



Islamic Theology at Western European Universities

*Articulating Ikhtilāf
in the Netherlands, Germany,
United Kingdom and Austria*

Welmoet Boender

BRILL

Islamic Theology at Western European Universities

Muslim Minorities

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In recent years, several state universities in Western Europe have established programs for teaching and studying Islam from a confessional perspective. The opening of public universities to this so-called Islamic theology is unprecedented in Western European modern history. According to Ednan Aslan, director of Islamic Religious Education and the Institute for Islamic Studies of the University of Vienna,

the most important challenge of the coming years ... will be in the 'housing' of the theological training within the context of academia, and the development of a European shaped Islamic theology. (Aslan 2013: 173)¹

He concluded in 2013 that “despite generous financial support of newly founded centers, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, a mature conceptual basis and an advanced theoretical discourse are yet to be awaited – both from the internal and from the external perspective”. A scholarly discourse about how a ‘European molded’ Islamic theology looks like, is currently in full progress (Aslan 2013: 175).

This book contributes to this scholarly discourse by observing the first phase of the newly established university programs of Islamic theology in the Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom and Austria, focusing on the period from the 2000s until 2018. It is the result of a research project I undertook as a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Amsterdam in 2017–18. It has, however, its roots in my entire career as a student and scholar of Islamic Studies, which spans almost thirty years of participating observing positions in Dutch and Western European innovative academic initiatives.

Looking back on my career so far, it is fascinating to realise how I have always been present at the beginnings of pioneering interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multi-epistemic educational and research convergences, amidst what could be called the epistemic ‘problem space’ of the study of Islam at Western European universities (Groeninck & Boender 2020). In these initiatives, previously separated disciplinary fields, methodological approaches, audiences and perspectives reached out and formed new amalgamations, interstices and

1 The original German reference is as follows: “Die wichtigste Herausforderung der nächsten Jahre liegt ... in der ‘Beheimatung’ der theologischen Ausbildung vor Ort und der Entwicklung einer europäisch geprägten islamischen Theologie” (Aslan 2013: 173). All translations from German originals are made by the author, WB.

intersections. Each of these moves was a response to upcoming trends and needs in the study of Islam, Muslim societies and 'the West'.

My participation in these processes started in 1993, when I was among the first cohort of students in the renewed Islamic Studies program at Leiden University, a joint program of the Faculties of Arts and Theology. I owe much to my early teachers, Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, Gerard Wiegers, Nico Kaptein, Leon Buskens and Nasr Abu Zayd. As a student who combined Islamic Studies and Cultural Anthropology, I learned to approach texts and authoritative ideas, and to understand these anthropologically in various sociocultural contexts. For my anthropological undergraduate thesis, I studied female students' options in Islamic higher education in the Indonesian province of Aceh – where the famous Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje determined the Dutch image of Islam in the colonial context a century before.

Towards the end of my undergraduate studies at Leiden, I decided to focus on integration and emancipation processes of Muslims in the Netherlands and Western Europe, writing my second undergraduate thesis about the then unexplored role of imams. Shortly after my graduation in 1998, I got the chance to become a guest researcher at the Center for Islam in Europe at Ghent University in Belgium, together with Meryem Kanmaz. This newly founded research institute by Herman De Ley and Jan Blommaert focused on questions of Islamic community formation and religious leadership among Flemish Muslims in Belgium. In 2000, I became the first Ph.D. candidate at the new International Institute of the Study of Islam in Modern Society (ISIM) under direction of Khalid Masud and later Asef Bayat. ISIM focused on the development of Islam and Muslim societies in the modern world, offering ample space for interdisciplinarity and exchange of scholars from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. I became part of the research group Production of Islamic Knowledge led by Martin van Bruinessen and wrote my dissertation on the role of imams in the Netherlands under supervision of Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, defended at Leiden University in 2007 (Boender 2007).

Between 2006 and 2011, I worked at Oikos Foundation, exploring the crossroads of academia and development cooperation as a staff member of the newly established Knowledge Centre Religion and Development. Firmly attracted by academic life, I returned in 2011 to become Assistant Professor in the Islam and Arabic program of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy of Utrecht University, colleaguelying Nico Landman with whom I shared my research interest in the role of imams.

At my next station, Leiden University, I arrived in 2015 at an important transition moment: its Islamic Theology program was terminated in 2013, and

instead the Faculty of Humanities set up the Leiden Islam Academy, more or less as an experiment. Together with Maurits Berger, Fatiha Azzarhouni and Roukayya Oueslati, I developed and analysed this innovative form of Islamic higher education (Boender 2019).

After a research fellowship of ten months at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS-KNAW) in Amsterdam, I was welcomed in 2018 at the Faculty Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam by Ruard Ganzevoort, Eddy Van der Borgh, Joke van Saane, Wim Janse, Marja Horsman and Gijsbert van den Brink, to become the faculty's educational director. Since then, I have been working in the dynamic context of an interreligious faculty that offers theology and religious studies Ba- and Ma-programs, and that houses nine religious seminaries which offer ministry education for their respective denominations. One of those is the Centre for Islamic Theology, of which I became a staff member at the end of 2019, arriving in the academic heart of Islamic university theology in the Netherlands. I am grateful to be part of this faculty and the Centre for Islamic Theology, having Pieter Coppens, Nelly van Doorn-Harder (with special thanks), Mohamed Ajouaou, Yaser Ellethy and Razi Quadir as my proximate colleagues. Apart from teaching in the Ba and Ma programs, amongst which the Master's track Islamic Spiritual Care, one of my current key tasks is to represent the faculty in the development of imam training and the professionalisation program for imams in the Netherlands (Boender 2021), in which I closely interact with the Representative Council of Muslims in the Netherlands, CMO. Since 1 April 2025, I act as Vice Dean of Education of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Vrije Universiteit.

My engaged and analytical participative observations regarding the development of Muslim religious professionals and new training facilities have not remained limited to the Dutch situation. I have always included a comparative perspective on Western European developments. I owe much to my colleagues in Germany, Bekim Agai, Raida Chbib, Jan Felix Engelhardt and the entire AIWG team who welcomed me as an expert in the network of the Academy for Islam in Science and Society (AIWG). The FAU Research Centre for Islam and Law in Europe EZIRE of Jörn Thielmann, Mathias Rohe, Riem Spielhaus and Gerdien Jonker gave me institutional backup when I needed it at those times. In the United Kingdom, it was Alison Scott-Baumann who invited me to be present at the Roundtable conference in 2013 in London in which the participants identified the 'roadblocks' that stood in the way between further collaboration of Muslim colleges and secular universities. Abdullah Sahin welcomed me in his Warwick summer school on Islamic higher education of 2016. Mohammad

Mesbahi of Islamic College London and Atif Imtiaz of Cambridge Muslim College were willing to meet me in 2013, just like Reinhard Schulze, Andreas Tunger-Zunetti and Ricarda Stegmann in Switzerland in the same year.

During this highly interesting career, I met so many impressive people. I want to thank them all for what they brought me. Many of the above-mentioned people also feature in this study, whereas the majority of the people whose work I discuss, I personally met at one of the numerous international conferences or network meetings I participated in. I sincerely hope I have done their work justice. The organisers of the Berlin Forum for Muslim Thinking (FES) in which I participated several times, deserve thankful mentioning. I want to include in these acknowledgements my colleagues Samim Akgönül, John Bowen, Alfrid Bustanov, Mohamed Ghairabeh, Mieke Groeninck, Robert Hefner, Martijn de Koning, Naima Lafrarchi, Göran Larsson, Elif Medeni, Jørgen Nielsen, Fatih Okümüs, Ali Özgür Özdil, Frank Peter, Thijl Sunier and Niels Valdemar Vinding.

Together, we are engaged as participant observers in a dynamic field in which the study of Islam in the European context is converging into something new, using the free academic space that postmodern and postsecular society offers to their intellectuals to deeply think about the meaning of religious traditions – in this case Islam – by studying discursively its past, present and/or future. It is about the exploration and articulation of a plurality of religiously legitimate, and historically or academically accountable positions, not about apologetic determination or normative prescriptions. Using a religious legal term, this propagation ‘to agree to disagree’ about hermeneutical outcomes is what I will refer to as the articulation of *ikhtilāf*.

Finally, I want to mention a few more people. My father Kees Boender who has intensively followed my career. I thank him deeply for being my sociological sparring partner, also in the process of writing this second monograph. My mother Anneke Boender-Herwig (1942–1993) who was able to guide me to the start of my academic journey as an eighteen-year-old student in Leiden. Femke Krijger who was always there to encourage me. Christiaan de Jong who made it all possible with his loyal love. And my daughters Anne and Eline, who have now embarked on their Master and Bachelor study journeys, I wish them joy.

Gijsbert van den Brink has been so kind to read and discuss the full manuscript for which I am greatly indebted. Grammarly Premium was used for an English language check. This study has been made financially possible by the Aspasia fund of Utrecht University, Leiden University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS-KNAW). I am glad that this study can finally be mentioned in the rubric ‘Written at NIAS’.

Challenges of Islamic University Theology in the Western European Context

I am talking about a practical theology that largely answers the questions of the early days anew or investigates new questions ... However, an Islamic theology must and can only do this in a recognised form, i.e. if we have theological faculties, institutes, academies or chairs in European universities run by people who have the ability to reach out to both Muslims and the rest of society. They should not only reach them, but also bring them together and thus confront the splitters on both sides. ... A central goal would be to demand the acceptance of Muslims in Western societies as citizens with equal rights. Seen in this way, Islamic theology should see itself as a society-changing force.

ALI ÖZGÜR ÖZDİL (2011: 244–45)¹



1.1 Introduction

This book addresses the fascinating but highly complicated process of incorporating Islamic theology programs into the study of Islam at universities in

¹ The original reference in German goes as follows: “Ich spreche von einer praktischen Theologie, die die Fragen der Frühzeit weitestgehend neu beantwortet oder neuen Fragen nachgeht. ...Dies muss und kann eine islamische Theologie jedoch nur in anerkannter Form leisten, d.h. wenn wir z.B theologische Fakultäte, Institute, Akademien oder eben Lehrstühle an europäischen Hochschulen haben, die von Personen geleitet werden, die die Fähigkeit besitzen, sowohl die Muslime als auch den Rest der Gesellschaft zu erreichen. Sie sollten sie nicht nur erreichen, sondern auch zusammenführen und somit auch den Spaltern auf beiden Seiten entgegentreten. ... Ein zentrales Ziel wäre, die Akzeptanz der Muslime in westlichen Gesellschaften als gleichberechtigte Bürger zu fördern. So gesehen müsste sich die islamische Theologie als gesellschaftsverändernde Größe verstehen” (Özdil 2011: 244–45). Ali Özgür Özdil is a Muslim social scientist who defended his Ph.D. on this topic at Hamburg University in 2010.

Western Europe. One observer called this integration process “an almost herculean task” (Hoffmann, 2016: 145). Since the 1980s and 1990s, and especially in the aftermath of the striking attacks of 11 September 2001, governments in European secular states have attempted to stimulate the establishment of a new type of university programs in the study of Islam that can ‘bridge’ Islamic diaspora traditions and European secularity. These efforts have largely been driven by a strong political and societal desire to no longer invite imams from abroad and instead educate them at European institutes.

As a result, in recent years, the training of Europe’s future religious elites, both male and female, has no longer been the exclusive domain of private Islamic educational institutes, founded by the Muslim diaspora communities, and of institutes in Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt’s al-Azhar University, the Turkish Faculties of Divinity, or the Saudi University of Medina. It also means that European public universities with post-Orientalist programs have been asked to adjust their Islamic Studies programs or to create parallel ones to accommodate confessional perspectives. This shift would allow a Muslim scholar in Islamic Studies to critically start from the acknowledgement of the existence of a divine truth (*haqīqa*), while taking this as a focal point for one’s scholarly query.

Increasingly, new institutional opportunities have been developed in Western Europe. Since the mid-2000s, some state-funded universities in different Western European countries have started to offer (or validate) programs in so-called Islamic theology, imam training, or Islamic religious teachers training. This process can be either partaken on the instigation of the state (‘top-down’), crafted by Muslim faith communities (‘bottom-up’) or through cooperation between these stakeholders (‘mixed model’). Amidst these contested processes, a scenery of academic Muslim thinking in the European context now unfolds.

Western European universities have a long tradition of offering teaching and research programs in the study of Islam. However, until recent years, the study of Islam has been carried out mainly from a religion-scientific, historical-critical perspective that tries to refrain from an Islamic confessional or personal faith perspective. With the emergence of programs in Islamic theology, a new dimension is now being introduced in the study of Islam in Western European universities. Oddbjørn Leirvik quotes the German Muslim professor Ömer Özsoy when he says:

For the first time in history ... Muslim intellectuals are now able to express themselves in the first person in a European university context

marked by modern philosophy and post-Enlightenment scientific tradition. (Leirvik 2016: 131)²

In public, political and academic debate alike, one currently witnesses much speculation about the educational content of these academic programs, their theological and methodological approaches, and their intellectual output. Some consider the programs as an instrument of the state to control and regulate the formation of a 'liberal progressive Islam' (cf. Hafez 2014; cf. Fernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020). Others point at their (potential) function as an emancipatory platform for Muslims in Europe (cf. Aslan & Weiß 2015; cf. Leirvik 2016; cf. Hermansen 2013). Either way, many speculate about the impact of the academic output and the theological endeavours of Muslim scholars: Will a 'European Islam' develop here?

This controversial question has been mainly discussed within two antagonistic frames that have dominated the debate. One frame understands the establishment of new academic programs as part of governmental *integration* policies, while the other views them as state *security* measures. Both discursive frames perceive the programs as targeting the development of a 'European Islam', considering it as the ideal outcome of a process of adaptation to the European context (cf. Salih 2004). 'European Islam' could be perceived as a theological project of Islamic renewal (Klausen 2005: 97), but also as a state-controlled product of liberal reform, even to the extent of being enforced upon Muslims in Europe (Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020).

This study focuses on the conceptual and intellectual development of Islamic theology in the context of European universities, within and beyond these politicised frames. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the academic knowledge production of a new wave of European Muslim intellectuals, particularly in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The study seeks to understand the content, methods and significance that scholars attribute to their academic work in this field between 2010 and 2018. It aims to coherently bring into focus the contours of what Oddbjørn Leirvik has called the process of 'formatting Islamic university theology' at the nexus of university, Muslim communities and society (Leirvik 2016). So far, we have fragmentary views of the academic knowledge production of a

2 Leirvik, in turn, refers to the article of Ömer Özsoy, 2015, "Islamische Theologie als Wissenschaft: Funktionen, Methoden, Argumentationen," in: Mohammed Gharaibeh, Esnaf Begic, Hansjörg Schmid, and Christian Ströbele (eds.), *Zwischen Glaube und Wissenschaft: Theologie in Islamic university theology. Christentum und Islam*, Regensburg: Pustet, pp. 56–68.

new cohort of European Muslim intellectuals during these earliest stages (Van Bruinessen & Allievi 2011; Aslan 2013; Leirvik 2016; Engelhardt 2017). The study thus aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the emergence of a European shaped Islamic theology in the academic context of Western Europe in its early stages (cf. Aslan 2013: 173).

Tellingly, one of the most frequently used words in discussions about the development of Islamic theology in Western Europe is ‘challenge’. In what follows, the study hopes to gradually provide insight into why this has been the case and how Islamic theologians have faced these summonses. This introductory chapter will sketch some fundamental backgrounds against which these challenges and considerations must be understood, thus providing a conceptual framework. It will first briefly look at how Muslims in Western Europe manifested competitive theological interpretive frames since the start of mass immigration in the 1960s. Secondly, it will discuss ways to define Islamic theology, particularly in relation to the Western tradition of the study of Islam. Thirdly, the chapter will introduce the main research questions and methods to arrive at a systematic overview of what has happened in academic knowledge production. The chapter will end with the outline of the book.

1.2 Muslims in Europe and the Shaping of Islam

In public debate, Muslims in Western Europe are often referred to as one, more or less unified, community of believers, even if they show a wide internal variety and diversity. The large majority of Muslims in Western Europe originally came to Europe as immigrants from Muslim-majority countries or are their descendants. Some came from the formerly colonised Indian subcontinent; others came as labour migrants to North-West Europe in the 1960s and 1970s from Turkey and North Africa. Later groups consisted of asylum seekers and war refugees, for instance from Iraq or Eritrea and most recently from Syria. They sometimes came from large cities, but most Turkish, Moroccan, Pakistani or Bengali families originated from villages in rural areas and practised ‘customary’ or ‘traditional’ forms of Islam, meaning that people have a particular view of Islam that is “shared without dispute: they know what is and what is not allowed” (Vroom 2007: 230; Kurzman 1998). Their migration to Europe dramatically changed this seemingly accustomed situation, and the familiar and trusted interpretative schemes crumbled (Schiffauer 1987). Facing massive socio-economic and socio-cultural predicaments, Muslims as a socio-religious minority have gone through profound processes of acculturation and enculturation.

Since the 1990s, a plethora of anthropological and sociological literature has been published to analyse these processes of adapting and accommodating Islamic religious life in all its forms (e.g. Bowen 2004; Césari & McLaughlin 2006). Most Muslims in Europe are Sunnite, but other branches of Islam are present as well, like various Shi'ite denominations, Alevites, Ahmadis, or Druze. Social scientific studies examined the processes of institutionalisation of Muslims who now lived as religious minorities, bringing into focus how the immigrants' organisation of religious institutions mainly occurred along ethnic-religious lines, often with strong ties to the countries of origin and other transnational networks. In the decades after the 1970s, these ethnic-religious organisations have played a major role in developing a firm religious infrastructure with mosques, Islamic schools, *halāl* food provisions, fashion, Islamic cemeteries, Islamic media, and political parties.

Painting a picture of highly complex and ambiguous Islamic landscapes in Europe, social scientists have observed different strategies of religious identity formation among Muslims (Sunier 2015: 160–161). Whereas the first- and second-generation immigrants often maintained a strong focus on the country of origin, third- and fourth-generation and converts no longer wished to talk in terms of integration into the majority culture but strived for emancipation. For many, emancipation refers to equal opportunities and endorsement of civil rights, including a situation in which they can publicly express their religious identity on matters of dress, food, schooling, housing, recreation and access to the labour market.

Significantly, how European Muslims have expressed religious identity also differs widely. It suffices here to refer to Mathias Rohe (2010), who schematically and tentatively points to five modes or attitudes among Muslims in European secular democratic states under the rule of law. The first are those Muslims who are “simply accepting the European legal and social framework in their daily lives without any further theoretical reflection on that topic” (Rohe 2010: 222). Rohe calls them ‘pragmatics’. As a second group, small in number, Rohe identifies those who have abandoned Islam but are called ‘ex-Muslims’ (Rohe 2010: 223). As a third group, Rohe mentions “a small, but dangerous group of extremists rejecting European orders and demanding the supremacy of Islamic norms as a whole. They denounce European legal orders to consist of weak and arbitrary men-made laws in fundamental contrast to the law of God as they perceive it, and European societies to lack moral standards” (Rohe 2010: 223). They might be called ‘exclusivists’. Much media and governmental attention goes to this group. Fourthly, Rohe discerns Muslims that follow traditionalist approaches, as not necessarily the largest, but as the best organised group, particularly in mosques (Rohe 2010: 225). He calls

them 'traditionalists'. The fifth attitude shows deep integration into European societies, fully embracing and adhering to Europe's fundamental principles and national laws, while maintaining Muslim identity within the framework of extensive freedom of religion. Rohe calls them 'theological integrationists' (Rohe 2010: 226). Both 'traditionalists' and 'theological integrationists' seem to want to live an exemplary life and conform to religious tradition and cultural practices. These practices differ among generation units and are shaped in a pluriform context, resulting in multiple identities. Together, these groups most likely form the majority of practising Muslims in Europe.

Without going into details about these forms of religiosity or entering a debate about the value of these kinds of rudimentary classification, it is crucial to recognise that among Muslims in Western Europe, competing cultural-religious discursive repertoires circulate. Rohe's scheme is helpful as it shows how in Western Europe different religious identities and practices have emerged, both as a result of and resulting in the need for reaffirmed, reinvented or alternative interpretative schemes. In multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and post-secular Europe, Muslims encounter competing Islamic scholarly traditions and cultural-religious repertoires. How are doctrines, ideas, practices, material expressions, institutions and organisations made (sufficiently) congruent with the European societal context? (Grand)parents often have different views than their offspring or converts. Certain answers based on classical Islamic law (*fiqh*) no longer apply and have to be 'reinvented' (Van Bruinessen & Allievi 2011). Religious leaders and constituencies of the five ideal-typical groups, as identified by Rohe, have been involved in competing discourses, negotiating answers to socio-religious and socio-political ideas of 'what is Islam' (S. Ahmed 2016).

Therefore, the starting point of this book's investigation is that competing claims of religious authority have emerged in the Western European context, as empirical studies have shown (e.g. Peter and Arigita 2006). Key questions in this competition are: Who has or gets the authority to define what the 'proper', 'right', or perhaps 'exclusive', Islamic interpretational scheme is? What could be the desired outcomes, and to whom? How do Western European Muslims envision empirically shaping Islam (its rituals, legal-ethical norms, practices, ideas, spirituality, organisations and community-building) in Western Europe? How do they theologially reflect on the presence of Islam in a non-Islamic, secular majority society? Moreover, what are the (hermeneutical, philosophical, legal and ethical) methodological instruments that the Islamic scholarly tradition offers to think these questions through?

These exciting deliberative processes are being negotiated in various spaces. Firstly, there is an active scene of Islamic traditional learning in the

confines of mosques and madrasas (Qur'anic schools), not seldomly governed by ethnic-religious and religious-political organisations with strong links to the countries of origin. Among them are Deobandi and Barelwi in Indian, Pakistani, Bengali and Surinamese oriented mosques; Diyanet, Milli Görüş and Süleymanlı in Turkish mosques; and traditionalist-Maliki groups in Maghreb mosques.³ Secondly, these organisations have in the past decades faced competition from transnational movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbut-Tahrir, Tablighi-Jama'at, and Salafi networks, as well as from reformist Muslim intellectuals, such as Tariq Ramadan or Amina Wadud. As a third space, the internet has become a crucial global playing field for this competition. This digital space is pre-eminently uncontrolled and sometimes volatile, but has gained a dominant position. Its transnational reach is predominantly beyond the grip of national governments and serves as a primary locus for ongoing forms of theological debate and (re)grounding (cf. Grillo 2004).

Among the institutional spaces for debate that have come up in recent years, there is now a fourth space: the publicly funded, formal domain of Islamic higher education and academic research at Western European universities. This study explicitly focuses on this domain. Many have asked the exciting question of what is happening in this new field. Among them is Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, who pointedly expressed his fascination by explaining how for him:

It is intriguing for a non-Muslim to see the kinds of discussion that go forward about this at the present time. I have in mind some of the work of Muslim friends and colleagues who in different ways have recently produced some sharply focused discussions [on the matter that it has never been easy for Muslims to accept the idea that there is something permanent about minority status or detachment from a social order, because the social order is the realm in which Islam appears to operate] (...) The question of the parameters for current engagement is clearly a discussion which will go on for quite a long time (...). (Williams 2018: 17)

3 For more information on this “story of transnational religion” and its shifts, see e.g. Jonathan Laurence 2018: 76. Not until recently, the “religious capitals” of Turkey and Morocco have come to consider their migrants in Western Europe a permanent minority (Laurence 2018: 77, referring to Hosseini 2013). How these transnational relationships of Muslim diaspora communities will evolve in the coming decades will thus remain to be seen and is subject to further study. What I will address in this research must be considered as part of these complex realities.

The intriguing questions for Muslim and non-Muslim observers alike are: which interpretational claims develop in the space of Western European universities? How are theological spaces being shaped where these discourses take place, and on whose terms? Will something like a ‘European Islam’ develop here? If so, what does this contain?

1.3 Thinking about the Legitimacy of Islamic Theology at Publicly Funded Universities

The question of whether European universities could become places where new forms of Islamic religious knowledge could be produced and disseminated became prominent in the turmoil of societal and political constraints of the 1990s, and especially after the violent global attacks of 11 September 2001. Many politicians and Muslim representatives voiced the hope that a local Islamic theology could provide pacifying solutions, which could serve as guidelines for Muslims and facilitate the practice of their religion in non-Islamic countries, arguing how European Muslims should take responsibility for themselves instead of relying on assistance from foreign countries (Özdil 2011: 65).

The training of imams and Islamic teachers received much public and political attention in various Western European countries, because of their pivotal position in mosque communities and their potential role in the integration processes of Muslim newcomers into European liberal democracies (Hashas et al. 2018; Drees & Van Koningsveld 2008; Boender 2007; Boender & Kanmaz 2002). In order for imams and Islamic teachers to adequately prepare for these integrational tasks, politicians urged these professionals to be trained at European educational institutes instead of (exclusively) in foreign countries (Hashas et al. 2018; Boender 2013; Nielsen 2012; Schepeleern Johansen 2008). The provisions for such training were to be organised by Western universities and higher vocational schools, who until then had approached the study of Islam first and foremost from an ‘outsider’s perspective’. As already briefly addressed in the introduction of this chapter, the organisation of these new training programs has, however, by no means been a smooth process.

On the one hand, the ambition to educate the future religious elite of Europe on European soil, while enabling European-based Muslim scholars to undertake research into Islam in the context of Europe, has increasingly been shared by stakeholders from the state, Muslim communities and universities. On the other hand, however, discussions about the programs’ aims, content and institutional embedding have often been contentious, political and emotional. If the stakes are about the ‘housing of the development of a “European shaped

Islamic theology” (Aslan 2013: 173, *supra*), what is meant by this, and by whom? In 2004, Ruba Salih remarked that:

‘European Islam’ may be conceived as the outcome of a process of adaptation of a universal religion to a European context, but it must also be understood as a contested terrain which discloses an unresolved tension between transnational and national agendas, loyalties and identities. A new European public sphere is emerging where young Muslims are actively seeking to promote new and changing frontiers of identity and political activity. (Salih 2004: 997)⁴

If it is about a process of adaptation to European context and social, cultural, and legal standards, what should be ‘adapted’? Who ‘steers’ this course? How do European-based Muslim theologians balance a constructivist trilemma of confirming, innovating, or revoking (established) religious ideas, practices and ethical notions that come with this adaptation process to European soil?

Clearly, the poly-interpretable term ‘European Islam’ is contested among different audiences, as it is regularly used in a prescriptive, normative sense (Boening 2007). However, what it precisely means has been difficult to capture descriptively and analytically (AlSayyad & Castells 2002; Nielsen 2007; Yildiz & Verkuyten 2012). Due to the ambiguities regarding what ‘European Islam’ should look like, stakeholders have differed widely in their expectations about the intended university programs’ aims, content and institutional ownership. They have articulated different ideas about the legitimacy of the new field of teaching, learning and researching Islam (Schepeleern-Johansen 2008: 446), making the institutional incorporation and acceptance of Islamic theology at Western European universities a bumpy road to this day.

This brings me to formulate the central question of this study:

How did the thinking about the legitimacy of Islamic theology at Western European universities take shape in recent years (2010–2018), and how has its legitimacy been articulated in the academic knowledge production of the scholars affiliated with these new programs?

Legitimacy is about intersubjective expectations regarding what is considered and accepted as reasonable, just, fair, or correct, in line with the values, norms and ethics of the communities involved. To examine the thinking about the

4 Salih points here at Islamic student associations.

legitimacy of Islamic theology at Western European universities, one must distinguish three domains in which these questions are being discussed and configured. These are the socio-political domain of legitimacy, the academic domain of legitimacy, and the religious domain of legitimacy. Within and between these realms, stakeholders emphasise, prioritise, dispute, or discredit (delegitimise) aspects of relevance, credibility and feasibility.

In the *socio-political realm*, a primary focus is put on expectations about acceptability and justness according to the law. Throughout Europe, (constitutional) law promotes equality and equal treatment, making sure that Muslims, as newcomers, have the same legal rights as other religious communities, including the right to religious education. The question arises whether the state should take a proactive or reactive approach toward Muslim communities and state-funded universities in facilitating these legal rights, or remain inactive. European secular states are bound by the separation of state and religious institutions, meaning they cannot interfere in internal religious affairs. However, they are also obligated to protect their citizens from subversive powers and extremism, including invasive foreign influences. As a result, national governments must strike a balance between 'tolerance' and 'restriction' within existing legal, institutional, and political frameworks. The key dilemma is whether the justification for the state's actions in establishing programs in Islamic theology stems from a legal endorsement of integrating Muslim communities or from its effectiveness in combating radicalisation, addressing global extremism, and countering foreign influences. This predicament boils down to sharp questions about the acceptability of the secular state's active interference in steering the direction of Islamic theology toward a 'liberal' or 'moderate' Islam (cf. Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020; Hafez 2014).

In the *academic domain*, a prime question is about the acceptability and justness of Islamic theology according to academic standards of accountability of the scholarly work. These encourage free inquiry according to Popperian standards of validity, critical rationalism and objectivity of research. In a liberal democracy, academic freedom of research and expression is among the highest goods. Theology has traditionally had a firm place at European universities, and existing legal possibilities can extend to Muslims. Nevertheless, in providing equal footage to Islamic theology, universities are also facing the question of whether they should act proactively, reactively, or remain inactive towards Muslim communities and the state. For instance, is it (still) the task of modern public universities in secular societies to house academic theology or to validate religious seminaries? These questions are not only posed towards Muslims, but are also discussed in the context of Christian university theology. Furthermore, how can new programs be integrated into existing institutional structures, curricula, and didactic traditions that have been 'designed'

foremost for Christian denominations or secular Islamic Studies? How can the university (satisfactorily) collaborate with the heterogeneous Muslim communities in the country? Moreover, university management has to balance the societal relevance of opening up the academic sphere for (new) confessional traditions and collaborations and the possibility of financing this.

Within *religious configurations*, the debate focuses on the acceptability and authenticity of Islamic university theology in Europe according to the faith community, the believers. For Muslim communities, the grounding of religious thought and pious acts in religious traditions is at stake. To be authentic, and thus convincing, Muslim scholars must connect their theologies to classical Islamic texts and authoritative thinking from the past (Zaman 2004). Mosques in Europe and Muslim community-based organisations are mainly organised along ethnic and cultural primordial ties. How can Muslim scholars balance cultural and ethnic proliferations in the university programs if the Muslim community is highly diverse and often involved in internal power struggles? If there is not one Muslim position on how Islam should develop in Europe (Klausen 2005: 4), the delicate question is to what extent and how can the religious tradition be confirmed and renewed through academic explorations. On whose authority is an interpretation considered plausible? Moreover, the question is who is qualified to bring in interpretations that are regarded as authentic. European universities have not yet been integrated into the traditional Islamic higher education authorisation system, in which a student obtains *ijāza*, a certification based on the authority of the teacher (*shaykh*) where the student has followed religious lessons.⁵ The representative organisations of multi-faceted Muslim communities can either legitimise or delegitimise these new initiatives (cf. El-Asri 2018; Sözeri et al. 2018).

Throughout this study, it will become clear how these three domains of legitimacy have been at stake among the stakeholders (state, Muslim organisations, universities) in assessing the value, authority and transformative impact of the university programs, its scholars and their intellectual output. If one of the three domains gains the upper hand, the other two become under pressure, because expectations about the (potential) impact can become at odds with each other. The same events can be observed and evaluated differently, either as a project of emancipating liberation, political control, or a deviation from mainstream religious orthodoxy.

5 One way to gain religious authority within mosques, is a study in a Muslim country at a respected religious institute and a (near) fluency in classical Arabic. Research from Groeninck shows how Muslim pious students or teachers (can) carry different epistemes in traditional and academised formations of knowledge and authority (Groeninck 2017; 2020).

The central research question of legitimacy will bring matters of control sharply into focus. Who sets the limits and who steers the course of Islamic university theology? This focus on legitimacy differs from the empirical question about impact or authority. Authority is formed in a relation of persuasiveness between the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’, and consequently needs to be studied on this relational spectrum (cf. Sunier 2023). Whereas I will not delve into that matter empirically, the issue of transformative impact is lingering above the study. These predicaments come together in the question formulated by the German Professor Harry Harun Behr:

Very well possible, though, that in the end a deeper problem is involved than just a supposed opposition between an academic and confessional self-understanding and its disciplining culture: Who wins, and thus also, who loses the power to define Islam (also in the sense of religion-related creative power). (Behr 2014: 116)⁶

This ultimate question of ‘who has the power to define Islam’ puts heavy pressure on the entire project of ‘making space’ for Islamic theology. In what follows, we will see how the relevance of Islamic university theology in Western Europe is negotiated within and between the socio-political, the religious (including its ethnic-cultural proliferations) and the academic domains of legitimacy, each with their standards for credibility, authenticity and validity. By analytically distinguishing these domains, the study opens the door to questioning how interventions and legitimations relate to expectations, pressure, or demands from state actors, universities, or Muslim groups. Once we have a clear view of those complexities, we can look at how the key players have articulated the legitimacy of Islamic university theology in their academic publications.

1.4 What Is Islamic Theology?

So far, we have been discussing the creation of academic programs in Islamic theology. But what exactly is Islamic theology? This question is complex in the

⁶ The original reference in German goes as follows: “Gut möglich aber, dass es bei der ganzen Sache um ein tiefer liegendes Problem geht als nur um die Gegenständigkeit des akademischen und konfessionellen Selbstverständnisses und der jeweiligen Fachkultur: Wer gewinnt und wer verliert am Ende an Definitionsmacht über den Islam, und zwar auch im Sinne religionsbezogene Gestaltungsmacht?” (Behr 2014: 116).

Western study of Islam. The very notion of Islamic theology is “fraught with difficulties” (Lange 2016: 136). There is much more to this often-used concept than a secular person might suspect, as stated by Ali Özgür Özdil (2011).

This starts already with the matter of terminology. The English term ‘theology’ is often used for the Islamic sub-discipline of dialectical or speculative theology, which in Arabic is called *kalām*. This can be literally translated as ‘discourse’ or ‘speech’ (Winter 2008: 2). Tim Winter, who edited a Companion to classical Islamic theology, approvingly quotes Wisnovsky (2003) who called *kalām* ‘Islamic doctrinal theology’ (2008: 2). In English, the term Islamic theology is also used to refer to the entire scope of Islamic scholarly disciplines, such as *tafsīr* (Qur’an exegesis), *hadīth*, *usūl al-fiqh* (legal studies), *falsafa* (philosophy), and *tasawwuf* (mysticism). Many theological issues are not (only) treated by the *mutakallimūn* – those scholars who ‘do’ *kalām* – but are discussed in this wide range of disciplines (the *ulūm al-dīn* or *ulūm al-islamīyya*). This brings Winter to introduce William Chitticks’ definition that ‘theology is “God-talk in all its forms”’ (Winter 2008: 2).

The totality of scholarly disciplines developed by Muslims over the centuries to explain, analyse and evaluate the sacred texts can be called in English the Sciences of Islam (in Arabic *‘ulūm al-islamīyya*). In these relentless attempts to come to holistic understandings, conflicts have always been on the rise. It is precisely this contingency that Alexander Knysh identified as a “perpetual collision of individual opinions over an invariant set of theological problems that eventually leads to a transient consensus that already contains the seed of future disagreement” (Knysh 1993: 57, referring to the picture of Muslim intellectual life provided by al-Shahrastāni (d. 548 AH/1153 AD)).

In describing theological debates, a distinction is usually made between the classical period, which started with the origin of Islam in the seventh century and continued until the eighteenth century, and the modern period. The accent of the classical period falls in the ‘formative period’ between the tenth and thirteenth centuries (Winter 2008: 2). The modern period covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

1.4.1 *Onto-epistemological Questions*

At the basis of this ‘God-talk in all its forms’ is the onto-epistemological question of how humans can know God and His divine will. Emphatically monotheistic, Islam centralises the Oneness and Unity of God (*tawhīd*) to which humans are to submit (*islām*) and put their trust in, along with the belief in the Angels, the sacred Books, the Prophets, and the Final Judgment (*aqīda*), often including the belief in divine predestination. Speculative or doctrinal theology (*kalām*) could be characterised as the rational reflection on questions such

as how people can know God, the relation between predestination and free will or accountability, and who is Muslim. As such, *kalām* is a fundamental discipline in the quest for human understanding of the divine. Its theological interpretative schemes underpin and are elaborated in all Islamic scholarly disciplines.

As an Abrahamic tradition based on the Qur'anic revelation (*al-wahy*, *al-naql*), the Islamic (scholarly) tradition accounts that people have various resources available that can lead to a true understanding of God and His relation to creation and humanity. These are the subsequent revelations revealed to the Prophets, starting with the first man, Adam, to the final Messenger, considered the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad, who lived in Arabia between circa 570 and 632 AD. Muslims take the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad as the Word of God. The second source of knowing and certainty is the understanding of the revelation by the Prophet Muhammad, both in its exoteric and esoteric forms. The Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet, his Companions and the first generations of followers form the two primary sources of Sunni Islam. For Shi'ites, this is the Qur'an, the Prophet, his son-in-law and cousin Ali, and the subsequent Imams.

Other sources also contain and endorse religious authority on the questions about God and His divine will. The role of the human intellect (*al-aql*) and logical reasoning to come to an understanding of God's will was developed by early Muslim scholars, elaborating upon and in discussion with Greek-Hellenist philosophical thought. Subsequently, the reasoning of the religious scholars (*al-ra'y*), based on analogical thinking and deduction (*qiyās*), is also an indispensable source and method. Furthermore, Islam knows a strongly developed mystical tradition that started in the seventh century with individual Sufis who attempted to experience the proximity of God through asceticism, and evolved in Sufi brotherhoods that developed from the twelfth century. These *tarikats* hold specific paths in esteem that aim to understand God and His relation to humankind through mystical experience.

1.4.2 *Classical Theological Debates*

A crucial debate that emerged at the early stages of the classical period and has continued until the present has been between those who privilege a scripturalist, restrictive reading of the Qur'anic text, and those who insist that the Qur'an should be interpreted with the help of ratio and human intellect, allowing for allegorical interpretations (Hermansen 2013: 12). The choice between the two has essential consequences for *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis) and *ta'wīl* (which could be translated as hermeneutics), as well as for the development of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Briefly, this debate's outcome has severe implications

for the relationship between power, community formation, and the soteriological idea of salvation (Lange 2016). In the course of the ninth to thirteenth centuries, to use Alexander Knysch's summary, rulers and men of religion were instrumental in creating the doctrinal synthesis that encompassed most of the attested ritual, spiritual and intellectual tenets within Islam from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries onward. By the sixteenth century, the established creeds were readily adopted as state dogmas by the great Muslim empires that came into existence at that time (Knysch 1993: 66).

By then, the theological and political dispute between the literalist-traditionalist Hanbalite and the rationalist Mu'tazilites schools of thought had more or less ended. Alternatively, the Sunnite Asharite and Maturidi schools of thought found a 'middle way' between the authority of the revelation and the authority of the human intellect and reason. Whereas the Hanbalite school persisted, especially in the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, and the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools became the basis of the Sunnite Shafi'ite, Hanafi, and Maliki law schools (*madhāhib*), the rationalist Mu'tazilite perspective was fiercely denounced, from the eleventh century until the present, except among Shi'ites.

With the formation of schools of theology and law after the great schisms of the earliest Islam, from the twelfth century onwards, *kalām* as a separate scholarly discipline in Arabic *madāris* (advanced schools for religious learning) seemed to have disappeared. The record of its rationalist theories, however, remained present as frames of reference within the various fields of Islamic sciences over the centuries (Hildebrandt 2007: 99). *Kalām* has continued to play an important role as a mode of argumentation (Hildebrandt 2007: 100). The various classical Islamic scholarly disciplines have shown a strong awareness of epistemological tensions concerning 'the power of defining' and comprehending the (sacred) sources of Islam.

The religious ideal concerns this world and the Hereafter and has implications for the Muslim collective and the individual believer. The Muslim world has always known a vivid and dynamic religious tradition built upon long indigenous traditions of *Gelehrsamkeit* that have been primarily concerned with ordering, describing and sanctioning a religious ideal (Rudolph 1991: 6). This sanctioning process admittedly or unadmittedly connects theological interpretations to its social and political contexts. Traditionalist scholars base their systematic accounts on the religious sources of Islam and authoritative ways of interpreting them. These can differ and diverge, and disagreement is never far.

In any case, to be persuasive and authoritative, there must always be a strong reference to the religious past. Hildebrandt (2007) refers to this as 'a memory discourse' (*Gedächtnisdiskurs*): "Positions and convictions, which as a rule

stem from contemporary contexts, are justified and legitimised by reference to certain aspects of one's own intellectual history" (Hildebrandt 2007: 2). The modern Arabic discourse talks constantly about 'heritage' and how to understand it. However, precisely in this memory discourse, different ideas about understanding the past, influence ideas and attitudes regarding the present. Consequently, ideas about the future can collide (Hildebrandt 2007: 2).⁷ These 'acts of reception' (*Rezeptionsakten*) have involved dialectical encounters with other scholarly traditions, such as the Greek-Hellenistic during Islam's formative period. In modern times, it has been foremost encounters with the West and modernity.

1.4.3 *Modern Theological Currents*

Colonial rule has tremendously influenced every aspect of Muslim societies, including intellectual thought, theological traditions, educational structures, and socio-political platforms. At the end of the nineteenth century and earlier, Muslim intellectuals responded to the predicaments of their time with a plea to reform Islam to cope with modernity while clinging to the authenticity of the tradition (Abu Zayd, 2006: 89). It is commonplace in the study of Islam to distinguish three theological discursive approaches developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: 'traditionalism', 'reformist modernism', and 'revivalist Islamism' (L. Berger 2010: 120ff, 150). These three basic currents or "traditions of socioreligious interpretation" (Kurzman 1998: 5) have offered religious sociopolitical repertoires. These repertoires juggle between unifying those forces that aim to confirm religious collectivist ideals as rooted in the past, and channelling the ongoing particularisms of time and context, thus identifying specific spatiotemporal interpretations of God's divine intentions and law: *shari'a*.

The first current, 'traditionalism', also referred to by some as 'customary Islam', is basically a combination of regional practices and those that are shared throughout the Islamic world, contained in the Sunni or Shi'a traditional schools of law (*madhāhib*). These continue to exist everywhere, representing the great majority of Muslims in most times and places (Kurzman 1998: 5).

7 The original reference in German is as follows: "Positionen und Überzeugungen, die in aller Regel zeitgenössischen Zusammenhängen entstammen, werden durch den Rückbezug auf bestimmte Aspekte der eigenen Geistesgeschichte begründet und legitimiert" (...) Vom 'Erbe' und seinem Verständnis ist in ihm unablässig die Rede, und dieser Diskurs über das Erbe ist nicht nur ein Gebiet, auf dem sich die verschiedene Betrachtungsweisen der eigenen Vergangenheit gegenüber stehen, sondern auch eines, auf dem die unterschiedlichen aus der Gegenwart resultierenden Geisteshaltungen und die unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen über die zukünftige gesellschaftliche Entwicklung kollidieren" (Hildebrandt 2007: 2).

The traditionalist approach focuses on learning and interpretation of the primary source texts to clarify and enhance personal and communal religious practice, as well as the application of Islamic law according to the classical legal methods of the *madhāhib*. The traditionalists' aim is to bring devout action in line with the sacred sources.

The second current is 'reformism', which has taken on various identities. Reformist movements that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in the Muslim world strongly pleaded for the unification of the Muslim global *umma*, while strengthening its original unifying force. As modernity came to the Muslim world mainly as part of Western colonialism and imperialism, the educated and ruling classes had to respond to it. This has not been a simple search (Piscatori 1986: 76).⁸ Reformists agreed that neither the conservatism of 'traditionalism' nor the 'haphazard copying' of Western ways was sufficient (Shepard 2014: 237). They consented on the importance of firmly basing their reflections upon the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet and his righteous Companions (the *salāf al-sahīh*, hence the term *salafiyya*) to seek authoritative answers to modern questions. They insisted that only by recalling the authenticity of Islam the problems of modernity and colonialism could be tackled. Reformists also agreed that somewhere along the road, Islam has lost its superior position:

Islam once led the caravan of human progress. It has now fallen behind but with the needed reform it will take the lead again, adding to its own virtues the virtues of the West but avoiding the West's vices. (Shepard 2014: 238)

These reformists can be called 'modernists'. "Modernists do not ignore the scholarship of the past, but they are not bound by it and may try to use it in creative ways" (Shepard 2014: 238).

'Revivalist Islamists' share this basic ideology and the need for reform. They long to go back to the early days and glorious past of Islam. However, as a third current, they firmly differ from other (modernist) reformists in their political agendas. These contemporary revivalist movements are closely intertwined

8 In James Piscatori's words: "Some wanted primarily to avoid a blind return to the past and accepted the need for change; others have wanted primarily to purify Islam of the innovations and deviations which the Westerners, and worse, Westernized Muslims introduced. Others have come to see many contradictions between Islam and the demands of modern life and have opted for the restriction of Islam to the individual's private life. Still others have held a variety of options in between" (Piscatori 1986: 76).

with geopolitics.⁹ For Islamists, the ideology of society must be Islam and the Shari'a must be applied in society. Anti-modern in outlook, Islamists insist that it is possible to have modernisation without secularisation. The call for an Islamic state is a characteristic of Islamism. How such state must be realised, and what the legitimacy of its sovereign rulership is (*hākimiyya*), is a matter of great dispute. Some insist that it is an active duty to strive for the realisation of an Islamic state in Muslim majority societies such as Egypt or Indonesia, either through political means (political Islamists) or by force (militant jihadism). Others are quietist and refrain from active interference in political affairs (cf. Wiktorowicz 2006).¹⁰ For the purpose of this book, it is only necessary to acknowledge that both quietist/pietist and political, ideological exemplary forms, as well as militant jihadist branches, have become influential among some of the second and third-generation European Sunni Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds. Mathias Rohe referred to this small group as the 'exclusivists' (Rohe 2011, *supra*).

To this often-used classifications into 'traditionalism', 'reformist-modernism' and 'revivalist-Islamism', Charles Kurzman identifies 'Islamic liberalism', analysing it as a modern discursive-theological option of Muslims in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries:

There are various versions of Islamic liberalism ..., but one common element is the critique of both the customary and revivalist traditions for what liberals sometimes term 'backwardness', which in their view has prevented the Islamic world from enjoying the fruits of modernity: economic progress, democracy, legal rights and so on. Instead, the liberal tradition argues that Islam, properly understood, is compatible with – or even a precursor to – Western liberalism. (Kurzman 1998: 6)

9 Inside the Salafi movement, there are various networks and ideological positions regarding the notion of theocracy and the idea that the state's sovereignty lies in the hands of God's representative on earth (*hākimiyya*). As a socio-religious movement throughout the twentieth century, one can distinguish between Salafi movements that envision a mass movement that can realise an Islamic state 'bottom-up', and movements that aim for a 'top-down' realisation of such a state, propagating the establishment of a theocratic government and shari'a as state law. Jihadist currents have propagated the use of force to overthrow a regime as permissible to reach that goal (see for instance R. Meijer 2009).

10 Although Wiktorowicz's threefold framework is no longer in vogue among specialists, it is helpful as an introduction in what Wiktorowicz has called "the anatomy of Salafism" (2006).

Obviously, these labels should only be taken with all necessary caveats (as Kurzman himself also warned (1998: 4)). The terms can easily become simplified classifying instruments. In any case, it is “a heuristic device, not a hard-and-fast category” (Kurzman 1998: 4) that should not be used to reify the complexities of reality. Therefore, in this study, the classifications ‘traditionalism’, ‘reformism’, ‘Islamism’ and ‘liberalism’ can only function as “heuristic devices that provide significant insight into the recent history of Islamic discourse” (Kurzman 1998: 5). What is important for our study to trace is how reformists (be they modernist, revivalist or liberalist) have intended to ‘replace the customary tradition’ with what they considered ‘theologically sound Islamic teaching’ (Kurzman 1998: 6), and how this has been at stake in the Western European academic contexts.¹¹

To make a long story short, in the second half of the twentieth century, ‘Islamic theology’ in Muslim-majority countries has been dynamic and changing fast. On the one hand, Faculties of Divinity in Turkey, Indonesia, and Iran developed modern Islamic theology that worked in central classical Islamic disciplines such as *tafsīr*, *hadith* studies and *fiqh*, while also engaging in Western-oriented Social Sciences and Humanities. On the other hand, *madrasa* education has been prominent, and source-oriented approaches often determine traditional Islamic curriculum and discourse. Robert Hefner and Muhammed Qasim Zaman point out how, in this process of standing guard over the faith, it has not been easy for traditional Islamic education to develop attitudes rooted in the authenticity of the tradition. Instead,

Islamic education has been drawn squarely into the reflexive questioning and public-cultural debate so characteristic of modern plural societies. Indeed [in] the struggle for the heart and minds of Muslims taking place around the world ..., madrasas and religious education are in its front line. (Hefner and Zaman 2007: 2–3)

For ‘traditionalists’, ‘modernists’, ‘revivalists’ and ‘liberals’ – and any other persuasive current alike, the socioreligious predicaments of the present time are huge. “The flow of people and ideas across social borders has fragmented identities, destabilized social hierarchies, and challenged all traditions of

11 “*Liberal Islam*, like revivalist Islam, defines itself in contrast to the customary tradition and calls upon the precedent of the early period of Islam in order to delegitimize present-day practices. Yet liberal Islam calls upon the past in the name of modernity, while revivalists might be said to call upon modernity (for example electronic technologies) in the name of the past” (Kurzman 1998: 6).

knowledge and faith” (Hefner and Zaman 2007: 2–3). Answers given by Muslim scholars to the major theological questions continue to vary profoundly. Global theological debates regarding fundamental theological questions like ‘What is Islam?’ and ‘Who is (good) Muslim?’, are also in present times accompanied by fierce dispute.

At the heart of the dispute lie two important questions: just what is required to live as an observant Muslim in the modern world? And who is qualified to provide instruction in this matter? (Hefner and Zaman 2007: 2–3)

The answers to these questions have never been unequivocal, but the call to religious spokesmen – men and women, trained in classical or modern institutes – to provide clarity is ubiquitous.

1.5 Islamic Theology in the Western Genealogy of the Study of Islam

The exploration of Islam’s rich scholarly tradition spanning over fourteen centuries has always been a crucial aspect of the Western study of the religion (Lange 2016). This is evident in the comprehensive study of various Islamic scholarly disciplines, such as *tafsīr*, *hadith*, *usūl al-fiqh*, *falsafa*, and *tasawwuf*, and for the subdiscipline of *kalām*.

A primary characteristic, however, of this Western study of Islam is that it has been carried out as ‘third-person’ research: scholars studied about Islamic theology. Islamologists in the Western tradition examining Islamic theology were its interpreters – sometimes polemic, sometimes mediating (cf. Curtis 2009). Except for some converts, they were not representatives of the religious tradition, as religious scholars (*ulama*) would be.

Moreover, for five centuries, scholars in the West have studied Islam in the context of problematic global power structures. Their work contributed to the making of public and political images of Islam in Western contexts, which have been predominantly, although not exclusively, negative (cf. Daniel, 1960). Islam was predominantly studied by Christian theologians, who often repeated classical refutations. In these refutations, Islam was considered a heretic form of Christianity (John of Damascus, d. 749 AD), seeing it as a punishment of God for the errors of early Christianity (Martin Luther, d. 1546 AD). More irenic positions considered Islam as the fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ismael (Goddard 2000). Europe’s prolonged understanding of Islam as “nomocratic and nomocentric” must be seen in this larger context

of the Western Christian narrative in which “the progress of Christian Europe was mirrored by the decline of Islam” (Griffel 2017: 2–3).

These traditional Christian and Euro-centric viewpoints have heavily influenced the academic study of Islam and notions about Islam’s relationship with modernity. This latter relationship has often been depicted as ambiguous. For a long time, it was commonly believed that Islam was a culture and civilisation that had reached a high level of development in the past, but was now being challenged and threatened by the values and systems of Western modernity (Tayob 2016: 176). In many twentieth century studies on Islam and modernity, Western scholarship has tended to understand Islamic intellectual thought as either being in conflict with Enlightenment values and European social and political frameworks, or as undergoing a transformation towards modernity through intellectual interaction and confrontation with the West, according to the modernisation theory prevalent at that time (cf. Tipps 1973).¹² The first view, focusing on conflict, suggested that Islam as a tradition was destined to disappear in the encounter with the modern West. The second perception suggested that Islam would transform, just as it had done in the past (Tayob 2016). These perceptions reveal a European self-imagery that has historically viewed the Islamic world as ‘Europe’s primary *alter*’. Among a more general European audience, these notions can still easily resurface among those who understand Islam as “the antithesis of just those characteristics which Europe and Europeans would like to believe that they themselves epitomize” (Ballard 1996: 40).

1.5.1 *Postcolonial Study of Islam*

There are few Western Islamologists these days who are not aware of Europe’s problematic history of understanding and portraying Islam and Muslim societies. Particularly from the 1970s, Western scholars of Islam realised the shortcomings of their approaches. In his famous study *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) pointed out how colonial perceptions had coloured the image of Islam that emphasised a rationalist, modern and superior European collective identity against an irrational, traditional and inferior Muslim society and a portrayal of Islam “as if it were one giant entity” (Said 2002: 71). Said argued how, in polemical views, “Islam was considered to be a threat to Christian Europe and had to be fixed ideologically. (...) Later, knowledge of Islam was associated

12 The anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1989) identified three prevalent “zones of theory” that had been common in many Western anthropological studies about the Arab world when examining its societies in response to modernity: tribalism, women and Islam.

with control, with power, with the need to understand ‘the [Muslim] mind’” (2002: 71).

Although Edward Said’s name will always be connected to this ‘postcolonial turn’, others have also been influential in developing Critical Theories in Islamic Studies. Social scientists considerably added to the previously foremost text-based philological and historical Western study of Islam (Nielsen et al. 2013). Moreover, anthropologists like Marshall Hodgson (1966), Clifford Geertz (1968), and Abdul Hamid El-Zein (1977) contributed with their ethnographic studies to the theoretical understanding of the empirical relations between Islam’s universal pretensions and its particular cultural outlooks (for an overview cf. S. Ahmed 2016). Against a ‘static’ source-oriented understanding of Islamic texts, later anthropologists showed how ‘tradition’ is always dynamic and part of complex configurations of power regarding the meaning of ‘tradition’ (for instance Eickelman (1982); Gilsenan (1982); Bowen (1989); Metcalf (1997)).¹³ Talal Asad resolved the postmodern ‘essentialism-problem’ for many, by understanding Islam as a ‘discursive tradition’, in which authoritative notions of tradition are subject to change because of internal interventions (Asad 1986).¹⁴ Anthropologists also urged to have ‘more eye for ambiguity’ (Schielke 2010), and to become more conscious of conceptualisations that persistently contained implicit Western understandings of power, particularly regarding the agency of Muslim pious women (Mahmood 2005; Jouili & Amir-Moazami 2006). These Western scholarships showed a much more nuanced understanding of the relation between Islam and modernity, or ‘multiple modernities’, then the two aforementioned understandings of

13 As an illustration, I quote Eickelman who argued for the exploration of a “middle ground” that would show “... a notion of context wider than earlier anthropological concerns with specific village locales and more narrow than the Islam of all times and places sometimes invoked by scholars and believers with non-sociological views of religious experience” (Eickelman 1982: 11). He aptly phrased that: “The main challenge for the study of Islam in local contexts is to describe and analyze how the universalistic principles of Islam have been realized in various social and historical contexts without representing Islam as a seamless essence on the one hand or as plastic congeries of beliefs and practices on the other” (Eickelman 1982: 59).

14 Asad seminally described this as: “Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artefacts, customs and morals. It is a tradition. (...) A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) to a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)” (Asad 1986).

'conflict' or 'responsive transformation' (Tayob, 2016: 166). If it is possible at all to 'define' what is Islam (S. Ahmed 2016), this should be described 'on its own terms' and not in mirroring 'Islam versus the West' (Griffel 2017: 3).

Meanwhile, Muslim students and scholars joined Western universities and became active in studying unexplored fields in theology and *usūl al-islamīyya*. Cambridge-based Tim Winter, himself a Muslim scholar, has been among those who tried to provide a much broader conceptualisation of Islamic theology, including the idea of Western Orientalist Islamic studies as being structurally caught in Eurocentric hegemonic ways of 'knowing Islam'. He observed how:

many of the younger scholars in the field are Muslims, and the fact that, as in other 'Orientalist' disciplines such as Qur'anic studies, they have adapted well to the discipline's paradigms, suggests that older ideas of Western Islamic studies as a monolithic and structurally anti-Islamic project now need to be modified, if not discarded altogether. (Winter 2008: 4)

However, despite these paradigmatic shifts in Islamic Studies in the West, this did not fully bring the European study of Islam beyond its troubled past. As Morris et al. aptly phrased, "In the postcolonial context in the world today, the study of Islam has a politics of its own" (Morris et al. 2014: 2). Before entering into studying how these recent paradigmatic changes have affected the field of Islamic Studies and Islamic theology in Western Europe, it is important to consider what these 'politics' entail.

1.5.2 *The Study of Islam Has a 'Politics of Its Own'*

According to Kamali and Nalla (2014), a pattern of binary thinking in which Islam and the West are understood in some sort of juxtaposition has proven persistent in the study of Islam and Muslims in the West. Particularly in public and political discourses, the idea of the incompatibility of Islamic and Western value systems and epistemes has been unrelenting and forceful, affecting the agenda of the study of Islam.

From the 1990s onwards, social scientific attention for religious identity formation of Muslims as European immigrants strongly increased. Particularly the attraction of Salafism as a regressive neo-fundamentalist socio-religious movement among young Muslims, as an aspired alternative to 'cultural Islam' and a discriminatory environment, got proportionally much attention (Roy 2009). In this period, in public and political debate in Western Europe an Islamophobic framing of Muslims and Islam that perceives them as 'deviant' from Western liberal norms and values became persistent. Islamophobic

feelings were translated into policy decisions in many countries that restricted civil rights of Muslim minorities (the ban on headscarves in France, the prohibition of minaret construction in Switzerland). Some observers called the tendency of perceiving Muslims as an undifferentiated group a form of ‘racialisation of Muslims’ (Gurbuz 2014: 756). Specific topics formed new ‘zones of theory’, notably the position of Muslim women, identity politics, and radicalisation. Deep-seated suspicion about the incompatibility of Islam and the West and a rising ‘politics of fear’ gained a strong impetus from the terrorist attacks in the early 2000s. Public funding of radicalisation studies sharply increased after September 2001, carried out mostly by political scientists and sociologists and less by Islamologists (Buskens & Van Sandwijk 2016; Morris 2014).

Also the ‘solution’ of Islamic Studies in the post-Saidan frame to remain objective and ‘neutral’, or perhaps impartial towards faith questions, gave rise to new debates. Indeed, one consequence of the strong realisation of the legacy of the colonial past, has been a consistent emphasis on the objectivity of secular Islamic Studies. Consequently, secular Islamic Studies deliberately does not foresee in providing space for a confessional approach (Hughes 2015). As Marcia Hermansen formulated: “(...) a secular academic formation in religious studies, area studies or the social sciences implies a constructivist and critical attitude to sources which may either bracket the “faith” question or assume that religion is socially or historically constructed” (Hermansen 2013:24). However, this privileging of a secular intellectual culture (Holub 2002) became increasingly questioned by Muslim scholars. The American philosopher of science Ali Zaidi (2011), for instance, made this point in arguing that:

the Orientalist encounter with the Muslim Other did not, and could not, live up to the dialogical ideal of taking the Other’s truth-claims seriously, because, in its historicist interpretation of texts and in its claims to being a *scientific* discipline, it denied *a priori* Islamic metaphysics. (Zaidi 2011: 19)

Zaidi points at a tendency in which “some scholars of the human sciences ... simply dismiss out of hand Islamic metaphysics as mere speculation and a residue of a premodern and, hence, unenlightened past” (Zaidi 2011: 19). Whereas conventional Islamic studies have continued to exclude religious explanations (“which maintain that the origin of human communities lies in acts of divine intervention” (Zaidi 2011: 4)), Zaidi plead for more explicit space for metaphysics in the Humanities.

Moreover, if postcolonial Islamic studies had to remain ‘objective’, where would be the space for religion critique? If there is such a need for ‘religion

critique', who should provide for it? Due to its Orientalist nearby past, Western conventional Islamic Studies has a tendency to refrain from providing 'religion critique', and might also not be in the position to do so. Islamologists generally do not want to act as 'caretakers' or 'representatives' (*Stellvertreter*) for Muslims in Europe who have permanently settled by now.

1.5.3 *Politics of Authorisation*

Whereas a growing emphasis was put on the necessity of a Muslim 'insider's perspective' in Islamic Studies, the question became prominent: What does an 'insider's perspective' entail? This question has given rise to rather polemical debates about this issue of normativity in Western Islamic Studies (Hughes 2015; Ernst & Martin 2010), that ultimately connect to 'the politics of authorisation' (Morris et al. 2014).

Basically, the terms 'insider' and 'outsider' can be used to distinguish between a perspective taken by a scholar to reflect on the sources from a 'participant' position, and, in contrast, an outsider's perspective meaning an 'observer's' position. However, one must be careful of how these terms are used. The terminology quickly becomes problematic if used to mark a fault line between 'outsiders', being 'non-Muslim' and 'insiders', being Muslim. Even more so, a persistent tendency would remain in place to juxtapose confessional arguments as traditional, conservative, subjective or uncritical, and secular ones as 'modern', progressive, objective or critical outsider's understanding, particularly with the use Western epistemological methods (Rudolph 1991: 10). Used this way, the terms can function to dismiss the validity and authenticity of either line of argumentation.¹⁵ This might even be more crippling if a Muslim scholar is automatically considered as taking an 'insider's position' (even independent of personal faith commitment), whereas the non-Muslim is always put on distance to the faith community. Even more so, a Muslim scholar would then be (perceived as) a '*Stellvertreter*', a representative of the tradition, deputising the voice of the faith community, whereas this might not be his or her intention. Or, alternatively, to provide a Western-nurtured critique to Muslim culture and intellectual thought instead of invoking a long tradition of Islamic scholarship (cf. Rudolph 1991: 6).¹⁶

15 This is applicable to the Western context, but equally so to the Muslim world, where Ekkehart Rudolph claimed that internal conflict about the value of ideas is manifold and almost inextricable (1991: 7).

16 The full reference in German goes as follows: "Die Wissenschaft im Islam ... beruht auf einer langen einheimischen Tradition der Gelehrsamkeit. Ihre methodische Voraussetzung ist nicht Kritik im westlich verstandenen Sinn, sondern die Ordnung, Beschreibung und Sanktionierung eines Idealbildes. Das erstreckte sich in der ersten Linie auf die religiösen

Some have considered the emphasis on the plausibility of an ‘insider’s perspective’ in seeking authenticity as a Muslim scholar a form of ‘identity politics’ in the Western context. According to Aaron Hughes, progressive Muslim scholars working in secular Islamic Studies at American universities have deliberately used this academic space to demarcate Muslims as a religious minority under siege, giving them as Muslims the sole right to define what is authentic and true Islam – while dismissing radical acts and ideas of Muslims as inauthentic and not ‘true Islam’ (Hughes 2015).

This discussion has not yet reached its conclusion and the terminology is still flawed. On social media, during academic conferences and in academic publications, intense discussions continue on the consequences of the above-mentioned predicaments for Islamic Studies (for instance in the field of contemporary interpretations of the Qur’an, but also for political theories, for combating religious intolerance, or for global ethics).

Nasr Abu Zayd referred to the persistence of these forms of binary thinking as a ‘logjam’. He concluded in 2006 that:

Without a shift away from the paradigm of two independent world views, one Western, the other Islamic, the logjam will remain in place. (Abu Zayd 2006: 101)

Islamic Studies in the West seems very well aware of the problematics and prevalence of such paradigm that considers a Western and an Islamic worldview as two independent entities. However, the search for new, integrative paradigms has so far not been evident.

