later generations face, Toujgani posits that one must scrutinize the socio-cultural and educational milieus they inhabit. As he explains, "The problem comes with the 3rd and 4th generations; the second generation still had a strong influence from their parents. For the 3rd and the 4th generations, we must look at the context where they receive their education and culture to know where the problem comes from" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012). By saying that he emphasizes the fact that Morocco only teaches moderate Islam and, in a way, supports its religious initiatives in Europe.

Toujgani posits that while Morocco maintains a centrality in its interpretation of Islam, the seeds of radicalization are sown through contemporary means such as manipulation via new media platforms. He unequivocally condemns extremism and terrorism, drawing attention to the vulnerabilities of the youth to modern communication tools. As he notes, "Some youngsters are manipulated to riot by stirring their emotions through SMS messaging. And young people are impulsive by nature" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012). Further, he adds, "Internet is open to everybody and this is where this mindset is promoted" (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

He suggests a proactive approach to combat Islamic radicalism, emphasizing the value of education and seeking knowledge from authentic scholars. He states:

> I call young people to pursue knowledge and learn from scholars. they should try their best to be good and positive citizens. Their role here is to worship God and make their religion known thanks to their good behavior and being of service to others. Our religion is a religion of peace and compassion; they must embody these attributes. However, media outlets should open the door for moderate people to define our orientations and ethics that serve humans and citizens (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

Toujgani underscores the protective role of mosques in shielding young Muslims in Belgium from extremist ideologies. Advocating for a more prominent role for imams, he believes that they should be equipped to effectively engage with the youth, thereby curbing the spread of radical ideologies. He says, “Imams and all Muslims who come to the mosque denounce these people consider them strange to their tradition and their actions are going to shake the safety in this country. This is one of the biggest crimes because safety is the endowment of God.”

Highlighting the significance of imams in the counter-radicalization discourse, he urges the Belgian authorities to enhance their access and opportunities for outreach, thus enabling a constructive engagement with the youth. He concludes:

> In mosques, there is no room for such radical thinking and young people who go there are protected from this because they get their teaching directly from the imam. We must be careful about the ones who get their knowledge through other means. If imams were given the means, they could go inside the society with the help of other youngsters to educate others (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

Imam Toujgani underscores the importance of imams in Belgium taking on a proactive rather than reactive role. He asserts, “The most important thing now is to work together with the educators, media, and politicians.” The crux of his perspective is to rebuild the trust of young individuals in their society, protecting them from radical influences. He laments the prevailing reactive approach, explaining, “We become of interest only when something bad happens as if to extinguish the fire.”

Toujgani also reveals that there have been prior interactions with authorities, signaling the willingness of the religious community to collaborate. He states, “I already told the authorities that we're ready to make mutual programs to help diminish the problem.” Emphasizing the role of media, he advocates for more representation for imams to sensitize and educate the public. In his words, “We need the Belgian official media to open the door for us even for five or 10 minutes every week.” He also highlights the importance of reaching out in multiple languages, suggesting outreach in “Arabic, French, Flemish and Turkish” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012).

6.1.4 The Revocation of Toujgani's Residence Permit and 10 Years Ban from Schengen

In a 2021 development, imam Mohamed Toujgani faced an expulsion order from Belgium. A State Security report directed to Sammy Mahdi characterizes Toujgani as presenting "a danger to national security" (Rtbf.be, 2022). As reported by the Rtbf newspaper, this consequential decision, which bars Toujgani from Belgian territory for a decade, hinges on a 2009 footage that surfaced in 2019. Within this footage, Toujgani is recorded making a contentious statement: "Lord, Master of the Worlds, pour fear into the heart of the Zionist oppressors [...] Lord, make the blood of the martyrs a weapon under the feet of the Zionist oppressors, and let this blood be a blazing fire that burns them and a wind that chastises them [...] O Lord, demolish them." Sammy Mahdi, interpreting this statement, describes it as an act of inciting violence against Jewish individuals. In a subsequent 2019 response, Imam Toujgani extended apologies, attributing the sentiments to the "critical geopolitical context" of the time.

This pivotal decision to revoke Imam Toujgani's residency potentially conveys a message to Moroccan officials, suggesting Belgium's intent to curtail Morocco's influence over Islamic practices within its borders. It is pertinent to note that in December 2020, Minister of Justice Vincent Van Quickenborne objected to the recognition of the Grand Mosque of Brussels, spurred by concerns over Moroccan interventions, as delineated by State Security per Rtbf's findings.

Providing a contrasting viewpoint, Molenbeek's Municipal Councilor Ahmed El Khanouss expressed astonishment over the decision, portraying Toujgani as a bridge-builder between communities. El Khanouss recounts, "He has participated in many activities with Catholics and with the Chief Rabbi of Brussels, Albert Guigui." Addressing the 2009 inflammatory remarks, the councilor posits that the statements were devoid of their broader context, especially given the geopolitical turmoil of the time, highlighted by Israeli military operations in Gaza. A liaison close to Moroccan governance conveyed to Rtbf their perplexity regarding the decision, emphasizing, "Imam Toujgani practiced moderate Islam and had never caused any problems" (Rtbf.be, 2022).

On 15 January, 2022, Mohamed Toujgani participated in an interview on a MaghrebTV broadcast. Journalist Mohammed Tijjini aimed to shed light on the implications of recent decisions taken against Toujgani by Belgian authorities during his interview of the imam.

Tijjini succinctly summarized the gravity of the allegations leveled against Toujgani by Mahdi, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration. He elucidated that Toujgani faced “accusations related to spreading extremism, hate, Anti-Semitic, anti-Western culture, and anti-Shi’ism discourses −very heavy accusations.” This situation, Tijjini noted, was unprecedented in Belgian history. He remarked, “A very dangerous decision, the first time in Belgium such a decision has been taken. A decision as big as this one against someone as big as you." He also referenced Belgian journalistic commentary which identifies “scholar Mohamed Toujgani as a reference to the Muslim diaspora in Belgium in general and to the Moroccan Muslim diaspora in particular." Tijjini acknowledged the widespread shock this decision incited, pointing out the "huge sympathy and solidarity in Belgium, Europe, and Morocco."

Responding to these concerns, Toujgani narrated his personal ordeal and engagement with the Belgian legal system. He recounted: “I lived in Belgium more than I did in Morocco. I have been living for around 40 years [...] First, I requested the nationality. I answered the accusations that were directed at me at the court, and it ruled in my favor on the 3rd of the 11th month that I deserved the nationality. Public Prosecution resumed the case which has been sent to the Court of Appeal.” Detailing the subsequent bureaucratic maneuvers, Toujgani continued, "On the 5th of the 11th month, the office of foreigners issued a decision and sent me a letter that I did not receive. After a month, it implemented the decision." While in Morocco, a revelation stunned Toujgani's family when they discovered that his residency status was essentially nullified. Toujgani recalled the unfolding of events, "When we asked the lawyer and he checked, he found that the office of foreigners had revoked my residency and issued the order that I cannot get into the Schengen area for 10 years."

Toujgani's statement revealed his resilient demeanor and faith in the Belgian justice system. He reflected, “When I received the news, I felt normal, I thought this was a trial, and thank God, I am now in my country of origin where I was born and educated. I migrated to Europe to offer what I have learned. I am now feeling normal, and waiting for the result with the belief that I trust Belgian justice to be fair towards me because I am aggrieved.”

Mohamed Toujgani addressed the accusations levied against him by Sammy Mahdi, Belgium's Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration. The gravity of the charges painted Toujgani as an “extremist propagandist” and “an agent of Moroccan intelligence.” Furthermore, Mahdi accused Toujgani of disseminating anti-Western, anti-Semitic, and anti-Shi’ism rhetoric,

endorsing jihad, promoting gender inequality, and advocating polygamy, with an insinuation about Toujgani's personal life as a polygamist.

In response, Toujgani argued for the necessity of evidence and context when making such grave allegations. He stated, “first of all, it must be proven when you spread radicalism, where you spread it, and where you practiced it.” Toujgani highlighted the contradictory nature of the charges, questioning how one could simultaneously be charged as a radical and as an agent for Morocco. He emphasized, “My discourse is normal. I call for clinging to religion and coexistence. I spread general human values.” To further substantiate his defense, Toujgani mentioned his cordial interactions with representatives of other faiths, including Jews and Christians, adding, “The Jews have given me proof that we dealt with various things together, and I gave it to the court.”

Tijjini then steered the conversation towards the specific video that is central to the controversy surrounding Toujgani. The video in question allegedly captures Toujgani inciting violence against Jews, particularly in the context of the Gaza conflict. In response to this, Toujgani asserted, “[for burning the Jews] this is lying. We can play the video now, and if I am found saying something about Jews, this minister is right.” He elaborated on the backdrop of the video, placing it within the timeframe of the Gaza conflict, marked by its significant casualties and worldwide reactions. Toujgani clarified that his words during that emotionally charged period were directed at the “Zionist oppressors,” and not the Jewish community at large. He recounted, “So I made a prayer against the ‘Zionist oppressors’ exactly with these words. I prayed for revenge against them.”

When asked about the exact phrasing of his prior statements, which the authorities and certain segments of the public had considered inflammatory, Toujgani clarified, “I said the blood that they are shedding will turn into fire that burns them. I did not say burn them. I said that that blood will ignite the fire of chaos [...] I agree that I was emotional, I am not trying to evade this.” Firmly distancing himself from any animosity towards religious communities, he emphasized, “But I have never prayed against the Jews or the Christians.” Further, he denounced Zionism when it exhibits radical tendencies, irrespective of the religious affiliations its advocates might hold, reaffirming his stance against any form of radicalism or terrorism.

The interview then shifted to the matter of Toujgani’s alleged association with Moroccan intelligence. While the journalist clarified that Toujgani wasn’t being labeled a conventional spy,

there was an underlying claim that his influential religious position was indirectly furthering Morocco's transnational sway within the Muslim diaspora in Belgium.

Responding to this, Toujgani said, “The authority that I have exists in the religious spheres whether it be Moroccan or not, inside Belgium and outside.” He admitted having associations with various religious institutions in Europe, attributing his influential stature to his preaching and guidance roles. He addressed his connection with Morocco, emphasizing, “Morocco in itself does not interfere with internal affairs [in Belgium].” His advocacy for adopting a moderate, open-minded Moroccan model for coexistence was underscored, pointing out the perils faced by newer Moroccan generations lured by radical ideologies. He stressed, “When we want to spread moderate thinking, we spread it starting from our identity.” He further lauded Morocco for its ethos of coexistence, citing its protective measures for Jewish sites and judicative provisions for the Jewish community. He drew a comparison, indicating, “Till now, Europe has not been able to achieve what Morocco has.”

In agreement with Toujgani, the journalist highlighted the collaborative efforts between the Moroccan and Belgian governments regarding imam training, Toujgani cited a parallel, saying, “France has sent imams to be trained in Morocco.” He insinuated that there's a distortion of facts, labeling it as “oppression.”

Addressing the accusations concerning Shi’ism, he differentiated between opposing specific doctrines and opposing an entire community. He expressed his concerns regarding the "Rawafid" doctrine within Shi’a Islam, which he perceives as having political motivations, particularly the efforts to recruit Moroccans. Toujgani emphasized his role, saying, “I tried to answer to the ideas of these currents and discuss those ideas.” He staunchly defended his right to engage in such discussions, highlighting the importance of freedom of expression. Contrary to the allegations, he asserted he has never promoted animosity towards Shi’a, but has only tried to elucidate their ideas. Furthermore, he revealed that he had been on the receiving end of threats, including death threats. He referenced a previous era, the 80s, during which certain figures faced similar threats, naming "Ahdal" as an example.

The conversation then shifted to the contentious topic of jihad. In his response, Toujgani delineated the layers of the term's meaning. He stressed, “jihad is a Sharia law, it has its rules and only a country can do it.” Drawing attention to the spiritual aspects of jihad, he mentioned "jihad annafs" (self-jihad), "jihad achaytan" (jihad against the devil), and "jihad alhawa" (jihad against

one's whims and desires). According to Toujgani, these forms of jihad, which emphasize personal discipline and spiritual growth, are what he promotes. He adamantly denied any advocacy for "armed jihad," emphasizing his and his students' role in dissuading many young individuals from getting embroiled in volatile situations.

In a significant interfaith initiative, Mohamed Toujgani undertook a visit alongside Chief Rabbi of Belgium, Albert Guigui, and a representative from the Christian faith to Morocco. This journey entailed a tour of mosques, churches, and synagogues, reflecting a commitment to fostering understanding among the three Abrahamic traditions. Guigui elucidated the essence of Jewish prayer as fundamentally rooted in reverence. Responding to this, Toujgani stated, "this is something shared between all religions. The only difference is that the how differs but the end goal is one and the same and it is to be good and beneficial."

Further in the conversation, the journalist inquired if a misinterpretation of Toujgani's statements lay at the heart of the controversy. Affirming this notion, Toujgani suggested a consultation with the Jewish community, whom the authorities aim to safeguard, to ascertain their perception of him. He recounted, “when we were on a peace march and besides me was Guigui. He speaks a little bit of Arabic. He told me this coexistence that we are striving for, we have in Morocco. Our friends in Morocco, it is already reality rather than demand. I start from these values that I was brought up in." He then addressed the Minister of Migration, articulating, "My message to the minister [of Migration] is: you are a minister so you have to respect the rights and laws and implement them. You have accusations towards me. Give me the chance to have an interview and be investigated by the relevant authorities and take the case to court. And when the court thinks that the accusations towards me are real, then you can take a decision. However, only taking a decision based on accusations..."

Mohamed Toujgani's situation garnered extensive empathy from both Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the population. Ahmed El Khanouss, a Municipal Councilor of Molenbeek, asserted that Toujgani never provoked any sentiments against the Jews. This defense, however, drew El Khanouss into a predicament with his political party, leading him to face potential expulsion.

Reflecting on the overwhelming support he has received, Toujgani expressed:

> I first and foremost extend my gratitude to him [El Khanouss] and to all who have rallied behind me, be they Muslim or otherwise, parliamentarians or common citizens. Those speaking on my behalf have grown up alongside me. I've nurtured students who now hold positions in parliament, the police, and other sectors. Their upbringing under my guidance stands testament; had I been a purveyor of radicalism, they would reflect that. This serves as evidence.

He further questioned the constriction of free expression, observing, "Merely because an individual identifies with my plight and perceives the injustice meted out to me, should he not be granted the liberty to voice his opinions?"

Drawing attention to a historical anecdote, Toujgani noted, "Even the party president, formerly the Minister of the Interior, Joëlle Milquet, visited my office at the League of Imams. She, along with representatives from socialist and liberal factions... Whenever the youth were in turmoil, I always stepped in, urging parents to connect with their children."

The journalist then brought up Toujgani's pronounced stance against the 2016 terrorist attacks in Belgium, to which Toujgani responded:

> Indeed, we even issued a unified sermon across Belgium under the auspices of the League of Imams. I penned it. It was the sole sermon broadcast throughout the nation. I personally took a stand at the very metro station where the bombings took place, a moment captured in photographs. Additionally, during the floods, I beckoned the community to extend aid to those afflicted. At the onset of the Covid pandemic, I rallied support for those in need, leading our Liege branch of the League of Imams, along with other benefactors, to amass funds under our directive. I consider Belgium my second country and Belgians fellow citizens with whom I share citizenship.

The journalist posed a question to Imam Toujgani, suggesting, "Given that many of the criticisms levied against you appear to be rooted in broader critiques of Islamic beliefs—such as polygamy—wouldn't it be more direct for critics to address these religious beliefs outright rather than through you? Personally, I view you as a moderate, albeit conservative, imam."

In response, Imam Toujgani declared, "There exist certain religious tenets that I am bound by and cannot alter or dismiss. They are personal and foundational to my faith. There are also deeply held values from my homeland that I am unyielding in upholding, regardless of external pressures. My loyalty remains steadfast to my faith, cultural identity, my birth country, my adopted country, and my monarch. I am who I am, and whether society accepts or rejects me, I remain rooted in my identity."

During the conversation, the journalist mistakenly referred to Imam Mohamed Toujgani by the name of his cousin, Tahar Toujgani, who is also an imam situated in Antwerp. After a light-hearted acknowledgment of the error, the journalist hinted that Tahar might similarly face challenges in the future due to potential undisclosed disputes. Concluding the discussion, Imam Mohamed Toujgani emphasized:

> Given my association with *Durus al Hasania* and access to the royal palace—a privilege that necessitates rigorous vetting—it's implausible for me to hold extremist views. I have always adhered to and propagated the principles of moderation, which I inherited from my theological mentors. This moderate approach to Islam, emphasizing openness and coexistence, is one I am proud to disseminate, especially in my role as the president of the League of Imams. Furthermore, our continuous training sessions have guided numerous imams towards adopting this balanced and harmonious interpretation.

In a follow-up discussion with journalist Mohammed Tijjini on 15th February 2022, Sammy Mahdi, the Minister of Foreigners, was questioned about the revocation of Imam Mohamed Toujgani's residence permit. Tijjini sought clarity on whether the imam's alleged hate preaching and anti-Semitic discourse were the reasons behind the action.

Minister Mahdi responded by emphasizing his commitment to national security and the broader protection of Belgian society. He explained:

> I don't delve into individual files out of respect for privacy and national security. As State Secretary, I daily receive reports from our security agencies, pointing out individuals who may pose a genuine threat. If such a report suggests, for example,

> that someone is engaged in radical preaching or other forms of subversive influence, it's my duty to take these concerns seriously. If our national security services advise that an individual should not remain on Belgian soil, I have to act accordingly.

Drawing a parallel, Mahdi recalled an incident from a year and a half prior, where he prohibited a far-right Danish individual from entering Belgium, based on police reports of potential disruptions and hate speeches. He emphasized, "Whether from the extreme right, left, religious extremists, or any other ideology, when state security alerts are unequivocal, I execute my duty irrespective of the individual's religious affiliation."

Continuing, Mahdi acknowledged that while the vast majority of religious figures in Belgium preach love and unity, there exist a few who spread messages of discord. Using the example of the Grand Mosque Schuman Mosque from the 1970s, he remarked how Belgium had once handed its oversight to Saudi Arabia, indicating a past reluctance to deal with Muslim matters internally. Mahdi asserted, "It's not Saudi Arabia's responsibility to govern our Belgian Muslims. They are our citizens and integral to our society. The onus lies on Muslim Belgians to self-organize, without external influences, especially from ideologies like Salafism that can impede coexistence."

Tijinni then raised a pivotal query, noting the seeming contradiction between the justice department's decision to naturalize Imam Toujgani and the subsequent ban from the ministry within a week. He questioned, "Isn't this action perceived by some as revenge, perhaps against Morocco?"

6.1.1 Review

Imam Toujgani is an advocate for the universality of Islam, emphasizing its applicability across all geographies and epochs. In his perspective, given the presence of Muslims with European citizenship, it is valid to assert that Islam is intrinsically European. He asserts that the religion does not hinder one from thriving within a European milieu; any inability to assimilate or feel at home in Europe, he contends, is an individual's struggle rather than an intrinsic feature of Islam.

He has deep-seated allegiance to his Moroccan roots and the values instilled in him during his upbringing there, Toujgani equally identifies with Belgium as his homeland. Drawing upon the Maliki jurisprudence, he points out that according to its teachings, residing in a country for a span of three to four years renders one a citizen. Toujgani frequently cites the Maliki tradition, extolling it for resonating with European realities, a result of geographical closeness and historical interactions, especially its capacity to coexist with diverse religious practices, as seen in Morocco.

In supporting institutions like the European Council of Moroccan Ulama, Toujgani expresses a hope that they would cater to the younger Moroccan Muslim populace in Belgium, imparting to them both cultural and religious ethos. He discerns a gap in the way congregations perceive religious teachings and the original intent of imams. Yet, he emphasizes the importance of "al-niya", or the underlying intention in religious communication, rather than merely attributing it to linguistic barriers.

Toujgani identifies a pressing need for the younger Muslim cohorts in Belgium, and more broadly in Europe, to access a theological framework that's attuned to their unique contexts. While he advocates for imams to gain proficiency in local languages, he prioritizes the importance of religious wisdom over linguistic skills. To him, the mastery of religious texts for imams, which are predominantly in Arabic, remains paramount for Belgian Muslims, even over learning languages like French.

In advocating for the progression of Belgian imam training programs, Toujgani endorses a curriculum that seamlessly merges traditional Islamic studies with contemporary scientific disciplines. Interestingly, he remains open to the possibility of future imams being instructed by non-Muslims and foreigners. While acknowledging the apprehensions of the older generation of imams—who might see the amalgamation of contemporary sciences with Islamic education as signaling their redundancy—Toujgani draws attention to the Moroccan tradition. Herein, the memorization of the Quran is a prerequisite for imamic roles, ensuring that these elder imams continue to be distinguished and revered. He asserts that religious teachings should remain the domain of seasoned imams, with Belgian universities focusing on imparting knowledge in modern sciences. However, he holds reservations about potential deviations or dilutions of religious tenets under the guise of training. Interestingly, Morocco itself has transitioned towards an educational approach that integrates modern scientific education with traditional religious

teachings. In discussing this dynamic within Belgium, Toujgani seems to be mirroring Morocco's strategic shift.

Toujgani paints a rather challenging picture of the circumstances of imams in Europe. They operate under the close scrutiny of mosque committees, predominantly comprised of an older demographic, potentially limiting progressive visions.

While asserting his commitment to gender equity and advocating for female employment, Toujgani acknowledges the complexities surrounding his personal life choices. As a proponent of polygamy based on Islamic principles, he highlights his respect for national laws by not practicing polygamy within Belgium.

Toujgani views Belgium as a state characterized by liberal values, offering its Muslim populace a degree of autonomy. He emphasizes the importance of adhering to national laws, albeit with a caveat that certain regulations impinging upon Muslim rights merit reconsideration. His perspective on residency positions it as a binding agreement between the individual and the host nation. This compels adherence to the nation's established norms.

Toujgani is deeply concerned about the tarnishing of Islam's image due to the actions of extremists, asserting that their activities adversely affect the entire Belgian society, inclusive of Muslims. He attributes the radicalization of certain segments to the pervasive influence of the Internet, countering that mosques serve as bulwarks, protecting young Muslims in Belgium from extremist ideologies. Toujgani articulates a desire for imams in Belgium to be engaged in a more proactive manner, rather than being sought only in the aftermath of unfortunate incidents. He laments the tendency to extrapolate generalized conclusions about Islam based on the actions of a few, while also condemning reactionary and radical responses from within the Muslim community.

6.2 Imam Al Khammar El Bakkali

6.2.1 Biography

Imam Khammar El-Bakkali was born in 1945 in Northern Morocco. In 1980, he migrated from Morocco to The Hague where he became an imam in the Moroccan mosque El-Muhsinin, near The Hague Hollands Spoor station. "Friends in The Hague asked me to become their imam," he says in an interview in NRC Handelsblad (Joke Mat, 12/21/04). This is the older most common way of recruiting Moroccan imams. The first-generation mosque council often looks for someone from the area in Morocco where the council and most of the regular mosque visitors come from. In 1983 he became an imam in the newly established mosque El-Islam, in Schilderswijk in The Hague. Before he came to the Netherlands in 1980, he was also an imam in Morocco (Mat, 2004). He is married, has two daughters, and lives near the mosque.

The imam received his religious training in the traditional way at various shaykhs in Morocco (interview El-Bakkali by Boender, 2007). Traditional religious instruction takes place at religious institutions such as the Qarawiyyin in Fez, or in local mosques with individual teachers (shaykhs). The study focuses on the recitation and memorization of the Quran and the study of authoritative Maliki handbooks in the field of Islamic jurisprudence. He memorized the Qur'an at the age of twelve and studied *fiqh* with various sheikhs in the 1960s. Then he studied at the Qarawiyyin University.

Three years after his migration, Bakkali was appointed Imam at the Moroccan El-Islam Mosque in the Schilderswijk in The Hague. The mosque has about 700 attendees. Because his preaching is in classical Arabic, the mosque attracts not only Moroccans but also Muslims from other countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Bosnia, and Somalia. He gives lectures in Arabic inside and outside the mosque. He also speaks to people from outside the mosque with the help of an interpreter. He also regularly leads conversions, funeral prayers, and also circumcision rituals.

El Khammar El Bakkali is the president of the Council of Imams in the Netherlands, an Islamic organization founded in 1995 by a group of imams. He is also a member of the European Council of Moroccan Scholars, a member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, and a member of the International Union of Muslim Scholars.

In 2017, his book, *Asyilat w 'ajwibat tuhimu almuslim w almuslimat fi algharb* (Questions and answers of concern to Muslim men and women in the West), was published by 't Kennishuys,

a house of publication specialized in Islam-related books. In its blurb, he is described as, “an imam, khatib, and social guide for over forty years”.

6.2.2 Views on Identity

El-Bakkali posits that the legitimacy of an imam's role is rooted in tradition, which was a primary impetus for Moroccan imams' migration to the Netherlands in the 1970s. He delineates a distinction between the functions of an imam in Morocco and the expanded responsibilities they assume in the Netherlands. In his perspective, mere memorization of the Qur'an qualifies one to lead prayers, but in the Dutch context, an imam's role is not confined to this singular task.

Upon migration, El-Bakkali identifies a bifurcation in the approach adopted by imams. One group chose to remain entrenched in traditional practices, primarily leading prayers, and adhering to the "traditional range of duties" elucidated by Beck and Ljamai (1997, p. 4). This subset, according to El-Bakkali, remained somewhat stagnant, not evolving in tandem with Dutch societal norms. Conversely, the other group recognized the inadequacy of their existing knowledge for their new environment. They were cognizant of the necessity to augment their understanding to align with their altered realities, leading them to work assiduously to expand their knowledge base (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali further elaborates on the multifaceted role of an imam in the Netherlands. Beyond leading prayers, they are expected to provide guidance on both religious and societal queries (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). He clarifies that in the Moroccan context, the imam primarily serves as a prayer leader, with the Friday sermon being the purview of the imam-khatib, and theological inquiries addressed by the mufti. However, in the Netherlands, an imam's role amalgamates these functions. He is required not only to lead prayers but also to deliver sermons and respond to religious queries making a solid "knowledge of reality" indispensable (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). This expansion of duties in the diasporic context signifies a shift in societal expectations and responsibilities associated with their position, as indicated by Cherribi (2000). Consequently, El-Bakkali underscores that the term "imam" in the Dutch context embodies a more comprehensive set of responsibilities than its traditional counterpart.

In an endeavor to bolster his role as a purveyor of religious knowledge, El-Bakkali conducts a monthly question-answer session at the El-Islam Mosque. These sessions, typically

lasting between one to two hours and scheduled post the final evening prayer, witness a gathering of approximately ten to twenty women, aged eighteen to twenty-five. The structure of the session places the imam at the forefront, seated at a table alongside a translator. While male attendees have the option to directly pose questions to the imam in either Arabic or Dutch or alternatively via written notes, female participants convey their queries through notes. Translation services, facilitating communication between Dutch and Arabic, are usually provided by a representative from the Moroccan Youth Association (MJV).

These monthly engagements offer an open forum for queries, often centered around topics such as Islamic attire guidelines, loan procurement, and fasting rules. El-Bakkali perceives these sessions as a pivotal platform, enabling the alignment of Islam's formal religious tenets with the distinctive requirements and challenges faced by the community, as elucidated by Antoun (1989: XIII). These sessions are availed not only by the youth but also by the older demographics. El-Bakkali employs Islamic resources to guide his answers, addressing the unique conundrums presented by life within a predominantly non-Islamic Dutch society.

For him, imams have to convey religious knowledge and act as mediators in faith. It is the thorough memorization and study of the Qur'an that allows them to carry out this duty, "Otherwise he will not be able to fulfill this task properly" (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). Based on his religious knowledge of *Qur'an*, *Sunna*, and *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, the imam has to provide a framework for the religious and social actions of believers in Dutch society. El-Bakkali believes that the message of an imam should fit in space and time and should be tailored to the individual:

> His task is that he answers from his science, he must have a thorough knowledge to study these answers properly and find the right one, for the right person, for the right place, and for the right time (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali highlights the importance of mastering the Qur'an, particularly for imams in the Netherlands. He mentions the indispensability of a solid foundation and defines it as, "memorizing first, then understanding and then giving people the rules of Islam. Thus we can speak of the correct use of the Quran" (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). And this solid foundation must be accompanied by a deep understanding of *fiqh*. In other words, an imam

should be able to interpret this knowledge of Quran, Sunna, and *fiqh* in the context of daily life without detracting from the *fiqh* itself. To illustrate, El-Bakkali mentions young mosque-goers who learn about the Islamic rules on cleanliness. Moreover, he sees that imams in the Netherlands must encourage believers to study Islam critically to know the rights God has endowed them with.

Bakkali thinks that *fiqh* has universal foundations that can fit any time and space; however, the answers to the questions that arise are not always crystal clear and need to be interpreted by specialists; he emphasizes this point by saying that:

> The entire Islamic *fiqh*, not a particular book, is an enormously rich treasure. We cannot pretend that for every issue that arises, there is a clear opinion anyone can reach. But we are sure that there are basic principles, foundations, and universal concepts. For every event and issue, we can find a basic principle and a universal concept that fits into it and provides it with the correct *hukm* [opinion/rule]. Not everyone can reach this by far; either you have the necessary tools to do that, or else you must seek help from those who do, the specialists. And *alhamdulillah* [thank God] the formation of the fiqh is now a group process; *ijtihad* occurs in groups, as the individual is more likely to make mistakes than the group (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

Therefore, he does not agree with the view of some that ijtihad, the interpretation of religious sources to find religious opinions where there is no clear rule to an issue, can be done by both Muslims and non-Muslims. He highlights this point with the following answer:

> Unfortunately, in our time, some are considered "*mujtahid*" [someone who does *ijtihad*] if they can search in books. That is not a mujtahid. And such a person eventually comes up with something and says 'That's my ijtihad, that's what I found'. So, he would then have become a mujtahid. But he does not have the resources to do ijtihad at all. There are many conditions to be a mujtahid (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

In addressing the queries, El-Bakkali's initial recourse is to rely on his immediate knowledge. Failing an immediate response, he refers to Islamic jurisprudential texts. As a further measure, he engages with fellow scholars. El-Bakkali expresses a marked preference for consulting imams based in the Netherlands and Belgium, attributing their heightened relevance to their firsthand experience and understanding of the local context, compared to scholars based overseas. He candidly acknowledges the limitations of individual knowledge, stating that if neither he nor his wide network of contacts, inclusive of those affiliated with Morocco's Qarawiyyin, can provide an answer, he humbly admits his lack of knowledge and advises the inquirer to seek guidance elsewhere. As he remarks during these assemblies, no single imam possesses answers to all queries (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). Furthermore, he emphasizes the continued importance of seeking counsel from religious experts within the Muslim community.

El-Bakkali underscores the significance of an educational approach that merges religious knowledge with contemporary sciences for imams. Given that Muslims are a minority in the societies where they reside, distinct from Islamic societies, El-Bakkali posits that imams operating in such environments need specific attributes. He observes:

> Muslims are a minority in the society where we live, differing from an Islamic society. Consequently, preachers here require attributes that set them apart from those in Muslim societies to effectively carry out their roles. They should possess proficiency in various disciplines to meaningfully engage with any ideology or group, irrespective of whether they are friends or foes. Comprehensive knowledge of modern and social sciences, including economics, law, sociology, religious history, and scientific facts, is essential for effective communication across diverse social groups. Further, imams must maintain neutrality, especially in contexts with myriad religious groups. Aligning with one can lead to opposition from others. Embracing diversity, understanding local dynamics, and being aware of popular channels are crucial to ensure relevance and effective communication (CEOM, 2013).

Nevertheless, El-Bakkali is skeptical about the depth of Islamic understanding imparted by training programs in the Netherlands. He expresses his concerns by stating:

> I am perplexed by claims that we can mold an imam within a span of a year or two. If the role of an imam is solely to lead prayers, there's no necessity for a university education. However, if the objective is to develop an imam with a profound understanding of Islam, capable of effectively disseminating and contextualizing it, such a feat is unattainable within merely one or two years (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

To elucidate further, El-Bakkali delineates two types of training required for an imam intending to serve in the Netherlands. The foundational training, commencing at an early age, imparts basic Islamic sciences and facilitates the memorization of the Quran. In contrast, the supplementary training is tailored specifically for imams destined for roles in the Netherlands. El-Bakkali argues that while the latter can be accomplished within a short duration, the foundational training demands far more than just two years.

El-Bakkali adheres to the *Ash'ari* School in Islamic theology. He continuously defends this religious school of thought in his lectures. Note for instance this quote where he tells other imams in a conference by the European Council of Moroccan Ulama to stick to the right teachings of the *Ash'aria* so as not to confuse Muslim youth in Western Europe:

> Some say do not pray behind this imam or that because they are *Ashari* [...] They take things out of their general context to claim that this is the whole Ashari school [...] It's important that we do not confuse our youth and the leaders of our mosques, we must provide them with adequate teachings for their age and mind (CEOM, 2017).

In another lecture, he says restressing his position, "Our doctrine is the one of *ahl assuna wa al jama'a*, the *Asha'ira* with a full mouth [pride] as the Egyptians say. I am not hiding it, and if somebody wants to say something they can" (Sahih. NL, 2015).

During an interview with Moroccan national television, El-Bakkali claims that the multiplicity of doctrines in one religion causes spiritual instability. He sees that the pledge of allegiance is essential in maintaining this spiritual stability and regulating fatwa. El-Bakkali appears to be transnationally bound to Moroccan Islam with his pledge of allegiance to the commander of the faithful and belonging to the Maliki School of jurisprudence. He says that:

> The pledge of allegiance can ensure spiritual security by unifying the Islamic belief since it is the basis of stability and security. If there are many doctrines of the same religion in one country, there won't be spiritual stability [...] Fatwa is another form of spiritual stability and it is regulated in the country of the commander of the faithful unlike other countries [...] Muslims even outside Morocco, and I am one as well, are proud about this spiritual stability and if someone wants to argue with them about it they say we have our own reference; we follow the *Maliki* school [...] Our behavior is based on the Sunni one (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019).

El Bakkali believes that the pledge of allegiance is based in Qur'an and those who denigrate it want to harm society. In the same interview with the religious Moroccan television channel *Assadisa*, he mentions that:

> The pledge of allegiance is a contract between the commander of the faithful and his people. It is rooted in the Quran [...] To avoid chaos there should be a commander of the faithful who is obeyed [...] And the ones who criticize that either want to live in chaos or they mean harm to the society (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019).

In examining El-Bakkali's interpretive approach to sacred Islamic texts, a perceived dichotomy emerges. While he articulates a commitment to making religious texts comprehensible within a non-Islamic societal framework, this seems to be at odds with his steadfast allegiance to the Moroccan model of Islam, especially in his assertion that diverse religious doctrines engender instability. His stance on adapting to the host context underscores

the primacy of the textual when interpreting the Quran. He posits, “One cannot analyze a Quranic verse without fully appreciating its textual context” (CEOM, 2017). He further postulates that the prevailing reality should adapt according to the religious text rather than the converse, bolstering this viewpoint through a rhetorical inquiry, “Why is the entirety of reality deemed acceptable, while the textual content possesses both acceptable and non-acceptable facets? Which one should influence the other?” (CEOM, 2017).

El-Bakkali's reflections extend to the evolving religious landscape in the Netherlands. He recalls a time of relative religious harmony until the late 70s and early 80s, observing:

> For nearly four decades in Holland, we resided in tranquility. We were grounded in our Islamic legacy. However, the subsequent influx of varied ideologies from multiple nations led to our youth being clandestinely indoctrinated to “rectify their faith.” This paved the way for previously unseen divisions among Moroccans – divisions alien to our native land. The onus is now upon us to impart the correct beliefs (CEOM, 2017).

Shifting to the role of an Imam in Western Europe, El-Bakkali delineates specific responsibilities that should be inherent to their position in the Netherlands. Primarily, when leading prayers, an imam symbolizes the unity of the diverse Muslim Ummah, transcending their diverse backgrounds. He elucidates:

> In the mosque's sanctum, distinctions among attendees dissolve. The primary task of an imam is to bridge any inherent differences or divides among the mosque's community, fostering cohesion” (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

For him, to manifest this, the imam must embrace an egalitarian perspective, ensuring that every mosque attendee comprehends their equal standing in the eyes of God. He claims that the mosque where he preaches Dutch and open to non-Muslims as well for discussion. He emphasizes in his speech on April 22, 2001, “We should not look at the mosque as if it were a mosque in Egypt, Tunisia or Morocco. The mosque must open its doors and target youth” (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

However, it is essential to note a seeming incongruity in El-Bakkali's views. His unwavering commitment to fostering equality seems in tension with his belief that a plurality of religious interpretations induces instability. This commitment to rectifying religious understanding arguably does not fully embrace the diverse tapestry of Islamic expressions prevalent in Western Europe.

