

Editorial

# Introduction to Special Issue on “Exploring New Assemblages of Islamic Expert Education in Western Europe”

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**Abstract:** What constitutes ‘relevant’ and ‘apt’ Islamic knowledge and expert education of future Islamic authorities in Western Europe? This central point of departure of this Special Issue is a burdened question in the current public and political debate in Western Europe. In the last decades, higher education on Islam in Europe has predominantly taken place in two domains: in the publicly funded university context as Islamic Studies, and in the privately funded context of mosques, madrasa’s and teaching institutes, often with strong links to Muslim countries of origin. In recent years, however, different answers have been formulated to this question; alternative initiatives have been taken—or are in the making—to train Islamic experts who are preparing for professional and academic careers in Europe. Publicly funded universities have started to organize imam training or Islamic theology programs, notably in Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. Furthermore, private confessional Muslim institutes are now recruiting lecturers who also graduated from Western Islamic Studies university programs. This Special Issue focuses both theoretically and empirically on these new aspirations, initiatives, debates and practices of those various actors who navigate between and beyond. To understand these developments, we need a theoretical framework that is able to deconstruct the power related epistemological narratives constituting these dichotomies. Therefore, we will use this introductory editorial article to elaborate on how these spaces/places of departure are not absolute or analytically stable, but per definition uncertain, blurry and constantly ‘in the making’, constituted by what David Scott has called ‘a problem-space’. Moreover, in addition to thinking only in terms of ‘interstices’ in order to overcome these dichotomies by way of ‘bonding or bridging’, but which often seems to presume an essential character to both ends, we suggest to consider these alternative initiatives in terms of ‘assemblages’.

**Keywords:** Islamic authority formation; Islamic higher education; Islamic expert formation; Islamic theology; Islamic studies; Imam EDU

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*Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction. (Said [1978] 2003, p. xxii)*

## 1. Introduction

*What Constitutes 'Relevant' and 'Apt' Islamic Knowledge and Expert Education of Future Islamic Authorities in Western Europe?*

The central point of departure of this Special Issue is a burdened question in the current public and political debate in Western Europe. In the last decades, higher education on Islam in Europe has predominantly taken place in two domains: in the publicly funded university context as Islamic Studies, and in the privately funded context of mosques, *madrassa*'s and teaching institutes, often with strong links to Muslim countries of origin. In recent years, however, different answers have been formulated to this question; alternative initiatives have been taken—or are in the making—to train Islamic experts who are preparing for professional and academic careers in Europe. Publicly funded universities have started to organize imam training or Islamic theology programs, notably in Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.<sup>1</sup> New curricula are being developed that aspire to answer the needs of Muslim believers while also meeting university, wider society and policy, standards. Furthermore, private confessional Muslim institutes are now recruiting lecturers who also graduated from Western Islamic Studies university programs. This Special Issue focuses both theoretically and empirically on these new aspirations and initiatives, often illustrating a space of negotiation for future potentialities.

The quest for home-educated Islamic authority figures has a longer history in Western Europe. Various authors have shown how it was originally formulated already in the 1980s and—90s in terms of integration (policy) (Birt 2006; Sunier 2009; Boender 2013; Loobuyck and Meier 2014). Policy makers underlined the role of religion, and of a 'European Islam' in particular, in the constellation of social cohesion and the enhancement of social integration on behalf of post-war migrant workers (Frégosi 1998; Adviescommissie Imamopleidingen 2003; Boender 2007, 2013). 'Inappropriately educated' authority figures were on the other hand considered counterproductive, either constituting a safety risk, or on the verge of becoming irrelevant and illustrative of the presumed crisis in religious authority and Islamic discursivity (Mandaville 2001, 2007; Robinson 2009; Grewal 2013; El Asri 2018; Hashas 2018).

