

FRANKFURTER ZEITSCHRIFT
FÜR ISLAMISCH-THEOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

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Islam in Knowledge-Power Relations

A Challenge for Muslim Theologies?

Jan Felix Engelhardt and Hansjörg Schmid | *guest editors*



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Introduction

*Jan Felix Engelhardt / Hansjörg Schmid**

The archive of Islamic knowledge in the history of Islam; 20th century Egyptian discourses on politics and religion; the case of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd; present-day Saudi Arabian *‘ulamā’*; Islamic Theological Studies in Germany. Despite spanning a variety of historical periods and geographical locations, these topics can all be subsumed under the broad analytical concept of Islam. But they are also all linked closely by a phenomenon that is the focus of this special issue and that can be detected across time and space, even if this phenomenon differs to a great extent with regard to its structural context and function, the actors involved and its tangible outcome: the interplay between religious knowledge production and power in contexts of Islam.

Knowledge-power relations have been a central area of theory-building and research in political sciences, philosophy, sociology and other academic disciplines. With regard to Islam, Islamic Studies and its related area studies have contributed to an understanding of the way scholars (in the widest sense of the term), educators, and people of Muslim belief construct and (re-)negotiate their knowledge of the religion of Islam and how this knowledge has been influenced by, and itself influences, its respective power context.¹ In Muslim theologies, awareness of the mechanisms at work between political/non-political power and knowledge production is vital, as the various public, political and academic discussions on Islam demonstrate.

This special issue aims to highlight the reciprocal influence of knowledge and power, providing insights which feed into research and teaching

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¹ See for example Hallaq, Wael B. *Restating Orientalism. A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018; Ahmad, Shahab. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016; Salvatore, Armando. *The Sociology of Islam. Knowledge, Power and Civility*. Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2016; Dabashi, Hamid. *Post-Orientalism. Knowledge and Power in a Time of Terror*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2015.

in Islamic Theological Studies² and help shape the discipline's role in academic and public debates. It focuses on three questions: What is the relationship between Islamic religious knowledge and power structures in political and social contexts? How does Islamic knowledge – as it is archived in scriptures, texts and scholarly traditions, structured in epistemic systems and (re-)configured in different modes of knowledge production – influence the political field? And how does the political, both within and without the state, influence religious knowledge in different Muslim contexts?

These questions have been identified as key issues in the project of theologies of Islam at European universities.³ In relation to Islam in modern nation states which exhibit a highly politicised discourse on Islam, these issues play a vital role in the process of establishing religious knowledge production. They also directly inform this process, as Islamic knowledge stemming from the traditions of Islam and from present-day Islamic countries is affected by the ways in which religion, knowledge and power interact.

This is the starting point for examining different aspects of Islam in knowledge-power relations:

Reinhard Schulze develops a general framework for the relationship between Islamic knowledge and authority from the perspective of comparative cultural studies. He contrasts a mode of authority that is primarily based on congregation and discourse with an official institutional authority that often develops within the state context in the modern era.

Nimet Seker explores power relationships through readings of the Qur'an, referring to both the hermeneutical analysis of Naṣr Ḥamid Abū Zayd and to the conflicts with which he was confronted. She contrasts polyphonic with authoritarian and monopolistic discourses, discusses methods for "objective exegesis" and explores limitations of textualist approaches.

² "Islamic Theological Studies" refers to the academic discipline set up at German public universities in 2010/2011.

³ See for example Khalfaoui, Mouez. "Islamic Religious Education and Critical Thought in European Plural Societies", in: Dorroll, Courtney M. (ed.), *Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia and the Internet*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019; Leirvik, Oddbjørn. "The Study of Islam between University Theology and Lived Religion. Introductory Reflections", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29/4 (2018), pp. 413–427; Engelhardt, Jan Felix. *Islamische Theologie im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem. Ausdifferenzierung und Selbstkonzeption einer neu etablierten Wissenschaftsdisziplin*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017; and Schepeleyn Johansen, Birgitte. *Islamic Theology at the European Universities. Secularisation, Boundaries and the Role of Religion*. University of Copenhagen, 2006.

Roel Meijer discusses the political-philosophical dimension of citizenship and the issue of political participation in Egypt since the late 19th century. His article explores how, with the introduction of the nation-state and the processes of secularisation, Islamic thinkers developed different notions of citizenship and political ideas.

Mohammad Gharaibeh looks at religious issues in Saudi Arabia and examines strategies used by the ‘*ulamā*’ to exercise power in public debate. His article contextualises and analyses fatwas and statements by religious scholars on issues such as criticising the government, gender segregation, working women and the driving ban for women.

