Brigitte Maréchal

Changes among Islamic organisational structures in Europe*

Many types of Muslim organisations have been founded by some of the 11-12 million Muslims living in Western Europe. They co-exist, exercising influence on many levels and interacting more or less intensively and regularly. Only organisations depending on intra-European Muslim dynamics are considered in this article. Muslim organisations more related to strictly external processes, whose influence seems to be on the decline, are disregarded. The same goes for the extensive book trade to represent Muslims vis-à-vis the state because they tend to be the outcome of a process mostly set in motion by the governments themselves.

In fact, we will deal with local associations set up to provide a place for worship and teaching the Quran and also others, ever more numerous, that have widened the scope of the activities.

Beyond taking root in European cities, these associations are often affiliated to diverse religious movements either mystical, missionary or sometimes politically oriented. These trends will be pointed out because they illustrate the variety and the dynamism of contemporary Islam.

Finally, in order to clarify the situation, major changes and evolutions will be indicated.

Establishment and internal organisation of mosques

Western Europe possesses approximately 6400 mosques or prayer rooms. Mosques, often mono-ethnic and/or recognised as favouring a particular interpretation of Islam, constitute local organisations disposing of a wide, and sometimes complete, administrative autonomy. And being connected to or belonging to a particular religious movement does not necessarily mean that they are influenced by any federal structure.

Persons in charge of mosques, almost exclusively men, often exemplify the first generation’s monopoly, even if some evolution is perceptible. Usually appointed through a consensus of members, they start the mosque off: they establish a place for meetings and worship and choose which services and activities to organise. But as soon as the mosque becomes more important, it fulfills other functions too, organising courses in religion and Arabic, offering advice to young people to help them find professional training, establishing a library etc.

The men in charge employ people as teachers and/or volunteers — whose role nowadays may turn professional, where visiting persons and sick persons in hospitals is concerned — and supervise the religious staff, especially the imam. Sometimes they have recourse to one of the wider organisations, which may be in competition with each other. On one hand, the authorities of the countries of origin may be involved through their own consular services; for instance the Diyanet Islami Türk İslam Birliği, an imposing administrative body linked to the higher authorities of the Turkish state, exerts wide influence. Beyond controlling the mosques in Europe, it had 760 imams attached to it in 1995. Another example is the Great Mosque of Paris, whose rector appoints a hundred imams, often paid by the Algerian state. On the other hand, they resort to important international Islamic organisations sometimes dependent on political bodies in Muslim countries. For example, the Islamic World League emanates from the Saudi leadership: it established the Superior Council for Mosques in Europe in 1982 in order to found or restore mosques and promote Islamic culture. As for the Muslim World Congress, it reflects Pakistan’s particular orientations and tries to affirm itself in discrete competition with Saudi Arabia.

Emergence of associations

Noteworthy is the increase since the mid 80s of associations that have taken over the central role of mosques, while reinforcing the importance of the latter at the same time. Consequently there are now approximately 3000 associations in France and more than 2000 regional organisations in Germany.

These associations are active in various fields: religious and cultural, social, political, educational, sport and even leisure. Youth associations promote activities linked to the second generation’s needs, whether remedial classes, sports grounds, publishing and bookelling, organising conferences, helping families in trouble, marriage guidance etc. They usually focus on the improvement of daily life in the neighbourhood, and so they may receive government grants. Now and then, these associations are linked to an international organisation or to a specific Islamic movement, unless they hold a position at the regional or even at the national level, like the UK Islamic Mission or the Union des Jeunes Musulmans, which is close to the influential Union des Organisations Islamiques de France.

In this framework, new leaders emerge. No matter who they are — former students from abroad, children of immigrants who may have followed some courses abroad, converts — they try to establish a position in a very open and competitive market. They are basically new mediators, charismatic personalities who put forward a pragmatic discourse while challenging the scholars’ position, but not their knowledge. They present themselves as referrants for young people who are torn by questions about their insertion in society at large, or about reconciling the practice of citizenship with worship, and thus they reinforce the re-Islamisation process.

