

Article

Academization of Pious Learning: A Student's Quest in Religious Education

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the move towards “academization” of Islamic religious education in private institutes belonging to the reform movement in Brussels. An attempt is made to think through this move in terms of the sacred knowledge concerned, and the alleged implications for teachers and students of Islam. Some of the crucial elements that go with this shift are the aspiration for “distantiation” in teaching and knowing aspects of internal diversity, as well as the aspired changes in the professor–student (instead of shaykh–disciple) relationship. By focusing on ethnographic examples, the aim is to contribute to our understanding of the importance of the internal debates instigated by an attempt towards academization, the search for coherence that goes with it, its repercussions on people’s daily life and personal sensibilities, as well as on Islamic expert authority formation.

Keywords: Islamic education; academization; piety; distantiation; Islamic authority; Islamic knowledge

1. Introduction

This contribution is based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2013 and 2015 in three mosques and three private Islamic institutes from a Moroccan background in the region of Brussels (Belgium). They all delivered women-only or gender-mixed courses on Islam for lay adults.¹ People of Moroccan descent account for the largest minority group in Brussels, while they also make up the majority of the 200,000–300,000 (17–25%) inhabitants of Brussels who self-identify as “Muslim” (Willaert and Deboosere 2005, pp. 73–77; Bousetta 2008, p. 398; Dassetto 2011, p. 23).

In four of the six places where I have worked (which included the mosque courses and a women-only Islamic institute), the explicit aim of their courses was a pious personal and communal reform through a re-engagement with one’s own Islamic tradition by acquiring additional discursive and practical knowledge about it. This meant that Islamic religious knowledge gathering was not merely aimed at the correct performance of Islamic rituals (*al-‘ibādāt’*), but also at the acquisition of a specific ethical conduct. Such a personal and communal reform, also in “normal daily life” (Fadil and Fernando 2015), was not experienced nor presented as an active counter-movement against the (Belgian) majority society. Instead, this aspired reform of conduct, punctuated by an Islamic vision, was seen to be not only beneficial for the pious individual on an eschatological level, but for the

¹ This was part of a PhD project at the Catholic University of Leuven (2013–2017), for which I have followed over 200 classes in *fiqh* (Islamic law), *sirah* (biography of the Prophet Muhammad), *tafsir* (Quran exegesis), *tajwid* (Quran recitation), *al-akhlāq* (ethics), *usūl al-fiqh* (legal studies), *‘aqidah* (creed), *Hadīth* (traditions of the Prophet and his Companions) and *kalām* (systematic theology). Half of the courses I attended were gender-mixed, whereas half were women-only. In addition, I conducted interviews with fellow students and teachers, complemented by individual or group talks during, before, after or outside of class. As an anthropologist, I wanted to grasp what kind of knowledge was being transferred and how this relates to personal and communal processes of piety and authority formation.

general coexistence in society as a whole as well—not through sameness and assimilation, but through a self-conscious re-engagement with one’s own religious tradition. In this regard, these courses could be said to relate to the Sunni “revivalist” or “pietist reform movement” in Islam (Mahmood 2005; Jouili 2015).²

The remaining two gender-mixed Islamic institutes, however, distanced themselves from this traditional offer on the basis of being “academized”. The internal reform they aspired required a different pedagogy, didactics, structure, and aspired subjectivization project in the process. But it also coincided with skepticism, internal critique, and different expectations towards educating and learning Islamic religious knowledge. In this contribution, an attempt is made to think through this move towards “academization” in terms of the “sacred knowledge” concerned, and the alleged implications for teachers and students of Islam.³

In order to grasp the concepts and internal debates that go with it from an emic point of view, I will specifically focus on the ethnographic in-depth account of one of my key respondents and fellow students, Fatma. At the time of fieldwork in a gender-mixed institute that was known for its high level and self-proclaimed academized curriculum, she was a university student in her early twenties. Previously, however, she had followed courses on Islam since her teens in several of the mosque sites where I conducted fieldwork. Yet her subscription to this specific “academic institute” triggered an internal evolution instigated through the debates that she witnessed there. According to her own reasoning, this was due to her encounter with several differing epistemologies that caused her to have various doubts. Although this is a specific ethnographic example of one key interlocutor, the accompanying theoretical reflection and empirical bottom-up approach nevertheless aim to contribute to our understanding of the importance of these debates instigated by an attempt towards academization, the search for coherence that goes with it, its repercussions on people’s daily life and personal sensibilities, as well as on Islamic expert authority formation.

In what follows, I will first provide a short ethnographic account of the difference between the mosque courses and the self-proclaimed academized courses in the Islamic institutes. Secondly, I will elaborate on what we could call the metaphysical status and potential “affects” of Islamic sacred knowledge. I believe this is a necessary prerequisite in order to understand what is at stake for the subject and object of knowledge during the move towards “distanciation”. The latter will be shown to be one of the characterizations of processes of “academization”, which coincides with internal critique and debate. It is therefore also a precondition for grasping the “danger in knowledge”, as for instance experienced by Fatma in the ensuing paragraphs; among others because the move towards distanciation implies different understandings of and from the rational and agentive subject of knowledge acquisition (Keane 2007, p. 4).

