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4 Religious authority, social action and political participation

A case study of the *Mosquée de la rue de Tanger* in Paris

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Introduction

Compared with other religious leaders active in France or in Europe, Larbi Kechat is certainly not a celebrity for a non-Muslim audience.¹ Names like those of Tariq Ramadan, the notorious and controversial Muslim intellectual now living in Great Britain, or Dalil Boubakeur, the director of the Great Mosque of Paris (Grande Mosquée de Paris), are much more familiar than Larbi Kechat's. He does not lead a national federation and he did not take part in the highly publicized 2002–3 discussions that led to the creation of the French Council of Muslim Worship (Conseil français du culte musulman, hereafter CFCM).² He rarely participates in talk shows and does not make public statements when something happens in the Muslim world. As he once said to me when I asked him to introduce himself at the beginning of a round-table discussion I had organized to discuss a report dealing with the discrimination of Muslims in Europe,³ 'I can't be classified' ('je suis inclassable'). The man's position, relatively popular among Muslims in Paris and its neighbourhood, but also among journalists, local politicians, researchers, and academics can indeed hardly be located on the *Islam de France* map, which at the time of our exchanges and conversations was in the process of being completely reshaped by the implementation of CFCM.

Born in Algeria, Larbi Kechat is discreet and favours back stages to front stages. He is nevertheless a well-known figure for Muslims living in France, at a national, but in particular, at a local level. He is known as the imam of the mosque that is inside the building hosting the Social and Cultural Centre of the Rue de Tanger, in the 19th arrondissement in the north-eastern part of Paris.⁴ Part of his popularity among young Muslims appears to be due to his decision to preach in French instead of only in Arabic. Two major events have also contributed to his larger visibility in the media. First, in 1994, the then Minister of Interior Charles Pasqua had Kechat (along with twenty-five other persons) placed under arrest in Folembray. They were charged with Islamist militancy and accused of incitement to hatred of the West. After three weeks, Kechat was released, in particular thanks to the mobilization of several intellectuals and religious leaders from various communities. Following this episode, 'Monsieur le Recteur', as he is called,⁵ decided to launch regular seminars and conferences on Saturday afternoons

in his Centre, inviting Muslims and non-Muslims, and religious and non-religious scholars to discuss social problems and political questions. The second event that attracted journalistic attention to the Rue de Tanger was an attack on the mosque in March 1997 that ended in one person being injured. In the course of investigations by the police, a large amount of cash was discovered in the private residence of some members of the association, apparently to be sent to Islamic organizations abroad. The most recent accusation against Kechat's mosque concerned the presence of young activists involved in radical movements, who were allegedly recruiting young French Muslim volunteers to be sent to Iraq.⁶ To sum up, during the past fifteen years, Kechat and his Centre (including the mosque) have been quite systematically presented as ambiguous in their political and religious acquaintances. Both logically became targets of active police surveillance.

My focus in this chapter will be on the Centre itself, located in the same building as the mosque, on the Centre's local significance, and on the way Larbi Kechat managed to become such a popular local religious leader, with an appeal far beyond his strict religious domain of competence, and far beyond the community of Muslim believers. I met with him on numerous occasions between 2000 and 2004, had discussions with some of his collaborators, mostly women, and attended some of the Saturday conferences, observing the settings. However, I did not conduct systematic interviews with the visitors (Muslims or non-Muslims) of the mosque, and I cannot provide the reader with an assessment of the profile of the mosque's regular audience.⁷ In the first part of this chapter, I focus less on the individual life history of Kechat than on the Centre's trajectory, roughly since the 1970s. This will provide the background, first, for an analysis of the transformation of religious authority in secular contexts and, second, a broader exposition of the different paths to civic participation for religious associations.

The setting

Without pretending to provide an accurate and exhaustive biographical picture of Kechat, I open this chapter with some pertinent information on the life trajectory of the Rue de Tanger's leader. My intention is not to present a life history type of analysis, but it will be difficult to speak of the institution without some background on the rector and on the circumstances that caused him to have such an impact on the Centre. Indeed, the dynamism of the place is intimately linked with the personality of Larbi Kechat and both stories merge and overlap.

Larbi's itinerary: from Constantine to the Rue de Tanger

Larbi Kechat was born in Algeria near Constantine before the end of the 1940s.⁸ He came to France to study in 1972.

I was studying general linguistics at Paris III and sociology at Paris IV, following the courses taught by Georges Balandier. I was so young at that time!

I met Bani Sadr (the Iranian revolutionary and future president) there too! He was a PhD student of Balandier.

Kechat was, with other Muslim students whom he met at the Sorbonne, involved in the activities of the first Muslim students' association (the Association des Étudiants Islamiques de France, hereafter AEIF),⁹ which was established in 1963. He came under the influence of Mohammed Hamidullah, who later on gave regular Sunday lectures in the mosque of the Rue de Tanger.¹⁰

Larbi was the first of his family to migrate to France: 'And I am the first in the family who has access to Western culture'. He likes to tell the story of his father who put him in contact with the oral culture of migrants, Algerians coming back from France for the holidays.

My father was famous in the region of Constantine. At that time, workers used to migrate without their family. I forgot to tell you that I discovered Paris thanks to the addresses on the letters sent by migrants to their families! People brought those letters to my father, perhaps a hundred letters each week; because most women could not read or write, the mothers and wives were queuing in front of our house. And I heard my father reading these letters. ... The same happened with boxes that were sent and then distributed, also every two weeks; my father distributed money that was sent from France. During the holidays, all immigrants came to visit us. ... When I came to France, I had several questions, in particular why were these women unable to read? Then, how come all those people trusted my father so much?

Kechat does not hold a degree in traditional Islamic studies delivered by one of the renowned Islamic universities. His religious training was mostly 'home-made'. By that I mean first that he received some religious teaching locally, in Algeria, before his departure for Paris. Second, this religious education was mostly provided in private by his father and grandfathers who were all local religious figures.

When I was a kid, I learned the Quran. I went through a double training then: I went both to the French school and to the Quranic school. Then I received a higher level of religious education under a sheikh who had a good local reputation. It was obvious that the teaching of Islam and Arabic in official institutions in Algeria was worthless. I had the chance to have a sheikh who was both extremely good in Islamic knowledge and a spiritual father at the same time. He had a double authority, spiritual and intellectual, Sheikh Omar Abu Hafez, in the region of Constantine. ... I never followed a curriculum in the biggest Islamic institutions. And I don't regret it. ... When I happen to speak with Egyptian, Syrian, Middle Eastern ulama such as [the Egyptian Muslim Brother] Sheikh Muhammad Al-Ghazali ... or [the Syrian scholar] Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, they ask me where I studied. I say: in Algeria. 'Where in Algeria?' Everybody knows there is no university there for that.

In spite of not having a formal degree from a recognized institution, Kechat clearly enjoys legitimacy as a person of religious learning, besides being widely seen as a wise, independent (regarding the French 'Muslim politics'), and responsive leader (morally speaking) – qualities that need to be analysed.

Kechat does not want to speak much about his own itinerary. 'The particulars of my life do not bring much to the understanding of the world'. It is hard to disentangle the impact of external mentorship and personal efforts at self-education in Kechat's training. His reputation as a leader and a man of wisdom as well as his profound personal commitment to the survival of the community goes back, at least, to the 1970s, when he was involved in the precursor of the current mosque, then located in the Rue de Belleville. Through the years, Kechat has assigned himself a particularly difficult task consisting of encouraging the Muslim audience to an active and committed citizenship, with no tolerance for ignorance and passivity. His ability to articulate scriptural religious knowledge with incentives for commitment in civic life is particularly salient in the final statements with which he concludes the Saturday conferences. Certainly, Kechat's lyricism plays a role in his capacity to move (in both senses) Muslims attending the conferences. For the occasional visitor, his lyricism and flowery style may at times appear excessive or even ridiculous. But regular visitors appreciate that Kechat's style as a speaker stands in the service of his mission of the conciliation of spiritual and social needs ('*la verticalité et l'horizontalité*') towards the implementation of a peaceful social cohesion.

