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Border Thinking in the Training of Imams and Muslim Caregivers

Abstract: The continuing education of imams and Muslim caregivers in Europe, which complements their basic training, has so far mostly been analysed within social and political debates. Continuing education is understood as a contact zone where multiple perspectives and bodies of knowledge meet, where border thinking emerges and leads to the development of creative strategies for dealing with this diversity. In this article, we will focus on the active role imams and caregivers have in such programmes. Our case study example shows how imams and caregivers reconcile binary preconceptions and strive for innovative perspectives on Islam and society, resulting in transformative ideas which are not only useful for the continuing education of these target groups, but also for an emerging Islamic practical theology.

Keywords: continuing education, imams, Islamic practical theology, diversity

Zusammenfassung: Die Weiterbildung von Imamen und muslimischen Betreungspersonen in Europa, die deren Grundausbildung ergänzt, wurde bisher vor allem im Rahmen gesellschaftlicher und politischer Debatten analysiert. Im Rahmen dieser Untersuchung wird Weiterbildung als eine Kontaktzone verstanden, in der mehrere Perspektiven und Wissensbestände aufeinandertreffen und in der Grenzdenken entsteht. Sie führt zur Entwicklung kreativer Strategien für den Umgang mit dieser Vielfalt. In diesem Artikel konzentrieren wir uns auf die aktive Rolle, die Imame und Betreuungspersonen in solchen Angeboten spielen. Unser Fallstudienbeispiel zeigt, wie Imame und muslimische Betreuungspersonen binäre Vorverständnisse miteinander in Einklang bringen und sich um innovative Perspektiven auf den Islam und die Gesellschaft bemühen. Es entstehen transformative Ideen, die nicht nur für die Weiterbildung dieser Zielgruppen nützlich sind, sondern auch für eine emergente Islamische Praktische Theologie.

Schlagwörter: Weiterbildung, Imame, Islamische Praktische Theologie, Vielfalt

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1. Introduction

The training of imams is proving to be a key issue at the interface between Muslim communities and society in different European countries. However, it also plays a central role in the development of Islamic practical theology as an "interdisciplinary and action-oriented field"[1] still under construction. When it comes to Muslim organisations, not only imams, but a broad range of positions commonly summarized as caregivers are relevant. These include teachers, youth workers, women's group leaders, chaplains, coordinators, board members of associations, etc. They work mostly as volunteers, sometimes also as employees. Their activities partly overlap with those of the imam, who is particularly responsible for leading prayers, the Friday sermon, and teaching, although the range of tasks performed by imams in migratory contexts has expanded considerably. Therefore, Islamic practical theology should refer to the training of religious professionals in various functions.[2]

This article is dedicated to how imams and caregivers are trained, taking as its basis a case study involving a unique approach to continuing education in Switzerland. It provides an insight into the social and political framework of the training course, as well as its content and interactive dynamics. Following a participant-oriented pedagogy, the imams and caregivers themselves play an active rather than a receptive role in the programme. Finally, this article is intended as a first step towards gaining insights from the training programme to develop further practical theological reflections.

We take the current state of research as our departure point, particularly concerning imam training, and present the theories and methods that are in use. Then we look at the framework of the case study and analyse the material in relation to two main topics: social participation and theological and religious issues. Finally, we present results and further perspectives.

1 Nazila Isgandarova, "Practical Theology and its Importance for Islamic Theological Studies," *Ilahiyat Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 217–236, 218.
2 Mumina Kowalski, "Names of God: Practical Theology for Muslim Chaplains in CPE," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 29 (2012): 178–186.

2. Imam Training: Between Recognition and Regulation

Imam training has been a controversial issue in political and social debates in many European countries since 9/11.[3] As imams play a key role as "a cultural symbol of the community"[4] and are often seen "both as causes of problems and as possible solutions to them,"[5] politicians have discovered that imams have the ability to build bridges between Muslim communities and the wider society. While in most countries the majority of imams have been trained abroad, the qualification and training of imams is becoming a focus for central European governments which directly contest "home state governance over Islam abroad,"[6] e.g. by Turkey, as organisers of imam training. With increasing settlement of Muslims in European immigration countries, training programmes in the countries of origin are reaching their limits, as they are too far removed linguistically and socio-culturally from European imamship.[7]

While it has been asserted there is a "severe lack of new training experiences,"[8] the situation has changed in recent years, and various training programmes with different aims have been introduced in several European countries. Some of these are study programmes in Islamic theology, which were often initially presented as "modules in imam training programmes"[9] or have only later begun offering "graduates of Islamic theological studies an imam training."[10] Others are continuing education programmes in various formats. Some training courses aim to exercise con-

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3 Mohammed Hashas, Jan J. de Ruiter, and Niels V. Vinding, eds., *Imams in Western Europe: Developments, Transformations, and Institutional Challenges* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

4 Mohammed Hashas, "The European Imam. A Nationalised Religious Authority," in *Imams in Western Europe* (n. 3), 79–99, 93.

5 Hansjörg Schmid, "'I'm Just an Imam, Not Superman'. Imams in Switzerland: Between Stakeholder Objects and Self-Interpretation," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 9 (2020): 64–95, 64.

