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“A Minaret of Light”: Transducing the Azan?

*It is He who made for you the night to rest therein and the day, giving sight.
Indeed in that are signs for a people who listen.*

Qur'an, Surat Yunus 10:67

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The idea that the truth of religion must be heard, that truth consists of the response of believers to a call, is fundamental to religions such as Christianity and Islam. Having faith means adhering to the truth of the call, and this truth is a matter of trust or submission, of being true to the call. The Islamic call to prayer, the azan, is a practical way of calling believers, but it can also be understood as a spiritual metaphor for the turn and change in orientation that takes place in the believer's soul. This reorientation of the soul toward a transcendent good—Muslims take great pride in emphasizing that Islam teaches monotheism in the strictest sense possible—is reminiscent of Plato's account in the *Republic* of the turning (*periakteon*) of the soul toward the good. The Platonic metaphor for the reorientation of the soul presupposes a body that must turn to see a kind of bright light or a lantern (*phanos*) (518c). Similarly, the Qur'an repeatedly demands that its believers both listen to divine words and bear witness to a divine truth. Studies of actual ritual practice, however, reveal that hearing cannot be so easily conflated with seeing (Erlmann 2004). In this chapter, I examine the importance of the ear by discussing the physical transduction¹ of the Islamic call to prayer, from sound to light, in a European context. Even though it can be said to be a marginal development in European Islamic architecture, the proposal to use light signals instead of loudspeakers for the azan reveals the fundamental issues at stake: European Muslims would like to amplify their call to prayer, what does this mean and entail, and what are the options on the table?

The same sound can have multiple meanings that are worlds apart depending on the listener, in a metaphysical sense but also of the social and the political. The emergence of the amplified Islamic call to prayer in European countries is

bringing hidden sentiments to the fore and creating new “soundmarks” which, like landmarks, demarcate emotional boundaries for distinct communities but do so aurally rather than visually (cf. Weiner 2014: 163). According to a Dutch Muslim interviewed by a local newspaper, the problem is that “for [a believer] the call can sound like streaming water, whereas I can imagine that for local non-Muslims it can be like a cannon.”² This divergence of opinion and experience is part and parcel of the *fact of pluralism*, the (historical) *a priori* condition and product of constitutional liberal democracy (Rawls 1987). In an age of globalization, religious pluralism is a “permanent feature of the public culture of modern democracies,” wrote John Rawls, and only “the oppressive use of state power” (1987: 4) can, or can attempt to, undo this condition. It is not only reasonable to assume pluralism, but pluralism itself is reasonable, the outcome of the myriad life stories of persons and groups in contemporary society. As a political principle, reasonable pluralism only requires citizens to be able to relativize their own position, practices, and beliefs, but does not go so far as to require citizens to regress into metaphysical relativism. How then should people deal with religious pluralism in practice, especially if, on the basis of their backgrounds, different individuals and groups can legitimately disagree over such matters as whether or not listening to the *azan* is agreeable? One way is to limit or change the nature of pluralism in public life, to search for alternatives that can ameliorate agonistic relations. Of the many questions I was asked during my fieldwork, one of the most recurrent was whether Muslims in the Netherlands could use an alternative to amplifying the call to prayer. “Can’t they just use a watch?” is still a frequent response among *azan* opponents, but also among people who have not given the meaning of religious sounds in urban settings much thought. As I will show, alternatives to the use of loudspeakers for the Muslim call to prayer are limited in their success.

In order to situate the demand for the amplified *azan* in the Dutch context, we need to grasp the issues of pluralism and material religion and their history in the Netherlands, which form the topic of this chapter and the next. Before looking at the cultural history of visible and audible expressions of religious pluralism in Chapter 2, this chapter expounds the contemporary situation by focusing on the thought-provoking attempt in the Netherlands to transduce the call into light, precisely because sound can be experienced as intrusive. This idea has come up in response to European discrimination or ambivalence toward Islamic aesthetics; Muslims and involved non-Muslims such as architects and local officials are adapting to find solutions to the strained relation between Islam and Dutch society. It shows that we need to pay attention not only to aesthetic

formations (Meyer 2009; see Introduction) to understand how European societies are dealing with religious pluralism, but also to attempts to switch between different media—and thus bodily senses—by aesthetic transductions.

Below, I will begin with a brief review of the anthropology of the technologized azan and its relation to globalization and religious innovation. I then explain how the idea of a light-azan originated in the context of European debates about Islam. This, however, raised questions of religious dogma among European Muslims. What is the place of aesthetics, sound, and innovation within Islam itself? Are alternatives such as the light-azan acceptable to Muslim scholars and everyday worshippers? Finally, I end this chapter with a discussion of the extent to which the light-azan has been adopted and associated with inaudible spirituality, and conclude that the aesthetic transduction of the azan is mainly a "spiritualizing strategy" (cf. Margry 2000: 393–94; Chapter 2), a creative attempt to discipline Islam into publicly accepted forms of piety.

Globalization and the technologized azan

The broad term *globalization* encapsulates both migration flows and modern technological advancement, both of which have impacted the call to prayer. Globalization not only transforms how we relate to our time, it also changes our perceptions of space (Anderson 2006: xiv; cf. Robertson 1995). Thanks to the variety of global flows, today new multi- and trans-ethnic religious spaces have emerged so that traditional "religioscapes" intersect and cross with each other in unprecedented ways. The concept of the *religioscape*,³ building on Arjun Appadurai's original intention to theoretically dissect the impact of globalization on culture, provides an approach to some key questions: what do we mean by the adjective cultural in our time, why is the noun culture misleading in the way it posits culture as something fixed, and how does religious pluralism manifest itself in localities in the present time? By using the metaphor of "scapes," this approach automatically leads to the aesthetics of globalization, expressed in changing land-, sound-, and smellscapes. Thus, amplifying Islamic calls to prayer in European countries where the practice is still widely associated with "the East" challenges how "the West" is conceived of today.

