



## AUTO TRANSLATION

### Hamza Saidi

EVELYN

Welcome to the sixth episode of our podcast. Two weeks ago you could hear the story of Jan de Cock about his commitment to prisoners and victims and about his work in the hospital. And also about gratitude and joy, in spite of everything.

Today we have Hamza Saidi with us, teacher, Islamic religion.

Hi Hamza, welcome to our home studio.

HAMZA

Day Evelyn.

I've already given away a bit in the introduction, but it's still best to introduce yourself yourself. So here's to... Who are you, where do you come from and what are you doing?

HAMZA

My name is Saidi Hamza. I was born and raised in Sint-Niklaas.

In addition to my job as a teacher of Islamic religion, I am a proud father of two children, a six-year-old boy and a nine-year-old daughter. They also take up a lot of my time. I also like to work on IT, especially.

That's a... Let's say, not a microbe, but a passion that I picked up from a young age. And that has always continued to grow and develop.

Voilà. First, a little more about my job. Why did I choose this job?

When they asked me after my sixth year of secondary school what I wanted to become, I answered out loud: physiotherapist.

Without discussion. Finally, at the end of my sixth year of secondary school, we went on a trip with school to the SID scholarship in Ghent. That's where I met one of the teachers. He laughingly told me that he had never seen a Moroccan physiotherapist before. So voilà. I was left a bit hungry. In the end, due to some pushing from a family member of mine, I went for hotel management. So I spent a year in Bruges, a year in Antwerp. But in the end, it was just a choice that I didn't fully support. And I think it was the summer of 2006. At the time, I was working on a summer job. And... I was constantly talking about Islam with one of my friends. A good friend of mine. We were constantly talking about Islam. And about our experience, about what we have learned and so on. He said to me... I myself am in the

college program in Brussels as a teacher of Islam and mathematics. I really think this is for you. But I say becoming a teacher, standing in front of the class all day and hearing sawing from young people...

Now, a lot of times they say that if you're faced with a choice and you're not sure what to do, then you have to take a step back. So, my mother had put some savings aside for me, one of those children's savings accounts from the past. And I went to Mecca with that money for a month and ten days. In the middle of the month of Ramadan. That was the ideal moment to reflect, to reflect on what I am going to do with my life. And eventually I came back and three days later I started the college program. That's the path I've walked to this day.

And I didn't regret it for a second. I thought at first that you would give some Islam, but it's more than that. If you take your job seriously, as an Islam teacher within a school you are a point of contact, a bridge figure, a confidant. You are more than just someone who has a subject like mathematics or chemistry. With all due respect to those subjects, but you really are the point of contact within the school for other teachings in the end. So voilà.

That was who I am in a nutshell.

EVELYN

Okay. You've actually already told a lot of your story. But I thought we could go a little bit deeper into what you said, that you call yourself a bridge figure. Is that a conscious choice of yours to really take on the role of bridging figure in addition to teaching?

HAMZA

I think... On the one hand, it's a bit of... I'm not going to say forced, because my supporters, who also taught Islam, the older generation, very consciously chose to stay very aloof. I also want to show that this is not how a Muslim should be. You have to have both feet in society. But on the other hand... The needs of today's young people are enormous. Young people are facing an identity crisis. They come from a foreign origin. They have a different religious belief. Within the school, you are a landmark.

But on the other hand, I also notice that in terms of upbringing, in terms of home situation, it only becomes more poignant over the years. CPGs are overcrowded.

So basically, it's a role that I've taken on myself, what I like to do, what I sometimes do too much. But in the end, you don't get much satisfaction from it. A lot. I used to say that we are the third parent, but over the course of those eleven years, you have evolved into the second or first parent. That you are the person they can turn to. While the home situation sometimes does not allow that.

And apart from that... I say it, outside the school walls, to the parents, even to the police, to all kinds of institutions. You are always a kind of point of contact who can build a bridge between the situation of students. Because it is always a problem if you have a certain background yourself, then you understand the students better than a student counselor who listens to a story. That doesn't always work.

EVELYN

You just mentioned the difference between the former teachers of Islamic religion and you. What about generational differences? I suspect that has something to do with it as well.

