

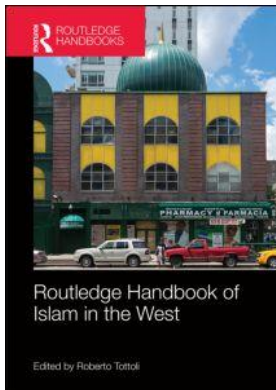
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On: 02 Oct 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West**

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### **The production of Western Islamic knowledge**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315794273.ch27>

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**Published online on: 20 Aug 2014**

**How to cite :-** Stefano Allievi. 20 Aug 2014, *The production of Western Islamic knowledge from:* Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West Routledge

Accessed on: 02 Oct 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315794273.ch27>

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# The production of Western Islamic knowledge

Stefano Allievi

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## Islamic knowledge: approximations

Defining Islamic knowledge is far from an easy task. What Muslims define as properly Islamic is not something that holds general consensus. Islam is a living tradition that in practical terms refers to an orthodoxy and an orthopraxy. The idea of living tradition implies differences in views, opinions, and behaviors. In this sense, a single, unique, unified, homogeneous, universally accepted form of Islamic knowledge simply does not exist. What exists is a corpus that constitutes a set of references, in which differences, contradictions, and conflicts of interpretation, as well as consensus (*ijma'*) and agreement, are intrinsic parts of the concept of tradition. A sociological concept, in this sense, not exactly equal to that of *taqlid*; and also a historical one: because, as Asad (1986) points out, tradition has (or, better, is) a history that refers to a past and redefines itself in respect to a future, through a relation with the present. In this sense we can speak of an Islamic discursive tradition, as the author does, in a broader sense: that is not only the common intellectual meaning of the word “discourse,” but rather the etymological one, from the Latin *dis-currere* – “running (*currere*) here and there”; moving and changing, we might say.

We underline this aspect because, if in the rational process of deduction (which is the result of a merely intellectual approach) orthopraxy is the consequence of orthodoxy, in the process of socialization (in daily life) orthopraxy often comes before the reference to orthodoxy, and is more the outcome of a relational process. Islamic knowledge, in this sense, is much less the fruit of an intellectual activity than the result of a specific contextualization and of a set of interrelations. Orthopraxy is quicker in acknowledging change than orthodoxy: and often change in practices does not necessarily, and in any case not immediately, produce change in its reference to, interpretation of, and deduction from orthodoxy. What we mean here with Islamic knowledge, then, is whatever Muslims (and non-Muslims, in interrelation with Muslims, as we will see) consider to be the correct Islamic belief and practice: using both these words – belief and practice – in the widest possible sense, including also popular knowledge and embodied practices (van Bruinessen 2011). There is obviously no judgment, on our side, of what is correctly Islamic and what is not.

We also have to take into account that the word “Islamic” is often used too extensively, in analysis and, particularly, in debates in the public space about Muslims. Not everything Muslims

do is Islamic; this is obvious. But in the meantime, most of what Muslims do, in such debates, is considered Islamic even when it is not, through a process of “over-Islamization of Muslims” (Al-Azmeh 2004) that involves both Muslims (particularly strict believers, ‘*ulama*’ and intellectuals, several social and political Islamic movements and organizations) and non-Muslims (in particular media, political actors – peculiarly anti-Muslim actors – but also, sometimes, academics, in the field of Islamic studies and Orientalism, religious studies, and political sciences, but also in sociology and anthropology). This process of over-Islamization is particularly visible in societal debates on individual and collective behaviors (wearing a *hijab*, for instance), or on deviating cases (to give an example, a husband beating his wife, or a father forcing his daughter into marriage), but also in more general debates on religion and politics, or religion and gender. To quote an example from family controversies: a violent husband or father from Morocco or Pakistan will often be considered by default as Muslim, and religion will be considered quite naturally as an obvious cause of his behavior; while in the case of a Greek or a Romanian nobody would search for the reason for his behavior in the Orthodox tradition, and in the case of a Danish or a Norwegian no one would consider Lutheranism the cause (even though in the early waves of migration to the United States and to northern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century the traditionalist Catholicism of Italians or Spanish was sometimes seen as a cause of “primitive” deviating behaviors).

This societal attitude also has implications in the process of production of Islamic knowledge.

### **What does it change? Islamic knowledge in Western countries: specificities**

We are not talking here of Islamic knowledge in general. In particular, we are not analyzing the process of producing Islamic knowledge in Muslim (or Muslim majority) countries. We are referring to the process of producing Islamic knowledge in non-Muslim countries, that is, in countries where Muslims are a minority. Even though there are interrelations and feedback effects, this process, in this context, has important specificities that it is necessary to underline from the beginning.

