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Religious Healing Methods among Muslims in the Netherlands

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Health
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In search for Islamic healers, inquiries made at mosques and Islamic organizations revealed a striking contradiction. In these places, it is generally said that the activities of these healers have nothing to do with Islam. Direct contact with Islamic healers through healthcare workers, however, revealed that they themselves are of the opinion that what they do fits fully in the Islamic tradition. In actual practice, the formal taboo on Islamic healing methods is often ignored at the informal level.



Amulet for curing measles.

A division is often made between 'official Islam' and 'popular belief' in Islamic societies. It is understood that the term 'official Islam' refers to the belief as propagated by the *ulama* and imams in mosques – representing the orthodoxy. On the other hand, 'popular belief' consists of, ostensibly, pre-Islamic elements, local customs and traditions. In practice, the drawing of the boundary between the two is problematic in that it depends on the perceptions of those involved. In the course of time, diverse theological arguments have been put forward by the (Sunni) orthodoxy to delineate the boundary between Islam and popular belief. The fundamentally monotheistic character of Islam is emphasized. Thus, practices such as fortune telling, magical rituals and saint worship are labelled pre-Islamic, *bid'a* (unlawful innovation) and *shirk* (idolatry). However, in the common religious perception of many Muslims, so-called official Islam and popular belief go hand in hand. For them, there is only one Islam, namely the one that they themselves experience.

Amulet against the evil eye or jinns.

The theological argument used against, or for, popular belief also has sociological and ideological traits. The habit of orthodox scholars of labelling practices of popular belief as 'pre-Islamic' can thus be seen as a form of marginalization and as an attempt to protect their own interests and positions. Those who have limited or no access to the dominant religious system may resort to alternative religious interpretations and beliefs. Apart from reformist tendencies, practices of popular belief are viable alternatives. Popular belief can thus be a part of the struggle of interests between different religious and political groups.

In the period from 1990-1994, Cor Hoffer conducted research regarding Islamic healing methods in the Netherlands on assignment from the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports. The study was primarily oriented towards aspects of Islamic healing methods that are of importance to healthcare policy. The findings of the research were published in the book: *Islamic Healers and Their Patients: Healthcare, Religion and Giving Meaning*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994 (in Dutch).

With the financial support of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, Hoffer successfully defended his PhD thesis at Leiden University in February of this year: *Popular Belief and Religious Healing Methods among Muslims in the Netherlands: A Historical-Sociological Analysis of Religious-Medical Thinking and Actions*. Amsterdam: Thela Thesis, 2000. (in Dutch with a summary in English.) On the basis of interviews and observations, he collected data regarding 39 Islamic healers (34 men and 5 women) and 65 of their patients. In addition, he conducted a written questionnaire among 227 patients.¹

Religious Healing Methods among Muslims in the Netherlands

The dichotomy between Islam and popular belief is arbitrary and capricious. Whether or not the division is made, and where the border is drawn, depends on religious (theological) interpretations in combination with social and political factors. In practice, this implies that Islam is given different forms in different societies under the influence of local, social, political and economic factors. In the course of the history of Islamic societies, certain variants of Islam have dominated over others in conjunction with the power structures. Following Bax, it can be said that a struggle exists between religious (sub-)regimes that alternate power positions.²

Islamic Healing Methods in the Netherlands

The relationship between Islam and popular belief in Islamic societies offers a vital background for understanding the recent emergence of Islamic healing in the Netherlands. The term 'Islamic healer' can be understood here as one who bases his or her work on power inspired by Islam (for example, an inherited healing gift, which is said to go back to the Prophet Mohammed); has an Islamic vision with reference to the work of healing; and describes himself or herself as a healer either informally (via family and acquaintances) or formally (via advertisements). Islamic healers differ from regular healthcare workers in their views on certain illnesses and problems. They distinguish between illnesses with natural (physical or psychological) causes and those with supernatural causes (the evil eye, magic, or *jinns*). From the viewpoint of Islamic healers, people consult a doctor for the former, an Islamic healer for the latter. An important element in the treatment by Islamic healers is the use of Qur'anic verses which they believe to bestow *baraka*, blessing power. They use these verses for faith healings and the making of amulets. Most Islamic healers are of the opinion that they may not ask for money for their work; they believe that Allah is ultimately the One who heals – not the therapist.