6 Benjamin Bruce, *Governing Islam Abroad: Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in Western Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 295.

7 Farid El Asri, "Imam Training in Europe. Changes and Challenges," in *Imams in Western Europe* (n. 3), 101–119, 110.

8 El Asri, "Imam training in Europe" (n. 7), 117

9 Göran Larsson, "Studying Islamic theology at European Universities," in *Imams in Western Europe* (n. 3), 121–141, 122f.

10 Bekim Agai and Jan Felix Engelhardt, "A Decade of Islamic Theological Studies at German Universities: Expectations, Outcomes and Future Perspectives," in *Islamic Studies in European Higher Education. Navigating Academic and Confessional Approaches*, eds. Jørgen S. Nielsen and Stephen Jones (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2023), 69–91, 86.

trol over imams and, through them, the entire Muslim community, leading to its domestication.[11] Others are concerned with the strengthening of the secular state, integration and the prevention of radicalisation.[12] As some of these programmes were strongly politically motivated and not sufficiently anchored in Muslim communities, they failed due to "lack of trust"[13] and collaboration, as was the case in the Netherlands. In state initiated or purely academic programmes there is the "difficulty of finding a balance between academic freedom and the exigencies of religious doctrine."[14] One area of conflict arises from the fact that some representatives of imam training see it solely as the responsibility of Muslim communities.[15]

In response to these challenges, a movement away from state-dominated training towards a multi-stakeholder approach can be observed: "one witnesses various initiatives in Western Europe in which state, Muslim organizations and educational institutes (are willing to) collaborate to better prepare imams for their tasks in European secular countries."[16] These new attempts and projects are characterised by "cooperation across Muslim organisations and public education institutions,"[17] with key basic ideas of "shared ownership"[18] or "joint ownership."[19] Instead of a deficit-orientated approach, the aim is "strengthening the imams' professional skills and competencies."[20] However, claims of "independent imam training" as "the result of cooperation"[21] between Muslim communities and governments can be questioned: "Are these programmes as independent and free of power plays as is claimed?"[22] It is therefore not a question of asserting an unrealistic independence, but rather of

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11 Thijl Sunier, *Making Islam Work. Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 74.

12 Sunier, *Making Islam Work* (n. 11), 85.

13 Semiha Sözeri, Hülya Kosar Altinyelken, and Monique Volman, "Training Imams in the Netherlands: The Failure of a Post-Secular endeavour," *British Journal of Religious Education* 41, no. 4 (2019): 435–445, 440.

14 Bruce, *Governing Islam Abroad* (n. 6), 243.

15 Asligül Aysel, "Warten auf den deutschen Imam. Studierte Imame – ein Meilenstein in der deutschen Geschichte oder eine politische Sackgasse?" in *Islam in Europa. Institutionalisierung und Konflikt*, eds. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Levent Tezcan (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022), 136–162, 145f.

16 Welmoet Boender, "Professionalizing the Imam in Europe: Imam Training. Programs as Sites of Deliberative Engagement," *Religions* 12, no. 5 (2021): 308, 3.

17 Niels V. Vinding and Raida Chbib, *Education and Training of Muslim Religious Professionals in Europe and North America* (Frankfurt am Main: Akademie für Islam in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft, 2020), 24.

18 Boender, "Professionalizing" (n. 16), 8.

19 Vinding and Chbib, *Education and Training* (n. 17), 48.

20 Boender, "Professionalizing" (n. 16), 10.

21 Sunier, *Making Islam Work* (n. 11), 93.

22 Sunier, *Making Islam Work* (n. 11), 94.

asking whether and how the multiple relations, claims, and interdependencies can be made a subject of the training. To what extent can the training itself function as a space for critical dialogue with different stakeholders?

Current research focuses more on study programmes for persons who want to become imams than on "continuous training programmes for already-working imams."[23] Research has mainly been focused on elements of the structural and institutional frameworks. As a result, content-related questions have remained something of a desideratum: "More research is needed to explore exactly how this works in the context of the imam training as a site of deliberative engagement."[24] This gap in research allows us to raise the following questions: What communication processes take place in the training programmes? What competencies are they geared towards? What content is included? What active part do imams and caregivers play in the training course?

While both political strategies and research on training primarily focus on (male) imams, "the diversity inherent in Islamic religious leadership"[25] comprises chaplains, teachers, leaders of youth or women's groups, and association board members. Unlike in the US context, in Europe there is no clear "shift to full-time paid professionals,"[26] so volunteers also have to be considered as part of the target group. The professionalisation processes for imams are more diverse than is the case for Muslim chaplains, for whom a specific and standardized training is required.[27] This situation raises the question of how different profiles perceive training and how they contribute to shaping it. An interesting aspect to consider is the interaction between imams and other caregivers in a training context.

To sum up, there is a strong desideratum to analyse the training of imams and Muslim caregivers with a wider focus, considering the reflective agency of the participants and the processes of exchange taking place within this framework. This focus will now be deepened theoretically and analysed empirically, using a case study.

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23 Hashas, "The European imam" (n. 4), 89.

