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Training Imams and the Future of Islam in France

FRANK PETER

Since the early 1990s, Muslim organizations, activists and French politicians have been discussing the complex issue of how to organize the training of imams in France. These discussions seem to have recently entered a new phase. In connection with the creation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) earlier this year, it seems the debates might soon be leading to their first tangible results. According to leading French politicians, one of the primary tasks of this national representative body is to reflect on the development of an officially recognized curriculum for imams in France. Various other public bodies, together with the ministry of the interior, are also currently investigating the modalities for the training of imams in France. The issue is being addressed by the newly installed Commission, headed by Bernard Stasi and created by President Chirac, in order to review the current conditions for implementing the principle of *laïcité*. In May, the French minister of education assigned the historian, Daniel Rivet, the task of outlining a possible syllabus for French imams. Everything thus indicates that the current government is continuing along the path France embarked on in the late 1980s when it assumed a much more direct role in the institutionalization of Islam in France in order to accelerate its gallicization.

The State and the gallicization of Islam

How great would the contribution of French-trained imams be to the aim of gallicization? In the speeches of French politicians, particularly in the last months, the creation of training facilities for imams in France has become a kind of necessary condition for the harmonious incorporation of Islam into French society. Imams, 'the foremost representatives' of Islam in France, in the words of the minister of the interior, have to be 'integrated' and trained in France in order for Islam to be fully integrated into the Republic.² According to the government, the perceived menace of foreign extremist preachers is to be circumvented

by increasing the currently very low percentage of Francophone imams in France (fewer than 50%)—the percentage of French imams not even reaching 10%. Indisputably, this is not an easy task. The above figures show that the creation in the early 1990s of seminaries for the training of imams in France has had a very limited influence on the make-up of this group.

Interestingly, the three major Islamic federations have all made attempts to establish training facilities for imams, albeit with varying success. The Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF), for example, is currently involved in the running of two interrelated seminaries, the first of

these established in 1991-1992 in the rural area of Château-Chinon. The French convert, Didier Ali Bourg, in cooperation with the Fédération Nationale des Musulmans de France (FNMF) and the Islamic World League, founded in 1992 the Institut d'Études Islamiques de Paris, currently called Centre d'Études et de Recherches sur l'Islam. This institute

There has been a growing political urgency in several Western European countries to institutionalize and create facilities for imam-training. With the formation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) earlier this year¹ the French government aims to create a uniform training system for imams. This state-sponsored institutionalization of Islam offers more 'traditional' organizations the opportunity to appropriate 'French Islam', possibly at the expense of alternative structures that have emerged in the French Muslim community over the last few decades.

is, however, currently not engaged in the training of imams. The Mosque of Paris has also participated in similar developments and in 1993 set up a seminary that was ridden with problems, almost since its inception.³ Furthermore, the recently created Institut Français des Études et Sciences Islamiques, as well as the Turkish movement, Milli Görüş, also aim to develop training programmes for imams. The Conseil des Imams de France, founded in 1992, has thus far had only a modest role in this respect, and in the current

circumstances, strongly risks to be marginalized by the CFCM, which is not cooperating with the Conseil des imams, according to its secretary general, Dhaou Meskine. This lack of cooperation has, in fact, recently led Meskine to openly contest the competence of the CFCM in dealing with the training of imams, claiming that the CFCM is only an 'administrative organ'.⁴

The Transformation of Islam in France

In order for the CFCM to become a truly efficient partner of the French government in its Islam policy, work must still be done inside the Muslim community. This is, however, only one of several issues raised by the current discussions on the training of imams. More importantly, these discussions make one wonder just how much leverage the reform of the imam system would really offer to Islamic organizations and to the French government. Are imams really the 'foremost representatives' of Islam in France? How would such a reform affect the religious life of French Muslims?

The insistence on the need to gallicize imams is based upon a specific view of Islamic life that accords the 'mosque' a dominant role as the place for prayer and sermon in the life of the average Muslim. Considered mutually reinforcing, the imam is seen as the major agent in the transmission of Islam and the mosque as the centre of Islamic life. In most western European countries, however, the structure of Islamic life differs notably from this perception. As a number of authors have noted, many 'mosques' in Europe serve as multi-functional community centres. Besides being used as gathering places for prayer, these mosques also serve as the focal point for various groups and, more generally, for the social life of the community. This fact can be explained in relation to the near absence of migrant-specific institutions, which thus turns mosques into key elements in the development of a community infrastructure. The fact that subsidies for mosques are often granted based on the incorporation of social and cultural programmes into the scope of the mosques' activities, also contributes to this trend.

