Perspectives in the Study of Religion
Perspectives en sciences des religions
Perspektiven in der Religionswissenschaft
Prospettive in scienze della religione

Religious authority in the digital age: Exploring the reception of fatwas and muftis among Muslims in Germany

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Published on 05/05/2026

Abstract

Fatwas, Islamic legal guidance, and muftis (Islamic scholars) hold profound significance in the everyday lives of Muslims, providing essential guidance on religious norms and principles and orienting individuals toward living in accordance with Islamic precepts. This study concentrates on the pertinence of fatwas and muftis for Muslims residing in Germany, with particular attention to the evolving landscape shaped by contemporary digital media. It investigates how the notions of fatwa and mufti are construed and operationalized by individuals: specifically, what meanings German Muslims attribute to these concepts and which factors influence their adherence to fatwas. Moreover, the study interrogates the primary sources German Muslims consult for religious guidance, underscoring the increasing primacy of the internet as a key mediator of Islamic knowledge. To frame this inquiry and contextualize the discourse, the analysis engages with foundational debates within both Islamic studies and the social sciences, employing Max Weber's sociology of domination as a theoretical lens to interpret empirical findings.

1. Introduction: Fatwa, religious authority, and media

A fatwa is a religious explanation or legal instruction issued by a mufti or a qualified Islamic jurist (*faqīh*) in response to a query from a person, referred to as a *mustaftī*, seeking advice. Fatwas aim to clarify complexities and provide concrete guidance on how to conduct oneself in accordance with Shariʿa law in various aspects of life. Shariʿa, described as the "core and kernel of Islam itself" (Schacht 1982: 1), represents the foundational Islamic framework guiding Muslim behavior in areas such as personal conduct, familial relationships, state affairs, and societal interactions (Rohe 2011; Vikør 2005). However, interpretations and applications of Shariʿa vary widely among Islamic communities and cultures worldwide. This diversity stems from several factors that have also led to the formation of different schools of law and theology throughout Islamic history. Key reasons for this diversity include the inherent ambiguity found within the primary texts, the Qurʾan and Sunna; the absence of a singular clerical authority responsible for definitive interpretation of these texts; and the

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To quote this article: El-Wereny, Mahmud. 2026. "Religious authority in the digital age: Exploring the reception of fatwas and muftis among Muslims in Germany." *ARGOS* 5 (2), Special Issue *Contested, Conflated, Converted: Dynamics of Religious Authority in Minority Constellations and Digital Media,* 123–147. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2026.9762.

development of multiple interpretive methodologies to address the varied realities and challenges faced by Muslims (Masud 2009; Melchert 1997).

Since it is not feasible for every Muslim to independently interpret the normative sources of Islam to find answers to their questions, many Muslims seek advice from a respected and credible mufti or Islamic scholar. These individuals are qualified to issue religious rulings or fatwas. Although essentially non-binding, the acceptance of these fatwas fosters a relationship of authority between the mufti and the individual seeking advice. This relationship is rooted in trust in the scholar's expertise and their ability to provide guidance that both aligns with religious principles and is pertinent to the person's particular situation (Ibn Qaiyim 2003: 82; El-Wereny 2017: 101).

The elements involved in the issuance of fatwas (*iftāʾ*)—namely the *muftī*, the *mustaftī*, and the *fatwā* itself[1]—constitute the essential components of a relationship of authority. Viewed from an Islamic perspective, a mufti is perceived as a "translator" or "representative" of God's will, and fatwas serve as guides toward living a life in accordance with Shariʿa law. Throughout the historical development of Islamic law, the practice of issuing fatwas has contributed greatly to the expansion and continuous evolution of Islamic law. As such, fatwas function by providing pivotal authority to help Muslims adapt to a wide array of new situations and complexities posed by changing times (Hallaq 2009; Agrama 2010; Awass 2023: 312).

The advent of the internet has fundamentally transformed the means and methods of issuing fatwas. Traditionally, individuals sought out the local mufti or imam within their community to pose their questions and receive guidance through fatwas. Nowadays, the internet has greatly expanded access to this kind of religious counseling. Unlike traditional mediums of communication such as radio and television, cyber-fatwas provide a more organized categorization of Islamic laws, dedicated platforms, relative privacy, and significantly easier access for individuals seeking religious guidance. According to Masud et al. "Muslims may now consult any number of muftīs worldwide, anonymously, instantly, and from the comfort of their home or local Internet café" (Masud et al. 2009: 242).

With a multitude of fatwas and religious content available online, the internet has become an arena where many contenders compete for interpretative influence and recognition. Not just individuals but also state institutions in Islamic countries have leveraged the internet for many years. They use it to communicate with Muslims domestically and internationally and to distribute religious content for *daʿwa* purposes—i.e. inviting people to Islam. Additionally, individuals, along with Islamist groups, have exploited the internet's extensive reach and accessibility to gain more influence. Thus, the internet has become a marketplace of fatwas and religious interpretations, providing unparalleled opportunities for a wider propagation of

[1] In the following, transliteration of the terms *fatwā*, *muftī*, and *mustaftī* will be omitted for ease of reading.

varied viewpoints and perspectives on Islam (Berger 1963; Brückner 2001; Hero 2018; El-Wereny 2020).

Bunt argues that many Muslims today are increasingly turning to the internet for advice and answers to their religious questions. He attributes the attractiveness of the internet to its anonymity, its time efficiency, and its broad range of available options. On the internet, asking intimate questions carries no risk of reprisal. In online settings, due to anonymity, individuals can voice opinions and pursue agendas that might be unfeasible elsewhere (Bunt 2018: 207).

Many studies examining the intersection of Islam and media identify the interconnected relationship between the evolution of the media landscape and the transformation of religious authority. Digital media not only provides access to a broad range of fatwas but also empowers laypersons to independently disseminate fatwas and information about Islam. Additionally, it enables participants to actively engage in religious discourse. This capability challenges the position of authority of local religious scholars in the production and dissemination of knowledge, thereby signaling a transformation in the dynamics of religious authority in the digital age (Robinson 2009: 349; Bunt 2018; Krüger 2012). In light of these developments, several authors hypothesize that traditional religious institutions are experiencing a decrease in their stature as the primary religious authorities. The decentralization and democratization of religious knowledge enabled by digital platforms have challenged these institutions once unshakeable positions, ushering diverse voices into the religious discourse (Abou El Fadl 2007: 26, 29; Bunt 2018: 73–74; Masud/Messick/Powers 1996: 23).

