“MELTING THE HEART”: MUSLIM YOUTH IN THE NETHERLANDS AND THE QUR’ĀN

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Rachid (20) 2002: At the youth home we always played music, played cards and drank something.
MdK: Alcohol?
Rachid: Alcohol. But one evening someone came and played the Qur’ān [a cassette tape with verses of the Qur’ān]. At one point it was nothing else than the Qur’ān. We threw out the alcohol, threw out the cigarettes. There are now many of us. We all go to the mosque together.

In this excerpt of an interview, Rachid speaks about what happens when someone plays Qur’ān tapes in a youth centre in the Dutch city of Gouda. Apparently these tapes bring about a change in attitude and behaviour among a group of Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth. In this chapter I will explore how these young people engage with the Qur’ān, Qur’ānic texts and audio versions of the Qur’ān. The chapter is based on my PhD project1 and the project I am currently involved in, called “Salafism as a Transnational Movement”.2 First I will deal with some general developments among Muslims in the Netherlands, more particularly the Dutch Islam debate and the changing religiosity

2 Between 1999 en 2005 I conducted my field research among Moroccan-Dutch boys and girls who visited a homework support project of the An Nour mosque in Gouda. Gouda is a middle-sized town of 70,000 inhabitants in the western part of the Netherlands (at equal distances from Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht). Almost 10 per cent of the population is of Muslim background: Moroccan-Dutch people with 6,000 constituting the largest group, Turks a distant second with 400. Besides being a researcher in the An Nour mosque, I was also the coordinator of several youth activities in that mosque. A total number of 223 Moroccan-Dutch boys and girls (12-20 years old) participated in the research and have been followed and observed during the six years of research. The research ended with in-depth interviews with 18 boys and 18 girls who participated in the research between 2001 and 2004 on an almost daily basis. The Salafism project I am working on in the Netherlands is led by the question how young Muslims acquire their sense of what Islam “really” is and what the role of the Salafī movement is in the process of producing, consuming, distributing Islamic knowledge for these young Muslims. The project has 60 participants (of whom 20 are female) and is furthermore based on observations of lessons, conferences and lectures.
among Moroccan-Dutch youth. Then I will explore how Muslim youth use the Qurʾān—in a way that goes beyond its actual contents—as a repository for experiences, to create religious sensibilities and in the formation of identities. In all of these the Salafi movement plays its own role by trying to sustain its claim of being the true representative of authentic Islam based on the Qurʾān and the Sunna.

**Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands since the 1990s**

During the 1990s, two trends could be discerned: on the one hand, ethnicity and religion increasingly came to be seen as private matters instead of issues that the state has to deal with; at the same time, however, the limits of religious and cultural differences and the conditions for social cohesion and integration started to be questioned by a broad political spectrum ranging from ultra-left to ultra-right, by socialist, liberal and religious parties. As we can see in other parts of Europe, the “Muslim issue” is framed as a combination of migrant problems and integration as a cultural problem.

The Islam debate started in the early 1990s when Frits Bolkestein, the leader of the Dutch centre-right VVD party, started to warn against Islam as an adverse influence on the integration of minorities. After 9/11 a new ingredient was inserted into the debates about integration and immigration: the focus in the media and in politics shifted almost entirely to Islam and Muslims and their alleged threat to Dutch society. From that moment on, Islam was associated with backwardness by several mainstream politicians and opinion leaders such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, the leader of the Freedom Party (PVV), and was considered to be undermining Dutch society. The reasoning was that Dutch society supported equality of men and woman, accepted homosexuality and embraced modern thought and

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2 Ibid., 247.