Most studies on technologized religious sounds, however, primarily focus on the impact of modernity as technological advancement, for example how new technologies can reduce the meaning of calls to prayer to a practical function. American churches faced such issues when city clocks and pocket watches were

introduced, making church bells appear pointless and at best nostalgic (Weiner 2014: 55). In a premodern world that was much quieter than our globalized one, church bells dominated city soundscapes as much as church towers dominated the skyline. As cities became noisy and industrialized, the meaning of church bells changed dramatically. The great Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga contrasted modernity's clamor with the Middle Ages' silence. In *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, he wrote:

The contrast between silence and sound, darkness and light, like that between summer and winter, was more strongly marked than it is in our lives. The modern town hardly knows silence or darkness in their purity, nor the effect of a solitary light or a single distant cry. . . . [In the Middle Ages] One sound rose ceaselessly above the noises of busy life and lifted all things unto a sphere of order and serenity: the sound of bells. The bells were in daily life like good spirits, which by their familiar voices, now called upon the citizens to mourn and now to rejoice, now warned them of danger, now exhorted them to piety. They were known by their names: big Jacqueline, or the bell Roland. Every one knew the difference in meaning of the various ways of ringing. However continuous the ringing of the bells, people would seem not to have become blunted to the effect of their sound. (Huizinga 1924: 2)

The religious ambition to amplify sounds beyond bells, however, is an old wish. As early as the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher “experimented with mammoth speaking trumpets to beckon devotees from the surrounding countryside to a hilltop shrine” (Schmidt 2000: 107). In Islam too, amplification has existed prior to the invention of the loudspeaker. The great Shah Mosque of Isfahan, currently known as the Imam Mosque, found an impressive architectural solution to amplifying the call: when standing directly under its dome, the human voice echoes far beyond it, making even very subtle sounds audible to a public audience. The reach of these solutions was, however, limited until, in the twentieth century, the dream of amplifying religious calls became a technological reality. In 1934, a Dutch newspaper reported how King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia established a radio broadcasting of the call to prayer: “Believers in the entire world will be henceforth called to prayer from the microphone.”⁴

Technological innovation not only amplified but also changed the meaning of religious sounds. For instance, in the nineteenth century, it became possible to produce bells that sounded exactly alike; in a similar way, in Egypt, before the fall of Mubarak in 2011, there were plans to introduce one master call to prayer for the entire city of Cairo through the use of radio

and loudspeakers. In such cases, aural homogenization can shift power from religious organizations to the regulatory powers of the modern state. The transition to modernity has therefore often implied a fundamental shift from "qualitative time" toward the homogeneous, "quantitative time" of the modern state (Corbin 1998: 110). From such a perspective in which time is nothing more than desacralized measured time, calls to prayer can sound not only *out of place* (Chapter 4) but also *out of time* (Chapter 2). Alain Corbin notes, for instance, that French clergy in the nineteenth-century countryside were suspicious of private clocks. They worried that the profane private clock would challenge the church's monopoly on regulating time through bells and have a negative impact on the public community of worshippers and, indeed, on the power of the Catholic Church.

Similarly, contemporary Muslim scholars are ambivalent toward the suggestion that private smartphone applications and other innovations can replace the public call to prayer and thus make the traditional call appear old fashioned. The move toward quantitative time implies both a privatization and a disciplining of Muslim ritual practice to make it adhere to standards that a nonreligious society may want to respect, rather than engaging with the way in which a Muslim minority in that society would like to practice their religion, namely in public. The state regulation of amplified calls to prayer is one way of determining the extent to which a religious community is publicly present. When a prohibition is in place, as in contemporary Singapore, listening to the call to prayer at home via the radio can "reunite each member of the Islamic community and create an abstract communal Islamic space without the encroachment of non-Islamic social spaces" (Lee 1999: 94). Islamic sounds have indeed been significantly recreated in private settings across the world, for example with digital azan clocks, which are often shaped like a miniature mosque and can set the time for the five daily prayers (Metcalf 1996: 8), or with smartphone applications that call to prayer and often reproduce mosque architectural iconography. On the other hand, Muslim scholars have been ambivalent about technological innovation for public calls to prayer. In Pakistan, for example, the introduction of loudspeakers in the twentieth century prompted debates on the question of whether loudspeakers could authentically reproduce the human voice (Khan 2011).

In our case study, the question of authenticity returns, although the idea of a light-azan deviates from the studies mentioned above because it is a European proposal to use *transduction* as a "translation" of the azan from sound to light

rather than merely reproducing sound in private contexts. We will see that the proposal for a light-azan is part and parcel of a cosmopolitan and avant-garde development in Islamic architecture. The sources from which architects and their patrons draw inspiration for mosque proposals in the Netherlands have many local as well as transnational connections. By studying the light-azan, we also get a glimpse of the volatile nature of the aesthetic formations of globalization. Scholars of globalization have pointed out its chaotic, contingent nature, following no single line and resulting in social constructions that are strongly dependent on the many perspectives and interests of involved groups (Casanova 1994; Appadurai 1996; Beyer 2006). As Peter Beyer puts it, “The development of the religious system is not the outcome of some inevitable evolutionary process, but rather something historically arbitrary, constructed, and in that sense even odd” (Beyer 2006: 115). The light-azan is one of those odd, unexpected outcomes of the volatile process of globalization.

The idea of a light-azan

The azan has been heard in the streets of the Netherlands since the 1980s (the early history of the Dutch azan is described in Chapter 2). Even though some mosques in cities and small towns have amplified their call to prayer for about three decades, most mosques refrain from doing so or do so only once a week. Because the volume is usually limited, so that it is audible only in the immediate surroundings, the majority of Dutch citizens rarely hear the azan. One of the mosques that does amplify the call is the An Nasr Mosque in Rotterdam, visited primarily by Moroccan-Dutch Muslims. The building was originally constructed as a Protestant church, but because of rapid and enduring “de-churching” (*ontkerkelijking*) after the Second World War, it is now a mosque and broadcasts the call to prayer on Friday afternoons. As with most mosques in the Netherlands, the building is only recognizable as a Muslim house of worship thanks to an entrance sign in Arabic, which is decorated with the shapes of a dome and minaret, and through the people who gather there and look stereotypically “Muslim.” But the amplified call to prayer proclaims the existence of the mosque in a way that is often experienced as much more pervasive than its visual characteristics (Chapter 4).