² Note that the concept of internal reform (*islāh*), renewal (*tajdīd*) or revival has a long history in the Islamic tradition (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, p. 55). The term *islāh* is cited in the Quran under different derivations (more on this, see: Merad et al. 2012). Current reform or revivalist movements in Islam are often traced back to the famous Muslim modernist reformers at the end of the 19th century: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghāni (d.1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (d.1905) and Muhammad Rashīd Ridā (d.1935). In a time of decolonization and the formation of nation-states, they gathered around the notion of *islāh* to think about ways to reform the Islamic society through a public engagement in the name of Islam. This was “certainly inspired by a variety of sources of influence [such as Western nation-state frameworks and discourses], but nonetheless rooted in a genuine sense of belonging to a tradition” (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, pp. 56–57). In the context of the Brussels courses I followed, the concept of “reform” (“*se reformer*”) was used to depict the ethical, pious self-disciplining process the courses aspired to initiate. Through these individual efforts of Muslim subjects, the entire Muslim community could ultimately be reformed.

³ “Sacred” does not mean to indicate “that which is completely set apart” from the profane, in a Durkheimian way. In the words of the Malaysian Islamic philosopher, Syed Naquib al-Attas: “Islam does not concede to the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane; the worldview of Islam encompasses both *al-dunyāh* [the visible world] and *al-akhirah* [the invisible world], in which the *dunyāh*-aspect *must* be related in a profound and inseparable way to the *akhirah*-aspect, and in which the *akhirah*-aspect has ultimate and final significance” (Al-Attas 1995, p. 1). My use of the depictions “sacred / religious knowledge” here indicates the object of knowledge, which belongs to the sphere of *al-akhirah* and differs from knowledge about the profane or *al-dunyāh*. According to this logic, Abdullah Sahin recalls the historic division at Islamic *madrasahs* between religious sciences (*naqliyāt*), auxiliary sciences (*alliyāt*) and philosophical and natural sciences (*aqliyāt*) (Sahin 2018).

2. “Traditional” as Opposed to “Academized” Courses

The traditional mosque courses took place in the women’s prayer room, where we would sit in a circle, possibly taking notes, but mainly listening attentively to the female teacher’s stories and explanations. These courses were placed in the long tradition of “*durūs*”; courses delivered by the imam usually after prayer and for an almost exclusively male public. This feminized counterpart, which the mosques I visited had started to organize during the first decade of the 21st century, had the same informal and personal sphere. The focus lied on answering questions (often very personally) from the people present; on telling stories about the Prophet’s life (*sirah*); on reflecting on God’s names, on central concepts from the Qur’ān or on the *Hadīth* Nawawi⁴; on practical, jurisprudential knowledge regarding the right way of purification (*al-tahārah*) or performing prayer (*al-salāt*); or on exercising *tajwīd* in group (Qur’ānic recitation). Hence, the central aim of the courses was to provide spiritual “*rappels*” (reminders) of God, of His presence in believers’ lives, and on how to return *fi l-dīn* (“within religion”). In the words of one of the people present, it provided them with “spiritual boosts” to get through the week.⁵

Meanwhile, the courses offered by private Islamic institutes presented themselves as “academized”. This was demonstrated first of all by the formal implementation of structural and organizational measures. These included the distribution of syllabi, the organization of exams, or the division of the curriculum into several modules. We would sit in classrooms, looking at a blackboard, highlighting our syllabi and taking notes. The sphere during class was more organized, mirroring a genuine school structure. Instead of highlighting certain concepts in order to provide spiritual reminders, the aim was to finish the modules and acquire discursive knowledge. However, and most importantly, the content of these modules also differed from the mosques’ offer. Their move towards “academization” equally pointed to their preference to organize courses on the origins of *fiqh* (*usūl al-fiqh*), instead of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*); or courses on theology (*kalām*), instead of Islamic dogma (*‘aqīdah*). They emphasized their teaching *about* the Islamic tradition in all its richness, instead of only *into* it from a clearly situated perspective.⁶ The latter was considered only a first step towards a practical “man/woman on the street” kind of knowledge (Schütz 1946, pp. 465–66), preserved for a different time and place. Their own offer instead provided an additional meta-kind of knowledge, what Alfred Schütz would call a “well-informed citizen” type of knowledge (Ibid., pp. 465–66).⁷

This internal differentiation in the educational offer created for Brussels previously less known forms of authority from so-called “new [male and female] Islamic intellectuals” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, pp. 134–35). In addition, it installed different expectations towards what it meant to be a “student of Islam”. This proliferation in authority and demand on what Amel Boubekeur has called the “religious education market” (Boubekeur 2004; Krämer and Schmidtke 2006, p. 12), together with a renewed focus by these institutes on “academization” as a means to guarantee quality education, equally coincided with other forms of didactical or pedagogical aspirations and internal critique.

⁴ This is a famous collection by Imam al-Nawawi (d. 1277). He was a Shāfi’i jurist, and collected these forty (though actually forty-two) *Hadīths* that are said to contain the most important values of Islam. Many commentaries on it have been written by scholars throughout the ages. Today, courses are often organized around the *Forty Hadīth Nawawi*, which are translated in multiple languages.

⁵ For more on this aspect of “listening” in order to “mold the heart”, see among others: (Hirschkind 2006).

⁶ Note how this does not coincide with the so-called insider–outsider dichotomy (Grimmit 1994). For more on this, see Groeninck and Welmoet 2020, in the introductory editorial to this Special Issue.