Despite explicit warnings in Islamic literature against issuing fatwas without appropriate knowledge—a practice considered sinful by religious authorities—there has been an ever-growing number of fatwas propagated from diverse sources in recent times. Some Sunni scholars label this phenomenon, greatly facilitated by the widespread use of digital platforms, as "fatwa chaos" (*fauḍā al-iftāʾ*) (al-Ashqar 2009: 20). The increase in fatwas also indicates a potential decline in believers' religious commitment and the diminishing value of fatwas. Helland posits that the plethora of online fatwas inevitably fosters a "pick and choose" mindset among fatwa-seekers. Rather than adhering to the standard religious guidance offered by a qualified mufti, individuals are sifting through and selecting fatwas that suit their personal beliefs or circumstances:

> "As an open and developing religious environment, the Internet caters to people who wish to be religious and spiritual on their own terms. In this environment, by developing and maintaining their own religious websites or by searching the tens of thousands of religiously oriented sites available, individuals can either create or simply find what they require religiously. (Helland 2004: 34)

This evolution of the accessibility of religious information has had a profound impact on religious authority. In academic circles, many describe this shift as "a fragmentation" of religious authority, as the centralization of religious interpretations and rulings is dispersed across multiple sources. However, others perceive this development as "a pluralization" of religious authority. Instead of viewing it as creating confusion or conflict, they argue that it offers believers an opportunity to interact with a broader spectrum of religious thought. This enables the faithful to delve deeper into their faith and explore various interpretations and viewpoints that may not be readily accessible in their local religious communities (Robinson 2009: 349; Reichertz 2018: 154).

In the face of these changes, individuals seeking religious counsel are faced with both the opportunity to explore a vast array of fatwas and the challenge of navigating this diversity or "chaos". This paper explores the interaction of fatwas amid the evolving media environment and within the context of migration. It aims to understand how fatwas are received and perceived by Muslims living in Germany in the midst of the sweeping changes brought about by the evolution of online media.

2. Objective and methodological approach

Numerous publications have examined the phenomenon of fatwas and the role of the mufti. However, the overwhelming majority focus on the theoretical and institutional dimensions of *iftāʾ* (the practice of issuing fatwas). These studies typically emphasize the qualifications, authority, and scholarly competence of the individual issuing the fatwa, as well as the representation of religious rulings in digital and traditional media contexts (Gräf 2010; Krawietz 1991; Krawietz 1995: 161–180). In contrast, less scholarly attention has been devoted to investigating the practical significance of fatwas in the everyday lives of Muslims, including how such juridical opinions are received, interpreted, and enacted by the wider Muslim population. This lacuna is notable given the pivotal role fatwas and Shariʿa play within Muslim communal identity and normative frameworks. A deeper empirical exploration of how fatwas are received and understood is thus needed for a more complete understanding of Islamic legal authority in contemporary contexts.

Examining the importance of fatwas and muftis for Muslims in Germany—particularly their connection to Islamic normativity and religious authority in the context of new media—forms the basis of this study. Of primary interest is how Muslims in Germany understand and interact with the concepts of fatwa and mufti: How do they interpret these concepts, and what criteria guide their adherence to fatwas? Closely linked to these issues is the examination of where German Muslims seek answers about Islam, along with the extent of the internet's role in delivering such information.

In addressing these questions, I rely on qualitative data gathered from my ongoing research project.[2] The study's research design employs a semi-structured interview guide, offering room for participants to express opinions freely and to delve more deeply into answers than they might in a standard survey. The study involves 46 interviews with Sunni Muslims, including Muslim immigrants, second-generation Muslims with immigrant backgrounds, and German converts. The age of the interviewees ranges from 18 to 66 years. Participants for the study were mainly recruited within mosque communities, predominantly those located in southern Lower Saxony. These locations were chosen primarily because they tend to attract devoted followers who strive to lead lives in accordance with Islamic teachings.

To ensure a diverse representation within the research scope, a snowball sampling approach was used. Each interview participant was asked to recommend other potential respondents who might provide relevant insights to the research questions. The interviews were conducted in a mix of German and Arabic, carried out within communal spaces or at my university workspace. Translations of any quoted excerpts from the Arabic content are provided by me.

The interview questions tackle the significance and the role of fatwas and muftis in the everyday lives of Muslims in Germany. This includes aspects like believers' media consumption and the resources they consult for fatwas, along with criteria used to acknowledge authority. The Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) serves as the foundation for analysis of the collected interview data. The GTM strategy for qualitative data analysis involves an iterative process of alternating between data collection and analytical stages, culminating in the generation of a theory grounded in the subject of the study (Glaser/Strauss 2010).

To adequately represent the participant's diverse understandings of religious authority, I employ a broader understanding of the concept of authority. This operational definition derives from the notion that religious authority rests with individuals or institutions who claim to articulate God's directives and who hold the requisite knowledge and understanding of Islamic scriptures to lead others in matters of faith. This aligns with Islamic theological discourses, where the function of religious authority is to shape convictions and rituals. In line with this understanding, Zaman defines authority as: "[T]he aspiration, effort, and ability to shape people's belief and practice on recognizably 'religious' grounds" (Zaman 2012: 29).

The interview participants mentioned various criteria for adhering to religious directives, indicating diverse expressions of obedience. Therefore, Weber's theory on the sociology of authority is employed to classify their responses. This approach offers valuable insights into

[2] The interviews evaluated for this article constitute a part of the research material gathered for my postdoctoral research project. This project is devoted to understanding the association between Muslim ways of life and Islamic normative values, both generally and specifically within the virtual sphere. It explores the locations, modes, standards, and outcomes of online *iftāʾ* connected with religious practices.

the dynamics of authority and legitimacy. It serves, therefore, as an orientation and framework for understanding and analysing the interview findings. Weber defines authority as the ability to issue a directive and have it been acknowledged and followed without it being perceived as forced or coerced. The acknowledgment of authority assumes the acceptance of the legitimacy claimed by an individual or institution. In other words, when a person with authority, in our case, a mufti, gives fatwas, followers willingly comply owing to their recognition of the said authority (Weber 1976: 124).

According to Weber's analysis, there are three forms of legitimacy that underpin figures of authority: *Traditional Authority* rests on a belief in the sanctity of traditions and rules that have been handed down and inherited through generations. *Charismatic Authority* is rooted in the exceptional personal charisma of an individual. This type of authority thrives on a belief "in the sacredness, heroic potential, or the exemplary character of a person or the commands unveiled or established by them [...]" (ibid.). It is the followers' commitment to and belief in the charismatic leader that grants legitimacy to this form of authority. *Legal Authority* is legitimized by a standardized and codified system of laws. This authority is respected and followed because it is backed by recognized legal frameworks or systems (ibid.: 124, 130). With regard to the question posed in this article of how Muslims in Germany acknowledge authority, this type of authority can be found in fatwa institutions or state bodies that issue religious advice—especially those observed in Islamic societies (Otto 2010).