When concluding the Saturday conferences, his particular attention to the linguistic form and his poetic enthusiasm never stop him from correcting the most radical attendants, to reaffirm his commitment to 'an enlightened and active citizenship' ('*une citoyenneté active et éclairée*'). Most of the topics of the Saturday conferences are related to issues of social exclusion and marginalization (AIDS, drugs, prisons), violence (war and political violence in particular in Muslim contexts), and equality (gender, poverty, secularism). On these arguments, Kechat seeks harmony and active interaction between faith and citizenship. Social action and spirituality can, in his view, go very well together: 'I encourage people not to forget the "how" while thinking of the "why"'. Expressions that recur frequently in his sermons and speeches concern the complementarities of vertically (the relation to God) and horizontally (social integration), of love and solidarity (one of his favourite metaphors is that of joining hands in order to reach 'the True, the Good, and the Beautiful'). He therefore appeals to solidarity and consolation ('*une solidarité réconfortante*'), to intellectual curiosity and understanding ('*exploration*', '*connaissance stimulante*'), and to love of God and one's neighbours ('*adoration de Dieu, amour des siens et des autres*'). We find him oscillating all the time between the position of a moral counsellor, mobilizing a religious repertoire of responsibility ('God has enabled us to do so many things'), and the position of a political mediator, referring to the Republican framework of equality with pompous metaphors.

As mentioned above, Kechat has been involved in the mosque of the Rue de Tanger even before it moved to its current neighbourhood. The beginnings of the

mosque and its congregation were in the Rue de Belleville, about two kilometres south-east. Abd el Kader Ben Ahmad, the Algerian owner of a small hotel in this neighbourhood, opened a prayer room there for the migrant workers and students of the neighbourhood. This early mosque was not under the control of any single group or association; there was for instance also a Tablighi group that used to congregate here.¹¹ Leading personalities in the mosque were mostly Algerian and Egyptian (the imam, for most of the 1960s, was an Egyptian). The room was soon too small to accommodate all the believers – especially students – who wished to perform their daily prayers there. Towards the end of the 1960s, renovations of the neighbourhood began and, as a temporary replacement, the nearby church of Menilmontant offered the Muslims the use of part of this Catholic house of worship as a prayer hall. They stayed there until the end of the 1970s, when the mosque moved to its current location in the Rue de Tanger.

We had an immense space in this church. ... We arranged for a door and a wall to separate the two spaces for worship. We had hidden the images, the icons, very quickly. This place was available every day, for the five daily prayers. A lot of believers came and joined our congregation. Gradually, the Great Mosque of Paris was abandoned by Muslims who came to us.

And so the mosque of the Rue de Tanger emerged as the second important mosque of Paris, in terms both of size and of number of worshippers, especially on Fridays and during festivities. The project of implementing a decent Islamic place for worship started in this context, and the support of Christian communities in Paris.¹²

The place: the ad-Da'wa mosque and the Social and Cultural Centre of the Rue de Tanger

The mosque in the Rue de Tanger is in a sense the largest popular mosque in Paris. (It is) less intimidating than the mosque on the Place du Puits de l'Ermitte in the 5th arrondissement (the Great Mosque of Paris). ... It is commonly called the 'Stalingrad mosque', after the name of the nearest metro station. Its real name is ad-Da'wa, 'the predication'. Since 1985, it has been based in the old textile warehouse Bouchara.

(Ternisien 2002: 17)

Seen from outside, the building looked old but impressive, huge, high, and dark. It certainly does not possess the external characteristics expected of a mosque: there is no dome, no minaret, and no oriental design to distinguish it from the rest of the urban landscape. Moreover, there is nothing to attract the attention of passers-by in this neighbourhood, and, as is the case with most other French mosques, daily attendance is rather low. In her work on the perceptions and representations of the Rue de Tanger mosque in the local neighbourhood, Marie Lejeune notices precisely the extent to which the visibility of the place is related

to specific practices and precise moments, in particular during the Friday prayer. On Friday mornings, the crowded pavements suddenly make the existence of the mosque more explicit to non-Muslim neighbours (Lejeune 2000).

Almost next to the mosque there is a state school, and it faces a church (the Église Notre Dame des Forges) across the street. An Islamic bookshop and a shop selling various Islamic goods (clothes, food) have recently opened. Further in the street, bakeries offer oriental pastries and sell Arab bread. In this specific area of Paris, people are of mixed background. Muslims constituting only a part of this diversity (not the majority), and the clientele visiting the Centre for religious motivations is not exclusively local. The rector comments on the new, 'Oriental' urban aesthetics of the street as 'ridiculous': how come a mosque attracts such an ethnic business? Is that necessary for the life of Muslims? 'Does it mean that we should stay among ourselves and continue to live here, in France, as we would be supposed to do it in the country of our parents?', wonders Keechat. The 'orientalization' of the immediate neighbourhood contrasts with the absolute invisibility of any external signs enabling the identification of the Centre.¹³

This notion of visibility of Islam and identification as Muslims from outside by outsiders relates to a key motif of Islam in Europe in the 1980s when 'Muslims sought room, figuratively and literally for the practice of Islam and Islamic practices' (Grillo 2004: 868). In the French context, Keechat underlines the necessity to adopt the local rules and adapt to an environment by confirming to the Republican principles, i.e. those requiring one 'to be discreet and polite' (*de la discrétion et de la politesse*). By living as a Muslim in France, Keechat invites the believers to integrate into the fabric of French society, not only to be in France passively (Grillo 2004). Keechat enacts in his Centre the reconciliation of usually opposing structures of justification. The first is based on French positive laws and the French conception of the Republic. The second stems from a religious interpretation of Islamic norms and texts. In doing so, Keechat draws limits and boundaries (what is absolute is Islam, what is pragmatic and concrete is the French context) but performs his personal authority in organizing the dialogue and articulated cooperation between the two repertoires. As expressed by Bowen, 'Muslims participating in these debates may take account of norms, laws and conditions prevailing in France, as elements that are normatively external but pragmatically internal to the debates' (Bowen 2004: 890). Islamic norms and principles have a value of their own, *per se*. However, they should not be considered, says Keechat, as contradictory to French politics and Republican principles (freedom, equality, fraternity). In this respect, Keechat's Centre may be the unique Muslim site where these two repertoires coexist and share a common territory – although this does not mean that interactions are numerous.

Inside the building, social and cultural activities (conferences, mediation, Arabic classes, literacy courses) are strictly separated from the religious and liturgical ones. The space dedicated to worship is completely isolated from the more cultural and social activities, the prayer rooms being on the ground floor (a large one on the left for men, a smaller one on the right for women). A door opens to the stairs that take the visitor to the conference room, the administrative offices,

and a small library. The classrooms are upstairs and the Centre also has a restaurant with a kitchen on the top floor where lunches are served during the conferences, and *iftars* (meals to break the fast) during Ramadan.¹⁴ The mosque (which moved here from Belleville in 1985) and the social and cultural centre (which started its activities in 1994–5) are two separated entities sharing a common territory and a unique legal identification as an association. Both do not attract the same audience but the circulation from one space to the other remains possible. Since 1996, requests for permission to renovate, extend and even reconstruct the entire building were being unsuccessfully submitted to the Paris municipality. Following the Socialist Party victory in the municipal elections of 2001, under the new mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, full permission for the demolition (in July 2001) and the construction of a new building (September 2002) has finally been approved.¹⁵ The project is ambitious and includes the erection of a dome and a minaret, an open garden through which the believer can reach the prayer hall, and a front building dedicated to the social and cultural activities of the place.¹⁶ The main motivation for Keechat is the salubrity of the place and its 'normalization' in the local urban landscape.

In France, questions about the building of mosques usually involve an unanswered dilemma: should a mosque be a place of worship or a cultural centre?¹⁷ Going back to the most important projects of construction of mosques (Strasbourg, Lille, Marseille, Paris), this unanswered question seems to be common to all local political debates that took place in relation with the perspective of having an Islamic place of worship in urban settings (see Frégosi and William 2001; Césari 2005; Lejeune 2000). Besides, mosques have also become a systematic target of police inspection and surveillance, imams and religious leaders being also classical figures of potential threat to the national territory and to the Republican values (Amiraux 2009). Since 9/11, their control became more intense and the eventual deportation to their country of origin has become more systematic, not only in France. In this respect, Keechat was a precursor as his problems with justice and police started long before 9/11.