Concerning the language issue, El-Bakkali preaches in Arabic but avoids the classical one so that his congregation can understand him; he says, “I preach in Arabic, but I try not to speak classical Arabic so that everyone can understand. The lessons we give in this mosque are in Dutch as well as in Arabic and Berber” (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

He regrets that knowledge of Arabic as a means of access to sacred literature and its roots in the Arabic cultural tradition has been poorly maintained and passed on by the first generation of migrants. According to him, it would be best if a (Moroccan) Muslim in the Netherlands mastered both Dutch and Arabic, "It is good and logical that people start using Dutch. That is very important. It is no problem that people start researching in Dutch, you cannot blame them. But with knowledge of Arabic, religious ties can best be maintained” (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali allots such significance to standard Arabic since he considers it unreplaceable for Muslims to preserve their religious and cultural roots. And by roots, he means the religious tradition of the country of origin and "universal Islam", both of which he links to the Arabic language and culture in general and not specifically Moroccan culture. He notes, “Those roots are disappearing or have already disappeared. And if we want to be optimistic, we can say they are very weak" (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). He emphasizes the importance of embedding the Islamic faith in the Arab cultural tradition and insists on the importance of teaching Arabic to Moroccan-Dutch Muslims:

> Some were born and raised in this society and know a language or more. Children in school learn Dutch as a first language, English as a second, and probably French as a third. So why don’t they learn Arabic as a fourth for instance? And you know people know that Arabic is one of the richest languages. Why don't we tell people to learn this language because of the treasures it has [...] I do not agree

> with the marginalization of the Arabic language. Our youths are Muslims and communication is not absent as some claim (In Between, 2012).

He thinks that Dutch translations of Islamic Arabic books are not loaded with the cultural traditions the original ones have. He says,

> Everyone must know Dutch. We cannot ask everyone to learn Arabic. What is necessary, however, is the presence of institutions specialized in the Arabic language in the Netherlands, because this language is not only a spoken language, it is also related to the background of Muslims from different countries since their original sources are in this language. At the very least, there must be schools and institutions to teach this language in a good and structured way. Translation alone is not enough; I am not specialized in linguistics, but linguists believe that it is not enough for a translator to master two languages to translate. He must master the art of transmitting the mind from one language to another. The spirit of the text. Many translations do not do this; in fact, they distort the text (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

Some criticize El-Bakkali for speaking out about the importance of knowledge of Dutch and participating in Dutch society while he does not speak Dutch. In reaction to such criticism, El-Bakkali remarks, “I've tried it. But the problem that I and many imams face is that our work is concentrated in the mosque. We are in the process of solving people's problems. You have to be in the mosque to pray five times a day” and adds, “Language is important but is not everything. There are people who speak the language but do not have religious knowledge. People must be educated. But I repeat, Language is very important. I wish I had not needed an interpreter for this interview to express myself” (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

He finds the emphasis placed in the public debate on the lack of Dutch language skills among imams inadequate although he welcomes its use in addition to Arabic, "Ultimately, language is a means, not an end. If a person knows a lot of languages but does not have good

knowledge that he can transfer to society, then what good is knowing them? You can also find someone who only knows a language, but who has a lot of knowledge to transmit to society," he says (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

Putting the language matter aside, in his discourse on the assimilation of religious practices, El-Bakkali posits a more lenient and gradual approach, particularly concerning the integration of Islamic tenets into the lives of recent converts. A salient illustration of this can be discerned from his counsel to a novice convert: He underscores the prudence of methodically incorporating Islamic precepts into one's life, rather than striving for immediate and flawless adherence. Such an endeavor, he contends, is a lifelong journey, even for those born into the faith.

Furthermore, El-Bakkali admonishes against rigorous parental imposition of the quintessential pillars of Islam on their progeny, despite their paramount importance in religious observance. Drawing from an inquiry presented during a monthly theological dialogue at El-Islam mosque, El-Bakkali was confronted with the predicament of a parent with a son who observes the Ramadan fast but neglects the obligatory prayers. The query posed was as follows:

> I have a son who is married. He fasts, but he doesn't pray. What should we do with such a person? Should we separate him while eating, shouldn't he eat with us? How should we punish him? A table has four legs. If we saw off one of those four legs, this table will fall over. So you need those five pillars to get the completeness of realize Islam. But what about a person who is fasting and who does not pray? should we tell him that his fast is not accepted? That is not true. Should we send him away from home? No (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

In response to this dilemma, El-Bakkali advocates for an emphasis on the significance of prayer, rather than severing familial ties or meting out punitive measures. The underlying ethos of his guidance is the preservation and fortification of familial bonds, irrespective of partial adherence to religious rites.

In his discourse on intercommunal relations, El-Bakkali emphasizes the fundamental tenet that the pursuit of closeness to the Divine necessitates the impartial treatment of all

individuals, irrespective of their religious affiliations. The El-Islam Mosque, his place of service, frequently facilitates dialogues intended to foster rapport between Muslims in The Hague and various stakeholders from local governmental bodies, the business sector of The Hague, and educational professionals.

Despite El-Bakkali's profound sense of pride rooted in his Moroccan heritage, coupled with his unwavering allegiance to the Moroccan monarch, he underscores the imperative of adhering to the laws of the host nation. His assertion is illustrative of this dual commitment:

> Our allegiance is inherently tied to our homeland, and this sentiment remains unaltered regardless of our geographical location. Concurrently, as European citizens, it is incumbent upon us to uphold the laws of our host countries, even as we retain our spiritual connection to our native lands. (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019).

A quintessential manifestation of El-Bakkali's deference to Dutch legal stipulations is evident in his stance on matrimonial ceremonies. He unequivocally mandates the precondition of a civil marriage – either officiated at the Moroccan consulate or within Dutch civil jurisdictions – prior to sanctifying the union within the mosque. This protocol underscores the imam's allegiance to Dutch law: for matrimonial recognition within the Netherlands, a civil ceremony must precede any religious rites.

In an introspective dialogue concerning the prospects of the Netherlands as a nurturing environment for his progeny, El-Bakkali reflects on a quarter-century of personal experience within Dutch borders acknowledging the privileges he has been accorded, notably the freedom to exercise his religious beliefs. El-Bakkali's remarks, as recorded by Boender in 2007, elucidate his perspective:

> Having benefited from the freedoms and rights here for a span of 25 years, particularly in the realm of religious expression, I harbor optimism for the future of my descendants. I envisage an evolution towards a more inclusive and accepting society. When people assume that the other is an enemy of peace only, things look bad. You have to see the light, not the dark.

El-Bakkali, fully aware of the freedoms afforded to him by the Netherlands, maintains a hopeful stance for an increasingly open future for the generations to come. Yet, when approached by a pupil regarding the pursuit of the imamate, he cautions against it. The underlying reason stems from the ambiguity in the legal structures surrounding the role, from both Islamic and secular entities. He contends that for the imamate to thrive in Dutch society, its status necessitates enhancement. On the office of the Imam, he says:

> If we want to make this position function properly, we can expect things from it, but we also have to invest in it. A proverb says: "As much as you take, you will also have to give." But I think it is a great pity that things are now being demanded of him from all sides. And he is often accused of shortcomings with nothing in return: he is not respected in society. When we talk about the position of Imam, we are either talking about leadership that is constructive, that leads to greater cohesion and understanding in society −which is something we applaud and encourage −or we are neglecting this office and demanding things from imams without doing anything in return; we impose things on them without helping them, we demand things from them without giving them anything in return, causing the office to collapse. And with that, everything will collapse, God forbid (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

The effective role of an imam is integral to societal cohesion, given their influential reach encompassing diverse demographics such as men, women, and children, posits El-Bakkali. He argues:

> My intentions are pure, driven by divine commitment, such a stance might suffice for a select few. However, the holistic satisfaction of all cannot hinge merely on such spiritual proclamations. It is imperative to recognize that imams, like any individual, have familial responsibilities and financial obligations. Consequently, their material well-being is crucial for fulfilling their duties diligently (El-Bakkali, as cited in Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali contends that a synergy of trust, respect, and acknowledgment should be extended by the entirety of Dutch society, encompassing both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. He challenges the prevalent stereotype of imams as insular figures, estranged from Dutch societal norms, and espousing anti-tolerant rhetoric. Drawing from his personal acquaintance, he affirms the presence of many who diverge significantly from such misconceptions. Yet, what is disconcerting for El-Bakkali is the recognition that these skewed perceptions are not exclusively held by non-Muslims; a segment of the Muslim community similarly subscribes to them. He notes, "Certain men exhibit reticence in seeking clarifications, and a comparable hesitation is discernible among women. Yet, this paradigm is undergoing a transformation. Encounters with me have emboldened both female and younger male members of the Muslim community" (El-Bakkali, as cited in Boender, 2007). El-Bakkali underscores that it is not a given that individuals repose their trust in imams or divulge their intimate confidences. The onus, he believes, rests also on the imam to cultivate an environment conducive to such trust. This is a domain in which he has personally invested significant effort.

6.2.3 Views on Gender

Contrary to the argument some people hold, suggesting that women cannot assert their rights from an Islamic perspective, El-Bakkali presents a divergent interpretation. He posits that women can indeed champion their rights within the parameters of Islam. He says:

> Rights from Islam can improve the situation of women. Recently, there has been awareness among Muslims. Science and knowledge have increased and became predominant. That is why women have started to research their rights and their duties, from the Islamic point of view. For example, if someone says to a woman: “It is obligatory for you to do like this, (or) it is not allowed to act in a certain way, it is haram to do like this”, then she will see if it is from an Islamic point of view, or whether it is just the opinion of these people. I think that is a very good phenomenon that we should support, encourage and it might be good for women, for men, and for the whole society (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali postulates specific criteria concerning the appropriate Islamic attire for women. Firstly, it should encompass the entirety of the body, exempting the face and hands. Secondly, it is imperative that the attire remains non-transparent. Thirdly, the garment should not be form-fitting to the extent that it accentuates the body's contours. Fourthly, the fabric and color selection should be such that it doesn't attract undue attention. While El-Bakkali does not deem the *niqab* as either obligatory or forbidden, he underscores its discretionary nature, noting that consensus among a majority of Islamic scholars is that the niqab is neither mandatory nor prohibited. Nonetheless, El-Bakkali emphasizes the practical considerations surrounding its use. If donning a niqab poses challenges in daily activities or is proscribed in certain environments such as schools or workplaces, it becomes an impediment. Consequently, in such situations, refraining from wearing the niqab might be judicious. He also adds:

> The dress varies per Islamic country. What we know as Islamic dress in Morocco is not the same as what is known in the Middle East, and it also not the same as what is current in Malaysia or what is normal in Indonesia. it differs according to culture and country, also whether it is an Islamic country (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali believes that, for men, traditional attire like the jellaba can be substituted with contemporary Islamic clothing, given the variability in Islamic dress across different nations. Similarly, for women, modern Islamic attire is acceptable provided it adheres to the previously outlined four criteria. Imam El-Bakkali firmly believes that wearing a headscarf is obligatory for Muslim women, while the niqab is discretionary. His perspective, deeply rooted in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), intertwines lifestyle choices with access to opportunities. Notably, if wearing the niqab acts as a barrier to educational or professional pursuits, El-Bakkali counsels against its adoption, highlighting his cognizance of challenges faced by niqab-wearing women in Dutch educational settings.

He further elaborates on the intricate relations between lifestyle decisions and life opportunities, especially concerning the headscarf. This is evinced in one of his responses during a Q&A session at the El-Islam Mosque. Addressing the dilemma of a woman needing to forgo her headscarf for employment, El-Bakkali elucidates:

> The resolution to such a quandary is contingent upon the individual's circumstances. Broadly, two scenarios are discernible: one wherein the employment is vital for the woman's sustenance – lacking essentials like health insurance, housing, and basic provisions – thereby rendering the job indispensable. Conversely, in situations where the job serves merely as an auxiliary source of income and the woman has dependable financial support, the predicaments differ. In the latter scenario, it becomes impermissible (haram) for her to work without the headscarf. However, if the employment is indispensable, she may undertake the role without the headscarf, provided she persistently seeks alternative employment that accommodates her religious attire. Concurrently, she should advocate for her rights, urging her current employer to permit the headscarf (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

This religious opinion epitomizes how El-Bakkali adapts Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, to the Dutch context. The imam is clear that the headscarf is a necessity for women and every infringement of this rule, which is not caused by the reason mentioned previously is considered *haram*, prohibited in religious terms. The pattern of this answer is in line with the previous answer about *niqab*: the religious rule is that a headscarf is mandatory in the lifestyle of Muslim women, but the imam was aware that this can cause tensions in the Netherlands. An exception is therefore possible.

El-Bakkali's fatwa with regard to the headscarf shows somewhat of flexibility for the sake of necessity. When it comes to homosexuality, however, the imam states that Islam is clear on this topic and cannot be changed, "The position of Islam is fixed on this issue and cannot be changed, and as we live in a multicultural country, we must act according to their laws and call for vice to be changed from our hearts". In 2001, Khalil al-Momani, Moroccan imam who preached at the An-Nasr mosque in West Rotterdam, triggered a huge controversy when he stated during an interview with Dutch Television that homosexuality is prohibited in Islamic law. Bakkali, then imam of the Nasr Mosque in Amsterdam, reacted by saying that, "Imam al-Momani did not intend to insult the Dutch society. Rather, his words were about the position of the Islamic religion on homosexuality". Together with other Muslim personalities, El-Bakkali

stated that their elucidation on the issue, "is not an apology but rather an explanation to the Dutch public opinion" (Islamweb, 2001).

6.2.4 Views on Politics and Radicalization

El-Bakkali encourages Muslims in the Netherlands to participate in Dutch politics. An election rally was organized in the mosque, at which the imam gave a lecture. In it he stated that every resident in the Netherlands should act as an active citizen. For him that means, for example, that everyone has to vote. Although Muslims in the Netherlands do not form a unity, they still have to look for ways to unite. By voting, their interests can be represented and they have a negotiating position. His message: "You should not isolate yourself from society. If you want to participate, you have to vote. And if you don't vote, you shouldn't complain either" (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

In that sense, he wants Dutch Muslims to be involved in politics and actively strive for their rights by embracing democracy. From an Islamic legal point of view, he legitimized his argument with a fatwa from Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Theologically he substantiated his argument by referring to the example of Yusuf [Jozef] who committed himself to his people, although he was not in his own country. Historically, he legitimized his position by referring to the long history of Muslims living in non-Islamic countries, such as India and the United States, who function as citizens there.

It should not be taken for granted that he makes this argument in the context where he operates. Just a few years before, several Moroccan imams were against Muslims voting in elections. Regarding the role of imams in this matter, El-Bakkali believes that they should not say from the pulpit that voting is haram. "One scholar issues a fatwa that it is not good, the other issues one that is good. Scholars should discuss such matters among themselves", he points out (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

Moving from voting to the subject of radicalization, El-Bakkali is aware that young people can be trapped in the unregulated and possibly harmful religious information circulating on the internet:

> On the internet, you have different pages and in books, you have different pages. You have knowledge there and you have knowledge here. But can the person who

> searches the Internet differentiate between the useful information and the non-useful information? Can he differentiate between what is good and what is bad? That is a question. Is he going to read and just be convinced of everything he reads, or is he critical enough? Or does he remain confused about the answers that contradict each other? What is he going to do with this information? My job as an imam is to answer from science. I must have solid knowledge to find the right answer: the right answer, for the right person, for the right place, for the right time. That is my job. But how can the person who is going to read a book, or who personally searches the Internet, how can he do such a thing? He cannot differentiate between what is in his interest and what will harm him (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

Consequently, El-Bakkali advises believers, youth especially, to submit their questions about the knowledge they have acquired elsewhere to the imam. He strongly believes that this will make them more critical. He says, "Scholars are much better able to estimate the information that the young people receive through all kinds of channels outside the mosque: they can compare it with other sources and opinions and, above all, place the fragments of information in the larger context" (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007). He metaphorically compares those information fragments brought to him by askers with beads that do not yet form a chain to acquire their intended function:

> The loose beads can be valuable one by one, but it is only a beautiful necklace that can fulfill its function as a decoration when the beads are strung, and arranged in a certain way. That is why young people with the information they get from the Internet have to sit with the imams, with the scholars to discuss it. Some do this, *alhamdulillah* (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

For instance, he advised a recently converted 19-year-old Dutch girl to be careful not to listen to just anyone:

> Every profession has its specialists. If you are ill, you go to a healthcare professional, and there are different specializations within that. You should approach the religious sphere in the same way. Precisely because Muslims in the Netherlands live in a minority situation, a context to which not the entire corpus of Islamic legal rules has been adapted, since they were established in different times and circumstances, the imam recommends making use of the judgments of religious specialists (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

El-Bakkali knows the limit of his role as a mediator in faith and spiritual guide when he puts it into perspective with regard to young people who do not go to the mosque. "I am not responsible for what they do on the street," he declares (interview El-Bakkali with Mat, NRC Handelsblad, December 2004).

In 2010, a group of Muslim Youth called for the struggle to implement Sharia law in Belgium and the Netherland. Al Khammar El Bakkali was among the imams who denounced this move. In an interview with Al-Jazeera Net, he considered the advocates to be ignorant. He said, "Whoever calls for the application of something out of place is only ignorant." He said that they only represented themselves (Aljazeera, 2010).

El-Bakkali consistently advocates for measured and non-aggressive responses. Emphasizing to the Dutch Muslim community, he opines that homosexuality should be addressed through earnest prayer rather than through confrontational means, be they verbal or physical. Similarly, in response to the controversial movie "Submission" produced by People's Party for Freedom and Democracy MP Hirsi Ali, El-Bakkali advised those in his purview to remain unperturbed. As he articulated, “When confronted with her ideas of Islam, I counselled my colleagues exercise restraint and patience. Time will eventually diminish such narratives while the truth retains its integrity” (El-Bakkali, interview with Mat, NRC Handelsblad, December 2004).

Recognizing the fervent reactions the film elicited among many young Muslims, the Imam proffers a reflective stance:

> What merit does Islam derive from such impassioned reactions? Do these benefit the Muslim community? A discerning individual navigates towards outcomes that

> are either advantageous or, at the very least, non-detrimental. Not all possess the acumen to make such judicious evaluations. Hence, it's imprudent to vocally broadcast sentiments without foreseeing their potential repercussions, particularly given the susceptibility of the youth (El-Bakkali, interview with Mat, NRC Handelsblad, December 2004).

When probed about his views on Imam Abdul-Jabbar van de Ven, who expressed on television a lack of concern over the potential demise of Member of Parliament Geert Wilders, El-Bakkali remarked, “I am not acquainted with him. Nevertheless, I find it concerning how the designation 'imam' has been broadly and sometimes inappropriately applied. Even at 59, I am in relentless pursuit of knowledge, and I feel I haven't attained the scholarly depth I aspire to. It raises questions when an individual, previously not of the Muslim faith, converts, undertakes brief religious studies, and is subsequently addressed as an imam” (El-Bakkali, interview with Mat, NRC Handelsblad, December 2004).

El-Bakkali's reflections highlight a discernible shift in the religious realm, where the title “imam” has seen an expanded and sometimes incautious use. The rise of new media platforms has undoubtedly played a role in accelerating this change. Such a trend underscores the imperative of distinguishing between institutionally recognized imams and those who may self-appoint to such positions, particularly given the profound impact both can have on shaping public discourse.

6.2.5 Review

El-Bakkali asserts that the role of an imam in Morocco significantly diverges from its counterpart in the Netherlands, underlining the evolution of the imam’s responsibilities when transitioning to European contexts. In his perspective, mere memorization of the Qur’an qualifies an individual to lead prayers, but in the Netherlands, the scope of an imam's duties is broader. Beyond leading prayers, a Dutch imam is entrusted with answering theological queries and must possess a profound "knowledge of reality." He is also tasked with uniting a diverse Muslim community, disseminating religious teachings, and serving as a spiritual mediator.

Recognizing the intricacies of the role, El-Bakkali highlights the necessity of a holistic training approach that melds traditional religious instruction with contemporary knowledge. In

his assessment, the Netherlands' short-term imam training initiatives serve merely as supplements to more intensive, foundational studies in Islamic sciences and Qur'anic memorization.

On the subject of fiqh, El-Bakkali believes in its timeless and universal principles. However, he acknowledges the complexities involved in deriving clear answers from it, emphasizing the need for expert interpretation, especially when adapting to the Dutch milieu. Interestingly, while he acknowledges the importance of adapting religious discourses to the prevailing societal context, he maintains a staunch stance on privileging the textual framework over lived experiences in Qur'anic interpretation, a viewpoint that presents nuanced contradictions.

In a interview with Morocco's national television, which emphasizes religious themes, El-Bakkali expressed the view that a religion's doctrinal multiplicity can engender spiritual instability. He posits that adhering to a singular pledge of allegiance is pivotal in ensuring spiritual cohesion and guiding fatwa issuance. With his allegiance to the commander of the faithful and affiliation with the Maliki School of Jurisprudence, El-Bakkali appears deeply rooted in Moroccan Islamic traditions. He ardently advocates for the teachings of Ash'aria, urging adherence to its doctrines as a bulwark against doctrinal confusion.

Subsequently, El-Bakkali delved into the rectification of Muslim faith and the significance of sustaining cultural affiliations. He underscores the need for embedding Islamic beliefs within the Arab cultural fabric. However, this perspective seems somewhat exclusive, especially given the diverse backgrounds of his congregants. Paradoxically, he asserts that mosques in the Netherlands should be perceived distinctly from those in nations like Egypt, Tunisia, or Morocco.

El-Bakkali's narrative exhibits contradictions, which can be elucidated through philosopher Pecheux's concept of "discourses in conflict." As Pecheux articulates, meanings emerge and evolve within a landscape of contestations and juxtapositions (1975). Such dialectical stances encapsulate the complexities inherent in the role of imamship in Western Europe, characterized by its dualistic nature.

On the matter of linguistic proficiency, El-Bakkali asserts the significance of mastering Dutch for effective communication in the Netherlands. Interestingly, despite advocating for the importance of the language, he himself remains non-fluent in Dutch, opting instead to deliver

sermons in Arabic. However, he strategically circumvents classical Arabic to cater to the linguistic comfort of his congregation. While he acknowledges the importance of the Dutch language, he contends that linguistic proficiency does not necessarily equate to religious knowledge. He expresses a profound lament that the intrinsic value of Arabic, not merely as a language but as a gateway to sacred texts and deep-rooted cultural traditions, has been inadequately preserved and transmitted by the inaugural generation of migrants. Thus, El-Bakkali underscores the urgent need for specialized institutions in the Netherlands dedicated to the pedagogy of the Arabic language.

Transitioning to gender-specific religious tenets, El-Bakkali elucidates that while the headscarf (*hijab*) is mandated for Muslim women, the face veil (*niqab*) is not universally obligatory. He acknowledges the intricate nature of this discourse, noting that contextual nuances might necessitate adjustments, such as the removal of the headscarf in certain circumstances. Tackling matters of sexual orientation, he unequivocally states Islam's traditional stance against homosexuality. Yet, he emphasizes that while holding onto personal beliefs, Muslims in the Netherlands must operate within the legal and cultural frameworks of Dutch society. Rather than resorting to overt actions, they should harbor a heartfelt aspiration for societal change.

In terms of political engagement and governance, El-Bakkali believes in the sanctity of abiding by Dutch law. While he acknowledges the religious freedoms the Netherlands offers, he simultaneously expresses an aspiration for an even more inclusive and tolerant society. He highlights a perceived gap in the existing legal framework, underscoring the need for both Islamic and secular institutions, including governmental bodies, to collaboratively define a more precise role and guidelines for imams.

Advocating for active civic participation, El-Bakkali urges Dutch Muslims to immerse themselves in the political arena, emphasizing the importance of unity as a strategy to voice their concerns and protect their interests. He firmly believes that the electoral process serves as a platform for Muslims to solidify their representation and position in negotiations. Responding to a recent call by a faction of Muslim youth advocating for the introduction of Sharia law in Belgium and the Netherlands, El-Bakkali was amongst the religious leaders who publicly opposed this proposition.

In relation to digital information, El-Bakkali expresses deep-seated concerns about the unchecked proliferation of potentially harmful religious content on the internet, fearing its allure

to impressionable youth. He strongly encourages believers, particularly the younger demographic, to seek guidance and clarification from knowledgeable religious figures, such as imams, when confronted with ambiguous or controversial religious content. Yet, in all his guidance and leadership, El-Bakkali remains candid about the confines of his influence, asserting that his role as a spiritual mediator does not extend to overseeing individual actions beyond the mosque's premises.

6.3 Imam Mustafa Kastit

6.3.1 Biography

Mustafa Kastit memorized the Koran in Koranic schools in Brussels, then at the age of 20, he travelled to study Islam at Madina University in Saudi Arabia and studied there for 8 years. After graduating with a degree in the science of the *Hadith*, he returned to preach and teach in Belgium. In 1997, he joined the Islamic and Cultural Centre in Belgium where he became a teacher and preacher. Then he taught at the European Islamic Institute and other venues. He is also one of the imams at Al Khalil Mosque and the Great Mosque of Brussels. He believes that "the duty of the Imam is to have a discourse which is not disconnected from reality" (bxlbondyblog.be, 2016).

Kastit lives in Molenbeek the district in Brussels where the 2015 Paris attacks were planned. He wants to clear out the name of the district. He says, "First of all if I may I want to defend the district. Because Molenbeek is a district where I lived for long. It is a peaceful district, of course, there are conflicts and incidents in this district because of hopelessness where quite a lot of our youth find themselves facing a saturated horizon" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). Nevertheless, it is for him a multi-faith and multicultural district with multiple nationalities and communities. It has Belgians of Maghrebin origins and especially Moroccans as well as Turks, Pakistanis, Africans, Polish, Bulgarian, and Romanian.

Kastit's voice has a far outreach. He preaches in two languages, Arabic and French because many of his attendees are Arabic-speaking. The vast majority of his francophone attendees are youngsters. He preaches twice every month, the first Friday of each month in the Big Mosque of Cinquantenaire and the third in al-Khalil Mosque in Molenbeek. Between 700 and 1000 believers attend the Friday prayer. It reaches 1000 when the Friday is a public holiday.

This number is multiplied when on celebrations. It gets to 4000 to 5000. He says, “For the feast of the sacrifice and the feast of the end of Ramadan we reach 4000 to 5000 in the two mosques” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

6.3.2 Views on Identity

Interestingly, Kastit thinks that there is a similarity between Islamic theology and leftist literature. both of them, he claims, aim to keep social justice and human dignity intact. He says, “During my adolescence, I sank myself in leftist readings, especially from Latin America [...] I read Marx, Engels, and Lenin. I read Che Guevara and was interested in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire and others. In fact what interests me in this literature Is two important questions, social justice and human dignity. And I find some of that in the Islamic theology” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit wrote three books about different pillars of Islam: praying, fasting during Ramadan, and almsgiving. On his books, He comments that “with regards to the pillars of Islam, I do not think I will go beyond *zakat* almsgiving. For pilgrimage, there are many good quality books and I do not see why I would add one. However, for zakat [...] the third pillar of Islam that is known as legal almsgiving is the often forgotten pillar in the community. Unfortunately, to this day there are some Muslims who do not know that zakat exists or acquit themselves of it” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Another reason why the theme of almsgiving interests Kastit very deeply is that he believes that humanity is going through a very difficult period where social inequality is ever-growing, while in the time of globalization, the world is supposed to witness social progress. He believes that social development was, “a dream we had also with the construction of the European Union. These social inequalities impact all society and Muslim communities are hit hard by it. So how can zakat become an instrument to fight against poverty? and how can we reach one of the first aims of Islam which is to preserve human dignity? These are problems I am trying to answer in the book I am preparing” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

He wants to ensure that, “zakat is no longer the pieces that we give to the poor to console them but change the paradigm to make legal almsgiving an instrument to generate sustainable development so that the most fragile people can decide their fate” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). So, Kastit contends that Islam can help society, especially those hit hard by social

inequality and poverty, and this is one of the things he hopes to achieve through his lectures and writings.

His sermons revolve around three fundamental themes: spirituality, education, and youth. He declares that "believers need those themes; they need an inner peace. This inner peace in a society shaken as ours makes many people fragile, including spiritual fragility. (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). While tackling these themes, he is keen on giving them, "a connection with our contemporary social reality in my discourse. I do not want to have an abstract discourse that idealizes a notion or an aspect without being anchored in reality. Because after the believer leaves the mosque, what are the questions he poses to himself? 'What will I do now?' All I heard is good but what next" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). He thinks that a successful imam is someone who teaches his attendees how to understand religion, not indoctrinates them.

Some during Kastit's live session wanted to know the orientation, nature, and school *(Madhab)* guiding the answers he gives during his Q&A sessions. Before immediately giving an answer, Kastit explains to his viewers that they must know the difference between the three types of Islamic law which is interested in practices and illuminates the way and helps believers construct the puzzle of their faith. He continues with his explanation, "It should be known that there are three types of *fiqh* and it is important to learn them. There is the *Madhabi fiqh*, it is the *fiqh* from a specific school. Hanafite, Malikite, Shafi'ite, or Hanbalite. There is what we call today in our contemporary school the *fiqh moqaran*, comparative law, where different opinions are exposed as well as the methods of analysis of each school and jurists who adopted a certain opinion. The third type is the *fiqh adalil*, which is the clear knowledge of the argument. In other words, it is looking for the closest argument to the divine will and to the prophetic will" (Q&A Kastit, 16 October 2020).

Then, Kastit discloses the type of *fiqh* he uses to answer the questions of European Muslims and gives a justification for his choice. The first reason is the diversity of European Muslim community. He says:

> for my part, I consider that the third type of *fiqh*, [*fiqh adalil*] Muslim law, is for us here in the Occident, here in Europe in Belgium, for me, is the most pertinent. Be careful, the most pertinent in these questions and answers sessions. Why?

> Because of two reasons. First of all, our Muslim community, or our Muslim community in Europe and the Occident is heterogeneous. They are not homogeneous communities. There are not only Maghrebis or Turks. There are not only Africans. There are converts, and there are those different origins and nationalities that compose it (Q&A Kastit, 16 October 2020).

The second reason why Kastit chooses the *fiqh adalil* as an approach of jurisprudence for the European reality is that:

> It is more interested in the argumentation than the actual opinion of a certain school. The second is that our Muslim community in Europe, and especially in Europe, has in the last few years integrated new segments. I am referring to our sisters and brothers who have escaped countries in wars or undergoing serious crises, and I am thinking about our Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, and even African brothers from central Africa and other countries, Mali and others who escaped their countries of origin for a better future and today are part of our Muslim community. Answering from a certain school is more adequate when you are in a community or society where this school is predominant (Q&A Kastit, 16 October 2020).

He genuinely thinks that answering from one school of jurisprudence can only be useful if the jurist is in a country where there is a unified conceptualization of faith. He declares:

> For instance, if we go to Morocco, Tunisia, or Algeria, the Maliki school is very dominant. it is logical and wise that the jurist, the *faqih*, that exists there answers the questions of the believers from the predominant school. In Syria for instance there is the Shafi'ite and the Hanafite schools. The jurist has to take into account these schools. However, here in Europe, in the Occident, it is not the case because our communities are plural. And if they are plural, I believe that the most adequate school of jurisprudence for us is the last one. And it also allows us to

> keep an open field because there are controversial questions and we cannot close the door for controversy (Q&A Kastit, 16 October 2020).

Kastit uses the same approach for his books and argues that relying solely on the Maliki doctrine would not do justice to his wide diverse audience of European Muslims. And sometimes different arguments from separate schools have equal strengths making them worthy of mentioning. He says:

> Sometimes there are divergences that are solid and have strong argumentation. and I think that answering only from the Malikite school for instance means excluding all other members of the community. I do not think it is the best solution. I think that this orientation is best, [comparative law] and it is the one adopted by many councils of Muslim law internationally [...] And by the way, it is the opinion I adopted in my book about Ramadan and the coming one soon hopefully about almsgiving. I have put the opinion that appeared the most just, but I never close the door especially if there is divergence, I declared that there is divergence. And this is my choice. And believers are free to either choose my opinion or not" (Q&A Kastit, 16 October 2020).

Kastit does not hold the opinion that the multiplicity of schools and their arguments harms the comprehension and understanding of Muslim law. On the contrary, it leads to a healthier Islam as long as it enriches the debate. He states that "on the opposite, the plurality of *Madahibs*, schools of jurisprudence, represents the richness of this law and proves that Muslim law is not fixed" (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

He rejects what he considers to be the "two extremes" in approaching schools of jurisprudence in Islam:

> The first extreme of those who ensure that legal doctrines belonging to different schools among which are the four schools [Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafei]. They make sure that the opinions of the imams belonging to these schools took the place of the revealed text. they accord more importance to Imam Malik may

> he rest in peace, Abu Hanifa, Abu Ahmad, or Shafi'i take a saying [prophetic] or a verse. Even if such an opinion could oppose a revealed text (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

The second extreme is that of those who:

> Reject the schools altogether saying that they are not needed. I remember I've read in a book something that appears to me very suicidal. It is an author who says we want to move towards the dissolution of schools of jurisprudence to create a new school. With all due respect for this author, this project is merely a slogan rather than something else. They say we have to create another school which is the school of Qur'an and Sunna. I wonder whether these four imams were not following the Qur'an and Sunna. Weren't they defenders and promoters of these revealed texts? To abandon these four schools and create another school is impossible. We do not invent a wheel if it already exists (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

In other words, according to Kastit, there is very rich patrimony and Muslims only need to be capable of benefiting from it in an intelligent way. Doctrinal sectarianism, seeing the world and questions of jurisprudence only from the point of view of schools while rejecting everything else. And the other extreme that rejects all schools must be avoided. He says it's funny and paradoxical that even those who reject all schools end up imitating contemporary people and following them exactly. Since these people criticize others for following the school and the four imams, he would rather join them in following the four imams. He believes the imams know better than many contemporary individuals and are closer to the prophetic tradition than the current period (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

This does not mean that Kastit is a rabid follower of these schools. He thinks that a contextual and contemporary reading of them should apply. He explains,

> We should not fall in these defects. it is a richness that we have to profit from and of course with intelligence and reading that does not lack in nuances and contemporaneity. There are questions that all the old ones did not know of and

> confront us today. We should be able to look at them and why not by getting illumination by *Ijtihad* from the qualified people or from the critical analysis from those who have the necessary religious competence to be able to benefit from this patrimony to remedy the series of problems that face us today (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

Kastit says that religious opinions from translations should not be adopted to the letter with the exception of those regarding worship. There are questions treating a societal aspect to which the scholars answer from a different reality than the Occidental one. He reproaches publishing houses for not pointing out the context of *fatwas.* For him, they should warn readers to pay attention as there are *fatwas,* answering to the contexts of the scholars, their countries, and their local norms. He is confident that the reckless importation of *fatwas* can be prejudicial to Muslims in many ways. He explains that there is a rule jurists have and it says that a *fatwa* can change in relation to time and place. It does not apply to matters that were clearly established, but those that involve interpretation, *majal ijtihadi*. He says:

> There is a necessity to nuance some religious opinions because they do not talk about our environment here. In Europe and the Occident we face different challenges and the parameters are not the same […] Some like to make polemics. Because he read some religious opinions in these books, he wants to impose them on people around him […] A religious opinion has no compelling character. By the way most of the definitions say *min ghayr ilzam*, does not constrain. Said differently, it is not imposed upon the one who receives it […] Dear brother or sister, you have the right to have your own affinities; it is strictly your right but respect others. Respect others, and respect other renowned scholars who do not share the same opinion on one or another question especially those involving *ijtihad* than those you follow. Let us be open-minded and let us have a larger horizon of tolerance (Q&A Kastit, 13 November 2020).

Kastit mentions that writing his books, *L'humilité dans la prière* and *Le Jeûne De Ramadan −Éthique Et Préceptes,* was part of a project he founded in 2009 and aims to create a

reading club to ensure the promotion of cultivation, knowledge, and reading as he believes the Muslim youth are not as connected as they should be with reading and pursuing knowledge and cultivation. He believes that this phenomenon does not only affect Muslim youth but youth in general because of the Internet and social media.

His objective is to reconcile the Muslim culture with the universal one. Kastit encourages reading not only about religion but also about ecology, philosophy, politics, society, economy, and history. He invites guest lecturers as well such as his interviewer and historian Jean-Michel Dufays who gave a lecture on Belgian history. With this, he wants to demonstrate to Muslim youth, not only Arab Muslims but other ethnic groups like Amazigh, Turks, and Somalians, that it is possible to reconcile their Islamic culture with their occidental culture and personality and considers it to be a window open into the universal culture. In his reading circle, Kastit mentions some of the names they are interested in reading. These include the French author Victor Hugo, the Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Italian Niccolò Machiavelli.