⁷ Alfred Schütz made a distinction in levels of knowledge between “the man on the street”, the “well-informed citizen” and the “expert”. Whereas the “expert’s knowledge is restricted to a limited field but therein it is clear and distinct,” the “man on the street has a working knowledge of many fields which are not necessarily coherent with one another.” It contains “a knowledge of recipes indicating how to bring forth in typical situations typical results by typical means.” The “informed citizen”, then, “stands between the ideal type of the expert and that of the man on the street. (...) To be well informed means to him to arrive at *reasonably founded* opinions in fields which as he knows are at least mediately of concern to him although not bearing upon his purpose at hand” (Schütz 1946, pp. 465–466).

As indicated by Talal Asad, discussions and internal critique on “apt” (education of) “Muslimness” are inherent to the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad 1986, p. 15). Knowledge of what constitutes correct, relevant and apt Islam is always related to questions of power, which aim to “regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones” (Ibid.). What changes throughout time, however, are the modes of reflection, the social hierarchy and the institutional power present in this particular historical context (Mahmood 2005, pp. 54–55). Therefore, the “exact interpretation [of this search for academization], necessary measures, aspired aims and possible partners that this internal reform would need” differ considerably throughout time and space (Mahmood 2006, p. 329). So does the search for coherence that “would make its social effect such a powerful possibility” (Asad 1986, p. 17; Asad 1993, p. 185). In order to translate something of this coherence according to the “ways of reasoning characteristic for a given tradition” (Asad 1993, p. 200), the following paragraph first elaborates on the status of knowledge in Islam, and how it relates to questions of being and believing.

3. Knowing, Being and Believing in Islam

As already implied in the introduction to this Special Issue (Groeninck and Boender 2020), the Cartesian way of looking at knowledge, morality and human autonomy departs from a specific (yet mostly overlooked) doctrinal metaphysical understanding with its roots in Protestantism (Keane 2007, pp. 7, 67, 77; Mahmood 2009, p. 72). Following the Reformation, an attempt was made to purify, distantiate and disengage the subject from object, human from non-human, the immaterial from the material, signs from the world, transcendent from immanent categories, albeit unsuccessfully, as Bruno Latour famously argued (Latour 1993, p. 27; Pickering 1994, p. 257; Keane 2007, pp. 7, 66–67).⁸ This perspective should therefore be approached as a “kind of reasoning that has shaped our modern world—and not as the ground from which all [anthropological] understanding of non-Enlightenment traditions must begin” (Asad 1993, p. 200).

Therefore, in order to comprehend how internal critique related to the academization of Islamic knowledge plays out in the life of students, it is important to start from the “ways of reasoning characteristic of given traditions” (Asad 1993, pp. 185, 200). This means, in epistemological terms, the conditions of/for humans’ understandings of the world and everything in it. Included are Islamic students’ understandings of the Texts, according to a specific “semiotic ideology” as it is called by Webb Keane (2007, pp. 5–7). He used this term to indicate a tradition’s argumentation about what the preconditions, potentiality or limits of human agency (such as a full understanding) are in relation to semiotic material outings like the Qur’ān and the Sunnah (Ibid.). As we will see in the example of Fatma, an encounter with a different approach to the Texts, called “historico-critical”, will have repercussions for Fatma’s self-conceptualization of her own proper rationality and agency towards understanding (Keane 2007, p. 20).

Yet, this does not imply for Fatma nor her teachers a complete process of purification as symbolized by what is called a “secular”, “liberal”, or “modern” approach (Latour 1993, p. 11). Instead, a more nuanced articulation of a heterogeneous assemblage within and between different traditions is taking place, the coherence of which cannot be fully given weight without taking the doctrinal metaphysical and cosmological preconditions into account (see also Keane 2007, p. 32). This is because these clarify how the world has to be in order for a specific epistemology and semiotic ideology to be

⁸ In *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993), Bruno Latour argued against modern dichotomies like human and non-human, nature and society, material and immaterial. He explained that the modernist work of “purification” that would entail a complete dichotomous separation from nature and society, the material from the immaterial, the object from subject, has never taken place. Nature and society “expunging from each the traces of the other” (Pickering 1994, p. 257), have in reality never stopped coproducing each other, creating multiple “hybrids of nature and culture” (Latour 1993, p. 27; Pickering 1994, p. 257).

logic and coherent, and for human pious becoming in (line with) it to be imaginable (Hallowell 1960; Bhaskar 2008). In this regard, Ali Zaidi argues:

The privileging of historicity in discourse analysis over and above metaphysics, the attempt to reveal the groundedness of the Islamic Other's religious discourse in solely this-worldly considerations is tantamount to a refutation of the metaphysical mode of thought, and pre-emptively denies the right of the Other to hold onto metaphysics. (Zaidi 2011, p. 33)

This “metaphysical turn” when discussing the move towards “academization” of sacred knowledge is equally prompted by the moments of “strong evaluation” (Taylor 1985, p. 3) that the courses on Islam initiated for their students. During these moments, students were reminded of “root assumptions concerning the essential nature of things” (Scott 2007, p. 3) based on the professor’s doctrinal teaching of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. Courses on Islam therefore also served as a “rappel d’appartenance à un ordre des choses” (a recall of adherence to an order of things (Ricoeur 1977, p. 40)) for those “who believe and whom are given knowledge” (Q. 58: 11).