The environment is lively, with people of different backgrounds continuously passing by on foot, on bikes, and in cars. There are veiled women who just went shopping, young Moroccan-Dutch boys wearing jeans and caps, and

men wearing *djellabas*. A blond-haired woman walks alongside the mosque as the muezzin, the one who recites the azan, continues to call loudly, *hayya 'ala 's-salat*, "hurry to prayer"; *hayya 'ala 'l-falah*, "hurry to salvation"; *la ilaha illa Allah*, "there is no deity but God." Adolescent schoolchildren, wearing heavy rucksacks filled with schoolbooks, are crossing the street. A woman wearing a black veil that covers her hair and chest is cycling and takes a turn in the bike lane. A brown-skinned woman, perhaps originally from Suriname or the Dutch Antilles, passes by. Everyone is moving as if they cannot hear the call to prayer. They do not appear to be disturbed by its amplification.

And yet, non-Muslims in Rotterdam have protested mosque constructions as well as the amplified call to prayer. The protests are against the call *an sich* and not because one dislikes the voice or style of the muezzin, which is one of the responses among skeptical Muslims and non-Muslims from Muslim-majority countries. International students from Iran, for example, expressed the view that Moroccan-Dutch muezzins did not perform well. A Tunisian-Dutch Muslim said that he thought the Moroccan call was "aggressive," which was not far from the judgment of a Moroccan-Dutch Muslim who described the Moroccan call as "severe and manly, without too many ornaments such as the Turkish and Iranian versions [have]."⁵ There were often complaints about the poor quality of the loudspeakers too. The same students from Iran also remarked, "Of course the Dutch don't like the call when the loudspeakers make screeching sounds." However, conversations in Dutch about the call with people who did not grow up in a similar acoustic context usually do not delve into these subtleties.

A few Dutch and English comments to a YouTube post about the An Nasr Mosque's amplified call give us an impression of the anxieties that the call arouses: "Is that allowed like that, blaring like that? This isn't normal!" Someone else asked, "How could we have ever let this happen to our country!" There were also those who defended the call, but most comments in Dutch were negative, some even threatening the mosque. During my fieldwork in 2012, over 50 percent of four million individuals who voted in a national election poll agreed with the statement, proposed by the Party for Freedom (PVV, *Partij Voor de Vrijheid*), that "the construction of new mosques must stop."⁶ Earlier, in 2010, the PVV's leader protested the construction of "megamosques" and "palaces of hatred" (Tamimi Arab 2013a). The PVV came out of the 2012 elections as the nation's third largest party, with one and a half million votes (out of roughly ten million). The winner of the elections was the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, or Liberal Party (VVD, *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*), which appointed Henk Kamp, who previously served as Minister of Defense and

Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, as the Minister of Economic Affairs. Earlier, in 2007, Kamp had suggested that the Muslim call to prayer should be banned because it was not part of the cultural heritage of the Netherlands (Chapter 3).⁷ Such electoral outcomes resonate with my fieldwork observation that both mosques and the amplified azan are widely unwanted among non-Muslim Dutch citizens (as I will discuss in Chapter 4).

In another district of the city, Rotterdam-South, stands the Essalam Mosque (Figure 1). The mosque, which opened in 2010, follows a conventional dome and minaret plan. With a height of 50 meters, the two minarets are the highest in the Netherlands, but the mosque's call to prayer can only be heard inside. Ibrahim, a middle-aged man who is a regular at the mosque, said that it is right that the

Figure 1 Molenaar & Van Winden architects. The Essalam Mosque, Rotterdam. Photograph by the author, Spring 2012.

mosque does not have an amplified call: "For me, the call is beautiful. A mosque should call to prayer. But it's better not to do it here, because the others [non-Muslims] would be provoked." Ibrahim was particularly worried about the amplified call because the Essalam Mosque had been subject to intense criticism during its planning and construction. It was one of the most discussed mosques in the country as well as abroad, for example in Switzerland where minarets were banned in 2009.⁸ The Essalam Mosque's minarets were discussed on television—in both 2010 and 2012, it figured prominently in video advertisements for the Party for Freedom's anti-Islam campaign. Moreover, the process of construction, which spanned more than a decade, had been very tedious, with conflicts within the Moroccan community and with the municipality. The building's style has been scorned by local politicians, but also by architecture critics such as Christian Welzbacher, who thinks that the "traditional" appearance of the mosque emphasizes the otherness of Dutch Muslims—it is a mosque built in the Netherlands, and by a Dutch architect, but it is not of the Netherlands (Welzbacher 2008). For Ibrahim, who did not follow these intellectual debates, the media fuss around the mosque was wearisome. Using loudspeakers for the call to prayer would again attract negative attention to the mosque and could provoke conflict in a neighborhood that he described as otherwise "calm, green, and nice," a way of looking at the environment that contrasted sharply with the national perception of Rotterdam-South as marginal and unpopular (Tamimi Arab 2013b).