Kastit says:

> [this reading project] is in fact an attempt to reconcile these [Muslim culture and universal] because the richness whereby reading opens new horizons and puts us in contact with new realities that we tend not to master or know about. And that who does not know falls in caricature. And as the previous president of France François Hollande said in one of his speeches when he was still president ‘ignorance leads to intolerance’ and it goes both ways. (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit names his book editions "Renouveau" or "Renewal" to encourage religious and intellectual rejuvenation among the youth. He aims to demonstrate that one can identify as Muslim, Turkish, Moroccan, Algerian, Somalian, or Senegalese, while simultaneously belonging to a European Occidental country, embracing the multiple identities referred to by Amin Maalouf in his book, *In the Name of Identity*. Contrary to the concept of murderous identities, a literal translation from the French title "Les Identités Meurtrières," Kastit promotes the idea of

complementary multiple identities. He firmly believes in moving towards universality, as stated in the interview with Jean-Michel Dufays in 2018.

Kastit notes the excessive expectations placed on imams in Europe. Often, they are anticipated to perform roles beyond their capacity, including duties of a psychologist, therapist, and mediator. He explains that the prevalent perception within European and Western Muslim communities is that an imam or religious figure should address all requests presented to them. This leads to imams being approached to resolve various issues, such as familial concerns involving a defiant adolescent. Kastit questions whether these imams possess the requisite expertise to tackle these matters effectively. He humorously comments on the presumption that imams have a "magic wand" to instantly rectify problems, just by offering a moral lesson or gentle reminder of one's responsibilities. Kastit expresses skepticism towards this approach, doubting its effectiveness in resolving issues, as per his statements in a question and answer session on 23 October 2020.

He thinks that imams have to be consulted within their fields of expertise, not beyond. He strongly criticizes this commonly held idea of a super-imam. He says that Muslims have to:

> Solicit the right person not get the wrong target. I always give this example to some parents who contact me and tell me I have a problem with my son or daughter etc. I tell them that I am clearly not competent [...] For such a situation, a therapist is needed and unfortunately, some parents take it very badly when I tell them this [...] I have an expression that I use to talk with the brothers around me. I say that the imam is some sort of Superman. They must be on all fronts and must answer all the problems and solve every situation. The imam himself, religious actor, and theologian has his own limits. And it is part of the spiritual and religious ethics of an imam to learn how to know one's limits. We cannot intervene on all matters (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

He believes that the role of an imam is only advisory, even when he gives *fatwas*. People are free with regard to whether they want to adopt his opinion or not. During the first Q&A session, Kastit begins by explaining that the answers he will provide in the live session are reflections of his personal beliefs in religion, ethics, and context. He emphasizes his focus on

considering the environment and the context in which we live when formulating his answers. He clarifies that his responses are not intended to satisfy everyone. His primary aim is to satisfy God. He reminds his audience that his answers serve as the foundation for judicial religious answers. They are not binding, and everyone is free to decide whether to accept them or not. He asserts his responsibility to answer these questions as best he can, leaving the final decision up to the individual (Q&A Kastit, 9 October 2020).

In another instance, he says the same thing only differently this time, "the imam accompanies the believer but has no authority over him. He accompanies the believer on a religious, spiritual, and moral level" (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). With his belief that imams' role is only advisory, he deconstructs commonly held assumptions about imamship: a position to exert power over believers. He also says, "It means that when a believer poses a question regarding a religious opinion, the imam delivers the opinion on an advisory basis. This means that the believer has the freedom to choose between taking or not taking the opinion of his adviser" (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit claims that it is okay to pray behind an imam without understanding Arabic. Concentration, or humility is the only requirement to validate a prayer. He says:

> Concentration during prayer is a very fundamental aspect because it allows us to be connected with God almighty and be present with him. But the simple fact is that the brother does not master Arabic, and we can understand that he does not get what the imam recites. The most important is to feel the presence of God while praying which in itself is reverence and humility in prayer (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

He argues that "there are some people who understand, but they only get the apparent meaning of the verses read by the imam but do not break through to the deep mysteries and secrets of those verses (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020). So, for Kastit learning Arabic is not a requirement but an added value for European Muslims.

Kastit firmly believes in the value of learning Arabic, especially for European Muslims, while recognizing the global diversity of the Muslim community. He expresses his hope that individuals will take the opportunity to explore the Arabic language and commit to a basic

understanding of it. He acknowledges that over the centuries, non-Arabic speaking Muslim countries have nevertheless maintained a relationship with the Arabic language due to religious necessities. In a session, he highlights:

> We wish, however, with the will of God almighty that the brother might discover the Arabic language and study it a little bit to reach a minimum of comprehension. And by the way, it has prevailed in Muslim countries over the centuries. Even today, most Muslim countries are not Arabic-speaking. Look at Indonesia, Malaysia, Africa, and even other countries as well, there are Muslim populations that are not Arabic speaking by birth. But because of the needs of the religion, they have learned the Arabic language even if they do not speak it in their daily lives (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

Kastit goes on to share his personal observations from his travels to Turkey. He meets numerous Turkish imams, some fluent in Arabic and others not so much. He is moved by the sight of imams who, despite not speaking Arabic conversationally, can beautifully read the Qur'an, understand it, and possibly translate it into Turkish, demonstrating the global and unifying impact of the language within the Muslim community (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

He thinks that the Arabic language federates somehow all Muslim populations and converges them towards the same goal. For Kastit, this does not mean that we cannot understand religion in a different language. But since praying is in Arabic, and the Quran is in the Arabic language, and all translations are only attempts to translate, he is of the point of view that learning Arabic is very important.

He assumes that belonging to an ethnic group other than Arab should not be a hindrance to learning Arabic. He epitomizes this stance with the case of Persia:

> which for a long time has produced a lot of scholars in all disciplines, whether religious or profane, that have built the Muslim civilization. Persia which does not have Arabic as its language, Persians embraced the Arabic language and even mastered it better than Arabs themselves. It is not a question of race, ethnicity, or tribe. The Arabic language is a common patrimony among all Muslims. And with

> the will of God, I am hopeful that this brother will be able to learn the basics of this language to have better access to the revealed text if God wills (Q&A Kastit, 30 October 2020).

Kastit endeavors to give his projects a local Occidental European anchoring, "because in the libraries or the production of francophone Islamic religious literature," he argues, "I can tell you that 70% is only translations. Books that come from the Maghreb and the Middle East, that are not always in the equation with the Euro-reality. I have the advantage of being born here in Belgium I grew up in a double culture, Maghrebian, and Occidental" (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Born in Belgium, he considers himself fortunate. He has no trouble reconciling the two cultures. He claims that throughout his publications, he is only focused on issues concerning Occidental Muslims. He explains, "The questions that I tackle in my books, it is important for me to give them a European Occidental anchoring because, after all, I address Occidental Muslims, not oriental Muslims or Maghrebian and Muslims who do not have the same challenges Occidental Muslims have." (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit observes that Muslims can learn from the Occident the work ethics that used to belong to the Muslims but now are in decay in Muslim communities. He also believes that Muslims should aim for prosperity in addition to piety. He says, "I invite all my brothers present here to think about projects, to invest, to be organized, to be meticulous, to be organized, to be orderly. All these qualities, we can regain them" (Facebook Kastit, 2013).

Kastit shares an anecdote about his friend, underscoring the impact of integrating Western work ethics into a business in Morocco. His friend moved back to Morocco to establish his prosthetist laboratory. This move proved to be highly successful. Kastit recounts:

> I went to Morocco in the month of June to visit a friend, he is a friend from Brussels who went back to Morocco for good. He is a prosthetist and has his own laboratory and dentists order from him. And Mashallah he is successful. Why? it is because the people back home see cheating, lying, deception, and work that is not well done, and then they see someone who came from the Occident. Who, unfortunately, and in part, fortunately, has taken from the Occident what is

> supposed to be Muslim qualities and adopted them. And by the way now in Morocco he says "Listen to me, I work in a European manner. I do not have feelings during work. they are for elsewhere." He is very organized, meticulous, and precise. And God has blessed his livelihood (Facebook Kastit, 2013).

In his story, Kastit emphasizes his friend's adoption of what he calls "supposed to be Muslim qualities" from the Western world. These traits of organization, precision, and meticulousness, blended with his commitment to quality work, devoid of emotional entanglements during professional dealings, contributed significantly to his friend's thriving business in Morocco, underlining the influence and benefit of integrating diverse work ethics and values.

Concerning the topic of education, Kastit holds the opinion that the traditional instruction of Morocco is not adequate for the European context, especially for the newer generations, he says, "Many parents are outdated in relation to the education of their children because the classical schemes of education do not work today anymore" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

He uses his personal narrative to argue that it is Western education and his contact with Belgians that has allowed him to fit in the receiving context. He states:

> Both of my parents come from Morocco and grew up in the countryside. They were educated in the classical way in very illiterate environments. They came here and my father was a laborer for a very long time, for forty years he was a laborer. They reproduced a classical system that in part worked for us with the only difference that we succeeded in keeping some autonomy […] in relation to the model that they proposed because we were educated. We attended school; we had friends who were Belgians and not (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

He acknowledges the fact that parents do not educate their children alone mainly because of the Internet where offspring can receive different worldviews. So, his proposition indicates that parents only have to give a cultural-religious foundation for their children to ensure their belonging inside the family while not interfering with their adherence to the Western environment. He says:

> In the times of the internet and social media, youth listen more to You Tube videos from actors or You Tubers than they listen to their parents. You see, in all of this, parents are in some kind of helplessness. So, the insight that I propose, and I do not claim to be the only one, is to tell them simply: how to start from a common foundation consisting of transmitting Muslim values that create family membership, to transmit to our offspring without disconnecting from the social environment (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

The Internet's pervasive influence poses a global educational challenge. However, Kastit doesn't advocate for its censorship to mitigate this global dilemma. He believes this approach may inadvertently escalate Internet usage. Instead, he suggests the integration of the Internet, social media, and social culture into the educational process. In a discussion, he expressed his concerns about the ineffective approach of banning or imposing stringent control over the Internet or its censorship. He warned parents that this is not the optimal solution. Kastit pointed out the inherent human tendency to seek forbidden things elsewhere, thus reinforcing the idea that prohibition might not always serve as a deterrent (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit emphatically states that the content of an imam's sermons should extend beyond religious matters, encompassing issues that resonate with the Muslim Belgian community and the global community at large. He notes his own focus on environmental concerns within his sermons, acknowledging it as a commonly overlooked issue. During an interview, he expressed, "I have also tackled the issue of the environment in my sermons, with all due respect to other imams, I think it is a neglected issue" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Beyond environmental concerns, Kastit also delves into the topic of racism, which he perceives as a universal problem transcending racial and ethnic boundaries. He underscores that racism is not an issue confined to white communities; it permeates various cultures and societies, including his own Maghrebin community. He observes the existence of internal discrimination within Morocco and other regional divisions, as well as within the Belgian context. Despite these divisions, he ardently reminds the youth from diverse backgrounds, including Maghrebins, Turks, Africans, and converts, of Islam's universal message. Kastit highlights the embracing nature of Islam, reinforcing that upon embracing the faith, individuals from any background

become Muslims, without the need to abandon their cultural or ethnic identities. He advocates for the harmonious integration of cultural, educational, and Islamic values, allowing for a diverse yet united Islamic community (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

During a Q&A session, Kastit had to answer a question with a dietary aspect. The asker says, "can we eat cheese with animal rennet?" Kastit, before answering, gave context to the question, "I would like to remind you that rennet is an enzyme that exists in the stomach of young ruminants that were killed before the weaning such as calves, young goats, and lambs and concerns, especially calves, it is used to accelerate the process of curdling because this enzyme existing in the stomach of these animals is a powerful coagulant and this is how cheese is made" (Q&A Kastit, October 2020).

His advisory opinion on this question consists of the following. If the animal was sacrificed ritually, the cheese is edible and there is no argument about it in the Islamic tradition. He explains, "This does not pose a problem in any way while consuming this cheese knowing that it was taken out of the stomach of an animal that was killed ritually" (Q&A Kastit, October 2020). The question that arises is: What about when animals were not killed with the ritual?

Here, Kastit Gives the two major conflicting opinions of scholars:

> The opinion of the majority of scholars who are from the Shafi'ite, Malikite, and Hanbalit schools who prohibit the consumption of these cheeses made of rennet from the stomach of an animal killed in a non-ritual way. The second opinion is that of Ibn Hanifa and another opinion adopted by Imam Ibn Hanbal and was also chosen by Ibn Taimia is to allow the use of consumption of these cheeses made from the rennet of animals not sacrificed ritually. I do not hide the fact that the arguments that were advanced from each side do not revolve around a prophetic *Hadith* but from what the companions used to do, some did not consume the cheese of which they did not know the origin but others did" (Q&A Kastit, October 2020).

Kastit then tells his viewer that he is of the second opinion:

> So the opinion that sounds right, if God wills, from my point of view and that of many contemporary scholars is that the consumption of this cheese does not pose any problem by the will of God [...] However, if someone does not want to consume them because he is convinced by this opinion of the majority it is his right to do so with the only condition that they do not bother others and put pressure on those who have a different opinion (Q&A Kastit, October 2020).

It is important to mention that Kastit did not favor the opinion of the Malikite school. In this case, it is safe to say that his Moroccan origins did not influence his decision-making while choosing between the two options. He adds that this divergence should not be in any way a reason to fight, and both opinions must be respected. He emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and tolerance amidst differing opinions, particularly on matters of personal choice. He discourages any form of conflict or hostility arising from such differences. According to him, even if people hold opposing views on a particular issue, it's essential to acknowledge that such divergence is tolerable. Each side's opinion should be considered valid, promoting mutual respect while allowing individuals to act upon their own convictions (Q&A Kastit, October 2020).

In his approach to democracy, Kastit believes that the concept should be adopted in families in the decision-making process. Kastit buttresses his argument by quoting verses from the Qur'an:

> First of all, let's start from a principle: the Qur'an and the prophet peace be upon him have given big value to the culture of consultation. Almighty God says in his Qur'an 'and conduct their affairs by mutual consultation [and] "and consult them in affairs," and mentioning the prophetic tradition, "so their affairs are based on consultation." The prophet himself peace be upon him received an order from God to consult his companions [...] in fact, consultation is a principle valorized by Islamic sources (Q&A Kastit, 9 October 2020).

The rest of what Kastit has to say about to concept of consultation in families stands as witness to how he tries to contextualize his answers to the Occidental context where he preaches. The rest of his opinion follows

> The modality has not been defined because It is evolutionary. it differs depending on the time period, culture, and society. that is why voting is not bad in itself. when we cannot reach unanimity in a family, a secret vote could be done and if there is a majority that is obtained then it is good; otherwise, the head of the family could privilege one opinion over the other with the only condition that everybody in the family trusts them. In fact, the modality itself should be decided between the members of the family since there are no rules to follow (Q&A Kastit, 9 October 2020).

While he thinks that the concept of consultation should be used in families to make decisions when unanimity does not apply, the how is subject to context and changes according to it.

Residing in the Molenbeek District, Kastit deeply identifies with its diverse fabric and is vested in its narrative. He paints a vivid picture of his neighborhood, stating, "The street where I live, and I live close to the Maritime District, is a multicultural street. In my street, there are Belgians, Albanians, Moroccans, Turks, and other nationalities, Africans as well and it goes very well between neighbors" (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). He hopes to clear out the tarnished name of the district. He announces:

> I want to break this cliche stuck with Molenbeek, the hub of terrorism and jihadism. This fact is very marginal, these youth are at a loose end and swung to these edges. These youth do not exist only in Molenbeek, they are also in other cities of Belgium. In fact, what brings Molenbeek to the fore is that the perpetrators of the Paris attacks were mainly from Molenbeek (Interview with Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

6.3.3 Views on Gender

When it comes to the marriage institution, Kastit strongly recommends against being married religiously without first getting married civilly. He answers the question, "Is there a deadline between a religious marriage and a civil marriage?" as follows, "I explained these many

times before. I strongly advise against having a religious marriage without it being preceded by a civil marriage or doing them both at the same time" (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

Kastit possesses this opinion because he thinks that religious marriage alone, from a moral perspective poses a huge problem. Secondly, religious marriage, strictly speaking, does not guarantee any protection, especially for the wife. He states:

> Tomorrow there will be a problem with the husband and he vanishes. and it is the wife who finds herself in misfortune and difficulties because if the husband marries again. She needs to look for him and probably he made her pregnant and after that, he does not want her. The Euro-Islamic marriage is susceptible to many deviations. for this reason, there should always be an official marriage contract that protects (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

Concluding his answer, Kastit underscores the historical context of legally binding marriage contracts within Islam. He brings attention to the Malikite judicial school, renowned for its extensive work in developing contract theories. He emphasizes the school's insistence on the ratification and signing of contracts, whether related to marriage or other matters. For the Malikite school, clear conditions that obligate both parties involved are paramount to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the contracts (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

On the contentious issue of the headscarf, particularly in the context of whether it can be removed out of necessity, Kastit provides an enlightened perspective rooted in faith and individual agency. Addressing the situations where a woman may contemplate wearing it but is restricted by workplace norms, or where a young girl has to remove it upon entering her school, Kastit opines with a clear stand on personal conviction and spiritual journey. He articulates:

> At its core, the headscarf is more than a mere piece of cloth; it symbolizes a deep act of faith and plays a pivotal role in the spiritual evolution of Muslim women. It is essential to emphasize that this is not about external compulsion. Rather, the decision to don the headscarf must stem from an intrinsic motivation and commitment. No sister or young girl should feel pressured into wearing it; they should be wholly invested in this choice (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

However, he considers it to be a personal choice that anybody makes out of conviction not pressure. He explains, “We do not wear the headscarf to satisfy parents or under pressure. It is important that the sister walks towards this goal. This is very important” (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

Kastit mentions the hardship of answering such a question because there is a legal dimension within it, and it is the right of Muslims to practice their faith in Europe. He says:

> Unfortunately I do not have a miracle answer for this. There is another question that was mentioned in this regard. What are the paths that could be followed to equate between work, studies, and headscarves? I will be frank with you I do not have a miracle solution. We are no longer dealing with the religious question but a legal problem related to the right of the individual to practice their faith [...] Our primary mission is to come close to what is best and what is requested to the maximum. but everyone is aware of their situation (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

Nevertheless, Kastit indirectly says that his role is not to make life more complicated for female Muslims in Europe by giving them burdening religious opinions. He stresses that it is important to strive to wear the headscarf, but sometimes life imposes difficult situations on people, and they only have to choose what is best. He explains:

> I cannot say that someone is right and one is not. It is important to try to find what is best. I will give an example here, if the sister were to choose between a job where she can wear the headscarf and a job where she cannot, of course, she would try to get into the former. However, we do not live the lives of others. Everyone is dealing with their own life problems, but the important thing is to subscribe to this trajectory and move little by little towards what satisfies God almighty. And the means of livelihood belong to God. He gives or deprives whoever of them as he wants (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

His closing statement summarizes his position on the headscarf, “All that is demanded from us is to strive for success and go for what is best and also what protects in part our livelihood and means of subsistence and gains whether social, political, or others” (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022). In other words, people have to work towards satisfying God but without putting themselves in detrimental situations regarding their earthly matters (Q&A Kastit, 18 March 2022).

6.3.4 Views on Politics and Radicalization

Kastit believes that portraying Islam as a threatening ideology is part of a deliberate strategy. He contends that during the Cold War, the West, particularly from a political perspective, saw the Eastern Bloc as its main adversary, symbolized by the division between Western and Eastern Europe. However, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, countries like the U.S. needed to justify their imperialistic actions. The 9/11 attacks provided the U.S. with an opportunity to identify a new enemy. This new threat, according to Kastit, is represented by Islamic groups like the Muslim Brothers, Salafism, and Wahhabism (as per a 2018 interview by Jean-Michel Dufays). He brings an argument from political science contending that grand powers have to shape an enemy for themselves to continue to exist and legitimize their power. He mentions a book written on the matter and says, “In that book, the author points out the fact that all the big systems have to identify an enemy to justify their supremacy, either visible or invisible. Visible like in the case of Eastern Europe, or invisible like the circulating ideologies and has to be fought (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

He even thinks that some who do terrorism in the name of Islam, in fact, only want to defy these imperialist powers stating that “those who perpetrate terrorist attacks also play this card in some way, they want to defy Uncle Sam. I have met some youth who flirted with these kinds of ideologies. It is a bit like young militants of the extreme left in the 50s and 60s who embraced the discourse of the contestation of a global imperialist system” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Upon being asked to define what Muslim Brothers, Salafism, and Wahhabism are, Kastit states that “these are very much more subtle notions and nuanced than the way they are presented today on research theses, of which I do not deny the quality because I read quite some of them treating Muslim Brothers, Salafism, Wahhabism, or other Sunni Muslim currents. There is of

course good work that has been produced but there are some issues. There are quite many shortcuts and sometimes I get the impression that the researcher has already predefined the concepts before studying them (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit believes that a lot of academic works on these movements often misrepresent them in ways that tarnish their image. He urges people who want to:

> seize the nature of a current you have to come into contact with it and try to understand what it is rather than how you represent it. These are two very different things. today there is a huge media representation around the word Salafism, and by the way, I prefer using Salafia which sounds more appropriate for me. Salafism is connoted in a very pejorative way today (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit starts by defining the Muslim Brotherhood. But before going straight to the definition, he lingers a bit on the history stating that:

> it is sad that in a country like Egypt, which is the cradle of the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, it is sad to see that a country like Egypt, which is the lungs of the Arab world and its nervous center, underwent a revolution with the Arab Spring and for the first time in Egyptian history there were free elections as was attested by the international community. These have led to the election of the first civilian Egyptian President since the overthrowing of the dynasty of King Farouk in 1956 by Gamal Abdel Nasser (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit feels disappointment when the first time after the 1956 coup, a civilian who was voted president stirred negative reactions from the Occident. He says:

> The first time in the history of Egypt there is a president elected with universal suffrage, who belongs to the Muslim Brothers, and as we know a coup d'état was orchestrated. A counter-revolution and it is not only in Egypt it happens in Yemen,

> in Syria of course unfortunately with a civil war. What is striking here and what disappoints me is the attitude of the Occident, of Europe towards that. ‘The triple failure of the Muslim Brotherhood’ for example in the *Le Monde* newspaper when Mohamed Morsi was still president of Egypt (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

He also notes the carelessness with which the European media has reported the coup against a democratically elected president, “Europe has tacitly felicitated the coup d’état because it did not react much except for condemning violence used against pacifist demonstrators at Rabi'a Al-Adawiya square” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Here again, Kastit points out the factors that are out of religion per se but can ignite the radical mindset: the dynamics of global geopolitics between the Occident and the Arab world whereby the West tries to interfere with the politics of Arabic countries. he states, "So it is kind of this ambivalent relation that the Occident and Europe have with the Arab world that poses a problem and nourishes radicals, 'This is proof that Europe does not want us and interferes with our affairs, take a look at this, even a president elected through democratic means is not wanted by Europe.' And General or Marshal Sisi came into power” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

After only one year of presidency, Morsi was attacked by western media, which is not reasonable, Kastit explains adding:

> What surprises me in the case of the president Mohamed Morsi […] is that we want of him to, we can disagree with him that is an absolute right, we want him to change a state of corruption that has lasted more than eighty years in country murdered by corruption and injustice very deeply. We want a president who can in one year, in one mandate, change this social, political, and economic state (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

He stresses the fact that while European powers strive to keep their democracy intact, they interfere with the democracy of other countries. He asserts:

> I ask myself the question, François Hollande was one of the worst presidents in French history after the Second World War, did anybody displace him in the middle of his mandate? No. So why do we accept that a president who has not finished his mandate like Mohamed Morsi, let him display what he has, let him finish the mandate. It is voters who are free to choose. whether to renew his mandate or choose someone else. This is political alternance. And unfortunately, we do not want alternance for Arab states. Look at what is happening in Yemen, Syria the same scenario is repeated, and Libya we must not forget which is across the Mediterranean and is in an atrocious civil war" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit highlights the negative impact of foreign interference on international security, suggesting it exacerbates tensions and civil wars. He conveys his concern that it is against the interests of Europe and the Western world to have Arab states plagued by corruption, political despotism, and instability due to ongoing conflicts. Contrarily, he advocates for the promotion of stability, the establishment of lawful governance, and a political system in those nations where citizens have the ultimate authority. Kastit expresses his discontent over the denial of these rights to Arab states, emphasizing that such a situation only fuels extremism, whether in the form of Daesh or other groups (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Then Kastit goes on to describe the Muslim brotherhood through a piece of history described as:

> This movement started in 1928. And here as well we have to put it in its historical context. It must be recalled that 4 years before that, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the caliphate that was the emblematic institution of the Muslim world [...] it must be known that in the Muslim world, and what many Europeans do not know, in the Muslim world abolishing the caliphate has caused a terrible shockwave [...] and many Europeans in our regions, because they lack this historical element, cannot understand what is happening there (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

So, to cope with the abolishment of the caliphate and a state under the British colonial mandate, "Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brothers association with a double project, and even a triple project if I may. The first was to liberate the country from Britain and foreign occupation. The second is to give people back faith in their religion, history, and patrimony. And thirdly is to propose an alternative. Because if the caliphate was abolished, what is the alternative?" Kastit says (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Therefore, the association came as a reform of which the dimensions were noted down in a book by Hassan al-Banna, "entitled *Les Epitres de Hassan al-Banna* […] in which we see very clearly the religiopolitical vision of Hassan al-Banna. Hassan al-Banna explains very well that the religious and the political for Europeans can be shocking because again, they are not the same codes. For an Oriental, this is not the case, unless they are secularized," Kastit argues (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit acknowledges the potential bewilderment of a European audience regarding the integration of Islam and state. He cites Hassan al-Banna's assertion that Islam embodies both firmness and mercy, as well as state and religion, and that these elements should synergize or complement each other. Kastit explains that al-Banna advocated for a national project aimed at restoring Egypt's historical, cultural, and religious dignity, coupled with an international perspective considering the expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood into various other Arab countries such as Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, among others (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Additionally, Kastit observes the significant evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood from 1928 to the present. He dismisses the idea that the Muslim Brotherhood has strategically abandoned the concept of an Islamic state. Instead, he perceives the emergence of pragmatism in the political actions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Kastit points to the Syrian Muslim Brothers' charter post-Assad, which envisions a civilian and inclusive state, acknowledging Syria's diverse faiths and ethnicities. He also notes the political involvement of parties inspired by the Brotherhood in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, which actively participate in the political process and have embraced political alternation without issue (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit believes that there should be an up-to-date sociological study of such movements since studying them through their early writings only locks them up in history, thus stigmatizing them. He states that "there is a margin of difference between the ideologists and early

theoreticians and the religious and political actions on the ground" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Kastit then proceeds to define Salafism or rather Salafia, which is the term he prefers. He contends that it does not aim to go back in time but to get inspiration from the methods that prevailed at a time to understand one's faith and be able to live with it. For him, Salafia is a call for a social, spiritual, and political renewal. He mentions the famous author in Egypt named Muhammad Rashid Rida. He founded a journal that had a very strong impact, especially in the Arab world entitled *al-Manar,* meaning the lighthouse. Kastit comments on Muhammad Rashid Rida's book:

> This journal that he directed for some decades proposed reflection paths to recover, revive, and reform Muslim societies. These reforms are inspired by Salafism and aimed to get rid of foreign authority [...] he says we have a model in our history which is the prophetic period and 30 years after the death of the prophet which is the reference par excellence for all Muslims with no exception. How can we ensure finding this greatness of the old days without falling in anachronism (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

For Kastit, Muslim Brothers are deeply inspired by Muhammad Rashid Rida, "Hasan al-Banna himself says that one of our fundamentals is Salafia [...] because he says that our project of renewal and renaissance has to start from our first sources" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). Kastit describes the Salafia of the 21st century as varied ranging from, "very literalist readings, even radical and violent unfortunately to very intellectual readings" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

The concept is localized diversely in different regions as is the case of Salafia in Morocco which aims to fight off colonial forces. "Salafia in Morocco was one of the driving forces in the fight against French colonialism. They were not quietists. They were on the frontlines to fight against the French and liberate Morocco from French occupation and French mandate" Kastit notes (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

Shifting away from Salafia, on the 2nd of October 2020, Macron, France's president said, "Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, we are not just seeing this in our

country.” He presented a strategy to preserve France's “secular traditions” against "Islamist extremism," claiming that the religion is "in crisis" throughout the world, which has sparked a response from Muslim activists. According to Macron, the legislation allows individuals to practice any religion they want, but outward demonstrations of religious affiliation would be prohibited in schools and the public sector.

Kastit tackled the issue in the first part of the Q&A session. He wants to guide the believers through this hardship. He says:

> Crucibles are not a new thing whether they affect an individual, collectivity, community, society, or a country. It is not a new thing; they have existed from when Adam was born and descended to earth. Ordeals will continue to exist even after us. Now the real question is to know how to behave while facing a test however it is. I will not go into the details of the event that have shaken France over the past days. Because I think that some in France and elsewhere have already talked about this. They have enlightened the believers about the ends of this instrumentalization of religion which are electoral (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

Kastit emphasizes that his goal is not to criticize Macron or French politics regarding Islam in France. Instead, he seeks to guide the Muslim community through these circumstances. He expresses concern about the community's reaction, noting that he is interested in their attitude towards unfolding events. Kastit observes significant agitation and effervescence among brothers and sisters on social media platforms like Facebook, in response to the current situation. He believes that, unfortunately, many in the community are missing the crucial issues at hand. He cites the onset of the COVID crisis as an example, where the proliferation of diverse and often conflicting information on platforms like YouTube and Facebook led to confusion and the spread of misinformation, causing many to waste time and energy on futile debates (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

He uses the occasion to criticize the impulsion of Muslims generated from their emotions with regard to emotive situations, “unfortunately we, our Muslim community of Europe and the Occident, our Muslim community also in terms of Islam, we are unfortunately the community of

instant reaction. We are not a community of reflection, intelligence, well-thought, and mature action. We always act upon our emotions" (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

Kastit emphasizes that it is not that the Muslim community is inherently emotional, but rather they sometimes allow their emotions to guide them into actions that might not be in their best interests. He notes, "While it's natural to feel emotions when hurt or stigmatized, I urge both myself and others to reflect on a relevant prophetic teaching. In Sahih Muslim, the Prophet, peace be upon him, advises, 'real patience takes place during the first shock.'" Kastit brings up this saying to underscore the importance of patience in reacting to events.

Kastit believes that true patience encompasses two dimensions. First, it entails mastering and understanding one's own emotions and impulses while still acknowledging them. Secondly, it involves refraining from actions that could inadvertently validate any negative perceptions or misconceptions about the Muslim community. In essence, he advocates for three core principles:

1. Restraint: Not to be needlessly restless or agitated.
2. Emotional Intelligence: Going beyond merely controlling emotions, but also managing one's actions and reactions in response to those emotions.
3. Strategic Response: Taking thoughtful, well-considered actions that are focused on long-term goals rather than reacting impulsively to immediate events.

Kastit laments the community's tendency to become consumed by short-term emotions during trying times. He observes, "Often, we are overwhelmed by immediate emotional reactions to episodic challenges. We tend to succumb to unbridled emotions, acting without forethought. Yet, once the incident passes, we revert to our usual state as if nothing transpired, failing to derive any meaningful lessons from the experience. That, to me, is the most concerning aspect—our inability to learn from past events" (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

He criticizes people who want imams to react to such political events by holding sermons on them immediately after their eruption. He declares, "I have read a comment of someone following the events that happened in France saying that he went inside a mosque to pray on Friday, and he was disappointed about the imam's sermon which was about children's education. I would like to tell this brother or sister that the imam cannot in any case be the hostage of people's feelings" (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

According to Kastit, the imam has to be comforted, wise, calm, and serene however dramatic the event is. And the mosque should not be a space to preach a discourse that will amplify and inflate the community's anger and emotions. The mosque is a setting to learn, get an education, and be reminded. He announces, "The mosque is not a media platform. It does not mean that the imam, on the pulpit of his mosque, should not tackle the news that affects his community. He should do it but in the right moment" (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020).

Following the assassination of Samuel Paty, the Minister of the Interior of France Gérald Darmanin said in a press conference that it was because of a *fatwa* posted on Facebook. He alluded to the father who expressed his indignation on social media regarding what this teacher has done at school. Kastit believes that there is "a considerable religious and intellectual poverty our politicians have. This public expression of indignation made by this father on social media is not called *fatwa*" (Q&A Kastit, 13 November 2020). After that, Kastit explains that *fatwa*:

> is issued from a man or woman of science. It has a well-defined framework [...] it is issued by a person who is able to do it. someone who has the necessary religious competence, who masters Arabic, the science of the Quran, the science of *hadith*, law, a serious religious discipline, and theology that he has studied. And his opinion is not compelling. He answers out of his convictions on a question, and people are free to either adopt it or not (Q&A Kastit, 13 November 2020).

Kastit believes that the best instrument to fight off radicalization is knowledge because youth who become radicalized are often destitute in terms of knowledge. He asserts, "Youth that are recruited for radicalization are often poor. They are often poor youth who are in intellectual and religious misery with impressive poverty in terms of knowledge. That who is poor in knowledge is manipulable" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018).

6.3.5 Review

Kastit, a Belgian-born Moroccan imam, proudly calls the Molenbeek District home, seeking to rejuvenate its tarnished reputation. His sermons predominantly address spirituality, education, and youth, all rooted in a keen awareness of "our contemporary social reality" (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). Intent on bridging the gap between Muslim and global

cultures, he feels fortunate to be Belgian-born and is devoted to addressing the concerns of Occidental Muslims through his writings.

Kastit highlights a notable perspective: that Muslims can relearn the work ethics from the West, which historically were deeply rooted in Muslim communities but have since dwindled. He opines that the traditional Moroccan education system does not cater well to European environments, especially for the youth. Drawing from personal experiences, he attributes his successful integration into Belgian society to his Western education and interactions with Belgians. In today's digital age, with the internet exposing the youth to a plethora of perspectives, Kastit feels parents can't be sole educators. Instead, they should lay a cultural-religious foundation, ensuring familial bonds remain intact while simultaneously allowing their children to assimilate into Western culture.

On family dynamics, Kastit champions the application of democratic principles, advocating for consultative decision-making, especially when consensus is elusive. He is firm in his stance against religious marriages devoid of civil ceremonies. Concerning the headscarf, he emphasizes the dual importance of pleasing God and ensuring one's well-being in worldly matters.

Furthermore, Kastit believes that understanding Arabic is not paramount to praying behind an imam; sincerity and humility suffice. However, he does advocate for European Muslims to learn Arabic. According to him, while religious directives derived from translations can generally be followed, especially in matters of worship, one must exercise caution. Societal queries might elicit responses rooted in non-Western contexts. He underscores the flexibility in Islamic jurisprudence by mentioning the principle that fatwas can evolve based on time and place.

As an imam deeply rooted in the contemporary world, he emphasizes the importance of diverse reading beyond religious texts. He advocates for imams to address broader societal issues, touching upon pressing concerns like the environment and pervasive racism. While recognizing that racism is not just a white versus others phenomenon, he notes its interplay between various ethnic groups, a pattern he's observed both in Morocco and Europe.

Though he acknowledges the significance of the four classical schools of jurisprudence, Kastit is not dogmatically tethered to them. He believes in a contemporary and contextual reading, and in leveraging a comparative approach, known as *fiqh adalil*, when issuing fatwas in

Europe. He sees the multiplicity of these schools not as a complication, but as a richness that can cater to the diverse needs of European Muslims. Contrary to a rigid traditionalist stance, Kastit's approach is not solely governed by the Maliki doctrine, despite his Moroccan origins. This underscores his belief in evolving with the times and catering to the unique demands of his diverse congregation.

In Kastit's view, the role of an imam is not authoritarian. He sees it more as offering guidance. Fatwas, in his perspective, are consultative rather than prescriptive. He challenges traditional notions of imamship, moving away from the idea of imposing authority to a more supportive, advisory role. Acknowledging the multifaceted challenges imams face in Europe, he highlights that they are often expected take on roles beyond their nature: therapist, mediator, psychologist, and more.

Kastit underscores the narrative that certain global powers, in a bid to legitimize their dominance, frame Islam as a monolithic, ideological adversary. From a political science lens, he argues that major powers often construct an 'enemy' image to maintain their hegemonic positions. In his view, some acts of terror, while ascribed to Islam, are in fact reactions against these imperialistic endeavors.

He expresses deep reservations about Western academic portrayals of Salafia and the Muslim Brotherhood, suggesting they often perpetuate misconceptions that tarnish these groups' reputations. Kastit takes issue with the West's reaction to the aftermath of the 1956 coup d'état, particularly concerning its treatment of the first civilian president. He criticizes European media for their hasty and, in his opinion, skewed portrayal of events following the coup against a democratically elected leader. Kastit speaks of a larger geopolitical game where Western powers, while championing their own democracies, often interfere in the democratic pathways of other nations, a stance he sees as destabilizing and counterproductive for global peace.

