



Book Review

Thijl Sunier: *Making Islam Work: Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe*. Leiden: Brill, 2023, 317 pp.

Thijl Sunier is a Dutch professor emeritus of the Anthropology of Religion who has had a long career in research on Islam and Muslims in Western Europe. *Making Islam Work: Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe* is his latest book, and I read it as a summary of his theoretical and empirical interests in the topic. The book's basic aim is to provide insights into how Islamic authority has been produced among Muslims with migrant backgrounds in Western Europe in the last fifty years. Sunier is less interested in religious professionals than in a wider group of Muslims. Much of the book is based on his own research projects, but he also co-authors parts with his postgraduate students. Most of the examples and cases Sunier uses are from the Netherlands, but I believe that many of his analyses and insights apply more widely as well.

The book's empirical context is Muslim migration and integration in Western Europe since the Second World War. Methodologically, it is clearly anthropological, with an emphasis on ethnographic rootedness; theoretically, it has been significantly influenced by Talal Asad, Michel Foucault, and some postcolonial theorists. The Asadian influence is most evident in Sunier's

view of Islam as a discursive tradition, and Foucault's role is central in his analysis of power. Moreover, constant challenges are targeted at academic, public, media, and policy conceptualizations and categorizations of Islam and Muslims that aim to reduce migrant-background Muslims' agency and capacity to change.

The book starts with a theoretical discussion of Islamic authority, followed by six chapters focusing on different topics. Sunier defines religious authority as persuasive power that 'deals with issues of truth, authenticity, legitimacy, trust, ethics, and imagination with references to religious matters' (p. 1), which is commonly associated with religious professionals and elites. However, Sunier's focus is not primarily on religious professionals but on other Muslims who in one way or another contribute to the creation of Islamic authority. The context of change is also important. As Muslim migrants began to arrive in various Western European countries mainly as guest workers, they encountered an Islamic institutional void that was gradually filled with religious entrepreneurs, mosque associations, home country interests, Islamic movements, political responses, and discourses about Islam. The growth of an Islamic infrastructure is 'embedded in broader societal, political, and technological contexts (...) in unprecedented circumstances' (p. 10). This is the messy context of which Sunier aims to make sense.

The first substantive chapter deals with 'religious brokers', who function as mediators between a community and the outside society. According to Sunier such figures emerged all over Europe as figures who aimed to help their countrymen in a new society. They were 'leaders, mediators and representatives, who belonged to the earliest cohort' (p. 44) and played a significant role in the initial establishment of the community and its relationship with local society, usually its bureaucracy. Later such figures became less important, but they were at first central. As Sunier reflects on his own study of the Rotterdam of the mid-1980s: 'these religious brokers introduced me to mosque associations, not realising how crucial their position was. ... [T]hey were essential to keep things going and to bring together parties to the table that would otherwise never meet' (p. 62).

Chapter 2 examines Imam training, which has been one of the major topics about Islam in Western Europe. As Muslim migration was initially primarily work-related, matters of cultural reproduction were not central. Yet as communities matured, a need for religious collective practice, education, and religious guidance also emerged. This was partly met by Imams sent from home countries. It soon became clear, however, that many of the Imams who were sent lacked the knowledge and skills needed in the new context. An interest in training Imams in Europe there-

fore arose, as the religious training institutions in sending countries were unable to assist in producing the required skills. Several European states became interested in the issue simultaneously with the increasing problematization and securitization of Islam in the 1990s and 2000s. This led to expectations that in addition to leading religious practice and counselling, Imams should foster integration and work against radicalization (pp. 85–88). A problem with some of the initiated Imam training programmes was that they were insensitive to Muslim communities' actual needs and sensitivities, and the issue therefore remains largely unsolved despite significant government interventions in some countries, including the Netherlands.