The subsequent study is structured into three main sections, reflecting the research questions previously mentioned. The first section explores the understanding of fatwa among the participants. The second section presents the different information and communication media channels used for seeking fatwas and discusses the reasons for and against utilizing the internet. The third section applies Weber's typology of authority to examine criteria for selecting religious authorities and evaluating fatwas. Beyond Weber's traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal types, it introduces a discursive-pragmatic category encompassing Muslim advice-seekers who autonomously negotiate decisions rather than deferring to established figures. A concluding section will encapsulate the findings and link them back to the initial theoretical discourse.

3. Empirical findings

Understanding fatwas among Muslim adherents

The interview data offers various definitions for the term fatwa, reflecting the initial understandings and associations of participants. The predominant notion of Shariʿa's universality, widely embraced among respondents, suggests that Islamic rules and teachings hold validity for all individuals, irrespective of time or place. This notion is especially common among first and second-generation immigrants. In their understanding, fatwas are explicit directives given by a religious authority concerning the legal status of an issue at hand. A

fatwa elucidates whether carrying out an action is legal or illegal based on Shariʿa principles. It provides explicit guidelines for conducting daily life in line with Shariʿa. For example, one respondent, Samy, explained: "A fatwa distinguishes whether something is allowable, and therefore whether one may engage in it, or if it is prohibited, and hence one should refrain from doing it. Simply put, it clarifies whether it is *ḥalāl* or *ḥarām*" (Interview, Samy).

Fatwas, as fundamental component of Shariʿa, are not intended to only establish ritual, societal, or ethical norms but also to delineate how a Muslim should act in alignment with Islamic principles concerning political, economic, legal, and other issues. As Hilal, one of the interviewees, put it: "Shariʿa norms govern all aspects of life. Our entire lifestyle as Muslims should adhere to Shariʿa law, and this extends to political matters as well" (Interview: Hilal).

Although interviewees viewed Shariʿa as an all-encompassing set of guidelines, some topics like politics, inheritance, property, or criminal law were not identified as areas needing clarity or religious advice, especially in the context of migration. Rather, the range of issues for which participants sought advice from a mufti or religious guide includes ritual practices, social interactions, theological matters, gender roles, dress codes, and financial concerns. This finding supports the hypothesis in Islamic studies that fatwas are more often sought for explicitly religious questions and less often about legal and political matters. According to Masud et al., Muslims today have a more pronounced need for information on religious and societal aspects of Shariʿa —*ʿibādāt* and *muʿāmalāt*—over other subjects. This is based on the observation that modern mass media channels are increasingly issuing fatwas on religious obligations, rather than on legal matters (such as commercial, tax, contract, administrative, or criminal law) (Masud/Messick/Powers 1996: 29). This observation that the majority of everyday questions posed by Muslims revolve around religious matters, rather than legal or political ones, aligns with secularization trends observed among Muslims in Germany, as put forth by Rohe and Weyers (Rohe 2015; Weyers 2010: 162).

In addition, many second-generation Muslims and recent converts perceive fatwas, not as stringent Shariʿa regulations, but more as guidelines or recommendations for religious compliance. Fatwas influence their religious observances and social conduct in line with Islamic tenets and values but are regarded as offerings of religious advice that demand only a voluntary commitment, allowing for some flexibility in their implementation and adoption (Interview: Hilal).

For this group, a negative association towards 'fatwa' and 'Shariʿawas also observed: Some individuals who converted to Islam correlate the term fatwa with the issuance of capital punishments. These associations were largely ascribed to the depiction of Islam in Western media. Their conversion to Islam and subsequent deep exploration of its teachings reshaped their attitudes towards fatwas and Shariʿa, so they subsequently viewed them as a guideline for living according to Islamic principles. It was also noted among the interviewed converts that unlike Christianity, Islam does not have a singular dominant authority or hierarchical

structure. While some interviewees appreciated the resulting diversity of religious interpretations and opinions, others felt daunted by the challenge of navigating fatwas (Interview: Sofia).

On the other hand, some study participants did not place much importance on fatwas. These individuals generally dismissed the concept of living their lives according to Shariʿa law, finding the terms fatwa and mufti unfamiliar and difficult to understand. An example of this was Almasa, who mistook the term 'fatwa' for *al-fātiḥa*, the sura recited at the beginning of each prayer, leading her to be confused by the question (Interview: Amalsa). This stance does not reflect a shift in religious life nor is it a product of being situated in the context of migration. Instead, it stems from the low relevance of Islam in these participants' daily lives. Factors such as religious or non-religious upbringing and socialization were often cited as reasons for the lack of importance placed on fatwas. To illustrate this, interviewee Anisa explains her religious indifference in dealing with fatwas:

> "I think it's because I personally didn't really think about whether what my actions align with Islam or not. Because I don't think it was that important to me in my life. So I've tended to stick to these social norms, what's expected by society, what's perhaps also expected by my parents. (Interview: Anisa)

This statement exemplifies how a person's religious upbringing and perception of religion are deeply influenced by their family and social environments. Growing up in predominantly non-Islamic or secular surroundings may lead individuals to align more with societal norms and less with religious values. Similarly, participant Fatima's responses underscore how little fatwas, and religion in general, influence her daily life. She highlights her upbringing without them, contrasting it to others "who from a young age saw their parents praying throughout the day and their mothers wearing a headscarf, these individuals might find connecting to these topics comparatively effortless" (Interview: Fatima).

Navigating the fatwa landscape: The roadmap for advice seekers

A significant number of survey participants reported that they frequently seek fatwas and religious information about Islam online, often without any in-person guidance. The use of the internet is most common amongst newcomers to Germany, specifically refugees, due to the absence of a familiar religious infrastructure (such as native communities and Islamic libraries in their native language) and the daily challenges they encounter in Germany. They may not (as yet) know any local muftis or religious authorities they trust, while at the same time, the internet provides flexible and rapid access to a broad range of services in their native languages. Amr succinctly summarizes this situation:

> “The internet is undoubtedly the first place where I look for Fatwa. I see it as a great blessing from God nowadays. Thanks to the internet, which is nearly accessible everywhere, all conceivable questions can be answered. Previously, one had to turn to books, fatwa collections, or the sheikh of the local mosque. However, that simply isn’t as effortless here as it was in Syria. (Interview: Amr)

In addition to its accessibility, a major factor for preferring the internet over other advisory resources is the range of choices it offers—different solutions can be found for a single query. The mediums are also diverse: As shared by the interviewees, not only is text-based information available, but also videos and audio files providing comprehensive answers. The option to view or listen to fatwas or general Islamic information in video or audio formats is particularly appreciated. For instance, Ramy shared: “I enjoy watching lectures, typically during meals. I usually dine on my own and then, on my tablet, I view various sheikhs delivering speeches on YouTube. I simply observe and allow it to resonate” (Interview: Ramy).

