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Islamic burials in the Netherlands and Belgium. Legal, religious and social aspects

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Summary

This dissertation addresses the issue of legal, religious and practical possibilities for Muslims to be buried in the Netherlands and Belgium. It explores national laws, scholarly opinions and the ideas and views of Muslims on Islamic burials. The results are based for an important part on fieldwork that was conducted in 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Throughout this study I found that legal and religious regulations and possibilities are not decisive in the considerations that underlie the choice of burial location among Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium. Of much more importance seems to be the sense of belonging to a country, to which many respondents also connected a feeling of descent. I have proposed to use the theory on the multilayered messages of rituals (Beck 2010) to reveal the various functions and meanings that are embedded in the performance of burial rituals in the multicultural, religiously pluralist context of the Netherlands and Belgium. A focus on these multilayered messages reveals that burial practices entail four messages: expressing individual belief and faith, identification with religious denominations, sense of belonging to a country and ethnic community and religious identity of Muslims in a non-Muslim environment. The study of Islamic burials among Muslims in both countries, therefore, reveals much about the feeling of belonging and the intensively debated integration of Muslims into these societies. The choice on where to be buried entails much more than just being a burial location for a corpse.

In the five chapters of this dissertation I discuss the various parts that are related to Islamic burials in the Netherlands and Belgium. Chapter one begins by situating this study into the larger context of the study on Islam and its institutionalization in Western Europe. I present some demographic data on Muslims in both countries, as well as on the various denominations they adhere to. In relation to the already existing scope of research on Islam and Muslims in Western Europe, I explain how this study fills in the gap of a multidisciplinary and comparative approach, by combining social science, religious science and national laws into one methodological framework.

Chapter two discusses the ideas on death and eschatology as held by Muslims and as explained by Islamic scholars. I briefly elaborate on the relevance and meaning of Islamic and national legal definitions of death, which have changed in the last

century due to medical developments. The process of dying itself is accompanied by several rituals that are performed by those surrounding the dying person. Respondents attached much value to the performance of these rituals and explained why these should be performed in a specific way. Furthermore, this chapter provides a meta-discussion on eschatology as an organizing principle in the practice of separate death rituals. I argue that the different ideas held by Muslim with regard to death, dying and the Afterlife correspond with a socio-cosmology, in which one's community after death corresponds with the community one belonged to while alive. This continuity of belonging is expressed, among others, in the location of the grave.

Chapter three presents and discusses the Islamic burial preparations. The washing, shrouding, funeral prayer and the funeral procession are discussed consecutively. I argue that Islamic burial preparations as performed in a migration context are inevitably subject of change, due to a changed social and legal context. Migration, however, is not the only reason for the changing of rituals. The diversity among Islamic communities, which is expressed in various ethnic and denominational backgrounds, also plays an important role. The mutual influence between a context of migration and the diversity among Islamic communities brings along an interchange in the performance of rituals and in the religious views on these rituals. This was mostly expressed in why, how and by who the burial preparations were to be performed. Consequently, this brought along the inclusion and exclusion of individuals, on the basis of gender and religious denominational adherence.

In chapter four I focus on the burial itself and the ritual practices that surround it. I go into the obligation of burial as opposed to cremation, the internment and the construction of the grave, the question of clearing out graves and the importance of visiting graves. The burial rituals seem to be central to the identities and meaning which groups construct for themselves. In this chapter I use these ritual practices as a window to look at the way Muslims see themselves and the society of which they are part. By doing so I elaborate on the fact that the choice for burial location is not only a matter of being well-informed on the practical, legal and religious possibilities and impossibilities. A much more important matter is, as mentioned before, the sense of belonging to a country and what has been indicated as the myth of returning to countries of origin. This chapter, furthermore, provides insights into the legal and practical possibilities for Islamic burials in the Netherlands and Belgium. Both countries offer the possibility for Muslims to be buried at a separate plot in a public

cemetery, where graves are organized in such a way that they face the direction of Mecca. An interesting and important issue with regard to the Islamic plots is the diversity among the Islamic communities in both countries. Where burial is concerned the fact of the matter is that Sunni, Shiite, Ahmadiyya and Alevi Muslims all want to be buried in the Islamic plot. Individual requests from Muslims towards municipalities to either include or exclude other Muslims from burial in an Islamic plot, has led to the existence of several Islamic subplots in one cemetery for Muslims of different denominations. In the Netherlands, furthermore, Muslims have also realized the first (and so far only) private Islamic cemetery.

In chapter five I turn to the discussion on the practices and processes of mourning and grief. I elaborate on how mourning and grief among Muslims correspond with Islamic scholarly opinions, national laws and theories from social sciences. I argue that these practices and processes are dynamic and changeable in a situation of migration and as a result of the adherence of Muslims to different denominations. In this chapter I make a distinction between private and public mourning.

Models of grief as have been developed within social sciences have focused much on the private part of mourning. During the last decades these models have been subject to change and do not seem to focus as much as they did on detaching from the deceased and moving on. These developments are of great relevance for the counseling of bereaved Muslims. Taking into account the religious aspects of mourning such as the annual mourning gatherings, may be very helpful in professionally guiding Muslims through their mourning process. Furthermore the national laws in relation to an absence of leave in case of death are discussed in this chapter. Respondents found it of utmost importance to be able to observe a mourning period and attend condolence and memorial gatherings, as part of their mourning process.

Throughout the dissertation I emphasize the relevance of the many meanings and functions that are embedded in burial ritual practices. The multidisciplinary and comparative approach that I used in this dissertation, proved very useful in illuminating these meanings and functions. Burial practices are not only performed as an expression of Islamic adherence to a specific denomination, but also as part of individual religious belief and faith. The performance of burial practices furthermore emphasizes one's Islamic identity in a non-Muslim environment both to non-Muslims

and to other Muslims as well. The choice Muslims make with regard to their preferred burial location is the result of the various meanings and functions that are embedded in burial practices. It is certainly not only a matter of legal and practical possibilities and impossibilities, but much more a matter of how Muslims see themselves and the society of which they are part. It is a matter of being part of a whole.