

7 Studying Islamic theology at European universities

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Abstract

The primary aim of this chapter is to describe the relationship between the last decade's discussions and debates about theology and religious studies and the start of courses in academic Islamic theology at European universities. After a brief outline of the most important positions in this debate, I turn to how Muslim theologians sometimes behave when they describe how the study of Islamic theology 'should' be performed. A second aim is to discuss, with the help of a survey sample from Sweden, whether and to what extent Muslims who seek a theological education at a European university are interested in courses on academic Islamic theology. A third and final aim is to discuss why European universities are interested in starting courses in a subject that is often promoted under the title of academic Islamic theology.

Keywords: Islam in Sweden, Islam in Germany, Islamic theology, secular universities

1 Introduction

Some more-or-less organized studies of Islam and Muslim texts have been part of the academic curriculum of European universities since the Middle Ages (Martin, 1995). The earliest studies were primarily philological and polemical, often with an overarching purpose of demonstrating that Islam was a false religion. After the rise of the history of religions as a sub-discipline at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Islamic studies continued primarily to be the study of history and ancient texts, a process in which Islam and Muslims were generally, if not always,

seen as non-European. The Swedish Professor of History of Religions at Uppsala, Geo Widengren (1907-1996), serves as an example here, as he is quoted as having claimed that: 'Yes, when it comes to the study of Islam I have never done anything on this side of the 12th century' (quoted in Hjärpe, 2012, p. 270, my translation). I suggest that this quotation tells us much about the early study of Islam in Western Europe, namely that it was rooted in the idea that Islam was only a relevant object of study in relation to the Christian theological traditions, and that consequently scholars should focus on texts and not on living Muslims. Today the situation has changed, as it is evident that large numbers of Europe's very heterogeneous population have Muslim cultural backgrounds. These structural changes have challenged the study of religions in many ways. For example, more academic studies have focused on sociological and contemporary issues of so-called lived religions. One could say that the tables have been turned, and that there is currently less focus on history and philological questions. Apart from the risk of losing important philological and historical aspects of religious studies, one new advantage is the rich diversity in terms of faith, worldviews, ethnicities, and languages of university students today. However, it is evident that the study of Islam and Muslims has not taken the theoretical and methodological implications of these changes sufficiently into account. According to Aaron Hughes (2007), the field could, in fact, be described as immature when it comes to theoretical and methodological issues; there is, then, a great need to develop the study of Islam and Muslims in a scientific and critical manner.

Leaving Hughes' critique aside, the primary aim of this chapter is to describe the relationship between the last decade's discussions and debates about theology and religious studies and the start of courses in academic Islamic theology at European universities. After a brief outline of the most important positions in this debate, I turn to how Muslim theologians (sometimes) behave when describing how the study of Islamic theology should be conducted. My intention is to highlight the possible differences between how Muslim theologians envisage Islamic theology and how an academic Islamic theology might be taught at European universities, most of which are secular by nature. A second aim is to discuss, with the help of a sample survey in Sweden, whether and to what extent Muslims who seek a theological education at European universities are interested in programmes that offer academic Islamic theology. A third and final aim is to discuss why European universities are interested in starting courses in a subject that is often promoted under the title 'academic Islamic theology'. Sometimes these initiatives are presented as parts or rather as modules in imam training

programmes, but in other cases they are 'only' labelled as courses in Islamic theology. Given the focus of Part I, it is important to underline that the difference between so-called Islamic training programmes and courses in Islamic theology is unclear, and that the two terms are often used as synonyms. The focus in this chapter is on courses in Islamic theology, but these courses can often be parts of larger programmes, some of which could have the ambition to educate Islamic theologians or imams.

2 Same but different?

First, it is clear that all academic subjects must be situated in a theoretical, methodological, and conceptual understanding that addresses the problem of what to include and what to exclude, and how the 'subject matter' should be delimited and studied. Although I am well aware that the scope and definition of what to include and what to exclude in the general rules of science is debatable and has changed over time, I wish to primarily focus on the importance of coming to conclusions that are based on intersubjectively testable observations and studies that are based on hypothetical-inductive methods. It is therefore important to decide whether the study of Islam and Muslims should form part of the general programmes covering the history of religions. Is this field an area study in a geographical sense? Does it have its own theories and methods, or does it follow the general rules of academia?