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, however, and with renewed incentives after the attacks in London (June 2007), Paris (January 2015) and Brussels (March 2016), the focus shifted from integration in terms of social cohesion, to securitization of Islam and responsabilization of its authority figures in terms of social order, safety and control (Birt 2006; Schepelern Johansen 2008; Yazbeck Haddad and Balz 2008; Boender 2013). The number of teaching programs in Islamic Studies at publicly funded universities in Western Europe increased rapidly in the last decade and a half (Morris et al. 2014). These programs primarily answered the need for 'secularized' education *about* Islam (e.g., considered useful for policy recommendations (Asad 2009, p. 54)), rather than 'religious' education *into* it (Grimmit 1994). This Special Issue will elaborate on this difference—often articulated as 'Islamic Studies' as opposed to 'Islamic Theology'—and how it plays out in the aspiration of home-educated Islamic authority figures within the context of secular liberal national projects.

Importantly, although practice and discourses concerning Islamic higher education still seem to originate in either one of these two domains, we felt the need to observe what goes beyond this dichotomous narrative. Because what is missing in those politicized discussions that understand the development of Islamic higher education as opting between 'secularism' or 'faith', 'modern' or 'traditional', 'rational' or 'normative', are the aspirations, debates and practices of those various actors who navigate between and beyond (Mukadam and Scott-Baumann 2010; Scott-Baumann and Chervallil-Contractor 2015). Alternatives appear, in which educational domains and trajectories are looking for various combinations, accommodating needs and expectations of diverse groups of

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<sup>1</sup> More on these initiatives, see among others: (Drees and van Koningsveld 2008; Aslan 2013; Agai et al. 2014; Leirvik 2016; Boender 2014, 2019).

Muslim and non-Muslim stakeholders. Reaching out to diverse audiences with various expectations and backgrounds regarding what ‘apt’ teaching about Islam should be, these programs and their educators illustrate a different phase of Islam education in Europe.

## 2. Deconstructing Narratives

To understand these developments, we need a theoretical framework that is able to deconstruct the power related epistemological narratives constituting these dichotomies. Therefore, we will use this introductory article to elaborate on how these spaces/places of departure are not absolute or analytically stable, but per definition uncertain, blurry and constantly ‘in the making’, constituted by what David Scott has called ‘a problem-space’ (Scott 2004, p. 3. See also: Bowen 1993; Halstead 1995; Asad 2003, 2015; Taylor 2007). The latter is understood as “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes hangs” (Scott 2004, pp. 3–6). We therefore consider this ‘ensemble’ or ‘problem-space’ inherent to the discursive dichotomies surrounding our central question of *What constitutes apt and relevant Islamic knowledge and expert education in Western Europe?*

Moreover, in addition to thinking only in terms of ‘interstices’ in order to overcome these dichotomies by way of ‘bonding or bridging’, but which often seems to presume an essential character to both ends, we suggest to also consider de-essentialization by “moving from intersectionality to assemblage” (Puar 2007, p. 211). As indicated by Hall (Grossberg 1986), De Landa (2006) and others, the benefit of considering thinking in terms of ‘assemblages’ that are ‘articulated’, is first of all that it departs from the idea that ‘interstitiality’ is only possible by a coming together of several, already stable and essential entities, instead of recognizing how they are heterogeneous and ‘becoming’ from the start (see also Larsson 2018). Secondly, it also allows for the relationality between different components of assemblages to be contingent, meaning that it depends on empirical questions, structures, discourses, rationalities, spaces and contestations (see also Grossberg 1986, p. 53).

The ensuing contributions to this Special Issue will especially illustrate the latter empirically. Some were first presented at the international conference *Innovative forms of Islamic higher education in Western Europe* at Leiden University, 3–4 April 2017. The aim is to provide insights in what is actually happening if we closely look at the central issue of what (might) constitute(s) relevant and apt Islamic knowledge and expert education in Europe. Especially considering the space of negotiation between private initiatives and state-funded universities, the contributions theoretically and empirically focus on new articulations of Islamic expert educational assemblages.

## 3. Mapping the Problem-Space

Scott (2004) introduced the concept of a ‘problem-space’ in order to think conceptually not only about the situatedness of *answers*, but also about the ensemble of *questions* that seem “worth having answers to” in a specific historical context concerning a social problem (Scott 2004, p. 4). He defined a problem-space as follows:

*An ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such ( . . . ), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power. (Scott 2004, p. 4)*

We will perceive the forms of criticism, dispute, challenges, and formulated alternatives that constitute the discursive context of the central question at stake in terms of a problem-space. This will allow us to not only reflect about the answers, here in terms of the articulation of new assemblages of Islamic higher education. It will also enable us to think conceptually about how the problem is presently perceived in the first place; how “to frame the criticism of the present in terms of the strategic value of responding” (ibid., p. 4).

