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BRILL

Review Essay



On Being a (Good) Muslim in the West: Four Contributions by Dutch Muslim Publicists

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Abstract

This review essay discusses four books published in Dutch by three Muslims and an ‘ex-Muslim’ in 2014 and 2015 that present different approaches to how to live as a (‘good’) Muslim in the West. The former Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali pleads for far-reaching amendments to Islamic rules concerning belief, ethics and law. Her view differs fundamentally from that of the Muslim theologian Razi Quadir (VU Amsterdam), who positions himself within the Sunni legal tradition. The third author, Muslim theologian and ministry official Mohamed Ajjouaou (VU Amsterdam) argues that one should focus primarily on the diversity of Muslim religiosity in the Dutch secular context. Finally, in his autobiographical portrait, Dennis Abdelkarim Honing explains how he discovered legitimate options for living as a pious Muslim in the West. Each in their own way, the authors point to the phenomenon of accusing fellow Muslims being heretical or going astray, and its heavy impact on internal Islamic debate.

Keywords

Muslim religiosity – heresy – The Netherlands – Hirsi Ali

1 Introduction: Public Constraints

The question of why some young Dutch Muslims—estimated at 250 since 2013—have been willing to join the battle in Syria and Iraq, and appear to be prepared to use violence in the name of Islam, has been of deep public concern in the Netherlands, as has been the case elsewhere. This concern about ‘home-grown’ radicalisation has been prominent since film-maker Theo van Gogh was murdered by a 26-year-old Dutch-born Muslim in November 2004. Non-Muslims and Muslims alike are concerned about how Islam relates to this kind of atrocity and Daesh’s (IS) religious and political interpretations of jihad. Clearly, such violent attacks have nurtured the growth of Islamophobia and there has been growing public concern that Muslims as a collective seem unwilling to assimilate into Dutch society.¹

At this moment of tension, four books were published in Dutch between June 2014 and March 2015, written by two Dutch Muslim academics, one ‘ex-Muslim’ former politician, and the other an ‘ordinary’ believer. Presenting substantially different views on Islamic ethics and law, they all discuss how to interpret the Islamic sources in the socio-political context of contemporary Western Europe and address questions of radicalisation, assimilation and integration. As such, they can be seen as Muslim contributions to the Dutch public debate and each contribution presents fragments of the complicated realities of living as a Muslim in the West.

Heretic. Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now, by the former Dutch politician for the Liberal Party, and often called an ‘ex-Muslim’, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, appeared in 2015 in Dutch translation² and received the bulk of media attention. Theologian, publicist and policy maker Mohamed Ajouaou published *Who is Muslim? Faith and Secularisation among Western Muslims* in 2014.³ Hardly noted in the media was *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (2014) by the Muslim spiritual counsellor Razi H. Quadir, a reworking of his MA thesis for the Free University Amsterdam.⁴ The Dutch convert Dennis Abdelkarim Honing

1 Ineke van der Valk, *Islamophobia in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

2 Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Ketters: Pleidooi voor een hervorming van de islam* (Amsterdam/Antwerp: Uitgeverij Augustus, 2015). All translations from the Dutch are made by the author of this review essay.

3 Mohamed Ajouaou, *Wie is moslim? Geloof en secularisatie onder westerse moslims* (Zoetermeer: uitgeverij Meinema, 2014).

4 Razi Quadir, *Vrijheid van meningsuiting in de islam* (Voorburg: uitgeverij U2pi, 2014).

published his personal story, *Worthy of Unbelief: How I Radicalised Myself and Changed My Opinion on It* (2015).⁵

2 Four Different Publications

The books differ in style and content. They represent different genres, varying from popular-scientific (Ajouaou) and Islamic-theological (Quadir), to essayist-activist (Hirsi Ali) and autobiographical (Honing), but it is nevertheless fascinating and worthwhile to discuss these four books together. The four authors address a broad Dutch audience and aim to offer 'proper information' about Islam and Muslim diversity; they all intend to provide an insight into the problems of Muslims in Dutch or Western society. As 'home-grown' publications, they all discuss the question of how Muslims interpret Islamic sources, particularly the Qur'an and Sunna, in the context of The Netherlands, Europe and the West.