Second, it has also become more important to consider the real or imagined boundary between the academic study of religions and theology, especially since a growing number of universities in Europe have started imam-training programmes (Larsson, 2009) and to set up courses in academic Islamic theology and philosophy, such as the one at the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Should the theological study of Islam follow a different set of rules, live up to other expectations, or should this topic be part of the curriculum at universities that are often secular by nature?

Without going into these sometimes heated debates in great detail, the issue at stake seems closely related to questions about the nature and scope of the study of religions and whether theology should be considered a scientific discipline. On the one hand, there are those who strongly argue that universities should be driven by critical and scientific agendas that follow the basic requirements promoted by most scholars of the natural sciences. This understanding is, for example, advocated by many scholars who adhere to the programme that often is known as the cognitive study

of religions (Pyysiäinen, 2014). Accordingly, the university scholar should only be a critic and not a caretaker that works like an apologist (Lincoln, 1996; McCutcheon, 2001). In the words of the Canadian professor of religious studies Donald Wiebe:

the academic study of religions must be undertaken for academic – that is, purely intellectual/scientific reasons and not as instrumental in the achievement of religious, cultural, political or other ends. This means, quite simply, that the academic/scientific study of religion must aim only at understanding religion where ‘understanding’ is mediated through an intersubjectively testable set of statements about religious phenomena and religious traditions. As with any other scientific enterprise, therefore, the academic study of religion aims at public knowledge of public facts. (1988, p. 407)

Still, we also find scholars and thinkers who are more open to the idea that the study of religions could be innovative, constructive, and contribute to the development of so-called theological thinking (Ford, 2009, p. 34). In Jeppe Sinding Jensen’s understanding, this approach is often characterized by a common explicit or implicit agreement that religions ‘have a “common essence” and refer to something metaphysically real (e.g. “God”) that is considered the origin and cause of religion’ (2014, pp. 21–22). While the first position, i.e. the scientific study of religions, leaves little to no room for theology, the other position is more open and positive towards theology and other forms of constructive sociological and historical enquiry, such as post-colonial studies (Joy, 2001), gender studies, or the critique of ideologies.

Between the two positions I have described above according to a somewhat Weberian ideal-type model, it is also possible to find a large number of scholars occupying what we might call the middle ground. Scholars like Craig Martin (2012) and Russell McCutcheon (2001) have problems with propositions that are based on religious claims, i.e., with some kind of reference to a transcendent reality, but not with theories that are based on, for example, social constructivism, post-colonialism, or gender studies. These scholars emphasize the importance of considering language, semiotics, hermeneutics, and power constellations when studying religions to a much greater degree than, for example, Wiebe. Because of their understanding of science, they are also more inclined to express doubts about explanations that primarily equate the study of religions with the natural sciences. Hence, it is essential to stress that there is no consensus among scholars. Instead, there are a number of different and often conflicting understandings of the

definitions of both theology and religious studies (Jensen, 2014). David Ford envisages a combination of religious studies and theological studies, with the two approaches coexisting in the university (2009), but for a thinker and Thomist like Gavin D'Costa, theology should be theology. In his own words, 'If theology is not theological, it should abandon its name' (D'Costa, 2009, p. 53). Leaving aside these interesting differences over how to teach religious studies and theology, it is still necessary to ask what these questions have to do with the study of Islam at European universities today.

Before I turn to this question, however, I should make my own position clear. According to my own understanding and scientific outlook, religious studies consist primarily of the study of humans and what individuals do with something they call religion, both in history and today. Consequently, it is beyond the scope of science to decide whether God exists or not, and the matter of interpretation has nothing to do with God or any other superhuman agencies. Rather, it is a matter of conflicts over authority and legitimacy. Interpretations about what God thinks, approves, or dislikes, or what 'religion says' is nothing more or less than information about how humans interpret and make use of something they call religion to gain power or influence in society. My attitude to religious studies is therefore reductionist and in line with the approach commonly known as the critical academic study of religions, an approach upheld and supported by thinkers such as Russell T. McCutcheon, Craig Martin, and Donald Wiebe, three academics to whom I refer and quote extensively in this text. That said, it should be clear that I have problems with speculations that make reference to something transcendent, for example: 'this is the will of God', or this is in line with 'proper' Christianity, or something similar, but this scientific outlook does not automatically rule out the ability to make normative or ethical statements. In my understanding, the university should be free from confessional statements, but it should not be free from normative statements concerning values like democracy, equality, or justice.