In other words, in order to understand the currently perceived articulation of new assemblages of Islamic higher education that seem to be conditioned by, what we call, the ‘space of negotiation’ between the various actors, desires, traditions, grammars and rationales present, we first need to think further about “the context of dispute [and] rival views” that matter in “the language-game we find ourselves participants in” (ibid., p. 4). We believe this point of departure to be important in order to understand the *temporal* and *strategic* dimensions of the problem-space and its conceptual horizons.

As indicated by Scott, “problems are not timeless”, and neither are the strategic value of the questions and answers that define it, nor the ‘objectifications’ of the concepts used in the “context of argument” (ibid., p. 4; Marshall 2014, p. 345). Our choice for thinking in terms of ‘assemblages’ was exactly prompted by this de-essentializing approach, that understands the use of concepts like ‘secular’/‘outsider’/‘modern’/‘rational’, or ‘religious’/‘insider’/‘traditional’/‘normative’ in “purely relational and contingent terms insofar as they emerge from within a mobile field of relations of power and knowledge” (Marshall 2009, pp. 6, 36; 2014, p. 345). In the next paragraphs we will attempt to provide a mapping of these concepts, which “are always already comparative, always already designating an order of things, of lines of inclusion and exclusion” (Marshall 2014, p. 345).

### 3.1. ‘Outsiders’ Secular Modernity’ versus ‘Insiders’ Confessional Tradition’

As previously indicated, much of what has been said in the past three decades about educating Islamic experts—be it imams, religious teachers, Muslim chaplains, Islamic theologians or other Muslim leaders—can easily be framed in dichotomous terms, juxtaposing ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ as two adversary positions.<sup>2</sup> These are mostly considered two distinct domains in which the teaching of Islam fundamentally differs in approach and outcome: whereas the public university usually taught *about* Islam from an ‘outsider, critical and secular perspective’, the private institute taught *into* Islam from an ‘insider and confessional perspective’ (Grimmit 1994, p. 142).

However, instead of perceiving this presumed incommensurable dichotomy between religious and secular worldviews as analytically given, we consider it as part of an ongoing political, historical and epistemological process that “attempts to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living [and knowing] is required to take place” (Asad 2003, p. 14; Mahmood 2009, p. 64). Both are considered co-constitutive of one another, as “concepts that are ( . . . ) interdependent and necessarily linked in their mutual transformation and historical emergence” (Mahmood 2009, p. 64). As further elaborated on by Saba Mahmood, “secularism here is understood not simply as the doctrinal separation of church from state but also as the rearticulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance” (ibid., p. 65).

These representations of ‘the secular’ or ‘the religious’ in everyday life have been shown to “mediate people’s identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences” (Asad 2003, p. 14. See also Chadwick 1999; Hashas 2018); not in the least about what (should) constitute(s) apt Islamic knowledge or expert education for ‘modern Islamic home-based authorities’ in the eyes of the political aspirations of religious freedom, tolerance and liberal democracy (El Asri 2018; Hashas 2018; Sunier 2018). Therefore, in terms of mapping the problem-space defined by this central issue, we believe this requires first of all a reflection on the hegemony of epistemic value inherent to the concept of ‘outsiders’ and secular criticism’. A second question that we deem worth asking, is the latter’s interrelatedness to the idea of conservative and static religious traditions, particularly with regards to widespread perceptions of Islam.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that this ‘educational dualism’ does not exclusively occur in a diasporic context, but is also manifest in the postcolonial educational structures in Muslim majority countries (see among others: Cook 1999).

