

Final conference MIWIN - Thursday 24 January 2019 (VU Amsterdam)

Islamic authority

Since 2014, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Leiden University have been conducting research into recent developments in the way in which Islam takes shape in Dutch society. The research, entitled *'Making Islam work in the Netherlands. Islamic law and Islamic law in the Netherlands, among ordinary Muslims: recent trends and developments'* (MIWIN), was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and focuses in particular on the development of religious authority and legitimacy. The large majority of Muslims in the Netherlands has long passed the phase of (temporal) migrants and has become Dutch citizens. An increasing number of Muslims is born and raised in the Netherlands. Moreover, we now find Muslims in almost all social layers of the population and in all sectors of society. This means, among other things, that the engagement of Muslims with Dutch society has become more complex, more entangled, and more intensive. This development can be observed in many fields, including that of the development of religious authority. Religious authority is a broad and comprehensive concept that is not exclusively related to personal leadership; it also concerns the question which practices and forms of religious knowledge are recognized and legitimized by Muslims. The starting point of the research was that religious authority and legitimacy are not self-evident, but must be reaffirmed continuously. Especially in situations of rapid social change and development, legitimacy of religious authority becomes a crucial issue. This is the case in all religious communities, but not least among Muslims in Europe.

A central issue in the research was the tension between, on the one hand, established centres of Islamic knowledge and authority, and on the other hand, the development of new practices, new initiatives and new interpretations of Islamic teachings that often circumvent authoritative institutions. An important observation that ran through the research was the fact that many situations, practices and initiatives we included, were not (yet) under direct control of organized social institutions, political agendas and legal frameworks. Fischer (2011) in his study on halal-markets has introduced the notion of 'frontier', which could be applied to our findings as well.

Two studies

The research focused on two themes in two separate studies: (1) religious authority in everyday situations and (2) religious authority and Islamic law. In both studies the connection between Islamic doctrine and daily experiences and actions of Muslims played a central role. The research was carried out in collaboration with a large number of social partners such as CMO (National Advisory Platform Muslims and Government), SPIOR (local Muslim representative body), Arslan Lawyers, Ihsan, Al-Nisa, Platform INS Municipality of Leiden, Municipality of The Hague, Municipality of Rotterdam and the Ministry of Defense.

The first study analysed the ways in which Islam takes shape in the Netherlands in everyday situations that at first glance do not always directly relate to religious

doctrine. The focus was thus not on well-known areas such as the development of religious accommodation, the training of imams, religious-ideological differences, or the participation of Muslim representatives in consultative bodies. This 'strategic dimension' of Islamic presence has been extensively investigated. The study rests on the proposition that every religious renewal starts with discussions about 'contentious issues' among 'ordinary' believers; people who do not professionally deal with religion, but who try to live according to the spirit of their faith, but encounter dilemmas in daily life. Research has been done on this theme, for example by analysing decisions by Islamic scholars (fatwa's) to questions from believers. Our study focused on issues where answers were not obvious, where different theological views existed among Islamic scholars, or where ordinary believers felt that there was ambiguity about how to act. In other words: to what or to whom does one refer, which (innovative) solutions come to light and how are decisions being substantiated or changed in order to bring religious rules and regulations in line with living in Dutch society. Often public and highly visible issues begin low profile ('below the radar'). It is important to focus on these seemingly 'marginal' issues because they provide important insights into how Islam is being embedded in society and who are involved in this process. Ethics, relevant religious knowledge, and legitimacy are key concepts here.

The research focused on a number of case studies on the themes 'halal market' and 'lifestyle'. Halal is more than food: halal is also a lifestyle, entertainment, leisure activities and sport. A striking development at the societal level that emerged from the research was the development of new forms of community building and participation of Muslims who explore new ways of living.