1.6 Questions Posed to Islamic Theology in the European Context

This lengthy introduction has been necessary to better understand the circulating central questions posed in public, political and academic debates about the legitimacy of ‘Islamic theology’ in Europe. The intellectual challenges faced by the ‘interpretive community’ of Islamic academic theologians occur in this vortex of historic socio-political, academic, and religious expectations and conditions. Many expect European Muslim scholars of Islam to use these

Quellen des Islam. Die Wissenschaftskritik des Westens, die schon frühzeitig von arabischen Intellektuellen aufgenommen und auf die eigene Religion, Geschichte und Literatur angewandt wurde, schuf nun ein Methodikgefälle, das die überlieferte Tradition radikal in Frage stellte” (Rudolph 1991: 6).

new spaces to formalise their theological stances, addressing their Muslim constituencies (whoever they are), society, academic peers, and themselves. If theology is indeed “the attempt to systematically represent a religion’s teachings about God and his relationship to people and to define and defend them against differing views” (L. Berger 2010: 9), then the question follows automatically *who* is to define, to demarcate and to defend? This is an internal affair for religious communities and, ultimately, for the believer. This hermeneutical process is tremendously complex in itself and has its specific complexities in the European context.

Against the background of these problematic European understandings of what Islamic theology is, or might be, we now better understand the conditional acceptance of the emerging field of Islamic university theology.

These conditionalities and concomitant questions occur in all three domains. In the socio-political realm, one can often observe an emphasis on the importance of overcoming the ‘crisis of authority’ in the Muslim world with a pre-eminent role for Europe to realise Islam’s reform, particularly in facilitating the emergence of a ‘liberal Islam’. Will the academic output be authoritative among Muslim grassroots, and perhaps even decisive in fostering their emancipation and integration into European societies? Can Islamic university theology in Europe offer full-fledged alternatives to traditional places of study and learning for Muslims in Europe – as a substantive interpretive space that has so far not been offered in these places, or perhaps only under political or communal restrictions? What about the role of women? Posed this way, these questions implicitly or explicitly reveal how the Euro-centric history of Western thinking about Islam and Muslim societies has influenced the expectations about the new disciplinary field of Islamic university theology. The European ‘politics of the study of Islam’ have exerted pressure on ideas about the upcoming role of Muslim theologians. As outlined above, debates about ‘the politics of authorisation’ of Islamic knowledge production have not yet been settled in the European or Western context.¹⁷

In the academic realm, the question is raised whether European Islamic theology can bridge Western secular and Islamic confessional scholarly traditions

17 Stefano Allievi argued in 2011 that, “(...) In this sense, the role of European ears is decisive in determining the internal changes of Muslim social actors, pushing them in one direction or another: to put it bluntly, that of integration or that of separation and opposition or even rejection” (Allievi 2011: 42). He immediately adds to this: “Nevertheless, the push factor of the European interpretation can also go in the direction of endogenization. Muslim social and religious actors and producers of Islamic knowledge, in order to be understood, also need to use cognitive categories that can easily be understood by society at large (...)” (Allievi 2011: 42).

and epistemologies. Could Islamic theology fulfil a post-secular need?¹⁸ However, if so, would integration of Islamic theology be at the expense of the neutrality of Islamic Studies cherished in the post-Saidan era? Is it ‘tricky’ to unconditionally include Islamic theology at Western universities, as this could perhaps go against what Jørgen Nielsen identified as the “institutionalised consensus which says that the way Western universities teach and conduct research is the right and best one in terms of teaching methods and objectives” (Nielsen 2017: 445)? Will Muslim theologians offer a discursive critique on hegemonic ways of ‘knowing Islam’ at Western, secular educational and research centres, and if so, how (Groeninck & Boender 2020)? Moreover, what does ‘critique’ mean? Should Islamic theology have an autonomous place, separate from secular Islamic Studies – and perhaps join Faculties of Theology? Or, instead of opting for a ‘division of labour’ between the two, each with its own epistemology and methodology, should Islamic Studies genuinely integrate confessional teaching and research?¹⁹

In the religious realm, another crucial question is posed: If and to what extent can Islamic university theology be trusted in the hands of university theologians? Can these practitioners of Islamic theology be trusted as guardians of the faith, and will these places be accepted for the training of religious professionals, particularly of imams? Do the highly diverse European Muslims – as diverse as Rohe’s classification showed – expect Islamic university theology to affirm or defend established doctrines, or do they hope to see a ‘liberalist intellectual elite’ or a ‘reformist-modernist vanguard’ develop here? Is it, as Jan Felix Engelhardt rightly asked, “about the processing of normative orientations of Muslim life ..., [is it about] the transmission of traditional faith, or [is it] about the deconstruction of Muslim traditions in order to re-think Islam in a post-secular context?” (Engelhardt 2017: 9).²⁰

18 Zaidi (2011) raised the question of what constitutes ways of knowing. He wonders if, in Europe, a “disenchantment of knowledge” is an a priori condition for the modern human sciences. As discussed above, this topic has been a point of discussion among Islamic theologians and Muslim scholars, especially in the context of Islamic Studies in North America (e.g. Hughes 2015).

19 I borrowed the term ‘division of labour’ from Nora Eggen (2018) who used this term in the context of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Norway.

20 The full reference in German is as follows: “Geht es um die Erarbeitung normativer Orientierungen muslimischen Lebens in Deutschland, um die Vermittlung des traditionellen Glaubens oder um die Dekonstruktion von muslimischen Selbstverständlichkeiten, auf dessen Grundlage dann die islamische Religion im postsäkularen Kontext neu gedacht werden kann?” (Engelhardt 2017: 9).

The answers to these questions have never been unequivocal, but the urge to assert and clarify what is considered ‘true Islam’ is ubiquitous. The subsequent struggle for power in defining Islam has, perhaps paradoxically, resulted in what some Western observers have called a fragmentation, or crisis, of religious authority (cf. Griffel 2017; Abou El Fadl 2001; Robinson 2009).

Clearly, the public and political questions posed to Islamic theology in Europe are immense, and expecting answers that will satisfy all is unrealistic and naive. Islamic theology (*ulūm al-islamīyya*) is a field that a single person can never overlook. Moreover, univocality or certainty regarding the proper relationship between creed, ritual and ethical practices, and spirituality might very well be the ultimate salvific telos of a pious believer, but reality has shown differently.

Moreover, opinions on the (expected) positionality and ‘agency’ of Muslim scholars vary. It is important to consider whether one understands their propositions as modern Muslim *responses* to challenges posed by ‘the West’, or as Muslim scholars’ *engagements* with ever-changing contexts and situations, in this case in relation to Europe or ‘the West’ (Tayob 2016: 172). This is related to the questions about whether the Muslim academic community can play a role in mediating between the mosque and society. Will theologians feel called to take on this task? Are universities willing to provide a platform for discussion, regardless of the potential outcomes – whether they are progressive, conservative, regressive, or even militant? Or is it primarily the responsibility of religious communities to engage in such interpretative discourses? To what extent does the secular state, driven by the principles of religious freedom and civil equality, have a responsibility to facilitate religious (minority) communities in this process?

These are indeed major challenges. The conundrum a European Muslim theologian may face is not only about the constitution of a new scientific field at Western European universities. It is also about compelling decisions regarding adopting, adapting, or rejecting deeply embedded religious ideas and practices in the present time and context (Engelhardt 2017: 163).²¹ These value-loaded questions and ‘paradoxes of inclusion’ hang over the field – and thus above the current study.

21 Engelhardt’s reference in German goes as follows: “Die Islamische Theologie besitzt das Spezifikum, dass es bei ihr nicht nur um die Neukonstitution einer Wissenschaft geht, sondern auch um die notwendige Positionierung zu einem internationalen und historisch wirkmächtigen Referenzrahmen islamisch-theologischer Wissensordnungen, die zu einer Entscheidung über Übernahme, Adaption oder Zurückweisung dieser Wissensordnungen in einem neuen Kontext zwingen” (Engelhardt 2017:163).

Having said this, I use the words of Frank Griffel, who observed that a generation of scholars is upcoming “who matured in the West after 9/11”. “Among them are some who have reached a new level in a project that earlier scholars in their field had already demanded: trying to understand Islam on its own terms” (Griffel 2017: 3).

Who is this generation? What academic knowledge do they produce? How can we understand their output? This study hopes to provide more insight to these questions.

1.7 Need for an Overview Study of the First Ten Years

Since the mid-2000s, state-funded academic programs in Islamic theology have been established in, for instance, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland. It happened at a tremendous speed – in “*ein rasantes Tempo*” – (Ceylan 2017: 289). In light of the questions raised above, it is highly relevant to get a well-informed and realistic insight into how the broad field of Islamic university theology in these countries developed institutionally, conceptually, and intellectually in the first years after their establishment.

At the country level, the processes of institutionalisation and curriculum design have been relatively well documented (Özgür 2011; Aslan 2013; Ghaly 2008; Weiß 2009). However, there is still a need for reflections on the fundamental question of what is (to be) understood by the study of Islamic theology within the European academic framework, a perspective that this systematic and comparative study will provide.²² With a substantial number of scholarly contributions now available, it is possible to delve into the academic knowledge production. This study will explore the themes elaborated by Muslim scholars and will take stock of the knowledge production between 2010 and 2018 at selected programs in four countries: Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and the UK.²³ It will bring into focus the main foci (subjects), the scope (research fields in which the questions are being posed), the directions (what problem definitions are directing the research),

22 See also the introduction of the Special Issue “The Study of Islam: between Islamic Theology and Lived Religion” edited by Flakerud & Leirvik (2018).

23 By now, six German universities have received state funding for programs of teaching of and research in Islamic Theology, while four more focus on Islamic Religious Education and Teachers Training, located at the universities of Frankfurt/Giessen, Münster, Erlangen/Nürnberg, Tübingen, Osnabrück, Paderborn, Hamburg, Karlsruhe, Ludwigsburg and, most recently, Humboldt Universität Berlin.

and the main methods and approaches used (how do historical-critical and critical-reflective and/or other approaches resonate)?

These four countries were chosen because they will allow us to observe notable similarities at the Western European level, especially regarding content and epistemological-methodological approaches, and systematic differences, as the relationship between the state, Muslim organisations, and educational institutes takes shape in different 'national models' (Boender 2013).

Briefly put, Germany has opted for a 'top-down'-model: universities have received state funding and funding from private agencies. Cooperation with Muslim organisations was sought from there, more or less corresponding to the organisation of Christian university theology. The United Kingdom shows a 'bottom-up'-model: Muslim communities have developed infrastructure with privately financed Muslim colleges which seek collaboration with state universities through validation or collaborative programs (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Siddiqui 2007; Sinclair 2016). 'Finishing schools' for religious leaders, including imams, have been offered in a few academic settings (Ebbyary 2018). The Netherlands shows a 'mixed model' rooted in historically grounded provisions in which state and religious denominations can find each other at the university level (Ghaly 2008; Vroom 2009; Boender 2013). Whereas the Netherlands sought inclusion through a 'tried-and-tested' model of state-religion collaboration, the Austrian state (recently) opted for a radical shift. Where for Austrian Muslims, it has long been relatively easy to receive state funding for private Islamic schools (based on the 1912 Islam Act), legal changes in 2015 have made it almost impossible to recruit imams and other religious personnel from non-EU countries. State-funded Austrian universities and colleges for higher education must now provide Islamic higher education to train Muslim religious professionals and scholars in Austria.

Comparing these countries will provide ample insights that will prove relevant to other Western European countries where state actors, universities, and Muslim organisations have been juggling their respective interests. Also in Scandinavian countries, Belgium and Switzerland, much effort has been spent in establishing programs or professorships in Islamic theology in recent years; however, in the timeframe 2010–2018, they mostly still needed to be put up and running.²⁴ France, with its unique *laïcité*-model, remains outside the scope of my survey. As my study focuses on state-funded university programs in Islamic theology, this leaves out France, where only the University of Strasbourg has

24 At the universities of Copenhagen, Oslo and Uppsala there are now Chairs in Islamic Theology. In Belgium, the Catholic university of Leuven has been active in this regard. Switzerland founded the Schweizerischen Zentrum für Islam und Gesellschaft (SZIG).

some options offering Islamic theology (cf. Akgönül 2012). However, most importantly, it has been a pragmatic choice: although I read French, it would have been too ambitious to cover this field as well.²⁵

Within the four chosen countries, the study looks at nine academic centres. In Germany, it concerns the Department für Islamisch-Religiöse Studien (DIRS) at the Friedrich-Alexander university Erlangen-Nürnberg; the Zentrum für Islamische Studien (ZEFIS) at the Goethe University Frankfurt/Justus-Liebig university Giessen; the Zentrum für Islamisch Theologie (ZIT) at the University of Münster; the Institut für Islamisch Theologie (IIT) at the University of Osnabrück; and the Zentrum für Islamische Theologie (ZITh) at the University of Tübingen. In the Netherlands, the search was confined to the Centre for Islamic Theology (CIT) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In Britain, the investigation included the publications of scholars at the Markfield Institute for Higher Education (MIHE), validated by Newman University, and the Islamic College London (ICL), validated by Middlesex University. The Austrian compartment listed the work of academic staff at the Institute for Islamic Studies (IIS) at the University of Vienna and the Islamic Religious Pedagogics Department of the University of Innsbruck.

The study counted and cross-studied 650 titles published between 2010 and 2018 by scholars formally affiliated with one of these nine programs in the academic year 2017/18. The method will be explained in more detail in Chapter 4, as it will provide a rudimentary but significant overview of the field in its formative phase.²⁶

This study builds upon various previous studies that discuss the initial period. Jan Felix Engelhardt's comprehensive study, published in 2017, provides in-depth information about the pioneering phase of the emergence of German Islamic university theology. Prior to this, attention was mainly focused on institutional affairs and curriculum development. Engelhardt systematically

25 As a consequence of this choice, my study reveals the prominent role of German and English, but does not compare with publications produced in France and/or in French.

26 The study focuses on 2010–2018, as 2010 marks the start of the German programs. Consequently, the study found a precise comparative moment, although some developments started before or after 2010. For instance, at the universities of Münster and Frankfurt, there were already Chairs in Islamic Theology. In Amsterdam, the Centre for Islamic Theology was founded in 2006. In the UK, the validated centres active prior to 2010 remain outside the scope of this study. As the end year, 2018 has been chosen pragmatically but has been consistently kept during the years of writing this study to realise the aim of documenting and surveying a specific time frame. This clear demarcation in time makes it possible to document a period and to draw up and record the balance over that period.

collected and analysed perceptions and views on Islamic theology as a newly emerging scientific discipline in Germany. His aim was to account for the genesis of Islamic Theology and to demonstrate the internal (*fachinterne*) conceptions of this new scientific discipline (Engelhardt 2017: 327). Engelhardt's study shows how Christian theology has served as a model for the institutional set-up and its relation to traditional ordering systems as a 'proto-scientific' context of Islamic Theology. His meticulous study convincingly demonstrates how the institutionalisation of Islamic theology in Germany and its intellectual proliferation have been an ongoing process (Engelhardt 2017). His work is the first study that provides a coherent analysis of the self-perception of German professors, who have been the pioneers of the emerging 'scientific community' of Islamic theology in Germany. Engelhardt dedicates extensive exploration and ample space to the voices of those who 'inhabit' the new discipline and give it its intellectual shape, content, and methodological character.

Also, the study of Alison Scott-Baumann and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor about the British situation forms a primary source for understanding recent developments in the United Kingdom regarding Islamic studies and the role of universities in it. In Austria, Ednan Aslan has documented profoundly together with various co-authors. Furthermore, the study will use the sharp observations in various countries of Oddbjørn Leirvik, Jørgen Nielsen, Ali Özgür Özdil and Reinhard Schulze.

Different from these insightful works, my study concentrates on cross-studying the written academic knowledge production. These are publicly accessible data published in peer-reviewed journals or by academic publishing houses. Furthermore, I focus explicitly on publications in a European vernacular. Whereas these data form the heart of my account, I have also carried out a limited number of conversations with experts, and, as acknowledged in the preface, the numerous international conferences and expert meetings in which many of the discussed scholars assembled form an essential source of expertise. As such, my participant observations, reflective documentation, analyses and interpretations take stock of almost a decade of scholarly production amid governmental, university and mosque politics.

I intentionally chose not to work with a predetermined set of criteria for defining 'European Islamic theology' in order to avoid being influenced by or prioritising certain assumptions from specific domains of legitimacy. I aim to avoid becoming a force that imposes certain political, religious, or academic expectations on Islamic university theology. By refraining from evaluative criteria, and by working descriptively-exploratively, I aim to accurately identify prevailing patterns and characteristics in the field. Only after surveying the field, I trust I will be able to identify prevailing patterns or characteristics.

Therefore, the primary criteria for selection will be a scholar's formal academic position within one of the designated nine programs and their published works between 2010 and 2018. Through this approach, the study will gain valuable insights into the landscape of European Islamic university theology in its first stage.²⁷

Secondly, as explained in the previous paragraphs, I will position the development of this knowledge production primarily within the context of the Western European 'genealogy' of Islamic Studies. In this way, I will maintain a conscious eye on the persistent politicised discourse juxtaposing Western and Islamic epistemologies. It also means that I do not aim to compare, or even contrast, modern Islamic theology in Europe with that in countries like Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia or Iran. My account will not answer the question of to what extent contemporary studies produced in Europe differ from those in Islamic-majority countries. However, I trust that the result will provide ample opportunities for such a study and discussion.

The same counts for that other urgent question that might be on many lips: what is the (potentially transformative) impact of this academic knowledge production on 'grassroots level'? Will 'Islamic theology' meet the high expectations expressed by Özdil in 2011, and many others? This research does not, or in a very limited way, study the intersections between the production, dissemination and reception of theology, and the practices of religion in ritual and everyday life experiences (Flaskerud & Leirvik 2018; Leirvik 2016).²⁸ It is simply not an impact study, which would require a completely different method that also studies the receiving side.²⁹

Evidently, various platforms are available to the studied theologians to reach out to various publics besides the purely academic realm of 'peer-reviewed' publications. Many scholars discussed in this study have been active in public fora, both digitally and physically, and performed in diverse media, nationally

27 The study hopes to avoid consciously or unconsciously acting as a controlling influence that evaluates the extent to which Islamic university theology meets specific political, religious, or academic expectations regarding desired objectives and directions (see also Chapter 8).

28 Leirvik contends that in "Researching the new initiatives aimed at institutionalizing Islamic university theology, a basic question will be how the interaction works between tradition-centred approaches to theology (as sought for by the faith communities) and the more general ethical and theological discourses associated with university theology (and expected by the academy and larger society). The latter aspect includes interreligious relations and discourses" (Leirvik 2016: 134).

29 Engelhardt's study does not answer to this question, neither: "To what extent it [Islamic Theology] will fulfill its mission – imposed and self-imposed- to reflect upon Islam in the German context remains to be further investigated" (Engelhardt 2017: 329).

and internationally. They taught their classes at universities, but sometimes also in mosques; they have been visible, perhaps even as ‘influencers’, in social media and talkshows; some spoke with government representatives and NGOs. As a consequence of my choice to focus on the formalised academic discourse while limiting the scope to publications in the purely academic setting, I direct my attention to one of the three ‘publics’ (circles) of academic theology: that of the scholarly debate. The other two publics – the faith community and society – will only be discussed indirectly. Understanding what Islamic theologians produce thus *precedes* the question of whether Islamic university theology will be ‘game-changing’ in both the religious spaces of European mosques and socio-cultural spaces elsewhere.

By looking at their academic positioning as it appears from their scholarly publications, my study will contribute to answering the thorny question of how Islamic university theology looked like in the first decades of the twenty-first century in Western Europe. The relevance of this descriptive-explorative research is that it maps the content direction, critical intensity, and pace as it unfolds in four countries, each with different state–religion relations. By examining the academic output in a cursory way, we have the opportunity to look in the first place at how scholars themselves *engaged* with their tasks as academicians working in a Western context. This approach is intentionally different from an a priori consideration of their intellectual effort as Muslim *responses* to challenges set in motion by the ‘West’ (cf. Tayob 2016: 172, *supra*).

1.8 Outline of the Study

In the following chapters, I will come to take Islamic university theology as the academically institutionalised systematic, rationally grounded debate about the contextual understanding of Islam’s sacred sources, its ritual, legal-ethical, societal and political beliefs and practices, and its history of ideas.³⁰ This field as such is incredibly extensive and never unequivocal. Faith (or ‘God-talk’) is ultimately intertwined with soteriological thinking about the past, present and future of the faith community and humanity at large. I follow those who have regarded Islam as a discursive tradition, understanding it as a dynamic

30 In Engelhardt’s working definition, theology is the systematic, rationally grounded, and faith connected reflexion of a religion, meaningfully connected to a canon of objects, sources, methods and theories. These reflections are accountable and based on a religious set of meaning that is considered relevant by a faith community (Engelhardt 2017: 86).

normative religious system of beliefs, values and norms, rituals and practices, materialised in institutions, organisations and roles.

In order to gain a better understanding of how Islamic university theology has developed in Western Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chapter 1 has focused on tracing its background within the 'genealogy' of the Western study of Islam as religion and culture. Chapter 2 will give an overview of the infrastructural positioning of Islamic theology in the academic landscape of the four focus countries. It will illustrate how this institutional positioning has taken place within constrained 'tripartite' collaborations of secular governments, Muslims as religious minorities and state-funded higher educational institutes.

Chapter 3 takes stock of how, in the period between 2010 and 2018, ideas about the aim and direction of the new academic field were expressed by those actively involved in the programs. The chapter will explore their answers to the circulating question of how a European-rooted Islamic university theology looks like, or should look like, and what the ideal role of Muslim theologians should be. The analysis shows how, during this first phase, five (different) aspects were emphasised regarding the aim and relevance of Islamic university theology and its conceptual positioning. This chapter will provide insight into circulating ideas about Islamic university theology's directions as pronounced by its closest observers.

Chapter 4 continues from there, looking into the actual knowledge production. By bringing 'trending topics' into focus, it has found a way to overlook the field as it has developed in the four countries. A fascinating picture of about fifty themes arises.

To delve deeper, Chapter 5 investigates three pivotal themes that surface from the survey: religious pedagogy, Qur'an hermeneutics, and 'historical theology'. Through a selected number of studies, the reader will gain more insight into the main methods and approaches used by scholars working at the nexus of secular and Islamic scholarly traditions within the confines of the state-funded or validated research programs.

Chapter 6 further deepens these insights by discussing some selected works that read as 'position papers' of Islamic theologians, positioning their work in the university as an 'external platform' for study and debate (compared to the 'internal platform' of mosque and madrasa, cf. Jonker 2003). What problem definitions guided their research and ambitions? How did scholars reflect upon the ways the Qur'anic message can be included in human deliberation about the contemporary world? The chapter will pay separate attention to how female scholars positioned their contributions to and ambitions within Islamic university theology in Western Europe.

In this way, a picture will arise of a cohort of scholars who feel intensely engaged in critically and reflectively addressing research questions and suggesting roads to explore the plurality of the faith. The themes they study cover the broad scope of Islamic faith tradition. They conduct research and express their analytical views on the construction and deconstruction of classical and contemporary interpretative traditions, either in an observing mode or in a constructivist, participatory manner.

The scope of the scholars' work is of a dazzling variety and daunting complexity. In Chapter 7, I will argue that it is precisely this characteristic that offers the key to understanding the central features of Islamic university theology. The 'paradigm of plurality' as it can be found firmly rooted in Islamic tradition itself – and which might have gotten 'out of sight' in modern times – is the central paradigm that Islamic theologians want to articulate, propagate, and, if necessary, discover.

Although this seems a superficial conclusion at first sight, it is not as simple as it looks. Whereas one could get the wrong impression that an emphasis on plurality and diversity will eventually lead to postmodern theology in which the binding link with the sources gets lost in relativism, precisely this openness to plurality offers the key to the scholars' vocation. Their priority seems to be the nuancing of reductionist views, stale legalism, essentialist dogmas and prejudiced or apologetic imaginations. Importantly, they firmly root their views and proposals in the Islamic tradition, with or without (comparatively) referring to Western philosophies and conceptualisations, whether secular or Christian. In Chapter 7, I will capture this with the term *articulating ikhtilāf*. *Ikhtilāf* (difference, dissimilarity, diversity), which in itself is a classical Islamic legal concept, then becomes a key term to point at the importance the scholars adhere to the exploration and articulation of a plurality of religiously legitimate and historically, theologically or academically accountable positions.

Chapter 8 will close with a reflection on what the findings of this very first decade could mean for future developments and possibilities for Islamic university theology in Western Europe. Interestingly, despite important differences in legal institutional constituencies, the four countries show considerable similarities. Overall, the study will conclude that the Islamic theologians move in the heart of what academia aims for: the university provides them with an autonomous space for critical-reflective and hermeneutical study of the Islamic tradition in all its facets, undertaken within the European context, with much attention to how to deal historically, theologically, and pedagogically with intra-religious and inter-religious plurality.

Making Space for Islamic Theology: Institutional Complexities in the Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom and Austria

'Importing' religious professionals and emulating models developed in other contexts has proven more and more unsatisfying for the different stakeholders from public, religious and civil society institutions. However, the secular state cannot offer solutions on its own, and the religious communities need expertise from different fields that are not part of a classical religious curriculum. Moreover, in many cases, cooperation with the state is necessary to gain access to fields that are structured by the state or a public beyond the community.

BEKIM AGAI (2020: 1)



2.1 Introduction

Everywhere in Western Europe, first- and second-generation Muslim migrants have invested in setting up private institutes dedicated to learning and teaching Islam. These initiatives have led to the creation of various facilities that represent different religious schools of thought, not seldomly oriented at socio-religious currents in the countries of origin. The legal-institutional options to organise these educational forms were grounded in constitutional rights like the freedom of religion and association. These community-based facilities have guided the integration of Muslims in Western Europe in the past fifty years. However, they have often met with distrust from politicians and various societal voices. Furthermore, it has been proven very difficult for the pluriform Muslim communities to set up or join collaborative initiatives, as ethnically organised collectives wanted to guard their denominational authenticity and the specificities of their training. Moreover, for a substantial number of young Muslims who wanted to study Islam in-depth, universities in Muslim-majority countries remained a first-choice option (cf. Boender 2022).

Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing effort by state authorities to organise the training of Europe's future Muslim religious leaders, with funding provided by national governments. Initiatives to establish imam training programs at universities were motivated both by integration policies and by the desire to reduce the influence of foreign governments that send imams to work in European diaspora mosques (Drees & Van Koningsveld 2008; Hashas et al. 2018; Boender 2013). Meanwhile, several paradigmatic shifts occurred place in Islamic Studies, which started in the 1970s. Slowly, space increased for 'first-person' or 'insider's' perspectives. From the end of the 1990s, universities established several chairs for prominent Muslim professors, like Bassam Tibi in Göttingen, Germany, Mohamed Arkoun at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, Tariq Ramadan at Oxford University, UK, and the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIIM) in the Netherlands directed by the Muslim legal scholar Khalid Masud.

These attempts to incorporate Muslim intellectual voices in Europe's public fora precipitated with the global geopolitical events in the late 1990s and early 2000s, iconically captured by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001. Since the early 2000s, several European public universities have started offering programs for which the term 'Islamic theology' has increasingly been used.

As already addressed in Chapter 1, the institutional and legal establishment of these kinds of programs has often been difficult. Studies of social scientists point to laborious political processes in which at least three social actors were involved as parties: the state, Muslim communities and the universities (e.g. Haddad & Balz 2008; Schepeleer Johansen 2008; Birt 2006; Geaves 2008; Kamp 2008; Boender 2013; Hashas et al. 2018). The institutional conditions for possible forms of Islamic higher education have been set by legal and historical frameworks, which differ in each European country. At the same time, everywhere in Europe, three pillars have been prominent in dealing with religious pluralism in liberal democratic secular states: freedom of religion and equal treatment of all religions, a right to self-determination of the religious communities, and certain cooperation between state and church (Ferrari 2002). Consequently, each country has its own 'national model' that provides directions for the state how to balance these in 'moral covenants' for state and civil society to relate to (Boender 2013).

Incentives driven by academic, political or religious requests, actuated changes to gain more space for Muslim intellectual perspectives within academia. Although a strong sense of urgency was shared, the central notions thrusting these processes were not necessarily the same. This resulted in forms of contested collaboration between the three parties, with 'roadblocks on

the way' (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Boender 2013, 2021). Furthermore, it meant that none of the three parties, the secular state, the religious communities, or the educational institute, could do it 'on its own' (Agai 2020: 1).

These developments, which have been relatively well-documented in country studies, will be summarised in the chapter below. The chapter will point out how certain choices were made within the prevalent framework of state–religion relations and how this affected the institutional set-up of the programs. The nine centres for Islamic Theology that feature in this study will be introduced, starting with the Netherlands, followed by a description of the German situation. Subsequently, the UK will be discussed, finishing with a brief account of developments in Austria.

2.2 The Netherlands

The Muslim community in the Netherlands, making up about 5,5 % of the total population, is ethnically, denominationally, culturally and socio-politically highly diverse. The majority originated from Turkey and Morocco, but there are also Surinamese, Indonesian, Bosnian, Iraqi, Somali and Syrian communities. For a long time, the Netherlands seemed to lead the way in facilitating state-funded facilities for the training of future Muslim religious professionals in Nederland. In 2005, the Netherlands became the first Western European country to provide state-funded university programs in Islamic theology. By 2013, however, it had lost its leading position when two out of three programs terminated after about six years of running.

The developments towards setting up academic programs in Islamic theology in the Netherlands cannot be seen separately from the intensive attention paid to the training of mosque imams. Already at an early stage, at the beginning of the 1980s, the Dutch government wanted to support imams in guiding the integration of first-generation Muslim immigrants and their children.¹ This governmental eagerness to actively stimulate the establishment of imam training at Dutch universities fits a tried-and-tested practice in which the state deals with religious pluralism via the emancipation of faith communities.

1 As early as 1983, an advisory committee on integration policy highlighted the need for imam training in the Netherlands. The committee recommended the establishment of Dutch imam training programs to support the emancipation of Muslim minorities. They believed that a 'homegrown imam' could effectively bridge a gap between Muslim communities and Dutch society.

Since the end of the 19th century, state universities have facilitated the training of Protestant ministers (Boender 2013). In analogy, some promoted the idea that the state should play a facilitating role for the newcoming Muslim community. Besides this, concerns about the negative influences of foreign governments and transnational organisations played a role (Boender 2013). In the 1980s and 1990s, the 'imam training debate' aimed at the long-term perspective of integration. So-called 'polder imams' were envisioned as much needed alternative to the imams sent by countries of origin. As the latter did not speak Dutch and were unfamiliar with Dutch norms and values, they were thought to impede immigrants from fully adapting to Dutch society. National hope was that 'polder imams' could also prevent young Muslims from seeking their answers from radical preachers, either in mosques, in 'living room meetings' or on the internet.

Although Dutch Muslim organisations increasingly felt this urgency, subsequent governments had to carefully navigate within the prevailing model of separation of church and state. For the state, this meant it could not unilaterally establish facilities for training religious clergy. It could only happen at the initiative of the Muslim community itself. For a long time, however, the heterogeneous Muslim community was unsuccessful in establishing the necessary representative organisation which would represent all major mosque movements and schools of thought. Meanwhile, private initiatives such as the Islamic University Rotterdam (IUR), established in 1998 in Rotterdam, and its demerged rival Islamitische Universiteit Europa (closed in 2019 because of financial malversations) (Boender 2022) were successful in obtaining accreditation for their programs. However, they did not succeed in acquiring the legal position needed to receive state funding. Although the Netherlands has several theological universities that are managed by a specific religious denomination and receive state funding (Van den Brink 2004: 337), it was legally no longer possible to embed new bottom-up initiatives in the Higher Education Act. Although the management of the Islamic University Rotterdam expected that they would become the first Islamic university, the 'political door' closed in front of them. The political will to change the law was lacking, particularly after the public anti-gay statements of the IUR's Rector.

The political concern about the lack of quality of so-called 'import imams' increased at the end of the 1990s, especially since the infamous month of September 2001. Like elsewhere in Europe, the focus shifted from integration to securitisation with increased fear of radicalisation of Muslim youngsters against Western secular societies. Suggestions to establish domestic imam training now became part of anti-terrorism measures. However, the state was still obliged to respect the principle of separation of church and state. If the

government wanted to support an imam training facility financially, it had to wait for the initiative of Muslim organisations or universities. It was in the aftermath of the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in November 2004 that the Minister of Integration achieved a breakthrough. Two Muslim representative organisations were formally recognised by the government to function as intermediates between government and Muslim constituencies, one (CMO) comprising ten Sunnite organisations, the other (CGI) representing Shi'a, Alevite and Ahmadi Muslims. Now, the road became open to the Minister of Integration to invite higher education institutes to prepare a proposal for imam training and Islamic theology, which – ideally – had to be developed in close cooperation with Muslim organisations.

Three state-funded institutes responded to this 'top-down' call. The proposal of the University of Applied Sciences InHolland focused on training imams, spiritual counsellors and religious teachers. Its curriculum took the existing Christian pastoral vocational training as its starting point. Five member organisations of the CMO (Contact Organ for Muslims and Government) supplied its Muslim lecturers. The Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, an originally private Protestant university funded by the government since the 1970s, also submitted a plan. Finally, Leiden University, which has a centuries-long tradition of Oriental and Islamic Studies sent in a proposal. These universities also newly appointed Muslim teachers for the new curriculum. Thus, Islamic theology was offered in three distinct forms and approaches. InHolland offered a vocational program. The VU and Leiden differed from each other in their choice between a 'simplex ordo' model and a 'duplex ordo' model respectively. In the duplex ordo model, the confessional part of the training is strictly separated from the more general scientific part of theology, whereas the simplex ordo combines them (Ghaly 2014).

2.2.1 *Islamic Theology at Leiden University and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

Leiden University embedded the new program in the so-called 'duplex ordo', meaning that students were versed in historical-critical education and research into Islam and Muslim societies.² Two Muslim teachers who had completed

2 In the now-defunct Leiden duplex ordo model of theology, the first four years emphasised the broader scientific aspects of theology, which were overseen by the public university. In the final two years, theology students focused on doctrinal and practical theological subjects, which fell under the responsibility of the Protestant Church. Church professors were in charge of providing education aligned with the church's confessional beliefs (Van den Brink, 2004: 339). In the early 2000s, the Protestant Church ceased to offer seminary education in Leiden. Following a significant internal reorganisation, the Faculty of Theology lost its

their BA at Al-Azhar University and their MA and Ph.D. in Islamic Studies at Leiden University, together with several non-Muslim teachers, provided the BA and MA programs. The intended post-master part, however, which would be under the auspices of Muslim religious organisations, was never realised. Therefore, even if the program was called Islamic Theology, the students became well-versed in the historical-critical methods of Islam Studies, but not, or much less so, in confessionally reflecting upon the sources in the classroom setting (see also Van Heutz et al. 2012).

Conversely, the VU integrated Islamic theology in the Faculty of Divinity, where academic teaching in theology departed from the principle of 'simplex ordo', meaning that teaching included space for confessional argumentation. This university was founded in 1880 by Abraham Kuyper, a prolific Protestant Reformed foreman, who believed that their church ministers should not be trained at national universities and therefore by the state, but free from the state and the 'privileged' church. Hence the name Free University, as part of acquiring sovereignty within one's circle (*sovereiniteit in eigen kring*). The ambition of the newly established university reached further: the aim was to emancipate the subaltern Reformed middle class (*kleine luyden*, or 'little people'). While the theological faculty housed Protestant ministerial training courses for a long time and various Protestant scholarly voices – from orthodox to liberal – it underwent a vital renewal impulse in the mid-2000s. In the first two decades of the new millennium, the VU opened its doors to the seminaries of no fewer than nine religious denominations – Restored Reformed, Remonstrant, Anabaptist Mennonite, Baptists, (Greek and Russian) Orthodox, but also of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. The state financed the clergy training of all these denominations. This provision included the Centre for Islamic Theology (CIT).

Contrary to the 'national plan and expectations', both InHolland's Higher Vocational School and Leiden University announced the termination of their programs in 2013. The Executive Board of InHolland mainly provided financial arguments to explain their decision: As not enough students graduated, the program became too expensive for them to cover. Students often dropped out, partly due to a poor labour market forecast. Sometimes, the content of the program did not match their expectations (Boender 2013). Attempts of the CMO to restart the program at the higher vocational level in collaboration with

independent status and became part of the Faculty of Humanities. In an increasingly competitive university landscape, the department of Religious Studies, of which Islamic Studies was part, has experienced difficulty securing sufficient financial resources.

educational institutes and the Ministry of Social Affairs have not yet been successful (Boender 2021).

Also, the Executive Board of Leiden University lost faith in its mission to train imams and Islamic theologians. Muslim organisations did not invest in setting up their part of the program. Its director, Maurits Berger, phrased this in a blog post as “It is difficult to meet an offer – supplying homegrown imams – if there is no clear demand for it. This question has been given lip service within the Muslim community, but few have advocated it.”³ With the money left from the government subsidy for Islamic theology, Leiden University transformed the program into a knowledge centre. The Leiden Islam Academy aimed to reach out to society, valorising academic expertise in a reversed manner, turning Islamic Theology’s academic inward orientation into a society-oriented institute for Muslim and non-Muslim audiences (Boender 2019; M. Berger 2021). The Leiden Islam Academy ran until 2018, when resources dried out. The BA Islamic theology courses transferred to Middle Eastern Studies in 2013/14. Initially as BA Islamic Studies, but soon reduced to a track and a minor within the BA Middle Eastern Studies.

In conclusion, the only state-funded university program in confessional Islamic Theology that remained in operation after 2013 was located at the VU.

2.2.2 *Profile of the Centrum voor Islamitische Theologie (CIT) at the Vrije Universiteit (VU)*

The Centre for Islamic Theology (CIT) was established in September 2005 at the Faculty of Theology at the Vrije Universiteit. It offers a bachelor’s in Islamic theology and a Master’s specialisation in Islamic Spiritual Care. Additionally, CIT provides postgraduate education for community-based imams and spiritual caretakers. The faculty received a state subsidy of 1.5 million euros for its first six years and has continued to receive financial support since then.

On its website, it profiled its mission as aiming to be a centre for studying Islam from an Islamic perspective, with a special focus on the Dutch (Western European) context. The Centre’s studies concentrate on four themes: an in-depth exploration of historical Islam, a reflection on Islam in the modern period, the context of Muslims in the Netherlands, and Islamic spiritual care. The Centre aims to be hermeneutical, contextual, and dialogical in teaching and research. *Hermeneutical* means understanding Islam from the sources and attempting to understand the faith responsibly and apply it accordingly in the

3 Maurits Berger, www.leiden-islamblog.nl/articles/gemiste-kans-voor-imamopleidingen-in-nederland, posted on 11 Februari 2013 (cf. Boender 2019).

present. *Contextual* refers to the Dutch and Western context. *Dialogical* refers to conversations with people who think differently (*andersdenkenden*).⁴

A Protestant theologian, Henk Vroom (1945–2014), acted as the Centre's first director. In a position paper, Vroom explained how Islamic theology faces the task of reflecting upon their own tradition within the Western European context in which one lives. This duty could effectuate the hermeneutical task of contextually interpreting the Islamic heritage. Furthermore, in a plural society, theology is unavoidably also dialogical (Vroom 2009: 59).⁵ A confrontation with one's spiritual understanding was also part of the Centre's education for imams "to become respectful and open towards others, as well as with the competence to judge to explain the faith towards others", particularly to the young and to the faith community. This also means that "The training also includes promoting the personal development of the clergy so that they are respectful and open to others, but also can discern and account for their faith to others" (Vroom 2009: 59).⁶ "Students of theology should have the competence to develop contextual statements." However, Vroom observed that many of the interested Muslim students (at least in the early years of the VU-program between 2005 and 2009) "until now, they often do not live up to these claims, since they have only learned to get to know the views of others" (Vroom, 2009: 61).⁷ According to Vroom:

The problem of the transfer from a receptive tradition to a personal and more or less critical dedication is a major didactical problem, as the

4 Extracted 8 January 2018, translation WB.

5 The original reference in German is: "Die islamische Theologie steht vor der Aufgabe, die eigene Traditionen im westeuropäischen Kontext, in dem man lebt, zu reflektieren. Daraus ergibt sich eine hermeneutische Aufgabe: die kontextuelle Interpretation des islamischen Erbes. In einer pluralen Gesellschaft ist Theologie unvermeidlich auch dialogisch" (Vroom 2009: 59).

6 The original reference in German continues as follows: "Die Imame sollen lernen, den Glauben und die islamische Lebensweise den Jugendlichen und den Gläubigen auszulegen. Die Ausbildung beinhaltet dazu auch die Förderung der persönlichen Entwicklung der Geistlichen, so dass sie respektvoll und offen gegenüber anderen sind, aber auch mit Urteilsvermögen den Glauben anderen gegenüber verantworten zu können" (Vroom 2009: 59).

7 The original German reference is: "Denn Studierende der Theologie sollen die Kompetenz haben, eigene kontextuelle Stellungnahmen zu entwickeln. Oft entsprechen sie aber diesen Ansprüchen nicht, da sie bislang nur gelernt hatten, die Auffassungen anderer kennen zu lernen" (Vroom 2009: 61).

students should learn not only to reproduce but also to independently think about the faith – for many, this is new. (Vroom 2009: 63)⁸

In 2011, Vroom was succeeded by Yaser Ellethy, an Egyptian philological polyglot who had worked as an assistant professor in Greece in philological studies. During 2010–2018, the Center had a staff of seven (one full, one endowed, one associate and four assistant professors). During this period, at least three external Ph.D. candidates received their doctorate under the supervision of Van Doorn-Harder, amongst whom Tim Winter, director of the Cambridge Muslim College (in December 2015). The confessional identity of the staff formed a point of departure, with Islamic subjects taught by Muslim teachers. Vroom explained that the lecturers were made familiar with the processes of the Western academic research tradition (2009: 65). He found it of utmost importance that “the lecturers are connected to the Dutch Muslim communities and are not controlled in terms of content by Islamic organisations (or Christian or secular bodies)” (Vroom 2009: 65).⁹ Although still building on its simplex ordo model, the VU took a turn here. The collaboration with the national Representative Council of Muslims, CMO, remained limited to specific projects and the recognition of its Spiritual Care Master for becoming spiritual caretakers that work at the Ministry of Justice (prison chaplaincy, police), the Ministry of Defence (army chaplaincy) under the instigation of the Muslim community (*Zending*). Because of the relatively robust embedding of Islam education in the faculty, secured finances in the first crucial years, and the chosen profile of the centre, it was not considered essential to obtain an authorisation (*Genehmigung*) of Islamic organisations (Vroom, 2009: 59). The relations were limited to an advisory role, with the intention that good relations with diverse Muslim organisations would offer the best chances to graduates to be accepted within the communities and find (paid) jobs as theologians or imams (Vroom 2009: 65).¹⁰

8 The original reference in German is: “Das Problem des Übergangs von einer rezeptiven Überlieferung zu einer persönlichen und mehr oder weniger kritischen Zueignung ist ein grosses didaktisches Problem, weil die Studierenden lernen sollen, nicht nur zu reproduzieren, sondern auch über den Glauben selbständig nachzudenken – für viele ist das neu” (Vroom 2009: 63).

9 The original German reference is: “Das Wichtigste ist aber, dass die Dozenten mit den niederländischen muslimischen Gemeinschaften verbunden sind und inhaltlich nicht durch islamische Organisationen (oder christliche bzw. säkulare Gremien) gesteuert werden” (Vroom 2009: 65).

10 The original reference in German is: “Die Intention ist, auf diese Weise gute Beziehungen zu den verschiedenen islamischen Richtungen zu unterhalten und Theologinnen und

2.3 Germany

German Muslims, like their Dutch neighbours, have set up a solid educational infrastructure for the religious training of their Muslim religious constituencies, of whom the majority originated from Turkey. Moreover, similar to the Dutch situation, Germany knows a contingent or strenuous relationship between the state, universities, and Muslim representative organisations in the period that preceded the actual establishment of five state-funded programs in Islamic theology in 2010. The opening of five centres spread over Germany in 2010 was the (provisional) summit of negotiations between the state, universities and some Muslim representatives to position Islamic confessional theology programs in German universities. In these negotiations, the National Scientific Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) played an active and perhaps decisive role. According to the Council's advice, the German federal government invested twenty million euros for a period of five years.

Obviously, this step did not come out of the blue. It was part of the dynamics in at least three fields: religious education, interreligious relations,¹¹ and institutional collaboration of state and Muslim organisations (Engelhardt 2017). In each field there were collaborations and the need for fostering the Muslim academic voice became increasingly felt. With a growing number of Muslims living in Germany from 3,3 million in 2010 (4,1% of the population) to nearly 5 million (6,1%) in 2016,¹² the emancipation of Germany's second and third generation migrants and the integration of newcomers, particularly from Syria, has been urgent in the period under investigation.

The first dynamic can be linked to developments in religious education in public schools. German public schools offer ample space for religious education (*teaching about* and *teaching in* a religious tradition). Therefore, a need for well-trained Islamic religious teachers who could teach Islamic Religious Education (IRE) became persistent. In 2003, discussions were well underway to launch the establishment of seats of learning for Islamic religious pedagogy (Kamp 2003). In 2011, seven German universities and universities for applied sciences (*Hochschulen*) housed programs for Islamic Religious Pedagogy (Özdil 2011). In 2007, Bülent Ucar, University of Osnabrück, was the first Muslim professor to hold a chair in Islamic Religious Pedagogy. In 2009, the

Theologen sowie Imamen und Imame auszubilden, die in ihren eigenen Moscheeorganisationen arbeiten können" (Vroom 2009: 65).

11 Engelhardt (2017) uses the term 'intertheological dialogue'.

12 The Growth of Germany's Muslim Population | Pew Research Center, extracted 29 November 2017.

right to receive Islamic religious education (*Islamisches Religionsunterricht*) at public schools became legally possible, leading to an increased demand for teachers training facilities in IRE. Access to this labour market requires a German university diploma, contrary to employment by mosques and private Islamic teaching facilities. Additionally, for women wearing headscarves who wanted to become teachers, this was the only university program open to them to achieve this goal. New programs in Islamic Religious Pedagogy could, therefore, attract a substantial number of interested students from all over Germany.

A second dynamic came from the academic environments where Muslim scholars were working. One is that of Protestant (*Evangelisch*) and Catholic Faculties. These urged Muslim scholars to bring a profound Muslim voice into various themes discussed in the academic context of interreligious dialogue. These Muslim scholars were often located at Turkish universities or working in departments for German Oriental Studies, where they, substantial in numbers, studied and taught foremost in the secular tradition of Islamic Studies. Increasingly, colleagues in Interreligious Studies stimulated them to publish not only at the invitation of ‘non-Muslims’ in their edited volumes but to initiate this on their own terms (Engelhardt 2017).

The other academic environment is Islamic Studies. Among established Islamologists, one could hear strong resistance against the positioning of an explicitly religious ‘Muslim normative voice’ under their banner; secular Islam studies should be about non-normative Islam studies instead of prescriptive-normative (see Chapter 1.5). Among a substantial number of German Islamologists, there was a vital concern that such opening up the space for confessional teaching, learning and studying Islam would be at the cost of the academic quality of Islam Studies that wants to be historical-critical, secular, neutral or methodologically agnostic in its epistemological and methodological foundations (cf. Agai 2016; Engelhardt 2017). This contributed to the question whether separate departments for Islamic theology had to be founded.

Thirdly, two central actors played a central role. On the one hand, Muslim organisations who strived to provide a home (*Beheimatung*) for Islam in Germany (Engelhardt 2017: 11). And on the other hand, the German state. In the first decade of the 2000s, state and Muslim organisations started to collaborate on a national representative level in the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK), a governmental initiative launched in 2006. With the DIK, the religious-political structures of community representation at the level of the state were created (Peter 2009). They acted from different motives, though, as faith-based actors who were striving for an integration of Islam while moving along an axis between transmission of the original identity in the diaspora and the creation of a ‘German Islam’, and the state that was primarily concerned with

integration as the taming of a religion that was perceived as foreign and strived for control by incorporation (Engelhardt 2017: 11).¹³

Like in the Netherlands, the call to domestically educate German imams was prominently heard in the 2000s. However, unlike the Dutch situation, German universities have managed to keep the professional training of mosque imams outside their curriculum, with Osnabrück as an exception (Engelhardt 2017: 16, note 18). There are several explanations for this difference. One is that in Germany, the professional training of a minister or priest only starts after finishing university studies in theology. Politicians realised that they had to support the establishment of an academic facility for theological training first, before a next step could be taken. The other is that the infrastructure for the training and recruitment of imams is well-developed among Muslim organisations. Most large denominations have a consistent organisational infrastructure along religious-ethnic and religious-political lines. The most prominent example is DITIB, which is directly related to the Turkish state and governs more than 900 of the circa 2340 Islamic communities that facilitate communal prayer facilities. A third explanation is that the government prioritised establishing Islamic religious teachers training as this would fill an urgent labour market request.

Except for the fact that the state had to carry a particular responsibility for the integration of religious minority groups in Germany while guaranteeing their equal treatment, the state also had to take into account the security of all its citizens in a time in which radical Islamists increasingly became a threat to national safety.

2.3.1 *The German Model of State–Religion Relations*

In the German ‘national model’ that guides the relationship between church and state, the state cannot act without a Muslim representative organisation.¹⁴ The Christian theological faculties have had a responsibility in developing ‘public theology’ framed in the legal model of the Church as *Körperschaft* (civil body). The state carries a responsibility in offering university chairs in public service law, while the Church is responsible for the ecclesiastical doctrine as

13 The original reference in German goes as follows: “Zum einen glaubensgemeinschaftliche Akteure, die eine Beheimatung des Islams in Deutschland anstreben und sich auf einer Achse zwischen die Tradierung Herkunftsidentität in der Diaspora und der Schaffung eines deutschen Islams bewegen. Zum anderen staatliche und gesellschaftliche Institutionen, die mit der Integration des Islams vorrängig die Zähmung einer als fremd empfundenen Religion verbinden und Kontrolle durch Inkorporation anstreben” (Engelhardt 2017: 11).

14 This is similar to the situation in the Netherlands (see Chapter 2.2).

the subject of teaching at the university (Wissenschaftsrat 2010: 17). The state and the respective religious community are obligated to cooperate in establishing theology departments and denominational courses of studies at public universities (Hafez 2014: 49).

However, this system did not include the Muslim communities of Germany. Where the Catholic and Protestant Church did have substantial influence in Christian theological faculties, this was not the case for Islamic organisations. This historically grown situation had many reasons, which will not be further discussed here. What is important to point out is that to initiate university training for imams, the state was not allowed to establish a theology department or any denominational-oriented academic program unilaterally (Hafez 2014: 49). However, Muslim organisations themselves could not take the necessary action to fulfill this wish as their legal rights had not yet been recognised as a civil body (*Körperschaft*).

In this complicated situation, a committee of the German Scientific Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) chaired by Reinhard Schulze, a German Professor of Islamic Studies at the Swiss University of Bern, took the lead. The German Scientific Council is a policy body that acts at the national level and played a decisive role in bringing the institutional and intellectual development of Islamic university theology in Germany into the next phase.¹⁵

The *Wissenschaftsrat* took the existing model as its point of departure, realising that the situation was fundamentally different for Muslims: Islam did not have the same legal position as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, or Judaism. Because Islam was not recognised as *Körperschaft*, it long seemed impossible for the Muslim community to claim similar rights. Simply said, the legal structure was lacking. In 2006, the state tried to force a way out by establishing the mentioned German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz, DIK*), founded as a Forum by the Ministry of the Interior. Various parties (organisations and individuals) from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds were invited to the DIK. Not being a 'bottom-up-initiative', it was received positively by some while encountering protest and resistance from others (cf. Peter 2009).

When the *Wissenschaftsrat* started its advisory preparations, Muslim organisations were not yet included in the formatting of a proposal. This decision was motivated by the concern of the *Wissenschaftsrat* that consensus would

15 Whereas the *Wissenschaftsrat* discussed the position of Islamic Theology in the wider context of academic Theology and Religious Studies, the Dutch Royal Scientific Academy (KNAW) did not include Islamic Theology in its exploration of the future of theology within secular academia (KNAW 2015).

be almost impossible to achieve among the highly diverse Muslim umbrella organisations, who would themselves only represent twenty per cent of the 4.5 million Muslims in Germany and who themselves were involved in complicated power balances (Ceylan 2017: 273).

The Muslim organisations came in only in the second stage of preparation, during the formation of the advisory councils or steering groups (*Beiräte*) in which they would be represented. This step fulfilled the legal demand that the ‘Church’ has a voice in the design of the curriculum and the appointment of Chairs and lecturers. Through these advisory councils, the link between the religious communities, the programs, its professors and the university was organised similarly to the Christian theological faculties or departments. In this way, the academic legitimacy rests with the universities, while the religious legitimacy forms the domain of the *Beirat*.

Observers have varying opinions on the extent to which Muslim organisations could actually influence the curriculum and academic staff of programs, thereby impacting the power balance between the state and religious communities. Engelhardt (2017) suggests that Muslim umbrella organisations were able to establish their position during the preparatory phase and in the development of the scientific field once the programs were operational. Some viewed the *Beirat* as ensuring authenticity in cooperation and support from Muslim organisations (Ceylan 2017: 279). They also highlighted how Muslims felt represented by the advisory boards, both organisationally and on an individual level.

Others criticise the system in which the advisory boards (*Beiräte*) and Muslim associations must operate (Ahmad & Hernández Aguilar 2018; Hafez 2014). Hafez condemns it as a “religious policy” in an agenda that turns “[Muslim] objects ... into security threats” (Hafez 2014: 45). He argues that this structure of religious policy allows European governments to gradually assert control over their Muslim populations by granting unique influence over organisations and leadership (Hafez 2014: 45). Critics also disapproved of the *Wissenschaftsrat*’s decision to involve Muslim organisations only at a later stage. They further condemned the role of the Ministry particularly in Münster, in deciding (negotiating) who would get a seat on the *Beirat*, including the distribution of seats for Muslims and non-Muslims. They object that this governmental interference on the *Beiräte* and subsequently the content of the programs, goes against the separation of Church and state. Hafez also considers the demand for meetings to be conducted in the German language as an indication that the German Office for Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) wishes to monitor and control these developments,

suggesting that the *Verfassungsschutz* has become a defining power in the German religio-political landscape (Hafez 2014: 44). According to Hafez, integration policy has turned into controlling policy.

The German Scientific Council proactively advised the Minister of Interior to facilitate the desired programs financially. The state's financial support would pragmatically surpass several bottlenecks of this difficult pre-initial phase of tripartite negotiation (Ceylan 2017). The German architect behind this plan, Prof Reinhard Schulze, learned from the Dutch experiences where the realisation of the program in the Leiden *duplex ordo* system could only work if one or more large Muslim organisations (like Diyanet or Milli Görüş) would commit themselves fully.¹⁶ Moreover, this facilitating role is part of the legal duty of the German state to organise *Bildung* and science at its state universities (Indenhuck 2016: 80). According to its criteria, Islamic theology also falls under the definition of science in constitutional law (*Grundgesetz, Art. 5 Abs. 3*) (Indenhuck 2016: 80–87). It is, therefore, legally possible for the state to make efforts to establish these new colleges without privileging any religion.¹⁷

However, this construction also comes with responsibilities for theology as academic science, as it must balance the boundaries set by the confession on the one hand and an open and critical approach that can question 'limitless'. Indenhuck explains:

However, recourse to recognising the scientific system also means that theological sciences must proceed open-endedly within the boundaries

16 In a personal conversation in September 2013, Schulze explained how he analysed the attempts of his Dutch colleague at Leiden University, Professor Sjoerd van Koningsveld, to establish a collaborative agreement between Leiden University and one or more large Muslim organisations (Diyanet and Milli Görüş). Such agreement would be necessary to set up a program in the *duplex ordo* model. These attempts failed; Islamic Theology at Leiden University remained limited to the first four years and was not 'topped' with a seminary education (see Chapter 2.2).

17 Earlier, Indenhuck explained how "The ban on the state church does not contain a strict separation requirement which would fundamentally contradict the admissibility of theological higher education institutions. However, if the state decides to create such institutions, it must observe the ban on institutional connections and the ban on identification. This results in particular in the state's lack of competence in religious-content issues and the need for a corresponding limitation of tasks" (Indenhuck 2016: 76). The original German reference is: "Das Verbot der Staatskirche enthält kein strenges Trennungsgebot, das der Zulässigkeit theologischer Hochschuleinrichtungen grundsätzlich entgegensteht. Entscheidet sich der Staat aber dafür, solche Einrichtungen zu schaffen, muss er das Verbot institutioneller Verbindung sowie das Identifikationsverbot beachten. Hieraus folgen insbesondere die staatliche Unzuständigkeit in religiös-inhaltlichen Fragen und die Notwendigkeit einer entsprechenden Aufgabenbegrenzung" (Indenhuck 2016: 76).

set by the confession. If, on the other hand, they limit themselves to the mere proclamation of truths of faith in the sense of a clerical ideology, they lose touch with the rational, method-based scientific discourse and ultimately put their scientific nature at risk. (Indenhuck 2016: 86)¹⁸

One can assume, Indenhuck argues, that this should also apply to Islamic theology, although, as a newcomer, it does not have the old credentials of Christian theology (or Jewish, for that matter). The legal legitimacy of the German state's actions lies in her constitutional duty to create institutional space for Islamic theology at German universities. We have seen that the state must collaborate with the Muslim communities in Germany, which has been realised by installing *Beiräte* (see Indenhuck 2016: 299 for their functioning). Legally, the state can set conditions for this collaboration, as "... the state may only cooperate in the organisation of university theology with those religious communities ... whose understanding of science is compatible with the constitutional requirements for a freedom-preserving scientific organisation" (Indenhuck 2016: 209). This is to prevent specific organisations from using this secular space for proselytism. In the case of Münster, the state exercised this legal right when the *Bundesministerium* blocked the candidacy of two members of the *Beirat* with a *Milli Görüş* affiliation – a legally forbidden organisation at the time (Indenhuck 2016: 58).

It is imperative to note that this collaboration with the advisory councils does not apply to scientific research, neither to Ph.D.-level training in the Graduate School (*Graduierterkolleg*), nor to research conducted by academic staff. Indenhuck believes that as a result, there is actually no question of a confessional study and research program at (post)graduate level, despite that impression being given (Indenhuck 2016: 295).¹⁹

18 The original reference in German is as follows: "Der Rekurs auf die Anerkennung des Wissenschaftssystems bedeutet allerdings auch, dass theologische Wissenschaften innerhalb der durch das Bekenntnis gezogenen Grenzen ergebnisoffen verfahren müssen. Beschränken sie sich hingegen im Sinne einer klerikalen Ideologie auf die bloße Verkündung von Glaubenswahrheiten, verlieren sie den Anschluss an den rational-methodengeleiteten Wissenschaftsdiskurs und setzen damit letztlich ihre Wissenschaftlichkeit aufs Spiel" (Indenhuck 2016: 86).

19 The original reference in German is: "(...) Hierfür könnte sprechen, dass die Kollegiaten mit der Promotion gerade keinen spezifisch theologischen Qualifikationsnachweis erhalten. Die Bezeichnung der Einrichtung ist dann allerdings missverständlich, erweckt sie doch den Eindruck, es handelte um ein konfessionel gebundenes Studien- und Forschungsprogramm" (Indenhuck 2016: 295).

To conclude, the professors, the Muslim representatives in the advisory councils (*Beiräte*), and the Ministry of Education play crucial roles in a delicate interdependency, guided by the (legal) obligation to take each other seriously (Indenhuck 2016: 303).²⁰ The Ministry of Education, in particular, holds significant influence in this dynamic. In their 2010 advice, the Council for Science and Research attempted to navigate this minefield of interests. They did so by delaying the legal involvement of the religious ‘civil society’ until the commitment of the state and universities had been formalised. This strategic approach is what I refer to as the ‘top down’ German model. Had a different strategy been employed, it might have taken significantly longer to overcome the hurdles. However, since 2010, institutionalisation has progressed at a ‘meteoric speed’ (*ein rasantes Tempo*, Ceylan 2017).²¹

2.3.2 Profiles of the First Five Centres

Five universities, geographically spread over several federal German states, received funding to start a teaching and research program in Islamic theology.²² These will be briefly introduced below.²³

2.3.2.1 The Center for Islamic Theology (ZIT) at the Westfälische Wilhelms-University of Münster

The *Zentrum für Islamische theologie* (ZIT, Centre for Islamic Theology), housed at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, was founded on 1 October 2011, adding an Islamic department to this university that housed the two largest Christian faculties of Europe (Khorchide 2016: 31). On its website, the centre introduced itself as “a university department dedicated to

20 Moritz Indenhuck ends his legal account with a notification, or even a warning, that because of the legal challenges, it is not sure whether the establishment of Islamic theology at German *Hochschulen* will last for the long term. Therefore, he advises to build on the historical achievements of academic theology in Germany in case of tensions or conflict (Indenhuck 2016: 303–304).

21 Indenhuck provides a description of the German centres before and after the advice of the Scientific Council was realised (2016: 47–64).

22 For instance, according to information found on the website of IIT Osnabrück, this centre received 3.3 million Euro of the federal *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* and the regional government of Niedersachsen for the periode between 2012 and 2017, as well as financing from the Mercator Stiftung for their participation in the Graduate School.

23 Later, more centres joined: the *Akademie der Weltreligionen* (AWR) at Hamburg University; the Institut für Islamische Theologie/Religionspädagogik at the PH Karlsruhe, the Department for Islamic Theology/Religious Pedagogy (*die Abteilung für Islamische Theologie/Religionspädagogik*) at the PH Ludwigsburg, and the Seminary for Islamic theology (*das Seminar für Islamische Theologie* (SIT)) at the University of Paderborn.

faith-oriented Islamic theology and Islamic religious education, making the ZIT Münster the only Islamic theological-academic institution in all of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous federal state. With experts addressing questions about Islam as a religion, the Centre seeks to meet the growing demand for independent Islamic theology in German society. One of the ways of achieving this is through the promotion and (further) training of young researchers."²⁴

Mouhanad Khorchide, a university's professor in Islamic Religious Pedagogy at the same university, became the Centre's academic director, with Ahmad Milad Karimi as its vice-director. On its website, the Centre presented its vision and mission as follows: "The aim of the Center for Islamic Theology is to take account of the growing plurality of religious denominations in Germany and to contribute to the training of urgently needed young academics in the field of denomination-oriented engagement with Islam, as well as to establish Islamic theology in Germany, as the Science Council advises in its "Recommendations for the further development of theologies and religion-related sciences at German universities" from January 2010."²⁵ For this goal, the Centre established research professorships, junior research groups and denomination-oriented courses from Bachelor to Doctoral, covering the fields of 'Islamic theology' and 'Islamic Religious Education'. "These activities in the field of denomination-oriented engagement with Islam are to be expanded in order to ensure scientific-rational reflexion on Islamic theology and to contribute to the constitution of a scientifically based Islamic theology in the European context."²⁶

24 www.uni-muenster.de/ZIT, accessed 11-3-2018.

25 www.uni-muenster.de/ZIT, accessed 11-3-2018.