Knowledge (*‘ilm*) and faith (*īmān*) are thus considered closely related in the Qur’ān. Derivations of the word *‘-l-m* occur approximately 750 times in it, which underlines its importance in the Revelatory Message (Rosenthal 2007, pp. 20–21). The following Qur’ānic verse is one of the examples in which the necessity of studying and learning is emphasized:

*So they found one of Our servants
On whom We had bestowed
Mercy from Ourselves
And whom We had taught
Knowledge from Our own Presence.
Moses said to him:
“May I follow thee,
On the footing that thou teach me something
Of the (higher) Truth Which thou has been taught?
(Q. 18: 65–66)*

As implicated by this verse, *īmān* (“faith”) results in giving a certain kind of knowledge or insight (*‘ilm*), whereas true knowledge or insight cannot but result in an increased *īmān* (Rosenthal 2007, p. 97). This is, for instance, indicated in Qur’ānic verses that combine the two elements of “those of you who believe and who have been granted knowledge” (Q. 58: 11). Reason (*‘aql*), therefore, is not considered as external to faith, let alone opposed to it, but as one of the means to acquire true conviction. They are put in line with one another, rather than juxtaposed against each other. As the British scholar on Islam, Matthew L.N. Wilkinson, argued in the following citation:

If faith and reason find themselves in contradiction (. . .), either faith is wrong or reason is deficient, or faith is deficient and reason is wrong. Qur’anicly speaking, faith and reason, the rational intellect (‘aql*) and belief (*īmān*), are an inseparable generative mechanism of a serious relationship with God. (Wilkinson 2015, p. 63)*

In line with this, the contemporary Muslim philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, explained in his study on Islamic cosmological doctrines that “human reason (. . .), when healthy and balanced leads naturally to *tawhīd* [which can be translated here as “monotheism”] rather than to a denial of the Divine and can be misled only when the passions destroy its balance and obscure its vision” (Nasr 1993, p. 7). Hence, if used correctly and sincerely, i.e., purified from “passions and obscurity”, reason may give

a clear understanding of the nature of things, of life, and of the world, which naturally leads to a profound conviction and a strong faith (*īmān*).⁹

In general, we could say that “Islam looks upon knowledge as the central means to salvation of the soul and to the attainment of human happiness and prosperity in this life as well as in the hereafter,” as Osman Bakar writes on the first page of his book on *The History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (Bakar 2012). And in the words of the famous *Hadīth* collector, at-Tirmidhī (d. A.H. 279/892 C.E.), “the person in quest of knowledge is on the path of God until he returns” (cited in Rosenthal 2007, p. 87).

Religious knowledge acquisition therefore has a long tradition of lying on the path towards piety of the heart, body and mind (Halstead 1995; Al-Zarnuji 2001; Gardet 2012). In analogy with this triadic understanding of the person, the courses on Islam for lay Muslims in the reform movement are perceived as frequent sensory and intellectual reminders (through body and mind) with the aim of affecting the heart so that pious embodiment will potentially result from it (Groeninck 2017). Hence, acquiring (religious or any other kind of) knowledge in Islam “is not meant to be an end unto itself, but only a means to stimulate a more elevated moral and spiritual consciousness leading to faith and righteous action” (Cook 1999, p. 346. See also Alavi (2007, pp. 312–15) on Imam Ghazali’s pedagogy, for instance).

As implied by the three traditional Arabic words for education, the whole personal development is included in the process: on an intellectual level, for instance, with regards to knowledge about the Qur’ān, the *Hadīth* or *fiqh* (*ta’līm*); with regards to spiritual and ethical behavior towards God (*tarbiyah*); as well as concerning apt moral and social behavior towards others (*tādīb*) (Halstead 1995, pp. 27–30; Cook 1999, pp. 344–45; Sahin 2014, pp. 167–91; Sahin 2018). Therefore, the task of teachers who aim at a pious personal reform is not only to educate correct bodily (ritual and social) behavior, nor to “merely” teach religious knowledge, but also to *touch* the students’ hearts in order to produce pious internal disposition and spiritual insights (Groeninck 2017, pp. 68, 146).

All this pertains to the “grammar” when trying to translate how the move towards “academization”, the doctrinal nuances in semiotic ideology and the internal critique this will be shown to coincide with, not only implies a changed relation between the object and subject of knowledge, but also has repercussions on the Islamic subject’s self-understanding (see also Butler 2009, p. 114; Mahmood 2009, p. 91). Since the courses on Islam establish an epitomized relationship between doctrinal metaphysical considerations, epistemological attempts at understanding, and personal human becoming, the outcome of the internal debates initiated by academization might, in extremis, result in existential doubts for students. This is demonstrated by the ethnographic example of Fatma. What she self-reflexively called “her personal shift” (in self-understanding) was initiated by her plugging into an online Facebook discussion over the doctrinal question touching both upon epistemology and metaphysics: Where is God?

4. “Devastating” Academic Approach

The doctrinal debate over the question “Where is God” frequently returned during courses on *‘aqīdah* (dogma) and *kalām* (theology) that I attended in the Brussels mosques and private institutes. Fatma’s introduction to it was on an online forum, as she testified in the following extract:

During the exams I subscribed to this online Facebook group containing various shuyūkh [religious scholars] from Belgium and France, where someone asked the question: “Where is Allāh?” and the answers astonished me! I didn’t understand anything from it! Due to the courses in the mosque I had

⁹ Besides reason, gnosticism and contemplation have a strong tradition in Islamic Sufism. In that case, the focus lies mostly on the heart (*qalb*), through which the intensity of conviction and faith might become even higher (Frank 1994, pp. 24, 40; Bakar 2012, p. 194).

learned that God is up there, on his Throne¹⁰, but that wasn't at all what these people were saying. It seemed as though these people were talking about a different religion!