Compared to the text-based materials found on online fatwa platforms, YouTube content often generates a higher degree of trust, as explained by participants. This trust in the content is mainly attributed to its visual aspect: Viewers do not only read texts that could have been written and posted by anyone, but they are also able to observe the individuals speaking. This visual validation enables them to identify and confirm the authenticity of the people delivering the messages.

Another factor leading to the use of the internet is the anonymity it offers. This is particularly valued by users when it comes to sensitive subjects like intimacy and sexuality. For Muslim women who have recently immigrated, the use of the internet extends beyond the temporary or situational requirements of migration. They generally do not alternate between offline and online guidance but display a fundamental preference for addressing religious queries online. They view the internet as a safe private space to explore personal topics that they might find difficult to discuss in offline settings, such as at social events or through established religious structures. The internet offers a platform where they can express, discuss, or pose questions about personal subjects, free from worries about potential social stigmatization, judgment, or consequences. This trend indicates that patriarchal structures in Islamic societies still significantly influence the dynamics between men and women—with some migrant women even viewing mosque visits as predominantly “men’s territory” (Interview: Boshra). This aligns with related research, such as the studies carried out by Braune and Cooke, which also highlight the importance of the internet for Muslim women and identify it as a critical driver of feminist individualization trends within Islam (Cooke 2007; Braune 2015).

While many participants regard the internet as their first go-to when seeking a fatwa, others, particularly second-generation immigrants or those who have resided longer in Germany, view it as a less reliable source for fatwas. They attribute their skepticism about using the internet for fatwas to the absence of quality control measures for religious content posted

online: “Anyone can post anything they want online and attribute it to a scholar” (Interview: Nader). Some respondents also question the validity of online fatwas due to the conflicting perspectives and the varied opinions encountered on the internet and, thus, opt to seek validation from local experts. They accomplish this by consulting trusted individuals within their social circle, referring to specialized literature or conventional print media, or getting in touch with credible sources abroad (ibid.).

This practice contradicts the common belief in Islamic legal thought that the issuance of fatwas is confined to a select group of qualified scholars. Instead, the empirical data collected for this study suggests that not only state-sanctioned muftis or privately educated scholars, but also personal acquaintances such as parents or friends, may give fatwas. Ramy provides an example of this, stating, “For certain questions, I would primarily seek answers at the mosque. Among my brothers [in Islam], many are well-versed in Islam and have extensive knowledge. If their help was unclear or unavailable, I’d discuss the matter with the sheikh, the imam of the mosque” (Interview: Ramy).

This quote adeptly illustrates the approach many Muslim immigrants take when seeking religious advice. The mosque is considered a safe environment where they can consult trusted individuals for religious inquiries. Yet, the community Imam is not a primary resource but rather is a secondary source of Islamic information. The preference is to initially discuss matters with co-believers, referred to as “brothers”, and learn from their experiences. Consulting with the Imam happens only when these co-believers are unable to provide sufficient guidance on the topic.

In this way, one of the interviewees, Omar, identifies his father as his primary source for answers to religious questions (Interview: Omar). This indicates that authority is established through the acknowledgment of the mufti’s person and the attribution of legitimacy to his directives. The dynamic of seeking and giving advice is not limited to interactions between a seeker and a knowledgeable scholar but also takes place among community members and lay believers. This assignment of authority requires not only religious knowledge but also trust. Trust is shaped by the local context (the mosque) and is closely tied to strict observance of religious duties and adherence to divine laws.

For Muslims in Germany, the internet plays a primary important role for those seeking fatwas, while trustworthy individuals are a secondary resource for religious advice. Yet, established fatwa offices in Islamic countries, such as al-Azhar, or the fatwa councils formed in European countries in the 1990s, like the *European Council for Fatwa and Research* (ECFR), were hardly mentioned by interview participants. Despite the fact that first-generation Muslim immigrants tend to use the internet as their principal resource for religious inquiries does not imply that their search for fatwas is haphazard. Rather, almost all study participants, especially those from Arab regions, stated that they frequented particular websites that they are familiar with from conventional mass media—books, radio, and TV—in their homelands.

Among the most commonly referenced portals for fatwas were *Islamweb* and *IslamQ&A*. Further, the sites of renowned experts and preachers from the Arab world were often referred to as sources for resolving religious queries. Those experts named most often include ʿAbd alʿAzīz Ibn Bāz (d. 1999), ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Kāfī (b. 1951), Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022), and Muḥammad Rātib an-Nābulsī (b. 1938). On the other hand, respondents who do not speak Arabic only mentioned German language sites which are often Salafist-aligned and can be assigned to the Salafist spectrum, such as *Islamfatwa.de*, *Botschaft des Islam*, the platform *Die Wahre Religion*—prohibited in Germany since 2016—, and YouTube preachers like Pierre Vogel and Abul Baraa (Interview: Nader, Karim, Ramy, Farha).[3]

It was common for all interviewees to encounter Salafist or Islamist content in their online searches, however, the majority of study participants either dissociated themselves from it or maintained a critical outlook towards it. Yet, as a result of their religious upbringing and socialization within their homelands, many newer immigrants often associate with conservative, Salafi-influenced content, but may also distinguish themselves from it. Other users, mainly converts as well as second-generation migrants—predominantly the young—often struggle to differentiate between liberal and radical content due to a lack of religious socialization. The cross-media framework and vibrant online presence of Salafism offer a simplified, binary representation of Islam that appeals to the varying needs and interests of this demographic, as well as offering a sense of community. This feeling of belonging appeals to many younger users, especially in light of experiences with social exclusion and discrimination (Toprak/Weitzel 2017).

In both online and offline consultations, those seeking religious guidance via fatwas do not take the information at face value. Rather, they apply a set of individual criteria to assess the authority and credibility of the person giving the fatwa, and thus, the validity of the fatwa. The following section will delve deeper into these criteria, shedding light on how recipients of these religious instructions evaluate and authenticate religious authority.