HAMZA

Yes. This year, Islam as a religion has been recognized in Belgium for fifty years. And in 1978, the first generation of teachers began teaching a lesson. At that time, it was even in their own language. So if you were unlucky as a Moroccan to sit with the Turkish teacher, then so be it and you had lessons in Turkish for a whole year. But that ended up being more occupational therapy.

And that still translates into the protests that come from politicians to abolish the subject of ideology. That it's just small talk after all. I myself never had an Islamic religion at school.

Which is actually a blessing, because I haven't seen the wrong model either. My youngest brother did and he told me that they had to write the same topic in the diary every week. In the end it was just, we're going to bring some pastries, we're going to make some mint tea and we're going to make something cozy out of it.

The only thing the teacher could do well, that was in the atheneum in Sint-Niklaas, was write their names in calligraphy. That was like 'wow, I was able to do something...' So the students came home with that and the parents are proud.

But in the end, if we look at what you really give of learning material... The first attempts were made about six or seven years ago. Then books were published. They were called Noorboeken. They have also been to Pano, the famous Pano report, books that were strongly inspired by the Turkish model. They were also printed there. The curriculum also came from Turkey. And those books, that was also occupational therapy.

Now, as a teacher, you really have to be close to your students and see what the needs are. In the end, just rattling off some learning material, that's not the intention. And also, we have moved away from the system of examination to permanent evaluation.

So in the end, you're a bit flexible in your subject matter. What is good, and this is only very recently, is that a number of friends of mine, college teachers, have published books, together with Uitgeverij Van In, that are really tailored to the needs of students. It is different to give a lesson in Islam in an Islamic country than here in Belgium.

And the problem is often that we deliberately avoid certain themes in order to discuss those taboos. Exactly whether a Muslim cannot have depression. Or that having feelings for other boys, that that's not possible. So... That's right...

These are the issues that young people are dealing with today. And if you don't mention them as a point of contact in your lessons, where will they go... Are they going to search on social media? Because 'I learned on TikTok'. I hear that a thousand times a week. 'I got that from TikTok'. I say okay, that's good.

BASKET

Hamza, you made quite a leap to that decision to become an Islam teacher, when you had other plans. But I would love to go back, because you had those experiences yourself as a boy in class. You didn't have an Islamic religion, but you will also have had a lot of experiences and then also had a lot of questions. Can we take that step back for a moment? From you as a youngster in secondary school and maybe even earlier. But tell us about your personal experiences and questions that you encountered.

HAMZA

It was my parents' choice to put me in college. The college used to be the point of reference of discipline, of order, of rigor, of a little elite. And that you had the opposites, without calling them by name.

Well, in primary school it wasn't that bad. There were a few students of Moroccan origin, with whom I was friends, but from the moment I was in high school and that I was in ASO, I came to a point where I was the only boy of Moroccan origin in my school. And there were indeed...

Gee, how should I say that? I will put it another way. I experienced September 11 as the only Moroccan boy in the school. You don't want to go through that. Because then, all of a sudden, you were blamed for everything. Exactly as if I were a pilot myself and that I myself... And I didn't have the resources or the tools to defend myself at the time.

You have a lot of conspiracy theories and so on. In the end, as a young lad of sixteen years old, in the middle of your adolescence, to defend yourself, I found that a very difficult...

And I noticed that it was only getting bigger. So my well-being has really reached an all-time low, so I had to double up for a year, that I really didn't want to do it anymore. I went to boarding school for a year. That certainly didn't help that. And finally, in my fourth year, around December, just before the Christmas holidays, I decided to leave myself. And that actually came, after orchestrated bullying initiatives are being done against me even from the management, from teachers.

To give just one example, during PE class the management said 'hide that calculator in Hamza's gymnastics bag, that we can say it was stolen'. Yes. I immediately saw that it was a set up. That it was so far-reaching is something that I could not imagine today.

But when I heard, within my group of friends, even in other schools, that was the most normal state of affairs. 'You are the student, you have nothing to say'. It was really the authoritarianism from the school and the management. And real scaremongering even.

And then you as a young adolescent of foreign origin, who is still in the process of discovering himself, and who then for all of them...

The problem is also parental involvement. That is a problem that we still have today. And my mother spoke the language well. She also came to Belgium at a young age. But she didn't always understand the context. So that was often a very impulsive reaction against the school.