Shedding light on the historical trajectory of the Muslim Brothers, Kastit aims to challenge prevailing stigmas attached to the organization. He lists its foundational objectives: liberating the nation from British control, reinstating confidence in its historical, religious, and cultural legacies, and offering an alternative model post the caliphate's dissolution. Emphasizing the evolving nature of such movements, he advocates for a sociological lens when studying them today, instead of pigeonholing them based on antiquated publications.

Kastit's interpretation of Salafia is nuanced. He emphasizes that its objective is not a wholesale regression to past practices, but rather gleaning inspiration from time-tested traditions. He presents a spectrum of Salafia interpretations in the 21st century, spanning from highly literalist, occasionally veering into radical and even violent interpretations, to profound intellectual engagements. Regional distinctions in Salafist interpretations are significant; for instance, in Morocco, the movement staunchly opposed French colonization.

Kastit strongly champions education as the panacea for radicalization. In his eyes, the root of radical behavior often lies in a vacuum of genuine knowledge, underscoring the need for informed, holistic education to counteract extremist tendencies.

6.4 Imam Rachid Haddach

6.4.1 Biography

Like Mustafa Kastit, Rachid Haddach was born and raised in Molenbeek (municipality of the Brussels-Capital Region) in Belgium, to a Moroccan family coming from Tangier. He was deeply committed to Islam and frequently sought instruction from Imam Mohamed Toujgani of the al Khalil Mosque in his area. He began as a volunteer speaker in numerous Brussels schools and mosques, where he engaged with young people. He was then formally taught in Brussels' Great Mosque and preached in Anderlecht's Assouna mosque.

Rachid Haddach's conservative viewpoint has been questioned at times. The media referred to him as a figure of the Salafist movement in Belgium, however, the primary French-speaking Salafist preacher, Sulaiman Al-Hayiti, denied he was a Salafist.[5] He was also threatened with murder by Sharia4Belgium takfirists and has always insisted that he is not an extremist. Fundamentalists think that his statements are too light, and some even consider him a disbeliever because he shook hands with rabbis or even priests.

6.4.2 Views on Identity

Haddach is deeply in tune with the pervasive feeling of not belonging that many second or third-generation Moroccan immigrants in Western Europe grapple with. When confronted by a mosque-goer about this sense of non-belonging, Haddach takes a moment to introspect before recognizing the profound weight of such emotions. His understanding is rooted both in observations of the younger generation and personal experience. As he shares his own narrative, Haddach recalls how even in his childhood days in Tangier, he was referred to as 'Belgiko' (small Belgian) rather than being acknowledged as someone truly from Tangier. This feeling of displacement persisted upon his return to Belgium, where he was often labeled as Moroccan or subjected to a variety of derogatory terms, depending on prevalent stereotypes (Haddach, 2016).

Yet, Haddach’s response to this profound issue diverges from conventional academic discourses surrounding identity crises. Instead, he roots his perspective in a broader Islamic worldview, asserting that for a Muslim, every inch of the earth belongs to God. Thus, a Muslim is truly a global citizen, unbound by conventional territorial or nationalistic boundaries. Whether

[5] https://twitter.com/sulaimanhayiti/status/251841358376091648?lang=fr

they find themselves in Belgium, Canada, Africa, or anywhere else, they always stand on God's land, allowing for a more fluid and encompassing sense of belonging (Haddach, 2016).

For him, hardships are a trial, and the problem of belonging is one of them. He advises youth not to let themselves crumble down in front of such crucibles. The problem is exacerbated by the terrorist attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam. He says:

> On the news, they say that there is an incredible resurgence of racism and Islamophobia. It means that because of the attacks, some now unleash themselves. Just go on Facebook and search the pages of some news channels of which I will not cite the name. Once they say that there is a search warrant in Molenbeek, go read the comments. Disastrous, everyone unleashes themselves, “the Arabs, the *bougnoule*, they must be sent back to their countries, they have to be gassed” (Haddach, 2016).

When young people approach Haddach, frustrated by experiences of racism, he reminds them that Belgium, with its nearly 11 million inhabitants, is not entirely populated by racists. "Do you think all 11 million are racists?" he asks them (Haddach, 2016). He believes the best response to the heightened racism, intensified by radical attacks, is consistent good behavior. "When given a platform, speak out. Articulate the truth. If you can't speak, then write," he advises (Haddach, 2016). Haddach emphasizes to the youth the importance of peaceful resistance, like dialogue and writing. Even if faced with adversity for years, he assures them, "Your words will leave an impact. Someone, someday, will read your sentiments and be transformed" (Haddach, 2016).

As a testament to his philosophy, Haddach recounts an experience with his overtly racist neighbor. The man frequently addressed him as "bougnoule," but Haddach met the insult with a smile, returning the neighbor's jibes with polite greetings. This endured for 15 years. Instead of reacting negatively to the continuous racism, Haddach extended kindness. When the neighbor aged, Haddach offered to assist with his daily chores, including disposing of his garbage. There was a poignant moment when the old man fell one night, and his wife sought Haddach's help. Together with his wife, Haddach lifted the neighbor back to bed. The elderly man's old habits resurfaced with a muttered "good, bougnoule." Yet, the relationship transformed so deeply that

when the man passed away, Haddach assured his widow, "We are here for you. Day or night, knock on our door if you need anything" (Haddach, 2016).

When Haddach had to change his place of residence, his neighbor started crying. This achievement took him 15 years of good treatment. He says:

> You should see how much she cried. she is little, she caught me, her head reaches here [shows the audience with his hand]. She caught me like this, ‘do not go, do not go!’ I said, ‘ma'am that's the law. I have to quit the apartment. I received better.’ ‘Please Mr. Haddach, you are like my children.’ Contemplate this and praise be to God. But how many years of work? 15 years, 15 years (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach believes that to address the pervasive feeling of non-belonging among Belgian Muslims, it is vital to have Muslims in authoritative positions to bridge the communication gap between the Belgian-Muslim community and the authorities. He perceives that deeply ingrained tribalist sentiments can inhibit genuine interpersonal communication. However, he emphasizes that such biases shouldn't be inherent to Muslims. Their faith, as he understands it, advocates open communication with everyone, regardless of their background. But this crucial teaching, he laments, is often overlooked by the community.

Haddach cites personal experiences, noting "I have many friends in the police force who are of Maghrebi origin. It's a blessing that in some neighborhoods, we have Muslim police officers. And it's not just those of Maghrebi descent. I know Belgian officers, those you'd call 'true Belgians,' who converted to Islam. Some of them converted right here in this center” (Haddach, 2016). He underscores the importance of such representation by adding, "When a young person interacts with an officer who shares their faith and understands their background, the dynamics of the conversation change. It becomes more understanding and empathetic" (Haddach, 2016).

But Haddach also reminds his attendees that at its core, Islam encourages its followers to engage respectfully and openly with everyone, irrespective of their faith. He emphasizes, "A true Muslim communicates without bias, treating everyone as a fellow human being. This is the

practice our Prophet followed, as depicted in many religious texts. Unfortunately, many in our community don't delve into these teachings" (Haddach, 2016).

He considers real Muslims to be an added value in society. He announces, “It is not a loss. Real Muslims I am saying, not those who stand by the walls. And I assure you, I give them 500 excuses. There is no child born with the ‘function: stand by the wall’ written here. There were circumstances that made some of our youth go right or left” (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach offers a nuanced perspective on integration, challenging the notion that integrating into Belgian society requires sacrificing religious identity. Instead, he emphasizes that integration should be approached in terms of scientific, cultural, and political contributions that benefit society as a whole. Yet, he also notes that there are boundaries to this integration. These boundaries, in his view, should be defined by religious scholars, emphasizing, "Do not compromise or feel ashamed of your religion" (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach emphasizes the value of upholding one's cultural and religious traditions rather than thoughtlessly assimilating into prevailing trends. Highlighting the fad of belly button piercings, he uses humor to illustrate how some Muslims might uncritically embrace Western or Christian practices. This reminds him of a prophetic teaching cautioning against such unreflective emulation. Addressing the question of body piercings, Haddach recalls consulting a scholar from Saudi Arabia. While the scholar found no explicit religious prohibition, he warned against inflicting unnecessary harm on one's body. Beyond this, Haddach underscores the need to be wary of adopting practices solely to mirror Westerners, concluding with a prophetic admonition: "Whoever emulates a group becomes one of them" (Haddach, 2011).

Furthermore, Haddach draws parallels between Muslims and Jews in Brussels to illustrate that each community has its distinct practices and norms. Just as there are things considered taboo or “haram” in Islam, Jews too have their dietary restrictions. He asserts that these variations in practices are normal and should be respected. Highlighting this similarity, he says, "Just like us, if a Jew encounters something that's not kosher, they won't consume it" (Haddach, 2016).

In discussing the permissibility of certain musical instruments in Islam, Haddach states that among Sunni Muslims, women can use the "douf," a type of round drum. However, it mustn't have strings inside, making it akin to prohibited instruments (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach notes the disagreement surrounding the shape of acceptable instruments, with many religious leaders advising against the darbuka (goblet drum). This stems from a hadith found in Bukhari that references the "kawba." His consultations with scholars in Saudi Arabia led him to understand that there's a difference of opinion regarding this hadith (Haddach, 2011).

For male adherents of Sunni Islam, Haddach maintains that vocal performances are permitted. He remarks, "There are those who believe men can engage in other musical forms, but they will answer to God for those choices" (Haddach, 2011).

Yet, while Haddach encourages Muslims in Belgium to honor their distinct cultural and religious practices, he emphasizes the importance of respecting the host country's societal norms. If someone wishes to enforce their preferences contrary to these norms, he suggests they might be better suited to live elsewhere. He comments, "We reside in a nation with established norms. If you disagree with these, there are many Muslim-majority countries to consider. Yet causing disruption here and branding everyone an apostate is not the solution" (Haddach, 2016).

During a lecture on marriage in the month of Ramadan, Rachid Haddach was interrupted by the news that a car had blocked the mosque's entrance. Visibly perturbed, Haddach remarked, “For situations like this, simply call the police. Don't stress over it, whether it's Ramadan or any other time. Some might be surprised at my stance and say, 'Would you involve authorities over a simple parking issue?' But let me ask you: If someone blocked your personal driveway, wouldn't you be upset? A mosque deserves the same respect" (Haddach, 2011).

However, Haddach clarifies that his reaction is not borne out of personal anger but rather rooted in religious teachings. He recalls, “The Prophet, peace be upon him, said, ‘Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not harm his neighbor.’ Respecting one's neighbor is a matter of faith” (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach emphasizes the importance of portraying Islam positively, especially in diverse communities. He adds, “We should uphold the best principles of our religion, especially in the eyes of those unfamiliar with Islam. We don't want our neighbors to think of us as careless or thoughtless. Our actions reflect our beliefs, and we must ensure we're not pushing people away from understanding Islam. Always be mindful and considerate, whether it's here or anywhere else” (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach emphasizes that Sunni Muslims can maintain friendships with Shiites as long as there is mutual respect for their beliefs. Addressing a query about befriending a Shiite who

speaks ill of the Prophet's wives, Haddach firmly states, "For us Sunnis, denigrating the Prophet's wives is an unforgivable act. They are our spiritual mothers. If such a boundary is crossed, it's best to part ways with that person" (Haddach, 2011). However, if the friend ceases such remarks, reconciliation is possible. Haddach concludes by urging, "Pray to Allah that he finds guidance" (Haddach, 2011).

In another scenario, a mosque attendee seeks Haddach's counsel on convincing his beloved to marry him, fearing her parents might object due to their student status and financial constraints. Haddach responds that in Islam, intimate contact before marriage is not sanctioned. The recommended approach is to hold an engagement conversation where both parties discuss and agree upon conditions, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. He says, "If you both agree on the financial viability of starting a life together, then trust in God and move forward. Marriage can be a source of blessings and provisions. There are many who began their marital journey with little and found abundance in it" (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach then clarifies a common misconception, stating that the concept of "engagement" as understood in some cultures doesn't exist in Islam. He notes, "We recognize the formal religious marriage or al'akd ashar'i. It's a binding contract with legal implications for inheritance among other matters. We don't have the term 'engagement' in our tradition" (Haddach, 2011).

He gives advice to youth who want to marry and is against social media platforms to find a husband or a wife. He declares, "We do not go look for a husband or a wife on Internet websites;" he also says, "The Sunnah was very simple. It has taught us that a man can ask a woman for marriage and a woman can ask a man for marriage [...] this is our *Sunnah.* That is how your parents married and your grandparents since the first ones" (Haddach, 2011).

While he often references scholars from Saudi Arabia, Haddach clarifies that Islam's vast knowledge is not exclusive to that region. He states:

> I've encountered numerous intellectuals, both Belgian and international, who suggest that Islamic rulings primarily come from Wahhabis. I see where they're coming from. It's a common misconception that renowned Islamic scholars are primarily in Saudi Arabia, inadvertently implying countries like Morocco, Algeria, or Pakistan lack them. Yet, many professors in Saudi Arabia hail from

> Morocco, Egypt, and Pakistan. It's an oversight to think that true Islamic knowledge is only rooted in Saudi Arabia. It's not that these young people intentionally devalue others; often they've been misinformed, told that scholars from other regions are lesser or even “sold out” (Haddach, 2016).

On the topic of financial support, Haddach urges Moroccans in Belgium to assist their families back home, regardless of their parents' financial status. Responding to a query about a mother owning properties in both countries and lamenting her child's lack of support, he advises, “For those with the means – and by that, I mean those who are comfortably off – if by month's end you find you've saved a bit, it's a noble act to send something, however small, to your parents in Morocco. Your duty is dictated by your means. But if you're struggling to make ends meet, you can only give what's within your capacity” (Haddach, 2011).

However, he also believes in reciprocity, noting that well-off parents can and should support their struggling children. He observes, “There are parents who, regrettably, prioritize wealth. Young people should understand that if their parents have substantial assets, such as multiple properties and steady income, it's only fitting for them to assist their children in times of need” (Haddach, 2011).

6.4.3 Views on Gender

Haddach asserts that men and women each have distinct characteristics that they should respect. This stance became evident when addressing a question about men's attire, “Is it appropriate for men to wear conspicuous colors like pink or yellow?” After sharing the question, Haddach, with a humorous glint in his eye, glances at the audience, triggering laughter. He jests, “Pose that question to yourself. Wearing pink in Molenbeek might make for an eventful journey home!” He elaborates, “A man is recognized for his distinct characteristics, just as a woman is for hers” (Haddach, 2011). Drawing from prophetic traditions, Haddach advises men against wearing all-red attire. He encourages seeking guidance from these traditions when choosing appropriate attire, asking oneself whether such a color or mannerism aligns with customary Muslim practices for men or women.

Haddach, in another session, emphasizes these gender-specific differences. While discussing the historical practice of cleaning oneself with stones before ablutions, he reflects on

the perceived robustness of men during the Prophet's time compared to contemporary notions of masculinity. He remarks with a touch of humor, “Those men had a different kind of resilience. Today's youth are taken aback when they learn about using stones for cleansing. The men of that era were stalwart. Today, even after using water, one might feel the need for an ointment! Modern bathrooms are replete with various ointments catering to different needs. Nowadays, the distinction between men and women has blurred,” he jests, raising his hands to indicate a leveling of roles (Haddach, 2011).

On the subject of headscarves, Haddach firmly believes in its mandatory nature, even if it poses challenges in one's professional or academic pursuits. Responding to a female student's predicament of potentially needing to remove her headscarf for a hospital internship, he states, “Religiously speaking, the directive is clear: we don't remove the headscarf, be it for a career in medicine, to appease a loved one, or any other reason. If a woman reveres God and believes in the significance of her headscarf, she should view it as an obligation. And this principle is not exclusive to just the headscarf” (Haddach, 2011).

He thinks that it applies to men as well, “Even men do not have to commit forbidden acts on themselves to go work. One has to inform themselves about the studies and whether they can do internships elsewhere” (Haddach, 2011).

While Haddach is hesitant to provide a religious ruling permitting the temporary removal of the headscarf for the internship, he suggests seeking guidance from another scholar. He advises, “To avoid leaving her in a state of uncertainty, I recommend she consult with a reputable Islamic center, especially if she's in her advanced years of study, like the fifth or sixth year” (Haddach, 2011).

However, he emphasizes that the guidance should not focus on completely removing the headscarf, but rather on finding an agreeable solution to maintain coverage. “Instead of entirely removing the headscarf, she should seek a fatwa on alternate ways to cover her head. As for our stance, we maintain that it shouldn't be removed” (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach argues that Muslim women in Belgium do not face such dire circumstances that they should be compelled to forgo wearing the headscarf. He believes the onus is on the Muslim community for not presenting a unified front in championing their right to wear the headscarf. To illustrate his perspective, he recounts an experience, “During my six-year tenure as the president of a parents' committee, whenever a headscarf issue arose, school authorities would argue that

some Moroccan parents believed the headscarf wasn't mandated by the Qur'an. The true challenge is not the schools. I firmly believe that the headscarf is not essentially a school-related issue" (Haddach, 2011).

In one discussion, a woman sought Haddach's advice on whether she could remove her headscarf to pursue university education. She mentioned that educators at the Khayriya Religious Academy advised her based on the principle "Allah burdens no soul beyond its capacity," suggesting she could remove the scarf since she felt she had no alternatives.

Haddach critiques these educators for their interpretation. he opines:

> Using the precept 'Allah burdens no soul beyond its capacity' requires a deep understanding of its context, especially from those teaching at such an institution. It's crucial to understand the essence of this verse. Ironically, their interpretation may have had the opposite effect of their intention. We shouldn't have to go against our religious beliefs for the sake of higher education. There are other paths to take (Haddach, 2011).

He extends this sentiment to men, emphasizing that life's choices shouldn't be a trade-off between faith and worldly pursuits. He cites his personal journey to elucidate:

> I completed my studies in management and accounting in 1990. Although I envisioned transitioning into Islamic accounting, the roles available in my field often conflicted with my religious beliefs. So, instead of compromising, I spent five years working as a tram driver for STIB, a departure from my academic background, but in line with my convictions (Haddach, 2011).

Furthermore, Haddach reflects on times when his beard – a symbol of his faith – became a point of contention during job interviews.

> I recall interviewing for office roles and being told, 'Everything was perfect, but there's a slight issue [referring to his beard].' To which I'd respond, 'If there's an issue, then so be it.' Once, an interviewer, seemingly perplexed by my stance,

> even offered perks like a company car, only to later ask, somewhat humorously, if I was 'normal' because of my unwavering commitment to my beard (Haddach, 2011).

He does not reproach Belgian society and politicians for the limitations the Muslim-Belgian community is undergoing in the case of wearing the headscarf. He believes that it is the problem of Muslims who do not stand together for their rights. He comments, “And some people say the Belgians are racist, we are the racists against our religion. But a Belgian, I understand him. He is an atheist and does his job” (Haddach, 2011).

To illustrate his point, Haddach shares a personal experience involving his daughters and the wearing of the headscarf in a Belgian school. Haddach remarks with irony:

> Years ago, when my daughters were still in school, a group of parents, including myself, agreed to address the headscarf issue with the school director. We felt that collectively taking a stand might influence the school's policy, given the potential implications if many students left. However, on the agreed-upon date, only five parents stood firm, while the rest silently accompanied their daughters, now without headscarves. One of the parents I confronted merely said, 'our daughters have to study.' So it begins with the headscarf and then what follows? (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach believes that the primary issue lies in the Belgian Muslim community's lax attitude towards their own principles, rather than external societal pressures. He wryly notes, "We seem ready to compromise our values for the smallest of gains. We prioritize various obligations, yet often neglect the crucial one −upholding our core principles" (Haddach, 2011).

When discussing relationships and marriage, Haddach underscores the value of familial involvement. He advises couples not to engage in romantic pursuits without informing their parents. Drawing on scholarly interpretations, Haddach contends that if a father opposes his daughter's marital choice, it is imperative for the couple to respect that decision to sidestep potential discord. He reveals, "There have been numerous accounts of daughters eloping without their parent's awareness" (Haddach, 2011). Haddach maintains that such unions aren't recognized

as legitimate by a significant segment of Muslim scholars. He notes that while men aren't obligated to have a family guardian when marrying, a woman needs approval and the attendance of her primary male guardian—initially her father, and subsequently other male kin if needed (Haddach, 2011).

Touching on the topic of pre-marital acquaintance, Haddach states that although the prophetic tradition generally discourages couples from establishing a relationship prior to marriage, it allows a man to discreetly observe a woman before proposing. He clarifies, "Despite the general stance against 'spying,' when it comes to marital prospects, there are established texts that permit such observations. This is not invasive spying, but rather a sanctioned opportunity to discern compatibility" (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach asserts that women should only converse with certain men over the phone without their spouse's awareness—specifically, their father, brother, uncle, or grandfather. He regards all other interactions with men over the phone as impermissible, barring specific necessities like legal consultations. If a woman is truly devout, Haddach believes her primary phone interactions should be with her female acquaintances. However, he concedes there might be scenarios where even the permissible male interlocutors are best avoided—for instance, if the uncle has a history of inappropriate behavior. Furthermore, he stresses that when a woman responds to a call meant for her husband, the exchange should be concise. He cautions, "Excessive conversation is unwarranted. For example, if a caller inquires 'Is Mohammed available?', the reply should simply be 'No, he isn't,' and the discussion should terminate there" (Haddach, 2011). Haddach justifies this caution by suggesting that extended interactions can pave the way for potential misunderstandings or unwanted emotions, especially if there's marital discord.

In a particular fatwa, Haddach advises against a male driving his female coworker home, cautioning that such proximity might provide an avenue for temptation and missteps. On another occasion, Haddach was approached by an online religious educator who maintains a Facebook page and occasionally communicates with female followers about religious teachings. This individual asked Haddach, “Is it appropriate for me to discuss religious matters with sisters without crossing boundaries?” (Haddach, 2011).

Haddach firmly believes in maintaining separation in conversations between opposite genders. He humorously suggests, “Focus on imparting knowledge to your mother, sister, or

aunt. If necessary, you could even call your grandmother in Morocco to educate her [audience laughs]. It's quite evident, isn't it? Some brothers seem especially enthusiastic about enlightening our sisters about religion [Haddach grins, causing the audience to chuckle]" (Haddach, 2011).

Furthermore, Haddach is critical of young Muslim men who, influenced by Western media, try to shape their wives according to what they see on screen. He observes, "I've noticed that some, after glimpsing Western women adopting a particular style or fashion on television, feel compelled to have their wives emulate it. If they witness a woman with a belly button piercing or a neck tattoo, they might urge their wives to adopt the same. They might even suggest their wives mimic the way another woman walks. It's high time they reassessed their values and ethics" (Haddach, 2011).

6.4.4 Views on Politics and Radicalization

Haddach notes that it is only in recent times that the term “Islamic terrorism” has become widely recognized. He emphasizes that prior acts of terror in Belgium were driven by various other motives. "The landscape has drastically changed today. For years, we hadn't heard of major terror attacks being carried out 'in the name of Islam'. Let's not forget groups like the communist militants, who weren't Muslims but rather disenchanted Belgians. The Braban killers weren't of Moroccan descent either; they were native Belgians, former gendarmes,” Haddach points out (Haddach, 2016).

He firmly refutes being labeled a “Salafi”, condemning those who have mistakenly branded him as such. Haddach is also critical of individuals who record his sermons and selectively edit them to depict him as having extremist views. He laments:

> Once, there was an article branding me a 'Salafi'. Based on what? A misguided interpretation? I did comment on boxing, labeling it as Haram, but they took it out of context. I explained the dangers of boxing when the intent is harm, emphasizing Islam's deep respect for the human body. But if it's for sport, training, or point-based championships, it's a different story. Yet, they chose to focus solely on my statement about it being Haram (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach also shares his perspective on the challenges faced by religious preachers. They are often burdened with the responsibility to voice the truth and become convenient targets when things go awry. He states, “The expectations from a preacher are high. People say, 'You should speak the truth.' And when I ask about their role, they shrug it off because they aren't preachers. Is this the essence of our faith? To lay the blame solely at the feet of the preacher? It's an oversimplification,” (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach notes a significant shortage of imams leading conferences across various regions in Belgium. He himself, despite being a regular contributor, contemplates ceasing his contributions. This is largely because instead of receiving appreciation for his efforts, he often faces accusations of radicalism. He shares:

> In Belgium, I'm one of the very few imams consistently touring and speaking. Many have ceased their efforts. I might follow suit soon. After dedicating 26 years to these conferences, I shouldn't have to defend myself against labels of extremism on national television. Let the youth seek knowledge wherever they choose—whether that's in local neighborhoods, cafes, or elsewhere (Haddach, 2016).

Anticipating claims of fundamentalism directed at him, Haddach remarks, “These terms ending in 'ist'—they aren't exclusive to one group. People of all beliefs, including Christians and atheists, have their convictions. Why wouldn't an atheist attend a Christian school? Because it's not in line with their beliefs,” (Haddach, 2011).

He encourages his listeners to remain steadfast, especially in the face of growing animosity towards Islam that often intensifies following terror attacks claimed to be in its name. Haddach stresses, “Don't be disheartened by current events. We, the regular Muslims, mourn them too. Such acts only serve the interests of fringe groups and not mainstream Islam. While many Muslims are victims, some people fail to distinguish between extremists and everyday believers, lumping everyone together,” (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach highlights that the Quran frequently speaks of peace, yet many focus predominantly on its references to jihad. He urges people to consider the magnitude of violence

in wars instigated by the West and juxtapose this with the conflict history in Islam. Haddach remarks:

> Many young people mistakenly believe that the Prophet, peace be upon him, dedicated his life to warfare. I challenge them to count the battles and their casualties and compare these numbers to the losses in the First World War, Second World War, Indochina War, Vietnam War, and so on. The contrasts are revealing. On platforms like Facebook, numerous videos and specialists encourage viewers to compare mentions of 'jihad' in the Quran to those of 'peace' and its variations. Peace is referenced hundreds of times, even with phrases like 'the peace of God almighty.' But these facts remain under-discussed because our youth haven't explored them, (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach believes that while terms like jihad might be formidable, they possess clear, well-defined interpretations in Islam. Drawing an analogy between jihad and national defense, he elaborates:

> Certain terms might seem daunting and evoke apprehension. However, thanks be to God, they are precisely defined. Entire volumes have been dedicated to explaining jihad. Consider it analogous to a nation's ministry of defense. Every Muslim, just as every global citizen, has a right to self-defense. No nation exists without a defense mechanism. Even the Vatican maintains the Swiss Guard, which symbolizes peace, yet it remains armed. In the face of aggression, what would you do? Simply stand by passively? No, you'd defend yourself (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach firmly believes that jihad is a state-driven action, not an individual mandate. It is aligned with the principle of defense and is the purview of official ministries. He expresses concern about young individuals who, from the corners of Belgian neighborhoods like Molenbeek, misconstrue the concept of jihad. He laments:

> It baffles me, these young ones who casually discuss 'jihad' in places like Molenbeek. There was a time when mentioning Molenbeek was met with chuckles, but now it's mentioned with a sense of pride. They provocatively declare, 'we need jihad,' or label others as 'infidels.' Such discussions are concerning and, unfortunately, they do occur. It's essential to acknowledge this reality, one that we've been pointing out for years (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach shares the dangers he has encountered while advocating for peace. He recalls:

> Within these very walls, we have faced numerous threats. Time and again, I've reached out to the authorities. And who are these aggressors? People who resemble us, adorned with beards and similar clothing. They witness our peaceful teachings, yet one of them, now convicted by the courts, confronted me in my office some years ago. His anger stemmed from my assertion that Belgium, a peaceful nation governed by law, has no room for jihad. I implored, 'If you seek chaos, take it elsewhere. Honor the tranquility and order of this nation.' My words incensed him to the extent that he threatened both me and my wife (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach emphasizes the importance of discernment when confronted with Islam's portrayal in Western media. He advises, "Living as a Muslim in a non-Muslim society, we're bound to face challenges. Don't be swayed by those who misrepresent Islam on television for mere sensationalism. Many discerning individuals recognize Islam as an open, structured faith with each tenet occupying a specific domain," (Haddach, 2016).

He also acknowledges that while some media exaggerations exist, there are undeniable truths, illustrated by his own harrowing experiences. Haddach draws a connection between extremism and the neglect of proper Islamic education for the youth, especially in the local language. He stresses:

> While some argue that the media distorts the image of extremism, certain truths cannot be denied. It's disheartening when one's kin threatens them with death. I

> ask, who addresses our community in French? We need to introspect. If you have a religious query, where do you seek answers? Where do our 14 or 15-year-olds turn to learn about their faith in French? Who conducts sessions for our youth in Belgium? By my estimation, very few. Who tours the mosques in Belgium, speaking French? Candidly, they are a rare few (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach condemns the binary mindset that simplifies an entire religion into mere terms like halal (allowed) and haram (forbidden). He attributes this to the current tumultuous state of Islam and observes, “With everything unfolding on television, be it attacks in Belgium, France, Syria, Palestine, Burma, Iraq, and others—there's barely a country that's untouched by conflict. Unfortunately, the youth these days rely more on superficial tools than in-depth learning,” (Haddach, 2016).

By "tools," Haddach refers to oversimplifications that reduce religious understanding to mere keywords. He elaborates, “Platforms like YouTube, Google, and the wider internet have made it so easy. Just seek an answer with a click. For instance, try searching 'Is being a policeman halal or haram?' You'll encounter a myriad of answers, from a simple 'yes' to outright condemnation,” (Haddach, 2016).

The backdrop of these remarks is pivotal: Haddach released this Q&A session on YouTube on 10th May 2016, shortly after the devastating 2016 Brussels bombings. He underscores, “We cannot avoid addressing the elephant in the room,” (Haddach, 2016). His primary concern is the lack of substantive Islamic education among the young, which can make them susceptible to radicalism. Drawing from his experience as an educator, he notes:

> I teach. But among every hundred or thousand students, a substantial number might believe I am misguided. Consequently, they might dismiss my teachings. Many might have a rudimentary exposure to Arabic school, which, it's worth noting, doesn't equate to a comprehensive religious education. Such schools often provide basic Arabic and an overview of the Prophet's life. Having taught in Arabic schools for eight years, I am well-acquainted with the curriculum. And then there are institutes, like the Islamic Institute here since the 80s, where I was a student around '87 (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach candidly acknowledges that even religious leaders can be perceived through a lens of popularity. He remarks, “By December, some students cease attending certain classes while persisting in others. When questioned, their reasoning was simply a preference for specific teachers, like myself or Kastit. It’s amusing — even in religious circles, there’s a sense of celebrity” (Haddach, 2016).

Once, a concerned father approached Haddach, stating, “A young man asked you about jihad, and you refrained from answering.” The father then posed a poignant question: “If you don’t guide our youth, then who will?” Haddach’s hesitation wasn’t due to evasion but because he recognizes that some questions can't be encapsulated in a few minutes. He observes, “There are topics so intricate that scholars pen entire 200-300 page books on them. Yet, some youths seek abbreviated responses like ‘infidels, jihad, end.’ Those expansive writings are now met with trepidation,” (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach believes that many youths yearn for unequivocal answers due to their way of approaching Islamic teachings. He opines that religious perspectives should accommodate variations and nuances reflecting time and place. He notes, “It's a fundamental duty to seek knowledge. At times, a question's depth and context can't be condensed into a binary answer. But for some, it’s reduced to a simple ‘it exists’ or ‘it doesn’t,’” (Haddach, 2016).

Concerned about the global narrative surrounding Islam and Muslims, Haddach warns of the risks associated with this limited comprehension. He reflects, “As years progress and tensions rise, the youth grapple with questions such as, 'If Muslims are under attack, how should we respond?'” (Haddach, 2016).

On occasions, Haddach finds young individuals invoking religious terms inappropriately within their local milieu. He asserts, “When young voices suddenly speak of tawhid [unification of God], it begs the question: Who taught you? Where did you learn this? We must engage in self-reflection,” (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach references Saudi Arabia to elucidate a setting where religious discourse is deeply woven into the societal framework. He explains:

> In Saudi Arabia, discussing myriad religious topics is standard due to its integrated religious fabric. Such discourse is buttressed by the nation's

> convictions, its constitution, and academic curriculum. Here, educators comprehensively address topics like jihad, knowing their discussions are anchored within a clear and structured context (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach points out that Belgium's religious discourse lacks the organizational structure present in some countries, resulting in a different dynamic when discussing religion. This absence of a robust framework in the domain of Islamic religious education makes Islam more susceptible to critiques by some Western media outlets. Haddach laments, "In Belgium, without such structure, we become easy targets. On television, they mock us, citing 'radicalism.' The Islamic center faced unwarranted criticism for weeks, as if it had contributed nothing positive. Yet, this very center pioneered advanced theological studies with preparatory programs in both French and Arabic, paving the way for further university education," (Haddach, 2016).

Addressing the participation rate in Islamic religious education in Belgium, particularly among the second and third generations of Moroccan immigrants, Haddach notes an unsettling trend. He recalls, "Where were the local youths? Many students, even from my era, hailed from Morocco, with a handful from Tunisia and Algeria. I vividly recall this as a student representative back then," (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach believes that this educational gap is the reason behind questions like the permissibility of Muslims working in police forces. He retorts, "Might there come a time when we'll need Muslim-origin officers to better connect with and understand our youth? This is beyond just theological rulings of halal or haram," (Haddach, 2016).

He criticizes those who in the case of emergencies, like child delivery, still cannot accept if a man helps deliver their child. He compares them to the first generation of Moroccans in Belgium and says:

> Like when our parents arrived here. Did they ever ask if the doctor was Muslim or not? When I was born in 1970, who helped my mother, blessed be her soul, deliver me? Did they ever ask if this person was a man or a woman? and if it is an emergency, will you tell them no let me call a scholar in Morocco to tell me if I can or not? People by instinct knew if there was something urgent or not. It is what it is. Even if they knew that in their modesty man should not look at the

> nakedness of one's wife, in their education, religion etc., but the moment he sees it is an emergency, he lets it be (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach views the Internet as a significant factor in propagating a radical mindset, noting how easy access allows followers to be influenced by various imams and religious teachings. He recalls, “In the past, without the internet, the thinking was more straightforward, and minds operated rationally. Back then, people would usually follow two or three imams at most. The older generation can vouch for how things were during the 80s, prior to the emergence of scholars like Zamzami. It was only then that we began hearing discussions on topics like 'the Sunna' and other aspects,” (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach emphasizes the importance of adapting religious education to align with the migratory patterns of Moroccans in Belgium. As the second generation of Moroccan immigrants transitioned from being guest workers to permanent settlers, there was a pressing need for a more structured religious education. Haddach asserts:

> It's unsurprising that the Belgians, especially those in power, find themselves in a conundrum. For years, we've lacked a proper religious framework that systematically imparts religious knowledge to our students. Brussels only had a few small mosques where teachings were dependent on what was available, not what was needed. Initially, our predecessors came with the intention to work for a short period and then return home. But with time and growing families, they settled. Were we equipped to offer these settlers the religious education they required? Merely attending an Arabic school doesn't equate to understanding religion (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach connects the acts of terrorism committed in Islam's name to the queries he often receives, such as whether one can be both a Muslim and a policeman in Belgium. He believes this is a reflection of a radicalized mindset, stemming largely from inadequate Islamic education. He explains, “When there are instances of Muslims committing acts of terror, citing religious motives like jihad, and then you're questioned about professions like policing or law, there's an underlying implication. This suggests that young Muslims in such professions are viewed as non-

believers. So, a youngster, based on this mindset, would deem even his own brother in the police force as an infidel," (Haddach, 2016).

For Haddach, the solution is not merely increasing the number of religious institutions but establishing a unified structure. He highlights an attendance issue, exacerbated by language barriers, since many do not comprehend Arabic. He asserts, "There's a palpable void in our community. Despite the abundance of mosques, there's a lack of cohesive structure. We're fragmented. One might establish a religious institution in the city center, only for another to pop up in Molenbeek shortly after, then another in Schaerbeek. We have countless institutes, but many attendees either don't understand Arabic or lack commitment. I've experienced this firsthand: starting a course in September with 50 students, only to have 20 by December, despite having multiple educators," (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach finds it baffling that debates still persist on whether Muslims can participate in politics or voting. He comments, "There are youngsters still pondering if they can vote in Belgium. It's surprising, especially when revered bodies like the Council of Senior Scholars and the Islamic Fiqh Academy have given their clear stance. Some of our youth need such clarifications" (Haddach, 2016).

Contrasting the Muslim and Jewish communities in Brussels, Haddach observes that the Jewish community presents a united front and respects their elected representatives' decisions and opinions. He remarks,

> A fellow once pointed out their limited numbers, but their unity and structure are commendable. When an issue concerns the Jewish community in Belgium, you don't see an array of voices; a few represent them, often the rabbi and a central representative. This is despite many in their community possessing accolades, wealth, and more. But since their spokesperson has been chosen to represent them, he speaks on their behalf. We should take a leaf out of their book. In our community, everyone feels the urge to speak out. After the terror attacks linked to young individuals from Molenbeek, I was disheartened to see some of our own tarnishing the image of innocent Muslims on channels like RTB and RTL. One even blamed the Al-Khalil Mosque without any evidence, asserting that it was the breeding ground for radicals (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach argues that laws in Islam are adaptable according to the context. He remarks, “A student once questioned me about the nature of 'law' in Islam, referring to the phrase 'bima anzala alah.' The divine laws were revealed in a different context and don't necessarily apply directly to modern-day scenarios in non-Muslim countries” (Haddach, 2016).