Parameters for the acknowledgement of authority[4]

With the evolving media landscape and the corresponding marketplace of religious offerings, many Muslims adopt a value-rational approach to evaluating fatwas, which is paired with a heightened interest in the clarity and understandability of fatwas or religious instructions. In this approach, individuals autonomously decide in favor of or against a religious lifestyle, and hence, for or against certain religious authority relations—their decisions can therefore be characterized as a process of reflection and inner reassurance.

In order to understand the criteria for attributing authority, I asked the study participants about the factors and conditions that would lead them to consider a mufti or a religious

[3] For more information about these scholars and websites see El-Wereny 2020.

[4] This chapter is substantially based on El-Wereny 2024.

institution as an authority. The feedback received was diverse, reflecting myriad perspectives. Analyzing these responses, I classified them into four categories. This typology was inductively created and is not to be perceived as a rigid or unchanging framework, but rather as an ideal-typical categorization that provides an insightful basis for understanding how authority is attributed. In addition, it is entirely possible for an individual to change between the different authority types and this occurs based on contextual factors depending on the situation and the type of question posed.

Traditional authority

The first category, which includes the majority of the study's participants, is 'traditional'. In this category, individuals attribute authority based on tradition. The assessment of the validity of issued fatwas derives from textual legitimization and the theological training received by the muftis. The personality of the individual plays a subordinate role as authority is assessed solely based on their possession of the appropriate qualifications. The required expertise includes not just knowledge of source texts, but also familiarity with legal methodology, traditions of legal schools within Islamic jurisprudence (*madhāhib*), and an understanding of the life context of the seeker, etc.

Many respondents described the mufti's expertise as a primary criterion for acknowledging his claim to authority. This is summarized in the following quote:

> "For me, a mufti is someone who issues a fatwa and who's been educated to do so. He comprehends the text, the Qurʾan, and the hadiths, ideally even memorizing them [...] and therefore has superior access to, and better understanding of these matters than I do, considering that I haven't been trained for this, don't speak Arabic, I'm unfamiliar with the original text, and don't comprehend the nuances of the Arabic language. (Interview: Murat)

The relevance of this foundational knowledge (Qur'an, Sunna, consensus, analogy etc.), from which the attribution of religious authority emerges, lies in how they are anchored in the Islamic tradition, more precisely in Islamic legal literature. Traditionally, these represent the first sources of legitimacy in the formation of norms in Sunni Islam. Earlier Islamic scholars of legal methodology defined knowledge of these *uṣūl*—the fundamental principles and sources of Islamic law—as a prerequisite to access *iftāʾ* (issuing fatwas) and independent *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning).[5]

The importance of having knowledge grounded in the legal school tradition for the attribution of authority raises the question of how Muslims react when a suitable solution to a particular issue is found in a different legal school tradition.

[5] *Ijtihād* (effort) refers to the exertion of mental effort by a jurist to derive laws from the foundational texts of Islam, the Qurʾan and Hadith, when a clear answer is not easily discernible from the texts. It is a critical component of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) (Hallaq 2001).

Most participants in the study mentioned legal school traditions as an additional consideration when assessing authority. They expect that a person providing religious guidance has an understanding of the established Islamic legal heritage and is cognizant of the diverse viewpoints of past authorities. However, most respondents hold a pragmatic approach to dealing with the different legal school affiliations, i.e., they typically do not differentiate between the four Sunni legal schools— Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī — and tend to follow fatwas that can be conveniently implemented in their daily lives. One common rationale given for a lack of strict adherence to a specific legal school was a fatwa's compatibility with daily life. Interviewees reflected a tendency to seek practical and manageable solutions within their religious practices:

> "Our religion is a religion of ease. I do not bind myself [...]. While I respect all four legal schools, I do not bind myself to a particular one. In my homeland, however, I follow the Mālikī legal school, as the countrymen there, in Sudan, I follow the Mālikī legal school. (Interview: Taha)

This quote indicates that it is quite common to alternate between different schools of law, particularly if one offers fatwas that are simpler or easier to apply to everyday life. The interviewee's willingness to adhere to the *madhhab* prevalent in his home country underscores the importance of schools of law in Islamic societies. Additionally, the quote illustrates the logistical challenges that can arise in the context of migration, which can cause fluidity in whether adherents affiliate with a specific *madhhab* or not.

Many participants, especially those with a migration background, did not tie themselves to one traditional legal school authority, often due to the desire to find a balance between the commandments of religion and the reality of life in a predominantly non-Muslim society. At the same time, many participants feel overwhelmed when navigating the diverse opinions and fatwas they encounter online. Therefore, they often resort to evaluating the evidence supporting the issued fatwas themselves. This approach is particularly common among converts, due to their unfamiliarity with the various legal schools. Susanne provides an example of this independent research into fatwas, unconstrained by a specific *madhhab*: "I don't know much about the schools of law yet and, uh, that's why I first conduct a broad search" (Interview: Susanne).

In such situations, pragmatism often guides decision-making on fatwas, with convenience and necessity becoming the decisive factors. Take Michael as an example: He opts to combine his prayers when his work schedule conflicts with the designated prayer times. He justifies this action by weighing the importance of prayer—which can be made up later—against the need to preserve his employment, which is crucial for his livelihood. As he puts it, "I need the job to survive" (Interview: Michael).

In order to justify prioritizing ease when arguing for or against a certain authority or certain fatwas, some interviewees refer to the traditional religious texts—the Qurʾan and the Sunna.

The Prophet Muḥammad said "always chose the easier path," as asserted by interviewees Michael and Mariem. The Prophet recommended taking the path that brings relief and not difficulty when choosing among multiple opinions. They added: "God intends ease for us, not hardship" (Interview: Mariem). These justifications support an individual's religious autonomy and are also substantiated with religious references. As such, religion is credited with the intrinsic endorsement of the individual's decision-making and interpretative autonomy, even regarding fatwas. Therefore, being governed by a traditional authority does not inherently conflict with the autonomy of those following its rules. Conforming to a tradition can coexist alongside religious individualism. Given that tradition is dynamic and subject to interpretation, traditional authorities hold considerable liberties when interpreting the foundational texts and can thus offer fatwas adjusted to a specific time and place.