But in the end, to fast-forward, I arrived at the OLVP as a sixteen-year-old in the fourth year of secondary school (*ed. Our Lady Presentation*). And that was for me... Wow, I'm seeing a friend of mine who I know from outside the school. I see girls here, which we didn't have in college. That was mainly a boys' school. But because of the management, because of my great popularity, I was promoted to gang leader after two or three months. So in the end... That's not exactly a...

EVELYN

It wasn't much better.

HAMZA

It wasn't much better. Indeed not. And in the end, I had to wait for an official apology until I got my degree. That they said 'yes sorry, I didn't mean that'. But I remember that very well. When my dad had to look up what that word means, gang leader, because he didn't know that word, I sat in my room for a whole weekend.

Because of something you didn't do. I did grow up with that feeling of injustice. Enormously. That is also something that I have held in high esteem over the years. Don't do injustice. Don't do injustice. You can't stop people from wronging you. That's kind of how the world works, I guess. But don't do yourself an injustice.

EVELYN

Which is nice, because you could just as easily become bitter or start rebelling against...

HAMZA

I think... My main support at the time was to gain knowledge. At some point, I just clicked and just started reading like a freak.

Until I read a book a day. Which wasn't necessarily a good thing, because the Dutch-language books... There is a difference between the Arabic lessons we used to get in the mosque. I'm going to say, that was also some occupational therapy. Yes. That was mainly from... Am I going to get spanked this weekend or not? Because that was kind of the teacher's job. If you hang it out a bit, get a beating.

So we did get basic Arabic, but most of them got a backlash, because it wasn't a comfortable environment. Most of them just said they had to do it from their parents. They just stopped. But the Arabic that is then unconsciously licked at the mosque, most have said that they should not know about it. I started to gain knowledge in Dutch, but the problem is that all, but also all Dutch-language books that existed at that time were sponsored by Saudi Arabia. That was a very narrow Salafist interpretation of Islam.

And actually, a lot of people stuck with that idea. With age, that flattens out a bit, so to speak. But this was certainly not the right knowledge. Absolutely not. But the problem was that it was mainstream. You have to know that billions of euros or petrodollars are being pumped in to make that kind of vision mainstream in the West.

And it wasn't until I went to university, KU Leuven, that I started to see things completely differently. Because even at a university of applied sciences, you get a very well-behaved inside perspective. But really very well-behaved. That is not enough.

When I was in college, I was taught by a Tunisian man who himself was taught by the Dominicans in Paris. I'm not going to say an anti-Islam movement, but still... Who do have a serious opinion. And it has actually leveled all our accumulated beliefs and ideas from the past few years to the ground.

You have an inside perspective, but you can also look at things in a different way. And that really broadened my view, to say 'ah yes, now that you mention it, you're kind of right'. So are those things that you consciously choose? No. I went to KU Leuven for a better degree and a higher salary. That was my first goal.

But that you were going to learn so many things... My best subject was introduction to Judaism. Whereas before I thought 'Judaism, no rather not'.

So in the end, that education and general my knowledge... Your view only gets wider and wider.

EVELYN

Is that also what you want to pass on to your children? Do you want to pass on a broader perspective and a piece of knowledge?

HAMZA

Sure. With us, when my children come home, we always have a moment at four o'clock. How has the day been? What happened today? Now, I mainly let my children discover most of it for themselves.

I try not to play a role there where I impose it, where they come up with questions themselves. You see, and that is an advantage, you have a boy and a girl. Girls can often be affected by small things. Then I explain the difference and importance of an EQ. Not just an IQ, but she understands that.

Now, they're six and nine now. They already know most of it just by setting an example. When I pray, they automatically join me in praying. They say they haven't prayed today. I'm not going to be the bogeyman who's going to say you have to. It is setting an example.

There are certain things that I think are very important, that they also pick up on themselves. But again, by leading by example. For example, don't lie. That's something... Yes, you can say 'a white lie'. But I'm always teaching them... Okay, if you lied, what are the consequences?

So eventually, I think it evolves with them. But we give that in a gentle way. It is always by example.