Islam in Western countries has very different characteristics from those in countries where Islam is the majority religion. Islam in these countries is a minority in a pluralistic and secularized context: an aspect whose consequences are rarely understood in all their dimensions. The process of secularization of Europe, the USA, and other Western countries, their progressive self-definition as plural societies, their being free and democratic countries, in which, even with certain limits occasionally concerning Muslims and immigrants more generally, individual and collective rights are in different ways recognized and protected and religious rights in principle guaranteed; all these things make the Western situation quite different from many others in which Muslims equally constitute a minority.

From the theological point of view – which is obviously crucial in the process of producing Islamic knowledge – the situation of Muslims in the West could be compared to the situation of Muslims in Mecca at the inception of Islam (see Allievi 2011, where the argument is more broadly treated). The importance of the passage from Mecca to Medina, the *hijra*, in 622 AD, is so evident that it has become the beginning of the Islamic calendar, the date of the birth of Islam. As Bernard Lewis (1996) noted, while Muhammad preached Islam in Mecca, in Medina he was able to practice it, also in its collective consequences. In Mecca, Islam was a minority religion (a marginal sect, in contemporary terms): during this period the Prophet Muhammad led a small group of followers and Muslims were excluded from power. In Medina Islam became a majority and, therefore, law and government (a state religion, in contemporary terms). And

Muhammad became for the whole city what in Mecca he was only for his few followers: prophet and envoy of God, but also religious, political, legislative, juridical, and even military authority. Only in Medina did Islam become *din wa-dunya wa-dawl*, as majority Islam is defined in politico-religious terms.

Present-day Western Islam is in a situation that in some crucial aspects is more similar to that which prevailed in Mecca than in Medina: a tolerated minority religion that is sometimes stigmatized and sometimes integrated and institutionalized; and being a minority has important sociological and theological consequences. Socially, it is a minority quite different from that of Mecca. In general terms, with some exceptions, the average Muslim in Europe is richer, more cultivated, freer, more entitled to individual rights than the average Muslim in the respective countries of origin; and this makes their situation different, in comparative terms (a situation that also has important and underestimated consequences in terms of feedback effects, at several levels). Conceptually, the problem is that, while Muslims in Mecca did not have a solid theology of community and power yet, Muslims in the West rely on a theology that is that of Medina. Much cultural production *on* Islam and much production that comes *from* Muslim countries implicitly refer to situations where Islam is hegemonic, dominant, in power. The same idea of *shari'a*, from many points of view (to quote an example, the majority/minority idea of society implicit in the concept of *dhimmi*) simply presupposes that Muslims are a majority. Incidentally, this also applies to religious structures: no legitimizing center exists that is able to issue licenses of orthodoxy or heterodoxy, and the dimension of legitimization is, for structural reasons, subject to the logic of *de facto* power of contestation and permanent regeneration.

Not only is Western Islam a minority; it is also internally pluralistic, as it reproduces in itself different cultural, national, theological, and juridical interpretations of Islam, to a degree that is hardly observable in Muslim majority countries and in other countries where the presence of Islam is not the result of a recent migration process. This characteristic of internal plurality is in fact far more accentuated in present-day Europe, in the USA, and in other Western countries. The origins of this are multiple: even in countries where there is – or there was – an identifiable dominant ethnic group, the process of internal pluralization and differentiation has weakened their strength. There is no single origin or an original center of power that can be easily identified as dominant and representative: as a consequence, it does make less sense to try to manage Islamic presence as a foreign politics issue, in collaboration with the countries of origin of immigrants, as happened particularly in the earlier waves of migration, and is still a common temptation, both for Western governments and for Islamic organizations. The observable panorama shows us a plurality of presences and contributions in terms of law schools (all coexisting, which makes them lose much of their traditional meaning), mystical confraternities (a far greater diversity of which can be encountered more easily in the West than elsewhere and whose boundaries are easier to cross in Europe), ethnic groups, religious denominations (Sunnis, Shi'is, Ismailis, Alevis, etc.), and languages (those of the countries of origin, and the dominant Western languages in the respective host countries, which, for newer generations, often become the main or only language Muslims have in common).

In many ways, the perception of the *umma* as uniting believers of all skin colors and languages is far more directly perceptible in Europe and America than in most countries of origin. Not only this: in Western countries the need to define themselves as Muslim, which in countries where Islam is a majority is simply obvious and pleonastic, becomes more urgent. Only on the occasion of the *hajj*, probably, can a Muslim experience the *umma* as a visible plural reality, in the same vivid way that the common believer can usually experience it in many mosques and Islamic organizations throughout Europe and Western countries (in the case of the *hajj*, obviously with more symbolical relevance, but probably with fewer practical consequences). The internal diversity among Muslims is, then, ordinarily, more evident in the West than in

many countries of origin of Muslim immigrants. The *umma*, in its diversity, becomes a unifying concept as a reality – not only as a desire, as an emotion, or as a rhetorical tool – precisely because it is internally visibly divided; and Muslims know that.