Fatma indicated that the Facebook discussion she witnessed on the question “Where is God?” confused her a great deal. “As if these people were talking about a different religion,” she adds. She did not recognize the alternative answers at all, which caused her distress. Who was right or wrong about this fundamental theological question? As a way to solve this question, she subscribed to courses in Islamic theology in the specific institute mentioned previously, where, as she emphasized, “an academic approach was maintained”. In this institute, her self-described personal change took shape. It was there that she learned that the Qur’ānic verse of God sitting on His Throne belonged to the *mutashābihāt* or equivocal verses in the Qur’ān as stated in Q. 3: 7:

*He it is Who has sent down to thee the book
In it are verses basic or fundamental
Clear (in meaning) (muhkamāt)
They are the foundation of the book.
Others are not entirely clear (mutashābihāt)
But those in whose hearts is perversity
follow the part thereof that is not entirely clear.
Seeking discord, and searching for its interpretation
But no one knows its true meanings except Allāh.
And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say
“We believe in it, the whole of it is from our Lord”
And none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.*

Besides the verses on God’s Throne, another often-used example in class from the *mutashābihāt* is the following Qur’ānic verse on God’s hand (as one of His attributes):

*Verily those who plight their fealty to thee
Plight their fealty in truth to Allāh:
The Hand of Allāh is over their hands:
Then any one who violates his oath
Does so to the harm of his own soul
And any one who fulfills what he has covenanted with Allāh,
Allāh will soon grant him a great reward.
(Q. 48: 10)*

Verses on the (right) hand of God, His eyes, and the sitting on His Throne (as in the extract of Fatma) thus belong to the *mutashābihāt*: equivocal, unclear or ambiguous verses (contrary to the clear verses in the Qur’ān or *muhkamāt*), which are sometimes also understood to belong to the much-debated abrogated ones (Kindberg n.d.; Syamsuddin 1999, p. 63).¹¹ Whether and how to interpret the *mutashābihāt* is a historical doctrinal discussion illustrating the workings of semiotic ideology, since it points to the difficult relation between language on the one hand and Qur’ānic interpretation and theology on the other (Gilliot 1990, p. 231).

As Fatma’s male teacher of *kalām*, here under the name of Hamed, in the academized institute explained: one of the reasons why these verses are unclear is because of the Qur’ānic verse elsewhere that says: “There is nothing whatever like unto Him” (Q. 42: 11).¹² Hence, the Qur’ān itself points

¹⁰ As in the Qur’ānic verse: “Your Guardian Lord is Allāh, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then He settled Himself on the Throne” (Q. 7: 54).

¹¹ More on the historical discussion among Qur’ānic scholars on the abrogating and abrogated verses, see (Burton 1985, 2016).

¹² “He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle: By this means does He multiply you. There is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees.” (Q. 42: 11)

to the semiotic tension between language and the thing named, and it is considered impossible for the Qurʾān to contradict itself. In the classical Qurʾānic exegesis of al-Tabari (d. A.H. 310/923 C.E.), these equivocal verses are shown to tie into the earliest theological-philosophical debates concerning how to interpret the Qurʾān as a whole through its exegesis and the use of rational speculation while doing so (Gilliot 1990, p. 232; Frank 1994, pp. 6, 78; Kindberg n.d.; Syamsuddin 1999, p. 64; Shah 2019, pp. 159–61)—or, in terms of Keane’s analysis of semiotic ideologies, how to consider human agency in relation to the semiotics of the Qurʾān.

In this institute, Fatma learned that there are roughly three tendencies distinguishable in interpreting these equivocal verses: those who tried to interpret them as metaphors, or contextual, or through the use of other verses in the Qurʾān; anthropomorphists who, for instance, claimed that the hand of God was one of his (unknown) attributes; and those who stated about this same Divine attribute that “God has a hand but it is dissimilar from ours” and there is no point in trying to understand more from it, since this will always, necessarily, remain mere human speculation.¹³

Hamed emphasized that whereas the second opinion is negligible, the first opinion allows for humans to reason and speculate on these verses. For the students in this institute, it was clear that this was actually the “default option”, as Charles Taylor would call it (Taylor 2007, p. 12). Hamed very explicitly did not utter it as such, emphasizing instead (and to the frustration of many students) that everyone needed to “choose for themselves which approach they preferred”. Nevertheless, they all sensed that this first tendency was seen as the most apt and plausible way of interpreting “rationally”, with its roots in the long history of rational and dialectical disputation in the Islamic tradition; and “academically”, which Hamad used as a synonym for university standards (of “doing theology”).¹⁴

The last position mentioned by Hamed, however, finds it most correct to curb human tendencies for interpretation concerning what belongs to the sphere of *al-ghayb* (“the unseen”) (Mittermaier 2011, p. 47). For people sharing this position, knowledge of these specific verses is limited to God; as such, they remain ontologically unclear for human beings using their own, also Divinely created, reason (Kindberg n.d.). Acceptance of the unknown is therefore the most certain and rational choice (Frank 1994, pp. 80–81); not a proof of passivity, but a self-disciplinary and conscious act. In this regard, Imām Mālik is believed to have said on the equivocal verse of God’s Throne:

The sitting is not unknown, but how is un-thinkable. But it is obligatory to believe it and a reprehensible innovation to ask questions concerning this topic. (Gilliot 1990, p. 241)

Nevertheless, in the Facebook discussion described in the extract, Fatma learned for the first time how this question on “Where is God” is actually a matter of doctrinal contingent debate, illustrating the important nuances in the semiotic ideology at stake. She was devastated to hear that God was not sitting on His Throne “up there”; that this could be understood in a metaphorical way; that for some theologians God is not in one place as contingently bound beings are, but everywhere instead of “up there”.