3 A confessional study of Islam, or an apologetic approach?

One way to describe how the majority of Muslims have approached Islamic theology is to turn to an educational text compiled for Muslim students who want to learn about Islamic dogmas and creeds. Still, when using the word 'creed' in an Islamic context, it is important to bear in mind that the 'notion of creed comes from the Christian thought world' and that it is difficult to find an exact parallel in Islamic traditions when it comes to

form and function (Speight, 1995, p. 139). Within Christian traditions, creeds are often the outcome of Church synods and discussions of conflicting opinions about how to understand and apply Christian theology. In Islamic traditions – which are the focus of this chapter – there are in most cases no similar way to lay down a creed. One Islamic parallel that is very similar to a Christian creed is the *shahada*, the declaration of faith ('I witness that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God'), the utterance that generally constitutes the minimal qualification for an individual to be counted as a Muslim. Yet another parallel to Christian creeds are the debates about '*aqīda*, generally translated as 'creed', 'doctrine', 'dogma', or 'article of faith'; a formula written with the aim of 'defining the position of an individual, school or sect on some disputed point' (Watt, 2013, p. 332). While there does not seem to be much conflict over the content of the *shahada*, there are evidently more disputes concerning the issue of '*aqīda*. Drawing a boundary around the Islamic faith is complicated because there are few if any organizational structures among Muslims that resemble the organizations found among Christian churches. As a consequence, there are few instances or people that can claim the authority to stipulate a definition that would automatically become valid for or applied to all Muslims around the world.¹ Thus, when discussing creeds it would, of course, be possible to choose many different texts, but one illustrative example that is often recommended by Sunni Muslim theologians is from the ninth-century theologian Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi al-Hanafi's very popular text, *Aqidah al-Tahawiyya* (On the life of al-Tahawi, see Calder, 2012/2014).²

The *Aqidah al-Tahawiyya* is a short text that lists what Muslims 'should' believe in and what they 'should' refrain from, in al-Tahawi's understanding. Explicitly or implicitly, the text contains references to a number of so-called

1 One example is the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks, who tried to impose Hanafi law on their subjects by installing a chief theologian with authority over how Islam 'should' be applied and understood by Muslims. This position was held by the Shaykh al-Islam (Hallaq, 2009, pp. 55-56, 80-82). Today the situation is different, and several states in the Middle East and the Gulf region have so-called state imams and muftis, who try to lay down how Islam should be interpreted, applied, and understood in a specific country. One illustrative example of this development is found in Skovgaard-Petersen's study of Egypt and the rule and function of the Al-Azhar Institute and the *dār al-iftā'* (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1997). See also Waardenburg (2000) for more examples.

2 The text *Aqida al-Tahawiyya* is easy to find online in both translation and in Arabic (with or without commentaries). One such collection of different editions and translations can be found at: <http://attahawi.com/2009/03/21/english-aqidah-tahawiyyah-translations-and-commentaries/>, consulted on 10 November 2014. An academic translation of the text is also found in Watt, 2007, pp. 48-56, 332-336.

Muslim sectarian opinions, or, to use a more scientific language, positions that are different from or in conflict with al-Tahawi's views. These groups are the Mu^ctazila, Jahmiyya, Qadriyya, Jabriyya, Shia, Khawarij, and those aiming at the mystical interpretation of Islam, i.e., interpretations that are generally subsumed under the heading of Sufism. Because of the limitations of this chapter I do not have enough space to go into any theological or historical details about any of these sets of ideas (for general references see, for example, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition). However, the most important point is that readers of al-Tahawi's creed should be sceptical or even openly critical of the approaches, interpretations, and ways that are associated with these ideas. The text confirms over and over again that a Muslim should believe in Allah, his messengers, the books, the angels, divine destiny, the end of time, and judgement day. To give one example from al-Tahawi's compendium:

The Quran is the word of Allah. It came from Him as speech without it being possible to say how. He sent it down on His Messenger as revelation. The believers accept it, as absolute truth. They are certain that it is, in truth, the word of Allah. It is not created, as is the speech of human beings, and anyone who hears it and claims that it is human speech has become an unbeliever. (Al-Tahawi, n.d., p. 7)