This internal diversity has important consequences. A particularly relevant example is provided by law schools: all of the *madhhab* are present in the West; but the major difference from the situation in the countries of origin is that they mix much more easily, and individuals can find their way *through* them even more than *in* one of them. This is why Western Sunni Muslims are beginning to call the “minority” interpretative school now in progress the “fifth law school” of contemporary Sunni Islam: a new and different context, in which *fiqh* also needs to be produced differently, with specific tools of interpretation, different foundations, and inevitably new contents.

Internal plurality, as it is experimented with by common believers in many vivid ways, calls into question, even without doing so explicitly, traditional beliefs and behaviors, and produces self-reflexivity, in ways which in turn implement and accelerate the process of pluralization itself.

Our interest here is to show the processes by which Muslims acquire or produce Islamic knowledge in this context. The issue is even more important concerning young Muslims, for the majority of whom their country of origin is the Western country in which they were born and which they live in. This turn is crucial because in these cases we can talk of an autochthonous form of Islamic knowledge, which cannot be considered as imported, even if it can be heavily influenced by a more general and global process of production, diffusion, and discussion of Islamic knowledge.

Finally, we have to consider that the process of production of Islamic knowledge does not concern only Islamic institutions and authorized actors (such as ‘*ulama*’, mufti, imam, and other religious authorities), but new emerging cultural and even economic actors (Haenni 2005), and even ordinary non-organized Muslim individuals (Jeldtoft and Nielsen 2012), in their process of interpretation and personal *ijtihad*. And this process is interrelated with the action of non-Muslim actors, as different as intellectuals, media, political parties, and also ordinary non-Muslim individuals, and their views and opinions on Islam.

## What are Muslims searching for?

The way Muslims in Western countries imagine their role and produce their self-image helps us to understand where they position themselves, between the connections they have and maintain with their multiple countries of origin, on the one hand, and their projections – including cultural and religious ones – in Western contexts, on the other: between where they come from (at least culturally and even mythologically, for those who were born in Western countries) and where they are going to. The success of their inclusion (or co-inclusion, Dassetto 2011) in Western societies largely depends – among other things – on the plausibility of this process. A process that is also crucial for the self-definition of host societies.

What kind of knowledge are Muslims in Western countries searching for? And are they all looking for some kind of Islamic knowledge? The answer cannot be other than approximate: but it is important to note, as an obvious but seldom considered starting point, that not every Muslim born or resident in a Western country is in search of some kind of knowledge about Islam. We can observe, among Muslim populations in the West, three main tendencies: which may vary in percentage from one country to another and in different periods.

A substantial part of the population from different ethnic Muslim backgrounds is simply being (or wants to be) progressively integrated, or, to put it differently, is and will be

progressively increasingly similar to the autochthonous populations it is becoming part of: this happens also in matters that concern religious belief and practice. This does not mean that Muslims do not want to be Muslims anymore: but that they want to be Muslim in a way that is not different – in form, and in some ways in content – from other religious belongings, and particularly the dominant ones in the respective countries they live in. This means that among Muslims one can observe the same tendencies that are observable in every other religious milieu, where beliefs are passing through important transformations, and traditional practice is diminishing, while new forms of religious behavior are emerging. Only a minority of the Muslim populations of Europe actively practice their religion on a regular basis (the data depend on the behaviour observed): this means that the majority do not, and consequently do not seek (new, different) religious knowledge. This does not mean that they are not interested at all in Islamic knowledge: they may have a secondary interest in it, eventually as a tool of education and a heritage for their sons and daughters, but they are not involved in the active search for, and production and transmission of, religious knowledge. We might call them “low-profile Muslims” or secularized Muslims.

Another segment of the population from Muslim backgrounds is, for the opposite reason, not interested in the quest for (new) Islamic knowledge: because it identifies with the old one. These Muslims tend to identify with traditional beliefs and practices from their countries of origin. Culturally they often tend to lock themselves up in their religious and ethnic communities, sharing the same Islamic knowledge, through their mother language, with their imported imam and codes of behavior, with their cassettes and satellite programs, often with their transnationally arranged marriages, and so on, which they tend to replicate. This segment of the Muslim populations is primarily, though not exclusively, part of the first generation of migrants: destined to become smaller, even if each new wave of immigration results in a new “first generation.” These “traditional Muslims” often constitute the most visible (though not necessarily the most conspicuous) segment of the Muslim population, and it receives disproportionate media attention. It is this segment in particular that is involved in clashes of cultural values that have led to incomprehension among the European public. Typically these Muslims continue to speak in their original languages, they tend to dress, eat, marry in the traditional way, and do not feel at ease or do not like at least some common Western values and practices, who more often produce incidents of miscommunication, and so on. This does not mean that the dimension of change is absent in this part of the Muslim population: a tree transplanted in a completely different ground and climate will not grow in the same way. In this sense what they go through it is not just cultural reproduction, but is in any case transformation, at least in its consequences: but this is more an unexpected secondary effect than a desire and a goal voluntarily achieved. These traditionalist attitudes, which are the consequence of specific forms of Islamic knowledge, are widespread, not only among the first generation, and they are strengthened by new forms of transnational communication, including the new electronic media (satellite TV, internet), and by transnational organizations. Transnationalism, in fact, does not only have innovative or progressive effects: it can simply be a new channel through which traditional views can be spread (as in the very un-innovative content of many Islamic websites, and of much Islamic – Neo-traditionalist and Salafi, for instance – literature in bookshops). Many of these traditional points of views are ineffective, and fail to offer explanations appropriate to the situation of Muslims in the West, for the precise reason that they come from very different situations and contexts, in which Muslims are by definition a majority, and the main if not the only admitted religious reference in the public space – Medinan situations, not Meccan ones.