24 Boender, "Professionalizing" (n. 16), 10.

25 Timur Yuskaev and Harvey Stark, "Imams and Chaplains as American Religious Professionals," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam*, eds. Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47–63, 50.

26 Yuskaev and Stark, "Imams and Chaplains" (n. 25), 49.

27 Yuskaev and Stark, "Imams and Chaplains" (n. 25), 50f.

3. Disrupting Binaries: Border Thinking in the Contact Zone

This analysis draws mainly on three postcolonial and strongly emancipatory concepts that emerged out of global and local challenges to the dynamics of hegemony, namely *Borderlands*, *contact zones* and *border thinking*. The term *border thinking* was based on Gloria Anzaldúa's work[28] and later developed by Walter Mignolo.[29] In her work, Anzaldúa describes the *Borderlands* as a physical and metaphorical space "wherever two or more cultures edge each other,"[30] characterized by a "constant state of transition" and inhabited by "those who cross over."[31] People who are marked as different by society, and are therefore seasoned in the crossing of physical and metaphorical borders, have to "become sensitive to a lot of different things in order to survive."[32] This (forced) sensitivity leads them to develop a perspective that is characterized by creatively breaking down, transcending and uprooting dualistic thinking and paradigms.[33] Adopting an epistemological lens, Mignolo recognises the *Borderlands* as a space where hegemonial and peripheral epistemologies intersect, and subaltern perspectives are produced – in other words, where *border thinking* emerges.[34] He describes border thinking as a "double critique" which attempts "to think from both traditions and, at the same time, from neither of them."[35] This complexity entails "thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies."[36] The concept thus reconciles opposing perspectives by overcoming divisions and creating innovative ways of thinking.

Another term that is used for this space of friction where different worlds and perspectives meet is the *contact zone*, a phrase coined by Mary Louse Pratt in the context of transcultural pedagogy. For Pratt, *contact zones* are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."[37] The marginalised parts of those contact zones are limited in their ability to control the dominant epistemology but are very much able to determine what is absorbed from it and how it is used. In spaces where people

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28 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).

29 Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2000).

30 Anzaldúa, *Borderland* (n. 28), Preface.

31 Anzaldúa, *Borderland* (n. 28), 3.

32 Anzaldúa, *Borderland* (n. 28), 182.

33 Anzaldúa, *Borderland* (n. 28), 80.

34 Mignolo, *Local Histories* (n. 29), 174.

35 Mignolo, *Local Histories* (n. 29), 67.

36 Mignolo, *Local Histories* (n. 29), 85.

37 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40, 34.

meet and communicate, there is often the expectation that all participants share the same rules and norms.[38] Pratt argues that in the contact zone, this is not the case and therefore any communication that is produced will generate a "radically heterogenous" reception.[39] The contact zone therefore allows for a multitude of perspectives and knowledges, and it is exactly the friction between these that enables disruptive ways of thinking.

Mignolo's rendering of border thinking has been criticised as constructing a simplified dichotomy which reproduces essentialising and homogenizing perceptions of the global south and the global north.[40] For this analysis, it is important to recognise that the concepts of borderlands, contact zones and border thinking are steeped in and emerged out of hegemonial and colonial power structures; therefore, we have to be wary about the reproduction of such notions when using them. At the same time, these concepts contain the potential for change and for disrupting the binary systems which created those liminal spaces and epistemologies in the first place. As such, they carry a disruptive and transformative energy which we attempt to transfer to our case study. To escape the binaries Mignolo was accused of reproducing, this analysis will examine the case of continuing education for imams and Muslim caregivers, seeing it as a contact zone and borderland where a multitude of perspectives, knowledges and practices meet, connect, and position themselves in relation to each other. Border thinking, then, is the product of this contact zone and is characterized by creative strategies which disrupt, transform, transcend, and subvert binary and hegemonial ways of thinking. We will especially focus on the multitudes of viewpoints from within the "marginal" as well as the "hegemonial" perspectives.

For our analysis, we consulted reflective material created by the participants, teaching material from the presenters and media coverage about the continuing education course. Most importantly, we closely examined protocols of the training days, which contain input from the presenters, summaries of discussions and direct quotes from participants, presenters and organisers of the programme. The protocols were written in an observatory manner by a member of the project team and intended partly for evaluation purposes, to assure the quality of the course, and partly for research purposes.[41] Using qualitative content analysis methods, we

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38 Pratt, "Arts" (n. 37), 36–38.

39 Pratt, "Arts" (n. 37), 39.

40 Scott Michaelsen and Scott C. Shershow, "Rethinking Border Thinking," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2007): 39–60.

41 We refer to the protocols with footnotes indicating the year and day of the continuing education course.

sought evidence of the strategies described above.[42] Categories were formed inductively, which in turn served to extract further significant examples from the material. The researchers of this study were, in cooperation with others, responsible for the planning and implementation of the continuing education course. Therefore, it represents an action-research approach, as described below.