As mentioned earlier, he was arrested on 10 August 1994, at a period of greater visibility of political movements linked to Islam in the Middle East, but also in Europe. During the different discussions we had, he confessed to not having yet fully understood why he was arrested on that day.

I was leaving the Centre. It was really extremely hot. I crossed the street and when I came to the Church on the other side of the street, a car stopped. Two persons came out, like in a movie. They surrounded me: 'Mister Keechat? I said yes. 'Come with us.' I said: 'Where?' ... I wondered: were they robbers or cops? I had never been an activist in France. So, me being arrested by the police, why?

In telling me the story of his arrest, Keechat insisted on the dramatic and incoherent part of it: more people came and at the end they were six; he had neither money, nor ID documents with him; he was very polite to them while they were

rude in pushing him into the police car, threatening him with handcuffs. Once in the car, in violation of normal procedures, Kechat signed a declaration based on a report issued by the Ministry of the Interior administration stating that he was a threat to the Republic and an adversary of Western culture.¹⁸ Consistent with his statements on the necessity to respect French norms and rules when addressing a Muslim audience, Kechat signed despite the fact that he disagreed with the content, 'saying to them that I was doing it in respect of the law of this country. I knew that all that they were doing was against the law'. Kechat was first kept under surveillance for a few hours on the fifth floor of the Paris police headquarters on the Quai des Orfèvres, being interrogated about his alleged links to the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) network that was accused of acts of terrorism. He confessed to me that he was impressed by the huge police record on him. He was then sent to Folembray, a military station transformed for this occasion into a provisional prison with place for twenty-six persons.¹⁹

I spent one month in Folembray. Then they transferred me here, to the Centre in the Rue de Tanger, changing the detention into house arrest. They considered this my place of residence. I stayed here night and day, sleeping here too, reading, working. ... During the first months, I was not authorized to leave the 19th arrondissement. ... Once, you know I was going to the hairdresser. I was convinced it was in the 19th arrondissement. And all of a sudden, I raised my head and saw that I was in the 10th! Oops! I immediately made a turn because I went off the limits.

Kechat's arrest had many effects on the local representation of the Centre. First, since this episode, the rector and the mosque have been under close surveillance by the police and secret services, whose officers usually attend the Saturday conferences. It has become one of the usual targets for police services working on Islamist networks and profiling specific leaders and places. Second, following the mobilization of a 'non-Muslim community' of intellectuals, academics, clergymen²⁰ that prevented his expulsion from French territory, Kechat decided to integrate this non-Muslim presence more explicitly in the activities organized by the Centre.²¹ The series of Saturday conferences started shortly after his dismissal from prison, as a testimony of his gratitude towards non-Muslim French citizens, who signed a public protest against his arrest.²² One of the Catholic leaders active in the defence of Kechat stated in 2004 how stupid some of the documents drafted by the police services were, and how dangerous was the impact these writings have on uninformed public authorities (prefects or mayors for instance).²³ *Ex post*, this initiative taken by Kechat on the basis of his personal experience of unfairness and in order publicly to thank the group of his defenders, ended up as a way of confirming Kechat's religious legitimacy amongst Muslims and of achieving a civic legitimacy for non-Muslims. The next section of this chapter explores Kechat's continuous work of mediation and dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens, in the name of Islam but also for the sake of larger French society.

Activities and publics: an ethic of responsibility

Larbi Kechat's mosque is 'not only a space for prayer but also a "community centre", where pre-existing networks of solidarity come together and where various rituals that mark Islamic family life – marriage, circumcision, death – take place' (Césari 2005: 1018). The demographic and sociological changes among Muslim populations living in non-Muslim Europe have had a direct impact on the way people 'use' mosques. To a certain extent, their significance for believers settled in European secular contexts has gained importance, helping the developments of intense networks of activities and socialization beside the sole praying activities. The Muslim population living in France is younger in the 2000s than in the 1980s, and the individualization of the tie to the community of belief is a common denominator. For the younger generation, self-identification as a Muslim and actually practising the religious obligations are not self-evidently connected, as they were for their elders: many of the young have distanced themselves from the daily rituals even as they insist on being Muslims.²⁴

With the move to non-Muslim territories, the role of the mosques in the life of the community of practising believers inevitably changed. They gained a renewed centrality in the life of the communities at large, just as the position of the imams became central for migrants (and later for intelligence services), who would have looked down upon them in their countries of origin. Mosques became places to meet, to get advice on daily concerns, to organize celebrations, but also – as in the case of the Centre of the Rue de Tanger – to deliberate about politics and society, to compare one's individual experiences with those of others. The invention of some of these new functions of the mosque went together with the specific needs of Muslims living in non-Muslim societies.²⁵ In the case of the Rue de Tanger, Kechat's arrest provided the occasion for opening up mosques to activities that were not strictly religious, and to invite non-Muslims to take part in discussions in the Cultural Centre. At least that is the way Kechat justifies his decision to launch this new set of activities in the 1990s. The Social and Cultural Centre was created in 1994, the year he was arrested. He was already travelling and giving conferences in the AELF network of mosques in France and Europe. 'At that time it was very discreet work, with no media attention. It was work on the ground, with social workers, with students, etc.'

Kechat's pedagogic project of the teaching of religious and civic values is promoted through activities other than those connected solely with worship or rituals. Listening to people, welcoming them, helping them, developing solidarity networks across various communities and in various matters (health, education, civic initiatives), and mixing Muslim with non-Muslim audiences, are the channels through which Kechat's Centre is locally active.²⁶ The local settlement goes far beyond Muslims, and the initiatives launched by Kechat and his colleagues do not address exclusively Muslims, 'spiralling out' from the restricted community of belief (Lichtermann 2005). In his study of nine liberal and conservative Protestant-based volunteering projects, Lichtermann points out the different ways that people bring religion into civic life: people do other things with religion than

just using religious discourses (or private beliefs) to define goals for action. Beyond limited readings of religion as 'resource' or justification for action, the commitment of a religious community to civic activities does create settings that allow people to 'think and talk about spiralling outward without threatening the group's own togetherness' (ibid. 18). Keechat illustrates for example how groups publicly articulate goals in religious terms with civic participation, mostly by means of a language of solidarity, responsibility and active citizenship, a language of justice and the public good referring to all sorts of moral vocabularies, which at the end also encompass societal values.²⁷ A good person, in Keechat's religious terms, overlaps with a good French citizen and helps the implementation of a good society. Religion is here to support the implementation of a good and just citizenry, to understand the civic roles of active citizens with the ambitious horizon of 'producing history together' says Keechat.²⁸ The religious language therefore sustains a sense of connection to society as a whole, which more secular languages would probably be unable to transmit, being based on individualism (Bellah et al. 1985).

The Saturday conferences: debating religious and secular topics

The Rue de Tanger Centre has more than one activity to offer to its visitors. These activities can be classified into three clusters: cultural (teaching activities, mostly the Quran and Arabic), social (Saturday conferences), and religious (prayer in the mosques, and also religious seminars in the Centre). The conferences organized once a month on Saturday afternoons are the core activity, besides the more traditional initiatives like teaching Arabic and Islam.²⁹ Undoubtedly, the conferences are the most well-known and visible activities of the Centre. Starting in October–November and going on until June, and the final conference which lasts an entire day, they give the visitors of the Centre the opportunity to listen to ulamas, academics, activists, politicians, journalists, and opinion-makers discussing a common topic.³⁰ The participants include people not residing in Paris, and also not always French-speaking.³¹ In that case, the simultaneous translation (quite regularly from Arabic and English) is organized by the Centre. The translator, who may be a woman as well as a man, sits among the speakers and also translates the question-and-answer session following the lectures. From 14:30 until 20:00 with a break for the prayer,³² presentations by the invited speakers are followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience. Everything is video-recorded. No question is forbidden, no subject taboo. People can choose to ask it directly or to write it down. In that case, once the questions are written and given to the speakers anonymously, one is free to read it or not. Keechat does not provide the participants with rules to follow but the organization of the afternoon obeys an intangible protocol: presentations are made one after the other, following an order pre-decided by Keechat (but it can be changed for matters of convenience and some people need to leave earlier). Usually, the highest religious authority speaks at the end. It is both a matter of having people attend the entire session, and also, implicitly, of establishing a

hierarchy between discourses. The most welcome moment of the Saturday afternoon conference is certainly the final speech, invariably given by Keechat. Depending upon his feeling about the afternoon, and depending upon the attitude of the audience (passive, patient, provocative or disrespectful of the speakers), the concluding speech by Keechat will be more or less vehement but always passionate and lyrical.