There is, however, another part of the Muslim population that is actively searching for new interpretative tools, thus demanding new religious knowledge and actively promoting and producing it. This third segment does not constitute the majority, nor can it be considered in

any sense – included statistically – more representative of Muslims than others. The quest for new interpretations is frequently related to efforts to integrate in the societies in which they live; in any case, it is their way of finding their place in Western societies, constructing their religious identities in different forms, that needs elaboration and, in many ways, a creative attitude. In their case, the production of Islamic knowledge can be a way of positioning themselves in the respective national public spheres, using the language of the country they live in (which from the second generation on is the language they know better). In this respect – and contrary to their fathers – they share the same interests, the same demands, and the same need for answers of converts (on which, see Allievi 1998; van Nieuwkerk 2006). They produce original contributions to emerging new discourses about Islam that are contextually Western (Dassetto 2000). The fact that they are the fruit and a consequence of Islamic presence in the West does not mean, in any sense, that the role they play and the knowledge they produce are necessarily progressive, secularized, pluralistic, democratic, tolerant, open-minded, etc. Neo-traditionalist, neo-Salafi, neo-conservative forms of Islamic knowledge are also part of this landscape. Their activity is visible in books, cassettes, magazines, radio and TV programs broadcast in and from Western countries, but also in *khutbas*, and in the discourses that can be heard in associations and NGOs. It is possible to observe in these various media how new contents that are specifically Islamic and Western – in a proactive, but also in a reactive way – are emerging. We could call all these groups the “new Western Muslims.” Not only Muslims in the West, not only Muslims of the West, but Western Muslims that make their presence in the West – and in many ways their belonging to Western culture – the starting point of their reflection on Islam.

Altogether, secularized Muslims, traditional Muslims, and new Western Muslims constitute the multiple facets that, in their interrelations (internal to Muslim milieus and, external to them, with society at large), produce the new forms and the new images of Western pluralistic Islamic knowledge.

### Where does it happen? Places and examples

Where does change happen? Where is Islamic knowledge produced, and how is it transmitted and diffused? As we have already noted, it starts in individual and collective behaviors, in embodied practices and in the emergence of new orthopraxis. But it becomes more visible in the field of theology: the process of construction of a theology adapted to the Western situation of minority. A situation that, when acknowledged as different from that of Muslim majority countries, is already in itself a big step in the direction of change and, in Islamic terms, *ijtihad* (sometimes interpreted, from the traditionalist – and majority Muslim countries’ theology – point of view, in the negative sense of *bid‘a*). The effort Muslims make takes different directions. One is producing a sort of minority *fiqh*, as seems to be the case, among others, with the European Council for Fatwa and Research (Caeiro 2010, 2011), founded in Dublin in 1997, but also of many *fatwa*-online websites (Bunt 2003, 2009). Another one is trying to elaborate a theology of Islam in a situation of religious plurality (Islam and Muslim communities as part of a new and different society), which seems to be what religious intellectuals are attempting, among whom Tariq Ramadan (2004a, 2004b, 2010) is only the most well-known case (other examples include Amina Wadud and what is known as Islamic feminism, among others). Remaining on mere terms of principle and speculative analysis, without playing a social activist role, this attempt is also made by Muslim intellectuals coming from Muslim majority countries, often having fled to the USA or Canada or Europe, by choice or to escape from threats and menaces: to quote randomly, among others, Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdullahi an-Na’im, Abdolkarim Soroush, Ramin Jahanbegloo (on Muslim intellectuals of various tendencies see, among others, Benzine 1994, Esposito and Voll 2001, Campanini 2005, Donohue and Esposito 2007). In the form of adaptation of

traditional *fiqh* to a different context, more than with the idea of a different *fiqh*, this is also the scope of some Muslim majority ‘*ulama*’ (that do not play only a conservative role: Zaman 2002), preachers and clerks, of whom Yussuf al-Qaradawi is the best-known example (Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen 2009). Many popular tele-preachers have the same role – Amr Khaled is one of the best-known examples (see Mariani 2011) – as well as, occasionally, institutions like the International Union of Muslim Scholars (founded in London in 2004 and now based in Cairo). An important role is also played by Muslim origin secular intellectuals as different (also in their relation with Islamic knowledge) as Muhammad Arkoun or Bassam Tibi, and many others. At the opposite end of the spectrum from producers of Islamic knowledge, there are anti-Muslim actors from Muslim backgrounds, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Chahdortt Djavann, Irshad Manji, Ibn Warraq, Magdi Allam, and many others, of local importance: their scope is to produce knowledge against Islam, giving legitimization to the prolific category of non-Muslim professional preachers of Islamophobic and anti-Muslim Western opinion (whose books are bestsellers in the West on Islam: their titles are regularly among the most sold books on Islam in Amazon, for instance). They are not at all popular among Western Muslims, but they play an important role in setting the agenda and the conditions of debate on Islam in the West.