### 3.2. Outsiders' Secular Hegemony

State-funded universities in Western Europe profile their Islamic Studies as 'secular' and 'dispassionate', working from a 'historical-critical methodological perspective' towards a specific type of 'knowledge-based liberal subjectivity' characterized by the modern aspiration of free choice, social tolerance, harmony and equal citizenship (Halstead 1995, p. 37; Asad 2003, p. 5; 2006, p. 515; 2009, p. 53; Hallaq 2013, p. 75. See also Taylor 2007; Agrama 2012; Agai 2015). Such a 'modern approach' is detached in a Weberian fashion from any explicit metaphysical considerations (Strauss 1953; Zaidi 2011), thereby assuming that the latter does not have a valid point of view on campus (Scott-Bauman et al. 2020). Instead, a 'disenchanted', 'purified' and 'distantiated' perspective is upheld towards the distinctive object and subject of religion as a social science (Latour [1991] 1993, pp. 10–11; Asad 2003, pp. 11–13; Warner 2004, p. 16; Mahmood 2009, p. 72; Zaidi 2011, p. 7).

Although the number of chairs, programs, curricula and centres of Islamic Studies has increased rapidly in Europe, the US and Australia in the last two decades following 9/11 (Bennet 2015, p. 4), 'the outsiders' critical study of 'the Orient' has a much longer history at Western universities. Starting in the sixteenth century with chairs of Arabic, the study of Islam primarily took place from a Christian apologetic perspective (Bennet 2015, p. 7; Larsson 2018, p. 121).<sup>3</sup> By the eighteenth century, in a time when the Church' worldly authority and power were increasingly under question, the study of Arabic, Islam and its Texts was considered mainly relevant as a way to reaffirm the power-knowledge nexus of the Church and the hierarchy in religion, with Christianity being the one true religion (Bennet 2015, pp. 7–9; Larsson 2018, p. 122; Topolski 2018, p. 63).

By the nineteenth century, this hierarchy of knowledge and power was 'laicized' through philology, with Ernest Renan (1823–92) being one of its pioneers (Topolski 2018, pp. 64–65). Based on the much contested philological system of order between Semitic, Aryan or Turanian languages, Semitic languages such as Arabic (and, therefore, the civilizations using it) were considered scientifically 'immature' or 'mediocre'. In the same line of thinking, Aryan languages (and their peoples) were seen as 'superior', 'more progressive' and more prone to 'rationality and science', instead of stagnation in 'belief' and a 'lack of accuracy' (Bennet 2015, pp. 11–13, 17; Topolski 2018, pp. 64–65).<sup>4</sup>

As clearly indicated by Edward Said, nineteenth century academics working in this field were impacted by the heritage of positivism, Enlightenment, colonial and imperial realities (Said [1978] 2003; Bennet 2015, p. 12). It was the coming of age of what he has famously called 'Orientalism', "based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said [1978] 2003, p. 2). This discourse of knowledge and power "was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (ibid., p. 3). The idea of the Orient was objectified, as simply 'there', ready to be explored and studied by European scientists (Said [1978] 2003, pp. 3–4; Bennet 2015, pp. 12–13). The latter's produced knowledge was considered "non-political, that is, scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief" (Said [1978] 2003, p. 10). Such 'true knowledge' was "premised upon exteriority": 'true representation' of 'the Orient' was enabled by this position of being "outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (Said [1978] 2003, pp. 21, 121–22).

Various authors have argued how this position of distantiation (or 'purification' as Latour has called it (Latour [1991] 1993) between the subject and object, which is deemed a crucial prerequisite for the possibility of scientific reasoning or rational critique, has its roots in Protestant Christianity

<sup>3</sup> With few notable exceptions, such as the Dutch Adrianus Relandus (1679–1718) (Vrolijk and Leeuwen 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Topolski indicates how this 'philological turn', "which depicts itself as moving away from 'religion' towards science and secularism", at the same time "naturalizes the hierarchical distinction of religious classifications" (namely 'Semitic', which is a 'religious category' containing Jews and Arabs (2018, p. 66)). Therefore, "although they claimed to be scientific and free from theological influence, these new philological categories incorporated the previous 'religious' hierarchy"; illustrating what Topolski refers to as 'the race-religion constellation' (Topolski 2018, p. 65).



