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# The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe

MARTIN VAN BRUINESSEN

Eleven papers were presented at the workshop 'The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe', most of which were based on new and ongoing research. The topics discussed may be roughly classed as follows: mosque and ethno-religious association, religious counsel and fatwa, and Muslim intellectuals.

## The mosque and ethno-religious association

Amirau's paper focused on the mosque in the Rue d'Alger in Paris, which under the leadership of the remarkable Larbi Kechat has become a major centre of intellectual debate and of encounter between Muslims and non-Muslims, in a didactic setting. The mosque also engages in social counselling and contributes to practical as well as discursive knowledge of Islamic norms. Amer spoke on the Minhajul Qur'an movement in the Netherlands and Denmark, a distinct subgroup within the Barelvi movement that is gaining much influence among the younger Muslims of Pakistani background and that appears to appeal to non-Pakistani Muslims, especially the youth, as well. Along with the shift from Urdu or Panjabi to European languages, the youth movement is developing discourses and practices that are significantly different from those of the first generation and that take explicit account of the European context. Thielmann described how in a small town in Germany with a heterogeneous but predominantly Turkish Muslim population and a number of competing mosques, the increasing importance of German as a common language facilitated a shift from 'national' (c.q. Turkish) identity to ideological preference as the dominant factor in mosque affiliation.

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## PAPERS PRESENTED

- **Martin van Bruinessen (ISIM):** 'Making and Unmaking Muslim Religious Authority in Western Europe'
- **Stefano Allievi (University of Padua: Italy):** 'Islamic Voices, European Ears. Exploring the Gap between the Production of Islamic Knowledge and its Perception'
- **Jörn Thielmann (University of Mainz: Germany):** 'Challenged Positions, Shifting Authorities: Muslim Communities in a Small Town in Southwest Germany'
- **Valérie Amirau (CNRS: Amiens, France):** 'Competence and Authority in the Muslim Community and Beyond: A Case Study in Paris'
- **Mohammed Amer (ISIM):** 'Emerging European Islam: The Case of the Minhajul Qur'an in the Netherlands'
- **Alexandre Caeiro (EHESS: Paris):** 'The European Council for Fatwa and Research'
- **Ermate Mariani (Université Lumière Lyon: France):** 'Fatwa on-line: Proposition pour une méthode de lecture'
- **Mark Sedgwick (American University of Cairo: Egypt):** 'The Renaissance Returns to Europe by Way of Tehran: Traditionalism and the Localization of Islam'
- **Ruth Mas (University of Toronto):** 'Producing "Islam" in French: The Discourse of Muslim Intellectuals in the French Press'
- **Nadia Fadil (Catholic University of Leuven: Belgium):** 'European Islam: An Individualized Religiosity? About Islamic Religiosity and its Relationship to Islamic Knowledge'
- **Johan Geets and Christiane Timmerman (University of Antwerp: Belgium):** 'The Significance of Islamic Knowledge for Highly Educated Muslims in Belgium'

The papers will be posted at the European University Institute's website: [www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/Mediterranean/mspr2003](http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/Mediterranean/mspr2003)

**'The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe', one of the twelve parallel workshops at the Fourth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting of the Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute's Mediterranean Program (Florence, 19–23 March 2003), was devoted to the theme of ISIM's research project under the same name (see [www.isim.nl](http://www.isim.nl)). The workshop, directed by Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi, brought together a group of mostly young scholars presently engaged in research on various aspects of religious knowledge and authority.**

(*istifta*) being perhaps even more significant than the authoritative answers. The concept of *fiqh al-aqalliyyat*, the theory of religious obligations for Muslims in a minority situation (cf. M. Khalid Masud's article in *ISIM Newsletter* 11), has rapidly gained popularity over the past few years. The institution most directly associated with it, the European Council for Fatwa and Research (Caeiro's paper, see also p. 26–7) appears to be establishing itself as a leading, although by no means uncontested, authority. An increasing number of websites offer online fatwa services for Muslims in Europe. Mariani

presented his analysis of such sites and his encounter with one of the ulama behind them, the UK-based radical Omar Bakri. The discussions further touched upon the more spontaneous television and telephone fatwas and the interesting case of social counselling at a Paris mosque, where social and psychological support comes with advice on proper Muslim comportment – a sort of fatwa-giving without reference to *fiqh*.

## Muslim intellectuals

Whereas the ulama – from the mosque imam to such internationally prominent scholars as Yusuf Qaradawi – may claim privileged access to religious knowledge, Muslim intellectuals, who usually depart from disciplines other than *fiqh*, have also made important contributions to Islamic discourses. Two papers discussed relatively neglected groups of such Muslim intellectuals: the mostly converted perennialist Sufis of the Maryami tradition, whose esotericism has also some appeal to highly educated, born Muslims in Europe (Sedgwick), and the French intellectuals of Muslim background such as Mohammad Arkoun, who are more visible in the secular French public sphere than in Muslim media (Mas). The latter may be rejected as spokespersons for Islam by many committed Muslims, but their influence on secular-minded Muslims should not be under-estimated.



A scene from the workshop.

PHOTO: STUDIO PORTFOLIO, 2003