As for Muslim women appearing in the public sphere, the process is still very slow but it has started, partly through the constitution of informal

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groups. A double dynamics now set in motion seeks to realise two distinct aims. First, there are personal initiatives taken to solve concrete social problems or stimulate women’s autonomy within Muslim communities. They are still extremely rare but one exemplary case is the association Al-Nissa, created in London in 1985: it advises women about their Islamic rights, offers them training to increase their self-esteem and teaches them how to play a role within their community. The other kind of initiative stems from ideological networks, which create branches for women and prompt them to organise activities. Beyond internal ideological or organisational reasons, this initiative may be explained by pressures of the environment inducing a wider representation of women in return for a possible acquisition of any privileges. The Turkish Millî Görûs federates stand out for 445 of its 791 local branches having a women’s section; it is well aware that girls, as future mothers, will have a leading role to play in the transmission of Islam. These groups represent both a frame for religious reference and a space for exchanging knowledge and experiences. Within other tendencies, SUNI groups, such as the ‘Alawiyah, and modernist Islamist movements seem more disposed to such openness. Some examples are the Jamâ’at-i-Islami or the trends inspired by the Muslim Brothers, even if nothing concrete has apparently yet been achieved.

Diversity of ideological-religious trends

This panorama aims to represent major and/or symptomatic trends present in western Europe while taking diverse origins into account. A few preliminary points have to be made: First, it is notable that very few movements are Shi’ite. Only minor trends exist, perceived especially as mystical movements. Examples, in order of importance, are Alevi, of Turkish or Kurdish origin, who accord Ali a central role, Ismailis mainly of Irani-ian origin, and Bohorans and Khodjya from

the Indian Ocean – not counting the groups considered as deviant sects, that is, the Ahmadîyyah movement, whose doctrine is condemned because its founder questioned the dogma of Muhammad being the Seal of the Prophets, and the Bah-á’ís who present themselves as a universal pacific and egalitarian religion with adherents engaged in an independent search for the truth from the Scriptures.

A second point concerns the official nature of the trends. Turkish Islamic trends are especially fixed, in the eyes of others, because they have to take a position about the government line on Islam maintained by the Diyanet and even state control. Indeed, the state disseminates a loyalist Islam and has succeeded in gaining a strong institutional position. Nevertheless, by keeping Turkish immigrants focussed on Turkey and maintaining them on the fringes of integration processes within European societies, it risks facing more difficulties in the future. These trends may be distinguished by many criteria, such as the attitude towards fundamental ideas, world visions, ideological sensitivities, practices, orientations and terms through which religious activism is elaborated, relations with the West etc. Beyond the intrinsic variations of the movements, five major types of religious organisations emerge in Europe.

1. Mystical movements. Mystical orders are distinguishable from each other by the way they propose to reach union with God, for instance through their particular chain of spiritual descent from the Prophet. Most groups, such as Darqawi, Tijani, Shadhili and Qâdîrî, meet informally with a very limited number of adherents. Among the most influential, the old-established Naqshbandiya’s moral influence has extended to the Millî Görûs and Sûleymanci movements. The popular Barâli movement, whose founder tried to oppose literal and modernist trends, is especially present in Great Britain. Keeping close links to the Indian sub-continent, it is mainly characterized by the intensity of its devotion for the Prophet and its tendency to rally around a spiritual leader with recognized powers of intercession. The Murîd brotherhood, of Senegalese origin, is centred around Sheikh Amadou Bamba. It promotes an oath of allegiance of disciple to master, a willingness to continue on one’s way to God and the importance of work. Represented by university students, this brotherhood also brings together an important diaspora of interdependent hawkers. Finally, the ‘Alawyyah brotherhood, of Algerian origin, develops a modern individualised mysticism, more focused on personal reflection and an intellectual relation between master and adherents than on a communal life and practice of collective worship.