In this article I shall discuss the four books to explain the positions their authors take in the debate on how to be a believing Muslim in the West. Inevitably, each offers a fragmentary view on what are very complicated realities. We shall see that all the authors try to formulate a solution to the conundrum of Islam, being one religion, but showing great diversity in its interpretations.⁶ Each author, in his or her own way, points to the phenomenon of accusing fellow Muslims of being heretical or going astray, and the heavy impact of such condemnation in internal Islamic debate.

3 Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Born 1969, Somalia)

In *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, Hirsi Ali repeats the argument from her earlier work: as long as it is not properly recognised or understood that violence is rooted in Islam itself, the oppression of women, homosexuals and people of other faiths or none, as well as atrocities by jihadists will continue. Whereas previously she pleaded that leaving Islam was the only 'way out', in *Heretic* she argues that the necessary reform and change might also be

5 Dennis Abdelkarim Honing and Nikki Sterkenburg, *Ongeloofwaardig: Hoe ik mezelf radicaliseerde, en daarvan terugkwam* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Q, 2015). Journalist Nikki Sterkenburg is co-author, as she wrote down Honing's personal story.

6 See Shahab Ahmad, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

found within Islam. This is a new element in her writing, arising from her observation that a group actively pleading for Islamic reform played a crucial role in the Arab Spring of 2011. She calls them 'Muslim dissidents'.

Hirsi Ali frames the reform she deems necessary in a comparison with Martin Luther's reform agenda. Just as Luther is said to have nailed his statements to the Wittenberg church door in 1517, Hirsi Ali pins her five amendments on a 'virtual door': 1) Ensure that Muhammad and the Qur'an are open to interpretation and criticism; 2) Give priority to this life, not the afterlife; 3) Shackle sharia and end its supremacy over secular law; 4) End the practice of 'commending right, forbidding wrong'; 5) Abandon the call to jihad' (p. 74). It should be noted that this is a very different reform agenda from that of the Muslim reformist movements of the early twentieth century, whose intellectuals also called for reform, but advocated a return to the authentic sources of Islam (the Qur'an and Sunna).

The second pillar of her argument is her division of Muslims into three categories. The first is the 'Medina-Muslims', or the 'fundamentalists', who propose a regime based on Sharia law and demand that it be forcibly imposed on society. 'Even if they do not themselves engage in violence, they do not hesitate to condone it' (p. 15). The second group she distinguishes are the 'Meccan Muslims', the conservative, non-militant but also silent majority who want to live according to the ethical rules and directions preached by the Prophet during the first period of revelation. According to Hirsi Ali, their problem is that their religious convictions exist in an uneasy tension with modernity (p. 16). The third group consists of those who want to escape this 'cognitive dissonance': the 'Muslim dissidents'. They do not, as Hirsi Ali did, leave Islam, but formulate suggestions for internal reform.

Here, Hirsi Ali seems to take a risk. Modern history (like pre-modern history) teaches that this kind of 'dissident' may be heavily persecuted by ruling political and religious powers by accusing them of heresy, which can suffocate internal critical debate. From the title of her book, it appears that Hirsi Ali is well aware of her highly sensitive notion of reform, renewal or change.⁷ She argues that 'In the eyes of the Medina Muslims, we are all heretics, because we have had the temerity to challenge the applicability of seventh-century teachings to the twenty-first-century world' (p. 18). In classical Islamic law, the punishment for heresy may be death. Ironically, she expresses her willingness to support the dissidents who express divergent opinions and mentions them by name in the appendix. One of them is the Dutch imam Yassin El-Forkani, who

7 The consecutive titles of her books reveal her changing position, starting with *The Caged Virgin* (2006), then *Infidel* (2007), followed by *Nomad* (2010) and now *Heretic* (2015).

risks being regarded as 'heretic'. This may restrict his role in the already limited space for internal and external theological and public debate.