Theology, theological interpretation, exegesis, hermeneutics are far from being the only means by which Western Islam emerges. Places and examples of production of Islamic knowledge in Western countries are many and various. Among others, they include: ‘*ulama*’, muftis, *mujtahids*, preachers, intellectuals, but also scientists and humanists of various kind; Islamic associations (including those of women and youth), NGOs, social organizations, political parties, religious movements, Sufi orders; mosques, mosque committees, imams; Qur’anic schools, Islamic schools, religious higher education institutes, Muslim seminaries; Islamic websites, religious broadcasting and other media; and, of course, families and informal peer groups. We will not go through all of them in detail. It is enough to have in mind the richness and complexity of the panorama.

All these places are interconnected: they can mutually reinforce each other (families, mosques, Qur’anic schools, religious broadcasting, for instance), helping to build what Peter Berger (1967) has called significant “plausibility structures”; but they can also produce cognitive dissonance and conflict if they display, even implicitly, different forms and interpretations of Islamic knowledge.

They have variable importance, also depending on individual trajectories and phases of life. Altogether, they form a strong and relevant combination of institutions and references that become part of the “tool box” of the average Muslim (accepting that tools are not necessarily part of everyday experience: but usually we prefer to have the tools in our box, even if we do not use them often – just in case ...). One needs to acknowledge also the rapidity of the process that has led to their diffusion: in a few decades, a new religion (new for the context) has been able to expand and institutionalize in a bottom-up process particularly impressive for its strength and efficacy. Western countries – and, from many points of view, particularly European ones – cannot be understood anymore, in their social and political evolutions and tendencies, and in their symbolic, religious, and even institutional landscape, without taking into account their internal Islamic presence.

### **What does it mean? Relevance and feedback effects**

The process of the production of Islamic knowledge in the West does not happen in a vacuum, and does not concern only Western countries. Its relevance is enormous and equally underestimated, compared to its importance.

There is a common habit of depicting the process of diffusion of Islamic knowledge as if it were from a “there” (meaning Muslim countries, and in general the countries of origin of



immigrant populations) to a “here” (meaning Western countries, and in general the host countries of immigrant populations). This might be partially true in the first wave of migrations: but things are far more complex. It is a question not only of the direction of these processes (often going in the opposite direction, from a “here” to a “there,” as we will see), but of a completely different landscape. Cultural and religious feedback effects play an important role that has not yet been sufficiently analyzed by scholars and researchers. The production of Islamic knowledge in the West (as well as in Muslim countries) has effects both “here” and “there.”

An important aspect of the religious and cultural processes concerning Islam in (and) the West is in fact their transnationalization (Allievi and Nielsen 2003; Mandaville 2011). Sometimes this process is labeled diaspora: but the word diaspora implies a center (a starting point and a symbolic – at least – reference) that sometimes is not so easy to define, and is in many ways a sort of extension of the concept of nation-state (Soysal 2000); and these social phenomena cannot be studied, observed, or measured by using the traditional approach of national-level case studies, marked by the borders of the different countries. We can probably better define it as the complex interrelation between the emerging importance of networks of all kinds and the existence of relatively open transnational spaces (Faist 2000). Processes involving communication flows, including the production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge, can only be properly understood if we adopt a transnational perspective. The links between Muslim communities and their countries of origin, as well as among Muslim communities within Europe and other Western countries, seem to be important elements in the current development of discourses concerning the social and political role of Muslim communities. They are also crucial to their theological status as minorities not living in Muslim countries, not exposed to an accepted common religious authority, and with no possibility of referring to a shared religious law. In this sense, plurality (which is not only internal to the West, representing diversities transplanted into the new context, but also external, transnational) constitutes an opportunity rather than an obstacle for the production of Islamic knowledge and its dissemination. It represents a source of different solutions to the problems encountered, rather than a problem in itself – even if religious representatives, whose starting point is often an implicit idea of internal homogeneity, do not always like to interpret it as such. This presumption of homogeneity, and the perception of internal and external diversity as a matter of pathology rather than physiology, incidentally, is not peculiar to Islam, and not even to religions only. It is a more general epistemological problem: we tend to start our understanding of cultural and social phenomena from a presumption of homogeneity, interpreting plurality as a sort of addition to an initial “one.” But plurality as a starting point brings – and needs – a different logic, and presupposes a different way of reasoning.