The second study focused on Islamic legal issues, with the aim to explore how 'ordinary' Muslims in the Netherlands settle their personal and family disputes through the cooperation of a third party. More specifically, we looked at the informal processes of dispute resolution, such as mediation, reconciliation and advice, facilitated by imams of local mosques and larger Islamic centres, especially among Dutch-Moroccan Muslims.

The researcher traced the entire process of mediation from the moment a dispute was 'made' to the religious official until the conclusion of an agreement, a so-called reconciliation (sulh). This has enabled him to describe who the relevant actors are involved in the process of informal mediation; which conflicts usually concern; which conflict strategies are used; what the expectations, experiences and motivations of those involved are; and how actors commit themselves to outcomes.

Furthermore, the researcher has looked at how religious officials acquire or claim authority, which techniques they use during the mediation sessions to achieve reconciliation, and what motivates them in particular to make mediation efforts successful. As in the first study, ethics, relevant Islamic knowledge and legitimacy were key concepts. An important result from this research was that mediation was the most effective when it remained low profile. An easily accessible and informal consultation turned out to offer the most guarantee for a solution.

Final conference

To complete this research project, which has now reached its final phase, a closing conference will be organized on Thursday, January 24, 2019 in Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit) about the overall theme of the project: 'Islamic authority in the Netherlands'. There are two sessions.

During the morning session (in Dutch), the societal relevance of the research findings will be discussed in interactive panel discussions. For the session we invite various societal parties and stakeholders, such as politicians, policy makers, imams, and other religious authorities, lawyers and social workers. They will enter into a dialogue with each other and with the public on the basis of a number of statements.

During the afternoon session (in English), the researchers will give a presentation about their research findings, and engage in dialogue with (international) experts in this research field. This discussion is preceded by lectures by two renowned researchers in the field, Professor Masooda Bano and Professor Johan Fischer.

Dr. Bano is Professor of Development Studies at the University of Oxford. She is an expert in the field of Islamic authority and knowledge production. She is currently conducting research on the transformation of Islamic authority. She previously conducted research into Islamic education organized by women. She has frequently published on these themes.

Dr. Johan Fischer from the University of Roskilde, Denmark, is an expert in religion and consumption in Asia and Europe. He published, among other things, about the growing halal market among Muslims in Europe. His research shows that this market cannot just be traced back to a stricter religious experience among Muslims, but must be understood against the background of globalizing and expanding markets.

Both speakers are asked to reflect from their research perspective on the following questions:

1. What is Islamic authority and how should its development among Muslims in Europe be understood?
2. Which social, economic and other developments in Europe and elsewhere in the world are relevant to understand the transformation of Islamic authority?
3. How should we understand the contentious field between top-down attempts to regulate, control and standardize matters relating to the embedding of Islam in society on the one hand, and the local-level bottom-up initiatives of Muslims on the other?
4. What is the role of women in the development and transformation of Islamic authority?

These questions are also central to the panel discussion after the lectures.

Program (provisional)

Morning (language Dutch)

Chair: Prof. Dr. Thijl Sunier (VU Amsterdam) / Prof. Dr. Léon Buskens (Leiden University)

8.45-9.15 Walk-in

9.15-9.30 Opening by project managers Sunier and Buskens.

9.30-9.45 Introduction to panel discussion on the basis of a number of statements.

9.45-10.30 First part of the panel discussion

10.30-11.00 Break

11.00-11.45 Second part of the panel discussion

11.45-12.30 Discussion / exchange / questions / closure

Afternoon (language English)

Chair: t.b.a.

13.15-13.30 Walk-in

13.30-13.45 Opening and introduction to the program

13.45-14.10 Presentation Arshad Muradin

14.10-14.35 Presentation Heleen van der Linden

14.35-14.45 Q & A

14.45-15.00 Break

15.00-15.40 Keynote lecture Masooda Bano

15.40-15.50 Q & A

15.50-16.30 Keynote lecture Johan Fischer

16.30-16.40 Q & A

16.40-17.30 Panel discussion

17.30 Drinks