2. Mystical reformist movements, rationalising and preaching. On one hand, the Deobandi movement, especially present in Great Britain, whose founders are both reformist Suﬁs and scholars in religion, propagates a strict Sunni orthodox. They reject local practices on behalf of universal beliefs and observances, but the unity they promote conflicts with their elite aspect. They maintain close ties to South Asia and benefit from recruiting by Jamâ’at al-Talibîgh informal networks. On the other hand, the Nurcu trend is mainly represented among Turkish communities. It proposes a neo-mystical approach emphasizing personal piety and promotes intellectual activity stemming from its founder’s writings on the Quran.

3. Prophets’ movements. Their strong missionary activity is meant to bring back to Islam those who have fallen away from it. One of the most informal and dynamic movements is the Jamâ’at al-Talibîgh, very popular in Great Britain among the Indo-Pakistani population, while it especially attracts North Africans in other countries. It aims at people on the fringes of society who wish to recover a certain respectability. Focusing attention on practice, active participation and changing the surroundings through preaching, it tries to revive religious life taking the Prophet’s companions as an example. The Jamâ’at al-Ta-bîghî is mainly criticized by the Jamâ’at-i-Islami for its apologetic attitude, by some Barâli for its supposed links to Wahhabism and by some Deobandi scholars for its promoting generalised preaching in public as a duty. Another movement is the Sûleymanci, whose national associations have been federated at the European level. Very hierarchical and politically right-wing, this movement opposes the Kemalist approach to Islam. Although it nowadays shows more openness like Millî Görûs, they are competitors; Millî Görûs qualifies Sûleymanci as mystical partly due to the importance it gives to personal piety. As for the Ahl-i-Hadîth movement, sometimes qualified as wâhibî, it considers hadith central for the interpretation of the Quran and rejects the authority both of diverse Suﬁ orders and of scholars of the classical schools of law. Unlike the Deobandis, it accords the Prophet particular importance and it condemns the Barâli’s popular practices of devotion. Its influence is rather marginal, even in Great Britain, but it distributes literature and audio and video cassettes propagating separatist ideological regards regarding European movement which reinforces its members’ Islamic identity as the Muslim Brothers do. Not only does the Millî Görûs movement try to introduce Islamic references within families and personal behaviour but it fo-
cuses on youth to Islamise them. For the Arabs, the constant reference is the Muslim Brothers' movement, the source of Islamist ideology world-wide. It aims for a re-moralisation of society and encourages integration while keeping religious identity intact. Its major impact is linked to the spread of a modern discourse which promotes both an intellectual synthesis of universal and global conceptions of Islam. This makes it attractive to Muslims already well integrated into European societies, such as students. From an organisational point of view, it appears as a sphere of influence divided into diverse trends even if these aren’t clear-cut. Although the action of the Muslim Brothers, based on preaching and especially education, rejects violence, a fringe of it has given birth to a radical ideology.

5. Militants for an Islamic society and state. Historically, the Jamat al-Islami is an intellectual re-Islamisation movement that aims to establish objective and social premises for Pakistan, based on a theological vision related to God’s absolute sovereignty. It pays a formal tribute to Sufism, while avoiding it because it accords excessive importance to the unknown. The Jamat al-Islami promotes a missionary strategy and efforts for erudition; hence its affinity with the Muslim Brothers. But in Europe, outside communities coming from the Indian sub-continent, it has little success even if its political opportunism allows it to boast a high political profile and its own student branch is the Tchelbigh, sometimes called Khomeny Movement. This trend is especially present in Germany and has a certain influence in the Netherlands. It comes from a split within the Milli Görüş because Tebghl refuses to adhere to parliamentary means to establish an Islamic society. Moreover, its adherents are irritated by Sibley, whom they consider as over-simplifying the duties of the believers. But following many internal tensions, it now envisages a certain co-operation with Milli Görüş.