A particular interest reveals the analysis of the feedback effects of the production of Islamic knowledge in the West: the feedback *to* – and not *from* – Muslim countries. It is a field which is difficult to research (the main indicators are not always easy to define, and it implies long qualitative research) and expensive to finance (it implies field research both “here” and “there”), but very promising in its results, also for its possible consequences, at the cultural, social, economic, political and religious level.

The feedback which is more easily identifiable is that at the economic level. It is not the focus of our interest here, but we can just mention the role of money transfers to countries of origin, which often represents a significant entry in the national balance sheet of many labor force exporting countries and an important percentage of their GNP. They concern individual and family transfers, which often represent crucial support for local economies, but also “Islamodollars”. Even for funding religious organizations and also the construction of mosques

and Qur'anic schools, or financing pious institutions, in an increasing number of cases the flows from Western countries to Muslim countries are higher than those coming from Muslim countries; and for several movements and Sufi confraternities, Western countries are becoming an important economic opportunity and support, if not the main one. Several Western countries (notably the City of London) are also among the main capitals of Islamic banking and finance, and some European local governments with significant Muslim populations have already issued Islamic bonds.

The political feedback is equally important. The rise of Western and particularly European Islamic leadership also has crucial effects in the public sphere in countries on the other side of the Mediterranean, and a particular impact in former colonies. It becomes a strategic tool in the increasingly religious dimension of international relations, and can influence significantly the development of Arab (and not only Arab) neo-democracies. The presence of political refugees (but with religious motivations) is a source of interest in the political and religious dimension of sending countries, and can offer in some cases important alternative leadership in the case of crisis and changes in government in those countries. They also play a key role in orienting Muslim populations both in the West and in respective countries of origin: an important source of information and activism also for Western diplomacies. Also increasing is the habit of involving Muslim religious personalities in Western diplomatic missions. Even more important is the political participation of Muslims in Western countries, and their social activism (in local associations, trade unions, NGOs, Muslim representative organizations, etc.), for two reasons. One is internal, because of their increasing numbers in municipal, regional, and national elected assemblies, where they acquire considerable experience in Western democracy, which can also have an effect in their countries of origin. The second reason is precisely external: an increasing number of Muslims, from Turkey to Senegal, from Tunisia to Pakistan, after an experience of engagement in social and political organizations in the West, have become leading figures in the politics of their countries of origin, becoming mayors, members of parliament, or even ministers and party leaders. But at a lower level, even political and religious internet discussion forums and social networks are interesting platforms in which members of the same organization or people discussing the same tendencies, living in their countries of origin or in the diaspora, intertwine continuously, elaborating transnational discourses concerning the role of Muslims and of Islamic knowledge in either the countries of origin or host countries.

The intellectual influence of Muslims in the West is increasing rapidly, and becoming more visible and pervasive. Cities like London and Paris are becoming intellectual capitals of the Arab world, and Berlin, Cologne, and Frankfurt are becoming important references for the Turkish context. The same is happening for other countries and situations elsewhere. The number of books written in Arabic or other languages of the Muslim world, for both internal and external markets, but published in Western countries, is increasing enormously, due to their openness in terms of markets and freedom of thinking. In Europe and the USA there is fertile theological production: many intellectuals born in the West, including Western converts, often teaching in Western universities, are regularly invited to lecture or speak at conferences in the Muslim world, and there is increasing awareness of the importance of their contribution. This is a major change in the traditional center-periphery dynamic, in which the Arab holy places and traditional intellectual institutions (al-Azhar, Zeytouna, etc.) were the center, where knowledge came from. New centers are now emerging, making these dynamics more complex. Agreements between universities (both American and European) are increasing in number, as are strategic projects, often with financing coming from Muslim countries, transnational Islamic institutions, and private foundations, with Islamic higher education offered in the West to students coming from Muslim countries. The increasing awareness on issues like the educational

skills of imams in the West makes it a sector in which public institutions (including European governments) are directly or indirectly involved. Islamic quality instruction has become part of a subtle Muslim diplomacy by Western governments. Many knowledge networks that have no explicit religious content often have a sort of not-so-vague Muslim hint.

The mediasphere (Appadurai 1996) is of fundamental importance. Internet, web television, satellite television, but also religious press (newspapers, journals, and books), and even – still – video and audio cassettes are helping to a great extent to create a Muslim transnational public space, that includes the countries of origin of Muslim populations as well as Western countries, in which contributions and messages go in different directions. The web is particularly important in building a transnational public space, creating interrelations in various languages, but particularly in English, which has become the main “Muslim” language worldwide.

Forms and occasions for interreligious dialog are also an important way to create transnational links, as well as institutional occasions such as those created by the different exchange programs of the European Union and other projects related to media, education, development, etc.

But probably the main religious feedback effect, in terms of efficacy, is the least studied and the most informal one: personal interrelations, family ties, travel to the countries of origin for holy days, religious festivals, family encounters, to arrange marriages, for import–export activities, etc. The development of communications and the diffusion of low-cost travel have had an enormous, though under-evaluated, impact in the reframing of transnational issues.