(Warner 2004; Keane 2007; Mahmood 2009, p. 72).<sup>5</sup> Afterwards, it became globalized and secularized, establishing a seemingly natural ethics of ‘true’ understanding by the liberal subject, neglecting in the meantime its own situated “disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments and subject-object relationality” (Warner 2004, pp. 23–24; Mahmood 2009, p. 90). In response to this naturalized ideal of distantiation and complete disengagement between the object and subject of science and critique, Edward Said repeatedly underlined to the contrary how this praxis of “critical consciousness is a part of its actual social world and of the literal body that the consciousness inhabits, not by any means an escape from either one or the other” (1983, p. 16).

However, this idea of maintaining a ‘critical distance’ allowing one to ‘see the world as it really is’, was nevertheless maintained during what has been called the ‘neo-Orientalism’ of the 21st century (Asad 2018, p. 16; Mutman 2018, p. 258). Some conservative think tanks or institutions underline their critical outsiders’ expert vision, focusing most often on topics like Islamic radicalism, Muslim women or LGBTQ rights within Islam, which Lila Abu-Lughod has labelled ‘zones of theory’ (Abu-Lughod 1989, p. 280).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Mutman points at a tendency to ‘authenticate’ these views by an insiders’ feel of the culture and religion by native authors (Mutman 2018, p. 258). The combination of this dual approach of (af)iliation (Said 1983, p. 20) “contributes to produce a general consensus on the essentially repressive nature of Islam, in conformity with the predominant stereotypes in the Western media” (Mutman 2018, p. 258).

Any engagement with, or return to, (religious) tradition in the form of Islamic revivalism is in this line of thinking interpreted in a Weberian fashion as something that is a-modern, collectivist, irrational, conservative, and incapable of reasoned critique (Asad 1986). As something that therefore needs explanation, because it is seen to be ‘out of place’ in the natural course of modern secularist history (Agrama 2012).

### 3.3. *Insiders’ Critique of the Islamic Tradition*

From the point of view of this ‘outsiders’ secular perspective’ in the dichotomous problem-space described, the private Islamic institutes are considered to provide a ‘normative-instructive’ perspective to the students from an exclusively insiders’ perspective. This is seen to be characterized by a lack of distantiation, “where the subject is understood to be so mired in the object that she cannot achieve the distance necessary for the practice of critique” (Warner 2004, p. 16; Mahmood 2009, p. 90).

The subjectivization project that is presumed to take place within these Islamic educational contexts is therefore often seen as antithetic to liberal and modern aspirations of the critically thinking citizen-subjects (Cook 1999; Agrama 2012). Instead, the demonstrated return to ‘authentic and purified’ knowledge and practice (Sunier 1999; Deeb 2006; Pedziwiatr 2010) about and within the Islamic tradition by subsequent generations of Muslim believers in secular contexts, is considered at odds with expected evolutions in terms of modernized, individualized, privatized forms of religiosity (Peter 2006; Fadil 2008, pp. 31, 35). Such evolutions would indicate a thorough and desired integration within the majority society (Kepel 1994, p. 318; Peter 2006, p. 106; Fadil 2008, pp. 34–38).

In reaction to this, social scientists like Cesari (2003) and Roy (1992, 2004) have indicated how the democratization of religious knowledge, the religious bricolage that is seen to take place, the fragmentation of traditional authority structures (Mandaville 2007), and the ‘culture of the self’ among younger generations of Muslims in their approach towards Islam as an ‘identity politics’ (Kepel

<sup>5</sup> This also has repercussions on Western ‘university theology’, which is historically associated with the Protestant Reformation and its theology performed within ‘the framework of a secular university, infused with liberal values, (...) associated with academic freedom, (...) [and combining] a practice-oriented insider perspective with a critically oriented outsider perspective” (Leirvik 2016, p. 128).

<sup>6</sup> In her seminal Anthropological Review article (1989), Abu-Lughod used the description of ‘zones of theorizing’, which indicated the dominant ‘theoretical metonyms’ by which—as in her review—the “vast and complex area of the Arab world” is grasped (1989, p. 280). For her, the “three central zones of theorizing within Middle East anthropology [were]: segmentation, the harem, and Islam” (ibid., p. 280). She further explored in her article why this is the case.

1994; Khosrokhavar 1997), are to the contrary seminal for the ‘Europeanization of Islam’ and its comprehensibility among European societies (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003; Fadil 2015; Peter 2006). Other authors have also indicated the empowering effect of Islamic revivalism in Europe in the formation of ‘counter publics’ and alternative ways of citizenship (Göle 2005, 2013).