Based on this brief summary and quotation from the *Aqidah al-Tahawiyya*, as well as other observations (Boender, 2013), most Muslim students who are interested in theology seem to be concerned about learning about God and how to become a good Muslim. For example, Jacques Waardenburg makes the following observation regarding books on other religions used in Muslim countries: 'As far as I could ascertain, most of these books directly (in often blunt terms) or indirectly make it clear to the reader that Islam is the only true religion, and the true alternative to the other religions that are described' (2000, p. 97). Boender also confirms that many young students who want to work in Islamic organizations or mosques are more interested in acquiring a confessional training rather than a secular understanding of Religious or Islamic Studies. She concludes: 'the attractiveness of foreign imams and Islam education is relatively large – Muslim students, born and raised in the Netherlands, go to the University of Medina or to Al-Azhar if they want to study Islam' (Boender, 2013, p. 244). The desire to learn about God and how to become a good Muslim is very different from how scholars of religious studies in the West approach religious texts and traditions (Jensen, 2014, p. 22). In stark contrast to McCutcheon's research credo, the whole purpose of this kind of study is that the student should become a

caretaker, not a critic. Faith should be upheld, maintained, and defended against heresy and all forms of corruption. However, before I leave this discussion it is important to stress that this understanding of the rule and function of theology and theological education as an apologetic enterprise is not unique to those Muslims who want to act as, for example, religious leaders in mosques or Islamic institutions. Similar ways of understanding the purpose of religious education can be found among most, if not all, religious traditions, no matter their time and place. Consequently, many religious leaders have been sceptical and suspicious of the academic theology that is found in many European universities. An illustrative example can be found in the words of Lars Lewi Pethrus (1884-1974), the organizer of the Pentecostal movement in Sweden. With regard to theological education, for which he uses the term 'seminaries for preachers', he says regretfully:

Christianity is a revelation that can only be received through revelation (Matthew 16:15-17). It is because of this [perception] that one loses track when one tries to move the salvation of Jesus Christ to the area of science. The innermost in Christianity cannot be grasped by any science in the world, for Christianity is foremost and in its innermost essence divine life. Hence it is obvious that no intellectual learning can bring any deeper knowledge to the question of salvation. (Pethrus, 1929, p. 24, my translation)

He continues by stressing that every congregation should know that no institution of intellectual learning is capable of giving a preacher the 'true' qualities that are required to understand God's secrets. It is only through salvation and the fruits of the Holy Ghost that a preacher has the potential to attain a 'sound' knowledge of the Bible and of God (Pethrus, 1929, p. 32). Without giving further examples, this should be enough to indicate that Christian theologians can also express concerns and even doubts about the value of so-called academic theology, and that there are different understandings of what one might mean by Christian theology.

4 Muslims at European universities

Having established a basic outline of the differences between the secular study of religions and Islamic theology, we must now ask why Muslims study Islam at European universities at all. This question can undoubtedly be answered in many different ways, and each student should primarily be looked on as an individual and not as a part of some religious collective.

We must not assume that, for example, all Christians or Muslims have the same expectations, wants, or needs just because they belong to the same religious tradition or family. In addition, this question is of an empirical nature, and to the best of my knowledge we lack studies examining why students actually choose to study the 'subject matter' we call religion, or for that matter theology or Islamic studies at universities. Leaving this significant lacuna aside, I still believe it is possible to identify some general and plausible trends, explanations, and ideal-type positions. One reason could be that students from a Muslim cultural background are interested in learning more about their own traditions (Waardenburg, 2000, p. 94). This is especially true if the students have been born and raised in the West. For students who fit this description, a critical study is generally not a problem: most of those who belong to this category have, for example, absorbed the importance of a critical approach to science and knowledge from European and for that matter Western school systems (Vertovec and Rogers, 1998). Some of these students could also be more interested in a critical approach than in studying and learning about religion in ways that are based on the so-called theological ways of thinking that could be described as a 'caretaker position' (McCutcheon, 2001). Some of them could also have been raised and taught according to specific norms and values, i.e., how to understand and apply Islam in a 'proper' way, in their homes, mosques, or other Islamic institutions. These might consequently want to learn other ways of studying their own traditions, and turn to European universities as a result. Others could be interested in finding new ways of developing their modes of thinking about Islam and Muslim traditions, perhaps wanting to develop a new kind of Islamic theology with the aid of, for example, philosophy, critical theory, gender studies, post-colonial theories, or academic theology (Waardenburg, 2000, p. 94). This approach could easily be compared with the 'subject matter' that many theologians label 'academic theology'. In the words of Ford, academic theology is defined and characterized in the following way:

It seeks wisdom in relation to questions, such as those of meaning, truth, beauty and practice, which are raised by, about and between the religions and are pursued through engagement with a range of academic disciplines.
(2010, p. 94, italics in original text)

For Ford, academic theology is different from 'ordinary' theology because of its 'relation to the various disciplines of the academy' (2010, p. 94). However, the ways in which this type of theology is different from 'theology in general' (Ford, 2010, p. 93) are not that clear.