The themes of the Saturday conferences are often said by people from the audience to be 'hot issues' or 'sensitive topics'. Moreover, non-Muslims are very often surprised that such issues like drugs or HIV (indirectly touching upon moral issues, gender and sexual aspects of social interaction) can be considered issues to be legitimately discussed inside an Islamic Centre. Relying on Licherman's study of how religion is made quickly public by the Protestant volunteer groups he studied, Keechat's Saturday conferences correspond to the definition of an arena for 'agreeing to disagree' in a respectful coexistence (Licherman 2005: 68). In Keechat's case this means that a very heterogeneous audience listens quietly to a contrasted bunch of speakers talking about controversial issues such as bio-ethics and cloning. *De facto*, Muslim liberals and Muslim conservatives sit together in public and among the speakers in the Rue de Tanger. The same thing can be said about non-Muslims. All sorts of voices can be heard at Keechat's place on these Saturday afternoons. What makes them sit together and tolerate each other so quietly during the Saturday conference routine? Part of the answer lies in Keechat's personality. The atmosphere remains secular in the sense that religious convictions are not at stake or checked to let people attend the meetings. During the course of the conferences, no activities are conducted that would attest a religious proselytizing project from the Muslim side. The speakers are usually a mixture of local actors, politicians, experts, intellectuals, academics, journalists, and theologians; and they include women as well as men, converts and non-Muslims as well as born Muslims. Keechat remains, however, conservative in his selection of the religious authorities he invites to speak: these are often conservative religious figures (such as Hani Ramadan, or Sa'ïd Ramadan al-Buiti) or imams of the AELF (for instance M. Daïfé from Bordeaux). He also invites Muslim figures that, in a way, could be said to be his own competitors in terms of leadership (Mohammed Arkoun, Tariq Ramadan among others). Keechat takes care that no controversial voice from the Muslim side can be heard,³³ preferring to leave it to non-Muslim speakers, in particular women, to voice subversive and original discourses.³⁴ For instance, Keechat is very cautious when inviting people to the conference dedicated to the national women's day: he avoids the men-talking-about-women type of round-table,³⁵ pays attention to the complexity of the debate and its non-religious impact, and shows respect for the diversity of Muslim women when dealing with the issue.

The audience is very heterogeneous: Muslims from all over the world come here. People of different ethnic origins and belonging to different generations mingle and listen together to the speakers. Women and men are not requested to sit in separate parts of the room, but 'naturally' Muslim women tend to sit together on one side and men on the other. However, as the non-Muslims attending, take

their seats freely, Muslim women end up sitting next to men and the audience is not strictly gender segregated.

Whereas it was initially probably conceived as an element of a network serving the interests of the AEIF, the Rue de Tanger mosque has ended up being an autonomous site for meetings and exchanges, open, and without any attempt to control the audience: there is no need to say your name, questions can be posed, and comments given in writing and anonymously. The Muslim audience attending the Saturday conferences reflects the diversity of the Muslim population in France. This can also be said for the worshippers coming especially for the Friday khutbas: as unusual as it may seem in the European context, the mosque of the Rue de Tanger is a multi-ethnic one. People come from the vast Parisian suburban districts, from far beyond the local neighbourhood. One of the workers of the Centre explains that, for instance, every Friday morning, people call before coming to be sure that Kechat will be conducting the prayer himself.

Non-Arab Muslims and non-French-speaking Muslims attend the conferences. Usually the Centre takes care of a translation from French into Arabic and vice versa. At the time of my research, this was done by a young girl who had recently arrived from Algiers to study American civilization at Jussieu University.³⁶ The audience's profile is as diverse as the speakers: local imams (preaching in Paris, Evry, Montreuil, Saint-Denis), leaders of Muslim associations, local city hall representatives, social workers, doctors, teachers, students, journalists, housekeepers waiting for their children who are being taught Arabic on the second floor of the Centre, curious neighbours, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Considering the variety of people attending the conferences (and more largely also visiting the mosque), language is not only a minor cosmetic issue in this analysis of the Centre's radiance and Kechat's influence. 'French Islam is a cultural, linguistic, financial, political and theological enterprise' (Caeiro 2006: 71). Historically, French is as central in the republican symbolic apparatus as the flag, the national hymn, or the principle of *laïcité*. Few EU member states make an explicit reference to the national language as the exclusive official language in their Constitution; France is one of them.³⁷ French is the language of communication in the Centre, even if it provides a translation into Arabic for the programme (sent out at the beginning of the year), on some parts of the website, and Arabic is occasionally used by Kechat to shout at some people in the audience who, he feels, do not get his message if it is expressed only in French. Language became an issue for the Minister of the Interior after an unpublished piece of research on imams in France was conducted on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior in 2004–5, in the framework of a larger reflection on the training of imams. It gave the following results: out of the 1,200 imams working in France, one third does not speak French at all, or with enormous difficulty, one third has an average level, while the final third speaks fluently (Godard 2005: 28). But as pointed out by Godard, one should definitely stop equating bad linguistic skills with low theological training. 'The imams with the worst command of French, the Turkish imams sent by Turkey's official institution for managing religious affairs, Dıyanet, are probably the best trained and certainly the imams with the highest number of degrees and diplomas' (ibid.).

The proliferation of activities besides worship: from spiritual to civic commitment

The opening of places of worship to non-spiritual types of activities is not exclusive to the Rue de Tanger Centre. Various religious associations have made great efforts to reconnect with youngsters, for instance by developing more social activities. The rationale behind the opening up to non-spiritual domains often lies in the need for visibility in the city. Finding out new ways to practise social interaction with youngsters is also a preoccupation of Kechat, who considers the mosque as part of urban life, not as isolated from it because of an untouchable sacred dimension. 'We should not underestimate the social vocation of the mosque to maintain a check on socially deviant behaviour', he says. One of Kechat's internal strategies aims also at reconnecting young Muslim people who are 'alienated from the mosques' (Lewis 2006: 174), thus accepting the risk that some of them may be implicated in radical political networks.³⁸ The mosque remains the central place for all religious activities, but it also becomes a partner of local initiatives for the management of exclusion and violence for instance. The people visiting the place therefore are of many different backgrounds, without excluding any type of believers. Sacred space enters politics through participation in civic initiatives and various types of voluntary associations. Kechat, however, emphasizes that there is a distinction between both types of actions: praying or commenting upon religious texts cannot be assimilated into political activism.

The presence of women in the Centre, who are in charge of various activities, is not without some problems. The fact that women are visibly active on the front stage in an Islamic Centre has not given rise to controversy among insiders, but the public visibility of women remains problematic for many traditional men, and the speaking to unrelated women is even more difficult for them. The mosque and the Centre share certain facilities, such as the telephone switchboard, which is sometimes operated by young female volunteers. These young women told that several callers hung up when they heard a woman's voice. Similarly, men sometimes hesitate to enter the building when they see women at the entrance door welcoming visitors.