While following the subsequent courses in theology in the academic institute together, Fatma and I both witnessed how she was not the only one moved by hearing theological alternatives. Hamed, who was trained both in Islamic sciences at a foreign university and in human sciences at a Western-European

¹³ More on the different stances towards the attributes of God: see among others Gilliot’s work on the *tafsīr* from al-Ṭabari (1990, p. 233. See also: Kindberg n.d.; Syamsuddin 1999; Shah 2019).

¹⁴ Leirvik has indicated this process with the concept of “self-formatting” by Muslim actors “who identify with the intellectual tradition of modern university theology” (Leirvik 2016, p. 129). The latter is a heritage from the Protestant Reformation, as it “connotes Protestant theology as done in the framework of a secular university, infused with liberal values conventionally associated with Northern European Protestantism. The term *university theology* is also strongly associated with academic freedom, albeit in constructive interaction with the religious tradition in question. Correspondingly, university theology (. . .) combines a practice-oriented insider perspective with a critically oriented outsider perspective” (Ibid.) For more on this dichotomy between “insider and confessional” versus “outsider and secular”, see Groeninck and Boender (2020) in the introduction to this Special Issue.

university, was indeed very careful not to take a personal stance. As he explained during the courses, he considered this unnecessary from an academic point of view. Instead, Hamed preferred to present the different opinions within the Islamic tradition in a distanced way so as to let “the students choose for themselves” (see also Halstead 1995; Taylor 2007). According to him, this was the most “neutral” and “academic” way of educating his students into independently and critically thinking believers. However, hearing different approaches each with their proper reasoning without pointing out which one is now truly “correct” made some people in class argue with him without returning for a while, or not at all.

Theirs and Fatma’s reaction showed how this “academic” approach felt for them anything but neutral. As will be shown in the next paragraphs, it had repercussions both for their self-understanding in a context of *tawhīd* (understood here as the Oneness of God as the sole Creator of everything seen and unseen, human and non-human, actualized and potential), as well as for conceptualizations of what it means, and requires, to teach sacred knowledge.¹⁵ Fatma’s personal struggles and changed sensibilities show how this process of “academization” and distanciation between the object and subject of knowledge was actually never completely fulfilled; or in other words, how nuances in the semiotic ideology not only had repercussions on humans’ relation to the Texts, but also on what that meant for acting as a rational agentive subject per se (Keane 2007).

5. Changes in the Rational and Agentive Subject

Fatma’s confrontation with “different pictures of what it is they believe or hold to be sacred in the context of their lived experiences” (Moosa 2005, pp. 140–41) proved to be very distressing for her, as well as for her fellow students (“If God is not on his Throne, then where exactly is He? If I was so certain before, how can I be certain now?”); but it caused further changes as well. Fatma’s now predominantly historical and linguistic approach to the Texts (what she explains implicates the “academic methodology”) implied changes in her proper appreciation of reason in relation to the Qur’ān, which she now deems (fully) comprehensible and interpretable by humans. In other words, it affected her idea of human agency in relation to the Holy Text (Keane 2007, pp. 3–6).

However, this did not imply any “disenchantment” for Fatma. Instead, her emphasis on the necessity and responsibility of human critical and autonomous reasoning was perceived as a way of adoring God sincerely, of avoiding *taqlīd* (blind imitation of earlier scholars’ legal interpretations), and of a personal striving for the Truth; all of which would be taken into account on the Day of Judgment. Previously, her not knowing but merely accepting, as Imām Mālik urged, was part of her *jihād al-naḥs* (“personal struggle”). It was based on an argued form of mistrust for human analytical and interpretative capacities concerning the Qur’ānic *mutashābihāt* based on reason. Back then, she considered the latter as sensitive for passionate deviation if not limited by a specific relation to the Texts that considered unclear verses as ontologically unclear for humans. Hence, the wisest thing to do was to self-reflexively limit critical questioning concerning matters on which humans could not (either per definition or at least not *yet*) agree on the right answer (Kindberg n.d.).

