

Social Science Research Council

Paper proposal for 2011 Berkeley workshop on “Religious Norms in the Public Sphere”

France’s Imams as Agents of Islam’s Formatting

Introduction

This paper stems from the preparation of a PhD in sociology about imams in France, prepared at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (Paris) and thanks to the *Partner University Fund’s* grant. While contemporary Islam is more often analyzed as an institution rather than as a daily practice (N. T. Ammerman, 2007), I would like on the contrary to approach an institution still not well known as an object of research – the decades old Islamic magisterium in France – from a bottom up perspective by examining the daily religion of imams. Since September 2006, I have visited around thirty mosques where I took part in various activities (prayers, sermons, conferences, imams’ consultations, courses...) and I interviewed thirty imams with varied profiles.

While imams are often considered (in the public speech) as ritualist and traditional actors, I would like to show their key role in religious change. Keeping in mind two specificities of Islam in France (even in the West) – the Islamic pluralism and the experience of the minority condition – I will show that imams maintain their legitimacy and exercise their authority by positioning themselves at the crossroads of multiple influences which interpenetrate with globalization, and in so doing they become agents of Islam’s formatting.

Intellectualization of the Domination’s Practices: an “Imam Islamologist”

It is what appears in first from their practices of domination. When religiosities do not fit any more into a common horizon of sense, they are intellectualized (*i.e.* explained and justified: O. Roy, 2002). Studies about priests and pastors in France show that they reinvent the exercise of their authority

by integrating this dynamic (M. Cohen, J. Joncheray, P.-J. Luizard, 2004), and it is legitimate to suppose that the Islamic magisterium cannot escape it. This hypothesis clarifies several reports.

Firstly, it appears that in most of mosques, imams impose a preliminary training on people who want to convert. What does it mean? This denotes a loss of relevance of the declaration of *shahâda* as rite of passage. That expresses a rejection of ritualism, which is a consequence of the disappearance of the religious evidence: imams remedy it in imposing a training on converts. So they reinvent the rite of passage by intellectualizing it.

In the same way, most of the sermons (*khutbât*) that I heard, are becoming an original product. The emotional strength, the art of public speaking (*'ilm al-balâgha*), which is a traditional characteristic of the sermons, and which participates in the efficiency of the transmission, tends to be eliminated. It is the consequence of a choice that imams explain: they want to be understood by many faithful who have different origins and so who use different languages. Rather than be eloquent, imams prefer simpler and more accessible speeches. But the art of public speaking is incompatible with that dynamic of explanation of religiosity. Displays of encyclopedic knowledge figure more prominently in sermons. As about the rite of passage, imams reinvent the literacy's genre of sermons by intellectualizing it.

Moreover, this dynamic also shapes sermons' contents. From a sample of thirty sermons, I identified several recurring themes as the eschatology, an instigation to the realization of one which puts in perspective all the Koranic prescriptions, the showing of a perfect concordance between modern sciences and the Koran, and a tendency to redefine the relation to God in a personalizing perspective which combines the fear and the love of God. These cross-sermons themes are various aspects of an effort of imams to give to the faithful a sense of responsibility in the observation of the worship. It is a consequence of the disappearance of the religious evidence, and as for other religious leaders, this effort passes by the explanation and the justification of religiosity.

Religious leaders do not exercise their authority violently because they cannot. These two cases, chosen among others, suggest to go further. The domination is not practiced by the violence, but by the intellectualization. So, in the process of institutionalization of Islam in France, an "imam-islamologist" (specialist in Islamic studies) is appearing. That is the creation of an original exercise of the Islamic authority, which can be moved closer to the declericalization of the priesthood and to recent evolutions

of the pastorate in France (M. Cohen, J. Joncheray, P.-J. Luizard, 2004), and it is as such a first aspect of an integration of the Islamic magisterium in the same paradigms as other religious authorities.

A “Fragile Islam”

This first hypothesis calls for one second. Indeed, this way of practicing domination involves a repositioning of imams as religious authorities. In France, they have progressively become the leaders of their local “community” and, in the absence of a central legal authority, they also have been placed in a position to reinvent orthodoxy. Now, this task is confronted with two specificities of Islam in France, that other religions also experiment in the West: the experience of the minority condition and that one of the intra-religious pluralism (French Muslims have different national, cultural origins, legal traditions, etc.). My second hypothesis is thus that imams building their legitimacy at the crossroads of these multiple borders (*i.e.* to mediatize Islamic pluralism and tensions which divide Islam and the surrounding society), they also reposition themselves as religious authorities, following the same ways than other religious leaders.

For being shorter, we will only pay attention to some general observations about sermons and consultations. Firstly, in sermons which treat of more or less debated questions – and they are many –, we can observe that imams have sometimes ambiguous speeches. For example, about the woman’s status in Islam, a same imam (East of France, 2008) condemns with strength the feminism which would be responsible of the main troubles in the West, at the same time he pronounces in favor of the sharing of houseworks between husband and wife, and his sermon insists on the primacy of the “respect” towards women, without define it. Often interpreted as double speeches, this kind of ambiguous constructions of sense results from the fact that imams address both a plural congregation riven by divisions (patriarchy habits, claims of young generations, of feminists, of neo-fundamentalists...) and a surrounding society where Islam is stigmatized (and where imams try consequently to legitimate the Muslim presence). Besides, these ambiguous constructions in imams’ sermons go with a wide berth given to the semantic field of consensus. Imams’ sermons in France often insist on the fact that some values as respect, love, tolerance, mercy (*etc.*) should be stronger than any other consideration. It is a first sign of and a practice of an imams’ repositioning as religious authorities facing pluralism.

