



Edited by Mohammed Hashas, Jan Jaap de Ruiter,
and Niels Valdemar Vinding

Imams in Western Europe

Developments, Transformations,
and Institutional Challenges

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and Institutional Challenges*

*Edited by Mohammed Hashas, Jan Jaap de Rooter,
and Niels Valdemar Vinding
With the collaboration of Khalid Hajji*

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Mohammed Hashas, Rome

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Preface

Jørgen S. Nielsen

This fascinating book on imams in Western Europe is well timed to respond to the European discourse on Islam and Muslims, coming at a time of remarkable developments in the imam as a concept, as a religious institution, and as an authority for the Muslims of Western Europe.

What are the origins of the concept of the ‘imam’, what lies behind it, and what are the historical antecedents that provide context for its current use? The present book provides pertinent answers to such questions; my short remarks here shall serve only to suggest the broadest possible framing of the many important themes, perspectives, and research on imams in Western Europe to be found within the following pages. By way of introduction to the multifaceted understandings and multiple usages of the concept of the imam, I trace three increasingly common and popular perspectives on the position of the imam. These are: first, the imam as the prayer leader; second, the imam as a religious authority; and, third, the imam – still almost exclusively a male role – as a kind of priest; the three perspectives lead to some of the complications and confusions that we are dealing with in the Western European context.

The imam as prayer leader

While the word ‘imam’ has its origins in the Quran – like many of the Islamic terms that have a social life and context in Western Europe – it did not originally have the technical sense that was later built into it. In the Quran, ‘imam’ means someone or something that is the moral model or guide for a community, which is held together by the shared ideal morality demonstrated by the imam. When leading his people into hellfire, for example, the Pharaoh is described as an ‘imam’ (Quran 28:41). The book of Moses and the record of each person’s deeds are also described as ‘imams’, in that they are models, examples, or prescriptions of proper behaviour (Quran 46:12 and 36:12, respectively). Equally, Abraham (Quran 2:124) is described as an example for all people, and therefore an ‘imam’. It is only later that the word ‘imam’ began to take on a variety of more specific meanings.

Most commonly, ‘imam’ now refers to someone who leads the prayer. Strictly speaking, that person is only the imam while the prayer is being led; anyone who has the competence to lead the prayer and knows enough Quranic passages to do so is an imam. The idea that one has to be highly qualified to be an imam does not necessarily follow.

The concept began to be applied as an honorific title to someone who regularly leads the prayer in a community. More formally – and this came with the passage of time and growing institutionalization in the early centuries of the Islamic world – individuals were officially appointed to the post of imam in larger mosques and provided with an income. In the biggest mosques in populous cities, the imam would be only one of several official posts attached to the mosque.

Then the term ‘imam’ began to be applied to the leader of the community. Initially, this was most common amongst the Shia current of Islam, and was applied to Ali and his descendants. This was true for both the Ismailis and the Twelvers, for whom a religious authority is appointed in the absence of a political authority – although in the Fatimid dynasty, the two aspects became united into the imam-caliph. In the modern period, Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran was often called ‘imam’ by some Shia factions, although he himself refused to claim that he was the returning twelfth imam.

Among the majority Sunnis, the term was applied to the *khalīfa/amīr al-mu’minīn* (‘commander of believers’) from very early on, and especially in medieval political theory. In the work of al-Mawardi the word used is ‘imam’ rather than *khalīfa* (‘caliph’). It is also applied to the great religious scholars of the formative period, so there are imams of different *madhāhib* (‘schools of law and theology’), both Sunni and Shia.

With the passage of time, the role of the imam as a prayer leader was impacted by their official appointments, which linked imams to the political authority. Historically, an early sign of dissent against a political authority has been the refusal of the community to pray behind the officially appointed imam. This often applies even today.

In the Western European context, local Islamic communities with or without a fixed mosque or prayer room have often made informal arrangements for someone to lead the prayer. It may be the same person on subsequent Fridays, but it may also be different ones. From the 1960s to the 1980s, it was left to the community itself to define what it meant by ‘religious leader’; immigration authorities would usually accept the community’s definition. The tightening of immigration rules in the 1980s and 1990s impacted the criteria of what constituted a religious leader.