26 The original German text reads as follows: "Ziel des Zentrums für Islamische Theologie ist es, der wachsenden Pluralität religiöser Bekenntnisse in Deutschland Rechnung zu tragen und zur Ausbildung des dringend benötigten wissenschaftlichen Nachwuchses auf dem Gebiet der bekenntnisorientierten Beschäftigung mit dem Islam beizutragen, sowie die Islamische Theologie in Deutschland zu etablieren, wie es der Wissenschaftsrat in seinen "Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung der Theologien und religionsbezogenen Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen" vom Januar 2010 rät. Durch die Einrichtungen von Forschungsprofessuren, Nachwuchsgruppen und bekenntnisorientierten Studiengängen vom Bachelor bis hin zum Promotionsprogramm sollen die bisherigen Aktivitäten in der Forschung, Nachwuchsförderung und Lehre auf dem Gebiet der bekenntnisorientierten Beschäftigung mit dem Islam ausgebaut werden, um die wissenschaftlich-rationale Reflexion der Islamischen Theologie zu gewährleisten und zur Konstituierung einer wissenschaftlich fundierten Islamischen Theologie im europäischen Kontext beizutragen."

Its Advisory Council plays a role in nominating candidates for professorships (see Chapter 6.4.2).

2.3.2.2 The Center for Islamic Theology (ZITH) at the Eberhart Karls University of Tübingen

The *Zentrum für Islamische Theologie* (Center for Islamic Theology (ZITH)) was founded at the Eberhart Karls University of Tübingen in 2011, with funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBWF), offering a Bachelor's program in Islamic Theology, a Teaching degree in Islamic Religious Education, a Master in Islamic Theology in a European Context and a Master in Islamic Practical Theology for Pastoral Care and Social Work.

On its website, the Centre prominently mentions the place of the denominational advisory board in the development of these training programs, made up of three associations, namely DİTİB (Diyanet İşleri Türk-Islam Birliği), İGBD (Islamic Community of Bosniaks in Germany) and VIKZ (National Association of Islamic Cultural Centers) as well as two independent Muslim experts who are nominated by the university's principal (cf. Ceylan 2017: 280).

In its research, the ZITH works in all classical disciplines of Islamic theology. "*Historical research* in its diversity (philology, historical anthropology, history of ideas, history of law and religion, exegesis, prophetic tradition) is supported by *systematic approaches* (systematic theology, philosophy of religion, doctrine of faith and legal theory) and *practical theology* (above all in the areas of pedagogy, social and youth work, pastoral care) constructively supplemented."²⁷

The ZITH also mentions how, "due to the international composition of the teaching and research staff, the ZITH is in close contact with national and international centers for Islamic theology and universities in the Arab, Turkish and Southeast European regions as well as in France, Italy, Hungary and Great Britain in joint research projects."²⁸

2.3.2.3 The Institute for Islamic Theology (IIT) at the University of Osnabrück

In October 2012, the Institute for Islamic Theology (*Institut für Islamische Theologie*, IIT) opened its doors, with Bülent Ucar as its academic director. IIT aimed to stimulate young academics' development, train Muslim theologians and chaplains, and thus ensure scientifically sound training for religious

27 www.uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/zentrum-fuer-islamische-theologie/zentrum/ accessed 11-3-2018.

28 www.uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/zentrum-fuer-islamische-theologie/zentrum/ accessed 11-3-2018.

scholars in the state university system. By 2018, the IIT held seven professorships, eight postdocs and more than twenty junior research fellows who did research in an Islamo-theological and interdisciplinary junior research group. The Mercator Stiftung (Mercator Foundation), the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation and the Maturidi Study Funding for Islamic Thinking of the Turkish Directorate in Germany, DITIB, funded these research positions.

On its website, the IIT explained how it has been advocating a ‘theological path of the middle’, with which they mean a denominational, scientific and systematic examination of the sources of faith or the practice of faith on the basis of the cumulative intellectual achievements of the Islamic history of ideas, whereby “1). The different currents of Islam in Germany with their everyday reality should be represented appropriately and brought into an exchange; 2). Space is given to the different Islamic schools of law; 3). The inner-Islamic pluralism is taken up constructively on the basis of historically grown theological approaches”.²⁹

As guiding principle, the IIT followed the notion of “innovation in tradition, [which] is about linking up with the tradition in its form of argumentative debate and scholarly discourse. On the basis of the Islamic primary sources, the historical and cultural contexts should be taken into account. The analysis of the contexts and conditions is not only important for a critical look at the tradition, but also for a reflection on the conditionality of contemporary positions in plural, democratically constituted societies. Based on a balanced basic orientation, the Islamic-theological thought traditions should function as a starting point for dynamic thought processes at the IIT.”³⁰ Like Münster, Osnabrück holds strong ties with the regional Muslim organisations through its Advisory Council.

2.3.2.4 The Center for Islamic Studies (ZEFIS), at the Goethe University Frankfurt and the Justus Liebig University Giessen

As early as 2002, the Goethe University in Frankfurt founded the Centre for Islamic Studies (*Zentrum für islamische Studien*, ZEFIS). Its first Chair that was sponsored by the German branch of the Turkish Diyanet (DITIB). In 2005 and 2009, two more Chairs were subsidised in a similar construct. In 2012, Goethe University took over the Centre (Ceylan 2017: 276), where it is now a joint institution of the Goethe University Frankfurt and the Justus Liebig University Gießen, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Federal State of Hessen.

29 www.iit.uni-osnabrueck.de, accessed 11-10-2017.

30 www.iit.uni-osnabrueck.de, accessed 11-10-2017.

It coordinates the teaching and research of the Institute for the Study of Islamic Culture and Religion at Goethe University (with professorships in Qur'anic Exegesis, Islamic Intellectual History, and Culture and Society of Islam in Past and Present) and the professorships of Education with a focus on Islamic Religious Education and its Didactics in Frankfurt and for Islamic Theology and its Didactics in Giessen. Its BA and MA programs had attracted around 400 students in 2017.

In its orientation, the Centre has emphasised the “principle of open-ended research” (*Leitbild der ergebnisoffenen Forschung*). This means that “the centre’s researchers reflect methodically-text-critically, systematically and contextually on the diverse intellectual heritage of Islam, and are engaged in international scientific exchange with Islamic theologies as well as with other theologies and other disciplines”.³¹ These include the Christian theologies, Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, Cultural Studies and other relevant disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

As advisory council, Frankfurt opted for a round table model with seats for a limited selection of Islamic organisations (Ceylan 2017).

2.3.2.5 The Department of Islamic-Religious Studies (DIRS) at the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg

The Department for Islamic-Religious Studies (*Departement für Islamisch-Religiöse Studien*), DIRS, was founded in September 2012, as part of the Faculty of Philosophy and the School of Theology at the Friedrich Alexander University (FAU) in Erlangen-Nürnberg. It formulated as its main aim the “academisation of Muslim self-interpretation”. On their website, they explained how “The aim of theology is to promote the development of sustainable concepts with regard to current questions concerning freedom, human rights, tolerance and religious pluralism from an interior as well as an interdisciplinary point of view.”³²

This aim was further elaborated in relation to its Bachelor program in Islamic Religious Studies (IRS), which “regards normative, analytical, methodological, discursive and practically relevant approaches to Islam. It places the necessary basis for it in the Arabic language as reference of Islamic source texts. In reference to Islam as a religious interpretation system, it incorporates systematic, practical, ethical and philosophical aspects. The BA IRS initiates specific operational competences and personal commitment in special religious-related areas, for instance spiritual counselling, ritual practice, community affairs,

31 www.uni-frankfurt.de/64182212/, accessed 2-4-2018.

32 www.dirs.phil.fau.de, accessed 11-10-2017.

youth work and pedagogical management (instrumental, generic and communicative competences)".³³

The DIRS' research foci have been on Texts and Norms, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology, and Religious Pedagogy, each led by a Chair and supported by a research group.

The Centre's educational Advisory Council consists of German and international scholars in Islamic Studies; the large Muslim organisations were hardly involved in their selection (Ceylan 2017: 281).

2.3.3 *Collaboration and Growth of the Centres*

Together, the five centres housed nineteen Chairs, financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, which invested twenty million Euros for the first five years. The private fund of the Mercator Stiftung funded twenty Ph.D. positions, investing 3,6 million euros between 2011 and 2016.³⁴ The universities guaranteed that they would not terminate the programs after the first five-year run.

In March 2015, the five centres for Islamic theology together counted around eighty-five persons with formal university affiliations (Engelhardt 2017: 177, note 447). Of them, thirty-six per cent had obtained a MA or Ph.D. in Islamic Studies (be it Islamic Studies, Oriental Studies, Arabic, Middle Eastern Studies, or Persian Studies). Twenty per cent of them were trained in a different disciplinary field, such as philosophy, political science, or history. About twenty per cent had finished a complete Islamic theological/confessional study. Nine per cent had integrated Islamic-theological elements in their studies, which could be in the form of a minor. Some of them had specialised in religious pedagogy. Fifteen per cent of the staff did not provide information on their educational background (Engelhardt 2017: 177, note 447).

The centres collaborated in one graduate school (*Graduiertenkolleg*) for all their Ph.D. candidates. Its coordinator was Jan Felix Engelhardt, who simultaneously prepared a dissertation on the development of Islamic theology in Germany as a distinctive scientific discipline in its constitutive period between 2010 and 2016 (Engelhardt 2017: 46–48). In 2017, a new five-year state and university funding guaranteed the consolidation of the existing programs.

Three out of five centres initiated an academic journal in Islamic theology: Osnabrück had *Hikma*; Frankfurt/Giessen the *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für*

33 www.dirs.phil.fau.de, accessed 11-10-2017.

34 Info taken from www.dirs.phil.uni-erlangen.de, accessed 11-10-2017. The Pedagogical Colleges of Paderborn and Hamburg also participated in the Graduate School.

Islamische Theologie, and Tübingen launched the *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*.

To conclude, from 2010 onwards, various universities implemented the advice of the Scientific Council, albeit differently (Ceylan 2017: 275). Germany was now leading the way in Europe because of the vast financial impulse by the state and the private Mercator Stiftung. Since 2017, the number of Islamic theology programs has grown further, with more than ten German universities offering comparable programs in Islamic theology and religious pedagogy.

2.4 United Kingdom

What would be the best places for Islamic higher education and research? This has also been a burning question in Great Britain. But here, we see that increasingly strict requirements were imposed on collaborations between state-funded universities and Muslim colleges. The roadblocks increased rather than decreased, reducing the space for tripartite collaboration.

In 2021, in England and Wales, the Muslim population was estimated to be 3.87 million, which accounts for 6.5% of the total population. The majority of British Muslims have South Asian ethnicity, but there are also significant Turkish, Arab, and Somali communities. Additionally, there were up to 100,000 British converts from various ethnic backgrounds.³⁵

2.4.1 *Two Distinct Spheres of Studying Islam*

Like Germany and the Netherlands, British universities have a rich academic tradition of Islamic studies. The British tradition of studying Islam has its historical roots in the heydays of the British Commonwealth when Oriental Studies flourished at the Faculties of Arts and Theology and institutes like the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) were established. This tradition still existed at the start of the new millennium (Siddiqui 2007: 6); in 2006, more than twelve universities offered Islamic Studies (Nielsen 2017: 428).

Simultaneously, and particularly after the independence of the British colonies, an extensive private educational infrastructure was built by Muslims in Britain, many of whom were of Indian, Pakistani or Bengali origin. This infrastructure to train religious leadership is well-developed, receiving both male and female students to become imams or *alimiyya*. It copies the religious curriculum, teaching methods and overall educational culture from

35 mcb.org.uk (census 2021).

the Subcontinent's well-established movements (Sahin 2013: 214). Islamic theology/Islamic studies is taught in these seminaries and colleges, as "an intensely personal study with the aim to morally and ethically better oneself" (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 19). Subsequently, traditional Islamic seminaries in Britain are very influential and trusted by Muslim communities to produce imams for mosques and to provide communal leadership. Graduates of the traditional Islamic seminaries have control over the mosque's *minbar* (pulpit). They have larger Muslim audiences than other categories of Muslim scholars (Mumisa 2014: 86).

In 2015, there were 138 Islamic schools (Sunni *dar ul-ulooms* or Shi'a *hawzas*) registered with the Department for Education (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 42). The state recognises the diplomas from these private initiatives on the condition that these institutes pass the inspection of the state's Ofsted, the school inspection service.³⁶ However, this is not always the case, resulting in the situation that although graduates gain an equivalent of an undergraduate-level theological degree, the degree is not officially recognised, so not all graduates can enter public universities (Sahin 2013: 214).³⁷

In the UK, as in other European countries, publications of social scientists and media coverage have caused concern among politicians and policy makers (Klausen 2005: 115). Many private Islamic seminaries (*dar ul-ulooms*, *hawzas*) have not been highly regarded, and their students have often lived in isolation from the broader British society. Some use Urdu or Arabic as their language of instruction (Klausen 2005). In 2006, Sophie Gilliat-Ray observed that in a process of 'transplantation' of *dar ul-ulooms* to Britain, sectarian groups created almost entirely hermetically sealed communities, limiting their members' exposure to different perspectives and situations. She also noticed a gradual but cautious shift towards greater interaction and openness to wider society among these groups (Gilliat-Ray 2006: 73).

Next to the concern about this isolation, engaged observers expressed concerns about the failure of secular institutes to overcome the distinction

36 The number of Muslim pupils that attend these private forms of Islamic education is very small. According to numbers from 2007, obtained by the Muslim Council of Britain, three per cent of all Muslims in school in the UK attend institutions that can be considered to provide some form of Islamic education (Mandaville 2007: 230).

37 The UK knows four types of Islamic schools: 1) Primary and secondary 'faith schools'; 2) Higher education facilities teaching Islamic Studies in the Western liberal tradition or offering a hybrid curriculum combining the former with classical Islamic Sciences; 3) *Madradas* – commonly referred to as the *Dar ul-Uloom*s. These often follow the Indian Deobandi school of thought; 4) Informal and semistructured learning programs organised around individual key religious authority figures (Mandaville 2007: 228).

between Islamic Studies as taught in the seminaries and the secular educational sphere. Although specific institutions, such as the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Selly Oaks College at the University of Birmingham, have been attractive to Muslim and non-Muslim students (Mandaville 2007: 33), a relatively sharp distinction between the two has kept in place in most cases (Siddiqui 2007), based on a general perception that the two approaches are incompatible: traditional, ethnically based Islamic education is out of step with British culture and a secular approach is not held in esteem by the Muslim community (Hussain 2007: 267). In 2007, Ataullah Siddiqui still concluded that “with the exception of a few individual initiatives, the study of Islam remains anchored in the colonial legacy and mainly serves diplomatic and foreign services.” However, “much recent debate about the provision of Islamic Studies in the universities has moved appreciably towards the recognition that it needs to be more aware of its responsibilities within the country” (Siddiqui 2007: 6).

In an influential report about this matter, Ataullah Siddiqui observed that a growing interest in Islamic Studies at Muslim ‘grassroots’ level from students searching for “appropriate programs” had not been picked up by the universities. “Instead, provision for Islamic studies (with varying degrees of formal programmes) is being offered by institutions other than universities” (Siddiqui 2007: 6). This observation was confirmed by the study of Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015), who argued that (even if in reality boundaries are less rigid and more permeable), there was a lack of possibilities to cross the “dichotomy” between the private Muslim institute and the secular public university (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 24). Their research indicated that “the people who adhere to one or the other of the two sides of this dichotomy rarely have the opportunity to come together or learn from each other’s curricula, pedagogy, and philosophical approaches” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 24). Whereas British Muslims who have undertaken Islamic Studies at secular universities like Edinburgh, Exeter, Manchester, Oxford or SOAS have gained a deep knowledge of classical Islamic theology, “opinion and experience differ considerably about whether their studies prepare them for life in pluralist Britain”, Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor found (2015: 23). They considered it “a lost opportunity for pluralist Britain” (2015: 46) if Muslim seminaries and universities would not engage more with each other in providing in-depth Islamic theology:

There is a need for the ‘pious’ outlook of the seminaries and the ‘critical’ outlook of universities to come together to create hybrid courses that can be horizon broadening and can also engage with the believer’s voice at the same time. (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 46)

2.4.2 *Validation Policies: 'Dialogue across Dichotomies'?*

Amid these ongoing concerns, several initiatives to found a third type of advanced Islamic education have emerged since the 2000s that could produce a new type of Muslim scholars in Britain (Mumisa 2014). Following the example and legal option of Catholic and Protestant seminaries whose diplomas were validated by public universities, several Muslim educational institutes sought formal collaboration with universities. These Muslim higher education institutes started to offer degrees in Islamic studies, from undergraduate up to Ph.D. levels, that British universities validated. Some expected this form of “twin-track” education to produce a new type of Muslim religious leadership (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 169). “The structure of these institutions can be described as hybrid; they are required to develop, deliver and monitor their programs within the framework of academic study. The content and delivery, on the other hand, reflects the culture of traditional Islamic education” (Sahin 2013: 215). The state’s approval was needed for the administrative endorsement of the partnerships (validation), as state laws guided these cooperations.

At the beginning of the new millennium, several Muslim leaders in Britain seemed enthusiastic about these new facilities (Klausen 2005). Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor emphasise how these forms of collaboration on curriculum, research methodologies and quality assurance procedures “[create] interesting creative tensions with faith-based thought” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 55). In 2007, Ataullah Siddiqui emphasised the need to review the overall provision of Islamic Studies. Proponents agreed on the need to align Arabic and Islamic Studies departments with the British multicultural context and to connect these departments with Muslim institutions.

In 2006, four Muslim colleges had such validation of a British university, meaning that the diplomas of their undergraduates were recognised at the same level as diplomas of British university undergraduates. These were *Markfield Institute for Higher Education* (MIHE) in Leicester, a Sunni college (currently) validated by the Catholic Newman University in Birmingham; *The Islamic College London*, a Shi’a academic centre validated by Middlesex University; *Khoja Shia Ithna Ashari Muslim Community*, validated in 2010 by Winchester University; *Al-Maktoum College* in Dundee, validated by Aberdeen University. Cambridge Muslim College (CMC) and Ebraheem College in London chose a different strategy for reaching out to secular universities by offering supplementary programs to ease the transition between Muslim colleges and secular universities. However, those latter two contacts have not been formalised by validation agreements.

In 2017, only MIHE and Islamic College London held their validation. The other partnerships had been terminated due to changed legislation that demanded that only universities with an Islamic Studies department could validate Muslim colleges.³⁸

2.4.3 *'Roadblocks on the Way'*

The British observer Michael Mumisa suggested that these hybrid initiatives "have had a crisis of identity since they were established": they neither function as traditional Islamic seminaries nor as independent secular universities – a tension which is reflected in the curriculum (Mumisa 2014: 87). All involved stakeholders (Muslim communities, government, universities, and students) actively or passively experienced "roadblocks" that stood in the way of successful elaboration of this innovative concept for education and research (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 133–158).

During this process, the attitude of the British state differed substantially from that of the German or Dutch one. In each case, the state was concerned about conservative forces in private institutions. In response, British politics have tightened control over programs, which has resulted in a decrease in partnerships and, therefore, opportunities to influence the curriculum and pedagogical methods.

Muslim communities often appeared reluctant to embrace these modern hybrid initiatives, for instance, by co-funding them. For them, the primary function of religious teaching centres would be to provide for local religious functionaries, like mosque imams and (male and female) teachers in the schools. Programs that do not offer those prospects for employment within the communities are not very appealing to madrasa graduates. At least as long as Muslim communities refuse to accept the graduates as employees as imams in their mosques and teachers in the madrasas, Mumisa argued:

graduates ... are disadvantaged in a number of ways. They lack the language skills to access Islamic sources in their original classical Arabic and as such they are not recognised by their communities as adequately educated Islamic scholars. At the same time, although their degree programs are validated and issued by secular universities, they are not recognized as true academics by the same universities since they were trained in a

38 The Higher Education law was not amended specifically for Islamic Studies. Generally, there must be a similarity between the validated program and the expertise present at the validating university (Alison Scott-Baumann, in a conversation with the author, September 2013; cf. Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 143).

purely religious institute. Moreover, many young British Muslims often ask why they should be joining a modern Islamic college for their education when they have an option of joining either a secular university or a traditional Islamic seminary. (Mumisa 2014: 87)

The suspicious attitude of politicians and policy advisors and the lack of civil servants' knowledge and tact did not help convince Muslim seminaries to increase collaboration.³⁹ In personal meetings in September 2013, Dr Mohammad Mesbahi of Islamic College London (ICL) and Dr Atif Imtiaz of Cambridge Muslim College (CMC) explained that it is difficult to reach out to many of the Muslim colleges that are low in intellectual and pedagogical quality and who often operate isolated from the secular surroundings. They have been concerned about it, warning that the government should not 'use a hammer to get in, then they break things'. They saw a role for the graduates of their colleges to provide information to more isolated Muslim seminaries and stimulate the students and lecturers there to proceed with their education outside the Muslim seminary. In line with Mumisa's analysis, they think this will only work if there is confidence in the independence of ICL or CMC to play their mediating role. CMC, for instance, is careful to speak out in the media about controversial actualities. When the media approach them, they prefer to forward them to lecturers at secular universities. Also, high-quality Muslim colleges are reluctant and often suspicious, as they fear governmental interference. According to Imtiaz, their boards are proud of their autonomy while being suspicious towards a government that is seeking control.

In turn, universities appeared to be reluctant to extend their academic validation to Islamic institutions, even if they would have a tradition of validating

39 The Danish sociologist Jytte Klausen warned in 2005, based on her empirical research in Great Britain that "if governments approach the issue by working with traditionalist or ethnic leaderships, the moderates and modernists may be the first victims of institutionalization" (Klausen 2005: 164). Her full reference reads as follows: "Given these complexities, Christian churches should be careful about demanding 'representative' interlocutors from European Muslims. These efforts to organize Islam run the danger of short-circuiting its ongoing reform. In one sense, that is the desired outcome. Governments want institutionalization in order to prevent political radicals from utilizing Islam for purposes of anti-Western mobilization. The churches favor clerical control as a means to avoid the diffusion of religious movements, particularly the emergence of religious entrepreneurship with supply-side diversification or 'consumerist' demand-side changes to rituals and liturgy. They fear, above all, the development of sectarianism. The problem is that if governments and churches approach the issue by working with traditionalist or ethnic leaderships, the moderates and modernists may be the first victims of institutionalization" (Klausen 2005: 163-4).

Christian, church-related seminaries (Nielsen 2017: 429). Also, mainstream universities have shown a lack of engagement, interest, and insufficient contact between key figures from the Islamic and higher education sectors. Administrative bureaucracy stood in the way of a straightforward realisation of validation contracts. Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor observed how formal institutional links between universities and Muslim colleges had terminated due to the new legislation, followed by a lack of contact between the university sector and Muslim colleges. Such lack of contact causes “ignorance and prejudices on both sides” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 141). Another roadblock from a university perspective was that the curricula used at Muslim colleges did not meet the criteria of secular universities.⁴⁰ Finally, funding was also mostly lacking for universities (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 140).

Finally, politicians, like elsewhere in Western Europe, have expressed concerns regarding the mobilising force of religious teachings in marginalised traditional educational institutes. This political and social anxiety grew in the wake of the radicalisation of some British Muslim youth, especially after the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005. As a response, the government scaled up the control over Islamic institutions, resulting in additional hurdles for collaboration. This affected also those Islamic institutes that had already formed partnerships with secular universities. As a result, several of these partnerships were terminated, whereas simultaneously political authorities continued to promote Islamic Studies at UK universities as an instrument for the prevention of terrorism in the name of Islam (Brahimi and Brisson 2020: 1025). Legal options for collaboration in ‘hybrid’ institutional and educational formats decreased as new laws demanded that validation of Muslim colleges can only be done by universities that have an Islamic Studies department. In 2017, only two examples of “successful collaborative partnership” were running (see Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015 for their full recommendation). These were the Markfield Institute for Higher Education (MIHE) and the Islamic College London (ICL).⁴¹

These validated programs can be considered as British examples of new spaces for what this study broadly calls ‘Islamic university theology’ in Western

40 Vice versa, Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor’s stakeholders’ study identified that Islamic Studies curricula needed “an epistemological shift from the study of Islam as external to British contexts towards inclusive models that incorporate the opinions of the different other” (2015: 140).

41 These two institutes will therefore be included in the survey presented in Chapter 4, leaving out the others as they were terminated in the period under scrutiny (2010–2018).

Europe, developing in the tripartite relation of state, university and Muslim communities. Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor conclude that these collaborative partnerships may offer a viable approach, “but evidence shows that this is not a popular model” (2015: 151). Moreover, they criticise the British (political) establishment for being unwilling to challenge “a narrative that is not accustomed to being questioned and which assumes its own hegemonic position in Western democracies is both deserved and valuable” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 181).

Moreover, whereas the concerns and anxieties of politicians regarding the mobilising force of religious teachings have been ever-present, the political will to allow Muslim private institutes to collaborate with secular universities has decreased in the first decade of the millennium. Interestingly, where German observers have sometimes been highly critical about the role politicians took, condemning the state’s role, in Britain, observers like Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor have promoted a more objectively supporting role of the state to stimulate a delicate ‘bottom-up’ movement. They strongly critique the new legislation blocking the validation option for Islamic education courses, as the political idea behind it is that secular specialists in Islamic Studies should monitor or control Islamic thought. They also encourage Muslim colleges to be more proactive in contacting universities. Finally, universities should be more open to Islamic epistemic approaches and not measure educational goals “in a narrow positivist epistemology” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 133). In short, although there have been options to cross dichotomies, the number of educational initiatives that did bridge this gap has remained small. The Markfield Institute for Higher Education is one example of an educational institute that can create “bridges” and “permeable membranes” between Muslim communities and the pluralist society in which they live (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 157).

2.4.3.1 Markfield Institute for Higher Education (MIHE)

The Markfield Institute for Higher Education (MIHE), was set up in 2000 in Leicester, UK, as a “pioneering educational institute at the forefront of Islamic studies in the UK”.⁴² Whereas Markfield Institute first collaborated with several state universities, amongst which the University of Gloucester and Loughborough University, it has been collaborating with the Catholic Newman university in Birmingham since 2015 (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 138; Mumisa 2014: 85–6). Whereas other universities were no longer in the

42 www.mihe.ac.uk, retrieved 31-10-2017.

position to validate its Degrees Programs due to the changes in national legislation, Newman became MIHE's sole validating university in 2017.

Sunni in orientation, the institute has offered BA, MA, MEd, and Ph.D. programs. Until 2017, more than 750 students had graduated from the institute. Among them were the graduates of the BA Islamic course which "offers a pathway to Islamic scholars, who have completed the standard *Alim* (Islamic Scholars) course at Islamic seminaries, to gain a BA (Hons) qualification in two years" that opens a road to pursue teaching qualifications for mainstream schools or colleges, or to continue for a Master's degree.⁴³

The institute's mission is "to contribute to the development of scholars who have a broader, deeper and critical understanding of Islam in the modern contemporary context. Such scholars would be better equipped to act as a bridge in developing understanding between Muslim communities and the Western societies they live in, and make positive contributions to addressing current and emerging challenges of contemporary societies. The Institute is driven by its vision to become a world-class higher education and research Institute, specializing in the pursuit of Islamic disciplines. It's [sic] uniqueness is derived from the ability to integrate the richness and high standards of traditional Islamic scholarship with the best of Western techniques, academic rigour and critical inquiry."⁴⁴

The institutes teaching and research foci are on Islamic studies, Islamic education, Muslim chaplaincy (including certificate training), and Islamic banking, finance and management, as well as Islam and sustainable development. The institute's library is, according to the institute's website "one of the largest Islamic libraries in Europe, holding over 40,000 books and journals".

2.4.3.2 Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICL), London, Validated by Middlesex University

Founded in 1998, the Islamic College for Advanced Studies in London is a Shi'a academic centre validated by Middlesex University, offering degrees from undergraduate up to Ph.D. levels in Islamic Studies, Islamic law, Muslim culture and civilisations, and Islamic finance (Mumisa 2014: 85; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 136). Its mission formulated on the website has been "to promote a new approach to the study of Islam and Muslims by providing a unique insider's perspective on Islam and fostering a non-sectarian

43 www.mihe.ac.uk, retrieved 31-10-2017.

44 www.mihe.ac.uk/about-us, retrieved 31-10-2017.

outlook".⁴⁵ Relatively small in size, with less than 500 students,⁴⁶ it is a Shi'ite academic centre that is open to students from any Islamic orientation, with seventy percent of the students having a Sunni background. Among the lecturers, Shi'a and Sunni denominations are represented, including 'distant learning teachers' from the UK, Canada and the USA. According to its website in 2018, it had published more than forty major texts in the field of Islamic studies. Since 2015, it has its own quarterly academic Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies.

2.5 Austria

Whereas in Britain, one could observe growing political distrust against Muslim private educational institutes and their capacity to educate the future national Muslim elites, this anxiety was heavily pronounced in the case of Austria. Here, the government completely lost trust in the legitimacy of the 'traditional' religious institutes and educational roads that had been open for Muslims since the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, while the Dutch and German states answered similar concerns by 'reinventing' their historical instruments for dealing with religious pluralism, the Austrian state chose to abolish the old 'national model' and 'replace' it with a new one.

2.5.1 History

The history of Islam in Austria is closely connected to its geographical location next to the Balkans. At the beginning of the twentieth Century, the Habsburg monarchy ruled over Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had previously belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the legal provisions to regulate the relations between state and Muslim communities date back to 1912, when the so-called Islam Act (*Islamgesetz*) was adopted.

The majority of Austria's 575.000 to 600.000 Muslims are of Turkish origin who arrived in the 1960s and '70s as labour migrants, making the percentage of Muslims around 6,8% of the total population (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 76).⁴⁷ In the 1990s, the country provided asylum for a relatively high percentage of Bosnian Muslim refugees as well as from Caucasian republics like Chechnya.

The Islam Act of 1912 regulated the legal space of Islam, paving the way for claiming many civil rights as religious minority (Ebrahim 2016: 69–70). This law eased the way for Muslim organisations to find government support for various

45 www.islamic-college.ac.uk, retrieved 31-10-2017.

46 Information dates from 2013 when I visited the institute.

47 www.islamportal.at/beitraege/artikel/islaminoesterreich, last accessed 15 August 2023.

socio-cultural activities. To be sure, it did not include the financing of mosques and mosque personnel. Mosques, organised as ethnic-religious organisations (*Vereine*), have acted relatively autonomous from the state. Particularly the Turkish mosques have recruited their imams from Turkey, often sent to Austria by the Turkish Presidium for Religious Affairs (Diyanet) government for a limited period.⁴⁸

In 1979, an important legal milestone was reached when the Islamic Community of Austria (IGGiÖ) was officially recognised as a religious community or 'cult'. The IGGiÖ acts as the representative body for Muslims in Austria as outlined in the Constitution (*Verfassung*), fulfilling the necessary requirements to benefit from the legal provisions offered by the state for religious communities.⁴⁹ One of these provisions is the authorisation to provide religious education in public elementary and secondary schools, a privilege that had been granted to the Catholic and Protestant (Evangelical) denominations since 1949.

Consequently, in 1982, Islamic religious education (IRE) was introduced in public schools. The state takes on the financial compensation of the teachers, while the religious communities are responsible for the content and design of the curriculum. Since 2013, Alevites have been recognised as a separate religious community and can issue religious education provisions in the Alevite tradition.

To prepare teachers for Islamic Religious Education, in 1998, the first professional teachers' training was established (not yet at a university level): IRPA (Reidegeld 2009). This gave a necessary impetus to the teachers' qualifications, which too often appeared substandard. Curricula content and teacher qualifications became increasingly scrutinised in the 2000s. An influential dissertation of Mouhanad Khorchide, who would later become a professor at the Islamic Theology Centre in Münster, revealed that many IRE lessons were of poor pedagogical quality. Khorchide's sociological study received abundant public and political attention (Tuna 2016: 166), and much work has been

48 The organisational structure of Turkish mosques in Austria is similar to that in Germany and the Netherlands. Austria also has relatively many Bosnian and Albanian Muslim communities.

49 Articles 41–43 further define the internal structure of the IGGiÖ. It has a checkered structure with a *Schurarat*, an *Oberste Rat*, an *Imamerat*, a *mufti*, a *Beirat* which provides seats to representatives of Muslim organisations with more than 200 members, and a *Schiedsgericht*. The IGGiÖ is fully financed with membership fees. In 2013, the number of members was small, particularly considering its essential function to claim legal rights for Muslims in Austria (Aslan 2013: 111).

done to revise and reform the learning plans and recruitment of personnel at Austrian public schools.

2.5.2 *Islamic Religious Pedagogy*

The University of Vienna started an Islamic Religious Pedagogy program in 2006, which was described as the first of its kind at a European university (Aslan & Rothangel 2015). In its prelude, the Catholic and Evangelical (Protestant) theological faculties provided indispensable collaborative support to help the staff of the new program to cope with the challenges they faced. These challenges continued after the program was launched, as national expectations were high. Islamic Religious Pedagogy (IRP) was expected to reform Islamic theology, address radicalisation, and integrate Muslims into Austrian society as quickly as possible – in other words, to bridge the gap between society and Islamic theology (Aslan & Rothangel 2015). Aslan and Rothangel noted that at the beginning the programme could not meet the high expectations as it was subjected to a lack of professional staff. During this difficult phase, the programme greatly benefitted from collaboration with the faculties of Catholic and Protestant Theology, as it was able to learn from established Christian religious educationalists. This learning process particularly yielded in teaching, research and interreligious encounters (Aslan & Rothangel 2015: 153–4; Scharer 2015: 157).⁵⁰

To accommodate students in the Western part of Austria, the University of Innsbruck started its own BA Islamic Religious Pedagogy in the winter of 2014 (Sejdini 2016). In 2010, laborious conversations started which led to sufficient support in 2013, primarily of individual university board members. They sought collaboration with the School of Education and the IGGiÖ (Scharer 2015). Furthermore, some modules were added to the program to make it suitable for Alevi students. Zekirija Sejdini, whose inaugural lecture will be discussed in Chapter 6, became the first professor.

2.5.3 *Towards a 'European Grounded Islamic Theology'*

Similar to the German case, the institutionalisation of Islamic pedagogy preceded the establishment of academic theology at Austrian universities. However, like in Germany and the Netherlands, the question about the domestic training of imams and expanding Christian and Jewish theology with Muslim theology were drivers of change. They intertwine, as the professional preparation of clerics takes place under the church's responsibility, whereas

50 Scharer (2015) points at their need to have competent Muslim colleagues working at their departments and faculties.

(like in Germany and the Netherlands) academic theology at a university precedes and forms an inherent part of their studies. Therefore, simultaneous with growing attention to the pivotal role of the mosque imam in integration processes, the question of establishing Islamic theology was raised. This topic featured during several ‘imam conferences’ with participating imams from forty countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs financed these gatherings, as this governmental body talks to the IGGiÖ as the representative council of Muslims in Austria (Aslan 2013: 112; Ferreiro 2011: 31; Rohe 2010: 228). The University of Vienna has played a leading role in developing a so-called ‘integration theology’.⁵¹

The Austrian scholar of Islam Ednan Aslan (born in 1959 in Bayburt, Turkey) became the program’s advocate and architect. In 2012, he published a study commissioned by the Austrian Ministry for Interior Affairs in which he investigated the possibilities for an advanced education program at state universities, which could have a decisive influence on the contextualisation of Islam in Austria (Aslan 2013: 5–6). Addressing the importance of the autonomy of Austrian Muslims from the countries of origin, Aslan argued that Muslims needed such facilities. The government had to facilitate this, if not for demographic reasons, then for political and inner-Islamic reasons (see Aslan 2013: 148–149). While Aslan concluded that “a European shaped” Islamic theology did not yet exist, a scholarly debate on how such theology should look was ongoing.⁵² In 2013, Aslan developed a proposal that was gradually implemented; in 2014, four Ph.D. students started in the new Graduate School for Islamic Theology, while by 2017, a complete BA-MA program was running in Austria’s capital city.⁵³

2.5.3.1 Institute for Islamic Theological Studies (IITS) University of Vienna

The Graduate Program Islamic Theology as a Science in Europe has been located at the Institute of Islamic Studies of the University of Vienna and

51 See also Aslan & Weiß who explained how “An Islamic-Theological education is rated by experts as a key prerequisite for the integration of Muslims in Austria. Out of this concern the Graduate Program Islamic Theology as a science in Europe was established” (2015: 73).

52 The original German reference is: “Eine ‘Europäisch geprägte’ islamische Theologie gibt es bis dato nicht. Die wissenschaftliche Diskussion darüber ist jedoch in vollem Gang” (Aslan 2013: 175).

53 Up to date information and reflection is regularly provided in the Online journal of Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum (ÖRF), in which one can find spin-off articles, discussions and book reviews. Published online by the university Graz (unipub.uni-graz.at/oerf) as a periodical.

cooperates with the Protestant Theological Faculty, and the Department of Religious Education of the University of Vienna. According to its founders, “The aim of this program is the promotion and the development of Islamic Theology in the context of Europe. By supporting young scientists in the field of Islamic Theology conditions for a qualified training of imams and teachers of Islamic Religious Education in Austria are created” (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 73).

The proposal for such Graduate School (*Doktorandenkolleg*) was written by Ednan Aslan in 2013, Between 2014/15 and 2018 it offered six early career research positions covering six focal fields: 1) Origin and exegesis of Qur’an (*Genese und Exegese des Koran*); 2) Hadith studies (*Hadithwissenschaften*); 3) Islamic law and integration theology (*Islamisches Recht und Integrationstheologie*); 4) Empirical theology and Islamic philosophy (*Empirische Theologie und islamische Philosophie*); 5) History of Islamic ideas and Islam in Europe (*Ideengeschichte des Islams und Islam in Europa*), and 6) Islamic Religious Pedagogy and subject didactics (*Islamische Religionpädagogik und Fachdidaktik*) (Aslan & Weiß 2015).

2.5.4 *The Renewed Islam Act of 2015*

Aslan’s proposal still shows confidence in the solid foundation of the Austrian legal construction, in which the state and religious community’s spheres of influence were mediated through the IGGiÖ. Departing from the then-valid Islam Act, Aslan advocated for a contextualised Islamic theology program in Austria financed by state and private funds (Aslan 2013: 175–6). He advised the stakeholders to include representatives of Muslim organisations in this process, as this would increase the acceptance of the institutionalisation of “their theology” within Austrian universities. “The modalities and boundaries of such cooperation should be clearly organised and made transparent, though”, Aslan added (2013: 176). Aslan warned that an initiative that would exclude partners from other universities or Islamic organisations would result in an “island-solution” that would only hamper the much-needed transitional phase. He therefore advised the Ministry to ask the University of Vienna to establish a ‘transitional institute’ as “a platform for teaching and research” (Aslan 2013: 178). Christian theological faculties also insisted on opening an Islamic faculty.

However, this shared concern turned into a one-sided, politically dictated decision to close alternative routes for training Muslim religious professionals. As a way to ‘speed up’ this process, the Austrian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Integration, Sebastian Kurz (FPÖ), introduced in 2015 the renewed Islam Act under the banner of “Islam with a European imprint” (Presse, 2015, quoted by Ebrahim 2016: 69–70). The Minister demanded a halt to foreign influences

on Islamic developments in Austria, banning foreign finances and requiring imams to speak German. More specifically, religious groups were ordained to have a positive basic attitude towards Austria. The law particularly emphasised how foreign influences should no longer dominate the Islamic educational sector: Muslim students should no longer be taught by individuals from a completely different cultural background who neither speak the local language nor understand the cultural context of their students, since this would risk emphasising dichotomies instead of reducing them (Ebrahim 2016:70).

As part of the execution of the new Islam Act, forty ATIB imams paid by Diyanet had to leave the country in 2018 while the ÖVP-FPÖ government closed seven mosques, one linked to the Turkish ultranationalist Grey Wolves and six others of Salafist orientation (Kamphorst 2018).

The new Austrian government legislation also led to the termination of a considerable number of private Qur'an courses and Islamic religious lecturers funded from abroad that had been well attended by young Austrian members on weekends and during summer breaks (Ebrahim 2016). Instead, Islamic religious education in Austrian public schools was considered to "play a significant role in replacing or at least reducing the educational gap caused by the new bill on Islam" (Ebrahim 2016).

The renewal and revision of the historical law in 2015 created discontent among many Austrian Muslims, especially the younger generation. They felt that they were unfairly targeted due to the political undertones of the law and the prohibition of foreign funding in the educational sector. This ban affected Islamic institutions, while others were still able to raise money from abroad (Ebrahim 2016: 69–70).

Clearly, Austria swayed between different incentives for setting up a domestic institute for Islamic theology: Was it foremost a new chapter for Muslims in Austria in realising equal opportunities as Muslims at schools and in universities? Or was it a thinly veiled attempt for governmental control over the imam, mosque, and 'the Muslim subject' (Hafez 2014)? It is a proper question to ask how this has influenced the thinking about the legitimacy of Islamic theology at European universities. This question will be discussed in Chapter 3.

2.6 Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the institutionalisation of Islamic theology in the four countries under review has been intricately shaped by a dynamic interplay between the state, Muslim communities, and higher educational institutions. This process has been significantly influenced by shifting legal, political, and

financial parameters that impacted collaboration. Nowhere have processes been self-evident, although legal provisions theoretically provide space for theological studies at public universities. Governments, universities, and Muslim organisations each had their levelling motivations, ranging from idealistic to pragmatic and from initiating to obstructive.

We can conclude from this account, that the governments of the four secular liberal democracies largely differed in how they addressed what could be called ‘the paradox of inclusion’. While the four countries legally strive for equality and attempt to open provisions for an emancipating religious minority, the national security agenda has put pressure on the options for establishing an autonomous scholarly space. In each country, stakeholders had to blend ideas about the political, academic, and religious legitimacy to balance political will and legal options, academic feasibility and religious credibility. Let us briefly summarise the roles of each of these.

2.6.1 *Political Will and Legal Options*

Firstly, the presence of *political will* – whether considered ‘legitimately functional’ or ‘illegitimately instrumentalising’, or something in between (Engelhardt 2017: 65), along with a *legal framework* to implement initiatives. Without a representative Muslim council that could execute these legal claims for the entire, highly diverse Muslim minority, it was not possible to materialise these legal rights. In Austria, this criterium had been set as early as 1979, followed by the Netherlands and Germany in the early 2000s (Laurence 2012; Boender 2013). But whereas in the latter two countries the options seemed to increase, in the UK and Austria, options for Muslims decreased due to legal changes.

In Germany, backed by constitutional law, initiatives were mainly driven ‘top-down’ when the German state gave a significant financial injection to several universities, while cooperation with Muslim organisations was sought from there. Financial resources for a Graduate School program were drawn from a private fund that invests its revenues in societal beneficiaries.

The Netherlands historically has a ‘seminary’ model (either in ‘simplex’ or ‘duplex ordo’) in which the state finances religious ministry training, which now had to include Islamic provisions. Legally, the state should wait for the initiative of Muslim organisations; in practice, the government and universities proactively paved the way for them. So far, implementing Islamic academic theology in an interreligious faculty has proved to be the most sustainable format.

In the UK, private Muslim educational institutes have worked ‘bottom-up’, seeking legally and politically approved collaboration in Islamic Studies with state universities. Similar to the Netherlands and Germany, the legal structure

in Britain has guided the options for faith communities to get space for confessional learning and teaching of Islam in public universities. Muslim colleges could conditionally reach out to universities for validation, mirroring the approach taken by Christian institutes in the past. However, reluctance among governments, universities and Muslim institutes has affected and hindered this process of rapprochement.

The Austrian state recently opted for a radical change in its leveraging conditions. Whereas it used to be relatively easy for Austrian Muslims to receive state funding for private Islamic educational facilities, based on the 1912 Islam Act, legal changes in 2015 made it almost impossible to recruit imams and other religious personnel from non-EU countries. This pushed the university programs in Islamic theology and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) to a foreground position.

2.6.2 *Academic Feasibility*

Secondly, it was necessary to provide sufficient financial resources to the universities to create an academic free space, while upholding high standards for academic quality in staff recruitment. In Germany, huge financial impulses were generated both for the teaching programs by the state and for research programs by non-governmental organisations (like the Mercator Stiftung and the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung (Özdil 2011: 245)). In contrast, in the Netherlands, university management decided to pull the plug when the educational programs turned out too costly. Moreover, a striking similarity is the role of ‘architects’ and ‘trailblazers’ who invested much effort to prepare the grounds.⁵⁴

2.6.3 *Religious Credibility*

A third essential component appeared to be trust and cooperation between Muslim organisations, the state, and academia, channelled in advisory boards (e.g. in the form of *Beiräte*), validation agreements, or other forms of sustainable commitment. The absence of support from any corner of this triangle,

54 In Germany, this was Reinhard Schulze; in the Netherlands Henk Vroom; in Austria, Ednan Aslan and Franz Pauer; and in the UK, Ataullah Siddiqui of MIHE, but also Alison Scott-Baumann and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor who administered an ESRC funded project on Collaborative Partnerships between Universities and Muslim Institutions. The latter were keen to enhance collaborations between these two sectors. They organised a series of Roundtable discussions in 2013 (on Sunni-Shi'a collaboration, Islamophobia and its impact on Islamic Studies and partnerships, Partnerships and QAA studies, and Women and opportunities) that could harvest strategies for future collaborative work (their report can be found in Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).

or even the initiation of a process of delegitimisation, could lead to tensions, delays and failures (cf. Sözeri et al. 2018).⁵⁵

2.6.4 *Setting Up Research Agendas*

Meanwhile, on their websites the programs themselves exhibited their profiles as institutes for teaching and learning that aim to support Islamic scholarship, which can immediately help meet their countries' many challenges. These profiles go beyond the immediate need for professional training of imams and teachers. Their websites introduced eloquent visions and mission statements, prioritising *Bildung* to contextualise the Islamic religious tradition in Europe. They also presented their research agendas.

Before we delve into these research trajectories, the following chapter will address how the stakeholders comprehended Islamic university theology's prime aims amidst the described complexities.

55 Özdil included the support and collaboration of Muslim scholars and universities in Muslim majority countries as a fourth criterium for success. This factor remains out of the scope of the current research, see Chapter 8.

Islamic University Theology as a Project: Conceptual Comprehensions

It is clear what is at stake: Islamic knowledge must not only be administered through academic discourse, but also elaborated and developed.

REINHARD SCHULZE (2010: 1)¹



3.1 Introduction

In the years leading up to the 2010s, stakeholders voiced differing viewpoints on the purpose and content of Islamic theology at publicly funded universities. Some engaged observers were in support of these developments as they regarded them as an emancipatory opportunity for European Muslims. Others strongly opposed the initiatives, viewing them as unwanted attempts by European governments to steer the course of Islam and Muslim communities in Europe. Some other critics believed that it was not the role of public universities to accommodate or validate confessional theology. Additionally, there was a discussion about whether the distinction between Islamic theology and Islamic Studies indicated a ‘disciplinary division of labour’, with one taking an ‘insider’ or ‘participant’s’ perspective and the other an ‘outsider’s’ perspective.

Once the programs were running, the question about the shape of Islamic university theology to come was no longer merely hypothetical. This chapter takes stock of how stakeholders defined its core mission, intended academic scope, and societal outreach in the period under scrutiny (2010–2018). If the intention was indeed, as Schulze predicted in a lecture in Cologne in July 2010,

1 The original reference in German is: “Von den Sache nach ist klar, worum es geht: Islamische Wissen soll durch einen akademischen Diskurs nicht nur verwaltet, sondern bearbeitet und weiterentwickelt werden” (Schulze 2010: 1).

“to administer Islamic knowledge through academic discourse, and to elaborate and develop it as well”, how did this define the outlooks?

Scholars have discussed Islamic academic theology’s primary mission and central tasks during conferences. This was documented in conference proceedings and scholarly publications. In these exchanges, I identified five overlapping approaches that emphasised distinct aspects. These approaches were observed in the context of the four focus countries but were also found in other Western European countries, such as the Nordic countries and Belgium (cf. Flakerud & Leirvik 2018).

The first recurring approach emphasised the intellectual, ethical, and societal value of Islamic theology for Muslims in Europe and potentially globally. From this angle, Islamic university theology was foremost seen as an emancipatory project, providing agency to European Muslims. The second angle brought the epistemological-methodological specificities of Islamic theology into focus, particularly when compared to secular Islamic Studies. Alternatively, bringing in a third focus, some scholars considered Islamic theology in relation to Catholic and Protestant academic theology rather than Islamic Studies. Fourthly, some approaches included deliberations of Islamic theology as a typically European intellectual rationalist project – aimed at shaping ‘European Islam.’ Lastly, some insisted that the development of Islamic theology should be ultimately understood as an academic project, aiming to move beyond politicised discussions about its purpose and value, or *‘Zweck- und Wert Rationalität.’*

All these approaches raised questions about how secular and religious paradigms influence each other and how they can either strengthen or hinder the development of Islamic theology and the autonomy of (Muslim) scholars in defining the project’s goals.

In this chapter, I will delve into each approach separately, highlighting their unique perspectives. While not mutually exclusive, these approaches collectively shape Islamic university theology into a multi-dimensional project. By examining each angle, we can uncover specific legitimising frames that might otherwise remain unaddressed or unclear. Therefore, through a detailed analysis of these arrangements, we can gain valuable insights into how different observers emphasised various aspects in substantiating the rationale of Islamic theology at Western European universities. This exploration provides essential perspectives on the legitimacy, authenticity, and ‘ownership’ of the intellectual contributions of this emerging field. Quoting stakeholders who were actively involved in or close to the programs offer insight into circulating ideas about the potential of Islamic theologians in defining ‘acceptable’ interpretations of the religious texts and traditions towards different audiences (its

Deutungsmacht) and the authoritative ‘operativeness’ of the scholarly output for academia and society.²

3.2 Islamic Theology as Emancipatory Project

An often-used angle to look at Islamic university theology’s relevance and main mission, has been to consider it foremost as an emancipatory project. Three aspects are often emphasised.

Firstly, proponents in all countries under study bring in how the programs for teaching and research must pave the way to inclusion of Muslims in Western European societies, as they provide space for research and debate that previously did not exist, neither in private institutions, nor at European universities. In this view, Islamic university theology offers Muslims in Europe an autonomous space for intellectual and progressive reflections on their tradition. For universities, opening the academic space can be considered an expression of postcolonial awareness and emancipation of the academic sphere of public universities. This approach puts the main emphasis on the urgent need for the provision of an academic environment for Islamic theology in Europe, in which there would be space for ‘first person expression’ of Muslim intellectuals (Leirvik 2016: 131).

Secondly, this is further elaborated with reflections on how this space is to be occupied. In the first issue of the Frankfurter Journal for Islamic-Theological Studies (*Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Islamisch-Theologische Studien*), a group of twelve German scholars elaborated how they envisioned the direction in which Islamic university theology should develop. Emphasising the wide scope of theological inquiry, these German ‘pioneers’ expressed how for them Islamic theology is not about preserving, but about reconstruction, reflection and actualisation of the inherently diverse Islamic heritage. For them, the project of Islamic university theology is all about a much needed and constant reflection and renewal, including the integration of multiple scholarly ways and disciplines with which one can better understand the complexities of the present day. As a central task, these pioneers bring in that “the canon of subjects that make up Islamic Theology must be supplemented accordingly

2 Normative Islam as being one (or several) outcome(s) of the “dialectical relationship negotiated by Muslims within and between a range of discourses – legal and non-legal and within and between themselves” (S. Ahmed 2016: 124).

if it is to provide orientation in today's world" (Agai et al. 2014: 12).³ Much like Reinhard Schulze advised in 2010, the first cohort of German professors brought up how they wanted to go beyond mere stewardship of the tradition. Importantly, they argued that:

contrary to the structuring of Islamic knowledge at non-state institutions, Islamic Theology cannot confine itself to the stewardship and passing on of traditional knowledge; instead, they have to 'further develop and update the forms and contents of Islamic self-interpretation under the conditions of rational scientific rigor'. (Engelhardt 2017: 199, referring to Schulze 2010)⁴

This may concern the challenges of the modern time in a global world, but often the need for reflection on the exigencies of Muslims living as minorities in Western Europe is highlighted.

This leads us to the third element of this focus on the emancipatory character of Islamic theology in Western Europe's universities. Frequent emphasis is put on the need for Islamic theology in the context of Europe, in which "the rich Islamic heritage must be made fertile, in order to provide helpful answers to the issues of the European present" (Von Stosch & Khorchide 2012: 11).⁵ In this viewpoint, Islamic university has as central aim to reconcile the theology of Islam and the 'lived' theology of being a Muslim in Europe (cf. Indenhuck 2016: 32–33). Hence, emancipation also concerns the substantive (tangible) outcome when the academic space is utilised for community-focused emancipation – aiming not just for equality, but also for progressive advancement.

In Austria, we see how Islamic theologians considered it a key responsibility of Islamic university theology to provide for a 'practical theology' which would be directly relevant for the present context, sometimes even called "integration

3 The original reference in German goes as follows: "Der Kanon der Fächer, welche die islamische Theologie ausmachen, bzw. aus denen sie schöpft und an welche sie anknüpft, muss entsprechend ergänzt werden, will sie bei der Erkenntnissuche in der heutigen Welt Orientierung geben" (Agai et al. 2014:12).

4 The original reference in German goes as follows: "Im Gegensatz zur Ordnung islamischen Wissens an nichtstaatlichen Institutionen könne sich die Islamische Theologie nicht auf Verwaltung und Weitergabe traditionellen Wissens beschränken, sondern müsse 'die Formen und Inhalte islamischer Selbstaulegung unter den Bedingungen rationaler Wissenschaftlichkeit weiterentwickeln und fortschreiben'" (Engelhardt 2017: 199, referring to Schulze 2010).

5 The original reference in German is as follows: "Immer wieder wurde deutlich, dass das reiche islamische Erbe so fruchtbar gemacht werden muss, dass es für Probleme der europäischen Gegenwart hilfreiche Antworten geben kann" (Von Stosch & Khorchide 2012: 11).

theology" (Aslan & Weiß 2015). Pointing at the importance of Islamic theology for Muslims living in plural European societies, the Austrian scholars Aslan and Rothangel stated that:

Islamic theology faces the novel challenge, that Muslims are to stay in a society which is pluralistic-Christian of character. (Aslan & Rothangel 2015: 153)

As outlined in Chapter 2, Ednan Aslan's agenda for the Viennese Islamic theology program distinguished six research fields to be prioritised: Origin and exegesis of Qur'an, Hadith studies, Islamic law and integration theology, Empirical theology and Islamic philosophy, History of Islamic ideas and Islam in Europe, and Islamic Religious Pedagogy and didactics (Aslan 2013: 172). Aslan's final theme was very much in line with the often-made connection between Islamic theology and religious education. An Islamic theological education has been considered a key prerequisite for integration of Muslim migrants, not only in Austria but also in Germany (Aslan & Weiß 2015). In both countries, proponents argue that Islamic theology has to invest in providing answers that might be different from those given in private religious educational infrastructures (Engelhardt 2017: 199).

This emancipatory aim of the university programs has also been prominent in the ongoing Dutch political discussions about inclusion of Muslims in the public sphere, mostly linked to the training of imams and the necessity to 'reform' the mosque. This potential of training imams was reaffirmed at the start of the Centre for Islamic Theology (CIT) in 2005 (Vroom 2009; Boender 2013).

In Britain, we notice that the empowering function of the academic constituency was mostly discussed in relation to authority formation of private Muslim seminaries. The British observers Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor were among those who endorsed intensive collaboration between secular universities and Muslim seminaries as part of the community's emancipation (see also Geaves 2008). As quoted before, they believed it to be a lost opportunity for pluralist modern Britain if Muslim seminaries and universities would not intensify their collaboration:

In-depth Islamic Theology provision is offered by Muslim seminaries and, much less, by universities. However, these very rarely engage with each other, which we believe is a lost opportunity for pluralist modern Britain. There is a need for the 'pious' outlook of the seminaries and the

‘critical’ outlook of universities to come together to create hybrid courses that can be horizon broadening and can also engage with the believer’s voice at the same time. (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 45–6)

The British Michael Mumisa argued that traditional Islamic ‘seminaries’ are “failing to equip its graduates with knowledge and tools needed to reinterpret Islam in modern pluralist societies” (Mumisa 2014: 86–7). Conversely, conservative Muslims do not regard secular universities that offer degrees in Islamic Studies as fulfilling the spiritual and intellectual needs of their communities (Mumisa 2014: 87). Mumisa is not convinced, though, that modern Islamic colleges can organise such a combination authoritatively. According to him “There currently does not exist in Britain, or indeed in Europe, an Islamic centre of learning which has succeeded in combining the best of the classical Islamic seminary tradition with the modern academic university tradition” (Mumisa 2014: 88).

Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) brought up how the (validated) university programs were considered necessary for Muslims in Europe as sources of social and cultural capital. Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor particularly saw benefit for the emancipation of Muslim women in Britain who are seeking Islamic knowledge to better understand and reconcile the religious and secular aspects of their British Muslim identities (2015: 119):

The scholarship [that is led by women, and which encourages Muslim women to study and work with Islamic theology] must include new content, methodologies that incorporate women’s opinion, their complex roles in pluralist Western societies and their aspirations. (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 124)⁶

Swedish observer Göran Larsson also noted that those scholars “who embrace the idea of an academic theology also want to make a positive contribution to how Islamic traditions could or ‘should’ be interpreted in a new, and maybe also more modern and egalitarian, way” (Larsson 2018: 134). Their output should not only be relevant for religious communities, but also for society at

⁶ Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor formulated this as a need for Islamic scholarships that is led by women. They postulate that there is a need to recover the expertise of *alimahs*, that must be recognised in Muslim communities and in pluralist British society (2015: 124), see Chapter 6.3.

large, “to develop interpretations that are capable of contributing to debates and challenging established opinions [considered mainstream within Muslim communities, WB]” (Larsson 2018: 134).⁷ To this observation, Larsson added empirical findings among Swedish mosque boards that indicate “the possibility of a gap between what Muslims would like to learn about Islamic theology and how the subject is taught at European universities” (Larsson 2018: 133).

In all countries, stakeholders showed their concern about the strongholds of rigorous, literalist and exclusivist interpretations of Islam, particularly the influence of (neo-)Salafists on young Muslims (see e.g., Khorchide 2016; Ceylan & Kiefer 2017). Not seldomly, stakeholders pointed at the role Islamic university theology should play to function as possible antidote against forms of religious indoctrination (see Ceylan 2017: 282). Particularly the British Abdullah Sahin of the Markfield Institute of Higher Education (2013) made this an explicit aim and duty for Islamic theology. In his view, ‘educational theology’ is aimed to catch up an intellectual backlog, thus taking the winds out of religious extremism. He passionately identified what in his eyes is at stake for Muslim scholars in the West:

the theology as well as the pedagogy of educational practices in the Muslim educational institutions set up within the European Muslim diaspora and wider Muslim world ... appear to be no longer capable of producing creative minds or nurturing the skills necessary to solve the complex problems facing the worldwide Muslim community (also known as the *ummah*). Considering the highly charged political context in Europe and the West, Muslims as minority communities face dramatic challenges. Islamic religious and educational institutions are frequently accused of nurturing extremist religious identities. Therefore, it is urgent that we attend to this question within the context of European Islam. (Sahin 2013: 2)

Sahin considers it the civic duty of society and the religious duty of Muslim communities to act against what he calls the religious and moral crisis in

⁷ Observers made similar demands towards Christian university theology in Western and Northern European universities. For example, the aforementioned report of the Dutch Royal Academy of the Sciences argued that “confessional theology finds itself in an academic isolation in certain ways. Whereas publications of the community-based constituencies serve an important function, academically speaking, it is important to consider whether and how this confessional research contributes to the general scholarly debate” (KNAW 2015: 10, translation WB).

Islamic education and a social crisis in majority society. Currently, both lack the necessary critical reflexive skills that can lead towards a mature and healthy multicultural society (Sahin 2013: 236) (see Chapter 5.2.2).

Less verbose, but inherently similar, the Innsbruck professor in Islamic religious pedagogy Zekirija Sejdini means that there is a task for Islamic religion pedagogy in European universities. Islamic religious pedagogy faces the task to strengthen “contingency-sensitivity” that cultivates an attitude of questioning that does not loose itself in either fundamentalism or scepticism, but is able to do exactly the opposite (Sejdini 2016: 29, see Chapter 6.2.1). According to Sejdini, Islamic self-interpretation (*Islamische Selbstausslegung*) must transform itself if it wants to meet the conditions of secular university (2016: 29). A recurring reference was made to the important contribution Islamic university theology can make in enabling Muslims in Europe to deal with plurality, which in German is referred to as *Pluralitätsfähigkeit*.

3.2.1 *Feasibility*

In the same breath as the arguments brought in so far, scholars frequently emphasised that realising such societally and academically emancipating impetus of Islamic theology was and will not be easy.

The concern at hand firstly revolves around the impact of academic theology, which ideally has the potential to bring about change at the grassroots level, among ‘Muslims’ or ‘non-Muslims’. Some scholars brought up that their academic studies cannot resolve the tension that some Muslims face while practising their faith in a secular and sometimes hostile environment. However, it is argued that Islamic theological research can contribute to thoughtful considerations of the dynamics of religious and non-religious institutions, ideas, practices and performances in personal, semi-public and public spheres (see for instance Aslan & Weiß 2015: 85–6, note 80).

Secondly, many scholars showed their concern about the strongholds of rigorous and literalist interpretations of Islam. Indeed, there is a challenging task ahead, as “there exists a substantial inner-Islamic multitude of approaches about how to deal with the challenges of modernity” (Stosch and Khorchide 2012: 11). The Erlanger theologian Mohammed Nekroumi pointed at the paradox that simultaneously with the “thickening of knowing” of Muslim scholars at universities, the distance between them and the grassroots they might hope to reach (and change) only increases (Nekroumi 2017: 32).

Thirdly, the scholars run the risk that politicians, policy makers or university boards will only consider their work relevant if it answers to such a transformative task. A focus on liberation and progressive reform would imply that

Islamic university theology is only relevant once there has been a measured effect at grassroots level – which, in its turn, is problematically considered ‘conservative’, backward, or even dangerous.

3.2.2 *Concerns about Governmentality*

For some observers, it has been precisely the axiomatic focus on emancipation as a call for reform and liberation defining the project, which worried them. They approached the enterprise with “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Hoffmann 2016: 147, who aptly used Ricoeur’s expression), pointing out a strategic rationale as a project of top-down crafting of European Muslim intelligentsia, as a form of “theological engineering” in the context of the liberal secular society (Hoffmann 2016: 148–9; cf. Völker 2014: 179). Some observers used the term *Zwangsaufklärung* which could be translated as an enforced disclosure to enlighten Islam. With this term they point at a socio-political incentive that considers the programs as a way for Muslims to liberate Islam, and thus themselves – just as Europeans have done during the phase of Enlightenment. They sharply identify the Islamic theology centres as a means of governing and disciplining Muslim populations and individuals according to secular-liberal parameters (Ahmad & Hernández Aguillar 2018; Hernández Aguillar & Ahmad 2020; Hafez 2014). These observers critically raised the question whether the establishment of Islamic university theology must be understood as a project to provide agency to Muslims, or as a state-led initiative that is controlled by the government. Instead of providing agency, Islamic university theology then becomes a governmentality project that risks depriving Muslim actors of their agency.

These concerns were raised in all four countries, but particularly in Germany and Austria. In Chapter 2, we already discussed how some observers believed the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) has monitored, controlled or even determined the outcome of Islamic university theology. In this perspective, some considered Islamic university theology a political project of “governmentality” (Hafez 2014; cf. Engelhardt 2017: 66–67), dictated by security demands set within the domain of political legitimacy. Opponents of state-funded Islamic university theology in the German or European context considered it “the [state-driven] attempt to forcefully enlighten Islam and to construct an Islamic scholarship within the European context” (Brunner 2012: 101).⁸ These observers strongly denounced the programs, calling them an instrument of

8 The original reference in German is as follows: “Islamische Theologie sei der Versuch, den Islam zwangsaufzuklären und eine islamische Gelehrsamkeit im europäischen Kontext zu konstruieren” (Brunner 2012: 101).

the state to monitor, control or even “discipline” Muslims (Hafez 2014). Hafez argued how a strategic use of Islamic theology as an ideal academic frame was implemented as a means of integration policy to discipline ‘the Muslim subject’. Hafez argued how the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior wanted to see Islamic theology develop *inside* the non-Muslim dominated university, and not in study programs offered by Muslims for Muslims (Hafez 2014: 53).