4. "Zurich Competence": Continuing Education as a Contact Zone

The starting point for this case study is the cooperative regime between the state and religious communities as it exists in almost all Swiss cantons.[43] State support is granted to legally recognised churches and religious communities.[44] Most Muslim communities in Switzerland are organised in associations which are not legally recognised.[45] The lack of legal recognition also carries through to social recognition. Muslims in Switzerland are often perceived as an out-group[46] requiring integration.[47] Additionally, there is an ongoing dominant anti-Muslim discourse in media and politics, which in turn leads to further anti-Muslim racism within mainstream society. For example, some discourses of this nature were seen in the lead up to the state ban on minarets or on face veils.[48] However, there are attempts from Muslim communities to influence the discourse by organising grassroot projects, and some

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42 Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003).

43 Raimund Süess and René Pahud de Mortanges, *Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe. Switzerland* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

44 Lorenz Engi, "Die staatliche Finanzierung von Religionsgemeinschaften," *sui-generis* (2018): 272–284.

45 Martin Baumann, Hansjörg Schmid, Andreas Tunger-Zanetti, Amir Sheikhzadegan, Frank Neubert, and Noemi Trucco, "Nicht anerkannt und dennoch Partner. Zwei Dokumente zur Fortentwicklung der Rechtsstellung nicht anerkannter Religionsgemeinschaften im Kanton Zürich," *in Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Kirchenrecht 2021*, ed. Schweizerische Vereinigung für evangelisches Kirchenrecht (TVZ: Zürich, 2021), 29–205.

46 Adrian Vatter, "Synthese: Religiöse Minderheiten im direktdemokratischen System der Schweiz," in *Vom Schächt- zum Minarettverbot. Religiöse Minderheiten in der direkten Demokratie,* ed. Adrian Vatter (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2011), 264–290, 277.

47 Patrick Ettinger and Kurt Imhof, *NFP 58 „Religionsgemeinschaften, Staat und Gesellschaft": Ethnisierung des Politischen und Problematisierung religiöser Differenz. Schlussbericht* (Zürich: fög, 2011), 31.

48 Flora Alvarado-Dupuy, "Anti-Gesichtsverhüllungsgesetz: Zwang zur Entschleierung," *Juridikum* 2 (2017): 152–156, 154.

authorities recognise their responsibility to create conditions for increased Muslim participation. One of these is the Canton of Zurich, which initially implemented the continuing education programme. The Canton of Zurich's religious policy is characterised by the fact that it also takes into account non-recognised religious communities, values their contributions to society, and supports their activities wherever possible. As a result of a study that highlighted the need for Continuing training in Muslim communities,[49] the project "Zurich Competence" was created. The project was conducted between April 2021 and December 2023. It comprised alternating phases of exploration, survey and preparation, as well as continuing education phases.

The project focused on the design and implementation of a continuing education programme for imams and Muslim caregivers in the Canton of Zurich. Based on the results of the conception phase and the needs assessment, an eight-day continuing education course was designed with the aim of strengthening the skills and social participation of imams and Muslim caregivers. The training course also included a short observation period in a public institution or (non-Muslim) NGO and an exchange of experiences, as well as the organisation, documentation, and presentation of a transfer project by each of the participants, in which insights from the programme were linked to a practical community activity. A total of thirty-five people completed the training course: sixteen women and nineteen men, eleven of whom were imams. Some of the participants were chaplains who had already completed a chaplaincy training course. In this sense, the continuing education course did not replace chaplaincy training but was focused on general skills relevant at the interface of communities and wider society.

This paper presents the results of the action-research, based on the principles of a relational self, wholeness and the primacy of practice.[50] In a "practice-research engagement" study and practice, institutions collaborate in order to transform social challenges.[51] The core of such an approach is mutual learning, with both researchers and practitioners producing knowledge which goes beyond that of the individual perspective.[52] This approach was implemented in the Zurich Competence project: the project was characterised by structural cooperation between the canto-

49 Noemi Trucco, Hansjörg Schmid, and Amir Sheikhzadegan, "Within and Beyond the Community: Tensions in Muslim Service Provision in Switzerland," *Religions* 15 (2023).
50 Hilary Bradbury, "Introduction: How to Situate and Define Action Research," in *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, ed. Hilary Bradbury (London: Sage, 2015), 1–9, 7.
51 David L. Brown, Gabriele Bammer, Srilatha Batliwala, and Frances Kunreuther, "Framing Practice-Research Engagement for Democratizing Knowledge," *Action Research* 1, no. 1 (2003): 81–102.
52 Chantal Munsch, "Praxisforschung in der Sozialen Arbeit," in *Grundriss Soziale Arbeit. Ein einführendes Handbuch*, ed. Werner Thole (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012), 1177–1189, 1180.

nal government, the Muslim umbrella organisation VIOZ and the University of Fribourg's Swiss Center for Islam and Society. The three partners worked together to design and implement the project. The first step was to carry out a needs assessment. Around fifty persons, half from Muslim communities and the other half from authorities, state, and civil society organisations, were interviewed to evaluate their needs, as well as important topics and skills for continuing education. In this way, the different educational backgrounds of the target groups were taken into account. The training course itself was also organised in a participatory manner and was jointly led by a person from the university and one from the Muslim umbrella organisation. In addition, people from the target group were involved as lecturers, with the work units encouraging active participation and serving as a space for reflection by the participants.