The place of Hirsi Ali's argument, as well as the issue of denouncing the validity of the faith and practices, will become clearer when we take a look at the other three books.

4 Razi Quadir (Born 1972, The Netherlands)

Razi Quadir is the second author discussed here. This former laboratory technician with Indian and Dutch roots is conducting PhD research at the Centre for Islamic Theology of the Free University Amsterdam. He also works as a prison chaplain. In his *Freedom of Expression in Islam*, he introduces himself as a 'Dutch citizen, Muslim, independent and critical thinking individual' (p. 9) and follows this with a contemporary orthodox Sunni explanation of religious opinions about the meaning of freedom of expression in Islam. Quadir is eager to resist the 'image that Islam is hostile to freedom of expression and therefore would be incompatible with generally applicable Dutch norms and values' (p. 10).

The core of his argument is that freedom of expression in Islam has two central aims. First: finding the truth of the divine law. Second: the protection of human dignity, through which Islamic order can resist or oppose a state of chaos (*fitna*). This means that there is a variety of ways for Muslims to call for the quest for Truth and the protection of the Islamic social order, both in an Islamic and in a non-Islamic state. The path to find the Truth about Sharia is free. What is good and what is evil touches the foundation of Islamic law and should be examined in freedom, without restrictions. Precisely in the present time, with its rapid changes and its pluralism, it is deemed necessary that Muslim scholars may resort to *ijtihad* (p. 57). This he explains as 'independent reasoning with the help of the human ratio/intellect' (p. 49). At the same time, there are strict rules to guide this process of *ijtihad*. For these rules, Quadir turns towards authoritative religious scholars from the Islamic tradition, such as al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), but also to modern scholars such as the Afghan-Malaysian-British Mohamed Hashim Kamali (b. 1944). The call to 'do good and leave evil' (*al-amr bi-l mar'ruf wa-l nahy 'an al-munkar*)⁸ is also bound by strict rules—whereas Hirsi Ali argues that it should be abandoned (see her fourth amendment). Quadir states:

⁸ For an introduction to this concept, see Michael Cook, *Forbidding Wrong in Islam: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

What is relevant in adopting freedom of expression, such as the right to free speech, is that the correct aims are being served. These aims are the quest for truth and protection of a person's dignity. This means that ... freedom of expression in Islam is not absolute. There is, for instance, no freedom to criticise issues that are clearly defined in Qur'an and Sunna. (p. 57)

However, using his own interpretation of the punishment for apostasy, he arrives at a conclusion different from that reached by many classical and contemporary Muslim scholars, differentiating between apostasy and blasphemy. This is relevant at the present time. In classical times and sources, apostasy was regarded as a form of high treason, but when a Muslim abandons his faith today, it cannot be considered high treason or a threat to an Islamic state. From this, Quadir concludes that the death penalty is an inappropriate punishment. In this matter, Quadir follows the argument of the influential fourteenth-century Sunni Qur'an exegete Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). Concerning blasphemy, Quadir states that it is not a crime for which the Qur'an or Hadith prescribes a set punishment and it should therefore be treated by an Islamic judge as a *ta'zir* crime, giving the judge the discretion to decide on the punishment. Moreover, in all cases, Muslims should abide by the laws of their country of residence. In the Dutch case, this means that, according to the Constitution, every individual has the right to change religion (p. 172).

To elaborate on Quadir's position, it is important to pay attention to his notion of religious innovation as the reform or modification Hirsi Ali refers to. One of the topics of Quadir's book is how a Muslim should deal with fellow Muslims who call for religious renewal that is regarded as *bid'a*—anything that does not conform to the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet and the first generations of followers. On this issue, he refers to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, arguing that:

A ... matter of general concern can exist in relation to people who call for theological innovation (*arbaab al-bida'*) and heresy. The question that arises here is whether this should be made public in order to protect the common good. Al-Ghazali has answered this question affirmatively and emphasises that heresy and decay should be criticised and revealed in order for the community to protect itself and to take measures against their errors. In this case it is necessary though that the publicity given to the supporters of *bida'* is confined to the facts and not goes with insults. (p. 162)