To prove their point, Hernández Aguilar and Ahmad (2020) explored the working of the German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*, DIK), which they intricately link to the centers for Islamic theology. They consider the DIK as a state-regulated channel to transfer one-sided ways to read Qur’an, or develop educational methods or pedagogical renewal, for instance in the context of gender. They suggest that the work that some German Muslim theologians conducted in the context of DIK, takes place in a “regime of secular-liberal power” (Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020: 100). They explained their judgment as follows:

the point is not that historical-critical readings of the Qur’an are made available or possible but that its political hegemony, backed by the liberal secular state and the DIK as one of its institutions, is underlined by ‘a secularized conception of religion in which religion is understood as an abstract category of beliefs and doctrines from the [sic] which the individual believer stands apart to examine, compare and evaluate its various manifestations’ (Mahmood 2006: 341). In this sense, what occurred in the GzTM [the DIK’s report published in 2013 entitled ‘Gender roles, between tradition and modernity’, *Geschlechterbilder zwischen Tradition und Moderne*], WB] was an outsourcing of the state’s policing of the Qur’an by recruiting Muslim representatives and authorising some particular readings – critical, contextual, and gender equal. These readings, furthermore, ideally would help pedagogues and social workers to work with the Muslim population and help them move towards modernity. (Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020: 101–102)

Hernández Aguilar and Ahmad considered it a “tactical conclusion” of the state “to pass this endeavour to Muslim communities and intellectuals to further develop and establish the hegemony of a certain interpretation and reading of the text which, in accordance with the secular-liberal framework and its understanding of religion, is imagined as a transformative force of Muslim subjects and the making of German-Muslim figures” (Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020: 102). They seem opposed to any form of state subsidy for the organisation of a public intellectual space, as it risks, or contains, “the political uses of the Qur’an in the Deutsche Islam Konferenz as (...) national project

of crafting a German Islam with German Muslims, or ... a project for the governmental reformation of Muslims” (Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad 2020: 102). Although they are firm in their claim, they did not (simultaneously) investigate whether there has indeed been such an effect of “the DIK’s policing of the Qur’an upon Muslim organisations, intellectuals, and individuals” (2020: 102).

In Austria too, confidence in constructive cooperation with and support from the community-based organisations came under severe pressure, especially after the legislative change of 2015 (Hafez 2017). Sözeri et al. (2018) pointed at a similar mechanism in the Netherlands, mentioning the distrust of (Turkish) Muslim organisations against state intervention as an important reason for the failure of the Islamic theology initiative in the secular context of Leiden University.⁹

In Britain, Abdullah Sahin – who regarded himself an active contributor to the developing field of European educational theology – acknowledged how much of the intellectual project can indeed be politically motivated (Sahin 2013: 217). It did not stop him, though, from strongly committing to the emancipatory project. Instead of pointing at the state, he mentioned the importance for Muslim communities to open up for and engage in these kinds of initiatives. According to Sahin, Muslim communities in the European diaspora currently “are not willing to engage within this important process of self-reflection” (2013: 217). For him, it was his “deep conviction that diverse groups of Muslim educators based in the mosque, *madrakah*, seminaries and wider Islamic schools need to have an *educational space* where they might reflect critically on the meaning of education in Islam by engaging with diverse interpretations of education within the Muslim tradition” (Sahin 2013: 217).

3.3 Islamic Theology as Epistemological and Methodological Project

Besides these ongoing debates about the empowering instrumentality of Islamic theology, discussions also focused on epistemology and methodology. Ömer Özsoy from Frankfurt university points at two central elements that Islamic university theology must contain:

‘an autonomous [Islamic] university theology’ has two essential elements: freedom of research and a binding link (“*Rückbindung*”) to tradition. (Leirvik 2016: 133)

9 According to Sözeri’s analysis, the Leiden initiative failed mainly because of lack of trust of Muslim organisations towards the university’s attempt to develop Islamic theology in a secular university context.

Precisely how these two relate then becomes the core of the academic exercise. In these discussions, Islamic theology is considered an epistemological project with its own methodological features, with universities providing academic space reserved for confessional training and research (cf. Nielsen 2017: 446). Two central questions were often raised in this regard. First, to what extent and how does Islamic theology distinguish itself from the Western tradition of Islamic Studies? And second, what are its epistemological and methodological specificities?

An often-heard answer to the first question has been that Islamic theology provides for a methodology that has not, or insufficiently, been an integral part of the 'Western approach' of 'established' study of Islam (cf. Zaidi 2011; Chapter 1.5). Secular Islamic Studies prioritises a descriptive-explorative, historical-critical approach, and does not allow for a methodology that takes a normative positing and prescriptive affirmation in matters pertaining to religious truth. For Islamic theology, however, the religious sources of Islam are central resources to draw from and to relate to. And whereas Western secular Humanities and Social Sciences have largely lost their connection with metaphysical arguments, God must be 'brought back' in considering the big questions of meaning (Zaidi 2011).

According to Amjad Hussain (UK), a Muslim theological approach is based on "the Muslim conviction of not only God's existence, but as well God's activeness in the world" (2009: 241). Hussain argues that only if this conviction is taken completely seriously and stands at the basis of understanding and dialogue, it is possible to study Islam (Hussain 2009: 242). For Ömer Özsoy as well, a crucial aspect of Islamic university theology is the effort to (re)affirm a connectedness to the religious past of the Islamic tradition (cf. Zaman 2002: 3–4). However, Özsoy did not define this as an uncritical or premeditated effort: it is not about uncritically copying the classical Islamic science approaches, but neither should that connection be lost (see Chapter 5.3.2). Together with eleven other German pioneers, Özsoy stated that:

A contemporary Islamic theology in Germany should grapple both with modern scholarship and with traditional methods and modalities and, if nothing else, reflect a new founding of Islamic knowledge ordering in the university context. (Agai et al. 2014: 11)¹⁰

10 The original German reference goes as follows: "Eine gegenwärtige Islamische Theologie in Deutschland muss sich sowohl mit modernen Wissenschaften als auch mit traditionellen Methoden und Vorgehensweisen auseinandersetzen und nicht zuletzt eine Neubegründung der islamischen Wissensordnung in universitärer Umgebung reflektieren" (Agai et al. 2014: 11).

Flaskerud and Leirvik (2018) bring up how they saw scholars working in what they called ‘an emic-etic constellation.’ Theology conventionally refers to what could be called an ‘emic’ praxis, that allows the scholar “to address the ontological status of things, seeking the foundations of faith within the tradition”, whereas the study of religion is “an *etic*, critical practice typically carried out by historians of religion, in addition to historians, anthropologists and sociologists” (Flaskerud & Leirvik 2018: 423). As the Nordic editors of a Special Issue on the theme, they bring up that “discussions about Islamic university theology as presented by the [contributing] authors ... try to connect the *etic* analytical perspective and the *emic* practice of doing university theology in ways that take mutual influences across disciplinary boundaries seriously” (Flaskerud & Leirvik 2018: 423).

In these discussions, interlocutors brought in that it is not a matter of choosing between two epistemological-methodological traditions – an Islamic or a Western – but about fruitfully combining, bridging, or merging them (e.g. Ellethy 2017:174). Whereas a binary construct that results in opting between so-called ‘inner’ or ‘outer’ perspectives, is often considered unproductive and unhelpful, Islamic theologians face the task of making Islamic theology simultaneously the object of study as well as becoming its authors (Schulze 2015). Islamic university theology thus must balance descriptive historical-critical approaches (*‘this is how it could have been’*), prescriptive-normative (*‘this is what it should be’*), and critical-reflective (*‘this is what it could be’*). We will see in Chapters 5 and 6 how this intersectionality of Islamic theology and Islamic Studies looked like in the work of some prominent scholars.

From my observations it becomes clear that for many scholars, Islamic university theology has been about taking a critical-reflective hermeneutical perspective to the sources and its interpretations, in past and present – and to some extent the future (cf. Coppens 2022). They approach Islamic university theology as a critical-hermeneutical project, with a clear eye for and manifest openness to the different interpretative traditions in Islam. Islamic Studies (Islamology) can offer knowledge and methodology but stops where religious positionality becomes an active end goal. Islamic theology wants to take up from there, (ultimately) seeking space for original thinking and an ability to “delicately probe beneath the skin of speech to question meanings” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 175).¹¹ Moreover, it is in the ‘creative tension’ that comes with the dialectic between Islamic theology

11 Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor argued that “hermeneutics refers to a desire and ability to delicately probe beneath the skin of speech to question meanings, and becomes part of our thinking when we are sensitive to language used” (2015: 175).

and Islamic religious studies, that modern theology can emerge (cf. Jeremy Henzell-Thomas 2015; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).

According to one German interviewee in Engelhardt's empirical study, Islamic theology is "to a high degree a *constructivist* discipline, which arranges the heritage in a certain manner" (Engelhardt 2007: 299, emphasis WB).¹² Such an hermeneutical construct must build on or relate to "the claim of Islam on the understanding of the world [that] bases itself on an epistemological model which starts from experiential observations, reason and the revelation as founding layers of human knowledge" (Agai et al 2014: 11).¹³

The German pioneers called it not so much a *binding* knowledge relation, but an *orienting* relation. It is not about restoration, but about reconstruction, reflection, and actualisation. For them as Muslim theologians "[t]he Qur'anic message is also a call for a reflexive interaction with the world" (Agai et al. p. 11).¹⁴ According to Harry Harun Behr the central task is to come to a 'hermeneutics of intentional reading' of the Qur'an (2014: 120, see also Chapter 5.3.2). This intention is visible in the self-definition of the Centre for Islamic Theology in Amsterdam that wants its theology to be hermeneutic, contextual, and dialogical (Vroom 2009).

As to the British context, Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor pointed at the complementing and on occasion challenging role of what they called "independent hermeneutics" against "established religious scholarship that insists upon Islam being non-ambiguous" (2015: 104):

[T]his may create opportunities for British and European Muslims to strengthen the emergent paradigm shift of understanding the Quran for oneself, and of creating an epistemic bridge between worlds; worlds of belief and secularism, worlds of East and West and worlds of old and new. (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 104)

These two British observers postulated that the approaches of Islamic Studies and classical Islamic theology should be seen as complementary to each

12 The original reference in German is as follows: "(...) Es ist also in hohen Maße eine konstruktivistische Disziplin, die das Erbe in einer bestimmten Art arrangiert (...)" (Engelhardt 2017: 299).

13 The original reference in German is as follows: "Der Anspruch des Islams auf die Deutung der Welt stützt sich auf ein erkenntnistheoretisches Modell, das von Sinneswahrnehmungen, der Vernunft und der Offenbarung als Grundlagen der menschlichen Erkenntnis ausgeht" (Agai et al. 2014: 11).

14 The original reference in German is as follows: "Die koranische Botschaft ist zugleich eine Aufforderung zu einem reflexiven Umgang mit der Welt" (Agai et al. 2014: 11).

other; it is both possible and necessary to bridge the two and create a dialectic between them. They applauded the attempts of the Markfield Institute for Higher Education as well as the Cambridge Muslim College, concluding that “We need a new pedagogy that consciously and deliberately brings together students who can and do otherwise avoid each other, both by design and by chance” (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 181).¹⁵

At the first lustrum conference on Islamic theology in Germany in September 2014, the Iranian American philosopher Abdelkarim Soroush plead for an Islamic theology that is based on modern philosophy, allowing Muslim philosophers to ‘borrow’ modern philosophical ideas, to sharpen their own thoughts. Chapters 5 and 6 will discuss some examples of scholars who assumed this task. Even if this is a platitude, it is important to emphasise that Islam is far from anti-intellectual as some outsiders might suspect. One can easily see traces of the debate about the place of ‘God-talk’ in the European tradition of the Humanities that Ali Zaidi wanted to retrieve (Zaidi 2011). For scholars like Ömer Özsoy, the task is not about in any way ‘denying’ the divine origin of the sources of Islamic theory, but to rationally approach the classical corpus of understanding. It is this rational-intellectual course of Islamic university theology that Jan Felix Engelhardt’s account clearly brought up. He found how:

contrary to how Islamic knowledge is structured at non-state institutions, Islamic theology cannot confine itself to stewardship of traditional knowledge. They must further develop it and update the forms and contents of Islamic self-interpretation under the condition of rational scientific rigor. (Engelhardt 2017: 199)¹⁶

Seen from this angle, Islamic theologians are considered Muslim intellectuals who discursively produce knowledge about the Islamic tradition: they are

15 Already in 2007, Peter Mandaville observed that in the Markfield Institute for Higher Education and the Cambridge Muslim College “new hybrid models combining elements of traditional Islamic sciences with liberal Islamic studies seem increasingly to be the norm” (Mandaville 2007).

16 The original reference in German is as follows: “Im Gegensatz zur Ordnung islamischen Wissens an nichtstaatlichen Institutionen könne sich die Islamische Theologie nicht auf Verwaltung und Weitergabe traditionellen Wissens beschränken, sondern müsse ‘die Formen und Inhalte islamischer Selbstausslegung unter den Bedingungen rationaler Wissenschaftlichkeit weiterentwickeln und fortschreiben” (Engelhardt 2017: 199). Engelhardt quotes Schulze’s position paper “Was ist Islamische Theologie?” of 2010, quoted at the beginning of Chapter 3.

engaging with the past, the present and a future through hermeneutical strategies (Tayob 2016: 173). Even if this comes with 'role tensions' about what their exact output of such critical-hermeneutical endeavor should be in this regard.

For Reinhard Schulze it is precisely this epistemological authenticity and distinctiveness that has legitimised the (more or less) autonomous space provided for Islamic theology in German academia. Schulze contended that within the modern [German] university denominational scholarship can take place, but not along previously decided, doctrinal, 'closed' positions or currents. This makes academic theology expectedly distinct from private seminars or educational institutes in Western Europe.

Insofar as the disciplines of Islamic Studies [he refers to Islamic university theology, *WB*] operate from a meta-perspective and understand the inner plurality of Islam as an expression of very different, historic choices of interpretation, they are not bound to any specific tradition. Obviously, as is also the case in the Christian theologies, the individual location of the academics within the system of Islamic traditions will be important. And we observe, certainly in some countries – just look at the developments in Iraq and Pakistan – that the differences between the traditions are becoming denominational in character. At local universities [in Germany, *WB*], however, such differences are resolved by the integrative principle of academic scholarship. (Schulze 2010: 4–5)¹⁷

Consequently, Schulze's advice might play a mediating or even reconciling role between those who are concerned about the academic legitimacy of Islamic theology compared to secular Islamic studies on the one hand, and the religious legitimacy for the faith community on the other:

The integration of Islamic Studies [Islamic theology, *WB*] at German universities will be the more successful the more readily they enter into dialogue with other theologies. With those they share the same epistemic

17 The original reference in German is: "Sofern Islamische Studien eine Metaperspektive einnehmen und die innere islamische Pluralität als Ausdruck sehr unterschiedlich historisch gewachsener Deutungsmöglichkeiten verstehen, sind sie nicht einer spezifischen Tradition verpflichtet. Natürlich ist wie auch in den christlichen Theologien der individuelle Standort der Wissenschaftler in dem islamischen Traditionsgefüge von Bedeutung. Und gewiss ist heute zu beobachten, dass in manchen Ländern die Traditionsdifferenzen konfessionellen Charakter annehmen. Ich verweise nur auf Entwicklungen im Irak oder Pakistan. An hiesigen Universitäten aber werden diese Differenzen durch das integrative Prinzip der akademischen Wissenschaftlichkeit aufgehoben" (Schulze 2010: 4–5).

assumptions, even if they address them in different ways. They share the concern *not* to make their own assumptions of truth a precondition for other sciences and scholarly disciplines. In the same way as the Christian theologies do not generate Christian sciences, Islamic Studies do *not* define Islamic normative requirements on other sciences. The acceptance of this epistemic autonomy of the sciences is fundamental; it guarantees the consensus of the university. (Schulze 2010: 5)¹⁸

This reference to the positionality of Islamic theology next to other theologies brings us to a third feature of the discussions on how to comprehend Islamic university theology.

3.4 Islamic Theology as Theological Project

As a third way in the circulating discussions about the question what Islamic university theology is or ought to be, I discern those who envision Islamic theology primarily parallel to Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish academic theology – instead of positioning it next to Islamic Studies. The legitimacy and rationality (credentials) of Islamic theology is then (to be) discussed in relation to questions about modern university theology and its dedication to critically discuss the truth that religion claims to represent (e.g. Boeve 2014; Schulze 2010; Van den Brink 2009).¹⁹

Previously non-existent room must be made for Muslim theologians who, as representatives of their faith, can take up this task for Islam. Islamic theology should offer reasoned considerations based on a critical-hermeneutical reflection of the sacred texts, established thought, and if possible religious experience. Islamic theology is then, just like Christian theology, “the attempt to present the teachings of a religion about God and His relationship to humans

18 The original reference in German is: “Die erfolgreiche Integration Islamischer Studien an hiesigen Universitäten gelingt umso besser, wie sie in den Dialog mit anderen Theologien eintreten. Mit ihnen teilen sie sich die epistemischen Voraussetzungen, auch wenn sie diese jeweils anders ansprechen. Gemeinsam ist ihnen das Anliegen, ihre Wahrheitsannahmen *nicht* zur Voraussetzung anderer Wissenschaften zu machen. Genauso wenig wie christliche Theologien christliche Wissenschaften generieren, definieren Islamische Studien auch *keine* normativen Voraussetzungen für andere Wissenschaften. Die Anerkennung dieser epistemischen Autonomie der Wissenschaften ist grundlegend und garantiert den Konsens der Universität” (Schulze 2010: 5).

19 In secular and Christian contexts in Western Europe, the role of academic theology has increasingly marginalised (cf. Ford et al. 2005).

and to delimit and defend these against divergent views”, in the words of Lutz Berger, Germany (2010: 10).²⁰

Theology as “*Welterklärung*” and “*Sinnstiftung*” always takes place in a specific cultural and socio-historical context: it grows out of it and it affects society (Berger 2010:10).^{21,22} A theology of ‘explaining the world’ and ‘giving meaning to it’ must then be done by Muslims themselves, autonomously embedded instead of in Christian faculties. It should also not be limited to interfaith dialogues. In this approach, the academic exploration of the foundations of faith and religion and the study of its various traditions and expressions, is considered a core task of modern theology at public universities in secular liberal democratic societies (Schulze 2010).

Those who primarily positioned Islamic theology next to Christian theology, did emphasise the emancipatory character of Islamic theology as well. They also envisioned an epistemic bridge between Islamic and Western scholarly traditions. However, seen from this angle, additional questions and recommendations came to the fore. One such question is what Martinson called “the relativity of differences” (2016: 124) between Protestant or Catholic and Muslim theology. According to some engaged observers any attempt to discuss Islamic theology in a European context must understand it in relation to the

20 The original reference in German is as follows: “der Versuch die Lehren einer Religion von Gott und seiner Beziehung zu den Menschen darzustellen und sie gegen abweichende Auffassungen abzugrenzen und zu verteidigen. Sie fusst in Christentum wie Islam auf bestimmten heiligen Texten, im Besonderen auf Bibel und Koran; sie ist aber nicht mit ihnen identisch, sondern ist das Ergebnis menschlichen Nachdenkes über diese Quellen” (L. Berger 2010: 10).

21 The original reference in German is as follows: “Theologie findet immer in einem bestimmten kultur- und sozialgeschichtlichen Kontext statt ... [und wir wollen verstehen] wie Theologie zum einen aus seiner bestimmten gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Wirklichkeit erwächst, aber auch, wie sie auf die Gesellschaft zurückwirkt” (L. Berger 2010: 10).

22 Lutz Berger’s study does not go into contemporary Islamic theology. He finishes his book with an open question about the future role of Islamic theology in relating with ‘multiple modernities’: “Muslime können und müssen die integrierende oder abwehrende Auseinandersetzung mit der Moderne immer auch mit Rückbezug auf die eigene Tradition und die gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen ihrer Länder führen. Der Begriff Moderne wird dabei zunehmend komplexer. Die Fixierung vieler Muslime auf den Westen als Gegenbild, die die letzten 200 Jahre muslimischer Geistesgeschichte geprägt hat, wird in der multipolaren Welt des 21. Jahrhunderts an Bedeutung verlieren. Ob Muslime sich dann künftig in einer Welt ‘vielfältiger Modernen’ (*multiple modernities*), in einer Welt, also, in der Moderne nicht mehr notwendigerweise mit der Kultur des Westens gleichgesetzt werden kann, in für sie und andere befriedigender Weise einrichten werden und welche Rolle islamische Theologie dabei spielen wird, muss die Zukunft weisen” (L. Berger 2010: 228).

already existing Christian college facilities, and to some extent to Jewish ones. Not only because of their similarities and differences in content as attempts to come to understandings of God and His relation to Creation, humans, the cosmos. It is also because of the institutional-legal comparative positions in academia and society (Özdil 2011: 16).²³

We already saw in Chapter 2 that the German Oriental Society originally tried to position Islamic theology next to Christian theology. Jørgen Nielsen recalls how “[It] issued a statement towards the end of 2010, signed by over 150 scholars, in which it welcomed these initiatives in principle, but they would have preferred that the term Islamic theology had been used and that the new chairs be located in faculties of theology rather than in the humanities” (Nielsen 2017: 439). Here, there would be ample space for Islamic theology, or ‘God-talk’, dealing with similar questions as Christian (or Jewish) theology as well as experiencing familiarity in methodologies, even if this would mean a “struggling with the *similarity in difference* between the theological heritages of Christianity and Islam, and the obvious *asymmetries* that pop up in the wake of the quest for an academic Islamic theology in Northern Europe” (Martinson 2016: 124, emphasis in the original). One obvious matter would be if *fiqh* questions would fall under theology.

In 2005, the Amsterdam Centre for Islamic Theology became embedded in the Faculty of Theology (later named Faculty of Religion and Theology). The twelve German pioneers, however, pointedly stated that they did not want to strive for an analogy with Christian theology, particularly if this would imply a binding link with mosques or ‘ecclesiastical’ structures alien to Islam:

A confessional commitment which would develop analogous to the forms of commitment to institutionalised bodies established by Christian theologies, would not only result in an assimilation of structures that are alien to the essence of Islam. By creating authoritarian ties, it would also severely curtail and in the long term undermine the potential of Islamic

23 The original reference in German is as follows: “Der Versuch, islamische Theologie im europäischen Kontext zu diskutieren, kann nicht ohne den Bezug auf die bereits vorhandenen christlichen und jüdischen Hochschuleinrichtungen geschehen. Schliesslich geht es hier auch – abgesehen von den Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschieden dieser Geschwisterreligionen – um akademische und gesellschaftliche Gleichberechtigung, was in Bezug auf die gegenwärtige Lage der Muslime nicht ohne weiteres gesagt werden kann” (Özdil 2011: 16).

theology to strengthen individual and scientific freedom, a potential inherent in its self-understanding. (Agai et al. 2014: 14)²⁴

They warned that creating this kind of similarity with Christian theology – as it has been embedded in European faculties of divinity for centuries- would go at the cost of one of the essential characteristics of Islamic university theology as identified in the previous paragraph by Özsoy, which is freedom of research.

Another warning for too much semiotic ‘similarity in difference’ came from Marcia Hermansen who explained that “the very concept of Islamic theology requires historical conceptualisation. Unlike Christianity, and more similarly to Judaism, law ... became the privileged intellectual discipline in classical religious thought” (Hermansen 2013: 11). What this means for understanding ‘orthodoxy’ has been a complicated matter in Christian understandings of Islam, as was brought up in Chapter 1 (cf. Knysh 1993).

In the university context, at least, it is less about determination (‘this is how it must be’), but about orientation (‘what are viable options’), and articulation (‘this is a well-argued possibility’). This is a careful and delicate approach, as for the believers the sacred texts carry eternal value and form the point of departure for the community of learned people and religious law. Academicians cannot ignore the question of how to manage inherent anachronism if value and meaning of Qur’an and Hadith are in principle infinite and eternal. Precisely these questions have always accompanied Islamic intellectualism. The Islamic disciplines of theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) can contribute, as they have done in the past, to reflecting on the ongoing tension between transcendent and immanent knowledge, drawing both from the Islamic rationalist tradition, as from Western humanist philosophy. Exactly how Muslim scholars in Western academies would bring these epistemes into fruitful considerations appears a core question (see Chapters 5 and 6 for examples).²⁵

24 The original reference in German goes as follows: “Eine Bekenntnisbindung, die analog zu den von christlichen Theologien etablierten Formen der Bindung an institutionalisierte Instanzen verlaufen würde, würde nicht nur in eine Assimilierung von Strukturen münden, die dem Wesen des Islams fremd sind. Sie würde durch die Schaffung von autoritären Bindungen auch das in ihrem Selbstverständnis angelegte Potential der islamischen Theologie zur Stärkung der individuellen und wissenschaftlichen Freiheit stark beschneiden und langfristig aushebeln” (Agai et al. 2014: 14).

25 This also touches on the question of how to deal with the internal denominational variety. The German Scientific Council emphasised that various currents within Islam (Sunni, Shi’a, and otherwise) had to be addressed proportionally in education and research to present this internal plurality (Ceylan 2017: 275; Schulze 2010).

The Nordic Christian theologian Mattias Martinson recognised these aspects. He argued that as Muslims' arrival is only very recent, one cannot expect them to have the same societal basis as Christian theology, which is deeply embedded in North-West European societies. Therefore, he warned that:

as soon as one begins to think of *Islamic* academic theology in analogy with this Christian academic theology in the Nordic context, one has to reflect seriously on the cultural divide between the Islamic and the Christian world. If Christian theology has a continuing cultural role to play in the Nordic countries, this might not at all be the case with Islamic theology. (Martinson 2016: 123–124, emphasis in original)

Nevertheless, Martinson insisted on the importance and necessity of “some kind of construction of a viable Islamic theological approach within our contemporary Nordic universities”, even if that means that “problematic aspects in both traditions” will become visible, including institutional and conceptual incongruences, and trigger clashes between different value systems and cultural inclinations” (Martinson 2016: 124). He concluded that “The academic theological institutions in the secularized Nordic countries have a lot to offer in the attempt to establish this new form of engaged academic study of Islam” (Martinson 2016: 124).

3.5 Islamic Theology as ‘European Islam’ Project

Again a related, yet distinct way to approach the question of what Islamic university theology is or ought to be, has been to consider it as an ultimately European intellectual project. This approach put the focus on the reformist tendency to serve the emergence of a ‘European Islam’. The focus in what has been called the ‘European Islam project’²⁶ is on seeking to make Islam compatible with Western political thinking, intellectually addressing the mutual relations between key Western political ideas, especially democracy, gender equality and secularism, and Islam (Brahimi and Brisson 2020). This intellectual ‘agenda’ can be called modernist-reformist, or liberalist in the definition of Charles Kurzman (1998), as it “pushes for a theological update of Islam” in order for the religion (and European Muslims of all ethnicities and cultures)

²⁶ Tariq Ramadan used the phrase ‘European Islam project’, see Brahimi and Brisson 2020.

to find a place in European secular society (Brahimi and Brisson 2020: 1020). Ednan Aslan, for instance, argued that:

If Europe is a community of shared values, then Muslims need to engage with it in a manner which makes it clear that Muslims have important contributions to make to this community of shared values. (Aslan & Windisch 2012: 16)

Aslan brings up that “*the European Islam* is challenged to answer questions which it does not know from its own epistemic tradition” (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 82, emphasis in original).²⁷ Consequently, it is up to the new researchers not only to diagnose a historical distance between Qur’an and Hadith exegesis and Western society, but also to overcome this, in order to establish Islam in European countries in such a way that it will be perceived as a self-evident part of society (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 82).

The key question in this regard than became *how* Muslim theologians in Europe will address this intellectual exercise, what their propositions will be, and how they will delineate the ‘idea of a European Islamic thought’ (cf. Hashas 2019). How will the place of Islam in postmodern and post secular Europe be demarcated and possibly defended? Or is it precisely that problematic idea of demarcation that should be countered? What *is* a European shaped Islamic theology – if it is supposed to be a reformist-modernist liberal project?

Seen from this viewpoint, Islamic university theology is essentially faced with a double task: on the one hand to create an Islamic ethical theory for European Muslims that focuses on social justice and morality. While in secular Europe, the academic task cannot be the formation of legally binding religious law, the divine sources remain an indispensable source for morality and an ethical system (Hashas 2019). On the other hand, Muslim theologians are asked to contribute to ‘Europe’s shared values’ from the Islamic tradition, looking for congruencies and critically discussing incongruencies. This request is particularly focused on human rights, gender equality and LHTBQ rights.

Although he did not address Islamic university theology as such, the Italian Moroccan researcher Mohammed Hashas (2019) brought in highly relevant insights for understanding the idea of such European project of reconciling Islam’s intellectual tradition with ‘Europe’s community of shared values’. In his extensive study of the work of four Muslim thinkers who explicitly locate their

²⁷ The original reference in German is: “*Der europäische Islam* ist herausgefordert, Fragen zu beantworten, die er aus eigener Wissenstradition heraus nicht kennt” (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 82).

thinking in Europe, Hashas identified a revisionist-reformist tendency that he identified as “the idea of European Islam”. He claims that “European Islam for Muslim thinkers is about *meaning, morality, and social justice*” (Hashas 2019: 3, emphasis WB). “It is about cosmic sovereignty and the place of man in it” (Hashas 2019: 3). Although political theology can be part of it, to be sure, it is not about realising a political theocratic ideal:

This is about cosmic sovereignty and the place of man in it; as to political sovereignty, it is in the hands of the state. This differs substantially from, say, Arab Islams and political Islams, which are struggling to reach a renewed interpretation of the place of religion in the political and spiritual-religious realms. (Hashas 2019: 3)

Thus, Hashas argues that ‘European Islam’ can be said to belong to the inherently Islamic plural tradition of *being Islamic* as it has always existed and shown to be flexible. Hashas agrees with the German Arabist Thomas Bauer’s recalling of the classical plurality of legal theories and the intellectual diversity of what Bauer called “‘the culture of ambiguity’ that enjoyed difference for over a millennium” (Hashas 2019: 2).

Hashas argues that ‘European Islam’ might be the already existing “fruit of confluences” that always occur in what Hodgson called “the Islamicate”, as the hemosphere of Islamic religion, culture and institutions which now extends to Europe (Hashas 2019: 1–2).

Hashas found how four European Muslim intellectuals (Bassam Tibi, Tariq Ramadan, Tareq Oubrou and Abdennour Bidar, portrayed in his book) progressively consulted classical rationalists (particularly the Muʿtazila school of thought), the ‘early’ reformists of the Arabic awakening (*nahda*) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the ‘late’ reformists, from the 1960s generation onwards (Hashas 2019: 5).²⁸

Evidently, these intellectuals developed their thinking in the West, under Western conditions of freedom of thought as well as ‘politics of identity formation’ – which were briefly introduced in Chapter 1. Hashas observed how the four intellectuals he studied attempt to get *beyond* these ongoing dynamics of binary thinking that (still) predominantly understand Muslims as newcomers in Europe:

28 Charles Kurzman (1998) called this tendency ‘liberal Islam’, see Chapter 1.

As self-proclaimed speakers of their own *Islamic* tradition in a modern context of consumerist ideologies, European Muslims, as committed intellectuals, are engaging with their tradition from this changing space and time of modernity. For them, European Islam is not a 'normative bricolage'. ... Rather it is a form of reconsidering their relation between this and the other world to regain their subjective place in a cosmopolitan world instead of remaining in the politics of identity confirmation, beyond classical Orientalism and Occidentalism discourses; it is a form of reclaiming ... 'hermeneutics of alterity', i.e. the sense of being in the world as independent subjects, beyond the boundaries made by politics and hegemonic power. (Hashas 2019: 2 3, emphasis in original)

Importantly, Hashas explains how they draw from two major domains of thinking: Islam in Europe and Islam outside Europe, which one should not take as intrinsically opposing domains, but as domains of controversy, different and intertwining (Hashas 2019: 4).

'European Islam' and 'European Islamic thought' are used interchangeably ... to generally mean any discourse, concept, or idea that claims to be minimally or maximally Islamic and European in theory and/or practice, irrespective of the degree of this affiliation to Islam and Europe. (Hashas 2019: 4)

In that sense, 'European Islam' can deal with any topic at the three axes, namely 1) the cosmos or the world, 2) society or the community as a whole, and 3) the individual as an agent that at the end interprets religious teachings for social purposes and for existential questions that involve her or his interpretation of the world. Hashas points out how " 'this' European Islam does the following:

(1) on the world axis, it humanizes the world through divinely willed inheritance for cosmic wellbeing, based on the principle of fraternity; (2) on the society axis, it historicizes revelation through practical, fiqh for social wellbeing, based on the principle of equality; (3) on the individual axis, it rationalizes individual faith through the principle of ethical liberty for individual wellbeing, based on the principle of liberty. (Hashas 2019: 4)

We recognise here the aforementioned focus of 'European Islamic thought' on 1) meaning, 2) ethics and morality, and 3) social justice, including gender justice and human rights.

Furthermore, Hashas was able to point out epistemological-methodological features of European Islam, thus distinguishing it as a category or subfield in contemporary Islamic thought. The first is that “European Islam builds on the Islamic intellectual tradition of religious rational disputes (*kalam*), especially that of the medieval Muʿtazila rationalist school, though this is not always visible or stressed” (Hashas 2019: 4). It focuses on ethics and not law in the Islamic tradition. Hashas explains this as “it centralizes ‘thin shari’a’, instead of ‘thick shari’a’” (2019: 4). Second, “European Islam also builds on the heritage of the modern Islamic reformist movements, and its revivalists who make what is known as the Arabic-Islamic *nahda* [renaissance]” – the era from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 to the 1930s (before World War II). His third reason that makes ‘European Islam’ a category or subfield in contemporary Islamic thought, is also highly relevant in approaching the question about Islamic theology as a ‘European theological project’. Hashas explains how in the continuation of the reformist-modernist movements in the postcolonial era, Islamic European thought draws on the “generation of scholarship that is critical and reformist. This generation has produced modern and plural interpretations of the tradition, and European Islam belongs to this renewed interpretative atmosphere of Islamic thought” (Hashas 2019: 4–5). Hashas explains how:

the scholarship of the contemporaries’ generation, to which European Islam is very close, constitutes what some call ‘Islamic critical thought’, ‘progressive Islam’, or ‘critical Islam’. (Hashas 2019: 5)

Although the portrayed scholars in Hashas’s account were not affiliated to one of the university programs I studied in this book, one can recognise how his picture connects to some of the central circulating understandings of Islamic university theology that were explored in the previous paragraphs. This European intellectual ‘project’

is not a radical breakthrough in Islamic thought; it is, however, a ‘mild revolution’ that does not aim at ‘killing’ or ‘denying’ God, but at working out theologically grateful ways of cultivating this world, without resorting to what is often referred to as divine law or divine prescription. (Hashas 2019: 5)

Moreover, “European Islam ... continues a tradition, but renews it as well” (Hashas 2019: 5). Hashas identifies its rationalisation of ethics as key.

This rationalization of ethics leads to the adoption of what might be referred to as the values of 'legal modernity' or 'Euro-modernity' and argues for them 'from within,' for theological legitimacy. This step in Islamic thought is what is referred to here as 'perpetual modernity,' in the sense that it does not satisfy itself with the achievements of 'Euro-modernity' but keeps religious thought as a form of critique for permanent awakening; it is only through this process that the divine remains a source of liberation for human beings, liberation from objects and subjects. ... By adapting 'thin shari'a' as the form for being European politically and Islamic theologically, European Islam establishes itself as a 'reasonable comprehensive doctrine,' able to legitimately contribute to the idea of 'overlapping consensus' in constitutionally liberal societies from its doctrinal perspective. (Hashas 2019: 5–6)

3.5.1 *European Islamic Thought as a Subfield in Contemporary Islamic Thought*

Through Hashas's theoretical and empirical explorations, we have identified a compelling account of what constitutes "a *version* of European Islam" (Hashas 2019: 15, emphasis *wb*). We will see in the second part of this book that these intellectual features are visible in the work of many of the studied scholars. In Chapter 6, I will present some examples of Muslim thinkers who considered the relevance of such project of developing theological positions that consider both the contemporary Islamic scholarly discourses and secularism, democracy, rule of law and philosophy that are characteristic of the European context. We will also be able to point out that references to 'rationalists,' early as well as late reformists, are indeed common, just like Hashas identified as core characteristics for those who fall under this specific category of European Muslim thinkers. Additionally, we will see how female theologians articulate the central idea of social justice as it pertains to gender justice. Marcia Hermansen points at how liberal and progressive Muslima theologians/Muslima theology aim to contribute to a theological project of gender justice within contemporary Islamic thought (Hermansen 2016: 24).

3.5.2 *Words of Caution*

Yet, also regarding this perception of Islamic university theology as a European intellectual project, words of caution are at place, as we must be keen on discovering what is exactly meant in this approach. In Chapter 1, I pointed at the ambiguity of the term 'European Islam'. Therefore, one must remain alert to see whether the term concerns a proposition of theological renewal,

critically-reflectively focusing on meaning, morality and social justice, or whether it intends the making of a 'Euro-Islam' in line with securitisation or integration discourses.

In any way, it would be incorrect to *a priori* project the findings of Mohammed Hashas as a set of reformist-modernist criteria to what Islamic university theology in Europe is, or ought to be. The main reason is that 'European Islam' remains a contentious concept, if treated exclusively as a political theology project that can converse with liberal political philosophy (Hashas 2019: 234). This would run the risk that the academic output is legitimised or delegitimised as a Western political construct of governance and control. Furthermore, we should not automatically conclude that this process of 'rationalising ethics' exclusively takes place in Europe. This might also be the proper moment to bring in the remark of Oddbjørn Leirvik who rightly observed that " 'emerging trends' in European university theology are not necessarily 'new' in content, as they should be expected to link up with established tendencies in Muslim reformist thought worldwide" (Leirvik 2016: 137). According to Leirvik, "[t]he 'newness' has primarily to do with the academic institutionalization of reform-oriented thought in the European context" (Leirvik 2016: 137).

The question of European states' roles as 'pull or push factors' remains open for now. What is clear, though, is that if one would only understand Islamic university theology as a specific category and sub-trend of Islamic thought, this would *a priori* set the boundaries of the intellectual output of Muslim theologians, potentially limiting their academic freedom. This question brings me to the final approach.

3.6 Islamic Theology as Academic Project

As a fifth characteristic, I identified those who seemingly wanted to stay away from choosing between all of the above – if at all possible. They tried to do so by considering and analysing the first decade of the new field as an emerging scholarly discipline in itself. In this approach, the thematic scope, methodologies, epistemological foundations, and the 'functionality' of the output, should per definition not have any prior limitations, except those dictated by the standards of academic legitimacy. How Islamic theological studies look is solely the responsibility of its scholars, be it confessional, non-confessional or methodologically agnostic academic theology. Even more so, 'confessionals' equally share the responsibility to meet the academic standards, like any other actor in the study of Islam and Muslim societies. In this view, as an academic discipline, university theology should take a 'meta-perspective' to the religious

tradition. It is possible to do so while including a (personal) confessional commitment to Islam, but that is not a prerequisite nor a condition.

Jan Felix Engelhardt extensively studied the establishment of German Islamic Theology as a scientific discipline ‘in the making’. In 2015, he interviewed twelve out of the first nineteen German professors about their self-understanding. The respondents emphasised four essential traits of academic Islamic theology, drawing from their perceptions of academic and religious authenticity. Their work should be 1) *critical-reflective* towards the classical sources; 2) *accountable* in the sense that the ideas and arguments expressed can be traced to their origin; 3) the work and ideas should be *contextualised*, taking the historical context in which a source came into being and/or the present context in which a source is being interpreted into account; and 4) the author should be *autonomous*, meaning that (s)he should not be obliged by an external force to take or not take a certain position on a matter. Or, in my words, their epistemological-methodological endeavor should always be academically sound to count.²⁹

As a discipline in the making, Engelhardt first traced the formation of an “epistemic community”³⁰ of scholars. In this stage, Muslim researchers in Germany were somehow transdisciplinary or interdepartmentally connected. With the establishment of the new programs, in Germany a ‘scientific community’ developed, having its own departments, educational programs, academic journals and research groups, publishing mostly in the German language.

By 2018, this process had not yet fully completed. Engelhardt observed how “... contrary to most other scholarly disciplines, the representatives of Islamic theology must still generate their own resources which they need for the legitimate exercise of their profession” (Engelhardt 2017: 10). Also, it was still in the nascent phase of finding its place towards the ‘triple publics’ of university

29 As mentioned before, this is also of continued importance for Christian theology at secular universities, which theologians must account for (see, e.g., Ford et al. 2005).

30 Engelhardt defines this as: “An *epistemic community* is a network of scholars or experts that is based on strong cognitive and normative ties and extends across multiple disciplines and institutional contexts. It refers to a specific societal topic on which its members share beliefs and truth claims and on which they are constantly increasing the density of communication among themselves and with relevant reference groups” (Engelhardt 2017: 102, emphasis in original). The original German reference is: “Bei einer *epistemic community* handelt es sich um ein Netzwerk von Wissenschaftlern bzw. Experten, das auf starken kognitiven und normativen Bindungen beruht und sich über mehrere Fächer und institutionelle Kontexte erstreckt. Sie bezieht sich dabei auf ein bestimmtes gesellschaftliches Thema, zu dem ihre Mitglieder Überzeugungen und Wahrheitsansprüche teilen und zu dem sie die Kommunikationsdichte untereinander sowie zu relevanten Bezugsgruppen stetig erhöhen” (Engelhardt 2017: 102).

theology: academia, ‘mosque’ and society. In that sense, Leirvik brings in two important remarks. On the one hand, it is not likely to expect the institutes to become “hubs of neo-fundamentalist learning” (Leirvik 2016: 132). On the other hand, modern university theology can emphasise its ‘secular element’ in thinking about ethics and normativity, “seeing secularity as a ‘third position’ in the spaces between different confessional theologies” (Leirvik 2016: 129, referring to Von Stosch).

Despite the ongoing predicaments, the autonomy and independence of the scholars has considerably increased – at least in Germany where Islamic theology became a distinct academic discipline with its own Ba, Ma and Ph.D. programs.³¹ Engelhardt subsequently concluded that a “confinement to societally relevant topics is less possible for the scientific discipline of Islamic Theology, as it now has independent degree programs and should educate its students in all Islamic-theological subdisciplines” (Engelhardt 2017: 161).

The academic positioning and liberties that come with academic freedom, *ideally* mean no restriction or limits to topic or methodological approach. Whether this is indeed the case, remained prone to some fierce discussions, as the previous sections have shown.

3.7 Concluding Remarks

From the critical discussions sketched in this chapter about the aim and relevance of Islamic university theology, it became clear how in the four studied countries, in the decade between 2010 and 2018, the process of ‘integrating’ Islamic theology in public, secular universities has been far from evident. By distinguishing five (sometimes overlapping) approaches that defined the legitimate tasks and position of Islamic university theology in Western Europe, we were able to see how stakeholders emphasised various – sometimes fricative – role descriptions.

Taken together, the chapter showed how closely engaged observers pointed at 1) how Islamic university theology has been aimed at fulfilling an urgent emancipatory need, 2) how it has been seeking its epistemological and methodological distinctiveness, occupying a space in university that was previously ‘empty’, either positioned adjacent to secular Islamic Studies or 3) to Christian

³¹ In a later publication, Engelhardt considers the divide between Islamic Studies and Islamic Theology in Germany in the end as more of a functional outcome from the recent German constellations that were discussed in Chapter 2.3, than as an epistemic necessity (Engelhardt 2020).

academic theology, 4) how it potentially brings in rationalist Islamic understandings of God, morality and social justice in the context of secular Europe, and 5) that it has been developing from a fragmented 'epistemic community' into a scientific discipline in itself, particularly in Germany.

Some engaged observers have positively perceived these formative arrangements as emancipatory, addressing the needs that occur in the context of Muslims' contemporary societal presence, while welcoming Muslim voices into the intellectual history of Europe. Others have warned for an unwanted influence of patronising socio-political forces on the freedom of research, fearing that the project has been foremost an example of enforced 'governmentality'.

Anyway, the assignment set to this cohort of scholars is huge. The academic field of Islamic knowledge production should ultimately be able to convincingly relate to Islam's and Muslims' internal variety as well as to societal plurality and develop modern understandings of pluralism from an Islamic perspective. For the last time this chapter, I quote the German pioneers who strongly expressed this position as:

Accordingly, the Islamic theology as a scholarly discipline should not be defined along an essentialist understanding, however it should in its self-image always keep in mind its relational character towards both its internal diversity as well as to the multiple and the variable context. (Agai et al. 2014: 12)³²

Balancing an academic text-based approach to longstanding classical Islamic sciences and a committed engagement with empirical Muslim and non-Muslim realities, this Western European Muslim scholarship is facing the task to trustworthy function as an interpretive community that can localise sources for inspiration to tackle today's questions about solidarity, identity and meaning making.

Now that we have gained an understanding of the circulating 'mission statements' of Islamic university theology, we can move on to the question of how these directions have been elaborated in academic research.

32 The original reference in German goes as follows: "Die islamische Theologie als wissenschaftliche Disziplin darf entsprechend nicht entlang eines essentialistischen Verständnisses definiert werden, sondern muss in ihrem Selbstbild stets den eigenen relationalen Charakter vis-à-vis sowohl der eigenen internen Vielfalt als auch der multiplen und variablen Kontexte mit bedenken" (Agai et al. 2014: 12).

A Helicopter View on the Topics of the Academic Publications

An Islamically-based research at the university level in Europe enters new research territory (*Forschungsneuland*).

EDNAN ASLAN (2013: 171)¹



4.1 Introduction

Islamically-based research at the European universities has embarked on uncharted research territory (*Forschungsneuland*), Ednan Aslan claimed in 2013. How did the engaged scholars cultivate this new land in the four countries under scrutiny? To gain more insight into this question, this chapter will take a helicopter view of the academic knowledge production of the new cohort of Muslim intellectuals in Europe between 2010 and 2018 at the nine research centres introduced in Chapter 2. By investigating what the researchers themselves considered essential to study, the chapter aims to address the second part of the main research question: How did the scholars in the ‘new’ field articulate the academic, societal, and religious legitimacy of Islamic university theology?

A cursory glance at the publication records of the academic staff reveals that we have to deal with more than 650 titles written by over seventy individual scholars. Particularly in Germany, the investment in five research centres resulted in a vast production of scholarly publications. The previous chapters noticed that Islamic theology developed in the proximity of Islamic Studies, the Humanities, Interreligious Studies, Religious Pedagogy, and the Social Sciences. To capture this characteristic, Engelhardt speaks of Islamic theology as a ‘hyphen discipline’ (*Bindestrich-Disziplin*) (Engelhardt 2017). We also saw how the traditional disciplines of Islamic scholarship – notably Qur’an Studies,

¹ The original reference in German is: “Eine islamisch begründete Forschung auf universitärem Niveau in Europa betritt Forschungsneuland” (Aslan 2013: 171).

Hadith Studies, Religious Legal Theory (*usūl al-fiqh*), Sufism (*tasawwuf*), Islamic Philosophy (*falsafā*), Systematic Theology (*kalām*) and Arabic – formed the new programs' disciplinary focal points, often with a strong attribution to contemporary questions and the context of Muslims living in the West.

Clearly, the scope of the Islamic research terrain is broad and the scholars working in the designated programs have covered a wide array of themes from various disciplines in the past years. Every attempt – including mine – to order this realm with the help of classifying principles, stumbles upon limitations.

4.1.1 *Organising the Field*

In 2010, the architect of the German programs, Reinhard Schulze, advised to configure the disciplines of Islamic Studies [*read: Islamic university theology, WB*] in three fields: the field of History, the field of Systematic studies, and the Practical field (Schulze 2010: 5).²

The field of history would comprise historical-critical research on all the cultures of Islamic knowledge and interpretation, and on the canonical and extra-canonical texts dealt with in these cultures. The field of history would also include historical theology, history of law, history of Islamic cultures of piety and history of philosophy. Consequently, the canonical texts (Qur'an, Hadith and the biography of the Prophet) and their exegetical traditions would be the subjects of historical studies.

The field of systematic studies would focus on how to gain evidence and insights about dogmatic and ethical issues from the entire inventory of Islamic knowledge and interpretation, and by reflexive reference to the canonical texts. Schulze placed *kalām* under this banner of systematic studies. He also positioned ethics here.

Schulze put Islamic law (*fiqh*) in the practical field. This practical field concerned the production and teaching of knowledge related to worship and congregational practice, such as Qur'an recitation, practice of worship, homiletics, but also social work. It would also include Islamic pedagogy, intended to ensure the pedagogical qualification in connection with academic training (Schulze 2010: 5).

A quick look at the academic knowledge production between 2010 and 2018 indeed clearly shows the research investments in each of the three fields as demarcated by Schulze, more or less evenly distributed in the four countries. However, it would be unsatisfactory to limit us to such confirmation. Similarly, we would still not gain much deeper insight if we would only affirm that Islamic

² Note that this configuration is similar to the division used in Protestant academic theology.

theologians work in the realms of the traditional Islamic disciplines. While they are equally important in all programs, this disciplinary classification does not distinguish between covering ‘classical Islam’, ‘Islam in the modern period’ and ‘the European situatedness of Muslims in Western Europe’. Furthermore, it can be arbitrary to decide on a study’s prime disciplinary focus. Islamic ethics, for instance, is a theme that various Islamic disciplines focalise.³ Moreover, can a critical discussion of Sura 4:34⁴ be classified as Qur’ān hermeneutics, *usūl al-fiqh*, or postcolonial gender studies, or otherwise?

4.1.2 *Accessing the Field*

To access the field, I gathered a comprehensive sample of publications from the nine centres under review. I coordinated this search by examining the publication records of paid academic staff – professors, assistant professors, postdocs, and Ph.D. candidates – who were officially part of the program in 2018, covering the years between 2010 and 2018. My sample included approximately 450 works authored by 40 German scholars, of whom ten were women. In Austria, I catalogued around 80 works by four scholars: two male professors, one female assistant professor, and one female Ph.D. candidate. For the UK, my sample comprised 70 studies reflecting the publication records of sixteen active researchers, three of whom were female. In the Netherlands, I examined 50 studies authored by eight staff members of the Centre for Islamic Theology, of which three were women.

Some of these researchers had combined ‘traditional’ and ‘secular’ Islam Studies in Germany, Austria or Great Britain. Others were trained at modern Islamic universities in Turkey, Pakistan, India, Morocco or Egypt before arriving in Europe for a Ph.D. trajectory or a position as a (assistant) professor.⁵ Again,

3 Cf. the public lecture on Youtube on Islamic Bioethics of the CILE based Prof. Mohamed Ghaly, 9 September 2019 for an explanation.

4 Sura 4:34 in Translation Sahih International (online) reads as follows: “Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband’s] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand.”

5 For instance, a few German and Austrian scholars showed a Bosnian orientation. In the UK, there were several postgraduates from Indian and Pakistani universities. Scholars at the Islamic College London showed an orientation to Iran.

others graduated in religious pedagogy, sociology, political sciences, Islamic studies or – in a few cases – Christian theology at a European university.⁶

Based on the published resumes (if available), I observed that most scholars working in the observed programs came from migrant families with a ‘heritage Muslim background’. Some made their ‘convert Muslim background’ explicit by using an additional first name from the Muslim tradition. I want to immediately emphasise that it is important not to assume that someone is a Muslim scholar, working confession-bound, based solely on their family background or surname. The only certainty regarding a scholar’s positionality is that he or she is employed by the faculty or institute being investigated, thus participating in the ‘formatting’ of Islamic university theology (cf. Leirvik 2016).⁷

I focused only on the publicly available information from the institutes’ websites, compiling a list of scholarly publications authored by the staff affiliated with the centres being studied. This list includes works that are often, but not exclusively, peer-reviewed.⁸ I did not include public lectures, media contributions, or community activities. These additional forms of dissemination remained outside the scope of this research which does not examine that other ‘burning’ question: the issue of impact within various communities.

To further explore the ‘unknown land’, I turned my gaze to the titles of the academic publications. An informative title ideally reveals the study’s primary subject and research focus (*topic*), the wider scope of the topic (*focal field*), and the particular problem the author aims to address (*aim* or *argumentative direction*) (Wisse & Roeland 2020). Additionally, the title provides immediate insight into the language used.

In this way, a rudimentary but significant thematical overview appeared on the radar. This initial cross-scanning serves as the first informative step in our exploration, as it will enable us to see how the titles fit four ‘subcategories’ or focal fields. These are: 1) the focal field of identity and integration studies, encompassing empirical studies of Muslim life in Europe, 2) the broad field of Islamic sciences, which also includes descriptive historical studies, 3) a focal field of interreligious studies, 4) a category of studies that address global philosophical and ethical issues. This overview will be detailed in the next sections.

6 I traced this in the records of Lejla Demiri (Tübingen, Germany) and Mohamed Ajouaou (CIT, Amsterdam).

7 The term ‘formatting’ is aptly introduced by Oddbjørn Leirvik (2016).

8 I decided this with the assumption that anyone hired for a scientific position would also have a publication record relevant to that program. As a result, my sample included a greater number of publications than those produced during the appointment itself.

A second step will be taken in the subsequent chapters, as it remains often unclear from the title alone whether a scholar is working confession-bound, or more explorative descriptively about a certain topic.⁹ Moreover, titles can be imprecise. To gain a better view of the epistemological and methodological specificities and arguments, one must examine the publications' content for clues. This is also necessary to determine whether a scholar operates within the Sunni or Shi'a tradition, among others.¹⁰

To deepen our understanding, Chapter 5 will therefore explore the three most 'trending topics' that emerged from my survey. Chapter 6 will highlight several studies that illustrate recurring 'argumentative directions' that centralised the intellectual challenge to critically examine how theological notions that origin from another time, cultural or political context, can be reinterpreted or reclaimed to fit the present, including the constitutionally secular liberal politics and plural societies of Western Europe (cf. Hashas 2019: 3). This will involve discussing a selection of publications from each of the four countries under examination. I trust that this systematic, albeit inherently subjective, funneling approach will provide sufficient observational strength to analyse this phase of the development of Islamic university theology.^{11,12}

4.2 A Bird's Eye View

Using this scanning method of looking at the titles of academic publications, I can first make some general remarks about the languages used and the places where the studies have been published.

4.2.1 *German as a 'New Islamic Language'*

It immediately becomes clear that, in absolute numbers, Germany has exceeded the other countries by far, with about two-thirds of the total sample written in German. German and Austrian scholars mainly published in this language. In Germany, less than ten per cent of the publications were in English; in Austria, this was approximately twenty per cent. The scholars

9 Engelhardt uses the terms *Bekennnisgebunden* and *Bekennnisungebunden* (2017: 153).

10 Only after 2017, Alevite theology was included in the Viennese and Innsbrücker programs.

11 Leirvik (2016) carried out a systematic overview of German studies by surveying the publications in the newly established Osnabrücker academic journal for Islamic philosophy (*Hikma*) between 2010 and 2016 (seven volumes).

12 Subsequent research can use digital techniques for such a reviewing survey. I considered utilising this method, however decided to proceed manually, as digital humanities techniques were rather unreliable and complex at the time of collecting my sample.

in the UK published foremost in English (and occasionally in Arabic). In the Netherlands, about three-quarters of the publications were in English, and the other quarter was in Dutch (or another language). I occasionally encountered publications in Arabic or Turkish in all observed institutes. Another notable language was Bosnian or another Balkan vernacular. In a few cases, I encountered French, Italian or Greek publications. In most of these instances, I could discern a link between the author's biography and orientation on the discussed country. Some works were translated studies about the European situation for a Turkish, Arabic or Bosnian-speaking audience.

The significant number of German publications can be attributed to the larger number of German and Austrian centres compared to those in the Netherlands and the UK. The financial support these centres receive 'pay off' in that regard. It also indicates a substantial market for these 'homegrown' publications, as they are often published by German commercial academic publishers such as Herder, Peter Lang, Springer, and Transcript, who focus on (inter)religious studies, social sciences, and humanities. In edited volumes on comparative interreligious studies and religious pedagogy, scholars not affiliated with any of the nine centres in the sample were also represented. Additionally, German scholars made extensive use of the newly established academic journals and yearbooks in Islamic theology (see Chapter 2.3). While German has historically served as a *lingua franca* in the Oriental tradition of Islamic Studies, there appears to be a sufficient readership base that allows scholars to use German instead of adopting English as transnational academic *lingua franca*. This aligns with Engelhardt's conclusion that an independent 'scientific community' with its own publication spaces has taken shape in Germany (Engelhardt 2017).

I also came across a few translations of original Arabic, Turkish, or other classical Islamic works into European vernacular languages. Beyond these translations, I observed a growing focus on the 'endogenisation' of Islamic languages, meaning Islamic terminology must now be translated into a Western language. This process requires a thoughtful translation effort to ensure that the original Arabic religious concepts reflect their intended meanings or analytical strengths.¹³

Now that we have this in focus, we will first discuss the four main 'focal fields' I have functionally distinguished in order to systematise this diffuse field. Within each of these clusters, I will highlight the main themes. I assigned

13 Compare the remark of Stefano Allievi quoted in chapter 1. He argued that in order to be understood by various audiences, European producers of Islamic knowledge need to use cognitive categories that are translatable to society at large (Allievi 2011).

each publication to only one category; this method required me to make decisions that, as mentioned earlier, could be somewhat arbitrary yet revealing. The next section will provide some remarks on the argumentative directions that could be identified from the titles. The chapter will finish with some preliminary conclusions.

4.2.2 *Focal Field: Identity and Integration Issues*

A significant number of studies explored identity and integration issues related to Muslim life in the diverse societies of Europe. These empirical studies primarily focus on Muslims living in the West. In Germany, approximately half of the studies pertain specifically to topics occurring in Germany or Europe. In Austria, this figure rises to about eighty per cent, while in the Netherlands, it approaches fifty per cent. The number of empirical studies on Muslim life in Britain is significantly lower, as it was well under half. A considerable portion of these studies was grounded in social scientific research that examines how Muslims in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Great Britain shape their religious identities and practices. Notably, studies in Islamic religious education and pedagogy also fall within this field. These studies can be linked to the first task that Islamic theology wants to address (Chapter 3.2): to study, elaborate upon, and potentially reconcile the ‘theology of Islam’ and the ‘lived’ experience of being a Muslim in Europe. Indeed, there is substantial investment in developing a theological foundation within the professional realms of education, spiritual care and social work. To focus more closely on this field, this section will identify several key themes (in italics).

Out of the 650 titles in the sample, almost 120 dealt with *Islamic religious education, pedagogy, and didactics*. In Germany and Austria, where public schools offer Islamic religious education, this was the case with 69 and 36 publications, respectively. Religious education was also a trending topic in the Netherlands and the UK. Furthermore, Educational Studies often relate to one or more of the topics in the rest of this section on integration and identity formation of Muslims living in Western Europe.¹⁴

Research in this focal field examines how *Muslim youth* form their identities and understand their ‘life worlds’ at home, school, work and in the *mosque*. These studies investigate how (young) Muslims envision their position as citizens within diasporic communities and how they navigate multiple loyalties, simultaneously honouring cultural traditions of their (grand)parents and the secular culture of the country they reside in and consider home, and the role

14 Chapter 5.2 will elaborate the prominent theme of Islamic Religious Education.

of Islam as an overarching identity marker. The findings highlight the tensions that may arise in these negotiations, which are influenced by increasing societal and political polarisation as well as global conflicts, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, al-Qaeda, and the rise of Da'esh (or IS). Some titles reveal a significant concern regarding the societal position of these young Muslims and the discrimination they face (for instance 'Muslim Youth Cry Out for Help', Bahaeddin Budak & Stella El Bouayadi-Van de Wetering, 2012, CIT Amsterdam, in English).

During the period under investigation, the question was often raised in public and political debates why some young European Muslims were drawn to join the 'global jihad' in Syria and Iraq from 2014 onwards. Various academic studies explored the phenomenon of **violence** and the attraction among a small minority of European Muslims to extreme religious-ideological currents (for instance, 'The Violent Salafism as challenge', Rauf Ceylan, IIT Osnabrück, 2018, in German). Several scholars studied the appeal of (*neo*) *Salafism*. Some also contributed to action research, demonstrating a commitment to providing tools and strategies to help *prevent radicalisation* of vulnerable Muslim youth (for instance 'Chances of Muslim youth work against radicalisation', Bacem Dziri 2011, IIT Osnabrück, in German, or 'Prevention of neo-salafist radicalisation in schools and youth services: prerequisites and fields of action', Rauf Ceylan, IIT Osnabrück 2018, in German). One German author added several studies into *antisemitism* among young Muslims in Germany and possible solutions to combat this from an Islamic perspective ('Antisemitism and Islam in Germany. Extent and origin of antisemitic attitudes among young people with a Muslim socialization context', Michael Kiefer, IIT Osnabrück 2016, 2017, in German).

In response to the tense socio-political context, other scholars examined the phenomenon of *Islamophobia*. Exacerbated by violent terrorist attacks carried out by Islamist extremists, negative perceptions directed at the entire Muslim population saw an increase during the period in question. Titles like 'The instilled fear for the Islam' (Ertugrul Sahin, ZEFIS Frankfurt, 2011, in German), or 'The correction of the stereotype of the West about Islam' (Marzouk Aulad Abdallah, CIT Amsterdam, 2011, in Dutch) express this concern.

There is specific attention to *the role of imams* in relation to integration and identity processes, including the prevention of radicalisation. This was particularly the case in the Netherlands, Germany and Austria. Next to the figure of the mosque-imam, all four countries studied the professional role of the *Muslim chaplain*, who is assigned new tasks in Western Europe. The studies show a need for understanding how their role gets shaped in the empirical context of hospitals and prisons. Related to that, some studies focus on the

religious grounding of these professions. In Germany, this includes the *social worker's* role in the Social Work domain.

These studies also show an interest in how these Muslim religious professionals must be prepared for this role, mainly how the university can accommodate the *higher education facilities* for this growing group. Particularly in Germany and Austria, these discussions included the *curriculum* and the epistemological and methodological approaches of the emerging *Islamic university theology and Islamic religious pedagogy programs*.¹⁵

Titles containing a reference to 'Europe', 'Germany', 'Austria', 'Netherlands', or 'UK', frequently addressed actual *political* and *legal developments*, as well as *state–religion relations*. Special attention was given to *the role of representative Muslim councils* and governmental politics. In Austria, for example, one can consider the new Islam Act, while in Germany some discussions centered around the German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK)). Additionally, there are studies that, while not referring to a specific country in the title, still examine these topics, such as Khorchide's work titled 'What Kind of Religious Policy Can Islam Tolerate? – Integration Between Demand and Approval', Mouhanad Khorchide, ZIT Münster, 2012, in German). Studies that extend beyond the national level and address salient global issues, such as human rights, democracy, and secularism, were categorised in the focal field of 'Global Issues' (see Chapter 4.2.5).

4.2.3 *Focal Field: Islamic Sciences*

While slightly less than half of the publications focused on Muslim religious life in Europe, a second broad category encompasses the field of Islamic Sciences, referred to by Paya as 'indigenous' sciences ('How indigenous are "indigenous sciences"? The case of "Islamic Sciences"', Ali Paya 2011, ICL London, in English). This area of study emphasises the epistemological and methodological frameworks needed to explore Islam from a theoretical 'insider's' perspective. Additionally, it includes historical and descriptive-exploratory research on Islamic thought and practices throughout the entire history of Islam, covering formative, classical, and contemporary periods. Both approaches aim to critically examine the tradition, though it is up to the scholar to determine to adopt a confession-bound perspective or remain 'methodologically agnostic' (cf. Coppens 2022).