In this way, the project provided imams and Muslim caregivers with a qualification but also produced knowledge for future qualification measures and cooperative actions between the state and religious communities. After the project was completed, focus group discussions were held with participants to evaluate the project and to identify further needs.

In addition to multi-stakeholder cooperation, the lecturers in the continuing education course came from a wide variety of contexts: state organisations, Muslim communities, associations and academia, and a number represented an intersectionality of those contexts. The same was the case for the participants. They are active in a variety of ethno-linguistic communities and roles, are of different age groups, educational backgrounds and are first- or second-generation migrants. These many different perspectives and knowledges mean that the project, and especially the continuing education course, represents a contact zone, as described by Pratt.[53] This notion of contact zone was accepted by the participants, at the beginning of the first day; they themselves set the ground rules for it, which included respect, diversity, and an inclusive attitude towards each other.[54] One participant indicated that they would not "necessarily have to have the same opinions" and different opinions should be accepted.[55] This shows that the participants themselves expected to see the wide variety of differing and opposing perspectives which characterise a contact zone. Observations and transfer projects created further contact zones for which the participants were the driving force, and which assumably also produced border thinking. Power relations during the programme became visible in the contrast between organisers and participants, presenters and participants,

53 Hansjörg Schmid and Andrea Lang, "Profilbildung muslimischer Seelsorge an Kontaktzonen. Erkenntnisse aus dem Fallbeispiel Zürich," *Forum Islamisch-Theologische Studien* 1 (2022): 5–24, 11.
54 Protocol 2022, day 1.
55 Protocol 2023, day 1.

and between imams and caregivers. Despite these power relations, the people involved in the programme found unique ways to contest, engage, or reconcile different perspectives, as illustrated in the following analysis.

5. Border Thinking in the Contact Zone between Community and Society: Analysis of Two Examples

In this section, we will demonstrate how the programme as a contact zone shaped the border thinking exhibited within the continuing education course. Under analysis, two themes emerged as particularly suitable to illustrate this. At different points in the course, the participants reflected on the question of participation and on different theological topics related to tradition, innovation and authority. Those will serve as structural points for the analysis.

5.1. Ambiguities of Social Participation

Social participation was central to the Zurich Competence project. Sometimes also referred to as civic participation, it comprises a spectrum of collective and mostly voluntary activities oriented towards social cohesion and the common good.[56] Given the diverse media and political discourses, as well as the multiple activities of Muslim organisations, the topic was discussed at various points in the continuing education course. During the course, there were moments when the adequacy of Muslim communities' participation in Switzerland was questioned. One caregiver mentioned during discussions about the perception of Muslims in Switzerland that "from the day I wore a hijab, I suddenly wasn't Swiss anymore."[57] Similar processes of exclusion were mentioned during input from a representative of the police department for the prevention of radicalisation. Participants criticised the generalised suspicion Muslim communities were under, the public's failure to differentiate between political and extremist Muslim movements, and media reporting on Muslim communities exclusively through a lens of radicalisation.[58] Confirming this, most media reports on the continuing education programme referred to radicalisation,

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56 Mario Peucker, *Muslim Citizenship in Liberal Democracies: Civic and Political Participation in the West* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 21f.

57 Protocol 2022, day 5.

58 Protocol 2022, day 2.

or the prevention of it.[59] Therefore, as in many of the above-mentioned political debates, the media coverage rhetorically placed Muslim communities in proximity with radicalisation. Muslim actors often have to re-position themselves in relation to such narratives. A cantonal communication expert who analysed a television report about the continuing education programme with participants challenged its framing: the report was introduced with a reference to hate preaching and ISIS. The expert expressed dissatisfaction to the responsible reporter, which led to a fruitful exchange. She advised the participants to do the same when confronted with unsatisfactory reporting. To shift the narrative, she additionally encouraged them to pursue a proactive approach to media reporting.[60] A cantonal representative who corrects and discusses unfair reporting demonstrates solidarity towards Muslim communities. The positive exchange which followed is an interesting example of how the friction of a contact zone may lead to new perspectives. While the recommendation to the participants to do the same might empower them to take charge of the situation, it simultaneously places the responsibility for fair reporting on the shoulders of the affected group. The participants' questioning of adequate Muslim participation could be interpreted as victim positions, further underlining unequal power structures. However, the participants expressed their critique in the presence of representatives of the police, academia, state, media, and other established institutions, which were sometimes even depicted as responsible for such power structures. Therefore, the statements could also be read as strategic placements of grievances, in the presence of people influential enough to make adequate changes.

More positive perspectives on Muslim participation were also evoked. One lecturer reinforced the notion of current Muslim participation as "we are part of society."[61] The observations and transfer projects that were part of the training programme confirmed this notion. When the participants visited other organisations and institutions, they often expressed surprise about the warm welcome they received. For example, a group of participants visited an open-house event where different associations gave insights into their voluntary work. One of them commented, "before [the observation], I thought only imams did voluntary work, but there are many other people who perform voluntary work."[62] Participants in the visitation were therefore able to revise their preconceived notions about voluntary workers in other organisations and find commonalities with them instead. The will-

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59 E.g. Reto Zanettin, "Wie Bildung gegen Ausgrenzung und Radikalisierung hilft", *Schaffhauser Nachrichten*, June 16, 2023; Schweiz Aktuell, "Die erste Imam-Weiterbildung der Schweiz ist beliebt", *SRF*, May 18, 2022.