Discursive-pragmatic authority

Discursive-pragmatic authority designates a type of authority where subjects' compliance is not grounded merely in faith in the sanctity of tradition or the exemplary status of an individual. Instead, it fundamentally relies on a reasoned conviction in the practical directives issued by the authority. This form of authority entails the active engagement of the mustafti (recipient of juridical opinion) with the mufti, characterized by questioning and deliberating together over the issued fatwas. The term "discursive-pragmatic" highlights the dialogic and rational negotiation central to this model of authority, setting it apart from models that yield uncritical acceptance based solely on reverence of tradition or personality. While those who respond to traditional authority rely predominantly on their religious tradition in their acceptance of authority, those who respond to discursive-pragmatic authority are typically better educated and adopt more analytical stances. They insist on understanding the substance of fatwas and religious rulings, with particular emphasis on the coherence and practical applicability of the solutions provided. For example, Murat expresses:

> "It's crucial for me that I also strive to understand the issued fatwa. [...] The mufti should clarify it in a way that is easy for me to grasp. The importance he places on understanding is designed to facilitate my comprehension. [...] I want to know the reasoning, the source, and the method behind it. What is the foundation of his fatwa? (Interview: Murat)

Like several other study participants, Murat emphasizes that he seeks to understand not just the conclusions but also the foundational reasoning and methodologies behind the issued fatwas. He appreciates the mufti's focus on making the religious edicts comprehensible, indicating that it is necessary for him not only to know, but also to understand, 'why' a directive is given, its origin ('where from'), and 'how' it is formulated.

In a similar vein, Basma expects her online mufti to elucidate the arguments with such thoroughness and transparency that they can be verified: "If we want to practice our religion in a correct way, and we should have the responsibility to do so, it is definitely important to

always question the sources" (Interview: Basma). Similarly, Sumaya explains that if the logic and reasoning behind a given fatwa are coherent and understandable, it essentially becomes binding for her. She states, "I'm a person who seldom accepts people's views outright, I always check things out. Yet if a fatwa is entirely understandable and reliable to me, then it becomes obligatory" (Interview: Sumaya). Sumaya, mirroring other interviewees in this category, is unwilling to uncritically adhere to religious instructions. She prioritizes verifying the information she receives. If a fatwa is unequivocally transparent and comprehensible to her, it then becomes mandatory in her view.

In terms of the methods mustaftis use to verify fatwas, two strategies emerged from the interview data. In the first, interviewees described how they employ the internet as a tool, taking advantage of the plethora of online resources available. As an example, Basma refers to the YouTube channel *HAQQ Analytics* as a tool for her own validation of fatwas. This channel, according to its own description, conducts "*ḥarām* checks" on Muslim religious practices and evaluates relevant fatwas. As reflected in the interview data, this channel is considered a reliable source of information and thus a means to gain assurance, especially on contested fatwas and other topics related to Islam (Interview: Basma).

The second approach to validating and scrutinizing questionable fatwas involves offline consultation. Several interviewees mentioned that they sometimes struggle to independently evaluate different online fatwas and to choose a position. Consequently, they lean on the expertise of local imams or other trusted individuals. For example, Huda, a participant in the study, highlights the advantage of in-person conversations in facilitating interactive dialogues. She seeks out the authority of her in-laws because, unlike her parents, they are educated and also offer an environment that facilitates open discussions. As she expresses it: "And then *we* usually arrive at a conclusion that I understand, which is logical and also provides satisfactory answers to my query" (Interview: Huda, Basma).

Conversely, some converts often feel overwhelmed when faced with similar situations. While they aim to use their own common sense and make autonomous decisions, they frequently grapple with deciding on the validity of fatwas due to the inundation of diverse views in the online fatwa market, compounded by a lack of local alternatives. Sofia describes this predicament:

> "Yet it's typically not clear-cut in the end, you have to make a choice, right? You're presented with options, someone has told you: 'There's this viewpoint or that, or this one. And indeed, in the end, it boils down to making a decision, a weighing up. (Interview: Sofia; similarly Silvia and Anna)

This sentiment implies that the multiplicity found within Islamic normativity—the range of different viewpoints within Islam—doesn't always support the process of religious counselling. While it offers individuals the opportunity to compare and formulate their own perspectives, it also requires them to discern or evaluate the merits of diverse alternatives.

As a result, both converts and Muslims with a migratory background are challenged to find their footing amidst intricate authority dynamics when deciding whether to follow one or multiple authorities. Often, navigating this diversity involves relying on individual "conscience", which serves as a distinct kind of authority.

The term "conscience"—which the interviewees often used interchangeably with terms like 'calming of the heart', 'conviction', or 'feeling'—signifies a sense of peace as well as trust in the authority of issuing the fatwas. Consequently, rather than demonstrating acting on absolute obedience, believers want to feel comfortable when implementing a directive and ensure they have personal accountability (Interview: Amr; Mariam, Basma).

In this regard, many study participants deem the calming of the conscience as the ultimate determinant in to whether they accept or reject a fatwa. Yasser, for example, states succinctly:

> "Let's say there are two conflicting fatwas, from people I trust equally, then / I'm not sure if it's correct / but perhaps I would adopt the one that brings calmness in my heart or where I feel more peaceful. Well, I'm uncertain if this is acceptable in terms of Islamic law, that I can just make a decision like this [...]. Then I would select the one that is calmest for me, where I feel at my best. (Interview: Yasser)

This excerpt underscores the agency exercised by those seeking advice through fatwas. The act of selecting and reflecting upon content and evidence is a demonstration of religious self-determination by believers. As suggested by the quote, trust forms a fundamental basis in being convinced by the arguments for or against a fatwa. When multiple viewpoints offer comparable levels of clarity and persuasiveness, one's own conscience assumes the ultimate authority. Despite the interviewee's uncertainty about whether this approach aligns with Islamic jurisprudence, he might still choose to follow his heart or instincts. As such, the quest for peace of mind emerges as a key facet in the process of issuing fatwas, regardless of the extent to which a given fatwa adheres to Shariʿa stipulations. This indicates a growing tendency toward individualistic and autonomous religious behavior among Muslims.

In this context, many study participants highlighted the consideration of their life circumstances as a key factor in deciding whether to accept the directives of an authority. According to Mariem, a study participant, many traditional fatwas require updating to adapt to current contexts, particularly for Muslims living as minorities. She cites interfaith interactions as an example. She considers traditional outlooks on interfaith relationships to be outdated and hence unsuitable, as they fail to promote a harmonious and kind coexistence with non-Muslims. Consequently, she believes a religious authority must truly understand the living conditions of Muslims in a migration context and have the capacity to tailor fatwas to accommodate these local realities. In this way, she, along with several other interviewees, deviates from traditional fatwas on issues like extending greetings to non-Muslims during

religious celebrations (Interview: Mariem, Boshra and Huda—on the concept of conscience in Islam: Badawia 2016).