However, rather than merely perceiving any outing of Islamic revivalism as informed by the socio-economic and cultural context of the new Muslim diaspora in the West, authors like Amir-Moazami and Salvatore (2003) have convincingly shown how it equally evolves out of a much older, as well as a more global dynamic within the Islamic tradition of internal reform (see also Bowen 2004). This thus counters the Western idea of (religious) traditions—and Islam in particular—as being per definition static and conservative (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, p. 55). In line with Asad (1986), they perceive the aspirations towards internal reform, critique and debate as characteristic for the survival of *any* (religious) tradition. For Asad, tradition is thus not understood in a conservative way as contradictory to reason, nor to critical renewal, crisis or conflict (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, p. 55). Instead, it is argued that such presuppositions about traditions are in themselves historically determined, among others by the work of Max Weber (Asad 1986, p. 16).<sup>7</sup>

Rather, Talal Asad perceives Islam as a ‘living tradition’, following the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre’s understanding of it as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument” (MacIntyre 1981, p. 222). Therefore, Islam can be considered according to Asad as a discursive tradition, “that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Quran and the *Hadīth*” (1986, p. 14). As he underlines, even in the case of ‘mere repetition’ or ‘imitation’ of tradition, “it will be the practitioners’ conceptions of what is *apt performance*, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition” (ibid., p. 15. Original emphasis). Hence, instead of perceiving reason and argument only in situations when the tradition is in crisis, he perceives it as essential “whenever people have to be taught about the point and proper performance of that practice, and whenever the teaching meets with doubt, indifference, or lack of understanding” (Asad 1986, p. 16). This may lead some authors to conclude that the debate over the tradition *is* the tradition for Talal Asad (Garriott and O’Neill 2008, p. 387). He further argues that:

*Critique is central to a living tradition; it is essential to how its followers assess the relevance of the past for the present, and the present for the future. (Asad 2015, p. 1)*

This, in other words, provides an alternative view to the prevalent contemporary idea that critique is an achievement of secular and outsiders’ thought (see *supra*). Instead, Asad continues by maintaining to the contrary that “a good critique is always an *internal* critique—that is, one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent” (1993, p. 189).

Especially in times of securitization of Islam and de-radicalization policies, intra-Muslim contestation or internal critique about correct practices, expert knowledge and formation will be shown in the contributions to be inspired by a variety of sources and traditions; exhibiting both Islamic and non-Islamic rationales (see also: MacIntyre 1977, p. 461; Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, pp. 56–57; Hashas 2018, p. 94; Larsson 2018, p. 129; Fadil et al. 2019, pp. 14–15). Contrary, therefore, to the dichotomous nature of the problem-space described—with a language game of homogeneous outsiders’ versus insiders’ power and knowledge—practitioners, actors and alternatives in the field are “generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a *number of traditions*” (MacIntyre 1981, p. 222. Own emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> As Asad explains: “In their representation of ‘Islamic tradition,’ Orientalists and anthropologists have often marginalized the place of argument and reasoning surrounding traditional practices. Argument is generally represented as a symptom of ‘the tradition in crisis’, on the assumption that ‘normal’ tradition (...) excludes reasoning just as it requires unthinking conformity. But these contrasts and equations are themselves the work of a historical motivation, manifest in Edmund Burke’s ideological opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘reason’, an opposition which was elaborated by the conservative theorists who followed him, and introduced into sociology by Weber” (Asad 1986, p. 16).

What is of most interest, then, is an attempt to understand “the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence” (Asad 1986, p. 17). Because, as Asad mentions, “although Islamic traditions are [thus] not homogeneous [nor static or conservative], they aspire to coherence, in the way that all discursive traditions do” (Asad 1986, p. 17). The formulated alternatives within the space of negotiation, enabled yet undetermined by the problem-space described, will exhibit different rationales that not merely oppose each other, nor are ‘incommensurable’ (MacIntyre 1988, p. 345; Fadil 2013, p. 17). Instead, they tend to form an “apparent ‘coherence’ [that] is established through a *systematic assemblage of a heterogeneous set of repertoires*” (Fadil 2013, p. 17. Own emphasis).