Moving from the question of how to define academic theology and differentiate it from the academic study of religions to the opinions of Muslim leaders who have actually been asked about Islamic theological programmes at European universities, the picture becomes more complicated. Before I provide some data from Sweden, it is important to stress that most imam training programmes that were started (and in some cases ended; see Boender and De Ruiter, Part I) in Europe (for example, in the Netherlands or Germany; Boender, 2013; Larsson, 2009, 2014a) have neglected to take into account the possible differences between the theological study of Islam and how Islam is studied at a secular university. From Boender's study of imam training programmes in the Netherlands, it is also clear that many mosques and other Muslim organizations are sceptical of how European universities study and teach Islam. One interviewee gave voice to this feeling by saying:

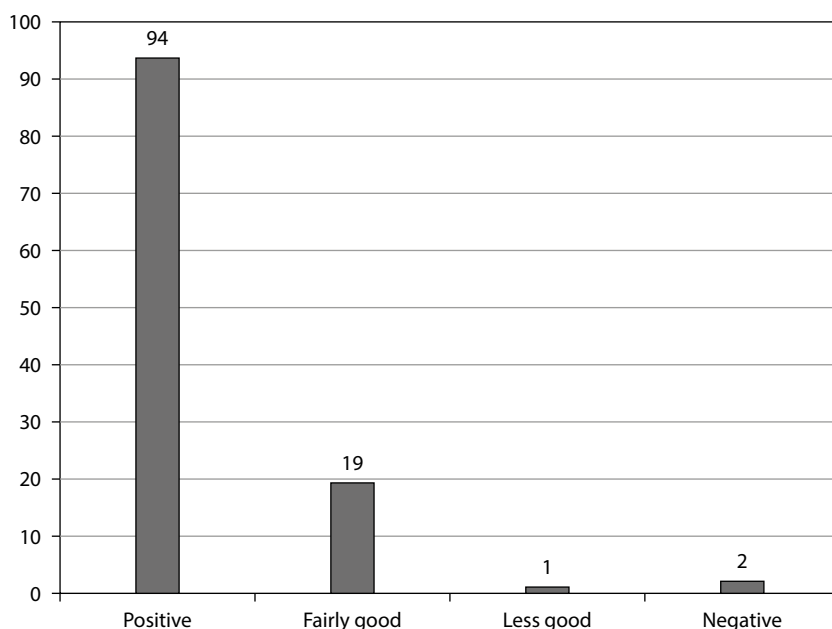
Some see our programme as in function of the Dutch government; we are sometimes accused of being here 'to confuse the young' and 'to assimilate them.' Until now, mosque boards have often kept a distance. (quotation taken from Boender, 2013, p. 243)

As indicated by this quotation, it is clear that the expectations and demands of confessional viewpoints and secular or scientific ways of studying religions could be very different, and that there might be clashes between the two.

5 The Swedish experience

The differences in expectations outlined above were clearly seen in Sweden in 2009, when the Ministry of Education asked Muslim leaders about the possibility of setting up a Swedish imam training programme that would include courses in Islamic theology and the history of religions as well as courses about Swedish society and its history. To acquire some background information on Muslims' opinions and needs, the Ministry of Education launched a government enquiry, and a questionnaire consisting of thirteen questions was sent to 181 mosques and Islamic institutions in Sweden. In total, 121 questionnaires were answered and returned (*Staten och imamerna*, 2009, pp. 38-39; the questions are found on pp. 117-120). The questions from the 2009 survey were repeated in 2014, when 73 responses were collected (Larsson, 2014b, p. 121). There are several reasons why the number of returned responses was lower in the 2014 survey. First, the Muslim religious leaders had already answered the same questions in 2009, and on the basis of

Figure 1 Attitudes towards the proposal to start an educational programme for imams in Sweden

