

Modes of apprehension of Islamic knowledge among female students in mosque education

Between 2013 and 2015, I have been doing participant observation in three mosques and three Islamic institutes from a Moroccan background in the region of Brussels, which deliver women-only or gendermixed courses on Islam for lay adults. The explicit or implicit aim of these courses is a personal and communal reform through a re-engagement with the own Islamic tradition by acquiring additional discursive and practical knowledge about it. This means that Islamic religious knowledge gathering is not merely aimed at the correct performance of Islamic rituals (*al-‘ibādāt*), but also at the acquisition of a specific ethical conduct. Such a personal and communal reform, also in ‘normal daily life’, is not experienced nor presented as an active counter-movement against the majority society. Instead, this aspired reform of conduct, punctuated by an Islamic vision, is seen to be not only beneficial for the pious individual on an eschatological level, but for the general coexistence in society as a whole as well. Not through sameness and assimilation, but through a self-conscious re-engagement with the own religious tradition. These courses therefore can be said to belong to the so-called ‘sunni revivalist’ or ‘pious reform movement’ in Islam.

My main doctoral research questions have been what kind of knowledge that is being transferred (in epistemological terms), and how it relates to personal processes of piety also outside of the courses (in ethical terms). Thereto, I’ve asked myself not only what religious knowledge acquisition does *in* the world, but *with* the world as well (in metaphysical terms). Hence, my doctoral research departs from the findings that the courses are not merely characterized by instigating the individual’s embodiment of a Geertzian ‘religious perspective’ in more and more situations, spaces or circumstances, but simultaneously and discursively aim to *unveil* the world (and everything in it) *in relation to which* piety is conceptually understood and aspirationally constructed, because beneficial for one’s and others’ being in the unveiled world.

In this presentation, though, the focus will lie on processes of internal critique and skepticism that mostly center around different expectations and approaches towards ‘what Islamic religious knowledge acquisition’ should contain. Because even though most of these courses seem to present themselves as at least formally ‘academized’, the weekly rappels of the relation between epistemology, ethics and ontology underlines the impression that the *kind* of knowledge that is being transferred nevertheless differs from others forms of (academic) knowledge acquisition. This is shown to have repercussions on processes of authority formation, methodology, and the kind of internal critique that emerges, as well as on processes of pious subjectivation. In the end, this will put a light not only on the difference between academic and non-academic approaches, but especially on the need to deconstruct an ‘academization’ of Islamic knowledge, not only in terms of epistemology, but also in terms of ethical objectives and metaphysical presumptions.