60 Protocol 2022, day 6.

61 Lecturer, protocol 2023, day 3.

62 Imam, protocol 2022, day 5.

ingness of established institutions and organisations to work with participants during observations and transfer projects further demonstrated how imams and Muslim caregivers are seen as a valued and essential part of society,[63] thereby taking a step towards building bridges between Muslim communities and society in general. Participants recognised this process, and some took on the responsibility of bridging borders at a grassroots level. One caregiver urged others to broaden their community to include people outside of their own religion and reduce prejudices,[64] thereby blending between different religious or secular communities to find common ground with non-Muslims. Another stated, in reference to generational migration, "the first generation worked on challenges within the communities, the second generation works on the challenges of society."[65] Second generation Muslim migrants in central Europe are often more visible as a religious minority than are the first generation.[66] This religiously marked visibility could mean they simultaneously pose more of a challenge to secular norms and are more challenged by society than the first generation. Through this friction, they are in a position to bridge borders and find new ways to engage in the participatory process.

One theme where the necessity of bridging borders became especially apparent was the question of identity. Second or third generation migrants are often confronted with conflicting notions of belonging. The participants expressed particular concern about adolescents in their communities who have to bridge the gap between community and society,[67] or between Muslim and Swiss values, and were interested in supporting them in this process.[68] Discussing the vulnerability of Muslim youth, one lecturer emphasised the transformative potential of people who act against certain norms of both society and communities, demonstrating unique perspectives to young people.[69] This lecturer also called for an "irritation of simple, rigid, one-dimensional identities" and a "visibility of multilayered, dynamic identities."[70] These ideas really strengthen the potential of the continuing education programme as a contact zone, with its multitudes of perspectives and identities. Calling for an irritation also allows for friction between assumed uniformity or one-dimen-

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63 Protocol 2022, day 5; protocol 2023, day 8.

64 Protocol 2023, day 1.

65 Imam, protocol 2023, day 1.

66 Leora Auslander, "Negotiating Embodied Difference: Veils, Minarets, Kippas and Sukkot in Contemporary Europe. An Essay," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 51 (2011): 401–418, 404.

67 Protocol 2022, day 1.

68 Protocol 2022, day 5.

69 Protocol 2022, day 2.

70 Lecturer, presentation 2022, day 2.

sionality and the multifaceted reality which became visible during the course, and which is also a reality in Muslim communities and society at large. Another lecturer emphasized, during input about youth work, that "it is important to have spaces for youth where those complex identities are possible, and I'm convinced mosques can be those spaces."[71] Seen within this frame, Muslim spaces can offer refuge to people whose complex identities are not adequately acknowledged within mainstream society. One lecturer also recognised the skills Muslim caregivers possess, switching between different identities and roles on the borders of society, as well as within and between communities.[72] The caregivers in this narrative act as bridging agents on multiple borders—a challenging role, as one participant emphasised: the diversity brought forth from within, between and outside of communities can make it hard to adequately build bridges.[73] Additionally, participants mentioned that the "role model character"[74] and availability expectations for the caregiver role can be overwhelming and make it hard to draw boundaries between the self and the community.[75] As one participant put it, this can feel invasive: "Actually we don't have any boundaries as imams."[76] The religious aspect of the work can further complicate boundary setting, as "it's hard to say no, because you do it for religion, you do it for God."[77]

Those factors challenge the work of participants not only on the borders of community and society, but also between and within communities. Some of these frictions could be observed during the programme. National, cultural and linguistic diversity between Muslim communities in Zurich was seen as a challenge to inter-Muslim networks.[78] Therefore, translative work was seen as important to reach diverse groups, and especially younger generations.[79] Some participants see the potential of highly educated imams for such translating work, while others perceived them as inadequately equipped to handle such challenges. One caregiver argued that imams often lack the tools to deal with the "postmodern phenomena" they are confronted with in this translating work.[80] This identified lack may be a critique of the fact that most imams completed their qualification outside of the central Eur-

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71 Lecturer, protocol 2022, day 5.

72 Protocol 2023, day 1.

73 Protocol 2022, day 1.

74 Caregiver, protocol 2023, day 1.

75 Protocol 2023, day 1.

76 Imam, protocol 2022, day 4.

77 Lecturer, protocol 2022, day 4.

78 Protocol 2022, day 4.

79 Protocol 2023, day 7.

80 Caregiver, Protocol 2022, day 1.

opean contexts in which they now work.[81] In addition, participants attributed this lack to other tensions they experienced within the communities, such as generational conflicts, lacking appreciation of voluntary workers and gender imbalances. The authority and the financial compensation related to the imam's role stands in stark contrast to the invisible voluntary work, often done by women.[82]