¹⁵ Chapter 3 quoted several of these contributions. In Germany, I found more than thirty studies that dealt with this question, in Austria three edited volumes.

When surveying the academic titles, I looked for key terms such as Qur'an, kalām, hadith, God, Creation, Shari'a, fiqh, or Sufism. Based on this categorisation, the following thematic subdivisions emerged (in italics).

The first discipline is that of Qur'an studies. Typically, *tafsir studies* focused on a specific verse (for instance, Sura 4:134) or the work of a specific exegete (*mufasssir*), like the Mu'tazilite Al-Zamakhshari. More often, the general field of *modern Qur'an hermeneutics* was studied.¹⁶ The subtitles revealed the particular problem the author aimed to address, such as a *feminist exegesis* of the Qur'an ('Adam and Eve in the perspective of contemporary feminist exegesis of the Qur'an', Dina El Omari ZIT Münster, 2017, in English) or a search for *humanist Qur'an hermeneutics* ('Towards a humanist Qur'an hermeneutics', Mouhanad Khorchide, ZIT Münster, 2010, in German). In the discipline of Hadith Studies, several introductions in the German language appeared, next to some studies about the *biography of the Prophet* (for instance, that of Ayşe Başol, who studied the image of Muhammad in the biography of the German Orientalist Tilman Nagel (b. 1942), ZEFIS Frankfurt, 2011, in German). Within the disciplines of Qur'an and Hadith Studies, historical works explored *the life and work of Muslim thinkers*.¹⁷ These could be classical authorities like Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 AD), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 AD), Ibn Shihāb (d. 741 AD), or the Persian-Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198). Or they could describe contemporary thinkers like the leader of a Turkish mystical movement, Said Nursi (d. 1960 AD), the Syrian Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Būtī (d. 2013), or the Egyptian-born and Qatar-based mufti Yusuf al-Qaradāwī (d. 2022). An example of a European oriented venue is the German volume developed as teaching material in high schools that has as translated title 'Muslim scholars newly read' (2016, in German).

Other works explicitly fall in the disciplines of 'systematic' theology (*kalām*) and Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*). I encountered works that dealt with classical topics, such as conceptions of God, Creation, Paradise, and Hell. Studied from the framework of *kalām*, the relationship between human intellect and revelation, between faith and reason, is centralised. Some studies connected the classical theological theme of free will with contemporary notions of political and individual freedom. Studies into the theodicy and human suffering were sometimes combined with the empirical study of the professionalisation of Islamic spiritual care. Similar to studies in Qur'an or Hadith, the subtitle

16 The theme of Qur'an hermeneutics will be elaborated in Chapter 5.3. Chapter 6.3 will present an example of a 'feminist exegesis'.

17 Chapter 5.3 will highlight the importance attributed to this subfield of historical studies for the development of Islamic theology in Europe.

could indicate the author's intention, like in the case of 'In dialogue with God. The necessity of a paradigm shift in Islamic systematic theology (kalam)' (Mouhanad Khorchide ZIT Münster, 2012, in German).¹⁸ Furthermore, *Islamic philosophy* was often studied historically and reflectively, aimed at discussing the work and influence of one or more authoritative Muslim thinkers.

In classical Islamic Sciences, the study of the foundations of Islamic law and ethics (*usūl al-fiqh*, literally 'roots of jurisprudence') is a crucial field. Looking at those titles that referenced 'Shari'a' or *fiqh* as a subject matter, I noticed that this topic was approached more practically or more theoretically. Some works discussed specific contemporary matters, for instance male *circumcision* in relation to religious and state law (Çeftli Ademi, ZIT Münster, 2012, in German), or determining the starting date of the month of *Ramadan* in Europe (Razi Quadir, CIT Amsterdam, 2014, in Dutch). Others discussed the topic of *blasphemy*. A British author worked on Islam and *refugees*, while another worked on *poverty reduction* from an Islamic ethical perspective. In the subfield of *bio-medical ethics*, themes like abortion, organ donation, euthanasia and palliative care were treated (e.g. Karagül, CIT Amsterdam, in English). UK scholars particularly paid attention to *Islamic finance*, comparing Islamic and British legal principles (for instance, a comparison of *waqf* and charity). Again other works approached *moral theory* from a theoretical legal and philosophical angle (e.g. Mohammed Nekroumi, DIRS Erlangen, 2016, in German). These studies did not discuss specific jurisprudential questions, but more general ethical issues on social justice and the higher purposes of the *shari'a* (*maqāsid al-sharī'a*) in a contemporary setting.¹⁹

In Germany, the sample included eight studies that specifically focused on Sufism. While this concentration might suggest that *Sufism* is overlooked in the other countries, it does not mean that the genre remained out of focus in the other countries, though deeper research is necessary to uncover it. For example, the study on new directions in Islamic education by Abdullah Sahin, discussed in the next chapter, describes the central concept of educational upbringing, or *tarbiyyah*, as a traditional Islamic model of psycho-spiritual development provided by well-established classical Sufi orders. This model aims to realise the Qur'anic approach to perfecting the art of being human through a specific set of experiential education practices (Sahin 2013: 25).

Another theme that occasionally occurred is *Islamic art and poetry*, particularly of Persian origin. Single studies focused, for instance, on a specific topic, like astronomy (in the UK). *Arabic linguistics* emerged as a final theme in the

18 A work of the Münster professor Mouhanad Khorchide will be highlighted in Chapter 6.4.1.

19 An example of such theoretical approach will be presented in Chapter 6.2.2.

focal field of Islamic Sciences, which can be understood from the importance of Arabic as an indispensable Islamic language.

4.2.4 *Focal Field: Interreligious Studies*

Quantitatively, a focal field of Interreligious Studies could be distinguished. However, it was not always clear to what extent a study could be set apart from the previous focal field of Islamic Sciences. An example is the work of Lejla Dejmiri (ZITH Tübingen), who studied the ideas of premodern Muslim thinkers about Christianity.²⁰ The reason to categorise this as a separate field was that Interreligious Studies were a prominent area of research in all four countries, encompassing studies in which a particular topic is discussed comparatively and in dialogue with the other two monotheistic traditions (e.g. Siddiqui, MIHE, Birmingham, in English). The titles relatively often included a reference to *Jesus* or *Abraham/Ibrahim* as a recurring theme in Christian–Muslim interreligious dialogue (see Chapter 1.5).

In the 1990s and 2000s, Christian theologians started inviting Muslim scholars working in Islamic Studies departments to publish in their theological and interfaith journals in the 1990s and 2000s.²¹ This was the case in all observed countries, whereas in the UK, similar invitations were made to scholars at Muslim Colleges (compare Rowan Williams quoted in Chapter 1). The Austrian scholars Aslan and Rothangel considered interreligious dialogical studies to play a determining role in the elaboration and indigenisation of Islamic theology (Aslan & Rothangel 2015: 155). Whereas Christian–Muslim interreligious dialogue was an important thematic field, the sample did not include a comparison or dialogue with Hinduism or Buddhism.

4.2.5 *Focal Field: Contemporary Global Issues*

Finally, the centres produced studies that focus on contemporary global issues, discussing how Islam relates to modern political concepts such as *secularism*, *democracy* and *pluralism*.²² These studies may present either general theories or specific discussions pertaining to particular European countries. In these

20 Whereas studies about the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad can be categorised under Hadith studies, some studies discussed the Prophet's sayings in a comparative theological perspective.

21 A clue for categorising these studies could also be found in the title of the edited volume, as contributions in this field often appeared in a collection of articles or conference proceedings.

22 Examples are titles like 'The idea of human rights in Islamic jurisprudence' by Çeftli Ademi, ZIT Münster, 2016; 'Postmodernism and Islam: Epistemological Challenges and Socio-political Perils' by Emad Bazzi, ICL, 2014; 'Islam and state: Renegotiating the

cases, the ‘compatibility question’ was not avoided: How does *European secularism* relate to Islamic ideas on governance and state polity? In this context, *human rights*, including *freedom of religion*, were examined in relation to Islamic concepts of *human dignity*. Moreover, internal critiques of religion were not overlooked, as evidenced by Khorchide & Abdel-Samad’s ‘Freedom Includes Criticizing the Koran. A Debate’ (ZIT Münster, 2016, in German). The publication records also reflect the commitments outlined in the institute’s mission statements (see Chapter 2) to address contemporary issues, including thorny topics like religion and violence (e.g. Zekerija Sejдини, Innsbruck 2016, in German).

Specific attention was paid to the experiences of Muslim *women* and their processes of constructing and negotiating their identities in a changing cultural geography as well as global changes (Sahin 2013: 46). These studies varied from ethnographic studies about female religious scholars in Indonesia (Nelly van Doorn-Harder, CIT Amsterdam, in English) to empirical studies about mosque education for women (Fatima Cavis, Innsbruck 2016, in German).²³ I did not come across studies on specific women issues like dress, marriage, or inheritance law, although these topics receive considerable attention in Western discourses. The sample did not contain titles with explicit references to LHTBQI+. I only found a brief article by Mohamed Ajouaou (CIT Amsterdam) about sexuality (2016, in Dutch).

Whereas the above-mentioned themes addressed global issues, country studies described the (modern) history of Islam and Muslim societies in *Turkey, Iran, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Rumania, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan, and India*. No country studies about Islam in Subsahara Africa emerged from the survey.

Only a handful of studies in the sample did not deal with a topic related to Islam or Muslim society (such as studies on Coptic women in Egypt or Alexander the Great, CIT Amsterdam).

4.3 Argumentative Directions

The titles often also revealed information about the author’s argumentative direction. Sometimes in plain words, like ‘Muslims belong to the German

politics of ummah and theocracy’ by Yaser Ellethy, CIT Amsterdam, 2014; ‘Approaches to the Concept of Secularism from the Perspective of Muslims’ by Ednan Aslan, Vienna, 2013.

23 Chapter 6.3 will pay separate attention to the publications of female scholars.

society' (Naime Cakir, ZEFIS Frankfurt, 2012, in German). Sometimes, the title made clear that a specific theme had to be understood in relation to modernity or in the context of the Muslim diaspora in Europe. Some studies mentioned that they wanted to make an alternative argument or a critical contribution in a certain disciplinary or focal field. Before entering in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6, I will first tell what the survey generally revealed in this regard.

4.3.1 *Critical Contributions from an Islamic Perspective amidst Societal Challenges*

Titles often indicated the research subject's position in a tense field, for instance, by adding 'between mosque and society', 'between radicalisation and tolerance', 'between helplessness and targeted intervention', or '[religious education] from provisionary to regular'. Sometimes, a question mark indicated such tension (like Paya's 'Islamic democracy: A valid concept or an oxymoron?', ICL London 2011, in English). Not seldomly, a theme was raised as a 'challenge', notably if it considered topics that occurred in the context of the integration of Muslims and the acculturation of ritual practices and ethics. Also, how Islamic law and national law relate and develop in European state–church relations was often defined as a challenge, immediately showing that the author is aware of possible predicaments in applying certain Islamic legal concepts or practices in the European context. Multiple times, the establishment of Islamic theology was typified as a challenge.

The word critical provided another telling clue about the purpose of a contribution. We already noticed that this could also include internal religion critique. Some studies explicitly referred to the future of Islam and Muslims in Europe in the title, revealing that the author reflected on Islam or Muslims' positionalities in Europe (e.g. Rauf Ceylan, IIT Osnabrück, 2017, in English). From such additional information, we can conclude that these scholars showed a (responsive) awareness of the delicate task set for Islamic university theology in Western Europe: To reverberate new and possibly critical contributions to Islamic knowledge and theology amidst societal challenges.

Additionally, a title could explicitly tell that a subject was approached from an Islamic perspective, not only in the focal field of Interreligious Studies and Comparative theology but also in the field of Global issues. For instance, as a contribution to the salient challenges raised in socio-political discourses about 'Islam in (post)modernity'. In his contribution to the focal field of Islamic Sciences, Mohammed Nekroumi (DIRS Erlangen, 2014, in German) inserted a combination of perspectives in his article titled 'Prophecy and Truth. The Prophet (saw) and his message seen from an outer-Islamic observation'. The subject appears as 'the outer perspective' on Muhammed's prophesy. However,

the addition of a eulogy (*saw* – peace be upon him) represents the religious positionality of the author to mark the Prophet's sacred status.

Based on the title, it was not or only indirectly possible to decide whether a contribution focused on the Sunni or Shi'a tradition. Only on a few occasions was Shi'a or Sunni added. In some cases, it could easily be guessed, for instance, in publications by the Islamic College London, which specialises in *hawza* studies, which concerns schools affiliated with Shi'ism.

4.3.2 *A Focus on Plurality and Diversity*

Another feature that became visible by looking at the titles is the emphasis on plurality, diversity, and diversity sensitivity. This also occurred in all four clusters, the most in the first field regarding Integration and identity issues. Perhaps not unexpectedly by now, dialogue or dialogical was a reoccurring term in the context of Interreligious Studies in all four countries.

4.3.3 *Male and Female Scholars*

Finally, the outline showed that, whereas the number of female scholars affiliated to the programs was between twenty and twenty-five per cent, male and female scholars published in all four focal fields identified in the survey.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

In recent years, Western European universities have witnessed a significant increase in original contributions to the field of Islamic theology. This chapter has brought this development into focus and has illustrated how scholars associated with specialised programs have explored a wide range of topics. By examining the titles of 650 publications across four countries, the literature survey has reduced this to approximately 50 themes (highlighted in italics), functionally organised into four main focal areas. Notably, a large number of studies have been published in the German language. Despite the strong presence of a German-speaking academic community, the overview indicates that the focal fields and trending topics have been fairly evenly represented across the four countries examined. Therefore, this chapter serves as a pivotal link in our research for two reasons.

Firstly, the helicopter view revealed how the mission statements of the nine centres examined – as described in Chapter 2 – and the central tasks identified in Chapter 3, were broadly articulated during the early years of Islamic university theology in Europe. In general terms, this concerned the emancipatory importance of critically examining one's religion and the need for space

to do so within the university, similar to what other religious traditions have. The centres' studies encompass the classical Islamic disciplines, engaging with Qur'an and Hadith studies, *kalām*, and legal studies. They emphasise the epistemological and methodological challenges of exploring the Islamic tradition in nuanced ways, investing in interreligious studies and comparative theology.

Moreover, we observed extensive empirical research into the lives of Muslims in Western European secular states and the political constellations they navigate. Notably, considerable attention has been directed toward religious pedagogy, reflecting a concern for strengthening the resilience of Muslim youth. The pressing global issues of the (post)modern world, such as the relationship between Islam and democracy, as well as human rights, are not overlooked. In national contexts, both empirical and theoretical studies have addressed topics related to religion, radicalisation and violence.

In conclusion, many scholars have undertaken the task of interpreting religious sources and assessing their alignment with the demands of contemporary society. Their arguments reveal critical perspectives directed both at Western European societies and within the Muslim community itself. Therefore, this chapter has provided valuable insight into how engaged scholars have so far contributed to the effort of incorporating Muslim voices into the intellectual history of Europe.

The second reason this fourth chapter serves as a central hinge is that it provides a key to further explore the complex field of Islamic university theology while laying a solid foundation for its thematic investigation. This will be further developed in the next chapter.

Epistemological and Methodological Elaborations of Three Prominent Themes

This tension between a critical-reflexive and a tradition-oriented conception of Islamic theology makes it clear that theological staff, as central actors in the process of shaping the subject, must respond to this tension.

JAN FELIX ENGELHARDT (2017: 200)¹



5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter gave a thorough impression of the subjects the Islamic theology scholars deemed important to study, resulting in hundreds of academic publications during the period under consultation. Three themes prominently surfaced: Islamic religious pedagogy, Qur'an hermeneutics and the history of Islamic intellectual thought. This chapter will take a closer look at these themes by zooming in on specific publications of renowned scholars from each of the studied countries.

The upcoming chapter thus takes a second step in answering the main research question of how the scholars articulate the nature and legitimacy of Islamic theology at Western European universities. My discussion of the selected studies in the three fields is not aimed as a review of their works within the respective specialisms of their research domains. As a consequence, I cannot avoid staying somewhat sketchy while discussing their works, providing a generic view only. The specialists in the field hold way more deep and thorough academic discussions than my account can even begin to represent. This is inherent to this study's surveying character, which aims to present a bird's

1 The original reference in German is as follows: "Diese Spannung zwischen einer kritisch-reflexiven und einer tradierungsorientierten Konzeptionierung Islamischer Theologie macht dabei zum einen deutlich, dass sich das theologische Personal als zentrale Akteure im Prozess der Ausgestaltung des Faches zu dieser Spannung verhalten muss" (Engelhardt 2017: 200).

eye view only. However, we will be able to gain an overall impression that can make clear how Muslim scholars in these fields think about what Engelhardt referred to as “the tension between a critical-reflexive and a tradition-oriented conception” of the sources of Islam, developing contemporary theological outlooks (Engelhardt 2017: 200).

Given the critiques I have examined in Chapter 3, it is clear that those who advocated for a faith-based approach were committed to maintaining a connection with the Islamic tradition.² At the same time, their work had to retain a distanced perspective: Islamic *subject* theology includes studying any topic in Islamic theology as an *object* of inquiry (Schulze 2015). Wandering around in the reservoir of theology’s ‘perennial questions’, many scholars have centralised the question of how the texts of the Qur’an and Sunna relate to their contexts through a ‘double dialectical relation’. This involves examining both their original context at the time of their emergence and their contemporary hermeneutical interpretations.³ In their critical reflections, they aim to ensure that a rationalist approach does not lead to a postmodern relativism that would disconnect their understandings from the core narratives of the Qur’an and Sunna. Furthermore, they consider the relationship between Islamic onto-epistemological frameworks and non-Islamic, predominantly Western frameworks.

In this chapter and the next, I will present examples of scholars seeking to pose new and innovative questions to the sources and traditional interpretation traditions, through reflection, deconstruction, reconstruction and actualisation. Their academic intellectual debates offer insight into the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of epistemic concepts and religious paradigms – *in time* during the formative, premodern and modern period of Islam, and *in space* in Muslim countries or in the West, where Arabic concepts have been translated with the help of concepts from the Christian tradition. Foremost, they emphasised the importance of religious education to develop a critical awareness among students of their preconceptions (cf. Coppens 2022), and to develop an attitude to deal with aspects of multidimensionality, contextuality, realities of life, and plurality (*Pluralitätsfähigkeit*, Sejdini 2015).⁴ This latter aspect is

2 Özsoy refers to this as ‘*Rückbindung*’, emphasising the importance of studying any aspect of Islamic theology within the ‘genealogy’ of the Islamic scholarly tradition.

3 The Pakistani modernist thinker Fazlur Rahman (1911–1988) described this process of interpretation as consisting of ‘a double movement, from the present situation to Qur’anic times, then back to the present’ (Rahman 1982: 118–121, quoted in Khorchide 2016: 179).

4 Sejdini lists as aspects of religious pedagogics in the European context ‘multidimensionality’ (*Mehrdimensionalität*), ‘interactionality’ (*Interaktionalität*), ‘orientation on processes’ (*Prozessorientierung*), contingency awareness (*Kontingenzbewusstsein*), ‘ability to cope with

particularly located in the Western European context of ‘lived religion’ – in the mosque, the madrasa, the classroom setting, and the public sphere.

Below, I will first discuss the trending topic of Islamic education, then I will delve into Qur’an hermeneutics. The chapter will finish with a case study in the field of history of Islamic thought. To be sure, my exposé is not intended to discuss how receivers, including students, process these intellectual lines of thinking. I only illuminate the side of the academic publications. The selected studies can be read as ‘position papers’, providing insight into the intentions of the authors regarding the aims and epistemological approaches of Islamic university theology.

5.2 Education and Religious Pedagogy

The first prominent theme that stands out is Islamic religious education within the national contexts of Western Europe. Numerous publications express strong concern about the lack of connection that Muslim students may experience in religious education, both in the context of mosques and madrasas and in formal educational environments of schools. Publications in this category highlight a lack of social connectivity for young Muslims between their home, the mosque, the school and society as a whole (e.g. El Bouayadi-Van de Wetering, CIT Amsterdam, 2012). The primary concerns revolve around the disconnect between the traditional, instruction-centred pedagogical approaches prevalent in mosque and madrasa education and a learner-centred Western secular pedagogy, which emphasises the autonomy of the individual (e.g. Khorchide, ZIT Münster, 2016). Significant attention is devoted to curriculum design for teacher training, spiritual care training, and the future domestic training of imams (e.g. Ucar, IIT Osnabrück, 2010). Scholars in this field envision a crucial role for Islamic theology and religious pedagogy to offer scientifically informed and religiously grounded solutions to mitigate these tensions.

5.2.1 *Religious Education as Motor for Islamic University Theology*

Religious education is widely seen as highly significant for the moral education of children and young people; a moral education is about knowing how to do the right thing and wanting to choose accordingly, whereby a child learns, as an independently thinking person, to take into account ethical principles that are

plurality’ *Pluralitätsfähigkeit*, ‘contextual reference’ (*Kontextbezug*) and ‘taking into account the reality of life’ (*die Berücksichtigung der Lebensrealität*). These are relevant in any religious pedagogics, not just the Islamic (Sejidini 2015: 26).

derived from the religious tradition (sources and practices) and the interests of fellow human beings (Sturm 1988: 9). The tension in which Islamic religious education (*tarbīyya*) then operates is between the eternal value of the texts, their deduction into religious law (*fiqh*), morals (*akhlāq*) and manners (*adab*), and the social reality in which the child lives. Simply put, Islamic education traditionally prioritises the instructiveness of the source texts that determine how one should act and think in faith. In contrast, modern religious pedagogy takes the social and cultural realities of 'lived religion' as the starting point to consider – and bridge – the relation between text and context. Whereas religious ethics, rooted in tradition, forms the common guiding framework, the 'tradition-oriented' and 'critical-reflective' approaches differ significantly in how they relate text to context. It is often argued that 'traditional Islamic education does not succeed in teaching the Muslim youth to master the critical skills they need to resist the difficult moral and social dilemmas they are confronted with' (El Bouayadi-van de Wetering 2012: 84).⁵ In contrast, when aided by critical, reflective and reflexive skills, children and adolescents can learn to reorient towards themselves and their understanding of history. This allows them to pose new questions and explore new pathways when old answers no longer apply (W. Meijer 2006: 223–4).⁶

5.2.1.1 'Informal' Religious Education

The first field that is extensively studied concerns the 'informal' field of religious education in the mosque and *madrassa* (or *hawza*, in Shi'a terms).⁷ Publications put the finger on the lack of connection described above, while they develop proposals for adequate and accurate renewal of mosque pedagogy. Mouhanad Khorchide (ZIT Münster) strongly expresses his concerns by exclaiming an emphatic 'no to black pedagogy' ("Nein zu schwarzen Pädagogik" (Khorchide 2016: 45)). He is vehemently opposed to a restrictive, conservative

5 El Bouayadi-van de Wetering refers to Tariq Ramadan's 2004 publication *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, published by Oxford University Press.

6 Wilna Meijer considers such reflexivity conditional for taking personal initiative and taking responsibility, despite the inevitable historicity of existing in time, in history, of being *mittendrin* – determined and shaped by it. The original reference in Dutch goes as follows: "Het zich terugbuigen op zichzelf en de eigen geschiedenis, nieuwe vragen leren stellen en nieuwe perspectieven openen als vertrouwde antwoorden niet meer blijken op te gaan, hoort als de andere kant van de medaille bij *historiciteit*, bij het in tijd en geschiedenis leven. Het is de voorwaarde voor de mogelijkheid van eigen initiatief en eigen verantwoordelijkheid ondanks de onvermijdelijke historiciteit van het in de tijd, de geschiedenis, *mittendrin* bestaan en daar ook door bepaald en gevormd te zijn" (W. Meijer 2006: 223–4).

7 This field is called informal to distinguish it from the publicly funded educational field.

and authoritarian pedagogical approach that does not leave any space for critical or curious questions of a child. He explains this as follows:

The problem [of what Khorchide calls ‘black pedagogy’, *wB*] lies not only in the exploitation of the image of a cruel God and of a hell that lurks and waits for the disobedient on whom God wants vengeance. The real problem lies in the lack of appreciation of human beings as human beings. Because whether one threatens with a ‘mouse room’, with violence or hellfire, there is always a pedagogy behind it that is not interested in people but aims to get people to carry out instructions at any price. Whether or not these instructions have anything to do with the reality of people’s lives or whether people can understand why they have to follow these instructions is of no interest. The important thing is only that the instructions are followed. (Khorchide 2016: 46)⁸

Chapter 6.4.1 will further discuss Khorchide’s theological position.

Another example is provided by Fatima Cavis from the University of Innsbruck, Austria. As a young female researcher, she conducted her Ph.D. studies on the content of religious courses designed for Turkish women, focusing on their rights and duties. Cavis discovered a significant distance, or disconnect, between the course material and the Western environment in which these women live. She reported her findings in an article based on her MA thesis, titled ‘Islamic Women Catechisms in Religious Adult Education: A Critical Analysis’ (Cavis 2016).⁹ In this article, she takes a stand against uncritical, restrictive, or misogynistic interpretations of Qur’anic imageries of women that she frequently encountered in male-authored ‘catechisms.’ These textbooks are commonly used in Turkey and have been brought to Europe, where they are used in Turkish mosques and households, a situation

8 The original reference in German goes as follows: “Das Problem [mit dieser schwarzen Pädagogik] liegt nicht nur in der Instrumentalisierung des Bildes von einem grausamen Gott und einer Hölle, die lauert und auf die Ungehorsamen wartet, an denen Gott sich richten will. Das eigentliche Problem liegt in der mangelnden Wertschätzung des Menschen als Mensch. Denn ob man nun mit einem »Mäusezimmer«, mit Gewalt oder Höllenfeuer droht, dahinter verbirgt sich stets eine Pädagogik, die sich nicht für den Menschen interessiert, sondern darauf zielt, Menschen um jeden Preis zum Ausführen von Instruktionen zu bringen. Ob diese Instruktionen mit der Lebenswirklichkeit der Menschen zu tun haben oder nicht, ob die Menschen nachvollziehen können, warum sie sich an diese Instruktionen halten müssen oder nicht, interessiert nicht. Wichtig ist nur, dass die Instruktionen eingehalten werden“ (Khorchide 2016: 46).

9 The original title in German is: ‘Islamische Frauenkatechismen in der religiösen Erwachsenenbildung: eine kritische Analyse.’

Cavis deems problematic. Her work aligns with a growing trend that promotes novel forms of ‘Muslim women’s education’ as a means of empowering Muslim women, allowing them to enhance their chances of assuming leadership roles in mosques and madrasas (cf. Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 106–131).

Meanwhile, I observed how scholars conducted empirical research in mosques and madrasas, demonstrating that mosques are increasingly adopting an open attitude that centralises the importance of creating “a child-friendly and effective pedagogical climate in Islamic education” (El Bouayadi-van de Wetering 2012: 84). However, these studies also indicate that much work remains to be done in embedding educational materials in the children and adolescents’ environments. Often, instructive materials are available only in Arabic or Turkish (Cavis 2016). The researchers hope their work will encourage ‘informal’ teachers to provide more opportunities for young audiences to uphold a critical-reflective attitude and an open ‘questioning attitude’. Their studies explain that children can be equipped with tools that reach beyond scepticism, doubt, and uncertainty, precisely because they will have the space to understand the rationale behind the moral principles underlying (restrictive) behavioural rules and regulations (El Bouayadi-van de Wetering 2012: 76). Thus, these studies underline several conditions for mosques to create a pedagogically safe environment that offers young people more clarity and certainty than the external world of social media and youth culture (El Bouayadi-van de Wetering 2012).

5.2.1.2 Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at Schools

The second field covers formal religious education in schools. Similar to the above, publications express a strong concern regarding the incongruence between the teaching materials used, the teacher’s knowledge of Islam, and the latest pedagogical-didactical insights on how to educate students about or within Islam in a ‘super-diverse’ classroom. Scholars in this field point to the problem that educational materials are frequently based on Christian or secular perspectives of Islam, particularly in mixed-class settings, or are direct translations from Turkish or Arabic when it comes to Islamic religious education in public schools. They demonstrate that these materials do not align with the daily experiences of Muslim students, both pedagogically and content-wise (Cavis 2016).

Some scholars are developing new teaching resources, often collaborating with educators, didacticians, and experts from other religious traditions, especially Protestantism and Catholicism. This is particularly evident in Austria and Germany, where educational faculties specialise in denominational teaching.

However, the Netherlands and the UK are also addressing the challenges of Islamic education. The survey in Chapter 4 has revealed that in these secularising countries, there is a need to strengthen religious education in (public) schools (see also Mandaville 2007; Ebbiary 2018). As indicated in Chapter 2, these ongoing needs in the educational realm have functioned to spark the engine of Islamic theology in the universities (Engelhardt 2017).

5.2.1.3 'Pluralitätsfähigkeit'

Religious education aimed at gaining knowledge and insights into the diversity of Islam is considered an indispensable tool for developing a mature religious identity and religiosity (Sahin 2013). Knowledge rooted in recognition of the breadth of tradition, along with '*Pluralitätsfähigkeit*', can serve as tools for coping with and preventing "the conflicting demands and expectations of the traditional culture of home, mosque, *madrasah*, secular multicultural life and peer group pressure" (Sahin 2013: 9). Understanding different perspectives 'can harness [them] against the force of religion' (El Bouyadi- van de Wetering 2012: 76). Without such knowledge and skills to structure their identities, some could get lost in feelings of alienation, separation, and radicalisation, or to leaving Islam and Muslim culture. Arslan Karagül (CIT Amsterdam), for instance, argued that:

in my view, there is a greater need for an intra-worldview model of Islamic RE [Religious Education, WB] in the Netherlands than an inter-worldview one. This is because of the need for an internal dialogue among Muslim groups, for Muslims in the Netherlands come from different countries with their own religious and cultural baggage (differences in subtraditions etc) with which other Muslims are often unfamiliar. An effective Islamic RE model should be directed first at constructing a bridge between Muslims and then non-Muslims – in that order. (Karagül 2012: 178)

Karagül refers to this bridge as 'the third model': Besides a multireligious model which *teaches about Islam* and a mono-religious model which *teaches in Islam*, he suggests the need for developing a model that departs from *teaching from Islam*. Such a model would start with the formative pedagogical and educative role of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet in the daily life of Muslims. The academic task of theologians and religious pedagogues would not lie in determining the normative instructions but in conveying the tools for a formative educative teaching model that is meant "to not only teach someone to be a good person but also to teach him to be a good Muslim." Karagül foresees a vital role for formal Islamic Religious Education (IRE), which, according to Karagül, should be given by a Muslim teacher:

If a child has had no religious training at school, there is in fact, an omission in his or her general development that does not help the process of integration. The ultimate goals of Islamic RE, is to raise children to be good Muslims, i.e. people who are aware in a positive, critical way of their responsibilities to God and to their fellow human beings. (Karagül 2012: 174–5)

Islamic Religious Education for him is not about ‘complete impartiality’, “as Western politicians or educationalists regard it to be”, but about refraining from imposing one’s view or belief to others, “as Muslims seem to take it”, Karagül added (2012: 171).

5.2.1.4 Empirical and Theoretical Educational Studies

The observed publications that study Islamic religious education in formal and informal school settings can often be located at the intersection of pedagogy and educational sciences, history, sociology, anthropology and Islamic theology. Part of the work invests in empirical educational research to gain insight into how Muslim children learn in either mosques, madrasas or super-diverse classrooms. Another part concerns the theoretical elaboration of Islamic and Western pedagogical concepts. Additionally, educationalists in Austria and Germany answer the growing need for educational material in German that can be used in Islamic Religious Education and in Teacher’s Training to replace the imported Turkish or Arabic material.

At stake is the need to develop a teaching method that intentionally brings together students who may not usually interact with each other. This includes students who might avoid each other by choice or due to circumstances (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 181). Many scholars fervently advocate for skilled religion teachers and pedagogical reform in Islamic education within mosques and schools to resolve the clash between the home environment, the mosque, the school, the community, and the Internet (cf. Leirvik 2016: 127; Kamali & Nalla 2014; Hussain 2007: 267). Their work connects to educationalists who argue that integrating “profound education about Islam for Western students, Muslim and non-Muslim, ... [will] help Muslims understand that their own heritage is deeply connected to the development of Europe’s scientific knowledge and societal values” (Baran 2010: 3).¹⁰

Other studies elaborate new proposals for theologically grounding a contextualised religious pedagogy in a Qur’anic perspective. These studies suggest

10 For instance, regarding the role played by Islamic intellectuals like Ibn Sina/Avicenna and Ibn Rushd/Averroes in preserving Greek-Hellenistic philosophy in Europe’s Renaissance, or the influence of Sufi mysticism among mediaeval Christians.

connecting the fundamental goals of liberal secular education, which include socialisation, qualification and personal development with their Islamic counterparts: *tarbiyya*, *ta'lim*, and *ta'dib* (e.g. Sahin 2013; Sejdini 2016; cf. Lafrarchi 2017). These proposals draw on the ideas of modern theologians and educators from countries like Turkey,¹¹ Pakistan, and India who advocate for similar educational reforms in their own countries that blend various learning and inquiry traditions (cf. Mandaville 2007: 224–5).

Below, I will highlight an influential example of this trend written by the British Turkish Abdullah Sahin. This work began as a Ph.D. research project at the Markfield Institute for Higher Education. In his book *New Directions in Islamic Education* (2013), Sahin elaborates on an educational theology that aims to solve two interconnected crises addressed in Educational Studies. The first is the social crisis of secular indifference and neglect by the majority society, leading to feelings of discrimination, anxiety, and frustration. The second is the religious and moral crisis within the diaspora community, which may stem from a narrow understanding of Islam and result in insulation, dissociation, or radicalisation (Sahin 2013).

5.2.2 Abdullah Sahin: *'Educational Theology' as Contextual Necessity*

Abdullah Sahin did his doctoral research at the Markfield Institute for Higher Education (MIHE). He defended his Ph.D. on “Critical and Dialogical Islamic Education” in 2002 at the (validating) University of Birmingham. In 2013, he moved to the University of Warwick, where he initiated an MA program in Islamic Religious Education and organised several summer schools for community-based Muslim educators.¹²

As a Muslim scholar from Turkey, a small minority among Muslims in the UK, Sahin had a unique perspective on the British Muslim higher educational landscape (2013: 17). His early education in Islam was traditional, under the guidance of his grandfather, who was an imam in a village in Southeast Turkey. He also received modern religious education at the Imam Hatip Lyceum (religious high school) and the Faculty of Divinity (*Ilahiyat Fakültesi*) in Ankara. When he had the opportunity to study abroad, he chose to go to Britain.

His focus was on understanding how Muslim youth in Britain navigate their beliefs in the context of conflicting demands and expectations from home, mosque, madrasa, secular multicultural life, and peer group pressure (2013: 9). He was especially interested in exploring how their thinking about

11 See e.g. Mualla Selçuk (2012) who published an article in the edited volume by El-Bouyadi-van de Wetering & Miedema (2012).

12 I attended the 2016 edition of the Warwick Summer School.

Islam affects their identity formation. Driven by a strong concern about the challenges faced by minority Muslim communities in Europe, Sahin sought to understand how young British Muslims learn. He argued that only through a thorough understanding of learning modes and a critical rethinking of traditional educational approaches, can British Muslim teachers effectively teach Islam in the modern British context.

In his book *New Directions in Islamic Education: Pedagogy and Identity Formation*, which was published by Kube Academic Publishing in 2013, he elaborated these questions. His key argument is captured in his conviction that:

the presence of a critical, dialogical and transformative educational self-understanding is the key to facilitating the emergence of a balanced and mature Islamic sense of belonging to the modern world. The lack of such an educational competence severely hinders contemporary Muslim efforts to engage meaningfully with their religious heritage and the challenging conditions of a rapidly-changing world. (Sahin 2013: 2)

Sahin accounts that it is the Qur'an itself, firmly supported by the example of the Prophet (the Sunna), that carries the educational and pedagogic hermeneutics while offering the reflective, thought-provoking vocabulary that can help humans to deal with the individual and collective ethical dilemmas they face (Sahin 2013).

The book consists of two connected parts. The first part identifies the learning modes of British Muslim pupils and the second develops an 'educational theology', as an urgently needed pedagogical strategy to adequately respond to the dramatic challenges Muslim face in Europe (2013: 2). Based on an inventory among 400 British Muslim students, Sahin concludes that the majority of male respondents showcased a predominantly 'foreclosed learning mode'; they showed a strong commitment to Islam which was not informed by an explorative mode of understanding. Female participants largely showed an exploratory mode without real commitment. A significant number of respondents remained in a diffused mode of religious subjectivity, neither committed nor explorative. The fourth mode (which Sahin clearly favoured), was least visible among the participants in his survey. In such an achieved mode of religious subjectivity, a pupil would express a commitment that had undergone a process of critical exploration.

As main reasons for the dominant presence of a foreclosed, rigid learning mode, Sahin firstly pointed at the increasing impact of proselytising Islamic transnational revivalist movements that favoured literalist interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet and his earliest Companions (2013: 6).

He also discovered that young Muslims were worried about the risk of losing their distinct communal identity in a predominantly secular society, where experiences of institutional racism and discrimination reinforce a committed but unreflected, diffuse, or uncommitted religious subjectivity. Additionally, Sahin highlighted another factor: British Muslim youth generally found the traditional instructional style of Islamic education in schools to be dull. This dissatisfaction also made radical religious groups more appealing to them. The London bombings on 7 July 2005 were a traumatic nadir for many.

An important part of the solution could be in the hands of Muslim educational institutes in Britain. However, Sahin heavily criticised their ability to communicate Islam effectively to their pupils. He argued that Muslim educational institutions established in the European Muslim diaspora and the broader Muslim world now insufficiently seem capable of fostering creative minds or nurturing the skills needed to solve the complex problems facing the global Muslim community (*ummah*) (2013: 50). Additionally, he contended that direct exposure to the demands of modern life has led to a cultural crisis in Muslim communities in the West, resembling the crisis evident in the global Muslim society, but more intensively pronounced among Western Muslims. This cultural crisis is manifested as a defensive, reactionary approach to engaging with the broader society (Sahin 2013: 50). Moreover, this 'defensive legal-political hermeneutics' has shaped Muslim responses to the challenges of modernity in the past two centuries (Sahin 2013: 2).¹³ "Instead of rethinking Islam under a new, radically different social context, Muslims seem to be adopting an all-too-easy strategy of trusting a strong emotional attachment to a literal interpretation of Islam, rather than engaging and reasoning with the Islamic tradition in light of contemporary life conditions. In this context, tradition itself is reduced to a reified, ahistorical entity" (Sahin 2013: 50).

Although Sahin did not deny the legitimate existence of independent Muslim theological seminaries, he is highly critical. The core of their problem lies in their lack of a robust pedagogic dimension to improve the seminaries' educational practices. Sahin heavily criticised the "teacher, text and instruction-centred Islamic education": "It is a rigidified, static and top-down learning experience" (Sahin 2013: 16).

Starting from this problem analysis, his book proposes to develop alternative pedagogical strategies as a solution. If Muslims want to respond adequately to the dramatic challenges that Muslims face in Europe (2013: 2), they should invest in critically engaging with their models of Islamic education, including

13 Sahin found similar learning modes among Muslim youth in Kuwait (Sahin 2013).

drawing upon Islamic and Religious Studies and benefitting from modern pedagogic and educational sciences (2013: 242–3).

Instead of an instructive-normative, teacher-centred pedagogical model, teachers should implement a critical-reflective, learner-centred model. This model is grounded in the Qur'an and the Sunna. The second part of Sahin's book is devoted to explaining how it is the Qur'an itself that offers the critical-dialogical foundation of Muslim educational thought, strongly supported by the exemplary life of the Prophet.

First, he makes the case that the Qur'an provides the critical and dialogical foundation for Muslim educational thought. The broader Qur'anic educational and pedagogic hermeneutics aim to foster the development and mature expression of a balanced orthopraxy within the lives of both individuals and diverse historical communities (Sahin 2013: 13). He explains:

In the foundational source of Islam, the Qur'ān, faith signifies the human ability to make meaning that centres human cognitive, psychosocial and spiritual powers around expressing gratitude towards the life-giving God by recognising His Oneness. (Sahin 2013: 15)

According to Sahin, faith that defines what it means to be human fosters psychosocial and spiritual maturity. This process leads to the development of a holistic personality characterised by contentment, balance, and creativity. On a sociopolitical level, faith serves as a civilising force, expressed within the context of various historical and cultural conditions. It promotes a just, balanced, and open social polity. Thus, “the Qur'ānic conception of humanity and faith are deeply educational and pedagogical in nature” (Sahin 2013: 15).

What makes the human species distinct is the pure, neutral character of its nature (*fitrah*), which opens up limitless possibilities for growth. However, without adopting a critical and reflective educational attitude, the Qur'ān warns that humans face the possibility of regression and even pathology in their lives. Therefore, the Qur'ān self-consciously presents itself as a Divine educational intervention programme. By using various challenging pedagogic strategies, it prepares us to be self-reflective so that we can engage with a long process of self-transformation. This participatory pedagogy does not simply attempt to inform, but also aims to help us articulate and express our potential. (Sahin 2013: 15)

God is *al-Rabb*, the ultimate Teacher, He is the Educator (Sahin 2013: 186), and the Qur'an introduces itself as a guide. Humans are created with responsive intellect and a natural sense of moral responsibility from their natural state

(*fitrah*). The oral character of the Qur'an is essentially employed as a pedagogic strategy to facilitate the effective communication of the divine message: it is the spoken word of God. It thus takes the form of a dialogue (2013: 179). The stories of the Prophets (*qisās al-anbiyya*) use the pedagogy of storytelling, while comforting the heart (2013: 184; 189). Many Qur'anic stories involve metaphors (2013: 185). Using the Qur'anic dialogue with Ibrahim/Abraham [Sura 14], Sahin illustrates his point that "questioning and curiosity are integral parts of what it means to be a human being and therefore are also part of faithfulness" (2013: 188). "God's response to Abraham explicitly endorses the legitimacy of human inquiry and the need for reasoning" (2013: 188).

Thus, the Qur'an utilises a learner-centred pedagogic strategy and not a teacher-centred one as traditional madrasa-style education has favoured (Sahin 2013: 16, 180): reasoning, argumentation, curiosity, and human inquiry are prominent, and inseparable from the content and structure of the Qur'an. "As such, the Qur'an, by using a rhetorical logical style, becomes a critical discourse that is not only sanctioned by Divine authority but is also justified according to the authority discerned by human reasoning" (2013: 187).

Second, Sahin illuminates how the religious authority of the Prophet Muhammad has strong educational and pedagogic dimensions. The Prophet brought the Qur'anic educational model into practice, to be followed by the community of faithful. Indeed, Sahin's substantiation includes later developments in Islamic thinking to argue that the dominant epistemological framework that developed in classical Muslim thought hints at an open-ended process. Legal, methodological principles like *qiyās* (analogy), *ijmā* (consensus), *ra'y* (opinion), *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), and the general notion of *maslahah* (common good) have been used to decide whether acts are allowed if they benefit the community. Moreover, he includes the *adab* literature and the Sufi legacy (Sahin 2013: 198; 202).

In fact, nearly all the distinct hermeneutic strategies developed within the classical Muslim intellectual genres (legal, exegetical, philosophical, theological, educational etc.) are displays of critical engagement with both tradition and the challenges of a changing contextual reality. During the post-formative period, tradition frequently got the upper hand in interpreting the core Muslim sources, but a critical attitude towards tradition itself never ceased to exist, and a complementary perception of faith and reason survived. (Sahin 2013: 193)

The centre of authority, therefore, lies in the open-ended process of *ijtihād* instead of in solidifying spatiotemporal *fiqh* interpretations (*taqlīd*). A mature

believer is an active, not a passive, recipient of knowledge (Sahin 2013: 217). If a Muslim looks at the surrounding world, which is ultimately diverse, (s)he can only be tolerant. Moreover, “The Qur’an strongly encourages Muslims to learn from the accumulated wisdom of other cultures, for ultimately all wisdom comes from God” (2013: 190). Consequently, extremist thoughts or actions are not ingrained in the religion but in the ways humans deal with the divine texts within a specific political and socio-economic context – including the painful colonial past and a disturbed postcolonial present (Sahin 2013: 13).

There will always be competing sectarian interpretations regarding what constitutes the correct theological criteria. However, in the Muslim tradition, the central salvific criterion is that one’s conduct observes the ethical values and teachings of the faith. The central issue facing Muslims here is not to determine orthodoxy or heterodoxy, but to facilitate an orthopraxy that embodies the devotional-spiritual and critical-reflective dimensions of the human condition. (Sahin 2013: 13)

Muslim educators therefore face the task to rethink the meaning of education within Islam:

Without rethinking the meaning of education within Islam, we will not be able to revive classical Islamic sciences or improve the pedagogic method of the traditional teaching of Islam. Similarly, we will not be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of modern Western approaches to the teaching of religion in History of Religions, Religious Studies, Islamic Studies, and multi-faith Religious Education within British mainstream schooling. The learning-centred approach to teaching Islam – an approach that seriously considers the need to teach Islam critically by enabling students to engage with the tradition and its civilisational legacy with an open mind- will not emerge. (Sahin 2013: 10)

In the last part of the book, Sahin tells his readers about his own experiences during the courses and summer schools he organised for British Muslim educators, male and female, from Muslim colleges (*dar ul-ulooms* and *hawzas*) to discuss (and train) this pedagogy of gaining ‘critical faithfulness’ (Sahin 2013: 234). Not only did they have to think of how to reach those young British Muslims who exhibit forms of foreclosed or non-committed religious subjectivity. They also had to reflect upon their own understandings of Islam. They must scrutinise their perceptions of Islamic education to achieve a teaching practice that allows students to arrive at an achieved religious mode (Sahin 2013: 212).

Bluntly put: “If a Muslim educator is convinced that education in Islam should simply be a process of indoctrination, then obviously her educational practise is unlikely to facilitate the emergence of an exploratory identity necessary for students to find their mature religious identities” (Sahin 2013: 211–2).

Gradually, the participants changed from more defensive to more reflective attitudes, away from binary thinking that would draw a hard line between Islamic and Western pedagogical approaches, including the teaching of Islam by non-Muslims in the context of multi-faith Religious Education taught in mainstream schools in Britain (Sahin 2013: 222–232).¹⁴

The more we explored the historical emergence of classical disciplines, the better students could see that a faith-based study of Islam was not monolithic. Furthermore, in terms of strengthening the methodological rigour, both Muslim scholarship and the Western study approaches could complement each other. (Sahin 2013: 224)

Sahin’s argument is similar to what other contributions to the central theme of Islamic Religious Education displayed – be it in the ‘informal’ or ‘formal’ school settings. Against a tendency of some believers to withdraw into a foreclosed group, Sahin is among those who propagate a Qur’anic educational theology which emphasises that critical reflection and an open learning attitude are essential for self-purification (*tazkīyya*) and reform (*islāh*) (Sahin 2013).

5.2.3 *Concluding Remarks: Converging ‘Western’ and Islamic Pedagogical Groundings*

The prominent attention to Islamic religious education and pedagogy underscores the scholars’ deep commitment to empowering Muslim grassroots populations in Western Europe. It also reflects the core objective of conducting original and inspiring research in university theology and religious pedagogy. The surveyed scholars emphasised the critical role of religious education, especially in a secular social context in which identities are often experienced as unstable. They bring up how the emancipation of Muslim youth and that of broader society can and must occur through education. Improving religious

14 “Their initial rigid style of learning started to show signs of gradual openness and was replaced by questioning and analysis over time. I [Abdullah Sahin, WB] was relieved to see that the students could appreciate that the central point of the exercise was not to replace a set of previously-held views with new ones, but to realize the importance of appropriating an inquiring educational strategy in order to be able to learn about Islam and to discern new meanings from it. (...) Still, a small minority of the students consistently disagreed with the entire educational process” (Sahin 2013: 230).

education in Europe is a shared concern of Muslim organisations, schools, universities, and the state, and its legitimacy is based on the firm belief that education is a pacifying and liberating instrument for plural, secular democratic societies.

This shared responsibility does not take away the concern, though, of critics who raise the issue of possible governmental instrumentalisation of the educational field, intended to steer towards the formation of a 'Euro-Islam'. In Chapter 3.2, we noticed that Abdullah Sahin was not insensitive to such unwanted interference. Undoubtedly, he was against a "state [which] is actively engineering the emergence of an 'Islamic Church' as reason to invest in these developments" (2013: 216).¹⁵ However, just like others in religious education did, Sahin advised tackling this in a twofold way. On the one hand, scholars acknowledge the existence of an actual problem, which they identify among Muslim communities, educational institutes, and broader society. As a solution, they point to the improvement of teaching material and teacher training. They act against a dominant social imaginary in contemporary discourse in secular society that casts Islamic education as problematic and antithetical to 'Western' notions of progress, modernisation, inclusion and global integration (cf. Tan 2014). On the other hand, they want to show that this improvement can be made while taking Islam as a focal point. A reorientation on pedagogical approaches that are or can be firmly rooted in Islam's intellectual tradition, fostering greater intellectual pluralism (Mandaville 2007: 224–5).

Consequently, the societal reality in which Muslims live and think is the pedagogical starting point, instead of the monitoring force of either community-set boundaries or that of the state. An unreflected 'swallowing' of normative instructions for a pious life can raise cognitive dissonances if they do not connect to the learners' actual experiences.

At the basis of this 'educational theology' lies a contextualised understanding of the Qur'an. This brings us to the second core theme that received substantive attention in our corpus of academic publications: the study Qur'an hermeneutics.

15 Sahin's position is reflected in his statement that: "The communities' engagement with this process is essential, as the new religious authority embodied by the *imāms* trained within these new institutions needs to be acknowledged by the community. It must be stressed that the majority of academic units created do not reflect a competent contextualisation of Muslim theology and Islamic education within Europe so far. However, despite this academic inadequacy and the presence of a political agenda in the programme, this is a significant policy development that will shape the future of Islamic theological education in Europe" (Sahin 2013: 216–7, 217).

5.3 Qur'an Hermeneutics

5.3.1 *The Study of the Qur'an as the Basis of Any Islamic Scholarship*

In one of the first collected volumes after the launch of the programs in Germany, significantly titled *Herausforderungen an die Islamische Theologie in Europa/Challenges for Islamic Theology in Europe*, Mouhanad Khorchide (ZIT Münster) and Klaus von Stosch (Centre for Comparative Theology and Cultural Studies, University of Paderborn) put Qur'an hermeneutics first in line of pivotal fields of attention of the new Islamic university theology (Khorchide & Von Stosch 2012). They placed it before (the importance of) modernising *kalām*, and before thematising Islamic religious pedagogy. In itself, this is not surprising: many believers think their salvation depends on the correct deductive understanding of the primary sacred texts: Qur'an and Sunna. The study of the Qur'an is at the basis of any Islamic scholarship; every scholar of Islam who wants to express confessional points of view on any theme, must relate to the Qur'an.

Khorchide and Von Stosch propagate that the European universities must prioritise the study of the interpretative traditions of the Qur'an and its dynamic reception history in past and present (2012: 8). Such clarification can be done through historical-critical study of *tafsīr* as a genre, as it has abundantly been done in the context of Western Islamic Studies. However, for Islamic theologians, the task goes beyond mere clarification. Their explanations also feed into the consequential matter of their interpretations for the process of 'meaning making' and mediating the divine.

If we zoom in a little further on these Qur'an studies, we will get a clearer picture of the epistemological, hermeneutical and dogmatic developments in this focal field.

The dialectical communication between the revealed Qur'anic text and human's understanding has always been a contentious relation: if the Qur'an is the Word of God, eternal and unalterable, how must humans understand it in post-revelation times and contexts, and what is the human role in conveying its message? Essentially, in scholasticism and liberal thinking, this dialectical relation makes the outcome perennially contingent (cf. Abu Zayd 2006: 85).

Questions regarding the contextualisation of the Qur'an as revealed Word of God have always been prominent in the Islamic exegetical tradition. Classical and modern exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) alike have extensively analysed the circumstances surrounding the divine messaging to the Prophet Muhammad (*'ilm asbāb an-nuzūl*, knowledge of occasions of revelation). Although perhaps less prominent, the question of how the conditions at the moment of reading

might be a cause for conflict about the rightness of interpretations has always been posed. The same counts for Hadith studies.

Basically, different ideological currents (see Chapter 1) take distinctive hermeneutical approaches to the Qur'an. Whereas so-called 'traditionalists' prefer to base their interpretations on canonical Qur'an commentaries,¹⁶ revivalist 'Islamists' want to approach the Qur'anic text directly, taking it literally and statically. In contrast, so-called 'modernist-reformists' approach the text in a 'flexible and process related way' (Ebrahim 2016: 59).¹⁷ These approaches have been subject of research by European Islamic theologians, such as Ranja Ebrahim (University of Vienna). In a chapter in the edited volume *Islam, Religions and Pluralism in Europe*, edited by Ednan Aslan, Ranja Ebrahim and Marcia Hermansen, she outlined how "these different approaches [show] that Muslim concepts and positions in regard to pluralism or respective opinions towards Western societies along with theological opinions on the roles and positions of Muslims within plural contexts are themselves diverse" (2016: 68). She concluded that

these positions depend on the way the Islamic revelation is interpreted. If it is seen as a process related revelation, which allows the Qur'anic teachings to be adapted according to place, time, and circumstances in order to foster the resolution of culturally and religiously related issues, this approach facilitates the process of integration, for example in the case of Austria. However, if revelation is seen as unalterable, which means that situational and contextual factors are not taken into account, then Muslims in the West will be discouraged from social participation and holding pluralistic attitudes. Hence theological orientation plays a considerable role in how pluralism is perceived and articulated by Muslims. (Ebrahim 2016: 68)

16 Although persistent imagery developed that classical Qur'an commentaries were canonised for centuries, contemporary scholars emphasise that classical Qur'an commentary has been dynamic throughout history, even if it has been paradigmatically understood as more or less static for a long time (Saleh 2003: 14).

17 As key examples of the 'flexible approach' which has been prominent in the West, Ebrahim discusses the approaches of Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Abu Zayd. The Paris-based Moroccan scholar Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010) took a historical approach, conferring that any scientific study of the Qur'an and of the exegetical tradition referring to it, has to keep in mind that religious truth, insofar it can be understood by Muslims – and adherents of other 'book religions', becomes effective only if it exists in a dialectical relation between the revealed text and history (cf. Abu Zayd 2006: 85).

We can safely say that the Islamic theologians in the surveyed European institutional contexts favoured the ‘flexible approach’. This attitude also shows in how their approving references to ‘late reformist’ scholars such as Nasr Abu Zayd (1943–2010) as a key player in this modernist study of the Qur’an, strongly opposing those pathways that consider the Qur’an statically.

This critical hermeneutical approach appears a focal point in the academic ‘interpretive community’ at the European universities. As an example of a study of the extensive Islamic exegetical traditions, as well as the critical reflection on the consequences of the outcome of this double dialectical endeavor for the ongoing communication between the Qur’an and its readers, I will introduce the work of the Frankfurt-based Ömer Özsoy. Özsoy works in the tradition of the so-called ‘Ankara school’ which elaborated the reformist dialectical ‘process-related approach’ from the mid-1990s and became influential in Turkey and abroad (cf. Körner 2007). “The Qur’an is not viewed here as a timeless revelation, but as God’s actual speech to a specific group of people at a specific time. As a result, the overarching message of the Qur’an can only be inferred by processing its text in this historical context” (Özdil 2011: 205–6, note 78).¹⁸

However, before giving a cursory view of Özsoy’s approach, it is important to pay attention to the debates surrounding these developments that show that such modern scholarship on the Qur’an is not self-evident in the Western European context.

5.3.1.1 Modern Qur’an Hermeneutics as European ‘Battle Ground’

Although modernist-reformist hermeneutical scholarship builds upon classical Qur’anic hermeneutics (Mumisa 2014: 99)¹⁹ the outcome of the interpretative process is not settled, and much variation can be observed. In the first volume of the *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Islamisch-Theologische Studien*, the

18 The full reference in German is as follows: “Die von Özsoy mitvertretene theologische Richtung wird als ‚Ankaraner Schule‘ bezeichnet. Diese Schule ist eine Reformströmung, die Mitte der 1990er Jahre entstand und seit 1996 ihre Ideen durch die Islamwissenschaftlich-theologische Zeitschrift ‚islamiyat‘ dem türkischen Publikum mitteilt. Der Koran wird hier nicht als zeitlose Offenbarung betrachtet, sondern als aktuelle Rede Gottes an eine bestimmte Gruppe Menschen zu einer bestimmten Zeit. Demzufolge lässt sich die übergeschichtliche Botschaft des Korans erst durch Aufarbeitung seines Textes in diesem historischen Kontext entnehmen“ (Özdil 2011: 205–6, note 78).

19 Among these modern Qur’an scholars, there is a firm attention for what Waleed Saleh called a “genealogical tradition”: in classical Qur’an commentary every new comment positions itself towards predecessors and within a tradition” (Saleh 2003: 14). Modern Qur’an studies can and does not want to escape from this.

Cambridge-based British Muslim scholar Michael Mumisa called for a critical engagement with tradition while also adopting new approaches in the field of Qur'anic exegesis. He accounts that for Muslim scholars:

modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, even for native Arabic speakers, is a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic exercise in bridging the gap between the reader who is socially located here and now, and another culture whose texts, language use and meanings resist the modern reader's immediate paradigm of understanding. (Mumisa 2014: 82)

In some traditionalist 'interpretative communities' there rests a taboo on this intellectual approach (Abu Zayd 2006: 79). The taboo rests on the fear that critical hermetical reading of the Qur'an will lead to 'humanising' the Qur'an by formulating a 'liberal' theology. Nasr Abu Zayd, himself an embodiment of these dynamics, personally experienced the effects of those who opposed his modernist Qur'an hermeneutics in the Egyptian political structures of the 1990s.

Amongst the complexities of modern Qur'an hermeneutics in Western Europe, Mumisa addresses the religious-communal and socio-political exigencies in which Muslims in Britain find themselves. He explains how since after the July 2005 bombings in London, the "Qur'an and its meaning have become a battle ground for the 'Othering' Muslims in British society" (Mumisa (2014: 83)). In response to fierce discourses that consider Islam as inherently incompatible with British values, Britain's Islamic scholars have "[avoided] any public discussion on the 'problematic' or 'exclusivist' verses [in the Qur'an]" (2014: 83).

While this approach may have been successful in presenting a 'favourable image' of Islam to the 'outsiders', it has at the same time been alienating young Muslim men and women who feel that their Islamic scholars are failing to engage directly with the primary texts and sources of Islam. When it comes to serious questions relating to how specific verses of the Qur'an should be read and understood here and now, British Muslims have not even begun to scratch the surface. (Mumisa 2014: 83)²⁰

20 Mumisa is highly critical about this: "Muslim organisations and communities in Britain have over the years adopted sophisticated public relation strategies which involve emphasizing and focusing on disseminating the 'positive' or 'inclusive' meaning of the Qur'an while avoiding any public discussion on the 'problematic' or 'exclusivist' verses" (Mumisa 2014: 83). As examples of modern Qur'anic hermeneuticians, Mumisa mentions

Such reading the Qur'an in a modern context is not an easy call. However, against those who want to refrain from including postmodern literary theories such as feminist theory or queer theory, that seems at least revolutionary to some, and outraging to others, Mumisa brings in that "Classical and medieval interpreters of the Qur'an made strong arguments for their need to incorporate new forms on knowledge into the existing traditional hermeneutical tools" (2014: 99). Although Mumisa is aware of the distance between academics and grassroots, for instance local mosque imams, he emphasises the religious legitimacy of such academic approach.²¹ Congruent with positions described in Chapter 3, notably Reinhard Schulze, Mumisa claims that "a modern Muslim's engagement with classical scholarship cannot be reduced to that of a passive transmitters [sic] and curator of tradition" (Mumisa 2014: 99).

Other observers also point at these political exigencies and the Qur'an as a 'battle ground'; however, they do not necessarily do this in the same manner. Just like Mumisa cautioned against the involvement of a secular government in the debate about "how Islam is interpreted or which theological school should be promoted" (Mumisa 2014: 84; cf. Hashas 2019: 9), these observers are especially suspicious of the interference of the state in a pre-ordained outcome. Particularly Luis Hernández Aguilar and Zubair Ahmad (2020) put their finger on the "policing of the Qur'an" by the German government, which, in their view, reflects "the long tradition of the Eurocentric-Orientalist order" which imagines the Qur'an as "a dangerous, almost subject-like text" that requires radical reinterpretation particularly regarding issues of gender justice and equality (2020: 86).²²

These anxieties highlight the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the work of Qur'an scholars in European universities. In the following section, I will summarise the thesis of Ömer Özsoy, who is keenly

Mona Siddiqui (2008) and Ziauddin Sardar (2011). Also, Amina Wadud and Farid Esack have been influential among young educated British Muslims interested in areas related to gender and pluralism.

21 As elaborated in Chapter 2, Mumisa is critical of the role of the two modern Muslim colleges, the Islamic College London and the Markfield Institute. "There currently does not exist in Britain, or indeed in Europe, an Islamic centre of learning which has succeeded in combining the best of classical seminary tradition with the modern academic university tradition" (Mumisa 2014: 88).

22 Hernández Aguilar and Zubair Ahmad (2020) considered the ways in which Frankfurter professor Ömer Özsoy – about whom more below – and others explain their methodological approach in their report for the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK), as examples of such selective understanding.

aware of “the discomfort of Qur’an exegesis”, which was the title of his inaugural lecture at the Centre for Islamic Theological Studies at Frankfurt University in 2014.

5.3.2 Ömer Özsoy: ‘the Qur’an as Self-Referential and Multireferential Word’

The Frankfurter Qur’an hermeneutician Ömer Özsoy is a prominent voice in these controversial debates. In his work, Özsoy emphasises the importance of maintaining a living relationship with divine Revelation through lively exchange and dialectical communication between the transcendence and immanence of the Qur’an. He argues against the suspicion that a critical-hermeneutical approach to the Qur’an would lead to a postmodern, relativist understanding that disregards faith (*imān*) or functions as a license for ‘anything goes’. Instead, he suggests that this dialectical communicative approach is crucial for understanding the Qur’anic message in both letter and spirit. As a hermeneutician, Özsoy aims to delve into the original meaning and substance of a Qur’anic passage, believing that only by understanding what a text says can we allow the text to speak to us (Özsoy 2014 and 2016).

Without taking Özsoy’s specific position as representative for all hermeneuticians working in Western Europe, his voice can be considered exemplary because of its modernist tone (L. Berger 2010: 167). Ömer Özsoy is a highly prolific and productive scholar. He studied Theology and Philosophy at the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University, where he became a professor in 2004. In 2005, he came to Germany as a guest researcher at the Seminar für Arabistik at the University of Göttingen.²³ During his inaugural lecture as the first Muslim professor at Goethe University in Frankfurt in 2007,²⁴ Özsoy, whose work aligns with the reformist-modernist tradition of the ‘Ankara school’, articulated his epistemological and methodological stance.²⁵

Like many others, Özsoy opposes reductionist literalist approaches to the Qur’an, believing that these fundamentalist interpretations lead to problematic, limited, and restrictive thinking. He is concerned about the societal impact

23 Ömer Özsoy studied Philosophy and Theology at the Theological Faculty of Ankara University. In 1991, he received his Ph.D. at Ankara University and became a lecturer of Qur’an exegesis in 1996 before being promoted to Professor at the same university in 2004.