Quadir argues that an act of religious innovation (*bid'a*) is often considered as heretical if no ground for it can be found in Sharia. 'Among the strongest forms of evil among Muslims are innovations and heresies. It is compulsory to repulse this to the best of one's ability' (p. 36). He continues by stating what is for him the core of religious morality: 'If no one resists evil, evil will be able to spread itself. Evil can than spread itself in such amounts that it can dominate and conquer a society' (p. 36).⁹

As an orthodox believer and a radical unbeliever, respectively, Quadir and Hirsi Ali stand in direct opposition. Whereas Hirsi Ali wants at least to amend and predominantly to abolish, Quadir shows that her proposals are unacceptable in Sunni orthodoxy, which wants to relate to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith. He looks for religious answers to societal questions within the boundaries set by Sunni Ash'ari doctrine. However, if the discussion ended here, only a part of the spectrum of positions taken by Dutch Muslim publicists would be revealed. A look at the third book is merited.

5 Mohamed Ajouaou (Born 1968, Morocco)

The two previous authors present a rather essentialist view on Islam, both discussing what happens if a believer deviates from what is considered to be the one possibility for religious Truth. I now discuss the third book, published by the Amsterdam Muslim theologian Mohamed Ajouaou. Its rhetorical title, *Who is Muslim?*, reveals the author's awareness of the notion of denunciation and heresy. He is aware of the pervasive problem brought up by Hirsi Ali, that Muslims judge each other's religiosity. He suggests three topics for debate. First, Muslims and non-Muslims should know that the questions 'who is Muslim?', and very much also 'who is a *good* Muslim?', are as old as Islam itself. One part of his book is dedicated to the historical explanation of these struggles between ideas, particularly in the formative period of Islam. Ajouaou implies that we need to know this history of internal Islamic debates to better understand the positions of Hirsi Ali and Quadir.

Second, Ajouaou argues that it is better to look at the 'lived religion' (p. 18). Such an approach will empirically reveal the wide range of religious practices, ideas and experiences of Muslims in The Netherlands and worldwide. He observes that this practical, empirical approach is highly relevant in the

9 On this doctrine (*hisba*) in Europe, see Lorenzo Vidino, *Hisba in Europe? Assessing a Murky Phenomenon* (Brussels: European Foundation for Democracy, 2013).

professional practice of spiritual counsellors in prisons and of the imams in the local mosques (to which female religious leaders should be added). They should develop a 'contextual' or 'practical' theology (p. 19). Ajouaou argues that religious leaders should start with the way believers shape their religion and experience their religiosity. A practical theology, he writes, 'involves ... a reflection from both distance and proximity, studies religious practice in all its varieties, and bases itself on the empirical reality' (p. 19). From this view, it follows that 'religious concepts can be questioned, reformed or re-calibrated while doing justice to the religious sources and tradition as well as linking to the present' (p. 19).

Ajouaou does not only reflect upon the question of how spiritual counsellors could adapt their professional practice. His third point is a critical appeal to social scientists who study Muslim religiosity and identity in the Dutch or Western European context. They should improve their methodological and conceptual instruments to better observe, analyse and interpret Muslim religiosity and forms of secularisation, as the concepts which are currently widely used to observe and analyse are too often coloured by Christian experiences with secularisation.¹⁰

Furthermore, Ajouaou addresses the fierce internal polarisation between opponents of secularisation and the broad category of Muslims who think otherwise. He points to a

crucial difference that contenders of secularisation use to label their opponents. This always has a threatening undertone, which increases in intensity depending on the term used. The terms they use are all variations on the denunciation that has proven to be permanently linked to physical punishment since the days of the Kharijites (p. 190).

His book notes that there are other ways open to practising (pious) Muslims than the paths discussed by Hirsi Ali or Quadir. This will become clearer when we consider the personal experiences of a Dutch Muslim convert, by discussing the fourth book, *Worthy of Unbelief*.