One lecturer, an imam himself, saw the lack of support from imams and male dominance in mosques as the reason for unequal representation of women within Muslim communities.[83] This statement was heavily contested by the participants for a variety of reasons. It was perceived as a reproduction of a common anti-Muslim narrative: women caregivers criticized the fact that the lecturer did not recognise the many contributions of women in communities, and imams were eager to state that they do not exclude women from access to mosques.[84] Conflicts like these illustrate the power struggle between imams and caregivers and between gender lines. On one hand, imams denied their role as gatekeepers concerning the representation of women in mosques. On the other, as seen above, they positioned themselves as key figures in translating work but were quickly criticized in relation to their ability to do so. Additionally, women caregivers passionately advocated for recognition of their work in presence of imams and other (male) authority figures. In the second run of the continuing education programme, the lecturer reframed the slide concerning the role of women in a more positive way. He emphasized the importance of shifting focus towards diverse roles in communities since through this "the chances to position ourselves in society will rise."[85] This framing links diverse participation within communities to Muslim participation within society. Inner Muslim diversity is seen as a necessary resource on the path to social recognition of Islam in Switzerland. The friction of the contact zone led the lecturer to rethink and reframe his critique in a more inclusive way.

5.2. Tradition, Innovation and Religious Authorities

Linked to social issues, religious and theological questions also played a central role in the Zurich Competence project. Public debates often mobilise expectations of se-

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81 Hansjörg Schmid and Noemi Trucco, *Bildungsangebote für Imame – ein Ländervergleich aus Schweizer Perspektive. SZIG/CSIS-Studies 3* (Fribourg: Swiss Center for Islam and Society, University of Fribourg), 4.

82 Protocol 2022, day 4.

83 Presentation 2022, day 1.

84 Protocol 2022, day 1.

85 Lecturer, protocol 2023, day 1.

cularisation as a means of integrating minority religions and, in particular, Muslims.[86] In contrast, the continuing education course offered an opportunity to renegotiate religious and theological issues, as an alternative to excluding them from public debate. In this sense, the course gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their social participation as Muslims.

The participants' theological knowledge was very diverse. Some completed studies on Islamic theology in different Muslim majority countries, some acquired a degree in Islamic studies in Western or central European countries, and some did both. Others gained their theological knowledge through independent studies.[87] Therefore, the participants represented the multiple perspectives of a contact zone between different accesses to and concepts of knowledge. Unsurprisingly, their views on theological questions varied immensely and led to fruitful exchanges. The participants acknowledged that different regional and cultural contexts can shape how theology is taught. One participant saw this diversity as a chance to prevent normative categorisation.[88] Another participant stated, "In Zurich there is a discussion of whether the Qur'an is the word of God; in Damascus that's not even a question."[89] Such deconstructive theological perspectives are sometimes criticised as a Christian approach to theology. However, they could also refer to debates about the relationship between the Qur'an's godly origin and its character as a "human text,"[90] as put forward by the Muslim thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010). Similarly, some participants criticised the concept of theology itself as a Christian one. These participants saw attempts to establish Islamic theology in non-Muslim contexts, as already mentioned (cf. chapter 2.), as the state exercising control over the content of such studies, which in turn lessens the programme's credibility within Muslim communities.[91] Others saw this as a possibility to instigate development in academia, a process which "demands sacrifices" but could ultimately be useful for Muslim communities.[92] These contradictory statements clearly show how multiple perspectives on Islamic theology coexist within communities. In contrast to the discussion about women's role in mosques described above, the participants did not

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86 Schirin Amir-Moazami, *Interrogating Muslims. The Liberal-Secular Matrix of Integration* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).

87 Protocol 2023, day 3.

88 Protocol 2023, day 3.

89 Imam, protocol 2023, day 3.

90 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse. Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 119.

91 Protocol 2022, day 3.

92 Caregiver, protocol 2023, day 3.

contest each other's opinions but accepted the existence of diverse perspectives within the continuing education programme.

The transfer projects further illustrated such plural approaches to theology. One participant organised an interreligious discussion where different religious perspectives on love were exchanged and discussed. These different perspectives encouraged the people present to reflect on their own prejudices.[93] One gave input on prophetic teaching methods for teaching students, with the intention of sharing commonalities and learning from each other,[94] creating a space for reflection on religion within a secular space. In cooperation with the Zurich Forum of Religions, an interreligious organisation, a participant contributed to an interreligious event concerning different clothing practices. Her presentation was split between theoretical input on the religious and cultural contexts of different Muslim veiling practices and practical input, in which she asked four Muslims to speak about their perceptions of and experiences with their own clothing practices. The audience was able to feel the materials the clothes were made from, try them on if they wished and ask questions.[95] The event took place in a mosque, different from many other projects, as the visitors were invited into a Muslim space. The mixture between theoretical information, personal testimonials, and practical, reflective and embodied experience, not only attempted to bridge the gap between Muslim communities and society but also between theory and practice. The possibility of trying on different clothes related to religious practices enabled the participants to quite literally walk in the shoes of Muslim minorities, encouraging sympathy on an embodied level. Such projects demonstrate an approach towards bridging borders, dissolving prejudices and building a common ground for multiple perspectives in society.