24 Since 2007, Özsoy possessed the *Stiftungsprofessur für Islamische Religion im Fachbereich Evangelische Theologie* at the Frankfurter Goethe University (Özdil 2011: 205, note 78).

25 This lecture was published in the opening issue of the *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Islamische Theologie* in 2014, and in slightly elaborated form in the edited volume of Zekirija Sejdini (2016).

of its prescriptive normativity on its followers. However, Özsoy also believes that modernist Qur'an interpreters who call for a 'de/reconstruction' do not always succeed because they do not fully consider the historical context of the Revelation. Özsoy sees it as a central weakness of contemporary Islamic thinking to ask the Qur'an, an ancient text, to speak on anything without considering its context – by lifting it out its (original) context. According to Özsoy, such absolutism risks reducing the Qur'an to a literal static text (Özsoy 2014: 59 ff; Özsoy 2016: 86).

In two publications of his inaugural address, which will be summarised as one below, Özsoy centralises the question how the Qur'an as the Word of God reaches beyond the moment it was heard.²⁶ In his inaugural lecture, he highlights how the earliest Muslims were already aware of the loaded complexities of this question and emphasised that the Qur'an as God's word extends beyond its immediate moment of revelation. The generation of Companions and particularly their followers were already aware that they were not among the Revelations' direct listeners (*Hörer*), like the first generations of eyewitnesses. They played a crucial role in preserving the orally transmitted text by writing it down (canonising the *mushaf*). Consequently, they transitioned to become readers (*Leser*) of the text. While they remained the addressees of the text, they now had a different conception of it. Unlike the first listeners, they could only receive an answer to their questions indirectly. This transition led to an increased existential and epistemological distance between the Qur'an and its readers (Özsoy 2014, 2016).

This very first phase of reception history laid the foundation for a certain detachment between context and interpretation (from witnessed revelation to a canonical book), which in turn opened ways for an anachronistic approach of the Qur'an. Because the Qur'an as the Word of God extends beyond the immediate time and context in which it was revealed, later arguments and exegesis can also be legitimised with reference to the Qur'an (Özsoy 2016: 73). "In just one generation, the attitude of Muslims towards the Qur'an has changed from *listening to a discourse* to a *philological study of a scripture*" (Özsoy 2016: 82, emphasis in original).²⁷

26 Özsoy gave his inaugural lecture on 1 November 2007 at the Goethe University Frankfurt. He published the lecture in 2014 and in slightly elaborated form in 2016. The translated title of the 2014 version is: 'The Discomfort of Qur'an Exegesis: Making the Qur'an Speak in Other Times'. The translated title of the 2016 version is 'Decontextualisation of the Qur'an: Modern Qur'an Interpretations or Construction of Modern Qur'ans'.

27 The original reference in German is: "Schon nach einer Generation hat sich die Haltung der Muslime dem Koran gegenüber von einem *Zuhören einer Rede* in eine *philologische Untersuchung einer Schrift* gewandelt" (Özsoy 2016: 82).

This reflected in the emerging legal methodology, in which the legalists (*fuqahā'*) distinguished between the original meaning (*ma'nā*) and the eventual aim (*magzā*), and later in the theory of the higher objectives of shari'a (*maqāsid al-sharī'a*) that calls upon the supposition that there is a 'spirit of the letter' (Özsoy 2016: 80–81). This is "based on the assumption that each Qur'anic provision relates to a specific historical context and is valid for similar situations" (Özsoy 2016: 81). Referring to fellow scholars such as Mehmet Akif Koç of the Ankara School and Nasr Abu Zayd, Özsoy brings up that:

Finally, one can say that every passage in the Qur'an refers in principle to the time of revelation and the living addressees, even if we have no report about it, and that this must be taken into account in the interpretation of the Qur'an at all times. This methodological approach implies that the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad are historical realities of the seventh century. (Özsoy 2016: 83)²⁸

A second shift occurred in the classical formative period, from the tenth/third century onward. Then, the Qur'an becomes "a mere reference text" (*eine reine Referenztext*) (Özsoy 2016: 83) and the Sunna was transformed "from living traditions into fixed texts".²⁹ In this canonisation process, the legal scholar al-Shāfi'i (d. 820 AD) played a central role (Özsoy 2016: 83). While on the one hand much effort was put in arranging the inherent coherence of the Suras and verses (*ayas*), legal scholars had to continue to treat the Qur'an in a practice-oriented manner.

Basically, the Qur'anic scholars were trying to prove the order of the verses within a Sura, even the sequence of the Suras, to be coherent (...). On the other hand, the legal scholars (*fuqahā'*) felt compelled to work out an actual chronology of the individual passages in the Qur'an beyond the exemplary order because they did not treat the Qur'an purely literary but practice-oriented. This means the jurists had to go beyond the existing textual structure and look at the Qur'an historically. Undoubtedly, the

28 The original reference in German is: "Zuletzt kann man sagen, dass jede Stelle im Koran prinzipiell auf die Offenbarungszeit und die lebendigen Adressaten Bezug nimmt, auch wenn uns kein Bericht darüber vorliegt, und dass dies bei der Koranauslegung in jeder Zeit berücksichtigt werden muss. Diese methodische Annäherung impliziert, dass der Koran und der Prophet Muhammad geschichtliche Wirklichkeiten des siebenten Jahrhunderts sind" (Özsoy 2016: 83).

29 The original reference in German is: "Mit dieser Initiative wurde die Sunna ja von lebendigen Traditionen zu festen Texten umgewandelt" (Özsoy 2016: 83).

differences between these interest-led approaches often created dilemmas. Qur'anic commentaries are full of examples of ambiguities that arise when the textual and historical contexts are used as benchmarks for understanding or interpreting a passage in the Qur'an. (Özsoy 2016: 84)³⁰

From that time onwards, it became a core question how to deal with the delineated written texts, while new questions appeared that the sacred texts did not discuss (Özsoy 2016: 83). Whereas Muslim scholars like Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 AD) realised that this meant that they were forced "to think deeply about the nature of change and of Qur'anic discourse" (Özsoy 2016: 84), some legal scholars did not want to tamper the demarcated stability of the primary sources. Within the Sunni 'orthodoxy' this field of tension became mitigated by bringing in the principle that the "legal provisions of the Qur'an and Sunna are universal, even if they are based on specific events (*'umūm al-hukm ma'a husūs as-sabab*)" (Özsoy 2016: 85).³¹

In modern times, the question of confinement versus flexibility continued. Modernist-reformists have also not been able to solve this. Importantly, Özsoy brings in, they have even continued in the modern time to radically *decontextualise* the Qur'an. Consequently, both democrats and dictators can call upon the Qur'an to legitimise their positions, as if there are multiple Qur'ans (Özsoy 2016: 87). The nastiest expressions of such decontextualisation come from extremists who act in the name of Islam. However, also the modernist-reformist approach risks to be (radically) relativist, if an 'über-historical' perspective is taken. And also conservative traditionalists and lay modernists (secularists) tend to take

30 The original reference in German is: "Im Grunde genommen versuchten die Koranwissenschaftler, die Reihenfolge der Verse innerhalb einer Sure, ja sogar die Aufeinanderfolge der Suren, als kohärent nachzuweisen (*tanāsuh al-āy wa-s-suwar*). Auf der anderen Seite sehen wir, dass die Rechtsgelehrten (*fuqahā'*) sich gezwungen fühlten, über die exemplarische Reihenfolge hinaus eine eigentliche Chronologie der einzelnen Koranpassagen zu eruieren, weil sie den Koran nicht rein literarisch, sondern praxisorientiert behandelten. Das heißt, die Juristen mussten über die vorhandene Textstruktur hinausgehen und den Koran geschichtlich betrachten. Zweifelsohne schufen die Unterschiede zwischen diesen interessegeleiteten Zugängen oft Dilemmata. Korankommentare sind voll Beispiele für Ambiguitäten, die auftreten, wenn einerseits der textliche und andererseits der geschichtliche Kontext als Maßstab für das Verstehen bzw. Interpretieren einer Koranstelle herangezogen wird" (Özsoy 2016: 84).

31 The original reference in German is: "Das Wissen um den historischen Charakter des koranischen Diskurses war also stets Bestandteil der muslimischen Gelehrsamkeit. Allerdings wurde u.a. folgendes Prinzip entwickelt: *'umūm al-hukm ma'a husūs as-sabab* (»die rechtlichen Bestimmungen von Koran und Sunna sind allgemeingültig, auch wenn ihnen spezifische Ereignisse zugrunde liegen«)" (Özsoy 2016: 85).

the Qur'an as factual, which puts them stuck in an *'Entweder-oder-Frage'* – not being able to untie that knot. The former suffocates in an anachronistic absolutism, whereas the latter loses the richness of the tradition (Özsoy 2016: 86).

Therefore, it is the duty of a Qur'an hermeneutician to contextualise the Qur'an, in such a way that the present is not confined to the past, but neither by unquestioningly conforming the Qur'an to the demands of the present.

Ultimately, a historical hermeneutics of the Qur'an has the task of ensuring that neither the present is reduced to the past as a result of which it remains stuck in history, nor Islam is identified with modernity by unhesitatingly subjecting the Qur'an to the demands of modernity. (Özsoy 2016: 88)³²

As Word of God the Qur'an is self-referential. However, the Qur'an also becomes a 'multireferential word' (Özsoy 2016: 75, 82).³³ The Qur'an has been revealed to remind humans of God's divine order and plan. It was sent to a chain of Prophets as a merciful way to remind people of the original bond and their original identity. It is not meant as a way to divide people into communities or as markers of communal identities, be they Jew, Christian or Muslim. This is made explicit in Sura 4:164 and Sura 41:43 (Özsoy 2016: 74–75).³⁴ For Özsoy,

32 The original reference in German is: "Eine historische Koranhermeneutik hat schließlich die Aufgabe, darauf zu achten, weder die Gegenwart auf die Vergangenheit zu reduzieren, indem sie in der Geschichte verhaftet bleibt, noch den Islam mit der Moderne zu identifizieren, indem sie den Koran bedenkenlos den Anforderungen der Moderne unterwirft" (Özsoy 2016: 88).

33 Referring to Abdullah Takim (2007), Özsoy points how, as the earlier revelations (Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel) are included in the creed (*aqida*), the Qur'an also becomes a 'multireferential word' (Özsoy 2016: 75, 82).

34 The full reference in English translation is: "Therefore, in the Qur'anic understanding of history, all prophetic messages are only a reminder of what is due to human nature according to creation. The prophets were needed simply because God's original revelation, the original contract, had been forgotten. They were sent by God in his mercy to remind people of the original contract and their original identity, but not to give them religious community identities – Jew, Christian or Muslim – which result solely from the necessities of being human and from God only be tolerated as such" (Özsoy 2016: 74–75).

The original reference in German is: "Daher gelten im koranischen Geschichtsverständnis alle prophetischen Botschaften nur als Erinnerung an das, was der Menschennatur schöpfungsgemäß ohnehin zukommt. Der Propheten bedurfte es allein deshalb, weil die ursprüngliche Offenbarung Gottes, der Urvertrag, vergessen worden war. Sie wurden von Gott in seiner Barmherzigkeit gesandt, um die Menschen an den Urvertrag und ihre Uridentität zu erinnern, nicht aber, um ihnen religionsgemeinschaftliche Identitäten – Jude, Christ oder Muslim – zu verleihen, welche sich allein aus den Notwendigkeiten des

this makes it exegetically necessary to read the Qur'an not only intertextual, in relation to the earlier revelation scriptures, but also to regard the Qur'an in coherence with them. "One has to look at it [the Qur'an] together with them [the other Books] as a whole (...) because the Qur'an is a multireferential word" (Özsoy 2016: 75).

Özsoy concludes his inaugural address by positioning himself with the following statement:

Muslim theologians and thinkers who want to give a new dimension to the classical historical approaches within Islamic theology and adorn them with a hermeneutic perspective, embody the reaction of 'historical consciousness' to the 'over-interpretations' of metaphysical (superhistorical) approaches and to the 'meaning-obscuring' attitude of 'cognitive atheism' or radical relativism. 'Historical consciousness' as they understand it, is a consciousness that accepts the Qur'an as speaking primarily for its own historical epoch and seeks to understand it as its first addressees understood it. The main motivation of historical consciousness is the ideal of grasping the 'authentic meaning' of the Qur'an in its own historical cosmos of meaning, in order to then be able to actualise it in newer contexts. (Özsoy 2016: 89–90)³⁵

Notably, Özsoy points out that contemporary Islamic thinkers have more space than perhaps presumed if they ascertain themselves of this history. However, in this interpretive process, meanings should not be projected 'exegetically' in the Qur'anic text, as if the sacred text would be detached from its original context and its listeners. Also, the current Muslims are *readers* and they need a

Menschseins ergeben und von Gott auch nur als solche toleriert werden" (Özsoy 2016: 74–75).

35 The original reference in German is: "Muslimische Theologen und Denker, die den klassischen geschichtlichen Ansätzen innerhalb der islamischen Theologie eine neue Dimension verleihen und diese mit einem hermeneutischen Blickwinkel schmücken wollen, verkörpern die Reaktion des »geschichtlichen Bewusstseins« auf die »Überinterpretationen« metaphysischer (übergeschichtlicher) Ansätze und auf die »bedeutungsvernebelnde« Haltung des »kognitiven Atheismus« bzw. des radikalen Relativismus. »Geschichtliches Bewusstsein« wie sie es verstehen, ist ein Bewusstsein, das den Koran als primär für seine eigene geschichtliche Epoche sprechend annimmt und ihn so zu verstehen sucht, wie seine ersten Adressaten ihn verstanden. Der Hauptbeweggrund des geschichtlichen Bewusstseins ist das Ideal, die »authentische Bedeutung« des Korans in seinem eigenen historischen Bedeutungskosmos zu begreifen, um sie dann in neueren Kontexten aktualisieren zu können" (Özsoy 2016: 89–90).

historical consciousness. Özsoy does not want to be revisionist.³⁶ Neither does he want to hide behind relativism, that could result in ‘plastic congeries of beliefs and practices’, to recall the words of the anthropologist Dale Eickelman (1982: 59, see Chapter 1). Instead, he hopes to grasp the Qur’an’s essential meaning.

Hence, in his own, unique manner, the Frankfurt-based professor encourages his colleagues to bring Qur’anic studies back to its original place in the classical scientific tradition. This involves understanding the dialectical relationship with the environment in which it was revealed, including its contextual relation to the Sunna of the Prophet.³⁷

5.3.3 *Concluding Remarks: the ‘Art of Intentional Reading of the Qur’an’*

Özsoy’s approach, while claiming to return to the original exegetical tradition, can be seen as an example of modernist thinking (Çelik 2020). In the field of Islamic university theology, Özsoy and many of his colleagues aim to study the transcendent and immanent nature of the Qur’an in its intricate complexity. This includes reflections about possible consequences of their hermeneutics for the communication process between the Qur’an and its readers.

The unquestionable divine origin of the Qur’an remains a cornerstone of this faith-based thought. The Qur’an is viewed as having eternal value, and it is the responsibility of humans to interpret its signs, which can be either clear or ambiguous. However, the hermeneutical process of interpreting the text in a meaningful manner involves a mediation between the text and the reader. Modernist Qur’an hermeneutics argues that the Qur’an cannot be interpreted without considering both its historical background and the contemporary context of the modern reader (L. Berger 2010: 169). This spatiotemporal concern creates the need for constant renewal of interpretations.

In elaborating this central thesis, many scholars have referred to contemporary reformist-modernist scholars, particularly Nasr Abu Zayd, Mohammed al-Jabri, and Fazlur Rahman. Hashas (2019) identified them as the ‘late reformist thinkers’ that have appeared to be key in the development of ‘the idea of European Islam’. Their intellectual efforts connect to what Harry Harun Behr (Erlangen and Frankfurt) referred to as the hermeneutics of intentional or

36 Modernist Qur’an hermeneuticians are often accused of denying the Ash’ari and Maturidi dogma of the uncreated Qur’an.

37 Özsoy refers to the Tatar scholar Musa Garallah Bigiev (d. 1949) in arguing that the interpretation of the Sunna seems mostly to precede the interpretation process of the Qur’an. In this view, Özsoy aligns with Nasr Abu Zayd, who distinguished between *descendent and ascendent dialectics*. He also refers to the Moroccan scholar Muhammad Abid al-Gabiri [al-Jabri] (d. 2011) (Özsoy 2014: 39–41).

deliberate reading. Behr identified as one of the central tasks for contemporary academic Islamic theology:

to formulate rules for the art of intentional reading of the Qur'an – born out of the doubt whether something like a flawless, objectifiable essential reading of the Qur'an is even possible and desired (*hermeneutics of intentional reading*). (Behr 2014: 120)³⁸

The specifics of these rules are the subject of global study and debate. Furthermore, the implications of these rules are heavily debated among different Islamic schools of thought (cf. Çelik 2020).

5.4 History of Islamic Thought

Chapter 1 discussed the emergence of a generation of Western scholars of Islam who take a strong critical stance against hegemonic Eurocentric views of pre-modern Islam and Muslim society that were common among their Orientalist predecessors. It raised the question whether Islamic university theology could provide Muslim scholars the opportunity to (re)write history from a postcolonial perspective. This question was explored within the framework of postcolonial Islamic studies, which heightened historians' awareness of their role as 'directors of memory'. The choices historians make regarding topics and methods are decisive in how religious heritage is transmitted to future generations. Postcolonial historians focus on how history often reflects dominant viewpoints while dissenting or minority voices are frequently marginalised.

In Chapter 4, we learned that a substantial number of scholars in the focal field of Islamic Sciences have explored the history of Islamic ideas, examining the intellectual traditions of Islam across multiple disciplinary fields, such as history, hadith studies, and Islamic philosophy. Below, I will discuss a paper by Erdal Toprakyan, a historian of Islam from Tübingen, as one example of a Muslim scholar who emphasised the essential role of theology in universities. Additionally, I will provide a brief overview of the work of British Iranian Shi'a scholar Ali Paya. Both scholars exhibit a strong awareness of the intellectual frameworks within which they operate (Paya 2014: 137).

38 The original reference in German is: "(...) Regeln zu formulieren für die Kunst der absichtvollen Lesarts des Korans – dies aus dem Zweifel geboren, ob so etwas wie eine einwandfrei objektivierbare essenzielle Lesung des Korans überhaupt möglich und erwünscht ist (*hermeneutics of intentional reading*)" (Behr 2014: 120).

5.4.1 Erdal Toprakçayan: 'on the (Dis)Advantages of a Historical Theology of Islam'

According to the Tübingen director of the Centre for Islamic Theology (ZITh), Erdal Toprakçayan (born 1974 in Grünfeld, Germany), 'historical theology' should be at the center of Islamic university theology in Europe.³⁹ The reason is clear: there is vast array of relevant topics that need to be studied, from the history of the life of the Prophet Muhammed (the *sīra*), the context of the revelation of the Qur'an (*asbāb an-nuzūl*), to the early formation of theological and legal schools, and its later developments. Just like a historian of Islam, a historical theologian of Islam studies the entire thematical reservoir: "The Islamic conceptual history, idea history, social, economic, event, art, religion, structure, mentalities, discourse, cultural, women's and global history, all belong in this area, as well as historical anthropology, contemporary history and contemporary culture, whereby a reference to religion must always be established" (Toprakçayan 2014: 124).⁴⁰

Whether as a contemporary historian of Islam or a historical theologian of Islam, it is crucial to recognise the subjectivity of the historical perspective. Both the historian of Islam and the historical theologian hold the responsibility of preserving and interpreting historical events as 'directors of memory'. They are tasked with delving into the core of historical matters. Nevertheless, according to Toprakçayan, the role of a historical theologian of Islam is distinct from that of a historian of Islam. Unlike historians, theologians approach the study of history with a different self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*):

39 Erdal Toprakçayan was born in 1974 in Grünstadt, Germany. He studied Islamic Studies and Ethnology at the University of Heidelberg. After completing his doctorate on Ottoman religious and legal history of the 18th/19th C., he worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the Seminar for Oriental Studies and Islamic Studies at the Ruhr University in Bochum. From 2008 to 2009, Toprakçayan taught *Islamkunde* at one secondary school and two elementary schools in Duisburg, parallel to his teaching position at the university, and until 2011 in Munich as a scientific coordinator of Christian-Islamic projects at the Eugen Biser Foundation. After a brief time as academic coordinator of the Institute for Studies in the Culture and Religion of Islam at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, he was appointed in April 2012 as a junior professor for Islamic history and contemporary culture at the University of Tübingen at the Center for Islamic Theology. A few months later, he was appointed executive director (Information unilu.ch, last accessed 5-2-2023).

40 The original German reference is: "Die islamische Begriffs-, Ideen, Sozial-, Wirtschafts-, Ereignis-, Kunst-, Religions-, Struktur-, Mentalitäten, Diskurs, Kultur-, Frauen-, und Globalgeschichte gehören inhaltlich ebenso in diesen Bereich wie auch Historische Anthropologie, Zeitgeschichte und Gegenwartskultur, wobei stets ein Bezug zum Religiösen hergestellt werden muss" (Toprakçayan 2014: 124).

Theologians want and must profess the religion they are studying; they approach their research object from the ‘internal perspective’ and not from the ‘external perspective’. But this internal perspective cannot mean that the theologian, in a ‘mysterious’ way, would always better tackle a verse from the Qur’an, a hadith, a legal text, a historical event, or even a ritual prayer, including its secrets from within (*bātini*), while the non-theologian would remain at the outer and thus superficial form. In my opinion, an internal perspective in the theological context simply means that one does not work in a confessionally neutral manner, but rather in a confessional manner. In addition, the theologian has a comprehensive social mission, namely the training of scientifically trained religious experts (theologians, teachers, chaplains, preachers, imams, etc.) for the associated religious community. (Toprakyan 2014: 124)⁴¹

Their job goes beyond that of scholars of Oriental or Islamic Studies. Theologians have the mission to think about what religious history means for the present (Toprakyan 2014: 131). Like Reinhard Schulze, Toprakyan calls on Muslim scholars to not only preserve Islamic knowledge but also to explore and elaborate on it (2014: 130). He assigns historical theologians an additional responsibility: to reflect critically on the meaning of history for the present and to think about the future. They also have a specific social mandate, namely the training of religious experts for the faith communities in Germany (Toprakyan 2014: 124).⁴²

This mandate affects their choice of disciplinary methods. Both the historian of Islam and the historical theologian work historical-critically (2014: 124). The historically working Islamic theologian considers “how things could have

41 The original German reference is: “Theologen wollen und müssen sich zu der von ihnen untersuchten Religion bekennen; sie betrachten ihren Forschungsgegenstand also aus der ‚Binnenperspektive‘ und nicht aus der ‚Außenperspektive‘. Binnenperspektive kann aber nicht bedeuten, dass der Theologe auf ‘mysteriöse’ Weise einen Koranvers, einen Hadith, einen rechtswissenschaftlichen Text, ein historisches Ereignis, oder gar ein Ritualgebet stets besser und samt aller Geheimnisse von innen heraus (*bātini*) greift, während der Nichttheologe an der äußeren und damit oberflächlichen Form stehenbleibt. Meines Erachtens bedeutet Binnenperspektive im theologischen Kontext lediglich, dass man nicht bekenntnisneutral, sondern bekenntnisgebunden arbeitet. Hinzu kommt, dass der Theologe einen umfassenden gesellschaftlichen Auftrag hat, nämlich die Ausbildung von wissenschaftlich geschulten religiösen Experten (TheologInnen, LehrerInnen, SeelsorgerInnen, PredigerInnen, ImamInnen, etc.) für die dazugehörige Religionsgemeinschaft“ (Toprakyan 2014: 124).

42 The original reference in German is: “Sie tun dies mit einem anderen Selbstverständnis und einem anderen gesellschaftlichen Auftrag“ (Toprakyan 2014: 124).

been". (S)he "wants to show through source-supported research with methods of criticism, hermeneutics and/or explanatory analysis (causality) *how it could have been*" (Toprakyaran 2014: 125, emphasis in original).⁴³

A historical theology is by no means ahistorical or acontextual. Contextual awareness and orientation have always been of interest in classical Islamic Sciences. Toprakyaran points, for instance, at the importance of knowing the context of the revelations (*asbāb an-nuzūl*). He also mentions the biographies of the chain of transmitters in the Hadith sciences. Moreover, he briefly points to the legal principle of *ikhtilāf* (diversity in opinions) (Toprakyaran 2014: 129).

Although Toprakyaran admits that these principles might feel familiar or well-known, he does not think it is unnecessary to say this explicitly. History abundantly shows that state authorities have often benefitted from establishing an unambiguous historiography. Islamic history shows ample 'ahistorical' tendencies and currents among scholars (Toprakyaran 2014: 128): there has always been a connection between 'writing history' and the possibility to establish, confirm, legitimise or oppose and delegitimise the ruling elites' power. Similar to other of his German colleagues, Toprakyaran refers to the recent study of Thomas Bauer to substantiate that "there was a very high tolerance for ambiguity in the Islamic world, but this dissipated with the beginning of modern times (compare Bauer 2011: 14)" (Toprakyaran 2014: 129).⁴⁴

According to Toprakyaran, "at a time when the foundations of a German Islamic theology are to be laid, partly in cooperation with 'traditional-conservative' associations, partly in competition with 'ahistorical-unscientific' Islamic currents (Salafites, etc.), a well-developed historical awareness cannot be waived" (Toprakyaran 2014: 123).⁴⁵

43 The original reference in German is: "[man will zeigen] durch quellengestützte Forschung mit Verfahren der Kritik, der verstehende Interpretation (Hermeneutik) und/oder der erklärende Analyse (Kausalität) ..., *wie es gewesen sein konnte*" (Toprakyaran 2014: 125).

44 The full original reference in German is: "Trotz des Versuchs der staatlichen Obrigkeiten, eine unzweideutige Geschichtsschreibung zu etablieren, galt die Meinungsvielfalt (*ikhtilāf*) unter den Gelehrten als ein hohes und von der Mehrheit anerkanntes Gut. Die verschiedenen, voneinander abweichenden Lehrmeinungen bereits der Prophetengefährten, zeigen, dass es schon früh eine gewisse Pluralität und Ambiguität gab. Laut dem deutschen Islamwissenschaftler Thomas Bauer gab es in der islamischen Welt eine sehr hohe Ambiguitätstoleranz, die sich jedoch mit dem Beginn der Neuzeit auflöste (vergleiche Bauer 2011: 14)" (Toprakyaran 2014: 129).

45 The original reference in German is: "Zugleich kann in einer Zeit, in der teils in Zusammenarbeit mit 'traditionell-konservativen' Verbänden, teils im Wettbewerb mit 'ahistorisch-unwissenschaftlichen' islamischen Strömungen (Salafiten etc) die Fundamente einer deutschen Islamischen Theologie gelegt werden sollen, auf ein ausgeprägtes historisches Bewusstsein nicht verzichtet werden" (Toprakyaran 2014: 123).

Embracing historiography is needed for effectively working from a combined academic and religious perspective. In historical theology, it is paramount to integrate a metaphysical epistemological understanding of the revelation while also acknowledging the historical context at the time of revelation. Nasr Abu Zayd (d. 2010) exemplifies this approach for Toprakyan.

The historical context should not only be taken into account in Qur'an exegesis. Even if there is a contemporary event, like a terror act in name of Islam, one must study the historical process in order to better assess these actions (Toprakyan 2014: 127).

Finally, the author points out that historical theologians often use frameworks and vocabulary borrowed from Arabic or Turkish originals, or from Christian theology. Moreover, Oriental or Islamic Studies may have overlooked certain themes. Islamic historical theology should focus on uncovering hidden Islamic concepts and themes, including the role of women and marginalised groups such as peasants, soldiers, and merchants. An interdisciplinary approach can shed more light on these themes. This leads to the key question that Islamic historical theology must address: What impact does this approach to history have on today's understanding of Islam? It is now up to a historical theology of Islam to develop adequate concepts for this reflexive enterprise (Toprakyan 2014: 131).⁴⁶

5.4.2 Ali Paya: 'Calling upon Islamic Philosophy'

Another example of a Muslim scholar who reflected on how the Islamic history of ideas can be studied critically-reflectively amid today's time and space is Ali Paya. He studied electronic engineering at the Iranian Sharif University of Technology in the 1970s, followed by a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Tehran in 1980. He then pursued further studies in the philosophy of science at the University of London, where he earned a master's and a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Science in 1985 and 1995 respectively. As director of the Islamic College for Advanced Studies in London at the time under study, he spoke out about how Islamic philosophy can and should embark into critical-reflexive dialectics with Western philosophical thinking.⁴⁷ As an exam-

46 The full reference in German is: "Der (Historischen) Theologie bleibt es im Unterschied Nachbardisziplinen vorbehalten, die Frage zu stellen, was diese Geschichte für heutige Islamverständnisse bedeutet. (...) Es bleibt somit die Zukunftsaufgabe einer Historische Theologie des Islam, in Auseinandersetzung mit der islamischen Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung adäquate Begrifflichkeiten für die Reflexion der eigenen Religion(sgeschichte) zu entwickeln" (Toprakyan 2014: 131).

47 Paya authored this article while associated with the University of Westminster (Department of Politics and International Relations). He also served as the director of

ple of this line of thinking, I discuss an article entitled ‘Islamic Philosophy: Past, Present and Future’, published in 2014. The article aims to critically assess the present state of Islamic philosophy in its main home, Iran (Paya 2014: 265).

Paya’s key argument is that, for Islamic philosophy to be future-proof, it needs cross-fertilisation between philosophers from different epistemic traditions and the sciences, as well as from the Muslim majority world and the West. He challenges the perception that dialectics between adherents of different intellectual frameworks will never be fruitful. On the contrary, he suggests that dialectical exchange can lead to intriguing and open-minded discussions and intellectual progress. Although it can be a difficult discussion (and Paya reminds his readers how Karl Popper also noticed this), the intellectual history of Islamic philosophy is indeed a case in point.

Islamic philosophy, and on a larger scale, Islamic culture, both greatly benefitted from their ‘discussions’ and ‘dialogues’ with other cultures and frameworks, especially the more rational ones. (Paya 2014: 267)

To underline his argument, Paya brings in that “in all those periods when Muslim scholars were deprived of intellectual challenges of ideas and views which belonged to other cultures, their dialogue amongst themselves turned more and more introverted and became less and less engaged with issues outside a strictly religious and theosophical framework” (Paya 2014: 267).

Paya pleads for continuous cross-fertilisation of Islamic and Western epistemes, attributing a vital role to English translations of seminal works from both knowledge traditions. He applauds those who take systems of thought within Islamic culture seriously, and he does not favour a strict separation of spheres of ideas or disciplines. One should not try to establish a comprehensive Islamic knowledge system isolated from other systems of thought – neither from Western philosophy nor science and technology.

Simultaneously, Paya calls for a more prominent role for Islamic philosophy, including the most intricate discussions about the meaning of gradations of epistemic certainty (*yaqīn*) and how to attain certainty “as the end goal of [...] epistemic pursuits” (p. 310). Indeed, certainty has a different meaning if understood in metaphysical frames than in scientific frameworks. According to Paya, traditional Islamic philosophy risks getting stuck in “the shackles of a dogmatic outlook”. For this he brings up three theses. Firstly, because of its strong emphasis on attaining certainty as the end goal of scholarly pursuits. Secondly,

the Islamic College London, and was affiliated with the National Research Institute for Science Policy in Tehran, Iran.

because it wants to adhere to self-evident truth as the justificatory basis of all knowledge claims. And thirdly, because of its insistence on the so-called '*ilm-i huduri*' (knowledge-by-presence) as the ultimate and most valuable type of knowledge (p. 309).

Paya advises Muslim philosophers to promote their rational approach much more firmly than they do now. Only then can they offer a coherent or convincing answer to "[t]he literalists, of different types and orientations among both the Sunnis and the Shi'as, [who] claim that certainty can be attained by closely following the sharia law' as well as to 'a second group, also of large variety, [who] are the Sufis/Mystics who advocate mystical practices, in place of rational arguments, as the best way of acquiring certainty". He continues:

The literal and mystical approaches, despite all their apparent differences, share a common epistemic attitude: they both, each in its own way, belittle rational approaches and maintain that the truth of faith cannot be attained by it. But when reason is pushed out of the scene, the stage is set for all sorts of non-rational, irrational, and anti-rational behaviours. I conjecture that the failure of Muslim philosophers with regard to the above three theses has played a major role in paving the way for the emergence of extremists (like jihadists) in the midst of Muslims. (Paya 2014: 310)

In conclusion, Paya argues that:

In my view, for Islamic philosophy to be able to play an efficient role in tackling real-life issues, it needs to reconnect with science and technology. It should regard sciences as a genuine companion in its knowledge pursuit, and not a mere means for justificatory purposes. It also needs to realise that [Qur'anic notions of] 'certainty' does not belong to the realm of knowledge investigation. (2014: 319)

5.4.3 *Concluding Remarks: Re-enhancing the Critical Approach to History and Philosophy*

These are no easy questions, and my survey study is not the place to further elaborate on these complex ideas. It suffices to notice how Paya, an Iranian British Muslim philosopher, cracks these critical notes, driven by a wish for dialectical exchange of Muslim intellectual thought with Western philosophy. He promotes the importance of rationalist philosophy, which can (re)connect with contemporary science and technology. Moreover, we see how Paya is among those who call for the revival of:

[t]he spirit of critical and rational thinking, openness to ideas and views developed in other cultures and civilisation, and tolerance which was once strong among Muslim thinkers must be encouraged and enhanced once again. Its choice of problems should also be considerably augmented and enriched by an attitude for combining abstract thinking with applied reasoning. (Paya 2014: 319)

This reminder of a tolerant attitude of earlier Muslim thinkers did occur in many publications (see also Chapter 7). Like many others, Paya takes a critical stance towards literalist interpretations, whether from Shi'a, Sunni, or mystical thinkers. Even if Paya addresses Iran and Iranian philosophy students in the discussed article, I think he includes a Western audience in his encouragement. Therefore, I take this article as a 'position paper' in which we can detect his idea about the task of Islamic philosophy and Islamic scholarship in the West, attributing a role to Western scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim, in comparing, contrasting and sharpening their philosophical understanding of the contemporary world.

Historians have a responsibility to study the past critically. Historians of Islamic thought have reflected upon their approaches, whether to observe Islamic thought from an 'external' perspective or to include a hermeneutical interpretation from a 'participant's perspective'. As Tim Winter already observed (Chapter 1), this dual approach enables them to bring a broad(er) conceptualisation of Islamic history and theology. Restoring heritages that were demolished in colonial and modern times, can become an important part of Islamic university theology's teaching and research.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter provided a more in-depth understanding of how key players concretised the intellectual task of Islamic university theology, including the formatting of its epistemological and methodological approaches.

By zooming in on three central themes (religious education as a pressing priority, Qur'an hermeneutics as a contextual necessity, and history of ideas as rearticulation of Islam's relevance in past and present), we revealed an empirically identifiable dynamic in which the 'first generation' theologians analysed and reflected on religious, philosophical and societal contextuality in the past and the present. They delved into 'discovering' Islam's past, in order to lean on its heritage in the present and make suggestions for its understanding in the future, while leaving ample space for questioning and diversity of opinion.

The first theme showed how scholars have not intended to replicate a conservative traditionalist perception of the world of some first-generation immigrants. Instead, they wanted to localise and do justice to the ‘multiple belonging’ of European Muslims, using social sciences, Islamic theology and pedagogy, aiming to guide this allocation process in formal and informal educational spaces (of mosque, madrasas and the ‘superdiverse classroom’). They realised how religious education, being at the core of the interface between the Islamic faith community, society and the state, is in need of improvement. This often involved collaboration with educationalists from other religions and worldviews who shared this interest and have been committed to this, for example in developing teachers’ training.

I presented a work of Abdullah Sahin as a case-study to illustrate the aim to develop a ‘mature’ pedagogical narrative, generally relevant to Muslim youth, but also to counter foreclosed or militant understandings of Islam. Core of the educationalists’ missionary message: Islam carries much more tolerance for ambiguity and dispute than pious believers – particularly ‘neo-Salafists’ – want to believe, even if extremist Muslims have showcased an intolerant attitude.

The second theme focused on hermeneutical engagements with the Qur’an as sacred text. Scholars study how exegetes (*mufassirūn*) have attributed meaning to the Qur’anic text, both in the earliest times and formative period of Islam, as well as in an ongoing hermeneutical process of deconstruction and reconstruction. The inaugural lecture of Ömer Özsoy functioned as a prominent example of a modernist scholar devoted to analysing these interpretive processes, while presenting his own theory of Qur’an hermeneutics.

The third theme illustrated the importance many scholars took in gaining more insight in the past, to be able to articulate the significance of the religious heritage in present time and context (and possibly the future). They did not make a methodological watershed between Islamic Studies and Islamic Theology, but integrated Religious Studies and Theology to build up their historical findings and theological claims. I took articles of the German Erdal Toprakyan and the London-based Ali Paya as examples to point this out. As historical theologian and philosopher they materialised what Özsoy called *Rückbindung*, meaning an adherence to the classical sources, and a responsiveness to modern circumstances, using a variety of disciplinary methods.

Their works show a deep curiosity in exploring inherently European intellectual and political concepts in interconnection with Islamic intellectual and political cultures. The field of historical theology and philosophy intends to reveal these similarities and converge them, bringing Muslim voices into the discussion about the Europe’s intellectual history and present. They consider this crucial in tackling persistent tendencies that perceive ‘Islam’ and ‘the

West' as antithetical – a reoccurring impetus that will further be addressed in Chapters 6 and 7.

It is paradoxical, though, that in order to effectively make their point, all of these Islamic theologians need to amplify the perception of Islam as a rigid tradition that has become so in response to the West during colonial times and in the contemporary 'clash of civilisations'.⁴⁸

5.5.1 *Interrelationship of the Three Themes*

This chapter arranged these three themes in order of their appearance in the list of trending topics (Chapter 4). At this moment, the pursuit of pacifying pedagogical-emancipatory goals is particularly evident. As the envisioned educational theology needs to be rooted in the foundation of modernist Qur'an hermeneutics, it leads to the aims of producing critical-reflective Qur'an hermeneutics and historical understanding of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Islamic thought. Hence, the three themes are closely connected to each other. Additionally, an overly apologetical understanding of religious history and ideas can undermine the reformist educational project as a boomerang.

Their ideas about the envisioned course of Islamic theology clearly align with those presented in Chapter 3. The presented scholars emphasised the necessity not to approach the sources from a 'foreclosed attitude' (Sahin), a-contextually (Özsoy), a-historically (Toprakyaran) or non-dialectically (Paya). They emphatically resist any attempt to interpret Islam statically, or in isolation. On the contrary, they want to connect Islamic and Western epistemes, allowing new horizons to be explored.⁴⁹ Their philosophical reflections potentially offer new trajectories to connect Islam with the intellectual history of Europe. According to those whose works I discussed in this chapter, it is a key task for Islamic theology at Western European universities to contextualise Islamic concepts and to provide adequate translations that are understandable and applicable: a process of 'double dialectics'.

48 Frank Griffel criticised Thomas Bauer and Shahab Ahmed for "their portrayal of modern Islam [as] reductionist and coarse" (Griffel 2017: 19). Moreover, "Bauer detects even 'hate' of modern Muslims toward their own history (53, 113)" (Griffel 2017: 20). According to Griffel "Both books [of Bauer and S. Ahmed] tend to assume that all modern Muslims are either Aligarh-style modernists or outright fundamentalists, focused in an almost Protestant manner on the text of the Qur'an. Or they are Salafists, who take their religious authority from the *hadith* corpus" (Griffel 2017:20).

49 Toprakyaran formulated this as: "It is about documenting and analysing all discourses and at the same time initiating new discourses", or, in its original German reference: "Es geht darum alle Diskurse zu dokumentieren und zu analysieren und zugleich neue Diskurse anzustossen" (Toprakyaran 2014: 132).

It is particularly in the field of Islamic religious pedagogy, and its practical translation into didactics, that Islamic theology can fulfill this mission. As academics, they take a meta-perspective on what happens both 'on the ground' in society, as well as on the textual 'corpus' of the tradition, as a committed but independent intelligentsia (a *'Freischwebende Intelligenz'*).

The next chapter will continue to deepen our understanding of their use of the academic platforms to articulate this mission.

The University as a Platform for Intellectual Reflection and Renewal

[In the modern phase of Muslim thinking], traditional characteristics and modern thought-provoking impulses meet in forms detached from their guiding principles and sometimes interpreted opportunistically, sometimes misunderstood. (...) The constant search for possible culprits in this diagnosed abuse of Islam and for overcoming it, is the dominant motivation of all these intellectual efforts.

ÖMER ÖZSOY (2014: 57–8)¹



6.1 Introduction

The modern phase of Muslim thinking is described by the Frankfurter Qur'an hermeneutician Ömer Özsoy as 'undoubtedly chaotic' (2014: 57),² as it encompasses at least two problematic characteristics. Firstly, there is a persistent idea that the Islamic tradition and Western modernity are separate entities that continue to oppose each other. Secondly, some literalist currents feature a regressive reception of tradition and modernity that "feeds on a traumatic admission of backwardness", Özsoy contends (2014: 58),³ hindering the devel-

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- 1 The original reference in German is: "[Die moderne Phase des muslimischen Denkens stellt zweifellos seine chaotischste Epoche da]. Hier treffen die traditionellen Ausprägungen und neuzeitlichen Denkanstöße in Formen aufeinander, die von ihren Leitgedanken abgekoppelt und teilweise opportunistisch interpretiert, teils missverstanden werden. (...) Die ständige Suche nach möglichen Verantwortlichen dieses diagnostizierten Misstands des Islams und nach seiner Überwindung ist die dominante Motivation all dieser intellektuellen Bestrebungen" (Özsoy 2014: 57–8).
 - 2 The full reference in German is: "Die moderne Phase des muslimischen Denkens stellt zweifellos seine chaotischste Epoche dar" (Özsoy 2014: 57).
 - 3 The original reference in German is: "die sich aus einem traumatischen Rückständigkeitsgeständnis speist" (Özsoy 2014: 58).

opment of what Abdullah Sahin (2013) called a mature understanding of faith among its adherents. The previous chapters have already provided more insight into the responsible role Islamic theologians at Western European universities wanted to play to get beyond binary and anachronistic thinking, in which Islamic sources would be interpreted ‘detached’ from their spatiotemporal contexts.

This chapter will continue the search for what Islamic university theology wanted to set in motion during its first decade, bringing in several examples of how scholars have wanted to use the university as a platform for intellectual reflection and renewal.

I will first discuss the 2016 inaugural lecture of the Austrian Zekirija Sejdini (University of Innsbruck), who spoke about how to develop theological positions that comply with the European context that is characterised by secularity, democracy, and the rule of law (Sejdini 2016: 10) (section 6.2.1). Subsequently, in section 6.2.2, I will present an article written by the German Mohammed Nekroumi (DIRS Erlangen-Nürnberg) as an example of a scholar who explained how the classical legal principle of the higher aims of Islamic law (*maqāsid al-sharī'a*) has for centuries offered the flexibility needed to develop a religious ethics that complies with time and context. This principle offers the Islamic legal hermeneuticians the possibility to (pro)actively contribute to ethical discussions regarding the relation between religious duties and civil-legal frameworks in modern times, specifically in present-day Europe. I will close this part with a brief discussion of some scholars who discuss matters concerning the ‘compatibility’ of contemporary Islamic and Western thought, amongst which is how to envision the (religious) Other from an Islamic perspective (Chapter 6.3.3).

Next, the chapter will focus on how female Islamic theologians have reflected on their positionality as scholars in a traditionally male-dominated field. Their academic position and knowledge production, captured as ‘Muslima theology’, warrant separate attention. As university-trained pioneers, women claim a decisive discursive position to influence scholarly and societal discourses. They intend to use academia as an ‘external platform of knowledge production’ to develop their intellectual credentials and engage in knowledge production, distinct from the traditional male-dominated sites of mosques and educational strongholds (cf. Jonker 2003). As a case in point, the chapter introduces an exegetical paper of the Dutch Arabist Stella El Bouayadi – van de Wetering (CIT Amsterdam).

Finally, I will highlight a work that was explicitly presented as an ‘alternative theology’ to prevailing Sunnite mainstream thought. This publication of the prominent German theologian and sociologist of Islam Mouhanad Khorchide

(ZIT Münster) was widely discussed not only in academic circles, but also among Islamic community-based organisations, while receiving a lot of attention in German media.

These studies illustrate recurring ‘argumentative directions’ that centralise the intellectual challenge to critically examine how theological notions that originate from another time, cultural, or political context, can be (re)interpreted or (re)claimed to fit the present, including the constitutionally secular liberal politics and societies of Western Europe.

6.2 Intellectual Reflections in and on Europe

6.2.1 Zekirija Sejdini: *Islamic Theology ‘between Certainty and Contingency’*

Since he is one of the leading scholars who reflected on a coherent theological grounding of Islam in Europe, I have chosen to present a publication of the Austrian thinker Zekirija Sejdini. Sejdini (born in 1972 in Vrapciste, Macedonia) became Innsbruck’s first Chair in Islamic Religious Pedagogy in 2015.⁴ His inaugural lecture, entitled ‘Between Certainty and Contingency. Towards a New Understanding of Islamic Theology and Religious Education in the European Context’⁵ reads as a ‘position paper’. It regards how Islamic theology should manoeuvre in the ultimate theological tension between ‘certainty’ and ‘contingency’.

Sejdini, like Sahin, envisioned the new institutional grounding in European universities as a major impulse to stimulate the inclusion of Islamic theological traditions that have not yet been incorporated into Western religious pedagogies. Sejdini explicates how the university has the responsibility to develop theological positions that are informed by the rich Islamic theological tradition, while also considering contemporary scholarly discourse in the European context. This context is characterised by secularity, democracy, the rule of law, and religious-philosophical plurality. The university must strive to meet these requirements (Sejdini 2016: 10).⁶

4 www.uibk.ac.at/de/islam-theol/team/zekirija-sejdini/ accessed March 2018.

5 ‘Zwischen Gewissheit und Kontingenz. Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Verständnis von islamischer Theologie und Religionspädagogik im europäischen Kontext’ (inaugural lecture presented on 13 January 2016 at the University of Innsbruck).

6 In an earlier publication, Sejdini had already introduced an ‘Innsbrucker model for religious pedagogics’ (Sejdini 2015).

Sejdini is deeply concerned with the state of public discourse about Islam as it is, broadly speaking, dominated by two positions that hijack each other, making a fruitful exchange impossible. On the one hand, there are those conservative Muslims who apologetically obstruct any attempt for reform and who see themselves as victims of European dominance; they qualify critique by non-Muslims as Islamophobic and by Muslims as heretic.⁷ On the other hand, a growing number of non-Muslims associate Islam essentially and exclusively with violence, political Islam and intolerance.

If one compares the convictions of the protagonists of both groups, one can discover a similar attitude behind the positions: Both assume the existence and clarity of only one (their own) understanding of Islam and negate the perspectivity of their own perceptions, statements and convictions. In doing so, they insist on static, unchangeable truths valid for all time, which they see themselves as possessing, indirectly or directly denying the existence of the Other and evading the confrontation with plurality. (Sejdini 2016: 18)⁸

To combat this essentialist and exclusivist attitude, Sejdini sets his agenda for developing a "contingency-sensitive Islamic theology and religious pedagogy", which he considers a core duty of the new academic field. Such theology and pedagogy must address the tension between the illusory idea of certainty and the endurance of contingency. Only a sensitivity or awareness of contingency (*Kontingenzsensibilität*) can embrace the insecurity caused by plurality and ambiguity.

Contingency is understood here in the sense of possibilities/awareness of possibility – very much in the spirit of various philosophical, theological and literary positions that understand contingency in the sense that something is also possible differently than it is. According to this

7 Sejdini refers to the book of B.T. Said & H. Fouad, 2014, *Salafismus. Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag.

8 The original reference in German is: "Vergleicht man die Überzeugungen der Protagonisten beider Gruppen, kann man hinter den Positionen eine ähnliche Geisteshaltung entdecken: Beide gehen von der Existenz und Eindeutigkeit nur eines (des eigenen) Islamverständnisses aus und negieren die Perspektivität ihrer eigenen Wahrnehmungen, Aussagen und Überzeugungen. Damit beharren sie auf statischen, unveränderbaren und für alle Zeiten gültigen Wahrheiten, in deren Besitz sie sich sehen, leugnen indirect oder direct das Vorhandensein von Anderem und entziehen sich der Auseinandersetzung mit Pluralität" (Sejdini 2016: 18).

understanding, contingency entails plurality, plurality in turn entails ambivalence and ambiguity. (Sejdini 2016: 18)⁹

Especially in these challenging times, it is imperative to provide a comprehensive religious education that incorporates multiple perspectives, scientific reflection, and interdisciplinary approaches firmly rooted in the university setting (Sejdini 2016: 19).¹⁰ For this, a renewal is needed, which must be developed from a genuinely ‘internal perspective’. Any innovation that is done from an external position and by adding foreign components would only generate resistance and isolation and is doomed to fail (Sejdini 2016: 19).¹¹

Sejdini’s proposal for a compatible Islamic theology and religious pedagogy is based on three pillars: 1) a plurality of images of the human being, instead of an essentialist conception, that can strengthen the humanistic image of humans; 2) the Qur’an must be considered a way of human communication with God; and 3) contextuality must play a constitutive role (Sejdini 2016).

Firstly, an academic theological explication of the sources will reveal the human dignity of all people as Children of Adam (Sura 17:70). All human beings – so not only Muslims – are endowed with dignity by God, gifted with a rational mind (*Vernunftbegabung*), and responsibility for their actions. Sejdini immediately links this to the centrality of human rights in any Islamic theological thinking or pedagogical consideration. Moreover, because of human’s rational capacity, humans are able to be addressed by the divine message and able to respond to its call. This call includes the task to explore one’s environment, to communicate with other people and to gain new insights which can be put at the service of all mankind (Sejdini 2016: 23). Intricately connected to human dignity and rationality is the anthropological concept of human

9 The original reference in German is: “Kontingenz wird hier im Sinne von Möglichkeiten/ Möglichkeitsbewusstsein verstanden – ganz im Geiste von verschiedenen philosophischen, theologischen und literarischen Positionen, die Kontingenz in dem Sinn, dass etwas auch anders möglich ist, als es ist, fassen. Gemäss diesem Verständniss hat Kontingenz Pluralität zur Folge, Pluralität zieht wiederum Ambivalenz und Ambiguität nach sich“ (Sejdini 2016: 18).

10 The original reference in German is: “Es erscheint äußerst wichtig, in diesen schwierigen Zeiten durch die universitäre Verankerung religionspädagogische Ansätze anbieten zu können, die durch Mehrperspektivität, wissenschaftlichen Reflexion und interdisziplinäre Zugänge gekennzeichnet sind“ (Sejdini 2016: 19).

11 The full reference in German is: “Denn der Versuch, eine islamische Theologie und Religionspädagogik von außen und durch Hinzufügung von ihr fremden Komponenten zu erneuern, würde nur Gegenwehr und Isolation erzeugen und wäre somit zum Scheitern verurteilt“ (Sejdini 2016: 19).

freedom, which must always go hand in hand with responsibility for one's own actions and care for others.¹²

Moreover, the Islamic intellectual tradition itself will always contain subjective and diverse positions about the image of humans, depending on time and context, which is reinforced by the lack of a centralised authority that can affirm certain interpretations as dogmas.

Referring to the Roman-Catholic and Anglican theologians Karl Rahner (1904–1984) and Kenneth Gragg (1913–2012), Sejdini endorsed that with this 'anthropological turn', "we can be sure that we shall never be far away from a living theology if we are radically and honestly committed to understanding man" (Sejdini 2016: 24).¹³

The second pillar of his proposal for a compelling Islamic theology and pedagogy centralises the Qur'an. The human being as free and rational needs to include the revelation as a precondition for responsible action. The Qur'an should not be considered a one-way normative-instructive handbook, but perceived as a way to communicate with God. In Sejdini's words:

This implies that revelation must not be understood as paternalism in the form of an instruction, not as an objective imparting of knowledge, and not as exclusively legitimated by authority to the exclusion of human reason. Rather, it should be understood as a communication process that includes subjectivity and can be kept alive, constantly reinterpreted and made fruitful precisely because of reason and freedom. (Sejdini 2016: 24)¹⁴

12 The full reference in German is: "Die drei angesprochenen anthropologischen Aspekte – Würde, Vernunft, Freiheit – dürfen nicht isoliert betrachtet werden, denn sie sind eingebunden in die Verantwortung, die Gott dem Menschen für sich und seine Umwelt übertragen hat, und sie zeigen, dass der Mensch selbst für seine Handlungen verantwortlich ist" (Sejdini 2016: 23).

13 The full reference in which Sejdini quotes Gragg is: "Diesen Ansatz vertritt auch Kenneth Gragg, wenn er sagt: »As reverent theists we can be sure we shall never be far away from a living theology if we are radically and honestly committed to understanding man«. Gragg, Kenneth: *The Christian and Other Religion. The Measure of Christ*, London & Oxford: Mowbrays 1977, S.3" (Sejdini 2016: 24 & note 11).

14 The original reference in German is: "Dies impliziert, dass die Offenbarung nicht als Bevormundung des Menschen in Form einer Instruktion, nicht als »objektive« Wissensvermittlung und nicht als ausschliesslich autoritätslegitimiert unter Ausschluss der menschlichen Vernunft verstanden werden darf. Vielmehr sollte sie als Kommunikationsprozess aufgefasst werden, der Subjektivität miteinschliesst und gerade aufgrund von Vernunft und Freiheit lebendig erhalten, ständig neu interpretiert und fruchtbar gemacht werden kann" (Sejdini 2016: 24).

This means that the Qur'an should always be considered in its context. Referring to Nasr Abu Zayd (2008), Sejdini claims: "Even if the Qur'an is viewed as a verbal inspiration, this does not constitute an obstacle to understanding it as a context-related communication process" (Sejdini 2016: 24–5).¹⁵ This is contrary to a literalist reading mode (*Wortwörtlich*) that wants to find normative instructions for the present day exclusively here. Such fundamentalist, contextless understanding stagnates human development instead of opening up new roads (Sejdini 2016: 25). Referring to Thomas Bauer's book *Die Kultur der Ambiguität* (2011), he claims that:

In this sense, a theology and religious education that is open to plurality and shows a tolerance for ambiguity – as Thomas Bauer suggests – is about finding an understanding and new approaches to revelation in the sense of the anthropological characteristics of dignity, reason and freedom. (Sejdini 2016: 25)¹⁶

The third pillar on which an innovative and authentic Islamic theology and religious pedagogy must rest, is therefore the constitutive role of the context. In the case of European Muslims, this is the secular context. The way something is perceived or experienced happens within a framework of cultural and religious imprints, and is shaped by previous perceptions and experiences that, in turn, were culturally and religiously contingent (Sejdini 2016: 26, referring to Joachim Willems 2011). Complying with Thomas Bauer (2011), Sejdini argues that the aversion against such contextual reading does not have its roots in the traditional Islamic religious scholarly tradition, but can be found in much more recent history. It was only in times of colonisation and its aftermath that resistance grew, as this contextualisation was understood or perceived as an adaptation or even capitulation to secular norms. Instead of pointing at this problematic past, however, Muslims should invest in the ability to adjust to circumstances, Sejdini argues. This means that the persisting aversion to contextuality – that has its roots in colonial history and remains apparent in much of contemporary Islamic theology and religious education – should be

15 The original reference in German is: "Auch wenn der Koran als Verbalinspiration betrachtet wird, stellt diese kein Hindernis dar, ihn als kontextbezogenen Kommunikationsprozess aufzufassen" (Sejdini 2016: 24–5).

16 The original reference in German is: "In diesem Sinne geht es in einer, wie Thomas Bauer sagt, pluralitätsoffenen und ambiguitätstoleranten Theologie und Religionspädagogik darum, ein Verständnis und neue Zugänge zur Offenbarung im Sinne der anthropologischen Merkmale von Würde, Vernunft und Freiheit zu finden" (Sejdini 2016: 25).

overcome, and should not be mixed up with an aversion against secularism as such (2016: 26).¹⁷

Sejdini is very concerned about the possible risk that in secular Europe, Muslims might see the inclusion of this contextuality as a dilution of Islamic theology. This could lead to a reinforcement of a more apologetic attitude rather than a confidently critical, faithful attitude. According to Sejdini, democracy and secularity can and should be constitutive parts of an Islamic theology and religious pedagogy in the democratic secular liberal state governed by the rule of law.

Sejdini concludes that a religious *Bildung* based on these pillars can develop a democratic habitus to deal with oneself, the world and others (2016: 29). Core ideas of this religious formation are an inclusivist image of human beings in which all are equal; belief is an offer by God that can freely be accepted or rejected; and faith is a contextualised, personal experience. In this way, secularity guarantees religious freedom (Sejdini 2016: 28–29).

In sum, to cultivate religious diversity means a great challenge for religious education.¹⁸ Therefore, universities in Europe must take up this core task and strengthen the academic debate about Islam. Sejdini calls for an Islamic self-interpretation that must transform itself if it wants to meet the conditions of the secular university, in such a way that religion and society are viewed as complementary orders that mutually recognise each other (Sejdini 2016:

17 The full reference in German is: “Erst im Zuge der Begegnung mit der säkularen Gesellschaft, die in manchen Regionen aufgrund der Kolonialisierung sehr unglücklich verlaufen ist, wurde die Interpretation des Islams aus dem säkularen Kontext als Niederlage und Kapitulation und eine daraus resultierende Erniedrigung verstanden, was eine Resistenz gegenüber der Kontextualisierung zur Folge hatte, so, als ob die Schuld bei der Zeit und nicht bei der Unfähigkeit, sich den Umständen anzupassen, läge. Diese Aversion gegenüber der Kontextualität hält in weiten Teilen der islamischen Theologie und Religionspädagogik noch immer an. Speziell in einem, ihnen von der eigenen Tradition her fremden, säkularen Umfeld sehen die Muslime die Kontextbezogenheit als eine Verwässerung der islamischen Theologie und nehmen eine apologetische Haltung ein“ (Sejdini 2016: 26–7).

18 The full reference in German is: “Es bedeutet eine große Herausforderung für die Religionspädagogik, religiöse Vielfalt zu pflegen, sich in der religiösen Vielfalt zu bewegen, diese zu fördern und als Bereicherung zu betrachten. Damit sind, »Veränderungsbereitschaft und Neuanpassung« verbunden und weniger »das Perpetuieren alter Gewohnheiten, Gebräuche und Traditionen«. Einer derartigen Religionspädagogik ist eine demokratische Gesinnung inhärent. (...) Es geht um die Ausbildung eines Habitus, sich vorlaufend mit sich selbst, der Welt und anderen auseinanderzusetzen“ (Sejdini 2016: 29, referring to Ulrich Krainz 2014).

29–30).¹⁹ A strong “contingency-sensitivity” that cultivates an attitude of questioning, will not lose itself in ambiguity, skepticism or doubt, but will be able to do the opposite, he contends.

6.2.2 Mohammed Nekroumi: *Anchoring the Debate with Philosophy and Islamic Legal Theory in European Humanities*

The question of the dialectical contextualisation of the Qur’anic message and the Sunna of the Prophet in the context of Europe, is not only a major question in the practical field of education. It is an ever-present question in legal hermeneutics and legal methodology (the *usūl al-fiqh*). In this section, I will briefly illuminate how one scholar, the German philosopher Mohammed Nekroumi, dealt with the perennial quest for reconciling the tension between the authority of the Scriptures and the need to come with authoritative directions on unprecedented situations and social change.

As shown in Chapter 4, the legal and ethical field mostly focused on textual discourse and analysis, addressing fundamental questions of traditional exegetical and legal approaches in the process of derivation of religious norms. Whereas the analytical results can certainly affect the normative level of *fiqh* production, the output of the surveyed publications was mainly theoretical in nature. In his 2017 article ‘Die Islamische Theologie und die Ethikfragen der Moderne’ [Islamic Theology and the Ethical Questions of Modernity] (2017), Nekroumi unfolds his proposal for developing a legal ethical theory in the context of European Islamic theology.²⁰

Since 2015, Mohammed Nekroumi has possessed the Chair for Discourse Analysis and Jurisprudence²¹ at the Department of Islamic-Religious Studies, Erlangen. Born in Fes, Morocco in 1961, he received his university training both in Morocco and in France, before coming to Germany in 1994 where he worked at universities in Berlin, Tübingen, Münster and Erlangen-Nürnberg. In the Erlangen-based Department for Islamic Religious Studies (DIRS), Nekroumi

19 The full reference in German is: “[As ninth principle for religious pedagogics in the European context, Sejdini considers the] *Universitäre Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam: Islamische Selbstausslegung muss sich transformieren, wenn sie den Bedingungen der säkularen Universität entsprechen will ... Voraussetzung ist, dass beide Ordnungen, »Religion und Gesellschaft«, als komplementär, sich gegenseitig anerkennende Ordnungen angesehen werden*“ (Sejdini 2016: 29–30).

20 In this edited volume, the author’s name is spelled as Mouhammad Nekroumi.

21 This chair was renamed in 2023 into the chair for Islamic-Religious Studies with the Focus Text Analysis and Jurisprudence.

worked on a research project about the *maqāṣid* ethical principles in the Qur'an and the elaboration of an ethical theory.²²

In the context of the current phase of transition of Islamic university theology, Nekroumi urges to prioritise epistemological research in the field of Islamic ethical and moral theories, which should also be the focus of the theological and ethical contextualisation of the current living situation of Muslims (Nekroumi 2017: 31).²³ Nekroumi is highly critical towards contemporary mainstream traditionalist thought and European discourses about Islam:

Whereas the mainstream inner-Islamic tradition often seems to close off for any intention of re-reading and reconstruction of tradition, while transmitting scholastic old-worn, context-bounded ideas and textual interpretations in a simplified form, global as well as European discourse about Islam show a certain amateuristic incline to apologetics, projection or generalisation. (Nekroumi 2017: 34)²⁴

He sees a vital and challenging role for Islamic theology to make a contribution to modern ethical theories. "The challenge today is primarily to make a contribution to the necessary and so far lacking self-orientation process of Islamic theology" (Nekroumi 2017: 35).²⁵ Nekroumi's proposal for the elaboration of

22 In 1985, Nekroumi gained a master's degree in *uṣūl al-fiqh* at the Department of Arabic Philology and Literature Studies at the University in Fes, Morocco. After completion he went to France to continue his studies at the university of Aix-en-Provence. Here, he obtained his Ph.D. in 1996 at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies Aix-en-Provence (www.dirs.phil.fau.de/ueber-uns/team/professorinnen/prof-dr-mohammed-nekroumi/, last accessed 1 May 2023).

23 The original reference in German is: "Die Grundlage für das dringend erforderliche Desiderat bilden dabei die epistemologischen Forschungen im Bereich der islamischen Ethik- und Moraltheorien, welche ebenfalls den Fokus bei der theologischen und ethischen Kontextualisierung der aktuellen Lebenssituation der Muslime sein soll" (Nekroumi 2017: 31).

24 The original reference in German is: "Während sich der Mainstream innerislamischer Diskussion überwiegend gegenüber jeglichem Vorhaben der Relektüre und Rekonstruktion der Tradition verschließt und scholastisch altgediente, kontextgebundene Denkinhalte und Textauslegungen in vereinfachter Form weitervermittelt, herrscht im globalen bzw. europäischen Diskurs über den Islam eine gewisse amateurhafte Neigung zu Apologie, Projektion oder Generalisierung" (Nekroumi 2017:34).