Jan Felix Engelhardt undertakes a critical analysis of Islamic Theological Studies in Germany in relation to both public debates and political attempts to domesticate Islam. The issue at stake is whether this type of academic research opens spaces of agency or merely reproduces power relationships between politics and Islam.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue negotiate four central topics that explore the relationship between knowledge and power in an Islamic context:

Constant interplay between political power and religious knowledge

Despite the various forms of political structures and systems that existed throughout the history of Islam and that exist in present-day Muslim countries, Islamic knowledge and political power did not and do not exist independently from each other. Yet, over the course of history, the degree of reciprocal influence seems to have increased. Schulze argues that in the pre-modern era, unlike today, the political did not dominate the formation and production of religious knowledge. For Meijer, the “historically deep distrust” between the ‘*ulamā*’ as the archivists of Islamic knowledge and the political rulers who presided over areas of secular law is one reason for today’s “grave difficulties in accepting modern political citizenship”. The state reforms of the 19th century, especially in the Ottoman Empire, extended the areas of secular state control, and “centralisation, bureaucratisation and standardisation undermined the role of the ‘*ulamā*’”. But these areas of control were not only increasingly limited for religious actors: with the formation of the modern state, religious knowledge production itself

was being brought under state control, for example in Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In these countries, “state-sanctioned national ‘Islams’ began to emerge, forming an established knowledge bureaucracy” (Schulze). This knowledge bureaucracy also played its part in the general process of creating governable citizens during the transformation of empires into nation states (Meijer).

Gharaibeh points out that in Saudi Arabia, the complex relation between rulers and religious establishment, dating back to the 1744 Sa‘ūdi-Wahhābi pact, is now characterised by reciprocal support and dependency at the same time. Yet, when the interests of government and religious elite collide, the state “does not hesitate to overrule the religious establishment” – in this case, the political dominates Islamic knowledge.

The historical process of secularisation led to the emergence of religion and politics as separate fields, and as a result “the Middle East has been confronted with the ‘radical indeterminacy’ of the political”, Meijer argues. This separation, however, does not mean that new interpretations of Islamic knowledge do not challenge the power of the political, because separating religion and world also strengthens religion and encourages religious actors “to try to attain a hegemony over world knowledge and thus the order of the world” (Schulze). Hence, Meijer comes to the conclusion that Sayid Qutb’s solution to – in his mind – *jāhiliyya* modernity was to transform “pure Islam, the antipolitical” into “the ultimate political” with the submission of society to religion. Seker illustrates this – successful – demand for political action by religious actors when she argues that the legal case involving Abū Zayd demonstrated “in a painful and perilous way [the] mechanisms of religious and political discourse in Egypt” based on “manipulative and arbitrary interpretations of Islamic law and exegesis of the Qur’an.”

It is also probably true in the late 20th century Egyptian context that there has been a reciprocal relationship between state and religion, each supporting and depending upon the other. Seker presents Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s work as essentially a critique of the “interplay between the interpretation of the scriptures by religious scholars and the ruling class’s claim to power.” With Abū Zayd questioning “the most important premise of contemporary Islamist thinking, namely the submission of men to the rule of God”, she argues, he also questioned the “interpretive monopoly of the exegetes and jurists as an instrument of domination in the modern nation-state context”. At the intersection of governability and knowledge production, Engelhardt discusses to what extent this relationship between state and

religion is mirrored in the establishment of Islamic Theological Studies as an academic discipline in Germany.

Stable material and diverging interpretations

The articles in this special issue show that while there does exist more or less canonised material that provides a stable body of knowledge on Islam, differing epistemic approaches to that material unavoidably bring about diverging interpretations. Schulze points out that the meanings and purposes Muslims attribute to the world are in no way determined by the material restrictions of the archive of Islamic knowledge. In fact, the Qur'an as the centrepiece of this archive can be considered a unidirectional manual for the political structuring of societies: Meijer underlines this in his discussion of Islamist political concepts in 20th century Egypt which are legitimised using the Qur'an, and Gharaibeh does so by analysing how Saudi scholars of religion negotiate politics on the basis of the holy text. Alternatively, the Qur'an can be considered a dialogical communication between God and the individual believer, as Seker points out in her discussion of Abū Zayd's work. These examples show that there is a limited body of texts, but seemingly unlimited scope for its interpretation.

Definite understanding vs pluralistic understandings

This volume finds that, over the course of history, Islamic knowledge production was – at least until the beginning of modernity – characterised by a plurality of understandings, and that this plurality was gradually replaced by the idea of the possibility of a definite, unequivocal understanding of religion. For Schulze, the dissolution of “approval authority and ambiguity tolerance [which] determined the social worlds of meaning [...] marked the beginning of the modern era” in Muslim societies. And for Seker, “the polyphonic religious discourse of the pre-Modern Sunni tradition, which could easily unite a variety of disparate and even contradictory interpretations and positions within a single orthodoxy”, were embedded in a “culture of the text” (Abū Zayd) that allowed for a huge pluralism of understandings. Yet, this variety also brought forward “claims to the monopoly of interpretation by the privileged class of rulers and scholars” and “today faces an increasing appetite for uniformity and unity in faith”. In that sense,