### Future actors of religious knowledge

One of the emerging issues, and one of the most interesting changes we can observe in the field of production of Islamic knowledge, is the increasing number of actors and places in which it is elaborated, and of the channels through which it is diffused, discussed, and disseminated. It is a change that is not only due to the ICT revolution (Eickelman and Anderson 1999; on the Muslim debates on media, see Larsson 2011); it is something that involves the ways in which religion is referred to, perceived, and practiced, particularly in the West. It is not something specific to Islam only; but the characteristics of Western Islam, and the quick contemporary changes to which it is subject, make it a particularly significant example of this transformation, for at least two main reasons, which, acting together, reinforce each other: the fact of being a minority rather than a majority – with the subsequent theological implications – and the passage from the first generation of migrants to the second and third generations born in a different context, which also includes a change in the language through which Islam is questioned that often precludes access to an entire corpus of traditional interpretation and exegesis.

This change has several consequences: the emergence of new Islamic actors, with a background in Islamic studies and curricula progressively different from traditional ones; the development of new places of elaboration and debate; the increasing influence of new and different media; the growing importance of new fields of study and research; the reduced importance given to traditional boundaries, that lose importance in the Western context (belonging to a specific *madhhab* or entering in a *tariqa* coming from a completely different context: to quote but one example, a Moroccan second-generation Muslim entering a Sufi group coming from India or Turkey and now based in Europe); the interrelation of all these factors, and their feedback with different but equally important changes taking place in Muslim countries.

Form and content of religion are both involved in this transformation, which for Islam takes the shape of profound processes of personal and collective *ijtihad* (for a vision from within Islam, see Khan and Ramadan 2011).

We can resume these transformations with two quotations from Muslim actors interviewed in the field (which are part of the materials collected for Maréchal et al. 2003).

The first one, concerning *madhhabs*, comes from an African Muslim of Yemeni origin based in London: “I am a Shafi’i, but I have to follow the most common *madhhab* here, which is the Hanafi one. Personally, as far as the *hajj* is concerned I am a Hanafi, for *jihad* I am a Maliki, for the conception of minority I am a Hanbali.”

The second one, on *ijtihad*, is part of a dialogue with another Muslim, during a gathering of believers on the occasion of one of the frequent European conference tours of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, followed by the usual question and answer session. To my observation on the fact that the questions were always more or less the same, my interlocutor answered: “Do you know why they always ask the same questions? Because they always hope for a different answer.”

## Two interpretative problems: exceptionalism and Islamophobia

The role of the perception of Islam in Western countries and of the production of Islamic knowledge by non-Muslim actors is significant not only for Western populations, but also for the feedback effects it has on Muslim actors. We will consider it briefly: starting with two key interpretative problems.

The first one is the tendency – of media, public institutions, political parties – to give, to the presence of Islam, specific and contextual answers, finding specific solutions, even when the issues raised, if correctly interpreted, could be compared and comparable to the issues raised by other religious (and even non-religious) groups.

We might define this tendency as exceptionalism, that is to say a tendency to see Islam and Muslims as an exceptional rather than standard case, one that does not fall within the cases relating to religious pluralism, and therefore requires specific bodies, actions, and specific targeted reactions, unlike those used for other groups and other religious minorities. Examples of exceptionalism include the forms of representation of Islam in various European countries, which vary from case to case but also differ with respect to the recognized practices of relations between states and religious denominations in general. The most symbolic case is the creation in various European countries of collective bodies of Islamic representation. Other cases concern the approval of laws banning specific dress (such as various forms of *hijab*, *niqab*, and *burqa*, even if often such laws are couched so that they do not seem specifically related only to Muslims, even when they are applied only or mainly to them) or buildings (minarets in some regions of Austria – Carinthia and Vorarlberg – and Switzerland, with a referendum), or the introduction of specific questions or conditions when applying for citizenship.

Forms of exceptionalism from a legal, political, and social perspective are, however, present in many other fields, following a pervasive trend: they even include, in some countries, the language used about Islam and Muslims, and the creation and increasing impact of political parties for whom fighting against the presence of Islam and Muslims in Europe is becoming a central point of their agenda.

These politics and policies concerning Islam and Muslims often contradict the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of religious communities on which relations with other denominations and religious minorities are grounded. And their conceptual foundation is neither equality of treatment nor religious freedom: exceptionalism seems to be constructed in these cases as a (problematic) third way. Even the media perception of Islam, by default in conflictual terms, can be considered a form of exceptionalism; and conflict a specific way of understanding Islam.