I then mainly have my wife, my beautiful wife, who is also a role model within the household. Not that I'm a role model, but mostly them. And it's mainly that children need it.

BASKET

During our preliminary conversation, you talked about those seven years in children. Can you repeat that? I thought that was a very nice idea.

HAMZA

Sure. The Prophet's nephew, Muhammad, was named Ali. He also became one of the caliphs after the death of the Prophet. A caliph is a leader of the Islamic Empire. He was best known for his wisdom. Now, he has explained the upbringing of a child in a very easy way.

Today, as a parent, you are sometimes ashamed to ask for external advice. But he explained it very simply. Do you want your child to have a good life span? That you have a certain bond with your child? Then follow this advice.

For the first seven years, it is important that you play with your child. That you mainly play with your child (لَاعِبِهِمْ – 'la'ibuhum'). You shouldn't be busy with rules or imposing things yet. No. Let that kid do it.

You have to remember that every human being has a natural aptitude to know what is wrong and what is not. Even an animal, a cat for example, if it steals a piece of meat, it is not going to eat it. He's going to take that and run with it. Your child knows what is allowed and what is not. Let that child discover for himself. It is especially important that you are engaged with your child.

I always say, even when I'm teaching... Now I'm your teacher, but at home I'm Superman or I'm Pocahontas or somebody else. I notice that too.

During my university reprocessing, I became a dad twice during that period. Once at the beginning and at the end of my training. I can already see how that has rubbed off on my daughter.

I often sat at my desk working and she always had a small desk next to me and she pretended to be reading. So that first period, just playing with them. That's something we forget to schedule in our busy daily lives.

Really playing with the kids, going outside, doing crazy things.

And the second period, from seven to fourteen years, that is the period in which you normally learn a little bit about what knowledge is, what is good, what is bad, how should I behave and so on. But Ali said: not 'teach them', but said, *teach them the good* (أَدِّبُهُمْ – 'addibuhum')

In Arabic, that means ethics or morality. He said, from seven to fourteen, teach them good morals. Again, that's another second foundation that you're building.

It's like a tower, really. So if you haven't spent those first seven years playing with them, you're not going to be able to build that second level. And after that, from fourteen to 21 years old, which are the difficult years, Ali has said, 'sahibuhum' (صَاحِبِهِمْ) '*Be their friend, be their companion*'. If anything, you're there for them. But again, you must have experienced that in those two previous stages.

And now I often notice with young people, they very often do things sneakily and the last one who should know is the parents. Whereas, you see, that's an upside-down world actually. Because insufficient investments have been made in the first two phases.

Yes, be their companion, be their friend. Don't force anything, don't impose anything, but if they need you, you're there for them.

I've also had that relationship with my parents. I still say it, if someone asks me who my best friend is, I say my dad. And who my best friend is, Mom.

I don't make any choice in my life before I consult with my mom. And even though it doesn't have the technical knowledge that I sometimes want to achieve in my life, but sometimes it says... Yes, but that doesn't suit you. You have a different character.

And that's why the... That may be the wisdom behind it, that I went to Mecca at the age of 21. Then I come back to another phase. And that takes up to forty years. I think women mature faster than men. We have been given a postponement of up to forty years.

BASKET

Happy.

You were just talking about it, that openness. That open mind you've learned. Now, if you're...

We live in a society with many philosophies. How do you see that openness, from your background, to all those others in society? How do you imagine that would work?

HAMZA

If all goes well, I want to make the link with one of the songs I chose.

EVELYN

That is certainly allowed.

HAMZA

One song is called 'Kun Anta'. That literally means 'be yourself'. By Homood AlKhudher.

I think he's an Egyptian man. And it's about embracing who you really are. Today, a lot of people lack their own identity. They often try to imitate someone else.

Now, first of all, if you already know who you are, and that is often something that is very difficult. We try to get along with everybody, do all sorts of things, but when I ask someone what defines you, who are you?

Even people who are already elderly can't answer. We often start by saying 'I'm that job'. You've described me as an Islam teacher, because that's my job. But does that job define me? In my case, maybe yes. But if I were to say that I am an IT professional, is that who Hamza is?

So that's important. Who am I? What defines me as a person?