Building on this, Haddach emphasizes the importance of societal rules set for communal harmony. He recounts a humorous conversation to illustrate his point:

> I once asked a student, “In Morocco, are there traffic lights?” He agreed. I continued, “If you run a red light, do you get fined?” Again, he agreed. Then I posed, “But it's not mentioned in the Quran, right? Does that mean you should ignore the red light since it isn't in the Quran?” He hesitated, realizing the point. I had to guide him further, noting that just because the Quran doesn't mention traffic lights doesn't mean you can recklessly ignore them. I explained, “Such societal rules are designed for our safety. Imagine in the days of the desert, camels never had accidents over who had the right of way!” [The audience found this analogy amusing] (Haddach, 2016).

Haddach asserts that the Quran provides overarching principles which must be interpreted in light of contemporary human evolution. He emphasizes, “Humanity and nations have progressed. There are modern situations not explicitly detailed in the Quran. However, they align with its broader teachings, such as the principle of living in peace. Hence, nations have framed rules around commerce, economy, society, politics, and more, inspired by these broader teachings” (Haddach, 2016).

In Belgium, Haddach underscores that Islamic rulings are typically applied in Muslim-majority countries. Here, judgments are determined by the judiciary, especially in sensitive matters like disputes between Shi’i and Sunni Muslims. He asserts, “In Belgium, judges assess each situation ensuring no descent into chaos” (Haddach, 2011).

6.4.5 Review

Haddach's stances on various religious topics categorize him as a conservative imam, although he vehemently refutes any associations with Salafism. He frequently cites Saudi Arabian scholars but emphasizes that esteemed scholars can be found globally. Haddach advocates for maintaining strong ties with Morocco, especially in the form of financial support for the family. For Haddach, while integration into Belgian society is essential, it should not erode one's Muslim identity. He believes that integration should be limited to scientific, cultural, and political dimensions and urges Muslims in Belgium not to blindly emulate other communities. For instance, he has specific views on permissible music based on his religious interpretations and believes in strict boundaries between men and women before marriage. The ideal marital process for him involves mutual questioning and agreement upon terms before marriage without engagement. He stands against using social media platforms for matrimonial purposes. Additionally, Haddach emphasizes the importance of respecting Belgian institutions, asserting that those who can't adhere should consider leaving.

Born in Belgium, Haddach recognizes the identity crisis many descendants of Moroccan immigrants in Western Europe grapple with. They're often viewed as Belgians in Morocco and as Moroccans in Belgium. To counteract this sentiment of non-belonging, he reminds his listeners that all land is God's creation. Addressing the challenges of racism and prejudice Muslims face in Belgium, Haddach advises good conduct to challenge and change these negative perceptions, amplified by extremism. He stresses the importance of Muslims portraying Islam positively, especially to those unfamiliar with it. Haddach believes Sunni Muslims can befriend Shiites, provided there's mutual respect for beliefs.

Haddach holds distinct views on gender roles. He believes men should avoid colors traditionally associated with women, such as pink or yellow. He laments what he sees as a blurring of gender distinctions in modern times. On the topic of marriage, Haddach maintains that while men do not require a male guardian to wed, women do. He further asserts that fathers have the right to refuse a suitor for their daughter, but he doesn't mention the mother's rights in this regard. Additionally, Haddach believes men can discreetly observe a woman to determine marital compatibility. He feels women should only communicate with male relatives such as fathers, brothers, uncles, or grandfathers without their husband's knowledge. However, he

frequently asserts that conversations between unrelated men and women are generally inappropriate.

Regarding the hijab, Haddach asserts its wearing is essential, even if it hampers educational or professional opportunities. He doesn't believe it's imperative for Muslim women in Belgium to be allowed to remove their headscarves. Instead of reproaching Belgian policies or society for hijab restrictions, Haddach points to the Muslim community, criticizing their lack of unified support for hijab rights. Drawing a parallel between the headscarf for women and beards for men, Haddach mentions having personally declined job offers due to his beard.

Haddach emphasizes that only in recent times has terrorism become associated with Islam. Earlier terrorist incidents in Belgium had distinct dynamics. While the Quran predominantly advocates for peace, he laments that many focus only on its mentions of jihad. He suggests comparing the brutality of certain Western-led wars to truly grasp the differences. Haddach urges his followers to stay resilient, especially considering the amplification of anti-Muslim sentiments due to acts of terror purportedly done in Islam's name. He delineates that while Islam acknowledges concepts like jihad, they are distinct, equating more with self-defense, and sees it as a state-driven initiative rather than an individual's prerogative. This stance makes him critical of youths promoting jihad locally in Belgium, which in turn has led to death threats against him.

Haddach concedes that while media can exaggerate the extent of Islamist extremism, there's some truth to it, underscored by threats to his own life. He correlates the rise of extremism with the lack of appropriate Islamic teachings in native languages, particularly during formative teenage years. He expresses the challenges faced by imams, often scapegoated when issues arise. Haddach notes the scarcity of imams giving lectures across Belgium, hinting at his own considerations of stepping back due to unwarranted accusations of extremism. He identifies a decline in attendance for Islamic religious education, especially among second and third-generation Moroccan-Belgians. The Internet, enabling followers to access various imams and teachings, he feels, exacerbates extremism. Haddach advocates for a unified teaching framework using the host country's language. He also critiques the contemporary trend where imams are sometimes idolized like celebrities.

Haddach critiques the oversimplified view that reduces the entire spectrum of a religion to just halal (allowed) and haram (forbidden). He links this binary mindset to the present-day

turmoil surrounding Islam. He believes that a lack of proper Islamic education for young Muslims may contribute to radicalization. He suggests that the youth, accustomed to binary responses, get frustrated when confronted with nuanced answers. Furthermore, he posits that religious understanding should recognize the diversity and nuances that shift with time and place. He remarks that young believers occasionally misuse theological terms, such as tawhid, in contexts inappropriate for their surroundings.

Citing Saudi Arabia, Haddach explains that religious teachers there have the liberty to discuss any religious topic because religion is deeply ingrained in social, educational, and political spheres, facilitated by structured institutions. He contrasts this with Belgium, where the absence of such a framework makes Islam more vulnerable to critiques, particularly by certain Western media.

Drawing a parallel, Haddach feels the Jewish community exhibits stronger cohesion and respect towards its leaders, unlike the Muslim community, where everyone tends to voice individual opinions. He finds it bewildering that debates persist regarding Muslim participation in politics or voting. He emphasizes that the Quran presents overarching principles that should be contextualized to human progress. He also underscores that while the laws of Islam might be rooted in a specific context, individuals have historically created universal rules to structure their lives. And while Islamic laws are applicable primarily in Muslim-majority nations, in Belgium, it is the legal system and the judges that prevail.

6.5 Imam Khalid Benhaddou

6.5.1 Biography

Another interesting imam to study is Khalid Benhaddou, Moroccan Belgian imam of the El Fath, the biggest mosque in Ghent. The opinion about Benhaddou is so polarized. "Radical Muslims find me too Westernized," he says in a recent interview with the daily newspaper *DeMorgen*, "the radical right calls me 'an extremist in a suit'" (Antonissen, 2020).

Khalid Benhaddou is from a Riffian background. His father immigrated from Al Houseima in the 60s and went to Belgium to work as a florist in Melle. He was born in 1988 in Ghent and raised there. He memorized the Koran at twelve. His parents wanted him and his siblings to, "know certain chapters from the Quran to say our prayers as Muslims" (Antonissen, 2020). And, unlike students of religion who traveled to the Middle East to pursue their Islamic studies, at the age of 14, Benhaddou started studying Islamic theology at the Grand Mosque in Brussels on Saturdays and Sundays. At the age of eighteen in 2006, he became the youngest imam in Belgium and worked in El Fath mosque in the city of Ghent. He recalls this experience,

> I had a good voice, they said, "You are ready to lead the Friday prayer." I had experience in public speaking. After memorizing the Quran, I participated in international Quran competitions for years, with candidates from all over the world, and a jury saying, "Recite from chapter three: verse 186." Then you have to do that on the spot, without a book. In Dubai, the most prestigious competition, I finished third. So, I was used to it, but for my first sermon as an imam, I trembled like an aspen leaf (Samuel, 2018).

Later, he became chairman of the platform for Flemish imams and coordinator of the educational network of Islam experts, collaborates with the Ministry of Education on prevention of polarization and radicalization and gives training and lectures on Islam. Khalid is chairman of the Platform of Flemish imams. He addresses both Turkish (12,000 people) and Moroccan Muslims (7,000) in Ghent.

He is considered to be an advocate of "rational Islam, " and a contemporary voice in the Flemish Muslim world. He is also a staunch critic of *Salafist* theology and preaches against radicalism. "To stop radicalization," he insists, "you have to know the story behind it"

(Klasse, 2016). Benhaddou is the author of several books in Dutch where he tries to reconcile Western values of enlightenment with the teachings of Islam. His publications include *Is there More than OneIslam?* (2016), and co-authored, *May God Have a Liberal, a Christian and a Muslim in Conversation* (2017), *Opinion, Fact and Judgment: Lessons for the 21st Century* (2018), and *Lost in Enlightenment: What Can We Agree on in a Society of Us against Them* (2019)?

In 2015, the Belgian post office, Bpost, announced its intention to release a stamp featuring Belgian faith leaders, including Khalid Benhaddou, Rabbi Guigui, chief rabbi of Belgium, and the Bishop of Antwerp Johan Bonny dressed in their faith's traditional garb, with the aimed of promoting religious unity and coexistence. The three figures appear close together with their hands clasping. The slogan on the stamp reads, "Everybody equal, everybody different" (Phila Mirror, 2015). This initiative demonstrates the distinguished position Imam Benhaddou has in Belgium's religious landscape.



Figure 16 Belgian Stamp featuring Belgian faith leaders, Imam Khalid Benhaddou with Rabbi Guigui and Bishop Johan Bonny

https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/tolerance.jpg

6.5.2 Views on Identity

By self-identification, Benhaddou is before anything else a Flemish citizen. He says, "I call myself a Flemish imam. I was born here and I am Flemish. I have Moroccan roots, but I am primarily a Flemish citizen. I also think it is important to profile myself as a Fleming. If only to show that imams can come from home and do not necessarily have to be imported from the Middle East." (DePaepe, 2014). On his Facebook page, he describes himself as Belgian, Flemish, Moroccan and Muslim. Benhaddou is critical of the imported Islam of foreign theologians. "We need Flemish imams more!" he insists. He is delighted that Belgium started imams' training programs in Leuven and Antwerp. "This is good," he comments, "In the coming years, more and more imams will come from home. And that will only benefit European Islam" (De Paepre, 2014).

He hopes that the phenomenon of imported imams will find its end. He views it as a matter of language and context. The first generation of immigrants did not speak the language of the host country, it was normal for them to have an imam who spoke their language and shared their culture. This, Benhaddou insists, should not apply to the new generations in Europe:

> Today we have many imported imams who preach a discourse that is good for areas in Morocco, good for a region where they grew up themselves. Muslims here largely cling to a reading of Islam that comes from the Middle East. That is not good. We need contextual Islam in Europe. We must disconnect from the experience of Islam there. But that is only possible if we have valid figures here (De Paepre, 2014).

Benhaddou stands out as a religious intellectual eager to harmonize Islamic doctrines with Western ideals. Identifying as a Flemish individual with Moroccan ancestry, he endeavors to lend credibility to his voice, addressing both the Muslim populace in Belgium and the broader Flemish community. He is not an outsider preaching an alien belief, but a Flemish national guiding his followers towards enlightenment, urging the larger community to approach his message with openness.

By insisting on his Flemish identity, the intention of Benhaddou is not really trying to

downplay his Moroccan identity. It is mainly to distance himself from foreign interventionism in the Islamic religious matters of Flemish and Belgian Muslims. Unlike imported imams, imams born locally such as himself know how to deal with the identity issues that the second generation, and the ones that follow it, of Muslims in Western Europe struggle with in their daily lives. On the dilemma of the identity of the second generation he says,

> It is the second generation that was and is still dealing with identity issues. They struggle and often wonder what they are now. Fleming, Moroccan? How can I live my faith in Flanders? Can I be a Muslim here? Do certain principles of Islam not run counter to the principles, for example here in Flanders? How can I be a good citizen of Flemish society without denying myself? All these questions have caused the need to arise in order to be able to talk about it with, for example, imams 'from here'. Imams who give sermons that are adapted to a real context and not to that of, say, Morocco. It is a new context with new challenges and new issues (De Paepe, 2014).

Benhaddou affirms that immigrant identity is not homogeneous and fixed but plural and disjunct, and identifying one as Muslim is only reductionist and undermines other aspects of their identity. He declares that, "often identities are played off against each other and people fall for it. I don't want to be reduced to that one Muslim identity. I am an imam, yes, but I am also European and I feel that utterly. It is actually a story of action and reaction. If you only address people on one identity, they fold back. I advocate de-Islamizing the debate" (Puymbroeck, 2018). Elsewhere he defines his identity as situated in between, "I'm somewhere in between. We can go back to the source, but not to linger in it, but as an inspiration to move forward" (Hiele, 2019).

Benhaddou, an outspoken critic of Belgium's practice of bringing in foreign imams, ardently supports the local training of religious leaders. He states, "We need comprehensive imam training in Flanders. There's already a program in Leuven, and now one in Antwerp has begun. This is a positive step. As the years pass, we'll see an increasing number of homegrown

imams, which will only strengthen European Islam" (Benhaddou, 2017).

Furthermore, he chides politicians for overlooking the importance of structuring the Islamic religious domain to safeguard it against radicalization. He comments, "It baffles me that while our politicians are quick to decry incidents related to extremism, they hesitate when asked to formally recognize Islam and create structures for its better integration. Without professionalizing Islam, we're pushing people towards unofficial religious instruction, which remains unchecked and uncontrolled" (Decre, 2019).

Benhaddou believes that young Flemish Muslims must be addressed in Dutch since it is their language. He remarks that one of the reasons why Ghent, the city where he preaches that has 20,000 Muslims, has no one who traveled to IS to fight is the use of Dutch in mosques. When Flemish Muslim youth feel answered and understand the sermons they do not go and look for information elsewhere. He says, "I think there are several reasons for that. For starters, there are several mosques here that also preach in Dutch in addition to Arabic. That is not unimportant. That is the language of the young. If these young Muslims are not addressed in their language, they look for information themselves and find it on often very dubious websites" (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

The aim of his book, *Is dit nu de islam?* 2017 (*Is this Islam now?*), is to "build a bridge between the Quran, which has become an integral part of me since childhood, and the European/global society in which I live" (Kooyman, 2017).

Benhaddou integrates concepts beyond the realm of religion to shape his perspectives. He believes human rights serve as a cornerstone for social consensus and the foundation of all religions. They have the potential to integrate religious laws into societal norms (Aerts, 2018). He states:

> In these challenging times, as various truths intersect and clash, I remain deeply committed to human rights. When we grapple for social consensus, we need a touchstone, and human rights fit this role perfectly. In my discussions about Islam, I always return to this human rights framework. The nuanced understanding was lost post-attacks, societal unity is strained, and fear is prevalent. We need balanced individuals to bridge the divide, engage with all sides, and identify common ground. That's my mission

(Aerts, 2018).

With a vision to reform, Benhaddou sees himself as a proactive imam. Responding to a journalist's query about his motivation and objectives, Benhaddou elaborated:

> My goal is to normalize the perception of Islam and its followers. To integrate them seamlessly into society, dispelling the fears of an emerging ideological extremism. The perceived disparity between Islam and the West isn't new, yet with millions of Muslims now in Europe, pertinent questions arise. Is Islam compatible with Western society? Is it an enrichment or threat? Amidst concerns of potential Islamization, my endeavor is to infuse rationality into these discussions. I aim to find interpretations within Islamic traditions that align with European ideals and resonate with the Muslim community. I'm hopeful of accentuating critical and scientific elements within Islam (De Paepe, 2014).

Benhaddou champions the infusion of rationality into religious interpretation, emphasizing critical thinking and drawing inspiration from Averroes' advocacy for the harmony of religion and science. The "rational Islam" that Benhaddou envisions rejects prevailing conservatism, envisioning instead an Islam resonant with contemporary society (DePaepe, 2014). He aspires “to normalize Islam and its followers.” He contends that religion, even in today's advanced societies, remains an ethical compass, stating, “Historically, religion has cemented societies. It imparted purpose, healed souls, and built bridges between individuals” (DePaepe, 2014). While secularism has its merits, it often yields feelings of isolation and existential voids; religion can bridge these gaps, offering solace and direction.

However, Benhaddou is discerning enough to recognize religion alone won't rectify all challenges in today's Flemish society. He postulates, "Humanity faces pressing, existential concerns—climate change, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, to name a few. How does religion address these? Religion risks irrelevance if it merely parrots ancient scriptures without evolving" (Hiele, 2019).

For a holistic understanding of rational Islam, Benhaddou delves into both Eastern and

Western intellectual traditions. Beyond the Koran, his foundational text, he studies ancient Arab luminaries like Ibn Rushd, praising him as a proponent of a progressive, "rational Islam" whose works faced persecution due to their avant-garde nature (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019). He also engages with contemporary Arab intellectuals, notably Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, and Western philosophers, spanning Plato to Marx. In contrast, traditional Moroccan imams, such as Sheikh Mohamed Toujgani and Al Khammar El Bekkali, primarily confine themselves to Islamic texts. Benhaddou feels this restricted scope hampers their ability to resonate with Europe's Muslim youth.

In an interview, when quizzed about his recent literary explorations, Benhaddou listed diverse figures from political scientist Francis Fukuyama to novelist Michel Houellebecq and historian-philosopher Yuval Noah Harari. Justifying his eclectic readings, he mentioned, “I'm deeply driven by understanding societal frameworks, and every book I delve into refines this understanding further” (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

In his book, "Is dit nu de islam?", Benhaddou asserts that the core values of Islam align with those championed by the West, with the rule of law as a foundational principle. He encapsulates his book's essence with, “Muslims deserve a reasoned Islamic discourse—one that captures the spirit of Islam and can inspire value addition to society, finding their rightful place within it” (Mil, 2017). He further emphasizes the importance of interpreting the Qur'an contextually and metaphorically, rather than merely literally.

Addressing the question of whether Flemish identity conflicts with Muslim beliefs, Benhaddou clarifies, “Being Flemish and Muslim are not mutually exclusive. Many values that resonate with the average Fleming are ones we, as Muslims, hold dear. We grapple with similar challenges, be it socio-economic issues, aging populations, or others” (DePaepe, 2014). Benhaddou, thus, counters the anti-immigration narrative that paints Muslims as incompatible with European society. He firmly believes Muslims can seamlessly integrate into Europe without compromising its essence.

Aiming to dispel misconceptions around Sharia, Benhaddou clarifies that its primary purpose is deterrence rather than punishment. "Sharia is a holistic legal system, encompassing more than the oft-cited punishments like death by stoning. These rules need to be contextualized historically, emphasizing their deterrent intent rather than a literal application. During the prophet's era, such punitive measures were rarely executed," he notes (Aerts, 2018).

Furthermore, Benhaddou asserts that, in essence, Sharia embodies values akin to European law, emphasizing that its interpretation is pivotal. "When approached in spirit, Sharia mirrors European laws. But problems arise when one attempts a verbatim application of ancient rules in today's context. The prophet wasn't fixated on regulations, but on justice," he remarks (Benhaddou, 2017).

Highlighting his distinct approach towards Sharia, Benhaddou is outspoken against the growing trend of "halalization of society." He clarifies:

> I refuse to be part of this 'halalization' wave, characterized by an excess of standards and norms. I understand its appeal, especially to a rising Muslim generation seeking guidance in a liberal society. Imams emphasizing 'haram' – forbidden acts – tend to be more popular. While I won't claim music is 'haram', some might question my legitimacy as an imam because of it. Regardless, I firmly differentiate myself from Salafism or conservative Islam (Hiele, 2019).

Obviously, Benhaddou sees himself as an imam whose mission is not restricted to the guidance of his congregation in the El Fath mosque in Ghent. It is much broader. “The task I have given myself […] my life purpose,” he says is “Not only in Flanders. I would also like to make my voice heard in the rest of Europe. There is room there for Muslim thinkers. We have had Tariq Ramadan, Swiss philosopher and Islamologist, who wrote about how to be a ‘European Muslim’” (Hiele, 2019). A European Muslim thinker is then the profile Benhaddou has shaped for himself.

Benhaddou rejects *Salafism* altogether. He thinks that the conservative thinking in Islam is incompatible with the European reality. He expresses his shock about the Salafist mosque schools in the Netherlands And their broadcast by Nieuwsuur and NRC. "It is inherent in the Salafist worldview that ideas are held that are at odds with our model of society, but the hardness with which they are conveyed to children is striking," says Imam Khalid Benhaddou (Decre, 2019).

Benhaddou argues that there are even scholars in the Arab world who are examining the question of whether political Islam has or can have a future in the Arab world. He explains,

“One question they are considering is, for example, how the Islamic world can get a renaissance, especially now that Islam is in a very bad light. We European and Flemish Muslims are also victims of this view. But those thinkers don't get a podium in the Islamic world” (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

Benhaddou considers Flanders to be less susceptible to indoctrination with Salafism in Koranic schools and radical ideologies that breed jihadism. He knows that Flanders is different from the Netherlands but is aware that it also exists in the north of Belgium as well. He announces, “Here and there I receive signals that there are Koranic schools with a Salafist signature, that they have a strange world view. that is not in line with our model of society" (Decre, 2019). Benhaddou notices this from parents who come to him because their children make certain strange statements, but also from teachers at school, "That happens now and then, without overestimating it. We have to think about how we can do something about it."

He is convinced that, "Salafism in the Netherlands is much more structured, much more institutionalized in the Muslim community than it is with us. In the Netherlands they have a much more foothold, a much greater reach and therefore a greater influence.” But he is apprehensive of how social media could serve as a vehicle to spread the Salafist ideology to Flanders, “they can also reach young people in Flanders., for example through social media. We have to keep an eye on that" (Decre, 2019).

According to Benhaddou, it is important to work on the recognition of mosques in order to monitor these Koranic schools, he insists, "Quran schools are often attached to mosques. If they are not recognized by the government, then there are few options to do anything about it. They can then offer Islamic education without any control from the government or the Muslim executives" (Decre, 2019).

Benhaddou’s Moroccan affiliation is expressed in his participation at several events organized by the European Council of Moroccan *Ulama* such as the press conference held by the European Council of Moroccan *Ulama*, and other Islamic organizations in Belgium on 8 May, 2013, to express their opposition to Muslim youth joining fighting in Syria. On 20 February, 2017, he participated in the conference organized by the Council at As-Salam Mosque in Antwerp, under the title “Muslim Youth and Coexistence” (Ceomeurope, 2020).



Figure 17 mam Benhaddou in a CEOM event.

Accessed at:
https://aljaliya24.tv/2017/02/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-

The Moroccan-Belgian imam attracted more spotlight in June 2017 when he received a visit from King Filip at his home. King Filip came to experience the *iftar* in Ramadan with the imam and his family. Under the title, "King Filip Joins a Table with a Moroccan Family," a journalist writes,

> What was striking was the loose atmosphere in which everything went. The packed house and a less solemn environment caused laughter and open stories. The family was introduced and there was also back and forth talk about Ramadan, the importance of the family, the meal itself of course and about Muslims in our society (Decroubele, 2017).



Figure 18 Belgian King Filip sharing the iftar in Ramadan with the imamBenhaddou and his family.
Accessed at:
https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/06/219637/king-philippe-belgium-breaks-fast-moroccan-family

Interviewed by the media about the royal visit, the imam, said that the king

> absolutely wanted to experience an *Iftar* meal during Ramadan. The king enjoyed our company and the food. He stayed for two hours instead of an hour. I had the feeling that he immediately felt at home with us. King Philippe was very curious. He wanted to know everything about Ramadan. Whether it is more difficult because the days are longer, for example. But he also asked about our personal interests. And he said to my father that he raised us well (Decroubele, 2017).

On the food the king was served Benhaddou explains: "*Harira*, a Moroccan beef soup, was followed with chicken *pastilla*, a savory pie. Then there was quiche and tuna spring roll. And those were just the starters. Then we served the king a tagine with veal and prunes. And of course, we ended with coffee and sweets (Claeys, 2017).

To the Moroccan online news media outlet *Alyaoum24*, on the Belgian king's visit to his home he says:

> From Moroccan origin, born and raised in Belgium from Moroccan parents […] Among the issues the King was interested to know was "how we managed to reconcile between two cultures and two identities. The original Moroccan identity and our Belgian identity. We have been born here and raised here so we have a Belgian identity and at the same time, we have never abandoned our original Moroccan identity because our parents were deeply attached to this authenticity and identity. We have, thank God, inherited that from them. And the king, our king, was inquiring about how these two identities can be reconciled. Praise be to God, we talked a great deal about that (Alyaoum24, 2017)

He also proudly lists the various Moroccan dishes served to the Belgian king, tea, and pasteries. The Moroccan food, so much cherished by the Belgian king, must have been a source of ethnic and cultural pride for the Moroccan Belgian imam and his family, and symbolically a transnational link with home as well as a migrant's contribution to the royal host and to the host country.

In addition to Moroccan food, the king was interested in knowing how his immigrant subjects cope with cultural and identity negotiation and manage to reconcile their original and acquired identities. "Praise be to God," says Benhaddou, "we talked a great deal about that."

6.5.3 Views on Gender

In 2017, the Muslim Executive of Belgium, led by Salah Echallaoui, proposed the introduction of female preachers. Echallaoui, a proponent for modernizing Islam, previously shared in a newspaper his belief in amplifying women's roles. "A woman as an imam? Not yet. But the day will come. In certain locales, women already teach and preach. I'm keen on having women in our theological council, and envision female imams in our future" (Amkreutz, 2017).

Khalid Benhaddou notes that while female preachers, or *murshidates*, are more common internationally, like in Morocco where many women have been officially recognized within Islam, they remain a novelty in Europe. He says, “Many female preachers exist in the Islamic world, but Europe is less familiar with the idea. Several Flemish and Dutch mosques are witnessing increased participation by women in roles like teaching or youth work” (Amkreutz, 2017).

Benhadddou sees this evolution as a necessary step. He states, “Granting them an official status is not just normal, but a necessary evolution. However, this is distinct from the conversation about female imams" (Amkreutz, 2017).

When posed with a question about freedom, particularly in the context of gender identity and roles, Benhaddou first acknowledged the importance of individual choices. “The ability for individuals to choose freely is commendable, and I recognize the battles fought to secure this freedom” (Benhaddou, 2021). But he also cautioned that unchecked freedom, devoid of morality, might exacerbate inequalities. "Nietzsche had forewarned that a post-Christian moral world wouldn't necessarily be egalitarian, suggesting a landscape where the powerful overshadow the weak. His predictions ring true today, given the prevalent social disparities" (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

Benhaddou perceives controversies like the one surrounding headscarves as manifestations of the inequalities produced by unchecked freedom. “It's disheartening to see religion being manipulated for cultural politics. Issues like the burkini and hijab are incessantly politicized” (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

The Moroccan-Flemish imam, Benhaddou, views the intense debate surrounding the headscarf as not only outdated but also disproportionate in its significance. He remarks, “It's disconcerting to see our society magnifying this as a central issue. The United Kingdom, for instance, doesn’t engage in such debates. The Netherlands too seems to be adopting a similar stance” (Benhaddou interview, 2017). In his perspective, this debate merely serves as a distraction from the genuine challenges facing Flemish Muslims.

Arguing against the inconsistency in the Flemish context, he points out, “It's a glaring contradiction to champion the virtues of a multicultural and diverse society, and then restrict the wearing of the headscarf in the name of neutrality. The government, of all entities, should be reinforcing the idea that diversity is a strength. True diversity entails allowing individuals the

freedom to express their religious beliefs without constraint" (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

Countering misconceptions about the headscarf, Benhaddou emphasizes the principle of individual choice in Islam, stating, "Notice how many Muslim women choose not to wear the hijab while their peers do. The essence of a Muslim woman is defined by her thoughts and beliefs, not the attire she dons" (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

When a journalist posed a question regarding the views of figures like Egyptian-American writer Mona Eltahawy or Turkish-German imam Seyran Ates, who argue that Muslim women in the West who advocate for the hijab may not fully comprehend the struggles of their counterparts in the Arab world who fight against it, he responded by suggesting a shift in focus. "While it's true that the hijab often brings up negative connotations for many, such as oppression or aversion to LGBTQ+, maybe it's these underlying associations we need to address rather than the hijab itself" (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

On the topic of relationships, his stance is more open than traditional views like those of Imam Haddach, who discourages any contact between a man and a woman prior to marriage. Recalling his personal experience, he shared, "Our relationship began with a chat on Facebook and then a meet-up at her university. It was platonic at first but grew over time. I've always believed I'd marry when I felt a genuine connection, and now, I feel it" (Benhaddou interview by Mulders, 2019).

His views on homosexuality are multifaceted. He mentions, "While Islam promotes a distinct kind of relationship, it underscores that no one has the authority to judge another, be it on religious grounds or sexual orientation. What one chooses to do privately is between them and God; I don't offer opinions on such matters." (2021, Van Giel)

However, when reminded of the Enlightenment's role in ensuring individuals in Belgium could freely express their sexual orientation, he retorts:

> The Enlightenment also championed the right to diverse thought. If you compel me to accept homosexuality, isn't that in conflict with Enlightenment ideals? I can hold a different perspective on homosexuality than you. It's concerning how frequently believers are pushed into defensive positions on subjects like

> homosexuality or evolution. It aligns with an emerging tendency to sideline religion in our society (2021, Van Giel).

6.5.4 Views on Politics and Radicalization

Benhaddou envisions a rational Islam where Muslims actively participate in European politics. He argues, “Our community often feels out of place in the existing political landscape. We don't entirely identify with liberals, socialists, or nationalists. Yet, rooted in our Islamic values, we possess a collective vision for society. There's no conflict in this, provided these values align with democratic principles” (Paepe, 2014).

He posits that the divine should have a place in politics. “Throughout history, religion has shaped societal norms. In our era of unparalleled personal freedom, many grapple with unhappiness, evident in rising antidepressant use and suicide rates. We don't live in a joyous society,” Benhaddou notes (Paepe, 2014). He further emphasizes, "Religion should significantly influence societal structures. It's a primary source of our shared norms. While my alignment with Christian Democrats is limited, we resonate with certain values rooted in faith. To me, the foundation of morality is divinely ordained, not individually determined" (Paepe, 2014).

Addressing the representation of Muslims in politics, Benhaddou advocates for a distinct Muslim political entity. Recognizing the challenges, particularly due to the diverse nature of Muslims in Belgium, he stresses:

> Undeniably, Muslims form a significant part of Flemish society, numbering around 300,000. And yet, many feel unrepresented. This underscores the need for collective action, to determine our societal role and ensure our Islamic values, harmonious with democratic principles, find representation (Paepe, 2014).

Benhaddou feels a distinct lack of representation and sees God as a potential guiding force in politics. He notes a shift away from traditional values, observing that Christian Democratic parties have increasingly distanced themselves from framing God as the cornerstone of morality. This trend, he feels, diminishes the pivotal role of religion as society's moral bedrock. Rik Torfs, a former senator for the Christian Democratic and Flemish party in the

Belgian Federal Parliament, expressed similar concerns, highlighting the neglect of Christian foundations in modern discourse.

Articulating his perspective, Benhaddou states, “Religion has historically shaped societal norms. Today's emphasis on unfettered freedom and extreme individualism raises questions about its sustainability. In this aspect, I find some alignment with the views of the Flemish nationalists, who also challenge the narrative of unchecked liberty” (Paepe, 2014).

When queried on whether he identifies as a “Muslim democrat”, akin to a Christian Democrat, Benhaddou responds that the overlap lies in their shared values. He believes that like him, Christian Democrats look to their faith as a source of guiding principles. “Morality's roots,” he asserts, “are embedded in divine guidance, not individual whims” (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

Despite his assertion that the Flemish political scene lacks genuine representation for Muslims, Benhaddou urges them to be pragmatic voters. He advises Flemish Muslims to support parties that align with their broader worldview, saying, “I don't abstain from voting. I choose a party that mirrors my beliefs. Beyond being a Muslim, I'm also an educator, and I seek a party that best captures my vision” (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

From his formative years, Benhaddou consciously steered away from radical and fundamentalist Islam. Throughout the interview, he continuously credits his parents for instilling in him a balanced worldview. This was evident in his youthful days when his interests spanned both the realms of football and Islamic studies. Such a balanced upbringing paved the way for him to embrace a more moderate and inclusive interpretation of Islam. His fluency in Dutch, combined with his age, positioned him uniquely close to the youth.

He mentions, "I resonate deeply with the younger generation here. Their passions are mine. I often find myself amidst them, engaging in conversations over tea, participating in sports, or simply discussing life. Furthermore, I am actively involved in initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between Muslims and the Flemish community. And I emphasize, as an imam, that the events in Iraq and Syria do not reflect the Islam we uphold" (Paepe, 2014).



Figure 19 A beardless imam with a suit and tie Accessed at: *https://www.humo.be/nieuws/radicale-moslims-vinden-me-te-verwesterd-radicaal-rechts-noemt-mij-een-extremist-in-maatpak~b84cecdd/?referrer=https://www.google.com/*

Benhaddou's sermons are distinct, and often centered around contemporary issues, particularly those that resonate with the youth. He asserts, "In my role as an imam, it's crucial to be attuned to the experiences and challenges of young Muslims in Flanders, so I can address their real-time concerns" (De Paepe, 2014).

Benhaddou actively stands against jihadist Salafism and the extremities of radical Islam, putting forth concerted efforts to dissuade the youth from affiliating with the Islamic State or engaging in acts of terror. Reflecting on the motivations of early recruits, he recalls:

> Many early sympathizers claimed their intentions were humanitarian, stating, 'We cannot stand by and watch Assad harm our brethren.' They believed that a Muslim should never forsake fellow believers. To this, I posed a counter: 'Isn't there a way to support these siblings, like raising funds for the White Helmets actively aiding on the ground?' Deradicalization is a step-by-step process. It's not about instantly endorsing the idea of rational Islam. If I had proclaimed, 'Every human being is your sibling,' my message might have fallen on deaf ears (DeMorgen, 2020).

Benhaddou observes that Ghent's absence of IS fighters might owe itself to the dominant Muslim Flemish-Turkish populace, renowned for their moderate interpretation of Islam. He notes, "Notably, the predominant Muslim group in Ghent is Turkish. Their adherence to movements emphasizes a remarkably balanced understanding of Islam." (Antonissen, 2020)

Furthermore, Benhaddou underscores the necessity for imams to embrace a tempered perspective on Islam and to effectively communicate using the vernacular of the youth. Otherwise, the young will inevitably seek knowledge independently, often stumbling upon misleading and extremist websites. Addressing the question of whether striving for a caliphate is a justifiable jihad from an Islamic standpoint, he firmly states, "From an Islamic perspective, it is not a sanctioned battle. Islam does not condone individuals or factions arbitrarily initiating a jihad" (DeMorgen, 2020).

Benhaddou, an imam noted for his clean-shaven face and progressive ideas, mentions that his modern approach led some youths to distance themselves. "Yet, I remained engaged. Whether at their homes or elsewhere, I often used Quranic verses to encourage introspection and question their beliefs," he shares (DeMorgen, 2020

He draws attention to the UK's approach, "In the UK, they've enlisted Salafists to deradicalize the youth, presuming their ideologies align. But that, in my view, is a perilous dance, akin to playing with fire. The real dilemma lies in discerning our goal: is it merely to deter violence, or do we aspire to offer a renewed perspective on Islam? And is shaping that perspective the state's responsibility?" (DeMorgen, 2020).

Benhaddou passionately champions the idea of steering youth away from fundamentalism and extremism, urging them to constructively assimilate into their adopted countries. He articulates, “My vision is to harmonize their spiritual leanings with our democratic tenets, reintegrating them into our societal fabric. This equilibrium is unachievable through the prisms of jihadism and Salafism, but feasible with other interpretations of Islam” (DeMorgen, 2020). He regards spirituality, when rooted in a European-compatible understanding of Islamic tradition, as a vital tool for integration.

Benhaddou, with unwavering commitment, aims to shepherd the youth towards a genuine understanding of Islam. "Empowerment and integration are deeply intertwined with a thorough understanding of one's faith. A divergence from core Islamic principles can lead many astray. The essence lies in embracing and understanding Islam in its true spirit. However, it's concerning

that today, there's a palpable absence of resonating voices from the Flemish Muslim community that can guide our youth" (DeMorgen, 2020).