Islamophobia is a specific case of exceptionalism, to which it is necessary to pay a certain amount of attention (Geissier 2003; Allen 2010; Helbling 2012). The word became widespread with the report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, published by the Runnymede Trust in 1997. A first empirical survey came out in 2002 with the *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after September 11*. A significant form of “officialization” of the term appeared with the seminar organized at the United Nations, at the highest level, on “Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding” in December 2004. Following on from this, other agencies joined in, among them the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which set up an observatory on Islamophobia, and since 2008 has been producing monthly bulletins and an annual report on the subject. In recent years various websites have also dedicated themselves to this subject (among which [www.islamophobia.org](http://www.islamophobia.org) and [www.islamophobia-watch.com](http://www.islamophobia-watch.com)), and practically all Islamic information sites, especially European and American ones, now have a section of documentation dedicated to Islamophobia.

Despite its institutionalization and its entry into the language and literature on the Islamic presence at an international level, the term has stirred up much criticism, also in spheres that could certainly not be suspected of anti-Islamic attitudes, because, among other reasons, it reduces all phenomena of reaction to Islam to the same kind, ending up by constructing the object of analysis instead of defining it correctly.

Nevertheless, Islamophobia as a phenomenon exists: in media and intellectual debates, and particularly among political entrepreneurs of Islamophobia. The political parties that take Islamophobia as a central part of their program, and as an efficient method of gaining consensus, are expanding strongly in several European countries and in other Western contexts. Islamophobia is not used only to target Islam, but also to attack multicultural politics and inclusive policies. On the other hand, anti-multiculturalist discourses often mask with general arguments a specific scope, having Islam as a hidden target.

### **Interrelations: views on Islam and Muslims, and their effects on Muslim populations**

The evolution of a tradition is the fruit of interrelation between internal and external actors. As Alasdair MacIntyre points out,

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.

*(MacIntyre, quoted in Zaman 2012: 34)*

We might add that external observers are not necessarily critics, but can also be sympathetic and positive towards a tradition.

Thus, the perception of the Islamic presence in Western countries, and specifically the attention paid to its intellectualization, plays an important role in the global perception of its Muslim presence, and also in the perception of Islam in general, not only Western Islam. From this point of view it is important to understand the role and the effects – also on Muslims themselves – of debates *on* Islam in the public space, which includes, among others, what is discussed in the media, in the political arena, and in the intellectual production.

Discourses about Islam are not only, and not even mainly, the product of Muslim interlocutors and social actors. There is a significant production of discourses about Islam that are becoming discourses about Muslims, and particularly Muslims in the West, that are produced by non-Muslims, but have important effects also on Muslims and on the production of Islamic knowledge.

The common lack of a socio-historical perspective and of a diachronic dimension (examples of which are the implicit assumption that nothing relevant has changed in the countries of origin, the common neglect of the rupture between the first and second generation in the host country, and so on), as well as the fact that links with the country and culture of origin are considered obvious, unidirectional, and not subject to reinterpretation, are but a few illustrations of this way of thinking. The selective perception of what is important and what is not in what happens in Muslim communities (very different between Muslims and non-Muslims) has other important effects: highlighting specific issues (notably the most controversial ones: the *hijab*, polygamy, female circumcision, gender roles and relations, separation between politics and religion, the whole issue of security, fundamentalism, and terrorism) and forgetting others; choosing between different aspects of Islam; pushing interpretation in one direction or another; or simply not seeing certain aspects of Islam and changes in Islamic knowledge that are less visible in the public space (popular religious practices, for instance; or processes of de-Islamization and secularization).

The role of selective perception in shaping the image of Muslim social, cultural, and religious actors is decisive also for its feedback effects on the actors themselves, who are obliged to deal with this image, take it into account, and often react to it, implicitly or explicitly.

The image of Islam and Muslims in the West is also produced by Western scholars and academics specializing in issues related to their presence, whose texts and research have a great impact – on societies and on Muslims themselves – in defining the frame, setting the agenda, and legitimizing policies. The outcome of their activity can be found in local and national researches, in collections of essays, in interpretative synthesis (more concerned with Europe, see Nielsen 1992; Dassetto 1996; Cesari 2004; Roy 2004; Klausen 2005; Jenkins 2007, and many others; on the American context, among the more recent, are Ahmed 2010; Bilici 2012), and as the outcome of comparative research (Maréchal et al. 2003); but also in less public activities including confidential reports, politicians' counseling, legal advice, training of public officials at different levels (including security agencies and police forces), etc. Together with the media, political parties, social and religious organizations, they are one of the main actors influencing the respective Western contexts (on the social, cultural, religious, political, institutional, jurisdictional level), particularly important in terms of legitimization (of political action and of public discourse): a key factor in favoring open processes of construction and recognition – but also transformation – of identities or, on the contrary, creating obstacles to them (Klausen 2005; Ferrari and Pastorelli 2012; Laurence 2012).

It is sufficiently clear that these processes are not only inherent in and internal to the respective identities – whose boundaries are not so easy to define and not so stable in time. They include interrelations with other identities, and imply transformation and change, also through forms of *métissage* and cultural syncretism: not only as a possible destiny, but as a necessity and, in the end, as a sign of vitality, on both sides of the coin: Muslim individual and collective actors, and society at large.

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