¹⁰ See also Yasemin El-Menouar, "The Five Dimensions of Muslim Religiosity: Results of an Empirical Study", *Methods, Data, Analyses*, 8 (1) (2014): 53-78, DOI: 10.12758/mda.2014.003.

6 Dennis Abdelkarim Honing (Born 1990, the Netherlands)

Dennis Abdelkarim Honing vividly describes his conversion to Islam in 2008 and his subsequent ideas about the religious tradition. He relates that, as a neglected youngster living in the poor neighbourhoods of The Hague, he was attracted to the reassuring normativity of Islamic orthodoxy, which gave him a feeling of safety, brotherhood, clarity and comfort. He experienced this in the small circle of Salafi brothers and in the strict Salafi doctrine. He reflects candidly on how he felt comfortable to be part of an international movement that resisted the 'double standards' of the Western powers (p. 104). As a young convert, he was dragged, almost without noticing, into a jihadist environment, participating in Sharia4Holland and Street Dawa. But eventually it was their cramped focus on a utopian lifestyle and the ideal of setting up and fighting for an Islamic State that estranged him from Islam. 'I thought about it, but I realised that I would be subject to *'takfir'* [being a heretical unbeliever WB], or worse' (p. 133). In the second part of the book, he relates how he disengaged from these Salafi circles. In his search for a less conflicting, less sinister religious reality, he realised that other legitimate interpretations exist within Islam. Through meeting a fellow convert, he got acquainted with alternative voices and opinions within Islam. 'He let me realise that it is not a sin to think about Islam, instead of only being docile' (p. 146). For Honing, it was crucial to realise that scriptural, mystical and rationalist ways of thinking and acting can co-exist—and are allowed to do so. It was this acquaintance with the variety of options within the religious tradition that enabled him to remain Muslim while distancing himself from the Salafi *manhaj*. While he was very well aware of the notions of heresy and apostasy conveyed by his former brothers in faith, he turned this on its head: 'Human rights and free thinking are more important to me than the rigid and inhuman interpretation of the brothers that I had dealt with. It is [exactly] that kind of "unbelief" that is worthwhile *not* to believe, and is worthy of unbelief' (p. 7). Interestingly, similar to Hirsi Ali, Honing proposes that 'as long as liberals do not recognise and address this violent face of Islam, a meaningful Islam debate will never be possible' (p. 132).

7 Contributions to Internal and External Debates about Living Islam in the West

These four books, all published within the time frame of one year, feature as contributions to Dutch debate (although Hirsi Ali is now living in the USA, she regularly refers to her Dutch experiences), providing relevant insiders' views on

the public and political questions about radicalisation, integration and assimilation of Muslims in The Netherlands. Where Hirsi Ali pleads for denouncing any orthodoxy from an overtly atheistic standpoint, Quadir calls for an intellectual reconsideration of doctrinal rules. He links his arguments to interpretations by authoritative Sunni thinkers, past and present, hoping that a detailed understanding of the legal traditions will strengthen the faith of wandering pious believers. Ajouaou, in turn, is looking for possibilities to connect to the lived religion of the ordinary Muslim in The Netherlands—particularly in the context of the professionalisation of Islamic spiritual care. Finally, Honing explains from his personal experiences how he solved his religious identity crisis. His personal solution did not lie in strengthening Salafi doctrinal practices, but in exploring the rich tradition of theological-philosophical and legal debates about the sharp questions of religion and life.

One of those sharp questions in Islam—as in every religion—is that of who is a ‘true believer’. The conflicts around this question are centuries old, but they have come to a new head at the present time, with IS/Daesh indulging in ruthless violence, and dragging young recruits from Europe into their struggle. It is in this context that Muslim intellectuals in Europe are in a position to enlarge the sphere of internal criticism and self-reflection. They can formulate a counter-narrative against the one-dimensional, undemocratic, regressive ideas of contemporary jihadists. As each of the books discussed shows, elements of such a counter-narrative are manifold. At the same time, these books show that the internal pressure exerted by extremists is high. The authors, each in his or her own way, warn that accusing someone of heresy and thus of going astray, can be an easy way to block the road to religious reform.