While *traditional* authority relies on tradition as the benchmark for recognizing authority and *discursive-pragmatic authority* endeavors to understand the internal logic and consistency of the argument, *charismatic* authority—followed by a minority of the study participants—primarily concentrates on the persona of the mufti, as will be elaborated in the following section.

Charismatic authority belief

Commitment to charismatic authority is visible when authority is assigned to a specific person because of their character traits. In this study, this applied to a minority of Muslim migrants (primarily older individuals), who, unlike those who follow the aforementioned authority types, put more emphasis on the personal appeal of the mufti. This attribution of authority relies on faith in the person, coupled with their charisma, repute, and credibility. Consequently, identifying the 'right' individual is deemed pivotal in the counselling process and in seeking fatwas. To quote Gamal:

> "First and foremost, I have to seek out a mufti who is qualified to issue a fatwa and with whom my heart finds peace. There are individuals who are God-fearing and possess a divine talent [...]. They can discern between what is wrong and right. These individuals have essentially been endowed by God with the capacity to issue authentic fatwas. (Interview: Gamal, Ridwan)

The quote implies that specific individuals are considered to have unique skills and can therefore be trusted with religious issues. Thus, the most critical stage in the counselling process involves finding a trustworthy person. These individuals earn trust due to their "divine talent" and perceived divine attributes. The quote also refers to the peace of conscience, which was previously described as a characteristic of religious self-determination, and here is regarded as a criterion for selecting an appropriate authority figure. The interviewees' belief that choosing the 'right' person is "the most important thing" stems from the fact that, once that person is chosen, their fatwas are viewed as binding. As Gamal puts it: "And if I have chosen a particular mufti, then it becomes obligatory for me to follow his fatwas. [...]" (Interview: Gamal).

Thus, believers who follow charismatic authority, unlike adherents of traditional and discursive-pragmatic authority, remove the obligation for authority figures to provide justifications for their fatwas and also demonstrate complete obedience to their rulings. Justifying this stance, an interviewee raises the question: "Even if the mufti provides the evidence, how is the advice-seeker supposed to distinguish between weak and authentic evidence?" (Interview: Gamal)

This unquestioning dedication hinges on the persona of the mufti and necessitates trust. To convey the importance of this trust-based relationship with an authority figure, Gamal uses the trust relationship between a patient and doctor as an analogy. "When you get a prescription from a doctor you trust, you don't question whether it's detrimental or beneficial for you. The real challenge lies in finding someone you can trust. You have to exert some effort to locate the right and trustworthy mufti for you" (Interview: Gamal).

The three authority types outlined thus far are bound by a degree of individuality. This means that authority is bestowed on the respective authority figure based on individual merit or on their professional and ethical competency. *Institutional authority*, on the other hand, is predicated upon the institution or office of *iftā'*, as will be detailed in the following section.

Institutional authority

Institutional authority is followed by those who seek fatwas from an institute in charge of *iftā'* (fatwa office, fatwa council, etc.). In this case, fatwas are not issued by a single individual, but by a committee that collectively arrives at decisions through discussions among multiple specialists, all of whom consider Islamic traditions in their deliberations. Tradition plays a significant role in this authority context. Therefore, this form of authority should not be viewed as purely legal or rational, as Weber would characterize it, with its roots in state structures, but rather as institutional-traditional. This implies that the norms and fatwas issued are not legal decrees or codified rules in the Weberian sense, instead, they are considered religious advice and guidance.

Based on the interview data, only a select few institutions emerged as key points of reference for addressing religious inquiries. These primarily include, as previously mentioned, the Azhar institution and the Egyptian Fatwa Office, which were often used interchangeably by the interviewees. Additionally, the *European Council for Fatwa and Research* (ECFR) and its subsidiary, the *Fatwa Committee Germany* in Frankfurt am Main, were frequently mentioned.[6] However, larger umbrella organizations or associations in Germany that represent Muslims within the state, such as *The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs* (DiTiB) or *The Central Council of Muslims in Germany* (ZMD), were not noted in the data. Despite their roles in supporting the spiritual lives of Muslims in the country and fostering an Islamic lifestyle, these organizations did not emerge as significant points of reference in addressing religious inquiries (Halm 2008: 85–95).

While one might expect individuals seeking advice to turn to imams representing these umbrella organizations in local mosque communities across Germany, notable criticisms of this option emerged. These criticisms are predominantly targeted towards local imams, especially due to perceived deficits in language skills, social understanding and cultural knowledge, as well as a disregard for diasporic living conditions. Many study participants,

[6] Fatwa Committee Germany: https://www.fatwarat.de/ (last accessed 12.09.2024).

notably second-generation migrants and converts, expressed dissatisfaction with German imams due to their conservative interpretation of traditional fatwas, which many interviewees perceived as outdated. These imams are often accused of disregarding local context and changes in lifestyle when handling legal matters. They are seen as following Shariʿa law in a strict manner, applying traditional norms to modern social realities. In this sense, Thamer expresses a skepticism towards imams who have largely lived in Arab countries and are relatively uninformed about life in Germany. He shares:

> “Often, when I encounter an imam who has only lived in an Arab country for 20 years and doesn’t know what life is like in Germany, I become a bit skeptical when he instantly responds, ‘It’s clearly this, this, and this’. [...] And I think to myself: We’re in Germany. Let’s discuss a little. (Interview: Thamer)

This stance suggests that there is a desire for more contextually sensitive, knowledgeable, and open-minded religious leadership that understands and can effectively respond to the experiences of Muslims living in diaspora situations like Germany.

The assumption that institutional authorities have lost prominence in modern societies is supported by the interviewee’s responses, which attribute only two roles to the most prominent institutions mentioned above—the Azhar and ECFR. The first role of these institutions is to use their authority to issue fatwas on religious occasions that concern the larger Muslim community. For instance, Gamal, the head of a mosque association, turns to the Azhar institution to address community matters. However, for personal queries, he opts to consult a private mufti who he regards as having charismatic authority (as mentioned above). This distinction underscores those institutional authorities, while still relevant in certain contexts, may no longer carry the same universal appeal or authority they once did, particularly in personal matters of faith and practice (Interview: Gamal).

The second role of these institutional authorities involves validating individuals as authority figures in the religious community. This means that a mufti who issues fatwas gains prestige and recognition due to his affiliation with a recognized religious institution. In this context, several study participants regarded education at al-Azhar University as a reliable indicator of a qualified mufti. These interviewees maintained that they would only seek counsel from scholars who have studied at al-Azhar. This suggests that institutional backing or authentication can effectively bolster the credibility and acceptability of religious leaders or scholars, indicating the significance of institutional authorities (Interview: Ridwan and Nader).