While that may ultimately be so, Fatma argued afterwards, it is nonetheless necessary that people realize that this conceptualization of “not knowing” is but one opinion, one embodiment of human striving, while there are others who decide otherwise and as such propose a different kind of reading of God’s Hand and His Throne—a reading in which Qur’ānic language and rational investigation does not install limits, but provides all the necessary keys for possible understanding. Because, even when taking into account that most humans might never know for certain and therefore follow one opinion

¹⁵ Referring back to the terminology used in the introductory editorial to this Special Issue (Groenink and Boender 2020): this thus shows how this new assemblage consisting of specific entities (such as the institute, the teacher and the students) and their expression (the “academized” knowledge transmission) had within itself both territorializing (for instance, of the “norm of academization”) and deterritorializing forces (internal criticism, debate, and risk of *fitna* within the community) (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 87–88; DeLanda 2006, pp. 12–13; Weheliye 2014, pp. 46–49).

they deem best, it is agreed that they do have the (Divinely created) capacity to question, disagree, judge, or change opinions based on intellectual and intuitive understandings. These are considered “human potentialities” that should also be actualized, to use a classic Aristotelian reference.¹⁶

Hence, what is considered rational reasoning in relation to the Texts coincides with a different understanding of human striving, and how human agentive potentialities should be actualized by responsible *mu'mīn* (believing subjects). This is remindful of Alvin Plantinga’s conceptualization of “rationality”:

What you properly take to be rational, at least in the sense of warranted, depends of what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt. It depends on what kinds of beings you think human beings are, what sorts of beliefs you think their noetic faculties produce when they are functioning properly, and which of their faculties or cognitive mechanisms are aimed at the truth And so the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational (warranted) can't be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations; it is at bottom not merely an epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological dispute. (Plantinga, cited in Alston 2006, p. 83)

Within the Islamic tradition, this dispute about human rational capacities in relation to the Texts has always been object of discussion.¹⁷ According to Ebrahim Moosa, this is because they are “related to questions of being, to an ontology of transcendent and Divine proportions, which may be informed by or constitutive of doubts, uncertainty or skepticism towards ‘apodictic truths’, cosmological as well as ontological premises” (Moosa 2005, p. 219). To put it differently, Fatma’s changed aspirations towards religious knowledge about God seemed to have also caused changes in what it means to be human and to actualize one’s created potentialities, such as reason and rational inquiry. It has, in other words, repercussions on the incorporation of agency and norms into the very formation of the subject. This is also bound up with new moral sentiments and moral judgments (Keane 2007, p. 20; Butler 2009, p. 108), for instance, with regards to religious authority figures.

6. Repercussions on Authority Formation

In the winter of 2015, when Fatma and I followed these courses in *kalām* in the academized institute, we met in her home together with Fatma’s former female mosque teacher of *‘aqīdah* (dogma). This is an extract of the conversation that followed, which exemplifies Fatma’s changing thoughts on how future Islamic authority should evolve:

“I realize that religious knowledge is not the same as academic knowledge,” Fatma started, “but I nonetheless feel that teachers should say everything, starting from the beginning. They should show intellectual honesty. How can you know you’re on the right path if you don’t know everything?”

“But the teachers who defend that you should start with one school [of thought],” the female teacher reacts, “feel that a lot of people aren’t ready yet to look for themselves elsewhere. I also think that a lot of people still feel really scared to act wrongly, to choose wrongly.” [. . .]

“I find it problematic,” Fatma continued, “that our teachers [by which she means male and female] aren’t educated properly or don’t have a diploma.”

¹⁶ Potentiality, or “*dynamis*”, in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics IX* (Makin 2006) is understood here as “the abilities one acquires through specific kinds of training and knowledge” (Mahmood 2005, p. 147). Or in the words of Agamben: “The potentiality that interests him [Aristotle] is one that belongs to someone who, for example, has knowledge or an ability. In this sense, we say of an architect that he or she has the potential to build, of the poet that he or she has the potential to write poems” (Agamben 1999, p. 179, cited in Mahmood 2005, p. 147, n. 44). As further recapitulated by Agamben, Aristotle perceives such potentiality in terms of a *hexis*, a “having”, “on the basis of which he can also *not* bring this knowledge into actuality (*me energein*)” (Agamben 1999, pp. 179–180).

¹⁷ The historical tension between “rational” and “textual” approaches has been present in the development of *usūl al-fiqh* since the early days of Islamic jurisprudence (Hallaq 2005). Since the early ninth century (third century after the Prophet Muhammad) the different understandings of the authority of the Texts and trustworthiness of human reason led to two opposing movements not only in jurisprudence, but in theology as well; the most extreme ends of which were identified with juridical “rationalists” and “traditionalists” in the field of *fiqh*, and with Mu’tazilites and Hanbalites in the field of *kalām*.

The teacher reacts: “I agree that some teachers don’t evolve. For me that is a big problem as well; there cannot be any stagnation. But I sometimes feel that the institute in which you’re engaged right now [i.e., the academized institute] becomes elitist. They should be careful in not dividing the community.”

What Fatma aspired to was not necessarily a full deconstruction of the Texts (like modern reformists, for instance)¹⁸, but a reform in authority and pedagogy that she qualified with an intellectual honesty towards the entire Islamic patrimonial and its different branches. She called this a “descriptive (“academic”) way of teaching instead of a normative way.”