25 The original reference in German is: "(...) die Herausforderung eines zeitgenössischen fachspezifischen theologischen Ansatzes [besteht] heute primär darin, einen Beitrag zu dem notwendigen und bisher ausgebliebenen Selbstorientierungsprozess der islamischen Theologie zu leisten" (Nekroumi 2017: 35).

such a contemporary Islamic theology in the West consists of four main pillars (*Säulen*).

The first pillar is the promotion of a strong position for theology in European society built on an Islamic ethical theory that integrates Islamic and European conceptions. Highly aware of how Greek-philosophical concepts such as logics (*mantīq*), syllogism (*qiyās*), or causality (*‘illīyya*) have influenced both Islamic and European thought until the present, Nekroumi calls for a re-reading of this history of ideas, that lost its influence within Islamic legal science from the end of the Andalusian era onwards. Nekroumi claims that it is precisely this classical Islamic intellectual-philosophical tradition that does give ample space for independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) to discover God’s intentions, with the help of human intellect and reason (Nekroumi 2017: 33–36).

Secondly, he urges Muslim theologians in Europe to concentrate on the classical debate about the relationship between reason and faith in understanding the revelation. According to Nekroumi, this debate “primarily revolves around the rational justification of *shari’ā*’s moral and legal norms. It calls for a thorough hermeneutic analysis of essential concepts related to intention theory, including reason, intention, motive, and context. These concepts form the foundation of the theory of justifiability” (2017: 36).²⁶ The focal point of this second pillar is the relation between reasoning (*Begründen*) and comprehension (*Verstehen*) in the process of deducing religious moral norms from God’s word, by taking into consideration the sphere of action (Nekroumi 2017: 36).²⁷

Nekroumi brings into memory legal principles related to the *maqāsid al-sharī’a*, or the identification of the ‘higher objectives of the divine law’, as the ultimate legal methodological principle to deduce ethical answers to new questions, providing a deontological focus on social justice that can guide (interdisciplinary) debates about the ‘common good’ (*maslahah*) as cornerstone of the ethical orientation or justification (Nekroumi 2017: 36).²⁸

26 The original reference in German is: “Vor allem betrifft diese Auseinandersetzung die Frage rationaler Begründung der *shari’ā* Moral- und Rechtsnormen, was eine umfassende hermeneutischen Reflexion über die Schlüsselbegriffe der sogenannten Intentionstheorie, wie etwa Grund, Absicht, Motiv und Anlass hervorruft, welche seiner Begründbarkeitstheorie zugrunde liegen“ (Nekroumi 2017: 36).

27 The original reference in German is: “Schwerpunkt dieser zweiten Fragestellung ist das Verhältnis zwischen Begründen und Verstehen im Prozess der Ableitung religiöser Moralnormen aus Gotteswort unter Berücksichtigung des Handlungsumfeld“ (Nekroumi 2017: 36).

28 Religious scholars have always been keen on the question of how to approach new problems, to find a legal position (*hukm*) that intends to be compatible with God’s intention. Highly authoritative Islamic thinkers like Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 AD) and Al-Shatibi (d. 1388 AD), already brought in that legal scholars must relate their methodologies to the question of what the higher aims of the *shari’ā* are, the *maqāsid al-sharī’a*. This is the principle that

He relates these legal principles to the third pillar of such an Islamic legal theory in Europe, which is to testify to the Islamic ethos in the formation of a community and to relate this to modern social ethics (Nekroumi 2017: 36–37).

Fourthly, Islamic theology in the contemporary West should think about the meaning of theological, moral and legal norms. These are called *al-ahkām ash-sharʿiyya* in the modern society (Nekroumi 2017: 37, emphasis in the original). Subject-matter here is the elaboration of a conception of the relation between religious duties and civil-legal frameworks.

To conclude, Nekroumi's suggestion to revive an ethical theory based on the legal principle of *maqāsid al-sharʿa* is not new, as it builds on highly authoritative Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Al-Shātibī (d. 1388), as well as early twentieth century reformists such as Muhammed Abduh (d. 1906). Nekroumi also refers to the ethical theories of Nasr Abu Zayd, Mohammed Arkoun, and Abed Al-Jabri (2017: 38–42). Hence his point: Muslims in Europe are equipped with legal hermeneutics that can help them to deal with social changes. Islamic theology in Europe should, therefore, not be reactionary, but pro-actively connect to these modern debates.

6.2.3 *Intra- and Interreligious Realities and the 'Compatibility Question'*

This paragraph could be extensively enlarged by discussing multiple studies that explore Islamic theories of religious diversity as an empirical reality for Muslims living in Europe. Some focus on the intrareligious realities, whereas others pay attention to interreligious and intercultural relations European Muslims must relate to. Their leading theological question here is how to perceive the (religious) Other from an Islamic perspective.

In his article entitled 'Plurality as the Will of God' (*Pluralität als Wille Gottes*), published in 2016, the already introduced Austrian scholar Ednan Aslan, for instance, explains the traditional position of how the Qur'an recognises and respects the 'People of the Book' (Jews and Christians). This divine call is rooted in the Qur'an, exemplified in the Sunna of the Prophet, and is an integral part of the Muslim creed (*aqīda*). Although this explanation of plurality and diversity among humans is well-known, Aslan argues in this contribution that it is imperative to approach the concept innovatively, considering that the present situation of plural cohabitation of Muslims and 'non-Muslims' is unprecedented in the history of Islam and Muslim societies. It is a particular challenge to organise such reflection among the European (and Western) Islamic diaspora, as only a few scholars have addressed the issue in Muslim

specific actions are permitted or forbidden based on the consequences: the protection of the faith, of life, of progeny, of property, and of intellect (and honour).

countries. Particularly the development of *fiqh al-aqalliyāt*, or religious law for Muslims living in a minority situation, deserves to become an area of interest in Islamic theology at Western European universities. Furthermore, Aslan considers it one of the tasks for Islamic university theology in Europe to coin their theology in an active dialogue with other religions in the European context. He intends an interreligious and intercultural dialogue to help solve contradictions between Islam and plural society while starting from Islam's authenticity. Moreover, European theologians can send appropriate (*entsprechende*) impulses to Islamic countries as proof of the suitability of the Qur'anic concepts for pluralistic societies. They can also justify living as a Muslim in a plural society on a Qur'anic basis (Aslan 2016: 34–35).

Another example of this line of thinking comes from the Dutch scholar Yaser Ellethy, who in his *Islam, Context, Pluralism and Democracy*, published in 2017 by Routledge, argues that the "achievement of a Western Muslim scholarship, which remains faithful to the longstanding classical Islamic studies in the Muslim world and contextualizes it in a non-Muslim sphere, is a must" (Ellethy 2017: 174).²⁹ His book explores the question of "how far Islamic thought can find ways to cope with different challenges, such as modernity, pluralism and democracy" (2017: 1–2). Ellethy stumbles upon the realisation that secular ('worldly') pluralism and democracy are not directly addressed in the Qur'an, the Sunna and the classical Islamic jurisprudence as human norms, whereas these are "the most salient socio-political challenges that face Islamic reform today" (2017: 6–7). According to Ellethy, however, it is possible "to show how Islamic principles, based on classical and modern interpretations, promote the expertise of all citizens and their collective right as a source of political authority. At the same time, a mere majoritarian democracy would not be Islamically welcomed if it does not achieve basic values such as justice, equality, freedom and minority rights" (Ellethy 2017: 15).

Ellethy makes a plea for a diachronically and theologically embedded understanding of the Islamic conception of universality in relation to pluralism. This conception "reflects heavily on a foremost unity of humanity, manifested in a contingent plurality and *a contrario* diversity compared to the Oneness of God" (Ellethy 2017: 165). This notion of pluralism is perceived within the Islamic scriptural sources as a human diversity within one universal unity (Ellethy 2017: 113). Like Aslan, Ellethy refers to the Qur'anic message that

29 The Egyptian-born Yaser Ellethy wrote this book as a second dissertation when he came to work as director of the Centre for Islamic Theology (CIT) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

considers the variation of languages and colors "as part of the signs of God's Might, and surely Will, in His creation" (Ellethy 2017: 106). Ellethy adds to this:

The more we are inspired by the higher *unity* of our existence the more we are aware of our *diversity* in pluralistic terms. The diachrony of the divine relations has always been a perpetual guidance toward the One and Unique Originator. That is why 'revelation' constitutes an essential part of Islamic pluralism, which fosters tolerance between diverse humans, but still recognizes their doctrinal and ritual particularities. (Ellethy 2017: 107)

This tolerance of difference among people counts to the extent that they are linked by the bond of brotherhood in humanity (Ellethy 2017: 107). However, the Islamic notion of pluralism does not involve religious relativism or soteriological relativism: "This would be theologically impossible simply because it contradicts the tenets of proper faith and deconstructs the very concept of 'religion' as it is in Islam", Ellethy explains (2017: 108). Moreover, "To neutralize the particularities and differences between worldviews and religions, especially those related to issues of creed, in the name of pluralism belongs more to a fanciful philosophical idealism than practical reality" (Ellethy 2017: 109). The acceptance of human diversity and dissimilarity is a divine norm. In the end, Ellethy contends, "a forgiving attitude and doing good to others and not harm them is what pluralism really implies" (2017: 121).³⁰

As a conclusion of his chapter 'On Pluralism', Ellethy argues that Western Muslims need a threefold impetus.³¹ Firstly, Muslims should not consider being a good Muslim and a good Western citizen as "essentially two contradictory identities" (2017: 175). He also sees a task "on the side of the 'host' Western society" that should accept the involvement of Muslims in the socio-political good of the state "as an in-group which can always contribute to, and not only impress, the multicultural richness of these societies" (2017: 174). "This will guarantee high levels of loyalty and participation" (p. 174). Secondly, the Muslim *ulama* within the Muslim world should go beyond a classical division of the world into the abode of Islam and the abode of Unbelief/War. Like

30 Compare Sahin (2013: 204, 207), who uses this argument as a theological ground for institutionalised critical thinking.

31 This summary rearranged the order of Ellethy's three arguments. In the original, the first argument emphasised the role of the 'host' Western society and the accomplishments of Western Muslim scholarship. This was followed by a reference to the Muslim *ulama* and *fiqh al-aqalliyāt*, and finally, it addressed the tasks that lie ahead for Western Muslims themselves (Ellethy 2017: 174–175).

Ednan Aslan, he contends that the “so-called *fiqh al-aqalliyat* ... should ... put more focus on the pressing global issues of Western Muslims and their relation to the non-Muslim context and implications. This should address the Muslim communities in the West through publications written or translated in their local languages, meetings and conferences discussing crucial, contextual issues” (Ellethy 2017: 174). Moreover, thirdly, Ellethy suggests that “[t]he establishment of official high educational and research institutes for Islamic studies, based on normative scientific criteria and not on political goals, in cooperation with qualified Muslims on national and international levels, is also necessary. These institutes should have as a target, based on a long-term strategy, a Western Muslim scholar who will receive trust, respect and recognition, not only among his community members, but also among his counterparts and intelligentsia in the Muslim world. This scholar will begin from the achievements of previous *ijtihāds* and develop new horizons for Islamic jurisprudence in fields which Muslims and non-Muslims alike in the West can utilize in facing common challenges and forming true pluralistic societies” (Ellethy 2017: 174). With this statement, Ellethy indicated how he wanted to ground the legitimacy of Islamic university theology in Western Europe.

6.3 Discussions among Female Theologians

For female scholars, the central question of this study about the nature and legitimacy of Islamic university theology in contemporary Western Europe is of special importance. What choices do they make, and how do they weigh their position as female scholars in the developing academic field?

There are strong reasons to consider this question in a separate paragraph. The role and influence of women as leaders, knowledge producers, and transmitters of knowledge have long remained a ‘blind spot’ in anthropological research about Islamic religious authority formation (Sunier 2023). Alternatively, their religious authority has been disregarded within strict conservative faith communities. Moreover, in popular narratives that are prevalent in many Western societies, Muslim women are easily imagined as being oppressed (cf. Noor 2018). These realities give Muslim women in this situation what Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor called a ‘doubly marginalised’ position (2015: 107).³²

32 This does not mean women scholars have been utterly absent from Islamic scholarly tradition. In a voluminous bibliographical study, the Oxford-based scholar Mohammad Akram Nadwi counted 8,000 female hadith scholars. In an earlier account, Ignaz

Furthermore, while the constituting relationship between men and women in societal, communal, and personal life spheres is central to Islamic tradition, warranting ample attention from religious scholars, gender relations are among the most often raised issues in European public debates, often in anticipation of an innovative equality perspective. Furthermore, many stereotypical views about male-female relationships circulate that can be the subject of study or refutation.

Meanwhile, university-trained Muslim women in Western Europe have been active in educational and interreligious studies, for instance in producing Islamic schoolbooks for European schools. Through a critical re-reading of texts and traditions, they intended to ignite what Jonker called 'creative theology' (Jonker 2003: 45). In this process, the German Dutch researcher Gerdien Jonker identified how the secular university functioned as an 'external knowledge production site', that differed from the male-dominated internal production sites of the mosques and more traditional educational institutions (Jonker 2003).

This period (2010–2018) witnessed significant attention to the realities of female religious leadership, particularly in Europe but also elsewhere (e.g. in Indonesia by Van Doorn-Harder, CIT, Amsterdam). Studies published during this time examined how female intellectuals represented a 'shift in tradition' by envisioning a future where they serve as new female religious authorities (Bano & Kalmbach 2012). The negotiations as female religious authorities have not been self-evident, neither for those who studied these changing positions, nor for those who acted as their advocates. A symposium organised in Germany showed the awareness of these role tensions among female scholars affiliated with the new centres for Islamic theology. Their discussion will be summarised below.

6.3.1 *Erlangen Conference*

In March 2014, two female scholars working on Islam and Muslims in Germany, organised a two-day conference titled *Innen- und Außenansichten: Frauen in der Islamischen Theologie im Spannungsfeld von Religion, Macht und Wissenschaft*.³³ The conference focused on the field of tension in which

Goldziher estimated the number of female hadith scholars at 15 per cent (<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/magazine/25wwlnEssay.t.html>).

33 The English translation reads as follows: 'Internal and external views: women in Islamic theology in the field of tension of religion, power and scholarship', held at the FAU Research Centre for Islam and Law in Europe EZIRE. Its organisers were Dr Riem Spielhaus and Dr Meltem Kulaçatan. I participated in this price-winning conference.

female Islamic theologians worked, posing the question of how they navigate inner and outer perspectives in Islamic theology. During two days, about forty female and ten male participants discussed how these relations influence their intellectual position and authority as female academic theologians and how they envisioned dealing with the fields of power that came with academic and political expectations, media attention, the influence of the advisory councils (*Beiräte*), and the expectations of often conservative students in their classrooms.

The symposium's title reveals the awareness of the existence of a 'politics of gender' – a process of appropriation, contestation and reinterpretation of positions on gender relations and women's rights by state, non-state and global actors (Jonker 2003: 35–46; Kandioty 2009: 92). In my observation, the participants seemed well aware of those frames that understand and conceptualise Islamic feminism as incompatible with Islam, either because it is considered as a downfall to the Western liberal norm, or as a *contradictio in terminis*, as they would still not be refrained from the tutelage of male authority. The participants concluded that these questions are often discussed in a frame that considers 'the secular West' and 'Islam' as two opposing entities. They want to surpass this dichotomy.

As one of the core assignments for Islamic theology in Europe, they consider the critical, scientific study of and theological reflection on dominant interpretations of Qur'an exegesis and Hadith studies that lead to gender injustice. Instead, they want to deconstruct these interpretations through a hermeneutical-exegetical process and propose an alternative interpretation. This is as much a task for women as for men.

As female researchers, they benefit from having access to female domains of religious life which are secluded for men, where they conduct social scientific research into the 'lived religion' and faith of women. Some contributed with their own hermeneutical interpretations of Qur'anic verses. Others chose to explore which positions others have taken in the past and present. In these ways, they contributed to insights into the cultural history of ideas, including the emergence of patriarchal views on understanding the Qur'an and Sunna, varying from the creation story to inheritance law and the relation between spouses.

The participants at the Erlangen symposium expressed a self-conscious and critical stance toward the academic space for producing religious knowledge the university – at least ideally – offers them. They navigate between perspectives as believing Muslims and scholars, referred to in a simplified terminology as 'inside and outside perspectives', but in practice full of tension. They discussed how, as academically trained German scholars, they

could interpret sacred sources in a way that upholds justice without being swayed by political expectations that depict Islam as centered around misogyny, religiously sponsored violence, and intolerance (cf. Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015: 166). The Erlanger participants seemed to agree that their constructivist theology could be activist. However, they did not want their hermeneutical endeavours turn into apologetical exercises. I heard some participants pose the question of what would happen if the Quran could not be interpreted progressively for women. Their answer was that, in that case, they should restrict to upholding a religious studies approach.

6.3.2 *Two More Illustrations*

As two more illustrations of this art of engagement of female scholars in Islamic theology, I will first discuss the edited volume *Muslima Theology* (2013) of Marcia Hermansen, Ednan Aslan and Elif Medeni. The editors position this collection as the immediate product of the new theological initiatives in Europe (2013: 23). As a second case study, I take an article by the Dutch Arabist Stella El Bouayadi-Van de Wetering in which she tackles the 'hot topic' of slander and rape. Her article exemplifies the activist spirit of some who enter pressing questions raised in public and political debate about gender injustice. She underscores the necessity to come up with interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunna that uphold human dignity and rights.

6.3.3 *Muslima Theology*

The first example that grasps these discussions among female theologians is the edited volume of Ednan Aslan, Elif Medeni and Marcia Hermansen, *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women* (2013) published by Peter Lang (Frankfurt am Main). The volume is the result of a project initiated by the Department for Islamic Religious Education at the University of Vienna, Austria, with Ednan Aslan being the Chair of the Institute for Islamic Studies and Islamic Religious Education between, and Medeni being one of his Ph.D. students. Hermansen was Director of the Islamic World Studies Program and Professor in the Theology Department at Loyola University Chicago.

The volume contains fifteen contributions, divided in three parts, written by Muslim female scholars from around the world. The majority is trained and now affiliated to universities in Spain, Austria, Germany, USA and South-Africa. Two are affiliated to major Turkish universities (Marmara and Ankara) and one is a researcher in a centre of Islamic Studies in Bahrain.

The collection is introduced as a "pioneering volume [that] defines the contours of the emerging engagements of Muslim women scholars from around the world with the authoritative interpretative traditions of Islam, classical

and contemporary” (back cover). The articles encompass a range of perspectives and arising from multiple social locations. “[Muslima theology] now claims a place alongside womanist and Hispanic *mujerista* liberation theology that interrogate scripture and other forms of religious discourse to empower women of faith to speak for themselves in the interests of gender justice” (back cover). In his foreword to the volume, Ednan Aslan captures this ethos as:

While rooted in authentic Islamic sources and interpretive methodologies, the contributions from Muslim theologians featured in this collection clearly demonstrate their creative and future-oriented approach. (Aslan 2013: 10)

In her introduction to the edited volume, Marcia Hermansen connects the term ‘Muslima theology’ to the emergence of academically trained women who gained positions at modern universities in the Muslim world since the 1970s. Their access to modern universities has deeply influenced women’s options for expressing an autonomic intellectual voice, albeit not uncontested. Although historically and doctrinally, there has been no barrier to women to comment and interpret Islamic sacred texts, their role has been primarily as transmitters rather than as interpreters of the tradition (Hermansen 2013: 11). In the twentieth century, Muslim women beyond the circle of a few elite scholarly families, began to have access to higher education and obtained the tools needed to engage in writing interpretive theology. This shifting institutional context of women’s learning and claiming authority has had a dramatic effect on the expansion and global networking of female activists and scholars whose work addresses such issues from within the tradition. “The authority of holding an academic degree and position within a university system has increasingly allowed Muslim women to present ideas that challenge traditional perspectives” (Hermansen 2013: 23).

Hermansen brings in how in recent times, Western European universities have played an explicit role in these processes. Hermansen points specifically at Germany and Austria, that support the creation of academic positions on a par with those accorded to Christian faculties within the academic system (Hermansen 2013: 23).

In her introductory article ‘The New Voices of Muslim Women Theologians’, Marcia Hermansen unfolds her analysis of the legitimacy of Islamic theology in the West and the role of women. She explains how:

current lively and critical discussions about the interpretation of religion and the role of Islam in all areas of life have provoked a renewal in

speculative theology among Muslims which addresses all areas of ethical, interpretative, and constructive engagement with religious teachings. (Hermansen 2013: 13)

In these critical discussions, female scholars play a prominent role. They re-read and re-translate existing legal and theological interpretations and resources from a woman's perspective (Hermansen 2013: 19). Importantly, they study Qur'an from a 'gendered' perspective. Some connect to the religious intellectual current to only relate to the Qur'an (referring to the approaches of scholars like Riffat Hassan). But they increasingly also include studying *hadith*, as well as legal theory and rulings (*fiqh*) (Hermansen 2013: 19–20).

Hermansen calls this trend 'Muslima theology', which she identifies as a constructive theology that pursues a Muslim theology of religious pluralism (2013: 33).³⁴ Religious pluralism is the consequence of changing global norms, in which men and women both get more space for making individual choices (cf. Sinclair 2016). A theology of religious pluralism endorses the moral acceptability of this situation. It critically reflects on gender positions, challenging prevalent patriarchal readings and practices.

Topic-wise, 'Muslima theology' often pivots around the validity of traditional interpretations of Qur'anic verses like Sura 4:34 and Sura 2:228, as these address the (hierarchical) relationship between the spouses, including a possible approval of domestic violence. In their critical reflections, female *mufasssirūn* (exegetes) often emphasise how these verses have been revealed in a specific context, and their interpretation should always include contemporary cultural and legal norms as well. Exegetes should therefore pose the question how the text can be understood in dialogue with its context, which is always time and culture dependent.

Related to this, they discuss the authority of male-dominated interpretations and the question whether women can gain religious authority while coming with interpretive alternatives. Furthermore, the question is raised whether gender inequality must be considered a problematic outgrowth typical for Muslim society's clash with modernity or whether the aim of the revelation was to obtain gender equality. Some connect to the hermeneutic procedure that is often used in the Islamic feminist approach, which consists of three steps: first, reviewing verses quoted by males to establish inequality; secondly, citing verses that clearly enunciate the equality; and lastly, deconstructing

34 Hermansen refers to the contribution of the American scholar Jerusha Tanner Lamptey in the edited volume.

verses attentive to male and female dissimilarities (Abu Zayd 2006: 90–91, referring to Margot Badran’s work on Islamic feminism).

From Hermansen’s account, we can identify seven characteristics of Muslima Theology. Firstly, it is predominantly located within Western universities. Many Muslim women writing theology are Muslim scholars living in the West, trained in or acquainted with postcolonial women’s studies at Western universities (Hermansen 2013: 24). Secondly, Muslima theology must contain an element of ‘idea-development’ that could be considered ‘theological’. Thirdly, Hermansen situates Muslima theology as ‘progressive thinking in a contemporary context’ (Hermansen 2013: 13).³⁵ As a fourth characteristic, Muslima theology, innovative in approach, seeks its legitimacy *within* the religious tradition. In this endeavour, “Their sources cannot be limited to pre-modern theologies of *‘ilm al-kalam* and *‘aqida*, which tended to be scholastic in argumentation and to address matters that are no longer compelling or relevant to most Muslims. Therefore, the writings of the new cohort of Muslim women theologians draw on a range of initiatives that support their project” (Hermansen 2013: 13). This relates to its fifth feature. ‘Muslima theology’ takes an explorative and multidisciplinary approach, theoretically often (but not exclusively) rooted in Critical Theory and Gender Studies (Hermansen 2013: 22). They seek an understanding that addresses the multiplicity of perspectives while giving this a theological imprint. The sixth characteristic of Muslima theology is its activism. Starting from this academic field, the theologians enter “in conversation with global activism for Muslim women’s rights, new academic and institutional contexts of higher-level studies of the Islamic tradition, and to an extent, more traditional institutions and discourses of Islamic learning” (Hermansen 2013: 24). Often supported by references to Amina Wadud’s work, this activism intends to produce a critical reading and to offer alternative interpretations that could propose new meanings. Seventhly and finally, Hermansen noted that ‘Muslima theology’ is still in a preliminary stage. While female scholars are increasingly working to counter conservative discourses through their academic contributions, this progressive thinking is not yet widely accepted in certain circles, especially in conservative religious settings.

35 Hermansen accounts that “When contemporary Muslim women engage in scriptural interpretation and theology they are breaking new ground in a number of areas, not only as females, but also as interpreters of the religious tradition in the context of significant contemporary challenges” (2013: 13).

6.3.4 Stella El Bouayadi-van de Wetering: *a Gender Critical Approach to Islamic Theology*

A publication that fits in the trend of endorsing change *in* tradition by producing an exegetical renewal, is the contribution of the Dutch Stella El Bouayadi-van de Wetering, lecturer of Arabic and staff member of the Centre for Islamic Theology in Amsterdam. El Bouayadi-van de Wetering was born in 1954 in a ‘not very practising’ Roman Catholic family; she studied Arabic at Utrecht University and in Egypt in the 1970s. She converted to Islam in the early 1980s. She received her Ph.D. in 1990, with a study into education in Arabic language and culture for Moroccan children in the Netherlands.³⁶

The chapter to be discussed here is entitled ‘A gender critical approach to Islamic theology and dialogue. The case of slander (*qadhf*) and rape’, as part of an edited volume of the German professor for Religious Studies and Missiology Volker Küster and the Indonesian Christian theologian Robert Setio (eds.), *Muslim-Christian Relations Observed*. It was published in 2014 by the Evangelische Verlagsanstalt in Leipzig.

El Bouayadi urges for a re-reading and re-translating of existing legal and theological interpretations from a gendered perspective, which Hermansen referred to as ‘Muslima theology’ (Hermansen 2013: 19). She calls on Islamic theologians and exegetes to not remain limited to the context of Arabic culture at the time of revelation, nor to adhere to the male-centric viewpoint of legalists (*fuqaha*) from ancient times and cultures. Instead, she focuses on social justice as originally intended in the revelation but wrongly interpreted in later times. Like the other Qur’anic scholars, she does not dispute the divine nature of the Qur’an.

As a case study, she looks at the topic of slander (*qadhf*) in relation to an accusation of rape from a gender-critical approach, addressing her contribution to a public of Muslim as well as non-Muslim readers (El Bouayadi 2014: 234). Her starting point is that the Qur’anic revelation aimed to gain more rights and protection for women. She identifies as the issue at stake that texts originally intended to protect women from unjust accusations have been interpreted in such a way that they became a hindrance for women. The female perspective was still important at the time when the Qur’anic verses about slander (*qadhf*) were revealed, but it soon disappeared during the development of the Islamic ‘penal code’ as a comprehensive system of legal rules (El Bouayadi 2014: 234–5).

36 www.hagar-sara.nl/wiezijnwij, last accessed 18-8-2023.

El Bouayadi then focuses on the effect of this legal reasoning, which she considers highly problematic: to prevent being accused of slander, someone must be able to bring forth four sound witnesses who were present at the extramarital sexual act because only in that case the accusation that a woman was having prohibited sexual intercourse can hold. The problem for a rape victim is how to file a complaint against her aggressor without risking being charged with slander, which carries a punishment almost as severe as that for engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

El Bouayadi explored the existing texts on adultery (*zīna*) and slander (*qadhf*) in Qur'an exegesis (*tafsīr*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), comparing them to the higher purposes of the divine law (*maqāsid al-sharī'a*). These higher purposes can be seen as the original juridical principles behind the texts of the *fiqh*, aiming to protect life, religion, the soul, the intellect, possessions and honour (Nekroumi 2017, *supra*). According to El Bouayadi following the *maqāsid* principles means that both the protection of the victim and that of the accused perpetrator are at stake. The example of slander demonstrates how a dominant male interpretive frame has obscured the original intention, but it can be reconstructed to reveal the original intent.

Her hermeneutical method follows those of so-called Islamic feminists whose approach consists of the three steps of Islamic feminist theology: first, reviewing verses quoted by males to establish inequality; secondly, citing verses that clearly enunciate the equality; and lastly, deconstructing verses attentive to male and female dissimilarities. Moreover, El Bouayadi sees the ongoing gender inequality as a result of the clash between Muslim society and modernity, where the original aim of the revelation to achieve gender equality was lost.

Subsequently, she concludes that only a gender-sensitive approach can restore the original Qur'anic intention, in this case the legal protection of a raped woman, and in the case of slander of both men and women.

6.3.5 *Concluding Remarks: 'Muslima Theology' as a Shared Commitment*

Marcia Hermansen observed that 'Muslima theologians' engage in scriptural interpretation and theology, breaking new ground in a number of areas, not only as females but also as interpreters of the religious tradition in the context of significant contemporary challenges (Hermansen 2013: 13). The three examples in this paragraph showed how engaged female scholars reflected on what it means to be in a position to effect change, and if so, in what directions, towards whom, and with what intensity or speed. Like their male counterparts, they work dialogically and hermeneutically, seeking alternative but authentic and authoritative 'interpretation spaces' in a male-dominated tradition. The

Erlangen discussion revealed how these scholars discuss their positionality between intellectualism and activism. They are well aware of the intellectual environment offered by the university, while expressing consciousness that their work often concerns themes that are surrounded by taboo within traditional diaspora communities ('because it is written in the Qur'an') or clothed with suspicion by those who consider Islam essentially misogynist.

With their dual interests (theological reflection and social-scientific exploration) and attitudes (engaged-activist and scholarly-distanced), they do not want to focus on a distinction between female and male scholars, but rather on the difference between progressive and regressive thought and ideologies. They share this commitment to progressive thinking with the other scholars featured in this study, regardless of gender. This is also the case with the final scholar whose work I will discuss in this chapter.

6.4 'Alternative' Academic Theological Proposals: Touching the Boundaries of Normativity?

I will finish this chapter with a discussion of the systematic theological book of Mouhanad Khorchide *Islam is mercy: trajectories of a modern religion (Islam ist Barmherzigkeit: Grundzüge einer modernen Religion)*, published in 2012 by Herder Verlag.

There are several reasons why he should not be left out of the review gallery. One reason is that he ranks number 1 in the top 3 of the most productive scholars in Germany and of the nine centres altogether.³⁷ Another important reason to portray a work of this highly visible scholar is that Khorchide formulates an "alternative theology" for the German Muslim diaspora context. Khorchide thus responds to Schulze's assignment to Islamic theologians not only to administer but also to elaborate the Islamic intellectual tradition (see Chapter 3.1). According to Khorchide, Islamic (university) theology has a major responsibility in the contemporary world, both in the Arab world as well as in Europe, and he addresses his message to Muslims and non-Muslims.

Khorchide, like scholars previously discussed, relates to modernist scholars like Nasr Abu Zayd, Fazlur Rahman, Mohamed Arkoun and Amina Wadud. Additionally, Khorchide advocates for intellectual renewal and against a 'blind'

37 The sample included 53 single-authored and 26 co-authored publications (books, edited volumes, chapters, and articles) on topics across the four focal fields. Khorchide also reworked some of his academic studies into popular scientific publications, reaching out to lay audiences.

following of local imams or transnational preachers ‘who only need such obedience to keep their power dominance’, which contradicts the Qur’anic message (Khorchide 2016: 47).

He makes a firm theological contribution to an issue that has been put under severe pressure by political Islamists: how does the religious collective ideal of a God-given *umma* relate to the rights of the religious individual? Is God merciful by giving the individual the freedom and responsibility to find one’s way? Or should the community provide for the socio-political structures to enforce that individuals exercise their religious duties? Khorchide connects this to the geopolitical situation in which radical Islamists strive for a theocracy in certain Muslim-majority countries, while the USA and some European countries support the dictatorial regime of Saudi Arabia (2016: 174–5).³⁸

But there is another reason. His proposal caused a considerable commotion in Germany and Austria and the book caught a lot of attention in the media. On the one hand, resistance came from militant extreme right hardliners who physically threatened him (while, ironically, a few years later they used Khorchide’s Islam criticism to endorse their extreme right anti-Islam propaganda).³⁹ On the other hand, opposition came from community-based organisations, including members of the Münster Advisory Council (*Beirat*). They were upset, as in his criticism, Korchide not only targeted so-called Salafis, but also ‘mainstream’ Ash’ari thought, which is the prevalent theological school among the majority of Sunnite Muslims in Germany.

In the following, I will first capture the core of his book. Then I will briefly say something about the responses from society, particularly from a number of German Muslim organisations that opposed his use of the university platform.

6.4.1 Mouhanad Khorchide: *Theology of Mercy as ‘Alternative Theology’*

In *Islam is Mercy*, Khorchide explains how an actualisation of understanding Islam can only be fruitful if it takes the Islamic tradition itself seriously (2016: 13). The opinions elaborated by Muslim scholars over a period of 1400 years must be taken seriously, but these should also be further developed (*fortzudenken und weiterzuentwickeln*) (2016: 13). This gives Islamic theology a major responsibility in the world, especially now, both in the Arab world as in Europe.

38 Additionally, Khorchide points out the role of geopolitics in these global tensions. He not only includes militant and violent Salafist currents but also the USA and some European states that support the Saudi and other dictatorial regimes. Moreover, he calls for religious institutions in the United States and Europe to increase their appeal for justice and human rights on national and international platforms (2016: 174–5).

39 Nos.nl/artikel/2522684-agent-die-werd-aangevallen-in-Mannheim-in-levensgevaar, 31 May 2024.

“Islam can only remain alive here and now through us Muslims”, immediately added by the disclaimer that this does not mean that the reader would have to agree with all of his suggestions or positions that are included in his book (2016: 14).⁴⁰

Born in 1971 in multireligious Beirut, Lebanon, in a Palestinian refugee family, Khorchide received his religious education primarily in a boys’ high school in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s (Khorchide 2016: 18). In Saudi Arabia he encountered a society “that does not know plurality” (2016: 17) and was hostile against Shi’a Islam and Sufism (2016: 18–19). At the age of 17, he migrated to Austria where he studied Sociology at the University of Vienna. He received his Ph.D. with a dissertation in which he vehemently criticised Islamic religious teachers in Austria and Germany because of their poor Islamic pedagogical perceptions and skills.

This biography stands at the basis of his central question he elaborates in his book *‘Islam ist Barmherzigkeit’* – which can be translated as *Islam is mercy or compassion*. His life experiences fed his endeavour to come up with alternative options for Muslims in Europe, who, like he did, grew up with contradictions: how can Islam help to deal with contradictions, or even cognitive dissonances, that come with a restrictive understanding of God and the Islamic prime sources? Moreover, his personal experiences strongly colored his questions about contemporary Islam and the state of Muslims in Germany, Western Europe and the world.

In his introductory chapter, he confesses how, once arrived in Austria, he started to pose new soteriological questions: whereas according to Islamic theology, atheists (those who consciously deny God) are doomed to eternally reside in hell, Khorchide met morally pristine people who were not Muslim, making him say that “I could not and cannot reconcile this with my common sense and my religious conscience” (Khorchide 2016: 28).⁴¹ This evoked questions about what this meant for his image of God and conceptions of being Muslim. “What kind of God is that, who has determined and wanted it this way?!” (2016: 28).⁴²

40 Khorchide addresses lay and believing readers while providing his perspective on the principles of Islam as a modern religion from his scholarly and believer’s viewpoint (2016: 12).

41 The original reference in German is: “Ich konnte und kann dies nicht mit meinem gesunden Menschenverstand und meinem religiösen Gewissen vereinbaren“ (Khorchide 2016: 28).

42 The original reference in German is: “Was ist das für ein Gott, der das so bestimmt hat und will?!” (Khorchide 2016: 28).

Against a widely spread ‘theology of obedience and fear’, he wants to offer ‘the theology of mercy’ as an alternative (*die Theologie der Barmherzigkeit*, 2016: 31).⁴³ The current problem is not Islam itself, Khorchide claims, but its restrictive and entrenched interpretations. People understand Islam, and God, wrongly, whether they are Salafis or other fundamentalists, including non-Muslims. A systematic theology that starts from the maxim that God is Merciful, will arrive at a completely different conclusion. God invites all to love Him. Men and women can in freedom accept God’s call for enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong [*hisba*]. *Kafirun* [disbelievers, WB] are those who willfully refuse this invitation (Khorchide 2016: 104–105).

To support this argument, Khorchide uses classical theological and philosophical rationalist theories, equally referring to the Prophet Muhammed and Immanuel Kant:

The following statement by the Prophet Muhammad is reminiscent of Immanuel Kant’s concept of freedom: ‘No one is really a believer if his will does not correspond to what I have proclaimed’. According to Kant, man is free when he is determined to do good. (Khorchide 2016: 132)⁴⁴

For Kant, the justification of the dignity of humans lies in his moral capacity.⁴⁵ A humanistic Qur’an hermeneutics connects to this, as human dignity is established through the creation of man out of the unconditional mercy of God and through his endowment with reason and freedom (Khorchide 2016: 215).⁴⁶

43 Khorchide’s book wants to explain this core idea in a simple manner that non-experts can also follow. Among his potential audience he considers Muslims “who are prepared to reflect on their faith, and who are open to answers they might not know before” (2016: 31). He also hopes to reach those who have a ‘heavily distorted image of Islam’ as a restrictive and violent religion (2016: 31).

44 The original reference in German is: “Folgende Aussage des Propheten Muhammad erinnert an Immanuel Kants Freiheitsbegriff: »Keiner ist richtig gläubig, wenn sein Wille nicht dem entspricht, was ich verkündet habe«. Nach Kant ist der Mensch frei, wenn er für das Gute entschlossen ist“ (Khorchide 2016: 132, referring to Hadith nr. 8 as transmitted by *an-Nasawi*, *al-Arba’ün*).

45 The original reference in German is: “Für Kant liegt die Begründung der Würde des Menschen in seiner Moralfähigkeit“ (Khorchide 2016: 215).

46 The original reference in German is: “Durch die Erschaffung des Menschen aus der bedingungslosen Barmherzigkeit Gottes heraus, und durch seine Ausstattung mit Vernunft und Freiheit ist die menschliche Würde begründet“ (Khorchide 2016: 215).

Spiritual liberation begins with reflected thinking, with questioning, with wanting to understand, with critical self-reflection. The Islamic formula <There is no deity but God> is the expression of a free, independent spirit. The formula denies any dependence, any paternalism, any glorification of people, things, ideas or thoughts. The only valid guiding principle is God. And what is God? He is the Mercy, the Love. Love and mercy form the framework in which the spirit can and should exercise itself freely. (Khorchide 2016: 217)⁴⁷

Even more so:

For the Qur'an's potential for liberation to unfold, one must not cling to its literal text. The historical context of the proclamation is crucial to understanding the intention of the text. If one leaves this context out of consideration, the danger exists that the Qur'an will be abused as instrument of oppression. (Khorchide 2016: 220–1)⁴⁸

Moreover, "The central values of the Qur'an are justice, freedom, inviolability of human dignity, and the human social responsibility. An Islamic reform means rediscovering these values and placing them at the center of religious life" (Khorchide 2016: 232).⁴⁹ Faith and freedom actually stand in a dialectical relationship, Khorchide states (2016: 232).⁵⁰

47 The original reference in German is: "Geistige Befreiung beginnt mit reflektiertem Denken, mit Hinterfragen, mit Verstehenwollen, mit der kritischen Reflektion seiner selbst. Die islamische Formel »Es gibt keine Gottheit außer Gott« ist Ausdruck eines freien, unabhängigen Geistes. Die Formel verneint jegliche Abhängigkeit, jegliche Bevormundung, jegliche Verherrlichung von Menschen, Dingen, Ideen oder Gedanken. Einziges gültiges Leitprinzip ist Gott. Und was ist Gott? Er ist die Barmherzigkeit, die Liebe. Liebe und Barmherzigkeit bilden den Rahmen, in dem sich der Geist frei ausüben kann und soll" (Khorchide 2016: 217).

48 The original reference in German is: "Damit sich das Befreiungspotenzial des Koran entfalten kann, darf man nicht an seinem Wortlaut kleben. Der historische Kontext der Verkündigung ist maßgeblich, um die Intention des Textes zu verstehen. Lässt man diesen Kontext außer Acht, besteht die Gefahr, dass der Koran als Unterdrückungsinstrument missbraucht wird" (Khorchide 2016: 220–1).

49 The original reference in German is: 'Denn die zentralen Werte des Koran sind: Gerechtigkeit, Gleichheit, Freiheit, Unantastbarkeit der menschlichen Würde und die soziale Verantwortlichkeit des Menschen. Eine islamische Reform bedeutet, diese Werte wiederzuentdecken und sie ins Zentrum religiösen Lebens zu stellen' (Khorchide 2016: 232).

50 Khorchide bases his conclusions on a theological examination of central kalām questions, such as the human representation of God, the problem of evil (theodicy), the relationship between faith and action, the concept of sin, and the interaction between free

Khorchide thus systematically theologises the conception of an absolute merciful God and the consequences for human individuals of a reasoned understanding of the message of the Qur'an: God stands in a loving relationship with humans, which He created. For people then to love God, one must know God (Khorchide 2016: 31–37). Briefly put, humans can do so with the help of the revelation.⁵¹ However, "It is amazing that this God, the absolute Merciful, has been hardly noted as such in the Islamic theology and folk religion!" (Khorchide 2016: 41).⁵²

Khorchide does not want to reduce the Qur'anic point of departure of ordaining the good and forbidding the evil into an ethical normative-instructive tool. Rather, he draws attention to the spiritual (building a bond with God) and to human reason (with which a person can determine what is good or bad). Beyond the classical dispute between the Mu'tazila, the Maturidi and the Ash'ari on this point, Khorchide poses that "Religion must achieve something that reason cannot, otherwise it becomes replaceable" (2016: 93).⁵³ "Religion wants to give people meaning for their lives, remind them of their humanity, and offer them the opportunity to build a relationship with God", Khorchide explains. He adds to this that religion should not be reduced to its ethical function (2016: 92).⁵⁴ The intellect alone is insufficient for a human to answer the question about the *why* of acting good. For this, he needs the divine revelation (Khorchide 2016: 95).⁵⁵

will and predestination. He also explores the overarching question of how revelation, reason, and spirituality are interconnected. He offers responses based on his interpretation of the Qur'an, in which he finds a consistent portrayal of God as ultimately merciful.

51 A vital way to comprehend this fundamental ontological question has been to look at the ninety-nine Attributes of God written in the Qur'an (Khorchide 2016: 35). One of these essentials is that God is the Compassionate (*ar-Rahmān*). "So God is not just compassionate [merciful]; he is the Compassionate [the Merciful]" (Khorchide 2016: 41).

52 The original reference in German is: "Es ist erstaunlich, dass dieser Gott, der absolut Barmherzige, in der islamischen Theologie und im Volksglauben kaum konsequent wahrgenommen wird!" (Khorchide 2016: 41).

53 The original German reference is: "Religion muss etwas leisten, das die Vernunft nicht leistet, ansonsten wird sie ersetzbar" (Khorchide 2016: 93).

54 The original German reference is: "Religion will dem Menschen Sinn für sein Leben geben, ihn an sein Menschsein erinnern, ihm aber auch die Möglichkeit bieten, eine Beziehung zu Gott aufzubauen. (...) Religion darf nicht auf ihre ethische Funktion reduziert werden" (Khorchide 2016: 92).

55 In this understanding, Khorchide distinguishes his thinking from those liberal thinkers who reduce the core of Islam to the confession of faith (Khorchide 2016: 97).

Khorchide's proposal unmistakably has features of the rationalist Mu'tazilite school of thought but does not coincide.⁵⁶ We could call it 'neo-Mu'tazilism', linking to what Hildebrandt observed, in which "In the realm of theology, the Mu'tazila is for modernist Muslims today what Ibn Rushd is in the realm of philosophy: a symbol of the rationalist heritage of Islam that has been marginalised and slandered by Hanbalite, Ash'arite and mystical forces over the centuries, and whose revival seems to enable the hoped for connection to the Western-influenced modernity" (Hildebrandt 2007: 3).⁵⁷

However, more useful than losing ourselves in classifying Khorchide's intellectual thought as neo-Mu'tazilite or not, I think it is important to identify that he rejects a 'blind' or uncritical following of the Sunnite Ash'arite, Maturidi or Hanbali theological schools as prevalent among many German and European Muslims. He claims that only if the central maxime of God as Merciful is implemented can the intentions of the Qur'an become sufficiently clear. He calls for a "humanistic Qur'an hermeneutics", which he defines as:

a hermeneutics that sees in people a medium for the realisation of divine love and mercy through human's free will and free action. God and men cooperate side by side to make love and mercy a lived reality. This is the basis of humanistic Qur'anic hermeneutics. (Khorchide 2016: 187)⁵⁸

How these are understood largely depends on the contextual reading of the Qur'an (Khorchide 2016: 36). People have a free devotion (*freie Hingabe*) towards God. "Precisely that is the meaning of 'Islam': the devotion to God, in

56 The five principles of the Mu'tazilite school (*Usūl al-khamsa*): Unity of God; Divine justice; Promise and threat; Commanding good and prohibiting evil; The intermediary state of the sinner (Saeed 2006).

57 The original reference in German is: "Im Bereich der Theologie ist die Mu'tazila für modernistische Muslime heute etwa das, was im Bereich der Philosophie Ibn Rushd ist: Symbol für das von den hanbalitischen, ash'aritischen und mystischen Kräften über die Jahrhunderte an den Rand gedrängte und verleumdete rationalistische Erbe des Islams, dessen Wiederaufnahme den erhofften Anschluss an die westlich geprägte Moderne zu ermöglichen scheint" (Hildebrandt 2007: 3).

58 The original reference in German is: "Daher spreche ich von humanistischer Koranhermeneutik: einer Hermeneutik, die im Menschen ein Medium der Verwirklichung göttlicher Liebe und Barmherzigkeit durch den freien Willen und das freie Handeln des Menschen sieht. Gott und Mensch kooperieren Seite an Seite, um Liebe und Barmherzigkeit als gelebte Wirklichkeit zu gestalten. Das ist die Basis humanistischer Koranhermeneutik" (Khorchide 2016: 187).

the sense of the promise of God's love and mercy" (Khorchide 2016: 39).⁵⁹ God is absolute, he is beyond/outside space and time. Thus, He does not take His decisions in the context of time. The creation of humans is part of His eternal plan, which does take place in a historical realisation as well as its end-time completion (Khorchide 2016: 40).

Here as well, Khorchide joins those Qur'an hermeneuticians who bring in that the Qur'an, as the materialised dialogue of God with humans, "can only be understood in its historical revelatory context" (Khorchide 2016: 61).

When Muslims address this Qur'anic claim [not only to the Arabs of the seventh century, but also to peoples of other languages and cultures, people of different times and eras and with different cognitive and emotional abilities], they have to historically contextualise its imagery in order to express it through these images to recognise transmitted, overarching principles and statements. (Khorchide 2016: 61)⁶⁰

Referring to Nasr Abu Zayd (2008), he argues that:

The Qur'an was revealed discursively; it is the result of dialogue, debate, argumentation, assumption and rejection (...) The Qur'an as discourse can only be understood in a discursive way; this means that both the individual experiences and the social environment of the reader influence his understanding of the Qur'an. The maxims of the Qur'anic text, which form the starting point of humanistic Qur'anic hermeneutics and are intended to serve as universal guidelines for every legitimate reading of the Qur'an, prevent selective understanding and arbitrariness in the way of reading the Qur'an. (Khorchide 2016: 189)⁶¹

59 The original reference in German is: "Der Mensch muss dies aber auch annehmen, denn es erfordert von ihm die freie Hingabe an Gott. Und genau das will das Begriff »Islam« ausdrücken: Die Hingabe an Gott, im Sinne der Zusage an Gottes Liebe und Barmherzigkeit" (Khorchide 2016: 39).

60 The original reference in German is: "Wenn Muslime diesem koranischen Anspruch [nicht nur die Araber des siebten Jahrhunderts anzusprechen, sondern auch Menschen anderer Sprachen und Kulturen, Menschen unterschiedlicher Zeiten und Epochen und mit unterschiedlichen kognitiven und emotionalen Fähigkeiten] tragen wollen, müssen sie seine Bildlichkeit historisch kontextualisieren, um die durch diese Bilder transportierten, übergeordneten Prinzipien und Aussagen zu erkennen" (Khorchide 2016: 61).

61 The original reference in German is: "Der Koran als Diskurs kann nur auf diskursive Weise verstanden werden; das heißt, dass sowohl die individuellen Erfahrungen als auch das gesellschaftliche Umfeld des Lesers seine Verstehensweise des Koran beeinflussen. Die Maximen des koranischen Textes, die den Ausgangspunkt der humanistischen

In his view, this theology should become the basis for the European diaspora and be envisioned in religious education, where it should be the foundation of an Islamic pedagogy.

Like Sahin and Sejdini, Khorchide's answer to those (young) Muslims who experience contingencies and contradictions in their living in Europe, is to overcome these uncertainties by focusing on the relation of God with humans, in which humans can maintain a loving relationship with God, rather than feeling restricted or frightened by a punishing God. If they embrace the notion of a loving God, the emphasis will shift to social justice and gender justice, and interreligious dialogue will become very well possible. Understood in this way, Islam is no longer scary or dangerous (Khorchide 2016).

Muslims – let alone Islamic theologians – should not lose themselves in seeking an “externalisation” of faith, reducing piety to rituals and visible identity markers like beard and headscarf (Khorchide 2016: 173–4). The Qur'an does not provide an encompassing legal guide, but in the first place a spiritual guide that enables humans to experience God (Khorchide 2016: 176–177).

Similar to those theologians whose work I discussed before, Khorchide is of the opinion that only an appropriate religion that can deal with the societal realities of the faithful – in this case Muslims living in Western Europe- is meaningful, just and sustainable.

Finally, Khorchide addresses, as one of the few scholars observed, the notion of soteriological pluralism, which in itself (the idea that members of diverse religious tradition are equally destined for Paradise) is fundamentally alien to Islam (Lange 2016: 153, referring to MacLiffe 1991: 290).⁶²

Koranhermeneutik bilden und als universale Richtlinien für jede legitime Lesart des Koran dienen sollen, verhindern selektives Verstehen und Beliebigkeit in der Lesart des Koran“ (Khorchide 2016: 189).

62 He also answers the soteriological question he raised in the beginning of his book: Who resides in hell? Is it about this simple distinction between those who call themselves Muslim, who will eventually enter Paradise, and all those others (Christians, Jews, unbelievers, etc) who do not? No, Khorchide says. In his theology of compassion, it is distinctive whether a human accepts God's invitation to love Him and accept His mercy. A human is thus given full responsibility over their deeds and moral actions instead of being caught in a predestined fate. Therefore, symbolically understood, hell can already start in the earthly life (2016: 65). Khorchide condemns those who use violence in God's name. Just like the *Murji'a* argued in the formative period, Khorchide brings up that it will be at the Day of Judgment (the youngest day) that one will be set free by God, through which one will find the truth about oneself (p. 57). The vivid imaginations of Paradise and Hell as described in the Meccan verses of the Qur'an function – like the Mu'tazilite argued – as divine attempts to explain to the earliest listeners in the Arab peninsula of the 7th century the deep impact of the two, which are beyond human imagination in itself (Khorchide 2016: 59–60).

6.4.2 *Resistance*

Khorchide's proposal for an 'alternative theology' received considerable resistance. This came partly from 'hardliners' belonging to militant German groups of radical Islamists. Khorchide experienced in 2016 how these radical groups led a bitter campaign against him and his work, even resulting in several death threats and he was given police protection (Heneghan 2016).

However, a larger group of German Muslims also voiced their disagreement with Khorchide's work. Between specific organised Muslim faith communities, particularly the German branch of the Turkish Diyanet – DITIB – and Khorchide, a severe break of trust took place. DITIB filed a motion of distrust in 2013 against his 'Islam ist Barmherzigkeit', as it was considered deviant from the central beliefs of Islam (Engelhardt 2017: 149), read the Asharite theological school and the 'neo-Mutazilite' ideas of Khorchide. Some called his work heretic (Khorchide 2016: 13). According to Engelhardt's account, DITIB motivated its complaint in 2013 with the argument that "theology should strengthen identity, not irritate, should mirror the faith of the grassroots, without criticising Islamic tradition and practices" (Engelhardt 2017: 146).⁶³

This dismissal caused a delicate situation for all stakeholders involved: the German professor himself, the university board of the Westfalian Wilhelms University Münster, and at a distance also the state via the German Ministry of Education and Science (cf. Agai 2016).

In itself, it concerned a situation in which the German law foresees (Indenhuck 2016: 303–4). Religious communities have binding rights to participate in the organisation of academic theology. This is arranged through the advisory councils – the *Beiräte*. This means that if they have conservative ideas about religious content, they are entitled to express them. However, the German constitution also emphasises that the religious communities should show some leniency as well, recognising that academic theology is located in the university, not in a 'seminary' (Indenhuck 2016: 303). It is important to note that these legal considerations only apply to the teaching part.

Indeed, Khorchide brought up for his defence that he distinguished between the commitment to teach Islam as a way to learn about faith, and conduction of unrestricted research, separate from any guidelines established by (a commitment to) representative organisations (Engelhardt 2017: 143–161).

Despite this opposition, Khorchide remained at his post.

63 The original reference in German is: "Theologie soll Identität stärken, nicht irritieren, soll den Glauben der 'Basis' spiegeln, ohne Kritik an islamischer Tradition und Lebenspraxis zu üben" (Engelhardt 2017: 146).

6.4.2.1 Muhammad Sven Kalisch

With this ending, the case took a different turn than that of another Muslim scholar at the same university several years earlier, which also raised considerable commotion. That case occurred in 2008 before the establishment of the new Münster program.⁶⁴ It concerned the Professor for Religion and Islam, Muhammed Sven Kalisch, who held an endowed Chair for Islamic Pedagogy. Kalisch was the leading lecturer in the first German academic program that provided training for schoolteachers in confessional Islamic religious education (Völker 2014: 177). This confessional characteristic involved a relationship with the Muslim community in Germany.

Kalisch (born in 1966 in Hamburg, Germany) was a Qur'an specialist who had converted to the marginal Zaydite school of thought.⁶⁵ In 2008, he expressed the revisionist claim that the Prophet Muhammad was not a historical figure. Consequently, he lost his religious credentials minimally needed to be recognised by the Muslim communities in Germany to remain in his post as a teaching professor in the confessional teachers training. The situation was untenable. His provocative opinion had caused a total lack of trust from the organised Muslim communities in Germany.

The Islamic Coordination Council, which advised the German Ministry of Science regarding the appointment of the Chair for Islamic religious education, annulled its authorisation (*Vocation*) for Muhammad Kalisch (Völker 2014: 178). From an academic point of view, however, there was insufficient reason to fire him as a professor. Although fiercely criticised by colleagues in Islamic Studies (for instance, by the Leiden Arabist Van Koningsveld (2009)), his scholarly work fell under the banner of academic freedom of research. However, the university could not refrain from action because of the constitutionally guaranteed ratio (Indenhuck 2016) that the religious community would recognise a theological professor. The university solved the situation by replacing Kalish to the Philology department at another faculty. He could keep his chair as Professor of Religion and Islam (Özdil 2011: 82; Engelhardt 2017: 143). His successor was Mouhanad Khorchide.

My interpretation of the commotion surrounding Mouhanad Khorchide is that it was less caused by dissatisfaction about the content of his 'alternative theology'. In my estimation, the resistance was foremost caused by the 'hijacking' by German media who embraced Khorchide as the much-wished expression of 'liberal Islam'. They hoisted him on the shield as the long-awaited

64 For a complete account, see Völker 2014.

65 A Yemeni branch of the Twelver Shi'a, the Zaydites fall under the Mu'tazilite school of thought.

liberal reformer, as the Luther of the German Muslims, implicitly or explicitly impeaching the authenticity of the mainstream Muslim groups.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has brought into focus how several scholars articulated the role of the new European university programs as platforms for rationalist reflections on the broad Islamic tradition and for enabling new theological approaches in the European context, aiming to maintain Islam's relevance for contemporary pluralistic societies – both in Europe and globally.

How unique were they in this regard? In itself, a modernist call for a 'revival' of rationalist thought, or the '(re)discovery' of the Mu'tazilite school of thought is not unique to Europe. Similar voices sound elsewhere (Kurzman 1998, see Chapter 1). Nevertheless, Western Muslim intellectuals have been prominent in these developments (Saeed 2006:153). Mohammed Hashas (2019) portrayed several as exponents of a 'European Islamic thought' (see Chapter 3.5).

The academics discussed in this chapter apprehended that their constructivist ideas and intellectual positions could be at odds with more conservative or mainstream grassroots currents. In this regard, the chapter paid particular attention to the position of female scholars in the European programs. Moreover, in his discussed inaugural lecture, Zekirija Sejdini noticed almost through the nose that he and quite many of his colleagues at European universities would probably not get a '*nihil obstat*' from 'clerical' offices for their humanist worldview designed to fit the contemporary context (Sejdini 2016: 21).⁶⁶ As a case in point, we saw how a work of Mouhanad Khorchide that called for an 'alternative theology' caused quite a stir in Germany.

Against this, the presented scholars emphasised the relevance of European university theology to scrutinise certain dominant knowledge regimes that juxtapose 'Islam' and 'the West', particularly those simplifying, reductionist

66 The full reference in German goes as follows: "Auch wenn das Fehlen einer höchsten theologischen Autorität innerhalb des Islams, die die Deutungshoheit über die Quellen innehat, im gegenwärtigen Kontext für viele als eine Schwäche erscheint, kann angesichts der in den mehrheitlich muslimischen Ländern herrschenden theologischen Positionen Gott für die Nichtexistenz einer verbindlichen islamischen »Kirche« nicht genug gedacht werden. Nicht nur weil viele Kolleginnen und Kollegen, die an den europäischen Universitäten forschen kein »nihil obstat« bekommen würden, sondern weil es keines institutionellen Beschlusses bedarf, um aus den islamischen Quellen Menschenbilder zu gewinnen, die dem gegenwärtigen Kontext entsprechen, das humanistische Menschenbild bekräftigen und neue theologische Ansätze im europäischen Kontext ermöglichen" (Sejdini 2016: 21).

tendencies that find a ready market on the internet. They not only targeted (young) Muslims, but also wider audiences among which anti-Muslim resentment has been on the rise. Sejdini and the other presented scholars fostered new theological approaches in the European context that could leave this binary thinking behind.

Firstly, they argued that certain dominant ‘memories of discourse’ need to be ‘pilloried’ (Hildebrandt 2007, see Chapter 1). Aware of a possible intellectual distance, or even distrust, between their university positions and ‘grassroots’ society, they uphold the tasks of European university theology to study certain dominant ‘knowledge regimes’ that juxtapose ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ and so must be criticised.

Second, the scholars quoted in this chapter urged the exploration of new ventures grounded in a Qur’anic understanding of God and humanity that can integrate and promote social justice, gender equality, freedom of religion, and minority rights. As an example, the chapter summarised an article of Stella El Bouayadi-van de Wetering in which she explained to her readers how a gender-critical hermeneutical approach to the Qur’anic text can retrace its message of social justice. By critically engaging with classical exegesis (*tafsīr*) and legal theory (*usūl al-fiqh*), and incorporating contemporary interpretation methods such as Qur’an hermeneutics, historical analysis, and constructivist theology, they were creating an intellectual framework for rethinking humanism from the Islamic point of view (cf. Bektovic 2018). The chapter presented Sejdini and Nekroumi as examples of this intellectual dialogue between Islamic and European humanist philosophies, which brings new angles and dialectical questions to the forefront.⁶⁷ These cases brought up that not only interreligious plurality, but also modern pluralism can be Qur’anicly endorsed.

Connected to this is a third point many scholars in Islamic theology wanted to make: their work is not aimed at a one-sided adoption of Western values and their associated standards; these should not be imposed unilaterally. Crucial in their work is to show that Muslims can accept these values while anchoring them in their own religious and philosophical worldviews. They reflect on how to value the principles of the democratic secular state granting human rights *from* a religious point of view rather than to substantiate the system *by*

67 The European humanist philosophical tradition offers new angles, dialectical questions, and modern critical reading methods that do not or no longer belong to classical Islamic sciences but that are neither in contradiction to them. The emphasis of Western philosophy of religion on the human being as an ethical subject provides new ways for Muslim philosophers that can, in the words of Safet Bektovic, “clarify the human role and its responsibility in interpreting and implementing Islam” (Bektovic 2018).

religious norms (cf. Rohe 2010: 227). Nekroumi, for instance, stipulated that Islamic values have historically preceded Western values or can currently do so, as they share a philosophical basis rooted in antique philosophy. Implicitly or explicitly, references were frequently made to the Mu'tazilite rationalist theological school, which has been denounced by the Sunnite mainstream since the 11th century AD (see Chapter 1.4). This rationalist school could be described as a 'missing link' between modern Western thought and Islamic philosophy, suggesting that it should be restored or, if necessary, rediscovered. Importantly, scholars aimed to demonstrate that the classical Islamic scientific tradition itself provides contemporary Muslims with the methodological tools and conceptual theories needed to keep the Islamic tradition relevant in today's world. If it becomes clear that democracy and pluralism are supported by an Islamic ethos, the 'logjam' referenced by Nasr Abu Zayd will no longer stay in place (see Chapter 1.5).

Fourthly, as in the previous chapter, we saw again how the scholars advocated to communicate this message through education. They hope that their research findings can support young Muslims to stand against a (post)modern 'chaos' (Özsoy 2014) or 'uncertainty' (Sejdini 2016). They particularly envision support for young Muslims whom Mathias Rohe pointed to as 'the fifth way': the option to fully accept and contribute to Europe's leading principles and laws while preserving Muslim identity, as a way to substantially integrate into European societies within the given frame of far-reaching freedom of religion (Rohe 2010: 226). The observed scholars' answer to an existing fear of 'losing certainty' when a believer accepts epistemological plurality is to learn to deal with the tension between seeking certainty and experiencing contingency. Instead of rigid reductionism or a denial of contemporality, they call for the recognition of contextuality in the reading of the Qur'an. With an appeal to the intellectual tradition of Islamic dialectical scholarship (*kalām*), they consider the Qur'an as materialised dialogue of God with humans, which must be understood by its readers in a continual process. The context of the Muslim reader is now emphatically also that of Europe.

Finally, the examples in Chapter 6 show that the scholars did not opt for intellectual or religious relativism. The sources of Islam do not offer an 'infinite malleability'.⁶⁸ Even the most far-reaching example of Khorchide did not aim for any loss of connection of the faithful with their religious tradition. Instead, he ventured a strengthening of faith. Khorchide, like Sejdini and others, considered the anti-Western sentiments of some young Muslims

68 I borrowed this term from Jumana Al-Ahmad's dissertation (2022).

as counter-productive responses of Muslims in Europe to the predicaments they encounter. On the contrary, they call for an open attitude to plurality, as they hope this attitude will lead to self-confidence among Muslims in Western Europe. This plea not only concerns interreligious and intercultural diversity. It also includes intra-religious plurality. Based on this divine command, they argue that also from an Islamic perspective, pluralism is a fundamental human right.

Thus, nurturing these intra-religious discussions becomes a central task for European Islamic theology, and European universities form an important platform for their theoretical studies.

Articulating *Ikhtilāf*: the Paradigmatic Plurality of Islamic Theology at Western European Universities

According to this understanding, contingency entails plurality, and plurality in turn entails ambivalence and ambiguity.

ZEKIRIJA SEJDINI (2016: 18)¹



7.1 Introduction

Over 650 titles written by more than seventy authors, fifty themes, and four focal fields: We have overviewed and analysed a wide variety of objects covered in the publications. Based on a systematic survey, the study could select telling examples from every country and academic centre to get a comparative impression of the recent intellectual developments in Islamic university theology at Western European universities.