Yet, the decreasing importance of institutional authority was evidenced by the fact that only a small minority of all interviewees recognized religious institutions as a resource for religious counsel. Interestingly, no other fatwa offices in the interviewees’ countries of origin were mentioned, outside of a passing reference to the Indonesian Ulema Council by an individual of Indonesian descent. Therefore, the relevance of institutional authority appears to be

lessening, possibly in favor of more individualized or localized sources of religious guidance (Interview: Khalaf).

This diminishing significance of institutions can primarily be linked to modernization processes, particularly the concurrent shift in increased media usage. As one study participant effectively articulated, access to diverse perspectives through the internet can significantly influence the perception and utilization of traditional religious institutions:

> “The internet has helped me to view the religion from a different perspective. I now understand that a mufti doesn’t necessarily have to be from al-Azhar. Al-Azhar isn’t always correct. There are other viewpoints and I’ve read extensively about them [...]. YouTube now makes it possible to discuss all subjects. In the past, it was monotonous; what al-Azhar stated, we implemented. (Interview: Boshra)

This statement illustrates how the advent of digital technology and platforms such as YouTube are revolutionizing the way people access and interpret religious information. There appears to be a shift away from reliance on singular institutional authorities like al-Azhar, and towards a broader range of sources offering a variety of perspectives. This change in the religious landscape indicates a trend towards individualization, which is facilitated by the pluralization of the religious market. The rise in media usage and increased accessibility of diverse online offerings is leading individuals to question, not just the authority of traditional institutions, but also that of individual figures within their religious sphere. These observations align with theories presented in related literature suggesting a decline in the relevance of Islamic religious institutions. The transformation in how individuals interact with religion and religious institutions is inherently tied to the availability and ubiquity of the internet. Without it, such a dramatic shift in religious authority and individualization may not have been possible.

4. Conclusion

The central aim of this study was to investigate the function and significance of fatwas and muftis within the lived experiences of Muslims in Germany, particularly with regard to the normative principles guiding the recognition of religious rulings as authoritative and binding. The empirical evidence reveals that Muslims in Germany conscientiously strive to adhere to the legal and ethical precepts of Shariʿa across a variety of life circumstances. Nonetheless, this adherence predominantly manifests within the sphere of personal religious practices (*ʿibādāt*), such as prayer, fasting, and ritual observance, while its extension to broader societal and public interactions (*muʿāmalāt*) appears comparatively limited. This pattern underscores a selective implementation of religious jurisprudence, reflecting the complex negotiation between religious obligations and contemporary social realities in a pluralistic context.

Fatwas are fundamentally perceived as normative directives governing the permissibility or prohibition of particular actions within an Islamic legal framework. This normative function is

underscored by a pronounced disposition among those seeking religious guidance to exhibit compliance towards recognized religious authorities. The establishment of such a relationship based on authority necessitates the acknowledgment and acceptance of the legitimacy of the issuing entity. To this end, those seeking advice through fatwas articulate and apply specific criteria—delineated below—that inform and justify their recognition of a given religious authority.

The study further reveals that the adoption and internalization of Islamic norms, as well as the reception of religious directives, frequently deviate from formalized procedures. Specifically, the classic advisory relationship between mustafti and mufti does not invariably characterize the fatwa process. Rather, normative guidance derived from Shariʿa is often acquired through trusted interlocutors in one's immediate social milieu, such as family members, friends, or fellow adherents. Moreover, religious consultation increasingly occurs via a multiplicity of media platforms rather than solely through direct personal encounters. These findings substantiate the thesis that the constitution of religious authority is an emergent and dynamic phenomenon, contingent upon continuous processes of attribution and negotiation within socioreligious contexts.

In this context, the internet proves to be a significant source for clarifying religious issues. For Muslims in Germany, the logistical challenges, the unfamiliar minority situation, especially among migrants, and the lack of suitable alternative offerings in the diaspora, mean many of them turn to the internet for religious guidance. Many of the respondents in this study, particularly newcomers to Germany, highlight specific features of the internet—such as its optionality, time efficiency, diversity, and anonymity—as reasons for utilizing fatwa offerings on the religious online market. Conversely, a minority, mainly long-term migrant residents in Germany, emphasize the lack of clarity and transparency on internet fatwa portals and thereby show a preference for personal, local consultancy.

Although many respondents turn to the internet for fatwas, often encountering providers who issue conservative, Islamist or Salafi fatwas, this does not mean that they accept and follow these fatwas unquestioningly or without skepticism. Rather, these individuals actively delineate their own standards by which they attribute authority to those dispensing advice. Given the lack of a central regulatory body, as well as with the distinct traits of the internet and the life circumstances of those in a migration setting, fatwas are frequently subject to negotiation. Even if this negotiation, sometimes controversially termed as "pick and choose" (Helland 2004: 34), can lead to discretionary interpretations of Shariʿa norms, it simultaneously promotes religious individualization among Muslims. The question of how the choice of religious authority is determined, and by what criteria compliance deviates between a theoretical interpretation and a practical application, has been examined using Weber's typology of authority. The empirical analysis yielded four types of authority beliefs: traditional, charismatic, institutional, and a discursive-pragmatic.

The traditional authority type attributes great importance to the professional competence of the person giving advice and is content with religious tradition as the basis for legitimizing obedience. Yet, it is a person's charisma or good reputation, often closely related to their scholarship, that provides the authority for the second type, charismatic authority. In contrast, the construction of institutional authority is not related to the person of the mufti but arises primarily from the positional integration of the person into a religious institution. These three types largely align with Max Weber's typology of authority in their fundamental characteristics. However, his distinctions do not cover all observable criteria in the current study's data. Therefore, I added a fourth authority type: the *discursive-pragmatic*. Members who adhere to this type—in contrast to the other three authority forms—attach great importance to conviction and their own judgement. This means that they do not uncritically submit to an authority figure or unquestioningly obey fatwas solely based on religious texts delivered by the mufti or on their reasoning or charismatic qualities. Instead, they initially discuss the question with the mufti but then decide rationally and consciously on their own. They do not want someone else to decide for them but instead want to be able to rationally understand the information conveyed and the action suggested in the fatwa. Their obedience is thus characterized by a high degree of religious individualization and subjectivation.

The question of how significantly fatwas overall, and especially online fatwas, impact the lifestyle of Muslims in Germany and what elements substantially drive individualization trends for this demographic, are comprehensively tackled within the context of this research project (El-Wereny 2026).

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