The Centre is also involved in various mediating activities implemented by the neighbourhood council, such as actions against violence at school, the rehabilitation of old buildings, and after-school tutoring for children who need it. Kechat is also a partner in a collective anti-crack initiative of the Stalingrad neighbourhood.³⁹ Addressing educational, health, and civic deficits of various kinds in the local community of citizens appears to be a priority for the Centre's leadership. One of these mediation activities is even based in the Centre. The Social and Health Mediation point (*antenne de médiation sociale et sanitaire*) was opened in 2002 and reaches out to vulnerable groups among the local population (migrants, single mothers, youngsters). By promoting mediation in social and health problems, Kechat intends the Centre to commit itself to the fight against social exclusion, and to provide social assistance in two domains in particular: access to care and health services, and improving the education of people from other cultural backgrounds.⁴⁰

The coordinator of these activities at the time of my regular visits to the Centre was Fatma, a typical representative of how activism may lead to the opening of new professional opportunities and to the 'professionalization' of activism. A mother of three children, she is from Algeria. She studied history but broke off her studies in order to raise her children. She has always been engaged as a volunteer in local associations in her neighbourhood (in the 18th arrondissement). Once the children were a bit older, she was admitted to a course of public health mediation in the Paris hospital designated for training such mediators.⁴¹ Once she had obtained her degree, she started working for the Centre. At the time we met in 2003, she was working as a permanent staff member three days a week, being also the respondent to the mediation phone line (available seven days a week). She defined her mission as one of cultural brokerage (*'je suis un médiateur culturel'*), trying to improve the communication between individuals and institutions (doctors, nurses, but also administrative staff). Through the interaction that she has with the public administration, she notices the lack of competence when dealing with people who are not French citizens, or with French citizens from different cultural and national backgrounds. The administrative staff and the public service are 'culturally too far removed from people's needs. I identify more quickly the needs' (ibid.).

The development of such an activity centred on mediation in health-related matters is in itself not so much of a surprise. In Kechat's view, being a committed citizen goes together with being a good Muslim. The necessity to commit oneself, to be publicly involved as a secular aspiration, to act out a socially useful role on behalf of the religious message, illustrates the social utility of religion in a secular environment, with a corollary conception of beneficiaries not being restricted to the community of believers. Just as the Saturday conferences organize a bridge between a religious association (the Centre) and a larger social group, the mediation activities contextualize the role of a religious group.⁴² This connection to a 'wider society' is primarily based on local and immediate surroundings (non-Muslims attending the Saturday conferences are either brought along by somebody or are acquainted with the Centre as local actors) through the identification of sensitive topics that need to be discussed with the right persons (competence and skills) in a 'safe' or protected environment which does not harm the 'cohesive togetherness' of the Centre (Lichterman 2005).

The Mediation point is therefore a natural extension of the Centre, a bridge to the immediate environment and a way to create relationships with the neighbourhood and the immediate environment. As Fatma readily admits, in her role as a mediator she sees herself taking over part of the tasks that traditionally would have belonged to the rector's domain of competence. Kechat delegates to her part of his activity that is not strictly spiritual, for instance when it comes to mediating between members of a family about mixed marriage. On certain topics, however, Fatma admits that she does not feel competent to answer specific questions and demands. As an example, she mentioned the case of a young Muslim woman who was pregnant and wished to get an abortion. She came to the Mediation point both to receive support in the administrative part of her project,

but also to get a religious opinion on her choice. Facing such a request, Fatma says 'I am not qualified', declining any authority in this matter.

Operating at the intersection of spiritual counselling, moral exhortation, and social activism, Kechat's role transcends the traditional boundaries of public and private spheres, and he appeals to civic as well as religious values without appearing to prioritize one over the other. Kechat is not enunciating norms pertaining to worship but instead suggests guidelines for civil commitment. His activities constitute a vivid illustration of Casanova's thesis of the deprivatization of modern religion (Casanova 1994). If one considers that secularization is composed of at least three dimensions (differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, decline of religious beliefs and practices, and marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere), deprivatization, in Casanova's terms, refers to the fact that religious traditions of different kinds are refusing to accept the privatized role which theories of modernity and secularization have reserved for them. Religious beliefs cease to be a matter of purely personal preference and again become the subject of public argument (Amiraux 2006). Concurrently, numerous public matters are re-moralized, and religious authorities intervene in the public sphere of civil society discussions by bringing in ethic notions. The rethinking of the relationship of religion and modernity imposes a reinvention of the way religious associations and other church-based communities relate to the public and behave as civic partners.

In other words, common norms cannot be presupposed as the premise and foundation of a modern social order but, rather as the potential and always fragile outcome of a process of communicative interaction. ... Through such a process of communicative interaction in the public sphere of modern civil societies, normative traditions can be reflexively reconstructed – that is, rationalized – and the differentiated subsystems of modern societies can be made responsible to a publicly defined 'common good'. By going 'public', religions as well as other normative traditions can, therefore, contribute to the vitality of such a public sphere.

(Casanova 1994: 230–1)

From his lyrical narratives about articulating vertical spirituality and horizontal social solidarity to his management of the internal tensions inside the audience and the speakers, Kechat makes possible a connection between a religious-based group togetherness (Muslims coming to the Centre motivated by religious considerations) and the broader society of non-Muslim French citizens (the non-Muslim speakers and listeners). With specific skills and a recognized competence for going public (in particular an undeniable talent for public speeches and strong personal charisma), Kechat ends up being an intermediary figure of a religious leader. On the one hand, he affirms the centrality of religious (Islamic) values and messages in social life, and of exerting an internal authority for the Muslim visitors of his Centre (and not claiming to address or to represent a larger group of Muslims). On the other hand, he secularizes in a way the internal space of the

Centre and makes of this internal secularization (separation of sacred and profane activities, relativizing his own religious authority on social issues by inviting other forms of expertise to speak next to him) the necessary condition for establishing dialogue. In the last section of the chapter, I shall return to the different aspects of Kechat's authority, spiralling in and out, and shall attempt to assess the specific interaction with the secular French context of action.

The autonomy of leadership and authority

Compared to other Muslim leaders, Kechat turns back to a more parochial conception of his own duty and role towards the community of his fellow citizens (*'mes concitoyens'*), referring to people sharing the same space and territory whether Muslims or non-Muslims. In line with his conception of the mosque's 'capacity of social control' over the neighbourhood, he assumes the dual role of local organizer and parish authority (*'curé de paroisse'*). In France, this refers to a traditional representation of the local involvement and commitment of religious leaders, in particular Muslims. From the days of managing a colonial empire to the recent urban riots, such community leaders have repeatedly been asked to intervene and mediate between 'vulnerable populations' and state authorities (Bouzar 2001). On many points, the initiatives taken by Kechat's Centre, the networks connected to it, and the nature of the projects carried out by the Centre are those of classical civic associations, at the intersection of renewal of local democracy, development of sociability, and affirmation of civic engagement of individuals (Barthélémy 2000: 81). Just as some studies illustrate the ties binding faith to rituals, Kechat's project of regular conferences and non-strictly religious activities illustrates his wish to act as a mediator between religious duties, moral obligation, and the social environment.

Kechat's authority cannot easily be assigned to any of the three ideal types that Weber distinguished: rather, it has some aspects of all three. Whereas he started on the basis of a rather rational pragmatic one, he progressively moved towards a more traditional one. Most of the regular visitors of the Rue de Tanger mosque consider him a charismatic leader,⁴³ besides a more traditional type of authority (*ijalbo*, New, Gaines 1987). He can be considered as a clergyman (*un ministre du culte*), due to his personal competences, his skills and his specific training (i.e. he has legal-rational authority), not to mention the role of his family in Algeria (local authorities situating him in a traditional lineage of authority). As usefully distinguished by Abou El Fadl, Kechat both is an authority and *has* authority (Abou El Fadl 2001). The Saturday conferences have become proper rituals, thanks to Kechat's clergyman's legitimacy based on his skills. Larbi Kechat bridges in one unique site daily-life issues, spiritual matters, and broader topics related to national and civic engagement in the public sphere. The local success of the Social and Cultural Centre of the Rue de Tanger is mainly based on Kechat's ability to carry out the dual tasks of, on the one hand, working for the education of Muslims, and on the other engaging with the social and cultural needs of the immediate neighbourhood.