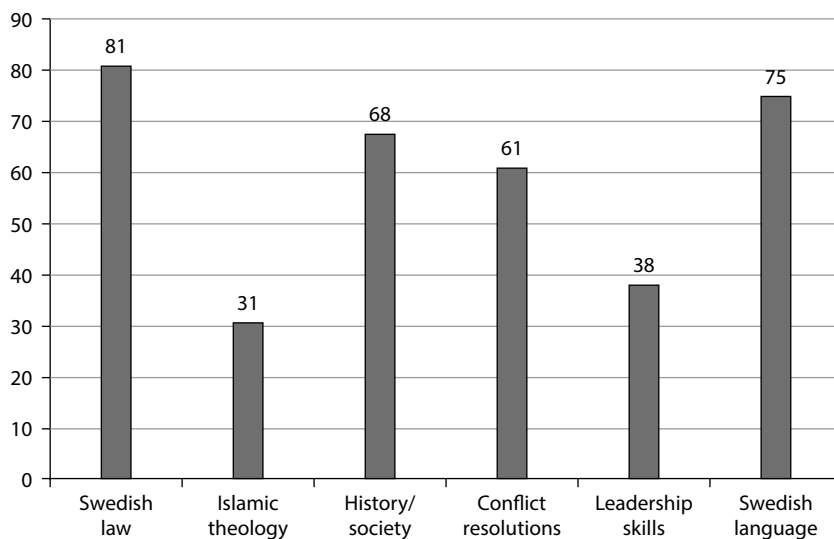


Source: *Staten och imamerna*, 2009, p. 46

that enquiry the government and the Ministry of Education decided not to start an imam-training programme in Sweden (*Staten och imamerna*, 2009). Second, the Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities had already launched a course for religious leaders working in Sweden in 2014.³ Held in the cities of Stockholm, Göteborg, and Helsingborg/Malmö, this course could partly be seen as a response to some of the requests that imams had made in the 2009 survey. This course did not include any modules on Islamic theology, and the content focus was on Swedish society. Figures 1 and 2 present data on how the Muslim leaders responded to the prospect of setting up an imam-training programme in Sweden.

Figure 1 shows clearly that most of the imams who returned the questionnaire felt positive about the idea of starting a Swedish imam-training programme.

3 For more information on these courses, see: <http://www.sst.a.se/sstsuppdrag/kompetensutvecklingfortrossamfundsledare.4.4c4b074714116bocfa29f60.html>, consulted on 17 November 2014.

Figure 2 What kind of educational needs are imams asking for in Sweden?

Source: *Staten och imamerna*, 2009, p. 47

Still, Figure 2 shows that most of those who answered the questionnaire were asking for training in so-called ‘non-theological’ subjects, such as the Swedish language, conflict resolution strategies, and Swedish law.

To properly understand Figure 2, it is important to know that each respondent could give several answers, and that most respondents who requested Islamic theology stressed that it should be taught by Muslims, not by non-Muslims at Swedish universities (*Staten och imamerna*, 2009, p. 47). However, it is clear from the survey results that the great majority wanted to acquire more knowledge of the Swedish language, how Swedish society works, rights and responsibilities in Sweden, and similar topics that are broadly related to living in Sweden.

These results could be interpreted as indicating that the respondents were not asking for a ‘secular’ or non-confessional education in Islamic subjects – i.e., these subjects should only be studied and taught by devout Muslims and not by non-Muslim academicians – or that they already had received a theological education from a Muslim institution. Would it have been possible to find different responses to these questions if the survey had been conducted among, for example, young Muslims who were born and raised in Sweden? This question is critically discussed by Jonatan Bäckelie (2011), who tends to answer it in the affirmative given the fact that most of

the imams who were included in the 2009 survey had already had a long period of education in countries like Turkey, Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt (*Staten och imamerna*, 2009, pp. 42-44).

Without going into great detail about the surveys, and no matter how we interpret the collected data, it is clear that the great majority of respondents were not interested in acquiring a degree in Islamic theology from universities that were secular by nature. It was also clear that internal differences among Muslim groups and competing *madhhabs* ('legal schools'), ethnic differences, and variations in language and political outlook were too great; it would be impossible to offer a single educational model that could cover every aspect of Islamic theology. To put it differently, most European universities do not have academics who are knowledgeable in every aspect of Islamic theology, such as *kalām*, *tafsīr*, hadith, *fiqh*, and *taṣawwuf*. And if different theological systems, such as the different opinions of the law schools, were mixed up in one educational programme, it would draw strong criticism from Muslim leaders and potential students who wanted to obtain a specific form of Islamic theological training according to one particular Muslim tradition or school. The survey of the Ministry of Education in 2009 made these tensions quite clear. It would be unlikely that imams who, for example, were trained according to the Turkish Diyanet model would be interested in a training programme moulded in accordance with the curriculum of the schools in Medina in Saudi Arabia, or of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. Though we should refrain from drawing the conclusion that the opinions of Muslim leaders automatically correspond to or match the way 'ordinary' Muslims would like to learn about Islamic theology, I believe that the answers in the Swedish surveys give us an important indication of the possibility of a gap between what Muslims would like to learn about Islamic theology and how the subject is taught at European universities.