The Turkish-origin Gülen (Hizmet) Movement is the focus of Chapter 3. Having presented background information about the movement's history and development, the rest of the chapter examines the *sohbet*, 'religious conversations and settings where Islamic sources are taught and discussed' (p. 118). The *sohbet* is a key element of Hizmet's pedagogics, in which members internalize the movement's teachings, ethics, and bodily expressions, including proper ways of talking and behaving (p. 120). The chapter is based on data gathered by one of Sunier's students and provides a rare glimpse into these emotionally laden weekly meetings and the careful ways by which newcomers are introduced to the movement's

doctrine. These meetings are part of the programme to raise 'a generation of active followers who embody the ideal image of a perfect Muslim, able to engage with Islamic traditions and modernity in a specific way' (pp. 135–136).

Chapter 4 examines 'alternative authorities', by which Sunier wishes to increase awareness of bottom-up developments that are often locally based. He presents cases of Muslim women's leadership and authority, local community-based authority positions, and halal-scapes. By halal-scapes he means often temporal spaces in which participants create their own Islam-friendly environments, or 'Islamic bubbles' (p. 168) in women's sports or recreational get-togethers, for example. A unifying feature for all these alternative spaces is that there are often negotiations between formal Islamic positions and localized creative adaptations, and as such they have the potential for change. The agents of change are not the religious professionals but ordinary believers working out practical and sometimes innovative solutions to everyday ethical dilemmas. Chapter 5 features a similar point of tension between participation in online and offline *majlis* Shia Muslim sermons during the month of Muharram. As communities can simultaneously be nearby and distant, they may challenge existing patterns of localized authority.

The final substantive chapter takes as its case the branding of Islam. For Sunier branding Islam

means 'claims and forms of appropriation with the epithet "Islamic", used by stakeholders, administrative authorities, religious authorities, representatives, and adversaries to make public statements about Islam' (p. 221). The chapter discusses issues ranging from hijabs to the halalification of all kinds of products. Sunier thus aims to incorporate discussions of contemporary marketized Islam into other political processes where making claims about Islam is central, including far-right discourses. He draws a contrast between 'regular processes of authority-making' (p. 254) that are largely invisible to the public eye and branding that is 'publicly visible, audible, sensible' (ibid.). This is an important point because it is one way of showing how much of the contemporary discussion of Islam is externally produced without any Muslim agency, but something to which they need to react.

In the concluding chapter Sunier reflects on his approach to examining religious authority through wide lenses. He acknowledges that established religious professionals and elites have a significant role to play, but the constantly evolving religious considerations of lay Muslims need a response, and they even sometimes change long-established understandings and practices because the religious elite also ultimately needs laypeople's acceptance. He also considers it important to point to those Muslim groups that are seeking religious answers to their considerations, as this is where the

seeds of change are located. Finally, he acknowledges the importance of the national context, which in many ways moulds the opportunity structure for actions and the questions in the first place (pp. 265–269).

Although Sunier is clearly widely read and professional in his own field, it would have been interesting to read his reflections on other research on religion in diaspora dealing with similar issues. Much research has been done on Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu diasporas, settlement processes, and – to a lesser extent – theological adaptations. Comparative reflections on changes and adaptations among other religions would have even served Sunier's interest in de-particularizing Muslim experiences because a focus on Muslims still puts them in the spotlight.

All in all *Making Islam Work: Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe* is an important contribution to the study of migrant-origin Islam and Muslims in Europe. Sunier's knowledge of the field and ability to connect insights from different times and contexts is at a high academic level. Although he is careful in drawing definitive conclusions, he is nevertheless sufficiently outspoken to further our understanding of the multitude of Islamic authorities in the making. *Making Islam Work* is a fine contribution to the topic of contemporary West European Islam, and I am sure it will become a regular reference in discussions of religious authority. The book will be of most interest

to people studying migrant-origin Islam, but it should also be of interest to others studying religion in diaspora and changing religious authority in general. As parts of the book are quite dense, requiring previous knowledge of anthropology and Islamic studies, I would not recommend it for undergraduates. The level is more accessible for those in the postgraduate phase and beyond.

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