His involvement in local affairs is not unrelated to his distancing himself from the national debate on Islam in France and from forms of engagement at the national level. Even though he was in one way or another also invited to the series of discussions and meetings launched by the successive Ministers of Interior since the mid-1980s, Kechat remains an independent figure among the Muslim leaders, 'a passive spectator' in his own words, and a discreet commentator. His local legitimacy and long-term presence in the field are two central elements of the fact that, notwithstanding his refusal to participate more actively, he still benefits from recognition as an important local partner by public actors. In early 2005, when the so-called '19th arrondissement network' of young radical Muslims (*la filière du 19ème*) was uncovered, and when it appeared that some of its members had a connection with the ad-Da'wa mosque, the mayor and senator of the 19th district, Roger Madec, made a highly public visit to the Rue de Tanger to reaffirm his trust in the Muslim leader.⁴⁴ The discourse promoted by Kechat is one of building bridges, participating, getting involved in civic action, and not at all one of claiming for exclusionary perspectives. Kechat prefers to communicate discreet and quiet signals of religious identity to the outside world. In that sense, he is in synergy with a dominant idea in French public opinion: it is much easier to deal with the ordinary Muslim next door than with an abstract Islam that remains scary. (See also Piette 2003 on 'ordinary' religion.)

Kechat is extremely critical of Muslim leaders in general, and especially of Muslims living in France.⁴⁵ The French Muslim leadership is in his own words 'defined by its intellectual poverty, which can be extended to the larger Muslim population in France'. Besides saying this, Kechat denounces the absence of a satisfactory setting for the training of Muslim leaders and authorities in the religious field and mentions the 'theological void on French soil'.

The main difficulty faced by the successive French Ministers of the Interior in charge of this item was precisely to help the emergence of a representative board in a democratic context where politics and religion coexist without further connection, the former being incompetent in what regards the activities of the latter. The implementation of the CFCM has thus been seen mostly as a symbolic and institutional gesture of recognition made by the French State towards its Muslim minorities (Zeghal 2005). The CFCM's role fits into the post-1905 French Republican representation of religion exclusively as *culte*, i.e. religions exist (and are seen by the State authorities) through their institutional settings: since 1905 the French Republic does not grant official recognition to any religion (*culte*), but it guarantees freedom of worship (*liberté de culte*) to all. In the CFCM project, Muslims are considered within the strict limits of the visible existence of Islam on French territory as a *culte*, with its double material and symbolic dimension. The term *culte* in the French context refers to two elements. The first one is subjective: faith or the belief in a deity. The second is objective: a *culte* needs a community that meets to practice this belief in the frame of ceremonies (Roland 2005: 59). The CFCM is therefore a system of management of the practical needs related to the life of the community of Muslim believers, organized around the mosque as a reference unit, that ended up as a race for recognition of the power amplitude of Muslim leaders.

When invited to comment on the CFCM, Kechat expresses his nostalgia for the Golden Age of the 1970s:

the world was not as complicated as today and Islam was not yet fashion. Later on, Islam became a means to do things, to obtain titles. Earlier, people just wanted to pray and learn. ... It was a time of brotherhood and discretion.

Indeed, following the provisions of the 1905 law, a regime of implicitly recognized cults has been installed, slowly moving towards a regime of the 'religiously admitted', and of the 'religiously correct', with the pluralization of the religious field in France. In its dealing with Muslim religious institutions, the French state has shown a clear preference for dealing with clearly identified persons rather than with the institutions as such.⁴⁶ The need for community does not diminish with the heterogenization of modes of believing (unstable modes of identification, eclectic references to different traditions). Paradoxically, it may seem that this local and parochial significance of religious authority such as Kechat's opposes the project of public regulation of Islam by giving more opportunity to a 'personalization' of religious authority. Since the establishment of the CFCM, Muslim religious clergymen openly operate on a competition market of religious leadership and authority.

Kechat in the end is popular because of his public autonomy and his declared independence. While in many cases, the authority of Muslim leaders has benefited from either high publicity in the media (as in the case of Tariq Ramadan) or official support by Muslim states (such as Dalit Boubakeur or Soheib Bencheikh), Kechat represents a growing tendency in France among local imams whose authority stems beforehand from their capacity to create the local conditions for a certain 'spirituality' of Muslims. With regard to people who were exposed to bad experiences of interaction with French surroundings (racism, discrimination, targeting, humiliation, exclusion), the scheme of the Centre, based on the unique individual authority of its leader, may be understood as community-centred. Kechat is, for instance, extremely strict in the matter of selecting his direct collaborators, volunteers, or those remunerated by the association.

I don't need passive volunteers, those who only run after visibility inside the Centre without being able to provide their commitment to a real spiritual and civic meaning. The youngsters in particular frighten me, especially young women: they are completely ignorant, with no culture at all of their own religion. They do not make any efforts and just express the wish to be there.

Empowering religious authority in a secular context?

The notion of authority brings together a double analytical perspective, practical and theoretical (Cochran 1977). In the French context, religious authority cannot be associated with the notion of power or coercion, or with that of legitimacy. Its meaning, as reminded by Cochran, only makes sense in a community.⁴⁷

The different publics that regularly visit the Centre, the Muslim believers, the persons requesting help and support, and the local associations, all contribute to reinforce Kechat's spiritual authority. But in the course of action the community-belonging is challenged by the intimacy, the emotional tests, and the moral commitment that the various audiences experience while sitting together. In the Rue de Tanger, authority presents two dimensions, vertical and horizontal (Polanyi 1964). Indeed, as mentioned earlier in the text, this dichotomy is constantly presented as central by Kechat in his own discourses.

In the master narrative of secularization various strands may be discerned, emphasizing different aspects of the process (Martin 2005). One aspect that most varieties have in common but do not equally stress concerns the decline of religious authority, or at least its retreat from central public position, as a central feature of modernity and secularity. As Mark Chaves observed, 'secularization is better understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority' (Chaves 1994: 750). This emphasis differs from what used to be the dominant view of secularization as the decreasing social significance of religion (e.g. Wilson 1982; Bruce 1992), and suggests an interesting perspective on transformations of religious authority in this process, where (religious) community leaders may compensate for loss of religious authority by seeking other forms of authority.

I argue here that Kechat has integrated the requirements of his secular environment (France) and that he has become a secular religious leader. In secular contexts, the boundaries of religious authority, as compared to those of other types of authority (political, bureaucratic, educational), are hard if not impossible to establish. However, religious authority, as Chaves observes, can be distinguished by a particular kind of legitimacy; he defines religious authority as 'a social structure that attempts to enforce its order and reach its ends by controlling the access of individuals to some desired goods, where the legitimization of that control includes some supernatural component, however weak' (Chaves 1994: 755-6).

As we have seen earlier, Kechat is the initiator of an internal process of secularization inside his own organization, mostly based on the dissociation of ritual and profane activities. Both as citizen and as rector, he is confronted with secularization in its many aspects, from the institutional and political limitations, to the internal secularization of religious organizations and the individual ones (decline of religious beliefs and practices, distance from rituals). France is a highly secularized setting, in which local leaders such as Kechat cannot properly speak out as religious leaders, but have to develop new skills and resources to be recognized as partners for social initiatives.⁴⁸ It is in particular the case in the neighbourhood development policy, as in the local security programme (Demerath and Williams 1992). In these sensitive issues, Kechat the religious leader becomes a local social partner. In order to promote his Centre as a place where conversations can take place, encouraging people to talk to each other, to learn from each other, to get educated and instructed in order to become good citizens, thus being good Muslims, Kechat created a public stage inside his Centre. On this