The imam as religious authority

The organized networks within the Islamic world and increasingly in Europe have tended to see the office of imam as the most effective access point to influence and organize European Muslim communities. The networks of the Turkish Diyanet especially, but also the Pakistani Jamaat-i-Islami and others, have organized their activities around trying to place members of their networks as imams in European communities. The local mosque communities often welcomed this, mostly because in the first generation they did not have the resources to give their imam an income or a place to live. There were instances in Britain, for example, where a small local community from a village in Kashmir would rent or purchase a property, set up a mosque, and bring in someone from their village who traditionally would have functioned as an imam. This person would be given a room in the same dwelling as the mosque. Because the imam would often speak little, if any, English, he would not be able to play a role in the leadership of the community other than leading the prayer and teaching basic prayer rituals and some Quranic texts to the children in the mosque's school. Representing the mosque community to the wider society, media, or local government, would be taken care of by a community member, often a businessman, occasionally an academic or a professionally trained lawyer or doctor. The exception, of course, is the Diyanet with its often treaty-based dispatch of community-leader imams to Turkish immigrant communities in the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

It is worth noting that in the European and more generally Western environment a whole new institution with no precedent in the historical Muslim world appeared, namely the generic Islamic Cultural Centre. This organization usually has at least a director and often has more than one full-time person. The director of the Cultural Centre also becomes known as an imam, and the centres enjoy significant financial and political sponsorship, sometimes from the countries of origin, but just as often from other affluent Muslim countries.

The imam as priest

The concept of the imam as a kind of priest comes from the confluence of the imam's role of representing a tradition of religious authority and the European concept of priesthood – whether Catholic or Protestant. In

the early phases of the establishment of Muslim communities in Western Europe, local Muslim communities were often placed in a difficult situation when local governments or churches wanted to enter into some form of dialogue with them. Through its priest, the local church would contact the equivalent peer in the Muslim community – most often a poorly trained, uneducated imam who could not speak the local language, and who was therefore unable to meet the church's expectations of interreligious dialogue. More precarious was when the local government wanted to engage with the Muslim community for reasons of social welfare, education, or integration policy, and found that the person they thought they were going to be talking to was – to put it frankly – absolutely useless. These imams were uneducated and unprepared for this new role. It was not a role that they had expected; in fact, nobody had expected it. Even if an imam had some learning, language problems remained. For instance, in Germany in the 1980s one of the big problems was that, although the imams the Diyanet were sending had theology degrees, they did not speak German. This produced an extended period of German converts to Islam playing a key role in communication with the authorities and other communities. In Britain, imams never played this role because they always stayed among the South Asian immigrants, while there was always someone else who could speak English and act on behalf of the community. This is why converts in Britain were seriously marginalized for a very long time.

In fact, there is a precedent for this role – a precedent that many Muslims for political reasons do not particularly like to face, even when they know about it: namely, the rabbi. In Judaism, the rabbi is traditionally a learned individual. He is a scholar, much more akin to a mufti, certainly, than to a prayer leader. But the rabbi has come to be treated as analogous to the Catholic priest or Protestant minister.

With the passage of time, the growth of Muslim communities, and the increased importance of integration, there is a growing need for communication with the administrative and social environment. This in turn has fostered a process of 'ecclesiastification': professionalization modelled on Christian theological leadership. Such a process requires competent personnel, not only in terms of Islamic theology and law, but also with extensive skills in and knowledge of European law, politics, education, and communication – competencies that are commonly shared by priests and pastors. Hypothetically, to train new imams, then, one might as well send trainees to a Protestant or Catholic faculty, and focus on all that the religions share – law, pastoral theology, and so on – while replacing the Catholic or the Protestant theology with Islamic theology and religious

teachings. These shared skills include the ability to deal with all the new expectations of the community, the Muslim intellectuals both at home and abroad, and state institutions at the local and national level, not to mention the media and politicians – including populists, with their often vocal attitudes towards imams and Muslim leadership. This competence also extends to all of the new skills, tools, and modes of communication that the twenty-first century demands of imams.

This book rises to the occasion to dig beneath the simplistic surface and identifies the variety of imams' roles in Western Europe and their implications for authority, training, and – possibly – developmental priorities.

Jørgen S. Nielsen, Birmingham
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