He observes that there's a faction within society keen on amplifying the 'clash of civilizations' narrative, aiming to deepen divides. "It's evident that certain elements thrive on polarization, driving a perception that being Muslim inherently poses challenges to integration within Flanders," Benhaddou notes (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

He also underscores the profound implications of racism, emphasizing that it could inadvertently push young individuals towards radicalization. Benhaddou doesn't hold back in his criticism of politicians who stoke these sentiments. "It's essential to acknowledge the gravity of racism, which often gets minimized from certain perspectives. When notable figures, like Minister Homans, trivialize racism or when individuals like Theo Francken express skepticism about the contributions of specific groups, it doesn't serve our societal fabric. Such remarks, whether intentional or not, foster an environment where prejudice can flourish" (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

Benhaddou points out that while the Flemish society often hesitates to confront the issue of racism, its existence cannot be denied. He asserts, "Although the topic might seem distant from some people's everyday experiences, it doesn't negate its presence. There's ample testimony from many Muslims, supported by various European and international reports, that highlight the pervasive issue of racism in Flanders. It's quite telling that no political party prioritized this concern in the recent elections, perhaps indicating a reluctance to address the underlying currents in Flanders" (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

He concedes that the term "racism" is sometimes misused, which risks diluting its severity. Responding to the sentiment that some Flemish individuals believe the term is overused, he mentions, "It's true that the term can be deployed too broadly, and this overuse is troubling. It's become a catch-all phrase for many. However, that doesn't invalidate the real instances of racism. We must refine our understanding of racism and take decisive action against genuine incidents" (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

6.5.5 Review

Benhaddou, Born and educated in Belgium, uniquely engages with both Turkish individuals and Moroccan Muslims in Ghent. He doesn't shy away from critiquing both the

Flemish natives, politicians, and the Muslim community in the region. Unlike traditional imams who root their discussions solely in religious teachings, Benhaddou integrates themes of democracy and human rights into his discourse.

He asserts that Flemish Islam should be led by individuals born, raised, and educated in Flanders, rather than relying on external influences. While he acknowledges the historical need for European Muslims of earlier generations to have imams from their countries of origin due to linguistic and cultural affinities, he believes those days are behind. For an authentic engagement with the Muslim community in Flanders, imams must be fluent in Dutch and have an intimate understanding of life in the region, facilitating an interpretation of Islam that aligns with the local reality.

Benhaddou envisions a reformed Flemish Islam that bridges religious teachings with reason, ensuring Muslims in Europe have a framework that aids their integration into European society. He firmly believes that even in modern times, societies derive strength and ethical grounding from religion.

A staunch critic of conservative Islam, particularly Salafism, Benhaddou is actively involved in youth deradicalization. He emphasizes that the battles waged by IS do not represent their fight. While some imams, like Elforkani, argue Salafism is merely an orthodox interpretation of Islam, Benhaddou believes it is out of sync with European realities. He advocates for the state to shape the Islamic religious landscape, curbing the growth of ideologies like Salafism. However, he also seeks to demystify Sharia, emphasizing that, when interpreted in context, its essence aligns with European values and legal principles.

While Benhaddou takes pride in his “Moroccan” heritage as part of his 'Flemish-Moroccan' identity, it is inaccurate to claim he champions a specifically Moroccan Islam. It is vital to recognize that the majority of Flemish Muslims are of Turkish descent, not Moroccan. Moreover, Benhaddou's vision extends beyond ethnic boundaries, aiming to guide all European Muslims, regardless of their ancestry. Adhering strictly to a specific school of jurisprudence would undoubtedly limit his influence across Europe.

Benhaddou acknowledges the presence of racism within Flemish society, identifying it as a catalyst for radicalization among Muslims. He champions the establishment of a representative body in Flemish politics to advocate for the interests of the approximately 300,000 Flemish Muslims. In his view, religion and politics are intertwined, with faith being a significant driver of

societal norms and values. He finds it hypocritical for some to advocate for banning headscarves in such a diverse society, viewing this debate as outdated. To Benhaddou, these discussions divert attention from the genuine challenges that European, and specifically Flemish, Muslims encounter.

6.6 Imam Yassin Elforkani

6.6.1 Biography

Yassin Elforkani was born in 1982 in the Netherlands in the city of Heerhugowaard to conservative Moroccan parents. His father and grandfathers were *fuqaha*, religious scholars, who memorized the Koran (Haguetalks, 2014). At the age of ten, Yassin was sent to a village in Morocco to memorize the Koran. Then, he studied the Koran and Islamic Law at Al Azhar University in Cairo. On his mother, her native village and arrival in the Netherlands, he says,

> One of my main sources of inspiration is my mother. She is illiterate, but so wise. Two weeks ago, I went to the village where she comes from. Then it seems as if you go back eighty years in time. From that village she came to Heerhugowaard. My father worked almost day and night. My mother ran a large family in a city with a different language and customs. I learned patience from her (Soest, 2018).

Elforkani is said to have had a conservative Islamic history, in which he tolerated or even encouraged the presence of conservative preachers from other countries, some of whom were Salafists. After graduation from Al Azhar University, Elforkani worked as *Imam* and khatib, Friday preacher, in several mosques in the Netherlands and is currently *khatib*, mosque preacher, of the De Blauwe Moskee (the Blue Mosque) in Slotervaart neighborhood, Amsterdam. He describes himself as the "imam of the youth."

Elforkani has been a prominent figure in the discussion about Islam, notably following the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri in November 2004. In 2010, he became the official spokesperson of Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid (Contact Organ of Muslims and Government, CMO), which oversees about 85% of mosques (380 mosques) in the Netherlands (Trouw, 2015). He is a religious leader, a young social worker, and a socio-political debater all rolled into one. His aesthetic performance reflects his triple role: while preaching, he wears a jellaba (robe) – giving him the air of a traditional imam –, the jeans and t-shirt of a social worker, and the black tie of a debater.

In the summer of 2015, he resigned as the CMO's spokesman, citing persistent security threats to him and his family as justification. Nevertheless, following the second Paris attack in

November 2015, he re-entered the spotlight, appearing on many media outlets as well as on Twitter and Facebook, and has been active since then. In March 2016, Imam Elforkani delivered a public statement warning society about continuous instability and radicalization in specific Muslim groups in Amsterdam, as well as the possibility of terrorist strikes. Muslim leaders criticized him over it, accusing him of fomenting unwarranted fear.



Figure 20 De Blauwe Moskee (the Blue Mosque), Amsterdam *Accessed at: https://nos.nl/artikel/2309517-amsterdamse-moskee-begint-met-versterkte-gebedsoproep-maar-is-zeker-niet-de-eerste*

In a time of increasing Islamophobia and the rise of Dutch national populism, Elforkani became an active media personality, involved in debates, interviews and public talks on Islam, Muslim Dutch youth, religious radicalization, and fundamentalism. He believes it is the responsibility of the *Imam* to correct misconceptions about religion and to guide youth to the Islamic values of peace and tolerance.



Figure 21 Yassin preaches in a Moroccan djellaba and a red fez

His Friday sermons are in Dutch, and sometimes in classical Arabic, mixed with Moroccan *darija* (dialect). The topics of his sermons include fasting, drugs, divorce, motherhood, Ramadan, and religious rituals.

6.6.2 Views on Identity

Elforkani identifies himself as a proponent of Islamic reform. "My goal," he asserts, "is to spark introspection among Muslims. It's imperative for us to self-reflect and face challenges head-on. If I stand at the pulpit merely echoing the sentiments of the two thousand people before me, I'm failing in my duty as an Imam. My responsibility is to address the core issues" (Soest, 2018). He shares that he continually ponders over faith, believing that God's judgment is not one-size-fits-all but contextual. This belief is reinforced by a Qur'anic verse that resonated with him during a reflective walk:

> As I walked the city, a verse from the Quran surfaced in my thoughts: 'We will weigh people's deeds in scales.' It speaks of multiple scales, not just one, emphasizing that everyone has their unique context. Thus, a universal judgment isn't fitting for all. This was a profound realization for me (Soest, 2018).

Elforkani anchors his religious beliefs in the foundational principle of good versus evil.

He comments, "Islam threads through every facet of my life. Yet, I continually reassess my perspectives. Central to faith is the notion: those who commit good deeds earn paradise, while those who indulge in wrongdoings risk damnation.” With this in mind, Elforkani aspires to reinterpret Islam in a manner befitting the Dutch-European milieu. He asserts the necessity for a revitalized Islam, stating, "We need an Islam that aligns with contemporary norms and values. There's a palpable fear among Muslims about crafting a 'new Islam.' Yet, in light of a transforming world, it's essential.” He believes gender inclusivity is crucial to this reformation, advocating for the appointment of female administrators in mosques. Citing a successful example, he says, “Like the Blue Mosque in Amsterdam. For us, the inclusion of women in such roles is truly liberating.”

Elforkani underscores the importance of acknowledging that certain radical Islamic ideologies, which entities like ISIS employ, are deeply rooted in Islamic tenets. He asserts:

> It's essential to realize that ISIS and its ideologies are intertwined with Islam. Many Muslims tend to distance themselves, thinking that by simply stating ISIS doesn't represent them, the issue is resolved. When I voiced that terrorism has ties to Islam in a discussion with fellow imams, none refuted my claim. Yet, one imam did ponder, 'Yassin, should we be vocalizing this?' (Beek, 2016).

He points out that a primary challenge for Dutch European Islam is grappling with its inherent diversity, which seems to contrast with the notion of a singular, unchanging, universal Islam. This presents a conundrum for the younger generation, especially given the transnational ties made accessible by new media platforms. These youths, "more connected with fellow believers globally than their predecessors, are often perplexed. They're constantly fed the notion that there exists just one true Islam, yet they recognize the cultural nuances when they hear 'sister' in a Moroccan mosque and differently in a Turkish one. They're pulled in various directions, each claiming to hold the absolute truth. The reality is that there are manifold interpretations of Islam. We must accept this and empower our youth with the freedom to determine their path within Islam” (Beek, 2016). Elforkani thus advocates for allowing young individuals the autonomy to navigate their religious identity, challenging the monolithic narrative of 'One Islam.'

Elforkani identifies himself as the "Youth Imam." He observes that a significant portion of Muslim Dutch youth remains unaware of Islamic law. This, he believes, stems from the fact that many imams in the Netherlands neither speak Dutch nor understand the nuances of Dutch culture, thus failing to resonate with the younger generation. For Elforkani, an imam's role extends beyond mere religious guidance; it involves forging genuine connections with the youth, comprehending their lived experiences, and importantly, communicating in their native language.

The dearth of Dutch-speaking imams has inadvertently opened doors for young Dutch Muslims to foreign preachers (Sözeri et. al, 2019). This lack of localized religious guidance, coupled with experiences of racial discrimination, can make them susceptible to extremist ideologies. Consequently, Elforkani stresses the imperative need for Dutch imams to be proficient in the Dutch language.

Imam Elforkani is immensely involved in the debate on Islam, identity, belonging, and integration of Muslim youth in the Netherlands. He backs up his position on the matter deploying the logic of citizenship. If one is Dutch, why would anybody question their belonging whether they are Muslim or not? He mentions the polarized political views on immigration and belonging represented by the position of two Dutch politicians on Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands: the view of Lodewijk Asscher, who believes that Muslims belong to the Netherlands against the view of Sybrand Buma, who states that Islam cannot be part of the Netherlands since the Dutch civilization comes from a Judeo-Christian tradition (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

He considers discussions alike futile and outdated with no viability and should be received with astonishment rather than seriousness. He says, “such a debate really lags behind social developments. I teach third-generation youth. When you talk to them about integration, they look at you in surprise. They are Dutch” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

He believes that questioning the identity of young Muslims makes them feel alienated and insecure about their position in Dutch society, “I understand it all, partly it is too because one does not know what to do or say. But one has to think about the effect of what they say. Then one can easily see what it makes those young people feel, insecurity of not belonging” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

In another conversation, Elforkani touches upon the ramifications of perpetual self-questioning. This persistent doubt can sometimes push individuals towards extreme ideologies as they search for a stronger sense of identity. While he specifically mentions the growing

attachment to religious symbols as an outcome of this alienation, there's an implicit undertone suggesting the rejection of the host society's values that might appear to conflict with one's religious beliefs. Responding to an interviewer's remark about the prevailing sentiment of wanting young immigrants to depart from the Netherlands, Elforkani remarks:

> Despite being born and raised here, many feel the constant need to validate their existence. They're asked: 'Why do you wear a headscarf? Does your faith condone killing innocents? Are women deemed inferior in Islam?' Such queries are part of their daily encounters. Consequently, they tend to gravitate towards their faith, embracing religious symbols and traditions even more fervently to underscore their Muslim identity. (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

In response to those who argue that European-Dutch values are rooted solely in Judeo-Christian traditions and perceive Islam as an outlier, Elforkani offers a compelling counter-argument. He asserts that Islam is intrinsically tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition. To be a Muslim, one inherently acknowledges and respects the teachings of both Judaism and Christianity, emphasizing the deep interconnectedness of these faiths. He underscores that the traditions are remarkably similar and intertwined, and hence, presenting Islam as a mere intruder is a misrepresentation.

With this view on integration, Elforkani does not intend to blame the issue of radicalism on the strategic alienation of Muslims from the Dutch social mosaic. He believes that one has to be self-reflexive and start by fixing oneself first when he mentions, “Of course, radicalization is also about isolation, bad treatment, and socio-economic disadvantage. But I always have trouble pinpointing one central problem. Reflection also means: no one-sided views. And I think that a person should always look at themselves first” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Elforkani rejects the notion that Muslims should view themselves as victims of discrimination or prejudice, “particularly in small circles, when you, parents, discuss with your children about faith, or during your conversations amongst yourselves in coffee and teahouses” (Boender and de Ruiter, 2018). Muslims should stop acting like victims and stop crying about how they are continually singled out for widespread condemnation (Boender and de Ruiter, 2018).

Even though Elforkani is of Moroccan descent, when it comes to integration, his scope of concern does not only include Muslims of Moroccan roots in the Netherlands. He explains that integration issues affect all of the Dutch Muslim groups as well as society at large. It was an essential component of his political message as spokesman and board member of the CMO, where he strove to act as a mediator between the government and the Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese, Bosnian, and other Muslim populations.

He has stated that he is motivated to enable young Muslims to integrate and operate in Dutch society while keeping their Muslim identity. In an interview published in February 2016 by Ekklesia Amsterdam, he urged young Muslims, to "come out of their comfort zone to reach out to the other" (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Imam Elforkani believes that Islam is compatible with secular democratic societies. He encourages young people to work hard to achieve a better future for themselves in the Dutch-Western context, to attend school, and to work in responsible occupations. He claims that Islam encourages young people to integrate and contribute to the development of their host nation. He emphasizes the significance of freely professing one's belonging to the Muslim religion in society, and he engages in the current public discussion regarding Islam's (in)compatibility with democracy.

Elforkani is Dutch. His Dutch identity is taken for granted. Yet, his Moroccanness is emphasized and foregrounded repeatedly. When preaching at the mosque, Elforkani always wears Moroccan clothes, *a djellaba,* an *abaya,* and Moroccan hats. Though born in the Netherlands, his Moroccan *darija i*s native-like because of his childhood in Morocco as well as his connection with Morocco and Moroccans.

In one of his lectures, he advises his congregation, evidently mostly of Moroccan immigrants, when visiting their homeland to be well-behaved and set a good example of a good Muslim. He particularly attacks some immigrants who behave boastfully and boisterously. “There are youths”, he says, “who when they go to Morocco, cut off ties with religion and become different people, without morals, religion, or hearts.” He advises parents when on a trip to their native country to “be close to their kids, keep them in good company so that they can discover their country.” His advice for the summer holiday is that, “we go to our Morocco,” they, “need to have to demonstrate noble conducts and be an ideal example of good behavior” (*Muhibi shaykh ductur rachid nafi’a,* 2018).

During the coronavirus pandemic, he complained about the scarcity of burial space for Moroccan fatalities and pressed the Dutch authorities to provide such space. "Nobody saw this pandemic coming," says Elforkani, "It certainly sparked discussion about the future of eternal burial peace in the Netherlands" (Salhany, 2020).

In Ramadan of 2015, Morocco sent about 50 Imams and Koran reciters to the Netherlands. Elforkani went to meet them at the airport, and in response to hostile Dutch media which opposed foreign interference and lobbied to ban Moroccan visiting *Imams,* Elforkani explained that "he has every confidence in the Moroccan *Imams* The mission is to combat radicalization and they will take this into account in their sermons." (Rietbroek, 2015). They are, "moderate imams from Morocco to spread a healthy Islam. This is in the context of countering radicalization," he says (Nanninga, 2015). He stresses in a statement to *De Volkskrant* newspaper that the visiting imams are adherents to the *Maliki* doctrine, which, in accordance with Morocco's official discourse on religion, he recommends as a moderate and tolerant doctrine that takes into account in its jurisprudence the context of the believer (Walsum, 2015).



Figure 22 Dinner photo of Yassin Elforkani (top left), October 19, 2019, attended byMayor ofRotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, the Moroccan ambassador, Abdelouaheb Bellouki, comedian and actor, Najib Amhali, chief fire watch plus and fire safety adviser in Amsterdam, Zouhair Jbyeh and other Moroccan Dutch personalities. *Accessed at: https://arifnews.com/news/hoe-diep-is-de-relatie-tussen-pvda-er-aboutaleb-en-de-marokkaanse-ambassadeur/*

He attends meetings with Moroccan officials such as the dinner on 19 October, 2019, attended by the Mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, the Moroccan ambassador, Abdelouaheb Bellouki, was reportedly invited by king Mohammed VI to attend the throne celebration of July 2019. Elforkani has also been a guest (speaker) at events organized by the CCME (the Moroccan Royal Advisory Council for Moroccans abroad) (Arif news, 2019), and attends and animated cultural and religious events organized by Moroccan Dutch organizations, such as Okad in March 2010 on "Islam in the West in Amsterdam" (arrabita.ma, 2010), and a meeting with Moroccan Dutch politician, Ahmed Markouch, in February 2011 (Nadorcity, 2011).

Concerning the issue of where imams should be trained, Elforkani believes that the Dutch government should implement a pedagogical program for training Imams. "Dutch Muslims want their own Imams," he told the *Dutch News*. To the *Trouw* newspaper he said, "Dutch Muslims have a great need for their own imams" (Trouw, 2013). Such a program was launched in the Netherlands in 2006 at Inholand University, but was suspended in 2013. Elforkani was sad by its suspension. He expresses his regret with the following words, "In Europe in particular, education is more focused on analysis, on critical thinking. That is why it is such a shame that after Leiden University, InHolland University of Applied Sciences is now also ending the imam training. Mosques therefore organize it themselves. From the CMO, we have to work even harder on this" (Interview with Elforkani, 2015).

Elforkani's desire for local training of imams and his regret for its suspension in InHolland University emerges within a context. He is apprehensive as he fears the free circulation of radical knowledge which has a strong theological foundation and its internalization. And what he hopes these programs would do is teach religious leaders critical thinking and argumentation which will benefit all Dutch Muslims. He says:

> What we as Muslims still fall short of is the counterargument. Against that radical theological perspective, those books from which IS gets its inspiration, that absolute truth. Muslims, myself included, have not had the courage to express ourselves critically about this Can women be stoned for adultery according to Islam? Yes, proponents say, because it is based on a religious text. But that's

> really a matter of interpretation. However much you may consider the Qur'an and the Sunnah to be the truth, as I do in my religious experience (Interview with Elforkani, 2015).

He wants to normalize debate on religious matters as it will endow youth with critical thinking and what he terms as 'religious resilience' against circulating radical ideologies and foreign religious interventionism, "Through the debate you develop reflection, through reflection you develop what I call religious resilience. Then Muslim youths are less susceptible to radical influences. Then there will be a solid theological foundation for them against the extremism of IS," he says (Interview with Elforkani, 2015). Elforkani believes that religious leaders are the ones who should adopt critical thinking, thus emphasizing further the need for local programs for training imams. He says, "It starts with people who want to start the discussion, who are at the forefront of this. Not in the newspaper or on TV, but in your own environment. People who know the Qur'an, who have developed a solid vision of Islam and society and can convey it. That touches on education, on training. In my view, many imams fall short in the connection with the secular and political context" (Interview with Elforkani, 2015).

On that particular issue, Elforkani says that even around the Arab world, there is greater room for being critical towards one's faith than in the Netherlands, "In the Arab countries, you can now see here and there a development in theological discourse. In the Netherlands, this is still minimal. I notice in groups that it is also sensitive: then we are even weaker with the criticism of our faith!" (Interview with Elforkani, 2015).

6.6.3 Views on Gender

Elforkani engages in gender discussions which include problems such as equitable treatment of women and homosexuals. Although he does not appear to take the initiative in expressing his views on these two groups' rights, when pressed, he claims that everyone in society has the freedom to live their lives as they like. While this does not imply support for these alternative lifestyles, Elforkani believes that Islam and Muslims can only find their proper position in Dutch democracy via mutual acceptance. He thinks that being pushed to think about the opinion of Islam on homosexuality in Dutch society leads one to be more self-reflexive. He observes,

> I think it has a certain advantage that there are more insights into positions in society. Debate sharpens, debate educates. As a starting imam, I was asked about my position on homosexuality. Sorry, I never thought about that. Being forced into the debate was good, because it led to reflection on my own beliefs. I too can be more critical of my own faith now than I was ten years ago. The reflection has really improved with many Muslims and non-Muslims. Unfortunately not everyone and therein lies the problem: if someone thinks they have the absolute truth (Interview with Elforkani, 2015).

He also believes that there should be some form of female Islamic religious authority in Islam. He considers this to be an essential step in reforming Islam to match the Dutch-Western context. According to him, such a female religious authority is exemplified in the female administrators in the Blue Mosque where he preaches. He announces, "So we have to appoint female administrators, such as in the Blue Mosque in Amsterdam. For us, it is a liberation that this succeeds" (Interview with Elforkani, 2015).

6.6.4 Views on Politics and Radicalization

Elforkani is not only a preacher and debater, but he also seeks to influence decision-makers. For instance, he launched a campaign to get permission for his mosque to use loudspeakers to broadcast the call of prayers, explaining that, because of international terrorism, the meaning of "*Allahu akbar*" has become associated with violence. "When I am on the train and I hear *'allahoe akbar'*," he explains in an interview, "I don't think the prayer time has come and that I am going to pray! I think something is going to happen." The call for prayer would help, "normalize Islam in this beautiful world city" (Cluskey, 2019). For him, the call for prayer would enhance the beauty and religious tolerance of Amsterdam as he states,

> So we thought: Amsterdam, Blue Mosque, beautiful neighborhood, Dutch name […] How beautiful would it be if we made the prayer call here every week? So people wouldn't have the association with an attack anymore, but with the beautiful, tolerant Amsterdam (Elforkani, 2019)?

Despite the reluctance of Mayer of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema, and relentless media attacks and vandalism of the audio cables, the call to prayer was heard on Friday November 15, 2019, at Blue Mosque (Bladi.net, 2019).

Elforkani actively engages in interfaith dialogues, such as discussions with Christian Union leader Gert-Jan Segers on topics like Islam, Jesus, and Christianity. He holds the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity in high regard, commenting, "Entering a church, I feel it's a house of God. Here, I can find God. One cannot claim to be a Muslim if they don't believe in the Bible" (nd.nl, 2019).

In a 2013 television documentary produced by the Muslim Broadcast Organization, he conveyed his concerns, "There's a pressing issue today, a form of radicalization, which politicians seem unaware of, let alone equipped to address. Certain municipalities face challenges unknown to their representatives. If they aren't informed, they can't effectively discuss or tackle these issues. They think they're knowledgeable about subjects they're truly unfamiliar with. So, I urge these politicians to immerse themselves in the community and truly understand what's happening" (Boender and de Ruiter, 2018).

Elforkani has been vocal in opposing young Muslims who travel to Syria to align with jihadist groups. He perceives this migration as ideologically motivated, stating, "Those young individuals aspire to reach paradise swiftly. The Islamic State offers them an alternate life, where they witness their ideology being realized" (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015). He believes these individuals lack a genuine comprehension of Islam's essence. In his teachings, he offers a contextual analysis of the scriptures, underscoring that the turmoils of Syria and the broader Middle East aren't inherently the battles of young Dutch Muslims.

His most controversial statement is his association of Islam with violence. Following the terrorist attack of Paris in November 2015, unlike the majority of Muslim scholars who stress that Islam has nothing to do with terrorism and violence, Elforkani declared in an interview with *de Volkskrant* newspaper, ‘‘The harsh reality is that the perpetrators of the offenses legitimize their actions theologically. We cannot ignore it. We cannot keep saying ‘this has nothing to do with Islam’’’ (Green, 2015). However, He contends that it is the interpretations of the sources that legitimize violence, not Islam per se since they lead to conceptions like the Caliphate, Islamic State (IS), and jihad in Syria and Iraq (Boender and de Ruiter, 2018).

In an interview, Elforkani remarks, "There's a common assertion that Islam and terrorism are unrelated. Many Muslims, non-Muslims, and politicians voice this view, especially when aiming to resonate with a specific audience. However, there exist theological interpretations deeply embedded in religious traditions that extremists and terrorists exploit" (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015). Elforkani warns of the volatile blend of these interpretations with sentiments of social marginalization and racial prejudice, stating:

> These aren't just conveniently crafted notions for entities like IS. They're rooted in decades-long interpretations, underpinned by significant theological works. When such nuanced perspectives on Islam intersect with young individuals already grappling with feelings of alienation—perhaps due to perceived unjust treatment by authorities—a perilous concoction emerges (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Highlighting the pervasive influence of social media, Elforkani adds, "The role of social media in disseminating these interpretations has amplified over the past decade. Organizations like IS have harnessed it effectively, ensuring their ideology reaches youths globally. It is rare to find a Muslim youth in Amsterdam unfamiliar with their rhetoric. In one instance, a student expressed, 'Their messages sow doubt in my mind; they're so persuasive!'" (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Elforkani identifies that the surging radicalism is multifaceted. Initially, there was an earnest effort to integrate this emerging culture. However, polarization now fosters a dual-radicalism—both among extreme nationalists and Muslim radicals. He observes:

> Earlier, there was a unifying sentiment: we will collaboratively address this, understanding the significance of our interdependence. This perspective was predominant. Back then, there might have been a conscious effort to tread carefully, to entertain nuances. Now, the societal fissures are more evident, where extreme sentiments range from 'Muslims don't belong here' and calls for mosque attacks, to advocating against democracy and championing the sharia. It appears we've seen a moral erosion across the spectrum (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Further fueling this cycle of animosity and radicalization is the sense of systemic targeting experienced by certain groups. This is not limited to political rhetoric but extends to law enforcement actions. The police need to be acutely aware of the potential repercussions of their words and deeds. Elforkani believes that a mere academic approach is not the panacea. Instead, the police should embrace self-reflection, gauging the ramifications of their actions. He illustrates:

> The police need to continually evaluate their role, not just theoretically, but in real-world scenarios. For instance, after a young boy was fatally shot by the police in Slotervaart in 2007, Muslim youths retaliated by pelting the police station with stones. Community elders, including myself, tried to mediate, but tensions flared again once we departed. Amidst the chaos, a distinct voice declared: 'We can't let this slide, we need to confront those Moroccans decisively' (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Such a statement could mean a lot to someone who already feels stigmatized and targeted racially and ethnically. And police stand as representatives of the government as security services as Elforkani further indicates, “Extremely understandable in the emotion of the moment. No reproach on my part. We are all human. But does that agent realize the impact of that statement afterwards? Someone in uniform on behalf of the government who names a group and announces what is going to happen” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015)? He adds, “To learn to better interpret your own actions, training can help, knowledge, learning to dare to step forward. As a police officer, you have to be open to that and understand its importance” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Elforkani acknowledges the challenge in discerning who qualifies as a 'hate imam'. He notes that the boundaries between freedom of expression and hate speech become blurred when the rhetoric doesn't directly incite violence. He elaborates, “The CMO recently requested a list of so-called 'hate imams'. But the definition is nebulous. Some in the Netherlands view every imam under this negative light. Others cite freedom of speech in their defense. The defining line? For us, it's the explicit incitement of violence” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

At times, an imam might invoke prayers wishing ill upon someone, potentially venturing into the territory of hate speech. Elforkani, however, pushes the discourse beyond this classification. He challenges the community's perspective, asking, “An instance is when an imam wishes for Hirsi Ali during a Friday sermon, 'May God inflict her tongue with cancer, silencing her.' Is this an expression of hate? Likely so. But the more pressing concern is the essence of the sentiment. The conversation among Muslims should pivot to: why not pray for God to enlighten and guide individuals rather than curse them?” (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

A pressing concern for Elforkani is his belief that extremist Muslims undermine the broader Muslim community, thereby compromising their standing as equal Dutch citizens. He recounts a particularly poignant experience that underscored the gravity of the situation:

> As an imam, I've consistently spoken on societal matters. Never did I anticipate the repercussions to escalate to a point where police had to oversee my sermons. I was the pioneer in cautioning against trips to Syria. This resolve was catalyzed after a sermon in Utrecht when distraught parents approached me. 'Our son has left for Syria,' they lamented. The mother's profound grief was palpable. That poignant moment galvanized me into action, prompting a public declaration highlighting the pressing issue at hand (Soest, 2018).

Elforkani emphasizes the importance of self-reflection for all parties involved: the Dutch Muslim community, Dutch society at large, politicians, and even those interpreting Islamic teachings. He urges Muslims to empathize with those who associate Islam with the violent images dominating social media. "It's crucial for Muslims to recognize the fear and anger people feel when witnessing acts of brutality committed in the name of Islam. While many Muslims are equally appalled by such acts, it's essential to comprehend the association these actions have with religion," Elforkani states (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015). He highlights mutual mistrust, noting it can emanate from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He also addresses concerns over visible orthodoxy, as captured in his recounting of a conversation, "Someone once told me about their bearded neighbor, commenting on his kind demeanor but expressing doubt about his trustworthiness. This perspective mirrors sentiments from the other side: can non-Muslims

discern orthodox practice from its potential violent extremes?" (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Elforkani underscores the potential for misunderstandings in multicultural settings. "One should always be open to the reality that what seems evident to one person might not be for another. It's astonishing how often we mistakenly assume others understand our perspectives," he observes (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Furthermore, Imam Elforkani critiques some media portrayals that amplify unwarranted fears using statistics about Muslim populations. He argues that these figures are not immutable truths but open to interpretation. "A particular program cited that 70% of Muslims prioritize the Koran over Dutch law. But it's essential to realize that the majority of Muslims have limited knowledge about Islam; their primary allegiance is to God. When posed with the choice between divine and man-made laws, believers will likely prioritize the former. It's crucial to approach even scientific figures with nuance and introspection," Elforkani asserts (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

Elforkani observes a disconnect in the political dialogue surrounding the integration of Muslims, contending that political discussions lag behind societal progression. "While society's discourse on the topic is evolving, political discussions aren't as incisive. Except for parties like the PVV, others are still grappling for clarity. Often, we hear tepid remarks like 'Muslims have a place here too. Their traditions differ from ours, but mutual adaptation is necessary,'" Elforkani comments (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

In a conversation with the Dutch national newspaper, Trouw, Elforkani tackles the topic of Salafism and its frequent association with extremism. Contrary to some Western European imams who challenge Salafism's alignment with Western ideals, Elforkani presents a nuanced perspective. He underscores that Salafism is not monolithic and one can be a Salafi while integrating seamlessly into Dutch society. “Salafism is multifaceted. It has an apolitical, non-violent strand that can coexist with democracy. Equating all of Salafism with danger is as reductive as saying all Muslims align with Salafists. Salafism and orthodox Islam aren't mutually exclusive,” he asserts. For him, the concern should be with violent Salafism: “When Salafism becomes extremist and breaches legal bounds, it must face legal repercussions. This extremist side is what we should oppose." He warns against a total ban on Salafism, suggesting that such a move could alarm the broader Muslim community, making them feel that Islam itself might be

next in line for prohibition. "The wider Muslim community was understandably unsettled by the proposal to consider banning Salafist groups. The sentiment echoed was, 'If Salafism today, perhaps it's all of Islam tomorrow,'" he argues (Beek, 2016).

Elforkani, expounding in an interview with Trouw, emphasizes that being a Salafi doesn't inherently lead to fundamentalism; factors like societal exclusion play a pivotal role. He says:

> Numerous young Salafis in the Netherlands harmoniously merge their religious practice with attending universities or working conventional jobs. They strike a balance — upholding Islamic traditions and attire, but relegating religious practices mostly to the personal. A bearded Muslim shouldn't be automatically labeled an extremist. However, if one prioritizes religious appearance over professional duties or hesitates to adopt basic societal norms, like shaking hands irrespective of gender, then it's an indication of a deliberate departure from Dutch values. Often, this distancing arises from feeling marginalized or perpetually having to defend one's beliefs in Dutch society (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking 2011).

At the risk of being associated with the Brotherhood organization, at the death of the deposed Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, the Blue Mosque performed the prayer of the absent. As the mosque's chief imam, Yassin Elforkani, says, "Whatever you think of Morsi, he was democratically elected. If he does not perform his work properly, it must be combated democratically. But democracy is hard to find in the Arab world, and especially in Egypt. We are concerned about that" (telegraaf.nl, 2019).

Elforkani has received respect from both Muslims and non-Muslims, who applaud him for acting as a go-between. The sympathetic Dutch press praises Elforkani the "Young Imam" and the voice of moderate Islam. Stefanie Danopoulos, a Dutch convert who chairs a mosque and runs the Middenweg Centre, says that "The government likes Yassin Elforkani," she tells MEE, "Because he is educated and speaks about moderate Islam" (Boender and de Ruiter, 2018).

He has, however, come under fire from a variety of groups, ranging from anti-Islamists to Salafi organizations. The religious and political views of Elforkani in the Friday sermons, media debates, and interviews made him a controversial figure and got him many enemies and,

sometimes, security threats. One such view, for instance, is his call that Muslims should protect rather than hurt Geert Wilders (Rhoul, 2018). The nationalist politician described Moroccan immigrants as "scum who in Holland make the streets unsafe" (Goldman, 2017). His statement was met with hostile messages on the Blue Mosque's Facebook webpage against th*e Imam*. "When I went to preach, fifty messages came in on the site: boycott Elforkani's sermon, because he sold his soul to the infidels" (Spanish, 2019).

On social media, the Dutch Muslim community reacted angrily to Elforkani's statements. Many believe that "the youth imam" was harming rather than defending Islam. "We just want to show that terror and bloodshed have nothing to do with our faith, while Elforkani now claims it has," stated a comment (nieuws.marokko.nl, 2015). Others consider the young imam a "collaborator" (Atkinson, 2016).

Mainstream Muslim organizations frequently express criticism of Elforkani, particularly on social media and during internal discussions. While many young Muslims initially view him in a positive light, their experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination often shift their perspective. They challenge Elforkani's advocacy, questioning the feasibility of defending Western principles when they feel the West hasn't extended equal opportunities to them, "Why champion Western values if the West itself falls short in fairness?" (Boender and de Ruiter, 2018). Some Salafis accuse Elforkani of collaborating with the secular government, dubbing him an infidel. These factions question the legitimacy of his position as an imam, alleging he didn't follow the correct religious path to his role. Jihadi-radicals, though limited in number but vociferous, are believed to be the ones threatening to silence him.

In a 2013 article in the Dutch online newspaper Trouw, Elforkani reveals that Syrian extremists have targeted him more intensely than even Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom and the nationalist right-wing populist party in the Netherlands. Moreover, while mainstream Dutch society generally backs Elforkani's efforts, skepticism lingers. Doubts regarding his integrity persist, with some speculating about financial support from Kuwait aiming to promote a conservative interpretation of Islam. His past association with the Muslim Brotherhood also continues to shape perceptions of him. On the populist platform GeenStijl, which leans right, critiques abound suggesting Elforkani is not sincere and often engages in doublespeak.

Elforkani recognizes the inherent risks of holding and vocalizing his critiques. Engaging in debates and challenging established ideas, he knows, might earn him disdain. However, he firmly believes that confronting these issues head-on is essential to address the challenges faced by Muslims in Western Europe. He observes:

> Taking a stand and being critical naturally poses dangers. It's not just prominent figures like Geert Wilders or Ahmed Marcouch who experience this, but any individual, including an imam, pushing for open dialogue. Solutions can't be crafted solely in homogenous meeting rooms. We need inclusive discussions across all sectors: in mosques, homes, neighborhoods, with local law enforcement on the streets, and even on social media. Otherwise, we'll miss crucial signals, like parents overlooking the potential danger when their teenage daughter is charmed by a bearded man with a weapon on Facebook. There was a time when a son's deepening interest in religion was welcomed, but now it's viewed with suspicion. (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

On the topic of the state of Islam in the Netherlands, Elforkani quipped, "When you ask a Moroccan how things are, he'll say 'good,' even if he's behind bars. For now, I'm still welcomed at the mosque every Friday." However, his tone shifted as he added, "We're at a crucial juncture where things could truly take a turn for the worse. But I remain hopeful. Amidst the radical fringes, a significant group of Muslims are genuinely seeking balance and understanding. I urge them to be more vocal and active in their communities." (Interview Yassin Elforkani, 2015).