stage. Kechat imposes the rules and fixes the constraints (engaging in dialogue on sensitive topics), in a public local arena that offers him the possibility to perform as an imam and even 'more' (a father, a brother, a colleague, a believer, a citizen, a spiritual advisor, a friend, etc.). In front of him, as part of the public scene, the audience does not share the same views and is encouraged to make this disagreement part of the discussion. What, however, is his influence on the political outcomes? Kechat's ability to operate the conversion of social difficulties into moral issues should not give the impression of the strength of religious authority over cultural and political authority beyond the religious communities. Larbi's preaching activities for instance have no impact on other social actors than those who sit in the prayer room and listen to him. But at the same time, the output in terms of spiralling outward and affecting non-Muslims' view of Muslims is high.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was first presented as a paper at the Annual Mediterranean Meeting in Montecatini, March 2003. Some interviews were added in the following months, but the present chapter is mostly based on the empirical investigation that was conducted earlier. It is not supposed to be an updated description of the current situation of this specific place of worship, but rather it should offer insights into the local articulation of religious authority and social action by the time of the fieldwork (i.e. before the urban riots of November 2005 for instance). When I held the presentation in 2003, I benefited from the comments and critiques of a very stimulating audience that is also authoring chapters of this edited volume. I would like to thank them and, more particularly, Stefano Allievi for his meticulous and patient interpretation of my syntax, and Martin van Bruinessen for his accurate comments on an earlier version of this text.
- 2 Kechat was asked by the then Minister of Interior J.-P. Chevènement to participate in the round of discussion launched in the 1990s and known as the *Isichlaza*. His refusal to participate certainly added to his image as an independent leader. He nevertheless positively answered the invitation for an informal exchange at the Ministry, the invitation issued by N. Sarkozy during the months preceding the first round of elections for the CFCM in early 2003.
- 3 Available in English and French at www.cunap.org, and in the printed version 'The situation of Muslims in France', *Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection, volume II. Case Studies in Selected Member States*, Country Reports (Budapest: OSI, 2002), 69–140.
- 4 The place is also known as the Stalingrad mosque, after the name of the nearest metro station.
- 5 Kechat is both the imam of the mosque and the rector of the Centre. Both labels cover academic duties and imply different skills. The word '*recteur*' in French designates an academic appointed by the central education administration to run an academy or a university. In the ecclesiastical hierarchy, it is also used to refer to certain institutional authorities (for instance prelate, superior, etc.). The word has, then, a double connotation in French: religious (i.e. ecclesiastical) and secular. It is also associated in everyday parlance with the Mosque of Paris, which is directed by a rector too. In the French context, a rector is thus an imam and director of a mosque.
- 6 See later in this chapter the developments on the '*filère du 19ème*'.
- 7 For work on the representations of the mosque by Muslims and non-Muslims living in the neighbourhood, see Lejeune 2000.
- 8 Kechat is very vague when invited to talk of his birth and his childhood. During one of our conversations, he mentioned the fact that being born after the death of an older brother,

he inherited both his brother's name and his documents, hence the birthdate (1946). Ironically, he suggested me to contact the secret services, which would certainly be able to give me his precise birthdate!

- 9 The AEJF was since its inception conceived as a network of Muslim students from diverse countries. It can be said to be the first Muslim student association established in France. The association was divided into two branches by the end of the 1970s. One group followed what is called the Syrian Muslim brotherhood's leader position, Issam Al-'Attar based in Germany (Aachen). L. Kechat used regularly to visit this Aachen mosque to give talks there, in particular in the 1990s. A second group joined the so-called Egyptian section of the Muslim Brotherhood. From this part came later the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF, Union of the Islamic Organizations of France). The AEJF still exists today, but does no longer has the lead as the Muslim Students Association (MSA), and stands behind the UOIF students' association Etudiants Musulmans de France (EMF, Muslim Students of France) on the French university campuses.
- 10 Mohammed Hamidullah (1908–2002), an Islamic scholar of Indian background, is known in France as the author of a translation of the Quran. He was one of the members of the founding board of the Islamic Centre in Geneva, together with Sa'ïd Ramadan, and he made most of his career as an independent leading religious authority, on issues related mostly to fiqh, in Western contexts (Europe and the USA).
- 11 'Our Tablighi group used to meet at 15, Belleville street in Paris', said Rachid Ghannouchi to Vincent Geisser in an interview in London, July 2001 (quoted in Ternisien 2005: 252–3). Rachid Ghannouchi is a Tunisian who lived in France during his studies at the Sorbonne and who started his Islamist activism during that stay, associating with different groups of Muslim students involved in various types of activism (including the Tablighi movement). Once back in Tunisia, he became the leader of the banned An-Nahda party (Islamic Tendency Movement), before leaving for London in 1991, where he still lives as a political refugee.
- 12 Since I have conducted the interviews that constitute the core of this chapter, things have changed and the mosque has been relocated to another site waiting for the final construction to be done after the newly elected City Hall socialist administration delivered the licence to rebuild the building. The city hall initiative to implement an Institut des Cultures de l'Islam (ICI) in the near 18th arrondissement and its impact on the local Muslim leadership from close areas is also excluded from this chapter.
- 13 I am referring here to the Centre before its modification, following the approval by the Paris municipality to rebuild the mosque and add a minaret and a dome.
- 14 One thousand five hundred meals are served here daily during Ramadan by an association called '*Chorba pour tous*' (Soup for everyone).
- 15 The socialist team of the Paris municipality has launched different 'best practice' initiatives towards the Muslim Parisians. The most recent and certainly the most ambitious one is the opening of a Fondation des cultures musulmanes in the 18th arrondissement scheduled for 2010. It will consist of a place of worship and cultural projects in the same space. The local associations are associated with this project, and a qualitative survey concerning the expectations and fears of citizens is currently being conducted by a team of social scientists.
- 16 Images and photos of the project can be seen on the web site of the mosque at <http://mosqueadawa.free.fr/>. For an urbanistic assessment of the project, see Sidi Mohamed el-Habib 2007.
- 17 More generally, this question is not specific to Islam and also concerns other religious places, in the aftermath of the 1905 law on the separation between Church and State.
- 18 The order of expulsion stated that Kechat was an influential member of a political movement advocating violence and promoting hatred of the Western world.
- 19 From a juridical point of view, the arrested suspects were assigned a compulsory residence in complete violation of the law. Indeed, most of the persons incarcerated

- in Folembray (twenty persons out of twenty-six) were expelled to Burkina Faso the day before their trial should have started (six of them are still in Burkina Faso). The six remaining persons were placed in forced residence (including Kechat). In 2005, one of them was still in this situation. See Delhomme 2005: 210–11.
- 20 Christian Delorme (a priest particularly active in the Muslim-Christian dialogue), Monseigneur Carillot (bishop of Evreux), and Monseigneur Deroubaix (bishop of Saint Denis) actively supported Kechat during his stay in Folembray. Dalil Boubakeur was among the persons who signed a joint statement in favour of Kechat. For an overview of the media treatment of the Folembray affair and the portrayal of Kechat, see Delhomme 2004.
- 21 'What my time in jail changed for me was my relation to politics. Not to culture or French civilization.'
- 22 'When I came out and finally discovered the entire listing, I saw all these names of scholars, intellectuals, opinion makers, clergymen, academics. And the idea came up: why don't we organize conferences here, at home, inviting these people to come and talk.'
- 23 'J'ai pu constater combien des notes d'une stupidité atterrante pouvaient venir sur les bureaux de ministres ou de préfets', Christian Delorme, *Le Monde*, 20 August 2004, quoted in Delhomme 2004.
- 24 For an attempt to quantify this statement that most of the qualitative research shares regarding Islam in Europe, and in France in particular, see Brouard and Tjibey 2005.
- 25 This can be said of other European countries and is by no means something specific to the French context. See the issue on mosques coordinated by Cesari, in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(6), 2005.
- 26 In his intense and rather heterogeneous networking, Kechat has also been in contact with 'borderline groups', in particular those linked with extreme right movements. He is involved in the drug-fighting neighbourhood association, Les Pères de Stalingrad (see also note 35), and there have been allegations concerning the 'friendship' between Kechat and Jacques Chéninade, the leader of Solidarity and Progress (Solidarité et progrès), the French section of the US Labor Party led by Lyndon LaRouche.
- 27 Other Muslim leaders have developed such a position of individualized Islamic commitment in a non-Muslim environment leading to what certain scholars have called a 'civic religiosity' (*une religiosité citoyenne*). See Frégosi 2000.
- 28 'I often say to my fellows that France and Islam only co-exist geographically. The challenge to all of us, I, Muslims and non-Muslims, is to transform this geographical proximity into a historical proximity.'
- 29 Fourteen classes for around 400 pupils visiting the Centre on a weekly basis for one or other classes.
- 30 The annual final conference usually takes place on a Saturday and is followed on Sunday by a more theologically oriented study group open to the general Muslim public. For instance, on 11 January 2003, the afternoon was entitled 'Stigmatization and discrimination: live and let people live!', as a celebration of the international day of action on HIV and AIDS. Invariably, in the first days of March, a conference is dedicated to women.
- 31 Travel costs for participants from outside Paris are reimbursed, and accommodation may be provided if needed. The use of French for preaching in a mosque or prayer room is not systematic. In most cases, Arabic (in a dialectal variant) is the language for preaching. In England and Wales, Urdu is the dominant vernacular language spoken in mosques, followed by Punjabi (14 per cent) and English (12 per cent) (Peach 2006).
- 32 In some particularly hot discussions, it can even last longer. On 14 December 2002, shortly after Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of Interior, had announced the signing of an agreement between his Ministry and three Muslim organizations in France, people stayed until 21:30, at the end of an afternoon discussing citizenship in Europe.