Right away... I'm going to go back to the verse I've already quoted. In the Qur'an, in chapter 49, verse 13, it says, *O mankind*, and in certain contexts God talks to 'O believers', but in



other verses God talks to man in general. *We have you*, and that we, that is not that God is plural, but that is a we of power. As the king says, 'we are king of the Belgians'.

*So We created you from a man and a woman, and We made you the nations and tribes so that you might know one another.* In the end, that is the essence. We focus too much on the differences, but I also think that there are too few sincere initiatives to get to know each other.

Society is often built on prejudice. And that's because there are no sincere overtures to the other either.

Regardless of what your religious beliefs are...

I had a meeting with a number of colleagues last night. This year we will start ILD in the third grade. ILD stands for inter-religious dialogue. That means that half of my teaching hours will be filled by that project.

I think that's a great initiative. This has been imposed by the government in order to preserve our profession. But in the end, I like the fact that it starts at the school itself.

It is sometimes difficult for a person who has grown up in a certain context and has a certain vision to take off those glasses and say 'I'm going to listen sincerely and really show interest in what the other person has to say'.

For example: at our school, we do an iftar every year. It is in the month of Ramadan. That's often used by politicians, but we did it effectively to get to know each other. And that's always such a beautiful moment. That is a moment of reflection, of sitting together, of sharing a meal together. I always give a short lecture at such an iftar. To say okay, what's the essence now?

People often say during the month of Ramadan 'oh those Muslims, look will go hungry again, right?' There are even t-shirts nowadays that say 'no water either'. Because our non-Muslim colleagues ask that question over and over again.

So in the end, I think... More safe spaces need to be created where people can meet in complete safety and serenity. That doesn't happen enough today. Because if that's not within a school context... It must be a coincidence that you meet someone at work with a foreign origin, but often you see that you have a completely different image than how that person is actually like.

But that's usually it. And that's the problem. It's always a first step from each side, but that's usually the end of it.

But at the end of the day, you have to emphasize: we are people first. I say the same to my fellow Members. If they tell me they have a question about Islam, I also like to talk about what I ate yesterday or where I like to travel.

That's the problem that we often put each other in short of a hat. But also, I think that needs a certain maturity to be able to deal with it. With young people today, you can see that the us-versus-them is still very much alive.

This is often reinforced by social media. It's often 'they're bad' and so on... But that's not how you get any further in the end.

BASKET

You've already quoted one song. You also have a second?

HAMZA

The second is by an Iranian singer. He's more than a singer. He is a multi-talent.

He was mainly born at a time when Salafism was still very mainstream. It was actually from... That's bad and so on.

And that's a question I hear a lot from my students. Are we allowed to listen to music as Muslims? Yes.

And then I say, what does your heart say? If you listen to music about money and about a lot of girlfriends and so on, then that is indeed less ideal for a Muslim than music that gives you peace or that makes you reflect. Those are types of music. I don't want to put it all on one camp.

So this guy was very popular. He ended up moving to London, I think, because he was too busy. At the time, it was mainly because there was a different vision.

Whereas if we only go back a few hundred years. Many philosophers and scholars attach enormous importance to poetry, to music. Until actually... It's only in the last 150 years that such a click has happened.

Sami Yusuf's second song is called 'Hasbi Rabbi'. That basically means "God is enough for me." And that is... The feeling of peace you have, of trusting in... God has a plan for me. Sometimes you don't understand that plan. Sometimes it's okay not to understand that plan. Sometimes you are indeed in a pit and then you wonder where that ladder is. But that also makes me think about the verse in the Qur'an. To which God says back of the we-form.

*And we will certainly try you with something.* And that means something... We're never going to drop a mountain on your head overnight. God is going to test you to the extent that you can. With your character, your personality. With something of fear, hunger, loss of wealth, so poverty, ... Lives. You see people dying around you. You see people who have cancer. And you wonder if it's all fair.

But God says... *But proclaim the good news to those who are patient.* So... That's kind of what a person of faith experiences in his life. But I'm going to say... That's not always easy. Sometimes it is indeed difficult to find God at such a low point. Because you often don't immediately make the click of... 'What I'm experiencing now is good for me'.