In his polemical book *Euro Islam Architecture*, Welzbacher defends the critical approach of the design for the Poldermosque in Rotterdam. The Poldermosque was designed in 2003 by architecture students with a Muslim background as a more "contemporary" alternative to the Essalam Mosque, which they considered uninspiring and orientalist. One of the principal designers of the Poldermosque was Ergün Erkoçu. Here, we will focus on an aspect of the Poldermosque that has been neglected in debates about mosque aesthetics, namely the proposal to transduce and replace the outward call to prayer by using light. Loudspeakers were not attached to the Poldermosque's "minaret" tower, which functioned and looked like an elevator shaft connected to the dome in an L-shape. Instead, the tower could emit an upward-going light signal that was supposed to replace the azan. From an interview I conducted with Erkoçu about this light-azan, we can conclude that it can be interpreted in at least three intersecting ways—a model for discussion, a compromise, and a religious experiment:

PTA: You've said that the light-azan is part of a "discussion model" for contemporary mosque designs. How did you come to this idea?

EE: It started in 2003 as a graduation project. Three other students and I at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences had the idea to design a mosque, the Poldermosque. We wanted to make something from scratch, and we wanted to redefine the meaning of “mosque.” What kind of building is it, and what is its meaning here in the Netherlands, not only in its appearance but also in its functionality? If you begin from scratch and look at the functionality, what could such a building look like?

There are a few ingredients, so to speak, that are functionally necessary for a Muslim house of worship. There are specific wishes regarding the direction of prayer, ablution spaces, the fact that people take off their shoes, and usually a separation of men from women. But there are also aesthetic wishes, and we wanted to put particularly those aside and begin from the beginning. At the time, we chose as a site the challenging location of the Essalam Mosque because there was already a plan for a mosque there. And in its appearance, the mosque was, to put it [in] black and white, “traditional,” namely with a dome and minaret. Throughout the years we have learned that this is, in fact, much more nuanced. Having a dome and minaret is not just about being “homesick.” There is much more attached to it, a sort of truth.

PTA: Yes, what are often seen as “traditional” mosque designs can for example be seen by Muslims as connecting to a transnational, “cosmopolitan” Islam, a way to religiously distinguish a community from other varieties of Islamic experience. It is tied to the phenomenon of people desiring to separate “culture” from “religion,” for example from “Moroccan” mosques in this case, which are perceived as less “pure” and “universal.”

EE: Indeed. We did not know such things at the time, but what we wanted was to juxtapose something to the “standard” mosque. But then you start thinking about the dome, and about the minaret. What are these things? Where do they come from? At the time there was a lot of discussion about a possible ban on constructing minarets and whether they were too high.

Erkoçu mistakenly thought that in the Netherlands it is ordinarily not allowed to amplify the call to prayer, and that a permit from the municipality is required for amplifying the azan. I explained that, in the past, mosque boards often did not know that there were legal guarantees for religious calls to prayer, and that they did not need a permit for amplification (see Chapters 2 and 3). In practice, many mosques chose not to use loudspeakers to avoid trouble. This uncertain situation had made Erkoçu consider alternatives:

At the same time, there are also other ways to call to prayer. There are paper timetables to see when the prayers begin. There are SMS reminders and iPhone applications. There are possibilities on the Internet that are very accurate. These

were ingredients for us to take a good look at the minaret and wonder what its meaning is today and whether a mosque really needs it. We tested that for the first time when we designed the Poldermosque.

Reactions to the Poldermosque design varied. The light-azan proposal was not worked out in detail; it was mainly proposed to evoke discussion. Two years later, in 2005, Erkoçu also made a design for the An Nasr Mosque in Rotterdam. It was (and still is) housed in a former Protestant church and the mosque board was interested in erecting a completely new building. The mosque’s amplified call had distressed those who feared “Islamization” and there was heated national debate about minarets.

Erkoçu’s first sketch for a new An Nasr Mosque did not include any minarets at all, but did include an empty space for the absent minaret. The idea was to have a beam of light in the sky instead of a minaret. The “non-space of the minaret” would be provocative because it appropriates contemporary commemoration iconography, particularly that of Ground Zero in New York City. However, the mosque board members who were thinking in more practical terms did not agree with this plan. They wanted a recognizable symbol, a physical minaret, and were not interested in commemoration iconography, which would have been too provocative for their needs. The discussion model had drifted too far in experimenting with religious functionality.

Figure 2 Ergün Erkoçu, CONCEPT0031. 2006. Design for the An Nasr Mosque in Rotterdam.

So Erkoçu designed a minaret that visually recalled the square minarets of Morocco, but which had new functions such as allowing fresh air to enter the mosque from the open top (Figures 2 and 3). As in the Poldermosque design, but with a more recognizable minaret, the idea now was to emanate light instead of sound for the call to prayer and not to try to replace the minaret. Furthermore, the light should be “translated,” de facto transduced, from the call to prayer:

EE: We didn’t choose to call to prayer using loudspeakers, but to translate the call into a play of light patterns. The fact that the minaret is opened up from above is used to communicate with light, but also to circulate air through the building.

PTA: How and what does the light communicate?

EE: The live call to prayer is sung into a microphone. The electric signal is then transformed via a machine into fragments of light. We chose to use only one color, a warm white color. The frequency is directly connected to the call, to the words. In a sense one can “see” the call. . . . It would also be possible to translate the flickering light back into a “text” from the outside. There are already smartphone scanner applications that can do that.

PTA: But can it be seen during the day?

EE: Yes, because we envisioned [making] a slit in the minaret that creates a shadow so that the light could be seen. Of course, at night it would work better.

PTA: And why the warm white color; why not green, the color of Islam?

Figure 3 Ergün Erkoçu, CONCEPT0031. 2006. Light-azan for the An Nasr Mosque.

EE: We thought white would reflect an open experience. It is a pure color. Green is often used, but [is] not very aesthetically pleasing. We also thought it shouldn't be blue or RGB disco lights, because we tried to keep the design as pure as possible.

As a discussion model and a religious experiment, the idea of the light-azan is also colored by the arts. Erkoçu took his inspiration not just from religious iconography and architecture but from indirectly and distantly related artworks such as a tower installation at the University of Milan, which refers back to the form of the tower but also to our technologized age, thanks to its use of LED lights. He showed me an image of the tower to explain what a light-azan could look like.