- 33 Evoking the conferences of the Rue de Tanger (to which he refers to as 'panel discussions'), John Bowen mentions for instance some liberties taken by a translator, who 'took it upon himself to render a very distinguished Islamic expert visitor's words in such a way as to completely reverse his meaning, in an effort to prevent divisions within the Muslim community' (Bowen 2002: 5; Bouzar and Kada 2003).
- 34 Dounia Bouzar, who was invited to the final June conference in 2006, is perhaps an exception. Dounia Bouzar is as difficult to classify as Larbi Kechat. By training, she is a social worker (*éducateur*) and an anthropologist, who worked for almost fifteen years for the Protection Judiciaire pour La Jeunesse (PJ), Judiciary Protection for Youth, in particular in the north of France (Lille, Roubaix). On the basis of this experience, she started publishing books relating her professional trajectory to broader reflections on Islam and Muslims in France (Bouzar and Kada 2003, Bouzar 2004). She has a complex multi-ethnic background with Moroccan, Algerian and French roots, and she converted to Islam in 1991. In 2003, she was asked by Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior, to join the CFCEM board. She resigned in January 2005. In the letter she addressed to the President of the CFCEM, she said her resignation was motivated by her impression that the members of this institution were more interested in their own positioning inside the Board than in discussing issues of serious concern for Muslims living in France.
- 35 This contrasts with the way such debates are often carried out in France: see for instance Tévastian 2005 on the gender dimension of French headscarf controversies.
- 36 Times are, however, changing and Kechat, who is translating his own words from one language to the other, sometimes expresses his irritation and refuses to do so because 'after all, everybody here should be speaking French' (December 2002, following the discussion on citizenship).
- 37 Other examples are Spain, Romania, and Bulgaria (Rouland 1998: 549, footnote 128).
- 38 See International Crisis Group 2006. Some indicators illustrate the difficulty of mapping the Muslim audience. In a 2001 survey of secondary schools, 85.7 per cent of Muslim pupils said that religious convictions were 'important' or 'very important' to them, without referring to a daily practice of this same religion (Geisser and Mohsen-Finan 2001).
- 39 This association was created by fathers of different national origins, all living next to Stalingrad square where crack and other drugs were being dealt. It came up as a very controversial initiative, criticized by several other civic associations for its methods (patrolling in the neighbourhood at night) and populist discourses. The association (*les Pères de Stalingrad*) has a website where its tone and modalities of acting in the public space are quite clearly exposed (<http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Stalingrad>).
- 40 As indicated earlier in this text, all these data were collected before the move of the Mosque to a provisory site near Porte de La Villette while the building of the new mosque was initiated.
- 41 The project of public health mediation was created in Paris in 1999, inside the Institut medical d'épidémiologie appliquée in one of the Paris public hospitals (Hôpital Bichat). Neither doctors nor social workers, the health mediators were conceived as partners to improve access to health care and services for vulnerable populations. Fama was one of the 180 newly trained mediators. Applicants for this training were asked to come with a project and were selected for their specific knowledge of vulnerable population groups. Drugs and HIV were priority topics in the training. Financially, the training session as well as the remuneration of the mediator is publicly funded.
- 42 A bridge represents here 'a routinized relationship that a civic group has to individuals or groups that it perceives as outside the group' (Licherman 2005: 44).
- 43 The qualification of Kechat as 'charismatic' came from different comments made by Muslims and non-Muslims I met during the conferences. Journalists also refer to him as such. The use of 'charisma' brings any social scientist to relate to the concept as studied by Weber, often restricting it to part of the Weberian theory. While Weber

- insists in his definition of the charismatic domination on the 'extraordinary quality' of the charismatic person, and of the exemplarity of his conduct, he also adds that the point is not to assess whether or not this 'charismatic' quality is objectively rooted, but rather to know how followers (*Anhänger*) experience and consider this extraordinary quality of the leader (*Führer*) (Weber 1995: 249). The way non-Muslim people relate to Kechat's charisma is mostly based on the perception they have of him through his physical gestures and manner of speech during the conferences. During the conference, and only during this period of activities that take place outside of the prayer room, Kechat is perceived as charismatic, not in the loose common sense, but in the Weberian representation of 'charisma' as 'revolutionary': charisma is a rupture with tradition, a break with the representation of authority as distant. Charisma exists as a performance, here and now, in relation with a voice, a body, and all its related gestures (Kalinowski 2009).
- 44 Young Muslims living in the neighbourhood were being arrested because of their implication in recruiting youngsters to fight against the US army in Iraq.
- 45 During one of our discussions, he explained his reserve towards Tariq Ramadan's 'simplistic populism'.
- 46 This may be illustrated by the outcome of a 2003 court case in which Larbi Kechat sued the weekly magazine *Marianne* for slandering his Association Culturelle Islamique. In the magazine, the association was called a dangerous fundamentalist group. At the trial, Scheib Bencheikh, the mufti of the Marseillaise mosque, testified in favour of the magazine, qualifying Kechat's mosque as 'rigorous'. The court (the Tribunal de Grande Instance of Paris) put the Association Culturelle Islamique and Kechat in the right, and sentenced the journalist and the editor of the magazine for defamation of the rector – but not of the association.
- 47 With the following definition of what a community is: 'a community is a group of persons who share a basic human value and who, at least to some extent, are aware that they share it. ... They may, as a church, share a faith and a hope, and a life of action in faith and hope'. Community is therefore a 'fusion of feeling and thought, of tradition and commitment, of membership and volition' (Cochran 1977: 547–8).
- 48 For quantitative data related to religious practices of Muslims in France, see Brouard and Tiberj 2005. For instance, on the basis of their sample, they state that Muslims in France do visit places of worship as regularly as believers of other denominations (p. 27). When comparing Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and Turkey, they identify the same proportion of 'no religion' ('*les sans religions*', p. 23) with a clear connection between religious affiliation and generation.

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5 The pattern of Islamic reform in Britain

The Deobandis between intra-Muslim sectarianism and engagement with wider society

Jonathan Birt and Philip Lewis

Introduction

The great historian of Islam in India, William Cantwell Smith, remarked that the ulama, the guardians of Islam's religious disciplines, appeared rather late in the process of Indian Islamization, which, historically, was gradual, even in the areas of military conquest, and whose pioneers were more often than not traders and mystics.¹ This does not hold true for the Muslims of Britain, three-quarters of whom are of South Asian heritage, where some ulama arrived with the first waves of mass migration in the 1960s. For this simple reason, it is better to understand the process of Islamic reform as deeply coloured by its Sub-Continental origins, even if it is now shaped by the British context.

This chapter will map the establishment of Islamic seminaries in Britain with a particular focus on the Deoband School (*mas'lat*), which of all the South Asian traditions has been far and away the most successful in this regard. We will look at continuities and changes in the curriculum, as well as new social roles that young British-educated Deobandi ulama are assuming. We will also identify the conditions and contexts in which they are able to free themselves from intra-Muslim sectarian debate to engage with wider society.

The continuity of Islamic reformism

The movement takes its name from Deoband, a small town a hundred miles north of Delhi, where the first, college-level *madrasah*, *dar al-'ulum*, was founded in 1867 (Mercalf 1982). It emerged as part of an efflorescence of religious revivalism in nineteenth-century India. Although the pattern of reform was not confined to the Deobandis, they were its most important exemplars. Their first priority was the preservation and dissemination of the religious heritage, understood in the classical sense of authentic religious belief and practice, the precondition for the transmission to new generations of a true Islamic formation. To this end, they created a network of financially independent seminaries, separate from traditional sources of aristocratic patronage – itself a diminishing asset in the new environment of British India. Their seminaries were designed for mass education and