However, the impact of migrant-specific factors on the diversification of the mosque's function should not lead one to overlook the parallels between this development within Islam and the general transformation of religious life in Europe or other parts of the world. The function of Christian churches has also undergone important changes in the past decades. Community life, which was once focused on Sunday services, has become decentralized and fragmented, and now takes place

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on a variety of levels and in different forms. Nowadays, the church, as Wuthnow puts it, tries to 'provide community in several distinct ways.'⁵ The ongoing 'division of labour' inside the churches has manifested itself primarily in the rise of small groups that are particularly well placed to meet the need for belonging in their often transient manifestations. While the institutional set-up of Islamic communities in France is, of course, far less developed than that of the church communities, one can nevertheless see a similar process in motion, which, since the 1990s, has been intricately linked to the 'institutionalization' of Islam. As many authors have noted, the number of age, gender or purpose-specific groups has been constantly increasing in French Muslim communities. Particularly in the 1990s, a host of educational associations and youth or women's groups were founded in France. In the context of a latent intra-generational conflict, these associations are often particularly important for young Muslims who are thus able to create a religious space conform to their specific needs.

This development has important consequences for the role of religious authorities, most notably, for the imam. The imam, as head of the mosque, is no longer necessarily the spiritual reference for all the 'members' of the community. Imams are working inside a complex net of groups and associations, where informal and formal authorities mingle and where the profile of the latter keeps changing. Be it in circumscribed local groups or in the broader based media space, Muslim intellectuals and activists of various forms play an increasingly important role in the life of the community. The emergence of these persons, who have access to a variety of media, further weakens the role of religious institutions in the production and dissemination of religion. Next to the traditional institutions of transmission, audio tapes, books, magazines and websites have become key elements in the teaching and dissemination of Islam. Publishers such as Éditions Tawhid, along with websites like <http://www.oumma.com>, have demonstrated the possibilities that entirely new organizational forms offer for the communication of religious knowledge within French Islam. With more than 120.000 subscriptions to its list server, oumma.com pursues ambitious projects and attempts to establish cooperative ventures with foreign Islamic institutes of higher learning, thereby indirectly contesting the work of Islamic organizations and their seminaries in France.⁶

Looking at this emerging Islamic mediascape, one wonders if the current debate on the training of imams is well founded. It is based on the assumption that the current state of Islamic religious life and imams in France is 'problematic' and that Muslims have to be assisted in the process of 'organization'. And while the relative lack of funds obviously limits the organizational possibilities of French Muslims, this does not mean that they are simply trapped in a state of stagnation or powerlessness. The new forms of religious community and authority that French Muslims have developed in the last decades are based on decentralized and sometimes temporary structures that often do not need the support of complex and costly institutions. While these developments have, in part, been imposed by necessity, they nevertheless also correspond to the profound transformations that religious life in Western Europe has undergone. The upsurge in small community groups, which could be interpreted as a decline in the imam's position of authority, is not solely attributable to the incapacity of the latter to communicate with young European Muslims, but also to the fact that small groups are often better adapted to new conceptions of community. Likewise, the lack of a more uniform or centralized structure of religious authorities is of course, partly a result of national, ethnic and doctrinal divisions in the Muslim communities. However, the current pluraliza-



tion of heterogeneous authority structures also corresponds to, and is indirectly supported by, a general trend in Europe's Muslim communities to move away from life-long affiliation with a specific mosque or organization and towards temporary or multiple associations.

Congress of French imams, 29 March 2003.

Creating religious authorities

Considering these developments, the current attempts in France to create a uniform training system for imams demand the taking into account of at least two interrelated issues. In France, as in other countries, the state's search for representative and powerful interlocutors within Muslim communities has, thanks to the cooperation of Islamic organizations, ultimately resulted in an often unacknowledged attempt to create these representatives. The creation of seminaries and the fostering of a group of French-trained imams will thus not only impact upon the future theological developments in French Islam, as is so often hoped; these developments will also affect the structure of religious life. In order to be truly effective, these institutionalizing attempts will have to initiate a substantial transformation in the basic structure of French Islam by shifting the centre of religious life back to imams and to mosques as dominant places of prayer and sermon. The process of state-sponsored institutionalization that French Islam is currently undergoing thus presents the paradoxical possibility that the present structures of religious life, which have emerged, in part, out of an adaptation to the 'French context', will be remodelled and partly appropriated by more 'traditional' organizational forms, whose functions and adaptation to the current situation can be debated. The ongoing experiments with Islamic seminaries and training programmes for imams will thus not only lead to a definition of the 'desirable' theological and professional profile of imams in France, but, more generally, they will show if it is possible to remodel the historically developed community structures of French Islam by reappraising the role of official religious authorities and unified community structures in the twenty-first century. Both issues are, of course, interdependent, but it is the latter which will decide the future role of institutionalized 'reform movements' in French Islam.

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Notes

1. See Valérie Amiraux, 'CCFM-A French Touch?', *ISIM Newsletter* 12 (June 2003), p.24f.
2. Nicolas Sarkozy, 'The 20th Annual Meeting of the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF)' (speech, Le Bourget, France, 2003). See also (<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr>), 2003.
3. See Franck Frégosi, *La formation des cadres religieux musulmans en France* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998).
4. Dhaou Meskine, Conference 'The training of religious personnel', (speech, Paris, 23 October 2003).
5. Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
6. See 'Partenariat entre Oumma.com et la prestigieuse Université Islamique Abou Nour de Damas' (<http://www.oumma.com>), 2001.