Above all other considerations, and especially at first sight, the light-azan could be interpreted as a compromise between the demand for the amplified call and local resistance to what is seen as an alien practice:

PTA: You said that you want to begin designing "from scratch," but of course the An Nasr Mosque does broadcast the call already, and they are doing so in a politicized situation where ordinary people, sometimes even Muslims, react negatively to having the call in what is often described as a "non-Muslim country." To what extent is the discussion model a reaction to this context? Should we interpret it as a compromise?

EE: No, no . . . well, many elements of the original Poldermosque have been explained as a compromise. And that is perhaps also intended a little. The name Poldermosque comes from the Dutch practice of "polderen," looking for an agreement, looking for a consensus. But that is then one of the questions of the discussion: Should one always look for a so-called polder-model solution? Should one always choose the middle? The design of the Poldermosque is very explicit and unique in the way it looks, so on the one hand it could be seen as a compromise, but on the other it is also very unconventional.

Reactions to the design are different every time. There are proponents and critics of all kinds and sizes. There are those who like it or don't within conservative Islamic movements, just like there are different opinions among the older as well as younger generations.

The Poldermosque is not supposed to replace all other Dutch mosque designs. It is one way to conceptualize a mosque next to several others. And we thought this model was still missing in the architectural spectrum of possibilities. When I talked about starting from scratch, I didn't think about a compromise, but I asked myself what could be done differently. You can see it as a compromise, but also as a new function of what a minaret

could be. From a political perspective, when one is looking for social and political solutions, it could be seen as a compromise, while at the same time it can be functionally—qua religion—very pure.

The plans for a light-azan in a new An Nasr Mosque were presented in 2006 to a broad audience, including the mayor of Rotterdam and city council members. The public event was a celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the An Nasr Mosque held at the Doelen concert venue and conference center. Erkoçu presented his design alongside speeches by the mayor and the famous Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan. The mosque board members approved of the design and were especially sympathetic toward the idea of building a new mosque from the ground up, but in the end the project turned out to be too expensive and so they opted instead for a more modest renovation, to be carried out by the Dutch architect Rokus Visser. This idea was dropped again in favor of constructing a new building, but the municipality has until now refused to permit the bulldozing of the former church, which has the status of a heritage monument.⁹ The unrealized idea of a light-azan, however, has slowly spread to other parts of the Netherlands and has come up in France as well, where the Marseille Grand Mosque—if it is built in the future—is planned to have a minaret that lights up specifically for the call. In 2009, the year of the Swiss minaret ban, the *New York Times* stated: “The minaret of the new Grand Mosque of Marseille, whose cornerstone will be laid here in April [2010], will be silent—no muezzin, live or recorded, will disturb the neighborhood with the call to prayer. Instead, the minaret will flash a beam of light for a couple of minutes, five times a day.”¹⁰

Glass and light

Ideas such as the light-azan and related elements such as the use of glass and the color white in order to be more “open” impact Dutch mosques and their aesthetic negotiations.¹¹ Almost a decade after the first Poldermosque design, Oskar Verkaaik noted that young Muslim students in the city of Almere held the view that a “minaret of light” could, in theory, replace the constructed minaret. They liked the idea of a minaret “with lots of glass” that would make it “light and transparent” (Verkaaik 2012: 168). Light from the outside would enter the mosque through the minaret during the day, and at night the light would emanate from within the mosque. As the discussion about the light-azan evolved, some of these ideas were realized.

The Al Ansaar Mosque in Delft is based on a design similar to the one described by Verkaaik—the minaret can light up in green on special occasions and is made of brick and glass. It is thought that one way to make a mosque appear more “Dutch” is to use brick. The elaborate use of bricks in mosques has a centuries-old history in countries such as Turkey and Iran, but they are chosen in the Netherlands because they are reminiscent of Dutch architecture. In Delft, I talked to a former board member of the mosque about the use of light and the call to prayer. Not only was he a *hafiz*, someone who can recite the Qur’an by heart, he told me that he had also performed as a muezzin and that his son was the building’s architect, an achievement of which he was very proud. Some of the non-Muslim residents in the neighborhood had visited the mosque on open days and had heard the call inside the mosque, but there was no amplified call: “No, we don’t broadcast the call. It would create trouble, but you know what, I will have a conversation about this again with the mosque’s board. Maybe we should have an amplified call.” It became clear to me that the use of light here had in no way replaced the need for a call. Merely being asked about the call prompted the man to reconsider its absence, and to acknowledge that the only reason was fear of aggravating the neighborhood.

In another small town, Hoofddorp, a minaret in the Ar-Rahman Mosque was constructed entirely out of glass. This minaret functions at the same time as a shaft for the elevator provided for elders, an idea that Erkoçu had already presented in his Poldermosque design, and that has also been applied to the bigger Ulu Mosque in Utrecht. There was local resistance to the Hoofddorp mosque when it was being built, and while granting permission for construction in 2006 the municipality stated that the plans did not include sounds that could cause annoyance (*geen geluidsgevoelige bestemming*). During a public meeting to explain their plans, one of the mosque’s board members, Donald Karamet Ali (of Surinamese descent, d. 2011), expressed his regret that local residents had not shown up. He assured the municipality and the local media that the mosque would not amplify the call to prayer, but would use “light signals” coming from the “transparent,” glass minaret.¹² This was necessary “to preserve the peace with our neighbors. . . . We [have] already [been located for] fifteen years in a residential area and have never had any trouble. But if we would use a sound installation, that would be assisting those who support people like Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.”¹³ A chairman of an overarching Dutch Islamic organization, Arslan Karagül, gave his support for the light-azan: “I find it an enlightened solution [*een verlichte oplossing; sic*] in more than one way. It will not change the meaning of the call to prayer.”