We were thus able to establish noticeable similarities in the four focus countries. The scholars' elaborations of religious pedagogy, their hermeneutical deconstructions of Qur'anic verses in the earliest and in contemporary contexts, and the study of the history of ideas from modern philosophical and historical perspectives, sometimes resulting in 'alternative theologies', appeared to have clear emancipatory intentions. We found how academic Islamic theology aimed to be relevant to Muslim communities and secular societies in Western Europe by bringing research-based ideas and conceptualisations into the academic fore, on equal footing with Christian academic theology and religious pedagogies.

The presented examples convincingly put into focus how Islamic theologians consciously reflected upon ways to combine historical-critical methods and critical-reflective approaches – both unequivocally considered necessary,

¹ The original reference in German is: "Gemäss diesem Verständnis hat Kontingenz Pluralität zur Folge, Pluralität zieht wiederum Ambivalenz und Ambiguität nach sich" (Sejdini 2016: 18).

thus settling unsatisfactory discussions about instrumentalising ‘outsider’ versus ‘insider’ positions, or worse, ‘neutral’ versus ‘subjective’ perspectives (see Chapter 3.7). Overall, I observed how, regardless of personal faith, these academic theologians were committed to obtaining a more comprehensive and contextualised insight into the broad religious tradition, often engaging interdisciplinary with other academic disciplines, such as history, social sciences or educational sciences.

Can we go a step further in uncovering a coherent pattern when scholars engage with such a wide array of topics using interdisciplinary methodologies and multi-epistemic approaches? My conclusive response to this question would be that it is precisely this extensive diversity and the unwavering emphasis on managing plurality that have been the fundamental characteristics of Islamic theology at Western European universities.

This might seem to be an obvious conclusion since Islam is a highly varied tradition. Who could deny that “difference, diversity and disagreement is an intrinsic part of Islam” (S. Ahmed 2016: 148)? Or in Ali Zaidi’s words: “Islam is neither monolithic ... nor devoid of any civilisational content” (Zaidi 2011: 25). Even more so, Aslan and Weiß accounted how “Like Christian or Jewish theology, Islamic theology can only be understood as plural” (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 74).² And has the anthropological ‘problem’ of analysing Islam’s huge empirical diversity not been long solved by Talal Asad, who suggested that Islam must be understood as a discursive tradition – even if this is not the puritanical outlook many pious believers might strive for?

From the previous chapters, however, it has become clear that the thematisation of plurality and pluralism is not as obvious as it might seem at first glance. Why else would the scholars bring this up time and again?

The strong emphasis on plurality lies firstly in the realisation that the empirical reality of Muslims living in Western Europe and globally is characterised by pluriformity that manifests in multiple forms. This was an important starting point for the new programs and their scholars. We can easily recall how the German pioneers expressed this as their point of departure (see Chapter 3.2):

With the establishment of Islamic theological studies in Germany, a new process will be started, which, particularly with an eye on its ... pluricontextuality, confronts this discipline with challenges that Islamic scholarship has faced never before. (Agai et al. 2014: 10–11)³

² The original reference in German is: “Wie die christliche oder die jüdische Theologie ist auch die islamische nur als Plural zu begreifen, als Theologien“ (Aslan & Weiß 2015: 74).

³ The original German reference is: “Mit dem Aufbau der islamisch-theologischen Studien in Deutschland wird ein neuer Prozess in Gang gesetzt, der gerade mit Blick auf seine ...

However, we also observed how several scholars went a step further: A religious tradition cannot ‘afford’ to be incapable of dealing with societal realities and a world far more plural than ever. Time and again, the scholars encouraged European Muslims to become ‘*Pluralitätsfähig*’ and to embrace unavoidable social, religious and cultural variations as positive values, also seen through an Islamic lens. Such tolerance and open attitude could function as a legitimate “fundamentalism prophylaxis” – a counter-narrative against currents militantly against inter- and intra-religious diversity (Engelhardt 2017: 65).

Indeed, the analytical focus on plurality formed the theologians’ central paradigmatic lens for examining the tradition. They intended to explore the diversity of Muslim understandings of the religious sources, their variegated religious experiences and the spatiotemporal contextuality of religious values, norms and practices. This overall observation thus fundamentally answers our question of what a European shaped Islamic theology looked like. In the European academic context, this paradigmatic plurality of Islamic theology is being articulated, discovered, and outlined in renewed and sometimes innovative ways.

Importantly, with their striking emphasis on recognising plurality and an orientation on diversity, they did not want to position themselves outside the classical Islamic scientific tradition. On the contrary, they positioned themselves amid a contested interpretative space traditionally recognised as such. To make that point, I will, as a way of conclusion, use the concept of *ikhtilāf* as a central, albeit perhaps paradoxical, notion of ‘agree to disagree’.

We will thus see how the mobilisation of a paradigm shift that puts the lens on plurality, pluralism and multiculturalism, while perceiving this as inherently Islamic, can be considered a core mission of Islamic theology at Western European universities.

7.2 Mobilisation of a Paradigm Shift

Although the term *ikhtilāf* was not used by all, I propose this as a capturing notion. The term immediately puts our attention to the fact that theological dispute and disagreement are inherent to Islamic Sciences – even at the heart of it (Walbridge 2002). How to deal with diversity within a unitarian religious ideal has always been paramount within the religious scholarly tradition of Islam. The concomitant paradoxes, dilemmas and antagonisms linger above the community of the faithful (*umma*) since its beginning. Contemporary

Plurikontextualität diese Disziplin vor Herausforderungen stellt, denen sich die islamische Gelehrsamkeit bisher in dieser Form nicht hat stellen müssen“ (Agai et al. 2014: 10–11).

Muslim intellectuals across the globe have been aware of these tensions, with the Western European scholars of Islam as a case in point.

7.2.1 *Thomas Bauer's Thesis of 'Ambiguitätstoleranz'*

To make their point that historically, the Islamic tradition has shown a more lenient attitude to diversity and dispute than might be expected in our days, many German and Austrian scholars referred to the recently published study of the Münster-based Arabist Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (The Culture of Ambiguity. An Alternative History of Islam), published by Verlag der Weltreligionen in 2011. This work won a prestigious German science award and was translated into English in 2021.⁴

Bauer's central thesis is that premodern Islam showed an inherent tolerance for plurality in ideas and practices (*Meinungsverschiedenheit*). However, it lost this flexibility in confrontation with modernity and Western imperialism. Instead, a shift towards intolerance for ambiguity occurred in the twentieth century (Bauer 2011: 14; 51–2). In his historical overview of Islamic thought in premodern times, Bauer extensively discusses the paradoxical attitude of earlier Islamic scholars (*ulama*) who, on the one hand, started from the notion that there is one divine truth about which the community cannot be in error. On the other hand, they acknowledged and accepted the existence of differences in interpretive traditions. John Walbridge also addressed that a 'tolerance of permanent disagreement' is an underlying feature of the Islamic religion (Walbridge 2002: 70). In the Islamic legal tradition, this acceptance of disagreement has been an institutionalised discursive practice called *ikhtilāf*. *Ikhtilāf* is an Islamic legal concept that, at its broadest, can be defined as the recognition of diversity in opinions (Masud 2009).

The term has a double meaning. It can be translated as dissimilarity or difference and as variation or diversity. On the one hand, it refers to disagreement about what legal ruling (*hukm*) would be correct in a particular case. *Ikhtilāf* is then a source of conflict. However, it is also used to address the acceptance of diversity and differences between different rulings on the same matter. In medieval Islamic education, Muslims were, in the words of Walbridge, "content to accept equally authoritative versions of things that we might think could have only one correct version" (Walbridge 2002: 76). He calls this a "remarkable phenomenon: a willingness to tolerate equally authoritative alternative versions of religious truth" (Walbridge 2002: 75). Following up on this, Bauer's study argues that the latter has been more or less 'forgotten' in modernity and 'replaced' by

4 For this study, Bauer received the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize in 2013.

a foremost normative- instructive approach (Bauer 2011; Walbridge 2002: 70). Although this somewhat monolithic representation of Islam in modernity can be criticised (see Chapter 1.5), his work has been cited frequently.⁵

To characterise the relatively open attitude in premodern Islamic thought toward dissimilarity, Bauer introduces the term ‘*Ambiguitätstoleranz*’, which he borrows from contemporary psychology (Bauer 2011: 18). In modern psychology, the concept refers to ‘an individual’s ability to accept situations in which truth or a right cannot be fully established, and a multiplicity of truth claims and claims of right and wrong remain unresolved’ (Griffel 2017: 18).

Among many, though not all, surveyed German-speaking scholars, Bauer’s point was highly welcomed. On the one hand, with only a brief reference to Bauer’s work, they could make the argument that Western colonisation and modernity meant a rupture in Islam’s history, disrupting the previous flexible attitudes towards internal differences, disagreement and dispute. On the other hand, with a reference to *ikhtilāf*, they could effectively build the argument of Islam’s inherent and internal variation and openness to plurality of ideas, particularly related to what Sejdini called contingency (see Chapter 6.2.1).

Diversity and concomitant disagreement have often been taken as a negative development, because it goes against the societal and soteriological communitarian ideal of unity. Yet, it could also be considered a valuable asset, supported by a Prophetic narrative ‘difference of opinion is a blessing for people.’⁶ Thomas Bauer brings up historical examples of reconciliation of seemingly contradictory discourses, such as Al-Ghazali’s reconciliation of Sunni exoteric law and Sufi esoteric mysticism in the 11th century; the recognition of clear or irrevocable verses (*muhkamāt*) and ambiguous (*mutashabihāt*) verses in Qur’an; and the continuous exchange of ideas, including profane ones (Bauer 2011: 41–53). As pointed out above, in the legal context, it refers to the determination of a range of acceptable interpretations.

While Bauer talks about premodern flexibility, the Pakistani legal scholar and former director of the Dutch Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) Khalid Masud presents the concept of *ikhtilāf* as a positive principle in the contemporary development of Islamic ethics and law. Masud explains how in Islamic legal thinking there has always been reflection on the matter what to do if there is difference of opinion, disagreement or dispute. If

5 For a critique against Bauer’s representation of Muslim modernity, see Frank Griffel. As mentioned in Chapter 5.5, he considers Bauer’s “portrayal of modern Islam ... reductionist and coarse” (Griffel 2017: 190). Ömer Özsoy is also amongst those who warn for exaggeration.

6 Note that in the Islamic tradition, there has been dispute about the authenticity of this hadith and whether it is based on a weak chain of transmitters.

one cannot fully establish who is right or wrong, then different options have their merits and legitimacy. As a legal concept, *ikhhtilāf* in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) legitimises the ongoing quest for new methods of interpretation, reflecting that deducing religious law is always a process of social, man-made construction (Masud 2009: 82).

7.2.1.1 Disagreement and Diversity as Sources of Stagnation and/or Change

Among the surveyed publications in Chapter 4, some explicitly called for the cultivation of *ikhhtilāf* as a contribution to inner-Islamic pluralism. For instance, in his article published in the 2012 issue of the Osnabrück Journal of Islamic Theology (*Hikma*), Bacem Dziri showed how, historically, the diversity of Islam and the plurality of Muslims have been a source of tension and stagnation, as well as of flexibility and change. He calls this “the ambivalence of multivalence”, which upholds the potential for both conflict and foundation (Dziri 2012: 61–3).

From the accounts in Chapters 5 and 6, it became clear that the discussed European scholars regularly mirrored their scholarship with more established traditionalist religious scholarship in mosques that may insist upon Islam being non-ambiguous, considering *ikhhtilāf* as non-desirable. Moreover, they would probably also agree with Walbridge’s remark that “[i]n the contemporary Islamic world, the range of disagreement is far broader, and there is not even agreement about the extent to which disagreement should be tolerated” (Walbridge 2002: 77). However, in the highlighted cases, many argued that a tolerance for plurality can function as a ‘way out’ to manage conflict and contingency in the contemporary world.⁷

In the next section, I will further explain why and how I believe this articulation of *ikhhtilāf* is significant in what we have observed so far, even if the term was not explicitly used.

7.2.2 Articulating *Ikhtilāf*

Academic Islamic theology has as its substantive goal the study of the Islamic religious and scholarly tradition in the past and present. This theoretical, historical and social scientific research has academic value in itself. Regarding this scope, it does not differ from the established secular tradition of Islamic Studies at Western European universities. However, the surveying approach of this study made it clear that many of the publications aimed to critically

⁷ Tariq Ramadan, referring to the aforementioned Prophetic narrative, called *ikhhtilāf* a blessing (*rahma*) not a threat if it is founded on Islamic principles (Ramadan 2013).

uncover a certain range of religiously legitimate positions on specific matters, whether in the past or the present, implicitly or explicitly underscoring Islam as a dynamic religion capable of dealing with change. Precisely by showing how various faith options can exist side by side within Islamic thought, scholars hoped that their work could potentially strengthen Muslims' resilience in Europe to cope with both internal disagreement and a sometimes hostile outside world. This endeavour is what I suggest to call 'articulating *ikhtilāf*'.

7.2.2.1 No 'Fatwa Issuing Hubs'

The observed academics wanted to highlight Islam's broad scope and relevance in their research. For instance, social-scientific study into 'integration and identity issues', 'lived religion' and the development of a 'practical theology' for spiritual care and social work formed one pillar of the institutes' research areas.

The scholars did not consider it their task to enter into a process of *ijtihād*, which is the legal term for the production of new jurisprudence by an expert in Islamic law. Importantly, with a few exceptions in the UK, the studies did not offer jurisprudence in the form of concrete *fiqh*-based answers to normative questions aimed to be immediately applied in the daily religious practice. It is precisely here where researchers can quickly reach the limits of their academic and religious legitimacy, as the intention of the academic programs has not been to function as 'fatwa institutes', nor is that likely to become so in the future (compare Leirvik 2016: 132; Zaman 2012). However, studies in Islamic ethics and the underlying theory formation formed a substantial focus of their knowledge production.

In this ethical theory formation, we noticed how scholars like Nekroumi, Paya, and Sejdini wanted to resist a dichotomy that juxtaposes 'Western' and 'Muslim' values, because such a 'fault-line' approach tends to overlook the internal plurality of ideas in both Western and Muslim majority countries. Instead of participating in a 'battle of values', they wanted to reflect upon human rights matters and the governance of religious diversity while integrating Muslim perspectives and points of view. They did so by referring to Islamic ideas as they have been suggested in premodern and modern times. One result is that to some, *ikhtilāf* has become an Islamic concept for dealing with multiculturalism (e.g. Ellethy 2017: 162; see also Masud 2009: 86).⁸

⁸ According to Ellethy, *ikhtilāf* should be "a basic premise for living as a Muslim in a multicultural democratic society, inside or outside the Muslim context" (Ellethy 2017: 162).

7.2.2.2 Towards a Change in Attitude

Coming to terms with Islam's inherent, sometimes confusing plurality and versatility is not a simple call. This is frequently mentioned in the cited studies that explored the religious experience and faith practice of Muslims in Western Europe. Subsequently, the articulation of *ikhtilāf* not only refers to accepting 'external differences' as multicultural realities, but also to dealing with internal divergences.

Against circulating tendencies to reify religious texts, experiences, and practices into one possible path (*manhaj*), or a 'pure' Islam – tendencies that fight for dominance amongst each other – Islamic theologians and religious pedagogues want to offer alternative avenues to young Muslims in Western Europe. Instead of reducing Islam to a single frame, they insist on broadening Muslims' (and non-Muslims') knowledge of the Islamic heritage.⁹

Whereas they recognise the Kantian antinomy, they argue that the believer's only option is to accept plurality.¹⁰ They hope an open attitude to contingency can offer (young) Muslims in Europe the certainty they seek: Embracing a 'tolerance for ambiguity' can then become a reconciling force.

This call to 'discover' *ikhtilāf* can be directly connected to their proposals for critical and dialogical pedagogy and educational theology that can help cultivate a reflexive attitude and self-understanding (see Chapter 5). It is foremost in religious education in public schools, mosques, and madrasas that they appropriately want to convey this message of tolerance and rapport.

7.2.2.3 Ivory Tower?

An open question is whether the scholars succeeded in explaining the difference between their value-oriented, ethical and theoretical approaches and expectations for normative-instructive answers. In Chapter 3, we observed how they were aware of the risk of being dismissed in religious communities, or instrumentalised in national political debates. The scholars realised that they could expect (firm) opposition from various audiences. This struggle for legitimacy can also be considered part of the notion of *ikhtilāf*.

For clearly, the suggested explicit focus on diversity is not self-evident in more traditionalist religious settings in Europe (Groeninck & Boender 2020).

9 This was visible, for instance, in the appeal of Ednan Aslan discussed in Chapter 6.2.3. He argued that "Unfortunately those verses of the Qur'an that call for plurality are ignored time and again, or – even worse – overruled by phoney theories, to legitimise the use of violence in the name of God" (Aslan 2016: 50, translation WB).

10 I owe this thought to Tarek Badawi, DIRS Erlangen, who brought this concept up in his presentation during the Akademie für Islam in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft conference *Islam in Texten, Normen, Lebenswelten*, 23–24 June 2022 in Frankfurt.

The portrayed Muslim scholars in Europe have been (re-)assessing and (re-)addressing values and lines of reasoning that some believers at the grass-roots level might consider non-negotiable.¹¹ An impactful argument in Muslim communities to distrust what happens at the university's 'ivory tower' is: Will such a critical attitude that stretches the range of acceptable differences about the religious truth unwantedly lead to scepticism and doubt (Groeninck 2020)?

At the mosque level and in the daily lives of many practising believers, ethnically, culturally, politically, and religiously defined distinctive identities play an important role. These become visible in the choice of mosque, dress, language, recreation, community associations, etcetera. They might see *ikhtilāf* as a synonym for conflict, and therefore contend that it should not be applauded. Moreover, for mosque organisations in the diaspora that are still organised along ethnic and religious denominational lines (see Chapter 2), it can be challenging to accept the theologians' proposal if they view 'difference' not so much theologically but perceive it from a functional perspective of 'power politics' (see Ceylan 2017: 275). Too much emphasis on transcending difference (by learning to cope with it) can be 'counter intuitive' or 'counter productive', as this would also affect their distinctiveness and transnational bond with the country of origin and traditionalist schools of thought (cf. Hashas 2019).

7.2.2.4 Anchoring Their Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Islamic Scholarly Tradition

As said, in my understanding, the core of the Islamic theologians' work over the period under scrutiny, boils down to their critical study of plurality and pluralism. However, this not only concerns the empirical reality that shows a highly differentiated picture of 'being Muslim'. Then, I could use social-scientific analytical concepts of 'diversity'. Their work goes beyond this empirical dimension.¹² Perhaps the most important reason to introduce the concept of *ikhtilāf* as an analytical tool is that it affirms that Islamic theology, as it now manifests itself at Western European universities, can be anchored in the Islamic scholarly tradition. The strength of the term eventually lies in the idea that the articulation of *ikhtilāf* can be considered a traditionally recognised dialectical discursive practice in which the critical character of

11 This insistence is not to deny in anyway the realities of everyday Islam that are ambiguous, adaptable and non-ideological – called the 'muddling through' or 'pragmatist' subjectivities of religiosity, see Rohe 2010, Chapter 1.

12 Compare Amjad Hussain's remark: "... It is when studying Islam through the lens of postmodernist thought, which only defines belief within the confines of social sciences, that the Muslim conviction as a valid postmodern belief is lost from the field of study" (Hussain 2009: 241).

questioning established legal and hermeneutical interpretations and theological approaches does not impede the confessional dimension.

In what follows, I will point to four ways in which this idea has been visible. The articulation of *ikhtilāf* firstly lies in their call to ‘theologise’ contextuality, plurality and pluralism. In doing so, they draw on the hermeneutical tools of modernist Qur’an hermeneutics (Zaidi 2011; Abu Zayd 2006). Their hermeneutical and critical research is meant to “take the own tradition seriously” (Khorchide 2016: 48).¹³ The previous chapters have presented cases that implemented this hermeneutical dialectical engagement in ‘educational theology’, in rigorous knowledge of history of ideas (‘historical theology’), in ‘reflexive philosophy’, in ‘constructivist’ and ‘gender-just’ theology, and in ‘humanist theology’.

Secondly, as *ikhtilāf* also concerns deciding on the range of what is considered acceptable within the confines of the tradition (Walbridge 2002: 71), the term also points to the tendency among scholars not to dissolve ‘Islam’ into a plurality of ‘local Islams’ (Zaidi 2011: 25). Instead, they wanted to embed their observations, analyses, interpretations and contributions to interreligious dialogue in the Islamic scholarly tradition, as impulses for revival, renewal and reconnection. Therefore, their call for recognising pluralism should not be understood as a plea for elusive, ‘endless’ heterogeneity. Nor should it be confused with soteriological pluralism.

Even when proposing ‘alternative’ theologies, as Khorchide did, these theologians did not advocate postmodern relativism or the idea of an ‘infinite malleability’ of religious sources that is detached from the realm of religious legitimacy. Any hermeneutical deconstruction of traditional interpretations, such as the patriarchal views critiqued by ‘Muslima theologians,’ should be followed by a value-oriented reconstruction of the sources. For example, the theologians’ reflections on the relationship between God and humans were meant to be authentic proposals. For them, an authentic Islamic theology necessitates a return to the sources – the Qur’an and the Sunna – while also drawing from there elements for endorsement or renewal, supported by academically sound arguments (Kurzman 1998: 13; Özsoy, *supra*).¹⁴ In this regard, I saw scholars like Ömer Özsoy warn against a possible tendency to reconcile any tension

13 The original reference in German is: “die eigene Tradition ernst nehmen” (Khorchide 2015: 48).

14 “... Islamic authenticity requires a return to the sources, that is, to the Qur’an and to the [Sunna], not to take shelter there, but to draw from thence elements for the renovation and revitalization of Islamic philosophy” (Kurzman 1998: 13, quoting Mamadiou Dia (d. 1911)).

about correctness or authenticity by a smoothing reference to Bauer's thesis of 'tolerance for ambiguity' (Özsoy 2014: 54).¹⁵ However, Özsoy is also among those who look for the channelling of a field of tension in which tradition and modernity are set against each other and/or in which the Qur'anic text is understood without context. My suggestion to be sensitive to the articulation of *ikhtilāf*, therefore, concerns the *inclination* of the academic contributions to Islamic university theology in Western Europe.

Thirdly, I use the concept *ikhtilāf* to mark that contemporary attempts to deconstruct, historicise, and reconstruct should not be seen as an uncritical adaptation to a European-imposed or dictated frame, or as a naive adoption of demands set in the domain of political legitimacy. The practice of thinking about diversity and deciding on legitimate readings of the texts is not exclusively linked to Europe but has been prevalent worldwide. By referring to this with an emic term, I emphasise that plurality is not something external, enforced on 'Muslims' by the secular, or something that has only been discussed in modern European intellectual traditions from a Kantian paradigm. Where in Western Europe, under the influence of philosophers like Immanuel Kant and, more recently, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, religious and secular conflicts about truth and power have been negotiated through the Enlightenment ideals and postmodernism, the portrayed Muslim thinkers want to look at ways in which the tension of religious difference has been dealt with in the Islamic scholarly tradition. This includes that metaphysical arguments can have their place (cf. Zaidi 2011).

15 Özsoy's argument is in English translation: "It is consequently unhelpful to welcome any disagreement in the area of *tafsir* [exegesis, wB] simply as the result of the classical interpretive tradition's tolerance for ambiguity or as a sign of God's mercy. A thorough reflection on possible causes for the variety of interpretations of a particular Qur'an passage rather reveals that the conflict of Qur'an interpretations in most places can be traced back to the tension between the compositionality and contextuality of the Qur'an. By combining these two approaches, it can be resolved in favour of one of the competing interpretations. There is no uniformity in dealing with ambiguity in the classic commentaries" (Özsoy 2014: 54). The original German reference is: "Es ist folgerichtig wenig hilfreich, jede Meinungsverschiedenheit im Bereich *Tafsir* einfach als Ergebnis der Ambiguitätstoleranz der klassischen Auslegungstradition oder als Zeichen der Barmherzigkeit Gottes zu begrüßen. Eine gründliche Reflexion über mögliche Ursachen für die Interpretationsvielfalt zu einer bestimmte Koranpassage lässt vielmehr erkennen, dass der Konflikt der Koraninterpretationen an den meisten Stellen auf die Spannung von Kompositionalität und Kontextualität des Korans zurückzuführen ist. Durch Bündelung dieser beiden Zugänge lässt er sich zugunsten einer der konkurrierenden Interpretationen lösen. In den klassischen Kommentaren herrscht keine Einheitlichkeit im Umgang mit Ambiguität" (Özsoy 2014: 54).

7.2.2.5 Institutional and Community Imperatives

Fourthly and finally, the institutional frameworks play a role in how this focus on diversity has been developed. Chapter 2 showed that a university environment does not intend to allow one view to dominate without acknowledging others. The design of the German, Dutch and Austrian programmes takes into account the representation of various religious movements. While particularism is allowed, where a theological position may be firmly rooted in one school of thought, these programs still choose to remain open to the value of other perspectives. Additionally, research at the Islamic College London (ICL) is not restricted solely to the Shi'a viewpoint. This makes the scope of Islamic university theology inherently broad, unable or unwilling to privilege one normative position as the only valid or legitimate option for the faithful. The academic task of Islamic university theologians is to go beyond ethnic-cultural and denominational exclusivist explanations.

This will remain the case because, positively formulated, equal positioning of the broadest possible bandwidth was and will expectedly remain a condition for government funding of Islamic theology at secular universities. However, the question of whether this promotion of diversity serves a vision of the state to 'produce' a kind of 'compliant Muslim citizen' remains unsolved. Also, the extent to which the scholars' propositions will be accepted by the communities of the faithful and their religious leaders at the grassroots level is ultimately up for discussion and debate inside and outside the university. These are important questions about legitimation and authorisation by different audiences. The epilogue in Chapter 8 will address how these questions can be studied in future research.

7.3 Concluding Remarks

If we go back to the predictions about the legitimacy and core mission of Islamic university theology ventured by the stakeholders quoted in Chapter 3, we remember how many of the engaged observers envisioned that the central challenge for Islamic theology would be to come to terms with the plurality and versatility of Muslims in Western Europe. They were undoubtedly right about that.

In European universities, an interpretive community of scholars of Islam has arrived who want to play a mediating role in discovering this plurality as part of an authentic understanding of the Islamic tradition while contributing to the theorisation of Islamic theology in Western Europe. Embracing plurality opens a range of legitimate options for connecting with the prime sources of

Islam (*Rückbindung*) – venues that go in an opposite direction from foreclosed, narrow understandings.

Thinking about the legitimacy of Islamic theology at Western European universities focuses on two fronts, often simultaneously. On the one hand, the addressed theologian's work and thought explicitly draw on authentic efforts to grasp what the Islamic revelatory tradition says about God, ethics and the common good. This gives them 'a legitimate place in the actualisation of the religion'.¹⁶ On the other hand, they study how Islamic thought and practices are or can be rooted in the European context, both in academia and society – at the level of faith communities and secular institutions, especially schools. It has become clear that many of their academic works emphasise the multivocality (or polyphony) of Islam while realising that their works are voices in a contested space. To make this point, they often contrasted their positions foremost against militant currents – either religious or secular- that consider Islam as incompatible with human rights, democracy, liberalism and secularism. The case studies that I have presented in Chapters 5 and 6 are examples of these efforts – which might be considered by some conservative currents as too innovative or too Eurocentric.

Although the emphasis on plurality, diversity, and the recognition of perennial dispute sounds obvious, it forms an essential part of our understanding of how theological reflection and theoretical grounding about Islam in Western Europe develops.

Their emphasis on plurality is not meant as fragmentation. Through multiple references to Thomas Bauer, they want to recall how medieval Muslims achieved consensus by (more or less systematically) 'tolerating' diversity and disagreement. If the recognition of diversity is a fundamental characteristic of the Islamic scholarly tradition, this engagement with diversity, either in an explorative descriptive way, or by building on the premises of classical faith, can be identified as a profound task of the Islamic theologians (cf. Ceylan 2017: 282).

This approach is not self-evident, however. Islamic university theologians do not want to be forced by a set of criteria dictated from outside but want to be given the academic freedom to study the entire Islamic tradition in the present and the past.

Pushed by the discursive practice of *ikhtilāf*, Islamic theology reaches out to bring 'tradition' and 'modernity' into dialogue. Only in relation to plurality can their theologies be contextual and rooted in the broad Islamic tradition.

16 I borrowed this phrase from Anthony H. Johns (2014: 60).

A theology that wants to be relevant for or is aimed at 'lived religion' must theologically reflect on the meaning of the plural context in which Islam is lived, and believers' questions emerge (cf. Henzell-Thomas 2015: 11).¹⁷ In this context of 'lived religion', disruptive developments take place for which academic theology can try to provide reflective answers. Stepping stones for this theology are hermeneutic dialogical engagement and epistemological and methodological multi-disciplinarity.

Many scholars are engaged in a modernist-reformist Islamic discourse that Kurzman has (cautiously) termed 'liberal Islam' (see Chapter 1.5). However, it is crucial not to conflate Islamic university theology with any specific school of thought. Doing so would limit the potential for academic exploration, and could easily be perceived as an unwelcome result of the politicisation of the debate about the relevance of Islamic theology in Western Europe. Within the framework of academic accountability, it is the theologians who bear the responsibility of shaping the content of their work.

What I observed is the initiation of a paradigm shift within Islamic theology. The focus on plurality, I believe, is not a departure from tradition but a reinvigoration of it. In the interstitial space that academic theology occupies, between faith communities, academic institutes and plural society, a 'new theology' is emerging. This theology, rooted in the Islamic tradition, seeks to be relevant in the modern world.

I, therefore, conclude that Islamic theologians move within the heart of what academia aims for: the university (at least ideally) provides them with an independent space for critical-reflective and hermeneutical study of the Islamic tradition in all its facets, undertaken within the European context, with much attention to how to deal historically, theologically, and pedagogically with intra-religious and inter-religious plurality.

In the final chapter, as an epilogue, I will finish with some remarks about the relevance and legitimacy for European societies of 'opening' the Western European university to Islamic theology.

17 In this progressive line of thinking, Jeremy Henzell-Thomas made the following plea for meeting the challenge of religious and cultural pluralism: "It can be argued ... that it is precisely by recognizing and understanding the condition of the world at this particular time that we can meet the challenge of religious and cultural pluralism. This is not to give precedence to the temporal world over the spiritual world, nor to set one against the other, but to understand that human minds are conditioned differently in each age, and that tradition must be dynamically self-renewing and responsive to new conditions and new questions if it is to remain a living tradition" (2015: 11).

On the Legitimacy of Islamic Theology at Western European Universities

the audience of Islamic university theology is not only the Muslim faith communities, but also society at large. This means that there is no escape for Islamic university theology from entanglements relating to discourses of conflict – both between various Muslim groups and among the general public.

ODDBJØRN LEIRVIK (2016: 134)



8.1 Directions of Islamic University Theology in Western Europe

This book examined the development of Islamic theology at Western European universities during the 2010s, focusing on four Western European countries: the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, and Austria. The study's broad and comparative approach, surveying almost a decade of academic knowledge production in three languages (German, English, and Dutch) across four nations, provided unique insights into a rapidly evolving field that has faced numerous critical questions from outside observers.

The study has situated the complexities surrounding the 'new' academic field in three key domains: the academic domain, which evaluates the validity of Islamic theology and the room for confessional studies and religion critique; the religious-communal realm, which emphasises the authenticity of religious truth claims among culturally and denominationally diverse groups; and the socio-political realm, where tensions over institutional desirability frequently arise. By exploring these dimensions, we could shed light on the importance of understanding the multifaceted nature of such discussions.

These complexities have not diminished in recent years. Since 2018, the year that I collected the sample of titles during my research stay at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS, Amsterdam), the academic corpus has grown substantially. Particularly in Germany, the trend to invest in research

and teaching programs continued with the launch of five more academic centres for Islamic Theology and Islamic Religious Pedagogy at German state-funded universities. Consequently, the German language kept its leading position as the most frequently used European language for contemporary Islamic theology.

Meanwhile, in other European countries as well new programs were launched, such as the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society (*Schweizerische Zentrum für Islam und Gesellschaft (szig)*) at the University of Fribourg.¹ Like earlier in Germany, the private Mercator Foundation provided substantial financial resources for the Centre's research activities. In Belgium, the Catholic University Leuven has included a teaching and research focus on Islamic theology and comparative ethics in its Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. At the universities of Copenhagen (Denmark), Oslo (Norway) and Uppsala (Sweden), Chairs in Islamic Theology were opened. In France, the Ministry of Education invested in a Graduate School, the *Institut Français d'Islamologie (IFI)* in 2022.² France, however, kept its typical *laïque* constitution, as this collaboration of eight state universities is specialised in secular Islamic Studies.

These processes have remained closely associated with a sociopolitical insistence on the training of imams and Islam teachers in Europe instead of in the countries of origin or Saudi Arabia (e.g. Şenel & Demmrich 2024). With this in mind, the Dutch government subsidised a supplementary training program for community-based imams organised by the Representative Council of Muslims (CMO) and the Vrije Universiteit (Boender 2021). In the UK, 'bottom-up' initiatives continued, with popular bridging programs offered by the Cambridge Muslim College and the Ebraheem College in London aimed to guide graduates of Muslim Colleges to secular universities (Ebbiary 2018). In Austria, the political attempts to avert the influence of foreign Islamic organisations and their imams continued, resulting in increased tensions between politics, Muslim organisations, and the universities, and new opportunities (cf. e.g. Hinghofer-Szalkay 2020).³

Furthermore, transnational influences have remained impactful among Muslim diaspora communities in Europe after 2018, influencing the search for religious identity among Muslim youth, parallel to growing influences of right-wing populist political parties and extreme right militant movements.

1 The centre was formally launched in 2015 and in full run since 2019; www.unifr.ch.szig.

2 See <https://institut-islamologie.fr>.

3 Whether other countries will follow Austria's example is difficult to predict but cannot be ruled out.

8.1.1 *From 'Challenging' to 'Critical'*

The tendency to instrumentalise Islamic theology for political ends has not disappeared in recent years and the debate about its legitimacy persists. Some observers have expressed their contemptuous criticism of national governments' interference, while others have emphasised the project's vital role in empowering Muslims in Western Europe.

The challenges related to the Islamic higher education and academic research programs undoubtedly remain timely and topical (cf. Nielsen & Jones 2023). Not only has this book shed light on the reasons behind the prevalent views of Islamic university theology as a considerable challenge for academia, religious communities, and society as a whole. It also brought into focus the proactive and responsive positions of the 'first-row actors': the academicians themselves.

Starting from an awareness of how 'politics of authorisation' have been at stake, this study showed that in their rise to the challenge, the academicians and closely involved stakeholders prominently used the word 'critical' in various contexts. First, in defining the primary tasks for Islamic university theology, the term 'critical' signifies the importance of understanding existing power structures and ideological collective representations. It underscores the need to deconstruct dominant interpretations of Islam and Muslim societies, including those hegemonic perceptions prevalent in 'the West'. Second, the survey of the academic works made insightful how the word 'critical' was used repeatedly to stress the importance of examining and judging the Islamic tradition reflectively and reflexively while seeking to explain its contextuality, building on classical and Western scholarship in studying Islam. Driven by these academic concerns, Islamic university theology has, in the past decade, invested in providing conceptual, theological and pedagogical foundations for recognition of diversity and a 'tolerance' for disagreement.

In this final chapter, I will first summarise my findings. After that, I will briefly address three pressing questions that are undoubtedly on the lips of many. The first question is: What is the influence of these intellectual voices at Muslim 'grassroots level'. How appealing are their ideas among 'ordinary' Muslims? The second question is: Can we speak of an intellectual movement that is inaugurating 'the birth of a European Islam', internalised by broader publics of believers? And third: To what extent has this movement been steered by secular regimes, particularly the governments, in a desired direction? These questions provide sufficient ground for subsequent research into the authority formation of Islamic university theology and its practitioners amongst various audiences. I will, however, finish this book with the argument that academic

Islamic theology at Western European universities has a legitimacy in itself, independent of these questions about its impact.

8.1.2 *The Arrangement of Islamic University Theology in Western Europe*

In monotheistic religions, theology is the study that reflects on the nature of God and the relationship between God and humans. It examines how notions of the transcendent and the immanent relate and what this relation means for the faith and actions of the adherents of a religious community. In Islamic theology, such reflection and conceptualisation is centralised in the subdiscipline of *kalām*. Like other Islamic scholarly fields, it emphasises the significance of the Qur'an and the Sunna, as well as the roles of reason and human intellect, esoteric knowledge, and spiritual experience. The classical Islamic scholarly tradition also studies earlier authoritative interpretations developed within the context of the religious schools of law (*madhāhib*), the sciences, politics, and society.

During the recent incorporation of Islamic theology within Western European public universities, Islamic theology faced a question of legitimacy towards (at least) three 'audiences'. In random order: the faith community, the academy, and society at large. This threefold audience is similar to that faced by the established Christian (and Jewish) university theology (e.g. Ford et al. 2005).

Firstly, the methods and outcomes of theological thinking must have a certain degree of religious credibility. This standing can be gained through plausible theoretical references to the prime sources, ideas, and practices of Islam (*Rückbindung*), as well as through the trustworthiness and practical applicability by the community of believers. This study has shown that precisely this feature can distinguish Islamic theology from secular Islamology. We also saw that the theological university perspective distinguishes itself from a tradition-oriented normative perspective that strives for a sure *confirmation* of the sources and traditional faith practices. Islamic university theology focuses primarily on a critical-reflective theoretical discourse that *probes* the sources hermeneutically and dialogically.

Secondly, the question of theology's legitimacy always depends on its academic operational validity. We have seen that this concern was addressed in two ways. On the one hand, the discussion was about the epistemological and methodological specificities of Islamic theology as a 'separate' field of study compared to the Western (secular) tradition of Islamic Studies. On the other hand, the discussion concerned the question of whether, in the present 'secular age', it was justified to provide space in (secular) public universities for academic theology and its metaphysical discourse at all (cf. Boeve 2014).

The outcome of these discussions so far has been that in the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria, financial investments by the state have been made in setting up Islamic university theology to secure and implement it in a (more or less) equal position with longstanding departments in Catholic and Protestant theology or Religious Pedagogy. Academic Islamic theology wants to acquire an equal, autonomous place in this intellectual field, in which scholars conduct theoretical and empirical research into Muslims and their religious traditions. Like a Christian or Jewish theologian, the academic Muslim theologian must navigate between 'value-driven' and 'value-free' (if that is possible) study of the corpus of religious texts and traditions and its adherents' beliefs and practices in past and present. The object of theology must be observed and analysed from a critical meta-perspective, whereas the theologians are urged to reflect on their positionality and subjectivity. We have seen how the Islamic university theology makes use of historical-critical methods from the Western tradition of studying Islam, the humanities, and the social and pedagogical sciences, but also of the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, like Qur'an exegesis (*tafsīr*), legal theory (*usūl al-fiqh*) or Islamic pedagogy. Ultimately, it is the academic's responsibility to make these epistemological and methodological choices, provided that this is justified according to scientific accountability standards and is open to scientific criticism.

Thirdly, the ongoing question is how academic theology can remain both dogmatically and practically relevant and appealing to diverse audiences in a rapidly changing society. This matter also applies to Islamic theology. As a discursive tradition, Islam is always understood, explained, and expressed within a specific spatiotemporal context. We have observed that, in addition to fundamental research into texts and traditions, Islamic university theology in Western Europe focuses significantly on critically reflecting on, conceptually underpinning of, and engaging in dialogue about the Islamic tradition in all its facets within contemporary, pluralistic Europe. Thus, it attempts to pursue a societal task.

8.1.2.1 Specificities of These Arrangements in Western Europe: 'the Politics of Authorisation'

This study has examined the urgent questions surrounding the positioning of Islamic theology, questions that are particularly due to the varying expectations regarding its potential effects in the diaspora setting. These questions have their own unique dynamics associated with this 'new' position.

Chapter 1 argued that to comprehend the situatedness of how Islamic university theology is 'formatted' at Western European universities, it is essential to account for three historically determined issues. The first is the permanent

establishment of Muslims in Western Europe during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which raised questions about how to organise the training of their religious intellectual and professional leaders. The second issue concerns the Western 'genealogy' of the study of Islam. Scholars in Western Islamic Studies recognise that the field has roots in a descriptive Orientalist tradition. And they have been well aware that colonial relationships have significantly influenced its scholarly legacy. Despite this awareness, the chapter contended that, in a post-colonial context, ambiguity persists. *Secular* Islamology cannot provide reflective religious critique or conduct confessional research. The third issue involves the socio-political context, where relationships are shaped by national and global geopolitical developments, rising Islamophobic sentiments, and increasing polarisation. The introductory chapter noted that ongoing binary thinking – which positions Islam in opposition to the West – must not be overlooked, as it impacts discussions about the legitimacy of Islamic theology in Western Europe.

Chapter 2 illustrated how highly politicised discourses were present in all four countries under study, particularly concerning the complex institutional framework of higher education programs within state-funded universities. This occurred under varying legal constellations and institutional circumstances. The chapter detailed how the state, religious communities, and universities negotiated their interests to establish higher Islamic education and research.

Although the four countries differed in their relationships between state and religion, the legal incorporation of academic theology into publicly funded universities is feasible, whether through a 'bottom-up' approach, a 'top-down' strategy, or a 'mixed model'. However, the realisation and establishment of accredited programs depended on several factors: the existence of a recognised and representative executive body, sufficient political will at the national level, adequate financial resources for the universities, and the strategic efforts of university 'architects' brokering alongside Muslim organisations and ministries of education.

The government played an initiating or supporting role in Germany and the Netherlands, but in the UK, national politics decelerated the process. In Austria, a political and legal change reshuffled the cards considerably. The chapter concluded how, despite these historical and contemporary differences, the incentives for governmental action (be it facilitation, obstruction or control) have been the same in the four countries: emancipation, integration and freedom of religion for Islam and Muslims as 'newcoming' religious minorities on the one hand, and securitisation and state monitoring on the other.

Chapter 3 identified five 'arts of engagement' of closely engaged observers and practitioners that together expressed the relevance, legitimacy and core tasks of Islamic university theology once the programs were running.

The first 'art of engagement' approached Islamic university theology foremost as a project for the emancipation of Muslims in the respective countries, discussing the extent to which the programs support or enable integration of Muslims within the academy and broader society. This engagement included a dispute about whether facilitation within the public system is a form of (unwanted) government control. The second 'venue' focused more on the epistemological and methodological features of the discipline. Particularly, the discussion addressed the degree of distinction between a confessional epistemology and secular Islamic Studies with its historical-critical methods of inquiry. It included different estimations about the necessity to make these into a 'separate' scientific discipline if financial resources are scarce. A third way to look at the profile and viability of Islamic theology was offered by those who considered Islamic theology primarily as filling a void in Christian-dominated theological faculties and departments for religious pedagogy. Fourthly, some emphasised not only the potential emancipatory function of Islamic theology for Muslims living in Western Europe but also highlighted the potential space for developing a 'European Islam', considering it as a subfield of contemporary Islamic thought that occurs as an intellectual European project within these new settings. Fifth and finally, some observers analysed the legitimacy of Islamic theology as a scientific discipline 'in the making' beyond an instrumentalised understanding of its legitimacy in the Western European context.

These five engagements converged into a tentative answer to the first part of the main research question that aimed at exploring ideas about the profile and legitimacy of Islamic university theology at Western European universities as formulated by its closest stakeholders. In its first decade, Islamic university theology has aimed at fulfilling an urgent emancipatory need for Muslims in Europe, by seeking its epistemological and methodological authenticity alongside established forms of academic Islamic Studies and Christian theology at European universities. Engaging with the prime sources of Islam, Islamic theology foremost adopts a contextual hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an and the Sunna while heading for a rational, critical-reflective understanding of their meaning and focusing foremost on ethics, morality and social justice. Theoretically and empirically, its prime but not exclusive focus is the context of 'lived religion' in secular Europe. Thus, it rapidly develops into an academic discipline 'of its own'.

8.1.3 *The Formation of an Interpretive Community*

The second part of the study reported how the academic staff of the examined centres developed their research. To achieve this, the study analysed the academic publications produced by the academic staff of nine centres, providing key access to this rapidly expanding field. Chapter 4 offered a thematic

overview of the scholarly output in four main areas: Integration and Identity Studies, Islamic Sciences, Interreligious Studies, and Global Issues. This analysis was based on a sample of 650 titles, approximately seventy per cent of which were written in German.

Based on this systematic approach, three prominent themes were selected and discussed more in-depth in Chapter 5: religious education, Qur'an hermeneutics and history of Islamic thought. One conclusion we could draw is that the universities place significant value on pursuing pedagogical-emancipatory goals in the context of public schools, mosques, and private religious education. The envisioned educational theology needs to be rooted in modernist Qur'an hermeneutics, which aims to foster critical and reflective interpretations of the Qur'an as well as a historical understanding of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Islamic thought. Hence, the three themes are closely connected. A similar propensity was at stake in Chapter 6, which portrayed the selected work of male and female scholars who utilised the academic environment for critical and reflexive explorations of the highly diverse Islamic tradition, aiming to highlight Islam's relevance for contemporary pluralist societies – both in Europe and globally. Against a-historical, a-contextual, and a-critical hermeneutical explanations of religious source texts and traditions, they propose a critical reflection on, and if necessary, a reconstruction of, (hegemonical) religious, ethical and legal interpretations in the European and global context.

Chapter 7 analysed how the observed scholars have foremost articulated a paradigmatic lens on plurality. This strong emphasis on plurality lies in the realisation that the empirical reality of Muslims living in Western Europe and globally is characterised by pluriformity that needs to be carefully studied as such. Furthermore, the focus on plurality also showed up in the repeated encouragement to embrace intra- and interreligious plurality as positive values. The analysis of their work boiled down to the conclusion that, in the end, only in relation to plurality can their theologies be contextual and rooted in the broad Islamic tradition.

This overall observation thus answered the second part of the research question: Using various methodologies, both confessional and non-confessional, the observed cohort of Islamic theologians articulated a paradigmatic lens on plurality. With their striking emphasis on recognising plurality (not to be confused with soteriological pluralism), the scholars did not want to position their work external to the Islamic scholarly tradition. On the contrary, they positioned themselves amid a contested interpretative space traditionally recognised as such. To capture their acknowledgement that the interpretative and performative authority and the social power of theology is always contested, I used the Islamic legal term of *ikhtilāf* as a sensitising concept. Pushed by this

traditional discursive practice, their envisioned paradigmatic focus on plurality might not be considered a shift away from the Islamic scholarly tradition, but a reinvigoration of it. Chapter 7 concluded that in the interstitial space that academic theology now occupies, between faith communities, the surrounding academic institutes, and plural society at large, Islamic university theology is emerging, seeking to be relevant in the modern world.

8.2 Transformative Impact?

What do these findings suggest regarding the influence of Islamic university theology on Muslim communities and individuals in Western Europe, as well as on Western European societies and the global context? It is evident that this study did not empirically examine the practical or mobilising effects of the academic works of Islamic theologians. Whereas authority can be understood as the *exercise* of legitimacy linked to a certain role or social organisation (Olsen 1968: 181, emphasis WB), investigating the ‘making of’ authority would require different research methods. Since the formation of authority is an inherently relational process, such a study must consider various audiences as recipients of these academic ideas. This study did not address the processes of dissemination and reception. Consequently, questions regarding the ‘performative authority’ and societal impact remain open for future research.

However, the complex question about the scholars’ ability to affect societal processes because of their academic role and activities within the Western European university settings (Olsen 1968: 181) has unmistakably been part of this study. It is precisely because of the intensity of public discussions about the potential dominance of European-based Islamic thought that the exploration of the discourses about legitimacy, as pursued in this book, must *precede* the (empirical) questions about ‘measuring’ the authority and social force of an emerging intellectual interpretive community.

Any further research into the authority and social influence of European-shaped Islamic theology must consider the leveraging conditions set by politics, including those of national governments, as well as the countries of origin, universities, and organisations within faith communities. This focus is crucial, as the study has shown that, along both an epistemological ‘secular-religious’ axis and a politicised ‘European–Muslim world’ axis, different perspectives emerge regarding the aims, content, and methods of Islamic theology. There is significant variation in how the community of scholars is viewed: they may be seen as ‘organic intellectuals’ in the ‘Gramscian sense’, supporting the ruling class – that is in this case, the European state and society. Alternatively,

they can be viewed as the first line of defense against hegemonic discourses, whether Eurocentric, neo-Orientalist, Islamist, or otherwise regressive. To put it plainly, it is essential to understand how perceptions of the legitimacy and authority of Islamic theology in Western Europe can shift depending on whether Islamic theologians are regarded as an intellectual elite and *'freischwebende Intelligenz'*, as 'executors of Islamic denominational orders', or as 'marionettes of the state'. This distinction has its consequences for any further study into grassroots impact, the formation of a 'European Islam', and the role of government influence.

The study has illustrated how engaged stakeholders were aware of these configurations. Moreover, the mapping of the main academic output from 2010 to 2018 has revealed a socially critical undertone regarding the impact of various hegemonic discourses. The portrayed authors recognise that their work may be interpreted in this context, aligning their work implicitly or explicitly with Critical Theory, which seeks to understand the dominance of specific modes of thought and the 'memories' associated with them, as well as how one mode of thought can dominate, structure and exert authority over others. Overall, their primary response is that, in opposition to certain understandings – whether it be 'the West versus the East' mode or sectarian interpretations of Islam – research must encompass a much broader spectrum. Many also acknowledge that in the pursuit of academically rigorous and authentic research, they may face criticism from various perspectives. Ultimately, also the reception of this study and the choices I made as a female anthropologist of Islam and myself not a Muslim scholar, will expectedly not escape from contrasting modalities of understanding.

Based on the above, I propose several follow-up questions that address the dissemination of Islamic university theology to and relationship with the religious communities' realm (Chapter 8.2.1.), its academic constituencies (Chapter 8.2.2), and the socio-political domain (Chapter 8.2.3).

8.2.1 *Reception at Grassroots Level?*

As said, one of the first questions that immediately comes to mind is to what extent this 'interpretive community' has an influence among diverse audiences. One possible audience is 'ordinary' Muslims living in Western Europe (Sunier 2023). How appealing are the academic outputs to these heterogeneous groups? More precisely, how will the proposed constructivist, gender-sensitive, or alternative theologies be received in pluralistic complexities?

Such research should begin from the realisation that Muslim religiosity and processes of identity formation in Western Europe (and elsewhere) are formed by a multitude of factors. Islamic university theology can be one of many, but it

will expectedly never be the single one. Another starting point becomes clear from this study: the observed scholars envision themselves in a different position than imams, *shuyūkh*, or *ulama*, who are the experts primarily based in mosques and madrasas, with distinct roles, institutional positions and epistemic authority (cf. Vinding 2018). Even more so, these professional roles and institutional contexts are frequent objects of the social scientific and educational inquiries of scholars featured in this book.

This finding serves as a valuable starting point for further investigation. The study clarified the pre-eminent importance given to Islamic education in alleviating societal tensions and promoting the solid social inclusion of Muslims in Western Europe. Follow-up research could focus on the implementation of the proposed pedagogical and didactical approaches within mosques, madrasas, and public schools across different European countries. How are new teaching methods being utilised in various educational settings? Are these methods having the desired mediating effect on resilience, which is a concern for many stakeholders? It would be particularly interesting to explore the resonance of the suggested 'educational theology', which is based on modern and contextual interpretations of the Qur'an.⁴ Such studies are important, especially given the increasing Islamophobic sentiments in Western Europe.⁵ Additionally, proposals for a 'practical theology' in the professional fields of spiritual care and social work form demarcated pathways to examine if and how (innovative) ideas are received and implemented. It is recommendable to pay sufficient attention to language matters: Will proposals written in German be effectively translated elsewhere, especially with the growing capabilities of AI translation tools?

Furthermore, the present study revealed a complex 'playing field' where researchers may encounter both support and opposition to their work. Other follow-up study can focus on analysing reasons for attraction and rejection by Muslim grassroots organisations. This can be representative councils, mosque umbrella organisations, Muslim student organisations, or others, and can include activities in (social) media. Such studies can observe the dynamics in which researchers build (trustful) relationships with community-based organisations, as these appeared an element of the institutionalisation of Islamic theology within Western European universities that should not be underestimated. How will expert knowledge link to the everyday reality of cultural and

4 Further investigation could also involve comparing Muslim Colleges in the USA, as some are also developing contextualised curricula and theology (cf. e.g. Barzegar 2011). Their approach appears to stem from what I observed as a confident traditional viewpoint regarding the relevance of the classical sources to contemporary issues.

5 European Islamophobia Report 2023, [Islamophobiareport.com](https://islamophobiareport.com).

religious difference? Additionally, further study can help us better understand how legal constellations ('top-down', 'bottom-up', or 'mixed model') influence legitimation and/or delegitimation processes by community-based organisations, which often have transnational ties (e.g. Sözeri et al., 2018). It remains important to study these questions comparatively, preferably by including other countries, like France, to gain more insight into 'which models work' and why.

8.2.2 *The Birth of a 'European Islam'?*

The second question that requires careful follow-up study is: Can one speak of the formation of an intellectual movement that is fostering the emergence of a 'European Islam'? It has become clear that any study done in this regard must clarify what is meant by 'European Islam'. Additionally, one must always consider how social power structures may influence the evaluation of this phenomenon. One needs to be alert if the academic output is analysed as the *result* of open academic research and deliberations in the European setting, or if the formation of a 'European Islam' is considered the *a priori aim* of the university programs.

This study took as its starting point that 'European Islam' or 'Islam in Europe' is neither empirically nor conceptually homogeneous or a pre-defined category (cf. Bektovic 2018). That said, my research has (at least tentatively) described the outline of an intellectual trend that takes up a 'dual task'. First, to develop an Islamic ethical theory for European Muslims that focuses on matters of social justice and morality, closely connected to empirical research done on what was called 'integration and identity issues'. Second, to seek to contribute to Europe's shared values by drawing on the Islamic tradition, identifying areas of agreement, and critically examining any discrepancies.

In this regard, the scholars examined have so far formed what Stanley Fish (1980) referred to as an 'interpretive community'. This term signifies that overall, the scholars shared a common approach, as they often referred to a specific set of 'late reformers' (with modernist thinkers like the Egyptian Nasr Abu Zayd or the Pakistani Fazlur Rahman) and utilised critical reflective hermeneutical studies alongside contextual understanding of religious texts and traditions. This observation aligns with Mohammed Hashas' definition of 'European Islam', which describes a situation where "at least two epistemologies try to find a new and coherent way of standing together in a non-Islamic-majority context that is already 'Western'" (Hashas 2019: 1).

To further study the question of what qualifies their work as 'European', and to what extent they see themselves as representatives of a specific intellectual trend, follow-up research should include interviewing academics to find

more information about what the scholars envision with their work. Not only in Germany, as Jan Felix Engelhardt (2017) did, but also comparatively across Western Europe. The annotated literature survey and analysis provided in the present study offers a tool to determine the range of interlocutors, focal fields, and main themes for this prolonged investigation.

Moreover, follow-up research could analyse how these findings compare with intellectual currents outside of Europe, to shed light on the complex question of what makes the findings in this study 'European'. The answer to that question will also be important in the deliberations among those who believe that 'progressive Muslim thought' can only develop in Europe or 'the West'. After all, it becomes problematic when external powers are pushing for a certain outcome of their thinking, while the academic space must be independent by definition. At least, it ideally should be. This brings us to the third pressing issue.

8.2.3 *Conditioned by Governmentality?*

The third issue that future research should not overlook is the extent to which the development of Islamic theology at Western European universities has been governed by a 'regime of secularity' that addresses the 'Otherness' of Muslims in terms of their religion (cf. Ivanescu 2013) while steering the knowledge production in a desired direction. This question has been addressed throughout this study. While the research consistently highlighted how the academic space has become a platform for 'plural thinking,' with scholars actively contributing to this process, it remains uncertain whether or to what extent this has been shaped by the concept of 'governmentality'. My study has not given a final answer to the question of what has come first: the organisation in a tripartite construct of a free academic space for a broad range of themes and argumentative directions, or a conditional provision for an interpretive community that recognises pluralism?

What has become clear from this study is that if facilitating Islamic university theology is viewed as a political project, this perspective affects how academic outputs are perceived – viz. as potentially serving a political agenda. My open survey method aimed to avoid a predetermined set of evaluation criteria by including as broad a sample of academic works as possible. Future research should maintain this wide focus. It could also consider academic higher education, its curricula, and didactics, rather than limiting itself solely to academic research.

Additionally, a comparative approach that keeps an eye on the practices of academic freedom could reveal differences and similarities among countries with varying legal and institutional frameworks for funding Islamic university

theology at public universities, paid with tax money that the government distributes. So far, Germany has invested the most – supplemented by private funds – resulting in the greatest ‘yield’ in absolute numbers of academic publications. Future research can further analyse these developments, including those of other countries with different systems, like France or the Scandinavian countries. Such research can also evaluate the consequences of the Austrian Islam Act of 2015 for the attractiveness of academic programs in Islamic theology and religious pedagogy in Vienna and Innsbruck (compare Aysel 2024).

Critical questions regarding the risks of governmentality are warranted, and the threat of ‘securitisation’ of the academic knowledge production is ever-present. However, viewing the issue through an overly functionalist lens can obscure the realities within the academic space and reduce academic actors to mere ‘puppets in the hands of the state’.⁶ This study has clearly illustrated the tremendous task faced by scholars who must earn the legitimate trust of both Muslim and non-Muslim constituencies, within and outside academia. They must navigate the demands of confessional learning and accommodate the expectations of politicians and policymakers, not only in their own countries but possibly also in other parts of the world (Leirvik 2016; Volker 2014).

Future research must, therefore, investigate *and go beyond* the ‘burden of securitisation or integration frames’ and focus on what is actually happening: the development of a novel intellectual discourse. Like all scholars, theologians must formulate their ideas within the boundaries of the law. Ultimately – and perhaps ideally – a truly liberal warrant of impartiality and an academic mandate do not aim to restrict the content of academic study. This ideal of freedom of research opens an inherently diffuse field characterised by a plurality of perspectives.

This leads to my final point.

8.3 Final Words: the Inherent Legitimacy of Islamic University Theology

This study made clear how ‘Islamic university theology’ currently manifests itself as a project of critical reflective study of the Islamic discursive tradition,

6 This may particularly apply to scholars affiliated with Islam. Non-Muslim scholars studying Islamic theology may encounter challenges as well; however, because their position is more distant from the faith community, they might receive a different response to their work from those within the community.

executed in the context of the Western European university. We observed how in four countries scholars investigated, administered and elaborated the Islamic tradition and contemporary Muslim beliefs and practices across a wide spectrum, often with a confessional focus, though not exclusively.

These intellectual developments are highly relevant, and there is something at stake. I believe that facilitating academic theology at public universities in secular states is, perhaps more than ever, a shared responsibility of state, university and Muslim communities. Developing a contextual Islamic theology should not be left solely to the private religious sphere. In my view, its academic articulation can possibly best be developed alongside Christian modalities of university theology, or similarly along Christian departments for religious education and pedagogical studies. To make this point, I quote the Dutch theologian Matthias Smalbrugge from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam:

Ultimately, the unique significance of theological scholarship lies not in reinforcing a specific church-based identity, but in learning how to critically engage with the plurality within oneself and in society: that you know you belong somewhere while simultaneously analysing that attachment. That is profoundly different from religious studies: it claims to study religions objectively, but one stays an outsider. Particularly in a pluralistic society, it is important that you can engage within a tradition, without completely confining yourself to it. (Smalbrugge in interview *Trouw* 21 April 2022)⁷

In my observation, Islamic theologians in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the UK have taken up this 'gauntlet' in the provided spaces, while publishing in academic peer-reviewed journals, books and conference proceedings, particularly singling out the themes of religious education, contextual Qur'an hermeneutics and intellectual history. In discussing their work, I noticed an awareness of the responsible role of Islamic university theology in Western Europe. This is expressed in a willingness to speak out about its tasks in inaugural lectures and 'position papers'. The quality assessment and the performative

⁷ The original reference in Dutch goes as follows: "Het unieke belang van de theologische wetenschap ligt uiteindelijk niet in de verdieping van een bepaalde kerkelijke identiteit. Het gaat erom dat theologie je leert je kritisch te verhouden tot de pluraliteit in jezelf en in de samenleving: in je ergens thuis weten en dat tegelijkertijd analyseren. Dat is wezenlijk anders dan religiestudies: daar beschouw je religies zogenaamd objectief, maar blijf je buitenstaander. In een pluralistische samenleving is het juist belangrijk dat je jezelf kunt engageren met een traditie, zonder dat je je helemaal in die traditie opsluit" (Smalbrugge in *Trouw*, 21 April 2022, interview by Sjoerd Mulder).

authority of their academic work remains to the discretion of the audiences of their work.

However, for four reasons, the manifestation of Islamic theology at Western European universities has a relevance, and thus legitimacy, *in and by itself*, beyond certain conditionalities.

Firstly, academic research must always have a high degree of autonomy. The negotiable character of views offered is characteristic of modern academic theology (Bremmer 2003). We have seen how the focal point of Islamic university theology lies in exploring theology as a site of meaning-making – rather than a mere set of doctrinal claims. Different from *ulama* who explicitly position themselves within a specific current (such as Sunni-Ash'ari, Shi'a, Salafi or otherwise) or a law school (*madhhab*), Islamic university theologians are first and foremost concerned with a broad scholarly investigation of conceptual understandings of the tradition and its adherents. They aim to construct, deconstruct and (sometimes) reconstruct classical interpretations with all academic means, from which they draw certain theological, hermeneutic, historical and/or pedagogical conclusions.

Secondly, the legitimacy of Islamic theological research should not be made dependent on 'measurable' impact. This study has abundantly made clear how Islamic theology programs within public higher education must operate within a constrained framework involving three key players: the state, universities, and Muslim communities, which frequently have differing perspectives on this issue of impact or transformative social force. Moreover, impact will never be clear-cut or straightforward, or even quantifiable at all. Notably, it is a secularist pitfall, or error, to assume that the social and personal identities of Muslims in Europe, or elsewhere, are exclusively shaped by religion. This misunderstanding is one of the reasons why Islamic university theology cannot and should not serve as a 'one-size-fits-all solution' for integration or other political objectives.⁸

Thirdly, the value of this study that oversees a decade of academic knowledge production should not be scrutinised for politically driven purposes. On the contrary, I hope my discussion reads as an invitation to study the scholars' works and ambitions further.

Fourth and finally, the inherent legitimacy of Islamic university theology is grounded in the obvious fact that it rests on a tradition of fourteen centuries

8 Also note the remark of Peter Mandaville who rightly argued that "The mere fact alone of more people being able to serve up a wider range of ideas about religion – that is, a widening of the public sphere – does not in itself produce more pluralistic (in the sense of being more tolerant or open-ended) knowledge" (Mandaville 2007: 102).

of religious scholarship. In the realm of theology, interpretive power is always contested. Analysing these discourses, and working within them, is central to the inquiries conducted in the current field of Islamic university theology in Western Europe, as observed in this book. Recognising these contestations, scholars have implicitly or explicitly formulated their approaches to the core objective of Islamic university theology: to examine Islamic texts, traditions, beliefs, and practices in their entirety, driven by curiosity and a willingness to confront challenging questions or taboos. The outcomes of such studies are, by their nature, multivocal and contested.

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In recent years, several Western European universities have started academic programs in Islamic theology. This study answers a much-debated question: How do Islamic theologians at Western European universities face the challenging task of administering, elaborating and developing Islamic knowledge through academic discourse?

This book systematically shows how scholars, first and foremost, want to use the academic space to mobilise a paradigm shift that focuses on plurality and pluralism. This approach is aimed at allowing European Muslims comfort and certainty to deal with the challenges of modern life. The study will explain this by using the concept of *ikhtilāf*, an Islamic legal term, which, at its broadest, can be defined as the recognition of diversity in opinions.

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