#### 4. Articulations of New Assemblages of Islamic Higher Education

The contributions in this Special Issue present several examples of new attempts or aspirations. It provides space for observations from scholars who, as engaged observers, are themselves often involved in the development of various kinds of Islamic higher education in Western Europe. We invite articles that bear (firsthand witness) accounts of new types of educational settings that emerge out of the problem-space described, yet find themselves in the space of negotiation characterized by different rationales and a search for coherence.

We chose to frame the implied connections, considerations and choices in terms of the articulation of ‘assemblages’. The latter are considered in a Deleuzian manner as “shifting relational totalities comprised of spasmodic networks between different *entities* [material content, such as interpersonal contact, networks, religious communities, institutes, or universities] and their articulation within acts and statements (*expressions*) [such as language, symbols, (non)verbal knowledge transmission, bodily expression, behavior, legitimacy]” (De Landa 2006, p. 12; Weheliye 2014, p. 46). Assemblages are considered as “inherently productive, entering into polyvalent becomings to produce and give expression to previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on” (Weheliye 2014, p. 47). Stuart Hall preferred to speak of these forged connections in terms of ‘articulations’, which for him meant “a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (1986, p. 53).

However, important to note is the fact that although the connections made are unprescribed, this does not render them unanimously free nor liberating. As elaborated on by Hall, there are ‘tendential combinations’ which are preferred based on the existing social forces, power and knowledge structures present (Weheliye 2014, p. 49), analyzed here in terms of the encapsulating problem-space. Such ‘preferred articulations’ tend to “transport potential territorializations”, which are considered by Deleuze as processes that increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage (ibid., p. 49; De Landa 2006, p. 13; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 87–88). This might imply for instance exclusion of certain (f)actors, or segregation processes meant to install or reconfirm social boundaries. In this regard, various authors have indicated how political facilitation or support for a specific (kind of) Islamic higher educational initiative might be considered exemplary for the Foucauldian governmentality theory (Schepelern Johansen 2008, p. 450; Leirvik 2016, p. 130; Hafez 2014).<sup>8</sup> Another clear example of territorialization processes is the continuing underrepresentation of Muslim women, both in authority positions at university as well as in leadership positions within Muslim communities (Scott-Bauman et al. 2020).<sup>9</sup>

Yet, as this Special Issue will illustrate, whether or not in combination with the *deterritorialization* processes that *destabilize* boundaries or increase internal *heterogeneity* (De Landa 2006, p. 13; Deleuze

<sup>8</sup> Foucault understood ‘government’ as the “regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means” (Hindess 1996, p. 106, cited in Lemke 2002). As explained by Lemke, crucial in Foucault’s understanding of government is the relation he sees implicit in the term between ‘governance of the self’ (subjectivization) and ‘governing others’ by the modern nation-state. This allows Lemke to conclude that “in his history of governmentality Foucault endeavors to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual codetermine each other’s emergence” (Foucault 1991; Lemke 2002, p. 51).

<sup>9</sup> We would like to thank Prof. Dr. Alison Scott-Baumann for her important feedback on this matter.



and Guattari 1987, pp. 87–88), the forces and forged relations are always precarious, continuously incorporating within themselves new potentialities. As will be shown in the contributions, this leaves room to describe the compelling centripetal or centrifugal forces that characterize the formation of strategic alternatives within the space of negotiation that comes with the problem-space described.

## 5. Relevance

The aim of this Special Issue is to demonstrate in various ways how new forms of Islamic higher education get shape and what challenges the stakeholders face in the institutional and didactical design of their educational formats, be it the teachers' training of Islamic religious teachers, Islamic theology, imam training, courses for Muslim students, or tailor-made courses for professionals like diplomats, school teachers or medical personnel. Authors are invited to share their analyses, including those who have been in the position to develop and design these varying teaching programs, thus. The collection will thus bring into focus that relevant initiatives are developed as assemblages in and between three entities: the university, private institutes and Muslim community organizations. Sometimes the articulations come with conflict, but we will see that tensions can also be creative (Henzell-Thomas 2015).

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