Karagül also thought that, in every town, the local context should determine whether or not the azan is amplified.¹⁴

I visited Hoofddorp's Ar-Rahman Mosque (Figure 4) in 2012 and had a conversation with Atef, a man of Egyptian origin who spends much of his time at the mosque. He was happy to give me a tour of the mosque, which had been completed only a year ago. Atef was enthusiastic about the mosque's facilities and the decorated prayer space, but he had no idea about the light-azan. The glass

Figure 4 The Ar-Rahman Mosque, Hoofddorp. Photograph by the author, Fall 2012.

minaret does not light up, contrary to other mosques in the Netherlands that have this feature. For Atef, it was mainly the minaret elevator that was important because it was helpful for an elderly friend.

Moreover, the use of glass and the metaphor of transparency should be taken with a grain of salt. In my conversation with Erkoçu, I broached the subject of the extensive use of glass: should it be seen as a religious innovation that has been provoked by European political pressures? For example, Wael Farhat, a Muslim mosque architect in Italy, told me in an interview I conducted in Venice that he used a lot of glass because he thought it stood for a more pure, universal Islam. At the same time, however, he talked about pressures from Italians who were against mosque construction. It was my impression that he did not want to admit that his mosque designs, and his concepts of transparency and a cosmopolitan Islam, were strongly influenced by local politics. In reality, alternative conceptions of Islam as well as local political pressures intersect and shape the final design. It would be an exaggeration to describe this particular form of globalized Islam as essentially reactive, as Olivier Roy (2004) has suggested, nor would a description of Farhat as totally immune to non-Muslim pressures and as essentially proactive be convincing. We should constantly remind ourselves of the fact that the globalization of religion is messy and deeply perspectival, and therefore unpack or nuance any simple explanations. Erkoçu's own explanation was that of an architect who wants to promote his design needs to use a language that is understood by non-Muslims:

We also used a lot of glass for our design of the Poldermosque and explained it every time [by saying] that there is nothing to hide, that it's open, while actually we made the prayer space very closed because that is something personal. Because when one passes by a church, it's not like you can see the people praying inside. And that is something that is being used in the discourse surrounding the acceptance of mosques, that they are closed. But it makes sense that they are closed off.

Indeed, the idea of a light-azan or the use of new materials such as glass has not fundamentally altered the traditional meanings of the call or what is, from the perspective of a religious minority group, the private, secluded experience of prayer. Kareem, a young Muslim intellectual who lives in Rotterdam, told me that he thought the physical effect of using light signals to call to prayer would be different, and thus also its religious meaning, particularly "because the function of sound is to make one turn toward the call, whereas a light-azan is something that one is confronted with when already facing that direction." As

I have already mentioned, for Plato the reorientation of the soul was primarily explained with an optical metaphor, but this may not always capture the importance of techniques of listening in Islam that enable believers to become “auditory receptacles of divine speech” (Hirschkind 2006: 39).¹⁵ Similarly, the captives of Plato’s cave were not only unable to properly see each other, they could equally only hear each other’s echo (515b). In other words, we should reject the stereotypical opposition of seeing versus hearing, and say that what is lost without sound is a part of the synergetic experience of the mosque building itself.¹⁶ Kareem was not against the idea of a transduction, but was skeptical about its possible value as *azan* in practice. The amplified call turns the mosque into an actor and people into objects of its attention; would not the light-*azan* mosque lose agency in the process of transducing the call?

It is worthwhile to distinguish the related discussion on glass from the light-*azan* in terms of the production of actors and their objects of attention. The material specificity of glass and the concomitant social idea of transparency create outsider subjects who are less sharply excluded from the mosque building. Muslims inside must perform their prayers while being (potentially) watched, in order to become more trustworthy to a skeptical, non-Muslim society. The light-*azan*, however, “rescues” non-Muslims outside the building from being touched by unwanted religious sounds and in that sense disempowers the mosque. In other words, different materials and strategies are used in response to power relations: the transduction is a transformation of hierarchies, changing who touches who, albeit in a soft way through sight and hearing. However, that does not mean that Muslims themselves wholly reject the use of light and glass because of different interpretations and experiences of material religion (see the Introduction). Kareem did indeed say that he considered the effect of light important for generating an aura of spirituality: “When I drive by the Essalam Mosque at night and see that it is lit up, I feel something, a pleasing sense of spirituality.” Erkoçu had also told me that he intended the use of light to enable a spiritual experience for mosque users.

Spirituality and religious authority

Puzzled by the varied reactions to the light-*azan* proposal, I arranged a meeting with three scholars at the Islamic University of Rotterdam, a school that was founded in 1997 and offers degrees in Islamic theology and spiritual care. One of the questions I put forth was whether it was religiously valid to translate the human sound of the call into light patterns. Suat, one of the young teachers

working at the school, immediately came up with the word "compromise." When I pressed further and asked him if he was sure that a light-azan should be interpreted as a compromise, he replied that perhaps it was not even a real compromise, in the sense of being fair, but "a necessary solution." His senior, Gamal, did not like the idea. He believed that the technologization of the call was dangerous because its long-term effects could not be predicted. "The roots of Islam," he said, "could be undermined and the azan could lose its importance. I am afraid that the azan will not stay in the hearts of Muslims." Gamal viewed the light-azan as he did the broadcasting of the azan by radio and the Egyptian government's desire, before the 2011 revolution, to replace the cacophony of numerous azans with a unified master azan in Cairo. He disapproved of all these innovations as either too mannerist or too modern.

The younger Suat was slightly more positive about the proposal, particularly because he thought it would be less threatening to non-Muslims. Both scholars said that in "non-Muslim countries" such as the Netherlands and France, it would be wise if Muslims did not challenge their environment too greatly. Muhammad, the third scholar who participated in the meeting, added that, after all, the call to prayer had historical ties to a sense of victory and conquest and that today this could be viewed as problematic. The scholars agreed that the decision to amplify the call should depend on the context; they thought it was more appropriate in a neighborhood with a significant number of Muslims, or in one which is very multicultural. Moreover, they thought that amplifying the azan in the afternoons was not a practical necessity, since most people visiting mosques during weekday afternoons are elders who do not require the azan to be on time for their prayers.