BASKET

Actually, you've now given the introduction to my next question. When you say... There are events, experiences of which you say at the time or perhaps afterwards 'there is more going

on here than just a coincidence'. Can you cite an example of this yourself, from your own life?

HAMZA

Yes. I told her that I had saved up the little savings my mother had saved for me in Mecca. The night before I left, I invited all my friends. That's a relative word, friendship. What does friendship actually mean?

So we had dinner at my house. Everyone started saying, 'bring that for me, can you bring that for me...'? To make the long story short, what I spent on presents, or rather shopping list, cost as much as my trip itself. I remember that very well. My suitcase weighed 56 kilos at the time.

In one suitcase, huh. In the end, that was a suitcase that we had to force, which was cracked in the middle.

So I came back... And I think I started my studies with a few hundred euros in my pocket. But in the end, that money ran out fairly quickly. Because yes, I'm not going to cook every day. You often eat outside as a student. One day I went to withdraw money and I saw 2.56 euros in my account. What are you going to do with 2.56 euros? What are you going to do with it? That's not half a sandwich these days. But in the end... I went to Aldi with that little bit of money. That was the only thing I could do within walking distance. And then I bought spaghetti and tomato sauce. That was just within my budget. And so many people have eaten from that. I felt a bit like Jesus with the bread and wine at that moment.

Final... when I was a student, I worked here in the Shopping Center in Sint-Niklaas, at the pizzeria. That's when I started applying for jobs. And that boss happened to call me the next day. I don't call it accidental. It all has to do with a divine plan. Now, not only did I have a decent salary at the time, because suddenly I went from zero to a nice 2000 euros a month as a student. Which was a lot for me. But I also arrived at my dorm every evening with pastries, pizzas, mosses, you name it. Of which not only my friends ate, but everyone in their dorms.

So I also brought sandwiches that were not halal, but they were all eaten. There was nothing left. This is an example of which I say... There's something behind it.

Now, often in times of need, in times of trouble, people go on a non-divine path to get out of their own problem. With the idea that it will work out that way.

I have students in my class, 16 years old, and they say to me 'you don't have to tell me anything, because I earn four times what you earn'. But yes, that's walking a non-divine path. But God says very clearly in the Qur'an, and those... And that is already a translation and interpretation. **تقوى** (taqwa) in Arabic is translated as fear of God, but that is not correct. It is God-consciousness. God says that *the one who is aware of God, God will give him a way out and provide him from an angle that he did not expect*. So, trust it.

And that angle that I didn't expect, I never expected to have that job. And in the end... I moved on to assistant manager in six months, which was suddenly wow for me, because at

the age of 21 I was responsible for four restaurants. I thought that was a luxury. But I did neglect my studies in that area, though. I couldn't have it all.

EVELYN

That was the downside.

HAMZA

Certainly, a small drawback.

That was my nickname by the way, 'the good Moroccan'.

EVELYN

Fantastic. Beautiful.

BASKET

We're already making good progress in our conversation. And we present everyone with a certain statement. Now, there's been a lot of talk about it, but it might be good to summarize it again. It's from a book by a Canadian writer, Greta Vosper. And she's written a book called *With or Without God?* It's more important how you live than what you believe in." They do believe in the meaning of a religious belief. If you saw that title, what would be your reaction to it?

HAMZA

Ultimately, I think for me, believing is kind of a compass. A kind of compass in your daily life. So you can be religious, but you can't practice. Or you can see that your actions are in line with what you believe. And as I say, everyone faces that non-divine path at some point in their lives. But for me, my actions, my choices in life, must always be in line with what I believe.

Now, believing... When you say, as a Muslim, how do you experience that in practice? My actions must be in line with what I believe. What does that mean for you as a Muslim? I say that very easily. A quarter of the Qur'an consists of ethics. A quarter out of ethics. So that's where the focus is already. The purpose of prayer is to keep you away from bad things. To improve your behavior. The purpose of fasting is not only fasting with your stomach, it is also fasting with your mouth, with your eyes, with your ears. So at the end of the day, you have a certain basis, but it has to be in line with each other.

And that is something that I miss very often with young people, but even with the elderly. That their actions, their behavior, are not in line with what they believe.

Now, that's why I always talk about being God-conscious. What you do, the reactions you give, the way you interact with people. Do you do that consciously, yes or no? So the question is, with or without God? With God, of course, but in accordance with your actions.