Finally there are minority movements, more or less clandestine, in the line of radical Muslim Brothers. On the one hand, Hizb ut-Tahrir wishes to restore the caliphate and represents a kind of symbolic point of reference rather than a group to adhere to. On the other hand, there are some networks led by Islamist exiles: Tunisians belonging to Al Nahda movement, Algerians of the Front Islamique du Salut and Groupe Islamique Armé, Palestinians of Hamas or, for example, some opponents to the Iraqi or Syrian regimes, who are trying to support resistance and promote opposition among the civil society in those countries.

Pluralism of trends, connections and beyond

Whatever their differences, major areas of origin have seen the emergence of similar trends. Nevertheless, even if these trends recognise each other, thanks to the doctrine that variety is a source of enrichment within the Umma, different Islamic traditions are now competing directly in Europe. The complementary character of the trends in Europe is clear, but all of them are being put to the test, each with equal legitimacy but still carrying different weight.

Several processes are at work, showing how impossible it is to think of one particular organisation without referring to the whole. Firstly, two tendencies are involved. On the one hand, the endless division of trends and tensions sometimes as load as they are ephemeral; the other affirms a unity as utopian as it is real, establishing a common identity and unifying processes. Secondly, the overall landscape is constantly shifting because of intrinsic changes in the movements. The major trend is thus not secularisation but pluralism and a differentiation of the religious offer, with new trends even appearing such as new age Sufis groups. Individuals are seen to come and go and some overlaps also exist between groups, caused by possible alliances and conflicts of influence.

The tendency to make connections is observed on several levels, especially among young people, who accord less importance to the criticism of ethno-national belonging as a distinctive element of their belief. It is especially questioned by young Muslims who are broadening their knowledge about the Muslim world. This openness to a universal tendency is now taken into account by different groups. Another change is that Islamism as an instrument for mobilisation is concerned with the intellectual and spiritual developments of Islam in Europe and not only with a strict political and social activism, even if some movements compensate for the authorities’ deficiencies. For example, the Muslim Brothers, Jamat al-Islami and Millî Görüs are getting closer and trying to meet the second generation’s aspirations, especially in France and Great Britain, but also in Germany. Moreover, if the line between Islamists and preaching movements seems to be becoming blurred, this is to the detriment of the second such as the Jamat al-Tabligh. After a rapid growth in the 80s, it has declined since the mid 90s, due to its critical attitude towards western education and its refusal of dialogue. More and more young Muslims choose to follow higher education and thus prefer to opt for secularism or a more active Islamic group. As for the attraction of groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir for young people, it consists less in radical anti-westernism in the model proposed by the charismatic leaders, considered as sources of inspiration and/or imitation. In addition, modernist changes in some brotherhoods should be noticed. For example, the Murids and Alawiyya are adapting themselves to individualised and cosmopolitan European societies. In general, brotherhoods are understood as necessary in order to become part of the surrounding society, becoming more individualised. And due to their attraction for many young people seeking spirituality and community, it seems that attitudes towards Sufism in European post-Islamism groups are softening. They are seen as a factor able to consolidate Islam in Europe, and so flexibility and openness towards them become more important.

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Zusammenfassung


In Westeuropa befinden sich mehrere hundert Organisationen, die in Religion und Philosophie organisiert sind. Jeder von ihnen hat sein eigenes Profil und die Möglichkeit, Einfluss auf die muslimische Gesellschaft in Europa zu nehmen. Die Unterschiede zwischen den Gruppen sind groß.

Die Autorin betrachtet, dass die Selbstorganisation nur im Zusammenhang mit der politischen und sozialen Entwicklung der Muslimen in Europa steht. Sie beschränkt sich nicht auf nur die politischen Aspekte, sondern betrachtet auch die sozialen und kulturellen Aspekte. Sie schlägt vor, dass die Islamisten als ein eigenständiger Organisationsstil zu betrachten sind, der in Europa eine wichtige Rolle spielt.

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