Muhammad said that Muslims should not seek recognition through a demand to amplify the azan:

We must not force people to recognize us. That will cause pain and resistance. We must look for other ways to be acknowledged. . . . We should engage in dialogue and explanation, but not in force. We could base ourselves on the law and demand our legal rights, but there is at the same time a social reality, the fact that people are not used to the azan. One must take this into account and behave pragmatically.

Gamal added that the history of the azan and that of church bells should be considered in judgments regarding the Dutch case. Although the law in the Netherlands is interpreted to equate the azan with church bells (as I discuss in Chapter 2), he and the others thought that in reality it was slightly different

because of the use of words and a specific spoken language. “Could we perform the call in Dutch? What would that mean?” For them, the red line of recognition was not the call, but first and primarily the right to construct recognizably Islamic mosques.

“Can the light-azan be seen as a ‘spiritual’ translation of sound into light?” I asked, to see whether a reference to spirituality could authenticate the light-azan in religious terms. In the Netherlands, I had not heard of any Qur’anic interpretations to defend the light-azan, but the word “spiritual” had been mentioned. Interestingly, according to Maxime Repaux, the architect of France’s Marseille Grand Mosque (Figure 5), French Muslims interpreted the spiritual aspect of the light-azan by referring to the Qur’an’s verse on divine light.¹⁷ Verse 35 of the *Surat an-Nur* goes as follows:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.

According to Repaux, the use of light symbolizes “a passage from the material to the immaterial,” toward the “spiritual,” from stone to sound, and from sound to light. During the interview he mentioned a very similar design for a mosque in Algeria that aims to be one of the largest mosques in the world and has a

Figure 5 Bureau Architecture Méditerranée. 2008. Design for the Marseille Grand Mosque.

minaret that can function as a "lighthouse," though not one that would replace the azan. There are also other mosques that use light—the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, for example, has a 210-meter-high minaret that can shoot a green laser beam toward Mecca, and the 600 meter-high Mecca Clock Tower blasts unprecedented glittering light upon the holy center of Islam—but none of these are meant to replace the call to prayer. Repaux portrayed the passage to light as going from the material to the less material and therefore spiritual, whereas both sound waves and light rays belong to the domain of physical phenomena. Following Webb Keane's discussion of the religious work of transduction, we can say that the azan is first materialized as sound, but then "dematerialized" as light, which is, in fact, a rematerialization (Keane 2013: 2). A similar notion of spirituality as a transcending of the material, or even a denial of the material, can be found for example in classical Islamic philosophy¹⁸ and also abounds in Protestant theologies. The point that I want to make is not genealogical, but that even though religious reasoning may deny materiality, in reality quite the opposite can be the case.

Repaux admitted that the idea of the light-azan had also come up in France—"to keep the neighborhood happy"—because of great resistance to the mosque. He claimed that the light-azan did not have any opponents and is often considered an interesting approach for preventing conflict. Yet, despite these intentions, significant local opposition to the very idea of building the mosque led the city to cancel the project's construction permit; the cancellation had to be overturned by an appeals court in 2012 before the first stone could be laid symbolically. At the time of writing, in 2015, the site for the future mosque was still a car park.

At the Islamic University of Rotterdam, Gamal thought it was strange to want to replace the azan. "It belongs to the Islamic tradition, but it is much more than just that, it is a part of Islam and mandatory inside a mosque." Though initially sympathetic, Suat also thought the idea of a translation was awkward: "It would be good if one could actually read the words of the call if they were to be projected, but still . . . if we start doing this then maybe in the future one will argue that a [particular] piece of a pig can be eaten and another piece cannot." Gamal added that the *Surat an-Nur* refers to a spiritual, divine light, and that the intention of the Qur'an was in no way to equate physical with divine light and certainly not to designate it as a replacement of the call. Moreover, being allowed to translate the words and the Arabic language cannot be simply taken for granted, as these are of importance to the sacred character of the azan.

The conversion from one sensorial dimension to another, the transduction, just like the translation of a text, raises issues of accuracy and authenticity. In order to be experienced as authentic and immediate, a medium must erase itself: “Can light as a medium faithfully convey the human voice, without its own specificity coloring the process of mediation to an unacceptable degree?” (Patrick Eisenlohr, private correspondence; also see Eisenlohr 2009a and 2009b). The question of immediacy is bound with that of religious authority. For a scholar of religions, it is revealing to analyze religions *as* media, recognizing the intertwining of sensational forms and theological content, but for a religious, Muslim scholar such as Gamal it is important to distinguish Islam *from* media, although without denigrating rituals as inessential. A successful process of mediation, from a worshiper’s perspective, requires that a religious practice be experienced as immediate. In other words, the general observation that religious sounds are socially acceptable when they fade into the background and go unnoticed (cf. Weiner 2014: 206) also holds from the intrareligious perspective of Islamic authority that, in the twentieth century, has widely come to accept the immediacy of a call broadcast on loudspeakers. The key question, therefore, is whether the transduction of the azan can ever be experienced as an immediate, spiritual way of calling to prayer.