Emphasizing the relativist position in education with a focus on individualism and freedom of individual choice (Cook 1999, pp. 51–52), Fatma thus echoed what some authors have called the Western “myth of neutrality” (Halstead 1995, p. 37; Taylor 2007, p. 12). This implied for her taking on the distanced academic perspective towards sacred knowledge as well. In reaction, Fatma’s female teacher declared how she felt that (at least some of) her students were “not ready yet” to take on such an approach. According to her, they seemed to lack a kind of “maturity of judgment” (Halstead 1995). This led these students to prefer clearer guidance from the teacher, in order to attain certainty and conviction concerning sacred knowledge with its aspired repercussions on the ethical self-disciplining of the pious subject (Halstead 1995; Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Jouili 2015; Groeninck 2017). This tendency was also reconfirmed by another male teacher in the academized institute, here under the name of Yusuf:

There are lots of students who arrive in search of a shaykh. In their conception, having Islamic knowledge means having a shaykh. And as a professor, they put us in the position of shaykh to whom one should obey. Me, personally, I try to fight that idea. I try to make them understand that we aren’t here in a relationship of shaykh and disciples, but in an academic vision that seeks to build mutual knowledge between a professor and his students. The students take part in the construction of knowledge by their critical approach. (. . .) We are aware of the fact that lots of students who visit us are disappointed somehow; they are looking for clear-cut knowledge on what (not) to do, but unfortunately, previous educational initiatives have habituated people that this is what Islamic knowledge is all about; that Islamic knowledge is really a practical knowledge that you can practice immediately, without theory or reflection. Which is the image we want to alter: that Islamic knowledge is also a knowledge of reflection, very theoretical too. There is a very complex relationship between theory and practice, which coincide in Islamic history. (Extract from interview in the spring of 2015).

Although Yusuf favored a relativistic and distanced didactical approach that he saw as inspired by academia, he nevertheless emphasized its relatedness to the normative “default option” (Taylor 2007, p. 12) of “critical reflection” as situated within one’s own Islamic tradition. This illustrates the assemblage of a coming together of different rationales, both of the distanced (often equated with disengaged and “secular”) academic approach on the one hand, and the historically rational approach within the Islamic tradition itself on the other hand. According to him, this reform in pedagogical and didactical ethics was necessary to increase internal tolerance and social cohesion within society as a whole. He considered it, in other words, to be crucial for the formation of “tolerant Islamic subjects”, both intra-communally as well as in terms of citizens of the Belgian nation-state (see also Leirvik 2016).

¹⁸ Contemporary Belgian and French reformist thinkers, like Rachid Benzine (*l’Observatoire du Religieux* (Benzine 2004) and Michaël Privot (*European Network Against Racism* (Privot 2015, 2016a, 2016b)), argue for the necessity of rethinking the Islamic textual paradigms. Central to this effort is a complete hermeneutical deconstruction of the texts in order to historicize and analyse them “in the context of the cultural, political and ideological domain of the period in which it was first revealed and then later interpreted and put into practice” (Mahmood 2006, p. 339). As Privot writes together with Benzine in December 2015, the means thereto are: “Using every classical and contemporary method that is at our disposal: linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, epigraphy, historical critique . . . It’s only by using these scientific methods that we will be able to regain access to the Qur’anic imaginary and to unravel what could have been the Prophet’s intention while addressing him to his surroundings. That means we have to re-read the Text from the position of the historical world that surrounded it, instead of making contemporary projections unto the Text” (Benzine and Privot 2015.)

This heterogeneous assemblage of different rationales (Fadil 2013, p. 17), as well as its aspired repercussions on subjectivization processes, was reconfirmed by Fatma herself. She self-reflexively reconsidered that, although she aspired towards “intellectual honesty” from “academic” Islamic knowledge acquisition and transmission, the elements of authoritative confirmation, guidance, or personal reassurance nevertheless remained important (Halstead 1995, p. 31; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006, p. 636). Although she wished for authoritative figures to first of all have an adequate, academic background in Islamic knowledge, she nonetheless deconstructed every authority that crossed her path in terms of educational trajectory, their ability to *move* her, and personal piety or conduct (see also Antoun 1989, pp. 102–03). The male teacher, Yusuf, was for these reasons very loved and popular among students: also having at the same time enjoyed a Western academic and a traditional Islamic education, while simultaneously demonstrating ethical and apt conduct at all times. For the students, this represented his sincerity (*ikhlas*) towards the object of his knowledge (Halstead 1995, p. 31; Afsaruddin 2006, pp. 49–51; Alavi 2007, p. 315), thus demonstrating the direct line we previously described between reason and heart; between faith, knowing and being (see above).

Yet, as the extract from the interview with Yusuf illustrates, he did not want to be considered a “shaykh” for his students. This highly responsible role of personal guide, who acts as an experienced leader and an example of wisdom and good behavior for the education of the entire person of its disciples (Alavi 2007, p. 314–15; Shryock 2009), was for him reserved for a different time and space. In line with the academized approach, he preferred another type of authority and relation with his public, yet—as we analyzed—one that just as much implied a specific subjectivization project in the occasion. This incongruence led to some initial confusion with his students, because for them, he ultimately fulfilled a role not so different from what he called “a traditional shaykh”. They granted him legitimacy and authority on partly similar arguments, such as apt conduct, sincerity, certain knowledge, and his ability to teach convincingly from the heart to the heart. What had changed were the conditions of teaching, learning and knowing, and the aspired sensibilities of the pious subject in relation to them.

Hence, the new assemblage of Islamic higher education with its different rationales coming together as in this academized institute also meant the formation of new assemblages of legitimate Islamic educational authority. In order for the knowledge transmission concerned to be persuasive, a “collaborative achievement” was therefore necessary between both the educational authority and its public in search for coherence (Asad 1993, p. 210). Without it, the lack of legitimacy would annihilate any meaningful continuation of such new assemblage of Islamic religious education.

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