6 Academic Islamic theology at European universities

From both historical and contemporary examples, we can plausibly argue that most (but not all) Muslims who go to university to study Islam for theological reasons might have different expectations than students who want to study Islam with the aid of secular theories and methods. These differences in expectations should come as no surprise, and the tension between a theological study and a critical academic study has been highlighted in several publications over the years (Bird and Smith, 2009; McCutcheon, 2001; Wiebe, 1988). Most of the examples and positions in this debate have been

derived from Christian and secular positions (Bird and Smith, 2009), but in this chapter I have tried to highlight these debates through the example of the study of Islam and Islamic theology. The problems I have discussed here are therefore not unique, and the positions in the debate primarily concern different opinions about science and the role and function of theology in the higher education system. I now leave these debates and turn to the crucial question: why do European universities want to start programmes in academic Islamic theology?

This question can, of course, be answered in many different ways, but it is still possible to outline some views and reasons. First, it is clear that most debates about, and attempts to start, imam training programmes in Europe have been closely related to the political debate about Islam and Muslims in Europe. Integration, security, and a need to gain control over Islamic theology have been important implicit and explicit reasons behind the setting up of many imam-training programmes in Europe (Birt, 2006; Sunier, 2009). This concern has, of course, increased in importance because of the rise of international terrorism in the name of Islam that has been carried out on European soil.

Second, the universities, especially within the field of humanities, are under great pressure to gain more money and new students, and to show that they have the potential to be useful and to contribute to society (cf. Nussbaum, 2010). From this point of view, imam training programmes and courses in academic Islamic theology can be perceived as a way to fulfil these needs.

Third, it is clear that some 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 (cf. Martinson, 2004, 2009). For scholars who adhere to this position, theology should be constructive; the rule and function of the theologian is to arrive at a position from which it is possible to know 'how we should talk about God in a fruitful way today' (Martinson, Sigurdson, and Svenungsson, 2007, p. 15; my translation). In accordance with this understanding, the aim is to develop interpretations that are capable of contributing to debates and challenging established opinions on subjects such as gender issues, sexuality, justice, and interfaith relations. Today it is possible to find this kind of academic theology when it comes to Christian traditions, and for Mattias Martinson (2004, 2009) it is important to close the gap between Christian and Islamic theology. He argues that the division of labour that predominates at Swedish universities – i.e. that theologians are primarily if not only studying Christian traditions, that scholars of religion

only study non-Christian religions, and that the former are more positive about ‘theological thinking’, while the latter are outspoken critics of theology at secular universities – puts many Muslims in a difficult position.⁴ If, he argues, ‘Muslim students’ decide to follow the path of a critical and secular study of religions, they will only meet an ‘instinctive fear and disgust against the very idea of being involved in a more constructive interpretation of Islam’ (Martinson, 2009, p. 82). But if they choose to do theology, they will only meet theologians who are interested in Christianity and who are ‘more or less incompetent when it comes to the field of Islam’ (Martinson, 2009, p. 82). This approach is stressed, for example, in a press release posted on the webpage of the University of Uppsala, in which Mikael Stenmark, the dean of the faculty of theology for the year 2012, explains how the university’s courses in Islamic theology and philosophy are structured. He states:

Within the new programme [at Uppsala University] we will be able to offer studies about *the specific content in Islam*: the creeds, ethical guidelines, legal principles and religious texts that are included. By this procedure *we take Islam as seriously as we take the Christian faith*; that is, with a critical and *constructive approach* to the content.⁵ (my translation and italics)

This quotation illustrates how some Swedish theologians understand and envisage the content and objective of academic Islamic theology – an approach that can be easily compared with that of many Muslim feminists, like Amina Wadud (2006) and Asma Barlas (2002) to give just two examples. Similar ideas are also found in the texts of thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan (2010), Tareq Oubrou (Hashas 2014), and Omid Safi (2003), who promote so-called modern or progressive interpretations of Islam. For example, in the introductory chapter to the edited volume *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, Safi claims to have been inspired by Bob Dylan and his song *The Times They Are A-Changin’* when he writes:

4 Martinson’s mode of argumentation resonates with that of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s over the distinction between theology and religious studies (Smith, 1987, p. 12). But it should also be emphasized that Martinson’s description of the distinction between the two could be called into question if we look at what topics historians of religions have actually studied. If we turn to Sweden, we can easily find scholars of religions who have studied Islam and Muslim traditions as well as Christian traditions (Marsh and Thurfjell, 2013; Westerlund, 2009). From this point of view, Martinson’s distinction tells more about the interests of the theologians who work at Swedish universities.