Secondly, concerning the case of imams' counsellor function, from several case of studies about questions as the famous case of the dating of Ramadan's fast which generate conflicts each year in French mosques¹, or the daily conflicts between faithful that imams manage, an observation is evident: rather than adopt a "magisterical" posture (to position themselves as the only holders of the truth which they try to impose from above), imams build their legitimacy by mediatizing faithful's claims and so they try to reinvent, by a "democratic" fashion, the horizons of acceptable consensus. Besides, considering that this way of exercising authority is an adjustment with imams' inability to impose norms from above, the work of T. Ubru (T. Ubru, 2004), a famous France's imam, is really interesting. He tries to elaborate a minorities' law, adapted to Muslim's presence in France. In this framework, he elaborated a typology of fatwas which theorizes and justifies the issue of an absence of norms. This attempt can be envisaged as a reaction to imams' difficulties to exercise their authority, emerging with individualism and pluralism, and consequently as the sign of a beginning of an institutional reaction to the Islamic magisterium's repositioning in France.

Ambiguous constructions of sense and primacy of the consensus' semantic field in imams' sermons, as the search for democratic consensus in imams' consultations, are different aspects of a same positioning of the Islamic magisterium, which adjusts to individualism and pluralism, to secularization and globalization. This issue is, in some respects, comparable to that of the Catholic Church in the XXth century (D. Hervieu- Léger, 2003), and to the process of democratization perceptible in the evolution of the Catholic and Protestant theologies from the second half of the last century (D. Avon et M. Fourcade, 2009). It is what Mrg. Rouet, a French archbishop, calls a "fragile Christianity" (Mrg. Rouet, 2001). So, what we can qualify by analogy a "fragile Islam" is another aspect of an integration of Islamic authority in common paradigms with other religions, but with the

¹ In France, mosques are directed by presidents and not by imams. They are "notables" (M. Weber, 1996), they follow a logic of "notabilization" which stems also from their loyalty to an institution, and they aim at referring to the dates retained in their native country. Now, mosques channel publics with diversified origins and the decision to follow each or other native country generate conflicts every years. Imams are obliged to justify the chosen date and they are confronted to dissatisfaction of the faithful and so they sometimes enter in conflict with mosques' presidents. In this respect, we observe interesting practices: for example a tendency which does not consist in trying to prove that the chosen date is more justifiable than another one, but on the contrary to distance from Islamic institutions. Some imams explain for example that the young moon can be seemed only once a (lunar) year, so no matter the moment when we observe it, there is only a single fast; consequently that the scientificity of the dating process is less important than to fast in unity. This perspective is sometimes justified by the invocation of the public interest (*maslahat al-'amma*, which is a source of the *fiqh*). Conflicts between imams and rectors about the Ramadan's dating are interesting because they show not only that imams act as mediators of the contradictions which rive the "community", but also that consequently they become more independent towards native countries, and so that they participate to an Islamic magisterium's repositioning.

specificity (among others) that it is elaborated from the bottom, by the daily practices of imams who fit and retranslate in legal and theological terms transformations of the contemporary Islam. So, these actors who have no appropriate trainings and often stigmatized are, *de facto*, agents of Islam's formatting, in an interface position between a simple evolution of religiosities and a repositioning of Islam in itself, which accompanies secularization and globalization. They question Islamic institutions and, somewhere, they summon them to react: will a democratization of Islamic theology and jurisprudence answer to this democratic exercise of authority? It remains to be seen if Islamic institutions are up to this challenge.

Conclusion: Bet on “Dangerous Social Actors”

These results suggest some practical considerations in place of a conclusion. The two hypotheses of an “islam islamologist” and of a “fragile Islam” show how France's imams are becoming agents of Islam's formatting. It is because they act on the border of the plurality of influences which interpenetrate with globalization, that they acquire this key role in institutional change. It is as such, if we open ourselves honestly to “positive secularism” (an expression still dear to some French policy makers...), that it is interesting to wonder about imams' “utility” and potential for social cohesion. I would like to formulate two remarks in this direction.

Firstly, these observations about the exercise of authority analyzed in this presentation (sermons' rhetoric, intellectualization of the rite of passage, importance of the consensus' semantic field in imams' speeches, democratic search for consensus...) are relevant indicators with which to identify the potential with the violence of Islamic authorities, and it would be useful to use this insight for enrich deradicalization's programs in Europe, which require speeches that offer alternative to violence.

Secondly, I shall formulate a more forward-looking and hypothetical proposition concerning the prevention of social conflicts. Without being alarmist, it is nevertheless important to be attentive to a situation. We are attending today and in France at least, to a rejection of Islamic markers considered as foreigners in the public sphere, and at the same time to a growth in the use of Islam as identical reference (P. Haenni, 2009) and to a multiplication of pockets of toughening. This tension generates a potentially explosive situation that imams have a real potential to defuse and that it is possible to

exploit (for example by training them in the mediation or by accompanying their expression in the public sphere).

France's imams began to arouse the interest of public authorities and opinion in the 1990's, when they appeared as conduits at risk of introducing into France the conflicts which trouble the Maghreb. This mistrust towards imams is still relevant today, while they are proving to be decisive agents of normalization and integration of Islam in France. It is a quiet but structuring, determining and desirable process. It would be largely wrong to waste this potential for social cohesion. It is high time to bet on these "dangerous" social actors.

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