Another theme where friction between multiple perspectives became visible during the course was in discussing the place of innovation compared to tradition within Islamic thought. Discussions covered, among other topics, the possibility of women leading prayer, the difficulties of connecting to tradition as a convert, and the transformation of religious discourse into a "practical theology" applicable to contemporary realities.[96] While some participants were cautious regarding change within Islamic thought, one expressing concerns that "innovation becomes Reformation,"[97] others criticised the perceived "stagnation"[98] that often accompanies tradition and called for radical changes. Although the inputs during this discussion

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93 Report on the transfer project 2023.

94 Protocol 2023, day 8.

95 Report on the transfer project 2023.

96 Caregiver, protocol 2022, day 3.

97 Caregiver, protocol 2022, day 3.

98 Caregiver, protocol 2022, day 3.

were quite varied, the imams showed a slight tendency to take a more sympathetic stance towards tradition and against innovation, whereas it was the other way around for caregivers.[99] This difference could be because, despite the role of imam diversifying, it still carries a certain status that derives from a more traditional understanding of Islamic authority figures. The question of innovation versus tradition could therefore also be symptomatic of the struggle between hierarchical dynamics of different roles within communities. A discussion on the formation of religious authority underlined this struggle. One female caregiver referred to scholars as a religious authority, including the possibility of women occupying such roles. An imam then equated scholars with imams, thereby excluding women. This exclusion and its male-centeredness was quickly pointed out and contested.[100] While the friction between different roles in communities seemed to influence the innovation vs. tradition discussion, there were also voices calling for reconciliation between the two. One caregiver stated, "tradition is very important to me, I see it as a compass, but the cities and landscapes have changed and applying these methodologies to the new world, that is the challenge."[101] Another said, "Tradition is my parents' legacy and now I have to broaden my horizons and incorporate new opinions and perspectives."[102] These statements illustrate how the participants, by invoking a practical approach to theological reflection, have found a middle ground, bridging the perceived gap between innovation and tradition, emphasising the importance of both. The lecturer present at the discussion underlined those statements with his own allegory, "traditions are our roots, but a tree cannot only consist of roots, it must continue to grow."[103] In this understanding, innovation and tradition are not mutually exclusive but contingent on each other, unlike in common discourse, where tradition and innovation are often seen as counter currents of each other.[104] These statements demonstrate how the contact zone enables creative thinking beyond binaries. It produces border thinking, disrupting and transcending concepts that are generally perceived as dichotomous within the broader society but also within Muslim communities, creating innovative perspectives.

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99 Protocol 2022, day 3.
100 Protocol 2023, day 3.
101 Protocol 2022, day 3.
102 Caregiver, protocol 2022, day 3.
103 Lecturer, protocol 2022, day 3.
104 Thomas A. Winter, *Traditionstheorie. Eine philosophische Grundlegung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 13.

6. Conclusion and Further Perspectives

Corresponding to the tendency to actively involve different stakeholders, this training programme emerged from a need for cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim actors in a social context which is often indifferent, mistrustful or even hostile to Muslims. Additionally, Zurich Competence was part of a wider policy of incorporation of non-recognised religion by the Canton of Zurich. The canton's approach is to recognise and support the social contributions of these communities. At the same time, tendencies to "domesticate" Muslim communities emerged in the programme as well, such as making the prevention of radicalisation part of the course and the funding proposal. Nonetheless, the course was not primarily aimed at conveying knowledge but at strengthening skills in/through contact zones.

The aim to strengthen skills was evident in the proactive approach to social participation, which focused on empowerment, collaboration, solidarity and diversity. Throughout the programme, the content and approaches were not simply adopted, but questioned, criticised and adapted by the participants. Frictions between the different roles and hierarchies of the participants shaped discussions on social participation, as well as theological issues. Additionally, the perception of Muslims' social participation in Switzerland influenced reflections on theological questions. Some references to religious authority, innovation and tradition or the institutionalisation of Islamic theology, evidently referred and reacted to broader societal perceptions of Muslims in Switzerland. Participants' arguments in relation to those questions were therefore informed by their own perception of social participation. The fields of social participation and theological questions are strongly interconnected and both include binary structures: recognition vs. exclusion, trust vs. suspicion and tradition vs. innovation, which run the risk of being reinforced by each other. Border thinking in this analysis revealed ways to reconcile such structures and develop more symbiotic concepts, which can mutually enrich the fields of social participation and theological reflection. The fact that various stakeholders were involved ensures the widespread impact of such considerations and contributes to the development of new social, political and religious frameworks.

As we can see, encouraging border thinking in the training of imams and Muslim caregivers is not a process which is free of tensions. It will always be impacted by the multi-perspectivity of Muslim communities and wider society. It is also evident that, beyond the reflections of those involved in practice, further scientific considerations are required. Islamic practical theology can refer to such experiences and develop a "conversation between the lived experience and the Islamic faith."[105] In this way, Is-

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[105] Isgandarova, "Practical Theology" (n. 1), 218.

lamic practical theology can participate in a negotiation process at multiple contact zones in diverse societies. An in-depth exploration of the different approaches and concepts of practical theology in the continuing education of imams and caregivers may also help to overcome polarisation between an orientation towards tradition or an orientation towards innovation and give current challenges an appropriate place in theological reflection.