6.6.5 Review

The preaching, media debates and interviews, social media activities, and cultural and religious involvement of Yassin Elforkani stand as witness to how a Moroccan-Dutch imam of the second generation tries to steer his way in a complex and highly tense religious and political environment. He has to speak and answer back not only to right-wing nationalist critics and media but also to his own community, which might not agree with his progressist ideas or critical reform of their faith.

On the issue of identity and Moroccan Islam, it is noticeable that Elforkani recommends

the *Maliki* doctrine as a moderate and tolerant form of Islam. However, in the Western context, he only approaches it as a school of jurisprudence among others, and constantly speaks about fate reform. His faith reforms are based on philosophical concepts existing in the *Maqasid* of Islam rather than on jurisprudence per se.

Elforkani anchors his understanding of Islam in the belief that the religion aims to foster goodness and challenge societal ills. He posits that reforms in Dutch Islam should prioritize the empowerment of women in leadership roles, be adaptable to context, and recognize that erroneous interpretations of Islamic tenets fuel radical behaviors. Passionately countering radicalization and extremist ideologies, he champions the cultural connections young people have with Morocco while underscoring the importance of their full assimilation into Dutch culture, including the critical need for Dutch imams to be fluent in the Dutch language.

Elforkani is a maverick within the realm of Islamic thought. He resists external influences in Dutch religious matters, adopts a non-judgmental stance on Salafism, and importantly, asserts that violence is inherent to some Islamic interpretations. Yet, his audacious views have positioned him in the crosshairs of Dutch nationalist media and Salafists. He's been linked with Qaradawi and accused of spreading hate-filled rhetoric (Brendel, 2011). Simultaneously, parts of the Muslim community label him a sell-out or even a spy. Undeterred, Elforkani remarks, “If I stand between two extremes, I'm content" (Elforkani, 2019).

Addressing a spectrum of topics—from youth radicalization to gender equality and democratic representation—Elforkani consistently offers counterarguments to populist groups' reductionist views on Islam and Muslims. His insistence on initiating reforms internally, particularly addressing educational shortcomings in the Moroccan community, means he thrusts both community-specific and broader societal issues into the limelight. He directs his critiques not just at the Muslim community but also engages politicians from the left and rights wings.

Elforkani aims to act as a conduit between generational realities. He endeavors to mediate between various Muslim factions and municipal bodies, while also championing Muslim community concerns nationally. In these roles, he occupies a space both within the Muslim socio-religious sphere and the broader secular public domain.

Publicly, Elforkani positions himself as a proponent of the comprehensive integration of Muslims into Dutch society. He's convinced of the harmonious coexistence of Muslim and Western values and encourages young Muslims to actively contribute to Dutch societal

advancement. His multifaceted roles as a young imam, social worker, and board member of the CMO provide him a platform in an increasingly divided public dialogue. As an influential voice, Elforkani brings a counter-narrative to debates about Islam's place in society, tirelessly working to influence both public perception and policymakers on matters of integration and radicalization.

Elforkani provides insightful commentary on Islam and Muslims in Western society, often venturing beyond what many Muslims deem acceptable. This willingness to challenge established norms sets him apart in religious discussions. However, his discourse is not limited to just religious or theological concerns; he also integrates external perspectives. Introducing these audacious views into public conversations about Islam and Muslims, Elforkani's standpoints—a blend of Islamic and Western values—draw sharp responses. These come from conservative Islamic factions, like the Salafi circles, populist groups inherently skeptical of Muslims, disillusioned young Muslims who doubt societal equity, and a portion of the Dutch populace affected by the rising apprehension towards Muslims.

Despite his vocal presence, Elforkani finds substantial support lacking both within his community and the broader society. As described by Welmoet Boender and Jan Jaap de Ruiter, Yassin Elforkani epitomizes an organic public intellectual, representing "a significant Muslim voice, perhaps even more so because of the resistance he encounters." (p. 180).

Chapter 7 ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

7.1 Discourses in Conflict: Religious Views and State Governance

Discourses, as observed in various studies, are not merely coherent narratives; they often entail contradictions and conflicts. In his work, "Language, Semantics and Ideology" (1982), Pecheux asserts that discourses are defined by relations characterized by tensions and disputes. Analyzing discourse as a singular power source could potentially overlook the myriad opposing dynamics that contribute to the shaping of meanings. Pecheux believes that meanings emerge from battles and confrontations, not in isolation. Adopting this perspective in discourse analysis results in a multifaceted examination, capturing various dimensions of how meanings are produced.

This idea of conflicting discourses becomes especially prominent when evaluating the rhetoric of the two Morocco-born imams among the six. Take Toujgani, who was born in Morocco, for instance: he identifies as both Moroccan and Belgian simultaneously. This dual sense of belonging doesn't present an inherent conflict. Research supports the notion of simultaneity, referring to the lived experiences that encompass activities and routines in both the host country and one's origin (Levitt and Schiller, 2004, p. 1003). Yet, while Toujgani's dual belonging may not be contradictory, his religious beliefs—deeply rooted in the Moroccan interpretation of Islam—clash with Belgium's expectations of its Muslim community. To understand this tension, it is crucial to recognize how the strong ties between Muslim-majority nations and European religious leadership can skew towards a singular interpretation of Islam. Such a narrow view of religion might sow discord in an increasingly diverse Muslim diaspora (Valentina Fedele, 2016).

Toujgani, with his pronounced ties to Morocco, displays a marked preference for the Maliki School of Jurisprudence. He suggests that the Maliki tradition in Islam, which allows a three-day period for the slaughter of sheep during Eid al-Adha, might present a pragmatic solution to the chaos often witnessed during the festival. Toujgani holds the Maliki tradition in high regard, emphasizing its alignment with European values and practices. He draws a connection between European multiculturalism and the tenets of the Maliki school, pointing out the historical context wherein Imam Malik was raised in Europe. As such, he believes the Maliki

jurisprudence has the closest affinity with European sensibilities. Furthermore, Toujgani expresses a desire for the continuation of the Moroccan interpretation of Islam among future European Muslims, especially those of Moroccan heritage. He commends the initiatives taken by the European Council of Moroccan Ulema but feels that greater attention should be directed at the younger generation, observing that the older generations have already firmly established their faith.

In addition to the Maliki school, the al-Asharia doctrine is a cornerstone of the Moroccan approach to Islam. Imam El-Bakkali, who was born in Morocco, is a fervent advocate of this doctrine. For example, during a conference hosted by the European Council of Moroccan Ulama, he emphasized to fellow imams the importance of adhering to the true teachings of the Ash'aria. He expressed concerns about certain misconceptions, where individuals advise against praying behind certain imams due to their Ashari beliefs. He warned against taking elements of the Ashari school out of context and emphasized the necessity of providing clear teachings to the younger generation and mosque leaders to avoid confusion.

In one of his lectures, El-Bakkali emphatically reiterates his commitment to the doctrine of Asha'ira. He openly embraces this belief, signaling that he's open to discussions or challenges on this front. During a conversation on Moroccan national television, El-Bakkali expressed his belief that the presence of multiple doctrines within a single religion can lead to spiritual unrest. He underscores the importance of allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful in ensuring this spiritual stability and in guiding religious decrees. He remarks on the pride Muslims, including those outside Morocco, feel about this spiritual stability, citing their allegiance to the Maliki school and their Sunni-based behavior as their point of reference.

El-Bakkali emphasizes that those who issue religious opinions should do so considering the individual, the place, and the time. Even though he believes in personalized religious views, his methodology in religious interpretation doesn't necessarily mirror this inclination. A close look at El-Bakkali's method of interpreting sacred Islamic texts reveals a potential contradiction. While he emphasizes the need to understand religious texts within the framework of non-Islamic societies, there appears to be a tension between this and his unwavering loyalty to the Moroccan interpretation of Islam. This is particularly evident in his viewpoint that diverse religious doctrines can lead to instability. He believes in the importance of the textual context when interpreting the Quran and argues that real-world situations should adjust according to the

religious text, rather than the other way around. He further elaborates on this by questioning why all aspects of reality are considered valid, while the textual content is subject to selective acceptance. He challenges the audience to consider which should influence the other.

The two imams who migrated from Morocco demonstrate a profound allegiance to the Moroccan interpretation of Islam. This allegiance starkly contrasts with the perspectives of imams born in Europe. For instance, rather than adhering to a single school of Jurisprudence, Kastit employs the *fiqh adalil* approach. This method places more emphasis on the underlying rationale than the specific stance of a given school, making it more suitable for the diverse European Muslim community.

Kastit believes that relying on one school of jurisprudence is only beneficial in regions with a unified understanding of faith. He contends that exclusively depending on the Maliki doctrine might not sufficiently address the varied concerns of European Muslims. Kastit cautions against the blind acceptance of religious opinions derived from translations, except for matters of worship. He points out that some questions address societal aspects where scholars might provide insights based on realities distinct from Western contexts.

He criticizes publishers for neglecting to highlight the specific contexts of fatwas, suggesting that readers should be made aware that these religious rulings are shaped by the scholars' local cultural and societal norms. Kastit is deeply concerned that indiscriminately adopting fatwas might harm Muslims in various ways. He emphasizes the juridical principle that a fatwa's applicability can vary with time and place. Ultimately, Kastit aims to harmonize Islamic culture with broader universal principles.

Kastit champions a holistic educational approach, urging followers to delve into diverse subjects like ecology, philosophy, politics, society, economy, and history. By inviting guest speakers, such as historian Jean-Michel Dufays, he enriches their understanding of broader contexts like Belgian history. His aim is to show Muslim youth, encompassing Arab Muslims, Amazigh, Turks, and Somalians, the feasibility of harmonizing their Islamic heritage with their Western identities, viewing it as an entryway into global culture. This perspective stands in contrast to Imam Bakkali's approach. Although Bakkali acknowledges the uniqueness of his mosque, separate from those in Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia, he underscores the significance of anchoring the Islamic faith within the Arab cultural framework.

Additionally, Haddach, Belgian-born, doesn't adhere to a single school of jurisprudence. In his discussions, he often cites Saudi Arabian scholars, but he also asserts that Islam's rich scholarship is not confined to that area. Haddach has engaged with various intellectuals, both from Belgium and globally, who often hold the perception that predominant Islamic rulings emanate mainly from the Wahhabis. He recognizes this misconception, noting that it diminishes the scholarly contributions of countries like Morocco, Algeria, and Pakistan.

Similarly, Benhaddou, also born in Belgium, believes that imams hailing from Morocco might not be entirely suited to the European milieu. He ardently argues for a more contextualized European Islam, emphasizing a separation from Islamic practices predominant in majority-Muslim countries. Instead of adhering strictly to a particular school of jurisprudence, Benhaddou emphasizes the role of rationality in religious interpretation. He advocates for a harmonious blend of religion and science, echoing the thoughts of philosopher Averroes, and envisions an Islam that aligns with contemporary societal values. Central to his religious stance is the dichotomy of good and evil.

Netherlands-born Imam Elforkani, meanwhile, grounds his religious perspective in the core principle of good versus evil. While he respects the moderation inherent in the Maliki doctrine, he firmly believes that Europe necessitates its unique interpretation of Islam. Despite the Moroccan heritage of these imams, it is evident they do not necessarily view the Moroccan model of Islam as the optimal representation for their European congregations.

A clear divergence in views regarding the importance of language can be observed between imams born in Morocco and their counterparts born in Europe. For Moroccan-born imams like Toujgani, while there's an acknowledgment of the importance of mastering the host country's language, religious knowledge is prioritized. For instance, Toujgani advocates for imams to be fluent in the language of their host country, such as French. However, he regards this linguistic proficiency as secondary to deep religious understanding. This perspective is echoed by El Bakkali, who, after acknowledging the significance of mastering the local language, ultimately places greater emphasis on religious knowledge. He feels that public debates overstate the importance of Dutch language proficiency among imams, though he appreciates the incorporation of Dutch alongside Arabic.

Contrastingly, in regions like Flanders, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the Netherlands, and Belgium, state-endorsed imam training reports underscore the crucial role of

local language proficiency, be it Dutch or French (Debeer, Loobuyck &Meier, 2011; Husson/Mandrin 2014). The European-born imams examined in these studies, consistently champion the significance of local languages. Kastit's view on language stands in stark contrast to Moroccan-born imams. While he acknowledges the importance of Arabic, he doesn't see it as essential for certain religious practices, such as prayer. Similarly, Haddach associates the rise of extremism with the absence of proper Islamic teachings in European native languages. Benhaddou emphasizes the indispensability of mastering local languages and perceives it as a strong argument against the influx of foreign imams. Elforkani highlights a concerning trend: the scarcity of Dutch-speaking imams creates a void, paving the way for foreign preachers to influence young Dutch Muslims (Sözeri et. al, 2019). Given this, coupled with experiences of racial discrimination, young Muslims might become vulnerable to extremist ideologies. As a solution, Elforkani ardently advocates for Dutch imams to possess an adept command of the Dutch language.

There's a distinct and palpable tension evident in the discourse of the imams born in Morocco, and a contrast between their perspectives and those of their European-born counterparts. This inner conflict is underscored by their deep-seated loyalty to Moroccan Islam even as they operate within European spheres. While there's significant alignment in numerous aspects, the overarching visions of Morocco and Western Europe regarding Islam are distinctly divergent. Both regions advocate for a peaceful interpretation of Islam devoid of radical tendencies. Europe, however, envisions an assimilative form of Islam that respects its sovereignty, whereas Morocco emphasizes maintaining its religious connection with its diasporic community.

This tension is perfectly encapsulated by the ban on Imam Toujgani. Following his ban, The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sammy Mahdi, notably commented on the historical oversight of the Grand Mosque of Schuman by Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, underscoring Belgium's prior hesitancy to address Muslim affairs domestically. Mahdi stressed that Saudi Arabia shouldn't preside over Belgian Muslims, emphasizing that these individuals are vital constituents of Belgian society. He argued that the responsibility rests with Belgian Muslims to organize without external interferences, especially from potentially divisive ideologies like Salafism.

The differing viewpoints on how Islam should be governed in Europe, as seen in the perspectives of Morocco and Western European countries, are reflected in the statements made

by the imams themselves. This is most apparent when comparing the narratives of Moroccan-born imams who migrated to Europe with those of European-born imams of Moroccan descent. When El Bakkali emphasizes the need to adapt *fiqh* to individual contexts, it appears less about a genuine recalibration of religious principles to contemporary settings and more about affirming his position as a European imam. At one point, he stresses the importance of regulated Fatwa for spiritual stability, and at another, he posits that religious text should dictate context, not the other way around. His stance on linguistic adaptability is emblematic of this tension: while he concedes the significance of mastering local languages, he subsequently deems it secondary to religious expertise. Toujgani's perspective on language resonates similarly.

Furthermore, beyond the internal discursive conflicts within the statements of imams born in Morocco, there is also a noticeable interdiscursive tension between their discourses and those of imams of Moroccan descent who were born in Europe. Imams born in Morocco tend to lean towards a unified interpretation of Islam that aligns with the Moroccan model. In contrast, European-born imams, particularly Kastit, Benhaddou, and Elforkani, resonate more with a European perspective on Islam. However, Haddach stands as an outlier, holding stringent religious views.

Kastit underscores that religious opinions aren't binding and emphasizes the diverse nature of his European Muslim audience, distancing himself from the Maliki School. Both Benhaddou and Elforkani advocate for reformation and a departure from imported Islamic traditions, while Haddach predominantly references Saudi scholars in his teachings. He holds views stricter than the two Moroccan-born imams, cautioning against adopting Western lifestyles, such as prescribing specific colors for men to wear and limiting interactions between genders.

Remarkably, even forward-thinking imams like Benhaddou and Elforkani have contrasting views on Salafism. Elforkani perceives it as a mere conservative strand of Islam that doesn't warrant prohibition, while Benhaddou critically opposes it, considering it inappropriate for the European context.

This layered dynamic illustrates a vast array of interpretations among Moroccan imams raised in Europe. Their perspectives range widely: from the progressive initiatives to revitalize Islam, as proposed by Benhaddou and Elforkani, to Kastit's more grounded approach anchored in traditional jurisprudence, and onto Haddach's perspectives, which some might view as extreme

within a European context. This spectrum of discourse underscores the intricate facets of European Islamic perspectives. However, such variation doesn't necessarily suggest that emergent European Islam leans heavily towards a liberal ideology embracing individualization and democracy (Mandaville, 2007, p. 102). A richer public dialogue doesn't invariably cultivate a more pluralistic or inclusive understanding. The doctrinal perspectives of imams born in Morocco appear more harmonized than those of their peers born in Belgium or the Netherlands with Moroccan roots, highlighting the evolving diversity in religious narratives.

Sunier (2018) observes that the myriad theological interpretations present considerable challenges for nation-states aiming to assimilate Islam and shape the public conduct of Muslims. This includes not only Muslim-majority countries like Morocco but also host nations such as Belgium, a venture that may compromise the impartiality secular states are committed to maintain. In fact, historical insights into the institutionalization of Islam in Belgium reveal apparent state involvement (Sagesser, 2020). While this study is not quantitative and cannot definitively quantify the extent of Morocco's diminishing influence over its diaspora's religious domain, insightful conclusions can be drawn. The reduced sway Morocco holds is not only due to Europe's grasp on its distinct Islamic identity but also the enriched diversity of religious interpretations nurtured by the European setting. A prime example is Imam Haddach. No European nation would endorse imams with his viewpoints. He strictly opposes women conversing with non-related males and firmly believes they should never remove their headscarf under any circumstances. This stands in stark contrast to the objectives of European-based imam training programs, which aim, in part, to foster a more “democratic” Islam. His fatwas are delivered with authority, elevating religious views to binding declarations.

Whether Morocco retains its influence as a significant religious entity in Europe hinges on several factors. Drawing parallels with the trajectory of Catholicism in the US, Laurence posits that unique regional adaptations of Islam, like French, German, and British Islam, are crystallizing. Yet, he asserts that this emergent European Islam remains intrinsically connected to the foundational Islamic centers of its origin nations that nurtured its growth. Laurence (2018) elaborates, “We see the same pattern of institutionalization through both the ‘collegio’ model – training targeted at the diaspora, but taking place in the country of origin – and the diocesan seminary model, which is located in the host country” (Laurence 2018). Further, he highlights the inception of the King Mohammed VI International Imam Training Centre in Rabat, which

welcomed its inaugural batch of 50 students from France in 2015. However, he remarks, “This is, of course, far from the level of institutional internationalization demonstrated by the cardinals who serve in the various governmental bodies of the Vatican.”

Two pivotal factors could shape the evolution of whether Morocco will retain its influence. Firstly, will Europe maintain its reliance on imams educated overseas? The challenges confronting local European imam training programs suggest that becoming self-sufficient in this regard might not be feasible in the immediate future. Secondly, the legitimacy of the theological authority wielded by institutions established through Moroccan initiatives in Europe, such as the European Council of Moroccan Ulema in Brussels, must be scrutinized. The extent to which Europe will lean on such frameworks is also up for debate, especially as some of these endeavors might not align with European preferences. A case in point is the ban of Mohamed Toujgani from the Schengen Area for 10 years, facing accusations of being a Moroccan intelligence operative, largely due to his religious perspectives echoing Morocco's model.

7.2 Controversies Around Gender

The topic of gender stands at the forefront of political and social discourse, not just in Europe, but globally. Analyzing the rhetoric of imams on gender serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it provides insights into the internal gender discussions from the viewpoint of religious leaders. Secondly, it aids in comprehending the landscape of religious authority in Europe. When these imams address gender, they predominantly focus on two pivotal issues: the headscarf and homosexuality.

Contrary to the widespread notion that Islam curtails women's freedoms, Bakkali, Moroccan-born, argues that true freedom for women arises from understanding their rights within Islam. He believes wearing the headscarf is obligatory. Yet, he concedes that in essential circumstances, like when a woman's livelihood depends on it and if the headscarf is forbidden, it can be removed. El-Bakkali's stance on the headscarf, hence, demonstrates a certain adaptability rooted in practicality.

Similarly, Belgium-born Kastit while speaking about the importance of wearing the headscarf implies that he doesn't intend to complicate life for Muslim women in Europe by imposing onerous religious edicts. He emphasizes the value of wearing the headscarf but also acknowledges that life can present challenges, urging individuals to make choices they deem

best. Nonetheless, he underlines the profound legal implications intertwined with this matter. Kastit highlights the difficulty in addressing this issue, emphasizing both the inherent legal complexities and the fundamental right of Muslims to practice their faith in Europe.

Benhaddou, who hails from Belgium, believes in the autonomy of individuals to decide whether to wear the headscarf. In critiquing the inconsistency prevalent in the Flemish context, he highlights the paradox of lauding the values of a multicultural, diverse society, while simultaneously imposing restrictions on the wearing of the headscarf in the guise of neutrality. Refuting common misconceptions about the headscarf, Benhaddou stresses the importance of personal choice within Islam, noting the observable fact that many Muslim women opt out of wearing the hijab, while others embrace it. He asserts that the true essence of a Muslim woman is shaped by her convictions and values, not merely her external appearance (Benhaddou interview, 2017).

Elforkani, born in the Netherlands, expresses a similar viewpoint. Discussing the hijab and relationships outside of wedlock, he conveys that if following such rules brings joy to individuals, then he shares in their contentment. However, if adherence leads to unhappiness, he prioritizes their well-being above all else.

In contrast, Haddach is unwavering in his belief that the headscarf is a religious obligation. Addressing a female student's quandary about potentially forgoing her hijab for a medical internship, he articulates that, from a religious standpoint, the mandate is clear. A woman's commitment to God and her understanding of the hijab's importance should drive her to perceive it as a binding duty, a principle that extends beyond the mere aspect of attire (Haddach, 2011). He contends that Muslim women in Belgium are not confronted with such pressing challenges that they need to abandon the hijab. He opines that the Muslim community bears the responsibility for not cohesively advocating their right to wear the headscarf.

Concerning the topic of homosexuality, Benhaddou approaches it with discernment. He explains that while Islam describes a particular kind of relationship, it also underscores that humans do not have the authority to judge others based on religious convictions or sexual orientation. Benhaddou believes that such personal choices remain between an individual and God, hence he abstains from voicing opinions on these subjects.

When discussing the Enlightenment's influence in promoting freedom of sexual orientation expression in Belgium, he suggests that the Enlightenment equally advocated for

diverse thinking. Benhaddou argues that pushing him to accept homosexuality might clash with Enlightenment values. He feels that one can possess a viewpoint on homosexuality different from another's. Benhaddou also expresses concern over believers frequently being put on the defensive about topics such as homosexuality or evolution. He perceives this as a part of a broader trend of sidelining religious perspectives in modern society.

Elforkani, while not overtly vocal about the rights of homosexuals, conveys when questioned that every person deserves the autonomy to lead their life on their terms. Though this stance doesn't explicitly endorse alternative lifestyles, Elforkani contends that Islam and its followers can attain a fitting role in Dutch democracy through collective understanding and acceptance.

Unlike El Forkani and Benhaddou, El Bakkali is assertive about homosexuality, emphasizing that Islam's viewpoint on the matter is definitive. He believes that in a multicultural society, individuals must respect the prevailing laws and hold and pray for the disappearance of homosexuality without engaging verbally or physically.

The perspectives of the imams on issues like the headscarf and homosexuality provide crucial insights for analysis. Firstly, their opinions about the headscarf display significant diversity, mirroring the varied religious approaches discussed earlier. Benhaddou and Elforkani, both native to Belgium and the Netherlands respectively, believe that wearing the headscarf should be an individual's choice. Conversely, El Khammar born in Morocco, and Kastit in Belgium lean towards viewing the headscarf as obligatory, albeit allowing exceptions under extreme conditions. In a more stringent viewpoint, Haddach, a Belgian native, opines that there are no justifiable circumstances for a woman to remove the headscarf.

Interestingly, while the previous discussion on religious approaches showcased a clear divergence between the perspectives of Moroccan-born and European-born imams, the headscarf debate sees El Khammar, El Bakkali, and Kastit largely in agreement. The most rigid stance surprisingly comes from Haddach, an imam born in Belgium. This observation underlines that the European religious context offers a broader scope for interpretation, though not always a more liberal one.

A notable emphasis is given by the imams when discussing the headscarf. They highlight the issue as primarily a legal challenge, arguing that Western democracies seem to curtail the

freedom to wear the headscarf. Hence, before it is seen as a religious matter, the headscarf debate first assumes a legal and political dimension.

When analyzing the discourse surrounding the rights of Muslim women, especially concerning the headscarf, a striking contradiction emerges, the freedom paradox. This concept suggests that pushing the limits of freedom can, at times, make it restrictive. The ongoing debate on the headscarf is a testament to this intricate dynamic.

In numerous secular societies, an overarching concern is the preservation and practice of secularism, a principle aimed at ensuring freedom from religious interference in public life. However, the line between ensuring this freedom and suppressing individual religious expressions can often become blurred. This becomes particularly evident in the restrictions placed upon Muslim women and their choice to wear the headscarf. Instead of upholding the value of religious freedom, the dominant narrative often twists into a perverse form of protection – protection from a woman's religion, rather than protection of a woman's choice to practice her religion.

Hilal Elver's perspective, elucidated in 2012, is particularly enlightening in this context. Elver argues:

> Therefore, secularism should not be used as an excuse to punish expressions of religious belief and observance, especially if these manifestations of religiosity are the basis for the denial of further human rights to individuals. On the contrary, secularism should be implemented and interpreted as a principle that supports the exercise of religious freedom in order to protect other, related human rights, such as the rights to education and gender equality.

The West, in particular, has been criticized for its approach towards the headscarf issue. Rather than viewing it as a symbol of devotion and religious freedom, it is often stereotypically seen as emblematic of the coercive and abusive aspects of Islam. As Elver poignantly notes, "Instead of the protection of religious freedom, the reverse protection—protection from a woman's religion—receives more attention and sympathy" (Elver, 2012). Such perceptions feed into the stereotype that Islam is inherently oppressive, particularly towards women. This narrow

viewpoint disregards the personal agency of countless Muslim women who choose to wear the headscarf as an act of devotion and identity.

This prevailing stereotype further explains why "international human rights principles have generally failed to protect pious women" (Elver, 2012). Instead of safeguarding their rights to express and practice their faith, these women are often made the subjects of misguided sympathy, predicated on misconceptions about their faith.

In sum, while secularism is undeniably essential for ensuring the separation of state and religious entities, it should not become a tool for denying individuals their rightful expressions of faith. The discourse surrounding the headscarf exemplifies this tension and underscores the necessity to re-evaluate and recalibrate the understanding of religious freedom in contemporary times.

On the topic of homosexuality, there's an initial semblance of consensus among the imams, with all unequivocally condemning violence against LGBTQ+ individuals. Yet, there are distinct shades of difference. El Bakkali is explicit in his assertion that homosexuality is proscribed within Islam, urging followers to pray for its cessation rather than resort to any form of aggressive intervention. In contrast, El Forkani and Benhaddou avoid direct comments on its religious permissibility. Instead, they emphasize the importance of refraining from judgment, asserting that such personal choices shouldn't be the concern of outsiders. Benhaddou further argues that forcing someone to adopt a specific perspective on homosexuality contradicts Enlightenment values, viewing it as a tactic to corner believers.

Within the discourses of the imams, certain elements of the conversation regarding homosexuality exhibit parallels with the headscarf debate, particularly the assertion that imposing specific beliefs about homosexuality might constitute an encroachment on freedom of expression. It is noteworthy to discern the prevailing diplomatic stance in the pronouncements of most imams. A distinct departure from this trend is observed in El Bakkali's stance, which unambiguously characterizes homosexuality as incongruent with Islamic tenets. His advocacy emphasizes prayer, cautioning against alternate interventions. Benhaddou invokes the Enlightenment, positing that its foundational principles ought to safeguard an individual's entitlement to an independent perspective on homosexuality. Furthermore, he speculates that the continuous emphasis on homosexuality, particularly within the framework of Islamic discourse, potentially aims at undermining the legitimacy of the faith.

While certain conservative Western politicians express reservations about homosexuality, its intersection with Islamic principles exacerbates the polemic. Gert Hekma, in his 2002 article, postulated that the media's alacrity in highlighting the imams' perspectives on homosexuality, further amplified by vigorous debates among politicians and the public, is perhaps indicative of a pervasive lack of nuanced comprehension of Islamic beliefs, intertwined with vestiges of ethnocentrism against the imams' ostensibly conservative articulations. Yet, it is salient to note that such perspectives, while contextualized within Islamic doctrine, resonate with certain canonical interpretations in Christianity and Judaism, rendering the ensuing consternation somewhat misplaced.

7.3 Authority, Views on Radicalism, and Globalization

The earlier sections discussing religious perspectives and gender roles have highlighted some of the challenges facing imams in Western Europe. These challenges can exert pressure on their views, leading to conflicting rhetoric. This segment intends to delve deeper into how they perceive their position, authority, and the challenges they face, simultaneously exploring their perspectives on radicalization. This conjunction is crucial, given the recurrent allegations insinuating imams as conduits of radicalization. In this context, their responses not only address these assertions but also elucidate the scope and authority inherent to their roles.

In examining the representation of Islam and radicalization within European political and media discourses, the studied imams, through their sermons and interviews, shed light on multifaceted aspects of the causes of radicalization. Despite the diversity in their discourses, a unifying theme emerges: a critical evaluation of both the self (the Muslim community) and the other (the wider European society). Toujgani, as an illustrative case, identifies two primary trajectories. Initially, he critiques the prevailing practice of generalizing an entire religion based on the deeds of a minority of its adherents. Concurrently, he underscores a tendency within sections of the Muslim community to resort to extremist views in reaction to perceived provocations.

In addition to Toujgani, in his views on radicalization, Kastit posits that the underlying causes are entrenched in a broader geopolitical and historical context, rather than being solely rooted in Islamic doctrine. He asserts that the characterization of Islam as a menacing ideology serves specific political ends. Drawing parallels to the Cold War era, Kastit suggests that the

Western political machinery previously perceived the Eastern Bloc as its primary adversary, epitomized by the schism between Western and Eastern Europe. Post the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, and especially after the 9/11 attacks, nations like the U.S. found a renewed impetus to pinpoint a new antagonist. Kastit argues that this newly crafted adversary has taken the form of Islamic factions such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, and Wahhabism, as elucidated in a 2018 interview with Jean-Michel Dufays. He further hypothesizes that certain acts of terrorism, ostensibly committed in the name of Islam, might indeed be expressions of defiance against these imperialistic forces.

That being said, Kastit articulates a critical assessment of segments of the Muslim community that demonstrate pronounced emotional and impulsive reactions, like those urging imams to promptly address contemporaneous political events in their sermons. He draws attention to a particular instance in France, recounting the story of an attendee who expressed dissatisfaction with an imam's sermon centered on children's education, "I would like to tell this brother or sister that the imam cannot in any case be the hostage of people's feelings" (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020). This viewpoint resonates with the assertions of Mohammed Hashas, who suggests that the modern-day role of imams leans more toward ethical considerations than political ones. This shift can be perceived as a reflection of a larger movement towards nationalization, institutionalization, and a growing dependence on state authority, with a focus on moral instruction and a strategic withdrawal from direct political discourse (Hashas, 2018). Further, Kastit advocates for the pivotal role of knowledge dissemination as a preventive measure against radicalization, underscoring the observation that a significant portion of radicalized youth displays a palpable deficiency in comprehensive understanding.

Haddach, echoing sentiments similar to Kastit, observes that the label "Islamic terrorism" has only recently entered mainstream discourse. He underscores that Belgium's earlier terrorist incidents were fueled by diverse motives. Mentioning religious texts, Haddach points out the Quran's recurrent themes of peace, lamenting that public attention is disproportionately concentrated on its mentions of jihad. He entreats individuals to juxtapose the scale of violence from Western-initiated wars against the historical context of conflicts within Islam.

In response to escalating antagonism towards Islam, particularly in the aftermath of attacks purportedly executed in its name, Haddach exhorts adherents to remain unwavering in their faith. He elucidates that while terminologies such as jihad might appear intimidating, they

have precise interpretations within Islamic doctrine. By drawing a parallel between jihad and national defense mechanisms, Haddach posits that jihad is an institutional response rather than an individual prerogative, inherently aligned with defense strategies and squarely within the jurisdiction of official state apparatuses. He expresses apprehension regarding youth, especially from Belgian locales like Molenbeek, who might misinterpret the essence of jihad.

Highlighting the need for critical engagement with Western media's representation of Islam, Haddach counsels that living as a Muslim in a non-Muslim society means being bound to face challenges. He advises not to be swayed by those who misrepresent Islam on television for mere sensationalism, as many discerning individuals recognize Islam as an open, structured faith with each tenet occupying a specific domain (Haddach, 2016).

Moreover, while Haddach concedes the existence of certain media false representations, he affirms the veracity of others, an assertion substantiated by his personal encounters. He identifies a correlation between radical tendencies and the deficit in comprehensive Islamic instruction for young believers, especially in vernacular languages. Lastly, Haddach critiques the reductive perspective that pigeonholes a multifaceted religion into simplistic binaries, such as halal (permissible) and haram (prohibited).

Haddach provides insight into the participation metrics within Islamic religious education in Belgium, particularly focusing on the engagement of second and third-generation Moroccan immigrants. He observes a troubling trend, reminiscing that many students, even during his time, were originally from Morocco, not local to Belgium. He is an advocate for the rise of imams who are native to Belgium, highlighting the difficulties presented by decreased attendance and linguistic barriers, given that many participants do not have a strong grasp of Arabic. He suggests that a structured framework for religious education might help to counteract extremist leanings by providing a stable and standardized foundation.

Like Haddach whose discourse portrays the same dual criticism, Benhaddou shows a similar trend. Throughout his developmental years, he diligently distanced himself from extremist Islamic ideologies. Demonstrating a palpable rapport with the younger generation, he consistently engages with them across various social activities, establishing himself not merely as a guide but also as a peer. He postulates that Ghent's dearth of IS militants is attributable to its substantial Muslim Flemish-Turkish demographic, renowned for its moderate religious practices. Such a viewpoint indirectly condemns some interpretations of Islam that he considers radical.

Benhaddou identifies a societal subset intent on exacerbating the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric, with aims to accentuate divisions. He critiques politicians who marginalize Muslims and accentuates the consequential repercussions of racism, suggesting it might inadvertently serve as a catalyst for radicalization among the aggrieved. While Benhaddou is candid in his disapproval of such divisive politicians, he also draws attention to the reticence within Flemish society to address the palpable issue of racism.

Elforkani, a “liberal” imam like Benhaddou, sees that delineating a “hate imam” is difficult, pointing out the nebulous boundary that exists between freedom of expression and hate discourse, particularly when the language in question doesn't overtly endorse violence. Central to Elforkani's apprehensions is his conviction that radical elements within the Muslim community inadvertently jeopardize the collective status of Muslims as equitable Dutch citizens.

Elforkani has drawn attention with some of his contentious assertions, notably linking Islam to acts of violence. In the wake of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, contrary to the prevalent stance among many Muslim scholars who distance Islam from violence and terror, Elforkani remarked in an engagement with de Volkskrant newspaper that continually asserting that this bears no relation to Islam' is an oversimplification (Green, 2015). Elforkani articulates concerns about the potent intersection of extremist theological interpretations with sentiments of social alienation and racial discrimination.

Elforkani's perspective on escalating radicalism is nuanced. He observes an initial genuine intention to assimilate this evolving cultural milieu; however, he pinpoints a growing polarization engendering dual extremisms: observed in extreme nationalists as well as in Muslim radicals. Elforkani's critique spans across various stakeholders: including the Dutch Muslim demographic, the broader Dutch society, political entities, and interpreters of Islamic doctrines. He advocates for a broader empathetic approach among Muslims towards individuals who, due to the pervasive imagery on digital platforms, equate Islam with violence. Additionally, Elforkani critically examines certain media portrayals that magnify misplaced anxieties through the selective presentation of data related to Muslim demographics, contending that these statistics are susceptible to multiple interpretations. A compounding factor in this escalating dynamic of hostility and radicalism is the perceived systemic profiling endured by specific groups.

Elforkani has received respect from both Muslims and non-Muslims, who applaud him for acting as a go-between. The sympathetic Dutch press praises Elforkani the “Young Imam”

and the voice of moderate Islam. He has, however, come under fire from a variety of groups, ranging from anti-Islamists to Salafi organizations. The religious and political views of Elforkani in the Friday sermons, media debates, and interviews made him a controversial figure and got him many enemies and, sometimes, security threats. One such view, for instance, is his call that Muslims should protect rather than hurt Geert Wilders (Rhoul, 2018).