5 The original quotation in Swedish is taken from: <http://www.uu.se/press/pressmeddelanden/pressmeddelande-visning/?id=1825&area=3,8&typ=pm&na=&lang=sv>, consulted on 22 August 2017.

It is time to start 'a-changin'. It is time to acknowledge the complicated mess around us, and to aim for the implementation of the vision of justice and goodness-and-beauty that is rooted in the Quran. We start by admitting that it is not just our time that is worth saving, but also our very humanity, the most precious blessing we have been given by God. (2003, p. 2)

Tellingly, the writers who are included in Safi's edited volume are presented as 'thinkers and activists', and from the quotation above it is tempting to compare this enterprise with how many academic Christian theologians outline their scholarly projects. Like their Christian counterparts, who are inclined to start with an implicit understanding of what constitutes the essence of Christianity, it is clear that a so-called progressive Muslim interpretation has to start from and have its roots in what Safi calls 'the soil of Islam'. He writes further:

To state the obvious, a progressive Muslim agenda has to be both progressive and Islamic, in the sense of deriving its inspiration from the heart of the Islamic tradition. It cannot survive as a graft of Secular Humanism onto the tree of Islam, but must emerge from within that very entity. It can receive and surely has received inspiration from other spiritual and political movements, but it must ultimately grow in the soil of Islam. (Safi, 2003, pp. 7-8)

In the quotation above, it is not clear what Safi includes or excludes in relation to the rich diversity that exists in Muslim historiography, i.e., what Muslims write about so-called Islamic traditions, and it is also unclear what he means when he talks about 'the soil of Islam'. As a result, there is a great risk that the theologian, thinker, or activist is doing nothing more or less than projecting his or her own values onto Islamic traditions or 'the soil of Islam' (Martin, 2012, pp. 14-15 and Figure 1.1 on p. 12). Safi's expression 'the soil of Islam' also seems to be analogous to the phrase 'the essence of religion', which, according to Jensen, is one of the most persistent yet unclear concepts found in the history of the study of religions (Jensen, 2014, p. 40).

Yet another position involving Islamic theology at European universities – and this is my fourth and final point – is found among those scholars who argue that Muslims should be given equal opportunities and rights to set up programmes for their own religious education. If priests and Christians can learn about Christian theology at European universities, why shouldn't Muslims be given a similar right (Martinson, 2004, 2009, and partly also

Mårtensson, 2010)? One could argue that this position is primarily based on a political vision that stresses how equal opportunities should be given to all religious groups.

7 Conclusions

From this discussion and the empirical data from the Swedish survey, it is clear that the issue of academic theology, whether Christian, Islamic, or something else, is closely related to the current debates about how to study religion at European universities. To put it more bluntly, does the so-called academic study of theology belong in the modern research university? While some will answer this question negatively, others will be more moderate and try to argue that both theology and religious studies should coexist, and that both belong in the university (Ford, 2009). No matter how we tackle this difficult but very important question, it is uncertain how many students from a Muslim confessional background are actually looking for an education in academic Islamic theology – at least from the Swedish sample I have referred to in this text. Why students in general or students from a Muslim cultural background in particular turn to the academic study of religions is something we actually know very little about (Sultán Sjökvist, 2009). Maybe some of them are interested in gaining insight into how religions can be studied from a secular academic point of view, or maybe they want to find something different that they may either reject or embrace from the confessional and normative approach to the study of religions. But should an academic institution really care about these questions, and what will happen if universities are primarily driven by a will to adjust and pick up on new trends without critical discussion? The primary aim of a university must be to seek better and more substantiated knowledge of how the world functions and why individuals believe and act the way they do. Hence, it is necessary to establish scientific models that are open to criticism and that can be tested intersubjectively by other scholars using a scientific approach that leaves no room for transcendent speculations. What God wants or thinks about the world is beyond scientific knowledge, and consequently to talk about God in a meaningful way produces nothing but speculation. Although some of these issues and discussions might be provocative, it is clear that both the questions and our answers must be related to how we view the study of religions and how the ‘subject matter’ that we call religion relates to the thing we call science.

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