Yes... And not just, seeing things as two separate books. And that's a problem. I always say that to my students. You are ambassadors of your religion. What you do has an impact on how people look at you.

They have an OC about this in the sixth year. A research competence, a kind of mini-thesis in which they have to investigate current events and show how young people are doing and

then show the contrast with what we actually have to do. That's great to make that click, or to look at that connection.

EVELYN

Yes. Beautiful. A little introspection.

HAMZA

Definitely, definitely.

EVELYN

Hamza, there is one more question we ask all our guests. And that is whether they have a certain book that inspires them or determines their worldview. We have already heard you quote from the Qur'an, but you have also brought another book with you. Tell me.

HAMZA

I have to say, I have a very large library. The moment I started browsing... I've been pulling out one bookmark after the other. I found it a difficult choice. Why I chose this book...

This book is by Ghalib Benhaddou. That's actually kind of the reference point in Belgium if you have a question for a modern imam, so to speak. A bit of a controversial figure, because he is also politically mixed and often acts out of self-interest.

But apart from that. I've known Ghalib for a long time. That was also someone who came to live in our dorm and went crazy with us. So for me, he still remains the Ghalib of the past.

Now, one thing is. We all used to think the same way. I said that. For us, Saudi influences were the standard. He has begun to delve again into philosophers and enlightenment and so on and has developed a more nuanced picture as a result. His book is called '*Is this Islam? How I, as a Muslim, go for new times: rational, European and conciliatory*'.

Okay. Personally, that title sounds very nice. I myself am not a fan of 'European Islam' or 'Belgian Islam'. But it's more of 'how am I supposed to understand that' and 'how am I supposed to practice that' where I live. But the rules are open to interpretation and flexible. But when I talk about European Islam, that is precisely delegated from politics.

The title is 'In Search of Mouthpieces'.

*Throughout its history, the West has already had far-reaching discussions about the role of the Church and about Christianity. The Muslim world is now experiencing this to some extent. And sometimes I can understand from Europe that there is a distrust of Islam and Muslims because of the deplorable level of debate, which feeds polarization. Are we still no further than 19th-century poet François-René de Chateaubriand? He looked down on the East from his deep Christian faith. When he made his first trip to Egypt, he said, "This is not the East that I know." Yet he had never been there before. His image of the East was the product of his imagination alone, and he used that imagination to measure reality.*

*We are sick in the same bed today. We take our stereotypes and prejudices as a measure of reality. And then we are surprised that someone of a different culture or faith that we get to know personally by chance is different from what we had imagined.*

*Islam and Muslims are often discussed without Muslims. In other words, people are objects, while real results can only be achieved when Muslims are considered as subjects in their own right.*

*It is a difficult exercise, because there is also a lot of mistrust between the Muslim communities. The Muslim world consists of many different movements, each of which is convinced of their right from their own vision and their own history, and that makes it very difficult to get things in order. After all, which figures are representative? Who can be presented in the media as the voice of the Muslim community?*

*Should extremists have their say? The hate preachers, if they were willing to testify openly in front of the cameras? Neither.*

*People who are looking for balances, who have the trust of the Muslim community and can interpret their voice, but who also connect with Belgian or Flemish opinion. Not everyone has to agree with their ideas, but there may be a debate in the aftermath.*

*It takes an awful lot of work to get a different vision of Islam that does fit in Europe to seep into all sections of our society. This must be done through the mosques, through the imams, through the schools, through the translation of important works from Arabic, so that the whole of society can work on these issues.*

This text is a bit about the shortage of mouthpieces and also about, as I say, seeing Islam and Muslim as an object and not as a subject. I often notice when people do make it to the seventh day, that they know very well who they are choosing. That they put someone who is less articulate against someone who is very articulate.

EVELYN

There is clearly still work to be done, but you are also very passionate about this, I think, from your work.

HAMZA

Definitely, definitely.

EVELYN

In any case, I thought it was a very nice and enlightening conversation. I think it will certainly have been interesting for our listeners as well. Reactions are also welcome via our website and via our social media.

Thank you, Hamza, for your time and all the inspiration.

HAMZA

You are welcome.