Although they had doubts about the light-azan, the Muslim teachers in Rotterdam could easily accept the link between spiritual light and the call to prayer. Indeed, many scholarly accounts of the minaret across the world describe it as originating in a lighthouse, and its development is widely seen as intertwined with that of the call to prayer. In 1880, Alfred J. Butler, an English historian, published an article in which he defended the hypothesis that the minaret developed from an antique lighthouse.¹⁹ The German orientalist Friedrich Schwally suggested that the use of the Arabic word *manar* to describe the minaret was related to the practice of the muezzin holding a light, for instance an oil lamp, while reciting the call (Schwally 1898).²⁰ The Iranian-American Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr has also stated that the connection between the call to prayer, the minaret, and light is valid. In his book *Islamic Art and Spirituality* Nasr writes of the call from the minarets emanating a divine, spiritual light into the city: “It is certainly not accidental that the place in the mosque from which the Word of God in the form of the call to prayer reaches the community, namely the minaret, is called in Arabic *al-manarah*, literally the place of light.” The message of Islam, its language, is not just contained in sound; the revealed word is “a light which shines upon the otherwise dark path of

human existence in this world" (Nasr 1987: 51). However, Muslim scholars often deem the intentional replacing of sound by light unacceptable. The influential Egyptian al-Azhar University has declared that the light-azan cannot replace or translate the call to prayer in Marseilles, and that Muslims should inform French citizens of the importance of the call.²¹ In this case, the connection between the spiritual and the political compromise was too direct and too close, while the deviation from tradition was too great.

Spiritualizing strategies and pluralism

To conclude, I want to make a general comment on spirituality in modern, pluralist societies. Peter van der Veer argues that "the gradual transformation of a transcendent hierarchical order into a modern egalitarian immanent order has displaced institutional religion, while freeing a space for spirituality" (2008: 790). This free space allows for peaceful interactions between worldviews: "An embracing, vague term like spirituality has been adopted precisely to make peaceful communication between different conceptual universes possible" (2008: 793). Such dialogue is much welcomed in highly diverse settings. However, the implementation of the light-azan shows that, in daily practice, the relation between freedom and spirituality can also be one of religio-aesthetic negotiation, spatial struggle, and political compromise. Thus, the light-azan, and spirituality in general, has a disciplinary aspect; as Weiner put it, they "[discipline] religious adherents into practicing more restrained forms of piety" for the sake of "public order" (Weiner 2014: 73). This prompted Tariq Ramadan to once exclaim at Erasmus University in Rotterdam that spirituality, often proposed as a kind of Sufism, is not a final answer to the question of living with religious difference, though it could be one among others. Similarly, the light-azan cannot solve the problem of Islamic sounds in a Muslim-minority space, but it can be one among several options to address the issue. Architects like Repaux and Erkoçu use the language and iconography of spirituality to open up new religious possibilities, as suggested in van der Veer's analysis. Such "spiritualizing strategies," however, are not entirely new (Margry 2000: 393–94). For centuries, Dutch Catholics held silent processions, prayed in clandestine churches, and could not ring the *Angelus* call to prayer. Through innovations such as the silent procession (*stille omgang*), they kept the memory of the abundant procession alive (Chapter 2).

These silent processions functioned as an immanent protest against religious intolerance from within a religious tradition. Similarly, the acceptance among some Muslims of the aesthetic transduction of the azan is not merely tied to a desired spiritual experience but is in fact a spiritualizing strategy, an attempt to balance religious obligation on the one hand and compromise with local situations on the other.

During my interviews, when I showed Dutch Muslims pictures of the Empire State Building lighting up green to celebrate the end of Ramadan, they reacted with enthusiasm and awe. In contrast to New York City's recognition of religious diversity, the Mevlana Mosque in Rotterdam has been lit up in orange to celebrate the Dutch soccer team, performing its allegiance to the nation. And yet, the idea of using light in a light-azan here in the Netherlands is often met with great reluctance. For those who were aware of the Empire State Building's subtle role in New York City's everyday life, its turning green was an impressive sign of recognition, while the European idea of a light-azan was mainly a sign of negotiation. This is an ongoing process: the recently constructed Ulu Mosque in Utrecht (Figure 6) has glass minarets that light up every night, and even before its opening voices were raised in protest against a possible amplified azan in Utrecht with suggestions that a smartphone application could replace the public call. The same holds true for the new mosque in Enschede, whose remarkably unorthodox mosque design was revealed to the public in 2014 and consists of white surfaces and glass to be lit at night. The architect, Erdal Önder, explained that the building

Figure 6 Architectenbureau Önen BNA. The Ulu Mosque, Utrecht. Photograph by the author, Winter 2016.

will have a very "open" and "inviting" aura (Figure 7).²² At the time of writing, the municipality had performed an azan test by placing loudspeakers on a tripod in a street in the neighborhood, which immediately attracted neighbors in opposition to it.²³ These examples show that Muslims of diverse backgrounds are sensitive to aesthetic formations, creating a common, cosmopolitan, European ecumene for Islamic architecture. At the same time, ordinary worshippers rarely embark on the avant-garde style of questioning that motivates architects like Erkoçu. This can lead us to questions regarding the relationship between recognition and compromise, and between religious experiences and their regulation, through aesthetic technologies of ordering physical spaces, shaping what we see and hear in private as well as in public domains.

As we will see in the next chapters, for the ordinary worshipper the demand for the amplified call in the Netherlands and Europe has grown in the past decades. It asks non-Muslim hearers to be certain kinds of people, who accept the public presence of Islam, visually and aurally. Such ethical calls, as Plato envisioned, reorient our souls. The way in which we respond to such calls determines who we are and, perhaps more importantly, who we want to be. Although Muslims may freely engage in religious innovations such as the light-azan, it has not been successful in fully addressing the concerns that arise in a diverse country such as the Netherlands. To the extent that it is a move toward greater spiritualization, the light-azan privatizes the call and yet retains some of its public, communal character. Modern religion is caught between these two poles, a privatized personal experience and a public, group-oriented conception of religion (cf. Taylor 2002). The light-azan is an attempt to straddle both poles

Figure 7 Erdal Önder, ENA Architecten. 2014. Design for the Turkish Cultural Center in Enschede.

but underestimates the importance of an aural presence for worshippers. For a greater understanding of their demand for the call to prayer, in Chapter 2 we will look back on the history of the Netherlands and trace its movement from a Protestant hegemony toward a pluralist constitutional liberal democracy. We will then move on, in Chapters 3 and 4, to see how the demand for the azan is played out in practice under contemporary Dutch secular government.