Islam and popular belief in the Netherlands

The ambivalent relationship between 'official Islam' and 'popular belief' also manifests itself among Muslims in the Netherlands. In the absence of Islamic scholars, the imams, as the religious officials in the mosques, propagate the official doctrine here. In contrast, Islamic healers can be considered exponents of Islamic popular belief. However, despite their official reticence, individual conversations with 31 imams revealed that the majority considers the techniques of Islamic healers permissible – and some even applied these techniques themselves. Although imams, as representatives of official Islam, may not openly associate themselves with practices of popular belief, they apparently deviate from this rule when practice necessitates. Thus, the formal taboo on Islamic healing methods appears to be ignored at an informal level.

How can this apparent contradiction be explained? Apart from their personality and vision, the social position of imams in Dutch society plays an important role. As a part of the institutionalization of Islam in the Netherlands, certain views and interests of the Islamic orthodoxy from the countries of origin are making their entrance. In conjunction with the formation of Islamic institutions such as mosque councils, interest groups and educational institutions, a Sunnite orthodox elite is developing – an elite which is appropriating control over the Islamic inheritance. A struggle between 'Islamic sub-regimes' also presents itself in the Netherlands. Recently, Dutch publications have been appearing (available in Islamic bookstores), in which, in accordance with strict orthodox views, the belief in the power of *jinns* and saints, for example, is considered *shirk* (idolatry). At the same time, the emphasis is placed on the fundamentally monotheistic character of Islam, which is expressed by the concept of *tawhid*.³

These developments imply that given the official Islamic disapproval of the practices in question, imams cannot permit themselves to be openly associated with these practices because of their religious and social positions. With regard to their appointments, they are after all dependent upon either the authorities in the countries of origin or on local mosque councils. Imams, however, are also involved in common practice in which they are confronted with the unorthodox views of believers, for example, through requests to write amulets or to perform certain rituals. Sometimes, they fulfil these requests in an informal way. It can be argued that imams personally experience that the theological/normative division between official Islam and popular belief does not exist in the common belief system of some Muslims in the Netherlands.

Islamic healers in the Netherlands find themselves in a completely different position than that of the imams. Their thinking and practices are determined through a combination of societal needs, individual motives, social interests and religious interpretations. Islamic healers meet specific needs of their patients centred on the conferring of meaning and offering help to persons who have run into medical and social difficulty. In contrast to imams, who are the representatives of official Islam, Islamic healers pay homage to religious viewpoints that are related to popular belief. There are two aspects to be found in the ways in which they legitimize their work: first, the power upon which they base their work; second, an Islamic vision. Three types of Islamic healers can be defined with respect to the former: healers with an inherited gift (for example, as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed), healers with a teacher (for example, as a member of a Sufi order) and healers who have taught themselves. As to their visions, all healers refer to passages from the Qur'an and the *hadith*. Most healers state that payments in return

for their treatments contradict the religious basis of their work. They may, however, accept a 'reward' for their work, something that occurs frequently.

Islamic healers consider their work to be in harmony with Islam. For them, no division exists between that which they do and Islamic doctrine. It has been argued that, given the absence of shrines of Muslim saints, popular Islam will have difficulty taking root in the Netherlands, since saint worship is one of the main pillars of popular religious belief and practice.⁴ However, another important pillar of Islamic popular belief has been overlooked: namely, the ideas and practices of Islamic healers and their patients. Their activities are manifestations of the gradual development of Islamic popular belief developing in the Netherlands. ◆



Notes

1. It is difficult to indicate how many Muslims in the Netherlands use the services of Islamic healers. In a number of studies, it has been concluded that approximately 5% of the Turkish and Moroccan population consults Islamic healers. There are doubts as to the accuracy of this figure (not everyone admits publicly to visiting an Islamic healer and the belief in Islamic healing methods is also dependent on the situations in which people find themselves.) It can, however, be stated that a minority of Muslims in the Netherlands uses these services (Shadid & Van Koningsveld (1997), *Muslims in Nederland. Minderheden en religie in een multiculturele samenleving*. Houten/Diegem: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum, p. 198)
2. Bax, M. (1985), 'Religieuze regimes en staatsontwikkeling: Notities voor een figuratie-benadering', *Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 12 (1), pp. 22-47.
3. See, for example, translations of works by M. Ashour (1986) and I. Hoesien (1998), the latter was published by the El Tawheed foundation.
4. Tennekes (1991), 'Een antropologische visie op de islam in Nederland'. *Migrantstudies* 7(4), pp. 18-19; and Nico Landman (1992), *Van mat tot minaret. De institutionalisering van de islam in Nederland*. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, pp. 190-191; 1992b, pp. 34-39.

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