Within the discourses of the imams, a recurrent theme emerges: a critique of both the self (the Muslim community) and the other (external factors and influences and the West). While this critique serves as a common thread, the approach and emphasis differ, often significantly, among the imams.

In self-critique, except for Elforkani, none of the imams explicitly assert that radicalization stems directly from the Islamic tradition. Figures like Toujgani, Kastit, and Haddach castigate those within the Muslim community who respond excessively to perceived provocations. In contrast, Benhaddou directs his critique towards what he perceives as more hardline interpretations of Islam, specifically Salafism.

Turning to the critique of external factors and the West, Kastit posits that radicalization can be seen as a reaction to interventions and imperialistic actions. This perspective finds partial agreement with Haddach, who contextualizes radicalization as a relatively recent phenomenon, advocating for a historical comparison of the casualties attributed to Islam against those resulting from Western actions. Further, both Benhaddou and Kastit underscore the detrimental effects of institutional racism, viewing it as a potential catalyst for radicalization. Toujgani, on the other hand, focuses on the misrepresentation of Islam within broader discourses, contending that such portrayals can inadvertently foster extremist views.

In discussions surrounding Islamic conservatism, particularly concerning Wahhabism and Salafism, there is a notable divergence among the imams in their perspectives. Benhaddou unequivocally distances himself from these interpretations, emphasizing that imams should pursue a more moderate approach to Islamic teachings and engage in language that resonates with younger audiences. In Benhaddou's view, there's an inherent need to harmonize spiritual convictions with democratic tenets, arguing that such equilibrium is untenable through the prisms of Salafism and jihadism, particularly as the former hinders integration.

Conversely, Kastit and Elforkani present alternate analyses. Kastit expresses concerns over the generalized misconceptions surrounding entities like the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism,

and Wahhabism, suggesting that these groups are often unjustly demonized. By drawing on historical contexts, specifically the post-1956 coup in Egypt, Kastit underscores his disapproval of the West's response to the presidency of Mohamed Morsi. He further critiques the portrayal by European media, spotlighting the longstanding geopolitical friction between the West and the Arab world, often marked by Western interventionism.

Kastit's understanding of Salafism, or "Salafia" as he terms it, transcends the notion of mere nostalgic reverence for the past. Instead, he views it as gleaning wisdom from historical methodologies to shape contemporary faith practices. Salafia, in his interpretation, symbolizes a call for socio-political and spiritual revival, with proponents often resisting foreign interventions in their countries. Regional nuances, such as in Morocco, position Salafia as a defense against colonial influence.

Elforkani, meanwhile, underscores a misalignment in political dialogues about Muslim integration, arguing that these discussions often fail to mirror societal advances. In his discourse with the Dutch newspaper, Trouw, he deliberates on the common conflation of Salafism with extremism. He contends that Salafism, in its essence, is not uniform and that individuals can identify as Salafi while concurrently integrating into Dutch society. The crux of the issue, for Elforkani, is "violent Salafism." Drawing from his insights shared with Trouw, he emphasizes that Salafi identification doesn't invariably lead to extremism; factors like societal marginalization significantly influence this trajectory. Despite potential associations with the Brotherhood, he conducted rites in memory of the ousted Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi.

In the realm of progressive Islamic discourse that emphasizes adaptation within the European context, the contrasting views of Benhaddou and Elforkani on the acceptance of conservative Islam, particularly Salafism, offer intriguing insights. Benhaddou remarked in an interview:

> Salafism possesses a more pronounced structural presence in the Netherlands, enjoying a more entrenched status within the Muslim society compared to our context. Their influence in the Netherlands is more pervasive, granting them a broader reach and consequently a heightened impact. However, such influence extends to regions like Flanders, facilitated by platforms like social media. It is imperative that we remain vigilant about such outreach (Decre, 2019).

Although Benhaddou's perspective may resonate more with European politicians, particularly those from right-wing affiliations, Elforkani's stance harmonizes more aptly with foundational principles of secularism that venerate religious freedom, contingent upon its non-harmful exercise. The legal tenets affirming this freedom are encapsulated in Article 19 of the Belgian Constitution, which states, "Freedom of worship, its public practice, and freedom to express one's opinions on all subjects are enshrined, but transgressions executed under this freedom's purview are subject to punishment" (Belgian Constitution, 2021). Similarly, Article 6 of the Dutch constitution elaborates on the freedom to profess one's religious or belief convictions, albeit with certain delineated boundaries for public safety and order (The Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2018).

Importantly, Salafism is not a monolithic doctrine. Contemporary sociological paradigms suggest categorizing it into three distinct subdivisions: apolitical/purist Salafists, political Salafists, and jihadi Salafists. The apolitical or purist Salafism advocates for an educative role, emphasizing the instilment of a foundational and ascetic lifestyle among Muslims, devoid of any violent undertones (Welten and Abbas, 2021).

The securitization of Salafism has engendered nuanced repercussions. When Muslim communities perceive themselves as being securitized, it fosters a fertile environment for the cultivation of an "us versus them" mentality. Salafist recruiters interpret such perceptions as conducive preconditions, attracting Muslims grappling with identity crises. The ambiance engendered by such anticipatory policies amplifies feelings of displacement within these communities, culminating in a heightened consciousness of alienation and perceived targeting. This sense of communal identity conflict has, in some instances, augmented inclinations towards jihadi Salafist ideologies (Welten and Abbas, 2021). The absence of a universally accepted definition that either incorporates or excludes specific sects within Salafism has further exacerbated the Muslim community's frustrations. Consequently, self-censorship has emerged as an adaptive strategy (Welten and Abbas, 2021). Thus, adopting an uncompromising stance towards Salafism may inadvertently bolster its appeal, potentially in more radicalized forms, rather than diminish it.

Shifting now the discussion from conservative Islam to authority, Imams seem to agree more or less on this issue. While imams predominantly function within the confines of mosques,

where they ostensibly hold considerable authority, their influence is not without constraints. Within the mosque itself, their actions and decisions often fall under the purview of a mosque committee. This dynamic is elucidated by Imam Toujgani who states, “They usually live under pressure and do not have freedom in the mosque where they work. It is usually the committee that runs the mosque and its vision is usually limited” (MaghrebTVchannel, 2013). This observation is corroborated by Amin el-Yousfi's study, which posits that rather than witnessing a diminishing of the imams' religious authority, the mosques have been increasingly subjected to the bureaucratic dominion of their committees (2019).

Furthermore, another constraining factor on an imam's authority is state intervention that has recast the imam's role, transitioning it more towards an ethical guide rather than a broader religious authority. An illustrative instance of this circumscribed role was evident when Imam Kastit responded to a European Muslim's query regarding an imam's lack of engagement with Macron's proclamation on the 2nd of October 2020, “Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, we are not just seeing this in our country.” He specified that the imam gave a lecture on children's education in this heated political context. Kastit retorted, “I would like to tell this brother or sister that the imam cannot in any case be the hostage of people’s feelings” (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020). This perspective aligns with the insights proffered by Mohammed Hashas, who argues that contemporary imams have transitioned towards primarily ethical roles, relegating political considerations. This transformation is indicative of an escalating reliance on state governance (Hashas, 2018).

Contrary to prevailing misconceptions suggesting that imams wield considerable authority within Muslim communities—sometimes allegedly exploiting it to hinder integration—there is substantial evidence indicating their restricted influence. This misconception often results in imams being unjustly scapegoated by political figures and sections of the Western media during turbulent periods. Imam Haddach illuminates the complexity inherent in this role, highlighting the challenge faced by religious leaders who endeavor to authentically represent Islam while simultaneously being vulnerable to mischaracterizations in conflict-ridden contexts. He further condemns instances where his messages are deliberately misconstrued through selective editing, portraying him inaccurately as an extremist.

Illustrating the undue expectations placed on imams, Imam Kastit notes, “I have an expression that I use to talk with the brothers around me. I say that the imam is some sort of

Superman. They must be on all fronts and must answer all the problems and solve every situation." (Q&A Kastit, 23 October 2020). Echoing this sentiment, Toujgani adds, "The situation of imams in Belgium and Europe is not comfortable neither psychologically nor materially. They usually live under pressure and do not have freedom in the mosque where they work." El-Bakkali posits that the paradigm of imamship requires reevaluation, emphasizing, "If we want to make this position function properly, we can expect things from it, but we also have to invest in it. A proverb says, 'As much as you take, you will also have to give.' But I think it is a great pity that things are now being demanded of him from all sides. And he is often accused of shortcomings with nothing in return: he is not respected in society." (El-Bakkali, interview by Boender, 2007).

Attributing integration challenges solely to imams is not only myopic but also unjust. The imams' influence is concurrently being diluted by two primary facets of globalization. Initially, advancements in communication mediums, especially the Internet and contemporary media forms, have relegated them to one of many voices in the vast religious discourse. Imam Benhaddou underscores the potential perils of young individuals turning to questionable online platforms for religious enlightenment. Similarly, Elforkani amplifies concerns regarding the role of social media in promoting extremist narratives, accentuating the digital realm's efficacy in disseminating such views. Haddach interprets the pervasive nature of the Internet as a formidable medium for the spread of radical ideologies, given its omnipresence and diverse religious narratives. The remedy, he proposes, is not simply the augmentation of religious infrastructures but the establishment of a structured and coherent organizational matrix.

Toujgani, in his analysis of the origins of radicalization, attributes a significant role to modern vectors, notably the potential manipulations within emerging media platforms. He references the pervasive influence of the internet, underscoring its salient role in disseminating extremist ideologies (MaghrebTVchannel, 2012). Building on this, he champions a forward-looking strategy to combat radicalization, postulating that imams should harness communication platforms more effectively to resonate with younger demographics. This recommendation aligns with the prevailing sentiment amongst mosque attendees who categorically denounce extremism. Highlighting the reactive nature of attention on imams, Toujgani poignantly observes that imams become of interest only when something adverse transpires, hinting at the propensity to place blame on religious leaders in the wake of calamitous events.

Concurrently, El-Bakkali articulates a discerning understanding of the potential hazards confronting young individuals in the digital age, especially given the surge in unchecked and potentially harmful religious content online. As a preventative initiative, El-Bakkali counsels believers, notably the younger cohort, to confer with official imams regarding religious content sourced from external platforms. He contends that such engagement might foster a judicious and analytical disposition among adherents. Reflecting on the boundaries of his pastoral duties, El-Bakkali comments, "I am not responsible for what they do on the street" (Interview with El-Bakkali, NRC Handelsblad, December 2004).

Moreover, El-Bakkali's insights provide a lens into a pertinent trend within religious contexts. He articulates reservations regarding the liberal conferral of the 'imam' title, noting, “I find it concerning how the designation 'imam' has been broadly and sometimes inappropriately applied” (Interview with El-Bakkali, NRC Handelsblad, December 2004). Such reflections bring to the fore the changing contours within religious authority, markedly amplified by the emergence and omnipresence of contemporary media platforms. This scenario underscores the imperative to differentiate between institutionally sanctioned imams and those who self-identify as such, given the consequential role each may play in moulding religious narratives and influencing public sentiment.

Beyond the rapid and varied means of communication as a primary domain wherein globalization undermines the role of imams, a secondary effect emerges from operating within a globalized milieu. This environment inevitably engenders points of tension between disparate populations. It is unjust to solely attribute this tension to imams. Toujgani argues that Morocco's steadfast adherence to its traditional interpretation of Islam has engendered peace within its borders. Yet, it is the juxtaposition with novel contexts that has engendered complications for ensuing generations. Toujgani emphasizes the harmonious assimilation of the first cohort of Moroccan immigrants, suggesting that their absence of extremist inclinations derives from an upbringing steeped in the cultural and moral tenets of Moroccan Islamic society. It is the subsequent encounter with European societal structures, he asserts, that spurred radical tendencies. Augmenting this perspective and accentuating potential misinterpretations in multicultural settings, Elforkani posits the necessity of remaining open to the likelihood that one's perceived truths may not correspond similarly across diverse populations (Interview Yassin

Elforkani, 2015). This aligns with the perspective that globalization's challenges can be catalysts for radicalization.

In these reconfigured settings, issues of identity emerge, cultivating a conducive environment for radicalization and amplifying societal bifurcation, whether originating from Muslim communities or European nationals. European-born imams, versed in these identity complexities, often articulate these sentiments more poignantly than their counterparts, such as El Bakkali and Toujgani. Haddach resonates profoundly with the pervasive sentiment of alienation prevalent among successive generations of Moroccan immigrants in Western Europe. Confronted by a mosque attendee regarding this sentiment of detachment, Haddach reflects, evoking the depth of such feelings. Drawing from both observational and personal experiences, Haddach narrates how, during his youthful days in Tangier, he was colloquially termed 'Belgiko' (small Belgian), rather than recognized as a native Tangier resident. Upon relocating to Belgium, this sensation of otherness persisted, as he was frequently identified as Moroccan or branded with various pejoratives contingent upon extant stereotypes (Haddach, 2016).

Benhaddou accentuates the significant ramifications of racism, positing that it can inadvertently propel individuals towards radicalism. His critique of politicians amplifying these sentiments is forthright, underscoring the necessity to confront racism's magnitude. Meanwhile, Kastit advocates universally for anti-racism, contending it transcends Whites. He opines, “The fight against racist discrimination, because racism exists in all communities; it is not specific to whites as it might be believed. We Maghrebins have some forms of racism between ourselves.” (Interview by Jean-Michel Dufays, 2018). Similarly, Elforkani addresses the amplification of animosity and radicalization due to perceived systemic targeting, asserting that this perception is not confined solely to political discourse but extends to law enforcement practices. The police, he suggests, ought to be judiciously cognizant of their actions' potential implications.

These reflections by imams offer a layered comprehension of globalization's impact. Instead of perceiving it as a unidirectional trajectory, it becomes pivotal to discern its capacity to engender societal dislocations, a viewpoint resonated by Anna Tsing (2004) as she argues against "programmatic global predictions" while emphasizing the "unexpected and unstable aspects of global interaction."

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has engaged with multiple intricate aspects related to Islam, authority, and imams of Moroccan descent residing in Belgium and the Netherlands. The primary objective centered on investigating the interplay between the perspectives of both the origin and host nations concerning the Muslim diaspora and the consequential ramifications on imams of Moroccan origin. Utilizing a conflicting discourse analysis methodology, these dynamics became especially manifest in the discursive divergences evidenced in the views of Moroccan-born European migrants, specifically Imams Toujgani and El Bakkali.

Imam Toujgani, possessing profound affiliations with Morocco, ardently adheres to the Maliki School of Jurisprudence. He contends that the Moroccan interpretation of Islam merits preservation within the European Muslim community, underscoring the imperative of concentrating on the younger cohorts. Conversely, Imam El-Bakkali exhibits staunch advocacy for the al-Asharia doctrine. A salient differentiation in their approaches is juxtaposed with European-born imams, exemplified by Kastit, who adopts a more malleable *fiqh adalil* methodological framework, resonating with the heterogeneous European Muslim populace.

Imam Toujgani, navigating both Moroccan and Belgian identities, elucidates the potential for harmonious coexistence of these identities. Drawing from the notion of simultaneity, his approach is not contradictory (Levitt and Schiller, 2004). However, his unwavering allegiance to the Maliki School of Jurisprudence occasionally conflicts with Belgian anticipations of its Muslim citizenry.

Parallelly, the Moroccan Islamic paradigm accentuates the al-Asharia doctrine, with Imam El-Bakkali as its prominent exponent. He accentuates the imperative of upholding the authentic teachings of Ash'aria to guarantee spiritual stability. Furthermore, speaking publicly on Moroccan broadcasting channels, Imam El-Bakkali fervently reiterates his dedication to the Asha'ira doctrine, spotlighting potential spiritual dissonance emerging from religious diversity. He champions contextually relevant religious exegeses, yet often manifests a tension between accommodating his religious interpretations to the European context and remaining unwaveringly aligned to Moroccan Islamic elucidations. Contrarily, European-born imams are not inclined towards a singular interpretation of religion.

In terms of language, a discernible dissonance characterizes the perspectives of imams originating from Morocco in juxtaposition with those who were born and raised in Europe. Imams of Moroccan descent, despite acknowledging the imperative of proficiency in European languages, predominantly emphasize theological erudition. As an example, despite advocating for linguistic proficiency in the host nation's language, neither Toujgani nor El Bakkali possesses knowledge of any European language. They assign a subordinate position to this skill in comparison to religious acumen. This orientation starkly contrasts with European-born imams who persistently underscore linguistic aptitude as paramount for seamless integration and for efficaciously addressing radical tendencies within European Muslim cohorts.

This dialectical tension elucidates a broader schism between Moroccan and Western European conceptualizations of Islam. While both geographies aspire towards a pacifistic exegesis of Islam, the European ambition gravitates towards an incarnation of Islam that is both integrative and deferential to its national sovereignties. Alternatively, Morocco endeavors to fortify its religious affinity with its expatriates, accentuating the conservation of its unique Islamic traditions and interpretations.

Such bifurcations are poignantly manifested in the prohibition imposed on Imam Toujgani. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sammy Mahdi, proffered commentary on the predicament, articulating that Belgium ought to autonomously govern its Islamic affairs, eschewing extraneous influence, with a tacit allusion to erstwhile Saudi Arabian oversight. Such a proclamation amplifies the European aspiration for a localized, integrated interpretation of Islam, unswayed by external influences.

The imams' discourses are very much affected by the difference in approaching Islam between Morocco and Western European countries. El Bakkali, for instance, promulgates religious interpretations that are germane to the European context. Nevertheless, his assertions frequently convey a proclivity towards legitimizing the status of a European imam, rather than a wholehearted accommodation to the European milieu.

In the second objective, the dissertation tackled deeply the perspectives of Western European imams of Moroccan ancestry on complex subjects such as identity, gender, doctrine, politics, and radicalization, with the intent of illuminating the indigenization process of Islam within Europe. This analytical endeavor holds significance in dual capacities. Firstly, it ascertains the positioning of imams vis-à-vis ongoing debates pertinent to Europe and Islam. Secondly, it

signals an array of divergent opinions, particularly amongst the European-born imams, thereby epitomizing the multifaceted Islamic panorama in Europe. By employing the "discourses in conflict" methodology, salient conclusions emerge. There exists a spectrum of both convergences and divergences in the imams' viewpoints. In the realm of religious doctrine, although Moroccan-born imams tend to adopt relatively conservative stances, their perspectives are not the most stringent and are emblematic of the Moroccan model of Islam. Contrarily, Haddach, a Belgian-born imam, embodies the most stringent perspectives, particularly in aspects such as attire and social behavior. He posits specific prohibitions on attire for men and women and strictly forbids inter-gender interactions among unrelated individuals. Conversely, Benhaddou and El Forkani champion a progressive model of Islam and advocate against external Islamic influences and their affiliated clerics. Kastit's position seems to oscillate between conservatism and liberalism. Rooted in the argumentative paradigm within *fiqh*, he eschews allegiance to a singular school, opting instead for contextually appropriate interpretations in the European milieu.

On gender dynamics, both Kastit and Bakkali advocate a nuanced stance, contending that while adherence to religious obligations, such as wearing the headscarf, is vital, it should not compromise Muslim women's well-being. Thus, in exceptional circumstances, concessions can be considered. Benhaddou and El Forkani, on the other hand, champion a woman's autonomy in choosing to wear the headscarf. Contrarily, Haddach, nurtured in a Belgian milieu, staunchly believes there exists no scenario that permits its removal.

In terms of views on homosexuality, Bakkali posits its religious prohibition but emphasizes that no individual should react to it, either physically or verbally. Both Benhaddou and El Forkani contend that such matters are a private contract between individuals and the divine, eschewing any external interference. Furthermore, Benhaddou postulates that subjects like homosexuality and religious attire are often exploited as tools to render Muslims defensive, contending that being dictated beliefs on such matters contravenes the Enlightenment's principles.

Within the scope of this dissertation, European-born imams collectively articulated concerns about perceived inequalities manifested by Western institutions, especially pertaining to the contentious issue of the headscarf. When confronted with queries regarding the proscription of the headscarf, Kastit, Haddach, and Benhaddou perceive it as a legislative challenge directly

impacting European Muslims. They assert that the unrestricted practice of one's religion is a fundamental right, and under the guise of advocating for women's emancipation, one cannot infringe upon the right to wear the headscarf. The Western narrative, in this context, has drawn criticism for its portrayal of the headscarf. Rather than recognizing it as an emblem of piety and religious liberty, it is frequently misconstrued as a symbol of Islam's oppressive dimensions. As elucidated by Elver, "The discourse often prioritizes protecting individuals from a woman's religious expression over safeguarding her religious freedom" (Elver, 2012).

On the radicalization issue, imams such as Toujgani, Kastit, and Haddach criticize both the Muslim community and the West, admonishing segments of the Muslim populace for excessive reactions to provocations. Only Elforkani distinctly attributes radicalization tendencies to Islamic traditions, while Benhaddou calls for getting rid of stringent interpretations, particularly emphasizing Salafism.

In terms of external criticism, Kastit postulates that radicalization tendencies may be symptomatic reactions to Western interferences and historical imperialist actions. This sentiment finds resonance with Haddach. Additionally, both Kastit and Benhaddou spotlight institutionalized racism as a potential incendiary for radicalization. Concurrently, Toujgani underscores misrepresentations of Islam in predominant discourses, postulating that such distortions may inadvertently engender extremist sentiments.

Engaging with the dialogues on Islamic conservatism, particularly Wahhabism and Salafism, opinions manifest divergence. Benhaddou advocates for a tempered interpretation of Islam that harmoniously melds spiritual tenets with democratic ideals, positing that Salafism impedes integrative processes. Conversely, Kastit and Elforkani voice apprehensions concerning the vilification of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, and Wahhabism.

Benhaddou and Elforkani, both imams with very liberal views, offer divergent interpretations regarding the integration of conservative Islam, notably Salafism, within the European milieu. Benhaddou acknowledges the pervasive influence of Salafism in regions like the Netherlands and underscores its burgeoning presence in areas such as Flanders, facilitated extensively by mediums like social media. In contrast, Elforkani's stance appears more congruent with foundational secularist tenets, championing the principle of religious liberty as long as it does not engender harm.

Such principles are codified within the legislative scaffolds of both Belgium and the Netherlands. Article 19 of the Belgian Constitution, along with Article 6 of the Dutch constitution, safeguards the rights to religious expression and worship, albeit within delineated confines to safeguard public tranquility and order. The heightened securitization of Salafism may engender sentiments of persecution within Muslim cohorts, fostering a divisive "in-group versus out-group" paradigm. The resultant estrangement might amplify inclinations towards jihadi Salafist tenets.

As demonstrated, the perspectives on gender, radicalization, identity, and religious doctrine evince a marked diversity among European-born imams. This variation is noteworthy, signifying the evolving landscape of the religious domain in Europe. Specifically, the absence of a cohesive, structured Islamic authority seems to foster this diversification.

Furthermore, as its third aim, the research delved into the perceived waning influence of nations of origin over the religious beliefs of their diasporic communities. This diminishing influence can be attributed to multiple factors. One predominant factor is the sovereignty concern, with European nations viewing Morocco's stewardship of the religious sphere as a potential infringement on their sovereignty. This perspective is exemplified by incidents such as the ban on Imam Toujgani, attributed to alleged affiliations with Moroccan intelligence. Yet, these geopolitical tensions are not the sole contributors. European-born Moroccan imams themselves express a preference for leadership that emerges from their European milieu, contending that such leaders are better equipped to address context-specific challenges within European Islam.

Sunier (2018) posits that these diverse theological stances present conundrums for nations striving to integrate Islam while preserving the impartiality that secular states seek. Historical analyses suggest active state participation in delineating the form and expression of Islam, as evidenced in countries like Belgium.

Laurence (2018) elaborates on the development of Islam within Europe, drawing parallels with the trajectory of Catholicism in the United States. He identifies the rise of regionally nuanced iterations of Islam, including distinct French, German, and British expressions. Nevertheless, these localized forms remain deeply rooted in foundational Islamic traditions from their respective countries of origin. Laurence delineates two predominant models of religious institutionalization: the 'collegio' model, which entails training within the country of origin, and

the diocesan seminary model, localized within the host nation. An illustrative example of the former is the King Mohammed VI International Imam Training Centre in Rabat. Yet, Laurence underscores that such international outreach pales in comparison to more established systems like the Vatican's cardinal structure.

The prospective influence of Morocco on European Islam hinges on two pivotal considerations:

1. The extent to which Europe will persist in its reliance on imams trained abroad. Current dynamics hint at Europe's enduring dependence in this domain.

2. The credibility and acceptance of Moroccan-initiated religious institutions within Europe. Institutions like the European Council of Moroccan Ulema in Brussels exemplify this dynamic. However, its congruence with European principles remains a point of contention, as underscored by the Schengen Area ban on Imam Mohamed Toujgani, stemming from suspicions surrounding his affiliations and doctrinal views reflective of the Moroccan stance.

Fourthly, the research sought to dissect the dichotomy between an imam's tangible authority within their community and the undue responsibility they are often burdened with concerning integration issues within the European context. This examination was achieved by gauging the perceptions of imams in Belgium and the Netherlands vis-à-vis their statutory framework, susceptibility, and perceived integration lapses.

State interventions have progressively circumscribed the ambit of imams, reconceptualizing them more as moral advisors rather than expansive religious leaders. A case in point is Imam Kastit's view on what imams should do during turmoil like when President Macron's 2020 proclamation regarding Islam's purported global crisis. Kastit accentuated that the imam ought to remain insulated from public whims and elected to concentrate on pedagogical endeavors amidst the political turbulence. Such an orientation aligns with Mohammed Hashas' postulation that contemporary imams predominantly serve as moral counselors, relegating political matters to the periphery, thereby manifesting an augmented reliance on state mechanisms (2018).

Contrary to the prevalent supposition that imams wield substantial clout within Muslim constituencies and might hinder integration, empirical data underscores their circumscribed influence. Misconceptions concerning the purview of imams frequently result in them being unjustly implicated by political figures and certain Western media outlets, particularly during

periods of heightened tension. Imam Haddach elucidates the intricacies of epitomizing Islam authentically whilst navigating the quagmire of potential mischaracterization, notably the risk of being unjustly portrayed as a radical extremist due to selective media portrayal.

Within the Western landscape, imams are often encumbered with exorbitant expectations, perceived as panaceas expected to redress multifarious challenges. Imam Kastit analogizes this responsibility to the persona of "Superman," underscoring the monumental pressures they encounter. Toujgani accentuates the psychological and tangible tribulations endured by imams in the European landscape, contending that they operate amidst sustained stress and are under the control of the mosque committee. El-Bakkali posits that for imams to discharge their duties efficaciously, societal recognition and investment are imperative, bemoaning the prevailing sentiment that imams are undervalued and overextended.

Attributing integration obstacles to imams is myopic and inequitable. Their sway is increasingly attenuated by two salient dimensions of globalization. First, the proliferation of digital media and the Internet has rendered them merely one voice amidst a cacophony in religious discourses. Imam Benhaddou elucidates the pitfalls of the younger generation sourcing religious insights from dubious online platforms. Both Elforkani and Haddach underscore the amplifying role of digital media in propagating extremist tenets.

Toujgani pinpoints the origins of radicalization to modern vectors, especially the manipulation within emerging media platforms. He suggests imams should be offered the opportunity to use communication platforms effectively to reach younger audiences. He remarks that imams only become the focus of attention when something negative happens, implying society's tendency to scapegoat them following unfortunate events.

Additionally, El-Bakkali highlights the digital age's risks, with unchecked online religious content. He advises young believers to consult official imams about online religious material. El-Bakkali is also concerned about the misuse of the 'imam' title, emphasizing the need to differentiate between recognized imams and self-proclaimed ones in the age of modern media.

Beyond the rapid and varied means of communication as a primary domain wherein globalization undermines the role of imams, a secondary effect emerges from operating within a globalized milieu. Within the context of an increasingly globalized world, the complexities surrounding identity and feelings of alienation intensify, potentially fostering radicalization and exacerbating societal cleavages. European-born imams possess an acute awareness of these

dynamics, having personally navigated the liminality experienced by Moroccan immigrants in Western Europe. Haddach's lived experiences, punctuated by identifiers such as 'Belgiko' in Tangier and the characterization as Moroccan in Belgium, crystallize the sensation of perpetual in-betweenness. Concurrently, Benhaddou underscores the perils of racial prejudice, positing that it may inadvertently propel individuals towards extremist ideologies. He further critiques political figures who exacerbate these tensions.

In a similar vein, Kastit elucidates that racial prejudice is not the sole province of any singular demographic; biases persist even within the Maghrebian diaspora. Elforkani, expanding the scope of the discourse, illuminates the phenomenon of systemic discrimination, evident not only in political rhetoric but also in institutional practices such as law enforcement. He accentuates the imperative for state actors to be cognizant of the long-term consequences of their policies and actions.

In addressing the thesis' four questions, the goal is to address existing lacunae in the literature pertaining to imams in Europe. One notable lacuna is the disproportionate emphasis on imam training, as evidenced in studies by Frégosi (1998) and the King Baudouin Foundation (2007). This inclination has been critically examined by scholars such as Willem B. Drees and Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld. The critique postulates that such a focus inadvertently places undue emphasis on the imam's role, potentially serving as a veneer to address broader political objectives. Haddad & Balz (2008) further contend that akin to the Global War on Terror strategies, many instruments adopted by European states to regulate imams often amount to superficial solutions rather than addressing the root causes. Corroborating this perspective, this thesis observes a marked caution and diplomacy in the responses elicited from imams, indicative of their constrained discourse owing to the securitization of Islam in Europe. Another study by Aslan and Windisch (2012) highlights the disproportionate expectations placed upon imams, incongruous with their official designations within bureaucratic hierarchies.

In response to these critiques, subsequent research efforts have sought to offer a more nuanced understanding of imams by delving into their discourses. Loobuyck and Meier (2014), employing a mixed-methods approach, effectively foregrounded the narratives of European imams. A salient inference from their study underscores the amplified responsibilities shouldered by these imams, extending beyond the remit of their counterparts in more traditional settings. This thesis resonates with such an observation, emphasizing the expanded expectations from

imams. Furthermore, a prevailing sentiment of distrust and apprehension towards state interventions is discernible among the imams and Islamic community.

This dissertation, drawing inspiration from the aforementioned research, harnesses qualitative methodologies to illuminate aspects that were previously veiled by stringent structural examinations concerning imam roles. In 2014, Cora Alexa Døving undertook a qualitative exploration focusing on the issue of authority ascribed to imams. Her contention is that while imams are frequently portrayed as wielding substantial influence, potentially hindering the integration of Muslims in Europe, the digital realm, particularly online platforms, has considerably democratized religious discourse. This proliferation of online religious advisory platforms challenges the conventional authority of mosque-based imams. While this research concurs with Døving's observations, it extends its insights to argue that imams' roles are also hemmed in by bureaucracy within their mosques and by state entities. As delineated in Hashash's study (2018), they largely operate under state authority, disseminating ethical directives while cautiously navigating political terrain, be it in Europe or Morocco. Additionally, Amin el-Yousfi's 2019 research affirms the idea that, rather than a decrease in the religious authority of imams, mosques have increasingly fallen under the administrative influence of their committees.

While the tenets of secularism mandate that European states maintain a detachment from religious domains, empirical assessments seem to challenge this ideal. Historical scrutiny of the institutionalization of Islam in Belgium, as delineated by Sagesser (2020), brings to light evident state interferences, particularly the state's role in appraising candidates for ecclesiastical leadership. Correspondingly, Jounneau's comprehensive analysis of imams in France unveils the nuanced interplay between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the imam appointment procedures since the 1990s. These interventions involve harnessing diplomatic channels and consular affiliations from the imams' native nations to nominate "consular imams"; rigorously appraising imam training programs, their advocated practices, and ascertaining "legitimate beliefs" through scrutiny of their residency application procedures. Such intensified oversight aims to endorse only those imams who resonate with French societal norms. Jounneau, in her critique, proposes that such strategies may inadvertently foster a defensive posture among Muslims, hindering the emergence of a uniquely European Islam.

Sunier (2018) clarifies that the diverse theological interpretations pose significant challenges for nation-states striving to assimilate and modulate the public representation of

Islam. This observation is pertinent to both Muslim-majority nations, such as Morocco, and host countries like Belgium, potentially imperiling the impartiality that secular states are obligated to preserve.

This research extends beyond merely examining the circumscribed authority of imams and their defensive positioning due to state intercessions. It ventures further, probing how state governance influences their discursive practices. Discourse analysis posits that imams operate within specific discursive formations. A meticulous dissection of their discourses can provide insights into the multifaceted constructs that mold their rhetoric. In the purview of this research, power dynamics are perceived as multi-dimensional, pervading various societal strata. "Discourses in Conflict" by Pecheux serves as a cornerstone for this inquiry, emphasizing the inherent contention within discourses. Among the discourses of Moroccan-born imams, heightened discordance was discerned. This dissertation contends that this discordance stems from their dual roles: as imams with deep-rooted affiliations to Morocco yet operating within Europe. To consolidate their legitimacy in Europe, their discourse underscores certain tenets—for instance, the importance of linguistic assimilation; however, it is noteworthy that neither imam possesses fluency in any European language. Furthermore, while they advocate contextual adaptation, their unwavering commitment to Moroccan Islamic interpretations results in a more monolithic religious outlook. Contrarily, European-born imams do not exhibit such binary dynamics. Absent a national religious framework, their discourses predominantly portray the conflict between the conceptualization of Islam and its pertinent issues within their host nation.

For instance, Haddach asserts the necessity for religion to be tailored to its host context. However, his religious sermons and interpretations seem incongruous with such a stance. He admonishes his congregants against emulating Western practices and possesses stringent perspectives on gender roles and lifestyle choices. Conversely, while Benhaddou's approach seems more liberal, it evokes curiosity when he suggests that both Salafism and Wahhabism, which can be perceived as representations of orthodox Islam, should be categorically prohibited. Notably, in their non-aggressive interpretations, these doctrines shouldn't pose challenges given the constitutional provisions in both the Netherlands and Belgium that safeguard religious freedoms, provided they aren't detrimental. After the 2015 Paris attacks, El Fokrani, known for his liberal religious perspectives, startled the Muslim community by attributing terrorism to

Islam. Across their discourses, there's a recurring theme where imams engage in a dual critique – one of their Islamic identity and the other of Western societies.

The primary objective of this research is not to indict imams for alleged doublespeak, but rather to discern that what may be construed as doublespeak could be symptomatic of broader dynamics. Such dynamics engage with existential questions, including the potentiality of Islam's integration into European identity or its perpetual marginality. Given Islam's contentious standing in Europe, imams invariably confront discursive tensions, arising from divergent societal expectations and narratives.

To persistently castigate imams seems unwarranted. Anthropological studies on globalization elucidate their predicaments. Imams navigate complex globalized terrains, making them susceptible to discursive dilemmas. While globalization is often heralded, it embodies inherent instabilities. Appadurai's construct of deterritorialization accentuates globalization's ambivalence, where, despite fostering unparalleled mobility, it concurrently fosters integrative challenges. He remarks, "Deterritorialization, whether of Hindus, Sikhs, Palestinians, or Ukrainians, is now at the core of a variety of global fundamentalisms, including Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism" (1990, p.301).

It is incontrovertible that global intersections can be tumultuous, spawning phenomena like radicalization. Yet, they can also catalyze innovation. Diverse religious interpretations have birthed imams like Haddach, characterized by rigorous views. However, another breed of imams fosters judicious religious interpretations congruent with European contexts, endorsing analytical jurisprudence and promoting critical thinking. El Forkani integrates philosophical tenets into his religious framework, aspiring to reshape policymaker perspectives on Islam in Europe. Notably, Kastit, Haddach, and El Forkani harbor postcolonial sensibilities, critiquing European interventions in Islamic countries and Islam's marginalization in Europe, positing these as catalysts for radicalization. It is evident that the interplay between European contexts and Islam engenders both challenges and constructive outcomes.

Policy Implications:

1. Recognizing interventionist strategies as potential radicalization catalysts, it is pivotal to refrain from portraying Islam in Europe solely through a security lens.

2. Imams, contrary to some perceptions, aren't omnipotent in dictating Islamic doctrines. Prioritizing other sociopolitical factors impacting Islam in Europe is crucial.

3. The discourse on Islam in Europe seems reflective of competitive national interests rather than collaborative endeavors. Transitioning from competition to cooperation could mitigate bifurcation.

4. As radicalization manifests among Muslim communities and right-wing factions, it is imperative for Muslim constituencies to respect European sovereignty, reciprocated by European recognition of Islam as an indigenous faith.

5. Radicalization cannot be disentangled from broader geopolitical dynamics, such as colonial legacies and Western interventions in Muslim nations. Respecting national sovereignties and abstaining from external interferences is paramount.

6. It is pertinent to acknowledge the often idealistic nature of academic discourses relative to real-world pragmatics. Pursuing these objectives, albeit challenging, should be undertaken incrementally, fostering conducive mindsets.

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